

The Significance of The Ornate Emblems on The Altar Thresholdframes in North Vietnamese Communal Houses

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Abstract

The history of the formation and development of communal houses in Northern Vietnam dates from the 16th to the 18th century. These houses carry many political, social, and spiritual meanings in the lives of Vietnamese people. The thresholdframe (Cua Vong) of their altars is a cultural symbol, a sacred partition between the main space of the building and the sanctuary space. It is made of wood and painted yellow. The statue body is carved with folk and sacred themes such as dragons, unicorns, turtles, phoenixes, tiger faces, dragon-shaped bamboo, and Chinese characters, along with various types of natural patterns. Many Vietnamese communal houses today no longer retain their original structures due to harsh climates and wars. As a result, the study demonstrates the significance of maintaining and advancing the traditional practice of thresholdframe decoration in Vietnamese communal homes as a way to offer the Vietnamese people spiritual assistance.

Keywords: Village Communal Houses, Thresholdframe, Cultural Symbol, Sacred Partition.

INTRODUCTION

Each Vietnamese village's cultural and religious heritage is preserved through the traditional communal house. Every Vietnamese person has numerous interpretations of it that relate to the political, social, and cultural lives of the past. In contrast to pagodas, temples, and shrines, village communal homes serve as a serious and sacred space for worship, host local festivals (based on the spring and fall seasons), and host meetings for local leaders to address state matters. The local community and government's cultural characteristics are embodied in the communal house. Therefore, there is a wealth of information on architecture, sculpture, and decoration in the village communal house itself.

An essential component of the communal house's interior design, the thresholdframe (Cửa Vồng) is positioned in the center of the worship area and serves as the focal point connecting the inner harem (forbidden palace) and the exterior space. The thresholdframe has a gold paint job and is constructed of wood. Dragons, turtles, tortoises, phoenixes, tigers, dragon-shaped bamboos, flowers, and other folk and religious themes are frequently carved into it. In north Vietnamese village communal dwellings, the majority of thresholdframes from the 16th and 17th centuries are either completely destroyed or hardly survive today.

Therefore, the art of adorning the thresholdframes is the main subject of the investigation. The research's objective is to identify the benefits and opportunities while learning about and contrasting the artistic and cultural significance of the inner thresholdframes across centuries in terms of themes, materials, and carving techniques, and the ability of materials to express themselves. The study also elucidates the thresholdframe's artistic and ornamental significance in the context of conserving and advancing North Vietnamese communal dwellings' traditional culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Northern Vietnam's communal houses began to take shape in the 16th century and reached their height in the 17th and 18th centuries. While the North's communal dwellings have been extensively studied, Vietnam's thresholdframe has received very little attention. For instance, Đức Thanh Lê presents communal buildings in "Northern Village Communal House" in a number of ways, including threshold frames, architectural ornamentation, truss structures, and ground layout [1]. "Vietnamese folk sculptures of the 16th - 17th - 18th

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centuries" conveys the idea of people adorning the architecture of common houses in a very quick manner. The thresholdframe portion of the village communal house has not been thoroughly discussed by Quân Nguyễn and Thương Cẩm Phan, who have written a brief section on the topic and introduced a number of early communal houses that deal with cultural and religious concerns [2]. The Institute of Fine Arts currently houses several study documents, primarily authored from the perspectives of architecture, decoration, and sculpture, by researchers such as Chi Du Nguyễn, Biền Lâm Trần, and Trú Quang Chu. The thresholdframe mentioned is merely meant to serve as an introduction [3].

Currently, there is a lack of systematic research on very detailed thresholdframe concerns. Typical Northern community houses in Hanoi provinces like Hưng Yên, Bắc Ninh, Bắc Giang, Hải Phòng, Quảng Ninh, Hà Nam, Nam Định, Thái Bình, and Phú Thọ are included in the study's scope. The goal of the study is to produce a comprehensive resource on the craft of thresholdframe ornamentation in common village homes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The local tutelary god, worshipped in the village communal dwelling, is the most prevalent face of god worship in the Northern Delta region. It was founded with three main goals in mind: administrative, religious, and cultural. "Tutelary Gods of Angelic origin (gods originating from heaven), Tutelary Gods of Natural Than origin (i.e., natural origin), and Tutelary Gods of natural origin". Village tutelary worship is divided into these three primary kinds. Human gods have their roots in historical figures, cultural icons, sages, the forerunners of professions, people who died on holy days, outsiders, and saints from other religions [4].

