

Syncretism in the worship of royal female deities in the Red River Delta: An interdisciplinary approach from area studies

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Received 11 October 2025; revised 7 February 2026; accepted 13 March 2026

Abstract:

The worship of royal female deities in the Red River Delta is a distinctive phenomenon that exemplifies the interplay and creativity within Vietnamese cultural life. Drawing on an interdisciplinary approach from area studies and combining fieldwork with textual analysis, this paper examines the process of syncretism between the worship of royal female deities and external religious-philosophical systems such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. At the same time, it highlights the unique fusion of courtly and popular elements within this belief system. Using evidence from worship spaces, festival rituals, local narratives, and authorised texts (including decrees, deity chronicles, inscriptions, and official titles in historiography), the study shows how dynastic authority is translated into local ritual legitimacy through titles, moralised biography, and the organisation of sacred space. The findings demonstrate that the worship of royal female deities not only honours the special role and status of women in Vietnamese history but also vividly reflects the flexibility, inclusiveness, and creativity of Vietnamese culture in absorbing and transforming external influences. In doing so, the investigation demonstrates the enduring vitality of Vietnamese culture within the broader regional context.

Keywords: area studies, cultural syncretism, interdisciplinary approach, Red River Delta, royal female deities, worship of female deities.

Classification numbers: 9.3, 10, 11

1. Introduction

In Vietnam's Red River Delta, folk beliefs express the spiritual needs of agricultural communities. They also preserve historical memory and affirm national identity. One prominent strand is the worship of royal female deities. This practice links court culture with the village religious life through the veneration of royal women such as Empress Dowager Y Lan, Empress Tran Thi Dung, Queen Ly Chieu Hoang, Princess An Tu, and Princess Tu Hoa, among others. These were historical figures who made significant contributions in politics, diplomacy, and society. After their passing, their merit and prestige were honoured by imperial decrees and further sanctified by the people, transforming them into protective deities for communal spiritual life.

A distinctive feature of the worship of royal female deities is "syncretism". Its formation and development embody the fusion of indigenous agrarian beliefs with external elements from Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. This combination imparts to the worship practice both the spiritual depth characteristic of folk religion and the solemnity associated with the imperial court, resulting in a unique character within

the spiritual life of the inhabitants of the Red River Delta. Although Vietnamese folk religion and goddess worship have been widely studied, the syncretic formation of royal female deities and their mediating role between the court and local communities remains underexplored.

From an area studies perspective, this phenomenon requires an interdisciplinary approach. It belongs not only to the realm of religion and belief but also reflects Vietnam's history, culture, society, and politics across different periods. Studying it helps affirm the prominent role of women in the nation's history while also highlighting the flexibility and inclusiveness of Vietnamese culture in adopting and integrating external elements. Syncretism does not erase local identity; rather, it enables the belief to adapt and endure. At the same time, examining the worship of royal female deities underscores the value of interdisciplinary methods in area studies. By investigating worship spaces, rituals, legends, and festivals, and combining fieldwork with textual analysis, one can reconstruct the processes of formation, transformation, and dissemination of this phenomenon. A comparative perspective further situates it within the regional context, revealing similarities with the worship of female

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deities in Southeast Asia, such as Dewi Sri¹ in Indonesia, Mae Phosop² in Thailand, and the Nat spirits³ in Myanmar.

Studying the worship of royal female deities in the context of globalisation not only affirms Vietnamese cultural identity but also highlights the universality of goddess-centred beliefs in agrarian societies. This belief system is both locally rooted in Vietnam's feudal history and transregional, connecting with broader Southeast Asian and global traditions. The interweaving of courtly and popular elements, as well as of indigenous and foreign influences, has endowed this belief with enduring vitality.

This study addresses two questions: (1) How does royal female deity worship in the Red River Delta emerge through syncretism between indigenous agrarian beliefs and Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism?; (2) How is the standardisation of royal authority reinterpreted in local worship through decrees, official historiography, and the organisation of sacred space?

2. Literature review

The literature relevant to the syncretism of royal female deity worship in the Red River Delta falls into two groups. The first group theorises that syncretism and hybridity are processes shaped by historical contact, institutional authority, and local agencies. The second group examines goddess-centred traditions in northern Vietnam and the Red River Delta, including studies documenting royal women who later became objects of worship. However, few studies connect these two groups to explain how dynastic authority is translated into local ritual practice through authorised texts, court-centred historiography, and sacred spaces. This article addresses that gap.

2.1. Research on syncretism in popular religion and festivals: global debates and Vietnam

In the first group, key works argue that syncretism is not a neutral mixture of intact traditions. Research by C. Stewart, et al. (1994) [1] shows that “syncretism and anti-syncretism” emerge from struggles over authenticity and authority in religious life, and that any integration of beliefs reflects social contestation as much as cultural blending. In this view, religious synthesis is also a struggle over legitimacy. A.M. Leopold, et al. (2004) [2] similarly argue that syncretism is not a simple mixture of traditions, but a dynamic process shaped by historical contact, social negotiation, and power relations. Taken together, these works support the analysis of

royal female deity worship as a negotiated field in which court institutions and local communities advance different claims to legitimacy.

Recent scholarship focuses on the fluid character of contemporary religiosity and the practical nature of hybridity. B. Bognár (2024) [3] shows that modern social and spatial transformation facilitates individualised, “patchwork” religious practice rather than fixed institutional adherence. P. Kitiarsa (2005) [4] argues that the popular spirit medium cults in Thailand operate as hybrid formations sustained by ritual performance and pragmatic borrowing across traditions. The author terms this process “hybridisation” rather than mere syncretism. These studies justify a practice-based approach in which syncretism is observed through ritual repertoires, participation, and the organisation of sacred space, rather than inferred from doctrine. Accordingly, the analysis below traces syncretism through what people at specific sites do and how ritual practice is authorised, organised, and remembered.

Vietnamese scholarship on religion and festivals repeatedly frames syncretism (*hỗn dung*) as a normal feature of vernacular practice rather than an anomaly. D.D. Nguyen (2004) [5] describes mixing in northern pagodas, including the Four Dharms Goddesses or the Four Ladies, including the Cloud Goddess, The Rain Goddess, The Lightning Goddess and The Thunder Goddess, and the widespread pattern of “Buddha in the front, Saints in the back rear” (*tiền Phật, hậu Thánh*), where Buddhist worship coexists with other local deities [6]. At the festival scale, Q.V. Tran's discussion of Huong Pagoda Festival (*Hội chùa Hương*) shows a Buddhist pilgrimage centred in Huong Tich (*Hương Tích*) that also incorporates Mountain Spirit Worship (*Sơn Thần*) at Trinh Temple (*Đền Trình*) and a Mother goddess (*Thần Mẫu*) at Cua Vong Temple (*đền Cửa Vồng*), illustrating a layered ritual landscape of Vietnam [7]. This perspective aligns with Vietnamese studies of festival community and participation as the main areas where legitimacy is negotiated.

