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Buddhism and the Masses in Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Comparative Study of the Sun Wukong Belief in Malaysia and Vietnam

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Abstract: This study examines the cross-cultural transmission and adaptation of the Qi Tian Da Sheng (Sun Wukong) belief among Chinese communities in Malaysia and Vietnam. As Chinese migrants settled in Southeast Asia, they introduced Qi Tian Da Sheng worship, which evolved uniquely in each region. In Malaysia, the deity symbolizes protection and cultural identity through numerous temples and community activities. In Vietnam, Qi Tian Da Sheng has integrated with local Buddhist and folk traditions, especially in the south, where he is revered as a protector and spiritual figure. This comparative analysis highlights how Qi Tian Da Sheng belief has adapted to local environments, demonstrating its significance in preserving cultural heritage and addressing spiritual needs in Southeast Asian Chinese communities.

Keywords: Qi Tian Da Sheng, Sun Wukong, Journey to the West, Chinese diaspora, religious belief, cultural integration

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Introduction

Journey to the West (西遊記) is a classic Chinese novel that integrates Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian philosophies. Its main character, Sun Wukong 孫悟空, known as Qi Tian Da Sheng (the Great Sage Equal to Heaven 齊天大聖) evolved from a powerful literary figure into a revered symbol of religious belief within popular folk worship. This character has not only been deeply ingrained in Chinese culture but also spread across Southeast Asia with waves of Chinese migration. In particular, the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng has gained prominence among Chinese communities in Malaysia and Vietnam.

Sun Wukong's spiritual journey toward enlightenment parallels the Buddhist path of awakening. Additionally, his sacred status within Taoism, where he is conferred the title Qi Tian Da Sheng, symbolizes strength and resilience. These traits laid the foundation for his later deification as a god of war and a protector deity. In Confucian thought, Sun Wukong's loyalty to and protection of Tang Sanzang 唐三藏 aligns with the Confucian ideals of loyalty and righteousness, further establishing his image as a figure transcending religious and cultural boundaries. Over time, Sun Wukong transformed from a fictional literary character into a tangible deity in folk religion.

As Chinese migrants settled in Southeast Asia, they brought their belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng with them, resulting in the development of unique religious and cultural phenomena in these regions. While the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng in Malaysia and Vietnam shares common Chinese origins, it has diverged, reflecting the distinct social structures and cultural contexts of each country. In Malaysia, Qi Tian Da Sheng has become a symbol of protection for Chinese communities, with numerous temples dedicated to his worship, making him a significant part of social life. In Vietnam, the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng has integrated with local cultural and religious traditions, deeply blending with Buddhist practices and presenting religious practices that differ from those in Malaysia. This paper aims to compare the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng in Malaysia and Vietnam, examining how it has evolved and adapted to the different cultural and social contexts of these two nations. Through a literature review, field research, and interviews, this study will analyze the transmission patterns and social functions of Qi Tian Da Sheng in these countries, thereby exploring its cultural significance in contemporary Southeast Asian Chinese communities.

Historical Introduction: The Migration of Chinese Communities and the Early Establishment of Qi Tian Da Sheng Belief

To understand the cultural and religious significance of Qi Tian Da Sheng, it is essential to explore its historical origins and development in different regions of Southeast Asia. As Chinese migrants moved southward into Southeast Asia, they

brought their religious beliefs with them. Facing the uncertainties of life in foreign lands, these migrants found comfort in their deities, making religious belief a central part of their spiritual lives. Most Chinese migrants practiced Buddhism or Taoism, and the belief in Sun Wukong, or Qi Tian Da Sheng, spread along with them, eventually becoming a significant religious symbol within Chinese communities in Malaysia and Vietnam.

Chinese migration to Malaysia began as early as the 15th century, during the Ming Dynasty when initial trade and cultural exchanges with the Malay Archipelago occurred. Migration surged from the late Qing Dynasty through the 19th century, with large numbers of immigrants from Fujian and Guangdong working in mining, agriculture, and trade. These communities established temples and religious practices that maintained their cultural identity. Over time, Qi Tian Da Sheng became widely revered as a protector deity, evolving into a vital religious figure within Malaysian society.

Similarly, Chinese migration to Vietnam dates back centuries, with a notable increase in the 17th century as immigrants sought economic opportunities, particularly in the southern regions like Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City). As these communities grew, the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng took root and flourished within local Chinese communities, reinforcing cultural identity and social cohesion.

The Origins of Qi Tian Da Sheng Belief in Malaysia: Chinese Immigration

According to data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia, as of 2020, Chinese Malaysians make up approximately 22.4% of the country's population, with 76% identifying as Buddhists and around 19% following Taoism and Confucianism. Religious practices among Chinese Malaysians often blend Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist elements. While many identify officially as Buddhists, they frequently participate in Taoist rituals and folk practices. The belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng is particularly prevalent among Buddhist and Taoist followers, with temples dedicated to him concentrated in areas with large Chinese populations, such as Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Johor. Based on data from the Malaysian temple information site Ang Kong Keng, it is estimated that over 400 temples in Malaysia venerate Qi Tian Da Sheng, with 36 temples solely dedicated to him, indicating that this belief has been present for about a century.

Early Chinese immigrants to Southeast Asia were largely from lower social strata and carried with them their traditional beliefs, establishing temples and ancestral halls similar to those in their homeland. The origins of Qi Tian Da Sheng worship trace back to Ming and Qing China, where religious practices fused Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist elements, leading to the veneration of historical and literary figures like Sun Wukong. In Malaysia, this belief became ingrained in the Chinese community,

spreading through cultural activities like temple festivals and opera performances, which reinforced Qi Tian Da Sheng's role as a guardian deity.

The Peranakans (Baba Nyonya) community played an important role in spreading the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng. Historian Koh Chin Yee, in his paper *The Influence of Chinese Classical Novels on the Religious Customs of Singapore Chinese*, indicated that the veneration of Qi Tian Da Sheng among Singaporean Chinese began as early as the mid-19th century, with the first wave of Chinese migration. Both newly arrived Chinese migrants and Peranakans worshipped Qi Tian Da Sheng (Koh 2014). The Peranakans, having a background that blended Chinese and Malay cultures, inherited their paternal cultural traditions and ethnic characteristics. Many of them practiced Buddhism and Taoism, strictly observing traditional Chinese religious rituals. As Chinese immigrants continued to arrive in Malaysia, the religious system that the Straits Chinese followed spread to other Chinese-populated areas, such as Malacca, Penang, and Singapore, where temples dedicated to Qi Tian Da Sheng (Peranakans call him Tai Seng Ya) were built, or altars were established in homes for regular worship. An important figure in this regard was the Baba translator Chan Kim Boon (1851–1920), who, between 1911 and 1913, published a nine-volume *Journey to the West* adaptation in Romanized Baba Malay titled *Kou Chey Thian*. His translation not only deepened the Straits Chinese community's understanding of Qi Tian Da Sheng's story but also intensified their reverence for him, further fueling the rise of his worship. However, as English became more widespread and the Straits Chinese community gradually Westernized, the practice of worshipping Qi Tian Da Sheng declined, with some Straits Chinese converting to Christianity or Catholicism. The belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng in Malaysia is not only found in traditional temples and private altars but also extends to Buddhist temples and Buddhist nunnery, showcasing the diversity of this religious practice. Scholar Ong Seng Huat highlights the close connection between the introduction of Qi Tian Da Sheng belief and the Qinglian Sect. Also known as "Xiantiandao," this was a new folk religion that emerged during the late imperial period of China. The sect venerated the Yaochi Jinmu (Jade Mother of the West)as the supreme deity and emphasized the cultivation of the "Primordial Heaven" (無極先天), focusing on moral ethics and self-discipline. The Qinglian Sect combined elements from Confucian ethics, Buddhist Zen, and Taoist inner alchemy. Its practitioners adhered to strict vegetarianism and celibacy and engaged in Taoist-inspired rituals such as spirit writing and inner alchemy cultivation.

