

# COMMUNAL HOUSE IN THANH HOA - ITS PRESERVATION AND PROMOTION

**Le Thi Thao**

---

Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism

Email: [lethithao@dvttdt.edu.vn](mailto:lethithao@dvttdt.edu.vn)

Received: 10/01/2022

Reviewed: 11/01/2022

Revised: 16/01/2022

Accepted: 18/01/2022

Released: 25/01/2022

*Thanh Hoa is a land rich in historical-cultural traditions, still preserving many valuable communal houses, distributed mainly in the delta and coastal areas. Due to many reasons, both objective and subjective, such as natural disasters, historical changes and daily activities and the unconscious influence of people, many communal houses are at the risk of being destroyed. The article studies the transformation of the communal house and the worship of the village tutelary god in Thanh Hoa in order to propose solutions to protect, preserve and promote this special historical relic.*

**Key words:** *Communal house; transformation; preservation and promotion.*

---

## **1. Introduction**

In the cultural space of traditional villages, the communal house is the largest and most prominent architectural work, imprinted in the mind of every Vietnamese people. Nowadays, the communal house is considered a "living museum" of Vietnamese village culture. Based on this architectural work, one can find out many issues related to the general history and society of each village and each region, thereby clarifying the history of the nation. However, after the fluctuations of history and the socio-economic development, the communal house has had many changes, requiring scientific solutions in preserving and promoting values.

## **2. Research overview**

There have been many researches on cultural heritage in Thanh Hoa, including communal houses. However, the awareness of the value of the communal house system in Thanh Hoa is only in the first step, which does not meet the requirements to learn about a very important area of Thanh's cultural heritage closely related to the requirements of building cultural life and socio-economic development today. Up to now, there has not been any research that studies in a comprehensive, systematic and in-depth way about the changes of communal houses in Thanh

Hoa and solutions to promote their values in the current period. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct further studies with scientific and practical values on this topic.

### **3. Research approach and methods**

The study of communal houses in Thanh Hoa, especially their historical and cultural values, must be placed in the current context. This approach helps researchers focus on understanding the values that are suitable with the development trend of the country and the world, avoiding studying too deeply into the factors that were once considered "values" but no longer suitable for modern life.

The communal houses in Thanh Hoa are studied in the overall system of Vietnamese communal houses. In addition to the common features, it is necessary to clarify the specific characteristics of the communal houses in Thanh Hoa.

With the above approach, the novelty of the research is shown in its synthesis and interdisciplinary, mainly expressed in two aspects: the changes of the village communal house as a traditional architectural work of the village and solutions to preserve and promote the value of the village communal house in the current context.

The article uses research methods of social sciences, especially interdisciplinary research methods, applying research methods of different disciplines to solve the content of the topic including History, Geography, Literature, Ethnology, Archeology, Art, Sociology, Economics, Management Science... The methods are used flexibly to meet the research objectives. In addition, the article uses in-depth interviews and field surveys to understand the changes of communal houses in Thanh Hoa and people's views on these changes.

### **4. Research results**

#### ***4.1. Number of communal houses and their distribution***

At present, Thanh Hoa has 559 communes, wards and towns; however, at the end of the 19th century, according to *Dong Khanh Geography*, the whole province had 2008 villages, communes, wards<sup>1</sup>. Except for the mountainous area where the majority of ethnic minorities reside, almost every village of the Vietnamese in the delta and coastal areas has a communal house. Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, in Thanh Hoa, there could be thousands of communal houses. Anh, Dao Duy commented in *Vietnam's historical culture*: "Every village has a communal house and a place to worship gods and a gathering place for people as well... Each village has one communal house because it is closely related to the history and activities of the village; and pagodas are not available to every village, because worshipping the Buddha is not the village's public work"<sup>2</sup>. In fact, because of population growth and distribution, one village can be split into two or three smaller villages; however, because they still worship the

---

<sup>1</sup> *Dong Khanh Geography*, World Publishing House, Hanoi, 2003, p. 1073.

