

Heritage Politics from Below: The Voices of Spirit Mediums in the Practices of Việt Beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of the Three Realms

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Abstract: The practices associated with the Việt beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of the Three Realms - commonly known as Mother Goddess worship - were inscribed on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2016. This marked a significant transformation of the Lên đồng ritual from a stigmatized superstition into a celebrated expression of Việt cultural identity. The inscription not only legitimized the practice, but also empowered spirit mediums to navigate social and political challenges. Focusing on the Phù Dầy site in Nam Định province and other active spirit medium's communities, this study examines how practitioners have mobilized the UNESCO status to claim greater visibility and advocate for legal recognition of Mother Goddess worship as a distinct religion. It explores the heritage politics from below, i.e., of spirit mediums, analyzing their use of soft power to expand ritual space, assert agency, and engage in broader struggles for cultural legitimacy and religious equality.

Keywords: Mother Goddess worship, Lên đồng ritual, UNESCO's inscription, politics from below, spirit mediums.

Subject classification: Cultural studies.

1. Introduction

Mother Goddess worship is a significant spiritual practice in Vietnam, with Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh revered as the supreme deity. Although practiced nationwide, Nam Định Province is considered its spiritual center, particularly at the Phù Dầy relic site, which houses over 20 palaces, temples, and shrines linked to the

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second descent of Liễu Hạnh. Key sites include Tiên Hương, Vân Cát, and Bóng Palaces. As a major pilgrimage destination, Phú Dầy hosts Lên đồng spirit possession rituals, and the annual Phú Dầy festival held during the third lunar month, drawing large numbers of devotees. These rituals and celebrations underscore the cultural and religious significance of the complex. The worship system follows a hierarchical pantheon, with the four Mother Goddesses at the apex, followed by mandarins, dames, damsels, princesses, child spirits, and sacred animal spirits (Ngô Đức Thịnh 1996; Norton 2016; Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2019).

The narrative surrounding the heritage element named *Practices Related to the Beliefs of the Việt People in the Mother Goddesses of the Three Realms* (in short 'Practices of the Mother Goddesses'), including the Lên đồng spirit possession ritual, has undergone a profound transformation following their inscription by UNESCO. These practices were inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2016, marking a pivotal moment in the perception and status of this folk belief system. Since the inscription, there has been a significant shift in public and media discourse, moving from past criticisms - where Lên đồng rituals were dismissed as "chaotic" or as acts of "buying and selling spirits" (*mua thần bán thánh*) - to widespread appreciation of their deep cultural significance and their embodiment of Vietnamese cultural identity.

UNESCO's inscription has empowered practitioners, particularly spirit mediums, with a form of soft power that enables them to challenge long-standing misconceptions and advocate for the official recognition of their beliefs as a distinct religion. This platform has also facilitated dialogue with Buddhist venerables who have historically underestimated the importance of these practices, as well as with the broader public. In this context, the UNESCO inscription has become a vital tool for spirit mediums to articulate their perspectives on the interplay between beliefs, religion, and cultural heritage, ultimately fostering greater understanding and legitimacy for the Practices of Mother Goddesses.

Heritage politics from below offers a perspective that underscores the critical role of local communities in shaping heritage narratives and practices (Aigner 2016). It emphasizes how heritage-making serves as a powerful tool for asserting local identities and reclaiming cultural agency. This article explores how UNESCO's heritage inscription can become a platform for grassroots politics, where heritage practitioners use it as a means of protest and resistance, challenging dominant narratives and existing power structures.

The focus is on three key incidents that illuminate the politics of heritage from below: (i) the UNESCO inscription of the Practices of the Mother

Goddesses as soft power of its adherents and dialogue with Buddhism; (ii) the issuance of the local Vụ Bản District dispatch on management of the Phù Dây relic site (*Quản thể Di tích Phù Dây*); and (iii) the protest by spirit mediums against the organizers of the *Engaging with Vietnam* Conference organized in Huế city (referred to later) for their perceived commodification of spirit mediumship through staged performances and the display of costumes on stage. After decades of marginalization - being accused of practicing superstition, positioned as inferior to state-sanctioned religions like Buddhism, and subjected to state-imposed management and centralized interpretations - a group of elite mediums and the managers of Tiên Hương Palace at the Phù Dây relic site together with numerous spirit mediums from all over Vietnam have raised their voices for religious equality, engagement in the site management and sacred space of their performance at the temples dedicated to their spirits.

Drawing on the three case studies discussed earlier, and based on interviews with practitioners, this article seeks to address the following research questions:

Question 1: How do the spirit mediums of the Mother Goddess worship leverage UNESCO's inscription to negotiate socio-political recognition and equal status among other state-recognized religions such as Buddhism? This question examines the ways in which UNESCO's heritage inscription has become a tool for marginalized practitioners to challenge historical stigmatization and assert their rights within Vietnam's religious landscape.

Question 2: What are the implications of staging rituals, such as *Lên đồng*, outside their sacred performing contexts for the integrity and meaning of intangible cultural heritage for the bearers? This inquiry explores the contested practice of decontextualizing rituals and its impact on both the spiritual essence and public understanding of Mother Goddess worship.

Question 3: How do top-down heritage management policies conflict with community-driven practices in the safeguarding of Mother Goddess worship at the Phù Dây relic site? This question focuses on the tensions between institutional heritage governance and the self-management traditions upheld by the local community, particularly the custodians and practitioners at Phù Dây.

