

The Influence of Buddhism on the Worship of The Three Palaces Mother Goddess Tradition in Contemporary Vietnam: A Study of Ritual Spaces in Hanoi

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the influence of Buddhism on the contemporary practice of the Mother Goddess Worship of the Three Palaces (Đạo Mẫu Tam Phủ) in Vietnam, with a focus on ritual spaces in Hanoi. It explores the interactions between Buddhist doctrines, rituals, and institutional presence, and the indigenous Đạo Mẫu practices, a vibrant and evolving spiritual tradition. Drawing upon fieldwork conducted in temples, pagodas, shrines, and palaces in Hanoi, this research reveals the syncretic nature of Vietnamese religious life, where Buddhist cosmology, moral teachings, and ritual forms have significantly shaped both the theology and performance of Mother Goddess worship. The findings highlight how Buddhism serves not only as a doctrinal influence but also as a legitimizing framework for Mother Goddess rituals, contributing to their resilience and adaptability in contemporary Vietnam. This study enriches the understanding of religious pluralism, cultural identity, and spiritual innovation in Vietnamese society.

KEYWORDS: Buddhism, Mother Goddess Worship, Three Palaces, Đạo Mẫu, Ritual Spaces, Religious Syncretism, Vietnam

1. INTRODUCTION

Religious life in Vietnam is marked by a dynamic and layered pluralism in which indigenous spiritual practices coexist, compete, and hybridize with global religious traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity (Taylor, 2007). This complex field of religiosity reflects not only Vietnam's long history of cultural exchange and political transformation, but also the agency of local communities in negotiating belief, identity, and ritual practice in a rapidly modernizing society. Within this rich spiritual tapestry, the Mother Goddess Worship of the Three Palaces (Đạo Mẫu Tam Phủ) represents one of the most vibrant and culturally resonant forms of contemporary religious expression.

Đạo Mẫu, centered on the veneration of female deities governing the realms of Heaven, Water, and Earth, offers a ritual grammar of spiritual empowerment and worldly efficacy. Through elaborate ceremonies of spirit possession (lên đồng), participants seek healing, fortune, and protection, while also performing and reaffirming social and gender identities (Fjelstad & Nguyễn, 2006; Endres, 2011). Long marginalized as mê tín dị đoan (superstition) under state atheism, Đạo Mẫu has experienced a striking resurgence since the late 1980s. The tradition now enjoys significant public visibility and cultural legitimacy, further solidified by its recognition as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2016.

Yet the contemporary revival of Đạo Mẫu has not occurred in isolation. Rather, it reflects a long and complex history of interaction with Buddhism, the most institutionally dominant and socially influential organized religion in Vietnam. Buddhist cosmology, moral teachings, and ritual forms have been repeatedly appropriated, adapted, and reinterpreted within Đạo Mẫu practices, contributing to its theological articulation and public legitimacy. Simultaneously, Buddhist institutions and clergy have engaged in both cooperative and ambivalent relationships with Đạo Mẫu practitioners, shaping the contours of religious authority and the moral boundaries of acceptable popular religiosity.

Understanding these interactions offers valuable insights into the processes of religious syncretism and spiritual innovation in post-reform Vietnam. It also speaks to broader questions of how indigenous religious traditions adapt to modern conditions of governance, marketization, and global cultural flows (Taylor, 2007; Dror & Taylor, 2006). In a political context where religious expression remains both encouraged as cultural heritage and monitored as a potential site of contestation, the positioning of Đạo Mẫu vis-à-vis Buddhism provides a telling case of negotiated legitimacy.

This study investigates how Buddhism influences the contemporary practice of Đạo Mẫu Tam Phủ, with particular attention to ritual spaces in Hanoi — a key urban center for both Buddhist and Đạo Mẫu activity. It seeks to address four interrelated research questions:

In what ways do Buddhist doctrines and cosmological schemas shape the theological frameworks of Đạo Mẫu?

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What specific Buddhist ritual forms and aesthetic elements are incorporated into Đạo Mẫu ceremonies and devotional practices? How do Buddhist institutions and clergy interact with Đạo Mẫu practitioners, and what forms of cooperation or tension emerge from these encounters?

