


From political leader to sacred symbol: the process of vernacular sacralization of Ho Chi Minh in the worship spaces of private home shrines in Northern Vietnam

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Abstract

This article examines the transformation of the symbol of Ho Chi Minh from a political leader into a sacred symbol within the worship spaces of private home shrines in Northern Vietnam. Rather than approaching this phenomenon as a form of official veneration or ideological cultism, the study situates it within the analytical framework of vernacular sacralization, understood as a process shaped by non-institutional cultural and religious practices. Employing methods such as synthesis and analysis of secondary sources, participant observation, and case studies conducted at several representative private home shrines in Northern Vietnam, the article investigates the historical, cultural, and social conditions that underpin the sacralization of the Ho Chi Minh symbol in domestic sacred spaces. The analysis focuses on the spatial configuration of worship settings, ritual practices, modes of spiritual cultivation, and the mechanisms through which vernacular sacralization operates. Through this approach, the study elucidates how Ho Chi Minh is reinterpreted as a moral exemplar, a protective figure, and an object of veneration within popular spiritual life. The findings indicate that this process is closely associated with the depoliticization and moralization of Ho Chi Minh's image, alongside its incorporation into indigenous belief systems. The domestic worship space thus becomes a site of memory negotiation, where revolutionary memory is transformed into sacred social memory through repetitive ritual practices. By engaging in comparative dialogue with cases of political leader sacralization worldwide, the article contributes to broader scholarly debates on the interrelationship between politics, religion, and cultural memory in contemporary society.


Keywords: Ho Chi Minh; sacred symbol; vernacular sacralization; private home shrines; Northern Vietnam.

De líder político a símbolo sagrado: o processo de sacralização popular de Ho Chi Minh nos espaços de culto dos altares domésticos no norte do Vietnã

Resumo

Este artigo examina a transformação do símbolo de Ho Chi Minh de líder político em símbolo sagrado nos espaços de culto dos santuários domésticos no norte do Vietnã. Em vez de abordar esse fenômeno como uma forma de veneração oficial ou culto ideológico, o estudo o situa no quadro analítico da sacralização vernacular, entendida como um processo moldado por práticas culturais e religiosas não institucionais.

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Empregando métodos como síntese e análise de fontes secundárias, observação participante e estudos de caso realizados em vários santuários domésticos representativos no norte do Vietnã, o artigo investiga as condições históricas, culturais e sociais que sustentam a sacralização do símbolo de Ho Chi Minh em espaços sagrados domésticos. A análise concentra-se na configuração espacial dos ambientes de culto, nas práticas rituais, nos modos de cultivo espiritual e nos mecanismos por meio dos quais a sacralização vernacular opera. Por meio dessa abordagem, o estudo elucida como Ho Chi Minh é reinterpretado como um exemplar moral, uma figura protetora e um objeto de veneração na vida espiritual popular. Os resultados indicam que esse processo está intimamente associado à despolitização e moralização da imagem de Ho Chi Minh, juntamente com sua incorporação aos sistemas de crenças indígenas. O espaço de culto doméstico torna-se, assim, um local de negociação da memória, onde a memória revolucionária é transformada em memória social sagrada por meio de práticas rituais repetitivas. Ao estabelecer um diálogo comparativo com casos de sacralização de líderes políticos em todo o mundo, o artigo contribui para debates acadêmicos mais amplos sobre a inter-relação entre política, religião e memória cultural na sociedade contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: Ho Chi Minh; símbolo sagrado; sacralização vernacular; santuários domésticos; Vietnã do Norte.

De líder político a símbolo sagrado: el proceso de sacralización popular de Ho Chi Minh en los espacios de culto de los altares domésticos del norte de Vietnam

Resumen

Este artículo examina la transformación del símbolo de Ho Chi Minh, que pasa de ser un líder político a convertirse en un símbolo sagrado en los espacios de culto de los altares domésticos privados del norte de Vietnam. En lugar de abordar este fenómeno como una forma de veneración oficial o de culto ideológico, el estudio lo sitúa en el marco analítico de la sacralización vernácula, entendida como un proceso moldeado por prácticas culturales y religiosas no institucionales. Mediante métodos como la síntesis y el análisis de fuentes secundarias, la observación participante y estudios de caso realizados en varios altares domésticos representativos del norte de Vietnam, el artículo investiga las condiciones históricas, culturales y sociales que sustentan la sacralización del símbolo de Ho Chi Minh en los espacios sagrados domésticos. El análisis se centra en la configuración espacial de los entornos de culto, las prácticas rituales, los modos de cultivo espiritual y los mecanismos a través de los cuales opera la sacralización vernácula. A través de este enfoque, el estudio aclara cómo Ho Chi Minh es reinterpretado como un modelo moral, una figura protectora y un objeto de veneración dentro de la vida espiritual popular. Los resultados indican que este proceso está estrechamente asociado a la despolitización y moralización de la imagen de Ho Chi Minh, junto con su incorporación a los sistemas de creencias indígenas. El espacio de culto doméstico se convierte así en un lugar de negociación de la memoria, donde la memoria revolucionaria se transforma en memoria social sagrada a través de prácticas rituales repetitivas. Al entablar un diálogo comparativo con casos de sacralización de líderes políticos en todo el mundo, el artículo contribuye a debates académicos más amplos sobre la interrelación entre política, religión y memoria cultural en la sociedad contemporánea.

Palabras clave: Ho Chi Minh; símbolo sagrado; sacralización vernácula; altares domésticos privados; Vietnam del Norte.

D'un leader politique à un symbole sacré : le processus de sacralisation populaire de Hô Chi Minh dans les espaces de culte des autels domestiques du nord du Vietnam

Résumé

Cet article examine la transformation de l'image de Hô Chi Minh, qui passe du statut de dirigeant politique à celui de figure sacrée au sein des espaces de culte qui constituent les autels domestiques privés dans le nord du Vietnam. Plutôt que d'aborder ce phénomène comme une forme de vénération officielle ou de culte idéologique, l'étude le replace dans le cadre analytique de la sacralisation vernaculaire, comprise comme un processus façonné par des pratiques culturelles et religieuses non institutionnelles. À l'aide de méthodes telles que la synthèse et l'analyse de sources secondaires, l'observation participante et des études de cas menées dans plusieurs autels domestiques représentatifs du nord du Vietnam, l'article examine les conditions historiques, culturelles et sociales qui sous-tendent la sacralisation du symbole de Ho Chi Minh dans les espaces sacrés domestiques. L'analyse se concentre sur la configuration spatiale des lieux de culte, les pratiques rituelles, les modes de cultivation spirituelle et les mécanismes par lesquels opère la sacralisation vernaculaire. Grâce à cette approche, l'étude élucide comment Ho Chi Minh est réinterprété comme un modèle moral, une figure protectrice et un objet de vénération au sein de la vie spirituelle populaire. Les résultats indiquent que ce processus est étroitement lié à la dépolitisation et à la moralisation de l'image de Ho Chi Minh, parallèlement à son intégration

dans les systèmes de croyances indigènes. L'espace de culte domestique devient ainsi un lieu de négociation de la mémoire, où la mémoire révolutionnaire se transforme en mémoire sociale sacrée à travers des pratiques rituelles répétitives. En engageant un dialogue comparatif avec des cas de sacralisation de dirigeants politiques à travers le monde, l'article contribue aux débats scientifiques plus larges sur l'interrelation entre politique, religion et mémoire culturelle dans la société contemporaine.

Mots-clés : Ho Chi Minh ; symbole sacré ; sacralisation vernaculaire ; autels domestiques ; Nord du Vietnam.

从政治领袖到神圣象征：越南北部私人住宅神龛中胡志明的神圣化过程

摘要

本文探讨了越南北部私人住宅神龛中胡志明从政治领袖到神圣象征的转变过程。作者跳出官方崇拜或意识形态崇拜的窠臼，将此过程置于在地圣化 (Vernacular Sacralization) 的框架下，研究这种文化与宗教实践。本文运用结合文献资料分析和参与式观察，对越南北部几个具有代表性的私人住宅里的神龛进行研究，考察了胡志明的形象在家庭神圣空间中圣化的历史、文化和社会条件。作者聚焦于家庭祭祀场所的空间格局、仪式实践、精神修养模式以及本土神圣化运作机制。通过这一视角，本研究阐明了胡志明如何在民众精神生活中被重新诠释为道德典范、守护神和崇拜对象。研究结果表明，这一过程与胡志明形象的去政治化和道德化密切相关，同时也与胡志明形象融入本土信仰体系密切相关。家庭祭祀空间由此成为记忆协商的场所，革命记忆通过重复的仪式实践转化为神圣的社会记忆。通过与世界各地政治领袖神圣化的案例进行比较对话，本文为当代社会中政治、宗教和文化记忆之间相互关系的更广泛的学术讨论做出了贡献。

关键词： 胡志明；政治领袖；神圣符号；本土神圣化；祭祀空间；私人住宅神龛；越南北部

Vom politischen Führer zum heiligen Symbol: Der Prozess der volkstümlichen Sakralisierung von Ho Chi Minh in den Kultstätten privater Hausaltäre in Nordvietnam

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel untersucht die Wandlung der Figur Ho Chi Minhs von einem politischen Führer zu einem sakralen Symbol in den Verehrungsräumen privater Hausaltäre in Nordvietnam. Anstatt dieses Phänomen als eine Form offizieller Verehrung oder ideologischen Kultismus zu betrachten, verortet die Studie es im analytischen Rahmen der volkstümlichen Sakralisierung, verstanden als ein Prozess, der durch nicht-institutionelle kulturelle und religiöse Praktiken geprägt ist. Unter Verwendung von Methoden wie der Synthese und Analyse von Sekundärquellen, teilnehmender Beobachtung und Fallstudien, die an mehreren repräsentativen privaten Hausaltären in Nordvietnam durchgeführt wurden, untersucht der Artikel die historischen, kulturellen und sozialen Bedingungen, die der Sakralisierung des Ho-Chi-Minh-Symbols in häuslichen sakralen Räumen zugrunde liegen. Die Analyse konzentriert sich auf die räumliche Gestaltung der Verehrungsorte, rituelle Praktiken, Formen der spirituellen Kultivierung und die Mechanismen, durch die die volkstümliche Sakralisierung wirkt. Durch diesen Ansatz verdeutlicht die Studie, wie Ho Chi Minh im volkstümlichen spirituellen Leben als moralisches Vorbild, Schutzfigur und Verehrungsobjekt neu interpretiert wird. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass dieser Prozess eng mit der Entpolitisierung und Moralisierung des Bildes von Ho Chi Minh verbunden ist, ebenso wie mit dessen Einbindung in indigene Glaubenssysteme. Der häusliche Kultort wird so zu einem Ort der Erinnerungsverhandlung, an dem revolutionäres Gedächtnis durch wiederholte rituelle Praktiken in heiliges soziales Gedächtnis umgewandelt wird. Durch den vergleichenden Dialog mit Fällen der Sakralisierung politischer Führer weltweit leistet der Artikel einen Beitrag zu breiteren wissenschaftlichen Debatten über die Wechselbeziehungen zwischen Politik, Religion und kulturellem Gedächtnis in der heutigen Gesellschaft.

