# The Art of Vietnam's Ethnic Minorities: Portrait of the Chams

In this article, **Rie Nakamura** examines how ethnic minority artists respond to a market-driven national integration, and how they represent themselves and their ethnic identity. While Vietnamese modern art and artists have become popular research subjects, most of the studies on them concentrate on the artistic activities in the North[1], with little mention about art produced by ethnic minority peoples. Dr. Nakamura explores the possibility of art as a medium for ethnic minorities to voice their feelings and thoughts in a rapidly changing Vietnam; and analyses the artwork of a number of artists working with Cham and Champa themes.

## The Cham ethnic minority

The Vietnamese state recognized 54 ethnic groups living in its territory. For classifying the ethnic groups, Vietnamese ethnologists heavily depend on language, and the population of Vietnam consists of three major language groups, Austronesiatic, Austroasiatic, and

[1] Boi Tran Huynh (2005) wrote her Ph.D. dissertation on South Vietnam's art movement. Art critique Huỳnh Hữu Ủy published several studies on pre-1975 arts in South Vietnam (1990, 1993).

Sino-Tibetan[2]. The Cham[3] ethnic group belongs to the Austronesiatic language group, and was regarded as a sea-oriented people in the past (A. Reid 1999; S. Momoki 2001). Their ancestry is linked to the people of the Kingdom of Champa. It is understood that Champa was established around the second century when it shed off Chinese influence, and accepted Hindu culture. Champa enjoyed considerable prosperity from the ninth to the fifteenth century by providing significant relay ports of the maritime trade route in the South China Sea. Today, the vestiges of the wealth and power of Champa can still be seen along the coast of central Vietnam (Y. Shige-eda & Tran Ky Phuong 1997; Momoki 1999).

The Cham population is around 132,000[4]. There are two distinct Cham groups in Vietnam, distinguished by their place of residence, historical background, and religion. One group lives in the south-central coastal region, particularly Ninh Thuận and Binh Thuân provinces, where the largest concentration of Cham people in Vietnam can be found. About 86,000[5] Chams who live in this region follow two main traditional religions, Balamon (an indigenized form of Hinduism), and Bani (an indigenized form of Islam[6]). The Balamon and Bani appear to be two separate religious groups; however, they are rooted in the Cham's cosmology of dualism. They are complementary aspects of one traditional religion of the Chams (Nakamura 1999, 2009). Cham visual artists are found amongst the Chams living in the south-central coast area.

---

[2] Ito Masako's work on ethnic classification in Vietnam discusses problems of ethnic classification and how people negotiate with the State's static ethnic classification (Ito 2008).

[3] In Vietnamese language, Cham is written as "Chăm" but in this article, the author uses the word without the diacritical mark.

[4] National census of 1999.

[5] National census of 1999.

[6] Toshihiko Shin-e argued that the group that call themselves Cham or Ahier is not really adherents of the Balamon religion but also believe in the God of Islam, Allah. This is a result of French scholars' misunderstanding of the Cham religion during the French colonial period. Though both Cham Balamon and Bani are adherents of Islam, only Bani hold ceremonies for Allah while Cham Balamon conduct ceremonies for gods known to the people prior to the arrival of Islam (Shin-e 2001b: 243, n8, n9). I have not yet further explored his argument, and for this article, I have adopted the conventional understanding of the differences between the Balamon and Bani based on local informants' explanations.

The second Cham group lives in the Mekong Delta, mainly around Châu Đôc city in An Giang province, close to the border with Cambodia. About 12,000 Chams[7] live in this region, and most of them are Sunni Muslims. The Mekong Delta Chams also live in Ho Chi Minh City, and surrounding provinces, such as Đồng Nai and Tây Ninh provinces (Phan Văn Dốp & Nguyễn Thị Nhung 2006: 25).

## Ethnic minorities in Vietnam

The policies affecting Vietnam's ethnic minorities were shaped by the two Indochina wars, and are clearly connected with the development of socialism after the reunification of North and South Vietnam. During the pre-reunification period, North and South Vietnam had different approaches toward ethnic minorities. While they both utilized the ethnic minorities in the war efforts, communist North Vietnam took a Stalinist approach to the ethnic minorities (W. Connor 1984). It was critical to gain support from ethnic minorities living in the strategic areas to win the wars, and the Communist party promised to set up ethnic autonomous regions. After the victory of Điện Biên Phù against the French, North Vietnam established three different ethnic minority autonomous zones between 1955 and 1957. The right of secession amongst these autonomous zones was somewhat left ambiguous. However, in 1959, all three autonomous zones were quietly dissolved.

South Vietnam took an assimilation approach toward the ethnic minorities, particularly during the Ngô Đình Diệm regime that encountered strong opposition from the ethnic minorities living in the central highland. South Vietnam shifted to integration policies, and tried to promote the ethnic minorities by establishing the Ministry for the Development of Ethnic Minorities. It was crucial for South Vietnam to win the support of the ethnic minorities who lived in the areas most suspected of communist infiltration (G. Hickey 1982, 1993).

[7] National census of 1999.

After the reunification of the North and the South, ethnic minority policies have been set within the socialist ideology, which appears to support self-determination, but in practice promotes assimilation through what is known as a "socialist civilizing project". In this project, all Vietnamese citizens, including various ethnic minorities, shall strive for the common goal of socialism. The state recognizes multiple paths to reach the goal for the ethnic minorities, which should be suitable to their social, cultural, and economic characteristics. However, such different paths to socialism amongst the minority peoples are under the state's control. The state has the authority to decide what kinds of society they should live in by selecting "their correct tradition and culture" for the minorities to preserve. The state pressures ethnic minority peoples to eliminate obstacles to progress and development. Consequently, various religious practices and traditions have been banned as they are considered superstitions (Connor 1984; G. Evans 1985; C. Keyes 1987; M. Furuta 1995; Shin-e 2007).

