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The sanctity of goddesses: an insight into the worship of *Bà Tổ Cô* in Northern Vietnam

Dinh Lam Nguyen¹, Ky Nam Nguyen¹ & Quang Anh Phan²  

In Vietnam, a country where religious expression is widespread, many gods and goddesses are commonly worshipped. Among those, *Bà Tổ Cô* (Family Goddess) is widely worshipped in the North of Vietnam due to her exceptional background as unmarried, young, and having spiritual roots, unlike other national and heroic figures. This article examines the sanctity of the Family Goddess by decoding the terms, worshippers, beliefs and practices, sacred encounters and supports. The research is a final result of decade-long field trips, archival study, and in-depth interviews with various stakeholders. The research findings show that the veneration of the Family Goddess in Northern Vietnam is a continuity of a long-standing tradition of worshipping female deities in Asia and thus emphasising the need to maintain this unique intangible heritage as a crucial part of Vietnamese cultural diversity.

¹VNU-University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. ²University of Zurich (Switzerland), Zurich, Switzerland.
email: phanquang.anh@uzh.ch

Introduction

In the scorching and humid summer of 2009, the first author of this paper was conducting a several-month field trip to many cities and provinces in Northern Vietnam, including Hanoi, Bac Ninh, Thai Binh, Nam Dinh, and Hai Duong, to gather data for his doctoral thesis called “Music in Buddhist rituals in Hanoi”. Whilst he was sitting and having several conversations with the monks and pagoda goers under the shadow of a Bodhi tree at the *Bà Đá* pagoda (Hanoi), he realised that many people had brought their beloved relatives’ ash to the pagoda and requested the monks to worship and “look after” them. Over the years, this pagoda has been a familiar venue for people to conduct a praying session for the peace of their dead family members’ souls. Among many venerated spirits there, *Bà Tổ Cô* (hereafter Family Goddess) was not on the list. The reason is relatively apparent. Although *Bà Tổ Cô* is a family or clan’s female member who died at a young age while being unmarried, she is not supposed to be worshipped in public places like pagodas. Instead, she has a customised spot reserved on the family’s altar. Despite being part of the Vietnamese worship system of ancestors, the reverence of *Bà Tổ Cô* is unique since the descendants consider her status to be analogous to the position of a female deity and worship her as the goddess of the family. The curiosity about the uniqueness of this belief led to the gathering of our research team in a ray of hope that a thorough perusal would help unveil the sacredness embedded in this form of veneration.

The cult of the ancestors has been practised worldwide since ancient times based on a fundamental concept that death is not the end of someone’s life but his or her shift into a privileged position in the family hierarchy (Tran Tuyet Nhung, 2018; Freedman, 2017; Alles, 2008; Klass and Goss, 1999). As the dead are remembered and honoured as ancestors, their virtues are appreciated, and their mistakes are forgiven. The ancestors are likely to transform into spiritual family members, capable of influencing their living relatives and the material world (Aijmer, 2018). According to the study conducted by Tran (2018), ancestral veneration relies on different premises: (1) the notion that the deceased exist in the spiritual realm; (2) the idea of family as a corporate body that consists of the deceased and the living; (3) the dead and the living people rely on and support each other, and (4) ritual is utilised as a means of communication between the dead and the living people.

There is a legion of gods and goddesses being venerated as many people postulate that there is “a connection between the spiritual and the material world” (Woodside, 1998, p. 12). All things possess their souls, and people are prone to seek support from different deities, particularly those inextricably linked to agricultural production with natural elements like the Sun, the Moon, the Earth, the Rivers, the Mountains, and weather (Nguyen, 2016). According to the research findings released by Pew Research Centre, 45.3% of the Vietnamese population is tied to folk religion, thus making Vietnam the country with the biggest proportion of folk religion followers, followed by Taiwan, South Sudan, and China (Hoskins and Ninh, 2017). Among many kinds of folk religion, ordinary people tend to remember the past and their ancestors who have been inseparable from the living people. This notion is reflected through a well-known Vietnamese proverb:

Humans have their ancestors

It is like trees having roots and rivers flowing from the source

(*Con người có tổ có tông*)

(*Như cây có cội như sông có nguồn*)

Many researchers have hitherto conducted various studies on Vietnamese Goddess worship. Among various Goddess-related themes, the worship of Mother Goddess is well-documented (Vu, 2006; Ngo, 2002), with numerous studies touching upon some renowned figures such as *Mother Lieu Hanh* (Dror, 2006); *Mother Bui Thi Xuan* (Ngo, 2018) in Northern Vietnam; *Thiên Y A Na*—a Vietnamese adaptation of Cham’s goddess *Ponagar* (Salemink, 2014) in Central Vietnam, and the Lady of Realms [*Bà Chúa Xứ*] (Taylor, 2004) in Southern Vietnam. It is critical to acknowledge that many deities are deceased heroic figures, such as *Mother Bui Thi Xuan*, who sacrificed and dedicated their lives for the country’s fight against invaders as well as for the safety and prosperity of the village and the community (Nguyen, 2016). Most of these women have been institutionalised, having well-structured rituals, places of worship, and many practitioners (Ngo, 2012; Salemink, 2014). Another major theme is the upsurge of goddess-related practices in tandem with the modern and market-oriented economy in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2016; Vu, 2015), including the popularity of the cult of Three Goddesses (Kendall et al., 2008), the prevalence of spirits and the materiality of devotional practices (Kendall, 2012), the encounters between marketisation and rising worship of the Lady of the Treasury (Lam, 2019), the profound social shifts between the feudal system and the market economy through the example of the Lady of Treasury (Ngo, 2002), and the worship of the Lady of Realm in the market economy (Taylor, 2004). Through various worshipping practices, the practitioners respect the deities and express their desire for profit and wealth (Le, 2007). Besides, different aspects of Vietnamese goddess veneration have been examined, such as the dualism between the Mother and the Father Cult through the *Lieu Hanh* and the *Tran Hung Dao* figures (Pham and Eipper, 2009), the *Saint Tran* worship and the Mother Goddess worship (Pham, 2018), the common patterns between the indigenous cult of Mother Goddess, Marian devotion and *Guanyin* worship (Nguyen, 2017), the transformation and revival of *Lady La Vang* and *Cao Dai Mother Goddess* among Vietnamese diaspora in the US (Ninh, 2018), the indigenisation and integration of *Mazu* (Chinese goddess) into Vietnamese culture (Ly and Phuong, 2021), and the heritage-making process of the Four Palaces worship (Endres, 2011).

