



The Worship of Tứ vị Thánh Nương in Hoàng Tiến Commune, Thanh Hóa Province: Religious Practice and Transformation in the Context of Coastal Tourism

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ABSTRACT: The worship of Tứ vị Thánh Nương (Four Holy Mothers) in the coastal commune of Hoàng Tiến, Thanh Hóa, represents a distinctive fusion of maritime protection beliefs and Vietnamese folk religion. Rooted in the 13th-century legend of the Southern Song dynasty's collapse, the worship of these deities has been localized and integrated into the spiritual life of coastal communities. This paper examines the contemporary practice and transformation of Tứ vị Thánh Nương worship in Hoàng Tiến, with a particular focus on Nghè Đò and its annual ritual activities. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and observations of ritual practices, the study explores the current role and significance of the belief in the local community and examines how coastal tourism development has affected its sacred space, management, ritual practices, and community participation. The study argues that, despite the decline in the scale of ritual activities and the loss of historical and material evidence, the worship of Tứ vị Thánh Nương continues to be maintained through ritual practices, collective memory, community participation, and narratives of spiritual efficacy. At the same time, tourism development has created new conditions for the adaptation of the religious site, generating both opportunities for its preservation and promotion and changes in its organization and contemporary practice.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The worship of Tứ vị Thánh Nương (Four Holy Mothers) is one of the distinctive maritime religious traditions among coastal communities in North-Central Vietnam. As guardian deities of seafarers, Tứ vị Thánh Nương have long been present in the spiritual life of fishing communities through a system of temples, festivals, and religious rituals. However, the significance of this belief extends beyond its functions of seeking safety and protection for fishing activities. Through ritual practices and ceremonial performances, the worship of Tứ vị Thánh Nương contributes to preserving the community's historical memories, strengthening social relationships, and reaffirming the cultural identity of coastal communities. In the contemporary context, as many traditional cultural elements are increasingly recognized as resources for sustainable development, the worship of Tứ vị Thánh Nương also participates in processes of heritage-making and the promotion of local cultural identity.

Specialized studies on the worship of Tứ vị Thánh Nương (Four Holy Mothers) in Vietnam remain relatively limited. Most studies discuss Tứ vị Thánh Nương within the broader contexts of Mother Goddess worship, the Three/Four Palaces tradition, and local goddess cults. Available direct evidence indicates that the worship of Tứ vị Thánh Nương is concentrated primarily in several coastal

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communities in northern and north-central Vietnam, and has subsequently expanded from fishing communities to agricultural areas and contemporary social groups (Tran, 2021).

The origin of this worship is generally associated with Cờn Temple in Nghệ An, a well-known sacred site in Central Vietnam within the Vietnamese Mother Goddess tradition. According to legend, Tứ vị Thánh Nương comprised a concubine, a princess of the Southern Song dynasty, and two female attendants. After the fall of the Southern Song, their bodies drifted to the Vietnamese coast, where coastal communities worshipped them as sea goddesses who protected fishermen and seafarers (Lý Tế Xuyên, 1960: 66–67). The worship is also associated with the history of territorial expansion of Vietnam. When King Lê Thánh Tông launched a military campaign against Champa, he stopped at Cờn Hải to pray for the goddesses' protection and, in gratitude for their assistance, bestowed upon them the title: “Đại Càn Thánh Nương Quốc Gia, Nam Hải tứ vị thượng đẳng Thần” (Trịnh Thị Tâm, 2011: 18–19). This event subsequently became an important point of departure for a form of sea-goddess worship among communities living along the Vietnamese coast, which developed into various local forms of Tứ vị Thánh Nương worship (Trần Quốc Tuấn, 2013: 41). Over time, this belief was also adopted in agricultural communities and has expanded to various contemporary social groups, including entrepreneurs, government officials, and urban residents, who seek safety and spiritual protection (Tran, 2021).

Based on previous research, one scholar has proposed a hypothesis concerning the transformation of Tứ vị worship. The earliest layer of this belief may have involved fish worship, with “cá” (fish) associated with “Cờn/Càn (kàn),” a term of Austronesian origin. Tứ vị were subsequently sacralized as celestial maidens and transformed into female sea deities (goddesses or Holy Mothers). At a later stage, the worship of fish and female sea deities absorbed influences from Chinese and Đại Việt cultures and possibly the Champa pantheon, leading to the personification and historicization of a system of human deities who were officially recognized by the feudal court through various titles (Ngô Đức Thịnh, 2000: 58; Nguyễn Xuân Hương, 2012: 177). Based on another legend concerning the origin of Cờn Temple, which involves a sacred piece of driftwood, another study suggests that Tứ vị worship may have originated from the veneration of sacred objects washed ashore, with the worship of people who died at sea being a relatively common phenomenon among water-based communities (Trương Minh Hằng, 2011).