How do these interactions influence the social legitimacy, cultural representation, and public perception of Đạo Mẫu in contemporary Vietnamese society?

By addressing these questions, the article aims to contribute to broader scholarly debates on religious hybridity, the negotiation of spiritual authority, and the politics of cultural heritage in late socialist contexts. It also highlights the resilience and adaptability of vernacular religious traditions within Southeast Asia's evolving religious landscapes.?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Buddhism in Vietnam

Buddhism has played a central role in shaping Vietnam's religious, cultural, and social landscape for over two millennia. Introduced via maritime and overland routes from both India and China, Buddhism in Vietnam quickly adapted to local conditions, absorbing and transforming indigenous beliefs while contributing to the formation of an enduring religious pluralism (Nguyễn & Barber, 1999; Taylor, 2007). Over centuries of political upheaval, foreign rule, and cultural change, Buddhism established itself not only as a system of metaphysical thought and monastic practice but also as a deeply embedded cultural framework, informing moral values, communal rituals, and everyday life.

The dominant form of Buddhism in Vietnam is a syncretic Mahayana tradition, which blends canonical Buddhist doctrines with elements of Daoist cosmology, Confucian ethics, and indigenous animist practices (Taylor, 2007). Rather than adhering to rigid doctrinal boundaries, Vietnamese Buddhism has historically exhibited remarkable flexibility and openness, allowing for the incorporation of diverse ritual forms and cosmological schemas. This has enabled its widespread diffusion across social strata and its integration into both elite and popular religious expressions.

Buddhist temples (chùa) in contemporary Vietnam continue to function as multifunctional spiritual centers. While they serve as loci of orthodox Buddhist practice — including sutra recitation, meditation, and monastic ordination — they also accommodate a wide range of popular devotional activities, from ancestor veneration to spirit cult offerings (Ngô, 2009). These hybrid practices reflect the embeddedness of Buddhist institutions within broader patterns of Vietnamese religiosity, where distinctions between "organized religion" and "popular religion" are frequently porous and contested (Dror & Taylor, 2006).

Moreover, Buddhism in Vietnam has maintained a dynamic relationship with the state and with evolving cultural discourses. Periods of suppression and surveillance under colonial and socialist regimes gave way, in the post-Đổi Mới era, to a more ambivalent recognition of Buddhism as both a national cultural heritage and a source of moral legitimacy (Taylor, 2007). This complex positioning has reinforced Buddhism's role as a key interlocutor in the negotiation of acceptable religious expression — a role that is particularly salient in shaping the public visibility and cultural framing of indigenous traditions such as Đạo Mẫu.

2.2 The Three Palaces Mother Goddess Tradition

The Mother Goddess Worship of the Three Palaces (Đạo Mẫu Tam Phủ) constitutes one of Vietnam's most distinctive and resilient indigenous religious traditions. At its core is the veneration of powerful female deities associated with three cosmic realms — Thiên Phủ (Heaven Palace), Thoải Phủ (Water Palace), and Địa Phủ (Earth Palace) — each governing aspects of the natural and spiritual order (Endres, 2011). These divine figures embody the protective, nurturing, and sovereign capacities of feminine power, and their cult reflects a deep cultural valorization of female spiritual agency within Vietnamese cosmology (Fjelstad & Nguyễn, 2006).

The ritual heart of Đạo Mẫu lies in the practice of lên đồng — elaborate ceremonies of spirit possession in which mediums (usually women) enter trance states to embody deities, enact symbolic performances, and transmit blessings to devotees (Endres, 2011). Through these highly theatrical and affectively charged rituals, participants seek to address a range of personal and communal concerns, including health, prosperity, fertility, and protection from misfortune. The performative dimension of lên đồng, with its striking visual aesthetics and complex ritual choreography, has also contributed to the tradition's popular appeal and cultural visibility.

