Sacred Spatial Structure In The Goddess Worship Beliefs Of The Chinese Community In Bac Lieu

Trương Thu Trang,[1*], Dr. Nayan Deep Singh Kanwal [2]

[1]Bac Lieu University, 178 Vo Thi Sau Street, Bac Lieu Ward, Ca Mau Province, Viet Nam

Email:ID: tttrang@blu.edu.vn

ORCID ID. https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5080-4102

[2]Professor and Independent Researcher, Horizon, Texas, USA

Email:ID: nayan.kanwal@gmail.com

ORCID ID. https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5983-6353

***Corresponding Author**:

Trương Thu Trang

Bac Lieu University, 178 Vo Thi Sau Street, Bac Lieu Ward, Ca Mau Province, Viet Nam

ORCID ID. https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5080-4102

Email:ID: tttrang@blu.edu.vn

Abstract:

Introduction:Throughout the long history of national construction and defense, Vietnamese culture has continually flourished, demonstrating strong spiritual values and enduring vitality. Within this cultural continuum, goddess worship has become an indispensable spiritual current in Vietnamese culture in general and in Southern Vietnamese culture in particular. The practice of goddess worship primarily serves to express gratitude toward deities and to seek their protection and blessing for human life. Goddess worship among the Chinese community in Bac Lieu is no exception. Notably, the sacred spatial structure manifested in the goddess worship practices of the Chinese community in Bac Lieu exhibits a number of distinctive characteristics. This article examines these features in order to contribute further insights into the local religious and cultural identity as reflected through the worship spaces of goddesses within the Chinese community of Bac Lieu

Keywords: *Sacred space; Chinese community; Bac Lieu; Goddess; folk belief*

Introduction

The Chinese community in Bac Lieu is smaller in population than the Kinh and Khmer communities, yet it has made significant contributions to the material and spiritual cultural life of the locality. Chinese residents are mainly concentrated in Bac Lieu City and in district and township centers, particularly along the coastal areas of Bac Lieu Province. Their primary occupations include commerce and trade; in addition, they also engage in maritime activities, agricultural cultivation, and small-scale handicrafts.Areas inhabited by the Chinese community are typically recognizable by the presence of temples, shrines, and assembly halls. These religious institutions serve as important spiritual supports as well as spaces for social interaction, commercial networking, and cultural activities. Among the religious establishments of the Chinese community in Bac Lieu, the Tian Hou

(Mazu) Temple and several other goddess temples represent particularly distinctive expressions of belief. Notably, the sacred spatial structure manifested in the goddess worship practices of the Chinese community in Bac Lieu exhibits unique characteristics that contribute to the articulation of the local religious and cultural identity.

1. Location of Temples and Altars

The goddess temples in Bac Lieu are generally located in areas that are convenient for both land and water transportation, occupying favorable feng shui positions described by the traditional principle *"first near the market, second near the river."*

In *Gia Dinh thanh thong chi*, Trinh Hoai Duc depicted the living environment of the Chinese community as being closely associated with a continuous system of temples and shrines. He wrote:

"Twelve *dam* to the south of the citadel, along the main road with official routes on both sides, stretches a broad street running straight through three intersections to the river… these roads intersect one another in a pattern resembling the character *điền* (田); the streets are densely built with houses standing wall to wall, where Chinese and Vietnamese residents live intermixed along a distance of about three *dam*… At the northern end of the main street stands the Quan Thanh Temple and three assembly halls—Fuzhou, Guangdong, and Chaozhou—arranged on both sides; to the west of the main street is the Tian Hou Temple, nearby to the west is the On Lang Assembly Hall, and at the southern end of the main street toward the west is the Zhangzhou Assembly Hall…"[1]

A characteristic feature of the Chinese community is its long-standing reputation for commercial activities. Wherever they settle, the Chinese tend to choose urban areas as bases for trade and business, while also living in close-knit communities in order to provide mutual support in the process of adapting to a new land. Consequently, their temples are also located within the urban spaces where they reside.

According to a survey conducted by Tran Hong Lien (2015) on goddess temples in Ca Mau, Bac Lieu, Soc Trang, Vinh Long, An Giang, and Kien Giang, "most of these temples were built in towns or market centers, often at river junctions. This is not only a characteristic feature of the spatial location of Chinese temples in the Southwestern region, but also a common pattern throughout Vietnam. When migrating to Vietnam, the majority of immigrants traveled by water, particularly in the South, where the dense river network made waterway transportation more convenient. Upon settlement, they chose river or canal junctions to construct goddess temples, as these locations attracted residents from various areas and served as focal points for commercial and residential activities. For example, the Tian Hou Temple in Quach Pham Commune, Dam Doi District, Ca Mau Province is located along the Cay Duong Canal near the Keo River; the Tian Hou Temple in Khanh Hung Commune, Tran Van Thoi District, Ca Mau Province is situated at the junction of the Nha May River and the Kinh Ngang Canal"[2]

In the Southwestern region of Vietnam, waterways have historically served as the primary routes for trade and exchange since the early period of land reclamation and settlement. Accordingly, when the Chinese arrived in this region, they also selected locations that were convenient for both residence and commerce—namely, areas that were close to markets and rivers.

