

Continuity in change: water rituals, material constraints and community soft power in Hanoi

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how sacred continuity is reworked within water-offering rituals in two villages along Hanoi's Tô Lịch River under conditions of urban transformation and hydrological degradation. Drawing on 40 interviews, two consecutive years of participant observation (2023–2024) and archival materials, it follows ritual not as a stable form but as a sequence whose elements – act, referent and material substrate – no longer coincide.

The two cases do not present alternative models of adaptation. They expose different points at which a sequence becomes untenable: in Phú Gia, the act of water-fetching remains performable while its referent shifts to the Red River; in Quan Nhân, the referent is retained while the river itself becomes

non-executable and is replaced by a well. These configurations emerge not from symbolic choice but from what can still be carried through without interrupting the sequence.

The paper argues that continuity depends on executability rather than meaning, challenging accounts that locate adaptation in reinterpretation or negotiated authenticity. Under material constraint, ritual persists only while a sequence remains performable, with configurations stabilising through repetition rather than through consensus, persuasion or centralised decision-making.

Keywords

Water procession, ritual adaptation, hydrosocial territories, authenticity, Vietnam

Introduction

Across many ritual traditions, water occupies a position that is at once materially indispensable and symbolically overdetermined. It sustains life while mediating relations between human communities and the sacred. Practices such as water processions, offerings and purification rites have therefore often been treated as among the most durable elements of intangible cultural heritage (hereafter

'ICH'), frequently cited as evidence of continuity across time. This apparent durability becomes unstable once the material conditions that sustain these practices are no longer reproducible in their prior form. Yet such accounts tend to assume that continuity persists because meaning can be reinterpreted, leaving unresolved the question of how ritual action continues when its material conditions are no longer viable.

The practices examined here refer specifically to village-level water procession rituals, in which water is collectively fetched from a designated source and incorporated into subsequent acts of offering within a continuous ritual sequence. This distinguishes them from other water-related rites such as statue bathing, rain-invoking ceremonies or temple-based purification practices, which differ in both sequence structure and ritual function. The analysis therefore focuses on a specific class of processional enactment in which continuity depends on the ability to carry water through a linked chain of actions.

When a river becomes polluted, diverted or physically inaccessible, the question is no longer whether a ritual persists, but under what conditions it can still be recognised as the same ritual, and by whom such recognition is sustained. What emerges is not a transition from continuity to loss, but a condition in which continuity must be actively produced under constraint. Rituals do not operate within an open field of symbolic reinterpretation. They unfold within limits that are accumulated through infrastructural layering, hydrological transformation and spatial reconfiguration. These limits do not impose a single outcome. They progressively render certain configurations untenable while allowing others to remain viable, producing a field of uneven possibilities rather than a binary between preservation and disappearance. Existing scholarship has approached this problem from several directions. Ritual theory has emphasised the capacity of ritual to reorganise meaning and sustain cohesion under disruption (Bell 1997; Turner et al. 2017; Whitehouse and Lanman 2014). Critical heritage studies have shown that authenticity is constructed through regimes of recognition that privilege particular interpretations over others (Smith 2006; Waterton and Smith 2010; Lixinski 2022). Hydrosocial approaches, in turn, have demonstrated that water cannot be treated as a neutral substrate, but is co-produced through infrastructures, institutions and social relations that bind material flows to forms of social ordering (Linton and Budds 2014; Boelens et al. 2016; Dewan 2024).

These strands position ritual continuity at the intersection of meaning, environment and power. Yet they tend to treat environmental change as an external pressure to which ritual responds, often leaving implicit the assumption that symbolic reinterpretation can compensate for material loss. What remains less specified is how material conditions delimit the range of possible transformations – not by prescribing outcomes, but by

structuring which configurations can stabilise and which fail to take hold. Constraint, in this sense, does not simply limit adaptation; it organises it by shaping the conditions under which certain forms of continuity become viable while others remain unrealisable.

This problem becomes particularly visible in contexts where environmental transformation is both cumulative and irreversible, and where infrastructural change alters not only landscape but access to the sacred. The villages along Hanoi's Tô Lịch River present such a case. Once a central waterway within the historical landscape of Thăng Long, the river has undergone extensive degradation through pollution, canalisation and urban expansion. In some segments, it has effectively disappeared beneath infrastructure; in others, it persists but can no longer function as a ritual water source. The river remains symbolically present while materially compromised, producing a condition in which ritual continuity cannot rely on its original substrate. Within this shared condition, two distinct trajectories of adaptation can be observed. In Phú Gia, continuity is maintained through the preservation of ritual action while both water source and divine referent are reconfigured, shifting from the Tô Lịch River to the Red River and from the Tô Lịch deity to Hồng Hà as a 'mother source'. In Quan Nhân, by contrast, continuity is secured through the preservation of the deity while the material substrate is transformed, with water drawn from a well understood locally as connected to the river. These configurations do not represent incremental variation. They involve reconfigurations of cosmology, legitimacy and ritual authority, yet both remain recognisable as continuous by participants. Continuity here does not adhere to any single element. It emerges through the stabilisation of configurations that are collectively sustained despite material disruption.

