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From Living in the Shadows to Facebook Livestreams: The Impact of Social Media on Current Mediumship Practice of Mother Goddesses Worship (*Đạo Mẫu*) in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the transformative impact of social media on mediumship practice within the context of Mother Goddesses worship (Đạo Mẫu) in contemporary Vietnam. By examining the ways in which spirit mediums and practitioners utilise social media platforms, the study reveals that these digital spaces facilitate the open expression of belief, foster connections among practitioners, and enable the sharing and promotion of spiritual services as well as the online trade in ritual costumes and objects. Furthermore, social media has become a catalyst for emerging trends directly influencing the ritual practices and increasing the visibility of spirit mediums in today's society, creating generational shifts between younger spirit mediums and their predecessors, who practiced their belief in pre-renovation Vietnam under precarious circumstances. As rituals become more visible and accessible through social media, the interplay between digital and spiritual realms becomes increasingly significant. The findings suggest that social

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media not only enhances a sense of community among practitioners that transcends geographical boundaries, but also shapes the continuing developments of this traditional practices, contributing to a dynamic landscape of Mother Goddesses worship in Vietnam today. This research underscores the agency and significance of digital platforms, in particular social media, in transforming spiritual expressions and adapting cultural traditions in the modern era.

Keywords: *religion in Vietnam, Mother Goddess worship, mediumship, social media, cultural heritage, digital ethnography*

1. Introduction

The Vietnamese folk belief of worshipping Mother Goddesses (*Đạo Mẫu* or *tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu*, also *Tứ Phủ*, Four Palaces) is a syncretic spiritual system centered around the veneration of four cosmological 'palaces', realms, or spheres. Those realms correspond to Heaven, Forest & Mountains, Water, and Earth, each governed by a Mother Goddess and a pantheon of lower deities serving her. The belief is strongly connected to Buddhist practice and Taoist influences while being heavily shaped by local cults and traditions. Despite regional differences, the diverse belief system is often looked at as one and referred to by the unifying term *Đạo Mẫu*, Mother Goddess(es) belief.[2] The ritual practice of *Đạo Mẫu* in Vietnam is primarily characterized by elaborate spirit possession ceremonies (*hầu đồng*) held in temples. During these ceremonies, spirit mediums become vessels for the deities, enacting highly aestheticized performances involving dance, music, costume changes, and the distribution of blessed gifts (*lộc*). Each of the 36 deities that are usually incarnating in *hầu đồng* ceremonies has their own story of contributing to the building up of the Vietnamese nation and helping people, inspiring those coming after them. The ceremonies are not only highly spiritual encounters for individuals and

[2] The use of this term has been introduced and coined by Ngô Đức Thịnh (1996) and his early works analysing and categorising Mother Goddesses traditions and cults all over Vietnam, see reference list.

the community alike, but are also significant expressions of Vietnamese tradition and culture.

Once marginalised as superstition and suffering political persecution, Mother Goddesses worship experienced a dramatic resurgence after Vietnam's *Đổi mới* economic and cultural reforms in 1986, as extensively discussed by various Vietnamese and foreign scholars alike. Notably the works of Philip Taylor (2004), specifically examine this time period where the belief evolved from a marginal tradition to a popular religious practice, illustrating its adaptability and emotional resonance in the wake of a new market economy and spiritual revival. In 2016, practices related to Mother Goddesses worship gained recognition as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.[3] This international acknowledgment marked a big milestone in destigmatising the practice, creating a safer environment for followers to openly practice their belief offline and online, inspiring young Vietnamese artists to merge aspects of the belief with popular culture and contemporary art, thus introducing it to even broader audiences. The UNESCO recognition also marks a turning point in the belief's relationship with the Vietnamese state and local authorities, who are now actively promoting it as an expression of Vietnamese culture for preservation and tourism purposes, e.g., through a 'certification program' awarding certain master spirit mediums with the titles of *Nghệ nhân nhân dân* (folk artisan) or *Nghệ nhân ưu tú* (artisan of merit), emphasising their role as cultural facilitators while providing practitioners with new-found pride, validation, and legitimisation.

The growing popularity of *Đạo Mẫu* in contemporary Vietnam reflects its adaptability and openness to external influences. Extensive merging with local cults, legends, and the absence of a centralised doctrine have preserved its diverse, fluid nature. This flexibility allows spirit mediums to develop their own practices—*mỗi thầy mỗi phép*, 'each teacher has their own teachings'—while broadly adhering to shared ritual rules. Emphasising 'this-worldly' concerns like wealth, prosperity, and family over abstract spiritual goals, *Đạo Mẫu* remains highly responsive to evolving social media and consumer trends, ensuring its relevance both within and beyond sacred contexts as spirit mediums and even the deities themselves cater to the ever-changing spiritual needs of their followers. This digital expansion has significantly reshaped *Đạo Mẫu*, influencing offerings, aesthetics,

[3] For a fascinating personal account on the heritage recognition process of the practice see Oscar Salemink (2020) in reference list.

enabling new forms of visibility, and community building. While older mediums practiced under political constraints, younger generations use social media to express their belief freely, build networks, and assert spiritual legitimacy. Today's Mother Goddesses worship reflects a dynamic negotiation between tradition and innovation, adapting rituals and agency to changing socio-economic and technological landscapes, with social media being central to shaping trends in content and practice.