In Bac Lieu, several goddess temples of the Chinese community are currently located approximately ten kilometers from the coastline. This distance, however, is the result of natural coastal sedimentation in the Bac Lieu coastal area. According to local elders and historical records, these temples were originally built close to the seashore, where Chinese residents gathered densely for daily

[1] Trinh Hoai Duc (translated by Tu Trai Nguyen Tao), 1972, pp. 98-99.
[2] Tran Hong Lien, 2015, pp. 102-117.

activities and commercial exchanges. Over time, the original temple sites have become central urban areas of Bac Lieu City, Bac Lieu Province.

Some temples are oriented toward the Bac Lieu River and are often situated at river junctions. By contrast, the Tian Hou Temple and the Son Lam Holy Mother Temple—within which several goddesses of the Chinese community are also worshipped—in Ganh Hao Town, Dong Hai District, remain the closest to the coastline. Additionally, at the Quan Am Phat Dai, the most prominent spiritual tourism site in Bac Lieu, the statue of Avalokitesvara of the Southern Sea faces the sea and is located approximately two kilometers inland from the shoreline.

In addition, within the belief system of personal guardian deities among residents of Bac Lieu, principal goddesses such as Avalokitesvara (Quan Am Bodhisattva), the Nine-Heaven Goddess (Cuu Thien Huyen Nu), and Tian Hou Holy Mother are worshipped in private households. These deities are enshrined in the most respected area of the home and follow specific rules regarding altar placement. The altar dedicated to the personal guardian goddess must be positioned lower than the Buddha altar (if present) but higher than the ancestral altar. It is typically placed on the right-hand side of the house (when facing outward) and oriented toward the front.

Household altars for guardian goddesses must not be installed in bedrooms or in spaces considered impure. If images of a guardian goddess are placed alongside those of a male guardian deity—most commonly Quan De Thanh Quan—special attention must be paid to positioning the goddess image on the right. Otherwise, it is believed that the weapon of the male deity's attendant would symbolically strike the goddess, thereby bringing reproach upon the household.

Furthermore, in more affluent families living in multi-story houses, an entire outer room on the highest floor is often reserved as a solemn and dedicated worship space.

2. Architecture of Worship Sites

In general, the construction of goddess temples of the Chinese community varies according to historical periods, and the scale and appearance of a temple often reflect the economic capacity of the community. The more prosperous the community, the greater the investment made in renovating and embellishing the temple to ensure its beauty and solemnity. The temple thus serves as a tangible expression of devotion and gratitude toward the deities believed to have provided protection and assistance, while also symbolizing the social standing of the Chinese community in relation to other ethnic groups.

In earlier times, when the Chinese first arrived in Bac Lieu to establish their livelihoods, their religious needs led them to construct simple shrines using locally available materials such as wood, nipa palm leaves, planks, and straw-mixed earth. These modest structures typically consisted of a single small chamber dedicated to the worship of water-related goddesses, most notably Thien Hau and the Water Goddess[3]. Gradually, as their economic conditions became more stable, the Chinese community sought to express gratitude to the deities while also creating a space for communal activities. As a result, they contributed labor and financial resources to reconstruct and expand the temples, making them increasingly spacious and ornate.

According to Dang Hoang Lan, in her study of the Nhi Phu Temple, "Chinese temples are easily recognizable by their red or deep pink coloration, which, according to Chinese belief, symbolizes good fortune and happiness. Inheriting traditional Chinese architectural forms, Chinese temples typically consist of three bays, with the central hall serving as the residence of deities, Buddhas, and saints, and standing higher than the two flanking bays. On either side are assembly halls and schools. The assembly

[3] Interview with researcher Tran Phuoc Thuan, a Chinese researcher in Bac Lieu, February 2021.

hall functions as the communal house of an association, serving as a venue for meetings among its members."[4]

Chinese temples in the Southern region in general, including goddess temples, are typically planned according to a horizontal layout. They are designed for multifunctional use, serving not only religious needs but also functioning as centers for educational activities and charitable work.

With regard to the architecture of goddess temples of the Chinese community in Bac Lieu, these structures generally retain their distinctive characteristics, while in many aspects they have undergone a process of Vietnamization, incorporating architectural elements of other ethnic groups living in the area. In terms of color, many temples are roofed with green yin–yang tiles rather than red tiles; however, the interior spaces continue to preserve the traditional decorative style of red lacquer and gilding. The dominant interior tone is a deep golden hue, accented by red borders, which enhances the sense of warmth and solemnity within the sacred space.

The traditional three-bay architectural layout is still maintained. Nevertheless, unlike in some other localities, the educational function in Bac Lieu is no longer integrated within the goddess temple complex. At present, only one Chinese primary school remains in operation, functioning independently from the temple space.