Schlüsselwörter: Ho Chi Minh; heiliges Symbol; volkstümliche Sakralisierung; private Hausaltäre; Nordvietnam.

Introduction

Over the past several decades, Ho Chi Minh has primarily been studied and interpreted as a political leader, a revolutionary symbol, and a central figure in modern Vietnamese history. However, beyond the political–public sphere, his image has become increasingly visible in domestic spaces, particularly through vernacular worship practices in Northern Vietnam. This phenomenon raises an important scholarly question: how can a modern political leader be reconstituted as a sacred symbol within domestic spiritual life?

Previous studies of the Ho Chi Minh symbol have largely focused on dimensions such as political propaganda, revolutionary memory, and the construction of leadership imagery in public spaces and state discourse. Meanwhile, non-institutional religious practices especially worship activities conducted in private home shrines have received far less attention as autonomous and dynamic sites of meaning production. This has resulted in a significant research gap in understanding how ordinary people receive, reinterpret, and refunctionalize the Ho Chi Minh symbol beyond official frameworks. This article approaches the worship of Ho Chi Minh within private home shrines not as a direct extension of state power or political ideology, but as a process of vernacular sacralization shaped by indigenous cultural and religious practices. In this process, the Ho Chi Minh symbol is no longer perceived solely as a historical figure or political leader; rather, it is re-encoded as a moral exemplar, a spiritual protector, and an object of veneration within domestic shrines spaces.

Through case studies conducted at several representative private home shrines in Northern Vietnam, the article analyzes the spatial structure of worship settings, ritual practices, modes of spiritual cultivation, and the mechanisms through which the vernacular sacralization of the Ho Chi Minh symbol operates. This approach makes it possible to conceptualize domestic shrines spaces as sites of memory negotiation, where revolutionary memory is transformed into sacred social memory through repetitive vernacular practices embedded in the everyday life of the community.

By situating the Vietnamese case in dialogue with international scholarship on the sacralization of political leaders and symbols of power, the article contributes to broader academic discussions on the relationship between politics, religion, and cultural memory. In doing so, it proposes a more flexible perspective on the circulation of political symbols in contemporary society, emphasizing the active role of vernacular practices in generating and sustaining sacredness around a specific historical figure in social life.

Structurally, the article comprises three main components: (1) An examination of the historical, cultural, and social foundations that have fostered the vernacular sacralization of

Ho Chi Minh in worship practices at private home shrines in Northern Vietnam. (2) An analysis of the sacralization process through case studies, focusing on the spatial organization of worship, ritual practices, modes of cultivation, and the mechanisms of vernacular sacralization of the Ho Chi Minh symbol. (3) A positioning of this phenomenon within a global comparative framework, engaging with international studies on the sacralization of political leaders and political symbols.

Literature review

The phenomenon of Ho Chi Minh being worshipped within domestic shrines spaces, particularly in Northern Vietnam, represents a distinctive case of political sacralization in contemporary vernacular life. While extensive scholarship has examined Ho Chi Minh as a political leader and national symbol, the transformation of his image into a sacred object within domestic worship spaces has been addressed only sporadically and has yet to be systematically theorized from an interdisciplinary perspective. This review clarifies the principal research trajectories, theoretical frameworks employed, and the scholarly gaps related to the vernacular sacralization of Ho Chi Minh.

Studies on Ho Chi Minh's image in political-symbolic discourse and national memory.

Over several decades, studies of Ho Chi Minh have predominantly situated him within analytical frameworks of revolutionary history, political symbolism, and national memory. Within this line of inquiry, he has been constructed as a central moral–political symbol of the modern Vietnamese nation.

From a theoretical perspective, the concept of cultural memory developed by Jan Assmann (2012) in *Cultural memory and early civilization: writing, remembrance, and political imagination* provides an important foundation for explaining how communities sustain and reproduce normative figures through texts, rituals, educational institutions, and commemorative practices. From this viewpoint, the image of Ho Chi Minh has been stabilized within the state's symbolic order through anniversaries, museums, monuments, and official political discourse. Complementing this approach, the interpretive anthropology of Clifford Geertz emphasizes the role of symbols as “webs of significance,” enabling an analysis of Ho Chi Minh not merely as a historical figure but as a symbolic structure imbued with moral, emotional, and sacred dimensions.

At the sociological level, Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority (1947) in *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* helps explain the foundations of leader veneration. Weber argues that charisma is an extraordinary quality attributed to an individual by a community and can only be sustained through processes of routinization and institutionalization. This theoretical lens is particularly useful for understanding how Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary prestige was transformed into enduring legitimacy within state structures and national memory.

Historical works such as David G. Marr's (2013) *Vietnam: State, War and Revolution (1945–1946)* and the "everyday politics" approach proposed by Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet (2005) in *The power of everyday politics: how Vietnamese peasants transformed national policy* show that citizens are not merely passive recipients of political symbols; on the contrary, they actively negotiate and reinterpret them in daily practice.

However, much of the research in this field still focuses on national memory and public space. It has not systematically considered how a political symbol is transformed into the realm of folk beliefs and integrated into family worship practices.

Studies on leader cults, political religion, and political sacralization

Another significant line of research situates the veneration of political leaders within the theoretical framework of "political religion". In *Politics as Religion*, Emilio Gentile (2006) argues that modern regimes may construct politics as a form of secular religion, complete with its own system of rituals, myths, symbols, and "sacred time." This approach enables the interpretation of leader veneration not merely as a strategy of propaganda, but as a process of producing sacredness within political life.

Comparative studies of personality cults provide an additional international dimension. In *Kim was Korea and Korea was Kim: the formation of Juche ideology and personality cult in North Korea*, Bianca Trifoi (2017) analyzes the formation of Juche ideology and the personality cult surrounding Kim Il-sung, demonstrating the close integration between state ideology and the mythologization of the leader.

Studies on the worship of Ho Chi Minh in vernacular life and domestic spaces.

Research on Vietnamese folk belief provides an essential cultural foundation for understanding the integration of historical figures into domestic worship. Kristen W. Endres's (2011) work shows the adaptive transformation of rituals and spiritual life in the context of

economic innovation and market reforms. Analysis of these works suggests that modernization in Vietnam does not equate to complete secularization, but rather to the restructuring of religious practices within new socio-economic conditions.

Direct research on the worship of Ho Chi Minh has been systematized in the works "The phenomenon of Ho Chi Minh worship in the ethical flow of ancestor worship" by Nguyen Hong Duong (2025) and "From folk culture to the cultural personality of Ho Chi Minh: traditional values in the structure of national spiritual heritage" by Pham Lan Oanh (2025), which analyzed the formation process, ritual characteristics, and religious nature of this phenomenon. More recent contributions, including those emphasizing the continuation of the moral tradition of remembering one's roots and affirming the humanistic values of communities that revere Ho Chi Minh, are noteworthy. In addition, internal ritual documents of *Hoang Thien Long private home shrines* (2021) illustrate how Ho Chi Minh is positioned within a sacred cosmology alongside ancestors and deities, thereby embedding him within an existing spiritual universe rather than isolating him as a purely political figure.

Nevertheless, most of these studies remain largely descriptive or emphasize cultural continuity. They have not consistently situated the phenomenon within broader theoretical frameworks such as cultural memory or political religion. In particular, few works conceptualize domestic space in Northern Vietnam as a "micro-site" where symbolic negotiation occurs between national narratives and vernacular religious practice.

Research gap and orientation

A review of the three strands of scholarship indicates that: (1) Ho Chi Minh has been extensively studied as a political symbol within national memory; (2) theories of political religion and leader cults have been substantially developed in international scholarship; and (3) the phenomenon of Ho Chi Minh worship in Vietnamese vernacular life has been documented and preliminarily analyzed.

However, the intersection of these three domains namely, the process through which a political leader is transformed into a sacred symbol within private household worship spaces has not yet been systematically and interdisciplinarily examined. This article seeks to address that gap by approaching the worship of Ho Chi Minh as a process of vernacular sacralization unfolding within the intimate sphere of domestic space, shaped by lived experience, historical memory, and contemporary moral concerns.

Through this perspective, the study contributes to enriching scholarly discussions on the relationship among politics, memory, and the sacred in contemporary Vietnamese society.

Objectives

Building upon the research gaps identified above, this article aims to analyze the process of vernacular sacralization of Ho Chi Minh within the worship spaces of private home shrines in Northern Vietnam. In doing so, it seeks to clarify how a modern political symbol is reconfigured into a sacred object within everyday religious life. The study does not attempt to evaluate the legitimacy or validity of belief and worship practices; rather, it focuses on examining the socio-cultural mechanisms through which sacredness is constructed, maintained, and reproduced.

More specifically, the article pursues three main objectives. *First*, it identifies the historical, cultural, and social conditions that have provided the foundation for the emergence and diffusion of Ho Chi Minh worship in private household shrine spaces, particularly in Northern Vietnam a region characterized by strong traditions of ancestor veneration and deeply embedded revolutionary memory. *Second*, through case studies of selected representative private home shrines, the article analyzes the spatial organization of worship, ritual practices, modes of spiritual cultivation, and the mechanisms underlying the vernacular sacralization of the Ho Chi Minh symbol. *Third*, the study situates this phenomenon within a comparative dialogue with cases of political leader sacralization worldwide, thereby highlighting both the distinctive features and the theoretical significance of the Vietnamese case.

Through these objectives, the article seeks to contribute to interdisciplinary debates on political sacralization, lived religion, and cultural memory, while proposing a more flexible approach to understanding the relationship among politics, religion, and vernacular practice in contemporary society.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach to investigate the process of vernacular sacralization of Ho Chi Minh within the worship spaces of private home shrines in Northern Vietnam. With its emphasis on meaning, lived experience, and everyday practice, qualitative methodology enables the phenomenon to be approached not as a fixed doctrinal system but as a socio-cultural process constructed within specific contexts. To ensure both comprehensiveness and analytical depth, the study combines multiple methods: analysis of academic literature, case study research, semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document–artifact analysis.

Academic literature review: A review of academic scholarship serves as the foundational method for constructing the theoretical framework and research context. Sources include published domestic and international scholarship related to political sacralization, charismatic authority, cultural memory, as well as studies on leader cults and the worship of Ho Chi Minh in Vietnamese vernacular life.

The review process situates the phenomenon of Ho Chi Minh worship within the broader traditions of ancestor veneration, the worship of national heroes, Northern Vietnamese folk beliefs, and global models of leader sacralization. This method not only provides the theoretical grounding for the study but also identifies key research gaps, thereby guiding the design of case studies and the analysis of fieldwork data.