These research questions aim to deepen the understanding of the complex dynamics of heritage politics, religious representation, and community advocacy within the context of the Mother Goddess worship in Vietnam.

2. Literature Review

The concept of “heritage politics from below” highlights the dynamic, everyday practices, localized narratives, and community agency in determining the parameters of heritage. This concept offers a critical lens for understanding the contested dynamics of heritage governance and the ways in which marginalized groups, such as the spirit mediums (*ông đồng, bà đồng*) of Mother Goddess worship, assert their voices and rights. Historically dismissed as superstitious and excluded from mainstream narratives, these spirit mediums have utilized grassroots agency to challenge the dominance of Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD), as described by Smith (2006). Smith posits that AHD predominantly privileges tangible, monumental heritage, often marginalizing diverse, localized, and intangible cultural manifestations. AHD often operates through top-down decision-making by state authorities and experts, framing heritage as a static, elite-driven construct. “Heritage politics from below” challenges this narrative, acknowledging the fluid, contested, and frequently subaltern dimensions of heritage-making, particularly in relation to identity construction, resistance, and collective memory among marginalized groups; for example in the case of Phù Dầy revealing that such hegemonic frameworks are not universally accepted, and community-driven resistance can reshape the landscape of heritage governance.

Further scholarly contributions by Robertson (2008) and Waterton and Watson (2011) expand upon the contested and resistant nature of “heritage politics from below.” For example, Robertson’s empirical studies illustrate how communities recontextualize industrial ruins or neglected spaces as significant cultural heritage, thereby subverting dominant discourses that render these sites obsolete or irrelevant. Likewise, Waterton and Watson elucidate how indigenous and local communities reclaim heritage narratives to assert identity and autonomy, often in defiance of state-centric or institutionalized frameworks. The intersection of “heritage from below” with intangible cultural heritage (ICH) constitutes another critical area of exploration. Grassroots practices such as oral traditions, artisanal crafts, and communal rituals exemplify how local heritage-making challenges the material focus of traditional heritage paradigms. Harrison (2013) underscores the importance of these practices in emphasizing the ephemeral and fluid characteristics of cultural expressions. While the 2003 UNESCO Convention provides an institutional framework for promoting ICH, critiques suggest that it may inadvertently impose hierarchical structures that could undermine community-driven heritage processes.

In Vietnam, heritage politics and the voice of communities have garnered increasing attention from scholars. Nguyễn Thị Hiền argues that community voices

are not uniform across regions but rather depend on the agency and adaptability of each local community (Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2022). For instance, while all are practitioners of the Mother Goddess folk belief, spirit mediums at Bắc Lê temple in Lạng Sơn Province are notably absent from the temple's management board, with all key decisions taken by state-appointed officials - unlike the case of the spirit mediums at the Phủ Dầy site, as examined in this paper. The forms of resistance and expression from local communities manifest themselves primarily through grievances and informal complaints, as they are not formally included in heritage affairs, even though they are occasionally invited to attend major heritage activities or are consulted on heritage activities and management (Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2021a, 2021b). Lê Hồng Lý et al. (2012) observe that gong players in the Central Highlands - particularly in Catholic communities and tourist areas near destinations like the Lang Biang foothills in Lạc Dương District, Lâm Đồng Province - have taken the initiative of forming their own clubs to revive gong performances for tourists. On the one hand, they leverage UNESCO's inscription to emphasize the heritage value of gong culture, on the other, they actively reinterpret and organize gong performances in new contexts, such as churches, housewarming ceremonies, restaurants, and other social-cultural gatherings, rather than in traditional agricultural rituals as in the past. Similarly, Hoàng Cầm et al (Hoàng Cầm et al 2021) note that practitioners of *Quan họ Bắc Ninh*, *Đờn ca Tài tử*, and *Ví, Giặm* folk songs have also utilized the UNESCO inscription as a means to promote performances and support the recognition of people's and meritorious main practitioners' title (nghệ nhân nhân dân, nghệ nhân ưu tú).

The paradigm of "heritage politics from below" signifies a critical evolution within the interdisciplinary field of heritage studies. By centering the experiences and voices of historically excluded communities, it democratizes heritage practices and deepens understanding of the negotiation of cultural identity and memory at the grassroots level. By engaging with the concept of heritage from below, this study highlights how spirit mediums have actively raised their voice for equal status with other religions and resisted state-led management of their sacred spaces, particularly the imposition of regulations that exclude their participation. Following the inscription of Mother Goddess worship on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, these practitioners have leveraged the recognition to legitimize their practices and demand greater inclusion in decision-making processes. This aligns with Muzaini and Minca's (2018) assertion that a community-centric approach empowers marginalized groups, giving them a platform to shape their cultural legacy and challenge elite-driven narratives.

The assertive responses of spirit mediums also resonate with Legg's (2005) exploration of counter-memories, where marginalized narratives continue to influence local practices. Similarly, Byrne's (2014) reflections on the "numinous" underscore the spiritual dimensions of heritage-making, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding sacred rituals like *Lên đồng* within their sacred contexts. For Mother Goddess practitioners, these rituals are not merely cultural artifacts but deeply spiritual acts that embody their identity and connection to the divine. Any attempt to decontextualize or commodify these practices is seen as a profound distortion of their heritage.