Chinese temples can thus be readily identified within the broader landscape by their distinctive architectural features and vibrant exterior appearance, created through elaborate decorative artistry.

In terms of layout, the temple complex consists of three rows of buildings arranged in a *tu tru* structural style and aligned sequentially in the form of the Chinese character *Tam* (三). From the innermost to the outermost, these comprise the rear sanctuary (hau dien), the main sanctuary (chinh dien), and the front hall (tien dien). Flanking the central architectural axis are two side wings—the Eastern Wing (Dong Lang) and the Western Wing (Tay Lang)—which are used for receiving visitors and accommodating various communal activities. The forecourt of the temples is typically spacious and open, enclosed by a low or permeable fence, with gates opening on both sides.

Architecturally, the three rows of buildings together form the front hall, main sanctuary, and rear sanctuary. Between these sections there is usually an open space known as the *thien tinh* (sky well or courtyard), which allows natural light and ventilation to penetrate the interior of the temple, ensures adequate illumination for the inner sanctum, and provides an outlet for incense smoke.

In Bac Lieu, several small temples are built directly within market centers and therefore lack sufficient space. An example is the temple located in Ward 3 Market, the central market of Bac Lieu City, which occupies an area of only about 100 square meters. Due to this limited space, such temples are unable to accommodate a spacious forecourt or follow the traditional three-section architectural layout, and consequently do not include a *thien tinh* (sky well) for ventilation and incense smoke release. Instead, modern ventilation systems are installed on the roof. This represents an integration of modern architectural solutions within a constrained spatial environment. The entire temple consists of a single chamber that combines the functions of the front hall, main sanctuary, and rear sanctuary. For this reason, in some locations where conditions permit, communities have considered vertical expansion by constructing additional floors in order to enlarge the worship space.

According to Tran Hong Lien (2005), the temple architecture of the Guangdong Chinese differs from that of the Fujian Chinese. Specifically, "temples of the Guangdong group feature very heavy roof structures, richly decorated with motifs of dragons and phoenixes, and square, sharply angled ridge ends. In contrast, temples of the Fujian-origin Chinese typically have boat-shaped roofs with gracefully

[4] Dang Hoang Lan, 2019, pp. 88-89.

upturned ends, creating a lighter and more elegant appearance that bears certain similarities to Vietnamese religious and belief-related architecture"[5]

In Bac Lieu, only one temple of Guangdong-origin Chinese remains in existence, dedicated to Tian Hou. Its original architecture conformed closely to traditional models; however, the temple is currently undergoing major renovation, and it is therefore not yet possible to determine whether the completed structure will continue to preserve its traditional architectural and cultural characteristics. All remaining Chinese temples in Bac Lieu belong to communities of Chaozhou and Fujian origin.

The decorative elements on temple roofs are highly characteristic of Chinese culture, including ceramic figures of the Sun and Moon deities, motifs of *Dual Dragons Chasing the Pearl*, dragons in a posture of homage, and carp transforming into dragons. In some temples, walls and columns are further adorned with paintings and relief sculptures that succinctly depict episodes drawn from classical Chinese legends and literary traditions, such as *The Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea*, *The Peach Banquet*, *Journey to the West*, *The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove*, *Wu Song Slays the Tiger*, *Cui Xiao Leading the Phoenix*, and *Di Qing Competing in Martial Arts*.

Such decorative practices are also commonly found in other Chinese temples. As noted by Dang Hoang Lan in her study on Chinese temple decoration in Saigon, "a distinctive feature is that temple roofs are universally adorned with motifs of carp transforming into dragons, dragons, and phoenixes; most notably, on the roofs of temples belonging to the Guangdong Chinese, there are figures of the Sun and Moon deities as well as ensembles of Saigon ceramic figurines decorating both the front and rear of the roof ridge. Similar ceramic figurine ensembles are also found on the walls flanking the temple courtyard, on the roof sections surrounding the *thien tinh* (sky well), and in the incense halls of Guangdong Chinese temples"[6]

The distinctive curves of the roof ridges and the layered roofing systems of goddess temples in particular, and Chinese temples in general, are characterized by clearly articulated curving, sagging, and sloping forms. According to local elders, these distinctive roof curves originated from the maritime experiences of Fujian settlers, particularly those from the prefectures of Zhangzhou and Quanzhou. Skilled in seafaring and having traveled to Vietnam by boat, these migrants conceived the rhythmically curved roof tiles as symbolic representations of ocean waves and storms, while the steeply sloping, upturned eaves evoke images of boats navigating rough seas in search of a new land for settlement and livelihood.

