

Rituals, Talismanic Practices And Sacred Space In Vietnamese Communal Houses: The Influence Of Daoism Talismanic Practices On The Worship Of The Village Tutelary Deity

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Abstract: This study examines the relationship between ritual practices, talismanic practices, and sacred space in Vietnamese communal houses, thereby elucidating the influence of Daoism talismanic practices (道教符术, Dàojiào fúshù) on the worship of the village tutelary deity. Adopting a qualitative and interpretive approach, the article draws on historical sources, ethnographic materials, studies of folk culture, and international scholarship on Daoism (道教, Dàojiào) to explore the mechanisms through which sacredness is constructed, activated, and reproduced within the communal house setting. The findings suggest that the Vietnamese communal house should not be understood merely as a static religious–architectural institution; rather, it can be conceptualized as a multi-layered ritual–symmetrical field in which sacredness emerges through the interaction of spatial arrangements, ritual performances, symbolic systems, and talismanic practices. In this context, Daoism talismanic elements particularly talismans (符, fú), incantations (咒, zhòu), and sacred inscriptions are not only symbolic artifacts but also function as semiotic technologies that activate, mediate, and reinforce sacred power within ritual processes. At the same time, the study highlights the hybrid character of village tutelary deity worship, reflecting the layering and interaction of Daoism traditions, indigenous shamanistic practices, and the socio-cultural structure of the Vietnamese village community. In contemporary contexts, talismanic practices tend to shift from a focus on ritual efficacy toward symbolic and heritage-oriented functions. However, this transformation does not necessarily entail a decline in sacredness; rather, it represents a process of re-signification within changing socio-cultural environments. By re-examining the relationship between religion and magic, this study proposes a dynamic analytical model of the interaction between ritual, talismanic practices, and sacred space, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of Vietnamese folk belief systems

Keywords: Ritual, talismanic practices, sacred space, Vietnamese communal houses, Daoism talismanic practices (道教符术, Dàojiào fúshù), village tutelary deity worship

Introduction

In the study of Vietnamese folk beliefs, alongside ancestor worship, Mother Goddess worship, the cult of wandering souls, and other forms of indigenous deity veneration, the worship of the village tutelary deity is commonly approached as a socio-cultural institution embedded in the structure of rural communities. Within this framework, the communal house functions as a central locus that is both symbolically meaningful and practically enacted (Phan Ngọc 2002; Ngô Đức Thịnh 2004).

Foundational studies have clarified the origins, functions, and pantheons associated with village tutelary deities, while emphasizing their role in protecting the community and maintaining traditional social order (Nguyễn Duy Hình 1996; Nguyễn Minh Tường 2013; Đinh Khắc Thuân 2014). From a spatial perspective, the communal house has often been described as a distinctive cultural architecture that brings together ritual performances, festivals, and communal life (Nguyễn Hồng Kiên 1993; Hồ Tường and Nguyễn Hữu Thế 2018). However, when the communal house is treated merely as a static “cultural space,” it becomes difficult to fully account for the mechanisms through which sacredness operates in lived religious practice.

Recent scholarship has begun to suggest a more dynamic approach by conceptualizing sacred space as a structure shaped by historical and social forces and continuously reconfigured across contexts (Hoàng Văn Chung 2020). In the context of festival revitalization and the broader restructuring of religious life, the communal house is not simply a site for preserving tradition, but a space that is constantly reconstituted through ritual practice (Lê Hồng Lý 2018). Nevertheless, most existing analyses remain grounded in sociological and cultural perspectives, while the internal mechanisms, namely how sacredness is activated, sustained, and reproduced, have yet to be systematically examined.

From another angle, studies of magic, talismanic practices, and ritual techniques in Vietnamese folk culture provide a rich body of material on modes of interaction with the invisible world. From the early work of Giran ([1912] 2021) to more recent scholarship, Daoism talismans (符, fú), talismanic registers (符籙, fúlù), incantations (咒, zhòu), and apotropaic rites have been widely documented as integral elements of religious practice (Đích Nguyễn Tiến and Nguyễn Thị Bích Chiêu 2017; Hoạch Kiều Thu 2023; Nguyễn Thị Suối Linh 2019). These studies demonstrate that magic is not merely a matter of belief, but operates as a structured system of techniques governed by rules, symbols, and socially recognized efficacy (Vũ Hồng Thuật 2016). At a broader theoretical level, magic can be understood as an enduring and foundational form of religion, associated with the human need to negotiate, regulate, and exert influence over supernatural forces (Tocarev 1994).