This paper explores the use and multifaceted impact of social media on the community of Mother Goddesses worship practitioners, as well as on its ritual practice in contemporary Vietnam. It argues that the use of social media is continuously transforming current mediumship practices by amplifying visibility, reshaping ritual economies, and fostering new forms of community, identity, and generational dynamics, highlighting the adaptability of this living spiritual and cultural tradition in response to a digital modernity. Drawing on long-term digital ethnography and participatory research, it examines how spirit mediums and other practitioners engage with online platforms to express belief, perform rituals, and shape spiritual authority. Following this introduction, the second section outlines the research methodology, particularly the use of social media as both a research tool and a field site. The third section introduces an analytical framework that links spirit mediums and digital media as 'tools of transmission' from a material religion approach. The then following section explores the concrete uses of Facebook, and TikTok by practitioners, with a focus on ritual livestreaming, influencer culture, and online community formation. The fifth section reflects on generational shifts in the community of practitioners and how digital engagement redefines ritual forms and spiritual narratives. The sixth section examines how social media affects ritual economy and aesthetics, focusing on emerging trends, increasing competition, and new standards regarding aesthetics and monetary value of ceremonies. The paper concludes by summarising the key findings and reflecting on the implications of these developments for the future of Mother Goddesses worship as both a living spiritual tradition and a recognised cultural heritage.

2. Research Approach

This paper is based on ongoing empirical and participatory research about and with practitioners of the Mother Goddesses belief in Vietnam, conducted both in person and through digital platforms over a period of six years. The research is grounded in long-term, hybrid ethnography, combining offline fieldwork in Central and Northern Vietnam, primarily Huế, Đà Nẵng, and Hà Nội, with active engagement in the respective online "communities," following practitioners across both their offline and online lives. Data collection included participant observation at ceremonies and festivals, as well as digital ethnography focusing on shared content, public interactions, and practitioner networks on Facebook and TikTok. Access to these online spaces was made possible by long-term in-person research and trust-based relationships.

With this in mind, the paper adopts a digital ethnography approach, grounded in the assumption that "digital media and technologies are part of the everyday and more spectacular worlds that people inhabit" (Pink et al. 2015, 7). This perspective allows us to explore the relationship between the digital, sensory, atmospheric, and material elements of the world that surrounds us, indicating that digital space is not regarded as a self-contained entity, but rather dynamically linking larger social discourses which are taking place offline in our everyday lives. Examining the use of social media among practitioners of *Đạo Mẫu* offers valuable insights into contemporary mediumship practices in Vietnam, because it serves as a tool for immediate self-expression of believers as well as a way for researchers to connect deeply and on a personal level with the community through direct participation (e.g. interactions such as Likes and Comments). Liana Chua (2021) notes about field research in times of increasing digital interactions that social media blurs temporal boundaries in ethnographic research, enabling ongoing "co-presence," whereby this "connectedness" is two-wayed (Chua 2021, 154) even after fieldwork concludes. When aware of the ethical implications, social media-based research shouldn't be underestimated as a tool to gain valuable insights, as demonstrated in this paper. Building on this methodological approach, the next section explores concepts from a Material Religion perspective that underline the analysis, focusing on how both spirit mediums and digital media function as "tools of transmission."

3. Thoughts on (Spirit) Mediums & Media

There are two categories of "media" that are particularly relevant to this paper; on one hand, spirit mediums—human bodies that act as "tools of transmission" (Meyer 2011) for the encounter and communication of spiritual powers with believers in the earthly realm—and, on the other hand, social (digital) media and their role in shaping contemporary religious practices.

In 2015, Heike Behrend et al. published an edited volume titled *Trance Mediums & New Media: Spirit Possession in the Age of Technical Reproduction* (2015), arguing that trance mediumship and technical media are inseparable with the sensory experience being central for ritual embodiment. This means, to achieve a "trance state" and to perform ritual mediation, (trance) mediums generally require tools or equipment, namely technical media. These can include, as we recall Meyer's definition of media as "tools of transmission," a variety of objects, physical spaces, or even specific mass media. Therefore, (trance) mediums are closely related and somewhat reciprocally dependent on technical media (Behrend and Zillinger 2015, 4).