By adapting *đôi mó'i* policies (economic reforms initiated in 1986 to create a "socialist-oriented market economy" in Vietnam), the government softens its control over people's cultural activities; and under relaxed cultural policies, many traditional rituals, rites, or religious pilgrimages and other traditional activities have seen a revival (Hy Van Luong 1992; J. Kleinen 1999; S. Malarney 2002); such changes were experienced by the ethnic minority groups as well. In 1991, the Vietnamese government released Notice No. 3 of the central politburo on policies toward the Cham ethnic group (*Thông tri cua Ban Bií thu' về công tác đôi vó'i đông bào Chăm*. Notice No. 3 stated that the government of Vietnam would conserve and protect the Cham people's historical and cultural heritage, establish cultural centres, popularize Cham script, and encourage mass-based artistic activities. This notice implies that the state respects Cham traditions and their customary laws in dealing with communal issues (Shin-e 2001b).

Ito argued that the special release of Notice No. 3 indicates that the government has been less successful in integrating the Cham ethnic group with mainstream Vietnamese society (Ito 2009b: 51). She further stated that after reunification, the Vietnamese government did not pay

as much attention to the ethnic minorities as before when they were mobilized in the war effort. In post-reunification Vietnam, they have been considered as obstacles to socio-economic development. In particular, ethnic minorities living in the mountainous areas have been left behind. The uprisings of ethnic minorities in the central highlands in 2001 and 2004 proved that government policies did not improve their lives. The uprisings were caused by the government's failure to understand the problems of ethnic minorities, mainly the issues concerning loss of land and livelihood as a result of the massive migration of the Kinh majority and other ethnic minorities from the North and other parts of Vietnam. These massive movements of people were credited to the new economic policies. Instead of admitting that its policies pertaining to the ethnic minorities failed, the state resorted to providing economic subsidies, and preserved the ethnic minority policies with the top-down approach (Ito 2009a).

## The Vietnamese art world and *đổi mó'i*

*Vietnamese art in đổi mói era*

The *đôi mó'i* policies brought significant changes to the Vietnamese art society. Before the *đôi mó'i* era, paintings were considered as a tool to propagate communist ideology, and strengthen national unity. The principles of the Vietnamese art under the Communist Party were established during the anti-colonial struggles, and were used to fight bourgeois decadence in art. The party believed that art should be scientific ("abandoning religious themes, mysticism, and idealism, and popularising the Marxist perspective"); national ("dedicating to the needs and aspirations of the Vietnamese nation, putting one's art in the service of the revolutionary cause"); and popular ("producing work that would simultaneously appeal to and educate the vast majority of people, labourers, farmers, and soldiers, inciting them to be loyal to, and be ready to sacrifice for, the revolution")

(Jamieson 1996: 19). Art was closely associated with Vietnamese nation-building projects such as national defence, national unity, and national integration. The artists were to serve the nation using their artistic talent. All artists belong to the centrally-controlled artists association (*Hội mỹ thật)* (M. Jamieson 1996; Taylor 2009: 15-17), and they painted and sculpted to glorify the image of the Vietnamese people. The dominant style of the art was called Socialist Realism, and abstract paintings including Cubism, Fauvism, and Surrealism were prohibited.

*Art as a tool to propagate idealogy*

Two years prior to the implementation of *đôi mó'i* policies, the Secretary General of the Communist Party Nguyễn Văn Linh organised a meeting with artists and cultural cadres who complained about the state's tight control over artistic activities. The Politburo Resolution 5 released a month after the meeting admitted that their policies on art and cultural management were "simplistic, coarse, superficial, and undemocratic", and relaxed the state control over arts (Jamieson 1996: 25). In the following years, the adoption of *đôi mó'i* brought drastic changes in the Vietnamese art scene.[8]

[8] N. Taylor argued that there was a liberal art movement between 1984 and 1989, prior to *đôi mó'i*, and it was such a movement that pushed the government to adopt the new policy of *đôi mó'i* (Taylor 2009 : 88-93).

The free market economy, however, has been transforming Vietnamese art into commodities, with artists selling their work through private galleries both in Vietnam and overseas. Although the number of such artists is limited, there are artists who can make their living by just selling their art work in the private galleries without joining the artists' association. Naturally, the style of artistic work has also been diversifying rapidly. Abstract paintings are no longer prohibited; installation art have become popular; and artists carry out performance art in public space (Taylor 2007). The work of some artists who have been neglected prior to *đôi mó'i* have gained national recognition and prestige, and have become the most demanded items in the Vietnamese art market. Bùi Xuân Phaí is one such artist. He was born to a family with Confucian values, and grew up in Hanoi. Educated in l'École des Beauxarts d'Indochine (established by the French colonial government), he joined the anti-colonial force and the Artists' Association of Vietnam. He is known for his street paintings, which often depict cloudy, gray, quiet, and lonely streets that evoke a sense of melancholy. At that time, the authorities needed to promote patriotism, heroism, and optimism, and Phaí's work were not well received and rarely exhibited – he kept a distance from the artists' association. However, after his first and only exhibition in 1984, he became one of the greatest modern artists in Vietnam, and received the Ho Chi Minh Award for his artistic contribution to the nation (Jamieson 1996: 24-25; Taylor 2009: 63-66).

While Vietnamese art is diversifying, rapid modernization and globalization compel the Vietnamese to question and redefine their art. The dominant buyers of Vietnamese arts are foreigners, and some art observers point to the influence of the international market (Taylor 1999: 247, 2009: 9; Kraevskaia 2005: 9, 22-23) in dictating the direction of Vietnamese art. There is a demand by foreigners for "Vietnamese art" that remind them of an agrarian-based, and rural Vietnam prior to *đôi mó'i*. Phaí's paintings, for example, can present a Vietnam that foreigners want to see. Taylor examines the reasons for the popularity of his paintings amongst foreigners, and states that foreigners or foreign travelers "see a 'truth' to Phai's painting. In contrast to the bustling city that is growing in the Vietnamese capital, they consider Phai's rendition of Hanoi streets

as a better representation of what they imagine to be a 'true' Asian city: pristine and untainted by Western goods" (Taylor 1999: 246).