Despite these advances, a significant gap remains between two strands of research: on the one hand, studies of village tutelary deity worship and communal house space; on the other, studies of magic and talismanic practices. Few works have explicitly examined whether such ritual technologies are directly embedded in communal house rituals and, if so, how they operate in constructing sacredness within both the cult of the village tutelary deity and its ritual space. This gap becomes even more pronounced when viewed in light of international scholarship on Daoism (道教, Dàojiào), where talismanic registers (符籙, fúlù), talismans (符, fú), incantations (咒, zhòu), and ritual performances are understood as central components of a highly structured system of sacred techniques. Studies of the Lingbao Scriptures (靈寶經, Língbǎo jīng) and Daoism ritual traditions indicate that talismans and incantations are not merely symbolic objects, but serve as mediating instruments that establish connections between human actors and the cosmic order (Bokenkamp 1983; Seidel 1983; Lü 2023). In ritual practice, talismanic registers are often deployed as operative tools for activating divine power, particularly in exorcistic and protective rites (Reiter 2017).

Notably, recent studies have begun to document the presence of Daoism ritual elements in Vietnam, including talismanic registers, ritual procedures, and liturgical manuals (Zavidovskaia 2017, 2018). These findings suggest that ritual technologies of Daoism origin may have been incorporated into indigenous religious practices, although the extent and mechanisms of such integration remain insufficiently explored. At the same time, research on transformations of sacredness in Vietnamese folk religion indicates that ritual and magic play a significant role in reshaping communal experiences of

the sacred (Nguyen 2024).

Building on these insights, this article re-examines the worship of the village tutelary deity from an integrated perspective in which ritual, talismanic practices, and sacred space are understood as mutually constitutive elements. Rather than treating the communal house as a static setting, the study conceptualizes it as a ritual field in operation, where sacred technologies, particularly those associated with Daoism talismanic practices (道教符术, *Dàojiào fúshù*), participate in the activation and reproduction of sacredness. Accordingly, the study addresses three key research questions: (1) how talismanic practices and Daoism-derived ritual techniques are manifested in the worship of the village tutelary deity; (2) how these practices interact with the spatial structure of the communal house; and (3) what role they play in sustaining the sacred efficacy of the belief system.

Literature Review

Review of related literature

Studies on the worship of the village tutelary deity in Vietnam have established a relatively solid academic foundation, yet they tend to develop along largely separate trajectories. One line of inquiry focuses on the structure of belief systems and village institutions, while another examines magic, talismanic practices, and ritual techniques in folk life. Bringing these strands into dialogue suggests that the potential for interdisciplinary integration remains underexplored.

Within research on village tutelary deities and communal houses, foundational works have provided detailed accounts of the origins, classifications, and functions of the village pantheon. Nguyễn Duy Hinh (1996), for instance, approaches the cult of the tutelary deity as both a historical and social structure, in which divine authority is legitimized through imperial investiture, local narratives, and collective memory. This perspective has been further developed in subsequent studies that frame the tutelary deity as a symbol of sacred authority embedded within the village community (Nguyễn Minh Tuyền 2013). From a spatial perspective, the communal house is commonly described as both an architectural and ritual center where religious practices, festivals, and communal activities converge (Nguyễn Hồng Kiên 1993).

However, these studies largely approach the communal house as a socio-cultural institution, leaving the internal dynamics of sacredness, particularly how divine presence is activated in practice, insufficiently examined. More recent scholarship has begun to extend this perspective by conceptualizing sacred space as a dynamic structure shaped by economic, social, and modernizing forces (Hoàng Văn Chung 2020). In the context of the revitalization of traditional festivals, ritual practices in communal houses are understood to be undergoing significant transformations, reflecting broader changes in religious life (Lê Hồng Lý 2018). Even so, the analytical focus remains predominantly sociological, with limited attention paid to the specific techniques through which the sacred is enacted.

A different body of research on magic, talismanic practices, and ritual techniques in Vietnamese folk culture offers a rich account of how practitioners engage with the invisible realm. Early studies, such as Giran ([1912] 2021), already noted the widespread use of talismans (符, *fú*) and incantations (咒, *zhòu*) in everyday religious life. Contemporary scholarship has continued to systematize these practices and clarify their functions within community contexts (Đích Nguyễn Tiến and Nguyễn Thị Bích Chiêu 2017; Hoạch Kiều Thu 2023). These analyses indicate that talismans and incantations are not merely symbolic elements but also serve as operative tools used to intervene in concrete situations, including protection, exorcism, healing, and the securing of well-being (Vũ Hồng Thuật 2016). At a

broader theoretical level, magic has been interpreted as a durable and foundational form of religion, reflecting human efforts to regulate and negotiate relationships with supernatural forces (Tocarev 1994; Hoạch Kiều Thu 2016).

Nevertheless, studies of ritual techniques tend to emphasize description or classification, while paying less attention to the specific spatial and ritual contexts in which these practices are performed. As a result, the relationship between talismanic practices and institutional settings such as the communal house has not been systematically clarified. Even research on magical rites in folk life often foregrounds symbolic or existential functions, rather than examining how these practices operate within concrete sacred spaces (Đỗ Thị Thu Hà and Phạm Đăng Xuân Hương 2017).