In the Vietnamese context, studies on folk religion, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism consistently describe a multi-layered religious field in which imported ideologies have been adapted, indigenised, and woven into agrarian cosmology. Particularly relevant is N.T. Nguyen's case study of the Tianhou cult in Ca Mau [8], which demonstrates how ritual incorporation enables cross-cultural communication while preserving symbolic difference. This concept helps explaining how Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist elements can enter royal female deity worship while remaining recognisable. The theoretical significance of this practice-based approach is supported by K. Pomeranz's study of the Taishan goddess cult (2007) [9], which illustrates how orthopraxy, state authority, and local agency interact in processes of religious standardisation. Together, these works provide an important foundation for analysing how syncretic practice is shaped by negotiation between institutional power and popular devotion. Building on K. Pomeranz's (2007) [9] discussion of

¹This is an indigenous fertility cult syncretised with Hinduism and Islam, creating a symbol that is at once local and global.

²This is a Thai indigenous belief system, linked to the wet-rice cultivation cults of Southeast Asian peoples, which later merged with Theravāda Buddhism.

³This belief encompasses 37 deities, combining indigenous spirits, historical figures, and Theravāda Buddhism, thereby forming a multi-layered religious model.

contested standardisation, this article treats royal decrees as interventions rather than automatic instruments of uniformity. Standardisation is not a single top-down act. It is produced through texts, narratives, and sacred space, and its effects depend on local mediation. In the Red River Delta, imperial titles legitimise royal female deities in an official idiom. However, local elites and devotees still negotiate how these figures are remembered and enacted through festivals, temple layout, repair work and everyday devotional practice. The outcome is therefore uneven: royal authority shapes what can be publicly authorised, while communities reshape what is ritually meaningful.

2.2. Research on the worship of the Red River Delta goddesses

Research on Vietnamese goddesses in the Red River Delta is extensive. The most developed strand focuses on Mother Goddess traditions, especially Mother Goddess Worship of Three Realms and Four Palaces (Đạo Mẫu Tam phủ - Tứ phủ). Key studies describe Mother Goddess Religion as a coherent ritual system with an organised pantheon, stable ritual repertoires, and recognised ritual specialists. T.D. Ngo's Vietnamese Mother Goddess Religion systematises the Three Realms and Four Palaces pantheon and clarifies the cultural meanings of mediumship (lên đồng) as a central ritual practice within this indigenous tradition [10]. Ethnographic research examines mediumship as a lived practice rather than a doctrine. K. Fjelstad, et al. (2006) [11] show that the spirit mediumship is sustained through a network of mediums, patrons, and temples, and that possession rituals organise authority, participation, and meaning in contemporary Vietnamese communities.

Beyond these traditions, case-based studies examine how particular goddess cults operate in contemporary socio-economic change. L.H. Le (2007) [12] analyses the Lady of the Treasury (Bà Chúa Kho) in Bac Ninh province and shows that the temple became a major pilgrimage destination from the 1990s, linking this expansion to the Đổi Mới revival of religious practice and socio-economic transformation after 1986. M.S. Nguyen (1998) [13] approaches folklore beliefs as a flexible system of local classifications and ritual practice rather than fixed doctrines. His work provides analytical vocabulary for understanding how deities, including female figures, are recognised in rural religious life.

A related but distinct body of work discusses the Cult of the Four Dharma Goddesses (Pháp Vân, Pháp Vũ, Pháp Điện, Pháp Lôi) centred on the Dau temple (Dâu), Dau temple (Đâu), Tuong temple (Trường) and Dan Temple (Dàn) system in Kinh Bac (Kinh Bắc) and its wider northern network [14]. This literature is relevant to this study because it illustrates a form of goddess-centred worship in northern Vietnam in which Buddhist idioms are expressed through temple spaces, ritual calendars, and local narratives. However, unlike royal female deities, the Four Dharma Goddess cult is not anchored in

dynastic biography or court authorisation. It therefore serves mainly as a comparative reference rather than as a direct account for royal female deity worship.

A smaller, dispersed body of scholarship addresses women of royal origin who later became objects of worship in the Red River Delta and northern Vietnam. One strand draws on court-centred historiography, especially Complete Chronicle of Dai Viet (Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư) [15] and Imperial Annotated Comprehensive History of Vietnam (Khâm định Việt sử Thông giám cương mục) [16] (initiated in 1856 and issued in 1884), to identify royal women and trace how official narrative and evaluative comments frame their virtues, authority, and posthumous legitimacy. This historiography and these local materials are repeatedly mobilised for figures such as Y Lan, Ly Chieu Hoang, and Huyen Tran, who are all worshipped at multiple sites in the Delta and northern Vietnam. A second strand uses Buddhist historiography, such as L. Nguyen (2010) [17], N.T. Thu (2021) [18], to situate royal women within the historical development of Buddhism and the patterns of elite patronage. A third strand consists of compilations that list Vietnamese goddesses and notable women (e.g., works cataloguing queens and royal women across dynasties) [19]. These publications are valuable for mapping names, basic narratives, and distributions of cult figures, but they often remain descriptive. More analytical contributions come from studies that classify vernacular deities and titles (e.g., M.S. Nguyen) [20], from the research on festival and village institutions (e.g., C.B. Nguyen) [21] and from scholarship on material culture and royal/elite patronage in Buddhist contexts (e.g., T.H. Vu) [22]. Finally, reference tools such as Index of Deity Chronicles by Village and Locality [23] and Bibliography of Deity Chronicles and Royal Ordinations support identification of deity chronicles by locality and help locate archival holdings for further verification [24]. Taken together, this scholarship provides rich materials on specific figures, sites, and textual corpora. However, the existing works tend to focus on individual figures or single sites and draw on local deity chronicles, court-centred historiography, inscriptions, royal decrees, and local archival materials. This scholarship offers rich descriptive material but rarely explains, across multiple communities, how dynastic biography becomes durable local sacred authority through authorised texts, historiography, and temple patronage. This article addresses that gap by treating royal female deities as a comparative category within Red River Delta goddess worship and by analysing standardisation as a contested process across three linked channels: decree language, court-centred historiography, and material patronage expressed in temple construction, restoration, and festival organisation.

Despite substantial scholarship on syncretism and on goddess worship in northern Vietnam, the literature rarely explains how dynastic authority becomes durable local ritual legitimacy of royal female deity cults. This article contributes in three ways. First, it integrates a practice-based approach

to syncretism with Vietnamese-based goddess scholarship to analyse royal female deities as a distinct category within Red River Delta worship. Second, it operationalises “standardisation” as a contested process across three linked channels: decree language, court-centred historiography, and material patronage expressed in temple construction, restoration, and festival organisation rather than treating royal recognition as automatic uniformity. Third, it clarifies what is distinctive about royal female deity worship in the region compared with the major non-royal goddess tradition in northern Vietnam.

3. Study approach and research methods

3.1. The concept of syncretism

In the study of religion and belief, *syncretism* is a key concept referring to the blending and integration of different faiths. According to the *Cambridge English Dictionary*, “syncretism” is defined as “the combining of different religions, cultures, or ideas” [6]. However, scholarship treats syncretism as a contested process rather than a neutral mixture. C. Stewart, et al. (1994) [1] show that “syncretism and anti-syncretism” emerge from struggles over authenticity and authority in religious life, and any integration of beliefs reflects social contestation as much as cultural blending. In this view, religious synthesis is also a struggle over legitimacy. A.M. Leopold, et al. (2004) [2] similarly argue that syncretism is not a simple mixture of traditions, but a dynamic process shaped by historical contact, social negotiation, and power relations. Because these struggles are often expressed in practice, syncretism is best analysed through ritual repertoires, shrine organisation, and the use of authorised titles, rather than through doctrine alone [4]. Taken together, these works support analysing royal female deity worship as a negotiated field in which court institutions and local communities advance different claims about legitimacy. In the historical development of Vietnamese culture, syncretism has been a prominent feature of the Vietnamese people’s spiritual life. Rooted in an agrarian rice civilisation with fertility cults at its foundation and situated along the crossroads of East-West cultural exchanges, Vietnam has long interacted with and absorbed external ideologies such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. This process did not unfold in an exclusive or oppositional manner; rather, it was characterised by adaptation, flexibility, integration, and harmonisation, resulting in a multi-layered and polytheistic belief system. This historical openness should not be perceived merely as a cultural mixture but as an ongoing negotiation through which communities adapted external systems to articulate local identity and establish sacred authority.