Historically, Đạo Mẫu occupied an ambiguous position within Vietnamese religious life. While widely practiced across regions and social classes, particularly among women, the tradition was long marginalized as mê tín dị đoan (superstition) by both colonial administrators and post-revolutionary socialist authorities (Fjelstad & Nguyễn, 2006). State discourses on religion privileged rationalized, doctrinally systematized forms of religiosity, casting popular spirit cults as relics of a "backward" past incompatible with modern socialist culture.

However, the post-Đổi Mới era has witnessed a significant reevaluation of Đạo Mẫu's cultural status. In tandem with broader processes of market reform, cultural liberalization, and a resurgence of interest in national heritage, Đạo Mẫu has been increasingly reframed as an integral component of Vietnamese cultural identity (Endres, 2011). Its official recognition by UNESCO

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in 2016 as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity marked a decisive moment in this rehabilitation, affirming the tradition's value not only as a living religious practice but also as a site of cultural creativity and resilience.

At the same time, Đạo Mẫu's ongoing evolution reflects dynamic processes of hybridization and negotiation. The incorporation of Buddhist cosmology, ethics, and ritual forms into Đạo Mẫu practice illustrates the tradition's adaptive capacity and its embeddedness within the broader religious ecology of Vietnam. As subsequent sections of this article will explore, the entanglement of Đạo Mẫu with Buddhist influences raises important questions about the politics of religious legitimacy, the construction of spiritual authority, and the reimagining of cultural heritage in contemporary Vietnam..

2.3 Religious Syncretism and Ritual Spaces

Vietnamese religious life is characterized by a high degree of syncretism, both at the level of doctrine and in the spatial organization of ritual practice. Rather than conforming to strict sectarian or institutional boundaries, religious spaces in Vietnam often embody a dynamic layering of multiple cosmological and ritual systems (Taylor, 2007). This fluidity reflects not only historical patterns of religious diffusion and interaction, but also the pragmatic orientation of many Vietnamese practitioners, for whom spiritual efficacy takes precedence over doctrinal purity.

Temples (chùa) and shrines (đền, miếu) across Vietnam frequently display Buddhist statues, Confucian tablets, and images of indigenous deities side by side, creating eclectic sacred environments that facilitate engagement with a wide array of spiritual forces (Taylor, 2007; Dror & Taylor, 2006). These blended spaces do not simply reflect a passive coexistence of traditions; rather, they foster active processes of creative religious adaptation, in which elements from different cosmological systems are selectively appropriated and reinterpreted to meet contemporary spiritual, social, and cultural needs.

The actors who animate these spaces likewise move fluidly across ritual boundaries. Buddhist monks, Đạo Mẫu mediums, and lay ritual specialists frequently collaborate or participate in each other's ceremonies, contributing to a shared religious repertoire that is both locally grounded and richly hybridized (Dror & Taylor, 2006). Such interactions not only enhance the symbolic potency of ritual performances but also contribute to the construction of religious legitimacy, as associations with respected traditions like Buddhism can confer moral authority and social acceptability upon more contested forms of popular practice (Taylor, 2007).

At the same time, the spatial and functional syncretism evident in Vietnamese ritual life underscores the importance of viewing religious traditions not as isolated systems but as interpenetrating fields of practice and meaning. This perspective aligns with broader scholarly approaches that emphasize the relational and negotiated character of religious identities in pluralistic contexts (Stewart & Shaw, 1994; Cannell, 2006). In the case of Đạo Mẫu, the incorporation of Buddhist elements within ritual spaces and performances exemplifies such dynamics of syncretism, enabling both the reinvention of traditional forms and the negotiation of their place within contemporary Vietnamese society.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design informed by the methodological traditions of ethnography and interpretive cultural analysis. Given the highly performative, embodied, and situated nature of Mother Goddess Worship of the Three Palaces (Đạo Mẫu Tam Phủ), ethnographic fieldwork provides a particularly suitable approach for capturing the nuances of ritual practice, spatial dynamics, and inter-religious interactions (Geertz, 1973; Hannerz, 2003).

The research was conducted over a six-month period, from June to December 2024, in Hanoi, a city that serves as both a historical center and a contemporary hub for Đạo Mẫu activity. Fieldwork combined participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, allowing for a triangulated understanding of how Buddhist influences manifest within Đạo Mẫu practice and ritual spaces.