Accordingly, the architectural composition of goddess temples in particular, and Chinese temples in general, comprises the following principal components:

Temple Courtyard:

Depending on the conditions of each temple, courtyard sizes vary considerably. Older Chinese temples typically feature more spacious courtyards, as during major festival occasions these spaces were used to erect stages for performances by Cantonese and Chaozhou opera troupes, capable of accommodating thousands of spectators. Temples constructed in later periods tend to have narrower courtyards. In Chinese temples in Bac Lieu, the courtyard is often landscaped with artificial rockeries, creating a harmonious mountain-and-water setting with gently flowing water. This area also commonly serves as the location for open-air statues of Avalokitesvara (Guanyin), catering to the spiritual needs of local devotees.

Notably, in front of the courtyards of goddess temples belonging to the Guangdong Chinese,

[5] Tran Hong Lien, 2015, pp. 102-117.
[6] Dang Hoang Lan, 2019, p. 91.

there is invariably a tamarind tree. This tree serves as an important symbolic marker of reverence toward the goddess worshipped—specifically, Tian Hou. According to caretakers of the Tian Hou Temple from the Guangdong Chinese community, the tamarind tree (*toan tu* in Sino-Vietnamese pronunciation) carries symbolic meaning because, in the Cantonese pronunciation, *toan* is a homophone of *ton* (*ton* / *tôn*), which is associated with *ton zi* (*tôn tử*), meaning descendants. This symbolism implies that the descendants of Tian Hou are as numerous and abundant as tamarind fruits, and that those who worship and venerate her will likewise be many. Moreover, as the tamarind tree is a long-lived species, it also conveys the idea that the lineage of devotees serving the goddess will endure endlessly, remaining ever filial toward her.

For this reason, when a tamarind tree becomes old or dies, the Guangdong Chinese customarily plant a new one in its place; allowing the tree to wither completely is believed to be an inauspicious sign. Temple caretakers further explain that this practice of planting tamarind trees emerged only after migration to Vietnam, symbolizing the determination of Guangdong-origin Chinese to preserve their customs and maintain their traditional cultural identity. This practice vividly reflects the strong sense of ethnic consciousness among the Chinese community.

In addition, the courtyards of Chinese temples are typically paved with traditional red terracotta bricks (*gach tau*), a material valued for its resistance to moss growth and slipperiness, as well as its ability to cool the surrounding space. This practice may also be interpreted as an act of cultural preservation or a nostalgic remembrance of the homeland among migrant communities.

Temple Gate (Entrance):

Typically, in front of the gates of goddess temples belonging to the Chinese community, there stand two *Qilin* positioned symmetrically on either side. The *Qilin* is regarded as an auspicious creature heralding good fortune, symbolizing grandeur, longevity, and great happiness. In China, the *Qilin* is also employed as a sacred guardian figure for architectural works, including palaces, residences, and tombs. It is commonly used as a decorative motif on screens and reliefs in pagodas, temples, and shrines, conveying the belief that good fortune accompanies moral values, learning, and ethical conduct in human life, and that sacred protection is therefore essential.

This symbolism is comparable to the pair of *nghe* (mythical lion-like creatures) flanking the ceremonial gate of Tian Hou temples in northern Vietnam. As described in folk verse:

"Whoever travels to the provincial capital of Hung Yen Should visit the Tian Hou Temple with *nghe* standing on both sides. The male holds a jade pearl in its mouth, The female nurses her young with sweet milk."

These stone *nghe* vividly embody the Chinese worldview and philosophy of life, in which material prosperity and offspring are regarded as the greatest sources of human happiness"[7]

In addition, the two door panels are invariably carved, engraved, or painted, or else flanked by full statues of the two Guardian Deities, commonly referred to in popular belief as *Ong Thien* (the Benevolent Guardian) and *Ong Ac* (the Punitive Guardian). These two figures are believed to perform the dual functions of encouraging virtuous conduct and punishing evil.

In Bac Lieu, when entering goddess temples of the Guangdong Chinese, visitors are invariably required to lower their heads; otherwise, they may stumble over the raised thresholds, as there are as many as two thresholds incorporated into the entrance design. This architectural feature reflects the profound reverence of the Guangdong Chinese for the goddess who is believed to have protected them during their migratory journeys and to continue accompanying and safeguarding them in all aspects

[7] Thich Minh Nghiem, 2010, p. 145.

of life. The dual thresholds thus serve as a constant reminder of this reverence: each person entering the temple must bow their head, which in itself constitutes a ritual gesture of homage to the goddess.

Furthermore, the threshold is treated with such respect that pregnant women or women during their menstrual period are traditionally prohibited from stepping over the main entrance threshold. Likewise, when temple caretakers become aware that a funeral procession is about to pass by, they close the main gate to prevent ritual impurity from affecting the sacred power and spiritual authority of the goddess.

Main Sanctuary (Chinh Dien):

The main sanctuary constitutes the central worship space of the temple and is therefore constructed and arranged to create an atmosphere of solemnity and reverence. Its floor area is larger than that of other sections, as it serves as the primary site for ritual worship by devotees. Within the main sanctuary stand rows of large, round columns rising up to the roof structure, generating a sense of majesty and grandeur. These columns are often adorned with high-relief carvings of soaring dragons and dancing phoenixes.

