

Religious architecture of Chams in Vietnam

Le Chien Thang

Abstract

Champa civilization lasted in long time from 2nd century AD and blossomed in the 9th and 10th centuries. In the process of developing its long history, the Chams has created a unique culture - art, rich in creativity. Creation of the Champa arts shown in both the architecture and building techniques as well as the decorative arts, harmony between the spiritual and the secular elements, between foreign and native cultures. The remaining architectural and art achievements of Champa are expressed mainly in the religious buildings which are scattered in the ancient sites from central to southern Vietnam nowadays. They are precious and uniqueness of cultural and artistic heritages of Vietnam.

Key words: Champa civilization, religious architecture, sculpture, temple tower, Central Vietnam

1. Overview

The Cham people or Chams is the indigenous people in the area of the coastal Central Vietnam and relates to Austronesian ethnic group and once be a mighty nation in history in nearly 1700 years, from 192 AD to 1832 AD. The Champa territory ranges from Quang Binh province in the north to Binh Thuan province in the south and from the sea in the east to the western mountains of Laos today.

The Chams were descendants of the residents of Sa Huynh culture (Iron Age from 1.000 to 200 BC in Quang Ngai province). Their culture flourished especially in the 9th and 10th century. Located on "Maritime silk road" between the two main Asian ancient civilizations, the Chams has diversified their cultures and arts through interference with ancient India and China as well as a closed relationship with other Southeast Asian countries through maritime commercial activities from the 2nd century AD. From the 11th century onwards, the Champa kingdom weakened gradually over the war with Viet dynasties and the Khmer Empire, and finally merged into Viet territory in 1832. However, the arts of the Chams have left many legacies independently as well as in combination with other Viet dynasties' arts from the Ly dynasty onwards. The Chams has three main religions (Brahmin, Mahayana Buddhism and Muslim) being influenced of the outside religions which are Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism. The Indian culture had influenced on the Chams from the early formative years of the kingdom: from trinitarian cult to unitary state organization, production experiences... Besides, the locations in the kingdom were also named as India such as Simhapura (Tra Kieu), Indrapura (Dong Duong)... Hindu religion had transformed and integrated into the local culture and formed a specialized religion to worship the Hindu God Siva. Buddhism was transferred and integrated to Champa but did not have a great impact as Hinduism. From 9th century, the imprint of Buddhism is clearly expressed in the architecture and sculpture, the most representative works of the Buddhist is the monastery Lokesvara Laskmida (built in the late 9th century but destroyed). By 10th century, Buddhism had no longer affected. Muslim was presented in Champa about 10th century and had a significant impact on the religious consciousness of the Chams. Many elements of Islam have changed the Hindu thought in Champa as well as the economy, politics and culture. Finally, by 16th century, Islam became popular in Champa with two branches: Cham BiNi and Cham Islam. Despite of existing until today, Islam has not much impact on the architecture and the art of temple towers. [1], [2], [3], [8]

2. Types of the Champa religious architecture

Architectural heritage remaining includes ancient temple towers, stelae and inscriptions, spread from Central region (Quang Binh province) to South region (An Giang province) of Vietnam nowadays. Major centers are Danang (Indrapudra), Quang Nam (Amaravati), Quy Nhon (Vijaya), Nha Trang (Kauthara), Phan Rang (Panduranga). Significant religious architecture includes the mosques of Cham Islam and temple tower of Cham Brahmins.

a. Mosque architecture of Cham Islam

Mosque consists of two types: Masjid of Cham Islam and Sang Mugik of Cham Bini with the broad differences in spatial organization, orientation, decoration... While the Masjid looks like other mosques worldwide with the orientation towards sanctuary Mecca, the Sang Mugik orients toward the sunrise. The external form of Masjid is highly domed with the crescent and the big star but Sang Mugik is without crescent, stars are often small as for decorative purpose only. The outside decoration of Sang Mugik has traditional Akhar thrah characters sometimes accompanied the Arab texts while the Masjid is decorated by Arabic texts only.

b. Temple tower architecture of the Cham Brahmins

The main function of temple tower is the house of Gods where ordinary people meet their Gods. With such function, the temple towers could be divided

