

Seeking Spiritual Security in Contemporary Vietnamese Society: The Case of Pilgrimage to Tianhou Temple in Binh Duong

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ABSTRACT

Religious activities in contemporary Vietnamese society have undergone significant fluctuations yet continue to thrive. This resurgence has heightened interest in religious life, with temple pilgrimages emerging as a prominent expression of a new form of piety. Through a case study of Tianhou Temple in Binh Duong, this research argues that the increasing prevalence of temple pilgrimages is primarily driven by the quest for spiritual security in response to socio-economic uncertainties. This phenomenon acts as a coping mechanism amid social unrest and is a growing manifestation of religiosity. Drawing on Oscar Salemink's concept of spiritual security-seeking and a Marxist political-economic framework, this research examines the underlying forces shaping this trend.

Keywords: spiritual security, temple pilgrimage, Tianhou Temple, Binh Duong, contemporary Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

The Tianhou (Mazu) worship system, encompassing various religious rituals and sacraments, was introduced to southern Vietnam by Chinese immigrants during the Ming and Qing dynasties. This religious tradition is characterized by its sacred nature and close affiliation with indigenous goddesses in Vietnam's folk Mother Goddess worship system. Moreover, its resemblance to *Quan Am Nam Hai* (南海觀音) in Buddhism has facilitated its widespread acceptance beyond the Chinese community. Consequently, this deity of Chinese origin, often referred to as the Buddha of the East Sea, has been integrated into Vietnamese religious life.

The worship of Tianhou, similar to many other forms of folk religion in Vietnam, has undergone significant transformations under the influence of historical and social contexts. During the colonial period and the wars, religious practices not only fulfilled individual spiritual needs but also became a means of collective resistance. However, after the reunification of the country in 1975, the socialist government imposed strict controls on religion, believing that traditional religious practices contradicted Marxist-Leninist ideology.

It was only after the introduction of the Doi Moi policy in 1986, along with adjustments in religious policies and the orientation toward developing cultural and spiritual tourism, that the worship of Tianhou gradually began to revive. Economic transformations, urbanization, and increased exposure to global cultural values created favorable conditions for the resurgence of folk religious activities, especially through the restoration and expansion of pilgrimage practices. A notable example is the Tianhou Temple festival in Binh Duong, a major pilgrimage center, which demonstrates the blending of traditional elements with modern influences.

The practice of Tianhou worship in Vietnam also reveals notable regional diversity. In Ho Chi Minh City, particularly in District 5 (Chinatown), home to the largest Chinese community in the country, the Tianhou festival tends to be more commercialized, serving both religious and tourism purposes. In contrast, in provinces such as Ca Mau and Soc Trang, the festivals are more community and clan-oriented, and less influenced by mass media and large-scale tourism activities. This difference reflects the relationship between the space of religious practice, the scale of the community, and the extent of exposure to modernization.

Regionally, the worship of Tianhou has also developed strongly in countries with long-established Chinese communities such as China and Thailand. In China, especially in coastal provinces like Fujian and Guangdong—

regions closely linked to the ancestral homes of many Chinese migrants—Tianhou festivals are held on a large scale, featuring traditional rituals such as parades, lion dances, dragon dances, and offerings. However, in China, these religious activities are closely monitored by the government, reflecting religious management practices similar to those in Vietnam, where folk religions face adjustment by authorities in the context of modernization. The strong resurgence of Buddhism and the Tianhou belief in urban centers in China highlights the tension between modern and spiritual elements as society increasingly faces the pressures of rapid urbanization and anti-superstition trends.

In contrast, in Thailand, religious freedom is guaranteed to a greater extent, which allows for the more unrestricted development of Tianhou worship compared to China and Vietnam. In Thailand, this worship not only preserves traditional elements but also integrates values from Theravada Buddhism and adapts to new social trends. Thai youth remain actively engaged in the festivals, but they primarily participate in the cultural performances rather than deeply involved in the religious rituals as previous generations did. Urban temples in Thailand serve not only religious needs but also social roles, attracting a large number of young people and professionals seeking spiritual balance in the fast-paced and stressful urban environment.