This dynamic interplay between grassroots agency and top-down management exemplifies the fluid and contested nature of heritage politics. As Robertson (2012:2) notes, bottom-up approaches to heritage-making provide "anti-hegemonic possibilities" that empower communities to reclaim their cultural agency. Muzaini and Minca (2018: 9) emphasize that the concept of 'heritage from below' is rooted in the acknowledgment that while top-down, high-profile, and representational approaches to heritage-making play an important role, grassroots, community-driven processes are equally critical. These bottom-up dynamics reveal the fluid and adaptive ways in which local actors interact with their cultural legacies, enabling more inclusive and diverse interpretations of heritage. Such approaches challenge traditional power structures and elite-centric narratives, repositioning heritage as not merely a subject of safeguarding but as a transformative platform for empowerment, resistance, and the reclamation of cultural agency.

The spirit mediums of the Phù Dâй relic site demonstrate this in practice, actively negotiating their rights and asserting their roles as custodians of their heritage. Through the lens of heritage politics from below, it becomes evident that safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is not solely a matter of institutional involvement and management, but also a process of empowering local voices. By challenging top-down regulations and advocating for their autonomy, the practitioners of Mother Goddess worship transform heritage into a platform for their voice, resistance, inclusion, and the reclamation of their legitimacy.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, fieldwork-based research design to explore the dynamics of heritage politics from below within the context of Mother Goddess

worship in Vietnam. A combination of ethnographic tools, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, ensures a holistic understanding of the interplay between grassroots agency of spirit mediums, institutional frameworks, and cultural heritage practices. The research focuses on capturing the real life experiences of practitioners, particularly spirit mediums, and their interactions with broader socio-political and cultural discourses.

Fieldwork was conducted across three key locations: Hà Nội, the Phủ Dầy relic site in Nam Định Province, and Hué over the last over ten years as part of the authors' work associated with heritage management. Hà Nội, as Vietnam's capital, was the center for meetings and workshops on the UNESCO inscription on the practices of Mother Goddess worship and observations on the debates among scholars and spirit mediums on the staged performances of the *Lên đồng* rituals. The Phủ Dầy relic site, regarded as the spiritual center of the belief system, serves as a vital space for observing rituals, community-driven governance, and the negotiation of heritage management practices. Finally, Hué case, specifically during the *Engaging with Vietnam* conference in 2023, offers an essential context for examining the staged performance of *Lên đồng* rituals and the controversies among the spirit mediums and researchers who supported staging the rituals.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two groups of participants: practitioners and experts. Fifteen spirit mediums (*ông đồng* and *bà đồng*) were interviewed to understand their experiences, challenges, and perspectives on the impact of UNESCO's inscription on their practices. Additionally, five experts, including scholars and policymakers, offered insights into the broader governance of intangible cultural heritage and the socio-political dynamics surrounding Mother Goddess worship.

Document analysis supplemented the fieldwork, focusing on legal frameworks, UNESCO conventions, and local policies related to intangible cultural heritage. Media reports and community petitions were also analyzed to contextualize the controversies surrounding heritage management at Phủ Dầy and the staged performances in Hué. These sources provided critical data on the discourse around the commodification and decontextualization of sacred rituals.

This study adopts an analytical framework rooted in the concept of heritage politics from below and critical heritage studies. It examines how marginalized groups, such as the spirit mediums, leverage UNESCO's inscription to challenge institutional hierarchies and advocate for their cultural agency. It also highlights the tensions between top-down heritage governance and community-driven practices, particularly in safeguarding sacred rituals like *Lên đồng*.

The research adhered to the principles of community-centered heritage practices, as outlined in the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, ensuring respect for the sacred contexts and voices of the communities involved. This methodological approach ensures a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complex interactions between grassroots agency and heritage politics from below.

4. Case Studies and Research Results

4.1. Case Study 1: The Inscription by UNESCO: Soft Power of the Mother Goddesses' Adherents and Dialogue with Buddhism

There are different terms for Mother Goddess, including Beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of Three and Four Realms. In this paper, we used the name of the Practices Related to the Việt Beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms, or for short, Mother Goddess worship. The inscription of the Practices of the Mother Goddesses holds particular significance, especially for the custodian communities, including practitioners, temple guardians, ritual assistants, and adherents of the Mother Goddesses. This inscription has not only instilled a sense of pride among these communities but also legitimized the associated rituals, such as the *Lên đồng* spirit possession ritual, which had previously faced societal stigma. The inscription is intended to enhance the visibility of intangible cultural heritage, promote cultural diversity, and foster dialogue, something beyond the awareness of the local practitioners. However, at the local level, the inscription has implications that extend beyond the stated objectives of the 2003 Convention. A critical question arises: *how does the inscription impact the expectations and practices of the spirit mediums?* Throughout the research, it became evident that the societal recognition and validation of their beliefs - held by the general public and national institutions - represent a deeply valued reward for these practitioners.

The inscription also grants the spirit mediums a form of “soft power” that they can wield in dialogues with the government and representatives of other religions. This newfound leverage has been particularly evident in recent interactions with authorities and Buddhist venerables, where the mediums have articulated their perspectives with a stronger sense of legitimacy (Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2021b). The inscription of the Practices of Mother Goddess worship has thus become a catalyst for not only preserving this rich cultural tradition but also

enhancing its societal standing. It bridges gaps between folk religion and institutionalized faiths while fostering dialogue between practitioners, authorities, and other religious communities. This inscription underscores the dynamic and complex nature of Vietnam's cultural and religious landscape, where traditional practices continue to evolve within contemporary frameworks of legitimacy and global heritage discourse.