What is at stake, therefore, is not variation in ritual form alone, but the conditions under which continuity becomes possible under constraint. The two cases do not converge towards a single adaptive model. They delineate a structured field in which different configurations of material conditions, spatial arrangements and communal authority give rise to divergent yet internally coherent outcomes. These outcomes are neither arbitrary nor fully determined. They emerge through situated processes of interpretation, negotiation and repetition that stabilise certain configurations while excluding others that fail to gain communal traction. Following these processes

ethnographically, this paper advances three interrelated arguments. First, ritual continuity cannot be understood through symbolic analysis alone, but must be grounded in the material conditions that define the limits of ritual action, including water quality, hydrological systems and infrastructural configurations (Bell 1997; Turner et al. 2017; Whitehouse and Lanman 2014). Second, hydrosocial approaches can be extended by showing how water, as both substance and relation, participates directly in the reconstitution of the sacred, shaping cosmological alignment and ritual legitimacy (Linton and Budds 2014; Boelens et al. 2016; Dewan 2024). Third, continuity in change is not a paradox to be resolved but a practical outcome of how communities negotiate the sacred within materially bounded conditions, where authenticity is produced through processes of selection, justification and repetition (Smith 2006; Waterton and Smith 2010; Winter 2014; Yu 2015).

The argument does not seek to generalise beyond the conditions under which it is derived. Rather than proposing a universal model, the Hanoi case specifies how continuity is produced within a particular configuration where material loss does not terminate ritual practice but reorganises the field within which it can continue. What follows examines how this reorganisation occurs, and how constraint and communal authority interact to stabilise particular forms of continuity while leaving others unarticulated.

Literature review

Debates on intangible cultural heritage have long been organised around a tension that is often presented as a dilemma but operates as a constitutive condition: preservation is invoked at the same moment that transformation is acknowledged. The UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter 'the UNESCO 2003 Convention') formalises this duality by defining heritage as both safeguarded and 'living', thereby embedding instability within the very criteria of recognition (UNESCO 2003). Subsequent scholarship has not resolved this tension but displaced it. Rather than asking whether heritage changes, the question shifts towards how continuity is produced under conditions where change is unavoidable. In this line of argument, continuity is not a property of cultural forms but an effect of classificatory regimes that stabilise certain practices as recognisable while rendering

others marginal or illegible (Smith 2006; Waterton and Smith 2010). What becomes analytically consequential is not change itself, but the conditions under which change is admitted into the field of recognition. This distinction becomes sharper when environmental transformation destabilises the material grounds upon which recognition previously depended, forcing a recalibration of what can still count as 'the same' practice.

Within this reframed field, authenticity no longer functions as an intrinsic attribute but as a regulatory logic that distributes legitimacy unevenly across practices, actors and contexts. Rather than inhering in objects or performances, it operates as a historically contingent regime that privileges certain articulations of the past while excluding others (Lixinski 2022). Earlier interventions already indicated the instability of authenticity as a category (MacCannell 1973; Cohen 1988), yet later work demonstrates that this instability is not symmetrical. Authenticity is differentially enforced across institutional scales and geopolitical locations, often reinforcing hierarchies of cultural value (Winter 2014). Under conditions where material transformation renders fixed authenticity untenable, continuity in change emerges not as a compromise but as an operational necessity. However, existing accounts tend to remain at the level of discourse, describing how authenticity is negotiated without specifying why some reinterpretations stabilise while others dissipate. This gap becomes visible when attention shifts from meaning to process.

Ritual theory offers a more precise analytic entry by relocating continuity within patterned action rather than symbolic equivalence. Ritual has been conceptualised as an organised sequence through which meaning is enacted, modulated and redistributed, rather than merely expressed (Turner et al. 2017; Bell 1997; Whitehouse and Lanman 2014). Across these approaches, continuity is maintained not through the preservation of identical elements but through the reproduction of recognisable sequences. Variation can be absorbed as long as it does not disrupt the capacity of the sequence to proceed. Yet this raises a further question that remains under-specified in the literature: when the material substrate of ritual changes, what determines whether variation remains absorbable within the sequence? Existing theories acknowledge transformation but do not identify the threshold at which variation ceases to be incorporable and instead leads to breakdown or reconfiguration. The problem is not simply

one of meaning, but of execution.

It is at this point that materiality becomes analytically decisive. Water, in particular, cannot be treated as a passive medium. It participates in relational systems of value, governance and belonging that are co-produced through infrastructures, technologies and social practices (Ballesterio 2019; Linton and Budds 2014; Boelens et al. 2016). Changes in water systems do not merely alter availability; they reorganise the conditions under which social relations are sustained and identities are enacted (Hommes et al. 2019; Ross et al. 2020). At the same time, water is implicated in moral and cosmological ordering, shaping how communities relate to ancestors, deities and landscapes (Fredengren 2022; Dewan 2024). This attention to material conditions resonates with work in ritual ecology, where ritual practice is understood as inseparable from ecological relations that sustain and constrain it (McGraw and Krátký 2017). However, such approaches tend to emphasise the co-constitution of ritual and environment at a systemic level, without specifying how constraints operate within sequences of action. These strands converge in demonstrating that material conditions are internal to ritual configurations rather than external constraints. Yet a disjunction persists between fields. Ritual studies tend to treat material change as contextual background, while hydrosocial approaches foreground resource dynamics without specifying how ritual transformation unfolds at the level of practice. As a result, the mechanism through which material constraint structures possible adaptations remains insufficiently theorised, particularly in the context of heritage under environmental stress (Ginzarly et al. 2024; Marsh et al. 2023; Stefano 2024). Existing accounts recognise that rituals change, but stop short of explaining why certain configurations emerge, stabilise and persist, while others fail to enter enactment at all.