From the analysis above, it can be seen that the Tianhou worship festivals—both in Binh Duong and in many other regions in and outside Vietnam—are in the process of restructuring, representing a "negotiation" between traditional and modern elements. This provides an opportunity for folk rituals not only to be preserved but also to adapt and thrive sustainably in the 21st century.

Academic discussions on religious revival have often centered on the resurgence of traditional practices, emphasizing the role of pilgrimage and festival participation in the pursuit of spiritual security (Salemink, 2019). However, Schipper (1960) contends that the worship of deities and Mother Goddesses in temples has not been widely recognized as a fundamental religious phenomenon (Chauvet, 2019, p.44). Consequently, despite extensive studies on festivals—which are intrinsically linked to pilgrimage and are a major focus in Vietnamese religious studies—specific research on temple pilgrimages remains relatively scarce.

This research examines the motivations behind pilgrimages to Tianhou Temple from an ethnographic perspective, arguing that these journeys reflect a broader quest for "spiritual security." Through a case study of pilgrimages to two Tianhou worship sites in Binh Duong—Tianhou Temple in Phu Cuong Ward, Thu Dau Mot City, and Tianhou Temple in Binh Duong New City—this research explores how worshippers engage in pilgrimage not only as a religious obligation but also as a means of navigating uncertainties in contemporary life.

Rather than focusing on the theological aspects of the Tianhou worship system or providing a detailed account of ritual practices at Tianhou Temple, this research foregrounds "spiritual security" as a key motivation for pilgrimage. In doing so, it provides insights into how temple pilgrimages function as mechanisms for seeking reassurance, coping with socio-economic uncertainties, and reaffirming cultural identity. This analysis contributes to a broader understanding of the cultural significance of Tianhou worship in contemporary Vietnam.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the seminal work *Seeking Spiritual Security in Contemporary Vietnam*, Salemink (2019) expands the human security concept beyond traditional notions of military and national security to include spiritual security. At its core, security—whether broadly defined or specifically related to spiritual well-being—arises from fundamental human needs such as economic stability, health, and social cohesion. This perspective underscores the multidimensional nature of security, emphasizing the importance of psychological and emotional well-being alongside material conditions.

The relationship between individual needs, religious practices, and broader socio-cultural dynamics is well-documented. Spiritual security-seeking is closely tied to religious beliefs, worship, and personal motivation. More specifically, religious identity and ethnic affiliation significantly shape how individuals seek security, particularly in response to personal anxieties and uncertainties. This suggests that spiritual security cannot be fully understood without considering the religious and cultural frameworks within which individuals operate.

While the concept of security is well-established, the notion of mental security has only recently gained scholarly attention. Salemin (2019) observes that mental security aligns with related concepts such as mental stability and psychological safety, though its application varies across different socio-cultural contexts. The emergence of mental security as a distinct field of study reflects the growing recognition of psychological and emotional well-being as integral components of security, rather than secondary concerns.

Religious engagement should not be confined to special occasions but rather incorporated into daily life as a mechanism for coping with adversity. This perspective aligns with folk worship traditions that associate religious devotion with protection from misfortune, reinforcing the practical and psychological functions of religious practice.

Spiritual security encompasses multiple dimensions, including health, financial stability, family and relationships, and career success. Each of these dimensions represents fundamental aspects of human life where individuals seek reassurance, often turning to religious practices for a sense of fulfillment and stability. Chauvet (2019) further distinguishes between religious pilgrimages and routine worship, arguing that pilgrimages foster a deeper communion with deities compared to everyday religious observances. However, for this discussion, pilgrimage is defined broadly to encompass both local and distant pilgrimages, as well as solemn and routine religious practices. This broader interpretation highlights the dynamic nature of religious engagement and underscores the varied ways individuals seek spiritual security through devotion.

