

# What Is the Central Highlands Gong-Culture Space in Vietnam?

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*Recognized as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2005, the space of gong culture has become the pride of those who are interested in the Central Highlands culture. Over the past decade, Vietnamese and foreign researchers and cultural managers at all levels have made many moves to identify and preserve this heritage. However, it is surprising that today there is not yet any clear definition of the space of gong culture. Based on an explanation of what cultural space means, in the specific context of the Central Highlands, this paper presents a new perspective on the nature and structure of the space of gong culture. The author argues that the Central Highlands gong-culture space essentially coincides with the village space, and the conservation of the former is just to preserve the latter—an environment in which gong-related activities are created, nurtured and practiced.*

## 1. Introduction

On 25 November 2005, the Central Highlands Gong-Culture Space of Vietnam was recognized by UNESCO as a “Masterpiece

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of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” (inscribed in 2008 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity). This event created a great push for the management and conservation of this type of intangible heritage at the central and local levels because, at that time, the state of “gong drain” was at an alarming level. Not long after the cultural space of gongs was “turned into heritage”, a veteran researcher specializing in the Central Highlands pointed out two issues of concern on the Central Highlands. First, there is little of the so-called “real culture” of the Central Highlands left, while “fake culture” is used in order to attract tourists. Second, the culture of the Central Highlands people is increasingly becoming miscellaneous under the impact of new cultural currents, leading to the phenomenon of “cultural uprooting and fracture” among young people. (Nguyễn Ngọc 2008)

Facing this situation, over the past decade, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism has provided concrete guidance for the Central Highlands provinces to implement a project on preserving the gong-culture space with a number of solutions, including promoting communication about the need to preserve the heritage among people, inventorying legacies in villages, honoring and treating gong artists, training gong teams of young people, and restoring traditional ceremonies and festivals in combination with community tourism development. In addition, in parallel with communication, the Central Highlands’ gong teams, under State sponsorship, participate in shows on various stages so that this heritage can be made better known at home and abroad. However, as many authors have pointed, the goal of preserving the gong-culture space still faces many limitations and the conservation is not effective enough or even unable to continue after the project is over. (Từ Thị Loan 2017, 2019; Vũ Tú Quyên 2017)

Through the research works on gong art in particular and the Central Highlands gong culture in general, we realize that there are only a few definitions of the Central Highlands gong-culture space. On the other hand, they do not provide theoretical bases to be converted into practical solutions to the conservation of this space. Therefore, this paper will focus on solving two fundamental problems: (i) clarifying the concept of cultural space to give a new definition of *the space of gong culture*; (ii) clarifying the structure of the Central Highlands gong-culture space.

## **2. From cultural space to gong-culture space**

### ***2.1. Cultural space***

In recent years, the concept of cultural space has been commonly mentioned at academic forums and in research studies done by Vietnamese scholars. It is more or less related to the obvious fact that we always exist in different types of cultural spaces. So, what is a cultural space?

According to Martin and Nakayama, as well as its abstraction and polysemy, “cultural space” is a rather complicated concept. It can be a physical space, for example a house where a person is born and grows up, or a metaphorical space like the Internet. It is also defined by neighborhood relationships, religious activities, daily life, and social organizations/institutions, for example, schools and hospitals. These factors combine to form invisible boundaries and the identity of each individual in a cultural space. When an individual moves out of a space to another one, she/he may face cultural shock and must find ways to adapt to the new culture. Thus, a cultural space is perceived as the environment where the cultural identity of an individual is defined. (J.N. Martin, T.K. Nakayama 2010)

The viewpoints of Vietnamese scholars on cultural space are different from those of Western scholars. According to Ngô Đức Thịnh, “cultural space” can be understood at two levels: concrete and abstract. In a specific sense, cultural space is a geographical space, in which a phenomenon—or a combination of cultural phenomena—arises, exists or changes, or phenomena are linked together as a system. In an abstract sense, cultural space is a “field” (physics) containing a phenomenon or a combination of phenomena (an ethnic, national or regional culture) that is able to receive and pervade (influence), giving the culture a wide or narrow space. (Ngô Đức Thịnh 2006: 39)

From the above definitions, in our opinion, the concept of cultural space encompasses the following meanings:

- A defined geographical space/territory. The space can be wide or narrow, depending on the particular context.