Despite facing suppression from Qing authorities, the Qinglian Sect spread to Malaysia around 1860, during a period of rising Chinese immigration, particularly because of the flourishing tin mining industry. At this time, the Chinese community in Malaysia was thriving, with large numbers of immigrants consolidating their presence in the region. In this context, the Chinese diaspora was no longer satisfied with traditional idol worship and pursuiting blessings: they began seeking higher forms of spiritual enlightenment. The Buddhist nunnery of the Qinglian Sect became

an important venue for such spiritual cultivation within Malaysia's religious landscape (Loh 1984). Within the belief system of the Qinglian Sect, *Journey to the West* was regarded as an allegory, and Sun Wukong (Qi Tian Da Sheng) was seen not merely as a literary figure but as a symbol of Taoist cultivation, representing the "heart" and the process of spiritual awakening. This interpretation imbued *Journey to the West* with profound religious significance, making it an essential text for various sects to disseminate their teachings. In the Qinglian Sect's belief system, Qi Tian Da Sheng was revered as *Dou Zhan Sheng Fo* (The Victorious Fighting Buddha), representing not just a protective deity or an efficacious god but also symbolizing human spiritual cultivation and the enhancement of one's inner character. Therefore, in Malaysia's Chinese community, the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng transcends mere folk worship and incorporates deeper religious and spiritual dimensions, becoming an integral part of the local religious life.

Current Worship Practices in Qi Tian Da Sheng Belief in Malaysia

A news report from the 1950s highlights the prevalence of superstition and religious belief in the Malaysian Chinese community during that time, particularly regarding the worship of deities like Qi Tian Da Sheng. The incident occurred the day after a man with the surname Ye was married. The newlywed suddenly felt an intense thirst and subsequently entered a sleepwalking state, exhibiting bizarre behavior such as hallucinations and incoherent speech. He claimed to have seen his deceased mother and sister and expressed strong emotions, accusing his family of failing to properly honor the deceased, thus committing a serious offense. This behavior caused panic within the family, drawing neighbors and relatives to the scene. An elderly female relative intervened, using folk religious practices to resolve the situation. She claimed to be possessed by Qi Tian Da Sheng and performed an exorcism ritual involving talismans and incense ash, ultimately calming the man. The report offered two interpretations of the event. From the superstitious perspective, it was viewed as a case of spirit possession, with the divine power of Qi Tian Da Sheng being used to expel the spirits. The alternative scientific explanation suggested that the man had suffered from nervous exhaustion following his wedding, leading to a state of mental confusion. The report criticized the superstitious practices, emphasizing that modern society should address such incidents through a scientific approach rather than relying on traditional religious beliefs. This incident occurred in 1953 when Malaysian Chinese society was influenced by revolutionary movements and the New Culture Movement from China. Chinese leaders and intellectuals strongly opposed superstition, viewing it as a remnant of feudal thought that should be replaced by science and rationality. The report's conclusion reflects the prevailing intellectual trend, attempting to guide readers to interpret abnormal behavior as psychological

rather than attributing it to divine intervention. However, a significant portion of society continued to believe in spiritual possession and the power of religious rituals. The elderly woman's method, claiming to be possessed by Qi Tian Da Sheng, was supported by the surrounding community. Despite the anti-superstition wave driven by the New Culture Movement and the rise of scientific thinking, belief in spirits and divine intervention retained influence among certain groups. This case illustrates the persistent tension between modernity and traditional religious practices within Malaysian Chinese society during this period.

Following Malaysia's independence, the nation began to promote nation-building centered on Malay culture and Islamic faith, which led to the marginalization and cultural identity confusion among the Chinese as a minority group. This situation generated collective cultural anxiety within the Chinese community, forcing them to seek a balance between national identity and their cultural heritage. Within this new national framework, Chinese Malaysians faced uncertainty and apprehension about their future, stemming from identity anxiety and psychological pressure. Consequently, they increasingly sought spiritual solace, leading to a resurgence of religious worship and divine authority. Traditional religious beliefs, such as the veneration of Qi Tian Da Sheng and Guanyin, not only persisted during this period but also expanded in scope. This religious revival manifested in the growth of religious activities, the construction and expansion of temples, and the increased frequency of religious rituals. The establishment of temples dedicated to Qi Tian Da Sheng reflects this trend. From the 1960s to the 1980s, numerous temples dedicated to Qi Tian Da Sheng were established across Malaysia, such as the Qingyan Temple in Penang (1965) and the Lingxian Temple in Kuala Lumpur (1967). These temples provided a source of spiritual comfort and became symbols of Chinese cultural heritage and centers of cohesion, reflecting the community's dedication to preserving their culture and reliance on divine protection. Under the pressure of national identity formation, the Chinese community responded collectively by using religion to strengthen internal cultural connections. This religious resurgence thus became a crucial response to the socio-cultural challenges faced by the Chinese minority in Malaysia during this era. The following sections explore specific case studies from Malaysia, highlighting the evolution of Qi Tian Da Sheng worship in this context.

Social Functions: Highlight Contributions to Education, Charity, and Community Cohesion

In Malaysian Chinese society, the worship of Qi Tian Da Sheng not only serves as a religious practice but also plays a vital role in integrating local community resources, particularly in education and charitable activities. Two news reports highlight how social capital, derived from religious beliefs, has been a crucial support for Chinese

education. A 1957 report describes the significant contribution of Qi Tian Da Sheng worship to the development of the Chinese elementary School in Pasir Penambang. During the celebration of Qi Tian Da Sheng's birthday, local temples held grand festivities, selling paper offerings, tea, and oil cans to raise funds. All the proceeds were donated to the school, alleviating its financial challenges. In contrast, a 2024 report from Penang's Qing Yan Temple shows the continuing social function of Qi Tian Da Sheng worship. During both the deity's birthday and the Mid-Autumn Festival, the temple organized fundraising events that raised RM 15,000, which was donated to various charitable institutions and schools, with an emphasis on supporting educational initiatives. These two reports, over 60 years, demonstrate the continuous influence and social impact of Qi Tian Da Sheng worship in Malaysia. Whether in 1957 or 2024, the temples have used their religious platforms to fund Chinese education and local community welfare projects. This historical continuity underscores the importance of local social resources, particularly temple resources, in supporting Chinese education. Through the integration of religion, economics, education, and philanthropy, the Chinese community has successfully consolidated local culture and belief while ensuring the ongoing development of Chinese education. In the absence of sufficient government support, local religious resources have become a critical force sustaining Chinese educational efforts.