In order to gather information about the thresholdframe that exists in current communal houses, the fieldwork approach involved taking pictures and recording them. Sociological methods were then used to interview and gather perspectives from specialists and people who are familiar with the frames. The goal of the multidisciplinary research approach is to demonstrate how the various functions of the village's shared house have bonded and shaped its varied culture. The collective house of faith in the village serves as the community's home, fostering connections, trust, and hope for all villagers. The study also determines the benefits of fine arts education through communal house heritage, which helps to preserve and sustain cultural and artistic heritage. It does this by employing fine arts methods to decipher the layers of meaning of decorative projects on the thresholdframe of village communal houses.

RESULTS

During the Nguyễn Dynasty, the threshold frame (Cửa Vồng) was used as an architectural element to divide the internal area of the pagoda and to embellish its interior architecture. It elevates the worship area's sacred significance and establishes a sacred place. In the realm of architecture, the same structure might have multiple names depending on the locality. For instance, a threshold frame beam (Thanh Cửa Vồng), a wooden curtain (Y môn) or threshold frame, as defined by the Northern term, according to the structure's classification, or the shielding of louvers (Bao Lam), as defined by the Southern term, according to the function's classification. They're all carved and fashioned of wood, except for Y môn. Fabric was used to make it initially. Later, it was swapped out for painted and carved wood with a threshold frame name for longevity. In contrast to threshold frame, Y môn does not employ aggressive sculptured techniques [5].

The thresholdframe Cửa Vồng, which is composed of one horizontal wooden board and two vertical wooden boards, connects two nearby columns in an upward arc or upside-down U shape. The thresholdframe measures 4.9 meters in height and 4.3 meters in width. The community and the spiritual realm are connected by the Cửa Vồng, which functions as a kind of sacred portal that bridges the past and present. Through the artist's spirit engaging with the community, it itself is a manifestation of the culture of heaven on earth.

The communal home serves as a place of worship for those who have made contributions to the nation and its citizens. At the site of its construction, the village or commune serves as its administrative and cultural hub. Included in the common house's construction are the main house, which consists of five compartments, the left and right wings, and the back palace. The northern communal houses typically employ their thresholdframes for hero worship, religious and cultural symbols, and interior décor. They are at the center of

The Significance of The Ornate Emblems on The Altar Thresholdframes in North Vietnamese Communal Houses

the main home, which is where the most sacred things are gathered and where people who have helped the nation are worshipped.

The thresholdframe panel extends from the 7-meter-tall upper beam to the communal house floor, which is made up of numerous floors and layers that progressively retreat and diminish until it reaches the main pillar's two sides. The panel is separated into tiny fragments, which are then used to create unique designs. Regardless of the size of the panels—whether they are square or rectangular—each of these little arrangements has a circle in the middle where letters are carved, giving the carved panels a sense of independence and focus. The primary design of the door is the solid panels that adorn the lettering. The patterns are all pierced into thin, flat slabs of wood, giving them a soft, thick, and golden appearance.

Most communal houses in the provinces of Hưng Yên, Bắc Ninh, Bắc Giang, Hải Phòng, Quảng Ninh, Hà Nam, Nam Định, Thái Bình, and Phú Thọ, have a central hall that is a sacred place of worship. This space is structured internally with wood, and the ceiling of this space is gilded. It is decorated with an intricate thresholdframe as sacred partition that divides the hall and the worship space, such as the thresholdframe of Khê Tang (Hà Nội), Vị Hạ (Hà Nam), Thổ Hà (Bắc Giang), and Cổ Loa (Hà Nội). These thresholdframe, together with the golden glow of the bronze furniture placed in front of the main hall, in the most majestic position, create a strong solemn and sacred impression as soon as we enter the communal house through the main door. A horizontal threshold frame can be seen parallel to the system of columns and crossbeams when viewed from the center. The threshold frame is an ancient carving that is valuable in today's aesthetic life, the carvings on the frame have been linked to the carvings on the pillars, planks, and bamboo poles (Table 1).