The altar and incense table of the principal goddess are placed in this space. In front of the altar are tables for ritual offerings or a miniature set of the *ngu* (five ritual implements). The remaining surfaces are decorated with bas-relief panels depicting classical narratives associated with the deity or well-known mythological themes such as *The Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea* and the traditional literati arts of zither playing, chess, poetry, and painting (*qin, qi, shi, hua*).

Most goddess temples of the Chinese community share similar architectural features and strongly reflect traditional Chinese architectural aesthetics. Inside the main sanctuary, large horizontal calligraphic plaques are commonly displayed, bearing inscriptions related to maritime journeys and praising the virtues and spiritual powers of the goddesses, such as *"Favorable winds and timely rains – a peaceful and prosperous nation," "The sea without surging waves,"* and *"Crossing the sea under a tranquil sky.*

Thien Tinh Courtyard (Sky Well):

Most Chinese temples incorporate an unroofed open space within the interior known as the *thien tinh* (sky well). Located between the main halls, the size of this courtyard varies depending on the overall scale of the temple. This space is carefully calculated during the architectural design process, with the primary purpose of regulating natural light penetration into the worship halls, thereby creating an atmosphere of solemnity and elegance. In many Chinese goddess temples, however, *thien tinh* courtyards are absent due to spatial constraints. In such cases, modern skylights are typically installed in the ceiling or along the side corridors to allow natural light into the interior.

Corridors:

Corridors are usually situated on both sides of the main sanctuary, connecting the various halls and forming circulation pathways. They create transitional spaces between different worship areas. Along these corridors are often placed subsidiary altars dedicated to minor deities and tutelary figures, such as Ong Bon (the Patron Spirit), the God of Wealth, and the Earth God.

Rear Sanctuary (Hau Dien):

The rear sanctuary is located behind the main sanctuary and is traditionally separated from it by

the *thien tinh* courtyard. However, as noted above, due to limited space, most Chinese goddess temples in Bac Lieu do not include a *thien tinh*. Consequently, the main sanctuary and the rear sanctuary are directly connected, with the latter positioned behind the former and reserved for the worship of secondary deities. The rear sanctuary typically occupies a smaller and more confined space than the

main sanctuary. To emphasize its subordinate status, many temples construct the rear sanctuary at a lower level, often descending by one or two steps to clearly indicate its lesser hierarchical position.

In terms of architectural form, Chinese temples are typically distinguished by the prominent use of vibrant red as the dominant decorative accent. This mode of decoration reflects the overseas Chinese community's expression of loyalty to Zhu Yuanzhang, the Ming dynasty founder (Emperor Taizu of Ming). The bright red color symbolizes the Zhu family name (as the character *Zhu* also connotes the color red) and is further associated with *Hongwu*, another reign title of Zhu Yuanzhang.

Another notable decorative feature is the presence of two large circular ventilation windows with balustrades, symmetrically arranged on the façade of the main structure, symbolizing the Sun and the Moon. Alternatively, ceramic figurines representing the Sun and Moon deities are placed on the roof ridge. In Chinese characters, the combination of *Sun* (日) and *Moon* (月) forms the character *Ming* (明), thereby evoking remembrance of the Ming dynasty. This architectural symbolism is widely prevalent within Chinese communities throughout Vietnam.

Overall, goddess temples of the Chinese community consistently preserve traditional architectural forms in accordance with shared cultural models. However, from an early stage, these temples were constructed with the participation and contributions of local Vietnamese communities. Over time, temple architecture has also incorporated elements of modern design in order to adapt to new living conditions and to enhance functional convenience.

3. Arrangement of Sacred Space

When viewed from the exterior inward, the sacred spatial arrangement in the goddess worship beliefs of the Chinese community can be described as follows:

Arrangement of the worship space in the temple courtyard:

In the courtyards of most goddess temples belonging to the Chaozhou Chinese, statues of Buddhist figures are commonly installed, most notably Maitreya Buddha. According to Buddhist tradition, Maitreya is identified with Ajita, who was born in Southern India (*Nam Thien Truc*), of noble origin, and was a disciple of Sakyamuni Buddha. It is prophesied that Maitreya will descend to the human world in the future to save sentient beings and succeed Sakyamuni. The Chinese community believes that placing a statue of Maitreya Buddha in the temple courtyard invites prosperity and joyful happiness. It is also believed that touching the belly of Maitreya brings peace, good health, and well-being.

More commonly, however, statues of Avalokitesvara (Guanyin Bodhisattva) are installed in open-air settings at the center of the temple courtyard, facing outward. At the Cuu Thien Ancient Temple in Ward 2, Bac Lieu City, for example, a statue of Avalokitesvara is placed outdoors on the second floor so that local residents can easily see it and come to worship. In contrast, goddess temples of the Guangdong Chinese in Bac Lieu rarely incorporate Buddhist figures or bodhisattvas. In these temples, the central courtyard space typically contains only a large incense burner used for offerings to Heaven and Earth.