Unfortunately, very little has been studied or published regarding who the Family Goddess is, how she is worshipped, and how sacred she is compared with other Vietnamese goddesses. The Family Goddess is highly respected and worshipped by the patrilineage’s male members in Northern Vietnam. In the world of Vietnamese Goddesses, the veneration of the Family Goddess is considered distinctive, thus being an integral part of Vietnam’s cultural heritage (Ngo, 2018; Tran, 2003). According to the book *Goddesses in Vietnam* released by the Institute of Sino-Nom in 1991, 75 goddesses were worshipped throughout Vietnam. Do and Mai (1984) unveiled that 250 out of the 1000 places of worship were designated for goddesses. They also contended that approximately three-quarters of the most popular female deities were honoured as mothers without male partners and counterparts.

Through an empirical case study of the Family Goddess, this paper endeavours to revisit the concept of “sacred” in religious studies and then apply it to examine Goddess’s veneration in Vietnam. The analytical value derived from this research would shed light on typical patterns, cultural significances, and transitions of traditional worship in Vietnam. This study is contextualised and analysed within a reference frame of the long-standing stature of Vietnamese women and the traditional veneration of the Goddess, particularly of the recent transformation of folk religions in Vietnam. This study is the final result

of many field trips and archival research in the Northern delta region of Vietnam in the last decade. Numerous in-depth interviews were conducted with the local practitioners, patrilineage leaders, monks, shamans, fortune tellers, students, ex-military officers, and religion experts, who were directly and indirectly linked to the Family Goddess worship, to help acquire first-hand research materials.

The status of Vietnamese women as the pedestal of Goddess worship

The studies of Goddess veneration have been catching the attention of a plethora of scholars from various disciplines, including archaeologists, theologians, psychologists, feminist critics, and popular writers who have created different analyses of the imaginable types (Wood, 1996). As a result, there has been a wide range of studies taking heed of Goddess, ranging from the history, origins, characters and functions in the images of Goddess (Hinsch, 2004); the development and transformation of the goddess (Overmyer, 2002; Hayashi, 2017); the evolution of the goddess into women religion and society (Zhang, 2021); the role of incense objects as a tangible bridge (Habkirk and Chang, 2017); the bonds between the dead and the living (Kanai et al., 2020); national and cultural identity and differences (Sheng, 2017); the interaction between the nation-state, popular religion, media capitalism and gendered territorialisation (Yang, 2004); the birth of Goddess of Democracy as a marked transformation process (Tsao, 2018), to the relationship between destination image, service quality, perceived values, satisfaction, and behavioural intention of the visitors who pay a visit to a Goddess temple (Chang et al., 2020).

As an agricultural country, Vietnam has relied on wet rice and its produce for a long time. Earth and water are deemed vital and “sacred” elements for rice making across the country. Strikingly, in different stages of rice planting, growing, and harvesting, Vietnamese women have been playing an indispensable role (Ngo, 2013). Based on folklore and oral history’s materials, Vietnamese women have been depicted as being resourceful, independent, and brave thanks to their heroic behaviour: “When the enemy has arrived, the woman will join the fight” (*Giặc đến nhà, Đàn bà cũng đánh*) (Nguyen, 2002). While the man is de facto the family leader in the household, the woman seems to be the family manager. The woman takes responsibility for child-bearing, childraising, and family management. A Vietnamese proverb metaphorically indicates that “A man is like a fish basket; a woman is like a funnel” (*Đàn ông như giỏ, Đàn bà như hom*). Indeed, without the funnel, the fish basket will not keep any fish inside and go useless. There will be a great success if both man and woman can live in harmony and reach consensus (as stated in the proverb *Thuận vợ thuận chồng, Tấn biển Đông cũng cạn*) (Tran, 2003). Consequently, there is an ultimate goal to acquire a balance between yin and yang, which links to mother and father and a vast range of phenomena that are understood in binary terms (Pham and Eipper, 2009). Despite the spread of Confucianism and the fact that elite groups during the monarchical period in Vietnam employed Confucianism as their ideological compass, most Vietnamese people were loyal to indigenous traditions that emphasised the crucial role of women in the household. They also had equal rights compared to men in possessing private properties, which was stipulated in the Hong Duc Law in the Early Le Dynasty (1428–1527) (Insun-Yu, 1978).

Many Vietnamese myths and legends are linked to goddesses, and it is tricky to name all the goddesses throughout Vietnam (Ngo, 2018). Some Vietnamese goddesses played a critical role in creating the universe and its features, including the Sun Goddess, the Moon Goddess, the Heaven Mother, the Realm Mother, the

Water Mother, the Land Mother, and the *Lady Nu Oa* (*Nũwa*, also read *Nũgua*). Notably, Vietnamese people also deified and feminised clouds, rain, thunder and lightning. Five natural elements are called Lady Metal, Lady Wood, Lady Water, Lady Fire, and Lady Earth (Ngo, 2018, Tran, 2003). During the very first days of independence in Vietnam, many goddesses such as *Mother Au Co*, *Trung sisters*, and *Lady Trieu* made a vital way for the formation and protection of the country. The title *Mother* as a form of canonisation represents motherhood’s empowering and protective nature. *Mother Au Co* was believed to be the founding deity who gave birth to a hundred children—those later settled in the mountains and coastal regions, thus forming the 54 ethnic groups of Vietnam. Influential and brave female figures such as the *Trung sisters* fought against the Chinese invaders and reigned over the country (Ngo, 2018). During the Vietnamese imperial dynasties (938–1945), many Vietnamese goddesses were also deified to the rank of Mother, including *Mother Duong Van Nga*, *Mother Y Lan*, *Mother Lieu Hanh*, *Mother Bui Thi Xuan*, etc. The rank of “deities of the first standing” was subsequently bestowed upon them, the highest tribute granted in the monarchical period in Vietnam to record their contribution to the country (Ngo, 2018; Vu, 2006, Tran, 2003).