Case study research: This approach is employed to examine in depth the sacralization of Ho Chi Minh as enacted in specific worship practices at selected representative private household shrines in Northern Vietnam. Cases were selected based on the following criteria: (1) the explicit presence of Ho Chi Minh's image within the sacred space; and (2) relatively stable worship activities combining political–historical elements with vernacular religious practices.

Data were collected through field observation, documentation of spatial arrangements, statues and portraits, ritual objects, ceremonial practices, and the discourses of ritual practitioners. Analyzing these specific cases allows for a nuanced understanding of how individuals and communities interpret, re-signify, and sacralize Ho Chi Minh's image in contemporary spiritual life. This approach contributes to clarifying the relationship among political authority, collective memory, and vernacular belief in present-day Vietnamese society.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews: This method was employed to explore the perspectives, interpretations, and religious experiences of individuals participating in Ho Chi Minh worship within private shrine spaces. A total of 40 participants were interviewed, representing three groups: (1) owners of private household shrines; (2) ritual participants and members directly involved in worship practices; and (3) residents living in the vicinity of the shrines.

The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to maintain focus on core themes—such as motivations for worship, perceptions of sacredness, and the interplay between political elements and vernacular belief while also enabling participants to share personal experiences, memories, and spiritual narratives in their own terms. Interview data were recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded for discourse analysis and cross-case comparison.

Participant observation: This method was employed to directly document religious practices related to Ho Chi Minh worship in everyday contexts as well as during specific ritual occasions at selected private household shrines in Northern Vietnam. Field sites included Đúc Ngọc Phat Ho Chi Minh Shrine of Mrs. N.T.L (Hai Phong), Hoa Binh Temple of Mrs. P.T.X (Hai Phong), Hoang Thien Long Shrine of Mrs. N.T.Đ (Ha Noi), Đai Phuc Temple of Mrs. N.T.Đ (Ha Noi), Thien Phuc Shrine of Mrs. N.T.D (Nam Định), and the private shrine of Mrs. N.T.T.N (Ha Noi). This method made it possible to examine the operation of sacredness not only at the level of discourse but also in embodied practice—through ritual procedures, spatial symbolism, and altar arrangement. Participant observation also served to triangulate and validate data obtained from interviews and document analysis, thereby enhancing the reliability of the findings.

Document and artifact analysis: Document and artifact analysis focused on material elements within the shrines, including statues, portraits, ritual objects, altar arrangements, as well as liturgical texts and internal ritual documents. This analysis aimed to clarify how symbols associated with Ho Chi Minh are selected, combined, and interpreted in relation to traditional religious symbols, thereby reflecting the processes of sacralization and vernacularization of this historical figure.

Ethical considerations: The study adheres to fundamental ethical principles in social science and humanities research. The identities and personal information of participants were anonymized to ensure privacy, safety, and dignity. Given that the research topic involves religious practices centered on a highly symbolic political figure, ethical issues were treated with particular caution throughout the research process. Data collection was conducted on a voluntary basis with informed consent from participants and without disrupting or interfering with ongoing religious practices. Interview data, field notes, and visual materials were securely stored and used exclusively for academic research purposes, not for any political or social agenda. The study also follows the principle of cultural and religious respect. The researcher approached worship practices not to assess their correctness or legitimacy, but to understand them within the cultural logic and lived experiences of participants. Observation and participation in rituals were conducted in accordance with community norms and boundaries. Throughout data presentation and analysis, the study maintains a neutral and non-judgmental stance toward participants' beliefs.

This research was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee for Social Sciences and Humanities Research of the Institute of Ethnicity and Religion, Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, ensuring that data collection and processing procedures

complied with international ethical standards. Ethical considerations were treated not merely as formal requirements but as integral to the research process, contributing to academic integrity and the credibility of the findings.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates approaches to political sacralization, vernacular religion, and cultural memory in order to explain the process through which Ho Chi Minh is transformed from a modern political leader into a sacred symbol within the worship spaces of private household shrines in Northern Vietnam. Rather than treating sacralization as the outcome of top-down ideological imposition, the framework emphasizes the agency of vernacular actors in reinterpreting, localizing, and reproducing sacredness in everyday life. Sacralization is thus conceptualized not as a static condition but as a dynamic socio-cultural process emerging at the intersection of political symbolism, collective memory, and religious practice, and shaped within worship spaces that are simultaneously domestic and communal.

Political sacralization and symbolic power: The concept of political sacralization provides a crucial theoretical foundation for understanding how modern political symbols may assume functions analogous to religion. Drawing on the works of Max Weber, Eric Voegelin, and Emilio Gentile, political sacralization can be understood as the process by which political power and symbols are invested with transcendent values, supreme moral authority, and ritual forms, thereby moving beyond the realm of secular governance into the domain of the sacred. However, this study does not approach political sacralization through a totalitarian or coercive model. Instead, it highlights the flexibility and non-dogmatic character of this process in the Vietnamese context. In this case, Ho Chi Minh is not only the bearer of routinized charismatic authority but also a moral symbol vernacularly appropriated and restructured through familiar religious practices.

Lived religion and vernacular practice: To analyze the worship of Ho Chi Minh in domestic spaces, the article draws on the concept of “vernacular religion” developed by Leonard Norman Primiano, which understands religion not primarily as an official doctrinal system but as a flexible ensemble of practices, interpretations, and experiences constructed within personal and communal life. This approach allows the worship of Ho Chi Minh to be examined as an open religious practice in which the boundaries between politics, morality, and spirituality are not rigidly defined. The private household shrine is conceptualized as a hybrid space where elements of ancestor veneration, the worship of national heroes, and revolutionary memory

intersect. In this space, Ho Chi Minh does not appear as a canonized deity but as a sacred figure capable of adapting to the moral, spiritual, and social needs of worshippers.

Cultural memory and sacred practice: The theory of cultural memory advanced by Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann is employed to interpret Ho Chi Minh worship as a form of sacred memory practice. Within this framework, Ho Chi Minh may be viewed as a form of “canon memory” of the nation, institutionalized in public space through monuments, museums, and state rituals. When this canonical memory enters the private shrine space, it becomes personalized and emotionalized through vernacular rituals and everyday symbolic practices. The transition from public memory to domestically enacted memory enables the Ho Chi Minh symbol to move beyond direct political functionality and become a moral and spiritual anchor, reaffirmed through the repetitive performance of ritual acts. In this intimate setting, revolutionary memory is reconfigured into sacred memory, embedded within local social, kinship, and community relationships.

The construction of sacred space and ritual practice: Drawing on approaches from the anthropology of space and symbolic anthropology, the article conceptualizes the domestic shrine not merely as a physical setting but as a socio-symbolic structure constructed through spatial arrangement, ritual performance, and material discourse. The placement of Ho Chi Minh’s image on the altar, its position within spatial hierarchy, and its relationship to ancestral altars and other sacred entities all participate in the production of sacredness. Ritual is understood here as a mediating practical mechanism through which the Ho Chi Minh symbol is activated, reaffirmed, and sustained in everyday life. The repetition of ritual acts not only consolidates belief but also renders sacredness present and operative within the moral order of vernacular life.

By synthesizing these approaches, the theoretical framework enables the analysis of Ho Chi Minh’s sacralization as a multilayered socio-cultural phenomenon unfolding at the intersection of political symbolism, cultural memory, and vernacular religious practice. By focusing on private shrine spaces and community-based ritual life, the framework highlights how vernacular actors actively reconstruct Ho Chi Minh’s image as a flexible sacred symbol integrated into the moral and spiritual fabric of contemporary Vietnamese society.

Central concepts

Building upon the theoretical framework outlined above, this study employs several interdisciplinary core concepts:

Sacralization refers to the socio-cultural process through which a person or symbol is invested with transcendent and moral values, elevating it beyond ordinary life. In this research, sacralization is not institutional or dogmatic in nature; rather, it unfolds through everyday practices and the repetition of ritual within domestic spaces.

Political sacralization denotes the process by which political symbols, figures, or discourses are endowed with sacred qualities and assume functions analogous to religion in social life. At the macro level, this occurs through national discourse, state symbolism, and official collective memory. However, this article does not confine the analysis to the institutional level; instead, it treats political sacralization as a theoretical foundation for examining how political symbols are reconstructed and reinterpreted within the informal spaces of private household shrines.

Folk sacralization is the central concept of this study, referring to a bottom-up process of sacralization actively practiced and interpreted by vernacular actors. In the case of Ho Chi Minh, folk sacralization is manifested in the integration of the leader's image into indigenous religious frameworks alongside ancestor veneration and the worship of national heroes.

Private home shrine refers to a worship space established by an individual or family, maintained and transmitted across generations within a lineage. Beyond serving familial devotional functions, a private home shrine may also become a site of religious gathering for a group sharing common beliefs with the shrine's custodian. In this study, the private home shrine is understood as the concrete site where the process of folk sacralization takes place.

Sacred space is understood not merely as a physical location but as a socio-symbolic structure constructed through spatial arrangement and ritual practice. Placing the image of Ho Chi Minh within this space signifies incorporating him into the sacred order of the household.

Ritual worship space refers to the specific form of sacred space within the context of Vietnamese domestic religious practice. It is a spatial-symbolic structure organized around the altar, where sacred entities ancestors, national heroes, and deities—are arranged according to a hierarchical order reflecting family cosmology and moral values. Positioning Ho Chi Minh's image within this structure signifies integrating him into both the sacred order of the family and the indigenous religious framework. This concept enables analysis of how a modern political symbol becomes embedded within an existing ritual structure rather than remaining an abstract national emblem.

Ritual is understood as a set of repetitive practices through which the meaning and sacred quality of a symbol are sustained and reaffirmed in everyday life. In this context,

domestic worship rituals function as mechanisms for reproducing the sacredness of Ho Chi Minh's image in daily religious practice.

Cultural memory refers to forms of collective memory preserved and transmitted through symbols, practices, and spaces. The worship of Ho Chi Minh in private homes constitutes a vernacularization of national memory, whereby memory of the leader is not confined to state discourse but becomes embedded in family life, moral orientation, and emotional experience.

National memory denotes the form of collective memory constructed at the level of the nation through historical narratives, education, commemorative rituals, and state symbols. This memory establishes certain figures and events as central to national identity and legitimacy. In the case of Ho Chi Minh, the leader's image is positioned as a canonical national memory. When incorporated into the private worship space, national memory is translated and personalized, becoming part of domestic religious and moral life.

Results

Based on data collected from in-depth interviews, participant observation, and symbolic analysis in private home shrines in Northern Vietnam, the study identifies four major themes reflecting how Ho Chi Minh is sacralized and integrated into vernacular religious life. These themes demonstrate the diversity of worship practices while highlighting the active role of local actors in constructing sacred meaning around a modern political figure.

Historical, cultural, and social foundations of folk sacralization in domestic worship practices in Northern Vietnam

In Vietnamese cultural history particularly in Northern Vietnam the sacralization of historical figures who have rendered significant service to the community represents a durable cultural pattern spanning from traditional to modern society. From the perspective of the anthropology of religion, sacralization is not merely supernatural deification but a social process through which an individual or symbol is set apart from ordinary secular life, endowed with supreme moral values, and surrounded by commemorative practices imbued with sacred significance.