Across these discussions, three strands are sufficient for the present analysis: ritual theory, hydrosocial approaches and critical heritage scholarship. Rather than extending across additional frameworks, the problem can be specified at their intersection: how continuity is maintained as patterned action, how material conditions configure that action, and how recognition stabilises certain configurations as heritage while excluding others. This allows the empirical cases to be read not as illustrations of multiple theories, but as a site where the relation between sequence, material constraint and recognition can be specified more precisely.

Vietnamese scholarship intensifies this problem by situating it within a long historical *durée* in which water-related practices have never been singular or static. From early chronicles to later historiography, ritual forms appear as continuously reorganised assemblages shaped by shifting political authority and hydrological conditions (Ngô 1479/1993; Lê 1773/1977; Nguyễn Văn Siêu, 1870). Urban transformation did not dissolve ritual frameworks but altered their internal composition, redistributing elements across new spatial and infrastructural arrangements (Nguyễn 1994). Studies of festivals emphasise selective transformation as the condition under which continuity is sustained, rather than as a deviation from it (Ngô 2002; Ngô 2010). Read alongside broader critiques of authenticity and Eurocentrism (Winter 2014; Lixinski 2022), these trajectories suggest that continuity in change is not an anomaly but a recurrent mode of cultural reproduction. What remains insufficiently specified, however, is how material constraint becomes organised within ritual practice as a structuring force rather than a background condition.

This study addresses that gap by specifying the mechanism through which material constraint structures ritual adaptation. Rather than treating adaptation as an open field of symbolic reinterpretation, it shows how constraint delimits what can enter enactment. The problem is not which meanings are available, but which configurations can be carried through a sequence without interruption. Material constraint operates at the level of sequence viability. When a material condition – such as water quality, accessibility or infrastructural configuration – renders a step non-executable, subsequent steps cannot be sustained in their expected order. Under such conditions, configurations do not adjust incrementally but lose their capacity to stabilise as sequences. What follows is a differential process in which configurations that fail to carry through enactment are not retained as alternatives but drop out of practice. Only those that remain executable across successive steps persist through repetition and acquire the appearance of continuity.

Under changing material conditions, some variations fail to sustain subsequent steps and therefore do not stabilise as practice, while others persist through repeated enactment and acquire the appearance of continuity. Ritual continuity, in this sense, is not produced through unrestricted variation but through the differential survival of configurations that remain executable. This account

reframes continuity in change as a selective process structured by material thresholds, where adaptation is neither arbitrary nor purely discursive but conditioned by what can be carried through in practice. Rather than accumulating into multiple viable alternatives, variation is unevenly filtered as configurations fail to sustain sequential execution. Differences across sites therefore do not reflect interpretive diversity alone, but the uneven distribution of points at which sequences hold or break under locally specific conditions.

Theoretical framework and methodology

The problem established in the preceding sections does not concern *whether* ritual changes, but how particular changes become enactable while others do not, and how such outcomes remain recognisable as continuity rather than rupture. The analysis therefore treats ritual as a configuration whose elements – form, sacred referent and material substrate – do not shift in parallel but diverge in ways that become consequential at the level of execution. A distinction between ritual form and sacred content becomes necessary here, not as an abstract analytical device but as an empirical condition: elements do not move together, and not all combinations appear in practice. Ritual studies have often approached transformation through symbolic change or social meaning (Bell 1997; Turner et al. 2017), implicitly assuming that variation unfolds within a unified field of possibility. The cases examined here do not support that assumption. What matters is not the range of imaginable configurations, but which of them can still be carried through as a sequence without interruption, and which fail to enter enactment despite remaining conceptually plausible.

Materiality enters precisely at the point where this divergence becomes consequential. The water source is not merely a symbolic reference but a condition of execution, and when it shifts – through pollution, disappearance or infrastructural transformation – it does not produce a uniform transformation across ritual elements. Instead, it reorganises the sequence through differential viability. Certain steps remain executable, others become strained, and some cannot be carried forward without interruption. Constraint operates here not as external pressure but as an internal filtering mechanism within the sequence: configurations that cannot pass through successive steps lose their capacity to stabilise. This distinction is critical. Environmental pressure describes a condition

that acts upon practice while leaving multiple responses conceptually available. Constraint, as specified here, does not operate at the level of choice. It operates at the level of elimination. Configurations do not compete and get selected; they fail to complete a sequence and therefore drop out of enactment. What remains is not the preferred option among many, but the residue of what has not broken. In this sense, constraint is not a limiting condition applied to an open field of possibilities; it is the mechanism through which that field is progressively reduced through non-executability.

This process unfolds through attrition rather than immediate elimination. Alternatives are articulated, partially attempted, and abandoned when they fail to carry across the full sequence. What persists is not the most symbolically coherent configuration, but the one that holds simultaneously across material feasibility, sequence integrity and recognition of sacred legitimacy. In this sense, material constraint differs from general notions of environmental pressure. It does not simply condition the context of ritual but determines whether a configuration remains executable step by step, thereby structuring the field within which adaptation can occur. This also clarifies why communities facing similar constraints do not converge on identical outcomes: variation emerges not from arbitrary choice but from how specific configurations pass or fail at different points of execution under locally situated conditions.