From 1930 to 1945, female workers and peasants were an active part of revolutionary activities, thus contributing to the success of the August Revolution in 1945 (Tetreault, 1996). In the subsequent year, Vietnamese women had the right to vote for the first time on the 6 January 1946; and 10 women were selected to the Chamber of Deputies, accounting for 2.5% of the total. When the French returned to Vietnam, a war against France broke out (1946–1954). Vietnamese women engaged in combat as members of commandoes and worked as transporters (*dân công*) during the Dien Bien Phu battle (accounting for 2/3 of total transporters) (Houtart and Lemerminier, 1984). In this so-called First Indochina War, the seemingly most salient heroine was *Vo Thi Sau*, a schoolgirl who fought as a guerrilla, was captured, then executed by the French colonialists in 1952, being the first woman who received the capital sentence at Con Son Prison. She is venerated as an ancestral spirit and has amassed a cult-like following of believers who regularly take care of her grave (Eisner, 2008). Women also played a crucial role during the resistance war against the US by increasing their autonomy in villages, thus contributing to the final success. They were represented as heroines in national protection and their productive efforts, as an active member of the labour force, and as mothers (Soucy, 2000). Since the *Đổi Mới* (Reform) in 1986, Vietnamese women have increasingly contributed to socio-economic development and building political regime (Safak, 2020). Therefore, Vietnamese women would become models of devotion and courage and hold critical and legitimate space in their families and society (Bélanger, 2004). A few hundred new temples have been lately constructed and dedicated to worshipping Goddesses in many places like Vinh Phuc, Phu Tho, Hanoi, Bac Ninh, and Hung Yen (Hung Yen, 2017). If we consider Vietnam a part of the Sino-sphere in terms of cultural proximity, then this level of goddesses’ popularity is not usually found in Chinese mythology, in which the humble status of women in society is mentioned more often (Sheng, 2017).

Vietnamese folk religion since 1945

From 1945 to 1986, Vietnamese religious landscapes were affected by the political and historical contexts in the North and the South. The government strictly controlled religion since many Marxists in Vietnam tended to link their patriotic efforts to liberate the country with an anti-religious struggle inherited from Western tradition (Tran, 2010). Also, a principal goal was to create a “secular” state that could soon clarify its official orientation and perspective of religion. The secular orientation was

represented in the Decree of Policies towards Religion [*Sắc lệnh về Chính sách Tôn giáo*] imposed on 4 October 1953 and subsequently in the Decree No. 234-SL on 12 June 1955 (Do, 2009). Vietnam made tremendous attempts to obstruct the practice of traditional religious beliefs and ritual customs in the North (1945–1975) and then across the country (1975–1986) (Kwon, 2008). Notably, Circular 785 VH/TT was issued by the Ministry of Culture and Information (now the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism) to limit some superstitious practices and promote the activities of traditional festivals. Consequently, many temples and communal halls were dismantled, and practices and rituals were prohibited during the *Cải cách ruộng đất* (Land reforms) in the 1950s. Many religious practices and worship spaces that were considered superstitious, backward, and feudalistic were destroyed (Hoang, 2017).

The idea of neutralising religious elements in the society was not uncommon since Vietnam was heavily influenced by the extreme ideology exerted by China during that time (Goscha, 2006), which later led to the infamous socio-political movement in China from 1966 until 1976: the Cultural Revolution. Both countries' goal was to preserve the ideology by purging remnants of capitalist and traditional elements from society, of which religions and beliefs were the most salient factors. In the 1980s, primary religions like Buddhism and Catholicism and folk religions in China gradually regained popularity thanks to economic reforms and the "open-door" policies (Yang Fenggang, 2004; Lai, 2003). Therefore, religious practices in line with the new construction of worship places related to Goddesses in China have been revived considerably in recent years. Similarly, the 1986 Reform has made way for socio-cultural and religious transformations in Vietnam in line with Vietnam's reintegration into the world markets (Do, 2009). Accordingly, the state has since then eased its control on religious practices and gone from seeing religions as a "strictly private" issue to "a matter of public interest" (Jellema, 2007a). Vietnamese people have engaged more in displays of rituals, constructed more temples, renovated places of worship, traded religious objects, and participated in public and private rituals. Strikingly, some prevalent ritual practices once regarded as backwardness, superstitions or even social evils boomed again in Vietnam (Fjelstad and Nguyen, 2018). Therefore, many kinds of folk religions, from communal house sacrifices to goddess cults, have revived, and their meanings have been reworked to be consistent with the new social life and relationships in the market economy (Taylor, 2007). Vasavakul (2003) indicates that the revival of the goddess cults in Northern Vietnam is a particularly salient example of "networking power". She argues that the collaboration between central and local organisations, intellectuals, musicians and practitioners shapes experimentation space and public recognition of this practice.

The concept of sacred

The concept of sacred seems crucial in terms of religious and spiritual studies. In the first place, the term "sacred" might be found in many languages, but it is not understood identically among different cultures (Pargament et al., 2017). From the historical perspective, it is argued that the understanding of the sacred is linked to the mystical and transcendent experiences of the founders and leaders of the tradition (Blum, 2014).

Generally, various researchers have approached and defined "sacred" differently. Terminologically, it is possible to differentiate two uses of the term "sacred" as a noun and an adjective in Western countries. The noun "sacred" means that something is apart or saturated with divine presence (Pargament et al., 2017). The adjective "sacred" originates from the Latin word *sacer*, which is to consecrate to God, and from the Old French word

sacer, which is to make some objects holy like the sanctification of the bread and wine in the Catholic mass (Stormonth and Phelps, 1895; Oxford, 2021). From another perspective, Durkheim (1995) postulated that the sacred, which includes a characteristic of religious beliefs and rituals, are usually placed higher and are considered more potent than the mundane. The sacred is also prohibited on normal days, and it is worth being compiled. In addition, Pargament and Mahoney (2005) considered the sacred as related to a core and a ring. The core includes God, divine, higher powers, and transcendent reality, while the ring consists of various aspects of life (friendship, love, work, marriage, parenting, etc.) that focus on the meaning and value owing to the process of sanctification. Jones (2002, p. 61) emphasised, "The sacred is not necessarily a unique and special object, or a domain split off from the rest of life but is rather the world of ordinary objects experienced in a particular way". This particular way somehow refers to the perception that some specific objects include divine-like or sacred elements (Pargament et al., 2017).