Qing Yan Temple in Penang, mentioned above, has a history dating back over 62 years, officially established in 1957. Initially, a group of young people created a clay statue of Qi Tian Da Sheng and placed it in a broken boat for worship. After several relocations, the temple finally settled at its current location. The temple upholds unique religious traditions, not only worshiping five different representations of Qi Tian Da Sheng but also other characters from *Journey to the West*, such as Zhu Bajie (Marshal Tianpeng), Sha Monk, and Red Boy. Worshipers visit the temple to seek blessings for wealth and wisdom, and students pray to Qi Tian Da Sheng for intelligence and academic success. The temple's rituals combine local Fujian customs with offerings such as apples symbolizing academic excellence, pineapples representing prosperity, and scallions signifying intelligence. The coconut, pronounced similarly to "win" in the Fujian dialect, is especially favored. These rituals are not only religious but also reflect the blending of local culture and language. Every year, on the 16th day of the 8th lunar month, Qing Yan Temple celebrates Qi Tian Da Sheng's birthday with a grand procession of floats every 12 years. The festivities include a variety of traditional rituals and performances, such as prayers to the Jade Emperor (asking for the protection of heavenly gods), military feasts (rewarding and honoring the five armies of gods), puppet shows, dance performances, and dragon and lion dances. These traditional ceremonies and cultural activities have become vital symbols of community cohesion, attracting large numbers of worshipers.

Qing Yan Temple's religious activities are not limited to worship but also emphasize social responsibility and charitable contributions. During the annual birthday

celebrations, the temple donates to charitable institutions and schools. For instance, in 2024, Qing Yan Temple raised funds through the sale of Chinese newspapers to support the local Chinese school building fund. Additionally, the temple organized environmental and educational activities, such as waste-sorting seminars and anti-drug lectures, helping raise community awareness of environmental issues and healthy living. Through these efforts, the temple integrates religious belief with modern societal needs, expanding the social influence of Qi Tian Da Sheng worship. As a major religious and cultural landmark in Penang, Qing Yan Temple attracts numerous tourists through its large-scale celebrations and parades, making it one of Penang's unique tourist attractions. This also demonstrates the economic and cultural value of Qi Tian Da Sheng worship in modern society. Local government officials and community leaders actively support the temple's activities, further solidifying its influence in the region. The case of Qing Yan Temple illustrates the current state of Qi Tian Da Sheng worship in Malaysia and its multifaceted role in contemporary society.

Cultural Significance: Syncretism and Cultural Fusion

Malaysia, as a multicultural nation, presents a unique phenomenon of religious syncretism. On this land, not only do the Chinese communities venerate Qi Tian Da Sheng, but the Indian communities also widely worship the Hindu monkey god, Hanuman. The coexistence of these two monkey gods in Malaysia reveals distinct cultural and religious features, even though their roles and characteristics differ. Hanuman is a prominent deity in Hinduism, originating from the Indian epic *Ramayana*. The central narrative of this epic revolves around Prince Rama and Hanuman joining forces to defeat the demon Ravana and rescue Rama's wife, Sita. Hanuman symbolizes loyalty and courage, qualities that make him a revered figure among the Indian community. His story is commonly depicted in temple sculptures, murals, and festive celebrations, representing the triumph of righteousness over evil. Festivals like Dussehra are widely celebrated in honor of Hanuman's victory. Batu Caves, one of the most iconic Hindu sacred sites in Malaysia, prominently displays various stories from the *Ramayana*, including the heroic deeds of Hanuman. The statue of Hanuman at Batu Caves reveals his unwavering loyalty to his master, depicted by his open chest showing Rama and Sita within.

In Chinese temples across Malaysia, Qi Tian Da Sheng is often portrayed in two forms: holding a peach, symbolizing immortality, or wielding a staff, representing resilience and the ability to overcome challenges. In Malaysia, it is common to find these two deities coexisting or being worshipped side by side. For example, at the Hanuman Temple in Sentul, Kuala Lumpur, the temple's guardian figures resemble Qi Tian Da Sheng clad in traditional Chinese armor. This phenomenon of shared worship between the two deities exemplifies the religious cohabitation in Malaysia.

In a multicultural setting, some devotees simultaneously worship gods from different traditions, with Chinese worshipers venerating Hanuman and Indian devotees paying homage to Qi Tian Da Sheng.

The worship of monkey gods in Malaysia highlights the deep cultural exchange between Indian, Chinese, and Malay traditions. This phenomenon is reflected not only in religious practices but also in classical and contemporary literature and cultural activities. The Indian monkey god Hanuman has left a profound mark on Malay traditions, while Qi Tian Da Sheng from Chinese classical literature has gradually become a shared cultural asset for multiple ethnic groups in Malaysia. For instance, *Hikayat Seri Rama*, the Malay adaptation of the *Ramayana*, integrates the monkey king character as a significant part of the story. This adaptation has also become a prominent subject in traditional Malay shadow puppetry (Wayang Kulit). This art form retains Indian cultural influences while incorporating local Malay elements, making the monkey god Hanuman's tale a symbol of cultural fusion between Malay and Indian traditions. Meanwhile, the story of Qi Tian Da Sheng, derived from the Chinese classic *Journey to the West*, has transcended the Chinese community's boundaries in Malaysia, gaining recognition among various ethnic groups. In 2009, a simplified Malay-language adaptation of *Journey to the West*, titled *Pengembaraan ke Dunia Barat*, was published for primary and secondary school students. This version, filled with illustrations, was well-received by younger readers and embraced by ethnic groups beyond the Chinese community. In 2015, a full Malay translation of *Journey to the West* (*Hikayat Jelajah ke Barat*) was co-published by Malaysia's Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka and Zhejiang Publishing Group in China. This translation faithfully conveyed the content of the original while incorporating localized elements to fit Malaysia's cultural context, such as dressing Qi Tian Da Sheng in the traditional Malaysian batik and reinterpreting characters like the Lord of the land (Tudi Gong) as the familiar "Datuk Gong." This adaptation made Qi Tian Da Sheng's story more accessible and relatable to local audiences, with the full support of the Malaysian government, ensuring its widespread distribution across the country. The dual worship of Qi Tian Da Sheng and Hanuman in Malaysia represents more than just religious devotion. These monkey god stories serve as bridges for cross-cultural exchanges, symbolizing the power of integration in Malaysia's multicultural society.

Chinese Migration and Regional Variations in the Belief of Qi Tian Da Sheng in Vietnam

The Qi Tian Da Sheng belief in Vietnam presents a different profile compared to its counterpart in the multicultural and multiethnic context of Malaysia. The elongated territory of Vietnam, stretching over 3,000 kilometers, coupled with its historical divisions and the complex process of southward expansion, has made the diffusion of the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng more complicated. This complexity is clear in the

distinct differences between the North and the South. These distinctions become clear in different aspects, ranging from the timing of introduction to methods of spreading, distribution, the demographics of followers, influence, and religious customs.