Within this broader cultural context, the folk sacralization of Ho Chi Minh in domestic worship practices in Northern Vietnam should be understood as a historical, cultural, and social process unfolding alongside and beyond the official state system of commemoration.

The phenomenon cannot be reduced to “personality cult” in a narrow political-science sense. Rather, it reflects the ways vernacular communities receive, reinterpret, and internalize historical memory through familiar religious frameworks deeply rooted in Vietnamese culture. Instead of emerging solely from institutional directives, this process is shaped by lived experiences, intergenerational memory, moral admiration, and the pre-existing structure of ancestor veneration and hero worship. In this sense, the sacralization of Ho Chi Minh in private home shrines represents not an ideological imposition but a culturally mediated act of meaning-making, in which a national political symbol is reconfigured within the intimate moral universe of family and community life.

Historical foundations: from the tradition of hero worship to modern national memory

To understand the process of folk sacralization of Ho Chi Minh in domestic worship practices in Northern Vietnam, it is necessary to situate this phenomenon within the *longue durée* of Vietnamese religious culture, where the veneration and worship of historical figures who rendered meritorious service to the community emerged at a very early stage. In this context, sacralization is neither accidental nor purely emotional; rather, it is the outcome of accumulated historical memory, the repetition of familiar cultural patterns, and the interaction between vernacular society and political authority across different historical periods.

From traditional to modern society, Northern Vietnam has remained a central space for sacred commemorative practices, where historical figures are transformed from earthly individuals into moral and spiritual symbols of the community. Within this trajectory, three interwoven historical layers may be identified. Together, they create a favorable historical-spiritual context for the sacralization of Ho Chi Minh in domestic life.

(1) The tradition of sacralizing historical figures in northern vernacular life

Northern Vietnam is densely embedded with traditions of worshipping historical heroes, village tutelary deities (*thành hoàng*), cultural dignitaries, sages, and figures credited with protecting the community and the nation. This tradition is closely tied to Vietnam’s particular geopolitical history, marked by repeated struggles against foreign domination in defense of national independence—from the millennium of Chinese rule to medieval conflicts against the Mongols and Ming, from resistance to Qing incursions to anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles in the modern era (Nguyen, 2025). Throughout these periods, numerous historical figures who contributed to national founding and defense were, after

death, transformed in vernacular belief into sacred presences—embodiments of the spiritual essence of the nation. They were elevated to the status of saints, deities, Buddhas, or bodhisattvas. In this transformation, they moved from material to immaterial existence; they did not “die” but continued to live in sacred time.

Notably, in many instances this sacralization process originated from vernacular communities, while the state or royal court later formalized recognition. The dynamic often followed a “vernacular-first, official-later” trajectory: communal consensus preceded state legitimation. Unlike formal recognitions—such as imperial decrees of investiture, state certificates, or official commemorations at memorial houses and monuments—the presence of historical figures in communal space was frequently materialized through images, statues, spirit tablets, or symbolic regalia (Nguyen, 2025). This mechanism of “popular initiative followed by official recognition” created a durable cultural foundation for the reception and sacralization of historical figures in new historical contexts. It is within this longstanding pattern that the integration of Ho Chi Minh into domestic worship spaces becomes intelligible—not as an anomalous development, but as a continuation of deeply rooted vernacular processes of memorial sacralization, now intersecting with the modern state’s active construction of national memory through education, commemoration, and public symbolism.

(2) The vernacular reception and interpretation of Ho Chi Minh as a “founding figure”

In modern Vietnamese history, Ho Chi Minh is officially recognized as the leader of the struggle for national independence and the founder of the modern Vietnamese state. However, in vernacular consciousness—particularly in Northern Vietnam—this historical role is not received purely through the language of modern revolutionary politics. Instead, it is interpreted and reconstructed through familiar symbolic patterns rooted in historical tradition. In popular perception, Ho Chi Minh is viewed as an outstanding leader, a figure who “founded and defended the nation,” a national liberation hero, and a person of immense merit toward the polity and the people—archetypes deeply embedded in Vietnamese cultural memory over centuries.

This reception process reveals a mechanism of “symbolic translation,” whereby modern concepts such as revolution, nation-state, and statehood are rendered into the idioms of traditional culture, making them more accessible and emotionally internalizable for the broader population. Rather than being imagined primarily as an abstract political thinker or ideological leader, Ho Chi Minh is vernacularized as a historical figure comparable to

premodern founding rulers. This interpretive transformation creates the cultural conditions for reverence and sacralization within the community's spiritual life.

Unlike premodern historical figures, Ho Chi Minh is not associated with a specific royal dynasty or hereditary bloodline. Instead, he is linked to the modern concept of the "nation." This shift marks a significant transformation in the structure of legitimacy: sacred authority is no longer grounded in heavenly mandate or dynastic lineage but in the historical struggle for liberation and the collective will of the national community. In this context, the sacralization of Ho Chi Minh assumes a distinctive character. It is not merely the sacralization of an individual historical figure, but the sacralization of the nation itself through a concrete and representational embodiment. His image becomes capable of condensing and symbolizing the moral, historical, and political values of modernity within a personalized sacred form.

Thus, the reception of Ho Chi Minh as a "founding figure" in vernacular consciousness reflects both continuity and transformation in Vietnamese cultural history. On the one hand, it continues the long-standing tradition of venerating those who rendered great service to the country. On the other hand, it demonstrates the adaptive capacity of vernacular consciousness in responding to new forms of authority and symbolism in the modern era. Through this process, modern national memory does not detach itself from traditional cultural foundations; rather, it is constructed upon preexisting patterns of sacralization deeply embedded in Vietnamese historical experience.

(3) The impact of death in wartime on the formation of collective memory and sacred sensibility

In the context of prolonged warfare, death ceases to be merely a biological event or a historical marker; it gradually becomes a collective socio-cultural experience that contributes to the formation of shared memory and sacred sensibility. The Vietnam War, with violence and sacrifice permeating everyday life, rendered death a reality extending beyond individual loss to assume broader moral and symbolic meanings for society as a whole. The passing of Ho Chi Minh in 1969 occurred while the war was still ongoing. Consequently, his death was not received as the completed closure of a life but as an unfinished loss, closely intertwined with the nation's still-unresolved historical destiny. Under these circumstances, memory of his death was not confined to the framework of political history. Rather, it accumulated, circulated, and was restructured within collective memory as a form of ultimate sacrifice—mirroring the widespread losses experienced by society at large. Vietnamese cultural tradition, particularly in Northern Vietnam, accords special reverence to those who "die for a righteous cause," viewing them as figures capable of transformation from ordinary

human beings into sacred presences within the community's spiritual life. When vernacularly interpreted as a total dedication to the nation at a moment of historical extremity, Ho Chi Minh's death could be readily integrated into this cultural pattern. At the same time, the prolonged instability caused by war intensified the need for spiritual protection and a stable moral order, often sought through religious practice—especially within domestic worship spaces that preserve personal, familial, and national memory. In these intimate settings, the death of Ho Chi Minh is not commemorated merely as a past event. It is continually reinterpreted through ritual acts, prayers, and the lived experiences of worshippers, fostering a sense of his ongoing presence as a sacred symbol capable of guidance and protection.

The convergence of wartime memory, the moral valorization of sacrifice, and the long-standing tradition of ancestor veneration thus created favorable conditions for the folk sacralization of Ho Chi Minh. In this process, history and sacredness do not stand in opposition; rather, they mutually reinforce one another in generating meaning for social life.

Cultural foundations: from expanded ancestor veneration to the worship of national heroes in domestic space

The process of folk sacralization of Ho Chi Minh in domestic worship practices in Northern Vietnam cannot be fully explained solely through a historical–political lens. It must also be situated within the broader context of Vietnamese religious culture. In this tradition, worship is not confined to bloodline ancestors but functions as an open moral-symbolic system that enables communities to commemorate and integrate individuals regarded as possessing exceptional merit and value for society.

From this perspective, the worship of Ho Chi Minh is essentially a form of national hero veneration, yet it operates within the cultural logic and spatial framework of an expanded ancestor worship system. This intersection explains why the image of a modern historical figure can be naturally incorporated into the private household shrine—traditionally the sacred space of the Vietnamese family—without producing cultural rupture or tension.

(1) The ethic of gratitude and the open structure of vietnamese worship

Ancestor veneration constitutes one of the central pillars of Vietnamese spiritual life, particularly in Northern Vietnam. However, this system is not organized according to a closed principle of lineage alone; rather, it is grounded in an ethic of gratitude—remembering merit and maintaining symbolic ties between the living and those regarded as foundational to the

community's moral order. Beyond lineage ancestors, Vietnamese communities also venerate craft founders, village tutelary deities, sages, national heroes, and founding ancestors of the nation. Although these figures do not share direct blood ties with individual families, they are incorporated into worship practices through the same ethical framework: those who have contributed to nation-building, defense, professional founding, or communal protection deserve remembrance and reverence. Within this cultural structure, Ho Chi Minh is received as a modern national hero, representing the origins of independence, freedom, and national sovereignty. When introduced into the domestic worship space, he does not replace lineage ancestors but coexists alongside them as a "spiritual progenitor" of the nation. This reflects the expansion of gratitude from the familial sphere to the national community.

(2) The model of "worshipping the meritorious" and the concept of "sinh vi tướng, tử vi thần" (a general in life, a deity in death)

In Northern vernacular practice, the worship of Ho Chi Minh largely follows the model of venerating meritorious individuals rather than supernatural deities. Within private shrines, he is commemorated as a historical person whose moral character has been idealized: living simply, sacrificing for the nation, remaining close to the people, and decisively shaping the country's destiny. The traditional Vietnamese notion of "*sinh vi tướng, tử vi thần*" (*a general in life, a deity in death*) that individuals who performed great services while alive may, after death, manifest spiritually and be venerated as protective sacred figures—provides an important conceptual basis for this sacralization process.

Yet the sacredness attributed to Ho Chi Minh carries a relatively non-supernatural character. He is not perceived as an omnipotent being wielding absolute supernatural power, but as a moral and spiritual symbol capable of "protection" in a symbolic sense—illuminating conduct, strengthening faith, and orienting values for worshippers. This feature allows the phenomenon of Ho Chi Minh worship to maintain spiritual depth while avoiding conflict with rationality and modern worldviews. Sacralization does not negate his historical character; rather, it is constructed directly upon his historical role and moral legacy.

(3) The private home shrine as a space for reconstructing and personalizing sacred meaning

The domestic worship space plays a crucial role in the folk sacralization of Ho Chi Minh. It is a flexible and informal environment where official symbolic models are

personalized, internalized, and reinterpreted according to the lived experiences of shrine custodians, families, and lineages.

