

THE YIN - YANG IDEOLOGY OF TAOISM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE ANCESTOR WORSHIP OF VIETNAM

*A IDEOLOGIA YIN-YANG DO TAOISMO E SUA INFLUÊNCIA
NO CULTO AOS ANTEPASSADOS DO VIETNÃ*

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but also a principle for organizing spiritual, moral, and social life. This ideology contributes to the formation of a harmonious, cyclical, and continuous worldview between humans, ancestors, and the universe. With an interdisciplinary approach combining philosophy, cultural anthropology, and folk ritual research, the article provides a systematic and updated view of the role of Yin - Yang (陰陽) theory in preserving and adapting traditional Vietnamese culture in the modern context.

Keywords: Yin - Yang (陰陽). Taoism (道教). ancestor worship. Vietnamese spiritual culture.

Abstract

The Yin - Yang (陰陽) Thought is the basic philosophical foundation in the Eastern cosmology, especially in the Taoist system of thought. According to Taoism, the Tao is the supreme entity (the supreme ultimate), from which yin and yang are born as two opposing forces, operating and transforming to create all things. This thought does not stop at the field of philosophical theory but also deeply permeates many aspects of Vietnamese cultural life, especially in ancestor worship. This article focuses on analyzing the relationship between the Yin - Yang (陰陽) doctrine in Taoism and the cultural and ritual manifestations in ancestor worship of the Vietnamese. Through the survey of worship spaces, death anniversary rituals, the arrangement of offerings, and worship symbols, the article shows that the Yin - Yang (陰陽) structure is not only a symbol

Resumo

O pensamento Yin-Yang (陰陽) constitui o fundamento filosófico básico da cosmologia oriental, especialmente no sistema de pensamento taoísta. Segundo o taoísmo, o Tao é a entidade suprema (o supremo absoluto), do qual nascem o yin e o yang como duas forças opostas que operam e se transformam para gerar todas as coisas. Esse pensamento não se limita ao campo da teoria filosófica, mas também permeia profundamente muitos aspectos da vida cultural vietnamita, em especial o culto aos antepassados. Este artigo se concentra em analisar a relação entre a doutrina do Yin-Yang (陰陽) no taoísmo e as manifestações culturais e rituais no culto aos antepassados dos vietnamitas. Por meio do levantamento de espaços de culto, rituais de aniversário de morte, disposição das oferendas e símbolos de adoração, o artigo mostra que a estrutura Yin-Yang (陰陽) não é apenas um símbolo, mas também um princípio de organização da vida espiritual, moral e social. Essa ideologia contribui para a formação de uma visão de mundo harmoniosa, cíclica e contínua entre os seres humanos, os antepassados e o universo. Com uma abordagem interdisciplinar que combina filosofia, antropologia cultural e pesquisa de rituais populares, o artigo oferece uma visão sistemática e atualizada sobre o papel da teoria Yin-Yang (陰陽) na preservação e adaptação da cultura tradicional vietnamita no contexto moderno.

Palavras-chave: Yin - Yang (陰陽). Taoísmo (道教). culto aos antepassados. cultura espiritual vietnamita.

Introduction

In the treasure trove of Eastern philosophical thought, the Yin - Yang (陰陽) theory occupies a central position as a fundamental principle to explain the birth, movement, and transformation of the universe. This ideology was not only formed and developed in the ancient Chinese philosophical system but was also systematized and deeply philosophized in Taoism (道教), one of the three mainstream schools of thought and religion in classical Chinese culture. Taoism (道教) not only inherited and developed the Yin - Yang (陰陽) theory from the “Yì jing” (易經) but also made this principle a core element in the perception of heaven - earth - human, thereby forming a unique system of thinking about life, death, souls, and the laws of operation of all things.

During the long-term cultural exchange between Vietnam and China, especially during the period of Northern domination and the prolonged influence of Han studies, the Yin - Yang (陰陽) ideology of Taoism (道教) penetrated and deeply integrated into the indigenous beliefs of the Vietnamese people. One of the most obvious manifestations of this integration is the ancestor worship belief, a universal belief that plays a core role in the spiritual life of the Vietnamese community. In addition, the series of rituals related to important milestones in the human life cycle such as: full-month ceremony, wedding ceremony, funeral, reburial are also imbued with the principle of yin and yang in the way of organization, ritual symbols and the way of explaining the philosophy of life - death - reincarnation.

However, despite its widespread presence and important role in the cultural life, beliefs and traditional rituals of the Vietnamese people, the yin and yang ideology has not been systematically and deeply studied from the perspective of philosophy, cultural studies and ethnology, especially in relation to ancestor worship and life cycle beliefs. Many current studies have only stopped at describing the phenomenon or analyzing each aspect of culture - ritual separately, not pointing out the deep philosophical mechanism that shapes specific symbols, behaviors and practices of beliefs.