Dr.Arch. Le Chien Thang

Institute of International Training and Cooperation,

Hanoi Architectural University

Mobile: 0947878818

Email: thanglc@hau.edu.vn

Date of receipt: 6/10/2023

Editing date: 26/11/2023

Post approval date: 8/12/2023

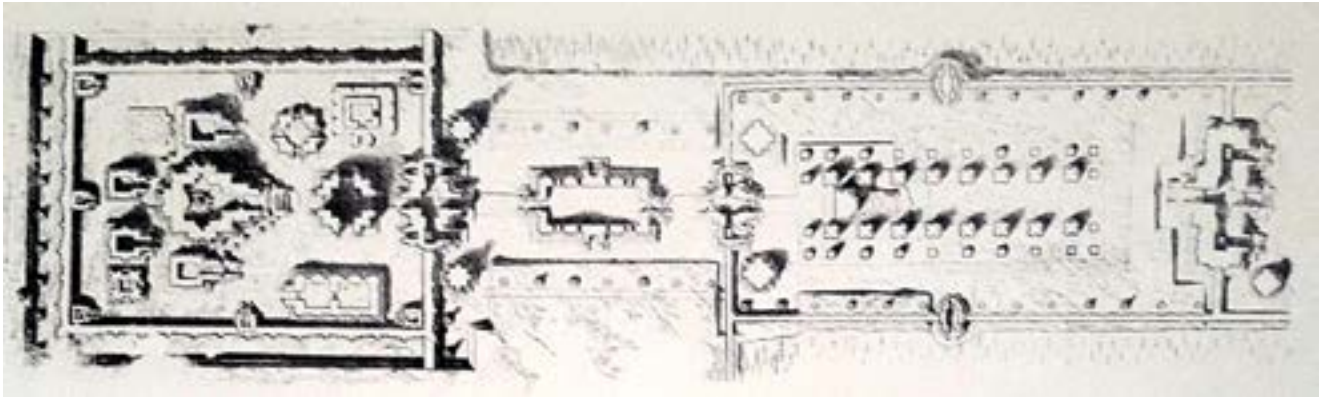


Figure 2. Dong Duong tower precinct (source: Champa museum in Danang) [1]

A typical precinct includes the Main tower (Kalan) in the center and symbolizes Meru peak where the gods live and the center of the Hindu universe), Gate tower (Gopura) in front of the main tower, Fire tower (Kosagraha) and Stele tower (Po Sha) after the main tower, Offering hall (Mandapa) and some other small towers worshipping stellar gods such as Navagrahas, Saptagrahas.... The whole precinct is surrounded by fence and the main gate orients the east.

In term of floor plan, the tower floor plan is convexo-concave rectangular or square and is divided in Mandala diagram with a small inner space in the center - the most sacred space dedicated only to the gods.

In term of architecture of the tower, styles are influenced from Hinduism (Indian), Khmer (Cambodian), Java (Indonesia)... Basically there are two main styles: group of three towers (Chien Dan, Duong Long, ...) worshipping three gods Brahma, Siva and Visnu, of which Siva tower is biggest; and one main tower (Poklong Garai, Po Nagar...) worshipping Siva – the God of the late Kingdom of Champa. Some group of towers such as Bang An, Hung Thanh have architectural features of North India with boat-shaped roof, others are mostly in South Indian style with a stepped pyramidal roof.

The Kalan typically is high, divided into three parts: pedestal (Jagati), body (Bhuwarloke) and roof (Swarloka), of which pedestal represents secular world, body - the spiritual world where people leave this world of dust to contact with the ancestors and integrate with gods) and the roof - the god world. Pedestal is built on a square or rectangle foundation and decorated around by motifs of animals, monsters (Kali, Makara, dancers, musicians... Tower body is solid and has gates at all four sides with one main door and three false doors often flanked by pillars and stone lintels. The tower elevation is decorated diversely: pillars (semicircular or half square), false doors and variety of sculptural objects. Most temples orient to the East except some face westwards. Tower roof has three stories with descriptive meaning of sacred mountain Meru, so the roof is decorated with many small models in form of temples, gods, holy animals... in Hinduism (holy birds, geese, cows, elephants, lions)... as well as the decorated lines of wall, column and other patterns. The corners are emphasized by small towers or stone or brick decorative objects. There are two types of roof top: pyramidal shape (corbel shape influenced by the 12th and 13th-century Khmer architecture and stepped pyramidal shape) and boat shape.



Figure 3. Po Nagar temple tower, Nha Trang (source: author)