Participant observation focused on documenting live ritual performances, particularly lên đồng ceremonies, as well as Buddhist rites occurring within shared or hybrid religious spaces. This approach enabled the researcher to observe not only the formal structure of rituals but also the embodied interactions, aesthetic choices, and audience responses that shape the experience of religious syncretism in practice (Endres, 2011; Dror & Taylor, 2006).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse range of interlocutors, including Đạo Mẫu mediums (thanh đồng), lay devotees, Buddhist monks, temple caretakers, and cultural heritage officials. These interviews provided insight into practitioners' interpretations of Buddhist elements within Đạo Mẫu, the perceived legitimacy of hybrid practices, and the broader sociocultural factors influencing the tradition's contemporary development.

Finally, document analysis was employed to examine religious texts, ritual manuals, state cultural policy documents, and UNESCO heritage reports. This material provided important contextual data on the discursive framing of Đạo Mẫu and Buddhism within official narratives and public representations.

Together, these methodological strategies allowed for a richly contextualized and reflexively grounded analysis of how Buddhist influences shape the evolving landscape of Mother Goddess Worship in contemporary Vietnam..

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3.2 Field Sites

The fieldwork for this study was conducted at 12 ritual sites across Hanoi, selected to capture the diversity of spaces where interactions between Buddhist and Đạo Mẫu practices occur. The city of Hanoi offers a particularly fertile setting for such research, as it has long served as a key center for both Buddhist institutional life and the flourishing of Mother Goddess Worship (Endres, 2011; Taylor, 2007). The chosen sites were identified through a combination of ethnographic mapping, consultation with practitioners, and recommendations from cultural heritage specialists.

Three broad categories of ritual spaces were included:

Buddhist pagodas with active Đạo Mẫu altars: Several prominent Buddhist temples in Hanoi accommodate Đạo Mẫu altars within their precincts or in adjoining structures. Key sites included Phủ Tây Hồ and Chùa Phúc Khánh, both of which serve as significant pilgrimage destinations where Buddhist and Đạo Mẫu devotional practices coexist. These spaces provided critical insight into how Buddhist cosmology and ritual authority intersect with Đạo Mẫu veneration in explicitly Buddhist settings.

Dedicated Đạo Mẫu palaces (phủ) and shrines (miếu): Visits to specialized Đạo Mẫu sites allowed for an in-depth examination of how Buddhist elements are selectively appropriated within the core ritual repertoire of Mother Goddess Worship. These spaces — often richly adorned with hybrid iconography — served as focal points for observing the performative dimensions of lên đồng and for exploring the narratives that practitioners construct around Buddhist influence.

Hybrid ritual spaces: A number of sites operate as explicitly hybrid religious venues, hosting both Buddhist and Đạo Mẫu ceremonies on a regular basis. These included smaller community shrines, lineage temples, and urban phủ with historical ties to both traditions. Observing ritual activity in such spaces offered valuable opportunities to analyze the negotiation of religious boundaries and the dynamics of shared spiritual authority.

By examining this spectrum of ritual environments, the study was able to document not only the material and spatial dimensions of religious syncretism but also the complex patterns of institutional cooperation, ritual borrowing, and symbolic reinterpretation that shape contemporary Vietnamese religious practice.

3.3 Data Collection

Data collection for this study employed a multi-method ethnographic approach designed to capture both the performative and discursive dimensions of the interactions between Buddhism and Mother Goddess Worship in contemporary Hanoi. Three primary modes of data collection were employed: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis.

Participant Observation: The core of the ethnographic engagement involved sustained participant observation across 18 ritual events, including both lên đồng ceremonies and Buddhist rituals conducted within the selected field sites. Detailed field notes were taken to document the spatial configurations of ritual spaces, the sequencing of ritual acts, the incorporation of Buddhist elements within Đạo Mẫu performances, and the interactions among ritual actors and audiences. This immersive approach enabled the researcher to trace both explicit and subtle forms of religious syncretism as they unfolded in practice (Endres, 2011).