From that need, rediscovering the Yin - Yang (陰陽) ideology from the origin of Taoism (道教) and analyzing its influence and integration in the spiritual life, especially the ancestor worship of the Vietnamese people, becomes necessary, not only to contribute to decoding the symbolic world and philosophy of folk beliefs, but also to understand more deeply the spiritual structure, cosmic awareness and humanistic concept of Vietnamese culture.

Based on the above theoretical and practical issues, this study aims to achi-

even three main objectives: First, to clarify the content of Yin - Yang (陰陽) ideology in the Taoism (道教) philosophical system, including basic principles such as mutual generation - mutual inhibition, static - dynamic, virtual - real, and the transformation law between Yin - Yang (陰陽). Second, to analyze the specific manifestations of Yin - Yang (陰陽) ideology in ancestor worship, thereby pointing out the penetration of philosophical thinking into cultural - ritual practices. Third, to explain the mechanism of integration between Yin - Yang (陰陽) of Taoism (道教) with indigenous beliefs in Vietnam, thereby making comments on the localization and restructuring of philosophy in the process of cultural integration.

To achieve the above objectives, the study will focus on answering the following research questions: How was the Yin-Yang (陰陽) ideology in Taoism (道教) formed and implemented? What core philosophical contents are expressed in the main texts of Taoism (道教) such as 道德经 - Dao De Jing, 南华经 - Nan Hua Jing, or 太玄经 - Tai Xuan Jing? What are the specific manifestations of the Yin-Yang (陰陽) ideology in ancestor worship? How to identify the Yin-Yang (陰陽) principle in rituals such as setting up ancestral altars, funerals or reburial ceremonies? How does the mechanism of reception, integration and localization of Yin - Yang (陰陽) ideology in Vietnamese culture take place? What are the similarities and differences between Yin - Yang (陰陽) in Taoism (道教) thinking and the understanding and practice in Vietnamese folk culture?

Research object and scope: (i) Research object: Yin - Yang (陰陽) ideology in the Taoism (道教) philosophical system and its manifestation in the ancestor worship beliefs of the Vietnamese people; (ii) Research scope: The research focuses on the traditional Vietnamese cultural space, especially the Northern and Central regions, where the ancestral ritual and belief system still retains many elements of synthesis. The philosophical, cultural and ethnographic materials used range from ancient China to modern Vietnam.

Scientific and practical significance: This study makes an important contribution to systematizing and clarifying a fundamental but little-exploited connection between Taoism philosophy (道教) and Vietnamese folk beliefs. Scientifically, the topic provides an interdisciplinary perspective, combining philosophy, cultural studies and ethnology to approach one of the important axes of thinking of Eastern culture. Practically, explaining the expression mechanism of Yin - Yang (陰陽) in ancestral beliefs and life cycles will help researchers, educators and cultural managers have more tools to preserve, promote and teach traditional cultural values in a profound, consistent and suitable way for the modern context.

Theoretical basis of the study

Originating from “yì jīng” (易經) and the yin-yang (陰陽) theory

The Yin-Yang (陰陽) theory is one of the fundamental thinking structures of ancient Chinese philosophy. According to “Yì jīng” (易經) (易經), Yin-Yang (陰陽) are not only two opposing sides of the universe but also two principles of motion that create all phenomena in nature and society. Yin represents the feminine, static, cold, dark, soft elements, while yang represents the masculine, dynamic, hot, bright, and hard elements. The interaction between Yin-Yang (陰陽) according to the principle of mutual generation - mutual inhibition and constant transformation is the basis for the formation of all things, the structure of the universe and the social order (Zhang Dainian, 2002).

The He Ci Zhuan (☱辭傳) in “Yì jīng” (易經) affirms: “One yin one yang is called the Tao”, meaning “One yin one yang is called the Tao” (Nguyen Hien Le, 2005). This is not only a description of a phenomenon but also reflects profound philosophical thinking about the unity in opposition and the universal law of operation of the world. Yin - Yang (陰陽) are not two separate entities but always transform, interact, and exist in each other (yang has yin, yin has yang), forming an endless circle of birth - transformation - death - rebirth.

Yin-yang (陰陽) thought in taoism (道教)

Different from Confucianism which views Yin-Yang (陰陽) as a system of ethical and political norms, Taoism (道教) accepts and philosophizes the Yin-Yang (陰陽) theory into a metaphysical and mystical cosmological principle. In 道德经 - Dao De Jing, Lǎo Zǐ emphasizes: “All things rely on Yin and embrace Yang, and the Qi merges and harmonizes to create and transform” (萬物負陰而抱陽, ☱氣以☱和) - “All things rely on Yin and embrace Yang, and the Qi harmonizes to create and transform” (Lǎo Zǐ, translated by Phan Huy Le, 2003). This ideology represents the harmony between two opposites as the principle of existence of all life. Humans, as a microcosm, also operate according to this principle.