Within this context, the worship of royal female deities in the Red River Delta both absorbed external cultural values and creatively transformed them to bear distinct local characteristics. This paper aims to clarify the syncretism between the worship of royal female deities and Buddhism,

Confucianism, and Daoism, while also analysing the interweaving of courtly and folk elements in this system of belief.

Through this examination, it becomes evident how the Vietnamese constructed a religious-spiritual tradition that is both receptive to outside influences and firmly rooted in indigenous cultural foundations.

3.2. Area studies and the interdisciplinary approach

Area studies is understood as “a highly interdisciplinary field that takes human communities as its central subject, examining their cultural, economic, and social characteristics through an integrated and historically grounded approach within a defined cultural region” [25].

In this sense, it is clear that area studies is not confined to a single discipline; rather, it draws upon the methodologies and knowledge of multiple fields. This interdisciplinarity enables scholars to approach cultural and social phenomena across multiple dimensions, from micro-level (community, local) dynamics to macro-level patterns at the national, regional, and transregional scales.

Studying the worship of royal female deities in the Red River Delta from the perspective of area studies is therefore particularly appropriate, as the phenomenon is multi-layered and complex. On the one hand, this belief system combines courtly traditions with folk practices; on the other hand, it embodies religious syncretism, where Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism are intertwined with indigenous beliefs. If examined solely through the lens of a single discipline - such as history or religious studies - it would be difficult to fully capture the multidimensional nature of this phenomenon. By contrast, through an interdisciplinary lens, area studies allow for a clearer identification of the layers of syncretism: between history and myth, folk and court, and indigenous and external influences.

Simultaneously, it is crucial to elucidate the practical implementation of this interdisciplinary synthesis. Rather than merely listing related disciplines, the present study operationalises area studies through the combined use of ethnographic fieldwork, textual-historical analysis, and comparative cultural interpretation. Ethnography documents contemporary ritual spaces, festival practices, and local narratives; textual analysis of deity chronicles, official histories, royal decrees and Hán - Nôm sources reconstructs historical trajectories and processes of standardisation; comparative cultural methods situate the worship of royal female deities within wider regional patterns of goddess veneration. The convergence of these methods enables tracing multiple layers of syncretism and generating analytical insights that would not emerge from any single disciplinary approach.

3.3. Research methodology

This study combines ethnographic fieldwork with textual analysis to examine syncretism in the worship of royal female

deities. Here, syncretism refers to the practical mixing of court-based authority and local religious life. It is visible when Buddhist, Confucian, or Daoist elements appear in rituals, temple layouts, narratives, and titles, while the cult remains anchored in local agrarian moral worlds. Standardisation refers to the efforts to regulate and legitimise worship through state-linked instruments, especially authorised titles, official histories, and patterns of temple patronage. Incorporation refers to the movement of ritual forms and symbols across domains without erasing their recognisable origins. Evidence for incorporation includes ritual objects and actions crossing between public sites and domestic rites, and borrowed symbols that remain identifiable within local practice. This approach aligns with Pomeranz's account of contested standardisation and with N.T. Nguyen's analysis of ritual incorporation [8, 9].

This article operationalises "standardisation" as a contested process through three channels of observation. First, it analyses decree language as an attempt to define authorised titles, virtues, and ritual legitimacy. An example is the set of decrees of Y Lan at Yen Thai temple (Hang Bong street, Ha Noi), with the earliest preserved decree dated Canh Hung 14 (1753). The decree's honourific formula frames her through her dynastic ranks and moralised language (e.g., Linh Nhan Hoang Thai Hau, Thanh Mau Y Lan), thereby standardising who she is and what she can do in an authorised idiom. However, C.B. Nguyen (2013) [21] argues that court promotion and local acceptance are not identical, and "the deity of the king" and "the deity of the people" may even coexist in the same site. This standardisation is not automatic uniformity; it provides a template that local custodian draw upon while festivals, offerings, and narratives rework her authority into maternal care and everyday protection. Second, it reads court-centred historiography as an official frame that selects and orders events, then compares this frame with local narratives and temple memory to identify shifts in emphasis. Third, it treats material patronage, temple construction, renovation, and the reorganisation of worship space as evidence of how authority is made durable in the sacred landscape. Together, these channels show standardisation as an intervention whose effects depend on local mediation rather than producing a uniform outcome.

Fieldwork was conducted as part of doctoral research between 2022 and 2025, including repeated visits to 20 worship sites in and around Hanoi, Bac Ninh, Hung Yen, Nam Dinh provinces (since July 2025 part of Ninh Binh province), and Thai Binh province (since July 2025 part of Hung Yen province). Data were collected through observation of worship spaces, architecture, and sanctuary arrangement; participant observation of rituals and festivals; and 15 semi-structured interviews with temple caretakers, ritual specialists, and local devotees. These interviews provided evidence on ritual practice, local interpretation, and historical memory.

To clarify what is distinctive about royal female deity worship, the study applies a within-region controlled comparison within the same regional religious ecology (the Red River Delta). The study compares royal female deities to three established female-centred traditions that share similarities in ritual aesthetics and sacred landscapes but differ in their sources of authority: (1) Four Dharmas Goddesses (agrarian weather goddesses tied to rainmaking and seasonal survival), (2) Mother Goddesses (a structured cosmology sustained through mediumship and ritual performance), and The Family Goddess (female ancestor veneration anchored within lineage-scale ritual boundaries). The Four Ladies grounds sacred authority in agrarian cosmology and weather control. These cases are selected because they represent three different bases of sacred authority - natural force, cosmological hierarchy, and kinship memory - whereas royal female deities are anchored in dynastic biography and state-linked recognition. The comparison isolates how dynastic categories become ritually workable in village life.

Textual analysis focused on mythic legends, imperial decrees, genealogical records (*ngọc phả*), and Hán-Nôm inscriptions. Field observations were compared with textual materials to strengthen the consistency and interpretation. Additional interviews conducted during ritual events with the temple caretakers help clarify local views and ritual meanings. Textual sources include local deity chronicles (*thần tích*), imperial decrees (*sắc phong*), genealogical records (*ngọc phả*), and Hán-Nôm inscriptions.

Finally, the study adopts an area-studies lens to integrate evidence and interpretation across disciplines. It draws on history, religious studies, ethnology, cultural studies, and anthropology while keeping the unit of analysis grounded in place and practice. This lens links court texts and institutions to village ritual life. It also connects local cases to wider patterns of goddess veneration in Southeast Asia. Syncretism is analysed not only as a set of mixed symbols but also as a process by which authority is produced, contested, and reworked across scales.