- In this geographical space there exists one or more communities of inhabitants who are of the same origins or have close mutual relationships, which are formed through land reclamation for living, production cooperation and the protection of shared interests, through marriage, community events, and the assurance of common norms of collective life (which are expressed in customary law or village conventions).

- The most important thing is that the community of inhabitants in a territory has created a way of life, in which a special type of culture can emerge, creating the “essence” for a cultural space. In Vietnam, typical cultural spaces are associated with a specific type of culture. For example, *quan họ* folk songs are the essence of Kinh Bắc cultural space; *ví* and *giặm* folk songs are the essence of Nghệ-Tĩnh cultural space; gong art, or epic-performing art, is the essence of the Central Highlands cultural space; etc.

In many cases, *cultural space* is identified with *cultural area*. For example, in his book *Việt Nam: cái nhìn địa – văn hóa* (*Vietnam: a Geo-*

*cultural View*), Trần Quốc Vượng uses the phrase “cultural space” to interpret the concept of cultural area. “A cultural area is a whole system, a cultural space with a structure-system consisting of sub-systems based on system analysis.” (Trần Quốc Vượng 1998: 401) However, we believe that *cultural area* and *cultural space* are not really synonymous. The distinction between the two concepts is that *cultural area* only refers to cultural spaces at the macroscopic or sub-regional level. Meanwhile, *cultural space* can be used to refer to both the macroscopic and microscopic spaces. Therefore, the phrase “village cultural area” is not employed but the concept of *village cultural space* is accepted and used by scholars.

## **2.2. The Central Highlands gong-culture space**

Since 2005, the phrase “the Central Highlands gong-culture space” has become so common in the media that only a few people worry about its connotation. It seems that everyone has already a clear definition of what the phrase is. According to our knowledge, Tô Ngọc Thanh is probably a rare scholar who intends to sketch the Central Highlands gong-culture space. In their article, Tô Ngọc Thanh and Nguyễn Chí Bền affirm: “The Central Highlands gong-culture space is the Central Highlands region of Vietnam. Currently, this region comprises five provinces: Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Đắk Lắk, Đắk Nông and Lâm Đồng. Additionally, this space also covers the neighboring provinces in Central Vietnam, such as Quảng Trị, Thừa Thiên Huế, Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi, Bình Định and Phú Yên.” (Tô Ngọc Thanh and Nguyễn Chí Bền 2017: 139) Their viewpoint is accepted by a large number of cultural researchers. For example, according to Lê Thị Hoài Phương, “as for the Tây Nguyên gong, its environment is the cultural space lying on the vast highlands in the west of Central Vietnam as well as on the western side of the Trường Sơn mountain range, hence it is called “Tây Nguyên–Trường Sơn culture” by many folk-cultural researchers. (Lê Thị Hoài Phương 2017: 448)

Thus, according to the current popular viewpoint, the Central Highlands gong-culture space is almost identified with the Central Highlands gong culture area (or the Central Highlands culture area). In other words, researchers see the Central Highlands gong-culture space as a macroscopic space. That is, the Central Highlands gong-culture space is understood as a large cultural area/space with a typical type of culture: gong-related activities.

We believe that a large-scale approach to the Central Highlands gong-culture space has revealed several limits and inadequacies. First, in fact, in the Central Highlands gong-related activities are cultural practice of each village; they do not exist in some vague space like outsiders think. Second, the macro-level approaches fail to give specific suggestions/directions for cultural conservation. Cultural managers at both central and local levels want to have a more explicit definition of the Central Highlands gong-culture space because a way of looking at heritage will regulate that of choosing tools/solutions to the conservation of the heritage itself.