This can be clearly seen in the ritual practice of spirit mediums in Vietnam, where an array of objects is needed for a successful *hầu đồng* ceremony. Those physical objects are e.g. a red veil to cover the face at the ascension and descension of deities within the body of the spirit medium, appropriate costumes for each deity, specific offerings, incense sticks, but also the temple space as a physical location, as well as the sensory sacred atmosphere, which is primarily produced audiovisually by professional musicians (*chầu văn*) and, for instance, olfactorily through the spraying of perfume and the smoke of agarwood and incense. All these elements serve as "technical media" and "tools of transmission," enabling the trance of the spirit medium (which is a "tool of transmission" in itself). Building on this, another "tool of transmission" extending this ritual mediation is mass media (such as coverage of aspects of the belief by news outlets, TV or film in a broader sense), but in particular and way more significantly nowadays social media. By livestreaming or capturing moments of the ceremony and sharing it virtually to a larger audience, across time and space, the time span of the presence of the deities, or what I like to call *temporary auspiciousness*, is indefinitely extended as the posted content can be reposted and kept online (theoretically) forever.

A concrete example of this idea in action is the *Tứ Phủ* (四府, Four Palaces) NFT project created by internationally renowned visual artist and creative director Lê Thanh Tùng, also known as Crazy Monkey.[4] Inspired by the aesthetics of *hầu đồng* ceremonies, his *Four Palaces* project from 2018 features limited short animations of a woman dressed as a spirit medium who appears to be in trance, marketed as NFTs (non-fungible tokens), meaning unique digital assets (in this case artworks) stored on a blockchain that allows people to verify ownership and authenticity while offering a new way of circulating and archiving cultural expressions digitally. He describes his project as "[…] a new way of storing content—culture—beliefs, while bearing the nature of decentralization. These pieces of knowledge and information will be preserved—forever stored with time."[5]

Unlike more traditional preservation strategies, such as the UNESCO inscription or the folk artisan certification program, Tùng's NFT project decentralizes the heritage by enabling its circulation and ownership in the hands of individuals globally. This aligns with the previously mentioned non-centralized, fluid character of Mother Goddesses worship and introduces a new form of digital sacred materiality that is worth further explorations. The *Four Palaces* NFTs have recently been exhibited at a gallery in Sydney, Australia (2024) and they continue to be displayed in a virtual metaverse exhibition, securing its public accessibility indefinitely. In this way, his work bridges the digital, intangible realm and our physical, tangible reality, mirroring mediumship practice on a very elementary level. Having established this conceptual framework of medium and media, we now turn to the practical ways social media is integrated into everyday ritual and spiritual life among *Đạo Mẫu* practitioners.

[4] He is also the visual art director for the music video of the song *Tứ Phủ* (Four Palaces) by pop singer Hoàng Thùy Linh (2019), introducing the belief's aesthetics to a broad audience.

[5] https://www.crazymonkey.vn/four-palaces-nft; The discourse surrounding NFTs from a cultural studies perspective regarding art and heritage preservation as well as ownership is still underexplored, but warrants more extensive research and reflections.

4. Deities Dancing on Screens: The Use of Social Media

Social networks, especially Facebook and TikTok, have become essential tools for followers of the Mother Goddesses, in particular master mediums (*đồng thầy*) and initiated spirit mediums (*thanh đồng*), to share about their ritual activities and their personal life. Practitioners frequently post pictures, clips, and livestreams of their spirit possession (*hầu đồng)* ceremonies, temple visits, pilgrimage trips, or other spiritual activities. These digital spaces allow them to express personal interpretations of the belief, honour deities on their anniversaries by posting their stories, teach their followers, exchange knowledge, and, in many cases, even advertise their spiritual services to potential clients. This content is posted across private profiles, public fan pages, business accounts, and large community groups with thousands of members who are connected with Mother Goddesses worship in a variety of ways. Beyond spirit mediums, musicians (*chầu văn*) accompanying the ceremonies and ritual assistants (*hầu dâng*) [6] who are responsible for helping the medium dress, pouring tea and wine, and attending to ritual tasks, are also expanding their presence on social media by promoting their services through posts, videos, and livestreams. Once they have established a good reputation, they often attract bookings across Vietnam. In this way, social media not only supports the professionalisation of ritual roles but also enhances interpersonal and business connections across regions, fostering a strong sense of community despite the diversity of the practice.

Building on this expanding digital ecosystem, livestreams and video calls have further redefined ritual experiences by transcending the physical boundaries of the temple, allowing audiences from around the world to virtually attend ceremonies and experience the presence of the deities through their smartphone screens. What is particularly interesting here is how technicalities, such as camera angles, digital framing, and editing, shape the experience of 'digital participants,' compared to the audience physically present. Here we can relate Alvin Eng Hui Lim's works on live streaming *getai* performances and spirit possessions in Singapore (2018, 2020) where he mentions that the camera not merely documents and reproduces the ceremony, but its perspective and framing also enable viewers

[6] In recent years, training academies for ritual assistants emerged in the North, advertising their courses online. Their sole existence furthering the professionalisation of the ritual role, while also creating new standards and competition.

"to encounter their deity in proximity, as if they were next to him" (Lim 2020, 9), demonstrating how digital techniques itself may construct ritual and enhance the emotional resonance of the viewer with the sacred. In this way, both the spirit medium and the digital format work together to create a sense of divine proximity.

