

Article

The Phenomenon of Presenting and Worshipping Buddha(s) at the Mother Goddess Worship's *Điện thờ Tư gia* in Contemporary Vietnam

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Abstract: The Mother Goddess Worship's (MGW) private shrine—*Điện thờ Mẫu tư gia*—has been a prominent worshipping place of a Vietnamese folk religion; however, it is rarely documented in scholarship in both Vietnamese and English. This paper is based mainly on in-depth interviews and numerous follow-up conversations with sixteen MGW spirit mediums in Hanoi capital city, additionally verified and supported by the authors' field notes. The findings reveal that worshipping Buddha(s) at MGW private shrines is a remarkable phenomenon and becoming common; however, they vary at different levels because of different reasons in which non-religious causes are significantly considered. The absence of worshipping Buddha(s), if there is any, is explained by the problems of lacking space or being in serious spiritual conflicts that cannot be avoided. In those cases, a Buddha(s) altar is often immediately added when the space is improved, and Buddha(s) statues/pictures are still displayed. Furthermore, the continuous blending of MGW—a Vietnamese folk religion—with Buddhism—a world religion—is proved to be not only a way that religious people choose to nurture their faith and seek preferable religious practices but additionally to be flexible to adapt their religion in the modern era. Finally, regarding religious freedom and tolerance, we argue that private shrines are able to be active freely without any control by the government such as they used to be prohibited in the past. In some circumstances, government officers also benefit from services offered by local mediums, even though they might not be MGW followers. Furthermore, mediums' neighbors are friendly to or even enjoy shrines' activities. Such facts show the improvement in religious freedom in Vietnam in recent decades, as well as once again proving the tolerance of the Vietnamese people towards different religions and beliefs.

Keywords: Mother Goddess Worship Private Shrines; Mother Goddess Worship Private Temples; *Điện thờ Mẫu tư gia*; Vietnamese Mother Goddess Worship and Buddhism; Đạo Mẫu và Đạo Phật



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1. Introduction

After being considered “superstitious” and prohibited by the government, the 1986 *Đổi Mới* policy opened a revival era of the Vietnamese folk belief *Tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu* (the Mother Goddess Worship) which is also widely known as *Đạo Mẫu* (the Mother Goddess Religion). Although it is confirmed that a more positive approach to religion in Vietnam has become dominant among Vietnamese scholars recently, particularly in acknowledging its characteristic of being a form of traditional culture and a way of integrally expressing the nation's identity, that approach “leaves little room for an appreciation of elements in religion that are dynamic, innovatory or tied up with changing social relations and global re-engagements.”¹ In contemporary Vietnam, the case of *Đạo Mẫu* and some of its elements can be seen as a typical example of the above statement.

As a matter of fact, the revival era of *Đạo Mẫu* has drawn the increasing attention of both domestic and international scholars to this Vietnamese folk religion. Accordingly, numerous studies on *Đạo Mẫu* have been conducted, mostly following several main approaches. First, many scholars focus on the history of *Đạo Mẫu* and its prominent practice—the spirit mediumship/*lên đồng* ritual—in which the relationship between spirit mediumship and various aspects of Vietnamese culture and society is particularly explored (Đức Thịnh Ngô 1996, 2006, 2010; Hien Thi Nguyen 2002; Karen and Nguyen 2006, 2011; Tu Anh Vu 2006; William B. Noseworthy 2015; Kirsten W Endres 2007, 2011; Mai Ngọc Nguyễn 2013; Vũ and Phạm 2018; Gertrud Hüwelmeier 2018; Trình Thế Cao 2020). Furthermore, some scholars study a specific goddess of the Mother Goddess religion who may play different roles in the Vietnamese folk belief system, such as *Liễu Hạnh* goddess (Olga Dror 2007; Tuấn Quốc Nguyễn 2007; Khánh Ngọc Vũ 2008), *Bà Chúa Xứ* goddess (Philip Taylor 2004; Hữu Hiếu Nguyễn 2017), and *Po Inâ Nâgar* goddess (T.T.V. Nguyễn 2009; William B. Noseworthy 2015). Meanwhile, several scholars pay more attention to specific elements of *Đạo Mẫu*, such as music and gender (Đức Thịnh Ngô 1992; Barley Norton 2018; Thi Thuy Binh Tran 2022).

Although the practice of *Đạo Mẫu* was officially recognized as the world's intangible cultural heritage by The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2016, many aspects of this Vietnamese religion are largely neglected, for instance, one of its major worshipping places called *Điện thờ Mẫu tư gia* (MGW private shrine/private temple). Some scholars mention *Điện thờ Mẫu tư gia* in their work as a way of acknowledging this unique worshipping place of *Đạo Mẫu*; however, they do not provide any details on it (Fjelstad Karen and Nguyen 2006, 2011; Thien-Huong T. Ninh 2017). Even in the latest published articles and monographs, scholars do not include private shrines while naming the various places of worship of *Đạo Mẫu* (Vũ and Phạm 2018; Phúc Hữu Nguyễn 2022)².

To our knowledge, there are only two scholars who study MGW private shrines. First, in addition to her thesis, Lê Thị Chiêng published several papers focusing on different types of private shrines in Vietnam. She discusses the very first MGW private shrines in Vietnam, explains their establishment, and describes how they were restored and significantly developed after being prohibited in Vietnam (Chiêng Thị Lê 2004, 2008, 2010). Meanwhile, Hương Thị Diễm Nguyễn (2018) studied the activities of MGW private shrines in a district of *Vĩnh Phúc* province for her thesis; however, she focuses on explaining the establishment and development of local shrines, understanding the relationship between the shrines' owners with their disciples and with local authorities, and the impact of those shrines on the community's cultural life. Both Lê and Nguyễn do not provide a comprehensive analysis of the religious beliefs and practices of the owners and their disciples at MGW private shrines in their surveyed regions.

Noticeably, recent years have witnessed a widespread phenomenon of worshipping Buddha(s) at MGW private shrines in Vietnam. Although the mutual impact between MGW and Buddhism has been recorded for centuries, the relationship between MGW and Buddhism is not intensively researched. In his 2016 unpublished thesis on the relationship between Buddhism and the Vietnamese folk belief system, the monk Châu Minh Đăng—Buddhist name *Thích Bảo Nghiêm*—only describes how Buddhism affects traditional Vietnamese festivals and how folk belief generally affects some rituals at Buddhist temples³. Other scholars, if they discuss the relationship between Buddhism and MGW, only pay attention to myths and stories presenting the interaction between these two religions in history (T.H. Nguyễn 2009; Chung Văn Vũ 2018).

It is obvious that there is no research conducted by Vietnamese and international scholars on the recent phenomenon of worshipping Buddha(s) at MGW private shrines that we mentioned above. Such Buddhism involvement is believed to occur lately and has become increasingly common. Therefore, our study aims to provide initial findings to understand the reasons behind this and explain complicated moves within defined communities, including MGW mediums who are caretakers of private shrines and their

disciples. Voices of Buddhist monks who also practice spirit mediumship are taken into consideration to shed light on religious changes in those shrines.

Structurally, our paper starts by giving basic information on the methods and research participants. This is followed by a part with a detailed explanation of the terms of *điện thờ tư gia* and *điện thờ Mẫu tư gia*, which English readers may sometimes encounter as *private shrine* or *private temple* of the Mother Goddess religion. Finally, a larger portion is dedicated to providing a comprehensive understanding of the Buddhism involvement in MGW private shrines in contemporary Vietnam, focusing on those in Hanoi capital city, which belongs to the birthplace region of this folk religion. In the final section, we offer an overview of the interaction between MGW and Buddhism in history, which is the foundation for modern Buddhist practices at private shrines. Further, three main types of private shrines related to ‘worshipping Buddha(s) or not’ will be particularly discussed. This paper will be concluded with a further discussion of some key insights that our research reveals.