There are some groups of Buddhist followers who undermined the practices of Mother Goddess worship by preaching at the temple and recording videos to post on social media platforms (These videos and sermons were ordered to be removed by the Government Committee for Religious Affairs and are no longer available). One such video featured a lecture titled "*What is your viewpoint on the Lên đồng ritual?* There are too many fake gods - be careful not to be fooled!" This was delivered by Mrs. Anh, a Buddhist nun from Tam Buddhist temple in Quảng Ninh Province (The name of the Buddhist Temple has been changed for its privacy). The video also displayed text that read: "The Lên đồng ritual is a disease," as a provocative slogan intended to demean a heritage element on the UNESCO list.

This recording was posted on Facebook and sparked fierce protests from spirit mediums, who traveled to and gathered at Tam temple to demand a dialogue with the Venerable and request an apology from him for the offensive words. According to spirit medium Mrs. Trần Kim Hồng, the Buddhist nun's remarks demonstrated a profound misunderstanding of Mother Goddess worship: "She distorted the meaning of the heritage, causing religious division and national disunity" (Facebook post by Kim Hồng - the name has been changed for her privacy - from Phủ Dầy Palace on December 29, 2017). She also argued that the comments had deeply harmed Vietnam's intangible cultural heritage: "The nun's words felt like a sharp knife stabbing my heart and the hearts of others. This time last year, we were filled with happiness and pride when Mother Goddesses worship was officially inscribed by UNESCO on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Now, we are heart broken and enraged" (Facebook post by Kim Hồng - the name has been changed for her privacy - from Phủ Dầy Palace on December 29, 2017).

In response to the incidents at Tam Buddhist temple, adherents of Mother Goddess worship reported the case to the Government Committee for Religious Affairs. The Committee assigned representatives to meet with the adherents at Phủ Dầy Palace, after which both parties were invited to participate in reconciliation talks. The meeting took place at the Committee's Hà Nội office on February 6,

2018, where the authors of this paper attended as observers. Representing the practitioners of Mother Goddess worship, Mrs. Trần Kim Hòng brought historical conferment documents to the meeting to demonstrate that these beliefs had been recognized by feudal states and were inscribed by UNESCO on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. She argued that there was no justification for Tam Buddhist temple to demean or undervalue the practices of Mother Goddess worship.

These events illustrate the strength and unity of the Mother Goddess worship communities. They have proven to be a cohesive, organized group, united in their efforts to defend their heritage through lawful means. Spirit mediums occupy positions across various levels of society, spanning different generations. They might be young or old, intellectuals, businesspeople, or even politicians. When faced with challenges, they come together, leveraging their shared knowledge and dedication to the beliefs to pursue their collective goals effectively.

The Venerable Thích Đức Thanh (The name of the Venerable has been changed for his privacy), General Secretary of the Steering Committee of the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam, referred to the incidents as unfortunate and emphasized the need to avoid similar occurrences in the future. He remarked, “I am surprised by the preaching from the venerables at Tam and other temples. We must learn from these incidents. This also touches on Buddhism’s principle of tolerance. Many temples listed on the National List of Cultural and Historical Sites include temples dedicated to the Mother Goddesses. There is nothing wrong with these beliefs, and we should respect the diversity of religions and beliefs” (This speech delivered by Venerable Thích Đức Thanh during the meeting between the Government Committee for Religious Affairs and the group of spirit mediums on February 6, 2018). The Venerable stressed that these incidents reflected the actions of individuals from Tam temple and that those who spoke wrongly were accountable before both the Mother Goddesses and the Buddha.

The leader of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, who chaired the meeting, concluded that mutual respect for different religions and beliefs was essential. It was recommended that the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam issue an official statement to clarify the situation. They also directed the individuals involved, particularly the Venerable Thích Thái Thành, to reflect on the incident, refrain from making false statements in the future, and remove all related online content, including videos and posts. The chairperson of the meeting emphasized: “We are all children of one homeland”, “The intangible heritage of Mother Goddess

worship should be honored”, and “Those who fail to honor their commitments will be held accountable under the relevant laws”.

Through observations and interviews with spirit medium Mrs. Hồng, it is clear that UNESCO’s inscription has significantly elevated the status of Mother Goddess worship in the eyes of both authorities and the public. During our interview, Mrs. Hồng acknowledged that without UNESCO’s inscription, the dialogue with the Venerable from Tam temple would have been far more challenging. She remarked, “Mother Goddess worship is now widespread and has been inscribed by UNESCO, meaning it is recognized around the world”. She further reflected on the positive outcome of the incident, saying, “As a result of what happened, many people and devotees of the Mother Goddesses have come to know the Mother Goddesses’ house”. Mrs. Hồng even joked, “We should be grateful to Tam temple, because if this incident hadn’t occurred, many others might still be exploiting or disrespecting the name of Mother Goddess worship” (Interview with Mrs. Trần Kim Hồng in April, 2018).

In Vietnam, as well as elsewhere, such as in China, the revival of folk beliefs or popular religions following the renovation era, “signals the strength of local communities to resist the state”. Anagnos (1994: 241) argues that the voices of practitioners are symbolic of them reclaiming their own space and right to practice their beliefs. Meanwhile, Chau asserted that for local communities to be negotiating with, and resisting, the state at all is “proof of the resurgence of communal power during the reform era” (Chau, 2005: 241). In China, religious leaders are regarded as local elites who “occupy positions of prominence in local society because of their wealth, formal political position, informal political influence, social connections, moral authority, education, ritual knowledge, experience, and leadership abilities, or a combination of these factors” (Chau 2005: 242).