Semi-Structured Interviews: Complementing the observational data, a series of 33 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse group of interlocutors: 20 Đạo Mẫu practitioners (including mediums, ritual assistants, and lay devotees), 5 Buddhist monks actively engaged in temples with Đạo Mẫu activity, and 8 temple caretakers or ritual specialists operating in hybrid or shared spaces. Interviews explored participants' understandings of Buddhist-Đạo Mẫu interactions, the perceived legitimacy of syncretic practices, and their reflections on the broader cultural and institutional dynamics shaping the evolution of Mother Goddess Worship.

Document Analysis: In parallel with field-based data collection, relevant documentary materials were analyzed to situate the ethnographic findings within broader institutional and discursive contexts. Sources included religious texts and ritual manuals used by Đạo Mẫu practitioners, Buddhist liturgical materials present at shared sites, government cultural policy documents concerning the management of religious practice and intangible heritage, and UNESCO reports related to Đạo Mẫu's inscription as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Together, these complementary data sources provided a rich empirical foundation for analyzing how Buddhist influences are appropriated, negotiated, and contested within contemporary Mother Goddess Worship and its associated ritual spaces.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Theological Influence of Buddhism

The fieldwork revealed that many Đạo Mẫu practitioners conceptualize the pantheon of Mother Goddesses and associated spiritual entities through an interpretive lens shaped by Buddhist cosmology and moral philosophy. This theological interpenetration reflects both historical processes of religious syncretism and contemporary efforts to align Mother Goddess Worship with culturally dominant and institutionally sanctioned religious frameworks.

A recurring theme across interviews was the perception of the Three Palaces — Thiên Phủ (Heaven), Thoải Phủ (Water), and Địa Phủ (Earth) — as corresponding to realms within the broader Buddhist cosmological order. Practitioners frequently described the deities of the Three Palaces as functioning within the karmic structures of Buddhist cosmology, where moral causality

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(nghịch báo) governs both the actions of humans and the disposition of spiritual forces. Spirit possession experiences during lên đồng were often interpreted not merely as supernatural interventions, but as manifestations of karmic merit or retribution shaped by both past lives and present ethical conduct.

Buddhist moral teachings — particularly those centered on compassion (từ bi), filial piety (hiếu đạo), and moral self-cultivation (tu tâm dưỡng tính) — were prominently invoked during Đạo Mẫu rituals. In several observed lên đồng ceremonies, mediums explicitly incorporated Buddhist language and ethical exhortations into their performances, urging devotees to cultivate compassion, avoid harming sentient beings, and honor both ancestors and living family members. Such moral framing serves not only to reinforce the ethical dimension of Mother Goddess Worship but also to align it with the normative moral discourses of Vietnamese Buddhism, thereby enhancing its social legitimacy.

The incorporation of Buddhist theological concepts within Đạo Mẫu practices thus illustrates a dynamic process of doctrinal hybridization. Rather than subordinating Mother Goddess Worship to Buddhist orthodoxy, practitioners selectively appropriate elements of Buddhist cosmology and ethics to enrich and reframe their own spiritual narratives. This process underscores the adaptive and dialogical character of Vietnamese religious life, in which popular traditions engage with institutional religions in ways that both accommodate and transform prevailing spiritual imaginaries..

4.2 Ritual Forms and Aesthetics

The ethnographic data revealed that lên đồng ceremonies are richly infused with Buddhist ritual elements, contributing both to the aesthetic repertoire of Mother Goddess Worship and to its perceived moral and spiritual legitimacy. This incorporation of Buddhist forms operates at multiple levels — verbal, visual, and material — shaping the experience of the ritual for both practitioners and audiences.

Chanting (tụng kinh): Buddhist sutra chanting is a common prelude to lên đồng rituals. Prior to spirit possession, mediums and their assistants often recite excerpts from well-known Mahayana sutras, such as the Lotus Sutra (Pháp Hoa Kinh) or the Heart Sutra (Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh), to invoke the protective presence of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and to sanctify the ritual space. This practice not only reflects a syncretic integration of Buddhist liturgical forms but also serves to frame the subsequent possession as occurring within a morally ordered and karmically auspicious context.