Table 1. Thresholdframes of North Vietnam Communal Houses in 16th and 17th Cen.

	
<p>Khê Tang thresholdframe, Hà Nội, 17th cen.</p>	<p>Thổ Hà thresholdframe, Bắc Giang, 16th cen.</p>
	
<p>Vị Hạ thresholdframe, Hà Nam, 17th cen.</p>	<p>Cổ Loa thresholdframe, Hà Nội, 16th cen.</p>

In addition to the thresholdframe, there is a horizontal diaphragm in the center. The column has two parallel sentences on either side. The interior limit is produced by the couplet and diaphragm. The majority of their inscriptions highlight the virtues of the local tutelary deity. The depth of space within the pavilion is increased by the multi-layer carved thresholdframe. These layers serve as a focal point for the main worship space when illuminated by candles. Although the social areas are open, roomy, and airy, the primary place of worship is set up in accordance with rigorous, rational guidelines that have their own significance [6].

In many communal dwellings and in every region, thresholdframes are continually changing and have their own unique beauty. The richness and uniqueness of the frames' ornate carvings increase with the diversity of the common house's space. The alteration and transformation adhere to the fundamental ideas of classical architectural design. Every time, the thresholdframe is positioned in the center of the primary worship area. Delicate carving methods including bubble, puncture, and filigree carving are used in the thresholdframe technique. Some community houses, like Cam Đà communal house in Hanoi and An Cỗ communal house in Thái Bình, have one or two thresholds that extend deep into the harem, giving the communal house layers and depth.

As demonstrated by the Trà Cỗ communal house (Quang Ninh, 13th century), the main worship space remains the center point even if some communal houses have thresholds that extend to the side rooms (Figure 1). In the royal style of the Nguyễn, the worship area is made to be very artistic, and the majority of the common



Figure 1 Communal house Trà Cỗ's thresholdframe. Source: Author

house's threshold frame is covered in gilded lacquer. For instance, the great hall of the Diem communal house (Bac Ninh, 16th century) has a thresholdframe that is more than three hundred years old. The communal house's four enormous floors, which are arranged in descending steps and are beautifully carved with numerous creative shapes based on themes relating to the four sacred animals—dragon, unicorn, turtle, and phoenix—stretch from the roof, which is around seven meters high, to the ground. Each floor is decorated with various themes and separated into distinct floors and sections; however, the floors have flexible and harmonious connections that bring about the beauty of life, the desire for human growth and fertility, the life of working people, and the spirit of democracy (Figure 2). There are no gaps in the entire threshold. Every tiny piece is distinctively carved and embellished. The sun and clouds are carved into the uppermost stratum of the attic. Four statues of fairies peering down and lifting the clouds adorn the next part in a lovely manner. The following floor is incredibly eye-catching, adorned with magnificent crimson paint and numerous relief-carved dragon forms. The altar is surrounded by the final floor of the arched door. Despite its rustic wooden appearance, this location draws spectators with its unusual and vibrant animal shapes.



Figure 1. Communal house Diêm's thresholdframe with sculptures of 4 layers from the top to down. Source: author.

The male tutelary god is worshipped in the majority of the village's common homes, which are lavishly, magnificently, and majestically decorated. The style and theme of the carvings at the thresholdframe of certain community houses correspond to the village god that is being worshipped. For instance, the inside door of the Huu Bo Thuong communal house is designed to resemble a table. It is moderately tall, and the wing features form little boxes that resemble pineapple thorns and rosettes rather than touching the dragon and phoenix. Mother Goddess Xuân Dung, a female divinity, is worshipped in this unique community home. The thresholdframe set is made of wood, which is careful, intricate, and rustically beautiful.

