



Current belief practices at “private shrines” in Vietnam

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Abstract

Private shrines - Điện thờ tư gia - are a common form of worship space in the → Private shrines (điện thờ tư gia) are a common form of worship space in the religious and belief life of the Vietnamese people, yet they have received relatively limited scholarly attention. Drawing on fieldwork and previous studies, this article examines the origins, objects of worship, spatial characteristics, and activities of private shrines in contemporary Vietnam. The findings show that private shrines are primarily established either through inheritance from previous generations or by individuals and families themselves → primarily established either through inheritance from previous generations or through initiatives undertaken by individuals and families themselves. Their objects of worship are diverse, most commonly including the Buddha, the Mother Goddesses, Đức Thánh Trần, and combinations of multiple sacred figures. Although located within private spaces, some shrines have become sites of communal religious and belief practices, attracting followers, disciples, and visitors from different places. The article identifies several issues concerning their recognition and governance, public order and safety, the potential exploitation of religious and belief practices for personal gain, and transformations in belief practices. It also proposes several directions for appropriate state governance of this form of worship space.

Keywords: Private shrines, folk beliefs, mother goddess worship, sacred space, religious and belief practices, state governance of religious and belief activities

Introduction

Vietnam has a rich and diverse religious and belief landscape. Alongside organized religions, various forms of folk beliefs continue to play an important role in the cultural and spiritual life of the Vietnamese people. In Vietnamese Culture, Beliefs and Religious Practices (Vol. 1), L. Cadière compares → In Culture, Beliefs and Religious Practices of the Vietnamese People (Vol. 1), L. Cadière compares the religious and belief life of the Vietnamese people to the interweaving, coexistence, and symbiosis of trees in the Trùng Sơn forests, thereby emphasizing the diversity and syncretic character of religious and belief practices [6]. This characteristic is evident in everyday life, where belief practices take place not only in communal worship institutions but also across diverse spaces, ranging from public spaces to family and individual settings. As L. Cadière observes, “In every ordinary act, whether momentous or trivial, this consciousness forms an intricate network of practices, sometimes expressed through elaborate rituals in temples and shrines open to the public, and sometimes quietly and briefly beside a tree or a stone...” [6].

From the perspective of belief studies, what matters to practitioners is not necessarily a fixed worship institution, but rather the presence of a “sacred space”—a space in which they establish relationships with sacred beings or entities through specific forms of practice. Such spaces may include communal houses, temples, shrines, worship halls, pagodas, churches, or cathedrals, but they may also be established within an individual’s or family’s residence.

The Law on Belief and Religion classifies worship spaces into belief establishments and religious establishments. → The Law on Belief and Religion classifies worship spaces as

belief establishments and religious establishments. A belief establishment is defined as a place where communal belief activities are conducted, such as communal houses, temples, shrines, lineage worship houses, and similar establishments. Religious establishments include pagodas, churches, chapels, thánh thất, cathedrals, offices of religious organizations, and other lawful establishments of religious organizations [7]. This legal framework indicates that belief establishments are primarily conceptualized in relation to communal belief activities, while worship spaces established and maintained by individuals or families within their private residences have not been fully recognized as an independent type of belief establishment.

In practice, alongside communal belief establishments, Vietnam also has various worship spaces established by individuals within their private residences, commonly referred to as *điện tư gia*, *điện thờ tư gia*, or *am thờ*. These spaces serve the belief practices of individuals and families and, in some cases, also become sites of practice for people who share the same beliefs as the shrine owner. The existence of such spaces demonstrates that belief life is maintained not only through communal institutions but also reproduced within individual, family, and semi-public settings.

Against this background, this article examines the current state of belief practices at private shrines in Vietnam, focusing on their origins, spatial characteristics, objects of worship, forms of practice, and the extent to which activities extend from the family setting into the wider community. Based on the findings, the article identifies several issues concerning the recognition and governance of these spaces and the protection of freedom of belief amid the increasing diversity and flexibility of contemporary belief practices.