By contrast, international scholarship on Daoism (道教, Dàojiào) offers a more coherent theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between ritual, talismanic registers (符籙, fúlù), and sacred power. Studies of the Lingbao Scriptures (靈寶經, Língbǎo jīng) show that talismans (符, fú), incantations (咒, zhòu), and sacred texts play a central role in mediating the relationship between human actors and the cosmic order (Bokenkamp 1983; Seidel 1983; Lü 2023). In ritual practice, talismanic registers function as performative devices capable of activating and actualizing divine power (Reiter 2017). More recent studies further conceptualize talismanic practices as systems of symbols and techniques that can be analyzed from psychological, semiotic, or ritual-anthropological perspectives (Liu 2024; You and Li 2022).

Some recent works have begun to document the presence of Daoism ritual elements in Vietnam, particularly through liturgical texts and the use of talismanic registers (Zavidovskaia 2017, 2018). These studies suggest that ritual techniques of Daoism origin have been localized and integrated into indigenous belief systems. At the same time, research on transformations of sacredness in Vietnamese folk religion highlights the role of ritual and magic in reshaping communal religious experience (Nguyen 2024). However, such studies are often limited to specific contexts and have yet to treat the worship of the village tutelary deity as a central analytical case.

Gaps and research directions

A review of the existing literature reveals three major gaps. First, although communal houses have been widely studied as cultural and religious spaces, most approaches remain descriptive or focused on social functions, without fully considering the communal house as a site of ritual operation where sacred techniques are enacted and reproduced. In other words, the relationship between space, ritual, and sacred efficacy has not yet been framed within an integrated theoretical model.

Second, research on talismanic practices and folk magic, despite offering rich empirical data, is rarely situated within the specific context of village tutelary deity worship. As a result, talismanic practices are often treated as peripheral or separate phenomena, rather than as elements potentially embedded within the ritual structure of the communal house. In contrast, Daoism studies demonstrate that talismans and ritual practices are inseparable from the spatial and cosmological systems in which they operate.

Third, although the presence of Daoism ritual elements in Vietnam has been acknowledged, the extent to which Daoism talismanic practices (道教符术, Dàojiào fúshù) shape specific forms of religious practice, particularly the worship of the village tutelary deity, remains insufficiently explored. Questions concerning how these ritual techniques have been localized, transformed, and integrated into indigenous belief systems, therefore, remain open.

Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts an integrated approach in which ritual, talismanic practices, and sacred space are examined as interacting components within a unified system.

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Rather than approaching village tutelary deity worship primarily through the lenses of belief or social institutions, the study focuses on practices and techniques to clarify how sacredness is constructed and sustained within communal life.

Conceptual Framework and Analytical Model

This study is based on the assumption that the worship of the village tutelary deity in Vietnamese village communal houses is not merely a belief system, but a practical structure in which space, rituals, sacred symbols, and community all participate in creating sacredness. In other words, sacredness does not exist inherently as a fixed attribute of the communal house, altar, or deity, but is activated, maintained, and reproduced through a series of ritual behaviors, sacred objects, talismanic practices, and communal memory.

Theoretical foundation

Firstly, from the study of the worship of the Village Tutelary Deity, the village communal house is understood as a cultural, ritual, and symbolic center of Vietnamese villages. The works of Nguyễn Duy Hinh, Nguyễn Minh Tường, Đinh Khắc Thuần, and Nguyễn Hồng Kiên show that the Village Tutelary Deity is not only a guardian deity but also an embodiment of community memory, social order, and sacred power within the village space (Nguyễn Duy Hinh 1996; Nguyễn Minh Tường 2013; Đinh Khắc Thuần 2014; Nguyễn Hồng Kiên 1993).

Secondly, from the study of sacred space, the village communal house should not be viewed as a static structure, but as a field for ritual operation. In this field, the inner sanctuary, the main hall, the courtyard, the altar, the royal decree, the ancestral tablets, the sacrificial offerings, and the ritual path form a layered spatial structure. Hoàng Văn Chung (2020) shows that traditional sacred spaces are always affected by social changes, but these changes do not necessarily destroy sacredness; they can change how sacredness is perceived and recreated.

Thirdly, from research on magic and talismanic practices in Vietnamese folklore, practices such as talismans, incantations, protective spells, prayers for peace, exorcism, healing, and protection are not only expressions of folk beliefs, but also techniques for interacting with the invisible world. Studies by Giran, Đích Nguyễn Tiến and Nguyễn Thị Bích Chiêu, Hoạch Kiều Thu, Nguyễn Thị Suối Linh, and Vũ Hồng Thuật show that magic in Vietnamese life operates as a technical system with rules, symbols, social functions, and symbolic effects (Giran 2021; Đích Nguyễn Tiến and Nguyễn Thị Bích Chiêu 2017; Hoạch Kiều Thu 2023; Nguyễn Thị Suối Linh 2019; Vũ Hồng Thuật 2016).