A private shrine may be located in a dedicated room within a house or constructed as a separate worship structure within the family compound. Within this space, Ho Chi Minh's image is often placed in a position of particular reverence, though in some cases he is worshipped alongside other deities and sacred figures, reflecting diversity in reception and symbolic arrangement. The representation of the worshipped figure varies: some shrines display statues, others use framed portraits or incense bowls as focal points. Many shrines initially begin with simple arrangements—often limited to incense burners—and gradually expand as they attract followers and receive financial contributions, adding statues, portraits, spirit tablets, horizontal plaques, parallel sentences, and decorative scrolls. The spatial arrangement depends largely on the shrine's physical dimensions and the custodian's perception and intention. The worship practices are typically not associated with elaborate rituals but are carried out through simple acts such as offering incense on holidays, the Lunar New Year, and on the fifteenth and first days of the lunar month. Offerings may include vegetarian or non-vegetarian foods; some shrines avoid offerings altogether or prohibit monetary offerings. Certain shrines also stipulate the avoidance of votive paper offerings or the use of foreign scripts—including classical Chinese characters—in petitions and spirit tablets.

Through these practices, Ho Chi Minh's image becomes embedded in everyday life, integrated into personal, familial, and communal memory. Sacralization thus occurs not only at the level of national symbolism but is continually reproduced within intimate domestic space. This ongoing integration sustains and revitalizes the image of a national hero within contemporary vernacular consciousness. The combination of sacredness and everyday familiarity generates what may be described as a "soft sacred continuum" linking past and present, enabling Ho Chi Minh's image to be continually renewed within modern Vietnamese cultural space (Pham, 2025).

Social foundations: moral demand and the intersection of official and vernacular discourses

Beyond historical and cultural foundations, the process of folk sacralization of Ho Chi Minh in domestic worship practices in Northern Vietnam is profoundly shaped by specific modern social conditions. Its social basis does not derive from a single factor but from the convergence of several dynamics: the need to re-establish moral norms in a transforming

society, the negotiation between official discourse and vernacular practice, and the distinctive socio-cultural characteristics of Northern Vietnam.

Since the end of the war—particularly during the Doi Moi period—Vietnamese society has undergone significant transformations in its economy, social structure, and value system. These changes have generated both opportunities for development and heightened feelings of uncertainty and moral disorientation. In this context, historical symbols are not remembered solely as past events but mobilized as moral and spiritual resources for navigating contemporary challenges.

From a cultural-sociological perspective, sacralization may be understood as an adaptive mechanism through which communities seek to reaffirm shared moral standards and collective belonging amid social change. Ho Chi Minh's image, associated with historical legitimacy and widely recognized moral virtues, becomes a particularly potent focal point for such needs. His incorporation into domestic worship spaces reflects not only personal reverence but also the vernacular internalization and “everydayization” of a national symbol within a specific social context.

(1) Value gaps in a transforming modern society

After the war and especially during the renovation era, Vietnamese society experienced profound economic and social restructuring. While these transformations fostered growth and integration, they also intensified social differentiation, competition, and individualization. Traditional values—such as communal solidarity, collective sacrifice, and modest living—have increasingly been challenged by market-oriented rationalities and social stratification. Within this shifting landscape, Ho Chi Minh's image—associated with simplicity, integrity, and devotion to the community—functions as a stable moral reference point endowed with historical legitimacy. The sacralization of his image in domestic spaces may thus be interpreted as a cultural response to perceived moral vacuums, offering communities a symbolically grounded ethical standard capable of reaffirming continuity amid change.

(2) The intersection of official discourse and vernacular belief

A significant feature of this sacralization process is the interaction—and at times negotiation—between official state discourse and vernacular reception. In official narratives, Ho Chi Minh is primarily represented as a political leader and revolutionary symbol tied to national goals and state legitimacy. In domestic life, however, this image is reinterpreted

through familiar vernacular religious frameworks. He is perceived less as an abstract political emblem and more as a morally exemplary forebear, closer to the models of ancestor veneration and national hero worship than to purely ideological symbolism. This reinterpretation highlights the agency of vernacular communities in transforming official symbols into moral and spiritual resources suited to everyday life. Through this process, the political image is softened and humanized, integrated into intimate ethical worlds rather than remaining confined to formal commemorative settings.

(3) Northern Vietnam as a favorable social space for folk sacralization

The sacralization of Ho Chi Minh does not occur uniformly across Vietnamese society but appears particularly pronounced in Northern Vietnam. This pattern is linked to distinctive regional characteristics: strong village structures, deeply rooted communal religious traditions, and established practices of preserving historical memory through sacralization. In this region, historical memory is not only maintained within official institutions but also “lived” through domestic worship practices. Revolutionary and wartime memory retains particular significance, especially among generations who directly experienced periods of resistance. Ho Chi Minh is thus remembered not solely as a political leader but as a moral exemplar associated with sacrifice, integrity, and communal commitment.

The intersection of revolutionary memory and traditional ethical frameworks creates a conducive environment for his reception as a vernacular sacred figure. Contemporary processes—urbanization, social differentiation, and the search for spiritual anchoring—further encourage the incorporation of his image into domestic worship spaces. In this context, worshipping Ho Chi Minh simultaneously sustains historical memory and addresses moral and spiritual needs within contemporary society.

In sum, the folk sacralization of Ho Chi Minh in private household worship in Northern Vietnam constitutes a complex socio-cultural phenomenon. It emerges from a long historical tradition of venerating meritorious figures, is rooted in the cultural structure of expanded ancestor veneration and the ethic of gratitude, and reflects broader social demands for moral stability and spiritual orientation in a modernizing context. From the perspective of social science and the anthropology of religion, this phenomenon is neither a simplistic deification nor merely an imposition of political discourse. Rather, it represents a cultural mechanism through which communities transform historical memory into spiritual resources, thereby maintaining cultural continuity and reinforcing collective identity in contemporary Vietnamese society.

The sacralization of Ho Chi Minh as a vernacular practice: case studies of selected private home shrines in Northern Vietnam

Within the official state sphere, Ho Chi Minh is constructed and maintained as a national–political symbol associated with revolutionary history, ideological doctrine, and the regime’s legitimizing value system. However, in the vernacular life of Northern Vietnam, religiously inflected practices have emerged and developed in which the image of Ho Chi Minh is received and sacralized within private household shrine spaces. This is not merely a “replication” of an official symbol within the vernacular sphere, but rather a complex cultural process through which communities actively select, reinterpret, and internalize this figure according to familiar religious patterns. The study of private household shrines makes it possible to directly observe how a national symbol is transformed into an object of vernacular worship, thereby illuminating the mechanisms through which sacralization operates in everyday life. Case studies of several private household shrines indicate that the sacralization of Ho Chi Minh is not a static condition but unfolds through concrete practices embedded in space, ritual performance, and the interpretations of worshippers. Although this process is flexible, diverse, and contingent upon specific domestic contexts, it nevertheless exhibits shared motifs characteristic of vernacular sacralization.

Spatial structure and the construction of sacredness in the domestic worship of Ho Chi Minh

Within private home shrines, the spatial structure of worship dedicated to Ho Chi Minh follows familiar principles of Vietnamese vernacular religiosity while being flexibly adjusted to accommodate a modern historical–political symbol. Research findings indicate that although his image is integrated into diverse spatial configurations, it is consistently positioned within the sacred hierarchy of the household. A prominent shared feature is that Ho Chi Minh’s image occupies the central or highest place on the altar, thereby affirming his elevated symbolic status. In many shrines, the national flag and the Party flag are also displayed as sacred emblems. Within these domestic sacred spaces, the red flag with a yellow star is interpreted not merely as a political symbol but as a condensed representation of national spirit and historical sacrifice—a visual embodiment of collective memory and moral continuity.

Based on survey research conducted at several representative private Ho Chi Minh shrines in Northern Vietnam—such as those in Ha Noi, Hai Phong, and Nam Dinh—we found that the objects of worship are quite diverse, ranging from historical figures to legendary characters. Notably, there are no foreign deities; instead, indigenous Vietnamese spiritual

figures are highly revered. In addition to worshipping portraits and statues of Ho Chi Minh, as well as the national flag and the Party flag, these Ho Chi Minh shrines also enshrine various Buddhas, Saints, Deities, cultural luminaries, national heroes, and outstanding leaders who rendered great service to the people and the nation. A representative example is the Duc Ngoc Phat Ho Chi Minh Shrine in Hai Phong, where Ho Chi Minh is worshipped alongside the Hung Kings, Trung Trac, Ngo Quyen, Dinh Tien Hoang, Le Hoan, Ly Thuong Kiet, Tran Hung Dao, Le Loi, and Quang Trung, along with local individuals who made contributions to their villages and homeland. The objects of worship at Hoa Binh Temple in Hai Duong include Ho Chi Minh, Hoang Thi Loan, Lac Long Quan, Au Co, Lieu Hanh, Dao Lang, the Hung Kings, Tran Nhan Tong, and Tran Hung Dao. Since 2014, the shrine has added Vo Nguyen Giap; his portrait and statue are typically placed below those of Ho Chi Minh. The altar also displays the Party flag, the national flag, horizontal lacquered boards, parallel sentences, incense burners, and candles (Field survey at Hoa Binh Temple, Sao Do Ward, Chi Linh City, Hai Duong Province, July 18, 2024). At Hoang Thien Long Shrine in Ha Noi, besides the statue of Ho Chi Minh, there are also statues of Vo Thi Sau and Vo Nguyen Giap (In-depth interview with a member at Dai Phuc Phuc Shrine, Hong Quang Commune, Ung Hoa District, Hà Nội, 8:30 a.m., October 12, 2024). Thien Phuc Shrine, owned by Mrs. N.T.D in Hải Hậu District, Nam Định, houses 117 gilded bronze statues arranged in nine tiers and fifteen rows. These honor figures ranging from Duc Ngoc Phat Ho Chi Minh, Heavenly Kings, Emperors, Great Kings, Earth Kings, Mother Au Co, Mother Hoang Loan, the Hung Kings, to national heroes from various dynasties such as Trung Trac, Trung Nhi, Le Chan, Ngo Quyen, Dinh Tien Hoang, Le Lai, Le Loi, Ly Thuong Kiet, Ly Thai To, Tran Hung Dao, Tran Nhan Tong, Quang Trung, Nguyen Trai, as well as modern figures such as Vo Thi Sau and Pham Van Dong (Participant observation at Thien Phuc Shrine, Hai Hau, Nam Dinh, 9:30 a.m., August 20, 2024). At Dai Phuc Phuc Temple in Ha Noi, the statue of Ho Chi Minh occupies the central position. To the left is an image of the scripture *Kinh Thien Dai Phap Doan Trang Tu Gia*, and to the right are portraits of Vo Nguyen Giap and Vo Thi Sau (Participant observation at Dai Phuc Phuc Temple, Ha Noi, 3:00 p.m., September 30, 2024).