An Overview of “Private Shrines”

“Private shrine” and “privately owned shrine” are terms used to refer to a relatively common form of belief practice in the cultural and belief life of the Vietnamese people. In general, these are worship spaces established by individuals or families within their residences or private premises to meet their own belief-practice needs and those of their families. In some cases, such spaces are also opened to accommodate the belief practices of a group of people who share the same beliefs as the shrine owner.

Private shrines are not a recent phenomenon that has emerged only in the past few decades. However, compared with communal belief establishments such as communal houses, temples, shrines, and lineage worship houses, this phenomenon has received relatively limited systematic scholarly attention. Among the studies that have been published → Among the published studies, the works of Lê Thị Chiêng and Nguyễn Thị Diễm Hương are particularly noteworthy.

Lê Thị Chiêng is one of the scholars who has conducted relatively systematic research on private shrines, particularly through fieldwork in Hanoi. Her major works include “Religious and Belief Practices Viewed from Several Private Shrines in Hanoi,” *Journal of Religious Studies*, No. 5/2004, pp. 61–64; “Private Shrines: A Form of Folk Belief in Modern Society (A Case Study in Hanoi),” *Journal of Religious Studies*, No. 11/2008, pp. 59–64; and her doctoral dissertation, *A Study of Private Shrines in Hanoi*, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2010.

According to Lê Thị Chiêng, a shrine in general is a place of worship dedicated to deities. → According to Lê Thị Chiêng, a shrine is generally a place of worship dedicated to deities. In forms of religion and belief characterized by individual practice → In forms of religious and belief practice characterized by individual practice, shrines are generally small in scale and associated with the residential space of the shrine-owning family. She defines the private shrine as a form of individual religious and belief practice established by a person and, in some cases, passed down through generations within a lineage. Such succession does not necessarily follow the principle of primogeniture or transmission through the eldest son, but may instead be entrusted to a person believed to possess a “spiritual affinity” (*căn duyên*)—that is, someone regarded as having the destined disposition or capacity to continue the worship and take responsibility for the shrine^[1].

From this perspective, private shrines are generally arranged in a relatively formal and respected area within the shrine owner’s home. They thus remain part of the family’s living space while simultaneously being distinguished as a sacred worship space. Notably, Lê Thị Chiêng argues that many private shrines currently in existence were established from the 1980s onward → since the 1980s. She also identifies a particular case in which certain communal houses and temples that originally belonged to the community, but had subsequently fallen into disuse, were restored and maintained with private funds and placed under the direct care of individuals. Although these sites are not entirely privately owned in legal terms, their management and actual use share several characteristics with private shrines^[1].

Another study, by Nguyễn Thị Diễm Hương, further examines the characteristics of privately established shrines through her master’s thesis in history, *The Activities of Private Mother Goddess Shrines in Bình Xuyên District,*

Vĩnh Phúc Province (University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, 2018). According to the author, a private shrine is a place of worship established within a family but is distinct from → According to the author, a private shrine is a place of worship established within a family that is distinct from the ancestral altar commonly found in Vietnamese households. It is a separate worship space established in response to the needs of a particular family member, usually someone believed to possess a “destined spiritual affinity” (*căn số*); in some cases, the shrine is inherited from a previous generation^{[3][4]}.

Thus, although these scholars have examined different localities and research cases, they share broad agreement on several fundamental characteristics of private shrines. First, they are worship spaces established within the family or the individual’s place of residence, but are distinct from ancestral worship spaces. Second, the objects of worship are primarily deities, sacred figures, and other supernatural beings within the belief systems embraced by the shrine owner, with Mother Goddess worship and practices associated with the Three Realms and Four Palaces (*Tam phủ, Tứ phủ*) occupying a significant position. Third, the establishment and maintenance of a private shrine are often associated with the practitioner’s beliefs concerning *căn số*, *căn duyên*, or with the inheritance of the shrine from previous generations. These characteristics distinguish private shrines from ancestral worship spaces, which constitute a widespread component of the belief structure of Vietnamese families.