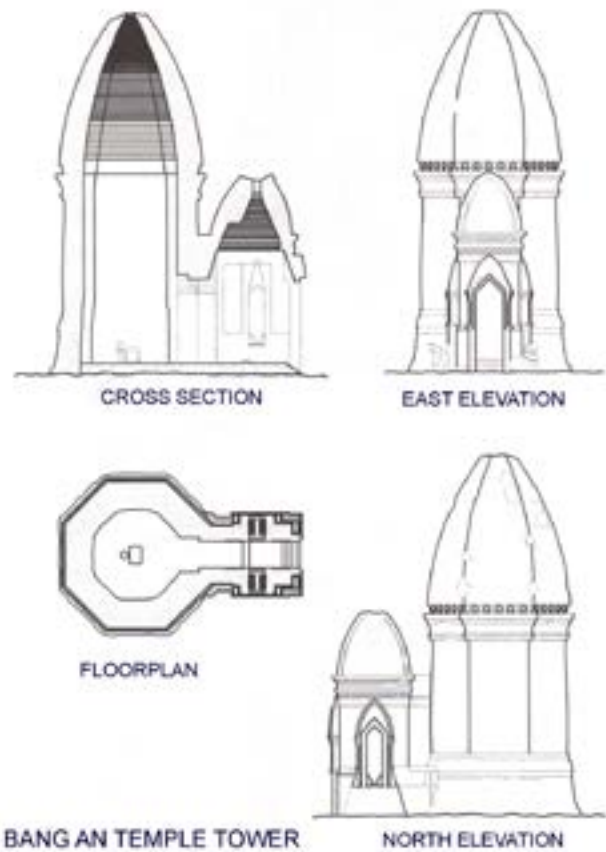
Figure 4. Nhan temple tower, Phú Yên (source: author)

Contrary to outside diverse decorations, the inner sanctum is small and does not decorate much except for few small niches. It also does not have windows, so the spatial atmosphere is dim, quiet and more sacred. Linga - Yoni is located in the center with narrow surrounding ways for ceremony which is performed by the Brahmins senior priests.

Besides the main tower, the supplementary towers usually have boat-shaped roof and small windows. Their internal spaces are also small. External decoration is similar to the main tower but simpler.

3. Styles of architecture and art of the temple tower

Styles of architecture and art of the temple tower were given by many researchers based on different criteria of decoration, location, historical periods... Base on the forms and decorative motifs, Henri Parmentier categorized two main periods: the first period includes three shorter periods respectively with three styles from 5th to 10th century: primitive art, cubic art and mixed art; and the second period includes three shorter periods respectively with three styles from 11th to 17th century: pyramidal art, classical art and derived art. Meanwhile Louis Finot, based on the inscriptions and historical documents, proposed four styles: Cambhvarman (5th - 6th century), Prakacadharmma (6th - 9th century), Harivarman I (10th - 11th Century), Harivarman II (11th - 13th century). Vietnamese researchers also suggested some style categories. Le Tuan Anh based on art characteristics and categorized in six styles: My Son E1 (classical style - built in the first half of 13th century), Hoa Lai (the first half of 9th century), Dong Duong (9th - the beginning of 10th century), My Son A1 (10th century), Po Nagar (11th century), Binh Dinh and Late style (12th - 13th century). Tran Ky Phuong and Shige-eda proposed seven styles based on the floor plan, construction technical analysis and structures at each stages at each heritage sites: My Son E1 (the beginning of 8th century to the beginning of 9th century), Hoa Lai (the first half of 9th century), Dong Duong (9th to 10th century), My Son A1 (10th century), Po Nagar (11th century), Binh Dinh



BANG AN TEMPLE TOWER
Figure 5. Bang An temple tower, Quang Nam
(source: Tran Ba Viet) [7]

(12th - 14th century), Late style (14th to 17th century). Of all above categorizations, those of Phillipe Stern (France, 1942) had much consensus and appreciation. He analyzed the process of eight architectural elements such as gate vault,



Hung Thanh temple towers, Binh Dinh. Left: Decoration on tower roof, right: Inside of the tower
(source: author)

pilaster, frieze, colonnade, cornice, accent pieces, damping corner, and lintel. Along with the continuous development of the styles (especially focusing on the transition between styles), he gave out seven styles as follows: [4], [5], [6]

- Classical style (My Son E1): from 7th - 8th century, the style reflected the outside impacts of the pre - Angkorian culture, Dvaravati and the southern India. The inside altar was Linga - shaped made of sandstone, surrounded by carved decoration of priests who playing various musical instruments, taming animals or relaxing... The relief above the main gate is carved with motif of dawn time according to Indian mythology. The typical towers were My Son Tower E1, Phu Hai, Damrei (Cambodia).
- Hoa Lai: in the first half of the 9th century, with the rounded gate vault with sandstone octagonal pilaster with curved leaf. The typical towers were Hoa Lai, Po Dam, My Son F3, My Son A2, My Son C7.
- Dong Duong: in the late 9th century. The decoration turned into flowers with outward form, the pilasters and gate vaults with hard angles. The typical towers were Dong Duong, My Son B2, My Son B4, My Son A10, My Son A11, My Son A12, My Son A13.
- My Son A1: from 10th - 11th century, this was influenced by Java and also the heyday of the temple tower. The tower body was high, roof was stepped, many dynamic decorations and charming beauty. Decorating details included dancers and mascots both in real life and in myths such as elephants, tigers, holy bird... The typical towers were Khuong My, My Son A1, and the towers of B, C, and D group in My Son sanctuary.
- Transitional style of between My Son A1 and Binh Dinh styles: from the early 11th to the mid-12th century. Typical towers were Binh Lam, My Son E1, Chien Dan, Po Nagar,

Banh It.