4. The worship of royal female deities in the cultural life of Red River Delta communities

The worship of royal female deities represents a distinctive form of female deity worship in Vietnam, rooted in female-centred religious and rice-based agricultural culture. Throughout history, alongside natural goddesses such as Mother Earth, Mother Water, and Mother Rice, a new pantheon emerged: women of royal descent (empress dowagers, empresses, princesses, and imperial consorts) who made significant contributions or exerted great influence and were subsequently deified and venerated by local communities. They were created to embody protective power, blessings, and spiritual guardianship for communal life. This indicates that the sacred authority of royal women was shaped through both historical legitimacy and the agrarian moral imagination.

The formation of this belief is closely tied to the Red River Delta, as it is both the political centre of Vietnamese dynasties and the heartland of agrarian culture. From the 10th century onwards, following national independence, the growth of local cults created space for royal women to move from the inner court into village worship. During the Ly and Tran dynasties, when Buddhism held the position of state religion, many queens and princesses served as cultural and religious patrons, fostering the intersection of folk beliefs and imported religions. From the Le So dynasty⁴ onwards, many royal women were granted imperial decrees and became officially recognised deities, thus legitimising folk practices and enabling their wide diffusion. This process reflected both the connection between the court and village communities and the consolidation of these beliefs within communal life. As a result, the Red River Delta became home to numerous temples and shrines dedicated to royal female deities, often associated with vibrant folk festivals.

Among the pantheon of deities, several figures stand out: Empress Dowager Y Lan - a capable regent, revered by the people as “Lady Tam”, protector of the nation and its people; and Princess Tu Hoa (Tù Hoa) - credited with introducing sericulture, worshipped as the patron deity of this craft. Other venerated figures include Princess Huyen Tran, Empress Tran Thi Dung, and Trinh Thi Ngoc Truc. These diverse roles demonstrate the intertwining of female sanctity with governance, craft transmission, and agricultural life.

In the cultural life of Red River Delta communities, the worship of royal female deities plays a vital role in strengthening social cohesion, nurturing cultural identity, and transmitting historical traditions. It fosters national pride and instils the moral principle of “*When drinking water, remember its source*” (a Vietnamese proverb emphasising gratitude and remembrance of origins). Festivals and rituals associated with this worship also create spaces for communal cultural activities, where folk performances, music, and oral literature converge. These festivals and rituals also sustain local participation in performance, music, and oral narrative, while helping to transmit shared memory across generations.

At the same time, this worship is not merely commemorative; it is a space where communities negotiate power, gender, and morality within a post-feudal Vietnamese society. Local ritual choices are narrative emphases that show that the cult remains adaptable while preserving its historical core.

These dynamics are not unique to Vietnam. They also appear across many agrarian societies in Asia, where feminine sacred power often represents land, fertility, and communal protection. In South Asia, Shakti (India) traditions and village mother cults play similar roles, while in Southeast Asia, the worship of rice goddesses and female

tutelary spirits connects women’s sacred authority with the protection of crops, households, and local moral order. Viewed through this wider regional lens, Vietnamese worship of royal female deities fits into a broader transnational pattern in which feminine divinity provides an alternative source of legitimacy and empowerment within rural communities. This comparative perspective shows that the cult of royal female deities honours historical women and offers a subtle way for communities to express and negotiate gendered power.

5. Expressions of syncretism in the worship of royal female deities in the Red River Delta

5.1. Syncretism with Buddhism

The worship of royal female deities in the Red River Delta demonstrates profound syncretism with Buddhism. Buddhism was introduced to Vietnam in the early centuries CE at the Luy Lau (Luy Lâu) Centre in Bac Ninh province, which was established through visits by Indian monks arriving by sea. Even before these monks, Indian merchants had already come to Vietnam, bringing Buddhist practices with them [17]. From the very beginning, Buddhism had opportunities to interact, spread, and establish a place within local beliefs.

When entering Vietnam, Buddhism did not impose itself as an “external religion” but instead adapted and integrated with local customs and spiritual sensibilities. A prime example is its fusion with the worship of the Four Dharmas - indigenous agricultural deities associated with natural phenomena: Clouds, Rain, Thunder, and Lightning. These elements were crucial to wet-rice cultivation, as reflected in the proverb “first water, second fertiliser, third diligence, fourth seeds”. As scholar L. Nguyen (2010) [17] observed, “One characteristic of Vietnamese Buddhism in the second century was its spirit of religious harmony. Buddhism permeated into local beliefs in Giao Chi as naturally as water soaks into the soil, without opposition, since local beliefs did not conflict with Buddhism’s fundamental tenets”.

With its teachings of compassion, benevolence, and community-mindedness, Buddhism was readily embraced by the Vietnamese and harmonised with traditional worship. People visited pagodas not only for moral cultivation - “to accumulate virtue for descendants” - but also to pray for peace and prosperity, much as they turned to female deities or mother goddesses for blessings and protection. This parallel facilitated the close affinity between Buddhism and Mother Goddess worship, laying the foundation for the later worship of royal female deities.

One of the clearest expressions of this syncretism is the worship structure known as “Buddha in the front, Saints in the rear” (Tiền Phật, hậu Thánh). Many pagodas in the Red River Delta enshrine not only the Buddha but also Mother Goddesses or saints, creating a hybrid pagoda-temple form. Fieldwork shows examples such as Ba Tam Pagoda in Duong Xa, Hanoi, Thanh Chua Pagoda (Hanoi), Do Temple (Dinh

⁴The Lê Sơ (Early Lê) dynasty, 1428–1527, established by Lê Lợi, marked a period of strong central rule and Confucian state consolidation.

Bang, Bac Ninh province administrative merged), and the shrine of Linh Tu Quoc Mau (Linh Từ Quốc Mẫu) in Thai Binh (since July 2025 part of Hung Yen province). Some of these were originally Buddhist temples but gradually incorporated the worship of saints or royal female deities [26].

The Ba Tam temple-pagoda complex (Duong Xa, Gia Lam, Hanoi) is a notable case. It honours Empress Dowager Y Lan - a remarkable historical figure, a devout Buddhist, and revered in folklore as the Bodhisattva of Compassion. The large complex, built in the traditional temple layout with “an inner-shaped core and an outer enclosed-shaped frame” (“nội công, ngoại quốc”) style, includes pagodas, shrines, temples, and sanctuaries. Initially dedicated mainly to the Buddha and Y Lan, it later expanded to include a Mother Goddess shrine (rebuilt in 2015 on its old foundation)⁵. Today, the site encompasses all three forms of worship: Buddha, Mother Goddesses, and Saints, reflecting not only the flexibility of local practices but also the Vietnamese ethos of inclusivity, blending different sacred figures within one space.

Another key example is Do Temple (Đền Đô) in Bac Ninh province administrative merger, the ancestral temple of the Ly dynasty. Established in the 11th century to honour eight Ly kings, it also bears deep Buddhist connections, as the Ly dynasty was devoutly Buddhist, and many queens and princesses were Buddhist practitioners. Behind the main shrine lies a sanctuary dedicated to seven queens of the Ly dynasty. Significantly, this form of goddess worship does not follow the common Three Palaces - Four Palaces belief systems but instead focuses directly on royal women. The structure demonstrates a distinctive type of syncretism: the intertwining of worshipping kings, Buddhas, and Mother Goddesses within one religious-architectural space. Scholars have noted that the “Buddha in the front, Saints in the rear” model is a unique Vietnamese religious architecture, not found in India, China, Cambodia, or Thailand [27].