Fourthly, based on international research on Daoism, particularly the Lingbao Scriptures, talismanic registers, and ritual manuals, talismans are not merely protective objects but a form of sacred text capable of connecting humans to the cosmic order. Bokenkamp, Seidel and Lü show that the symbolic system in Daoism functions as an intermediary between humans, deities, and the cosmos (Bokenkamp 1983; Seidel 1983; Lü 2023). Reiter emphasizes the role of talismans in exorcism rituals and the activation of divine power, while Zavidovskaia demonstrates the presence of ritual manuals and healing talismans in the Vietnamese context (Reiter 2017; Zavidovskaia 2017, 2018).

The central thesis of the theoretical framework

Based on the four foundations above, the study proposes the following central thesis:

Sacredness in Vietnamese village communal houses is constructed through the interaction between sacred space, community rituals, and talismanic practices. In this process, Daoism talismanic practices do not exist as purely foreign elements, but are localized, blended with indigenous shamanism, and integrated into the ritual structure of the Village Tutelary Deity.

This thesis allows us to overcome three simplistic perspectives. First, overcoming the view of the village communal house merely as an architectural relic. Second, overcoming the view of the worship of the Village Tutelary Deity as merely a community belief. Third, overcoming the view of magic and talismanic practices as superstitious or marginal elements.

Instead, the study views the village communal house as a ritual field, in which sacredness is created through the relationship between objects, symbols, ritual behaviors, community memory, and divine power.

Proposed analysis model

The study proposes a model: Ritual, Talismanic Practice, and Sacred Space Nexus consisting of five main components (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Conceptual model of sacred activation and communal continuity in the Vietnamese communal house

The model's operational logic

First level, creating sacred space: At this level, the village communal house is seen as a layered spatial structure. The inner sanctuary usually holds the sacred center, the main hall is where the main rituals take place, and the courtyard is the community space and festival area. However, sacredness is not only found in the physical structure, but is created when that space is activated by rituals, sacred objects, and symbols. Therefore, the village communal house is a space in operation, not a static space.

Second level, activating sacred power through ritual: Rituals are the mechanism that transforms physical space into sacred space. Through prayers, offerings, orderly movement, ceremonial music, sacrifices, incense offerings, and community actions, deities are invoked, present, and protect. At this level, ritual not only expresses belief, but also gives that belief social and symbolic effect.

The third level, mediating power through talismanic practices: Talismanic practices act as the symbolic technology of sacred power. Talismans, incantations, and talismanic registers are not merely auxiliary items, but means for humans to establish relationships with the invisible world. In Daoism, talismans have the ability to command, summon, protect, exorcise evil spirits, and regulate the cosmic order. When localized in Vietnamese village temples, this function transforms into a mechanism for reinforcing the power of the Village Tutelary Deity and enhancing the effectiveness of community rituals.

Uniqueness of the model

The novelty of the model lies in its inability to separate the three categories usually studied separately: village temples, rituals of worshipping the Village Tutelary Deity, and talismanic practices. The model shows that these three elements operate together within a unified structure.

Theoretically, the model helps to overcome the rigid opposition between religion and magic. In the case of Vietnamese village temples, magic is not outside of religion, but is ritualized, communalized, and legitimized within the space of the Village Tutelary Deity.

Methodologically, the model allows for the analysis of the village temple as an interactive field where architecture, ritual, symbols, memory, and sacred power all participate in creating a sacred experience.

From an international academic perspective, the model is capable of dialogue with studies on Daoism, folk religion, ritual studies, and anthropology of religion, while adding a Vietnamese case to the broader discussion of the localization of sacred techniques in East Asia and Southeast Asia.

General remarks

This theoretical framework allows for approaching the worship of Village Tutelary Deity not only as a traditional belief, but as a structured system of practice. Within that system, sacredness is constructed from the interaction between the village temple space, communal rituals, and talismanic practices. Daoism talismanic practices, when applied to the Vietnamese context, do not exist as exact copies from China, but are localized, reinterpreted, and integrated into the symbolic system of the village community. This forms the basis for understanding the Vietnamese village communal house as a vibrant ceremonial school, where tradition, magic, Daoism, and communal memory together create the sacred power of the Village Tutelary Deity.

Research Methodology

Research design: A qualitative interpretive approach to ritual and sacred space.

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach to examine how ritual practices, talismanic practices, and sacred space interact within the worship of the village tutelary deity. Rather than relying on quantitative measurement, the analysis focuses on the structure of meaning, symbolic systems, and the operational logic underlying religious practices.

This approach is grounded in the assumption that sacredness is not an entity that can be directly measured. Instead, it is constituted through social practices, systems of symbols, and communal relationships (Tiles 1992). Accordingly, the analysis is situated within the interrelations among texts, rituals, material objects, spatial configurations, and cultural contexts.