In addition, the temple courtyard often accommodates the worship of multiple other deities. For instance, at Van Ban Ngu Hanh Temple, which faces the East Sea, two small subsidiary shrines are

located on either side of the courtyard entrance: one dedicated to the Tiger Deity and the other to the Stone Deity. Further inside stands a Bodhi tree accompanied by a statue of the Buddha meditating beneath it, surrounded by representations of various animals, reenacting the narrative of Sakyamuni Buddha's ascetic journey toward enlightenment and the liberation of humanity from suffering.

Proceeding toward the central area of the courtyard, one finds on the left an open-air statue of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, and on the right a shrine dedicated to the Jade Emperor, the Earth Mother, and Nezha. Adjacent to this shrine is a Whale Spirit (*Ca Ong*) shrine, housing the remains of a whale that once washed ashore at this location.

In most cases, the subsidiary shrines situated in the courtyard are oriented outward; nevertheless, the shrine dedicated to the Earth Mother (Địa Mẫu) in Ward 3 uniquely faces inward, directly confronting the main altar of Lady Thien Hau.

- Arrangement of the worship space in the front hall (Tien Dien):

Proceeding further inward, the front hall typically features two subsidiary altars positioned on either side, commonly referred to as the Left Altar and Right Altar (*Ta Ban – Huu Ban*), or alternatively as *Tien Hien – Hau Hien*, or dedicated to Nezha (*Na Tra*) and Hong Hai Nhi. Next, on the right-hand side (when viewed from the outside looking inward), an altar to President Ho Chi Minh is usually installed, while on the left-hand side stands an altar dedicated to the God of Wealth (*Than Tai*) and the Earth God (*Tho Dia*).

The worship of the God of Wealth and the Earth God is highly prevalent among the Chinese community, and all temples include either an altar or a separate shrine dedicated to these deities. Such shrines may be placed in various locations, including the temple courtyard, the front hall, or even within the main sanctuary, where they are positioned below the principal goddess altar.

The forms of the God of Wealth and the Earth God worshipped are quite diverse. Statues of the God of Wealth are often made of fired clay and sometimes gilded with gold leaf. He is typically depicted holding a gold ingot and wearing a broad smile, symbolizing the deity who brings wealth, prosperity, and financial success to households. Within temple contexts, the God of Wealth and the Earth God are regarded as beneficent deities, to whom devotees pray for prosperity and good fortune. When worshipped individually, the God of Wealth may be sculpted in either a seated or standing posture; when worshipped as a paired set with the Earth God, the figures are usually depicted seated. Most temples worship the God of Wealth and the Earth God as a pair. At Dia Mau Cung Temple, however, the shrine includes a gilded standing statue of the God of Wealth, accompanied by an outer pair of seated statues representing the God of Wealth and the Earth God.

According to Vietnamese folklore, the God of Wealth was originally a boy named Nhu Nguyen, who was entrusted by a deity to a merchant named Au Minh. In return for caring for the boy, the merchant was promised prosperity and wealth. After Nhu Nguyen committed a mistake and was punished by the merchant, he fled in fear. Local people, upon learning of the story, established altars to worship Nhu Nguyen in hopes of attracting wealth and fortune, and he subsequently became known as the God of Wealth. In contrast, Chinese tradition identifies the God of Wealth as Zhao Xuan Tan, a powerful deity capable of dispelling evil influences and bestowing commercial profit and prosperity.

According to materials recorded in the Chinese text *Dam Thien*, the Earth God (*Tho Dia*) is the deity who protects land and territory. The Earth Deity is identified as Gou Long, the son of Gong Gong, who once contended for the position of the Yellow Emperor. Unlike his father, Gou Long did not seek fame, power, or authority, but instead aspired only to find fertile land for cultivating grains. Later generations venerated him as the Deity of the Land, commonly referred to as the Earth God or *Tho Dia*.

In contemporary times, Chinese merchants in mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong revere the Earth God as a Guardian Deity, and household worship of the Earth God is widespread. Vietnamese people likewise commonly worship the Earth God in their homes or places of business, believing that

he ensures stability and protection over land and property. The symbolic representations of the Earth

God vary in form but are generally simple and folk-oriented. Most commonly, he is depicted as a pot-bellied man seated directly on the ground, holding a fan and wearing a broad smile. Altars dedicated to the Earth God are therefore traditionally placed on a flat stone slab at ground level.

The reason the God of Wealth and the Earth God are consistently worshipped at ground level is reflected in a popular folk saying:

"The earth has the power to generate white jade, The land gives rise to pure gold."

For this reason, altars to the God of Wealth and the Earth God are not elevated but are instead placed close to the ground, symbolizing the generative power of the earth to produce jade and gold.