Another important aspect of this syncretism is the role of royal women in Vietnamese Buddhist history. Many were simultaneously members of the royal family, devout Buddhists, and later venerated as deities. A prime example is Empress Dowager Y Lan, who twice served as regent and made immense contributions to Buddhism, building hundreds of pagodas across the Red River Delta. For these merits, she was revered as “Ba Tam Bodhisattva” and regarded as an incarnation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Researcher Nguyen Minh San identified Y Lan as one of three women (alongside Ba Chua Ba and Thi Kinh) honoured as Avalokitesvara Bodhisattvas in Vietnamese folklore [13].

Another striking case is Queen Trinh Thi Ngoc Truc, wife of King Le Thanh Tong. As a devout Buddhist, she once practised at But Thap Pagoda (1644) and authored *Chi Nam Ngoc Am*

giai nghĩa, a bilingual Sino-Nom encyclopaedic dictionary with 3,394 entries. This invaluable cultural-linguistic work demonstrates her role in preserving and fostering Buddhist scholarship [27]. She is worshipped at several places, notably at Mat Pagoda (Thanh Hoa province), where her statue is remarkable: carved from a single block of wood, it depicts the queen in full lotus posture. Her right hand is raised in the *Abhaya mudra* (gesture of fearlessness and universal salvation), symbolising compassion and Buddhist spirit; her left hand rests in her lap in the *nectar mudra*, expressing steadfastness in Buddhist law and the wish to grant beings a peaceful, liberated life [28]. Thus, she is remembered as a queen, a Buddhist devotee, and a sacred figure, a vivid illustration of syncretism.

Through these examples, it is evident that the syncretism of Buddhism and the worship of royal female deities extends beyond sacred spaces to the worshipped figures themselves (royal women are simultaneously honoured as Buddhists, saints, and deities). This reflects a cultural logic in Vietnam: Buddhism does not conflict with but rather integrates with indigenous beliefs, while royal women - bridging the court and the populace - serve as mediators, embodying both dynastic authority and sacredness in folk consciousness.

In short, the syncretism between Buddhism and the worship of royal female deities in the Red River Delta is a distinctive cultural phenomenon. It is manifested through the association of Buddhism with the Four Dharmas, the widespread architectural model of “Buddha in the front, Saints in the rear”, and the dual identity of royal women as Buddhists, saints, and deities. These expressions highlight the flexibility, inclusivity, and creativity of Vietnamese culture, while affirming the unique intermediary role of royal female deity worship in the nation’s cultural-historical development.

5.2. Syncretism with Confucianism

Confucianism, one of the major philosophical schools of ancient China, exerted profound influence on many fields and societies in East Asia, including Vietnam. The doctrine was introduced into Vietnam in the early centuries Common Era. However, it was introduced into Vietnam largely during the period of Chinese rule, and it initially did not establish the same firm position in Vietnamese spiritual life as Buddhism or Daoism. A turning point came in 1070, when King Ly Thanh Tong ordered the construction of the Temple of Literature, with statues of Confucius, Zhou Gong, and the Four Correlates; portraits of the Seventy-Two Worthies; and mandated seasonal rituals there, while the Crown Prince studied at the site [15]. This marked the official reception of Confucianism as state orthodoxy.

As scholars have noted, the Vietnamese “resisted Sinicisation but did not completely reject Confucianisation” [29]. Thus, Confucianism was accepted but continually adapted to local socio-cultural and economic conditions. Although it never replaced Buddhism or Daoism in the sphere

⁵In-depth interview with Mr. Phung Huy Dien, Management Board of Ba Tam Temple Relic Site (Gia Lam, Hanoi).

of faith, Confucianism played a crucial role in education, ideology, and social organisation, with direct influence on women in the royal family.

First of all, Confucianism shaped the thought, character, and ethics of royal women. In the courtly environment, empresses, empress dowagers, and princesses were among those who directly engaged with Confucian teachings. They were educated as learnt persons (*kẻ sĩ*), instructed within the framework of orthodox dynastic ideology. While Buddhism conveyed compassion and salvation, and Daoism offered a cosmological-spiritual framework, Confucianism stressed moral norms and socio-political ideals. Particularly, it imposed ethical standards such as the three obediences (*tam tông*), four feminine virtues (*Tứ đức*), chastity, and filial piety upon women. Within this framework, royal women were trained to embody the role of the “exemplary mother of the realm”, serving as moral models for society. When they were venerated after death, their images were also idealised according to Confucian virtues, creating a unique syncretism: on the one hand, they retained their folk sacredness; on the other, they embodied the ethical discourse of official Confucianism.

The influence of Confucianism is also evident in the imperial decrees that conferred titles upon royal female deities. Granting honorific epithets was not only a way for the monarchy to honour and legitimise its rule but also a means of embedding Confucian ideology in folk worship. During the Le So and Le Trung Hung periods, many empresses and princesses were bestowed with titles imbued with Confucian values, such as “Chaste and Virtuous” (*Trinh Thuc*), “Manifested Saint” (*Hiển Thánh*), and “Reverent and Compassionate” (*Cung Từ*). These titles both recognised their merits and bound their sacred images to the moral ideals of Confucianism. Notably, at Yen Thai Temple - once the residence of an empress - there still hangs a banner inscribed “Exemplary Mother of the Ly dynasty” (*Lý Đại Mẫu Nghi*) [20], a vivid testimony to the fusion of female deity worship and Confucian moral discourse.

While Confucian norms often reinforced patriarchal expectations, feminist scholarship in East Asia shows that women in imperial settings used Confucian virtues strategically rather than passively submitting. In Vietnam, figures such as Y Lan, Tran Thi Dung, and Trinh Thi Ngoc Truc mobilised ideals such as filial piety, benevolence, and moral exemplarity to justify political action and strengthen their spiritual authority. Their later deification demonstrates how royal women could transform a patriarchal ethical system into a source of female prestige and sacred power, revealing Confucianism as a field of negotiation rather than mere constraint.

Thus, Confucianism shaped the worship of royal female deities in the Red River Delta in two dimensions: (i) By forming and reinforcing ethical standards and exemplary character for royal women to serve as societal models; (ii) Through

imperial decrees and honourific titles, by sacralising and legitimising their cults, ensuring that the veneration of these deities simultaneously affirmed dynastic political authority. This exemplifies religious syncretism in Vietnam: an imported ideology, when absorbed into local life, was adjusted and fused with indigenous beliefs, serving both the spiritual needs of the people and the political-social aims of the ruling class.

5.3. Syncretism with Daoism

Daoism was introduced into Vietnam quite early and quickly found its place due to similarities with indigenous beliefs and the wet-rice agricultural culture. Vietnam has long been regarded as a land of rich yet unpredictable nature: both “forests of gold and seas of silver” and “sacred forests and poisonous waters”. Agricultural life was heavily dependent on unstable weather and natural forces. Because of such precariousness and harshness, the Vietnamese tended to revere magic, believe in talismans, and emphasise ritual ceremonies to subdue or harmonise with nature. Daoism, especially magical Daoism, “quickly penetrated and blended easily with indigenous magical beliefs to the point where boundaries no longer existed” [30].