In the pre-*đôi mó'i* era, ethnic minorities appeared in paintings to promote war efforts and national solidarity, while in the post-*đôi mó'i* era, ethnic minorities are no longer depicted in the context of national defence, national unity, and national integration. Contemporary Vietnamese artists often depict ethnic minorities by presenting young women in their traditional clothes, against a natural backdrop, engaging in daily routines, work, and child-caring, deprived of the materialistic wealth of urban society, but content with the peaceful life in harmony with nature. The work of artist Dinh Ngoc Thang fall into this category. His paintings are displayed in one of the art galleries on Đồng Kho'i Street of Ho Chi Minh City, where many foreign tourists visit to purchase high-end souvenirs. He was born in North Vietnam, and educated in the University of Fine Arts in Ho Chi Minh City. His paintings of ethnic minority women from northern Vietnam are one of the best selling works in the Nguyen Gallery. Almost all the buyers of his work are foreign visitors, and the gallery attendants explained that "foreign visitors want to buy paintings that remind them of Vietnam, that is why they buy Dinh Ngoc Thang's work". Dinh's short biography given by the gallery mentioned that he made a tour of Vietnam in 2003, and was enchanted by the beauty of highland scenery and the people: "this land really enchants me with their daily life, its simplicity, and its natural surroundings … a brook is murmuring all day. H'mong, Dao, and many other ethnic groups go on with their lives:

*Dinh Ngoc Thang, courtesy of Nguyen gallery*

fetching water, carrying children on their backs, blanketed by mist at dawn on a market day. They all become one as a unique national character that is charming to me." Such phrases are reminiscent of musings found in travel book. Dinh's gaze cast upon the ethnic minorities is similar to the foreign tourists' gaze. His sense of romanticization of the life of ethnic minorities in the highlands and his nostalgia for pre-modern Vietnam are reflected in his paintings, and thus perhaps appeal to foreign buyers who sought the images of "traditional, authentic" Vietnam. Ethnic minorities are used to create images of pre-modern Vietnam in their "less developed status" and unique cultural tradition. They have become one of the symbols of a Vietnam that are embeded in tourists' fantasies.

## Mainstreaming minority culture and alienation of minority people

The new global art market has pushed the marginalized and highly localized population of Vietnam into the mainstream national culture. Responding to art market demands by mainstreaming ethnic minorities reflects a shift in evaluating the cultures of ethnic minorities. When I was conducting field research in Vietnam in 1993, something "ethnic" did not have positive meaning. I used to carry my belongings in a bag made of the Cham handwoven textile, and it was quite unpopular among my Vietnamese friends. The Vietnamese much preferred factory-manufactured textiles in the way they preferred plastic dishes over handmade pottery. They considered those industrially mass-produced products as modern and fashionable since they were made with modern technologies. As Chandra Mukerji said, the "taste" of consumers determine the demand for the products which eventually control the pattern of economic development (Mukerji 1983: 28). The textiles produced by ethnic minorities did not appeal to the "taste" of the majority Kinh people in Vietnam. Ethnic minority handicrafts, including handwoven textiles, had been neglected by the majority population and officials alike; however, 1994 seems to have been a turning point for ethnic minorities' weaving. This period witnessed the increase in the number of foreign tourists in Vietnam. (L. Kennedy & M. Williams 2001: 139). The tourists appreciated ethnic handicrafts, and

became major buyers. In the same year, I saw many female students carrying cloth bags made from Cham traditional weaving that were sold in every corner of downtown Ho Chi Minh City. The young Vietnamese generation has adapted to the "taste" of foreign tourists within a very short period. In the following year, a Vietnamese fashion company, Legafashion, held a fashion show in Ho Chi Minh City in which they introduced clothing such as cocktail dresses, business suits, and mini-skirts all made of Cham handwoven textiles. While models were cat-walking, two Cham women demonstrated weaving at both sides of the stage. The fashion show aimed to demonstrate that ethnic minority weavings can be used to make fashionable modern clothing.[9]

However, the mainstreaming of ethnic minority culture neither means that the ethnic minorities have attained a certain status nor gained some power in society. What can be observed is that the more ethnic minority cultures become popular and visible in public space in Vietnam, the more the ethnic minorities detach from their popularized culture. In early 2000[10], I began to notice, at the various tourist attractions, some souvenirs made of Cham textiles bearing the name of places such as Điên Biên Phu', Mỹ So'n or Huê. This type of souvenirs seemed to cater to domestic tourists. For this reason, Cham textiles were chosen not because they were produced locally but probably because it represented "otherness." Tourists buy such souvenirs to remember their unusual time and experiences, and the attributes of ethnic minorities appealed to them as the "other" and the "unusual." I was told by Cham weavers that many of these souvenirs with Cham textile patterns were manufactured in factories. The Chams were not involved in producing their ethnic textiles – factories made them on a massive scale.

---

[9] Vietnam Investment Review 1995 Dec. 18.

[10] I started to see Cham culture and historical vestiges being promoted as tourist attractions. In these tourism promotion and advertisements, the Cham traditions and historical vestiges are introduced as a part of the rich Vietnamese heritage. Today, one can find a magnet souvenir of Po Klong Garai temple with a Vietnamese flag or chocolate cookies in the shape of the temple sold as souvenirs at the airport duty free shops in Vietnam.