Within the broader context, studies generally regard Mother Goddess worship as an indigenous Vietnamese belief system that developed into the Three Palaces and Four Palaces traditions, incorporating influences from Taoism and Buddhism (Van, 2020; Mut, 2021; Tran, 2024). This belief system addresses practical human concerns, including health, prosperity, and protection, while also displaying considerable regional diversity and transformation in the contemporary context. It is closely associated with the veneration of feminine power, fertility, and women's dignity and, according to some interpretations, may also express resistance to Confucian patriarchal values (Tran, 2024; Nizhnikov, 2023; Kim, 2024). In addition, “the veneration of Tứ vị Thánh Nương as tutelary deities of a coastal village also partly demonstrates the reverence for the Mother, closely associated with people's aspirations for peace and happiness” (Lê Kim Lữ & Phạm Quỳnh Phương, 2000: 317).

Recent studies also indicate that Mother Goddess worship and the Four Palaces tradition have gradually gained recognition as cultural heritage, particularly following the inscription of the Vietnamese practice of worshipping the Mother Goddesses of the Three Realms by UNESCO in 2016. However, significant gaps remain in research on Tứ vị Thánh Nương, as direct studies are still scarce, while most existing scholarship discusses this belief primarily as part of the broader Vietnamese Mother Goddess tradition (Senepin, 2021; Tran, 2024; Hoang, 2025).

A prominent ritual within Mother Goddess worship is lên đồng (hầu đồng), a spirit-possession ritual incorporating music, dance, ceremonial costumes, and offerings (Senepin, 2021; Van, 2020; Dung, 2024). The ritual system also encompasses festivals and regular ceremonies held at temples and shrines, reflecting a rich religious life closely connected with sacred local spaces such as Phủ Dầy (Tuyết, 2023; Senepin, 2021).

Tran (2021) is the only study in the reviewed literature to directly examine Tứ vị Thánh Nương worship at Cờn Temple in Nghệ An, focusing on its legends, transformations within the worshipping community, and the pursuit of spiritual security. Other studies primarily provide contextual perspectives on Mother Goddess worship and the Four Palaces tradition, including the influence of Taoism (Mut, 2021), the indigenous character of the belief system (Tran et al., 2024), locality and heritagization (Senepin, 2021), and regional development (Nguyen et al., 2024).

Recent studies suggest that the worship of Tứ vị Thánh Nương has evolved from a primarily maritime protective function toward a broader role in helping people cope with the uncertainties of contemporary life (Tran, 2021). Studies of Thanh Hóa further emphasize that these rituals are not only religious practices but also constitute resources for cultural and spiritual tourism. Maintaining the authenticity of ritual practices has direct implications for the sustainability of local economic development (Shouhong Xuan, 2025). In Thanh Hóa, studies of coastal villages indicate that the worship of Tứ vị Thánh Nương is relatively widespread. According to *Thanh Hóa Chư Thần Lục*, there were 81 places of worship dedicated to Tứ vị Thánh Nương in Thanh Hóa before 1945. This number has reportedly increased to 94 villages across 11 districts of the province, with the highest concentration found in Tĩnh Gia, Hoằng Hóa, Quảng Xương, Nga Sơn, and other areas. The deities are believed to be particularly widely worshipped in estuarine and tidal-channel areas opening onto the sea, such as Lạch Bạng, Lạch Mom, and Lạch Vích. According to available statistics, there are 16 sites dedicated to Tứ vị Thánh Nương in the coastal villages of Thanh Hóa. The four deities were conferred the title of Thượng đẳng thần (Highest-ranking Deities), with the honorific title *Đại Càn Quốc gia Nam Hải Tứ vị Thánh Nương* (Hoàng Bá Tường,

2022). This widespread transmission from Nghệ An to Thanh Hóa is reflected in the local saying, “Bà Cờn từ Nghệ ra Thanh” (Lady Cờn came from Nghệ An to Thanh Hóa) (Lê Thái Phúc, 2016: 88).