Materially, domestic worship spaces dedicated to Ho Chi Minh employ familiar ritual objects of Vietnamese vernacular religion: incense burners, flower vases, candles, offering trays, horizontal lacquered boards, and parallel sentences. The use of these traditional elements ensures formal continuity with established ancestor and hero worship practices. Through such continuity, a modern political symbol is effectively localized within the vernacular sacred framework.

In several shrines, Ho Chi Minh is worshipped on a separate altar, yet this altar remains situated within the shared domestic living space. This arrangement reflects a balance between affirming the distinctiveness of the symbol and maintaining continuity with family tradition. The spatial configuration plays a crucial role in constructing sacredness, as it establishes Ho Chi Minh's position within the family's symbolic order.

Within members' households, images or statues of Ho Chi Minh are placed on the same altar as ancestors and national heroes, typically occupying the central or an elevated position. This placement signifies reverence and the integration of his image into the traditional system of ancestor worship. Fieldwork conducted in several households of members affiliated with the Hoang Thien Long shrine indicates that Ho Chi Minh is worshipped in the form of a portrait set against a red backdrop, combined with the hammer-and-sickle emblem and the yellow star. This visual composition creates a clear intersection between political–revolutionary symbolism and a spiritually oriented worship space. Below and surrounding the portrait of President Ho Chi Minh are framed images of figures revered by members, associated with revolutionary traditions, moral exemplarity, or spiritual significance within the value system of the Tu Gia Association. The placement of multiple portraits within a single sacred space reveals a syncretic mode of veneration, rather than a practice strictly conforming to either traditional ancestor worship or deity worship. The altar contains familiar ritual objects commonly found in Vietnamese households, such as an incense burner, altar lamps, flower vases, cups of water, and offerings (including fruit and other ritual items), all arranged in a balanced and orderly manner. Fresh flowers—often gladioli or other upright varieties—are placed symmetrically on both sides, symbolizing purity, integrity, and devotion. The warm yellow light emitted by altar lamps creates an atmosphere of intimacy and sacredness, contributing to the “spiritualization” of the leader's image (Participant observation conducted in households of Tu Gia Association members affiliated with Hoang Thien Long shrine, July 30, 2024).

Overall, the spatial structure of worship in private shrines demonstrates a harmonious combination of tradition and modernity, intertwining historical–political memory with vernacular religious practice. Through the organization of space, the arrangement of ritual objects, and the delineation of sacred and profane boundaries, the symbol of Ho Chi Minh is positioned within a sacred order that resonates with the community's cultural sensibilities. This spatial configuration provides the foundational framework for subsequent processes of sacralization, enabling rituals, discourses, and devotional practices to be maintained and reproduced within domestic life.

Ritual practice, modes of self-cultivation, and the vernacularization of Ho Chi Minh's symbolic authority

At Ho Chi Minh shrines in Northern Vietnam, regular ritual gatherings are typically held on a weekly and monthly basis. On these occasions, members assemble at the shrine to perform devotional rites and to chant, sing, or recite poems praising Ho Chi Minh and national heroes. Many of these compositions are authored by shrine custodians during moments described as “the ritual of receiving the remains” (*nhận linh*). In addition to these periodic observances, the ritual calendar includes major annual ceremonies aligned with significant national commemorative dates. These include the 10th day of the third lunar month (the Death Anniversary of the Hung Kings), April 30 (Reunification Day, marking the liberation of Southern Vietnam), May 19 (Ho Chi Minh's birthday), July 27 (War Invalids and Martyrs' Day), August 20 (the death anniversary of Duc Thanh Tran), September 2 (National Day), and December 22 (All People's National Defense Day and the anniversary of the Vietnam People's Army). On these solemn occasions, devotees from various localities undertake pilgrimages to the shrines to participate in collective rituals.

According to our fieldwork, the first and most important ritual marking the commencement of a gathering at private Ho Chi Minh shrines is the flag-saluting ceremony accompanied by the singing of the national anthem (Participant observation at private Ho Chi Minh shrines, including the Duc Ngoc Phat Ho Chi Minh Shrine in Hải Phòng, Hoa Binh Temple, and Thien Phuc Shrine in Nam Dinh, July–August 2024).

Performative activities recounting national history from the Hong Bang era to the present (for example, at the Ngoc Phat Ho Chi Minh Temple in Soc Son, Hà Nội); the singing of revolutionary songs during gatherings of Tu Gia associations (such as at Hoang Thien Long Shrine in Ung Hoa, Ha Noi); and commemorative activities reporting achievements to President Ho Chi Minh and presenting gifts to families of war martyrs on July 27 each year (for instance, at Long Hoa Di Lac Shrine in Soc Son, Hà Nội) serve to instruct members in the tradition of “*uống nước nhớ nguồn*” (remembering one's source when drinking water). These practices awaken patriotism and communal solidarity, encouraging members to remain worthy as “descendants of Lac and Hong” and “children of the Dragon and the Fairy”.

In this respect, ritual activities have been vernacularized, fostering among members an ethical way of life aligned with national moral principles, particularly the ethos of gratitude and reciprocity (*đền ơn đáp nghĩa*). One member of Hoàng Thiên Long Shrine stated:

“I find that practicing spiritual cultivation at home in accordance with the spiritual example of President Ho Chi Minh is entirely appropriate. It clearly embodies the nation's

moral traditions while also being modern, civilized, economical, beneficial to the country and advantageous to the family—corresponding to the aspirations of many social strata. Moreover, Uncle Ho is the Father of the nation, who devoted his entire life to the people and the country, forgetting his own interests and happiness. He rescued the Vietnamese nation from slavery, feudalism, misery, and thousands of years of domination. He founded our Party and gave birth to our country; without him, we would not have what we have today... Every day, when we read his books and scriptures, we feel as though a stream of cool sacred water refreshes our hearts, nurturing harmony, deepening our moral awareness, and enlightening our minds.” (Interview with Mrs. H.T.T., 65 years old, retired official, Cau Ong Lanh Ward, Ho Chi Minh City, member of the Tu Gia Association at Hoang Thien Long Shrine, 10:10 a.m., November 27, 2025).

Ritual worship of Ho Chi Minh at private shrines is generally characterized by simplicity and frugality, avoiding extravagance or waste. Offerings typically consist of incense, flowers, and fruit. Notably, these shrines explicitly encourage members to reject superstition. Conversations with members reveal a clear anti-superstition orientation: no hiring of ritual specialists, no divination for auspicious dates, no burning of votive paper offerings, minimal use of meat offerings, and the principle that each individual should act as the ritual guide within their own household.

When discussing Vietnamese ritual habits, Toan Anh observed that “Our people revere and believe in invisible forces out of gratitude, obligation, and ritual propriety,” implying that worship is fundamentally an act of maintaining ritual decorum. However, misunderstandings of this meaning have led some to rely excessively on fortune-tellers and spirit mediums, engaging in elaborate and costly ceremonies with problematic consequences. Such ritual practices cannot empirically demonstrate efficacy; moreover, they may cause financial strain, psychological anxiety, and even familial conflict. Public controversies surrounding ceremonies such as the “appeasing karmic creditors” ritual at Ba Vang Pagoda or star-offering rites for dispelling misfortune at Phuc Khanh Pagoda illustrate how time-consuming and expensive practices may generate spiritual insecurity as participants wait hours to perform rites. Consequently, Ho Chi Minh worship centers advocate a progressive lifestyle that seeks to overcome what they view as spiritual obscurantism perpetuated by certain ritual specialists. From a cultural perspective, this represents a spiritual and moral reform movement aimed at eliminating outdated customs incompatible with contemporary contexts.

The mode of home-based cultivation practiced by members centers on moral self-improvement modeled after Ho Chi Minh. Shrine custodians frequently counsel adherents

with the adage: “First, cultivate at home; second, cultivate in the marketplace; third, cultivate at the pagoda.” Cultivation at home thus becomes a guiding life principle, encouraging self-discipline, moral refinement, and living, studying, and working in accordance with the example of President Ho Chi Minh. Texts used at Hoang Thien Long Shrine in Ung Hoa, Ha Noi, state:

“Tu gia means cultivating at home /Who does not have a house of their own? /Who does not have a mother and father who gave them life? /That is the very foundation of all endeavor— /Therefore be admonished: never forget those who gave you birth” (Hoang Thien Long [...], 2021). Or: “Calling upon compatriots nationwide /To dissolve karmic burdens and enter Tu Gia /Which is to revere one’s mother and honor one’s father, /To worship ancestral roots—the moral foundation of Vietnam” (Hoang Thien Long [...], 2021).

These verses are accessible and memorable, offering gentle yet practical moral instruction. Another member remarked:

Studying and following Uncle Ho’s example means cultivating oneself, refining moral character, practicing simplicity, gradually abandoning bad habits, enhancing civic consciousness, and always placing virtue above all else... We adhere to a simple, humble, honest, and thrifty lifestyle, free from greed, anger, and delusion. We respect and uphold equality among all religions and beliefs in society (Interview with Mrs. N.T.H., 55 years old, Hà Nội, member of the Tu Gia Association at Hoàng Thiên Long Shrine, 9:30 a.m., November 25, 2025).

Through ritual practice and modes of cultivation, the symbolic power of Ho Chi Minh is transformed from public political authority into a form of moral authority embedded within personal and familial life. His image becomes a foundation of social trust, an exemplar of ethical conduct and human sentiment, and a moral yardstick for the community of devotees. This process illustrates the vernacularization of symbolic power, whereby Ho Chi Minh is received as an intimate sacred figure capable of accompanying family life and offering profound ethical guidance to the community.

Mechanisms of vernacular sacralization of the Ho Chi Minh symbol in domestic space

Depoliticization and symbolic re-encoding

The presence of the symbol of Ho Chi Minh in private domestic shrines reveals a distinctive process of vernacular sacralization, whereby the image of a modern political leader is transformed into a sacred object operating according to the logic of traditional belief systems. The central mechanism of this process lies in the interplay between depoliticization and

symbolic re-encoding, occurring primarily within the domestic sphere—a space that enables social actors to actively interpret and practice sacrality in accordance with their spiritual needs.

First, the depoliticization of the Ho Chi Minh symbol manifests in its detachment from the official political–ideological framework. In state discourse, Ho Chi Minh is positioned as the founder of the regime, a revolutionary leader, and an emblem of modern political authority. However, in domestic worship practices, these political layers of meaning are blurred or bracketed, giving way to moral and sacred interpretations. Ho Chi Minh is no longer received primarily as a historical figure associated with the Party or the State, but rather imagined as the benevolent Father of the nation, characterized by self-sacrifice, integrity, and compassion for the people. This depoliticization does not constitute resistance to or negation of official symbolic authority; rather, it represents a strategy of cultural adaptation, allowing the Ho Chi Minh symbol to be incorporated into a vernacular belief system that privileges sacred efficacy and spiritual responsiveness over political power.

