



## Mazu Worship in Chinese Assembly Halls in Hoi An (Vietnam): Cultural Heritage, Community Identity, and Regional Comparison

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### Abstract

Mazu worship, a form of folk goddess veneration originating from coastal China, plays a central role in the spiritual life of many overseas Chinese communities. In Hoi An (Quang Nam, Vietnam)—an important international trading port from the 17th to 19th centuries—this belief system was preserved and practiced by Chinese immigrants within the space of their assembly halls. Three notable examples include the Phuc Kien, Trung Hoa, and Quang Trieu Assembly Halls.

Based on fieldwork, architectural analysis, religious artifacts, and Han-Nom textual sources, this study investigates the role of Chinese assembly halls as socio-religious institutions where cultural identity is preserved and community cohesion is reinforced. It also provides a comparative perspective with Mazu worship at other temples and assembly halls in Ho Chi Minh City, where a large number of Chinese migrants settled, to reveal differences in ritual organization, sacred architecture, and levels of cultural localization.

The study demonstrates that Mazu worship not only reflects processes of cultural adaptation in new settlement environments but also serves as a vital mechanism for preserving identity, navigating historical transformations, and integrating into local society. Moreover, it constitutes an essential element of Vietnam's intangible cultural heritage that warrants protection in the context of modernization and globalization.

**Keywords:** Chinese Assembly Halls, Mazu Worship, Hoi An, Ho Chi Minh City, Community Identity, Cultural Heritage

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### 1. Introduction

Hoi An, located in Quang Nam province, is an ancient port city that played a central role in regional and international maritime trade from the 17th to 19th centuries. Its advantageous geographical location, situated along the Thu Bon River near the East Sea, enabled it to develop into a major commercial hub attracting merchants from Japan, China, Europe, and other parts of Asia. Among these, Chinese traders formed one of the most prominent and enduring migrant communities.

Chinese migration to Hoi An occurred in multiple waves and came predominantly from the coastal provinces of southern China such as Fujian, Guangdong, and Hainan. These migrants were organized into *bang* (congregations or associations) based on dialect and place of origin. By the late 17th century, two main groups had formed: the *Ngũ Bang* Chinese (Five-Dialect Groups), who remained Chinese nationals and maintained separate communal institutions, and the *Minh Hương*, who became naturalized Vietnamese. The Vietnamese often referred to the *Ngũ Bang* migrants as *khách trú* (sojourners) (Tran, V. A., Nguyen, C. T., & Tran, A., 2005) <sup>[1]</sup>. Historical accounts, such as that of Thích Đại Sán, a Qing envoy to Đại Việt, reveal how Chinese sojourners often married local women to facilitate commerce and integration (Thích Đại Sán, 2016) <sup>[2]</sup>. Archival documents from Hội An, including land contracts and community records, indicate that the Chinese maintained distinct communal structures alongside Vietnamese society (Nham, T. L., 2013) <sup>[3]</sup>.

To serve the needs of each *bang*, Chinese migrants constructed community facilities such as temples, ancestral halls, schools, hospitals, and most notably, assembly halls (Chau, T. H., 2006) <sup>[4]</sup>. By 2024, five major Chinese assembly halls remain in Hoi An: Phuc Kien (Fujian), Trieu Chau (Teochew), Quynh Phu (Hainan), Quang Trieu (Cantonese), and the Trung Hoa General Assembly Hall serving smaller groups such as Gia Ung (Hoi An Heritage Management Board, 1992) <sup>[5]</sup>.

These assembly halls not only functioned as places of worship but also as cultural and social institutions that preserved Chinese identity abroad. They played a crucial role in maintaining ethnic solidarity, regulating trade activities, mediating internal disputes, and organizing festivals and rituals. Understanding the architectural, religious, and social dimensions of these halls—especially in relation to the worship of Mazu (Thiên Hậu)—offers valuable insight into the adaptive strategies and cultural resilience of Chinese communities in early modern Vietnam.

## 2. Methods and Materials

This Study Adopts an interdisciplinary approach combining history, archaeology, and religious ethnology to analyze the formation, practice, and localization of Mazu worship within the Chinese assembly halls (*hội quán*) in Hoi An. The primary methods employed include: (1) Field surveys conducted at three prominent assembly halls that continue to worship Mazu—Phuc Kien, Trung Hoa, and Quang Trieu—focusing on architectural structures, spatial layout of altars, religious artifacts (statues, spirit tablets, horizontal boards, parallel scrolls), and contemporary ritual practices. (2) Analysis of Han-Nom sources, including steles, land deeds, royal edicts, and archival documents preserved at the Hoi An Center for Cultural Heritage Management and Preservation, to trace the historical development and social functions of these assembly halls over time. (3) Qualitative and comparative analysis to examine Mazu worship practices in Hoi An in relation to other Chinese diaspora centers such as Ho Chi Minh City, thereby identifying key differences in ritual organization, architectural expression, and levels of cultural adaptation.