Zhuangzi, the inheritor and developer of Taoism (道教), pushed the Yin-Yang (陰陽) ideology to its extreme when emphasizing the relativity of birth and death,

existence and non-existence, arguing that “birth is the beginning of death, death is the completion of birth”, expressing the thought that the Yin-Yang (陰陽) cycle never ends (Zhuangzi, translated by Nguyen Duy Can, 2002).

In Taoism (道教) practice, the Yin - Yang (陰陽) ideology is also concretized in the techniques of alchemy, regulating Qi, and Taoism, in which Yin - Yang (陰陽) are harmonized to achieve a state of “harmony”, internal balance, which is the foundation for cultivation and immortality.

Belief of ancestor worship of the vietnamese

Ancestor worship (*thờ cúng tổ tiên*) is one of the most prominent and lasting characteristics in the spiritual life of the Vietnamese. Unlike religions with a founder and doctrine, ancestor worship does not form a strict system of dogmas, but exists in the form of folk beliefs, closely associated with the morality of drinking water and remembering its source, deeply reflecting the Yin - Yang (陰陽) cosmology and family order in the traditional social structure. This is not only a ritual act but also a cultural system reflecting the relationship between humans and ancestors, between the living and the dead, between the past and the present.

The center of ancestor worship is the ancestral altar, a sacred space in each family, where rituals such as death anniversaries, longevity celebrations, Tet holidays, opening ceremonies, marriages, etc. take place. For Vietnamese people, ancestors are not only deceased people, but also sacred entities with the ability to supervise, protect and pass on blessings to descendants. The presence of ancestors in the community’s consciousness is not limited by time or physics, but always exists in the bloodline, creating a form of sacred collective memory.

Unlike the worship of gods or imported religions, ancestor worship is endogenous, formed from gratitude and respect for those who gave birth and raised them, and is maintained through generations through oral tradition and family traditions. In the ritual system, Vietnamese people attach great importance to the Yin - Yang (陰陽), five elements (Wǔ Xíng -五行), from the arrangement of the altar to the choice of offerings, colors, and worship time. The balance between opposing elements such as vegetarian dishes - meat dishes, candles - incense, water - fire, shows the clear presence of Eastern cosmological thinking.

This belief also has a strong patriarchal and institutionalized nature. In each clan, the clan temple is the place where the ancestors’ souls gather and unite generations of descendants, contributing to maintaining the sustainability of the clan

and the traditional agricultural social order. The role of the clan leader in organizing death anniversary ceremonies, managing the clan altar, defining the roles between branches, etc. is a clear demonstration of the integration between beliefs and social institutions.

In the modern context, despite many changes due to urban lifestyle, globalization and the development of new religions, the Vietnamese ancestor worship still maintains a central position in spiritual life, is a clear manifestation of indigenous character, cultural continuity, and is an irreplaceable foundation of family and social ethics.

Literature review

In Western academia, many works have deeply studied the role of the Yin-Yang (陰陽) doctrine in the thought and practice of Taoism (道教). Maspero, Henri (1971) in “Le Taoïsme et les religions chinoises”, systematically presented the formation and development process of Taoism (道教), in which the Yin-Yang (陰陽) doctrine is emphasized as a consistent ideological axis, playing a connecting role between the cosmology and religious rituals of the Taoism (道教) tradition. Yin-Yang (陰陽) is not only mentioned as a philosophical principle but also as the foundation for religious practices, which are both metaphysical and practical (Mair, 1994).

Sharing the same view, Kohn, Livia (2001) in “Daoism and Chinese Culture” devoted an important part to analyzing the profound influence of the Yin-Yang (陰陽) doctrine in the traditional Chinese knowledge system. According to him, Yin-Yang (陰陽) is present as a regulating principle in many fields, from traditional medicine, feng shui, to the practices of Taoism and numerology. Tony Fang (2011) believes that it is the principle of opposition and complementarity of Yin-Yang (陰陽) that created the characteristic thinking structure of ancient Chinese civilization, demonstrating the harmony between science, philosophy and religion.

In the East Asian region, scholars from Japan and Korea also made important contributions to explaining the role of the Yin-Yang (陰陽) doctrine in the context of indigenous culture. Works by Williams, J. (2020), John Dougill. (2022), C. Korea (2024), Jang (2025) pointed out that the Yin-Yang (陰陽) ideology is not only limited to Taoism (道教) but also strongly spread in East Asian folk religion. Specifically, this doctrine plays a guiding role in birth-death rituals, ancestor worship systems and important transitional rites in community life. Yin-Yang (陰陽) is therefore seen as a universal principle, capable of being flexibly integrated into many different

forms of belief in the region.