The studies discussed above suggest that the worship of Tứ vị Thánh Nương represents a syncretic formation involving multiple natural, cultural, and historical elements, ranging from Vietnamese folk beliefs to historical influences from China. However, these “foreign” elements were thoroughly localized and integrated into Vietnamese cultural contexts, becoming an established form of religious practice in coastal communities. At the same time, given that Cờn Temple in Nghệ An had already been associated with whale worship - a belief strongly characteristic of coastal communities - the subsequent incorporation of Tứ vị Thánh Nương worship further sacralized and expanded the protective religious sphere surrounding maritime life. These developments can also be situated within a broader historical context of the expansion of maritime activities, including fishing, seafood processing, and maritime trade, particularly the growth of commercial ports in Vietnam.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Hoàng Tiến Commune, formerly part of the former Hoàng Hóa District, is one of the coastal communes of Thanh Hóa Province. Following the recent reorganization of the local administrative system into a two-tier structure, the new commune was formed through the merger of three former coastal communes - Hoàng Tiến, Hoàng Hải, and Hoàng Trường - and one inland commune, Hoàng Yên. With its eastern side bordering the sea and its dense river network, including the Mã and Lạch Trường Rivers, the area has favorable conditions for boat traffic and maritime fishing. As a result, coastal areas of the commune have developed a strong fishing economy. The area is also located near the Gò Trũng archaeological site, across the Lạch Trường River, associated with the Đa Bút culture dating back approximately 7,000 years, as well as a later phase of the Đa Bút cultural tradition associated with coastal communities engaged in fishing and hunting.

This study employed an ethnographic approach to examine the worship of Tứ vị Thánh Nương in Hoàng Tiến Commune, Thanh Hóa Province. Fieldwork was conducted in April 2026 through site observations, 15 in-depth interviews, and four group discussions with local residents, ritual practitioners, caretakers, fishermen, and other relevant informants. Particular attention was paid to Nghè Đò, its ritual space, annual ceremonies, forms of community participation, and its relationship with tourism development. Field observations focused on ritual practices, offerings, sacred objects, festival activities, and interactions among local communities, tourism actors, and the sacred site. The collected materials were analyzed qualitatively from an anthropological perspective, with emphasis on the processes of localization, continuity, adaptation, and transformation of religious practices.

3. RESULTS

3.1. The Sacred Space of Nghè Đò in Hoàng Tiến Commune

Nghè Đò is a religious structure located along the coast, with its main façade facing the sea, approximately 3 km south of the Lạch Trường estuary. According to accounts provided by elderly members of the local community, Nghè Đò is a sacred site with a long history. However, over time, and as a result of changes in the state’s policies concerning the management of religious and belief practices during different historical periods, the shrine was demolished. It was not until November 1991, in response to the wishes of the local community, that Nghè Đò was reconstructed. Local residents and coastal communities from neighboring communes contributed financially to its reconstruction, enabling it to resume its function as a sacred space dedicated to the worship of Tứ vị Thánh Nương and as a site for religious practices among local coastal residents and communities from surrounding coastal areas.

Regarding the worship space, according to local accounts, in the past, boats traveling from the Sầm Sơn coastal area to the Hoàng Hóa coast had to navigate around Hòn Bò, while boats from Hậu Lộc² heading toward this area also had to cross the Lạch Trường estuary. This geographical position has contributed to making Nghè Đò a religious destination for fishermen from various coastal communities, not only those of Hoàng Tiến but also fishermen from Sầm Sơn, Ngư Lộc³, and surrounding areas. Before setting out to sea or after returning to shore, many boat owners still visit the shrine to burn incense and pray for calm seas, favorable fishing conditions, and safe journeys.

According to accounts from elderly local residents, Nghè Đò was formerly constructed in a traditional architectural style, consisting of three main compartments and two lean-to sections. The worship space comprised three principal altars: one dedicated to the Mother Goddess, one to Buddha, and one to the Council of Mandarins. Two imposing Guardian Statues (*Hộ pháp*) were placed in front of the entrance, contributing to the solemnity of the sacred site. Now, it is just 3m², showing the great change in the worship space.

Fieldwork findings show that although Nghè Đò is identified as a place of worship dedicated to Tứ vị Thánh Nương, its current religious space differs from many other sites dedicated to these deities. Inside the shrine, there is currently only one statue of a female deity dressed in red. Beside it are a Buddhist devotional painting and a model dragon boat, all situated within a relatively

² Hậu Lộc is an old district which has 6 coastal area communes in Thanh Hóa province

³ Sầm Sơn is a tourism-oriented city, while Ngư Lộc is a coastal commune in Thanh Hóa Province, formerly under the administration of Hậu Lộc District.

modest worship space. During fieldwork, the shrine caretaker explained that the information she knows about the history of the shrine was passed down to her through oral accounts from previous generations. She has little knowledge of the specific tradition of worship or of why only a single statue is currently enshrined there.