The Chams are well known for their rich music and dance tradition. Modern Cham royal court dance performances show how the ethnic minorities have been detached from their culture. According to History of Great Vietnam (*Đại Việt Su' Ký*), Vietnamese emperor Lý Thaí Tông attacked Champa's capital in 1069, and brought back more than 100 court dancers to the north, where they performed in the Vietnamese court (Đặng Hùng 1998: 143). The Cham royal court dance had been forgotten for a long time until in the mid-1990s, when it was recreated by a Vietnamese artist called Đặng Hùng. He was a native of Binh Định province, a former territory of Champa, and studied dance and theatre in Hanoi, North Korea, Nanjing, USSR, Bulgaria, and Cuba. Đặng Hùng argued that there was a need for the Cham royal dance to be restored since other Hinduinized Southeast Asian countries, like Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, have kept their royal court dance (Đặng Hùng 1998: 15)[11]. The recreated Cham royal court dance has become quite popular. It has been performed in various events, including international conferences, and also in restaurants and other tourist attractions holding theatrical performances. The more the Cham royal dance is accepted as part of Vietnamese national culture, the more the majority Kinh people perform this dance. I saw the Chams dancing the royal court dance only once at a theatre in Ho Chi Minh City in 1995. All other Cham royal court dances that I saw after 1995 were performed by Kinh dancers. As the Vietnamese government claimed that they encourage ethnic minorities to practise and preserve their culture, a part of Cham tradition was revived and preserved yet without Cham people as cultural agent. In the theatre, the ethnic minority culture and tradition have become a mere genre of performance (ethnic dance).

**The young Vietnamese generation has adapted to the "taste" of foreign tourists within a very short period.**

Several lacquer paintings I found at the gallery attached to the Ho Chi Minh City art museum seemed to symbolize alienation of ethnic minorities from their culture. The paintings were a series of pop art-like portraits of ethnic women wearing different head dresses, clothes, and jewelries, like

[11] Đặng Hùng legitimized his restoration of the Cham royal dance by referring to the decison of the 8th national assembly on culture and arts policies of the new era. The national assembly agreed to encourage "exploring and displaying people's traditional culture and art, and also making their culture and art more progressive and rich" (Đặng Hùng 1998: 15).

dressed-up dolls trying out different attire. This series of lacquer paintings conveys the message that the identity of ethnic minorities is formed by the style of head dresses, clothings, or jewelries rather than their lifestyle and culture. In the art market, the ethnic minority culture has become, quite prominently, a mere artistic style.

Mainstreaming minority culture has detached ethnic minorities from their cultures. Their lack of control over their socio-cultural life reveals that the ethnic minorities remain a passive body onto which the state imposes its policies (Ito 2009b). Such a passive political position of ethnic minorities in Vietnam is reflected in some of the paintings of ethnic minorities. In the following section, the work of a Kinh artist – who has been painting the Cham people – and two Cham painters are examined to offer glimpses of the images of the Cham ethnic minority people on canvas. The author explores how art provides a potential contested space for ethnic minorities to express their identity and culture through their own symbolisms and artistic vocabularies.

## Cao Thị Đu'ợ'c

Cao Thị Đu'ợc belongs to the Kinh majority, and was born in Bến Tre, a city in the Mekong Delta. She had wanted to attend the University of Fine Arts in Ho Chi Minh City but could not because of economic reasons. Instead, she studied art at the teacher's college, and worked at the office of education in her local district in Bến Tre, during which she was in contact with many who studied art in Ho Chi Minh City, and learned art from them. On a visit to Bến Tre, artist Văn Đen became acquainted with Đu'ợc's work, and recognized her talent. In 1980, Đu'ợc finally went to study in, and graduated from, the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts University in 1990 (Nguyễn Kim Loan 2007: 128-134).

She has been painting on the theme of the Cham people for a long time. Her teacher, Sỹ Hoang, used to carry out field work in the Cham village of Mỹ Nghiệp in Ninh Thuận province, and exhibited his work at the

university. Inspired by his art, she went to stay in Mỹ Nghiệp and Bâu Trúc villages. She was in Bâu Trúc, which is well known for traditional pottery production, for three months, and produced her graduation work, *Cham Market* (*Chọ Chăm)*. Later, Đu'ợc' visited Bâu Trúc with her students to practise sketch painting almost every year, and she produced a series of paintings on the Chams.[12]

Đu'ợc' often depicts Cham women; Cham men are rarely seen in her work. She is sympathetic toward Cham women who have been tied down by various social restrictions and constraints, and entitled to less freedom than the majority Kinh women. She also finds beauty in Cham women engaged in hard labour.[13] The artist usually does not use any models when she paints, using pastel colours for figures and portraits. Her pastel drawings provide models for her oil paintings, which comprise of her oeuvre. There are distinctive differences in the depiction of Cham women in her oil paintings and her pastel drawings. Her pastel drawings of Cham women were exhibited at the gallery of Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts University in May 2010. The portraits are titled in the models' names, without indication of the women's ethnic origins. It may not be easy to tell that the models were Cham women.

On the other hand, her oil paintings of Cham women depict them with darker complexion, connected eyebrows similar to Champa sculptures, and thick lips. They wear earrings, bracelets, and necklaces, and are often portrayed with bare breasts to connote their ethnic origins, proximity to nature, and isolation from modern life. The titles of her paintings do not bear the models' names, simply "a young Cham woman", "an Old Cham woman" or such. Laurel B. Kennedy and Mary Rose Williams examined tourism in Vietnam, and discussed how the image of Vietnamese women who were depicted as "heroic mother and female guerilla fighters" have been depoliticized and marginalized as "ornamental and sexual" (Kennedy & Williams 2001: 158-9). Similar comment can be made about Đu'ợc's oil paintings of Cham women; they are anonymous, decorative, retrospective,

[12] Interview with Cao Thị Đu'ợc in May 1, 2010.
[13] Ibid.

mythical, and sensual. The Chams that Đu'ợc' paints are Cham pastiche, and they are featured most in her paintings, projecting images of ethnic minorities as others wish to see them.