Parallel to depoliticization is the process of symbolic re-encoding, through which Ho Chi Minh is “translated” from the language of modern political ideology into the familiar cultural–religious codes of Vietnamese society. Re-encoding occurs first at the level of moral character and merit. The ethical qualities emphasized in vernacular discourse—such as simplicity, lifelong devotion to the nation, and altruism—facilitate his identification with the archetype of the virtuous sage or deified human figure (*nhân thần*) within traditional belief. Revolutionary achievements, in this reinterpretation, are no longer understood merely as political–historical accomplishments but are reframed as forms of transcendent merit sufficient to justify sacralization and veneration.

Re-encoding is also evident in the organization of ritual space and practice. In many private shrines, portraits or statues of Ho Chi Minh are placed alongside folk deities or other widely recognized sacred figures. This spatial arrangement indicates that the Ho Chi Minh symbol has been integrated into a shared sacred order rather than occupying a separate position as a national political icon. Acts of incense offering and prayer addressed to Ho Chi Minh are fundamentally similar to those directed toward other sacred beings and typically concern everyday aspirations such as health, peace, and spiritual protection. Such practices demonstrate that the symbol has been restructured to operate according to the logic of sacred responsiveness characteristic of vernacular religion, rather than according to the commemorative or pedagogical logic of political ritual.

The domestic sphere plays a crucial role in activating and sustaining this process of sacralization. Unlike official public spaces—such as museums, squares, or memorial temples—the home constitutes a semi-private environment in which individuals and families

enjoy greater autonomy in interpreting, combining, and creatively reworking sacred symbols. It is within this space that Ho Chi Minh is symbolically “drawn out” of the framework of national ceremony and simultaneously “elevated” into an intimate sacred presence capable of engaging with individuals through daily ritual practice. Vernacular sacralization, therefore, is not the result of top-down imposition but a bottom-up process of creative adaptation, reflecting the need for spiritual stability, moral orientation, and cultural identity in the modern context.

Taken as a whole, the mechanisms of depoliticization and re-encoding demonstrate the remarkable flexibility of the Ho Chi Minh symbol in contemporary cultural–religious life. Rather than remaining confined to the political–historical domain, the symbol is restructured as a sacred resource capable of deep participation in the spiritual life of ordinary people. Vernacular sacralization does not diminish the Ho Chi Minh symbol; on the contrary, it extends its vitality through processes of popularization and continuous re-embodiment within domestic religious practice.

Vernacularization through ritual and religious language

Another significant mechanism in the vernacular sacralization of the symbol of Ho Chi Minh within domestic worship spaces is the process of popularization through ritual practice and religious language. Through everyday ritual performances and a spiritually inflected discursive system, the symbol of Ho Chi Minh is not only sacralized at the conceptual level but also vernacularized within lived religious life, becoming an organic component of the sacred universe embedded in social existence.

First, vernacularization is clearly manifested in ritual practice. In private shrines in Northern Vietnam, the worship of Ho Chi Minh generally follows familiar ritual patterns of Vietnamese folk belief, including incense offerings, vegetarian or meat-based offerings, and prayers conducted on lunar observance days or at moments associated with personal and familial events. These rituals lack the formal solemnity and standardization characteristic of official commemorative spaces; instead, they are flexible, personalized, and closely aligned with the practical concerns of worshippers. The repetitive enactment of such everyday rites facilitates the “internalization” of the Ho Chi Minh symbol into the spiritual rhythm of family life, rather than allowing it to remain an external or abstract national emblem.

Alongside ritual practice, religious language plays a central role in the process of vernacularization. In prayer, Ho Chi Minh is often addressed through intimate and vernacular honorifics such as “Uncle Ho,” “Ngoc Phat Ho Chi Minh” (Jade Buddha Ho Chi Minh), “Quang Minh Ho Chi Minh,” or “Holy Enlightened One for the Nation”,... rather than through

political or historical titles. These forms of address reduce the symbolic distance between the sacred object and the practicing subject, transforming Ho Chi Minh into a proximate sacred presence capable of listening, witnessing, and intervening in human affairs. The language of prayer frequently emphasizes moral virtue, sincerity, and protective benevolence rather than political achievements or specific historical roles.

Notably, in many instances, the religious language directed toward Ho Chi Minh is structurally similar to that used for ancestors or indigenous deities. Worshippers petition him for health, family harmony, prosperous livelihood, or assistance in overcoming personal difficulties. The use of a shared ritual lexicon demonstrates that the Ho Chi Minh symbol has been fully “translated” into the vernacular expressive system, operating according to a logic of sacred responsiveness and symbolic exchange between humans and the supernatural realm. Here, the sacred is no longer an abstract category but an interactive relationship reinforced through spoken prayer and ritual action.

This process of vernacularization through ritual and religious language also contributes to the blurring of boundaries between historical memory and spiritual experience. Ho Chi Minh is not only commemorated as a figure of the past but experienced as a present and active spiritual entity capable of participating in contemporary life. Such presence is sustained and reproduced through repeated ritual acts and personalized devotional language, enabling the Ho Chi Minh symbol to move beyond the static character of a national icon and become a living sacred figure within vernacular religious practice.

From the perspective of the anthropology of religion, this mechanism of vernacularization illustrates how local communities actively internalize major symbols of modern history and politics, incorporating them into existing systems of belief without disrupting foundational cultural structures. Through ritual and religious language, the symbol of Ho Chi Minh is repositioned as a sacred moral and protective resource, reflecting the dynamic interweaving of modernity and tradition in the spiritual life of contemporary Vietnamese society.

Personalization of sacred experience and the legitimation of belief

In addition to depoliticization, symbolic re-encoding, and vernacularization through ritual, the vernacular sacralization of the symbol of Ho Chi Minh within domestic worship spaces is further reinforced by the personalization of sacred experience, which in turn legitimizes believers’ faith. It is precisely the direct linkage between the sacred symbol and

lived personal experience that enables the worship of Ho Chi Minh to transcend a merely symbolic level and become a durable, self-reproducing belief system.

Sacred experience in the domestic context is typically deeply personal, emerging through everyday events such as illness, economic crisis, family conflict, or major life transitions. In such circumstances, prayers addressed to Ho Chi Minh are associated with expectations of spiritual protection, moral guidance, or invisible “assistance.” When difficulties are resolved in a positive direction, practitioners tend to interpret these outcomes as evidence of sacred intervention, thereby reinforcing their belief in the efficacy of the worshipped figure.

This process of personalization shifts belief from a collective and abstract level to one grounded in individual experience and emotion. Ho Chi Minh thus ceases to function solely as a shared national or communal symbol and instead becomes a sacred presence engaged in a distinct relationship with particular individuals or families. Some private shrine custodians recount experiences such as receiving dreams, spiritual messages, or signs interpreted as validation from “Uncle Ho” in moments of important decision-making. For example, Mrs. N.T.L., the owner of a spirit shrine in Hai Phong, claims that she has been able to receive direct spiritual communications from Ho Chi Minh and has been instructed by him continuously for more than twenty years. Similarly, Mrs. N.T.D in Hanoi asserts that she is capable of receiving the direct spiritual descent of Ho Chi Minh, identifying herself as a “divine liaison” and as the former secretary of the President, and claiming that she can hear the confidences of Vietnamese historical figures and deities (Nguyen, 2014). Such accounts are frequently recounted and preserved as personal testimonies attesting to sacred presence. These experiential narratives function as “sacred narratives”, contributing to the concretization and vivification of belief, and rendering it more resilient to skepticism or refutation.

From the perspective of legitimation, personal sacred experience operates as a mechanism of self-validation that does not require endorsement from official religious or political institutions. The assertion that one has “personally experienced” sacred intervention becomes sufficient justification for devotional practice, even when such practice exists at the margins of dominant discourses. In this context, the legitimacy of belief is not grounded in doctrinal orthodoxy or fixed ritual norms, but in the subjective authenticity of lived experience. Moreover, these personal experiences are often shared within families, kinship networks, or small communities, forming a micro-level web of resonant sacred stories. When similar experiences are repeated and mutually affirmed, individual belief is reinforced by localized social consensus. Through this process, personal experience is transformed into a form of informal yet compelling religious knowledge within the practicing community.

In sum, the personalization of sacred experience is not merely a supplementary factor but a central mechanism sustaining and legitimizing the vernacular sacralization of the Ho Chi Minh symbol. By forging a direct connection between the sacred symbol and individual life, belief is internally consolidated, rendered flexible and adaptive, and endowed with long-term resilience within domestic religious space. This mechanism illustrates how modern social actors actively construct sacred meaning, traversing the boundaries between history, politics, and religion in order to address their own concrete spiritual needs.

Comparative and scholarly dialogue: Ho Chi Minh in a global context

To clarify the distinctive features of the vernacular sacralization of the symbol of Ho Chi Minh, it is necessary to situate this phenomenon within a comparative dialogue with other forms of leader sacralization worldwide. Such comparison does not seek to homogenize these cases but rather to identify divergent trajectories of sacralization, thereby highlighting the specific cultural mechanisms and logics operative in each context. When placed alongside China, Turkey, and North Korea, the Vietnamese case reveals a predominantly bottom-up model of sacralization, clearly distinct from forms largely driven by state power or official ideological discourse.

Comparison with Mao Zedong in China

Between Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong there exist significant points of convergence that render comparison both possible and analytically productive. Both were revolutionary leaders, founders of socialist states, and central figures in the political memory of their respective nations. Notably, in both cases, the image of the leader has transcended the boundaries of official political space to appear within popular devotional practices. In China, the portrait of Mao Zedong functions simultaneously as a major national symbol—displayed at Tiananmen Square (in the form of the Mao Memorial Hall) and incorporated into “red tourism” itineraries that attract large numbers of domestic visitors—and as a prominent presence in private households (in the form of posters and paintings). In Vietnam, by contrast, the image of Ho Chi Minh, beyond its significance as a national symbol, is also present in private domestic shrines as a sacred object of veneration.

However, the divergence between the two cases is particularly noteworthy. In Chinese popular practice, Mao Zedong is frequently associated with power and protective force. His image operates as a symbol capable of suppressing malevolent influences,

warding off misfortune, and ensuring safety, thereby reflecting the extension of political authority into the sacred domain. In other words, Mao Zedong's sacred potency is largely constructed upon the sacralization of revolutionary and state power.

Conversely, within the ritual spaces of private shrines in northern Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh is seldom received as a symbol of coercive authority or apotropaic force. Rather, his image is interpreted primarily along moral and spiritual dimensions. Devotees appeal to him for protection, guidance, and moral witness rather than for the exercise of punitive power. This contrast suggests that the sacralization of Ho Chi Minh does not simply prolong political authority within the sacred sphere; instead, it reconfigures the symbol according to the moral–humanistic paradigms characteristic of Vietnamese folk religiosity.