This integration was so profound that it “led not a few scholars to attribute all traditional Vietnamese beliefs to Daoism, while in reality, Vietnamese people fascinated with spirit-possession and talismans often had no idea what Daoism actually was” [28]. As a result, many folk religious practices appear at first glance to be direct products of Daoism but are in fact uniquely Vietnamese creations, most typically the Mother Goddess Religion or the Three Palaces-Four Palaces system. This is why some scholars have remarked, “The Daoist element is merely a matter of form; its influence on the substance of these beliefs is insignificant” [30]. Such observations show that the Vietnamese received Daoism in a highly distinctive way: not by adopting it wholesale, but by fusing and transforming it, producing a system that is at once indigenous yet infused with Daoist traces.

In the worship of royal female deities, syncretism with Daoism also unfolded naturally, without clear boundaries. The Vietnamese spiritual world has long been “inclined toward shamanism, spirit possession, and talismans” [31] and thus these practices easily merged with Daoist images of immortals and sorcery. This convergence enhanced sacredness, creating a mystical aura in rituals devoted to female deities in general and royal women in particular. From talismans and ritual singing (*chầu văn*) to ritual platforms, all bear the marks of Daoist-folk interaction.

At the same time, Daoist-influenced elements not only create a mystical atmosphere; they also reshape local spiritual authority. Sacred shrines, immortal symbolism, and tales of divine intervention enhance the moral standing of royal female deities and reinforce their role as protectors of communal ethics. This sacralisation emerged largely from local practice rather than elite design, though the state

later appropriated this prestige through imperial decrees to consolidate dynastic legitimacy. In this way, Daoist syncretism becomes a negotiated space in which communities exercise agency while also internalising broader moral and political norms.

An illustrative example can be found at the relic site dedicated to Nguyen phi Y Lan in Duong Xa commune. During field work, the caretaker explained that within the grounds stands a sacred shrine, long associated with mysterious tales. The shrine (*miếu*) is an architectural form imbued with Daoist symbolism, often associated with immortals and the supernatural. Locals still say that those who pass by the Lady's Shrine without showing respect will suffer illness or misfortune. Such accounts reveal how Daoist mysticism "intensifies" the aura of sacredness while simultaneously merging with the worship of Y Lan as a historical royal woman.

Thus, syncretism with Daoism in the cult of royal female deities manifests on two levels. First, at the formal level, many ritual practices, symbols, and sacred spaces carry Daoist features (shrines, talismans, spirit possession, and immortal imagery). Second, at the substantive level, royal female figures preserve their historical and social essence tied to the court but are sacralised and mystified through Daoist elements, thereby strengthening their spiritual authority and efficacy in communal belief. Thanks to this interplay, the worship of royal female deities has become a multi-layered sacred space: both a commemoration of historical figures and a mystical realm of supernatural powers. It shows that, while Daoism did not determine the content of this worship, it powerfully shaped its atmosphere of sacredness, mysticism, and sacralisation.

5.4. Syncretism between courtly and folk elements

The case of Imperial Consort/Empress Dowager Y Lan illustrates one of the most notable examples of the blending

between courtly and folk elements in the cult of royal female deities in the Red River Delta. She was not only an important historical figure of the Lý dynasty but also became a tutelary goddess in popular belief, worshipped by the people under various names, images, and rituals. Through legends, temple inscriptions, and village festivals, her courtly virtues were continually reinterpreted in local settings, allowing a royal figure to be absorbed into familiar rural moral worlds. In popular narratives, Y Lan appears not only as a powerful queen but also as a nurturing mother, a figure associated with moral protection, household well-being, and everyday livelihood. Many local traditions portray her as a young village woman (often associated with Co Tam), revealing how communities translated the symbols of authority into forms that resonated with the rural village. This process illustrates the dynamic and negotiated nature of belief formation, as the courtly image was adapted, softened, and integrated into the moral imagination of agrarian communities.

This case demonstrates what Pomeranz terms "contested standardisation": Court text defines authorised identity, but local practice determines what becomes ritually effective. It also illustrates Stewart and Shaw's argument that legitimacy is negotiated, as official titles and local narratives do not always align [9].

Official historiography (*Chính sử*) provides the court's authorised frame for this transformation. In Complete Chronicle of Dai Viet, Y Lan is constructed through the vocabulary of legitimacy: dynastic title, lawful regency, moral exemplarity, and agrarian protection. This is not a neutral description. It is a standardising discourse that makes a royal woman "publicly speakable" as a moral and political figure. Local worship then reworks this authorised biography into ritual efficacy. Legends and festivals foreground maternal care and everyday protection, but they often rely on the court's categories of rank and virtue as a base layer of legitimacy.

Table 1. Key narratives of Y Lan in Complete Chronicle of Dai Viet and their relevance in local worship.

Events in official history	Official framing	Standardisation function	Likely implications for local worship and memory
1063: The King performs a fertility rite at Thanh Chua pagoda; Y Lan becomes pregnant with Can Duc (King Ly Nhan Tong).	Links royal authority to Buddhist space and fertility	Authorises a "sacred origin" for the royal production	Supports later for interpretations of Y Lan as a fertility and protection figure
1066: Y Lan is granted the title "Thần phi"	Establishes rank through court title language	Creates a stable official idiom of status (title-making)	Produces a textual anchor for later decrees and temple honouring
1069: The king campaigns in Champa; Y Lan manages internal affairs	Frames competence as legitimate political agency	Legitimises female regency through merit and governance	Enables local narratives to recast authority as moral care and protection
1072: The king dies; Can Đức ascends; Y Lan acts as regent ("behind the curtain")	Frames Y Lan as a lawful political actor	Standardises the regency role as a legitimate form of rule	Supports worship of Y Lan as a protector of the realm and the community
1073: She is elevated to Linh Nhân Hoàng Thái hậu (Mother of the King)	Moralises authority through "maternal virtue" and exemplarity	Encodes virtue in official naming	Aligns with popular "motherly" memories and compassionate images
1103: She uses palace funds to redeem poor girls sold into bondage and arranges marriages	Frames benevolence as state-backed normal action	Converts biography into moral legitimacy.	Feeds the local theme of cứu dân (relieving suffering or helping people)
1117: Death; posthumous title; burial ritual	Ritualises closure through state and ceremony, and dating	Fixes memory through official calendrical markers	Provides an authoritative basis for anniversaries and festival timing

Source: Author's compilation from Complete Chronicle of Dai Viet [15].

Table 1 summarises the key episodes and shows how official narrative, court titles, and policy acts stabilise Y Lan's sanctity before communities localise its meaning.

Taken together, these entries show how official narratives stabilise a public biography, while local communities translate this biography into efficacy through rituals, space, and offerings.