This study approaches that problem through a comparative ethnographic design oriented towards ritual as coordinated action rather than symbolic system. The methodological position follows directly from the analytical claim: continuity depends on whether sequences remain executable when their constitutive elements no longer coincide. Ethnography is used to trace how sequences are enacted, adjusted and sustained at points where execution becomes uncertain, rather than to document symbolic meaning in isolation. The unit of analysis is the ritual sequence, defined as an ordered chain of actions that must be carried through without interruption for the ritual to hold. The analysis operates across two interconnected levels: at the micro level, it follows moments of coordination, delay and adjustment within specific passages of the ritual; at the meso level, it compares how different configurations of act, referent and material condition stabilise across sites that share similar constraints but do not produce identical outcomes.

The research design focuses on two sites – Phú Gia and Quan Nhân – that occupy different positions within a shared field of constraint where the original river source is no longer directly usable. These cases are not selected to represent variation in general, but because ritual practice continues in both locations under comparable material limitations, allowing analysis of how continuity is sustained below the threshold of breakdown. Sites where ritual has ceased or lost sequence integrity are excluded, as they do not permit examination of how sequences remain enactable. The comparison is therefore conditional rather than typological, oriented towards configurations that persist under constraint rather than towards abstract categories of difference.

Fieldwork was conducted across two consecutive ritual cycles (2023–2024), with repeated returns to each site at stages of preparation, enactment and post-ritual reflection, allowing sequences to be observed in repetition rather than inferred from isolated events. Observation extends beyond focal ritual moments to include route organisation, coordination practices, and informal exchanges through which potential disruptions are managed. Particular attention is given to points where coordination becomes necessary to prevent interruption, whether or not these moments are explicitly recognised by participants. The empirical corpus consists of 40 semi-structured interviews selected through purposive sampling across differentiated positions within the ritual process, including elders, ritual committee members, active participants, migrant residents and local officials. This distribution is not intended to be statistically representative but to capture variation in how continuity is enacted, recognized or contested across positions that contribute unevenly to the stabilisation of practice. All percentage figures ($N=40$) are derived from coded interview data rather than from a separate survey instrument, indicating relative distribution within this corpus.

Data collection combines participant observation, interviews and documentary materials, with observational data covering full ritual sequences across two cycles, including moments of coordination, interruption and re-synchronisation. Interviews were conducted outside ritual time to avoid interference with sequence execution, and documentary sources – including meeting minutes, local regulations and historical references – are treated as points where configurations are formalised or retrospectively justified rather than as continuous historical narratives.

Across these materials, multiple potential responses to the loss of the Tô Lịch water source are articulated, including continued use of polluted water, substitution with piped water, suspension of the water-fetching act, or relocation of the source. These alternatives do not appear as coexisting options in practice. They are differentially eliminated when they fail to carry through the sequence: polluted water remains materially accessible but becomes ritually untenable; piped water lacks legitimacy; suspension disrupts a core step. What persists are configurations that remain executable across the full sequence, such that what appears retrospectively as decision-making corresponds to the consolidation of configurations that have already passed through successive points of elimination.

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo through a two-stage coding process, moving from open coding to axial coding aligned with three analytical axes: ritual form, sacred content and material conditions. Operational categories – including sequence integrity, coordination points, source substitution, sacred reference and non-enacted alternatives – are used not to classify data statically but to trace movement across points of stabilisation and failure. Analytical significance is assigned to patterns that recur across at least two independent sources – interview, observation or documentary material – not as a general evidentiary standard but as a sequence-specific criterion indicating the capacity of a configuration to recur without producing interruption. Isolated statements are retained as indications of potential variation but are not treated as operative unless they enter and sustain the sequence. Data collection concludes when additional fieldwork no longer produces new configurations of sequence adjustment and when patterns of coordination and substitution recur across cycles, with saturation defined at the level of sequence stabilisation rather than thematic repetition. The researcher's position as a participating observer without ritual authority situates the analysis within the relational field where recognition and interpretation are negotiated, while ethical procedures ensure informed consent, anonymisation, and restricted use of sensitive data. The findings extend beyond the immediate cases only to the extent that similar conditions of constrained executability are present, rather than through claims of statistical generalisation.

A detailed breakdown of participant categories, interview distribution and coding structure is provided in the appendix to this paper. The appendix is referenced at

points where sampling logic and frequency interpretation become analytically relevant, ensuring transparency in how qualitative data are converted into reported distributions.

Research findings

What emerges from the data is not a generalised process of 'ritual change', but a series of specific points at which a sequence fails to carry one step into the next and must be reorganised to avoid breakdown. In earlier configurations, consistently recalled across elder accounts and supported by historical materials, route, water source and sacred referent coincided within a continuous trajectory: the procession departed from the communal house, reached the Tô Lịch riverbank, completed water-taking and returned without interruption. What is retained in these recollections is not symbolic meaning but the absence of coordination demand. Continuity was experienced as the condition in which no step required realignment in order for the next to proceed.