Qi Tian Da Sheng as Both Buddhist Deity and Folk Religious Figure: Its Role in the Social and Religious Life of Northern Vietnamese

According to the available historical records, the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng was introduced to northern Vietnam at an early stage and had a significant influence on the local people. According to the *Hương Hải thiền sư ngữ lục* (香海禪師語錄 Hương Hải Chan Master's Collected Sayings), as early as the late 17th century, Nguyệt Đường 月堂 Pagoda (now known as Xích Đằng Pagoda) in Hưng Yên Province, Vietnam, housed a statue of the Qi Tian Da Sheng. The record states:

> "In the front hall, there are two additional buildings, each with five rooms. On the left side, there is a golden wooden statue of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. On the right side, there is a gilt copper statue of the Maitreya Buddha. Additionally, there is a wooden statue of the Qi Tian Da Sheng... On both the left and right exterior sides, there are two wooden statues of Dharma protectors." (Hương Hải thiền sư 2024).

By its establishment in 1697, Nguyệt Đường pagoda demonstrated the integration of the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng into the Vietnamese Buddhist system. This integration led to its incorporation into the daily lives of the people in northern Vietnam, with temples serving as its residence. Sadly, the only remaining part of Nguyệt Đường pagoda today is its gate and two stone tower tombs, as the other buildings have vanished because of factors like weather and wars. Consequently, we cannot examine the Qi Tian Da Sheng statue and its associated rituals. Meanwhile, the footnotes of the book reveal a significant piece of information: the widespread worship of Qi Tian Da Sheng in numerous temples in northern Vietnam:

> "We should also understand why the statue of Qi Tian Da Sheng was here. In fact, in the past, when people read the stories of The Investiture of the Gods 封神演義 and novel Journey to the West, they thought they were real stories. Because they did not read The Records of the Western Regions 大唐西域記 by Xuanzang 玄奘, they thought the story of Journey to the West was real, and then they thought that the Qi Tian Da Sheng, was also a powerful Dharma protector and was worshiped in every temple." (Hương Hải thiền sư 2021, 3-4)

As noted in the footnotes, this simple record confirms the popularity of the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief in northern Vietnam and provides insights into the channels through which the cult was disseminated and how the Vietnamese people perceived the Monkey King. The people came to know and worship Sun Wukong through novels and based on their devotion to Buddhism, accepted his existence and his role as a protector of the Buddha. This allows us to better understand the intricate and complex relationship between early Buddhism and the folk religion in Vietnam.

Moreover, in northern Vietnam, the origin of the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng can be attributed to the Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, as stated by Chen and Zheng's research. It is revered as one of the two prominent protectors of Guanyin Bodhisattva, alongside the Vietnamese deity thần Độc cước (One-Legged God) (Chen and Zheng 2020, 319). However, no temples dedicated primarily to Qi Tian Da Sheng have been identified. The current statue of Qi Tian Da Sheng at Vĩnh Nghiêm Pagoda in Bắc Giang Province resembles the depiction of Sun Wukong from the television series *Journey to the West*. This indicates that it is likely that the statue was restored later, and its original form is still unknown. This observation suggests that the current Qi Tian Da Sheng belief in northern Vietnam has been shaped by the spread of popular culture, such as movies and TV shows.

This historical evidence not only highlights the early presence of Qi Tian Da Sheng belief in northern Vietnam but also underscores its integration into the local Buddhist tradition and its deep penetration into the lives of the local populace. Based on existing records about early 20th-century Vietnamese society, such as Edmond Nordemann (1869-1945)'s *Guang Ji Hua Wen* 廣集華文, we can see that various folk beliefs continued to be deeply trusted and supported by the people in northern Vietnam until this time (Nordemann 1917). Therefore, despite the loss of physical artifacts, these records provide valuable insights into the early spread and influence of Qi Tian Da Sheng's belief in Vietnam.

The lack of extensive historical records makes it challenging to fully understand the dissemination of the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief in northern Vietnam. Nevertheless, the existence of artifacts and artworks presents strong evidence that the inhabitants of this area not only knew of but also embraced the characters and Buddhist concepts from *Journey to the West*. By the late 17th century, vivid woodcuts depicting scenes from *Journey to the West* appeared in Hùng Lô Village Temple in Phú Thọ Province (Cao 2021, 20). In the 18th century, the Độc Lôi Village Temple in Nghệ An Province featured multiple murals illustrating episodes from *Journey to the West* (Bảo tàng 2024). These murals not only demonstrate the local population's devotion to Buddhism but also reflect the widespread dissemination of *Journey to the West* in northern Vietnam.

By the late 19th century, the *Journey to the West* had been adapted into a Nôm story titled *Tây du truyện* 西遊傳 (Nguyễn 2019). In the late 19th to early 20th century, advancements in printing and promotion of Quốc Ngữ led to more translations and

publications of Chinese novels (Yan 1989). The Chinese TV series *Journey to the West* spread rapidly in Vietnam in the 1980s, making Sun Wukong or Qi Tian Da Sheng even more well-known.

These developments underscore the deep cultural and religious impact of *Journey to the West* and its central character, Sun Wukong, on northern Vietnam. They have contributed to the establishment and promotion of the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng.

Currently, the Institute of Hán Nôm houses several documents related to Qi Tian Da Sheng belief, including *Qitian Juan* (齊天卷 The Scroll of Qi Tian), *Zhuoxie Zhibing Zouwen* (捉邪治病奏文 The Petition for Exorcism and Healing), *Fushui Shu* (符水書 The Book of Talismanic Water), and *Fosheng Jiangbing Zongke* (佛聖將兵總科 The General Code of Buddhist Saints and Soldiers). *Qitian Juan* compiles seals and talismans used by Chinese priests to worship Qi Tian Da Sheng for exorcism and healing. Similarly, *Zhuoxie Zhibing Zouwen* and *Fushui Shu* contain talismans for healing and exorcism. Among these, *Fosheng Jiangbing Zongke* is the only document written in Nôm script. The text known as "*Lian Qitian Dasheng Wen*" is included, written in a 7-7-6-8 verse form, and is used as an invocation to summon yin soldiers and generals during rituals. The book includes a ritual incantation entitled 'Calling Upon the Great Sage Equal to Heaven (請齊天大聖文).' This incantation, typical of the folk religious practices prevalent in the north of Vietnam during the end of the 19th century to the early 20th century, demonstrates the popular veneration of Sun Wukong as a powerful deity capable of intervening in human affairs. The incantation states:

> "With utmost devotion, we humbly invoke the Great Sage Equal to Heaven, the Supreme Sage of the Mysterious Heavens, and the Great Sage, who bear the weight of the heavens and earth, are the spirits of the three realms, and possess the divine powers to uproot mountains, vanquish demons from the four corners of the world, pursue the Golden-winged Roc and Iron Fan Princess, and journey to the Western Region to obtain the True Scriptures. Clad in green robes and white footwear, adorned with a jade pendant, they ride on lions to traverse the sun and moon, and on unicorns to journey between the heavens and earth, ascending to the three heavens in an instant and descending to the nine netherworlds in the blink of an eye. We beseech these revered sages to hear our supplication and swiftly descend to witness our virtuous deeds. May this offering of incense and flowers be pleasing to them." (Fosheng Jiangbing Zongke 1900s, 8).

Therefore, this evidence reveals a complex and syncretic Qi Tian Da Sheng belief that was deeply embedded in the Vietnamese grassroots society of that period. It

amalgamated elements of Buddhist and Daoist teachings, as well as Daoist and local indigenous rituals. The evidence shows that the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng in northern Vietnam up to the early 20th century mainly centers on healing and exorcism, with Sun Wukong being worshipped as a deity possessing supernatural abilities and divine power.