Regarding their formation and development, existing studies indicate that private shrines have existed in the belief life of the Vietnamese people since before the Đổi Mới period. Over the past several decades, however, particularly in the Red River Delta, this form of worship space appears to have developed more visibly → this form of worship space appears to have become more visible. Lê Thị Chiêng and Nguyễn Thị Diễm Hương both note the increasing presence of private shrines in localities such as Hanoi, Hai Phong, Nam Định, Thái Bình, Vĩnh Phúc, and neighboring areas^[4]. This development should be understood in the context of profound economic, social, and cultural transformations since Đổi Mới, as well as changes in the policies of the Communist Party and the State toward religion and belief. These changes have created more favorable conditions for the revival, maintenance, and expansion of various forms of belief practice in Vietnamese society.

However, existing studies have primarily focused on describing the characteristics, origins, objects of worship, and activities of private shrines in specific localities. More recent changes in the scale of their activities, participating actors, the expanding scope of belief practices, and the relationship between privately established worship spaces, local communities, and state governance require further investigation. In particular, the development of private shrines amid increasingly diverse forms of belief practice calls for closer examination of the boundary between private belief spaces and communal spaces of belief practice.

In this article, we use the term → In this article, the term “private shrine” (*điện thờ tư gia*, or a privately established belief establishment) to refer to a type of shrine established within the private residential premises of an individual or family for the worship of deities and sacred figures, rather than ancestors, based either on the shrine owner’s perceived *căn số* or on inheritance from previous generations.

1 Origins and Objects of Worship at Private Shrines

1.1 Origins of Private Shrines

Fieldwork indicates that private shrines are primarily established in two ways: through inheritance from previous generations or through their establishment by individuals and families.

For inherited shrines, the mode of succession differs in several respects from the transmission of responsibility for ancestral worship. In ancestral worship, such responsibility is generally passed down within the lineage, primarily to the eldest son. In contrast, succession in the case of private shrines is often explained in terms of a form of religious or spiritual selection. According to shrine owners, such selection may be indicated through dreams or messages from ancestors, deities, or sacred figures, or may involve a person believed to possess an appropriate *căn số* (spiritual destiny or affinity) for continuing the worship. Consequently, the successor is not necessarily the eldest child or a member of the paternal lineage. In some cases, the shrine may be inherited by a daughter's child or even by someone outside the bloodline who is believed to have a particular *duyên* (spiritual affinity) or to be compatible in *căn số* with the predecessor^[1].

However, not every case of succession requires the successor to possess a *căn số*. When no suitable successor can be found, or when no family member wishes to continue the practice, the shrine owner may designate another person to take care of the shrine → the shrine owner may designate another person to care for the shrine. In such cases, activities are generally limited to cleaning and maintaining the altar and burning incense on ritual occasions and holidays. This observation is consistent with the findings of Lê Thị Chiêng and Nguyễn Thị Diễm Hương, who argue that succession to a private shrine does not necessarily follow a hereditary principle from father to son, but may instead be entrusted to a person believed to possess *căn duyên*, including someone outside the bloodline. Where no successor remains, the shrine may eventually be dismantled (*giải điện*) [1, 4].

In addition to inherited shrines, many private shrines are newly established by individuals or families. According to shrine owners, the establishment of a shrine is not always regarded as an entirely voluntary choice but is often associated with reasons that they understand in religious or spiritual terms.

One common reason is the possession of *căn số* *hầu Thánh* - a spiritual destiny associated with serving and worshipping sacred figures. → One common reason is the possession of *căn số* *hầu Thánh*—a spiritual destiny associated with serving and worshipping sacred figures. Within Mother Goddess worship, *căn số* is used to explain the relationship between an individual and the sacred realm, as well as various events in the course of one's life → as well as various events throughout one's life. Practitioners may identify their *căn* through their date of birth, significant events in their lives, or experiences encountered while participating in *hầu đồng* rituals. Some only come to recognize themselves as having *căn đồng số lính* after experiencing phenomena referred to as *bắt đồng*, *châm đồng*, or *ốp đồng*.