The UNESCO inscription has served as a powerful tool for marginalized practitioners, providing them with a formal and internationally recognized framework to assert their rights. For a long time the Lên đồng ritual was dismissed as “baseless” and “nonsense” in atheistic, communist Vietnam. For decades, spirit mediums faced systemic dismissal. This marginalization extended to cultural, religious, and social spheres, leaving them in a disadvantaged position compared to adherents of more established religions like Buddhism, which is still the case even today.

However, UNESCO’s inscription has emboldened the practitioners, enabling

them to challenge such discrimination with a renewed sense of legitimacy. Armed with this international acknowledgment, the practitioners can now engage in dialogues with state authorities and religious institutions, demanding equal treatment and respect for their heritage. This newfound confidence not only amplifies the voices of the marginalized but also provides them with a legal and cultural basis to advocate for their rights. The UNESCO inscription has not only validated their practices but has also given them the confidence and tools to demand equality, redefining their position within the religious and cultural fabric of Vietnam. This is a testament to the transformative power of cultural heritage in fostering social and religious equity.

Research Result 1: The Inscription by UNESCO: Soft Power of the Mother Goddesses' Adherents and Dialogue with Buddhism

The UNESCO inscription of the Practices of the Mother Goddesses has transformed a once-marginalized belief into a legitimized heritage, enabling practitioners to assert cultural authority in both public and institutional arenas. The 2017 conflict with Tam Buddhist Temple exposed entrenched prejudices but also marked a turning point: spirit mediums, invoking the inscription, mobilized collectively and entered into structured dialogue with state and religious authorities. This episode demonstrates how global recognition empowered local actors not only to defend their practices but also to reshape interreligious dynamics through lawful advocacy and symbolic legitimacy. The case underscores how heritage inscription can function as a form of soft power, strengthening community agency, enabling engagement with power structures, and advancing pluralism in Vietnam's contested religious landscape.

4.2. Case Study 2: Regulations on Management of the Phù Dâй relic site in Vũ Bán District, Nam Định Province

In Vietnam, there is a comprehensive management system from central to local levels for historical and cultural temples, cultural practices, and cultural heritage, particularly for heritage elements listed under UNESCO's heritage conventions (1972 and 2003) and included on the national heritage register. This system significantly increases the involvement and oversight of governmental agencies and heritage experts. In essence, heritage has been institutionalized, subjected to multi-dimensional influences from management authorities, experts, and local participants. However, the degree of intervention and management varies

across heritage elements.

Some heritage sites are state-managed, with authorities overseeing activities ranging from temple restoration to organizing traditional festivals within temple spaces. Other heritage elements remain under community and practitioner management, where local stakeholders independently organize activities. A notable example is Phù Dầy, where the local community has self-managed the site for decades, even though regulations dictate this should fall under state management. Rather than comply with top-down directives from state leaders, managers, or experts, adherents/practitioners at the Phù Dầy relic site have resisted and demanded their right to manage the temples and associated heritage practices themselves. They argued that they had successfully managed the site for nearly half a century and had been instrumental in its restoration and development into the well-preserved complex it is today (Nguyễn Thị Hiền, 2021b).

The dispute was fuelled by Decision No. 06/2015/QD-UBND, issued on January 6, 2015, by the People's Committee of Vụ Bản District, Nam Định Province. This regulation aimed to reform the management of the complex, improve state supervision, and empower the local residential community as cultural stakeholders to directly participate in relic and festival management. The goal was to prevent the privatization of heritage sites while enhancing government and community responsibility in safeguarding the Mother Goddess practices. Despite these intentions, the regulation faced strong opposition from temple custodians and prefectures at Phù Dầy. Critics argued that it was implemented without prior discussion, debate, or consensus with the community - particularly the custodians who have long overseen the temples.

The regulation itself comprises six chapters and 18 articles. Articles 9, 10, and 11 outline the responsibilities of state management agencies, including Vụ Bản District and the People's Committee of Kim Thái Commune. Chapter IV, Article 12, specifies the tasks, standards, conditions, and procedures for selecting and appointing abbots to oversee relic management. Appointed individuals are required to participate in restoration plans, manage donations according to legal provisions, facilitate visitor access, and comply with directives from relevant agencies. These provisions strictly regulate activities under the supervision of agencies, the Festival Organizing Committee, and the Management Board. However, the regulation has sparked significant debate and opposition from temple custodians, the guardians of Phù Dầy, and adherents of Mother Goddess worship. The lack of community involvement in drafting and approving the regulation has been a bone of contention,

further highlighting the tension between state-led management and community autonomy in heritage safeguarding.

The management of the Phù Dầy relic site has sparked significant debate due to the lack of community involvement in the decision-making process. The imposition of state-led management at Phù Dầy, without prior consultation, triggered strong resistance from local practitioners who had long safeguarded the site. The failure of Decision No. 06/2015/QD-UBND to gain community consensus revealed deep tensions between institutional control and grassroots heritage stewardship. This case highlights the limits of top-down governance and affirms the need for participatory approaches that respect community agency in heritage management.