Consequently, given the scarcity of existing documents, artifacts, and the overall context, it can be inferred that the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng maintains a certain impact in northern Vietnam. Its existence is primarily attributed to being a Buddhist deity and a folk religious figure. It is highly embraced by the Vietnamese community and deeply intertwined with their daily existence, particularly in ensuring safety, promoting wellness, and warding off evil spirits. Although the quantity of temples devoted to Qi Tian Da Sheng is limited, the process of his deification in northern Vietnam has resulted in his transformation from a guardian figure in Buddhism to a revered "divine physician," thus emphasizing the progression of his religious significance and his distinct role and purpose within the local community.

Multiplicity and Localization of Qi Tian Da Sheng Belief: Exploring the Diverse Manifestations in Southern Vietnam

Based on the literature and the findings of our field survey, it has been determined that the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng is significantly more prevalent and deeply rooted in southern Vietnam compared to the northern region. Nevertheless, because of insufficient data, it remains challenging to obtain comprehensive evidence concerning the introduction time, dissemination process, characteristics, and localization of Qi Tian Da Sheng in the southern region. However, like the situation in the north, we can acquire an initial understanding of the origins and effects of the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief by analyzing the spread and influence of related characters and literary works, such as Journey to the West, in the southern region.

Drawing upon the existing fieldwork data and temples, it can be deduced that introducing the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng in southern Vietnam was a gradual process facilitated by Chinese immigrants. Such a conclusion can be drawn from the fact that a majority of the extant worshiping Qi Tian Da Sheng' shrines in the south are within Chinese community halls 華人會館 (A more detailed analysis will be presented in the following sections). The quantity of these worship sites suggests that, although Qi Tian Da Sheng is not as widely venerated in the southern Chinese community as deities such as Tian Hou (Mazu, Goddess of the Sea), Guan Di (God of War), Fude Zhengshen (God of Wealth and Prosperity), and Yuhuang Dadi (Jade Emperor), his popularity and influence are no less significant. This is evident from the channels through which he is disseminated, as elaborated in the subsequent section, signifying his significant recognition and influence within both the Chinese and Vietnamese communities.

When discussing the dissemination and influencing factors of the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief in the South, the pervasive influence of the novel *Journey to the West* cannot be overlooked. The distribution of this novel in southern Vietnam has been extensive and diverse. Incorporating classical Chinese novels, Nôm poetry, Quốc ngữ translations, theatrical performances, and television series have collectively solidified the profound impact of Journey to the West on Vietnamese culture. Qi Tian Da Sheng's prominent role in *Journey to the West* has left a profound mark on the hearts of southern Vietnamese individuals, thus establishing a firm footing for the dissemination and acceptance of his belief system.

The exchange of books from China to central and southern Vietnam between the 18th and early 20th centuries played a pivotal role in expanding the circulation and influence of the novel *Journey to the West* in Vietnam (Li 2015). These books were rich in content, with Ming and Qing dynasty long novels being popular among Vietnamese literati, and Journey to the West is a prime example.

About the earliest documented work influenced by *Journey to the West*, we find the "Đấu chiến thắng phật" (Dou Zhan Sheng Fo, the Victorious Fighting Buddha) dance performed at the Nguyễn court (Đỗ and Đỗ 1968). Originating during the reign of Nguyễn Phúc Nguyên (阮福源, 1563-1635), this dance was changed from Buddhist scriptures by the court artist Đào Duy Từ (陶維慈, 1572-1634). It illustrates Sun Wukong's journey to enlightenment and his subsequent clash with a Dharma protector, ultimately reconciling and jointly protecting Buddhism (Nguyen 2021). This dance was highly favored in the court, demonstrating the early influence of Journey to the West in Vietnam.

Subsequently, there was a proliferation of Nôm adaptations of the novel in the southern region. Nôm works satisfied Vietnamese reading needs and increased the popularity of Chinese literature, including *Journey to the West* (Nguyễn 2020). The Chinese-Vietnamese scholar Duy Minh thị notably transformed *Journey to the West* into *Tây du diễn ca* (西遊演歌, The Ballad of Journey to the West) in 1878, consequently leading to a proliferation of adaptations of *Journey to the West* (Nguyen 2020). Additionally, works such as the anonymous *Tây du Đường Tăng cầu Kinh ca truyện* (西游唐僧求經歌傳, The Song of Tang Monk's Quest for Scriptures) and Bùi Hữu Nghĩa (裴有義, 1807-1872)'s *Tuồng Tây du* (西游啜, Journey to the West: A Play) made significant contributions to the dissemination of *Journey to the West* in the south. As previously mentioned, the *Journey to the West* acquired popularity in Vietnam through translations and televised adaptations. The presence of these productions helped to boost the popularity of *Journey to the West*, consequently enhancing the prominence of characters such as Sun Wukong.

The novel and its adaptations have served as powerful vehicles for disseminating the image of Sun Wukong as a charismatic and rebellious figure, fostering his popularity and the subsequent development of Qi Tian Da Sheng belief in southern Vietnam, as detailed below.

Current Religious Practices of Qi Tian Da Sheng in Southern Vietnam

Worship within Temples

Taking into consideration the aforementioned factors, along with the sizable Chinese population in southern Vietnam, which makes up a significant portion of the overall Chinese population in the country, the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng is widely embraced and firmly established in the southern region, particularly in areas with dense concentrations of Chinese inhabitants, such as Ho Chi Minh City. According to surveys, many Chinese temples in the region revere Qi Tian Da Sheng as a secondary deity. Examples include the Nhị phủ Temple, Ôn Lăng Temple, Hà Chương Temple, and Phù Châu Temple in Ho Chi Minh City, as well as the ancient Qi Tian Da Sheng Temple in Bạc Liêu City, Bạc Liêu Province. Most of these temples were constructed by Fujian immigrants, which demonstrates the expansion of the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief from the Fujian region (Nguyen 2021).

The broad expansion of the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief in southern Vietnam is intricately linked to the religious rites and traditions observed by the local Chinese community and has also been shaped by local indigenous religions. In these temples, besides the primary deities, multiple secondary deities are often enshrined to meet the diverse needs of different worshippers. Qi Tian Da Sheng, a powerful and protective deity, is widely venerated for his ability to safeguard believers (Nguyen 2021). Some notable examples illustrate this point. As an example, the Phù Châu Temple case showcases the influence of local indigenous religions on the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief in southern Vietnam. Initially, the Phù Châu Temple was dedicated to local folk deities, and only later did it incorporate Chinese deities such as Qi Tian Da Sheng. The incorporation exemplifies the flexibility and inclusivity of the Qi Tian Da Sheng ideology, as it has been embraced and changed by both the Chinese and indigenous Vietnamese populations, contributing to its enduring presence in southern Vietnam.