Comparison with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Turkey

The case of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Turkey is often characterized as a form of secular sacralization. Atatürk was not divinized on theological or supernatural grounds; rather, he was elevated as the supreme symbol of the modern nation, rationality, science, and secularism. Personal devotion surrounding Atatürk symbolized collective ideological commitments of Kemalism and functioned as a mechanism of political integration. He became the embodiment of the Kemalist modernization project and the ultimate source of legitimacy for the republican order.

This sacralization was initially constructed from above through state institutions—monuments, portraits in public offices and schools, national ceremonies, official speeches, and educational curricula. Over time, however, it extended into civil society and everyday life, including pilgrimages to Anıtkabir and the display of Atatürk's image in domestic spaces. Despite this diffusion, the sacralization of Atatürk did not evolve into an independent folk belief system nor did it involve supernatural efficacy. Its “sacredness” remained fundamentally political–symbolic, aimed at reinforcing national identity, legitimizing state authority, and affirming secularism as the foundation of Turkish political life.

Comparison with Kim Il Sung in North Korea

The case of Kim Il Sung in North Korea represents a paradigmatic model of state-driven sacralization. Among socialist regimes, few personality cults have reached the comprehensive intensity of that surrounding Kim Il Sung (Trifoi, 2017). Here, the leader is sacralized through an all-encompassing system of propaganda, political ritual, and ideological control imposed

from above. His sacred status is institutionalized, standardized, and perpetuated by state power, leaving little room for vernacular reinterpretation or individualized sacred experience. The sacred dimension is inseparable from the apparatus of state authority.

The distinctiveness of the vietnamese case

Against this comparative backdrop, the case of Ho Chi Minh demonstrates a markedly different configuration. The sacralization of Ho Chi Minh within private domestic worship is neither a direct product of state policy nor wholly confined within official ritual frameworks. Rather, it constitutes a form of non-official vernacular sacralization, constructed through everyday practices involving ritual performance, religious language, and personal spiritual experience. While the state may provide the initial symbolic framework, it is ultimately communities and individuals who reinterpret and endow the symbol with sacred meaning in daily life. This bottom-up dynamic distinguishes the Vietnamese case from state-centric or ideologically institutionalized forms of leader sacralization. It reveals a process in which a modern political symbol is not merely preserved through political commemoration but continually reanimated through vernacular religious creativity, allowing it to function as a moral and spiritual resource embedded within domestic religious life.

Table 1: Comparative forms of political leader sacralization

Case	Source of Sacralization	Main Mechanism	Dominant Space	Type of Sacredness	Degree of Vernacularization
Mao Trạch Đông	Primarily state-driven, later diffused into popular practice	Political propaganda, protective symbolism	National space and family space	Revolutionary power, protection	Medium
Mustafa Kemal Atatürk	Constructed by the state, maintained by civil society	National rituals, secular symbolism	Public space	Secular–national	Low
Kim Nhật Thành	Totalitarian state	Comprehensive ideological control	Entire social space	Theocratic leader deification	Very low
Ho Chi Minh	Originated as a national symbol but reinterpreted from below	Family rituals, domestic worship practices	Private household worship space	Moral–spiritual patronage	High

Source: Adapted from the author's synthesis of secondary literature on political sacralization.

Dialogical thesis: the bottom-up path of sacralization in the Vietnamese case

From a comparative perspective, the Vietnamese case reveals a distinctive pathway of sacralization: a bottom-up process in which social actors actively integrate a modern political leader into an existing system of vernacular belief. This process does not rely on ideological imposition or coercive power, but rather on spiritual needs, moral orientation, and personal experience. It is precisely this dynamic that accounts for the flexibility and durability of the sacralization of Ho Chi Minh within domestic spaces.

The theoretical contribution of the Vietnamese case lies in demonstrating that the boundaries between politics, religion, and vernacular belief are not rigid demarcations but can be flexibly reconfigured through cultural practice. Sacralization need not be the product of state authority or formal religious institutions; it may emerge from everyday life through mechanisms of depoliticization, symbolic re-encoding, vernacularization, and the personalization of sacred experience. In this sense, the case of Ho Chi Minh opens an important avenue for approaching the study of religion, collective memory, and political symbolism in a global context—namely, by examining how sacrality is reconstructed from below and re-signified through vernacular practice and communal experience.

Situating the vernacular sacralization of Ho Chi Minh within a global framework reveals both parallels and divergences when compared with other cases of political leader sacralization. Similar to figures such as Mao Zedong in China, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Turkey, or Kim Il Sung in North Korea, Ho Chi Minh is associated with moral values and national memory, transcending the role of a mere historical figure. However, unlike institutionalized forms of leader veneration centered in public and state-controlled spaces, the sacralization of Ho Chi Minh in private domestic worship in Northern Vietnam is informal, flexible, and closely intertwined with indigenous religious traditions. His presence within private shrine spaces suggests a form of post-political sacralization, in which the leader's symbol persists through everyday practices even as political and social contexts evolve.

This comparative analysis thus positions the Ho Chi Minh case as a distinctive contribution to scholarly discussions of political sacralization and lived religion, while broadening our understanding of the dynamic relationship among politics, memory, and the sacred in contemporary societies.

Discussion

From political sacralization to vernacular sacralization: re-symbolizing the leader in domestic worship space

The research findings indicate that the presence of Ho Chi Minh in private household shrines cannot be adequately explained solely through the framework of state-level “political sacralization.” While at the macro level his image has been constructed as a moral–revolutionary symbol of the nation, within domestic worship spaces this symbol undergoes a profound process of reconfiguration through vernacular perspectives and personal practice. This process is not merely an extension of political authority into private life; rather, it entails the integration of the leader’s image into an indigenous religious paradigm grounded in filial piety, hierarchical order, and notions of spiritual patronage. Ho Chi Minh is received less as a symbol of coercive power than as a moral figure capable of witnessing, protecting, and guiding. This suggests that, in the Vietnamese case, sacrality is repositioned according to local cultural logics rather than preserving intact its original political logic. The study thus demonstrates that vernacular sacralization operates as a mechanism of re-symbolization, through which a national symbol is translated into the ritual language and spatial structure of family-based belief systems.

Worship space as a mechanism of sacred transformation

Fieldwork findings affirm the central role of worship space in producing and sustaining sacrality. This space is not merely a location for displaying the image of Ho Chi Minh but a structured system of meaning-making. The placement of his image on the altar, its relational positioning alongside ancestors or other sacred entities, and its incorporation into cyclical ritual practices together constitute a mechanism that transforms a political symbol into a sacred being. Sacralization, therefore, is not a singular symbolic act but a process materialized in spatial arrangements and reproduced through ritual repetition. The domestic shrine space functions as a cultural apparatus mediating between national memory and family life. Through this mediation, the memory of Ho Chi Minh does not remain confined to official historical discourse but becomes embedded in familial morality and everyday sacred experience.

Positioning the Vietnamese case within global models of leader sacralization

Comparison with cases such as Mao Zedong, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and Kim Il Sung highlights the diversity of pathways through which political leaders are sacralized globally. If the North Korean model represents totalitarian state sacralization, and the Turkish model exemplifies secular sacralization aimed at consolidating modern national identity, then the Vietnamese case stands out for its vernacular integrative mechanism.

Unlike the Maoist model—where revolutionary authority is often transmuted into protective spiritual power—the sacralization of Ho Chi Minh in private shrines does not foreground coercive authority but emphasizes moral virtue and spiritual patronage. This indicates that the political symbol is not reproduced according to a logic of power but reinterpreted through the ethical and humanistic frameworks characteristic of Vietnamese belief traditions.

Accordingly, the Vietnamese case may be conceptualized as a model of *folk-integrative sacralization*, in which the state provides the initial symbolic framework, yet vernacular practice ultimately determines the maintenance and redefinition of sacrality.

Conclusion

This article has examined the worship of Ho Chi Minh in private household shrines in Northern Vietnam as a contemporary form of vernacular religion, wherein a modern political leader is sacralized through highly personalized and localized ritual practices. Drawing on ethnographic data, the study demonstrates that the sacralization of Ho Chi Minh is not solely the product of top-down official political discourse but, more importantly, is constructed from below through lived experience, memory, and the spiritual needs of ordinary people.

The findings confirm that domestic worship spaces play a pivotal role in integrating political, historical, and vernacular religious elements. These spaces are not simply sites where a leader's image is displayed; rather, they constitute symbolic structures in which meaning is reconfigured. Within the altar arrangement, Ho Chi Minh is situated within a sacred order alongside ancestors and other spiritual entities, thereby being localized within indigenous belief paradigms.

Importantly, in the surveyed private shrines, Ho Chi Minh is not primarily received as a symbol of revolutionary power or coercive authority but is reinterpreted as a moral exemplar and spiritual patron associated with familial, communal, and national values. Worshippers seek moral witness, protection, and ethical guidance rather than coercive

force. This underscores the flexibility and creativity of Vietnamese vernacular religion in appropriating and reconfiguring modern political symbols according to its own cultural logic.

Through comparative dialogue with the cases of Mao Zedong, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and Kim Il Sung, the study demonstrates that leader sacralization unfolds along diverse trajectories shaped by specific power structures and cultural contexts. While Kim Il Sung represents a model of totalizing state sacralization and Atatürk exemplifies secular sacralization centered on modern nationhood without evolving into a supernatural folk belief, Mao Zedong reflects an intermediate pattern in which political sacralization associated with revolutionary charisma persists in certain vernacular practices, often still tied to the symbolism of state power. In contrast, the Vietnamese case is distinguished by its vernacular integrative mechanism: the sacrality of Ho Chi Minh is neither wholly controlled by the state nor purely political-symbolic but is integrated into preexisting structures of family and community worship, where it is maintained and redefined through everyday ritual practice.

Theoretically, this study contributes to three major scholarly debates. *First*, it expands the analytical framework of political sacralization by emphasizing its multi-layered character and the active role of vernacular actors. *Second*, it clarifies the role of worship space as an intermediary mechanism through which national symbols are transformed into sacred entities via spatial organization and ritual repetition. *Third*, it proposes the concept of “vernacular sacralization” as an analytical tool for understanding cases in which political symbols are localized within indigenous belief systems and embedded in familial cultural memory. These findings suggest that the relationship between politics and religion should not be understood as a rigid separation or a one-directional imposition, but rather as an ongoing negotiation between state discourse and social practice. The case of Ho Chi Minh in private shrines in Northern Vietnam demonstrates how national memory can be vernacularized, becoming part of everyday sacred life and sustained through familial ritual practice.

Nevertheless, the study has certain limitations. The research scope primarily focuses on Northern Vietnam and selected representative private shrines, and thus does not fully capture regional diversity and variations in practice. Future research could extend comparative analysis to other regions of Vietnam and examine the impact of urbanization, migration, and digital media on the transformation of this form of vernacular sacralization.

Overall, the article affirms that vernacular sacralization is not merely a religious–cultural phenomenon but also an important mechanism for reconfiguring the meaning of political symbols in contemporary social life. In doing so, it contributes to broader scholarly discussions on sacralization, cultural memory, and the intersection of politics and religion in an era of globalization.

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