Since ancient times, purity or chastity in some cultures has been closely tied to sacredness or spirituality. In the Tamil language (India) case, retaining purity and chastity means keeping its sanctity and spirituality. Therefore, Tamil women must maintain their purity and chastity to ensure their sacredness and religiosity (Sathiavathi, 2008). In China, the purity of women has served as the metaphor and the metonymy of national purity. As a result, the images of Chinese women who were raped by foreign invaders, including Mongol, Manchu and Japanese, represented the despoliation of the nation's authentic virtues. This vision continued during the anti-Japanese war; however, Chinese women writers usually rejected this representation (Duara, 2008). By studying the cases mentioned above, we could see that those women who died unmarried and young can be sacred. The bonds between the living and the dead are intertwined and asymmetrical in that the living people can do nothing for the dead, but the dead have the power to support the living (Klass and Goss, 1999; Hu, 2016; Yang and Hu, 2012; Feuchtwang, 2001).

The Family Goddess: an exceptional case study

Among the 75 Goddesses being venerated in Vietnam (The Institute of Sino-Nom, 1991), the Family Goddess has been one of the unique figures. The identity of the Family Goddess is usually unknown; she is the figure of the childless "aunt". In the Vietnamese culture, women are considered "complete" adults and achieve social recognition upon becoming wives and mothers since those who are single and childless defy social norms and expectations of femininity. In addition, the patrilineage tradition of Vietnam represents the continuity of the male family line through the birth of sons. Marriage is typically followed by patrilocal residence, and all daughters-in-law are supposed to give birth to a son; therefore, their husband's family lines might be carried on. The responsibility of women is to provide sons for males' descents that are vital to the definition of womanhood in Vietnam. Consequently, unmarried or childless women do not fulfil their primary functions of giving birth to sons in the family system (Bélanger, 2004, Tran, 1989). In the context of China, to be accorded ancestor status, women have to get married and give birth to their sons. The Chinese word for ancestor represents a phallus, and ancestral status bolsters the family's fertility or patrilineal line, thus ensuring its ability to reproduce (Shih, 2010).

The Family Goddess does not have children herself, so she does not leave her patrilineage of birth. She must be thus principally and morally appeased by downstream patrilineage members. According to the patrilineal family tree, the living people still worship and support the dead, although they might not know them. Similarly, the bonds with the dead are assured by the

traditional imagination to contact the sacred dead (Kanai et al., 2020). Since there are intergenerational ties between the living and dead, which are vital for the well-being of kin and the continuity of the family line (Feuchtwang, 2001), the dead still exerts their influence over the living people's lives. According to Dang (2002), many Vietnamese people trust the relationship between living and death because life is temporary and death is eternal. Around two-thirds of the research participants confirmed that the image of the Family Goddess is symbolised as "the luck, the salvation, the prosperity and success for all of the living people". Moreover, if a family gives up caring for their ancestors, the spirits are more likely to wander and search for comfort, food and take possession of freshly dead people, animals and other objects (Bell, 2021). Therefore, it can be said that the veneration of the Family Goddess is a form of ancestor worship, which has been contended to be a core feature among almost all Vietnamese's lives irrespective of their religious beliefs and political perspectives (Jellema, 2007b).

In terms of kinship, Luong (1989) comments that a male-oriented model that extends the male-centred continuity is prevalent in Vietnam, positioning itself based on a male-female hierarchy and its isomorphic relation to other conceptual dichotomies such as centre/periphery and spatially bound/spatially unbound. Accordingly, Luong (1989) notes that the male-oriented model in Vietnam, which is also usually found in other countries of East Asia, emphasises the rule of patrilocal residence, the domestic-centred role of women in patrilineally extended families, and the public-domain orientation of male household members. Nonetheless, this dominating model does not obliterate the possibility of having a parallel non-male-oriented mode whereby females' voice is heard, especially when they have a prominent economic role by actively engaging with the marketing system to increase the household's financial resources. This non-male-oriented model is also facilitated by the omnipresence of endogamy in the rural areas of Vietnam, as children have a more vital connection to their matrilineal relatives (Luong, 1989). We propose that the high stature of females and the co-existence of such a non-male model in the traditional patrilineal system are critical factors that reinforce the sanctity of the Family Goddess.

It would be insufficient if we do not take a closer look at the death status of the maidens since it is a striking feature in the deification of the Family Goddess. Kwon (2008) and Hogle (2014) assert that unnatural, unjust death (of which being dead at a young age is counted in) or deceased people whose funeral is not orderly arranged might be the origin of the formation of vengeful spirits- those who return from the afterlife to seek revenge. Whitehead (1988) and Romero-Frias (1999) emphasise that in certain cultures, the vengeful ghosts are mostly female since they have to endure an ill-treated life directly derived from a male-centred hegemony during their lifetime, and their death is the result after a long period of living in despair. Although the case of *Bà Tổ cô* in Vietnam is not necessarily linked to such sufferings, it is hypothetically reasonable to assert that being unmarried, childless, and passing away at a young age are tragic elements that construct the sacredness of the Family Goddess in an alternative way. The respect paid toward her might emanate from a wide range of insecure feelings, including anxiety, uncertainty, fear, and regret. The veneration, thus, is foremost a method to relieve her remorse and pacify her spirit.

Research method

A qualitative approach was deployed, initiated with the first field trip in 2008. Empirical data were subsequently gathered through document review, observation, and in-depth interviews. During approximately 12 years (2008–2020), we travelled back and forth

to five provinces, including Hanoi, Hai Duong, Hung Yen, Bac Ninh, and Nam Dinh, where there are many Family Goddess practitioners.

Based on our extensive observation and participation in the worship of the Family Goddess, we undertook in-depth interviews with 50 respondents to find out their perceptions about this practice. The study participants were in a wide range from 18 to 90 years old, both male and female. Detailed identifiers were removed, and attempts were made to secure the anonymity of the research participants. Notably, a careful selection of study interviewees who could represent their thoughts and experiences of the Family Goddesses was taken into account. The sacred is seen from the various perspectives of local participants, including their individual experiences and oral narratives passed down to them.