In summary, temple pilgrimages in contemporary Vietnamese society can be understood through the lens of spiritual security. Individuals engage in religious practices not solely for theological or doctrinal reasons but also as a means of addressing existential concerns, coping with uncertainty, and achieving psychological stability. This framework provides a comprehensive understanding of the role of religious practices in fostering a sense of security in an increasingly uncertain world.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach to examine the characteristics and motivations behind pilgrimages to the Tianhou Temple, focusing on Phu Cuong and the New City of Binh Duong. Data were collected between February 2017 and October 2024 using participant observation, in-depth interviews, and archival analysis.

Participant observation provided firsthand insights into rituals, offerings, and pilgrim behaviors. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with over 20 participants—including frequent pilgrims, ritual organizers, volunteers, and elder community members—captured diverse perspectives on faith, identity, and tradition. Archival documents offered historical and cultural context, supporting the ethnographic data.

Purposive sampling was used to select individuals actively involved in pilgrimage activities, ensuring diversity in age, gender, and role. While the study offers rich, context-specific findings, its limited geographic scope restricts generalizability. Access challenges due to cultural sensitivities may have also influenced data completeness.

Ethical standards in sociological research were strictly followed. Participants provided informed consent, retained the right to withdraw at any point, and were assured of confidentiality. Fieldwork was conducted with respect for religious beliefs and sacred spaces to uphold the dignity and rights of all participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Sacredness and the Search for Security in Life and Health through the Protection of Holy Mother Tianhou

The phenomenon of pilgrimage to the Tianhou Temple in Binh Duong can be attributed to various factors. Roberts (2012) suggests that this practice may arise from religious devotion, the belief that "wealth and honor give rise to propriety," or even as a response to psychological disturbances, chaos, and insecurity. However, this article argues that the primary motivation for pilgrimage to the temple stems from the search for spiritual security,

rooted in the worship of the sacredness and protective power of supernatural forces—specifically, the divine guardianship of Tianhou.

Philip Taylor (2004) asserts that religious practices in contemporary Vietnamese society are deeply influenced by discourses of power, ethnicity, and the sacred. Since the reform period, temple pilgrimage has expanded significantly, driven by widespread faith in the protective power of supernatural beings. The pervasive worship of Tianhou's sacredness has cultivated a strong belief in her miraculous abilities. Many devotees maintain that her blessings are most potent when they pay direct homage to her, articulating their thoughts and wishes in her presence. For worshippers, veneration of Tianhou is not merely a ritual but a source of profound psychological reassurance. As one believer emphatically stated, "*She is very sacred!*" This unwavering faith transcends ethnic and cultural boundaries, drawing both the Chinese community and the broader Vietnamese society.

As Ms. H affirmed:

"She is very sacred!... Regardless of whether one is Chinese or Vietnamese, anyone with sincerity and faith will receive her blessings" (personal communication, October 6, 2024).

The human pursuit of happiness is intrinsically linked to concerns about safety, health, and well-being. Salemink (2019) highlights that existential anxiety regarding death, health, and life's uncertainties compel individuals to seek spiritual security. This sentiment is reflected at the main entrance of Tianhou Temple, where a large Chinese inscription reads *Quốc Thái Dân an* (國泰民安), meaning "*The country prospers, the people live in peace.*" This inscription embodies the widely held belief in Tianhou's sacred power, contributing to the enduring practice of temple pilgrimage. For many, pilgrimage to the temple and praying for peace have become not just habits but essential aspects of life. As Ms. B expressed: "*It feels like something is missing if I don't go*" (personal communication, October 6, 2024).

The pursuit of mental security is inextricably linked to concerns about health and prosperity. Temple pilgrimage serves as a means of attaining reassurance, founded on the belief that "*the world mirrors the afterlife*" and the traditional idea that "*worship brings blessings, while abstinence ensures good fortune.*" In an era characterized by rapid social change and uncertainty, individuals increasingly turn to religion as a stabilizing force, seeking comfort and security through spiritual devotion.