2. Methods and Participants

According to our observations and the numerous conversations that we have had with MGW mediums since the early 2000s, most MGW private shrines used to not have a Buddha(s) altar; however, the phenomenon of worshipping Buddha(s) has been widespread recently. Therefore, we decided to investigate that phenomenon in 2019 with the main research question of “*How and Why do MGW mediums and disciples worship Buddhas at private shrines?*”. To not take other cases for granted, we also attempt to give an answer to the question “*In case a medium and his/her disciples at a private shrine do not worship Buddha(s), then why?*”.

Such as most other religious groups in Vietnam, it is not easy to approach and obtain valid information from shrines’ owners and their disciples by sending questionnaires. We, in fact, attempted to ask twenty participants to answer a questionnaire; however, the result was not positive. In addition, the Vietnamese people, generally, are not familiar with scientific research that takes them as the main participants and requires them to share their information. A research interview is somehow considered to be similar to being investigated by police officers, which usually reminds people of someone being accused and/or arrested as it has happened in the country. On the other hand, religious people, in particular, often find it strange and dangerous if they are suddenly approached and asked about their religion, especially due to the circumstance that the Mother Goddess Worship used to be considered “superstitious” and seriously banned in the past. Thus, we mainly applied qualitative design to collect data as if rapport and trust were established; it was less difficult to gather participants’ answers.

Generally, this research is based on in-depth interviews and numerous follow-up conversations with fifteen participants who are mediums taking care of their MGW private shrines. Two Buddhist monks, who are additionally MGW mediums, were on the interview list; however, we only could approach one, counted as the sixteenth contributor. The participants’ locations are in nine districts of Hanoi capital city (*Hoàn Kiếm, Tây Hồ, Hoàng Mai, Cầu Giấy, Hai Bà Trưng, Thanh Xuân, Hà Đông, Ba Vì, and Sóc Sơn*)⁴.

Regarding their gender, except for the monk there were four female and eleven male mediums, either in marriage with or without child/children or single. As a matter of fact, in the early period, MGW mediums were mainly women⁵. However, the number of male mediums has dramatically increased in both quantity and leadership positions in recent decades. For instance, Barney Norton (2018) reports, “By contrast with the comparatively large number of male mediums who preside over public temples, most female mediums construct private temples in their homes”⁶. Noticeably, while female mediums are said to tend to their own private temples, our data set reveals that the male mediums generate a much higher proportion among private shrine owners even though we, in fact, did not plan in advance regarding our participants’ gender.

In addition, occupation varies among mediums: freelancer, lawyer, lecturer, teacher, businessman, former government worker, and student. Mediums are also in different age

ranges: the youngest one started to serve the spirits (*hầu thánh*, also known as *serve the deities*)⁷ at eight and opened a private shrine at fifteen, and the oldest opened the shrine at forty one after nine years of serving the spirits.

Most of the in-depth interviews lasted one or two hours, excluding rapport time, such as café time and lunchtime with those whom we recently knew. For mediums with whom we have long-term relationships, the notes used for the research have been mainly taken from meetings we have had with them in the past years. Sometimes researchers were not allowed to record the interview. In those cases, notes were only taken for data coding. Generally, in-field interviews were followed up by private communications, mainly through another visit, a phone call, and/or chat.

In the process of collecting data, some of the participants refused to share their thoughts and gave irrelevant and/or invalid information. They neither allowed photographing nor videoing. For instance, when we visited medium S. (male; age 45; *Thanh Xuân* district), he spoke around the topic and ignored our questions. We only obtained scant information, and we then decided to leave after half an hour.

In terms of verifying the data, the technique of cross-checking was principally employed among the private shrines' owners, particularly regarding the emerging information that was not included in the research plan at the beginning. Furthermore, as mentioned, even though two Buddhist monks who were also mediums did not have a private shrine, their opinions were taken as comparative data. Lastly, disciples sometimes participated in the verifying process; however, if they could listen to the interview, they tended to agree with their medium. Whenever we had a chance, we tried to ask the disciples about their thoughts on and expectations for worshipping Buddhas at MGW private shrines.

Table 1. Key Research Participants.

No.	Title, Name	Age	Gender	Location (District)	Age of Serving as Medium/ Age of Opening Shrine
1	Medium A	31	M	Cầu Giấy	N/A
2	Medium B	57	M	Ba Vì	30/41
3	Medium D	30	M	Thanh Xuân	15/15
4	Medium G	21	M	Sóc Sơn	8/ 15
5	Medium H	59	M	Hai Bà Trưng	N/A
6	Medium K	34	M	Tây Hồ	N/A
7	Medium L	30	M	Tây Hồ	19/25
8	Medium M	28	M	Cầu Giấy	13/18
9	Medium N	24	M	Thanh Xuân	19/19
10	Medium O	50	F	Thanh Xuân	N/A
11	Medium P	53	F	Hà Đông	30/30
12	Medium S	45	M	Thanh Xuân	N/A
13	Medium T	16	M	Thanh Xuân	10/15
14	Medium V	55	F	Cầu Giấy	20/30
15	Medium Y	63	F	Hoàn Kiếm	N/A
16	Monk H	43	M	Hoàn Kiếm	not open

Note: All names are pseudonyms. Following the participants' wishes, some information is not published to protect their privacy.

3. “Điện thờ Mẫu tư gia”: A Unique Worshipping Place of the Vietnamese Mother Goddess Worship

Điện thờ tư gia. *Điện thờ* is usually translated as *shrine* or *temple*, and *tư gia* refers to activities that take place at a private house. Most scholars employ *private shrine* or *private temple* to refer to *điện thờ tư gia*. To avoid confusion with the *Buddhist temple* in this paper, we use *private shrine* more often.

In the literature, only Lê Thị Chiêng published several papers on the private shrine. Although we are not completely convinced by all of her viewpoints, neither did we have opportunities to research ourselves; therefore, it is essential to take her explanation of private shrines for consideration. According to Lê (2008), a private shrine is a worshipping place that is private and located within a household yet has a particular social impact. Such impact was created because some people trust the owners of the shrines and go there to practice religious rituals as in public worshipping places. She claims that approximately forty years ago⁸, the phenomenon of crowds going to private shrines to worship did not exist. Its emergence, Lê suggests, is due to several reasons. First, the slogan ‘Save yourself’ (*Hãy tự cứu lấy mình*) of the former General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party Nguyễn Văn Linh has positively encouraged the Vietnamese people to nurture their ‘self-awareness.’ Therefore, people started looking for new elements that could help them have a better life while the whole country had numerous difficulties in the 1970s and 1980s after wars. Additionally, being in the transition from a subsidized regime (*chế độ bao cấp*) to saving themselves, most people of all classes became more vulnerable and disoriented. Thus, they had to seek new spiritual support that created room for religions, such as the Mother Goddess Worship and its private shrines, to develop⁹.

Based on Lê’s analysis, private shrines in Vietnam are generally classified into five categories, devoted to the worship of Buddhas, Mother Goddesses, saint *Trần Hưng Đạo*, National Heroes, and *Thiên Đình* (Heaven), respectively¹⁰. In this paper, we will discuss a specific type dedicated to the worship of Mother Goddesses called *Điện thờ Mẫu tư gia* (The Mother Goddess Worship’s private shrine/ MGW private shrine).

Điện thờ Mẫu tư gia. In fact, *Mẫu* literally means *Mother* and *Thánh Mẫu* means *Mother Goddess*; however, *Mẫu* with a capital M in many cases additionally refers to *Thánh Mẫu*. As noted, there are several terms used interchangeably by scholars when it comes to this Vietnamese folk religion, such as *Tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu* (the Mother Goddess Worship), *Tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu Tam Tứ phủ* (the Mother Goddess Worship of the Three and Four Realms), *Đạo Mẫu* (Mother Goddess Religion), and *Đạo Tứ Phủ* (Four Palaces Religion). There is also no agreement on these terms among Vietnamese scholars. For instance, some think that it is a *belief* instead of a *religion* and vice versa. Throughout our field research, all of our participants mentioned this particular religion as either *Tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu* (the Mother Goddess Worship) or *Tín ngưỡng Tam Tứ phủ* (Three and Four Palaces Belief). Therefore, we would prefer to keep these two terms in this paper to respect the studied context.