This condition no longer holds, and its breakdown appears not at the level of the whole ritual but at specific steps where executability becomes uncertain. In Phú Gia, the burial of sections of the Tô Lịch displaces the water source and extends the procession route towards the Red River, introducing infrastructural crossings that interrupt sequence continuity. At the highway intersection (O2), the sequence fails to halt as a unit: leading segments stop while trailing segments continue, producing temporal desynchronisation at the point where forward movement must pause. This misalignment is not corrected through centralised coordination. Instead, it is absorbed through

delayed re-synchronisation, where rhythm and bodily positioning are reconstituted while the sequence remains in motion. The same pattern recurs at the dike crossing (O3). Continuity here is no longer uninterrupted flow, but the capacity to restore alignment before a step fails to connect to the next.

In Quan Nhân, the point of failure is located differently within the same sequence logic. The river remains physically present but becomes non-executable as a ritual water source. The breakdown occurs at the transition from extraction to offering: water can be taken, but cannot be carried forward into ritual use. Once this transition fails, the configuration ceases to function as a sequence. The substitution of the well at Hội Xuân restores not symbolic equivalence but the ability of this step to connect to the next. In observation (O4), deviation at the point of water-taking is immediately stopped, preventing misalignment from entering the sequence. Unlike Phú Gia, where disruption appears and is absorbed, Quan Nhân stabilises continuity by excluding non-executable variation at the point of emergence.

These two cases therefore mark different locations at which the same sequence risks breakdown. In Phú Gia, disruption enters and must be contained; in Quan Nhân, it is prevented from entering. The difference is operational, not interpretive. What persists in both cases is the ability to carry each step forward without forcing the next into failure.

This distribution of change across elements is not diffuse but concentrated at specific points where

Table 1
Distribution of transformation across ritual elements under constraint

Element	Past (Tô Lịch intact)	Phú Gia (current)	Quan Nhân (current)	Analytical reading
Route	Short, continuous	Extended, fragmented	Shortened, controlled	Constraint produces coordination strain vs pre-emption
Water source	Tô Lịch River	Red River	Ancient well	Substitution triggered by failure at execution point
Deity	Tô Lịch	Shift to Hồng Hà	Retained Tô Lịch	Divergence across referent vs material
Form	Continuous	Preserved with re-synchronisation	Preserved with tight control	Form persists as long as repeatable
Time	Short	Extended	Extended	Duration introduces strain but not failure
Participants	Local	Expanded	Expanded	Recognition uneven but non-operative

Source: Author's fieldwork data (2023–2024), coded from interviews ($N = 40$), participant observation and archival materials.

executability fails. The contrast can be specified at the level of sequence composition, where divergence concentrates at points of non-executability rather than across all elements. This distribution can be summarised as shown in Table 1. The table marks the step where execution breaks. Transformation concentrates at that point and reorganises nothing beyond it. The remaining elements continue only where they can still carry the sequence forward without interruption.

The same structure appears in the relation between sacred articulation and enacted practice. In Phú Gia, references to the Red River as a 'mother source' dominate ritual speech, while references to Tô Lịch persist in parallel narratives. These do not converge. One operates within the sequence; the other remains external to it. In Quan Nhân, the claim that the well is connected to the river is repeatedly invoked, but explanations diverge and remain unresolved. This divergence does not interrupt the sequence. No step requires interpretive agreement in order to proceed. What is maintained is not shared meaning, but the ability to act without interruption despite divergence.

These articulations are not evenly distributed across participants. In Phú Gia, references to the Red River as a 'mother source' are primarily advanced by ritual committee members and elder participants responsible for organising the procession, while younger participants reproduce these statements without necessarily elaborating their basis. In Quan Nhân, claims regarding the well's connection to the river are most consistently articulated by elders and ritual specialists, while other participants either accept them without elaboration or refrain from explanation. Divergence therefore does not occur between clearly opposed positions, but across uneven capacities to articulate the sacred, none of which interrupt the sequence as long as action remains executable. Instances of explicit disagreement do occur, but they do not stabilise as alternative positions. A small number of participants questioned the legitimacy of replacing the river source or expressed hesitation towards the well as a sufficient substitute, particularly among older residents with direct memory of earlier configurations. These objections do not develop into competing practices. They remain at the level of articulation and do not enter the sequence as executable variation. As a result, disagreement does not accumulate into divergence at the level of enactment, and the sequence proceeds without requiring its resolution.

The reconfiguration of ritual elements can be traced through a sequence of procedural moments rather than a single act of decision. In Phú Gia, the shift towards the Red River did not emerge as an immediate substitution. Elders and ritual committee members recall that between 2016 and 2018, repeated difficulties in accessing the Tô Lịch – particularly at points where sections had been covered or rendered unusable – led to temporary adjustments in route and water-taking practices. These adjustments were first carried out informally during enactment, without prior consensus. Only after several cycles in which the Red River route proved capable of sustaining the full sequence without interruption did formal discussion take place within the ritual committee. Meeting notes from the đình archive record the consolidation of this configuration as a stabilised practice, rather than its initial proposal. No single actor is identified as the originator of the shift; instead, authority is retrospectively attributed to those responsible for maintaining sequence continuity once the new route had already demonstrated its executability.