This court-village interaction is also evident at Yen Thai (Hang Bong Street, Hanoi), an old shrine known historically as Dong Thien temple (Quán Động Thiên), where Y Lan is worshipped as the central deity. During fieldwork, a notice from the communal house's management board stated that the site still preserves several valuable relics, including a bronze bell dated from Tu Duc's 17th year (1857), eight stone steles, stone palanquins, a lacquered horizontal board (hoành phi), parallel sentences (câu đối), and a set of imperial decrees (sắc phong) for Phu Khanh Linh Nhan Hoang Thai Hau. The earliest decree is dated from Canh Hung's 14th year (1753). At Yen Thai, material remains make the three channels visible. This site preserves imperial decrees (the earliest is Canh Hung 14, 1753), steles, and other ritual objects. First, the decree authorised titles and virtues, giving an official idiom for public ritual. Second, historiography frames her through governance, rank, and approved virtue; local legends and festival narratives foreground maternal care and everyday protection. Third, restoration and spatial arrangement materialise authorised memory by fixing it in place through inscriptions, layout, and curated objects. This outcome is uneven but productive: courtly authority shapes what can be publicly authorised, while local practice decides what becomes ritually meaningful.

First, this blending is evident in the system of names and images associated with Y Lan. In official histories, Y Lan was elevated from imperial consort (thần phi) to empress dowager [15], affirming her courtly status. However, among the people, she was affectionately called Lady Tam, Female Guanyin, or Holy Mother. Unlike The Four Dharma Deities (Tứ Pháp), where sacred power rests on agrarian natural force, Y Lan's authority begins with dynastic biography and then becomes locally effective through naming, legend, and ritual. The name "Y Lan", bestowed by the king, was both elegant and rustic, quickly becoming an intimate symbol. This coexistence of courtly titles and folk names created a multi-layered symbolic system that embodied the popularisation of a royal figure.

Second, there is the phenomenon of assimilation between Y Lan and the fairy-tale character Tam. Her life bore many similarities to the *Tam Cam (Tám Cám)* motif: losing her mother early, living with a stepmother, being a village girl, and suddenly entering the royal palace. Legends even recount that when asked her name by the king, she replied, "Tám". After her death, the pagoda she had built was called Lady Tám Temple. "it seems that no one has ever found a second region that worships Lady Tam (Bà Tám) like Luy Lau" [32]. Through this association, the historical figure was merged

with a familiar folk archetype. Nevertheless, unlike Tam, whose story ends with becoming the king's wife, Y Lan took on state affairs, raised King Ly Nhan Tong (Lý Nhân Tông), relieved famine, and left great merits. This relationship helped shape the dual image of Lady Tam - Y Lan: at once close to the people and of courtly stature.

Third, the syncretism between court and folk is also visible in the worship spaces dedicated to Imperial Consort Y Lan. At Lady Tam Temple (đền Bà Tám) in Gia Lam, Hanoi, courtly imprints are clear in the architecture and sculpture. Images of dragons, phoenixes, and lions - signalling royal power - are intricately carved. Notably, the pair of Ly dynasty stone lions beneath the pedestal of the Three Buddhas have been recognised as national treasures, affirming the pinnacle of Ly court art [33]. Furthermore, the worship space includes great generals such as Ly Thuong Kiet, Ly Dao Thanh, and the six Ladies of the Six Ministries (Lục Bộ Châu Bà) - manifestations of the court's bureaucratic system [26]. Yet alongside these courtly elements, the pagoda's space - with its water pavilion, trees, and incorporation of the Three Palaces tradition of Mother Goddess worship - reflects popular religiosity, showing its deep attachment to village communities.

Fourth, the rituals dedicated to Y Lan also demonstrate the blending of courtly and folk traditions. The festival at the Lady Tam Temple includes solemn ceremonies with courtly features: processions, palanquins, sacred horses, and male-female ritual troupes. However, folk elements play a central role: fetching water from the village well or the Red River; simple offerings such as ritual offering cakes (Bánh Oản), sticky rice, betel and areca, and rice wine [34]; and a calendar that follows the familiar village spring-festival rhythm, while major observations also mark Y Lan's death anniversary (the eighth lunar month). These agrarian gestures recall ritual logics seen in Tứ Pháp, yet the cult centres on a named royal woman and her public merits. Its authority is framed through royal biography and honorific epithets, rather than through a palace-based cosmological hierarchy as in Mother Goddess Worship of Three Realms and Four Palaces (Đạo Mẫu Tam phủ Tứ phủ) or lineage-based obligation as in Family Goddess (Bà Tổ Cô, hereafter "Family Goddess") worship. The festive part features Quan ho singing on the water pavilion - a fertility-inspired practice that is both religious and recreational. Thus, courtly elements are woven into a folk setting, simultaneously honouring royal authority and preserving community traditions.

From these aspects, it is clear that the worship of Imperial Consort Y Lan exemplifies the syncretism between courtly and folk traditions. The coexistence of royal titles and folk names, of historical figures and fairy-tale archetypes, of courtly architecture and popular elements, and of courtly ritual and agrarian festivity has created a unique cultural phenomenon. This blend not only enriches Vietnam's religious heritage but also reveals the creativity and adaptability of folk culture in absorbing and sacralising historical figures.

5.5. Comparative discussion: what is distinctive about royal female deities

To identify what is distinctive about the worship of royal female deities, this article compares it with three established belief complexes in the Red River Delta: The Four Dharma Goddesses, Mother Goddess Three Palace and the cult of Family Goddess. These traditions often share ritual practices and temple landscapes. However, they ground sacred authority in different ways. The comparison highlights what is specific to royal female deities and reveals the political and social discourse embedded in worship.

In the Red River Delta, goddess worship is diverse and layered. Clear boundaries are difficult to draw because cults overlap in origin, function, and sacred place. Royal female deity worship operates inside this wider field. It shares a common foundation with other goddess traditions, such as the veneration of women as protectors, nurturers, and sources of life. However, its distinctive feature is the social and political origin of the worshipped figures. These deities are linked to the royal family and carry the historical political imprint of a specific dynasty.

A brief comparison with three female-centred traditions helps clarify this distinctiveness. First, The Four Dharma Goddesses sacralise the agrarian culture of natural forces (cloud, rain, thunder, lightning). Its authority is grounded in weather control and seasonal survival. Vietnamese scholarship explicitly characterises this belief as a rain-invoking belief system (*tín ngưỡng cầu mưa, cầu đảo*) [14]. Worship is organised through a linked regional system rather than isolated village shrines. Although individual deities may be worshipped at different pagodas or temples within a district, they are ritually connected as a pair or group of figures, most commonly the Cloud Goddess, The Rain Goddess, or the full set of four deities. Their statues often occupy prominent positions within pagoda spaces, indicating the ritual priority accorded to agrarian protection [14].

Second, Mother Goddess worship centres sacred authority in a universal female cosmology and a structured pantheon, sustained through spirit mediumship and its ritual aesthetics. Although this tradition is closely connected to indigenous culture, the two are not identical. Vietnamese scholars emphasise that “All Mother Goddesses are female deities, but all female deities are recognised as Mother Goddesses. Only a limited number are elevated to the status of Mother Goddess within the Three Palaces- the Four Palaces” [10]. This distinction situates royal female deities outside of the formal pantheon of *Đạo Mẫu*, even when symbolic features overlap.

Third, the cult of the Family Goddess grounds authority in kinship morality and domestic obligation. Worship is usually confined to the household or lineage and derives its efficacy from family memory rather than from public history or political status. Studies of Family Goddess worship show that there is no fixed or standardised form of altar design or ritual practice.

Altar arrangements or ritual objects vary across families and communities in the Northern Delta, reflecting the lightly localised or personalised character of the cult [35].