<sup>2</sup> Anh, Dao Duy (1992), *Vietnam's historical culture*, Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, p. 232 - 234.

same Village God, in practice, there are still cases where many villages share a communal house. In three villages of Thuong Tho, Mau Thinh and My Khe (in Ba Dinh commune, Nga Son district), before 1945, there was only one communal house for both community activities and worshipping the same Village God. In other cases, there are large communal houses, shared by many villages and communes, such as Tam Tong communal house (Vinh Tien commune, Vinh Loc district), which is the communal house of three villages of Binh, Cao and Ho, located by Ma river and belonging to Vinh Loc district. The above cases are rare ones, because every village wants to have its own communal house. On the contrary, there are cases where a village has 2 or 3 communal houses. For example, Dai Khoi village (Dong Cuong commune, Thanh Hoa city), Van Lai Ha village (Xuan Chau commune, Tho Xuan district), Hoa Yen village (Thai Hoa commune, Trieu Son district) all have 3 communal houses in each village. The villages with many communal houses are rich ones with developed agricultural economy, convenient traffic location for trade. Perhaps, the wealth of the village has created conditions to build its own communal house.

Currently, due to war and historical upheavals, the communal house in Thanh Hoa has been destroyed a lot. According to the data of the districts and Thanh Hoa Cultural Heritage Conservation Center, the whole province of Thanh Hoa currently has 458 communal houses, of which 149 communal houses have been ranked and 12 communal houses ranked at the national level. Out of 458 communal houses, only 279 communal houses still keep their original architectural buildings, distributed in 20 districts/towns/cities, in which there is 01 communal house located in the cluster of relics that have been ranked special national level<sup>1</sup>, 11 communal houses are nationally ranked, 136 communal houses are provincially ranked and 131 communal houses are still architecturally intact but have not been ranked. In addition, in Thanh Hoa, there are 179 communal houses that have become ruins, but still have the land fund of the communal house identified by the Commune People's Committee. It can be seen that the number of communal houses has been destroyed quite a lot. At present, many villages in Thanh Hoa no longer have any communal house. However, the communal house in Thanh Hoa still occupies a large number of traditional wooden architectures so far.

Despite being distributed in a scattered manner, the communal houses in Thanh Hoa are concentrated mainly in the plains. Currently, 20/27 districts have identified to have their own communal houses. The districts that have not found communal houses including Ba Thuoc, Lang Chanh, Muong Lat, Nhu Thanh, Quan Hoa, Quan Son, Ngoc Lac. These are mountainous districts of Thanh Hoa. It is possible that there are still communal houses somewhere, but within our capacity, we are not able to find them out. However, in Thanh Hoa, there are still communal

---

<sup>1</sup> Phu Dien Communal House (Trieu Loc commune, Hau Loc district) located in Ba Trieu temple relic area, has been recognized as a special national relic in 2014.

houses of ethnic minority communities, which are Muong Don communal house of Muong people (Thanh My commune, Thach Thanh district), Dinh Thi communal house of Tho people (Yen Le commune, Nhu Xuan district).

Ha Trung is the district with the largest number of communal houses in existence (31 communal houses, of which there are 3 national-level communal houses and 24 provincial-level communal houses). In addition, districts in the central region of the Ma River Delta such as Hau Loc, Nga Son, Yen Dinh, Vinh Loc, and Thanh Hoa city also have a much higher number of communal houses than the others. Obviously, the construction and renovation, embellishment and preservation of communal houses of villages are closely related to the economic development conditions of that village. The richer the village is, the larger the communal house is.

In recent years, when people's lives have been increasingly improved, they want to return to the traditional values of the nation, which is closest to the village culture with the physical representation of the communal house. Therefore, they contributed efforts and money to rebuild many communal houses formerly ruins, or being damaged, such as Trung communal house (Hoang Quy commune, Hoang Hoa district), Kim Phu communal house (Ha Ngoc commune, Ha Trung district), Phuc Tu communal house (Ha Vinh commune, Ha Trung district), Lien Quy communal house (My Loc commune, Hau Loc district), Thuong communal house (Phong Loc commune, Hau Loc district), Giang communal house (Phu Loc commune, Hau Loc district), Phuc communal house (Thuan Loc commune, Hau Loc district), Giap Noi communal house (Nga Giap commune, Nga Son district), Nhat Tan communal house (Nga Thanh commune, Nga Son district), Tri Noi communal house (Nga Thien commune, Nga Son district), Trung communal house (Tan Khang commune, Nong Cong district), Tho Ngoa communal house (Quang Long commune, Quang Xuong district), Thach Loi communal house (Thanh Tan commune, Thach Thanh district)... However, out of 179 ruins of communal houses, in 13 places, public works of the village such as cultural houses, schools, etc. have been built on the ground of the communal house, therefore, there must be reasonable research and direction of the local government and all levels of government in rebuilding the communal house.