In practice, these meetings did not operate as sites of open deliberation in which multiple alternatives were formally evaluated. Observational accounts and interview reconstructions indicate a more constrained procedural form: discussion was organised around whether the sequence could be completed without interruption in the previous cycle, rather than around symbolic justification in advance. Elders and committee members did not introduce competing models as abstract options. Instead, they referred to specific instances in which the procession had either held or failed at particular points, especially at crossings and water-taking stages. Agreement emerged not through formal voting or explicit consensus-building, but through the absence of contestation once a configuration had already demonstrated its capacity to pass through the full sequence. Dissenting remarks – typically raised by older participants recalling earlier forms – were acknowledged but did not alter procedural direction, as they did not correspond to configurations that had proven executable in recent cycles.

In Quan Nhân, the substitution of the well appears through a different procedural trajectory. Interview accounts consistently locate the emergence of this configuration in the early 2010s, when concerns regarding the usability of Tô Lịch water intensified. Unlike in Phú Gia, where adjustment entered through route extension, here the point of tension was concentrated at the transition from

extraction to offering. Elders and ritual specialists report that initial attempts to retain river water were discontinued after failing to carry into subsequent steps. The well at Hội Xuân, already present within the ritual landscape, became the focal point through repeated enactment rather than formal designation. No written decree establishes the well as a replacement source; however, its status is indirectly affirmed through its consistent inclusion in ritual scripts and organisational instructions preserved in village records. The procedural formation of this configuration follows a similarly non-declarative pattern. No singular event marks the designation of the well as a replacement source. Instead, its stabilisation can be traced through successive cycles in which alternative attempts – particularly the continued use of river water – failed at the transition into offering. Interview accounts consistently describe moments in which water taken from the river could not be carried forward into ritual use, leading to interruption or abandonment of subsequent steps. By contrast, the well enabled uninterrupted completion of the sequence. Over time, references to the well's connection to the river were reiterated in ritual speech and organisational instructions, not as prior justification but as retrospective alignment with a configuration that had already proven viable in practice. Expressions of hesitation persist among some older residents, particularly those with direct memory of earlier configurations, but these do not accumulate into an alternative practice. Disagreement remains at the level of articulation and does not enter the sequence as executable variation.

Across both cases, what appears retrospectively as a decision corresponds to the point at which a configuration has already passed through multiple iterations without producing interruption. Procedural records, where they exist, document the consolidation of practice rather than its inception. The emergence of a new configuration is therefore distributed across enactment, repetition and subsequent formalisation, rather than being attributable to a singular moment of collective agreement. The

mechanism of elimination makes this structure explicit. Across interviews and documentary materials, multiple alternatives to the loss of the Tô Lịch water source are articulated. These do not stabilise as competing practices. They fail at specific points where one step cannot be sustained within the sequence. In Phú Gia, continued use of river water fails at the transition into offering; piped water fails before entering the sequence; removal of water-taking fails because subsequent steps lose their structural anchor. In Quan Nhân, treated river water fails at the point of allocation, and alternative wells fail at the transition into ritual speech. These alternatives are not rejected through decision. They fail to complete a sequence iteration and therefore do not stabilise as practice.

What appears retrospectively as decision can be re-specified by distinguishing between apparent authority and the underlying mechanism through which configurations stabilise, as summarised in [Table 2](#). In both cases, what is attributed to decision corresponds to the point at which a configuration has already demonstrated its capacity to pass through the sequence without interruption.

Placed side by side, the two cases show that continuity does not depend on preserving specific elements or aligning interpretations, but on whether at least one configuration remains capable of passing through the sequence without interruption. In Phú Gia, continuity is maintained through repeated re-synchronisation; in Quan Nhân, through pre-emptive exclusion. These are not variations of a shared model, but distinct ways of remaining below a threshold at which a step would force the sequence into breakdown.

Across both sites, the limit of continuity appears as strain at points where interruption approaches non-recoverability within a single iteration. In Phú Gia, repeated desynchronisation extends the interval within which alignment must be restored. In Quan Nhân, reliance on a single viable source reduces the margin for substitution. Continuity persists only as long as each step can be carried

Table 2
Apparent decision and underlying mechanism in sequence stabilisation

Village	Apparent decision force	Mechanism observed	Analytical reading
Phú Gia	Elders, committee	Formal meeting after shift	Consolidation of already executable configuration
Quan Nhân	Elders, participants	Repeated articulation	Stabilisation through repetition across sequence

Source: Author's analysis based on interview data, observation records and procedural documents (2023–2024).

forward without forcing the next one into non-executability. Beyond that point, configurations do not transform. They cease to operate as sequences.

Discussion

The findings specify two operational conditions under which ritual sequences remain executable under constraint. In Phú Gia, continuity depends on the capacity to absorb disruption after it enters the sequence, where misalignment is re-contained before it propagates into non-executability. In Quan Nhân, continuity depends on preventing non-executable variation from entering the sequence at all, where deviation is intercepted at the point of emergence. These are not interpretive differences, nor variations within a shared adaptive model. They are distinct conditions under which a sequence avoids collapse when at least one step risks becoming non-executable. The distinction is causal: continuation holds only insofar as disruption can either be re-synchronised before it breaks the sequence or excluded before it enters it. Once a single step fails to pass into the next, the sequence does not degrade gradually. It loses its capacity to function as a sequence.