## Chế Thị Kim Trung

Chế Thị Kim Trung is a young Cham painter. She was born in An Nho'n village, and liked to paint since she was young. She studied at a teachers' college; became an art teacher; and continued to study art after marriage. In 2002, as a mother of two children, she took the entrance examination, and successfully enrolled in Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts University.[14]

Some of Kim Trung's paintings reflect the unity and solidarity of ethnic minorities, such as those that celebrate the liberation of Phan Rang city, as well as those of ethnic women preparing food for soldiers. Most of her paintings, however, are about the Cham people and their traditions and religious activities. She said that she painted Cham rituals and traditions to pass on the Cham people's rich history and heritage to the next generations of Chams.[15] Her work have been shown in national exhibitions, receiving various prizes from the Vietnamese government. The national museums of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City[16] have purchased her award-winning works. Kim Trung's life and artwork have been publicized in a national TV programme, and she has become one of the most popular Cham artists.

---

[14] Interview with Chê Thị Kim Trung in June 1, 2010.
[15] Ibid.
[16] One of her paintings, titled Làng Chăm o'n Bác (Cham village gives thanks to Ho Chi Minh) received a national prize, and was purchased by the National Museum in Hanoi. This is a painting of Ho Chi Minh standing in front of Po Klong Garai temple (Hindu temple constructed during the 14th century) surrounded by Cham people and communities. Amongst the Chams, the painting created discussion on the copyright issue. The painting is named after the title of a song composed in 1985 by a Cham musician, Âm Nhân. Some of the lyrics in the song, "Hồ Chí Minh trong trái tim ngu'ò'i Chăm (Ho Chi Minh is in the hearts of Cham people) and "Hồ Chí Minh trong trái tim Việt Nam" (Ho Chi Minh is in the hearts of Vietnam) are rendered on to the plates placed above the God of Siva on the temple, which upset some people who considered it disrespectful (Inrasara).

Kim Trung painted *Kate* festival (*Lê Hội Katé*) in 2007, which was awarded a prize at the national exhibition of the Vietnamese Art Association, and purchased by the Ho Chi Minh City Museum. *Kate* is one of the most important ceremonies of the Chams, organised at their Balamon (Hindu) temples, and probably the most well-known Cham religious ceremony in Vietnam. During the *Kate* festival, many Chams go to temples to pray for prosperity, happiness, and the safety of their families. In her *Kate* festival painting, Kim Trung depicted a male and four female dancers accompanied by four musicians playing Cham traditional musical instruments. The background of these dancers and musicians is a brick Balamon temple, such as Po Klong Garai, a famous Champa monument built around the 14th century.

When I saw Kim Trung's painting on *Kate* festival in the Ho Chi Minh City Museum in 2011, I wondered about her knowledge of this ceremony. Most of the people depicted in her painting do not play any roles in the actual *Kate* ceremony. The male dancer, known as *Ong Kaing*, who wears a red jacket, and holds a stick in the centre of the painting, dances at other religious ceremonies, together with a drummer who plays a tambourine-like drum. None of the musicians depicted in this painting would be found in the actual *Kate* ceremony, yet the most significant musician, *Ong Kathar*, who plays the two-string instrument is not found (see Xu Man painting). Her painting of the *Kate* ceremony surprised me since Kim Trung explained during an interview that she painted so that Cham culture would be passed down to the next generations.

*Xu Man, Ho Chi Minh City Museum*

Her painting of the *Kate* festival reveals a striking similarity to the painting done by Nguyễn Công Văn, a Vietnamese painter from Ninh Thuận province, who also produced a painting in 2003, titled *Kate Festival* (*Lê Hội Katé*) which shows a male dancer, *Ong Kaing*, at the centre and groups of female dancers and musicians surrounding him in front of Po Klong Garai temple. Nguyễn Công Văn also did not include the *Ong Kathar* musician who plays the two-string insturment.

It is said that there are several kinds of rituals in Cham tradition, involving various musicians, dancers, and other religious practitioners. Who can work with whom in these rituals is strictly determined (Nakamura 1999: 294-300). To the Kinh majority, with the exception of ethnologists or anthropologists, such intricate cultural systems do not mean much. The painting of the *Kate* festival covers two subjects: Cham culture and festival. Both Kim Trung and Nguyễn Công Văn painted Cham temples, dancers wearing traditional clothes, and musicians playing traditional instruments.

The similarity of the paintings of Kim Trung and Nguyễn Công Văn, who belongs to the majority ethnic Kinh group, seems to indicate that the former has adopted the Vietnamese signifier for Chams. She paints in the perspective of the Kinh majority in viewing the Chams as a people of the Champa kingdom, and who have a rich history, colourful costumes, and unfamiliar traditions.

Kim Trung adopts the Kinh's gaze in perceiving ethnic minority groups as a result of her drive and position in the Cham community. She has been living at the margin of Cham society – away from her native Cham village – in the capital city of Phan Rang for the last 15 years, working as a teacher, with a husband who is a communist party cadre. The first floor of her three-storey house on one of the main streets of the city is an art gallery where she exhibits and sells her paintings, including souvenirs such as Cham textiles and earthenwares from Bâu Trúc village.[17] She puts her work on the art market through the small art gallery, and to

[17] Traditionally, earthenware from Bâu Trúc are without colouring.

make her paintings marketable, she has to cater to the majority's taste and perspective. She paints Chams in a pastiche way that outsiders can recognize Cham culture as that of an ethnic minority.

## Đàng Năng Thợ

Đàng Năng Thợ is one of the most well-known contemporary Cham artists. He studied painting at the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts University, and is also known for his terracotta sculptures. He was born in Bâu Trúc village in the Ninh Thuận province that is famous for earthenware production. His father did carpentry and his mother made earthenwares, and was also one of the ritual dancers of her lineage group. Thợ did not have siblings and was not very sociable as a child. He used to play alone at home and considered his mother as his only friend during childhood; he liked to observe funeral ceremonies, often staying overnight at the ceremonial house made temporarily for a funeral. He was fascinated by stories of Champa kings, princes, and princesses told by village elders at night. He studied at Po Klong High School for Cham ethnic minorities, and became known for his paintings of the Po Klong Garai temple, having painted many pieces as requested by fellow students – paintings that opened up a new life in arts for him.[18]