MGW is believed to be established in approximately the 13th century to the 16th century¹¹, rooted in the Vietnamese traditional worship of female spirits (*tục thờ nữ thần*). The ancient Vietnamese people feminized (*nữ tính hoá*) a variety of nature gods and worshipped them, such as the sun goddess, moon goddess, Earth Mother, Water Mother, and Rice Mother, five elements (*Bà Ngũ hành*) which are Lady Metal, Lady Wood, Lady Water, Lady Fire, and Lady Earth, and so on. Later on, in a more organized way, they mainly worshipped the Four Mother Goddesses, which are *Mẫu Thượng Thiên* (the Mother of Heaven; Goddess *Liễu Hạnh*), *Mẫu Thượng Ngàn* (the Mother of Mountains and Forests), *Mẫu Thoải* (the Mother of Water), and *Mẫu Địa* (the Mother of Earth). Now, the religious figures of the Mother Goddess Worship are not limited to these Mother Goddesses. It instead has a system of legendary and real historical figures being worshipped in a hierarchy, taking *Liễu Hạnh* Goddess as the supreme God¹².

Regarding the very first MGW private shrines appearing in Vietnam, although numerous articles and books mention *điện thờ Mẫu tư gia*, private shrine, or private temple, there is no comprehensive research revealing its birth time, development, and the characteristics of

its contemporary form¹³. According to Thị Chiềng Lê (2004), the first MGW private shrines were established in approximately the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries¹⁴. However, most of the shrines were removed by the government at the time Vietnam aimed to build “a new culture” (*xây dựng nền văn hoá mới*). MGW was considered to be superstitious; thus, any practices related to that belief were prohibited. By the end of the 1970s, most MGW private shrines had stopped being active, and a few were secretly active to avoid being caught by the government. Since the early 1980s¹⁵, Vietnam has started to restore religious practices, including the activities of MGW private shrines. Numerous new shrines were then opened and have significantly developed, especially in North Delta’s provinces such as Hanoi capital city, Hà Tây, Hải Phòng, Nam Định, and Thái Bình¹⁶.

Additionally, a couple of participants in our study revealed that they inherited the shrines from their ancestors, which have lasted for several generations or hundreds of years. Those heirs are called *đồng nối tự*. In fact, the person who inherited a shrine from his/her family also needs to have a heavy fate (*căn cao số nặng*) to be a medium and to be able to receive the spirits’ message (*chỉ bảo của thánh*); this is so that s/he can be a caretaker/owner of the shrine. In case s/he does not have those signs, s/he only continues to take care of the shrine by doing normal work such as cleaning up and burning incense (*trông nom việc hương khói*) without being involved in any spirit mediumship or spiritual services such as fortune-telling or *yin*¹⁷ illnesses healing. Even though five out of the fifteen participants of this research inherited the shrines from their family, it is reported that such *đồng nối tự* today are truly rare, such as the case in a district of Vĩnh Phúc, a province in the Red River Delta of northern Vietnam¹⁸.

Mediums. The owner (*thủ điện*/shrine caretaker) of an MGW private shrine is a medium, either male or female (*ông đồng/bà đồng*). Mediums are those who have *căn cao số nặng* (heavy fate) and have already completed the ritual *trình đồng mở phủ* (being initiated as a medium). In the belief of the Mother Goddess Worship, everyone is born with a specific *căn số* (fate), and each *căn* belongs to one of four Palaces. Those with a high fate have to serve the spirits (*hầu thánh*). There are several of the most visible signs, although not limited to, of those who *have to* serve the spirits: (1) The person has clumped hair that cannot be combed out¹⁹. If s/he tries to cut that clumped hair, s/he would be sick to death; (2) having a mental illness (*bị điên/insanity/yin illness*) or falling into spontaneous ecstasy for no apparent reason; (3) contracting a medically incurable sickness. Those people who have such signs will become completely normal after they undertake the *trình đồng mở phủ* ritual²⁰. In some cases, the soon-to-be-mediums receive the spirits’ message while they are attending a *hầu đồng* ritual. Such a phenomenon is called “*bị bắt đồng*” (being “seized” by the spirit as a medium/being “chosen” to become a medium). When the ritual ends, they have to return to their home and prepare for the *trình đồng mở phủ* ritual to become a medium officially. Mediums are able to perform spirit possession through a spirit mediumship ritual, the prominent practice of MGW.

However, it is worth noting that only mediums who receive the spirits’ message will need to open a private shrine. Some people who prefer to open an MGW private shrine except they do not have such a message might need to be gifted with several unique talents, such as fortune-telling²¹. Additionally, any beginning medium needs a medium master (*đồng thầy*) to be guided in setting up and running the shrine at the start²².

4. Buddhism Involvement: The Recent Religious Changes at *Điện thờ Tư gia* in Contemporary Vietnam

In order to extensively explore the phenomenon of worshipping Buddha(s) at MGW private shrines, we will first provide an overview of the relationship between MGW and Buddhism. Sections of detailed description and an explanation of the phenomenon follow.

The Mother Goddess Worship and Buddhism. First, it is essential to clarify *Buddhism* and *Buddhas*, which are mentioned in most parts of this paper. In fact, Buddhism was introduced to Vietnam in approximately the 2nd century BCE, existing in two main forms: Mahayana and Theravada. While Theravada Buddhism is rarely observed to interact

with the Mother Goddess Worship in the research site in particular and in other parts of Vietnam in general, Buddhism mentioned in this research refers to Mahayana Buddhism. Additionally, *Buddhas* does not refer to Gautama Buddha (*Phật Thích Ca*) only; the term is defined in plural forms mentioning Gautama Buddha, some other Buddhas, and some other bodhisattvas such as Amitabha Buddha (*Phật A-Di-Đà*), GuanYin Buddha (*Phật Bà Quan Âm*), Stratum Bodhisattva (*Địa Tạng Vương Bồ Tát*), and Thousand-armed and Thousand-eyed Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva (*Phật Thiên thủ Thiên nhãn*). Among Buddhas, GuanYin Buddha is most seen to be worshipped at MGW private shrines²³. Our participants explained that as this folk religion mainly worships the Mother Goddesses, it tends to worship female Buddhas instead of male Buddhas because female Goddesses and female Buddhas might find it much easier to “sit together” (*ngồi cùng với nhau*)²⁴. In this article, Buddha with an (s)—Buddha(s)—is used in the general discussion to not be limited to one specific Buddha. In any particular case, the name of the Buddha will be pointed out²⁵.

As a matter of fact, the presence of Buddhism in different worshipping places of the Mother Goddess Worship has been confirmed for centuries. One of the very first legends, which is considered to be the starting point of the interaction between MGW and Buddhism, is about the conversion to Buddhism of *Liễu Hạnh* Mother Goddess (*Mẫu Liễu Hạnh*). *Liễu Hạnh* is believed to be the daughter of the Jade Emperor, and she was reincarnated as a human living in the earthly world in approximately the 16th century. In a battle with Taoist priests, *Liễu Hạnh* fell into a trap and then was saved by GuanYin Buddha, which eventually caused her to be a Buddhist²⁶. Accordingly, numerous Mother Goddesses and spirits of the MGW are found to be worshipped at Buddhist temples, and vice versa, Buddhas are worshipped at different worshipping places of MGW, mainly at palaces and temples. Historically, Durand reveals that a *lễ cầu an* (praying ceremony for peace) at *Vũ Thạc* temple in Hanoi in 1949 already practiced worshipping Buddha(s), reading out Buddhist scriptures, and worshipping Four Palaces’ spirits at the same time²⁷. In modern times, Vũ and Phạm even claim that most Buddhist temples in northern Vietnam have a particular space for worshipping Mother Goddesses²⁸. Nevertheless, worshipping Buddha(s) at the private shrines of MGW has not been reported until recently²⁹.