However, not everyone believed to have a strong *căn* establishes a shrine. → However, not everyone believed to possess a strong *căn* establishes a shrine. According to shrine owners, the establishment of a shrine is generally

associated with signs that they interpret as guidance from deities, sacred figures, or ancestors, such as dreams, messages received in dreams, or other personal experiences. For some mediums (*thanh đồng*) who worship Đức Thánh Trần, the establishment of a shrine is similarly explained in terms of having a *căn* or a special spiritual affinity with the Trần dynasty, or from a perceived personal connection to or indebtedness toward Đức Thánh Trần. The concept of *căn số* is also invoked by some shrine owners belonging to other belief traditions to explain why they established their shrines.

Another reason given is having a “*căn duyên tu Phật*” → Another reason cited is having a “*căn duyên tu Phật*” - a spiritual affinity for Buddhist practice. Some shrine owners explain that they established a shrine at home because they possess such an affinity, which they came to recognize through divination, dreams, or guidance from a Buddhist monk whom they follow. There are also cases in which shrine owners believe that they have a spiritual affinity for worshipping the Buddha, the Mother Goddesses, and Đức Thánh Trần simultaneously.

1.2 Objects of Worship

The objects of worship at private shrines are diverse. Based on the fieldwork, four common types of shrines can be identified: (1) Mother Goddess shrines; (2) Buddhist shrines; (3) Đức Thánh Trần shrines; and (4) combined shrines incorporating two or more systems of worship.

The arrangement of each shrine varies according to its objects of worship, available space, and the shrine owner's understanding and interpretation of the tradition → the shrine owner's understanding and interpretation of the relevant tradition.

In *Mother Goddess shrines*, the typical arrangement includes a Buddhist altar at the highest position, with the altar of the *Công đồng* below it. On either side may be altars dedicated to the Trần Dynasty and Sơn Trang. Quan Thanh Xà and Bạch Xà may be placed on the wall, while an altar to Quan Ngũ Hồ may be located in the lower section, with an incense altar dedicated to Mẫu Cửu Trùng outside the shrine. However, not every shrine follows this arrangement in full. Depending on the available space and the resources of the *thủ nhang* (shrine keeper), a shrine may contain statues, devotional paintings, or simply incense bowls. Some shrines focus primarily on male deities, others on female deities, while some worship only the principal deity of the shrine together with the Mother Goddess^[5].

In *Đức Thánh Trần shrines*, the principal objects of worship generally include Đức Thánh Trần (Trần Hưng Đạo), members of the Trần court such as Dã Tượng and Yết Kiêu, and the *Đôi Cô* (the two daughters of Trần Hưng Đạo).

Notably, *combined shrines* are relatively common, reflecting the coexistence and integration of multiple sacred figures within the same worship space. A common form is the Buddhist–Mother Goddess shrine, in which separate Buddhist and Mother Goddess altars are established. Some shrines combine Mother Goddess worship with the worship of Đức Thánh Trần, while others simultaneously worship the Buddha, the Mother Goddesses, and Đức Thánh Trần. Their spatial arrangement depends largely on the size of the shrine and the shrine owner's understanding. Some contain only incense bowls, whereas others feature devotional paintings, statues, and separate altars for each system of worship.

The simultaneous presence of multiple sacred figures within a single shrine demonstrates the flexibility and syncretic character of belief practices in the private residential setting. Worship systems with different origins and ritual traditions may be adopted by the same practitioner and organized within a unified worship space. This is a notable characteristic of private shrines and reflects one dimension of the syncretic character that has long been prominent in the religious and belief life of the Vietnamese people.

This phenomenon indicates that the establishment of a private shrine does not necessarily originate from a single belief system. Rather, from the practitioner's perspective, different sacred figures and forms of practice may coexist within a single worship space. *Căn duyên* therefore becomes an important framework → *Căn duyên* therefore serves as an important framework through which practitioners explain their selection of objects of worship, the organization of the worship space, and their own role in belief practices conducted at home.