In Vietnam, a number of research works have initially approached and analyzed the relationship between the Yin-Yang (陰陽) doctrine and traditional folk culture. In his work *Philosophical Thought in Vietnamese Culture*, Nguyen Duy Hinh (1995) asserted that the Yin-Yang (陰陽) philosophy plays a central role in organizing the cultural life, beliefs and rituals of the Vietnamese people, especially clearly expressed in ancestor worship rituals and customs related to the life cycle (birth - adulthood, old age - death). Sharing this view, Tran Ngoc Them (2004), in the *Foundations of Vietnamese Culture*, considers Yin-Yang (陰陽) as the fundamental principle governing the symbolic structure and behavior of Vietnamese culture, through pairs of ritual oppositions such as male - female, heaven - earth, life - death, light - dark, above - below, etc. However, this work mainly focuses on describing cultural phenomena without going into depth to analyze the internal relationship between Yin-Yang (陰陽) theory and the Taoism (道教) ideology system.

Nguyen Duy Hinh (1999) has expanded the analysis of the profound influence of Taoism (道教) on Vietnamese life, from feng shui, folk medicine, to the system of rituals and religious practices. According to the author, the Yin-Yang (陰陽) doctrine has played the role of a philosophical bridge between Chinese Taoism (道教) and indigenous Vietnamese beliefs, thereby demonstrating the adaptability and flexible localization of Taoism (道教) in the indigenous cultural environment. Vo Van Dung and Cao Xuan Long (2022) clarified the relationship of the Yin-Yang theory to the human body through the relationship between above, below, left and right, inside and outside, and diagonal lines in body posture.

In addition, the symbolic studies of Do Lai Thuy (2009) approached the Yin-Yang (陰陽) theory from the perspective of cultural imagery. He argued that symbols such as “altar”, “soul”, “pole”, “tray” not only have ritual meanings but also contain the Yin-Yang (陰陽) philosophy and the cycle of birth - death - rebirth, reflecting the cyclical thinking structure in Vietnamese culture.

Some other scholars, such as Dang Nghiem Van (2005), Phan Ngoc (2002), Phan Dang Duy (2002), Nguyen Trong Long, et al (2019), etc., have also contributed to affirming the role of the Yin - Yang (陰陽) doctrine in the structure of traditional cultural ideology. In their research works on beliefs and folk religions, Phan Ngoc and Dang Nghiem Van emphasized the role of integration and transformation of Yin - Yang (陰陽) in the indigenous belief system, especially in life cycle rituals and ancestor worship practices. Dang Nghiem Van (2005), from the perspective of religious sociology, views Yin - Yang (陰陽) as a universal principle that guides community behavior in the structure of traditional beliefs. Meanwhile, Phan Ngoc (2002), with a

cultural-linguistic approach, argues that the Yin-Yang (陰陽) dialectical thinking is the core of the Vietnamese people's synthetic-symbolic thinking, deeply influencing both the language structure, folk storytelling and indigenous value system. However, in general, most of the above works have only stopped at approaching the Yin-Yang (陰陽) doctrine as a background cultural principle, without really deeply exploiting the philosophical content of this doctrine in interaction with Taoism (道教), as well as its infiltration, transformation and localization process in the ancestor worship and life cycle rituals of the Vietnamese people. This gap suggests a more in-depth research direction, aiming to trace the ideological structure of Taoism (道教) in the Vietnamese folk cultural space from an inter-regional comparative perspective.

Research gaps and approaches of the article

From the overview of the presented research works, it is possible to identify some notable academic gaps in the field of research on the relationship between the Yin - Yang (陰陽) Taoism (道教) doctrine and Vietnamese folk beliefs. Specifically as follows:

Firstly, there is currently no specialized work focusing on analyzing the internal relationship between the Yin - Yang (陰陽) ideology in Taoism (道教) and the two core practices in Vietnamese folk beliefs, which are ancestor worship.

Secondly, most of the current approaches still tend to describe phenomena, lacking an interdisciplinary integrated theoretical framework between philosophy, symbology and ethnology to explain the mechanism of expression and transformation of the Yin - Yang (陰陽) principle in belief practices.

Based on the above gaps, this article aims to contribute a more comprehensive and in-depth approach with three main directions as follows:

First, analyze the Yin - Yang (陰陽) doctrine from the Taoism ideology (道教), by systematizing fundamental concepts such as Yin - Yang (陰陽), five elements (Wǔ Xíng - 五行), Tai Chi (太極), Void - Reality, etc. in a consistent philosophical thinking.

Second, apply the Yin - Yang (陰陽) lens to examine specific rituals, symbols and religious practices in Vietnamese life, typically the establishment of ancestral altars, wedding ceremonies, funerals and reburials, in order to clarify the symbolic nature and social - spiritual function of the Yin - Yang (陰陽) principle in these practices.