In *hầu đồng* ceremonies, the smartphone used for livestreaming is often placed on the small table (*bàn loan*) in front of the altar, directly facing the spirit medium. This position—aligned with the altar's statues of the deities—grants viewers of the livestream a perspective typically reserved for divine beings, contrasting with the physical attendees seated behind or beside the medium. The medium's gestures of prayer and offering are thus simultaneously directed at both the altar and the unseen online audience. Moreover, the deities (or their statues) act as silent spectators, much like the digital viewers participating in the livestreams, except when the latter send comments or reactions. This contrasts sharply with the physical presence of those in the temple space, who joyfully clap, shout, and interact directly with the incarnating deities throughout the ceremony. In some cases, mediums vary the camera angle by positioning it diagonally in front of the altar, allowing the online audience to see both the spirit medium and the participants in the background or by placing the smartphone in the hands of someone in the audience, allowing for a more immersive or communal visual experience as digital participants experience the same perspective as if they were actually present in the temple with everyone else. As Heidi Campbell argues in her various works about digital religion, online platforms can serve as legitimate extensions of religious space, because digital spaces are able to facilitate meaningful ritual participation and spiritual engagement, among others through direct online interactions (liking or commenting) and real time co-presence enabling shared spiritual experience (e.g. livestreams), serving as networked spaces of sacred interaction (see Campbell 2012, Campbell and Bellar 2022). These evolving practices of digital mediation and virtual presence invite further inquiry into how sacred space is produced, perceived and extended across screens.

Another striking point in Campbell's works are her observations regarding shifting (religious) authority or leadership in the digital age. She argues that religious authority is increasingly "networked" and decentralised, meaning it is shaped not only by institutional legitimacy but also by a practitioner's ability to connect with audiences and build trust online, e.g., through personal narratives and interactions (2012, 11 ff.; Campbell and

Bellar 2022, 75 ff.). This mirrors a recent development in Vietnamese Mother Goddesses worship, namely the emergence of what I term "influencer mediums," drawing from the concept of social media influencers. This term describes spirit mediums, mostly master mediums, who create a carefully curated image or public persona of themselves, their ritual practice, and sometimes their economic means through their digital presence. These individuals often act as trendsetters, shaping how the belief is practiced and perceived through inspiring other believers in their own practice. Their curated content ranges from livestreamed ceremonies and edited images and videos of themselves serving the deities in extravagant costumes with pop music playing in the background, proudly presenting certificates and awards they received by cultural heritage organisations, to lecture videos for their followers, and even 'Get Ready With Me'-style segments popularised by influencer culture, in which they interact with viewers while applying their make-up for the temple or social outings. Their social media pages usually show a colourful mix of their daily spiritual activities while also providing insights into their personal lives and relationships, presenting themselves as religious authorities and charismatic figures.[7] Like their worldly counterparts, these influencer mediums often possess significant reach and their influence on their followers is tangible. Their aesthetic, spiritual, and material choices—shared with thousands of followers—extend their influence across temple communities and social networks alike, exemplifying how social media visibility, material wealth, and ritual authority have become increasingly intertwined.

Drawing the connection to previous studies, Taylor's early work explores how mediums construct charisma and spiritual authority through performance and aesthetic choices in their ceremonies. He writes, "The medium's charisma is not simply a matter of personal magnetism but is cultivated through performance, ritual knowledge, and the ability to mediate between the spiritual and social worlds" (Taylor 2004, 83). Adding to this, Endres later emphasises the performative character of the ritual practice in her work, highlighting how mediums seemingly effortlessly blend spirituality, efficacy, with entertainment through elaborate ceremonies (Endres 2011, 66). Today, the same forms of spiritual persona-building

[7] See Isabel Weitschies, *Zwischen rotem Schleier und Gucci Tasche. Geistermedien des Muttergottheitenglaubens und Transformationen ihrer sozialen Rolle im gegenwärtigen Vietnam* [*Between Red Veil and Gucci Bag. Spirit Mediums of the Mother Goddess Belief and Transformations of their Social Role in Contemporary Vietnam*] (Master's thesis, Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, 2024).

described here are simply continued and extended into the digital realm, where influencer mediums perform not only for deities and temple audiences but also curate their online presence to captivate larger online followings. Naturally, there are very mixed opinions among practitioners and the general public in regards to this new development, debating about what constitutes appropriate expression, yet they also reflect the participatory and contested nature of living heritage. However, those discussions seem perpetual as the use and impact of social media cannot be reversed or ignored, especially when it is directly initiated by many practitioners of this belief (or heritage) themselves in the most immediate, 'authentic', and unfiltered way possible (albeit with the help of a beauty filter or two).

Along these grassroots developments, tourism agencies and cultural institutions have also begun utilising social media to promote activities related to Mother Goddesses worship as a cultural heritage. This includes posts promoting festivals (*lễ hội*) at major religious sites, serving the spiritual needs of local communities but also increasingly position them as spiritual/heritage tourism destinations.[8] While digital tools have clearly opened new pathways for engagement within the community of spirit mediums and beyond, it is necessary to consider how these contemporary expressions differ from previous forms of practice and how generational memory may or may not continue to shape community and notions of solidarity.