Another significant example is the Qi Tian Da Sheng Ancient Temple in Bạc Liêu City, established by local Chinese in 1915. The temple's main deity is the Qi Tian Da Sheng Belief, with accompanying deities such as Sha Seng, Zhu Bajie, Guanyin Bodhisattva, the Heavenly Queen Mother, Thousand-Eye, and Shunfeng Er. It is the only temple in Vietnam dedicated primarily to the Qi Tian Da Sheng. The temple's interior is embellished with murals that portray scenes from the novel Journey to the West, along with numerous couplets extolling the divine abilities of Sun Wukong. This indicates that the Qi Tian Da Sheng Belief is surrounded by a constellation of characters from the novel, including his monkey brothers, celestial deities, Buddhas, and Bodhisattvas, effectively representing the spatial and character dimensions of the story. The act of venerating the three brothers, Sun Wukong, Zhu Bajie, and Sha Wujing, in the central sanctuary is unparalleled and seldom witnessed in other Qi Tian Da Sheng-worshipping temples in southern Vietnam. This has resulted in a

distinctive facet of the Qi Tian Da Sheng Belief in the local area, setting it apart from other Chinese-Vietnamese temples. This implies that the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng in southern Vietnam is not solely derived from Chinese culture, but results from the amalgamation of various cultures in Vietnam.

Simultaneously, the prevalence of the worship of the Qi Tian Da Sheng among private Vietnamese Chinese households is notable. The author has noted shrines dedicated to Qi Tian Da Sheng in numerous Chinese households, typically displaying his image. These shrines serve the purpose of seeking protection, warding off malevolent spirits, overcoming hardships, and turning misfortune into prosperity. Among the Chinese populace, numerous narratives recount the extraordinary manifestations of Qi Tian Da Sheng, which involve the ability to heal, intervene in emergencies, and suppress malevolent forces.

Ever since the airing of the television series *Journey to the West* in Vietnam, Sun Wukong has acquired widespread recognition as a revered figure who safeguards Buddhism, distinguishes truth from falsehood, and aids those in need. Ultimately, he attains enlightenment and becomes a Buddha or Bodhisattva. Consequently, some newly constructed or renovated temples in Vietnam, including both Buddhist temples and folk religion temples, have incorporated statues of Sun Wukong. For example, the Miếu Bà temple in Bình Long Commune, Tân Phú District, Ho Chi Minh City, added an altar and statue of the Qi Tian Da Sheng approximately twenty years ago, while the Thiên Vân Ancient Temple in Đông Hưng Thuận Ward, District 12, Ho Chi Minh City, began venerating a statue of the Qi Tian Da Sheng approximately fifteen years ago.

The veneration of Qi Tian Da Sheng in these places is not solely influenced by Chinese religious practices, but has also been shaped by the cultural impact of film and literature. This has fostered a sense of admiration and reverence, leading to the formation of independent acts of worship. Despite this, most of the population, who frequently engage in the worship of various local deities, continue to perceive Sun Wukong as a fictional character depicted in literature and film rather than incorporating him into the divine pantheon. This phenomenon underscores the intricate relationship between cultural transmission and religious practice, wherein the impact of popular media can give rise to novel modes of veneration while upholding a distinction from conventional religious doctrines.

The Image of Qi Tian Da Sheng in the Spirit-Writing of Southern Vietnam's Folk Sects

Qi Tian Da Sheng belief manifests not only in public temples and private altars but also distinct within Vietnamese religious practices, particularly in the spirit-writing texts and rituals of specific folk traditions. The emergence of these folk religious

practices predominantly occurred in Vietnam during the modern and contemporary epochs, with strong historical connections to Chinese popular religions. Moreover, they are intricately linked to diverse elements of Chinese modern history, such as the propagation of religion, migration, and the distribution of religious texts. Notable examples include the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân hiếu nghĩa, Thiên địa hội, Minh Sư Đao, Ngũ chi minh đạo, Đàn tiên phái, Cao Đài, Minh Đức Nho giáo đại đạo, and Hoà Hảo. These sects have historically been viewed by official authorities as heterodox and have not received the same recognition and support from successive governments as Confucianism and Buddhism. Accordingly, these folk religious sects have frequently garnered support from sectors of the ordinary people's community and have undergone fluctuations in their fortunes, contingent upon the prevailing political environment.

Out of these sects, two have been impacted by the Chinese Xiantian Dao 先天道 and have integrated Qi Tian Da Sheng into their religious texts and customs. These are the Đàn tiên phái (namely Altar Immortal Sect) and Cao Đài. Consequently, our attention will be directed towards the deity representation of Qi Tian Da Sheng in these two sects.

Cao Đài, also known as "Đại đạo tam kỳ phổ độ," is a new religious movement that originated in southern Vietnam in 1926, founded by a group of Western-educated intellectuals (Lê 1996). The supreme deity of Cao Đài is Cao Đài God (also known as Jade Emperor), and the first disciple was Ngô Minh Chiêu (吳明釗, 1878–1932). Ngô Minh Chiêu attained spiritual enlightenment through the practice of spirit-writing rituals, resulting in the establishment of the Cao Đài organization, which disseminated its teachings extensively. Drawing inspiration from Xiantian Dao (先天道), Cao Đài reveres the Jade Emperor, Queen Mother of the West (瑶池金母), Buddhas, diverse deities, and even notable figures from France (Many authors 2015, 98-99).

During the early 20th century, there was a widespread practice of spirit-writing rituals in southern Vietnam, where devotees would establish altars to venerate deities and seek spiritual guidance. It was during this period that the practice of spirit-writing, where Qi Tian Da Sheng would descend to compose poems for Cao Đài, originated. Initially, this practice was met with skepticism by numerous believers who regarded Sun Wukong as a fictional character from mythological novels or stage dramas and found no reference to him among the Xiantian Dao deities. However, through his frequent descents and the profound dialogues he engaged in via spirit-writing, Qi Tian Da Sheng garnered the esteem and reverence of Cao Đài disciples, ultimately attaining the position of a highly revered deity within the Cao Đài community (Huệ Nhẫn 2009, 161).

Depending on the location and the audience, Qi Tian Da Sheng's spirit-written poems exhibit varying content and purpose. In these poems, one can often find cautionary messages regarding the ingratitude of children towards their parents,

along with encouragement to embrace Buddhism and work toward the salvation of sentient beings (Nguyen 2021; Hoskins 2012). In Cao Đài spirit-writing, Qi Tian Da Sheng frequently references events and characters from the novel *Journey to the West*, including specific names and places such as Dongsheng Shenzhou (东胜神州), Huaguo Mountain (花果山), Water Curtain Cave (水帘洞), Patriarch Puti (菩提祖师), Guanyin Bodhisattva (观音菩萨), and Tang Xuanzang (唐玄奘). This reveals a close connection to the narrative and characters of *Journey to the West*.

Moreover, in southern Vietnam, the worship of Qi Tian Da Sheng continues to be manifested in Đàn tiên phái rituals. The Đàn tiên phái has been a central hub for seeking spiritual guidance and medicine remedies, traditionally relying on spirit mediumship seances to gather its followers. Among the deities that descend to interact with believers, a combination of Chinese and Vietnamese gods can be found, with Qi Tian Da Sheng, known as Đấu chiến thắng Phật (鬥戰勝佛 the Conqueror of Demons Buddha), being the most frequent visitor. In the eyes of Đàn tiên phái adherents, the Đấu chiến thắng Phật is held in high esteem as the sect's primary spiritual guide. It is noteworthy that a majority of the sect's holy scriptures were transmitted through the mediumship of both the Đấu chiến thắng Phật and Guanyin Bodhisattva (Thích 2021). The significance of the Đấu chiến thắng Phật cannot be overstated within the Đàn tiên phái.