Deprivation, Market Economic Pressure, and Religious Support

The increasing participation in religious practices in contemporary Vietnamese society can be understood through the lenses of economic instability, market risks, and social deprivation. Scholars suggest that these factors drive individuals to seek spiritual reassurance as a means of coping with uncertainty. In *Goddess on the Rise*, Taylor (2004) offers a Marxist-influenced interpretation, arguing that the resurgence of religious practices in Vietnam reflects the dynamics of market relations. He contends that the unpredictability and volatility of the market economy play a central role in the revival of religious activities.

The processes of urbanization, industrialization, and modernization have not only led to profound social changes but have also significantly impacted the functions and meanings of deities in Vietnam. Urban migration has disrupted traditional spiritual practices that were deeply tied to local communities, while consumerism and the materialization of lifestyles have created a spiritual void, particularly among the urban youth. Issues such as environmental concerns, public health, and the fast-paced nature of urban life have heightened existential anxieties and the search for spiritual values.

In response to these challenges, the people of Vietnam have turned to both traditional spiritual practices and emerging spiritual trends. Folk religions, along with ancestor worship, continue to retain special significance in rural areas. Meanwhile, urban residents are increasingly engaging in religious activities, particularly in the form of pilgrimages, often combining these activities with practices aimed at seeking health and fulfilling worldly needs.

In this context, Tianhou—a primordial deity worshipped as a sea goddess, protector of seafarers, and a guide for

settlers in new lands—has gradually expanded her role to address and respond to the socio-economic challenges of modern society. The worship of Tianhou is no longer solely a form of nature worship but has also evolved into a spiritual means of supporting individuals in the midst of the dynamic changes of contemporary society. Nowadays, she is worshiped not only for national peace, prosperity, and favorable weather but also for business success. The practice of seeking financial support from deities, once exclusively associated with the God of Wealth, has also been extended to Tianhou. This evolution highlights how religious practices adapt to economic uncertainties, with the worship of Tianhou becoming increasingly significant, especially in a context marked by urbanization and industrialization.

The growing number of temple pilgrimages, particularly to Tianhou Temple, cannot be solely attributed to the idea that wealth fosters religious devotion. Instead, these pilgrimages are closely linked to the precariousness of the market economy. Economic instability fosters a sense of helplessness, compelling individuals to seek spiritual reassurance to mitigate their anxieties. Worshippers view temple pilgrimages as a strategy to attain both financial success and personal fulfillment.

Importantly, the sense of spiritual security gained from temple pilgrimages is deeply embedded in the practices of worship that emphasize sacredness and sincerity. Participating in temple rituals reinforces individuals' faith in divine protection, enabling them to weather economic turmoil more confidently. As Taylor (2004) suggests, temple pilgrimages serve as a coping mechanism, allowing individuals to regain a sense of control over their concerns. Many devotees attribute their success, at least in part, to their devotion and the perceived blessings they receive

As illustrated by an interviewee:

"Going to the temple makes me feel very peaceful. Especially when everything is at a standstill, coming here (Tianhou Temple) makes me feel that my work is resolved much more effectively" (laughs) (personal communication, February 22, 2024).

In the context of modern society, young people in Vietnam are increasingly creating a hybrid spiritual identity, blending traditional elements with new spiritual trends. While some continue to uphold family traditions, others turn to practicing temple tourism as a way to explore and engage in spiritual activities. These activities often emphasize personal experience and emotional comfort, rather than relying on strict doctrinal beliefs, reflecting a pragmatic and flexible approach to spirituality in a time of instability and change.