5. Then and Now: Community Engagement and Social Media

The social landscape in which master mediums and practitioners express their faith today could hardly be more different from just a few decades ago. Rituals were held in secrecy, often under the cover of night, without music or elaborate offerings, as mediums and believers navigated the risks of stigma, political suspicion, and quiet resistance. Yet even in those precarious times, spirit mediums remained trusted figures within their

[8] See Isabel Weitschies, "Deities on Screens and Boats: *Lễ Hội Điện Hòn Chén* and the Impact of Social Media on Spiritual Heritage Tourism in Worshipping the Mother Goddesses in Huế, Central Vietnam" (forthcoming) on the promotion of the biannual festival worshipping Mother Goddess Thiên Y A Na for spiritual heritage tourism purposes on social media.

neighbourhoods, quietly tending to the spiritual needs of their communities. Following the recognition of Mother Goddesses worship as national and UNESCO cultural heritage, the practice rapidly gained public acceptance, boosting the visibility and confidence of practitioners. Spirit mediums and private temples have multiplied noticeably today, even without official records to show. As Tiên, the administrator of a major Facebook page on *Đạo Mẫu*[9] emphasises, the initiation to be a spirit medium was once rare and usually seen as the last resort due to social stigma, particularly for unmarried female spirit mediums, who often concealed their spiritual activities even from immediate family members as they were concerned about judgement and not finding a husband. Now, the spirit medium community is more visible than ever, though traces of the old caution still linger among some practitioners.

Today, initiation ceremonies are almost a regular part of the everyday work in the temple, although this, of course, heavily depends on the respective master medium and his or her following. With an increasing number of initiations, the demographic makeup of the whole community of practitioners is changing, as most practitioners are called into the service of the Mother Goddesses in young adulthood. Vietnam is generally a young country, with an average age of 32.9 years (2024)[10] so the demographics of contemporary Vietnamese society as such already provide a fertile ground for fast-moving trends, economic growth, and social development. This generational transformation illustrates what Endres observed as a redefinition of Vietnamese mediumship in response to changing social and political environments (2011, 154). While some older practitioners critique this shift as a loss of authenticity, others see it as a living testament to the belief's enduring adaptability, an argument that extends today into the digital realm.

As younger spirit mediums take on a more prominent role in the "scene," there is a growing receptivity to and willingness to integrate current (consumer) trends[11] into the practice, as well as an increased affinity for and engagement with social media, a space for younger generations to

[9] All references to Tiên (pseudonym) in this paper are based on continuing personal communication between 2020-2024 online and in person in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

[10] See World Population Prospects 2024 - Population Dynamics -Department of Economic and Social Affairs – United Nations: https://population.un.org/wpp/ (last accessed 25.02.2025).

[11] Not only directly related to Mother Goddesses worship, but sometimes also trends in broader society, e.g. the use of popular international name-brand plush animals as offerings for deities believed to be the age of children, such as *Cậu Bé*.

mediate, learn, display, and construct spiritual legitimacy online while navigate the belief's form and content. One example of this development is the portrayal of certain popular deities who are regularly incarnated in ceremonies, nowadays often embodying characteristics that do not necessarily stem from traditional narratives. Those new characteristics have rather become normalized through the repetitive interpretations of them shared by various practitioners online. A notable case is that of *Cô Bơ*, the Fourth Lady, who is frequently portrayed as a beautiful woman in tears, signifying her deep suffering. It is believed that in her lifetime she regularly rowed her boat across a river to help people cross. One day she met a renowned general who was on his way into battle against Chinese invaders. They fell in love and he promised to marry her upon his return. However, while she waited for him, enemy forces arrived at the riverbank seeking passage. In a selfless act, she offered to help them but drowned the boat with the enemy soldiers and herself, sacrificing her life to protect the Vietnamese nation. While her story is undeniably tragic, the emphasis today has increasingly shifted toward framing it as a romantic tragedy, which appeals more to contemporary audiences. As a result, many younger spirit mediums cry when they incarnate her in ceremonies, expressing her strong emotions on not having been able to reunite with her lover, whereas many older and more experienced spirit mediums tend to highlight her courage and noble sacrifice for the greater good instead, portraying her as a role model for her followers.[12]

These emerging trends, combined with the fluid nature of Mother Goddesses belief, are increasingly excluding older generations of spirit mediums from spaces and processes that are nowadays essential in shaping and negotiating the contemporary practice. As the number of practitioners grows, particular of a younger generation, altering the community's demographics, feelings of solidarity are strained, potentially leading to generational conflicts. As early as 2006, Viveca Larsson and Kirsten W. Endres wrote about the rapid increase in initiation ceremonies in Hanoi—a development that is even more favoured today by current social processes, the promotion of the belief by the Vietnamese government, and the active use of social media than it was nearly 20 years ago. In this context, Larsson and Endres speak to an older master medium about the practice during the times of the ban on the belief, writing "[...] during those difficult

[12] Personal conversation with Master Tâm (pseudonym) (23.06.2024, Hanoi) who is the 121st medium in his family lineage.

years, there used to be a really nice and cheerful community of mediums. [...] These were hard times, he adds, but he remembers them as 'happy days' because there was a strong feeling of solidarity. In contrast, he feels that nowadays many people just come and go and do not seem to have time to reflect and pray; they just come to the temple for blessed gifts from the spirits" (Larsson and Endres 2006, 154). They also write, "[...] elderly mediums criticise the new generation of mediums for not properly observing the spirits' rules and for entering into mediumship in order to tap the spirits' assumed efficacy for the sole purpose of improving their material well-being and economic success" (Larsson and Endres 2006, 156).