Within the context of the Đàn tiên phái spiritual texts, Qi Tian Da Sheng undergoes a transformation from a fierce and arrogant figure in the Water Curtain Cave to an enlightened Buddha or Bodhisattva. Hence, when he comes down to offer his teachings, he maintains a compassionate and selfless attitude, demonstrating deep concern for the well-being of all living creatures. He consistently encourages believers to engage in virtuous actions and to refrain from immoral behavior. It is worth mentioning that the Conqueror of Demons Buddha not only embodies Buddhism and spreads Buddhist teachings, but also takes upon itself promoting Confucian and Daoist philosophies. Consequently, it can be said that Qi Tian Da Sheng represents the convergence of the Three Teachings, which aligns with his multifaceted character in the *Journey to the West* novel: he embodies the Confucian spirit of upholding righteousness and suppressing tyranny, the Daoist pursuit of immortality through cultivation, and the Buddhist compassion for all beings and the understanding of emptiness (Nguyen 2021; Lâm 2013).

The inclusion of Qi Tian Da Sheng in Cao Đài's spirit-writing rituals, as well as the transformation of Sun Wukong into Đấu chiến thắng Phật in the Đàn tiên phái spirit-writing texts, exemplifies the syncretic religious approach of the sect. This approach involves the integration of elements from Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. The depiction of Qi Tian Da Sheng as a divine being who embodies the principles of the three teachings emphasizes his important position within the Cao Đài and Đàn tiên phái, demonstrating the sect's ability to integrate various religious influences. The gradual acceptance and veneration of Qi Tian Da Sheng by Cao Đài, Đàn tiên phái

followers highlight the adaptability of Vietnamese folk religions in incorporating new deities and narratives.

In brief, the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng in Vietnam has a history that is characterized by richness and complexity, influenced by a variety of cultural, religious, and media forces. (1) The belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng was introduced to Vietnam through Chinese immigrants. It was later integrated into local folk temples as either the primary or secondary deity, acquiring recognition and reverence among the local population. (2) The *Journey to the West* novel was introduced to Vietnam, where it was absorbed by the Vietnamese people from a Buddhist perspective. After that, it became widely circulated, prompting local literati to translate it into Nôm poetry and publish it repeatedly. Others adapted it into theatrical scripts, which were then performed on stages across the country. The popularity of the TV series *Journey to the West* further cemented his image in the public consciousness. This significantly increased the public's awareness of the Qi Tian Da Sheng Belief and deepened their belief in the cult. In the southern region of Vietnam, Qi Tian Da Sheng acquired significance as a deity because of performing spirit-writing rituals by various branches of Xiantian Dao.

Additionally, the analysis indicates before the 19th century, the prevalence of belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng was more prominent in the southern regions as opposed to the northern regions. The continuity of this trend is clear in the current times, as exemplified by the multitude of temples and surviving literature. Presently, the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng, although not as widespread as in the past, continues to maintain a certain level of vitality, especially in southern Vietnam. The Vietnamese belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng stands out because of its distinct regional variations, differentiating it from similar beliefs in places like Malaysia. This intriguing contrast presents an opportunity for deeper exploration.

Qi Tian Da Sheng Belief Across Borders: A Comparative Study of Its Diversity and Variations in Malaysia and Vietnam

Shared Aspects of Qi Tian Da Sheng Belief: Examining the Enduring Appeal of Qi Tian Da Sheng in Contemporary Malaysia and Vietnam

In the previous sections, we have presented an extensive overview of the emergence and evolution of the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief in Malaysia and Vietnam. This examination demonstrates that although there are noticeable distinctions in the contemporary expressions of this belief between the two countries, there are also considerable similarities. We will first discuss these shared aspects of the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief in Malaysia and Vietnam.

Chinese immigrants from mainland China transported the belief of Qi Tian

Da Sheng to Malaysia and Vietnam, where it gradually became established and prospered within the communities they settled. Moreover, the dissemination of the novel Journey to the West and its diverse regional translations and adaptations has played a pivotal role in the promotion of the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief in both nations, particularly Vietnam. Through reading *Journey to the West* and its adaptations, the public in Malaysia and Vietnam has acquired a deeper understanding of the character of Qi Tian Da Sheng, strengthening their trust and veneration of his brave, protective, and devotedly Buddhist qualities.

In the same vein, the television series *Journey to the West* has significantly influenced the public's perception of Qi Tian Da Sheng belief in both nations, cementing his image in people's minds. The widespread broadcast of the television series not only enhanced Qi Tian Da Sheng's public recognition but also promoted the popularity and prevalence of his cult, attracting numerous followers. This phenomenon is observed in Vietnam. In both the northern and southern regions of Vietnam, numerous statues of the Qi Tian Da Sheng have been crafted based on the portrayal of Sun Wukong in the television series. This can be viewed as an intriguing illustration of secularization, where conventional religious ideologies acquire broader acceptance and acknowledgment through the propagation of contemporary media.

Simultaneously, the influence of Chinese folk religions, particularly Xiantian Dao, has had a profound impact on the development of the Qi Tian Da Sheng Belief cult in both countries. The propagation of Xiantian Dao has introduced new ritual practices and interpretations to the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief, such as seeking blessings, exorcising evil spirits, and healing illnesses. Through Xiantian Dao's reinterpretation, the image of Qi Tian Da Sheng has been altered to highlight his protective and salvific roles, shifting his portrayal from a courageous hero to a compassionate savior. This new interpretation has resonated widely among believers in both regions. The combination of these rituals and interpretations has been widely embraced by Chinese communities in Malaysia and Chinese and Vietnamese communities in Vietnam, enriching the religious experiences of the believers.

Furthermore, the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief showcases a remarkable ability to adapt to the modern era, as evidenced in both Malaysia and Vietnam. In response to rapid social changes and the impact of multiculturalism, the inner content and external expressions of the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief have continuously evolved and updated. Qi Tian Da Sheng has acquired new societal roles, including the provision of safety, wealth accumulation, resolution of identity ambiguity (in Malaysia), and alleviation of anxiety, to address the spiritual requirements of individuals in contemporary society in both nations. The Qi Tian Da Sheng belief's capacity to keep up with the changing times allows it to flourish and renew itself in present-day contexts.

When examined through the lens of faith practices, the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng in both countries seems to undergo a discernible process of decline and transformation. In modern-day society, the belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng is frequently

linked with superstition and has not been recognized by the official authorities in Malaysia and Vietnam. Because of experiences (as analyzed in previous sections), the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief is frequently regarded as part of superstition, which affects its image in the public eye. This perception results in skepticism among certain younger generations towards the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief, given its perceived absence of modern scientific endorsement.

Notwithstanding the restrictions imposed by authorities and the skepticism among younger generations, the influence of the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief continues to be prevalent in familial and communal contexts. Many Chinese families in Malaysia and Vietnam continue to perform Qi Tian Da Sheng worship activities on specific holidays or important occasions, sustaining the transmission of the belief. Additionally, the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief maintains a significant place in folk customs. To provide an instance, the activities performed at Qi Tian Da Sheng temples in Malaysia and the private worship practices undertaken in Vietnam not only serve as religious rituals but also safeguard cultural heritage, guaranteeing the perpetuation of the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief.