Third, the article will point out the mechanism of integration, localization and transformation of the Yin - Yang (陰陽) doctrine in the process of integration

into Vietnamese folk beliefs, thereby affirming the central role of this doctrine in creating the structure of the traditional worldview and philosophy of life of the Vietnamese people.

Research method

The study of the Yin-Yang (陰陽) ideology of Taoism (道教) and its influence in ancestor worship and life cycle beliefs in Vietnam requires an interdisciplinary approach, combining philosophy, cultural studies and ethnology. To achieve the set objectives, the article uses a combination of the following methods:

Textual hermeneutics: The first focus of the study is the Yin-Yang (陰陽) ideology in the Taoism (道教) philosophical system, so the method of analyzing and interpreting ancient texts is used to approach classic works such as “Yì jing” (易經), 道德经 – Dao De Jing, 南华经 – Nan Hua Jing, 太玄经 – Tai Xuan Jing, and other traditional Taoism (道教) texts. Thereby, concepts such as “Yin - Yang (陰陽)”, “mutual generation - mutual inhibition”, “harmony of energy”, “inaction and governance” are explained about the cosmological and humanistic thinking of Taoism (道教). This is the basis for determining the content of the Yin - Yang (陰陽) doctrine consistently and as a foundation for comparing it with religious practices in Vietnam.

Ethnographic and field methods: To survey the practical manifestation of Yin - Yang (陰陽) ideology in Vietnamese beliefs, the study uses ethnographic methods, especially field surveys in some typical areas such as: the Northern Delta (Hanoi, Hung Yen, Ninh Binh), North Central (Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, Hue) and the South (Vinh Long, Ho Chi Minh City). Forms of practice such as ancestor worship rituals, funerals, full-month ceremonies, weddings, exhumations, etc., were observed and recorded to identify Yin-Yang (陰陽) symbolic elements. Semi-structured interviews with shamans, clan leaders, elders and ritualists in the localities were conducted to clarify people’s perceptions and explanations of ritual behaviors associated with the Yin-Yang (陰陽) doctrine. Symbolic analysis: The symbolic analysis method was applied to explain images, items and ritual spaces in relation to the Yin-Yang (陰陽) ideology. The objects of analysis include: ancestral altars (left-right, high-low, flowers-fruits, candles-water), wedding costumes (red-white, male-female), funeral space (yin-yang), poles, betel and areca nuts, offering trays, etc. Comparing these symbols with the Yin-Yang (陰陽) binary structure in Taoism (道教) helps determine the level of influence as well as the localization mechanism of this ideology in Vietnamese culture.

Comparative cultural method: The comparative method is used to compare the Yin-Yang (陰陽) ideology in Chinese Taoism (道教) with specific manifestations in Vietnamese folk beliefs. From there, the article points out the similarities (in the cosmological principle - human life) and differences (in ritual expression, symbolism and local interpretation), thereby clarifying the process of philosophical integration and transformation in the local cultural environment.

Research results

The yin-yang (陰陽) principle in the structure of worship space

In the traditional cultural space of Vietnam, the ancestral altar is considered the sacred center of each family, acting as a connecting point between two worlds: Yin - Yang (陰陽), the earthly world and the sacred world. Not simply a physical entity serving religious needs, the altar is also a complex symbolic structure, clearly reflecting the Yin - Yang (陰陽) thinking in organizing space and expressing folk beliefs. According to Tran Ngoc Them (2004), the arrangement of the ancestral altar demonstrates the principle of symmetry and dualism with pairs of spatial symbols such as “left - right”, “above - below”, “before - after”, which carry the meaning of Yin - Yang (陰陽) and operate according to the laws of the five elements (Wǔ Xíng -五行).

The structure of the traditional altar is usually arranged according to a symbolic axis from the outside in, from low to high: incense table - incense burner - candlestick - incense bowl - flower vase - fruit tray... creating a system of items with the conventional symbol of Yin - Yang (陰陽) - five elements (Wǔ Xíng -五行). Notably, according to the popular arrangement, the flower vase - a symbol of yin, is often placed on the right (from the inside out), while the fruit tray - a symbol of yang, fertility and fortune, is placed on the left. This arrangement follows the principle of “left yang, right yin” in traditional East Asian concepts.

In addition, the incense burner is placed in the center, with the incense smoke symbolizing the rising yin energy, connecting with two burning candles on both sides, symbols of fire and light (belonging to yang), creating a symbolic system of harmony between the two worlds. The worship space is also stratified according to its sacred nature: the highest position on the altar is usually reserved for the tablets of gods or holy ancestors, representing the positive and sacred protection, while the lower

levels are arranged to worship ancestors, grandparents, and deceased people, which are negative, associated with the family's origin and remembrance.