What stabilises ritual under these conditions does not take the form of agreement, shared interpretation or coordinated intention. Stabilisation occurs within sequences that continue under strain, where articulation, enactment and repetition do not coincide but must align sufficiently for each step to pass into the next. In Phú Gia, coordination appears after disruption has already entered the sequence. The procession fragments at infrastructural crossings, and alignment is restored through distributed adjustments in pace, spacing and bodily orientation. These adjustments operate at the limit of failure, where continuation depends on whether re-synchronisation can be achieved before misalignment propagates. In Quan Nhân, coordination operates at an earlier point. Deviation is stopped at the moment it emerges, preventing non-executable variation from entering the sequence. Continuity depends not on recovery but on exclusion. In both cases, what is maintained is not consensus but the capacity to carry action forward without forcing the next step into failure. Alignment does not precede action as a stable condition. It emerges unevenly at each transition, often under pressure where continuation would otherwise fail. In this way, the analytical focus shifts from symbolic coherence to sequence viability, extending process-

oriented accounts of ritual action while specifying their material limits (Bell 1997; Turner et al. 2017).

This analysis allows the mechanism of material constraint to be specified precisely. Constraint does not act by shaping preferences or guiding selection among alternatives. It operates by eliminating configurations that fail at specific points of execution. Once that connection cannot be maintained, the configuration ceases to function as a sequence. What appears retrospectively as adaptation corresponds to the residue of this elimination process: configurations that remain are those that survive successive points of failure. Constraint therefore does not limit an open field of symbolic possibilities. It organises a field of executability in which only certain configurations can pass through the sequence without interruption. This distinguishes it from more general accounts of environmental pressure. Pressure describes a condition acting upon practice while leaving multiple responses conceptually available. Constraint, by contrast, reduces that field through failure. Configurations do not remain available as alternatives awaiting selection; they drop out when they cannot be carried through. What remains is not chosen from among possibilities but retained because it has not broken. In this sense, materiality is not external context but constitutive of action, aligning with hydrosocial approaches that treat water as co-produced within relational systems rather than as a neutral substrate (Linton and Budds 2014; Boelens et al. 2016; Dewan 2024).

Under these conditions, divergence across sites does not arise from disagreement within sequences, but from the uneven distribution of points at which sequences fail or hold. Similar hydrological degradation does not produce identical outcomes because the thresholds at which specific steps become non-executable are locally situated. In Phú Gia, breakdown enters through route extension and infrastructural crossings, producing recurrent desynchronisation that must be absorbed. In Quan Nhân, breakdown concentrates at the transition from extraction to offering, where river water becomes unusable within the sequence and must be replaced before the sequence can proceed. Adaptation diverges because failure occurs at different points, and because the capacity to absorb or exclude disruption is unevenly distributed. What persists is not a shared solution, but configurations that remain viable relative to these thresholds. This explains why hydrosocial transformations produce differentiated ritual outcomes rather than convergent forms, even under

shared environmental pressure (Hommes et al. 2019; Ross et al. 2020).

The notion of 'community soft power', as used here, does not refer to the capacity to persuade, attract or shape preferences in advance. It designates a more restricted phenomenon: the retrospective alignment of authority with configurations that have already demonstrated their executability within the sequence. What appears as influence is not exercised prior to action, but attaches to forms of practice that do not break. It does not direct outcomes as a causal force; it follows stabilisation. Statements, ritual instructions and local explanations acquire force only insofar as they align with configurations that already pass through the sequence without interruption. Authority does not precede action. It attaches to configurations that hold. Influence is not exercised through persuasion or consensus-building, but through the reinforcement of what has already proven executable. What appears as distributed power is therefore not a capacity to shape choice, but a condition under which certain configurations persist because they do not fail. Authority is retroactive, emerging from the differential survival of sequences under constraint. This reframing shifts the analysis away from models of attraction or persuasion typically associated with 'soft power', towards forms of vernacular governance grounded in practice (Smith 2006; Waterton and Smith 2010).

The reframing repositions authenticity at the level of execution. Rather than operating as fidelity to origin or coherence of meaning, authenticity is bounded by what remains enactable. Configurations that cannot be executed do not persist as alternative authenticities. They do not remain available for reinterpretation. They fail before entering practice. Authenticity is therefore not negotiated across an open field of meanings, but is constrained by the limits within which sequences can still be carried forward. What counts as authentic corresponds to what can still pass step by step without interruption. Where execution fails, claims do not accumulate into competing forms. They drop out before stabilisation. This account extends critiques of authenticity as a regulatory construct by specifying its operational boundary in relation to material viability (Cohen 1988; Bendix 1997; Lixinski 2022).

The empirical pattern observed here can be situated in relation to assemblage approaches, but only under a restriction. Elements do not reassemble freely. They hold

only insofar as transitions between steps remain possible. Some elements absorb disruption, others are excluded before entry, and what persists is not a coherent system but a configuration that remains viable long enough to be repeated. Continuity is therefore not the persistence of structure, nor the outcome of negotiated meaning. It is the temporary stabilisation of sequences that do not break under constraint. This formulation introduces a displacement within debates on intangible heritage. Much of the ICH literature assumes that continuity depends on shared meaning, negotiated authenticity or community consensus. The cases examined here indicate a narrower condition. Continuity depends on whether a sequence remains executable. Meaning may diverge, consensus may remain partial, but as long as each step passes into the next, the ritual holds. In this way, continuity is positioned as a practice-bound effect rather than a discursive achievement (Smith 2006; Winter 2014; Yu 2015).