Iconography: Visual elements of Buddhist iconography are prominently featured within Đạo Mẫu altars and ritual spaces. Statues and images of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva (Quan Âm Bồ Tát), Amitābha Buddha (A Di Đà Phật), and other figures from the Buddhist pantheon are often displayed alongside depictions of Đạo Mẫu deities. In some cases, Buddhist relics (xá lợi) are enshrined within Đạo Mẫu palaces, further sacralizing the space and signaling the interpenetration of Buddhist and indigenous spiritual hierarchies.

Offerings: The aesthetics of ritual offerings in lên đồng ceremonies frequently reflect Buddhist norms. Incense, fresh flowers, and vegetarian food are among the most common offerings presented during both the preparatory and possession phases of the ritual. These offering practices not only resonate with Buddhist ideals of non-violence and purity but also contribute to the cultivation of a visually harmonious and ethically elevated ritual environment.

The selective incorporation of these Buddhist ritual forms into Mother Goddess Worship underscores the adaptive agency of Đạo Mẫu practitioners, who draw upon the cultural capital of Buddhism to enhance both the spiritual efficacy and the public legitimacy of their ceremonies. Moreover, these aesthetic convergences exemplify the fluid and relational nature of religious practice in contemporary Vietnam, where ritual actors negotiate and reconfigure religious boundaries in response to shifting cultural, institutional, and political dynamics.

4.3 Institutional and Clerical Interactions

The fieldwork revealed a complex and ambivalent landscape of interaction between Buddhist clergy and Đạo Mẫu practitioners, shaped by both pragmatic collaboration and underlying tensions over religious authority and orthodoxy. These interactions play a significant role in structuring the public legitimacy and evolving moral positioning of Mother Goddess Worship within contemporary Vietnamese society.

In many hybrid ritual spaces — particularly Buddhist temples that house Đạo Mẫu altars or host lên đồng ceremonies — Buddhist monks actively engage with Đạo Mẫu practitioners. In several cases, monks were observed providing ritual guidance prior to possession ceremonies, including leading Buddhist chanting or offering moral instruction to mediums and devotees. Such involvement serves to sanctify the ritual context and align Mother Goddess Worship with the moral and karmic frameworks of Vietnamese Buddhism, thereby enhancing its social acceptability.

Interviews with both Buddhist clergy and Đạo Mẫu mediums indicated that this pragmatic cooperation is often motivated by a shared interest in managing the boundaries of acceptable religious practice. Buddhist monks, by participating in or overseeing Đạo Mẫu rituals, can exert a degree of moral oversight, ensuring that ceremonies adhere to broadly accepted ethical norms and do not devolve into forms of spectacle or exploitation. Conversely, Đạo Mẫu practitioners benefit from the association with Buddhist moral authority, which can confer legitimacy upon a tradition historically stigmatized as superstition.

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However, these interactions are not without friction. Some Buddhist monks expressed ambivalence or outright criticism regarding the practice of *lên đồng*, which they viewed as spiritually risky or ethically problematic. Concerns centered on the potential for possession rituals to encourage materialistic desires, foster dependence on supernatural interventions, or attract excessive commercialism. Such critiques highlight the contested nature of religious syncretism in Vietnam, where shifting state policies and market dynamics complicate the negotiation of spiritual legitimacy (Dror & Taylor, 2006).

Overall, the institutional and clerical interactions between Buddhism and Mother Goddess Worship exemplify a broader dynamic of negotiated religious hybridity, in which cooperation and contestation coexist. These relationships are not merely reflections of doctrinal compatibility or incompatibility but are actively shaped by the evolving cultural politics of religion in post-reform Vietnam.