In the historical-cultural context of the Central Highlands, the Central Highlands gong-culture space should be approached at the micro-level of the concept of cultural space – at the village level. In the Central Highlands, the village has a special place in the history of the whole region in general and each local ethnic group in particular. Before being pacified and exploited by the French colonialists, in the Central Highlands region there were only ethnic villages but not a state. For the Central Highlands people, the village is so important that the sense of village community is even more important than that of ethnic community (Nguyễn Ngọc 2008: 153). Nguyễn Ngọc is absolutely right to think that, “In the seemingly small village-world that is actually extremely immense, men are born, grow up, work, play and give birth to children. Before leaving this world for reversion to the original forest mother, they create ethnic cultural values. *The Central*

*Highlands gong-culture space – Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity – is essentially a village-forest space, or more accurately speaking, a village-forest cultural space, because the forest is vital to the survival of all villages in the Central Highlands.”<sup>1</sup> Gong-related activities, along with all other cultural activities of the Central Highlands people, are associated with each village. It is the language of the soul of each village. (Nguyễn Ngọc 2010: 62)*

Thus, it can be affirmed that *the Central Highlands gong-culture space is the village cultural space—a spatial entity that acts as a space where cultural values of the village community are created, practiced and nurtured, with the most prominent being a unique gong art. This definition implies that “the conservation of the Central Highlands gong space, which UNESCO recognizes as the intangible heritage of humanity, is to preserve it in the village space but not on stage. On stage, it’s just a kind of ‘relic’.” (Nguyễn Ngọc 2010: 62)*

### **3. The structure of the Central Highlands gong-culture space**

Studying Vietnamese village space, the Vietnamese and foreign authors have worked out a number of spatial classification methods. In the collective work *Làng ở vùng châu thổ sông Hồng: vấn đề còn bỏ ngỏ* (The Villages in Questions), discussing the structure of village space, ethnologist Nguyễn Tùng points out three parts of the overall village space: administrative space, residential space and production space. (Nguyễn Tùng 2002: 97-138) Researching into the changes in Hanoi suburban villages’ livelihood, Nguyễn Văn Sửu has realized that inside or over what we imagine to be

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1. Đặng Hoài Giang. “Introduction”, *Biến đổi không gian văn hóa buôn làng Ê Đê ở Buôn Ma Thuột từ sau 1975 đến nay* (Changes in Space of Ede Village Culture in Buôn Ma Thuột from 1975 to Present), Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội Publishing House, Hanoi, 2019, p. 13.

a village space are different types of space: residential space, architectural space, social space, sacred space, farming space, administrative space, private space, common space, etc. And the classification and determination of such spaces depend on the purpose of each research project. (Nguyễn Văn Sửu 2014: 51-52) Meanwhile, on the basis of considering the Vietnamese village as an ecological-human space, Nguyễn Công Thảo classifies Vietnamese village space into four divisions: (i) space of production, including rice fields, grazing grounds, swamps and lakes; (ii) residential space, including hamlets, alleys, dwelling-houses and home gardens; (iii) community space, including courtyards of the *đình* (communal house), markets, village wells, village ponds, venues for social gatherings, festivals or entertainment; (iv) spiritual space, including communal houses, pagodas, temples and shrines.

Referring to our senior scholars' methods, in particular based on the examination of the local communities during our field trips to the Central Highlands, we consider the gong culture space/village culture space as a whole composed of four elements.

- Livelihood space with natural resources (land, water, flora and fauna, minerals...) that people have access to, and exploit for meeting their survival needs: land for residential and agricultural purposes; water for daily life and production; forests providing food (vegetables, fruits, meat) and important materials (wood, medicinal materials); grazing grounds for animal husbandry. In the process of interacting with, and adapting to livelihood space, people can accumulate knowledge of the natural world (indigenous knowledge) and establish cultural patterns: regulations on access to, ownership and transfer of land and natural resources; forms of agricultural cultivation (seasonal calendar, cultivation techniques, crop structure); patterns of product consumption, distribution



and exchange. In production space, the Central Highlands people grow dry rice and other crops. Rice is both the subsistence crop and religious plant. The life cycle of the rice plant is marked by different agricultural ceremonies held by the Central Highlands people. From the time of working the land for cultivation and sowing when the rainy season of the year starts (around April) to the time when the rice is harvested to be stored in granaries in January of the following year, a series of ceremonies are held, such as the grass-raking ceremony, rice-plant pruning ceremony, Rice God worshipping ceremony, new rice ceremony, rice-soul worshipping ceremony and rice-soul welcoming ceremony (Đặng Hoài Giang 2019). Certainly, gong-related activities are always present at these ceremonies, especially in such an important ritual as the new rice ceremony.