Conceptual framework: The ritual, magic, and sacred space nexus.

To guide the analysis, this study employs a conceptual model referred to as the Ritual, Magic, and Sacred Space Nexus. This model is developed through a synthesis of scholarship on Daoism (道教, Dàojiào), talismanic practices, sacred space, and Vietnamese folk belief systems. Rather than functioning as a rigid framework, it is used as a flexible analytical tool to identify the relationships among different elements involved in the construction of sacredness (see Table 1).

Table 1: Analytical Model

No.	Components	Content	Roles	Theoretical Sources
1	Sacred Space	Village communal house, inner sanctuary, courtyard, ceremonial axis	Physical and symbolic foundations	Hoàng Văn Chung 2020
2	Rituals	Rituals, prayers for peace, exorcism, and prayers for a good harvest	Mechanisms for recreating sacredness	Nguyễn Duy Hinh 1996
3	Talismanic Practices	Daoism talisman (符, fú), talisman, incantation (咒, zhòu), sacred symbols	Tools for activating power	Bokenkamp 1983; Reiter 2017
4	Daoism (道教, Dàojiào)	Symbolist system, rituals, texts	Technical and symbolic frameworks	Lü 2023; Zavidovskaia 2018
5	Indigenous Culture	Shamanism, worship of local deities	Platforms for localizing practice	Hoạch Kiêu Thu 2016
6	Contemporary Context	Tourism, media, heritage preservation	Restructuring sacred meaning	Lê Hồng Lý 2018

The model assumes that sacredness within the Vietnamese communal house is constituted through three primary dimensions: spatial organization, ritual practices, and talismanic practices. These three dimensions are shaped by two underlying foundations. The first is a traditional foundation that includes Daoism (道教, Dàojiào) and indigenous shamanistic practices. The second is a contemporary foundation that encompasses tourism, media, the cultural economy, and processes of heritagization. Integrating this model into the methodological framework allows the analysis to be guided along clearly defined dimensions, thereby avoiding a fragmented or disjointed approach.

Data sources and materials

The study draws on several categories of sources. The first consists of academic and historical materials, including works on the worship of the village tutelary deity, communal houses, talismanic practices, and Daoism (道教, Dàojiào) (Nguyễn Duy Hinh 1996; Đinh Khắc Thuân 2014; Bokenkamp 1983; Zavidovskaia 2018). These materials provide the historical and theoretical foundation for identifying ritual structures and symbolic systems.

The second category includes ethnographic materials and studies of folk culture. These works examine ritual techniques, talismans (符, fú), incantations (咒, zhòu), and practices of magic in everyday religious life (Địch Nguyễn Tiến and Nguyễn Thị Bích Chiêu 2017; Nguyễn Thị Suối Linh 2019; Hoạch

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Kiêu Thu 2023). They are used to analyze the role of talismanic practices within concrete religious practices.

The third category consists of comparative and international studies, particularly research on Daoism (道教, Dàojiào), talismanic practices, and ritual traditions in East Asia (Reiter 2017; Muchowska 2023, 2025; Liu 2024). These sources situate the Vietnamese case within a broader regional context and help identify both shared patterns and distinctive features in the localization of sacred techniques.

Analytical strategy and procedure

The study combines thematic analysis, symbolic interpretation, intertextual analysis, and comparative analysis. Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring patterns across the data. Symbolic interpretation focuses on the role of talismans (符, fú), ritual objects, and sacred signs in the production of meaning. Intertextual analysis enables a systematic comparison between Daoism texts (道教, Dàojiào), Hán - Nôm materials (漢喃), and ethnographic descriptions. Comparative analysis is employed to clarify the hybrid character that emerges from the interaction between Daoism traditions and indigenous practices, as presented (see Table 2).

Table 2: Data analysis procedure based on the conceptual model

o	Analysis Components	Analysis Questions	Data Used	Analysis Techniques	Expected Results
.	Sacred spaces	How is the temple space organized and tiered?	Documents on village communal houses, architecture, and descriptions of ritual spaces	Spatial-symbolic analysis	Identifying multi-layered sacred structures
	Rituals	Which ritual plays a central role? How does incantation (咒, zhòu)ng recreate sacredness?	Description of rituals, ethnographic documents	Thematic analysis	Determinin g ritual patterns and socio-spiritual functions
	Talismanic practices	In what context is talisman/Daois m talisman (符, fú) used? What is the role of incantation (咒, zhòu)ng?	Documents on Daoism talisman (符, fú), incantation (咒, zhòu), and sorcery	Symbolic analysis	Clarifying the mechanism s of sacred power activation

	Daoism (道教, Dàojiào)	In what form do Daoism (道教, Dàojiào) elements appear?	Research on talisman Daoism (道教, Dàojiào), scriptures	Intertextual analysis	Identifying the influence and degree of localization
	Indigenous elements	How do indigenous practices exist in contemporary rituals?	Research on shamanism, folk shamanism	Comparative analysis	Identifying ritual hybridization
	Contemporary context	How have rituals and talismanic practices transformed in modern times?	Research on festivals, traditions, and heritage	Discourse analysis	Clarifying the process of re-symbolizing sacredness