- Binh Dinh: the mid -12th century to the early 14th century. Typical towers were Hung Thanh, Duong Long, Thu Thien, Canh Tien, Phuoc Loc and Nhan tower.
- Late style: from early 14th century to the late 17th century. Typical towers were Po Klaung Garai, Po Rome, Yang Prong, Yang Mun.

4. Sculptural reliefs

Like the Hindu architecture and art, sculpture is inseparable part of temple towers, the relief decorative supplement to the architecture and increase the value of art and religion for temples. The temple is the abode of the gods, so decorative motifs throughout the architectural designs and decoration at the temples relating to the holy themes that here mainly Siva (Terminator God), besides Brahma (Creator God) and Vishnu (God of Preservation). The image of Siva is shown in the altar with two forms. One form is in human statue with different gestures and roles as Siva secularization, closer to the normal people or ascetic monks with long beard, holding a rosary... but more common is a form of dancing King Nataraja. The image of Siva also shows the influence of Buddhism over the artifact (Dong Duong) and sculpture in Binh Dinh style (the God holding the Lightning Range with his prime decision). However, the more common form of Siva is the Linga - Yoni set which consists of 3 parts: the base, the Yoni (with spout faces North symbolizing water and also represents the direction of the Fortune - Kuvera); Linga cylindrical portion (one of the main symbol of Siva). Besides Siva, the image of the goddess Po Nagar of the kingdom, a localized God Siva, who reigns southern part of kingdoms. This goddess is significant indigenous elements of the Chams, combining Hindu mythology and matriarchal indigenous beliefs. [1], [5], [7]



Figure 7. Towers of Duong Long, Binh Dinh (source: Xuan Tuyen)



Figure 8. Dancing Apsara on altar (source: Champa museum in Danang) [1]



Figure 9. Linga-Yoni (source: Champa museum in Danang) [1]

5. Building materials and construction techniques

Construction techniques of Champa tower consists of three stages: in the first stage (from 2nd – 6th century), the tower had the timber structure and only worship statue; in the second stage, the tower had brick walls and timber roofs and completed system of worship statues; in the third stage (6th – 12th century), the tower was completely made of brick and sandstone. Although being deeply influenced by Hinduism and the regions affected by Hinduism, the main building materials of temple tower were not stone blocks but bricks combined with sandstone. Some early towers had timber structure or other lightweight materials, usually used for secondary structures such as warehouse, house for clergy, musicians and dancers. Construction techniques with combination of brick and sandstone is an art of the Chams. The whole tower was supported by substrate solid foundation of large blocks or bricks, walls were made of brick with large thickness (about one meter). The roof is built with brick and

decorated with sandstone. Arch and vault techniques with above stones projected out from below ones to make arch, so the arch has a narrow width and a great height. About brick technique, although there are a lot of assumptions, they are undecided despite the assumption of a wall from the kiln bricks associated with mortar or Rai oil was widely endorsed. [6]

6. Conclusion

The Champa religious buildings express profound interference between Hindu thought, cultures of neighboring countries and indigenous beliefs, expressed in almost fields such as spatial arrangement, architecture, decoration as well as symbolic meaning. Besides, Southeast Asian indigenous factors of the famous Sa Huynh civilization, which were formed in very long history, is also expressed deeply. That is the precious heritage of the Vietnamese cultural and artistic treasure which needs to be preserved and promoted continuously./.

References

1. Champa Museum in Da Nang.
2. Le Dinh Phung, *Conversation with ancient Cham civilization*, Publishing House of Social Sciences, 2015.
3. Ngo Van Doanh, *Culture of Champa*, Ethnic Culture Publishing House, Ha Noi, 2002
4. Ngo Van Doanh, *Ancient Champa tower - myths and facts*, Cultural and Information Publishing House, Ha Noi, 2005.
5. Tran Ky Phuong, *My Son in Champa history of art*, Da Nang Publishing, 1988
6. Tran Ba Viet, *Research building technique of Champa towers to serve restoration and to promote the value of relics*, Publishing House of Construction, Hanoi, 2005.
7. Tran Ba Viet, *Champa towers – Construction Mystery*, Publishing House of Construction, Hanoi, 2007.
8. Tran Ky Phuong & Bruce Lockhart, *The Champa of Vietnam: History, Society and Art*, NUS Press, Singapore, 2011.