These observations indicate certain transformations in the organization of the worship space and the symbolic representation of the deities being worshipped. They also raise questions that warrant further investigation into the historical development and contemporary transformation of Tứ vị Thánh Nương worship in the local context.

Regarding ritual activities at Nghè Đỏ, the annual ritual calendar includes the Lễ mộc dục (ritual bathing of the sacred statue) on the 24th day of the twelfth lunar month, the Lễ húy kỵ (commemorative death anniversary) on the 15th day of the first lunar month, and rituals held on the first day of each lunar month.

The annual death anniversary of Tứ vị Thánh Nương is observed on the 15th day of the first lunar month. In the past, the two fishing villages of Man and Hải in Hoàng Tiến Commune jointly contributed offerings and organized the commemorative festival. The offerings primarily consisted of *xôi oản* (sticky rice and ritual cakes), fruit, and chicken. Prior to the Lễ húy kỵ, on the 24th day of the twelfth lunar month, the shrine caretaker performed the Lễ mộc dục, or ritual bathing of the sacred statue. During the early days of the lunar New Year, the shrine remained open regularly so that local residents could burn incense and perform rituals. The main sacrificial ceremony was held in the morning. On this occasion, the shrine also held a ritual of cooking and distributing rice porridge as offerings to wandering spirits and in remembrance of those who had died at sea. After the ritual, local residents used coconut shells that they had prepared beforehand to collect the porridge and take it home. According to local belief, those who collected more porridge would have greater good fortune, a successful fishing season, and a prosperous year. This practice not only expresses faith in divine protection but also reflects gratitude toward the deceased and a spirit of sharing among members of the fishing community. At present, this ritual practice is gradually being revived to encourage greater participation and engagement among local residents and fishermen in the religious activities of the shrine.

Notably, even when Nghè Đỏ was demolished in 2001 to make way for a project to expand the area for tourism development, the worship of Tứ vị Thánh Nương continued. According to Ms. T., the shrine caretaker, fishermen from Ngư Lộc Commune continued to return to the former site to conduct rituals on the main festival day, on the original grounds of the sacred site. However, because the ceremony, which included the full set of ritual procedures, traditional ceremonial music and drums, and a ritual procession, had not been authorized by the relevant authorities, the ritual group was fined VND 5 million by the Hoàng Tiến Commune authorities. This event demonstrates that although the material space of the sacred site had been disrupted, the community continued to preserve its collective memory and traditional religious practices independently of the physical structure of the shrine. At the same time, it reveals certain tensions between the community's desire to preserve cultural practices and the mechanisms governing festivals and religious activities under local administrative regulations at that time. In 2005, Tourism Company 126 invited a Buddhist monk from Trúc Lâm Zen Monastery to conduct a ceremony to reconsecrate and reopen the shrine after its reconstruction.

Due to the relatively small worship space at Nghè Đỏ, activities currently focus primarily on the ritual component, without the festive component found in some other localities. The ceremonies are conducted solemnly in accordance with local regulations, including the offering of incense, the reading of ritual texts, the presentation of offerings, and the performance of rites before the altar of Tứ vị Thánh Nương. The offerings are relatively simple, consisting mainly of sticky rice, chicken, wine, fruit, and a dragon boat offering (thuyền long châu). Although materially modest, these offerings symbolically express the reverence of the fishing community toward the deities believed to protect and safeguard maritime life.

After the sacrificial ceremony is completed, the dragon boat is carried to the mouth of the tidal channel and released into the sea as part of the traditional ritual. According to local beliefs, releasing the boat is not merely the concluding act of the ceremony but also symbolizes sending misfortune and calamities away with the outgoing current, while conveying prayers for a favorable fishing season, calm seas and winds, abundant catches, and safety for fishermen on each voyage. This ritual clearly reflects the worldview of coastal communities, in which faith in the protection of maritime deities is expressed through symbolic ritual practices closely connected to their livelihoods.