In general, the blending of MGW and Buddhism in religious practices has existed in Vietnam for a long time. This fact proves that in the belief of the Vietnamese people, either MGW followers or Buddhists, MGW and Buddhism are somewhat considered to exist in one religious system without conflict³⁰. However, MGW private shrines used to not worship Buddha(s); nevertheless, now Buddhism involvement in those shrines is becoming more and more common. This phenomenon might reflect certain changes in belief and practices among MGW mediums and their disciples, the two main groups engaging in activities of private shrines on a regular basis.

Buddhism Involvement in Mother Goddess Worship’s Private Shrines Today. To date, only two Vietnamese scholars have mentioned MGW private shrines that worship Buddha(s) in their studies. However, the establishment time and development of those shrines as well as the beliefs and practices of the shrines’ caretakers and their disciples are mainly untold. While our latest published paper presented several observable characteristics of MGW private shrines in Hanoi, mentioning the fact that some of the shrines started to worship Buddha(s) (See [Nguyễn 2022](#)), this paper will go further by exploring the phenomenon based on participants’ narratives and thoughts and discussing related matters in contemporary Vietnam.

Following the research question noted earlier, our study suggests that MGW private shrines can be classified into three types when it comes to *whether or not they have a Buddha(s) altar*, which are as follows: Setting Up a Buddha(s) Altar Right After Opening the Shrine, Setting Up a Buddha(s) Altar Additionally, and Having No Buddha(s) Altar. The last type will be mentioned in a discussion on the former types.

4.1. Setting Up a Buddha(s) Altar Right after Opening the Shrine

Although mediums who own the shrines that worshipped Buddha(s) from the beginning have different narratives, they share the similarity of *special encounters with Buddhism*. They used to be a novice monk (*chú tiểu*) at a Buddhist temple, have a close relationship with Buddhist monks, and/or be exceptionally given pictures of Buddha(s) for particular reasons.

When medium D. (male; age 30; *Thanh Xuân* district) was a child, because of some health problems, his mother sent him to his grandmother's house in a rural area of *Mỹ Đức* district³¹ where the *Hương* temple (*chùa Hương*) is located. Growing up with his grandmother, he was often taken to the temple that gave him a chance to meet Buddhist monks, learn Buddha scriptures, and be taught the *Nôm*³². By the age of five, D. felt his heavy fate to serve the spirits but did not officially practice *hầu đồng* until he was fifteen. In 2006, D. opened his own shrine and set up a Buddha altar by that time. Instead of placing a Buddha statue, he hung the pictures of Buddha that were given to him by the *Hương* temple monks when he was a child.

Similarly, medium N. (male; age 24; *Thanh Xuân* district) had a special connection with a Buddhist temple when he was a child. Different from D., who only lived nearby a temple, N. was a novice monk living within a temple throughout his childhood. N., in fact, got special signs showing that he had a heavy fate when he was four years old. Thus, he started to practice *hầu đồng nổi*³³ at the age of seven. Instead of asking for help from a medium master such as other beginning mediums, N. asked a Buddhist monk to guide him in opening his own private shrine in 2016. In fact, he felt a special connection with the monk after continuously having the same dreams for a month in which the monk always appeared to support him. It should be noted that the Buddhist monk is also an MGW medium who practices spirit mediumship³⁴. Accordingly, there was a Buddha(s) altar at N.'s shrine by the time it was opened.

Meanwhile, medium M. (male; age 28; *Cầu Giấy* district) did not spend his childhood at a Buddhist temple; however, he had a close relationship with Buddhist monks and often visited many temples where he was exceptionally given a couple of Buddha statues. In fact, M.'s mother is also a medium; however, she has not opened any shrine. Although M. was not a *đồng nổi tự*, his mother had supported him in his beginning period of serving the spirits since 2005. In 2010, he opened a private shrine under the guidance of a medium master. By that time, a Buddha(s) altar was set up, and those Buddha statues mentioned were placed at the shrine. M. shares that he invited Buddhist monks to perform a ceremony to sanctify all of the Buddha statues at his shrine, which is called *Lễ Khai quang An vị*.

Obviously, the special encounters with Buddhism, particularly at early ages, led MGW mediums to worship Buddha(s) at their private shrines right after the shrines were opened. Such a visible sign is not tricky for mediums to describe precisely in words; however, invisible reasons are actually much more commonly mentioned. Medium V. (female; age 55; *Cầu Giấy* district) began to practice spirit mediumship when she was 20. She then opened her private shrine having a Buddha(s) altar at the age of 30. V. shares it was due to her own personal belief in her fate, not because of anyone, such as a master medium, telling her to do so³⁵. In many other cases, *căn thờ Phật* (the heavy fate of worshipping Buddha(s)) is the keyword that mediums use to explain why they and their disciples worship Buddha(s).

Căn thờ Phật. As mentioned earlier, a person who has a heavy fate of serving the spirits will become a medium. Similarly, the heavy fate of worshipping Buddha(s) decides whether or not a medium has to follow Buddhism and practice that religion. Accordingly, many participants believe that if a medium does not worship Buddha(s) at his/her shrine, it does not mean s/he violates the MGW rules (*thờ lỗi*). Fate is not something someone can decide by him/herself; thus, it does not reflect someone's piety and religious ethics. Such reason also explains why having a Buddha(s) altar at an MGW private shrine is not mandatory³⁶. However, there are still conflicting opinions among mediums on this matter, which we will discuss later in this paper.

Duyên thờ Phật. In other cases, mediums take the concept of *duyên* (karmic connection) to explain the phenomenon of worshipping Buddha(s) at MGW private shrines. Such as the *căn*—a concept often used among MGW practitioners—*duyên* also decides many essential factors of what a medium does in real life. The case of medium O. (female; age 50; *Thanh Xuân* district) is an example. She self-claims that she has *duyên* in both following Buddha(s) and worshipping the mother goddesses, so she practices both MGW and Buddhism³⁷. Originally, *duyên* is a Buddhist concept. In Vietnam, it is common for people to use *duyên* equivalently to *căn*. *Căn duyên* is even used as one unified term. Such usages also reflect the belief of the Vietnamese people in both MGW and Buddhism that they are not conflicting principally. Having this belief, in fact, is mainly thanks to the historical interaction and mutual influence between MGW and Buddhism in the country.

Both *căn* and *duyên* imply the destiny of mediums to or not to worship Buddha(s). Even though it is not easy to describe those abstract concepts, some mediums reveal that they feel about their *căn duyên* such as the ways children know who their parents are and where their home is³⁸. Such energy, for them, is easily realized. In the case of medium D., when he first went to *Hương* temple, a monk there even affirmed that D. was given a name with its own special meaning by Buddha(s). At the age of 15, he met a fortune teller in a forest in *Vĩnh Phúc* province who told him exactly what had happened to him when he was a child. The fortune teller even was able to tell him that, for some reason, he recently often woke up at midnight to write some *Nho*. The fortune teller did not know D.; however, her surprising words strengthened D.'s belief in his heavy fate of becoming a medium.

Likewise, medium N. shared that when he was only three months old, he only stopped crying if adults carried him up and down three times when walking by any temples or shrines. These three times being hung up and down are equal to three times prostrating in the Buddhist tradition, which are as follows: once to the Buddha, once to the Dhamma, and once to the Sangha³⁹. Obviously, these phenomena that happened in the lives of mediums are hard to explain with scientific evidence. Thus, *căn duyên* in their beliefs is difficult to refute.