- Residential space is where households of a community live and where civil life takes place every day. When it comes to residential space, we should mention its architectural style (architectural motifs, architectural materials, the use of architectural space, decorative art), the type of family (nuclear or extended) and a multitude of principles that are laid down in the context of family life: modes of inheritance and property division, gender function, modes of choosing the partner for marriage and post-marital residence, forms of cooperation between blood relation families.
- Community space, which is notably a communal house and a place of entertainment, has the function of promoting social interaction, the process—through which an individual acquires a personal identity and becomes a proficient member of a society—of enhancing social cohesion and maintaining the cultural continuity of a community through cultural practices in a number of special events.

- Spiritual space where people organize their spiritual activities to create communication between the real world they live in and a vague world that is considered to have a close relationship with their world: spiritual world. It is the world of supernatural personages and their deceased relatives. The concepts and activities associated with the spiritual space have the function of regulating human behavior. At the same time, they play a role in maintaining and transmitting cultural skills and values from one generation to another in a community. Each event with spiritual activities, apart from its spiritual meaning, is an opportunity for community members to perform what is considered to be the best and most quintessential in their cultural capital.

According to functionalism, the functional linkage between the components of the structure of village cultural space is a basis for maintaining the entire cultural life of the village community. Without this linkage, the spatial structure will be broken, the community life be disturbed and, for rebalancing their life, the community necessarily has to find new components and accept to exist in a new space that is disordered. At this time, the constant interaction between old and new subjects may pave the way for acculturation in a living space that has already become multicultural.

It is necessary to add that any classification is relative. In the traditional Central Highlands society, it would be forced if we tried to find a clear boundary between parts of a village space; because one space can serve various functions. For example, the Ede long house is the residence of all households of a matrilineal family, but it is also considered a sacred object with strict taboos and in its living-room (*gah*), sacrifices are regularly performed with the participation of the family members and villagers. At that time,

the long house is the space for religious activities and community activities. Furthermore, the house itself is the product of the livelihood space (wood and furniture are taken from the forest).

In the traditional Central Highlands society, the four above-mentioned elements form the living space of the Central Highlands villages that, at the same time, is a source of inspiration for gong activities to be born and handed down from generation to generation. If gong culture is preserved in the village space but not on stage, the conservation of village space is synonymous with the conservation of its four component parts.

#### 4. Some initial discussions

*First*, fifteen years have passed since the Central Highlands gong-culture space was proclaimed by UNESCO as an “Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity”. Up to now, in Vietnam there is not yet any adequate definition of this legacy. With the macro-level approach, the current definitions prove inappropriate to the historical and cultural context of the Central Highlands and do not produce useful suggestions for the conservation of the Central Highlands gong-culture space. Therefore, while choosing a micro-level approach, this paper answers two key questions: (i) What is the Central Highlands gong-culture space? and (ii) its structure.

*Second*, the author believes that *the Central Highlands gong-culture space is the village cultural space—a spatial entity which acts as a space where cultural values of the village community are created, practiced and nurtured, with the most prominent being a unique gong art*. In terms of structure, the Central Highlands gong-culture space is constituted of four elements that have a reciprocal relationship: space of production, residential space, space of community activities and space of spiritual activities.

*Third*, such understanding can lead to a new perception: the conservation of Central Highlands gong space is actually the conservation of the space of Central Highlands villages. Therefore, we need to review the feasibility of solutions to preserving the Central Highlands gong-culture space that the localities have since long adopted. In the author's opinion, the current solutions, though necessary, are still superficial and short-term in the sense that they are not yet concerned with the most fundamental issue: preserving village space. However, with the great and profound impacts from the political, economic and social context of the Central Highlands for nearly half a century, the highlanders' village by itself has acquired a completely new face, especially communal ownership of resources and ethnic/population structure. In such a context, the conservation of the village space of ethnic groups in the Central Highlands is far from simple. It requires new approaches, new concepts and great efforts of the State to overcome the challenges in the conservation of the Central Highlands gong-culture space today.

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