4.4 Social Legitimacy and Public Perception

The Buddhist framing of *Đạo Mẫu* practices plays a critical role in shaping their contemporary public perception and in mediating the complex dynamics of religious legitimacy in Vietnam. As several scholars have noted, despite growing official recognition of Vietnam's religious diversity, state discourses continue to exhibit ambivalence toward popular religious forms historically categorized as *mê tín dị đoan* (superstition) (Taylor, 2007; Endres, 2011). Against this backdrop, the alignment of Mother Goddess Worship with Buddhist moral and ritual frameworks serves as a powerful strategy for countering lingering skepticism and enhancing the tradition's cultural standing.

Many *Đạo Mẫu* practitioners explicitly articulated the benefits of this alignment during interviews. Mediums and ritual specialists emphasized that incorporating Buddhist ethics — particularly values of compassion, filial piety, and non-violence — not only elevated the spiritual quality of their ceremonies but also reassured both state authorities and the broader public of the moral integrity of their practice. The presence of Buddhist monks at certain ceremonies, or the use of Buddhist sutra chanting and imagery, was frequently cited as enhancing perceptions of *Đạo Mẫu* as a legitimate and culturally valuable form of religious expression.

This reframing has also contributed to significant shifts in the demographic composition of *Đạo Mẫu* clientele. In recent years, the tradition has attracted a growing urban, middle-class following, with younger women in particular engaging with Mother Goddess Worship as a form of spiritual empowerment, cultural identity work, and personal well-being (Fjelstad & Nguyễn, 2006; Endres, 2011). For these newer participants, the integration of Buddhist elements provides an accessible moral and aesthetic vocabulary through which to engage with *Đạo Mẫu*, while mitigating potential concerns about its historical associations with superstition or excess.

At the same time, this evolving public perception reflects broader processes of religious commodification and cultural negotiation in post-reform Vietnam. As *Đạo Mẫu* becomes increasingly visible in public culture and media, its Buddhist-inflected presentation serves not only spiritual but also strategic purposes, positioning the tradition within acceptable parameters of "national cultural heritage" while fostering its appeal in an emerging spiritual marketplace (Taylor, 2007).

Ultimately, the Buddhist framing of Mother Goddess Worship exemplifies how religious traditions in Vietnam actively navigate the intersections of state policy, market forces, and cultural politics, leveraging syncretic adaptations to sustain their vitality and public legitimacy in a rapidly transforming society..

5. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Buddhism exerts a significant and multifaceted influence on the contemporary practice of Mother Goddess Worship of the Three Palaces in Hanoi. Through processes of theological reinterpretation, ritual borrowing, aesthetic convergence, and institutional interaction, *Đạo Mẫu* has become increasingly syncretic — not in the sense of losing its distinctive identity, but in dynamically adapting Buddhist elements to enhance its spiritual efficacy and cultural legitimacy. This syncretism is not merely cosmetic; it reflects deep engagements with Buddhist cosmology and moral philosophy, which practitioners integrate to align *Đạo Mẫu* with prevailing religious and ethical discourses in Vietnamese society.

Moreover, the collaboration — and occasional tension — between Buddhist clergy and *Đạo Mẫu* mediums highlights the negotiated nature of religious authority and legitimacy in Vietnam's pluralistic spiritual landscape. By strategically positioning itself in relation to Buddhism, Mother Goddess Worship has effectively navigated historical stigmas and secured a more favorable public image, while also appealing to new urban demographics seeking culturally resonant forms of spirituality.

These findings underscore the dynamic, adaptive, and relational character of Vietnamese religious life. Far from being static or bounded, traditions such as *Đạo Mẫu* evolve through ongoing dialogue with institutional religions, market forces, and state cultural policies. This process of creative adaptation reflects broader patterns of religious resilience and innovation in late socialist contexts.

Future research would benefit from examining how these interactions continue to unfold as both Buddhism and Mother Goddess Worship respond to accelerating processes of globalization, digitalization, and the commodification of cultural heritage.

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In particular, ethnographic attention to emerging ritual practices, transnational influences, and shifting modes of religious consumption could further illuminate the complex trajectories of syncretism and spiritual creativity in contemporary Vietnam.

Such inquiries not only contribute to a deeper understanding of Vietnamese religious transformations but also enrich wider theoretical debates on religious hybridity, cultural resilience, and the politics of heritage in plural and rapidly changing societies.

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