In addition to the altar, the “cây nêu” (usually a bamboo pole about 6 meters long, erected in front of the house) on “Tết nguyên đán” (Lunar New Year) is also a typical symbol of Yin - Yang (陰陽) thinking in Vietnamese culture. The bamboo pole is erected straight up to the sky, symbolizing the positive axis, vitality and connection with the sky - while hanging objects such as areca spathes, earthen bells, gold and silver bags, etc. are negative, symbolizing the afterlife and the souls of ancestors. The Vietnamese believe that on the day of setting up the pole, the pole is the “Yin - Yang (陰陽) pillar”, the place of spiritual communication between the living and the dead, opening the door for ancestors to return to the earthly world to enjoy offerings and bless their descendants.

Yin - yang (陰陽) symbol in worship items

In the spiritual culture of the Vietnamese, the ancestral worship tray is not only a ritualistic culinary arrangement, but also a model expressing the cosmological thinking system Yin - Yang (陰陽) - five elements (Wǔ Xíng -五行). The structure of the tray clearly shows dualism: salty dishes (attributes of yang, movement, heat) are often harmoniously combined with vegetarian dishes (attributes of yin, stillness, coolness); hot dishes go with cold dishes, dry dishes are combined with liquid dishes. This balance is not simply a matter of culinary preference or nutritional principles, but reflects the traditional concept of Yin-Yang (陰陽) harmony in the universe, where the visible world (earthly world - human world) and the invisible world (underworld - world of the dead) are connected through sacrificial rituals. The ancestral altar is therefore not only a ritual item but also a system of symbols that combine beliefs, philosophy and folk aesthetics, reflecting the cultural and spiritual depth of the Vietnamese people in their journey of gratitude to the past and orientation to the future.

In many families, especially in the Northern Delta, the number of dishes is often prepared in even numbers, symbolizing the yin nature, with the implication of “sending to the underworld” or “reserving for the dead”. This choice of the number of dishes is not only based on custom, but also reflects the philosophy of distinguishing between two worlds: yin is the place where ancestors and gods reside; yang is the world of the living. Betel and areca nuts, a classic symbol in wedding ceremonies, also often appear in ancestor worship ceremonies as an image of harmony between Yin - Yang (陰陽), between life and purity, and at the same time, showing the strong

bond in the ethics of husband and wife, family and clan.

In particular, a meaningful symbol is the “double oil lamp” or “candle and incense”, in which one side is the candle (fire), symbolizing yang, light, and wisdom; one side is an oil lamp or incense smoke (qi), symbolizing yin, vague, sacred. The simultaneous presence of fire and smoke represents the communication between two worlds: light guides the ancestors to return, and incense smoke is the means to convey offerings and prayers from the living world. The pair of parallel burning lamps also carries a deeper meaning: the aspiration for the harmony of Yin - Yang (陰陽) energy in the sacred space of the family, a necessary condition for ancestors to feel the sincerity and bless their descendants. This is the transformation between traditional worship ethics and the Taoism (道教) cosmology, where people must establish an energy balance between heaven - earth - human to achieve good fortune and prosperity. Behavior and gender roles in ancestor worship rituals.

The division of roles in ancestor worship rituals of the Vietnamese people not only reflects a traditional social order but also deeply demonstrates the Yin - Yang (陰陽) principle in Eastern cosmological thinking. The role of the master of ceremonies, representing the yang principle, is usually taken by the eldest son or a man of high status in the clan. This is the person who performs the main ritual movements such as lighting incense, praying, and offering offerings, with the meaning of “sunflower - receiving the mandate of heaven”, acting as a bridge between the world of the living and the sacred realm of the ancestors. Meanwhile, women, with a yin nature, associated with nurturing and caring nature - often take on logistical roles such as preparing the offerings, maintaining the fire, incense, lamps and worship space. This coordination demonstrates the principle of balance between two opposing but complementary forces, yin follows yang, yang determines yin - in the traditional cosmological model.

However, the flexibility in practicing folk beliefs shows that this model is not rigid. In many localities in the Northern Delta and midland, women, especially the eldest daughter, can take on the role of master of ceremonies in cases where the clan has no direct male heir or due to the actual conditions of the family. This behavior not only reflects the adaptability of ancestral beliefs to the social context, but also demonstrates a changing Yin-Yang (陰陽) concept, where gender roles are not constant but can change according to specific cycles, conditions and circumstances - in line with the Taoist ideology: “impermanence, selflessness, and non-fixity”. During Tet holidays, especially the Lunar New Year, the “yang” element is even more emphasized. The Vietnamese believe that the first days of the year are meant to “open the gate of the universe” and “open the way of destiny”. Therefore, the first person

to light incense, the “first person to enter the land”, needs to have “good fortune”, be healthy, open-minded, lucky, representing the positive yang energy that leads the ancestors back to enjoy the offerings, and at the same time transmits auspicious energy for the whole year. In that context, the celebrant is not only the embodiment of yang energy, but also has a symbolic role as the person who “calms the house’s energy”, maintaining the harmony between heaven - earth - human, between the present and the past.