#### ***4.2. Scale, architecture, carving art of village communal house***

The space of traditional communal houses in Thanh Hoa is usually quite open. The communal house architecture here also has a miniature effect in the large landscape environment. The communal house yard in Thanh Hoa is usually quite large with the ratio of the width of the communal house yard is often over 8 times the width of the communal house. In the communal house of Set village (Dinh Hai commune, Yen Dinh district), the great communal house is 150 meters from the gate.

Most of the communal houses in Thanh Hoa remaining are of a small and moderate size. However, there are some cases where the communal house is as large as the communal house

in the Northern Delta, typically Dong Bong communal house (Ha Tien commune) with the size of 30m x 16m; Gia Mieu communal house (Ha Long commune) with the size of 29.6m x 13m... Most of the remaining communal houses are only about 20m long and 10m wide.

However, nowadays, along with the disappearance of hundreds, even thousands of communal houses, the scale, architecture, and carving art of communal houses also have many changes, tending to be narrowed and degraded. Many communal houses in the past had multi-building architecture, or there were two houses on both front sides of the great communal house. At present, however, most of them only have one great house. Due to the pressure of population, most of the former spacious land of the communal house has been narrowed down.

Along with the economic, cultural and social development, the communal house has been restored and upgraded through many stages, causing the phenomenon of overlapping cultural layers in a communal house. In Bang Mon communal house (Hoang Loc commune, Hoang Hoa district), there is a harem with architectural style and carvings confirmed by many researchers to be of the 16th century<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile, the date of the front building is determined to be built in the year of The Eight Bao Dai (1933). Thuong Phu communal house (Ha Dong commune, Ha Trung district) still retains many carvings with themes of people "robbing" rattles, people hugging chickens, fairies riding dragons... in the style of the late seventeenth century, while the communal house was remodeled in the Nguyen Dynasty.

Phu Dien communal house (Trieu Loc commune, Hau Loc district) has many different periods of carving styles, most of which are of the 18th and 19th centuries, representing major renovations recorded over the years of Tu Duc 31 (1878) and Khai Dinh 2 (1917). In the harem of Vinh Tri communal house (Hoang Quang commune, Thanh Hoa city), there are still many carvings of the 17th century, with themes of elephant riders, dragons and tigers fighting..., but they are interwoven with many carvings of the nineteenth century.

Currently, in Thanh Hoa, there is no communal house retaining its yard, although their traces are still left in some communal houses in Ha Trung, Yen Dinh, Hoang Hoa, Tho Xuan, Vinh Loc, Trieu Son districts...

### ***4.3. The worship of the Village God***

Studying the religion of worshipping the Village God in Thanh Hoa communal house is not an easy job, because many communal houses have been destroyed over time. According to the research results by a group of lecturers from Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism at the end of 2018, 207 out of 458 communal houses in Thanh Hoa still retain information about the Village God (accounting for 45.3%).

---

<sup>1</sup> The researcher Bien, Tran Lam in the Scientific Conference "Solutions to preserve and promote the values of communal houses in Thanh Hoa" (held at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism in September 2018) affirmed that the temporary Bang Mon communal house can be considered as the earliest communal house architecture in the shape of Dinh (the harem behind is protruded) in Vietnam (16th century).

On the other hand, from 1945 until now, new gods have been worshiped in some communal houses, which makes the worship of the Village God become diversified and complicated.

During the survey, we came across a rather special phenomenon that some communal houses in Thanh Hoa now worship both Mother Goddess Lieu Hanh and the Village God, for example, Chi Duc communal house (Nghia Thanh commune, Nga Son district), Bai Do (Xuan Bai commune, Tho Xuan district), Tay Mo communal house (Ha Thai commune, Ha Trung district), Soi communal house (Thanh Minh commune, Thach Thanh district), Thanh Duong communal house (Thieu Khanh commune, Thieu Hoa district), Thuong communal house (Tan Thanh commune, Thuong Xuan district). Some communal houses have a shrine to Mother Goddesses such as Phu Khe communal house (Hoang Phu commune, Hoang Hoa district), Soi communal house (Xuan Phong commune, Tho Xuan district). The worship of Mother Goddess Lieu Hanh in the communal house is not mentioned in the legends. However, according to the old people in the village, this phenomenon has existed for a long time. It can be predicted that Mother Goddess Lieu Hanh is worshiped in the village communal houses in Thanh Hoa in order to satisfy the needs and beliefs of the people in the Mother Goddesses. According to Prof. Tan, Ha Van, "The gods in the villages who are awarded by the King are eligible to be the Village Gods"<sup>1</sup>.