Monthly rituals on the first day of the lunar month: On the first day of each lunar month, the shrine is generally kept open throughout the day to accommodate the religious needs of local residents. On other days, those wishing to pray to the deities for particular matters can contact the shrine caretaker by telephone, who will come and open the shrine so that they can make offerings. In addition, the third lunar month is often regarded as one of the early months of the new year, and activities at the shrine during this period commonly include prayers for romantic relationships, children, academic or career success, and prosperity. As the shrine caretaker is now elderly and therefore not regularly present at the shrine, she leaves her telephone number so that those wishing to offer incense can contact her in advance.

3.2. Characteristics of Nghè Đỏ in Comparison with Other Coastal Sites Dedicated to Tứ vị Thánh Nương in Thanh Hóa

The worship of Tứ vị Thánh Nương is widely distributed along the coastal areas of Thanh Hóa, reflecting the role of maritime deities in the spiritual life of fishing communities. Numerous places of worship continue to be maintained in localities such as Ngọc Lâm (Hoàng Trường), Trung Ngoại (Hoàng Hải), Xuân Vi (Hoàng Thanh), Khúc Phụ (Hoàng Phụ), Ngư Lộc, Hải Lộc, Đa Lộc, Thanh

Khê (Sầm Sơn), and Quảng Nham. Within this broader network, Nghè Đò in Hoàng Tiến Commune shares many common characteristics with other sites dedicated to Tứ vị Thánh Nương, while also exhibiting distinctive features in terms of its history, ritual practitioners, and role in community life.

Compared with many other places of worship, the significance of Nghè Đò lies less in the scale of its festivals or the richness of its tangible heritage than in the way the worship tradition has adapted and persisted amid repeated changes to the sacred site. These distinctive characteristics can be examined from three main aspects: (1) transformations in religious practices; (2) changes in the role of Nghè Đò in community life; and (3) the preservation of the site's cultural value through collective memory.

The first notable characteristic of Nghè Đò is the significant reduction in the scale of its religious practices compared with many other sites dedicated to Tứ vị Thánh Nương along the Thanh Hóa coast. At present, Nghè Đò maintains only small-scale annual sacrificial rituals, which generally last approximately two hours. The festive component is no longer organized, and the ritual ceremonies are primarily conducted by the ceremonial group from Ngư Lộc Commune rather than by local residents or fishermen of Hoàng Tiến. This suggests a certain decline in the influence of the belief among the local population, as they are no longer the primary participants in organizing and conducting the rituals. By contrast, in many other localities, festivals continue to be organized relatively fully, incorporating both ritual and festive activities.

For example, at Phúc Temple in Quảng Nham Commune, in addition to sacrificial rituals, activities include boat racing, the offering of votive objects to welcome revolutionary troops, Tây Sơn martial arts performances, and human chess. At Nghè Thánh Cả in Ngư Lộc Commune, the annual death anniversary of Tứ vị Thánh Nương on the ninth day of the sixth lunar month continues to be maintained as an important community religious event. At Thanh Khê Temple in Sầm Sơn, the annual commemorative ceremony for Tứ vị is organized on a much larger scale, with both male and female ceremonial groups participating. Representatives of the local pantheon from neighboring villages are also invited and carried in palanquins to the temple, followed by lively *hầu đồng* rituals. These differences in scale indicate that Nghè Đò is no longer a central festival-organizing site for the local community. Instead, it primarily serves to preserve the continued presence of the worship tradition through traditional rituals and the faith of a relatively small segment of the local population.

The second distinctive characteristic of Nghè Đò concerns the position of the shrine within the community's religious life. In many places, such as Thanh Khê Temple in Sầm Sơn and the Temple of Tứ vị in Ngư Lộc and Kê Mom–Cự Nham in Quảng Nham, Quảng Xương, Tứ vị Thánh Nương continue to occupy a central position as protective deities of coastal communities. Annual rituals attract broad participation from local residents and remain closely connected with maritime livelihoods.

At Nghè Đò, by contrast, current worship practices tend to emphasize the preservation of a historical religious tradition rather than meeting the community's regular religious needs. This is partly due to the decline of the fishing economy and partly to the practical difficulties involved in conducting religious activities at the shrine. The continued presence and participation of the Ngư Lộc community in ritual ceremonies also reflect the historical relationship between the two localities in maintaining the worship of Tứ vị Thánh Nương.