Thus, the gender role in ancestor worship rituals is not simply a cultural - social issue but also a specific manifestation of the Yin - Yang (陰陽) cosmological model, where the coordination and transformation of opposing principles is the foundation to ensure the prosperity, sustainability and continuity of the clan and family in Vietnamese culture.

Yin - yang (陰陽) harmony in worship

Field research in localities such as Hanoi, Hung Yen, Ninh Binh, Nghe An, Hue, lands with long-standing spiritual cultural traditions, shows that folk perceptions of ancestor worship rituals are always deeply shaped by the Yin-Yang ideology (陰陽), especially the principle of “yin harmony”. This principle is not only an abstract concept in Eastern philosophy, but has been internalized in the religious life of Vietnamese people as a “reference system” to explain and regulate ritual behaviors.

A resident in Hai Hau, old Nam Dinh (now Ninh Binh province), a Northern Delta region famous for its traditional clans and worship institutions, shared: “Ancestor worship must have both yin and yang, the offering tray must be balanced, the incense must be even so that the ancestors can return” (field interview, July 2025). That seemingly simple saying is a concise expression of traditional ideology: the offering tray is the symbolic space of the universe, where any imbalance between the elements (food - spirit, movement - stillness, light - dark, dry - wet) can lead to “disconnection”, meaning that the ancestors cannot return to receive the sincerity. The balance and harmony in the arrangement, the ingredients of the dishes, the rhythm of the incense smoke... are all signs of “yang energy” and “yin energy” being balanced to create a sacred channel between the two worlds.

Not only in the physical space, but even the time of the ceremony also follows the Yin - Yang rhythm (陰陽) of the “Thiên can” (Heavenly Stems) - “Địa chi” (Earthly Branches) calendar, good and bad days and hours, and solar terms - the five elements (Wǔ Xíng -五行). In many Vietnamese villages, people often pass on their experiences in choosing auspicious hours and days of vitality to worship, with

the notion that when yang energy is strong, communication with ancestors will be clear and effective.

From these field records, it can be seen that the Yin - Yang (陰陽) ideology is no longer an “imported” product from Chinese philosophy, but has undergone a process of localization and consolidation in the cultural and religious context of the Vietnamese people. Yin - Yang (陰陽) is not only present in theoretical thinking, but has become a “cultural code” that regulates the structure of ritual behavior, passed down through many generations naturally, without dogma. It is this internalization process that helps ancestor worship in Vietnam maintain its sustainability, flexibility and adaptability, while contributing to strengthening the spiritual connection between people and the supernatural world and their own lineage.

Discussion

Yin - yang (陰陽) as an axis of perception of the universe and life

From the research results, it can be affirmed that the Yin - Yang (陰陽) ideology is not only a system of metaphysical knowledge, but also a fundamental cognitive structure that governs the way Vietnamese people interpret human and cosmic phenomena. Yin - Yang (陰陽) are not simply two opposing states, but two aspects that are both antagonistic and mutually supportive. This ideology has created a dialectical perspective that is unique to Eastern culture in general and Vietnamese culture in particular, where opposition does not aim at elimination but towards harmony, balance and continuous movement.

In ancestor worship, the spatial hierarchy of the altar, the symmetrical arrangement of offerings, and the gender roles in the rituals all deeply reflect the Yin-Yang (陰陽) principle: above-below, left-right, male-female, life-death are all visible manifestations of an invisible mental structure. Each ritual is not only a traditional act, but also an attempt to re-establish the cosmic order, where humans play the role of mediators and coordinators between the two poles of Yin-Yang (陰陽) through rituals.

In life cycle rituals, the Yin - Yang (陰陽) principle is also applied flexibly and smoothly. From birth, adulthood, marriage, to death and reburial, Vietnamese people organize rituals not only to mark biological time, but also to “legitimize” the transition between Yin - Yang (陰陽) states in the life cycle. This shows that

the Yin - Yang (陰陽) ideology has been localized into the life cycle - the universe cycle, in which humans are not isolated individuals, but part of the “great self”, the co-existing universe. The mechanism of integration and localization of Yin - Yang (陰陽) ideology in Vietnamese beliefs.

A particularly important point discovered is: although Yin - Yang (陰陽) ideology originated from Taoism (道教) and Chinese philosophy, when penetrating into Vietnamese cultural life, it did not retain its dry theoretical form, but was “internalized” and flexibly localized according to the characteristics of folk beliefs.

Different from the rational, abstract interpretation in Chinese philosophy, Vietnamese people absorb Yin - Yang (陰陽) ideology through symbolic behavior, rituals and practical living space. Tet pole, betel and areca nuts in weddings, mourning scarves in funerals, incense bowls and lamps on the altar... are vivid artifacts showing how Yin - Yang (陰陽) ideology is “transformed” from philosophy into a specific cultural form.