The phenomenon of worshipping the Mother Goddess in the communal house of Thanh Hoa is quite special, which is rarely seen in other localities, especially in the Northern Delta, perhaps due to the overwhelming power of the Holy Mother in Thanh. It is said in the book *Thanh Hoa gods and goddesses* (1903) that Thanh Hoa had 48 villages in 11 districts worship Mother Goddess Lieu Hanh. However, in the *Thanh Hoa Geography book*, it is said that by 1920, the worship of Mother Goddess Lieu Hanh had developed to many palaces and temples throughout Thanh Hoa province. However, the village can still only worship the Mother Goddess together with the Village God.

Another reason can be seen from the development of trade in Vietnam in general and Thanh Hoa in particular from the 17th century, especially in the 18th - 19th centuries. Most of the relics of the communal house worshipping Mother Goddess Lieu Hanh are located on the banks of a large river - the lifeline of intra-regional and inter-regional trade in history. There is a hypothesis that these communal houses were constructed by not only villagers but also merchants (because according to many researchers, Mother Goddess Lieu Hanh is also a god associated with the trade). This confirmed the prestige and role of the trade which brought the worship of Mother Goddess Lieu Hanh into the communal house. Another hypothesis is that worship of Mother Goddess Lieu Hanh in the communal house has been conducted recently

---

<sup>1</sup> Tan, Ha Van – Ku, Nguyen Van (2014), *Vietnam communal houses*, Social Science Publishing House, p. 48

when the spiritual life of the residents had many changes and the worship facilities were narrowed. The crisis and "spiritual disruption" made the worship of gods in the communal house no longer follow the old standards. And it is more convenient for residents to bring the Mother Goddesses into spiritual activities in the communal house.

#### ***4.4. The role of the communal house in community life***

As a traditional cultural institution of the nation, before the development of economy and society, communal houses in Thanh Hoa as well as in other regions are facing many problems of preserving and promoting their values. Especially, in the process of new rural construction, when the cultural house appeared, the role and position of the communal house in the community also changed markedly.

The process of merging villages has greatly influenced the role of the communal house in the community, especially in places where there is a cultural house.

For villages without cultural houses, the communal house is still a place to organize community cultural activities, a meeting place as well as the administrative headquarters of the village. In the communal house, tables and chairs are arranged in the style of a hall, on the wall hang a picture of President Ho Chi Minh, certificates of merit and certificates of achievements of the village, while banners and slogans are attached to the beams... This is considered as a "creative" way in the process of building a new countryside in Vietnam: building a "2 in 1" cultural communal house, linking contemporary cultural life and activities with spiritual life. Some communal houses even built a podium in the communal house, with curtains and a lighting system to organize cultural activities, meetings... such as Phong Muc communal house (Chau Loc commune, Hau Loc district), Quan Chiem communal house (Ha Giang commune, Ha Trung district), Van Xa communal house (Ha Van commune, Ha Trung district), Kenh communal house (Ha Lai commune, Ha Trung district)... In Document No. 4688/HD-BVHTTDL dated November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2016 guiding the implementation of Criterion No. 06 on cultural facilities and Criterion No. 16 on culture in the set of national criteria for building new rural areas, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism clearly states that *the localities with traditional cultural institutions such as communal houses can use this institution to organize some appropriate cultural and sports activities if there is the consent of local people and authorities when they have had no cultural houses*. Thus, the role of the communal house has been confirmed in contributing to the construction of a new rural culture in the current period. However, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism also requires that in the long run, these localities need to have a specific roadmap for planning and investing in the construction of communal cultural and sports centers, cultural houses – sports area in the village in line with the criteria promulgated in the regulations.

After many efforts to build a new countryside, many places already have a village cultural house. The communal house exists in parallel with the cultural house. In these villages, the

meeting and organization of cultural and artistic activities have shifted to a new cultural institution (activities of the cultural house is one of the criteria for building a new countryside). However, the elderly still come to the communal house to meet and discuss the problems of the village.