Besides the personal encounters with Buddhism among mediums and their own heavy fate, another main reason accounting for the presence of Buddha(s) altars at MGW private shrines is the guidance of the medium master (*đồng thầy*).

As noted, any “chosen” mediums need the help of a medium master to open his/her own private shrine. In fact, the soon-to-be mediums do not randomly choose or prefer a master; instead, they realize their master through some special spiritual signs such as in the case of N. mentioned once before. N. met his potential medium master when he joined the spirit mediumship that a Buddhist monk conducted. After meeting the monk and supporting him throughout the ritual, he felt a particular connection with him and continuously dreamed of his supernatural power. N. then decided to meet the monk and asked the monk to be his master. However, he was rejected because the monk did not want to enter into any scandal (*tai tiếng*) involving the mediums' work as he was a Buddhist monk. N. did not give up convincing the monk after he received special spiritual messages about his master, which is very important to soon-to-be mediums. He eventually obtained acceptance after a period of time of being rejected and started to open his shrine with the guidance of his medium master-monk in August 2016⁴⁰.

Accordingly, with such a sacred mission and predestined role of a medium master, beginning mediums need to follow the guidance of their destined master strictly. If they do not follow their masters, they believe they might enter into some *yin* troubles. Thus, a medium master also plays the deciding role in the new shrine's structure and religious practices.

It is worth noting that as well as the factors of *căn duyên*, the guidance of the medium master is also cause for ‘not worshipping Buddha(s) at private shrines when they were opened.’ However, most of the studied shrines installed a Buddha(s) altar or displayed Buddha(s) statues and/or pictures lately; we will focus on explaining such change in the section below. In addition, it should be highlighted that no single reason leads to a decision;

mediums admitted to more than one of the reasons mentioned, at least, to explain their religious practices.

4.2. Setting Up Buddha(s) Altar/Statues/Pictures Additionally

It is interesting that recently the caretakers who owned no-Buddha(s)-altar shrines started to add one after being active for a period of time. As noted, they did not worship or display Buddha(s) statues and/or pictures in the beginning due to their *căn duyên* and the guidance of their medium master. Additionally, our study finds that some of them just followed their family tradition because they inherited the shrines from their previous generations who did not worship Buddha(s)⁴¹. In terms of *why did they change their mind recently*, the narratives collected suggest that there are several major reasons as well as the following concerns raised:

Sacred Calling and Its Concern. Without an exception, worshipping Buddha(s) at MGW private shrines in any period, including ‘after the shrines were opened for a while’, is explained with *căn duyên*. This reason has its religious meaning that a sacred feeling and/or experience leads them to worship Buddha(s). However, some participants have the concern that if the *căn duyên* is dramatically changed after a period of time a medium has served the spirits, it might not be an actual *căn duyên*, instead changes in his/her own perception⁴². Such a circumstance happened with medium P. (female; age 53; Hà Đông district). P. opened the shrine in 2004 without Buddha altar(s), saying that she only served the spirits and did not have *căn* to worship Buddha(s). Later on, *căn* was again used by her to explain why a Buddha altar was added in 2011 when she repaired the shrine. P. simply said that she now had both the *căn* of serving spirits and worshipping Buddha(s)⁴³. In those cases, the *căn* is taken as a reason without any convincing explanation; however, it is, in fact, about the individual sacred experience that no one can judge.

Supernatural power of Buddha(s). The supernatural power of Buddha(s) in controlling the peace of the earthly world is particularly considered among MGW private shrines’ owners. The reason is that “if a private shrine does not have the presence of Buddha(s), then wandering souls (*chúng sinh*) will come in and rebel. They are very fierce. Although they do not follow, but they are very afraid of Buddha(s). Thus, after a period of time worshipping, people⁴⁴ are aware of such threat posed by wandering souls, they start to set up an altar to worship Buddha(s)”⁴⁵. In fact, many Vietnamese people hold similar beliefs about the threat posed by wandering souls to human lives. Therefore, they make an effort to prevent such an effect by seeking help from deities, such as Buddha(s) in the case of the shrines’ caretakers.

Non-Religious Causes. Instead of receiving any sacred message, some mediums decide to worship Buddha(s) at their private shrines because of their personal preferences due to their *personal growth*. While medium B. (male; age 57; Ba Vì district) shares that he was determined to place a Buddha statue when he remodeled his shrine after he learned more about the Vietnamese *Tam giáo* (Three Teachings) tradition, medium L. (male; age 30; Tây Hồ district) considers having a Buddha(s) altar at his shrine as a reminder for him to control his thoughts and behaviors.

Furthermore, *social and interpersonal influence* is also claimed to be one of the causes explaining additionally setting up Buddha(s) altars at MGW private shrines. Normally, a beginning medium might follow his/her master medium in structuring the shrine; however, some mediums still place an altar to worship Buddha(s) later even though it is not their master medium’s initial guidance. Based on the experience with his network, medium M. (Cầu Giấy district) explained that many mediums realized that it was indispensable to worship Buddha(s) before Mother Goddesses after years of having chances to attend numerous MGW rituals in different parts of the country. Additionally, some mediums may meet a fortune-teller who suggests they worship Buddha(s) in order to run a private shrine properly⁴⁶.

Meanwhile, medium H. (male; age 59) in Hai Bà Trưng district and medium P. in Hà Đông district decided to add a Buddha(s) altar because of their disciples’ need. The

disciples share that they feel safer and more relieved while being able to worship both Mother Goddesses and Buddha(s) at the same time at MGW private shrines. At this point, it is noticeable that P. has more than one reason to worship Buddha(s), which is not only about the *căn* she claimed but additionally to satisfy her disciples. In fact, P. only shared with us about her disciples' needs after we were closer.

It is noteworthy that at several private shrines, Buddha(s) statues and pictures are not displayed for worshipping purposes. Medium G. (male; age 21; *Sóc Sơn* district) admitted that by adding a Guanyin Buddha statue to his shrine, he felt much more relieved to focus on serving MGW spirits even though the statue had no *cốt yểm tâm*. In G.'s case, 'statue without *cốt yểm tâm*' means that it was placed at the shrine without being sanctified, and it was similar to other ordinary statues used for decoration. Similarly, the Buddha(s) statues and pictures displayed at the private shrines of medium L. in *Tây Hồ* district and medium B. in *Ba Vì* district were also not sanctified. They are either souvenirs brought home from travel trips or goods that were bought elsewhere⁴⁷.

A question raised is, "Why do those mediums display Buddha(s)' statues/pictures at their shrines but not for worshipping?" On the one hand, our participants shared that Buddha(s) statues and/or pictures made them feel right while worshipping Mother Goddesses. On the other hand, we find it very interesting that those studied shrines' mediums do not worship Buddha not because they do not believe in Buddha(s); conversely, it is because they are training ghost soldiers (*luyện âm binh*) at their shrines. To be specific, medium A. (male; age 31; *Cầu Giấy*) believes that if an MGW private shrine's owner raises and trains ghost soldiers and asks them to work on *yin* matters, s/he will not worship Buddha(s) because these two activities are the opposite⁴⁸ of each other. Giving a more detailed explanation, medium G. revealed that *bùa chú* (incantation) is used to force ghost soldiers to work to the mediums' will, either good or bad wills. Such activity does not follow the Buddhist teachings on *từ bi cứu khổ cứu nạn* (being compassionate and saving humans from distress and misfortune), and using commands to force ghost soldiers to work for humans' intentions are not Buddhist principles. Therefore, if a medium trains ghost soldiers and s/he also worships Buddha(s), s/he will experience harmful consequences of the training activity, or s/he will even lose all their ghost soldiers. Interestingly, G. told us that he knew only one medium who did both; however, the Buddha altar was placed in another area separate from the altar used for training ghost soldiers, even though both altars were in shared land. Even for mediums such as G., it is surprising that a medium is able to train ghost soldiers very well although s/he still worships Buddha(s) at his/her shrine⁴⁹.