While not all practitioners share this perspective, it helps explain why many, especially older master mediums, spirit mediums, and believers, choose to keep their practice private and distance themselves from the highly visible and digitally active members of the community. Those who do engage publicly are often charismatic and skilled at presenting themselves as well as their ritual practice both online and offline. By contrast, many regular practitioners prefer to maintain a low profile, acting casual about their beliefs in daily life. Alongside this public expression, a "practice in the shadows" persists, reminiscent of the past when *Đạo Mẫu* was prohibited. Practitioners following this approach often avoid discussing their belief even with family, striving to preserve what they view as a "pure" and "truthful" practice. Less visible than their flamboyant counterparts, these private, usually more traditional practitioners are often overlooked, though they represent another face of Mother Goddesses worship. This lack of visibility can lead to emerging unwanted prejudices and judgement from broad society if they lack basic understanding of the belief's diverse expressions.

As spirit mediums become more visible both offline and online, new practitioners increasingly struggle to find a suitable master medium (*thầy*) to follow, even as the role of spiritual teachers becomes more significant. The search for a genuine teacher is complex, heavily rooted in fate and personal affinity, but also in the compatibility between an individual and the personal style of a master medium. Although digital platforms seemingly make it easier to connect and many master mediums appear just a message away, the abundance of teachers and temples today creates new uncertainties, making it difficult for new believers to navigate whom to trust and follow. As with any popular phenomenon, greater exposure leads to greater risks of commercialisation, appropriation, and fraud. As Tiên reflects,

"Back in the old days, there were very few mediums. Now you see them everywhere." She observes that many pursue mediumship for notoriety rather than spiritual calling (*căn*), some master mediums exploiting their followers financially through costly initiation ceremonies, imposing both economic and spiritual burdens. Despite their potential to serve as a space for support and knowledge exchange, Facebook groups have increasingly become breeding ground for predatory teachers as desperate posts for guidance appear almost daily, illustrating how vulnerable many new believers feel. New practitioners must therefore critically assess whom to trust, without being misled and blinded by curated online personas and public displays of material wealth. Complicating this further, the styles of master mediums are increasingly diversifying due to greater freedom and external influences, such as increased contact with practitioners of other regions and digital consumer trends, encouraging both innovation and competition. For new believers, navigating this vast and often conflicting landscape can be overwhelming and reinforces the need for a genuine teacher to show them the right path and provide guidance, not only in spiritual matters, but also how to live a good life.

Beyond these generational shifts and potential tensions, a major aspect shaped by social media is ritual economy. The next section therefore explores how a continuously increasing digital visibility intersects with monetary means, ritual aesthetics, and expends on notions of sincerity and competition in contemporary *Đạo Mẫu* practice.

6. Digital Consumption: Ritual Economics and Social Media

A Vietnamese proverb states: "Wealth gives birth to ritual forms" (*phú quí sinh lễ nghĩa*), meaning that material wealth determines the scale of one's ritual obligations. Those with greater means are morally expected to organise more elaborate ceremonies, reflecting a Confucian ideal of filial piety and the moral debt owed to ancestors and deities (Jellema cited in Endres 2014, 28). As Larsson and Endres (2006, 157) quote a spirit medium, "[...] who would buy ugly clothes for their parents? [...] would you present your parents with rotten meat or a burnt chicken? [...] I respect the spirits like my parents and it is the heart of a person that counts, not the money." A widespread view is that beyond a true heart and pure intentions, only five basic elements are needed for a successful ceremony: incense, candles,

something to drink (water, tea, or rice wine), flowers, and simple food like fruits that can be offered to the deities. Tiên shared that, in her experience, the deities value sincere attention above lavish offerings as long as they have a pure heart (*tâm*). She elaborates:

> […] spirit mediums do not necessarily need lots of expensive costumes for each deity. If you can afford it, you should do it, but if not, it is enough to have one costume for all the spirits. Again, it is all about your heart and intentions […] not one way is better than the other. It only becomes an issue if the very present, big, expensive ceremonies are being looked at as the norm and new mediums think they have to do the same. Both ways of conducting a ceremony are valid on their own and depend on the person, their situation and intentions. We shouldn't make a judgement. The same goes for different approaches of master mediums to teach their devotees. Each person has a different path to the belief and to serve the Mother Goddesses.