Private shrines are located in a variety of spaces. → Private shrines are located in a variety of settings. They may occupy a separate house within a family compound, a dedicated room within a residence, or a room in an apartment. The size and physical characteristics of the space partly determine the arrangement of the shrine. Nevertheless, regardless of size, private shrines generally contain basic ritual objects such as incense bowls, oil lamps, candles or candle holders, decorative and lighting fixtures, and fruit offering trays.

2 Activities of Private Shrines

Activities at private shrines are diverse and vary according to the objects of worship and the practices of individual shrine owners. In addition to regular activities such as burning incense, ringing bells, and maintaining the altar, some shrines also organize activities for followers, disciples, and others who share the same beliefs. These activities can be broadly classified into four main groups: (1) belief rituals and practices; (2) divination; (3) exorcism and healing; and (4) geomancy and ritual protection.

First, belief rituals and practices. → First, religious and belief rituals and practices. Mother Goddess shrines and combined shrines whose owners are *thanh đồng* (ritual mediums) commonly conduct rituals such as *hầu đồng* (spirit possession rituals), *mở phủ* (initiation rituals), and *tôn nhang bản mệnh* (ritual dedication to a person's tutelary deity). Shrines dedicated to Đức Thánh Trần also practice spirit possession, although this differs in certain respects from *hầu đồng* in Mother Goddess worship. In shrines that combine several systems of worship, these distinctions are sometimes not emphasized by practitioners. In addition, some shrines conduct rituals associated with life-cycle events, such as funerals, childbirth, first-month ceremonies, and death anniversaries. Such rituals may take place at the shrine or elsewhere, depending on the circumstances and needs of participants.

Second, divination. This is a relatively common activity at some private shrines. According to the beliefs of some practitioners of Mother Goddess worship, divination should be performed by someone who is believed to have received the spiritual favor or "blessing" of Bà Chúa Bói, and some shrines therefore maintain an altar dedicated to her. Forms of divination vary considerably and include divination using areca nuts, cards, coins, physiognomy, spirit calling, or

combinations with purported extrasensory perception. One form recorded in the fieldwork involves divination using a chessboard and 32 coins. The person seeking divination silently makes a wish or prayer and then drops the coins onto the chessboard. The shrine owner interprets the result based on the positions and whether the coins land face up or face down ^[3].

Third, exorcism and healing. In addition to divination, some people visit private shrines seeking exorcism or healing, reflecting popular beliefs expressed in sayings such as "Where there is worship, there is protection" and "When ill, seek help from every possible source." Different explanations are given for the perceived ability → Different explanations are offered for the perceived ability of shrine owners to heal illness or expel evil spirits. Among private shrines, those dedicated to the Trần Dynasty are particularly associated with such practices, based on popular beliefs concerning the power of Đức Thánh Trần and his generals, which is believed to operate through the bodies of ritual mediums in the expulsion of evil spirits. Some Mother Goddess shrines also perform such practices when the shrine owner is simultaneously a ritual practitioner with knowledge of magical rites, or through *lên đồng* rituals in which healing is attributed to sacred figures of the Four Palaces.

There are also cases in which healing is practiced by shrine owners who are not *thanh đồng* associated with the Trần Dynasty or the Three/Four Palaces tradition. Such individuals may consider themselves capable of healing through extrasensory perception or "bioenergy," or may believe that they channel the power of a higher spiritual entity to help others.

In general, shrine owners who practice healing tend to explain the causes of illness in similar terms: the sick person is believed to be affected or possessed by evil spirits. Healing is therefore understood as a process of expelling these spirits from the person's body. Various methods may be employed, including striking or threatening the patient with whips, sticks, or ritual weapons; using blood or *xiên linh* rituals at Trần Dynasty shrines; or applying what is understood as the "blessing" of a sacred figure, such as holy water or incense ash.