Immediately after the liberation of South Vietnam in 1975, the Ministry of Culture in Hanoi dispatched a group of scholars to the south to take action on publications supporting the ideas of the Saigon government. Phan Đăng Nhật, an ethnologist, was one of the scholars on this mission, during which he visited a Cham village to carry out research. He noticed that many Cham households hung a painting of the Po Klong Garai temple painted by a young Cham man named Đàng Năng Thợ. He met Thợ, and asked him if he wanted to study arts. With the help of the ethnologist, Đàng Năng Thợ was admitted in 1976 to the art college in Ho Chi Minh City where he studied until 1979. After working for the Office of Culture, Sports and Tourism at Ninh Thuận province for a few years, he enrolled at the University of Fine Arts in Ho Chi Minh City

[18] Interview with Đàng Năng Thọ in May and September 2010 and May 2011.

in 1987. While he was there, he frequented the National Library to do research on Champa and the Cham people.[19]

Thọ' considered Phan Đăng Nhật's help crucial to his major achievements in studying art at the university; holding his first exhibition in Hanoi in 1995; participating in an art conference in India (one of his teraccota sculptures was depicted on the cover page of the conference pamphlet); and selling his sculpture to the Museum of Hanoi. His story of artistic achievement has similarity to Champa legends in which people who are born with unusual talent or supernatural ability would become rulers or important persons in society with the help of persons who have ability to discover the extraordinary but hidden gifts of the protagonists.

Thọ' majored in painting at the University of Fine Arts. His graduation work is a piece called *Pray for Rain* that depicts a lady visiting a ritual musician (*Ong Kathar*), sitting in front of a brick temple. The female statue in the background indicates that she is Queen Bia Thanh Chi, and enshrined in the temple is her husband King Po Rame.[20] Thọ' originally painted the background with orange-red colour but it was not very well received by the graduation committee members at the university, so he altered the background by painting several women carrying their offerings to the temple.[21] The altered painting offers a better perspective, and has a classical look but it had lost significant symbols of the Cham culture. The original background colour of orange-red symbolizes the sun and fire, especially the cremation fire of the Balamon religion of the Chams who worship gods at temples like Po Ram. The province of Ninh Thuận is one of the driest places in Vietnam, with only 700-800 mm rainfall[22] in a year while the annual average rainfall in Vietnam is above 1000 mm.[23] The scorching sun over the area results in a dry landscape, and the Cham villages that could not be irrigated only harvest rice once a year instead

[19] Interview with Đàng Năng Thọ in May 2010 and May 2011.
[20] Po Rame temple was established between the 16th and 17th centuries.
[21] Interview with Đàng Năng Thọ in May 2011.
[22] http://www.ninhthuan.gov.vn/Pages/Dieu-kien-tu-nhien1.aspx accessed May 31, 2011
[23] http://news.bbc.co.uk/weather/hi/country_guides/newsid_9384000/9384374.stm accessed May 31, 2011

*Pray for Rain, courtesy of Đàng Năng Thọ*

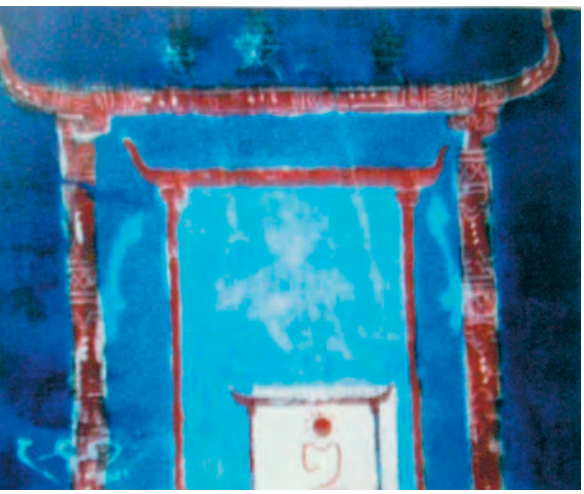
*Pray for Rain (altered version), courtesy of Đàng Năng Thọ*

of the 2-3 times in other areas. Naturally, rain is an important driver of the Cham's livelihood. Cham women, considered to be the source of life, visit the temples to pray for rain. In this context, the painting by Thọ' has two hidden notions of fire (sun) and water (rain) which present the most significant symbol of the Chams: *ahier* and *awal* dualism.

The concepts of *ahier* and *awal*, which can be interpreted as male and female dichotomy, are the foundation of the religion, cosmology, and world view of the Cham people (Nakamura 1999, 2009). One can also see this dualism in Thọ"s paintings, and, most vividly, his terracotta sculptures. After finishing his studies and returning to his native village which is famous for pottery production, he adopted this medium to express his artistic inspirations.[24] He created sculptures expressing the male and female unity, Linga and Yoni or *ahier* and *awal*. His sculptures can be better appreciated through our understanding of the *ahier* and *awal* dichotomy and the Cham's sacred symbol of *Hon Kan*, which consists of two male and two female signifiers.

[24] During the interview in May 2011, Đàng Năng Thọ explained that terracotta was the traditional medium of Cham people, and he was very familiar with it since he grew up watching his mother make earthenwares. He also mentioned that this medium was less expensive, compared to oil paintings. Thọ' never formally studied sculpture at the university, but he was already interested in sculpturing at the university, and often visited sculpture classes to practise.