This clearly shows a characteristic of Vietnamese culture: integration - integration without conflict. The Yin - Yang (陰陽) Taoism (道教) ideology when entering Vietnam did not confront indigenous beliefs but found compatibility. The concept that ancestors do not die but “go to heaven”, “incarnate”, or “sit on the altar” blends with the Taoism (道教) ideology about the soul escaping the yang - merging into the natural world, creating a belief system that has both spiritual depth and social adaptability.

Yin - yang (陰陽) ideology as a “cultural code system” organizing rituals

If using symbolic language, Yin - Yang (陰陽) can be considered a “fundamental cultural code system” organizing the ritual practices of the Vietnamese people. All symbols in the ritual - from color (red - white), material (bamboo - wood), quantity (even - odd numbers), spatial direction (east - west, south - north), time (day, auspicious hour - unlucky hour), all operate according to the Yin - Yang (陰陽) principle.

This is what creates the symbolic consistency in the Vietnamese folk belief system. A ritual, whether as simple as burning incense or as complex as a grand funeral, still adheres to the Yin - Yang (陰陽) balance principle, in order to establish “communication” between the two worlds. This is a clear demonstration of the assertion that the Yin - Yang (陰陽) ideology is the “symbolic axis” of life cycle

rituals and ancestral beliefs.

Not only that, the Yin - Yang (陰陽) code also plays a role in transmitting moral values and community beliefs. Concepts such as “yin and yang in harmony”, “following nature”, “harmony creates wealth”, “heaven - earth - human harmony”, etc., all become models for social behavior. Through that, the Yin - Yang (陰陽) philosophy not only operates in the ritual space but also permeates the ethics of life, the way of organizing families, clans and communities.

Sustainable and adaptive role in the modern context

In the context of modernization and globalization, many traditional cultural elements are being eroded or de-religiousized. However, the Yin-Yang (陰陽) ideology continues to be alive and maintains its influence in new forms of ritual - especially in modern variations of ritual, such as wedding ceremonies at restaurants, funerals at burial service centers, or online worship forms.

This shows that the Yin-Yang (陰陽) ideology not only exists as an “ancient ideological heritage”, but also as a living cultural system capable of adapting to changing contexts.

From this, an important conclusion can be drawn: the vitality of the Yin-Yang (陰陽) ideology lies in its ability to flexibly transform its form while preserving its core philosophical content. This is the factor that helps the Yin - Yang (陰陽) ideology of Taoism (道教) become an indispensable part of the thinking structure and ritual behavior of Vietnamese people from the past to the present.

Conclusion

The Yin - Yang (陰陽) ideology, a fundamental philosophical doctrine of ancient China, has been absorbed, developed and applied by Taoism (道教) into a theoretical system about the operation of the universe, humans and the order of existence. When penetrating into Vietnam through a long process of cultural exchange, this ideology not only retains its profound philosophical nature but is also localized, transformed into specific symbols and rituals in the folk religious life of Vietnamese people. Based on the survey and analysis of the ancestor worship ritual system, it can be affirmed that: the Yin - Yang (陰陽) ideology is present not only as a fundamental layer of meaning but also as a structural axis of thinking, organizing the entire system of ritual behaviors, symbols and sacred spaces of the community.

Every arrangement, from the position of the altar, the number of offerings, the color of the costumes, to the time of the ceremony, etc. all bear the mark of Yin - Yang (陰陽) interaction and movement. Maintaining the balance and harmony of Yin - Yang (陰陽) is considered an essential condition to maintain the connection between the living and the deceased, between individuals and the community, between humans and the universe.

In addition, the study shows that the mechanism of integration and localization of Yin-Yang (陰陽) ideology in Vietnamese culture does not take place mechanically or by copying, but through the process of internalization, adaptation and regeneration in accordance with the worldview, philosophy of life and local cultural and social living conditions. Vietnamese people do not absorb the concept of Yin-Yang (陰陽) as a purely rational doctrine, but transform it into specific cultural models: ancestral altars, death anniversary trays, mourning clothes, reburial, auspicious hours, grave orientation, etc., creating a unique ritual system that is both universally Oriental and uniquely Vietnamese. In particular, in the context of modernization and globalization, although the form of rituals may change and the space of worship may be narrowed, the Yin-Yang (陰陽) ideology continues to be maintained and adapted in many new manifestations. From the above results, this study has contributed to clarifying the role of Yin-Yang (陰陽) ideology as a fundamental structure, regulating the Vietnamese folk belief system. At the same time, it also shows the urgent need to approach folk beliefs not only from the perspective of ethnology or cultural history, but also from the depth of philosophy and ideology, in order to understand the internal operating principles of indigenous culture.

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