Twenty-five in-depth interviews were conducted with the Family Goddess worshippers who were considered knowledgeable and thoughtful about this religious ritual (Local 1–Local 25). Five interviews were done with the leaders of the patrilineage Nguyen, Do, Pham, and Le (Leader 1–Leader 5). They played a crucial role in this study thanks to their role of worshipping the Family Goddesses on behalf of their patrilineage. In addition, five interviews with Shaman (*thủ nhang*) (Shaman 1–Shaman 5) and three interviews with local fortune tellers (*thầy bói*) (Teller 1–Teller 3) were conducted. It is noteworthy that the presence of a fortune-teller who acts as a medium to facilitate the communication process is not uncommon, especially in the rural context where supernatural elements still play a crucial role. As Nguyen (2011) asserts, there are some mysterious communication channels between the dead and the living through intermediary factors such as a powwow, fortune teller, worshipper, and psychic. These actors are directly involved in the Family Goddess rituals; thus, they have brought essential insights to us. This study also included five in-depth interviews with three students (Student 1–Student 3) and two ex-military officers (Military 1 and Military 2), who claimed to have been exposed to and supported by the Family Goddesses in their private lives. Four different interviews with monks (Monk 1–Monk 4) were conducted since they often helped the locals make incense bowls for the worship. Finally, three in-depth interviews were conducted with three religion experts from the Vietnam Institute of Religious Studies (Expert 1–Expert 3). The final results were then manually categorised, coded, and analysed, which unfolded several themes as presented in the following section.

Research findings

The sacred of "Bà Tổ Cô". According to the Common Vietnamese Dictionary, *Tổ* is considered the ancestor of a family, a clan, and a community since "they belong to the first generation of a family and even a nation which has a link to subsequent generations" (Hoang Phe, 2016, p. 844). This term conveys flexible or fluid meanings concerning social contexts and cultures. It is usually inextricably linked to male ancestors in the patriarchal communities, whereas in the matriarchal society, it refers to women honoured as queens, lords and deities.

Local 9 (75 years old) has been worshipping the Family Goddess for around 40 years, claiming that not all deceased unmarried and young women can be worshipped as the Family Goddess. In addition to what Local 9 shared, Monk 1 and Monk 4, who have been working at Hanoi pagodas, posited that the Family Goddess must be a remarkable "figure" who is primarily invisible to almost all ordinary people. Notably, she must have a link or root with Buddhism to become a Goddess upon being deceased for many years, as Monk 1 indicated:

The Family Goddess is the special and invisible figure in the three realms of existence and reincarnation. Not many people are able to meet and contact her. She often dies at a very young age, experiences no sexual pleasure and desires no materials. Also, she has had a root in Buddhism, which is different from other ordinary people. Some young and unmarried women might become the Family Goddess within five generations or less.

In addition, the analysis of the lyrics of the song as part of the “*Văn châu Tô Cồ*” (text for the Family Goddess) given to Family Goddess clearly illustrates the Family Goddess’s holy status and essential role in the Vietnamese family: (1) She was born holy, (2) She returned to help grandchildren in the lineage, (3) She offered herself to the Holy Trinity, (4) She gave her descendants a warm life throughout their lifetime, (5) When she was at her home, she was in distress, (6) Her descendants lived in peace.

Extending Monk 1’s comments, Teller 2, who has been practising as a fortune-teller for 9 years, emphasised that the Family Goddess had to take some time to work and support Buddha and other holy saints before she was able to return to her family members: “In the first stage, she can stay and support Buddha, other holy saints and subsequently return to the family to provide protection and support. She can meet and talk with her descendants through dreams”. Luong (1989) noted that there was a close connection between ancestor worshipping and the Buddhist religious complex with its notion of cyclical reincarnation. Thus, serving Buddha is an inherent duty. Moreover, this finding is consistent with what Dao Duy Anh explained in his work *A comprehensive history of Vietnamese Culture* (2000)—humans have two parts: the soul and the body. Upon passing away, their soul will leave their body, and they still take care of the living relatives. If there is something harmful or dangerous, their soul will somehow alert or let the children and grandchildren be aware of it.

In addition, there are different definitions of gods and ghosts, who play a crucial role and exert their influences over society. Each spirit corresponds to a specific kind of group in the society (Shih 2010). Gods are deemed “supernatural forces to be worshipped, [they] are believed to be sacred and have extraordinary powers and miracles; thus they can cause disasters or bless living people” (Hoang Phe, 2016, p. 774). By contrast, those ordinary people who are already deceased belong to the afterworld. These people are entitled ghosts (“ma”) who possess some supernatural power. In this case, ghosts are not malevolent and are believed to protect their family members or relatives. Unfortunately, they could harm their descendants if they accidentally pass away in “sacred” hours, days, months, and years. They usually died unsatisfied and held a grudge. They tend to wander around, become angry and even vent their frustration on the living people. In some instances, emotional attachments connect the dead to the living. Some women who died unmarried or committed suicide are likely to become ghosts whom no one takes care of and treats as ancestors (Kendall, 1987). In some religious circles, unmarried women are not invited to weddings, and infertile women are requested to leave the community for fear that the local soil may be barren (Tanaka and Lowry, 2018). From the Buddhist perspective, a ghost/wight is the enemy of Buddhists, and only Buddhists can obliterate them (Hoang Phe, 2016).

The Family Goddess worshipper. In the traditional society, men are responsible for worshipping the Family Goddess in Northern Vietnamese families, just like other forms of ancestor worship (DiGregorio and Oscar, 2007; Szymańska-Matusiewicz, 2013). Also, the traditional Vietnamese family was profoundly impacted by Confucianism and ancestor worship was practised within

patrilineage. The oldest living man of the patrilineage was held responsible for the veneration of the dead, whereas women were excluded (Jellema, 2007a; Szymańska-Matusiewicz, 2013). The patrilineage Leader 2 asserted that:

As the chief of the Dang patrilineage, I take responsibility for worshipping the Family Goddess. Other patrilineage members will join the worship during the first, the mid-month days (Lunar calendar) and other important events. They are supported and guarded by the Family Goddess, and they also know the difficulties and dangers in their dreams to avoid and reduce the harm.