In the past, the communal house was also a place where people came to participate and enjoy the games and performances... However, at present, these activities are performed in the family with modern media... This fact has led to the gradual disappearance of cultural and artistic activities in of the village communal house. Especially, young people now rarely participate in community activities in communal houses. They only go there in festivals, and during most of the remaining time, the communal houses were left empty, leading to the deterioration. While there are a few communal houses ranked at national level, and invested for renovation and embellishment, the remaining communal houses (including the communal houses ranked at provincial level) are often in a state of serious deterioration. On the contrary, some communal houses, after being invested billions of dong to repair and embellish, create strange feelings for villagers due to non-traditional materials and architectural styles. Although the managers are conscious of preserving and promoting the value of communal houses, they are still confused by the questions: What to restore? What to promote? What to preserve?...

#### ***4.5. Conservation and promotion of values***

The mobilization of investment in socialization for communal houses is much more difficult than that in pagodas or temples, possibly because the communal house is only associated with a specific village community, and the Village God is also only attached to the communal house in a specific area. The development of tourism for this type of communal house is very limited. At present, there is only Phu Dien communal house in Thanh Hoa with unique architectural art and carvings, located in the Ba Trieu temple relic, is planned to become a tourist attraction. This situation requires that in the conservation and promotion of village communal house values, more appropriate solutions are needed.

It can be seen that the appearance of the village cultural house is in line with the development trend, meeting the increasing needs of the people's cultural and spiritual activities, especially transmitting new elements of culture such as information - communication, newspaper, radio - television, science and technology, and enjoyment of literature and art, including spaces for people to participate in cultural creation. Meanwhile, the village communal house, in relation to the village's cultural house, is still the place to organize spiritual and religious activities, organize festivals, maintain rituals, customs, and develop folk arts...

In addition, it is necessary to add new functions to the communal house to match the current context. It is possible to consider and use the village communal house as a traditional house, a "mini" library of the village or commune to display artifacts and images associated with the village's history, or agricultural tools, or daily objects associated with traditional village

life, such as plows, harrows, mills, traditional clothes... These artifacts, when displayed, will surely create a strong effect on many classes of people. For the elderly, it is the moment when they relive the past memories; For the younger generations, it will stimulate their desire to learn and discover. Thus, the communal house becomes a place to unite the village/commune community. That is also the meaning and the role of the village communal house in the history and at the present.

### **5. Discussion**

The preservation of the current communal house is not only to retain the place of community activities, but also to create a cultural and spiritual space of the village, creating a balance in development. This preservation does not mean just preserving the "communal house", but it is necessary to place the communal house in the cultural space of the village, so that the communal house becomes a "living" heritage. Therefore, it is not enough to consider what is "right" or "wrong" in the renovation and embellishment of the current communal house, but it is necessary to preserve the "cultural space of the communal house" including lifestyles, customs, legends, traditional crafts, folk performances, folk games... It is important for people to understand and continue to attach to the communal house, then the village community will be united together to create a solid support in the future.

### **6. Conclusion**

Currently, many valuable communal houses in Thanh Hoa are preserved. Communal houses are mainly concentrated in the plains, in which some districts still retain many communal houses such as Ha Trung, Hoang Hoa, Hau Loc... However, many traditional communal houses have been destroyed, or their architectural scale has been narrowed. The fact that the communal houses were restored over many periods creates the overlapping or repetition of many layers of art and culture.

The worship of the Village Gods has also undergone different changes. In some places, documents or knowledge about the Village Gods are no longer preserved. Besides, a number of other gods have also been brought into worship in the communal house, especially the worship of Mother Goddess in communal houses. Regarding the position and role of the village communal house in the community, with the appearance of the village cultural house, the administrative function of the village communal house has been faded. Meanwhile, cultural and spiritual activities has no longer retained their important roles as they used to be. Therefore, The preservation and promotion of the values of village communal houses need to be scientific and consistent with the actual situation.

### **References**

[1]. Thanh Hoa Management Board of Monuments and Landscapes (2006), Thanh Hoa relics and landscapes, volume 4, Thanh Hoa Publishing House.

[2]. Tan, Ha Van – Ku, Nguyen Van (2014), *Vietnam communal houses*, Social Science Publishing House.

[3]. Vietnam Committee of Social Sciences, Ly Tran Institute of Literature and Poetry, volume 1, Social Science Publishing House, Hanoi, 1977.

[4]. Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism, *Traditional cultural characteristics of Thanh Hoa*, Proceedings of the 2011 Scientific Conference

[5]. Vietnam Institute of Social Sciences (1998), *Complete Anals of Dai Viet* (translation), volume 2, Social Science Publishing House.