There is a striking contrast between the work of Chế Thị Kim Trung and Đàng Năng Thọ. Trung's paintings are etic (external approach), descriptive, and painted for the majority Vietnamese (Kinh) viewers, while Đàng Năng Thọ's paintings are emic (internal approach), symbolic, and painted for the Cham people.[25] Thọ's work are filled with coded messages which can be read by people who have knowledge of Champa history and Cham traditions. Comparisons can be made between the paintings of Trung and Thọ through the ceremony called *Rija prong* that is organized by a lineage group. In this ceremony, a female dancer called *Muk Rija* dances to the music sang by a ritual drummer called *Ong Mutho*. There are different types of *Rija prong* ceremonies; those that belong, and others that are associated with the sea group.[26]



*Painting the Rija prong, courtesy of Đàng Năng Thọ*

In Trung's painting of *Rija prong*, a *Muk Rija* sits on a swing, indicating that she painted the *Rija prong* of the sea group.[27] *Muk Rija* is surrounded by musicians[28], and a woman praying. The painting is descriptive, and evokes the atmosphere at *Rija prong*. In contrast, the painting of *Rija prong* by Thọ shows no dancer or musician. He painted only red wooden structures, the sun, and a letter-like figure with a blue background. It is a painting of *Rija prong* of the sea group. The red wooden struc-

[25] During the interview in May 2011, Đàng Năng Thọ explained that he creates his art for his family and the Cham community. He said that he was not concerned about whether he could make a living through his art.
[26] For more information on the historical significance of *Rija prong* ceremony and other *Rija* ceremonies, see Truong Van Mon (2008).
[27] The *Rija prong* of the mountain group does not use a swing, and the duration of their ceremony is shorter than that of the sea group.
[28] Chế Thị Kim Trung painted 5 musicians playing various musical insturments. In the actual Rija prong ritual, only the tumberine-like drum is used.

tures indicate the supporting structure of a swing, and the blue colour background indicates sea. The sun and a letter-like figure indicate a part of the *Hon Kan* symbol marks of the Chams. Also present in this painting is the symbolic dualism of Cham culture. The blue background colour and the frames for the swing where the *Muk Rija* sits symbolize the female realm while the red colour, sun, and the letter-like figure symbolize the male realm.

The paintings by Thọ' invite the observer to recognize hidden codes, and exclude those who cannot. Finding the cultural codes hidden in his paintings creates intimacy between the observer and the painter. Sharing the symbolic messages with the painter produces a sense of "in-group" identity.

In interviews, Thọ' explained that he only depicted the pre-1975 life of the Chams, which he considers more beautiful than the life of contemporary Cham people. According to him, the former Chams were more religious and respectful. They kept their genuine traditions from ancient times, and they were closer to the gods.[29] During the pre-1975 era, Chams had control over their communities and culture; in a way, they were the masters of their own lives. They could study their own culture together with the French priest, father Moussay, at the Cham cultural centre; Cham students went to their own Po Klong High School; they could form a Cham unit in the military which worked side by side with US soldiers; there were Chams in high-ranking positions in the Ministry for the Development of Ethnic Minorities; and so on. However, after 1975, the Chams were placed in the socialist framework, and taught, guided, and controlled to become citizens of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. After the reunification of North and South Vietnam, Cham religious traditions were abandoned under the instruction of the government, which carried out policies to protect the cultures of the ethnic minorities, yet abolished so-called "backward" customs and superstitions. The agrarian lands were collectivized, leading to the demise of many of the Cham rituals relating to rice fields and the agrarian cycle.

[29] Interview with Đàng Năng Thọ in May 2011.

After the introduction of *đôi mó'i* policies, Cham traditions and historical heritage have been "commodified" for the sake of tourism. The more Cham culture is recognized as part of Vietnamese national heritage, the less Cham people can assert their ownership of it. Cham traditional hand-woven textiles are now woven in factories; Cham traditional dances are performed by Vietnamese dancers; the *Kate* ceremony is organised by the prefectural office of culture and sport which "invites" Cham priests to carry out the ceremony in the temple; and Champa vestiges have been renovated and transformed into something else[30] (Shin-e 2001a: 234-236; 2001b: 244 footnotes 12; Tran Ky Phuong 2006: 22-23). The Po Klong Garai temple has unfortunately been Vietnamized.[31]

*Portrait of a Cham Balamon priest, courtesy of Đàng Năng Thọ*

Đàng Năng Thọ"s portrayal of a Cham Balamon priest seems to comment on the current situation of the Cham. In this painting, a priest wearing a white gown stands in front of a red background symbolizing a funeral fire. Behind him in the distance is a Cham village painted with green. The priest was painted facing slightly diagonally[32], giving an impression he is looking towards the side of viewers. The priest is wearing a white gown and a red scarf over his white turban, signifying he is taking a break from his duties in rituals. His wrinkled face expresses discontent or disagreement. It is as if the priest is taking a break from his pre-1975 Cham community to give a disapproving look at the contemporary Chams, and for how they are losing their religious traditions and culture.

While many artists are trying to make a living through their artistic work, Thọ' is not interested in selling his work at all. Many of his

work have been lost or he does not know their whereabouts.[33] Just as well that he values the process of creating art more than the finished work. It is probably because the process of creating art is his requiem to the lost Cham culture and tradition, and to the Cham people who have lost ownership of their culture. He expresses his mourning for the loss of Cham culture and traditions, through paintings that evoke feelings, emotions, thoughts; and turn spiritual values into something tangible.[34]

## Conclusion

Dru Gladney, who studied Muslim minority populations in China, maintained that the ethnic identities of majority groups have been constructed in opposition to the image of the ethnic minority. The majority is an unmarked entity that does not possess any unique, exotic or "bizarre" culture or customs in comparison with the ethnic minority people who are decorated with colourful dresses, and possess unusual culture (Gladney 2003: 51-98).

---

[30] Hoa Lai temple is located approximately 14 km north of Phan Rang city along the National Highway No. 1. Originally, it consisted of three towers but the central tower was destroyed by bombardment during the war period. Hoa Lai temple had gone through several renovations. The renovation done by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Ninh Thuận province in mid 2000 caused outcry among the Cham intellectuals. An American writer, Mike High, wrote a short article expressing his concern about poor conservation work on Hoa Lai temple in 2009. However, English newspaper, *Vietnam Times*, rejected his article, and it was never published.

[31] Po Klong Garai temple is one of the most well-known Champa vestiges. The Balamon temples of the Cham people are only opened four times a year. The rest of the time, few Chams visit the temples due to the respect and fear for the power of the gods. The Champa vestiges are now under the care of the provincial museum that belongs to the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of the province. The Po Klong Garai is now opened all year round for tourists. Inside, the temple is decorated with illumination, and the linga is decorated by the king's attire. There are flowers, incense, a donation box and other offerings, and none of these represent the Cham tradition. Tourism seems to drive the Vietnamization of the Cham's historical and cultural heritage.