Furthermore, the repeated changes to the sacred site have resulted in a disruption of its material documentary record. Unlike Thanh Khê Temple, which still preserves 13 *sắc phong* (royal decrees conferring divine titles), or Nghè Thánh Cả, which retains *sắc phong* dating from the reigns of Emperor Thiệu Trị and Emperor Khải Định, along with numerous valuable historical artifacts, or Phúc Temple in Quảng Nham, which preserves a Tây Sơn stele, Nghè Đò no longer retains any *sắc phong* or original documentary materials relating to Tứ vị Thánh Nương. The repeated demolition, relocation, and reconstruction of the place of worship have resulted in the loss of much of its material evidence, making it difficult to establish its historical significance and prepare documentation for official heritage recognition.

However, precisely in this context, community memory, local legends, and ritual practices transmitted across generations have become important factors in preserving the cultural value of Nghè Đò. This demonstrates that the significance of a heritage site is not determined solely by its material remains but is also sustained through cultural memory and the social practices of the community.

Despite these differences, Nghè Đò shares many common characteristics with other sites dedicated to Tứ vị Thánh Nương along the Thanh Hóa coast. As in Ngư Lộc, Thanh Khê, Cự Nham, and many other coastal villages in Thanh Hóa, worship at Nghè Đò reflects local communities' belief in the protection of female sea deities over maritime livelihoods, as well as their prayers for favorable weather, the safety of fishermen, and successful fishing trips. Ritual ceremonies, offerings, legends, symbols, and collective memories associated with Tứ vị continue to embody the fundamental characteristics of Tứ vị Thánh Nương worship in the coastal region of Thanh Hóa.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. The Contemporary Role and Transformation of Tứ vị Thánh Nương Worship

Interestingly, fieldwork in Ngư Lộc Commune revealed that the local legend of Tứ vị Thánh Nương is almost identical to the legend recounted in Hoàng Tiến. This similarity may be attributed to processes of cultural interaction and acculturation among neighboring fishing communities along the coast. This close relationship between the two communities is also reflected in ritual practice: every

year, fishermen from Ngư Lộc commune organize a ritual procession to Hoàng Tiến to participate in religious ceremonies and offerings.

The community's faith is also expressed through intriguing narratives about Tứ vị Thánh Nương helping families whose relatives died in accidents at sea. According to these accounts, the deities would communicate through a female spirit medium and guide families in locating the bodies of their deceased relatives so that they could be brought back to land and given a proper burial.

In the past, the two fishing villages of Hải and Văn Phong placed particular importance on worship and ritual observances, as most residents made their livelihoods through fishing and other maritime activities. In Hoàng Tiến Commune, currently owners of offshore fishing vessels, including the Hải Sơn, Thành Xuân, and Ninh Trường families in new resident place, often bring sweets and fruit to the shrine to perform rituals before each fishing trip, praying for safety and good fortune. In addition, on the annual death anniversary of Tứ vị Thánh Nương, fishermen from Ngư Lộc Commune organize a ritual procession, bringing two boats to the shrine to offer incense and wine and to perform traditional sacrificial rites. The ritual group includes a female ceremonial team of eight members, along with various offerings. The four villages of Ngư Lộc Commune each prepare their own offerings, consisting of sticky rice with chicken, sweets, and fruit, with one offering tray contributed by each village. The entire ritual usually lasts for more than two hours. This demonstrates that Nghè Đò plays an important role in the ritual life of fishermen, extending beyond the local community to neighboring coastal communities.

The present site of Nghè Đò was once a densely populated residential area. Following land clearance, however, the residents were relocated elsewhere. Consequently, visitors to Nghè Đò today may find it striking that there are no residential households in the immediate vicinity; the nearest inhabited area is approximately 500 meters to 1 kilometer away. According to local residents, after the original shrine was demolished, it was reconstructed by the community on a smaller scale, consisting of a single chamber measuring approximately 3m². When the company undertook the reconstruction of the shrine, it organized an elaborate ritual ceremony, including numerous paper offerings such as large paper horses, boats, and clothing, to mark the inauguration of the reconstructed shrine and make ritual amends to the Mother Goddess for the demolition of the former shrine. Since the tourism company took over the project land for tourism development, Nghè Đò has been under its management.

At present, the management mechanism of the sacred site reflects a form of cooperation between the private enterprise and the local community. The shrine has three keys: one is kept by Tourism Company 126, as the organization assigned to manage the site; one is kept by the *thủ từ* (shrine caretaker), who is directly responsible for maintaining incense offerings and receiving visitors; and the third is entrusted to the Ngư Lộc Commune Fishermen's Association, enabling local fishermen to access the shrine and conduct traditional rituals when necessary. This management arrangement both helps ensure the protection of the site and maintains the openness of the sacred space to the fishing community. Compared with the past, more people now visit the shrine to pray for children and descendants (*cầu tự*)⁴ suggesting that the reputation of Nghè Đò as a sacred and efficacious site has become more widely known.