Furthermore, it is seen that the shrines which only use decorative Buddha(s) statues and pictures and do not worship Buddha(s) worship at least one ethnic minority mother goddess. For instance, medium L. worships *Lê Mại Đại Vương*, a Mountain and Forest Mother Goddess. L. shares that the goddess is his ancestor (*tổ cô*) who lived in *Thanh Hoá* province. In fact, his shrine is one among three shrines worshipping that *tổ cô* (one is in Laos, and one is in Kon Tum province now due to migration)⁵⁰, and it can be said that *Lê Mại Đại Vương* has become a recognized goddess, at least within her family line⁵¹. In the case of medium B., he worships *Tân Viên Sơn Thánh* (the God of the *Ba Vì* mountain range who is one of the Four Immortals in traditional Vietnamese mythology) and his mother named *Đinh Thị Đen*; Four *Sơn Lâm* (Forests and Mountains, additionally known as *Sơn Trang*) are mother goddesses who are the *Mường* goddess, *Man* goddess, *Mán* goddess, and *Nùng* goddess⁵². Not exceptionally, the shrine of G. also worships the *Nùng* goddess, and the shrine belongs to the *Sơn Lâm* branch. All these examples indicate that if a private shrine displays Buddha(s) statues/pictures but does not worship them, it is more likely dedicated to mainly worshipping ethnic minorities' goddesses, possibly belonging to the *Sơn Lâm/Sơn Trang* branch.

Although we were not able to procure any obvious explanations from mediums, we suggest that worshipping ethnic minorities' goddesses is particularly related to training ghost soldiers' activities. To be precise, in Vietnam, it is common knowledge that ethnic minorities are very famous for their efficient use of *bùa chú*. Such a fact might reflect a

belief that *Sơn Lâm/Sơn Trang* goddesses are powerful in training ghost soldiers, including using *bùa chú*. Accordingly, similar to our interviewed mediums, in general, mediums who worship *Sơn Lâm/Sơn Trang* goddesses might also train ghost soldiers. They, therefore, do not worship Buddha(s) as explained previously.

Last but not least, numerous MGW private shrines have a space for Buddha(s) statues/pictures; however, it is not for worshipping them because their owners need to avoid the control of the government. The shrine of medium Y. (female; age 63; *Hoàn Kiếm* district), for example, used to not have a Buddha(s) altar. In the 1980s, the Vietnamese government prohibited worshipping Mother Goddesses because it was considered a superstitious activity⁵³. To not become involved in any problems, Y.'s mother chose to secretly follow the MGW and maintain the shrine. One day, she met a professor—a very famous scholar in Vietnam Culture and History—who then advised her to add a Buddha statue to the shrine so that the government would ignore her MGW activities. Y.'s mother followed the advice and set up a particular area used for worshipping Buddha(s) in front of her shrine, which has remained until today⁵⁴. However, it should be clarified that such a reason for worshipping Buddha(s) at MGW private shrines is no longer common even though it explains some shrines that added a Buddha(s) altar after a period of time from when they were opened.

To conclude, apart from the shrines that have had a Buddha(s) altar from the beginning, it has been a tendency that no-Buddha-altar shrines now tend to add one, either for worshipping purposes or not. We argue that such a tendency will become common among MGW private shrines in Hanoi and beyond, making the number of (3) *no-Buddha-altar shrines* fewer and fewer. Among the studied shrines, we notice that only one shrine has not installed a Buddha(s) altar; however, the shrine caretaker medium T. (male; age 16; *Thanh Xuân* district) admits that he will do so in the future when his shrine has more space⁵⁵.

Recent Changes in Religious Practices at MGW Private Shrines. Obviously, the changes in the beliefs and behaviors of having Buddha(s) present at MGW private shrines among mediums and their disciples lead to changes in their religious practices; however, such changes vary due to the reasons behind them.

Having a Buddha(s) altar. MGW private shrines used to not worship Buddha(s); they, therefore, used to not conduct any Buddhist rituals. However, since Buddha(s) altars were set up, mediums and their disciples started to practice many Buddhist rituals as well as engage in a variety of activities related to Buddhism.

As we observed, all the shrines that have Buddha(s) altars practice Buddhist rituals as one of the major religious practices. While offerings to MGW spirits include meat, offerings to Buddha(s) must have vegetarian food such as fruits, cookies, sticky rice, *oản*⁵⁶, and so on. Mediums generally agree on the reasons that cause such differences in offerings to Buddha(s) and MGW spirits. They believe that Buddhism teaches humans to be compassionate and merciful, which means we should not harm and eat animals; meanwhile, most MGW spirits used to be humans or animals who ate meat⁵⁷. This fact, interestingly, reflects a unique feature of being logically inconsistent that many indigenous religions such as those in Southeast Asia and Africa have. Different from most coherent western religions, the co-existence of different religions' factors within *Đạo Mẫu* in Vietnam, the phenomena of *kala-thesa* in Thailand, and *polyotologism* in Kenya are typical examples of "the patterns of amalgamation without merging."⁵⁸ These cases prove that, to a certain extent, religions are not necessarily coherent and logical. In numerous specific contexts, religions can be logically inconsistent yet still "be a religion"⁵⁹.

In addition, mediums who worship Buddha(s) at their shrines often invite Buddhist monks to conduct and co-organize numerous rituals such as the Shrine's Opening Ritual, Praying Ceremony for Peace (*Lễ Cầu An*), Praying for Redemption of the Dead (*Lễ Cầu Siêu*), Shrine Opening Ceremony at the Beginning of Spring (*Lễ Khai điện đầu Xuân*), Full Moon of July Ceremony (*Lễ Rằm tháng 7*), Thanksgiving at the End of the Year (*Lễ tạ Cuối năm*), and so on. It is noteworthy that traditionally MGW followers do not use any sacred written teachings. However, when Buddhism is involved, Buddhist monks come to private shrines

and use Buddhist scriptures for rituals such as reciting the sutras inviting Buddha and reciting the mantra. These activities are often performed before an MGW spirit possession ceremony starts at the shrines⁶⁰.

Regarding the role of Buddhist monks at private shrines, there are conflicting opinions among mediums. Some believe that a monk would do better than a shaman (*pháp sư*) in many cases. They explain that a Buddhist monk can do work for both Buddha(s) and MGW spirits (*cả việc Thánh và việc Phật*); however, a shaman can only perform MGW rituals⁶¹. This reason is used similarly among those mediums who believe that a shaman knows how to worship both Buddha(s) and MGW spirits which a monk cannot do⁶². Although our data are not enough to make any conclusion at this point, we see that those who are mediums and shamans at the same time tend to appreciate the role of shamans more.

In general, all mediums who are the owners of private shrines which have Buddha(s) altars claim that the presence of Buddhist monks makes MGW rituals at the shrines much more sacred to their followers. As noted, some mediums even take the impact of Buddha(s) on disciples as the main motivation for them to worship Buddha(s) instead of considering it a religious practice that they might follow if they believe in Buddhism.

Another activity showing the involvement of Buddhism at MGW private shrines is that mediums often organize pilgrimages to Buddhist temples for their disciples. The destinations are famous Buddhist temples such as *Hương* temple, *Yên Tử* temple, *Bái Đính* temple, and so on. Disciples also engage in religious practices at Buddhist temples, such as donating to Buddhist monks at the Retreat Season ceremony⁶³.

Otherwise, in any case, if a medium does not invite Buddhist monks to his/her shrine, it is explained to be because of the shrine's narrow space⁶⁴. The other activities mentioned above are generally conducted at all Buddha(s)-altar-having shrines.