Research Result 2: Regulations on Management of the Phù Dầy relic site in Vụ Bản District, Nam Định Province

The case of Phù Dầy highlights the complexities surrounding heritage administration in Vietnam, where tensions between state-led governance and community autonomy continue to shape policy outcomes. The resistance to Decision No. 06/2015/QD-UBND underscores a broader pattern of contestation in heritage governance, where local communities challenge state interventions perceived as disruptive to long-standing cultural practices. The custodians and practitioners of Phù Dầy argue that they have successfully managed the site for nearly half a century, playing an instrumental role in its restoration and preservation. They view state-imposed regulations as unnecessary and counterproductive, especially given their historical commitment to safeguarding the site. This resistance reflects a fundamental disconnect between top-down policy implementation and the actual experiences of heritage practitioners. This case demonstrates that policies formulated without meaningful community engagement are unlikely to achieve their intended outcomes. Instead, they risk alienating local stakeholders and fostering conflicts that hinder the effective preservation of cultural heritage. The ongoing contestation over Phù Dầy highlights the need for a more participatory approach to heritage governance, one that prioritizes community inclusion and recognizes the legitimacy of local knowledge and practices.

4.3. Case Study 3: Spirit Possession Rituals of Lên đồng on stage in Hué

The spirit possession ritual outside the Mother Goddess pantheon is often performed for various purposes as a form of folk art. However, the staging of spirit

mediumship in Hué has become a controversial issue, drawing significant media attention and the involvement of heritage management authorities due to initial objections from practitioners and contentious debates in the *Lao Động* (*Labor*) newspaper. The timeline of events is as follows: on August 2, 2023, the National Department of Cultural Heritage (*Cục Di sản văn hóa*) received reports from several master practitioners (*nghệ nhân*) and adherents of Mother Goddess worship about a staged performance of spirit mediumship, including a demonstration of spirit mediums' costumes, at the opening ceremony of the International Fine Arts Exhibition held at the Hué University - University of the Arts.

The organizing team collaborated with a group of spirit mediums from the North (mostly from Hà Nội). However, staging such a performance of the *Lên đồng* ritual in Hué City without the participation of local spirit mediums sparked discontent among community members. The fact that the event featured only a small group of about 10 spirit mediums - without broad consultation or consensus - raised sensitive concerns about representation, inclusion, and decision-making: who gets to participate, and who is invited to such a significant public event. Immediately after the performance, the backlash came from within the practitioner community itself, including phone calls and formal letters of protest addressed to the Department of Cultural Heritage.

In response, on August 3, 2023, the National Department of Cultural Heritage issued Official Dispatch No. 807/DSVH-PVT to the Department of Culture and Sports of Thừa Thiên Hué, calling for corrective measures regarding the *Lên đồng* activity on the university campus. The dispatch stated: "Based on the provisions of the Law on Cultural Heritage and the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, this activity misrepresents the heritage element by performing it outside its traditional setting. The use of heritage elements for performance purposes in this manner does not align with the true nature and traditional characteristics of the heritage". At this point, the issue might have been resolved with no further discussion. However, starting on 17 August, 2023, *Lao Động* newspaper published a series of articles featuring expert opinions that disagreed with the stance taken by the National Department of Cultural Heritage. The articles argued in favor of performing *Lên đồng* on stage and in public spaces as a way to promote, interpret, and recreate heritage for a wider audience.

These expert opinions sparked strong opposition from master practitioners and practitioners of Mother Goddess worship. On the same day, 17 August, 2023, the National Department of Cultural Heritage received 54 petitions from

practitioners and community representatives, condemning the staging of the *Lên đồng* ritual as a form of performance art. They argued that such acts amounted to “insulting” the sanctity of Mother Goddess worship (Report by the National Department of Cultural Heritage on the incident of *Lên đồng* performance in Hué City, 2023). This controversy underscores the deep sensitivities surrounding the practice of *Lên đồng* in Hué. The debate highlights the broader tension between the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage in its context and efforts to promote and reinterpret heritage for public appreciation.

From an institutional perspective, various legal and ethical frameworks - such as the Law on Cultural Heritage, the Law on Beliefs and Religions, the 2003 UNESCO Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage and its implementation guidelines, Decree 98/2010/ND-CP on the implementation of the Law on Cultural Heritage, and UNESCO’s ethical principles for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage - provide clear guidance on the appropriate practice of *Lên đồng*. These frameworks emphasize that such a ritual must remain within its religious context and require the consent of the broader community.

The performance of *Lên đồng* rituals outside the sacred space of Mother Goddess worship violates these principles, as it removes the practice from its inherent cultural and spiritual context. This lack of alignment with tradition and community consent undermines the integrity of the ritual. Therefore, most recently, Official Dispatch No. 2973/BVHTTDL-DSVH, issued on 21 July, 2023, reinforced these standards by directing cultural authorities in provinces and cities. This dispatch highlights the critical importance of respecting the practices of the community bearers in their context, and community-centered approach to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Also, in a private conversation between the author of this paper and Dr. Frank Proschan, former senior expert at the Secretariat of the 2003 Convention, the latter remarked, “A fashion show is very different from a sacred ritual. While it seems that some mediums agreed to participate, others have criticized the event. This suggests that the organizers did not adequately secure the free, prior, and informed consent of the broader *Lên đồng* community” (The co-author of this paper, Nguyễn Thị Hiền’s private conversation with Frank Proschan on the spirit possession in Hué City, August 2023).

All activities related to the heritage, from preparing the dossier for UNESCO to its identification, inventory, and the proposed safeguarding measures, have always emphasized broad, voluntary, prior, and informed participation. Moreover, Principle 10 of the 12 Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural

Heritage under the UNESCO 2003 Convention states: “Communities, groups, and, where applicable, individuals should play a significant role in determining what constitutes threats to their intangible cultural heritage, including its decontextualization, commodification, and misrepresentation, and in deciding how to prevent and mitigate such threats” (UNESCO, 2003).