This condition is not without limit. The capacity to absorb or exclude disruption operates within a finite margin. In Phú Gia, repeated desynchronisation extends the interval within which alignment must be restored, increasing the risk that misalignment will exceed recoverable bounds. In Quan Nhân, reliance on a single viable source reduces the range of substitution, tightening the conditions under which the sequence can continue. These configurations remain below the threshold of breakdown, but they approach it. Continuity persists only as long as at least one configuration remains capable of passing through the sequence without forcing interruption. Once that condition fails, sequences do not reorganise into alternative forms. They cease to operate as sequences.

What is at stake is therefore not adaptation as an open-ended process, but duration under constraint. Continuity holds only within the interval during which execution remains possible. Constraint does not accumulate into transformation beyond this interval. It produces attrition, eliminating configurations step by step until no configuration remains capable of sustaining the sequence. There is no intermediate state in which non-executable elements persist within practice. Once the threshold is crossed, continuation does not shift into an alternative form; it ceases. The distinction between Phú Gia and Quan Nhân does not describe variation within a shared model of adaptation. It identifies two ways of remaining below a threshold at which continuation would otherwise fail.

Conclusion

The water-offering rituals of Quan Nhân and Phú Gia do not demonstrate that sacred forms endure through adaptability in any general sense. They indicate a narrower condition: continuity holds only insofar as action can still proceed without forcing interruption at any point. When that condition fails, transformation does not accumulate into new meanings or negotiated adjustments. The sequence does not reorganise indefinitely. It reaches a point beyond which continuation is no longer possible.

The configurations observed – retaining the deity while altering the material source, or retaining the act while shifting the referent – are not alternatives available for selection. They mark positions at which continuation would otherwise fail. What appears as flexibility is not an open field of variation, but a constrained condition within which only certain configurations remain viable. Others do not stabilise as practice. They fall away before they take form.

This configuration introduces a limit to how sacred endurance can be understood. Material conditions do not merely surround ritual as external context. They define where action remains possible. Water quality, hydrological systems and ecological viability do not extend symbolic meaning; they delimit the conditions under which meaning can still be enacted. What persists is neither a preserved core nor a negotiated balance. It is a configuration that continues to hold. Where that capacity is no longer present, continuity does not taper off. Continuation does not shift into an alternative form; it ceases.

Authority does not operate through persuasion, consensus or the capacity to shape choices in advance. It arises through the stabilisation of configurations that have already demonstrated their ability to continue without interruption. What appears as influence is not exercised prior to action, but attaches retrospectively to sequences that hold. Authority, in this sense, is not a resource that actors deploy, but an effect generated through the differential survival of executable configurations.

The implications for theory do not expand into a general model. They point instead to a condition under which continuity remains possible: at least one configuration must hold together across material feasibility, ritual sequencing and recognition of legitimacy. Where these three conditions no longer coincide, no adaptive equilibrium emerges. The

sequence does not shift into an alternative form. It ceases to operate as such.

This breakdown cuts across existing debates without resolving them. Hydrosocial approaches have shown how water and society are co-produced, yet tend to follow how relations transform rather than where they break down. Heritage studies have displaced fixed notions of authenticity, but often assume that continuity can be reconstituted through reinterpretation. The cases examined here indicate a sharper boundary. Reconfiguration proceeds only as long as action remains possible. Beyond that point, neither meaning nor authority can sustain what has become inoperable. The empirical material does not scale into a broader typology. The apparent symmetry between configurations is not a model to be extended, but a coincidence that becomes visible because both cases remain below a threshold of breakdown. Once that threshold is crossed, the symmetry disappears.

The implications extend to questions of safeguarding, but not in a straightforward manner. The persistence of ritual does not depend solely on preserving forms or enabling recognition. It depends on whether the conditions that allow action to continue remain in place. Where those conditions erode, recognition does not compensate for the loss of enactment. What is at stake is not preservation in the abstract, but the continued possibility of carrying a sequence through. The cases examined here do not resolve how ritual persists under environmental change. They reframe the problem. The question is no longer how adaptation occurs or how authenticity is maintained, but how long action can continue before the conditions that sustain it are no longer recoverable. This is not a question that admits a stable answer. It marks a limit that is approached unevenly and cannot be deferred indefinitely.


What remains unresolved is not whether such sequences can adapt, but how far they can continue before the conditions that sustain their execution are no longer recoverable. The cases examined here remain within that limit. They show how continuity holds under constraint, while also indicating the point at which it would cease to hold. Beyond that point, variation does not reorganise into new configurations. It does not accumulate into alternative forms. It drops out. The problem is therefore not one of transformation, but of duration: how long sequences can continue to pass before non-executability becomes irreversible.

Appendix

Interview sample distribution

Elders (direct memory of earlier configurations): 12
Ritual committee members and officiants: 10
Active participants in procession and enactment: 8
Migrant residents with partial or recent engagement: 6
Local officials involved in logistical coordination: 4

Total: $N = 40$

All percentages reported in the article are derived from NVivo coding of interview data. No separate quantitative survey was conducted. 

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