Displaying unsanctified Buddha(s) statues and/or pictures. Accordingly, mediums at the shrines that only display unsanctified Buddha(s) statues and/or pictures do not conduct any Buddhist religious rituals. They neither go to Buddhist temples to worship nor invite any Buddhist monks to come to their shrines to perform any rituals. Additionally, mediums at those shrines do not organize pilgrimages for their disciples to Buddhist temples. As noted, those mediums who only exhibit Buddha(s) statues/pictures without worshipping even think that a Buddhist monk is less powerful than an MGW shaman in terms of conducting religious rituals.

Although not worshipping Buddha(s), the behavior of displaying Buddha(s) statues/pictures still reflects the mediums' belief in Buddhism. They might believe but not worship because of objective reasons such as the one related to training ghost soldiers' activities. In some cases, they also believe in the supernatural power of Buddha(s) on the earthly world and that it can help them in keeping peace at the shrines as well as making their disciples feel relieved.

5. Discussion

Apart from the research findings analyzed above, this section further discusses several aspects of MGW private shrines in Hanoi, both worshipping and not worshipping Buddha(s), to provide a more coherent understanding of the given phenomenon.

First, it is noteworthy that satisfying disciples is one of the main motivations for mediums to worship Buddha(s). In Vietnam, Buddhism was introduced very early, in approximately the second century BCE. It is now considered not to be a completely foreign religion, yet it is being localized to become a Vietnamese Buddhism. It has become such a part of Vietnamese culture that most Vietnamese people find it legitimate to go to temples to worship Buddha(s), even though they are not official Buddhists. Therefore, mediums explain that being able to worship Buddha(s) at MGW private shrines makes their disciples feel much more relieved in case they cannot go to a Buddhist temple. At this point, it can be said that religious changes are further caused by *non-religious factors*. Additionally, such changes among MGW private shrines show their flexibility in adapting to the modern and religiously diverse world.

Furthermore, the tendency to worship Buddha(s) and/or display their statues/pictures at MGW private shrines is growing. We argue that it might make the phenomenon dominant in the future. Although we did not plan which shrines we would approach in advance, there is only one shrine with no Buddha(s) altar; nevertheless, the owner said he would add one when his shrine had more space. In fact, *the shrine's area* has been one of the deciding reasons explaining the degree of Buddhism involvement in MGW private shrines in recent years. Specifically, most of the mediums interviewed immediately installed Buddha(s) altars into their shrines when the shrine's space was broadened.

Interestingly, although being within the body of MGW practitioners, mediums sometimes hold conflicting opinions on several aspects, such as matters on 'ghost soldiers' and 'the power of Buddhist monks and MGW shamans in religious practices' as discussed above. They also show *different viewpoints* on why and why not to worship Buddha(s) at private shrines. Most mediums believe that worshipping Buddha(s) depends on whether or not the medium-owner of a private shrine has *căn thờ Phật*. Thus, if a medium does not worship Buddha(s) at his/her shrine due to the lack of a heavy fate, s/he does not violate MGW roles⁶⁵. Some others think that not worshipping Buddha(s) does violate MGW rules because worshipping Buddha(s) has to be first, as Buddha(s) are at the highest position whom even the supreme God of MGW—*Liễu Hạnh* Goddess—follows. Medium S. even seriously complained, "whatever spirit root (heavy fate) one may have, they have to follow Buddha(s) first ... Buddha(s) statues are not toys! Cannot just display there without conducting the sanctifying ritual"⁶⁶. For the latter stance, mediums often take the story of when the *Liễu Hạnh* Goddess herself became a Buddhist after being saved by Guanyin Buddha.

Regarding the sacred calling to be mediums, some of our participants revealed that it is not only about the spirits' message as it is commonly known; it is additionally from the guidance and grace offered by their *ancestors*, especially those who died at young ages. For instance, medium T. (male; age 16; *Thanh Xuân* district) shared that he had the capacity to solve *yin* problems, such as searching for lost tombs by using boiled eggs, before officially becoming a medium. That gift, he believes, was given to him by his ancestors. Furthermore, he claims that thanks to the guidance of his ancestors, he could realize his *căn duyên* to be a medium⁶⁷.

In terms of religious freedom and religious tolerance, even though the studied private shrines vary in numerous aspects, including their belief and practices on worshipping Buddha(s), they are reported to be *freely active without any control by the government*, which is much different to the periods in which they were prohibited and damaged. Many local government leaders even ask mediums for help when they experience "the other world" problems. After such problems are solved, mediums often gain a lot more respect from the local government, and their MGW practice is significantly supported. Additionally, *mediums' neighbors* seem to respect and even enjoy the private shrines' activities in their region. The sound of reading Buddhist scripture out loud and *chầu văn*⁶⁸ singing is said to bring the people nearby peace⁶⁹. It is interesting that even when a Buddhist monk performs spirit mediumship at his Buddhist temple, many other monks and Buddhists moreover come to attend and enjoy the ritual⁷⁰. These facts not only demonstrate the acceptance and tolerance of the Vietnamese people towards MGW, it additionally proves that even though some of them do not have a MGW belief, such as in the case of the local leader mentioned earlier, they find it not too difficult to come, join, and ask mediums for help.

Finally, on the one hand, our research confirms that worshipping Buddha(s) or displaying their statues/pictures at MGW private shrines has been increasingly common in Hanoi. Such a tendency might even become a characteristic of MGW private shrines in the country. However, on the other hand, it is difficult to claim that the phenomenon is common in other provinces of Vietnam as well due to the lack of research. Being a Vietnamese folk religion with a related practice recognized as a UNESCO intangible cultural heritage of humanity, Mother Goddess Worship's private shrines deserve more systematic and intensive studies.

6. Conclusions

The private shrine has been one of the major worshipping places of the Vietnamese folk religion, the Mother Goddess Worship; however, it is rarely documented in scholarship in both Vietnamese and English. Our research proves that the phenomenon of worshipping and/or presenting Buddha(s) in MGW private shrines in Hanoi has emerged and been increasingly common recently, caused by both religious and non-religious factors. Moreover, that phenomenon again implies the flexibility of a folk religion in adapting its beliefs and practices in a modern era. Meanwhile, the main reason for not setting up a Buddha(s) altar at an earlier time, the time right after a private shrine is opened for instance, is said only to be related to the shrine's area. Among the surveyed shrines, those only displaying unsanctified Buddha(s) statues and/or hanging Buddha(s) pictures for non-worshipping purposes are normally doing so due to their activities of training ghost soldiers (*âm binh*), which conflict with Buddhist values and may cause the shrine owners certain harmful consequences if they ignore such conflict.

Regarding the freedom of practicing religions and beliefs and religious tolerance, we argue that MGW private shrines are able to be active freely without any control by the government as they used to be prohibited in the past. In some cases, government leaders also benefit from services offered by local mediums even though they might not be MGW followers. Furthermore, the mediums' neighbors are friendly to the shrines' activities, and some neighbors of different religions in the neighborhood even show their enjoyment of sounds from the shrines such as *chầu văn* singing or the sound of reading Buddhist scripture out loud. Meanwhile, Buddhist monks who sometimes practice spirit mediumship at their temples are welcomed, supported, and joined by other monks and Buddhists. Such acceptance once again proves the characteristic of the Vietnamese people being tolerant towards religions and beliefs, as well as shows the improvement in religious freedom in Vietnam in recent decades.

Finally, although mediums sometimes have conflicting opinions on several aspects of MGW private shrines, including whether or not 'not worshipping Buddha(s)' violates MGW rules, that difference implies the essence of not being a tightly organized religion of MGW, instead a folk religion rather than unsolvable problems. As noted, there is a serious lack of intensive research on MGW private shrines in Vietnam. In order to generate more general statements, we need more empirical evidence in the scholarship.

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Notes

- ¹ (Taylor 2007, p. 5).
- ² See (P. H. Nguyễn 2022, p. 131; Vũ and Phạm 2018, pp. 43–61).
- ³ (Đặng 2016, pp. 94, 101–3).
- ⁴ See Table 1. Key Research Participants below.
- ⁵ See (Durand 2019, p. 19); (Vu 2006, pp. 28, 37).
- ⁶ (Norton 2018, p. 59).