- Arrangement of the worship space in the main sanctuary (Chinh Dien):

The main sanctuary is the most important worship space, dedicated to the principal goddess of the temple. The statue of the main goddess is placed at the central position, typically in a seated posture, while attendant figures are arranged on either side or positioned one step lower.

For example, in the temple dedicated to the Five-Element Goddess (*Ba Ngu Hanh*), the main altar appears at first glance to display seven female figures. Upon closer observation, however, these consist of the Five Goddesses of the Elements accompanied by two female attendants. The attendant figures are sculpted at a lower height than the five goddesses, indicating their subordinate status. In the case of Dia Mau Nguyen Quan at Dia Mau Cung Temple, two attendant maidens are represented by smaller standing statues placed slightly behind the main deity, while the figures of Nezha (*Na Tra*) and Hong Hai Nhi are positioned in front as smaller statues.

In addition, secondary deities (*phoi tho*) are also arranged on either side of the principal goddess. Although temple names typically reflect only the main goddess worshipped, the interior invariably includes additional deities, who may be either goddesses or male deities. These figures are usually placed with due solemnity in separate shrines or alcoves flanking the central altar. For instance, at the Tian Hou Temple in Ward 2, Bac Lieu City, Tian Hou occupies the central position, with the Nine Heavens Holy Mother (*Cuu Thien Thanh Mau*) and the Lady of the Realm (*Chua Xu Thanh Mau*) positioned on either side. At the Tian Hou Temple in Ward 1, Thien Hau again occupies the central position, flanked by the Holy Lord Guan (*Quan De Thanh Quan*) and the Star Lord of Wealth (*Tai Bach Tinh Quan*).

There are, however, instances in which a secondary goddess is placed in front of the principal deity. At the Van Ban Ngu Hanh Temple, where Tian Hou is worshipped alongside the Five-Element Goddesses, Tian Hou is seated at the front of the main altar, while the Five-Element Goddesses are seated behind her at a higher level. According to temple caretakers, this arrangement reflects the seniority and eminence of Tian Hou. Nevertheless, worshippers can readily discern that the principal object of worship remains the Five-Element Goddesses, as their elevated placement at the rear visually signifies their primary status.

Overall, the arrangement of the altar is designed to emphasize and elevate the position of the principal goddess worshipped in the temple.

In front of the main altar there is always a divination set (*xin xam*) dedicated to the goddess, consisting of divination blocks, fortune sticks, and accompanying interpretive texts. At Dia Mau Cung

Temple in Ward 2, as well as at the neighboring Quan De Temple, printed copies of the divination interpretations are now provided. Worshippers draw their fortune stick and then collect the

corresponding printed explanation, which they may take home and consult repeatedly throughout the year.

In addition, the hanging of red lanterns within the main sanctuary is considered highly significant and represents a distinctive feature of Chinese religious culture. Scholar Ngo Duc Thinh refers to these lanterns as *sacred lamps* (*thanh dang*), noting that they are produced in various types and sizes, bearing auspicious inscriptions such as "Harmony brings prosperity – smooth progress like brocade," "All things as desired – flowers bloom in wealth and honor," and "Blessings, prosperity, longevity, and joy – harmony between Heaven, Earth, and humanity," as well as "Year after year of good fortune – flourishing prosperity.″…″[8]

Rear Sanctuary (Hau Dien):

The rear sanctuary of goddess temples within the Chinese community in Bac Lieu is arranged in diverse ways, depending on the available worship space and the degree of cultural interaction and acculturation.

As noted earlier, due to spatial limitations in many temples, the *thien tinh* courtyard has often been omitted and replaced by modern skylight systems. Consequently, the main sanctuary and the rear sanctuary are directly connected, and in some cases, where space is extremely limited, the rear sanctuary is entirely eliminated.

Traditionally, the rear sanctuary is used for the worship of patriarchs, fallen warriors, or the collective spirits of male and female souls (*bach linh nam, nu*). At present, many temples utilize the rear sanctuary to worship Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, as well as to house former statue cores of goddesses that have been replaced over successive renovations. For example, when a larger, newer, or more refined statue core is installed, the previous core is relocated to the rear sanctuary and placed in a separate altar space together with other former statue cores.