The performance of spirit mediums and showcasing their costumes in Hué City does not qualify as “heritage” under UNESCO’s Conventions. For Mother Goddess practitioners, staged performances of Lên đồng rituals as a performance Hué is perceived as an “insult” to the spirits and a disregard for the customs of this sacred heritage. For instance, before donning the robes or using objects related to each altar, practitioners must perform the *thur huong* ritual, a sacred act of empowering the costumes and items with the presence of the spirits. According to spirit mediums, these robes and items must “reside” within the temple space or at the place designated for “welcoming the saints” during related festivals - a location believed to be safeguarded by “heavenly soldiers, generals, and armies.” This reflects the understanding of these spaces as sacred, spiritual realms that embody the cultural and spiritual essence of the heritage (The opinion of a Master Practitioner (*Nghệ nhân ưu tú*) and spirit medium master (*đồng thầy*) in Hanoi, August 2023).

Thus, the Lên đồng ritual within the sacred context of the Mother Goddess pantheon is fundamentally tied to its cultural, spiritual, and ritualistic essence. These rituals are not merely performances but are sacred acts of faith, spiritual connection, and obligation. Moving Lên đồng out of its traditional context and into public or staged performances, such as those in Hué, fundamentally alters its meaning and integrity. Such rituals affirm the sanctity of the practice, ensuring that the robes, items, and sacred spaces remain under the divine protection of the spirits and the community’s collective respect. The temple or worship space itself is considered a spiritual realm safeguarded by divine forces, reinforcing the deep interconnection between place, ritual, and belief.

Performing Lên đồng outside these sacred spaces undermines its spiritual significance. These staged performances often disregard critical rituals, such as the empowerment of costumes and objects, and fail to convey the genuine spiritual connection that defines the practice. For adherents, such depictions are seen as a commodification of their faith and a distortion of their sacred customs, reducing deeply meaningful rituals to mere entertainment or spectacle.

This dissonance is further highlighted by the principles set forth in the 2003 UNESCO Convention. The Convention emphasizes the importance of safeguarding

heritage in its sacred context, avoiding decontextualization and commodification. The Law on Cultural Heritage in Vietnam also aligns with this perspective, advocating for practices that respect the heritage's traditional characteristics and ensuring the community's informed and consensual participation in any activity involving the heritage.

Hué's staged *Lên đồng* performance Hué provoked strong reactions from practitioners and experts alike. While some viewed it as an opportunity to promote and interpret heritage, others - particularly adherents of Mother Goddess worship - saw it as an affront to their beliefs and traditions. The debate surrounding *Lên đồng* on stage in this way highlights a broader issue of balancing heritage promotion with preservation. While efforts to raise awareness about intangible cultural heritage are valuable, they must not come at the expense of spiritual integrity. The Mother Goddess pantheon and its associated rituals demand not only respect for their sacred nature but also adherence to their traditional practice spaces. These rituals, deeply rooted in faith and community, should remain within the sacred spaces that have nurtured and preserved their meaning for generations,

Research Result 3: Spirit Possession Rituals of *Lên đồng* on stage in Hué

The staging of *Lên đồng* rituals in Hué during the International Fine Arts Exhibition sparked significant controversy, drawing attention to the tensions between heritage preservation and public performance. This issue underscored the deep sensitivities surrounding the decontextualization of sacred rituals and the broader implications of commodifying intangible cultural heritage. The performance, which included costume demonstrations, was perceived by practitioners as a misrepresentation of the rituals. The event violated key principles outlined in the 2003 UNESCO Convention by removing the rituals from their spiritual and cultural context. This lack of alignment with tradition provoked strong reactions from the community, resulting in the submission of 54 petitions to the National Department of Cultural Heritage. Practitioners argued that the performance amounted to an "insult" to their heritage, reducing deeply meaningful rituals to entertainment devoid of spiritual authenticity.

The controversy revealed gaps in ensuring informed community participation in decisions involving intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO's ethical principles for safeguarding heritage emphasize the need for community consent, particularly regarding activities that alter traditional practices or contexts. As Dr. Frank Proschan noted, the absence of broad, prior, and informed consent from the *Lên đồng* community undermined the legitimacy of the staged performance. The ritual's integrity relies on its performance within sacred spaces, which are imbued with

spiritual meaning and safeguarded by community traditions.

The controversy surrounding this performance in Hué illustrates the challenges of preserving intangible cultural heritage in a globalized context. It highlights the critical need for adherence to ethical and legal frameworks that prioritize community consent and respect for traditional practices. Ultimately, the preservation of Lên đồng rituals depends on maintaining their sacred nature and cultural authenticity, ensuring that they remain deeply rooted in the spaces and communities that have nurtured them for generations.

5. Discussions

5.1. Addressing the abovementioned questions:

Question 1: How do the spirit mediums of Mother Goddess worship leverage UNESCO's inscription to negotiate socio-political recognition and equal status among other state-recognized religions such as Buddhism?

The inscription of the Practices related to the Beliefs in Mother Goddess of the Three Realms by UNESCO has significantly contributed to the socio-political positioning of its practitioners, particularly the spirit mediums, within Vietnam's religious and cultural landscape. Historically marginalized and often labelled as superstitious, the adherents of Mother Goddess worship have utilized UNESCO's inscription as a tool to challenge stigmatization and assert their legitimacy alongside state-recognized religions. The case also illustrated the shifting power dynamics in Vietnam's religious sphere. While Buddhism and other state-recognized religions have traditionally dominated the discourse, the elevation of Mother Goddess worship through UNESCO has disrupted this hierarchy, allowing its practitioners to demand equal status.