Against these three traditions, royal female deities stand out because they make dynastic memory workable in local ritual. Their authority is neither cosmological, as in the Four Dharma Goddesses, nor primarily familial, as in the cult of The Family Goddess. Nor are they integrated into a unified ritual system, like the Mother Goddess. Instead, their sacred status emerged from the interaction between historical remembrance and village-level religious practice. Syncretism here is best understood as negotiation, in which a broader historical frame shapes recognition, while local communities determine how these figures are ritually enacted and made meaningful in everyday worship.

Royal female deity worship also carries a specific political and social discourse that is weaker or absent in the other comparison cases. Through decrees, royal authority enters villages as a moral vocabulary of rank and exemplarity. Through official historiography, royal women become “speakable” as legitimate political actors and ethical models. Through patronage and spatial ordering, that authorised memory is established in the sacred landscape and embedded in local institutions that host many festivals and public rituals. Local community members do not simply receive this state-like frame. They translate it into practical efficacy: it is not only a blending of symbols. It is a negotiation in which dynastic categories are converted into local authorities.

6. Significance from the perspective of area studies

The study of syncretism in the worship of royal female deities in the Red River Delta not only helps to identify the distinctive features of Vietnamese culture but also contributes to explaining the formation and development of national identity within the broader flow of regional and global integration. This is a unique cultural-religious phenomenon that vividly reflects the Vietnamese people’s flexibility, creativity, and resilience in responding to external influences.

From the perspective of area studies, the syncretism observed in the worship of royal female deities in the Red River is not only a distinctive feature of Vietnamese culture but also a broader cultural, historical, and political dynamic that shapes identity formation across regional and transregional contexts. Area studies emphasises an interdisciplinary grounding in locality, historical depth, and community practice, making it an effective framework for understanding how this belief system evolved at the intersections of imperial structures and external religious influences.

First, research into the worship of royal female deities affirms the special role of women in Vietnamese history and culture. In contrast to Confucian notions that often relegated women to a secondary position, this practice demonstrates that many royal women were not confined to the inner court

but actively participated in political, military, and cultural life. Figures such as Imperial Consort Y Lan, Princess Huyen Tran, Empress Tran Thi Dung, Trinh Thi Ngoc Truc, and Princess Dieu Nhan all serve as vivid examples. Imperial Consort Y Lan is particularly exemplary: she twice acted as regent in place of the king, governing the country with wisdom and decisiveness, while also being a devout Buddhist who combined political authority with spiritual influence. In recognition of her merits, people in many localities established temples in her honour after her death. She is especially venerated in provinces such as Hanoi, Bac Ninh (administrative merger), Hung Yen, and Hai Duong (since July 2025 a part of Hai Phong city).

Second, the study of syncretism reflects the adaptability and elasticity of Vietnamese culture in engaging with external influences such as Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. At its core, the worship of royal female deities derives from indigenous agricultural goddess worship - the image of the mother or woman associated with fertility, reproduction, and safeguarding crops. Yet it does not exist in isolation but instead merges with imported religious ideologies and models. With Buddhism, many royal women were associated with the image of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, as in the cases of Imperial Consort Y Lan or Trinh Thi Ngoc Truc; furthermore, many temples still preserve the architectural model "Buddha in the front, Saints in the rear", a concrete manifestation of the combination between Buddhism and goddess worship. With Daoism, the presence of talismans, ritual altars, trance-possession ceremonies (*hầu đồng*), as well as images of "sacred temples" or "sacred mounds" within the sanctuaries added layers of mysticism and sacrality to the practice. With Confucianism, the presence of honorific titles in royal decrees, such as "Chaste and Virtuous", "Manifested Saint", or "Reverent and Compassionate", shows how feudal authority employed Confucian discourse to legitimise and reinforce the prestige of these female deities. Thus, the worship of royal female deities is a striking example of the Vietnamese capacity for adaptation, integration, and creative synthesis throughout history.

Third, from the perspective of area studies, the study of syncretism in the worship of royal female deities should not be confined to the field of religion or belief but approached in an interdisciplinary manner, drawing upon history, culture, anthropology, gender studies, and area studies. On the historical level, this worship is closely tied to major events and figures of the feudal dynasties, reflecting the interplay between state power and popular religiosity. On the cultural level, it demonstrates the tight connection between religious practices and customs, folk arts, architecture, sculpture, and music (such as *chầu văn* singing or ritual songs). On the gender level, the worship of royal female deities offers valuable sources for studying the roles and status of women in traditional Vietnamese society, while also opening possibilities for dialogue with modern feminist theories.

At the regional level, the worship of royal female deities can be compared with similar phenomena in Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, the goddess Dewi Sri embodies rice, protects crops, and represents profound maternal symbolism. In Thailand, the goddess Mae Phosop is considered the soul of rice, linked with fertility and the prosperity of the community. In Myanmar, the system of Nats includes many female figures who were once historical persons and, after death, were deified - similar to the folk deification of royal women in Vietnam. Such comparisons demonstrate that Vietnamese goddess worship embodies both the shared universality of Southeast Asian agrarian cultures and the particular distinctiveness of Vietnam, given its deep entanglement with political history, culture, and the dynamics of religious adaptation.

In sum, the study of syncretism in the worship of royal female deities in the Red River Delta from the perspective of area studies illuminates the enduring values of national culture: honouring the role of women and demonstrating resilience in the face of external influences while fostering interdisciplinary dialogue and regional comparison. This research direction is significant not only academically but also in contributing to the preservation and promotion of the distinctive spiritual heritage of the Vietnamese people in today's globalised context.

7. Conclusions

Regarding the first research question, the findings show that royal female deity worship in the Red River Delta developed through the selective incorporation and reinterpretation of indigenous agrarian beliefs together with elements of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. Buddhist influences appear in shared temple-pagoda spaces, the "Buddha in the front, Saints in the rear" model, and associations of royal female deities with compassion and salvation, while Confucianism contributes moral ideals, honorific titles, and models of female virtue, and Daoist and vernacular elements emphasise supernatural efficacy and protection. Rather than being simply combined, these elements were adapted to the historical biographies of royal women and the ritual needs of local communities, producing a form of worship that joins dynastic solemnity with village religiosity.

Regarding the second research question, the study shows that royal authority was standardised through imperial decrees, official historiography, and sacred space: decrees authorised titles, virtues, and ritual status; historiography constructed legitimate biographies; and temple inscriptions, ritual objects, restoration activities, and festival practices materialised these authorised memories in local landscapes. Yet standardisation did not create uniform worship. Local communities reinterpreted official identities through folk names, legends, offerings, ritual practices, and narratives of maternal compassion and protection, thereby turning royal authority into local ritual legitimacy.

Taken together, these findings show that royal female deity worship developed through religious syncretism and the local reinterpretation of standardised royal authority.

Court recognition provided legitimacy, while village practice transformed royal women into accessible, protective, and ritually effective sacred figures. This interaction between official authority and local agency distinguishes royal female deity worship in the Red River Delta and helps explain its continuity in communal religious life.

From an area studies perspective, the findings show the value of combining historical, religious, cultural, anthropological, and spatial evidence to explain how dynastic authority was transformed in local settings. Royal female deity worship thus reflects both the historical role of royal women and the ability of local communities to select, reinterpret, and sustain different sources of sacred authority. Further research could examine how heritage governance and mediated communication shape the presentation of royal female deity worship at specific sites.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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