4.2. Sacredness Beyond Material Heritage

The shrine caretaker, born in 1949, reported that she had been told by elderly members of the community that the shrine had been demolished before 1945. Consequently, knowledge of the original appearance of the site is now preserved primarily through the memories and oral accounts of successive generations of elderly community members. According to her, only Đền Thánh Cả, dedicated to Tô Hiến Thành, still retains its royal *sắc phong* (imperial decree of divine investiture), while the *sắc phong* associated with other sacred sites in the commune were destroyed by fire. However, as much of the material evidence has been lost, the vitality of Nghè Đò is sustained through community participation, the continuity of religious practitioners, narratives of spiritual efficacy, and processes of adaptation to the contemporary socio-economic environment.

After undergoing considerable changes in its historical trajectory and spatial setting, Nghè Đò has faced not only the risk of deterioration of its tangible heritage but also the need to adapt to changes in the economic, social, and tourism landscape of the coastal area. Rather than disappearing entirely, however, religious practices at the site have continued through adaptations by the local community and other relevant actors. This process of adaptation is reflected in the management of the site, the transformation of sacred space, the ways in which sacredness is maintained, and the contemporary approaches to promoting the cultural values of the religious site. One of the factors contributing to the continued vitality of Nghè Đò is the community's belief in the spiritual efficacy of Tứ vị Thánh Nương. Although the site no longer preserves imperial decrees of investiture or many original historical records, its sacredness continues to be reaffirmed through stories circulated within the community.

During field interviews, many local residents recounted that relatives of fishermen who had gone missing at sea often came to Nghè Đò to pray to Tứ vị Thánh Nương for help in locating the deceased. According to local belief, the Tứ vị would “sang tai” (the deity “communicates with” or “gives instructions to” the medium) through a medium, thereby indicating the location where the family could find the victim's body. Stories about the spiritual efficacy of Tứ vị at Nghè Đò circulate throughout the coastal area from Sầm Sơn to Hậu Lộc, leading people to visit the site to seek their assistance. Although such accounts cannot be verified according to historical or scientific criteria, they have been transmitted orally across generations and have contributed to reinforcing the

⁴ “cầu tự” specifically refers to praying for offspring, particularly children

community's belief in the protection provided by Tứ vị Thánh Nương. From an anthropological perspective, narratives of spiritual efficacy not only reflect religious belief but also constitute a mechanism through which the sacredness of a religious site is continually reproduced. The processes of recounting, sharing, and validating experiences of spiritual efficacy have helped sustain the reputation of Nghè Đò, even as much of the material evidence concerning its historical development has been lost.

From an anthropological perspective, the case of Nghè Đò demonstrates that the continued existence of a religious site does not depend entirely on the physical integrity of the monument or the completeness of its historical documentation. In other words, the sacredness of Nghè Đò is not a fixed or immutable value; rather, it is continuously constructed, negotiated, and reaffirmed through the community's beliefs, experiences, and practices. This capacity for adaptation has contributed to sustaining the vitality of Nghè Đò amid tourism development and social transformation in coastal Thanh Hóa.

The case of Nghè Đò demonstrates that the sacredness of a religious site is shaped not only by its history or tangible heritage but is also continuously reaffirmed by the community through ritual practices, collective memory, and narratives of spiritual efficacy in the contemporary context.

4.3. Tourism, Sacred Space, and Community Adaptation

This situation indicates that the maintenance of Nghè Đò currently depends largely on voluntary contributions and individual devotion rather than on a specialized management mechanism or stable financial resources. At present, Nghè Đò is under the management of Tourism Company 126. The company is responsible for managing the physical infrastructure of the site, carrying out repairs and restoration when necessary, managing ritual donations, and appointing a caretaker. However, because religious worship is considered a spiritual practice requiring familiarity with rituals and the trust of the local community, after taking over the site for tourism development, the company continued to invite the former caretaker to perform this role. In practice, the site is managed through cooperation between the company and the local community: the company is responsible for infrastructure and overall management, while the caretaker oversees incense offerings, opens the site to visitors, assists local people in conducting religious practices, and manages daily worship activities. In recent years, ritual donations collected at the site have mainly been used for repairs and restoration, with a portion allocated to support the caretaker's expenses. The caretaker also expressed concern that there is currently no successor to continue this work. This reflects not only the difficulties involved in maintaining a small-scale religious site but also raises the issue of intergenerational succession among the practitioners who sustain the tradition - an important factor in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