The role of young people in the practice of rituals and participation in the Tianhou Temple festival in Binh Duong has become more prominent and diverse. They are not only participants but also play a significant role in inheriting, spreading, and modernizing the rituals to align with contemporary and civilized norms. Young people are directly involved in the rituals, such as participating in the procession of the goddess's palanquin, performing lion and dragon dances, and supporting logistical work during the festival. Many youth, particularly the descendants of the Chinese community, have been taught and inherited traditional rituals from their families and clans. These individuals also participate in lion dance troupes and palanquin procession groups, receiving training and assignments according to festival regulations.

In addition to ritual-related activities, young people also actively contribute to organizing the festival through volunteer work. Volunteer youth teams, organized by the local People's Committee and youth unions, carry out tasks such as guiding pilgrims, managing traffic flow, and maintaining environmental cleanliness, ensuring the festival proceeds safely and smoothly. For example, the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union in Thu Dau Mot City regularly collaborates with the festival organizers to send volunteers to assist pilgrims, distribute water, and provide directions.

Not only involved in practical activities, young people also play a crucial role in preserving and maintaining traditional rituals. Many are interested in folk culture and national beliefs, learning about the worship of Tianhou, and gaining knowledge from previous generations. Some young people, as the next generation of temple leaders and ritual committees, help preserve and conduct rituals according to the correct standards. At the Tianhou Temple, young descendants of the Cantonese Chinese community continue to study the Chinese language and

traditional ceremonies to preserve cultural identity.

In the digital age, young people have used social media platforms to promote the festival and share spiritual experiences. They engage in activities such as livestreaming rituals, vlogging their visits to the Tianhou Temple, or writing posts about the history and significance of the festival on platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram. These actions not only help spread the positive image of folk beliefs but also create a broader community connection, both domestically and internationally.

In addition to promoting the festival, young people also contribute to changing the way the festival is participated in, making it more civilized. With a modern mindset, they approach the festival not only as a spiritual activity but also as part of contemporary culture, distancing themselves from superstitious practices. They encourage participation in a cultural manner, such as refraining from pushing or shoving, avoiding excessive incense burning, and, importantly, not engaging in the widespread burning of joss paper. Some student groups have even created the slogan "*Cultural and Civilized Pilgrimage*" at the Tianhou Temple during the full moon of the first lunar month, contributing to the creation of a more respectful and friendly festival atmosphere.

Young people are not only participants in the festival but also the key force in preserving, organizing, and developing the Tianhou Temple festival in a way that aligns with modern society. They serve as a bridge between tradition and modernity, helping the worship of Tianhou remain vibrant and spread within the community in a refined and meaningful way.

The Influence of Wealth on Religious Practices in Contemporary Vietnam

Economic development, government policies, and evolving cultural values have significantly reshaped religious practices in contemporary Vietnam. Central to this transformation is the interplay between economic prosperity and spiritual engagement, rooted in the belief that wealth fosters social courtesy and the notion that worship is inherently sacred. As economic stratification deepens under Vietnam's transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented system, religious behaviors have adapted accordingly. Increasingly, individuals attend temples and churches not only for spiritual fulfillment but also to seek material prosperity, reinforcing a transactional dimension within religious observance (Endres, 2011). This dynamic has given rise to a "new form of piety" (Taylor, 2004, p. 83), where faith and economic aspirations become intertwined.

The flourishing practice of pilgrimage temples to pray for wealth and success is closely tied to Vietnam's broader socio-economic transformations. Market liberalization and economic integration into the global capitalist system have expanded religious engagement, with government policies playing a pivotal role. Resolution 5 of the 8th Central Committee emphasized the preservation and promotion of national cultural identity, encouraging a revival of religious traditions. Additionally, the Ordinance on Religion and Belief (2004) established a more permissive legal framework, further enabling the restoration and construction of religious sites and fostering public participation in worship (Taylor, 2007). As a result, religious life in Vietnam has not only been revitalized but has also become deeply embedded in the country's evolving economic and social structures.