Everyone has a strong link not only in the family: grandparents, parents, brother, sister, husband, wife and children, but also in the patrilineage: uncles, aunts, and their offspring. There are several traditional customs for visiting, funeral organising, worship, and mutual support among different members of the same family and patrilineage. More importantly, ancestor worship and the maintenance of ancestor graves are critical for the family and patrilineage, so people tend to stick with one another, thus shaping a solid bond for generations (Tran, 1989). As a result, Family Goddess is somehow part of the broader spectrum of Vietnamese ancestor worship tradition. The fundamental element of the Family Goddess links to the notion of great debt (*biết ơn*). It is argued that when someone is born, they become indebted to their ancestors, and they need to show their gratitude and pay the debt back. Whilst one’s ancestors, like parents and grandparents, are still alive, settling the debt might take the form of obedience or showing great respect for the elder people (*filial piety-hiếu*). Once they pass away, the debt can be paid by observing specific ancestor worship practices (Szymańska-Matusiewicz, 2013). Since everyone owns the debt, it is worth noting that the Family Goddess worshipping practice is not assigned to any specific male member in the lineage, and any male member could take this duty.

The notion mentioned above is strongly backed by the interview data gathered from Local 1, Local 2, Local 4, Local 7, and Local 10. To be clear, if there are three sons in a family, they will discuss and take up their duties to “look after” ancestors, including the deceased and the Family Goddess. In the case of a family with a sole son, he will be only in charge of the Family Goddess’ worship. In the case of Local 7, who was aged 68 and lived in Bac Ninh province, he shared that in one night he had a dream of his aunt; he immediately made a family altar and then worshipped her:

While sleeping with my wife, I dreamed of my unmarried aunt, who was already deceased for around 20 years. She came and sat next to my bed. She whispered that she would like to stay with my family, and I said yes to her proposal.

Worship beliefs and practices. There is no fixed criterion for the designs of the altar, incense bowls and other practices for the Family Goddess worship. Through our observation, it is clear that the design for the altar as a special place of worship is not identical among families and communities across the Northern Delta region.

Regarding incense bowls, there is no fixed criterion for the location of incense bowls in the household. However, some rules and regulations can be noted as Monk 3 commented: “Many families worship the Family Goddesses alongside the God of the Land, the God of the River and the Tutelary God. It means that every place is managed and governed by specific kinds of God or Deity. So, making incense bowls for the Family Goddess and

No	Place	Number of households	Percentage (%)
1	Separate incense burners on the ancestor altar	27	54
2	The same incense burner on the ancestor altar	16	32
3	Separate altar in the family	3	6
4	In the yard shrine or <i>Khám</i>	4	8
Total		50	100%

Fig. 1 Location of incense bowls for the Family Goddess in the family.

other deities must comply with some local rules and regulations”. According to Fig. 1, incense bowls for the Family Goddess can be at four places, including (1) separate incense burner on the ancestor altar; (2) the incense burner on the ancestor altar; (3) separate altar in the family, and (4) in the yard shrine. Specifically, most of the surveyed families have separate incense bowls on the ancestor altar (54%), followed by having the same incense bowls on the ancestor altar (32%). To specify, some families under the impact of Confucianism will not worship the Family Goddess on the family altar. If the Family Goddess is worshipped on the same family altar, the incense burner is not put at the centre but on the left or right side. It is believed that the centre, as the most solemn place on the altar, is supposed to be given to the ancestor.

In some cases, Leader 2, Leader 3, and Leader 5 confirmed that the incense burner for ancestors and Family Goddess is placed into a similar incense burner in compliance with the local customs to reduce the number of incense bowls on the altar. The proportions of the family having a separate altar in the family and yard shrine (*khám*) are 6% and 8%, respectively. Interestingly, during our fieldwork at the traditional village called *Đường Lâm* (Son Tay, Hanoi), we had opportunities to interview four households having their yard shrine dedicated to the Family Goddess. This phenomenon has become prevalent in some localities like Bac Ninh, Hanoi, and Hung Yen.

In case the Family Goddess had passed away a long time ago, Local 11, Local 16, and Local 19 told us about their experience of worship. In order to make incense bowls for the Family Goddesses, these people come up with local and traditional practices. If the Family Goddess’s name and age are forgotten, male members will ask a local sorcerer (*thầy cúng*) for help. The sorcerer would write a general name and then put it into the incense burner. For instance, if the last name of the Family Goddess is Nguyen, she will be entitled the Goddess of the Nguyen community accordingly.

There are also some regulations for offerings presented to the Family Goddess. Shaman 1, Shaman 3, and Shaman 5 revealed that some kinds of food, including dog meat, duck meat, buffalo meat, carp, garlic, and chilli, are not allowed to be placed on the altar for the Family Goddess as a tradition. This is consistent with the research conducted by Szymańska-Matusiewicz (2013), claiming that various kinds of food, burning paper objects, and money are used to worship the ancestor. Furthermore, Shaman 4 (43 years old), who lives in a traditional village, Kien Hung, Ha Dong, Hanoi, asserted that five worshippers in his village do not offer anything that is meat-related to the Family Goddess because she used to be a Buddhist:

Since the aunt was a follower of Buddhism, she is a vegetarian, and the worshippers will offer meat-free food to her altar.

People do not worship the Family Goddess by her death since the date is possibly not accurate. Instead, she is primarily worshipped on the first and full moon days of the Lunar Calendar months, especially during the Lunar New Year celebrations (Tết). In addition, on the anniversary of other ancestors, the Family Goddess is also invited to join. Strikingly, according to Local 12, Local 13, Local 15, Local 17, Local 18, and Local 20, the death date of Family Goddess is remembered, so she is invited to “enjoy offerings” on her death anniversary alongside other members of the family. Local 18, who is aged 90, emphasised:

Before the death anniversary of my aunt, I go to the village cemetery and then invite her to return and enjoy the offering made by all family members. Sometimes, we see a butterfly coming to us on this day, and we suppose that my aunt turns into a butterfly to join with the family.

Sacred encounters and supports. The sacred dead people do return through different activities and messages that are restricted to the private sphere. They would come in hidden presence, contact in silent words and side with our better selves (Klass and Goss, 1999). There is a strong agreement among Local 14, Local 23, Local 25, Leader 1, and Leader 4 that Family Goddess often protects and defends living members from diseases and unwanted things in their lives. Notably, Expert 1, who has been researching the Vietnamese Goddesses for many years, claimed that different Family Goddesses might be proficient in education, science, fertility and death. Some families have children at school, and those children can be supported and helped by the Family Goddess of education. The Family Goddess has the propensity to support the patrilineage descendants according to her mastery and ability. This is consistent with the icon of *Mazu* (China), who died unmarried and then ascended to heaven. She is the most popular deity in Taiwan, representing safety for seafarers, fertility for females, and divine intervention in familial and individual adversity (Yang, 2004). She is believed to be able to perform many miracles to help and save sailors in distress, and she is recognised as the goddess of the sea (Habkirk and Chang, 2017).