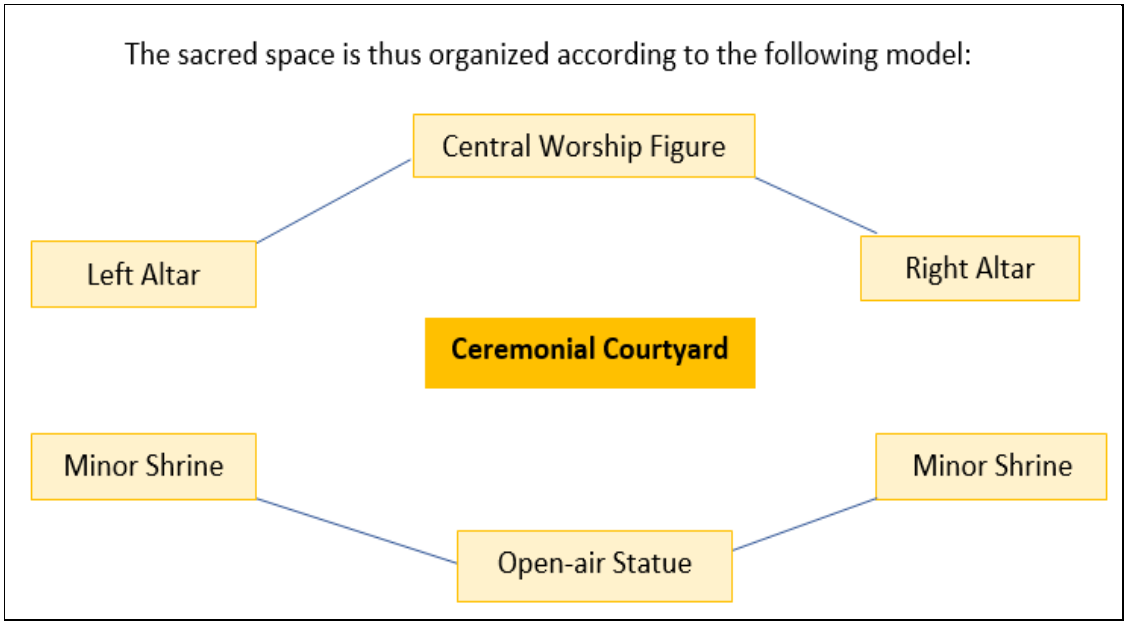
In addition, part of the rear sanctuary is often reserved for storing the ceremonial robes and crowns of the goddess. The number and quality of these ritual garments provide insight into the degree of devotion of the Chinese community toward the goddess, as well as the community's economic capacity. When prosperity is achieved, devotees demonstrate their reverence by adorning and honoring their goddess with elaborate offerings and vestments, thereby also expressing their ethnic and cultural identity.

Overall, the spatial arrangement clearly reflects the philosophy of *yin–yang*, in which yin exists within yang and yang within yin. These two categories are inseparably connected and are vividly manifested in both the selection of deities for co-worship and the organization of sacred space.

Our survey indicates that all goddess temples of the Chinese community in Bac Lieu arrange their sacred spaces according to principles of balance and harmony rooted in *yin–yang* philosophy and an even-numbered mode of thinking. For example, in the Van Ban Ngu Hanh Temple, the statues of the Five Goddesses are placed at the center, flanked by two spirit attendants holding fans. The principal object of worship occupies the central axis, while two subsidiary altars, known as the Left Altar (*Ta Ban*) and Right Altar (*Huu Ban*), are arranged symmetrically on either side. Outside the main sanctuary, two small shrines are positioned facing one another, with an open-air statue—typically Avalokitesvara of the Southern Sea (*Quan Am Nam Hai*)—placed at the center between them.

The sacred space is thus organized according to the following model:

[8] Ngo Duc Thinh, 2012, p. 365.



The incorporation of a wide range of revered Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the worship system further enhances the sacred space of goddess temples of the Chinese community, enabling it to meet the spiritual needs of all three ethnic groups—Vietnamese, Chinese, and Khmer—although Khmer participation in Chinese temples is less frequent than that of the Vietnamese.

The arrangement and co-worship of deities within the sacred spaces described above clearly demonstrate a polytheistic orientation and a high degree of cultural interaction and syncretism. The pantheon of deities is remarkably diverse, encompassing "deities and saints originally belonging to specific religions, as well as those associated with other ethnic groups." As members of the Chinese community have expressed, "we have always practiced polytheistic worship in order to cultivate faith and confidence while living in a new land; moreover, the veneration of multiple deities provides a stable spiritual support, enabling us to settle and establish our livelihoods.""[9] This arrangement embodies a harmonious relationship between nature and humanity, humans and deities, and the tangible and supernatural realms, articulating a shared aspiration for a tranquil and fortunate life, grounded in the belief that sincere worship brings spiritual efficacy and that observance of taboos ensures safety and prosperity.

Conclusion

Overall, the locations of goddess temples in Bac Lieu are strategically situated to facilitate both land and water transportation. In terms of architecture, goddess temples of the Chinese community retain distinctive characteristics while also undergoing processes of Vietnamization and incorporating architectural elements of other ethnic groups living in the area. Chinese temples in the Southern region in general, including goddess temples, are typically planned according to a horizontal layout and designed for multifunctional use, serving not only religious needs but also functioning as centers for educational and charitable activities.

Chinese temples can be readily identified within the broader landscape through their distinctive architectural features and vibrant exterior appearance, characterized by rich colors and elaborate decorative artistry. Beyond these shared features, the sacred spaces of goddess temples of the Chinese community in Bac Lieu have increasingly undergone transformations that integrate traditional and modern elements, while still preserving the distinctive characteristics of Chinese ethnic culture

[9] Lam Hoang Vien, 2017, p. 132.

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