- To avoid confusion, we often use *spirits*, which means *thánh*, to be coherent with the term “spirit mediumship”: the prominent practice of the Mother Goddess Worship. In some other parts of this paper, *thánh* can also be *Goddess* or *deity* in English without conflicting meanings.
- In her 2008 paper, she says “thirty years ago” which means “forty years ago” by date (Lê 2008, p. 59).
- Chiêng Thị Lê (2008, p. 60).
- Ibid, p. 62.
- Although *Lên đồng*—a prominent practice of the Mother Goddess Worship—is believed to appear in approximately the 14th century, the exact time the Mother Goddess Worship was established is not clearly mentioned in the scholarship. After being recognized as an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO, MGW is claimed to be found either in the 13th century or 16th century; see (M. N. Nguyễn 2013, p. 104; *Mother Goddesses: Vietnam’s centuries-old worship ritual honored by UNESCO 2016*; Tham and Springer 2018).
- Further details of the Mother Goddess Worship and its spirits system, see (Ngô 2010, pp. 61–62); *Liễu Hạnh* Goddess will be mentioned later in the paper.
- For instance, see (Karen and Nguyen 2006, p. 183; Karen and Nguyen 2011, pp. 24, 103, 164; Ninh 2017, pp. 151–52).
- (Lê 2004, p. 62). Some scholars do not claim the first time MGW private shrines appeared in Vietnam; however, they state that before Palaces (*Phủ*), most MGW followers practiced their belief at *đền* and *miếu* without mentioning the existence of private shrines. Both *đền* and *miếu* are known as ‘temple’ in English. Thus, it can be concluded that private shrines are not an original worshipping place of MGW; see Vũ and Phạm (2018, p. 40).
- As far as we know, the relaxation of restrictions on religions, including MGW and its private shrines, started in the late 1980s, not the early 1980s as Lê claimed.
- Chiêng Thị Lê (2004, p. 62).
- Yin* is commonly used to refer to ‘the spirit world’ or ‘the other world.’
- (H. T. D. Nguyễn 2018, p. 36).
- (H. T. Nguyễn 2004, pp. 298–99).
- See Hiền Thị Nguyễn (2004, pp. 300–4).
- Hương Thị Diễm Nguyễn (2018, p. 41).
- As this paper does not focus on the characteristics of MGW’s private shrines, for a more detailed description please see our latest published paper at (Nguyễn and Nguyễn 2022).
- It is also common among private shrines in other places of northern Vietnam; see Hương Thị Diễm Nguyễn (2018, p. 38). In Southeast Vietnam (*Đông Nam Bộ*), Vietnamese families often worship Guanyin Buddha as well at their family Buddha(s) altar; see (Trần 2014, p. 58).
- Interview with medium M. on 25 February 2021.
- Although some scholars use *Buddhist spirits* to refer to Buddhas worshipped in a variety of MGW worshipping places, we keep *Buddhas* to not make them MGW spirits as in MGW belief; at least among our participants, Buddhas are still religious figures of Buddhism instead of MGW. See (Nguyễn 2002, p. 37).
- (Ngô 2006, p. 30).
- Durand (2019, p. 31).
- Vũ and Phạm (2018, p. 60).
- Most of the scholars of MGW do not report the phenomenon of worshipping Buddhas on a large scale at MGW private shrines. In a 2008 article, Kendall mentions that “In private temples, a Bodhisattva is sometimes placed at the pinnacle of the Four Palaces pantheon”, which means a couple of decades ago, even if a Bodhisattva was worshipped at a private shrine, it was only “sometimes”, not “common”, such as it is now; see (Kendall et al. 2008, p. 234).
- It is obvious that MGW does not interact with only Buddhism, but at least with Taoism and Confucianism; however, due to the scope of this paper, we only discuss MGW and Buddhism. A further discussion on that co-existence will be provided in a later section.
- Mỹ Đức* used to be a rural district of *Hà Tây* province. In 2008, it was incorporated into Hanoi.
- Chữ Nôm* is the vernacular Sinographic writing of Vietnam.
- According to N., *hầu đồng nổi* means practicing spirit mediumship freely without any guidance from a medium master on opening a private shrine, following rules, practicing rituals, and so on. Interview with medium N. on 27 February 2021.
- Being a Buddhist monk and a Mother Goddess Worship Medium at the same time is a phenomenon in Vietnam; nevertheless, it has not become common. However, there is no detailed research on it.
- Personal notes taken in meetings with medium V. in January 2020.
- Personal notes taken in meetings with medium P. in 2004 and 2011.

- Interview with medium O. on 25 February 2021. O. also believes that *duyên* is defined by someone's date of birth as well as his/her karmas in previous lives. We cannot verify such belief among MGW mediums; thus, we do not generate it as a statement.
- Interview with medium D. on 25 February 2021 and with medium S. on 23 March 2021.
- Interview with medium N. on 27 February 2021.
- Interview with medium N. on 27 February 2021. N. did not tell the exact time he had to wait for the final acceptance of the monk. Such as in the cases of medium B. (*Ba Vì*), medium G. (*Sóc Sơn*), medium Y. (*Hoàn Kiếm*), and H. (*Hai Bà Trưng*).
- Interview with medium M. on 25 February 2021.
- Personal notes taken in meetings with medium P. in 2004 and 2011.
- The participant used the word "people"; however, it actually refers to mediums who are caretakers of MGW private shrines.
- Interview with medium D. on 25 February 2021.
- Interview with medium M. on 25 February 2021.
- Interview with medium L. on 27 February 2021; personal notes taken in meetings with medium B. in 2018 and 2019.
- Personal notes taken in meetings with medium A. in 2019.
- Interview with medium G. on 16 December 2021.
- Interview with medium L. on 27 February 2021.
- According to L., *Lê Mại Đại Vương* is a *tổ cô* (ancestor) of his maternal clan, belonging to the *Mường* ethnic minority group. On the other hand, it is common knowledge among MGW mediums that there are several legends about *Lê Mại Đại Vương*: she is the Mountain and Forest Mother Goddess who is also known as *La Bình* princess, *Quế Hoa* princess, or *Bạch Anh* princess.
- Mường*, *Man*, *Mán*, and *Nùng* are ethnic minority groups in Vietnam.
- For instance, see Kendall et al. (2008, p. 15).
- Interview with medium Y. on 24 March 2021.
- Interview with medium T. on 27 February 2021.
- Oản* is a Vietnamese cake made of roast glutinous rice flour. It has a truncated-cone shape.
- For instance, interview with G. on 21 December 2021; conversations with monk H. (age 43; *Hoàn Kiếm* district) in August 2018. Peter Jackson (2020, p. 9).
- For further discussion on unique patterns of amalgamation without merging, such as in the cases in Vietnam, Thailand, and Kenya, see our forthcoming paper at *anonymized*.
- Interview with medium D. on 19 December 2021.
- Interview with medium K. (male; age 34; *Tây Hồ* district) on 19 December 2021.
- Personal notes taken during meetings with medium B. on January 2021.
- Interview with medium M. on 25 February 2021.
- Interview with medium D. on 25 February 2021; interview with medium S. on 23 March 2021.
- Interview with medium O. on 25 February 2021.
- Interview with medium S. on 23 March 2021.
- Interview with medium T. on 27 February 2021.
- A traditional Vietnamese type of singing.
- Such as in the cases of medium D. and medium M.
- Conversations with monk H. in August 2018 and monk N. (age 65; *Hoàng Mai* district) in December 2017. We only could talk with monk N. for a while because he refused to be interviewed. Monk N. has a high position in the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha. Thus, he does not want to become involved in any scandals related to his being a MGW medium.

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