The most popular and exploited picture is that of the four sacred animals, which include the dragon, unicorn, turtle, and phoenix. The dragon represents all-pervading power and strength. A unicorn is a representation of virtue. To represent longevity, a stack of books is fastened to the turtle's back. The symbol of grace, the phoenix combines the traits of a crane and a peacock. Seldom are the four animals' photos used in the same arrangement; instead, they are frequently utilized separately on thresholdframes.

On the surface above the thresholdframe, the symmetrical post shape is comparatively prevalent. The Two Dragons of the Sun is a carved depiction of two dragons surrounding the same sun. Every common house has a distinct style for carving dragons on its thresholdframe, with variances and stylizations. The dragon is utilized frequently, for instance, at the thresholdframe of Dong Ky communal home. Two dragon representations flank the sun near the top of the ceiling, the head of the dragon protrudes fully next to the pillar, and a tiger symbol is depicted at the bottom.

At Đình Bảng (Bac Ninh, 16th cen.) communal house, the image of the phoenix stands with its head turned back in a strong, magnificent pose, showcasing the beauty of every little detail. Variations of thresholdframes shaped like phoenixes are embellished with silk, rattan, flowers, and leaves (Figure 3). The predominant carved themes on the frames and altars of village communal buildings from the late 19th and early 20th centuries are the preserved pictures of dragons, phoenixes, cranes, turtles, dragon horses, and tigers. Mascots help Vietnamese people balance their mental and spiritual lives in day-to-day living by creating a rich spiritual environment [7].

The community dwellings' thresholdframe structure is separated into cells with uniform spacing for ornamentation. Basic geometric boxes incorporate the letters on the frame. Phuc (good fortune) and Tho (long life living), as well as phrases referring to the tutelary god or a particular slogan like "Long live the Holy Palace" featuring dragon, phoenix, turtle, crane, tiger, and talisman, are among the most often used words. The words adhere to rigorous spiritual and artistic standards. They are strongly related to the purpose of worship objects because of their ornamental qualities that enhance thresholdframes. Additionally, the letters on the



Figure 2. Communal House Đình Bảng's thresholdframe Source: author.

"Long live the Holy Palace" featuring dragon, phoenix, turtle, crane, tiger, and talisman, are among the most often used words. The words adhere to rigorous spiritual and artistic standards. They are strongly related to the purpose of worship objects because of their ornamental qualities that enhance thresholdframes. Additionally, the letters on the

frames serve to inform people of all social strata about the history and philosophy of the village communal house.

DISCUSSION

According to the theory, the altar's lavish decoration, glitter, and magnificence symbolize the village's good fortune and prosperity, the tutelary god's care, respect, and pride, or the appreciation and passing down of the local cultural heritage. As a result, many communities lack sufficient material resources, but the residents nevertheless make every effort to construct a common home with a thresholdframe altar that is magnificent, glittering, and enchanted.

The threshold frame is composed of wood and has a gold finish. It frequently has carvings of dragons, turtles, unicorns, tigers, phoenixes, and other religious and folk animals, as well as flowers. In addition to being aesthetically pleasing, the decorative theme reflects the Vietnamese people's aspirations for truth, goodness, and beauty. Examples include folktales or legends that highlight the virtues of ancestors, the image of the four sacred animals (unicorn, unicorn, turtle, and phoenix), the four noble animals (apricot blossom, orchid, chrysanthemum, and bamboo), the concept of Buddha, the eighteen arhats and bodhisattvas, and Buddhism in a realistic, conventional style, or themes that are combined to produce a synthetic meaning.

The care, respect, and pride for the tutelary god and the stunning landscape of the motherland are evident in the rich and magnificent altar space. Whether the thresholdframes are close or far away, big or tiny, or intricately carved or straightforward, the gilding technique is still an essential requirement in the procedure. Painting thresholdframes with vermilion and gilding is a common method because the crimson hue of vermilion and the gleam of gold make them ideal for the altar, as a background for other decorations, and for arranging other objects of devotion together. Images of dragons, fairies, or the four sacred and valuable animals are weaved throughout the themes.