To summarise, the deities know our hearts and understand our (financial) situation. Elaborate ceremonies are appropriate if affordable, but they are by no means necessary. This is especially evident during the times of the ban on the belief when spirit mediums held their ceremonies hidden in secret, without expensive offerings, temple decorations or music, only using a single robe and veil to avoid drawing the attention of local authorities to their ritual activities. As Endres writes: "Whereas in times of war, food shortages and state persecution of *Tứ Phủ* [Four Palaces] mediums, a single robe and a few modest offerings sufficed, material prosperity and modern consumer habits have set new standards of ritual aesthetics, the agency of which is instrumentalised in different ways and at the same time critically negotiated" (emphasis in original, Endres 2008, 162, transl. by author). However, the aesthetics or "beauty" of a ceremony has always played a central role in ritual practice, primarily to pay the greatest possible honour and respect to the deities, but also because aesthetics are linked to the entertainment value for the participants and ultimately the efficacy of the ceremony. Accordingly, ritual aesthetics have agency (Kapferer cited in Endres 2008, 161). A *hầu đồng* ceremony must always be beautiful (*đẹp*), joyful (*vui*), and be done with a true heart (*thật tâm*), directly influencing the tangible presence of the deities. Nevertheless (or perhaps precisely because of this), there is a growing trend today for ceremonies to be increasingly expensive, elaborate, and engaging.

In today's *hầu đồng* ceremonies, the more impressive the costumes, flowers arrangements, professional make-up, musicians, and blessed gifts

(*lộc*), the better it seems. Many ceremonies now cost several hundred, and sometimes even thousands of USD, covering not just offerings, decorations, and gifts for the participants, but also transportation to special temples, and compensation for ritual assistants and musicians. Sharing wealth with the temple community fulfils a master medium's moral responsibility and publicly affirms their prestige and spiritual legitimacy, often interpreted as a sign of sincere devotion and divine favour (Endres 2008, 166). With economic growth, i.e. the constantly growing market and financial resources as well as the increasingly free availability of a wider range of goods in physical shops and online retail, the monetary value of ritual practices also continues to rise. Today's (digital) economy stands in stark contrast to the situation in pre-renovation Vietnam when, on the one hand, there was state repression of all ritual activities and, on the other hand, a tense economic situation affecting the entire country, in which neither offerings nor ritual clothing were affordable or available in sufficient quantities, regardless of a person's social class or finances (Larsson and Endres 2006, 158-159). Again, I want to connect my work to Taylor (2004), as his research highlights how economic prosperity has historically influenced ritual scale and aesthetic expression in *Đạo Mẫu* as well as its commercialisation directly after 1986, e.g., regarding pilgrimages to sites worshipping Goddesses. His study illustrates that the intertwining of commerce and spirituality in Mother Goddesses worship organically followed the previous limitations of the ritual practice, among others described by Larsson and Endres (2006), predating social media and now being amplified by it. Today's large and ever-growing selection of ritual and ceremonial objects and their increasing affordability and accessibility to believers of varying income levels, especially through Facebook groups or online shops such as shopee.vn drastically shapes ritual economies. The colourful embroidered ritual clothing with matching accessories, beautifully decorated fans with feathers, ritual weapons, golden jewellery, handcrafted paper offerings, and much more are increasingly becoming goods of digital consumption that can be purchased in seconds with just a few clicks on the smartphone. This has also led to mass-produced, lower-quality ritual goods now being widely available at low cost, either sold directly in online shops or through private resellers on Facebook. Consequently, many wealthy master mediums have already moved on from these mass-produced items and focus on uniqueness and high quality to set themselves apart.

In this sense, the spirit mediums I labelled as influencer mediums truly resemble social media personalities in their ability to shape their online

followings. Although, to my knowledge, they do not (yet) work with advertising deals and discount codes, many finance their lifestyles through their following, spiritual services, and often side businesses related to the belief, such as selling ritual goods like paper offerings or ritual accessories on Facebook. Financial wealth is widely seen as a tangible, material indicator of the benevolence and support of the deities, reinforcing a medium's spiritual credibility. The pursuit of elaborate ceremonies, luxury goods, and designer clothing[13] increasingly intertwines personal prestige with religious devotion, spiritual authority, and self-expression in and outside of the temple. Social media amplifies this dynamic as some spirit mediums showcase their spiritual and material success through displays of lavish status objects, creating trends and competition while potentially inviting gossip. It is a fine line between admiration and envy. For the majority of master mediums, whether or not they engage on social media and follow consumer trends, their spiritual work is not isolated but closely linked to broader aspects of their identity, including self-expression, gender and sexual identity, social status, and consumer behaviour. Their private lifestyle goes hand in hand with their spiritual calling and practice.