Question 2: What are the implications of staging rituals, such as Lên đồng, outside their sacred performing contexts for the integrity and meaning of intangible cultural heritage for the bearers?

The practice of staging Lên đồng rituals outside their sacred context raises critical concerns about the integrity and meaning of intangible cultural heritage for the bearers. As a possession ritual deeply rooted in the veneration of deities within Mother Goddess worship, Lên đồng rituals carry a complex array of symbolic, religious, and social meanings for their practitioners. When performed outside temple spaces, the rituals risk being reduced to a mere spectacle, detached from its

devotional purpose. This transformation can undermine the religious practice, turning it into a performance devoid of its spiritual and communal dimensions.

Question 3: How do top-down heritage management policies conflict with community-driven practices in the safeguarding of the Mother Goddess worship at the Phù Dầy relic site?

The safeguarding of Mother Goddess worship at Phù Dầy has become a contested space between institutional heritage governance and community-driven practices. The conflict between top-down heritage management policies and local custodians' self-management traditions illustrates broader tensions in the administration of intangible cultural heritage in Vietnam. This issue is particularly evident in cases where state-imposed regulations override or marginalize the roles of practitioners and custodians who have historically maintained these traditions. The regulatory frameworks applied to Phù Dầy have been criticized for failing to respect the community-led practices, replacing them with bureaucratic oversight that does not align with the spiritual or cultural priorities of the worshippers.

5.2. Regarding Research Methodology

This study adopts qualitative research methodologies to explore the real life experiences and perspectives of practitioners engaged in the Practices of the Mother Goddesses, specifically focusing on the voices of heritage bearers - the spirit mediums. Qualitative methods were particularly suitable for this research due to their effectiveness in capturing the rich, detailed, and context-specific insights of individuals whose experiences have historically been marginalized or misunderstood.

Fieldwork, which included ethnographic participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, was employed across multiple significant sites, such as at Phù Dầy in Nam Định Province, Hà Nội, and Hué. Participant observation allowed researchers to directly engage with, and understand, the spiritual and cultural dimensions of Lên đồng rituals, observing firsthand how these rituals functioned within their sacred contexts. This method was instrumental in uncovering the intricate interplay between heritage practices, practitioner agency, and broader socio-political dynamics.

Additionally, document analysis of relevant legal texts, UNESCO conventions, and local policy documents provided critical context and supported a more comprehensive understanding of the tensions between top-down heritage

governance and grassroots practices. Analyzing media discourses and community petitions further enriched the study, demonstrating how heritage politics from below involves active negotiation, contestation, and advocacy on the part of the heritage bearers themselves.

5.3. Regarding the Research Theme on Politics from Below in the Practice, Safeguarding, and Governance of Mother Goddess Worship

The concept of politics from below offers a crucial framework for understanding the active role of spirit mediums and adherents in shaping the governance, safeguarding, and practice of Mother Goddess worship in Vietnam. Unlike conventional heritage management models that prioritize top-down state policies and expert interventions, politics from below foregrounds grassroots agency, resistance, and negotiation strategies of local communities in their heritage-making process. In the case of Mother Goddess worship, this framework illuminates how spirit mediums have actively contested marginalization, asserted religious legitimacy, and negotiated power within the broader socio-political landscape.

6. Conclusion

The concept of politics from below highlights the dynamism and agency of local communities in shaping the governance and practice of their heritage, as seen in the case of Mother Goddess worship in Vietnam. The UNESCO inscription of the Practices of the Mother Goddesses was initially intended to raise awareness and foster respect for this heritage on both national and international levels (UNESCO, 2003). While these goals align with the objectives of the 2003 Convention, the inscription has also become a strategic tool for spirit mediums - particularly those at Phủ Dầy, the central Palace dedicated to the Mother Goddesses - to assert their rights and advocate for equality in the religious landscape.

By leveraging UNESCO's inscription, these practitioners have gained legitimacy, enabling them to engage in dialogue with state authorities and dominant religious institutions like Buddhism. This soft power has provided them with a formal framework to resist marginalization, challenge hierarchical management systems, and assert their role as active custodians of their heritage. This dynamic demonstrates that heritage is not merely a top-down construct imposed by global or national systems but is also actively shaped and defended by local communities

who live and breathe these traditions.

At Phù Dây, the failure of state-led management policies underscores the critical importance of community consensus in heritage governance. Decision-making processes that exclude the voices of temple custodians - those who have preserved and managed the space for decades - inevitably face resistance and remain unenforceable. The adherents of Mother Goddess worship demand not only recognition of their rights to manage their sacred spaces but also acknowledgment of their authority as the creators and practitioners of this heritage.

The case of Phù Dây illustrates how politics from below can empower marginalized groups to challenge top-down governance and claim their rightful place in heritage management. These spirit mediums have demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability, turning the UNESCO inscription into a means of not only safeguarding their practices, but also asserting their agency in a complex heritage regime. They embody the principle that heritage belongs first and foremost to its community, and their voices must be central in any decision-making process.

Ultimately, the spirit mediums' response exemplifies the transformative power of politics from below in redefining relationships between local practitioners, the state, and global heritage frameworks. It calls for a more inclusive approach that respects community autonomy and ensures that safeguarding efforts are rooted in the lived realities of heritage practitioners. In this way, the community of spirit mediums continues to play a proactive role in managing, practicing, and safeguarding their heritage on their own terms, reinforcing their cultural identity and equality within Vietnam's religious and social fabric.

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