The analytical process consists of three levels. The identification level identifies spatial elements, rituals, and talismanic practices in the documents. The linking level analyzes the relationships between these elements, such as where talismanic practices appear within the temple space, which rituals they are associated with, and which powers they are directed towards. The interpretation level places these relationships within the framework of Daoism (道教, Dàojiào), indigenous shamanism, and the contemporary context. This process allows for a transition from description to explanation while ensuring that conclusions remain within the theoretical framework.

Scope and limitations

This study is primarily based on the analysis of secondary documents, academic literature, and theoretical interpretation; therefore, the conclusions should be understood as conceptual interpretations rather than the results of a quantitative field survey. This limitation does not diminish the value of the paper, but requires caution in its wording. Further research could be expanded by observing rituals at specific village communal houses, interviewing ritual practitioners, temple keepers, ceremonial committees, and folk Taoist priests to more deeply verify the mechanisms of talismanic practices within the communal house space.

Results Finding

Sacred spatial structuring in Vietnamese communal houses from architectural layout to ritual field

A central finding of this study is that sacred space in the Vietnamese communal house needs to be understood beyond its purely architectural meaning and reconceptualized as a ritual field in which material objects, symbolic forms, and embodied practices interact to produce sacredness. From this perspective, the communal house is not simply a place where the altar of the village tutelary deity is located. Rather, it is a dynamic structure that is continuously reconstituted through ritual action, symbolic systems, and shared belief.

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Earlier studies have emphasized the physical layout of the communal house, including the main hall, the inner sanctuary, and the courtyard, with the inner sanctuary often regarded as the sacred center (Nguyễn Hồng Kiên 1993; Nguyễn Duy Hình 1996). When examined in relation to talismanic practices, however, sacredness does not remain confined to a fixed point. Instead, it extends along ritual axes, the placement of sacred objects, and specific sites where sacred force is activated.

Hoàng Văn Chung (2020) suggests that traditional sacred space is shaped by multiple social and cultural forces, leading to changes in how sacredness is experienced and produced. In the case of the communal house, such changes do not necessarily diminish sacredness. On the contrary, they may reconfigure it through new layers of meaning in which talismanic practices function as mechanisms of reinforcement.

From this perspective, objects such as talismans (符, fú), sacred charms, or Daoism symbols (道教, Dàojiào) should not be seen as decorative elements. They can instead be understood as nodal points through which supernatural power is concentrated, directed, and activated. Studies of Daoism have shown that talismans are often placed within ritual space to generate a field of sacred force capable of protection and cosmic regulation (Reiter 2017; Zavidovskaia 2018).

Ritual practices in village tutelary deity worship between communal memory and functional magic

The analysis of ritual practices associated with the village tutelary deity shows that they do not merely serve commemorative purposes or reinforce collective memory. They also incorporate elements of functional magic. This is particularly evident in rituals for protection, exorcism, rainmaking, agricultural fertility, and the safeguarding of village space.

Nguyễn Minh Tường (2013) argues that the worship of the village tutelary deity is closely linked to village life, where the deity is regarded as a direct source of communal protection and social stability. A closer reading of ritual structures, however, suggests that divine power is not only symbolically represented but is actively brought into effect through prayers, offerings, spatial arrangements, sacred objects, and actions that involve talismanic practices.

Research on ritual techniques in Vietnamese folk culture indicates that the use of talismans (符, fú), incantations (咒, zhòu), and protective sealing practices has long been widespread in community life (Đích Nguyễn Tiến and Nguyễn Thị Bích Chiếu 2017; Nguyễn Thị Suối Linh 2019). When incorporated into communal house rituals, these practices are legitimized within a collective ritual framework, giving rise to an intersection between belief, magic, and social order.

Tocarev (1994) observes that in many early forms of religion, the boundary between religion and magic is not clearly defined but exists along a continuum. This insight helps explain why talismanic practices are not excluded from village tutelary deity worship but are instead integrated into the ritual system. Giran ([1912] 2021) similarly notes that religious practices in Annam often combine deity worship with talismanic techniques aimed at achieving practical outcomes.

Daoism talismans and the mechanism of sacred activation

An important contribution of this study lies in clarifying the role of Daoism talismanic practices in activating sacred power within the communal house. Rather than functioning as peripheral elements, these practices participate directly in the operational logic of ritual.

In Daoism tradition, talismans are not merely physical objects but are regarded as sacred texts that mediate connections between humans and the supernatural realm (Bokenkamp 1983; Lü 2023). The symbols inscribed on talismans form a specialized language through which divine forces can be

invoked, directed, and controlled.