Nearly 20 years ago, Endres (2008) observed similar dynamics, noting how economic changes at that time were increasing the monetary value of offerings presented to the deities. She described the phenomenon of "show-off-mediums" (*đồng đua*), practitioners driven by competition to display wealth and beauty, often above their financial means, leading them into heavy debt (Endres 2008, 166). She mentions in a footnote that literary sources describe this competitive character among spirit mediums as far back as the 1940s in late colonial Hanoi. Although not new, this development is being driven further and faster by current economic growth and Western consumer influences in Vietnamese society. Today, social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok reinforce new "standards," influencing young practitioners, who may delay their initiation ceremony a long time to earn and save money or have to rely on wealthy relatives living abroad for their spiritual practice. Despite the wide availability of ritual goods seemingly having a unifying and egalitarian effect, new aesthetic trends may set standards so high that practitioners from lower social classes

[13] Here it is not relevant if the designer products are genuine or not as the market for counterfeit products in Southeast Asia is enormous. What counts is the idea or 'fantasy' that those products convey.

struggle to keep up and risk exclusion. However, this ultimately depends on the teachings and views of the teacher they follow.

While *Đạo Mẫu* traditionally prioritises sincerity of heart over material expression, Vietnam's economic growth and the rise of social media have shifted ritual practices. Ceremonies are increasingly commodified and digitally mediated, becoming displays of both spiritual devotion and personal prestige. This shift encourages consumerism, redefines spiritual authority, and intensifies competition among mediums, motivated both by serving the deities beautifully and the desire to distinguish themselves from other mediums. Feelings of envy, jealousy, and conflict often arise, revolving around the perceived sincerity of a mediums' practice, the relationship towards their followers, their wealth, and their personal lives. While these tensions have long circulated at ceremonies and festivals, today they are increasingly negotiated in online spaces too. These developments in the ritual economy—where aesthetics, wealth, and online influence converge—highlight how Mother Goddess worship is increasingly being shaped by digital negotiations and consumerist values. Ceremonies worshipping Mother Goddesses have been both public spectacle and personal expression for a long time, but the latter is seemingly growing in significance, continuing to blur the boundaries between spiritual sincerity and performative display while potentially even aiming to strengthen its own capability to compete with others. This shift demonstrates one of the main arguments of this paper, namely regarding social media not merely as a tool for communication, but as a powerful agent actively (re)shaping spiritual authority, ritual aesthetics, and community building all while providing the space for a diversifying individual practice. In the following conclusion, I summarise the findings of this paper and reflect on the broader implications of these shifts, particularly in terms of heritage, authenticity, and adaptability in a digital world.

7. Conclusion

This paper explores how spirit mediums and practitioners of Mother Goddesses worship in contemporary Vietnam use social media to express belief, connect across regions and abroad, and shape ritual practice. Platforms like Facebook and TikTok strengthen interpersonal and professional ties, facilitate the online trade of ritual goods, and continuously generate

new trends and standards—directly influenced by the rise of influencer mediums. These developments directly impact both the lived reality of the belief and its economic framework, reflecting generational shifts from pre-renovation Vietnam to today. Social media allows practitioners to utilise their newfound visibility in Vietnamese mainstream society and online, transcending static heritage politics by using their own voices to negotiate and adapt their spiritual practice to changing social, spiritual, and economic contexts. This adaptability is especially visible in the ritual performance, portrayal of the belief, and self-expressions of followers of the Mother Goddesses.

At the same time, a growing digital presence expands the accessibility of the belief and its ritual activities to outsiders, introducing potentially harmful external, consumeristic influences as well as risks of fraud. This tension highlights the ongoing debate between preserving a "frozen-in-time" version of a cultural heritage versus recognising the fluid realities of a living tradition, that is closely connected to the everyday lives of thousands of people on a very intimate level. Spirit mediums in contemporary Vietnam constantly navigate the interplay between tradition and fate, digital media and modernity, secular and sacred. Both human mediums and digital media act as "tools of transmission" (Meyer 2011), bridging the seen and unseen, the physical and intangible through reshaping what it means to mediate the divine in the 21st century. Facebook Stories featuring colourfully adorned altars or links to livestreams of *hầu đồng* ceremonies are seamlessly followed by videos of club visits with friends from the night before, blurring boundaries or even rendering them invisible. This study thus sheds light not only on the lived dynamics of *Đạo Mẫu* but also on how digital technologies reshape spiritual authority, ritual aesthetics, and the negotiation of spirituality and heritage today. The deities of the pantheon of the Mother Goddesses have found their unique ways to stay relevant and to bridge the past, present, and future, reaching across spiritual, human, and digital worlds to guide their followers through our fast-paced, ever-changing world.

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Ethics Statement

The research was conducted with a strong commitment to ethical standards. All participants provided informed consent and pseudonyms are used in publication to ensure privacy and confidentiality, unless explicit permission was granted. Data collection and analysis were carried out transparently both digitally and in person to avoid bias and ensure a balanced perspective. This study aims to contribute positively to societal knowledge while upholding all ethical considerations.

AI Declaration

The author used AI tools for partial translations, language editing, and grammar correction. Translations were done with DeepL Translator while the author used the Grammarly AI Writing Assistant throughout the writing process to check English spelling and grammar. Before submission the author edited selected passages again for language clarity, grammar, and overall feedback on structure using ChatGPT.

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