A particularly evident manifestation of this process of adaptation is the transformation of sacred space. At present, a restaurant serving tourists is located immediately adjacent to the Nghè Đò compound, creating a lively environment that differs considerably from the tranquil surroundings commonly associated with traditional religious sites. Nevertheless, according to the caretaker, the restaurant's activities do not affect the sacredness of the worship space. On the contrary, the restaurant owner regularly makes monetary offerings to support the purchase of lamp oil for the shrine. The restaurant owner stated that he attaches considerable importance to spiritual practices. Therefore, when establishing his restaurant next to the shrine, he also hoped that his business would prosper. At the beginning of each lunar month, he regularly visits the shrine to make offerings and pray for the protection of Tứ vị. He explained that, as someone from outside the locality, he does not know much about the deity worshipped there. Nevertheless, as a businessperson, he maintains a strong belief in divine protection and seeks to avoid actions that might offend the deities or invite their displeasure.

This suggests that the relationship between service-based economic activities and religious sites is not necessarily one of opposition. In the case of Nghè Đò, local economic actors not only share the same space with the religious site but also contribute to its maintenance through donations and financial support. Rather than diminishing the sacredness of the religious space, tourism development has created a process of negotiation and adaptation between economic and sacred spaces, thereby enabling the religious site to continue to exist in a changing context.

At present, efforts to promote the cultural values of Nghè Đò remain limited. Due to its small architectural scale and the absence of introductory signage or an information system presenting the history and cultural significance of the site, visitors are still predominantly local residents. Those coming from other localities are mostly fishermen or people who have learned about Tứ vị Thánh Nương through maritime occupational networks and the religious traditions of coastal communities.

This indicates that the current sphere of influence of Nghè Đò is maintained primarily through traditional social and occupational networks rather than through heritage promotion or cultural tourism activities. In this context, developing an information system and documentary materials about the site, as well as strengthening its connection with local cultural tourism routes, could broaden public access while enhancing the effectiveness of heritage preservation and promotion.

According to the caretaker of Nghè Đò, the largest number of visitors come during the Lunar New Year and on the first day of each lunar month. Few tourists are aware of the site because there are currently no directional signs; most visitors only stop to pay their respects when they happen to pass by. Consequently, visitors to the shrine are still predominantly local residents, particularly fishermen from the village. Outside major ritual occasions, those wishing to worship usually contact the caretaker in advance to

arrange for the shrine to be opened. The fact that the site is not regularly open to the public, combined with inadequate security measures, has resulted in the donation box being stolen on several occasions in previous years.

According to local authorities, Nghè Đò has not yet been recognized as a historical relic because sufficient documentary and historical evidence is no longer available to establish a formal heritage dossier, despite surveys and information collection conducted by heritage specialists. Consequently, the local authorities currently exercise their management role primarily by regularly visiting and encouraging the caretaker and supporting the preservation of religious practices at the site.

5. CONCLUSION

The case of Nghè Đò demonstrates that the worship of Tứ vị Thánh Nương remains a dynamic cultural practice closely associated with the maritime history and cultural identity of coastal communities in Hoàng Tiến. Despite repeated changes to the physical site and the loss of historical documents, the belief continues to be maintained through ritual practices, community participation, collective memory, and narratives of spiritual efficacy.

Compared with other Tứ vị Thánh Nương worship sites in coastal Thanh Hóa, the scale of ritual practice at Nghè Đò has become more limited, while its role as a central community religious space has also declined. Nevertheless, the participation of fishermen from Hoàng Tiến and neighboring communities, particularly Ngư Lộc, demonstrates the continued significance of the shrine within traditional maritime networks.

The development of coastal tourism has created both challenges and new opportunities for Nghè Đò. Rather than simply weakening the sacred space, tourism has generated processes of negotiation and adaptation between religious practices, local communities, and economic actors. However, the cultural value of Nghè Đò has not yet been effectively integrated into local tourism development due to the lack of historical documentation, interpretive information, and systematic promotion.

Overall, the case of Nghè Đò shows that the sacredness of a religious site is not determined solely by its material heritage or official recognition, but is continuously constructed and reaffirmed through ritual practice, collective memory, and community participation. In the context of tourism development, maintaining this community-based dimension is essential for both the preservation of Tứ vị Thánh Nương worship and the sustainable promotion of its cultural values.

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