Reiter (2017), in his study of thunder rites, demonstrates that talismanic practices occupy a central position in exorcistic rituals, where symbolic forms are used to command supernatural entities. Likewise, Zavidovskaia (2017, 2018) shows that Daoism ritual manuals in Vietnam employ talismans to activate cosmological elements such as stars, trigrams, and vital forces.

Within the context of Vietnamese communal houses, these practices have been adapted and incorporated into the worship of the village tutelary deity. Contemporary evidence suggests that the use of talismans remains widespread, particularly in rituals for protection, healing, and well-being (Vũ Hồng Thuật 2016). This indicates that talismanic practices should not be regarded as purely external influences but as elements that have been localized within the system of folk belief.

Liu (2024) proposes that talismanic practices may be understood as means of achieving spiritual integration, through which individuals seek balance via sacred symbols. In the communal house context, such practices not only address supernatural forces but also reshape the collective experience of the sacred.

Ritual hybridity and the interweaving of indigenous shamanism and Daoism magic

Talismanic practices within communal houses and village tutelary deity rituals cannot be traced to a single origin. Instead, they reflect a process of ritual hybridity involving indigenous traditions, Daoism influences, and broader layers of East Asian religious culture.

Hoạch Kiều Thu (2016) points out that practices such as spirit calling, exorcism, and ritual healing existed across many cultures before the emergence of organized religions. In the Vietnamese context, these elements have been absorbed, restructured, and reinterpreted under the influence of Daoism.

Recent studies on magic and talismanic practices in Vietnamese folk religion also reveal the coexistence of multiple ritual systems (Hoạch Kiều Thu 2023; Phạm Minh Quân 2023). This suggests that the worship of the village tutelary deity operates as a space in which diverse cultural layers interact and coexist.

In her study of zhuyou practices in Daoism, Muchowska (2023, 2025) shows that many healing and exorcistic techniques originated in folk traditions before being formalized within Daoism systems. A similar process can be observed in Vietnam, where talismanic practices in communal houses reflect both Daoism influence and indigenous foundations.

Contemporary transformations from efficacy to symbolic re-signification

A notable trend in the contemporary context is the shift of talismanic practices from a focus on ritual efficacy to symbolic and cultural functions. This shift, however, should not be interpreted simply as a decline in sacredness.

Lê Hồng Lý (2018) argues that the revival of traditional festivals in the context of global integration has led to the restructuring of ritual practices, with many elements adapted to tourism, media, and heritage management. In this process, talismanic practices may be retained but reinterpreted in new ways.

Nguyen (2024) suggests that transformations of sacredness in folk religion do not necessarily entail loss but may give rise to new forms of sacred experience. In the communal house context, talismanic practices can be reinterpreted as part of cultural heritage, collective memory, and ritual aesthetics.

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Research on cultural products further indicates that talismanic elements are being reconfigured as objects of design and consumption (You and Li 2022), reflecting a shift from ritual space to consumer space. Even so, this transformation does not eliminate sacred meaning but instead produces a re-signified form of sacredness.

Discussion

Reframing sacred space from architectural structure to ritual symbolic field

The findings suggest that understanding the Vietnamese communal house primarily as an architectural institution does not fully capture the nature of sacred space in the worship of the village tutelary deity. Rather, this space operates as a ritual and symbolic field in which sacredness is produced through the interaction of objects, ritual actions, signs, and communal memory.

Hoàng Văn Chung (2020) argues that traditional sacred space is shaped by various social factors, resulting in changes in how people perceive and reproduce sacredness. The findings of this study, however, suggest that such transformation is not only external but also occurs within the internal structure of ritual itself. The presence of talismanic practices, whether visible or latent, contributes to the formation of sacred activation points within the communal house.

Accordingly, space should not be approached as a static entity. Sacredness is not simply possessed by space; it is activated through ritual and symbol. This observation aligns with studies of Daoism (道教, Dàojiào), where space becomes sacred only when it is ritually operated through ceremonial procedures and talismanic signs (Zavidovskaia 2018).

Ritual as a mediating structure and the communalization of magic

In the worship of the village tutelary deity, ritual does not merely express belief; it also mediates between the community and the supernatural realm. Within the analytical model of this study, ritual connects space, divinity, and talismanic practices.

Talismanic practices rarely exist as isolated individual acts in the context of the communal house. Instead, they are often incorporated into communal rituals such as rites for peace, exorcism, agricultural fertility, or village protection. Ritual therefore communalizes magic by transferring it from the individual level to the collective level.

This argument can be placed in dialogue with Giran ([1912] 2021), who observed that religious life in Annam combined deity worship with talismanic practices as means of achieving practical efficacy. Similarly, Tocarev (1994) regards magic as an inseparable component of many early religious forms. In the worship of the village tutelary deity, ritual legitimizes talismanic practices by incorporating them into the authorized framework of communal practice.