To enhance the collective house's magical, enigmatic, and spiritual meaning, people employ images of fairies, dragons, clouds, or occasionally just fairy heads in addition to themes like the four seasons and sacred animals. The entire inside space of the communal house is covered with a spherical statue of a fairy head that is visible from above. It is a conventional yet subtly religious symbol. They are all infused with a traditional yet subtly religious spirit.

The gilded lacquer technique and material have shown to be highly appropriate for the central space of the house, where the surroundings are frequently left bare or sparsely decorated. Second, Vietnamese artists have produced stunning, eye-catching pieces that are more resilient than raw materials by using the lacquer technique. Gilded vermilion is used to paint the thresholds and columns of 19th and 20th century community dwellings, including those that are being refurbished or constructed today.

The mid-to-late 17th and early 18th century saw the appearance of numerous well-known communal homes with fully operational thresholdframes. With the diaphragm horizontal and the thresholdframe horizontal, the main place of worship is situated in the center, while pillars enclose the two sides. On the main column, two parallel sentences with literary substance that are painted and affixed with Chinese characters frequently highlight the virtues of the village's tutelary god. The notion of symmetry is frequently followed when placing the altar items.

The altar arrangement resembles the thresholdframe's depiction of two dragons flanking the sun. Together, they produce an extremely creative rhythmic harmony. The light in the house's interior produces very noticeable artistic effects regardless of whether the thresholdframe is painted or made of wood.

CONCLUSION

The thresholdframes' carved panels are the Northern village communal dwellings' most distinctive feature. It turns into the worth of traditional Vietnamese art. A great deal of folk information has accumulated at the thresholdframe, along with numerous skilled individuals who possess advanced degrees in technology, art, and general societal and feng-shui understanding. Many generations have acquired and transmitted that priceless knowledge. Previous generations' ideas and goals are also reflected in the art of carving thresholdframes. With

chisel strokes that are occasionally bold and occasionally deft, the artists employ a variety of techniques, including bubble carving, shallow carving, and puncture carving, to create a majestic, elegant, and dignified image on the thresholdframe. Each piece of wood, sometimes bare and other times coated with gleaming gold, was expertly imprinted with a reasonable impression by the artists. Different tone of gold is expertly blended with the colors of the thresholdframe's ornamental panels to produce a distinctly creative impression. The colors adhere to the shape's symmetrical composition theory. A pair of parallel sentences are suspended from two massive pillars on either side of the horizontal lacquered board in the center, which is the highest point in the thresholdframe. In addition to limiting the space of the ornamental shapes within, the horizontal lacquered board and parallel sentences convey the literary meaning of the lines, which mostly extol the virtues of the village's tutelary deity. Below the horizontal lacquered board, the sun was frequently carved in the center, with "two dragons facing the sun"—dragons and clouds facing the sun on either side. This carving is entirely coated in gold, giving it a dazzling appearance. Lower down, there would be a wide variety of thresholdframe shapes, colors, and decorative forms, depending on the culture of communal homes. In order to make the common house as magnificent as a little palace, the art of adorning inside doors has been merged with mosaics, bronze items, lacquered items, embroidered items, and candlelight in the center. The art of thresholdframe decoration has a special value that demonstrates its tight association to other components and how it has become an essential aspect of the village communal house.

Many communal homes still have their lovely and distinctive thresholdframes today, but the degradation and lack of knowledge of the locals are concerning. It gradually loses its perfection due to their inadvertent actions. Additionally, the preservation and promotion of inner door art values are impacted by contemporary requirements and existence. The majority of people primarily focus on ostentatious art forms and give little consideration to the original artistic merit. Thresholdframes are therefore always an essential architectural element, appropriate for Vietnamese village communal houses, as both new and old communal houses in Northern Vietnam are in desperate need of preservation and restoration.

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