According to the patrilineage Leader 2 and Leader 5, the Family Goddesses are also worshipped not only by her patrilineage but also by the village. The locals think that the Family Goddesses helped the village overcome challenges posed by the pandemic and drought that had happened five years ago in Tu La, Cam Giang, Hai Duong province and Phu Luong, Luong Tai, Bac Ninh province. These Family Goddesses are called in different names according to places of worship as the leaders said:

The Family Goddess is worshipped not only at home but also at the temple, Tu La village. She is called the Village

Goddess at the temple and is then worshipped at the community members' separate altar.

Local 23 (68 years old) told us about his story of his grandson who joined the Vietnam War during 1968–1972 in Buon Ma Thuot battlefield. His grandson was luckily protected and saved by the unmarried aunt as he mentioned:

My nephew and his military team were strictly surrounded by soldiers from the Republic of Vietnam in a village of *Bán Đôn*, Buon Ma Thuot city, and there was subsequently a fierce exchange of fire from both sides. He ran for life and hid next to a pond. While he was hiding for roughly three days, he dreamed of a woman who would guide and take his military team to his place. The dream became true. One morning, he was finally found and saved by other comrades. Upon returning to his village, he told others about his story. Other people commented that he was possibly blessed and safeguarded by his patrilineage's aunt, who died very young and was still a maiden. Upon returning to his family, as the oldest son of the patrilineage, he decided to honour this person as the Family Goddess at Kim Doi village, Cam Hoang commune, Cam Giang district, Hai Duong province.

The Family Goddess is believed to support other living people in developing their careers, thanks to an interview with Local 8 in Hung Yen province. He is working as a carpenter in the village. He stated that he often had conversations with his long-lost aunt about his jobs in his dreams, and he was guided and supported very much by her. Over the years, his career has prospered and grown considerably. Consequently, maintaining regular “contacts” though worshipping her has become a crucial part of his life:

I try to worship and remember my aunt as much as possible since I have owed her a lot. Without her support and guidance, my work would not have been so favourable and profitable.

Regarding education, many students interviewed explained that they have been supported by the Family Goddesses in their studies and exams. For instance, Student 1, who is a sophomore at the University of Science (Hanoi), revealed that she often received generous support from the Family Goddess in her life and her study:

I believe that I was supported by the Family Goddess in passing the university entrance exam and achieving outstanding academic results. Whenever I entered the test room, I felt that a person was pushing and helping me achieve whatever I wanted. My belief was firmly bolstered when I was told about the Family Goddess in my patrilineage at the fortune teller's house.

In addition, the interview conducted with students from a top-notch school—University of Science and Technology (HUST) in Hanoi—affirms that students have received some help from their Family Goddesses. Student 2 confessed:

He often worships and prays to the goddess asking for good things before important events, including university entrance exams and final exams. What he has achieved academically so far is probably blessed by the Family Goddess.

Discussion

This paper aspires to examine the sacred of worshipping Vietnamese goddesses uncovered by a case study of the Family

Goddess in Northern Vietnam. The research findings confirm a tradition for appreciating and worshipping goddesses, which has been long-rooted and crucial to the Vietnamese identity. In fact, many women have played a crucial role in laying the foundation of the independent nation, being at both the front line and the rear to fight against various outnumbering and aggressive foreign invaders in the course of Vietnam's history. Thanks to their contributions, these women have been recognised and worshipped as goddesses (Tran, 2003; Ngo, 2013). In terms of space, there are different places of worship for gods and goddesses in Vietnam, including *Đình*, *Đền*, *Chùa* and *Miếu*. Specifically, *Đình* (communal temple) is constructed to worship local deities like tutelary spirits and other associated deities. *Đền* (temple), which is made for deities of non-orthodox cults, is dedicated to locally deified heroes and figures. *Chùa* (pagoda) is primarily for Buddhists and located in a secluded place. *Miếu* (shrine) is utilised to venerate lower echelons of the pantheon, such as the Earth god, Agriculture god, Water goddess and Fire goddess. There is a wide range of shrines, including *gia miếu* (family chapel), *thế miếu* (generation shrine), *văn miếu* (Confucius shrine) and *y miếu* (medicine shrine). At the cemetery, there might be a place called *miếu cô hồn* (a shrine for forsaken spirits) (Do, 2003). Family Goddesses are primarily worshipped at the family or a smaller number are venerated at village temples, depending on their extent of influence. Some Family Goddesses can be transformed and worshipped as village goddesses in the village temples since they whole-heartedly contributed to the village. As a result, the veneration of Family Goddesses strengthens the position of women in the Vietnamese family.

New policies towards the veneration of goddess stem from the *Đổi Mới* (Reform) in 1986 and have created better conditions for the flourish of ancestor worship forms (Roszko, 2010; Pham and Eipper, 2009). More importantly, recent years have witnessed a so-called “heritagisation” that influences local communities' cultural heritage positively in Vietnam. This process might involve many national and international actors who actively lobby to register these heritages on UNESCO's list (Nguyen, 2021). As a matter of fact, Mother Goddess worship [Đạo Mẫu] was recognised as a UNESCO-certified intangible cultural heritage in 2016. It means that the Mother Goddess worship is placed at a similar level as *Hát Quan họ* (folk song) and *Nhã nhạc cung đình* (traditional royal music). The designation pays more attention to the performance and aesthetics of traditional practices and downplays aspects that can be considered religious content. This protects Mother Goddess worship from being banned for being a superstition (Hoskins and Ninh, 2017). This heritage-making process tends to relegate the religious elements of the worship practice to the background and emphasise its value as a heritage (Cohen, 2020). As a result, Family Goddess worship has been treated as part of Vietnam's intangible cultural heritage.