Daoism talismans as semiotic technologies of sacred power

A theoretical contribution of this study is its reinterpretation of Daoism talismanic practices (道教, Dàojiào) as semiotic technologies of sacred power. This perspective moves beyond a reductive view of talismans as superstitious objects and instead understands them as a system of signs with operative functions.

Studies of Daoism (道教, Dàojiào) show that the talisman (符, fú) is a form of sacred text in which signs carry imperative force and mediate between human beings and the supernatural world (Bokenkamp 1983; Lü 2023). Reiter (2017) likewise argues that talismans can function as instruments for activating and directing supernatural forces.

In Vietnam, the use of talismans (符, fú) and incantations (咒, zhòu) continues to appear in contemporary religious life, especially in rituals for peace, healing, and protection (Đích Nguyễn Tiến and Nguyễn Thị Bích Chiêu 2017; Nguyễn Thị Suối Linh 2019; Vũ Hồng Thuật 2016). This suggests that talismanic practices are not merely remnants of the past but continue to shape the structure of spiritual experience.

Ritual hybridity and the localization of Daoism techniques

Ritual hybridity is a defining feature of village tutelary deity worship. Rather than deriving from a single origin, this system results from a long process of integration among different layers of practice, including indigenous deity worship, folk shamanism, Daoism (道教, Dàojiào), and village ritual structures.

In the Vietnamese context, this process can be understood as a two-way localization. Daoism absorbs and systematizes indigenous elements, while local belief systems borrow Daoism symbolic language, texts, and ritual procedures to enhance their symbolic power. Zavidovskaia (2017) also notes the strong adaptation of Daoism ritual manuals in Vietnam to local contexts.

Village tutelary deity worship may therefore be understood as a multilayered system in which cultural layers do not exclude one another but coexist, supplement, and reinterpret each other. This observation is consistent with comparative studies of Daoism in East Asia, where local traditions often play a decisive role in shaping religious practice (Richey 2015).

The re-signification of sacredness in contemporary contexts

The shift of talismanic practices from ritual efficacy to symbolic function in modern contexts should not be read as a linear sign of secularization. Rather, it can be understood as a process through which sacredness is re-signified.

In the processes of festival revival, heritagization, and the mediatization of ritual, talismanic practices may no longer be performed with the same belief in direct efficacy as before. Yet they continue to function as signs of tradition, sacred power, and communal identity. This transformation reflects the adaptive capacity of folk belief in new social and cultural contexts.

Sacredness, therefore, does not disappear. It shifts from direct efficacy to symbolic force, from a technique for intervening in the invisible world to a language of heritage, aesthetics, and communal memory. This point is important because it avoids the simplistic assumption that modernization necessarily weakens religious life.

Theoretical implications beyond the religion and magic dichotomy

The preceding analyses help reconsider the boundary between religion and magic. Rather than treating them as separate categories, the findings show that they exist in a continuous and interactive relationship.

Tiles (1992) questioned the boundaries among science, religion, and magic, arguing that these categories are not entirely separate in practice. In the case of village tutelary deity worship, the integration of ritual and talismanic practices reveals an operational model that moves beyond binary divisions.

The Ritual, Magic, and Sacred Space Nexus proposed in this study may be seen as an attempt to generalize this phenomenon. Within this model, sacredness emerges from the interaction among space, ritual, and signs, while also being shaped by histories of localization and contemporary conditions. This approach not only explains the Vietnamese case but may also provide a useful reference framework for

comparative studies of folk religion in East Asia and Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

This study approaches the worship of the village tutelary deity in Vietnam through an integrated perspective that brings together ritual, talismanic practices, and sacred space. It shows that sacredness does not exist as a fixed attribute but is constructed and restructured through cultural and symbolic practices. Based on the Ritual, Magic, and Sacred Space Nexus, the analysis suggests that the communal house can be understood as a multilayered ritual field in which space, ritual, and talismanic practices interact to generate and sustain sacred experience.

On the one hand, the study shows that talismanic elements, especially Daoism talismans (符, fú), do not merely survive as symbolic heritage. They may also function as mechanisms for activating power, strengthening ritual efficacy, and reinforcing communal belief. On the other hand, the simultaneous presence of indigenous shamanistic elements indicates that village tutelary deity worship is not a homogeneous system. Rather, it reflects a long process of ritual hybridity and cultural integration.

In contemporary contexts, the study identifies a shift from efficacy-oriented functions to symbolic functions in talismanic practices. This shift, however, does not necessarily weaken sacredness. Instead, it gives rise to forms of re-signification in which sacred meanings are restructured within new contexts such as tourism, media, heritagization, and the cultural economy.

Theoretically, the study proposes a dynamic approach to folk belief that moves beyond the binary division between religion and magic. The analytical model developed here may serve as a reference framework for comparative studies of folk religion in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and other contexts marked by the interaction of religion, magic, and indigenous culture.

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Informed Consent

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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