Local Adaptations and Divergent Practices: Contrasting Interpretations of Qi Tian Da Sheng Belief in Malaysia and Vietnam

The Qi Tian Da Sheng belief differs significantly in Malaysia and Vietnam in terms of adherents and belief systems. In Malaysia, the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief is primarily concentrated among the Chinese community, with limited interaction with the religious beliefs of other ethnic groups. This is linked to the complex social fabric of Malaysia, characterized by its multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition. In contrast, the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief in Vietnam demonstrates greater inclusivity and adaptability. The attraction of the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief to a diverse group of Vietnamese individuals can be attributed to the prevalent Buddhist beliefs within the Vietnamese community and the seamless integration of the cult with indigenous folk religions.

Numerous attributes exhibited by Qi Tian Da Sheng, such as courage, intelligence, and faithfulness, closely correspond to the heroic archetypes prevalent in Vietnamese traditional culture. Furthermore, as the dissemination of the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief progressed, it consistently assimilated components from diverse faiths, encompassing Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, shaping a distinct belief system. This syncretism not only enriched the content of the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief but also made it more readily accepted by the Vietnamese people. Within the Vietnamese community, the veneration of the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief coincides with their perception of him as a deity with the ability to safeguard, bestow blessings, and heal ailments, thus reflecting the traditional Vietnamese ideals of familial and societal

harmony.

The divergences in belief systems reflect the discrepancies in the social, cultural, historical, and religious frameworks of the respective countries. In Malaysia, a nation characterized by its multi-ethnic immigrant society, the Chinese community stands out as having a distinctively independent religious belief system that preserves its traditional Chinese cultural traits. Vietnam, especially the southern region, is also a historically significant immigrant society. Through the ongoing development of new territories, the religious belief system has grown increasingly diverse and intricate, characterized by continuous intermingling and integration among various faiths.

In response to national political and cultural shifts, the development paths of the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief in Malaysia and Vietnam have taken significantly different directions. The belief of Qi Tian Da Sheng is deeply ingrained within the Chinese community in Malaysia, forming an integral part of their identity. Once Malaysia achieved independence, the Chinese community encountered various obstacles in defining their national and cultural identity, as well as handling marginalization. The belief in Qi Tian Da Sheng played a vital role in uniting and bringing together the Chinese community, serving as a significant symbol of cohesion. Furthermore, when confronted with identity crises, the Chinese community started to rely more and more on traditional beliefs as a source of spiritual solace. As a result, the construction and expansion of Qi Tian Da Sheng temples not only serve as a reflection of the Chinese community's dedication to preserving their culture but also serve as a demonstration of their deep reliance on divine support.

On the other hand, the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief in Vietnam has not only become more integrated into the local culture but has also been shaped by the influence of Chinese novels and films. Despite the influence of Chinese folk religion on the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief, its depiction strongly strikes a chord with the Vietnamese, particularly those in the southern region, who hold great admiration for heroic figures portrayed in the Chinese novel, including *Journey to the West*. Ever since the television series *Journey to the West* was broadcast in Vietnam and left a lasting impression on the viewers, countless families and temples have embraced the worship of Qi Tian Da Sheng, frequently adorning their spaces with statues that bear a striking resemblance to Sun Wukong as depicted in the television series. The broader adoption of the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief in Vietnamese society shows that it is not restricted to the Chinese community alone. This showcases the flexibility of the belief system and the welcoming attitude of the Vietnamese towards different religious practices.

In sum up, it can be concluded that although the Malaysian and Vietnamese Qi Tian Da Sheng belief have their roots in Chinese folk religion, their paths of development have been shaped by various historical, cultural, and political influences. While the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief in Malaysia prioritizes its role as a symbol of Chinese culture, the Vietnamese Qi Tian Da Sheng belief highlights its integration with the local culture, which has been influenced by Chinese media and deeply rooted

in Vietnamese religious traditions. The complexity and diversity of religious beliefs in the distinct social contexts of the two countries are highlighted by these differences, thus presenting an enthralling opportunity for research and analysis.

Conclusion

The spread and development of the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief in Malaysia and Vietnam showcase its remarkable adaptability and cultural integration across diverse social contexts. Although the origins of this belief can be traced back to Chinese folk religion, it evolved significantly as Chinese immigrants settled in Southeast Asia, merging with local religious traditions and cultural elements. In Malaysia, Qi Tian Da Sheng has grown beyond a symbol of divine protection for the Chinese community, becoming a focal point for social cohesion, cultural identity, and charitable activities. Particularly in the face of identity crises and marginalization, Qi Tian Da Sheng temples have emerged as important cultural symbols, provided not only spiritual comfort but also facilitated educational and charitable endeavors that strengthen the cohesion of the Malaysian Chinese community.

In contrast, the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief in Vietnam, especially in the southern regions, is deeply intertwined with local Buddhist and religious traditions, where the deity is revered as a protector within the Buddhist pantheon. This fusion with Vietnamese Buddhism has enhanced the deity's religious significance, making Qi Tian Da Sheng an integral figure in local religious practices. Additionally, the widespread influence of the Chinese classic *Journey to the West* has further shaped the popular image of Qi Tian Da Sheng in Vietnam. Modern media adaptations have cemented his status as both a cultural hero and a divine figure, extending the belief's reach beyond the Chinese community and into broader Vietnamese society.

Overall, the cross-border transmission of the Qi Tian Da Sheng belief demonstrates its powerful ability to adapt to new environments and integrate with local traditions. Despite sharing a common origin, the belief has evolved differently in Malaysia and Vietnam because of each country's unique historical and cultural circumstances. In Malaysia, Qi Tian Da Sheng serves as a unifying force that strengthens community ties and supports education and charity, while in Vietnam, the belief has blended with Buddhist practices and local folk traditions, contributing to a broader religious landscape.

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Јуен Чаи Ку, Јен Хоанг Нгујен и Чун Чију Ћијанг

Будизам и масе у савременој југоисточној Азији: Упоредна студија веровања у Сун Вукунга у Малезији и Вијетнаму

Сажетак: Ово истраживање испитује прекултурни пренос и прилагођавање веровања у Ћи Тјен Да Шенга (Сун Вуконга) међу кинеским заједницама у Малезији и Вијетнаму. Са насељавањем кинеских миграната у југоисточној Азији, култ Ћи Тјен Да Шенга је пренет и током времена се јединствено развио у свакој земљи. У Малезији, ово божанство симболизује заштиту и културни идентитет, што се огледа у бројним храмовима и заједничким активностима. У Вијетнаму, Ћи Тјен Да Шенг је интегрисан у локалне будистичке и народне традиције, нарочито на југу земље, где се поштује као заштитник и духовна фигура. Ова компаративна анализа истиче начин на који се веровање у Ћи Тјен Да Шенга прилагодило локалним културним околностима, показујући његов значај у очувању културног наслеђа и испуњавању духовних потреба кинеских заједница у југоисточној Азији.

Кључне речи: Ћи Тјен Да Шенг, Сун Вуконг, Путовање на Запад, кинеска дијаспора, религијско веровање, културна интеграција