The prosperous practices of pilgrimage temples, where people pray for wealth and success, are closely tied to the broader socio-economic transformations in Vietnam. For many individuals, religious participation remains connected to ancestral customs and community identity. Mr. H., a resident of Tan Uyen, Binh Duong Province, views his pilgrimage to the Tianhou Temple as an extension of his family tradition. He shared:

"For generations, people have followed this tradition, and I do the same. It is not about how one does it but about sincerity. I pray with respect, hoping that Tianhou will bless my family and bring prosperity to my business" (personal communication, October 6, 2024).

This perspective underscores the continuity of cultural identity in religious practices, where belief systems are preserved and adapted across generations. Field observations at Tianhou Temple in Phu Cuong reveal a steady stream of pilgrimages from morning to evening, with attendance peaking on significant religious occasions. These events draw large crowds, including both local devotees and travelers, demonstrating the enduring communal and spiritual dimensions of religious worship.

Despite the deeply spiritual nature of religious observance for many, economic prosperity has introduced elements of commercialization and secularization into faith-Tianhoused practices. The commodification of religion is evident in acts of charity, monetary donations, and material offerings, where contributions are sometimes perceived as transactions—exchanging material wealth for divine favor (Kendall, 2019). This phenomenon aligns with broader trends in Asian religious economies, where market forces increasingly shape religious participation.

As Vietnam's capitalist economy expands, religious sites have become arenas for social stratification and status display. For some, worship is not solely an act of devotion but also a means of signaling affluence and prestige. The choice of transportation, attire, and personal presentation at temples reflects individuals' social standing, transforming places of worship into spaces for conspicuous consumption (Weber, 1930). This trend raises concerns about the blurring of sacred and secular spheres, prompting scholars to question whether religious spaces are becoming increasingly commercialized (McDaniel, 2016).

In conclusion, the intersection of economic transformation, government policies, and cultural identity has profoundly influenced contemporary religious practices in Vietnam. While traditional beliefs and ancestral customs remain central to religious life, market-driven behaviors and social stratification have introduced new dimensions to spiritual engagement. This evolving dynamic underscores the complex relationship between faith and material aspirations, raising critical questions about the future trajectory of religious observance in an increasingly modernized society).

CONCLUSION

The pursuit of spiritual safety in contemporary Vietnamese society reflects an ongoing transformation as the nation reconciles its historical legacy with modern aspirations. While traditional practices endure, they increasingly merge with modern values and become personalized. Vietnam's evolving spiritual landscape is shaped by the dynamic interplay of cultural continuity, state influence, and individual agency.

Despite progress in science and technology, many continue to face existential uncertainties beyond rational explanation. This has led to a renewed interest in spiritual practices, such as pilgrimages to the Tianhou Temple. Pilgrims seek blessings for business success, health, protection, and family harmony—forms of “spiritual insurance” that provide psychological reassurance and a sense of control in an unpredictable world.

This study identifies pilgrimage to the Tianhou Temple as a symbolic cultural-religious practice that expresses both personal devotion and collective identity. Through ethnographic methods, it reveals that pilgrimage serves not only religious purposes but also functions as a social space that fosters cohesion, sustains collective memory, and reinforces belonging—key elements of communal spiritual life.

However, pilgrimage must be understood within broader social transformations. Future research should include urban youth—often facing identity challenges—and migrant populations, who may be disconnected from traditional spiritual institutions. Investigating the relationship between spiritual practices and mental security in these groups could yield valuable insights and support the development of inclusive cultural and social policies.

Even amid globalization and rising living standards, existential vulnerabilities persist, underscoring the enduring relevance of spiritual traditions. Temple pilgrimages continue to offer both personal solace and communal strength. The popular saying, “*If you worship, it will be sacred; if you abstain, you will be safe,*” encapsulates the cultural belief in spirituality as a protective force. The pilgrimage to the Tianhou Temple thus remains vital, evolving with modern perspectives while preserving its essential spiritual role.

Future studies—particularly longitudinal or comparative in design—could further explore how spiritual resilience is constructed in rapidly changing societies, offering guidance for policies that address the spiritual and psychological well-being of diverse social groups.

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