In parallel with the Family Goddess, there is a deity called “*Ông Mãnh*” in the Vietnamese folk belief. They are often men who died young and unmarried. As recorded through our field trips, he has not been worshipped as much as the Family Goddess in the North of Vietnam. When interviewing the research participants, they acknowledged that *Ông Mãnh* is deemed not as sacred as the Family Goddess. The reality sticks with the profound traditional veneration of mother and goddess (Ngo, 2013; Ngo, 2012). In addition, the Vietnamese pantheon showcases that Spirit Mother *Lieu Hanh* and Spirit Father *Tran Hung Dao* represent supreme rulers, and there is a hierarchy beneath them, including mandarins, ladies, princes, young princesses, and young princes. Among these, young princesses (spiritual *Cô*) and young princes (spiritual *Cậu*) somehow are linked to the Family Goddesses. Specifically, young princesses and princes are considered servants and handmaidens of the Mother Goddesses. Young

princesses are believed to belong to the realm of mountains and forests since they are native to upland regions. Based on this evidence, Ngo Duc Thinh (2018) highlighted that the worship of young princesses and young princes is likely to originate from the veneration of Family Goddesses widely found in the community. It can be deduced that there is an evolution in the image of the ancestral *Bà Tổ Cô* and the ancestral *Ông Mãnh* in the family to the Spiritual *Cô* and the Spiritual *Cậu* in the Four Palaces belief. The co-existence of *Bà Tổ Cô* and *Ông Mãnh*, *Cô* and *Cậu* authentically represent the male/female, father/mother, yang/yin dualisms, which are proved to be prevalent and pervasive in Chinese and Vietnamese culture. In particular, the popularity of female deities, such as *Bà Tổ Cô*, can be attributable to the social circumstances of Vietnamese women and their valorisation as women. This prevalence could also be found in many compound Vietnamese words; for example, *yin* and *yang*, *vợ chồng* (wife and husband), *chẵn lẻ* (even and odd) and *vuông tròn* (square and round). It is apparent that Vietnam's gender dualism entails and encourages complementarity (Pham and Eipper, 2009).

The veneration of the Family Goddess has resulted in a recent transformation in kinship terminology. In theory, family titles are strictly managed and regulated within the paternal and maternal sides. For instance, younger and elder sisters of a man in the paternal family are called "*cô*" (aunt). Therefore, "*cô*" refers to a woman who has the same position as a man in the clan. The titles of members in the paternal and maternal families are "*cô*" - "*cậu*" (older or younger sister of a man in one family's bloodline), "*bác*" - "*chú*" (two brothers in one family's bloodline), and "*già/bá*" "*đì*" (two sisters in one family's bloodline). Regarding the family relationship, there are some informal rules, such as "*Cô cũng như Cha*" (sisters of the father are as important as the father), "*Đì cũng như Mẹ*" (sisters of the mother are as important as the mother). Accordingly, the women with the same position as the men in the paternal family are called "*cô*" (aunt) by his children, no matter if they are younger or older sisters of the men. Unfortunately, the title "*cô*" has not been recently transformed as it used to be. On the one hand, the term "*cô*" is referred to as "*bá*" or "*già*" in the maternal family. On the other hand, this term changes to "*bác*" on the paternal side (Tran, 1989; Ngo, 2013).

Conclusion

By examining various opinions given by the research participants, this paper sheds light on the worship of the Family Goddess. It is evident that Family Goddess worship is situated in a long-established tradition for venerating the Mother and the Goddesses in Vietnam. Through the research findings, there are some significant differences between the Family Goddess and other goddesses. The Family Goddess in the Northern of Vietnam is primarily worshipped within the scale of households, while other goddesses, particularly the Mother goddess, are venerated at the national, provincial, and community levels. Additionally, although showing respect and gratitude to a goddess is common sense, the idea of worshipping this feminine deity might stem from fear first since the Family Goddess's departure from life might entail various forms of hostility.

Overall, family ancestor worship, indubitably, has played a crucial role in the everyday life of many people in the North of Vietnam since it reflects a fundamental Asian philosophy: through various ways, the living can somehow stay connected or link to the dead. In recent years, the worship of the Family Goddess has reflected the exponential changes in both the state governance and the local's attitude towards a kind of Vietnamese intangible cultural heritage. This tradition also suggests something Dang called "community consciousness" (1996). In fact, the cult of worshipping the dead pays homage to the deceased and

the individuals who contribute to the village and the country, thus strengthening national loyalty.

By utilising the concept of sacred, this study illustrates the striking features of the Family Goddess. Unlike national founders and national heroes, the Family Goddess primarily exists in the domestic space. She is only an unmarried young woman who has had a spiritual root before being worshipped as a goddess. By virtue of her sacredness, she is able to contact and help many people in her patrilineage. The particularities in worshippers, beliefs and practices, sacred encounters and supports from the Family Goddess worship have enriched the tradition for Vietnamese ancestral worship. In addition, the relationship between the dead and the living truly reflects the mutual trust and reciprocity between ascendants and descendants (Kanai et al. 2020).

In contemporary Vietnamese society, the belief of ancestor worship in general and the Family Goddess in particular have very much transformed under the impact of growing urbanisation. It is now rare to record the presence of *Bà Tổ cô* on the altar of families living in big cities and peri-urban areas like Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City. This concurs with the opinion of Cox (1999), who uncovered the relationships between the rise of urbanisation and the decline of religion. Also, secularisation refers to an irreversible historical transformation when societies move into the technological age (Cox, 1999). New secular practices such as the privatisation of rituals might be created, and these activities should be regarded as methods for folk religions and beliefs to adapt into the Vietnamese urban contexts (Phan, 2019). On the flip side, the prevalence of Family Goddess worship has still garnered the attention and reverence of those whose lives are attached to the rural regions and agricultural system in Northern Vietnam. As part of Vietnamese intangible cultural heritage and identity, the Family Goddess worship still needs to see a future in which its practice and conservation are conscientiously considered. This adequate attention would correspond with the idea of an "advanced Vietnamese culture imbued with national identity", as the Vietnamese Community Party has repeatedly acknowledged.

Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to the consent agreed with respondents but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

The study was granted exemption from requiring ethics approval. The exemption was provided by the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi. The exemption was provided on the basis that this research uses non-sensitive, completely anonymous interview procedures; the participants are not defined as “vulnerable”, and participation will not induce undue psychological stress or anxiety.

Informed consent

Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants and/or their legal guardians prior to the interview, and the participants have consented to the submission of the case report to the journal.

Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Quang Anh Phan.

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