[32] Tran Ky Phuong pointed out that the priest's posture, called *tribhanga* (triple fletion), represented the noble people in Champa art tradition as influenced by Hindu art.

[33] Most of his work are now his former wife's property; those exhibited for sale in Hanoi had been kept in his acquaintance's residence in Hanoi. However, his acquaintance has passed away, and Thọ' does not know what happened to his paintings. The work exhibited in India were not returned to Vietnam, and the artist does not know where they are now.

[34] Interview with Tran Ky Phuong, May 2011.

In Vietnam, the ethnic minorities' image as "less progressive", "less civilized", "pre-modern", "nature friendly" provides contrast to the modernized majority Vietnamese (Kinh). Such image of ethnic minorities is favoured by a foreign-oriented art market and tourism industry. Ethnic minorities have become essential to promoting an image of traditional, pre-modern Vietnam. While ethnic minority culture and their images have been co-opted, ethnic minorities have been estranged from their own cultures, and remain subject to government top-down policies. What is good and what is bad for them are decided by the government, leaving the ethnic minorities passive recipients of governmental aid and guidance. Ethnic minorities themselves have adopted the images created by the government about them, and have used state vocabularies to express their own identity. The situation is akin to colonized people having no vocabularies to explain themselves other than the ones given by the colonial masters (A. Loomba 2001: 75). Chế Thị Kim Trung's paintings demonstrate such a situation for the Cham ethnic minorities.

Đàng Năng Thọ"s work, however, indicate a possibility of breaking the spell on ethnic minorities, allowing them to talk about themselves in their own vocabularies. The art market opened up by *đôi mó'i* may provide a platform for the ethnic minorities to express their own identity and thoughts using their own artistic vocabularies in Socialist Vietnam.

## Bibliography


Boi Tran, H. (2005). *Vietnamese aesthetics from 1925 onwards*. Sydney: University of Sydney.

Connor, W. (1984). *The national question in Marxist-Leninist theory and strategy*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Evans, G. (1985). Vietnamese communist anthropology. *Canberra Anthropology*, *8*(1 & 2), 116-147.

Gladney, D. C. (2003). *Dislocating China: Muslims, minorities and other subaltern subjects*. London: University of Chicago Press.

Hickey, G. C. (1982). *Free in the forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese central highlands 1954-1976*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press.

Hickey, G. C. (1993). *Shattered world: Adaptation and survival among Vietnam's highland people during the Vietnam war*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Hy Van Luong. (1992). *Revolution in the village: Tradition and transformation in north Vietnam, 1925-1988*. Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.

Jamieson, N. (1996). The evolving context of contemporary Vietnamese painting. In *Cultural Representation in Transition: New Vietnamese Painting* (pp. 14-27). Bangkok: Siam Society.

Keyes, C. F. (1987). Tribal peoples and the nation-state in mainland Southeast Asia. In B.O. Anderson (Ed.), *Southeast Asian Tribal Groups and Ethnic Minorities: Prospects for the Eighties and Beyond* (Vol. 22, pp. 19-26). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cultural Survival, Inc.

Kleinen, J. (1999). *Facing the future, reviving the past: A study of social change in a northern Vietnamese village*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Kraevskaia, N. (2005). *From nostalgia towards exploration: Essays on contemporary art in Vietnam*. Hanoi: Kim Dong Publishing House.

Kennedy, L. B., & Williams, M. R. (2001). The past without the pain: The manufacture of nostalgia in Vietnam's tourism industry. In Tai Hue-Tam Ho (Ed.), *Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (pp. 135-163). Ewing, NJ: University of California Press.

Malarney, S. K. (2002). *Culture, ritual and revolution in Vietnam*. London: Routledge Curzon.

Nakamura, Rie. (1999). *Cham in Vietnam: Dynamics of ethnicity*. Washington, Seattle: Department of Anthropology.

Nakamura, Rie. (2009). Awar-ahier: Two keys to understanding the cosmology and ethnicity of the Cham people (Ninh Thuân province, Vietnam). In A. Hardy, M. Cucarzi & P. Zolese (Eds.), *My Son* (pp. 78-106). Singapore: National University of Singapore Press.

Anthony, R. (1999). *Charting the shape of early modern Southeast Asia*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.

Taylor, N. A. (1999). 'Pho' phai and faux phais: the market for fakes in Vietnam and the appropriation of national symbol. *Ethnos*, *64*(2),

Taylor, N. A. (2007). Vietnamese anti-art and anti-Vietnamese artists: Experimental performance culture in Hà nôi's alternative exhibition spaces. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, *2*(2), 108-128.

Taylor, N. A. (2009). *Painters in Hanoi: An ethnography of Vietnamese art*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press.

Tran Ky Phuong. (2006). *Cultural resource and heritage issues of historic Champa states in Vietnam: Champa origins, reconfirmed nomenclatures, and preservation of sites, Asia Research Institute working paper series no. 75*. Singapore: Asia Research Institute.

Truong Van Mon. (2008). *Historical relations between Champa and the Malay penninsula during 17th to 19th century: A study on development of Raja Praong ritual* (Unpublished master's thesis, University of Malaya).

Images on pages 1, 5, and 6 courtesy of Nguyen Quang Thang
All other images courtesy of Rie Nakamura

**Rie Nakamura** is currently a visiting senior lecturer at the School of International Studies at Universiti Utara Malaysia. She studied socio-cultural anthropology at the University of Washington, and received a Ph. D. in 1999. Her thesis was on the Cham ethnic minority people in Vietnam. After graduation, she worked as a programme officer at the Toyota Foundation in Japan, and also as the regional coordinator for the Southeast Asian programme of Open Society Institute (based in Thailand).