Fourth, geomancy and ritual protection. Some private shrines also provide practices related to *feng shui* and ritual protection or warding (*trấn yểm*) concerning houses, land, graves, or residential spaces. According to those who seek such services, these practices are intended to address problems they believe are associated with the location or orientation of a house, land, graves, or other unfavorable spiritual factors. In some cases, such practices are also associated with wishes for wealth, prosperity, career advancement, success, or romantic relationships.

Thus, activities at private shrines are not limited to worship and ritual practices for the shrine owner and family. In many cases, they have expanded into a broader range of belief-related services responding to the diverse needs of people who share the same beliefs. This expansion gives private shrines a distinctive character: the physical space remains privately owned, while the belief practices conducted there may extend to a wider group beyond the family.

Issues Arising from the Development of Private Shrines

The fieldwork indicates that private shrines constitute worship spaces located within the private sphere →

Fieldwork indicates that private shrines constitute worship spaces located within the private sphere, while the belief practices conducted there are not necessarily confined to individuals and families but, in many cases, extend to people who share the same beliefs. This characteristic raises an important question concerning the relationship between the private nature of the physical space and the communal character of belief practices. Although shrines are established by individuals or families within their residential spaces, many - particularly Mother Goddess shrines - have become → many—particularly Mother Goddess shrines—have become sites for rituals involving followers, disciples, and visitors from different places. This calls for further research to clarify the boundary between individual and family - based belief practices → individual- and family-based belief practices and belief activities with a communal character, thereby facilitating appropriate governance without restricting people's freedom of belief.

Furthermore, because most private shrines are located in residential areas, activities involving large gatherings, ritual music, or prolonged ceremonies may affect the daily lives of neighboring residents. Fire and safety risks also require particular attention because of the use of incense, oil lamps, candles, votive paper, and other combustible materials within residential spaces. Shrine owners therefore need to enhance their awareness of regulations concerning public order, social safety, and fire prevention, while respecting the legitimate rights and interests of surrounding residents.

Another issue concerns the potential exploitation of belief practices for personal gain, particularly in activities involving divination, spirit calling, exorcism, healing, *mở phủ*, and other forms of practice. A distinction should be made between belief practices themselves and the exploitation of belief for illicit financial gain or in ways that may harm people's health, property, or legitimate interests. At the same time, the combination of Buddhism, Mother Goddess worship, Đức Thánh Trần worship, and other practices within some private shrines demonstrates the syncretic and adaptive character of Vietnamese folk beliefs, while also raising questions about the preservation of traditional values amid ongoing transformation.

These issues point to the need for further research on private shrines in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of their scale, characteristics, and patterns of development. State authorities should adopt an appropriate approach based on respect for freedom of belief while paying due attention to public order, social safety, and fire prevention. Shrine owners, for their part, should improve their understanding of relevant laws, enhance safety measures for participants, and assume greater responsibility for preserving the cultural values of folk beliefs while limiting commercialization and the exploitation of belief for personal gain.

Conclusion

Private shrines constitute an important part of contemporary Vietnamese belief life → Private shrines constitute an important component of contemporary Vietnamese belief life, reflecting people's need to establish and maintain sacred spaces within the family and individual sphere. The fieldwork shows that these shrines have diverse origins, a wide range of objects of worship, and flexible forms of practice. Notably, many shrines have expanded their activities beyond the family setting, giving rise to

communities of belief practice involving followers, disciples, and visitors from different places.

This development contributes to the preservation of folk beliefs → This development contributes to preserving folk beliefs and their associated practices and values, while simultaneously generating new issues concerning governance, public order and safety, the potential exploitation of belief for personal gain, and transformations in traditional practices. Private shrines should therefore be understood as a dynamic belief phenomenon situated at the intersection of private space and communal practice, tradition and transformation.

The governance of private shrines should consequently not seek to deny or eliminate → Governance of private shrines should therefore not seek to deny or eliminate this form of belief space, but rather to strike a balance between protecting individuals' freedom of belief and safeguarding public order, social safety, and community cultural values. Further research on private shrines, particularly as belief practices increasingly extend into digital spaces, will also contribute to a better understanding of the ongoing transformations of Vietnamese belief life.

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