The materials used in this research include: (1) Primary sources: Han-Nom inscriptions, royal decrees, and historical land contracts; (2) Secondary literature: academic publications by Vietnamese and international scholars on Chinese communities, folk religion, and assembly hall architecture; (3) Fieldwork data: survey notes, photographs of material culture, and interviews with heritage managers, ritual specialists, and Chinese residents in Hoi An, conducted between 2023 and 2024.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 1. Mazu Worship in Chinese Assembly Halls in Hoi An: Ritual Practices and Worship Characteristics

#### 1.1. Introduction to the Assembly Halls Worshipping Mazu

In Hoi An, a major international port town that flourished from the 17th to 19th centuries, the worship of Mazu (Thiên Hậu Thánh Mẫu) has been closely associated with the religious life of the local Chinese community. This belief system was institutionalized through traditional assembly halls (*hội quán*), which functioned as both religious and social centers. Among the five surviving Chinese assembly halls in Hoi An, three still maintain the worship of Mazu:

- Phuc Kien Assembly Hall;
- Chinese Assembly Hall,;
- Quang Trieu Assembly Hall.

The Phuc Kien Assembly Hall (No. 46 Tran Phu Street, Minh An Ward, Hoi An) was founded in the late 17th century and is one of the oldest and most architecturally significant Chinese halls in the city. Here, Mazu is enshrined as the supreme guardian deity and is worshipped in the central sanctum, the most sacred space of the hall. Her presence not only reflects religious devotion but also symbolizes the maritime heritage and identity of the Fujianese merchant community that migrated to Hoi An.

The Chinese Assembly Hall (No. 64 Tran Phu Street, Minh An Ward, Hoi An), constructed in 1741, serves as a common spiritual and communal space for five Chinese groups (Fujian, Guangdong, Chaozhou, Hainan, and Gia Ung). In this hall, Mazu is venerated under the unique title "Mazu of the Five Bangs" (Thiên Hậu Ngũ Bang), emphasizing her role as a unifying spiritual protector of a multi-ethnic Chinese diaspora. Locals often refer to the site affectionately as the "Pagoda of the Five Bangs" (Chùa Ngũ Bang) or simply "Chùa Bà" (Temple of the Lady).

The Quang Trieu Assembly Hall (representing immigrants from Guangzhou and Zhaoqing), initially included Mazu among its primary deities. However, over time, its principal deity transitioned to Guan Gong (Quan Công), symbolizing righteousness and loyalty, aligning with the ethos of the Cantonese community. Despite this shift, Mazu continues to be venerated in the left chamber of the main sanctuary, reflecting both the resilience of traditional beliefs and the adaptability of Chinese religious practices in Vietnam (Tong, Q. H., pp. 353–359) <sup>[6]</sup>.

#### 1.2. Artifacts Associated with the Worship of Mazu

In the Chinese assembly halls in Hoi An dedicated to Mazu, the system of sacred artifacts associated with her veneration is not only diverse in type but also holds significant archaeological, historical, and symbolic value. These artifacts reflect the organic relationship between architecture, ritual practices, and communal belief systems.

In the assembly halls where Mazu is worshipped as the principal deity—namely the Fujian and Chinese Assembly Halls—her shrine occupies the central space of the main sanctuary, where she is revered as the supreme tutelary goddess. On the altar, three statues of Mazu are typically enshrined, crafted from traditional materials such as wood, plaster, or papier-mâché. These statues are arranged along a vertical axis, descending in size from tallest to shortest, symbolizing a sacred hierarchy and the layered structure of symbolic meaning within Chinese maternal deity worship.

The sacred space is adorned with horizontal lacquered boards (*hoành phi*) and parallel couplets (*liễn đối*) that extol Mazu's divine virtues. These inscriptions, often hung above or around the shrine, highlight her protective grace and moral virtue, emphasizing her benevolence toward overseas Chinese communities engaged in trade and settlement in this region.

Classical Chinese inscriptions such as “天后聖母” (Heavenly Queen, Holy Mother) or “护国庇民” (Protector of the Nation, Guardian of the People) frequently appear. Additionally, these sacred words are found on ancestral

tablets, incense burners, bronze bells, and carved wooden plaques, reflecting the belief in Mazu’s protective power over the perils of maritime journeys.

Representative artifacts include an incense burner from the Cantonese Assembly Hall bearing the inscription:

“天后聖母. 光緒乙酉年仲冬吉旦” (Heavenly Queen, Holy Mother. An auspicious day in mid-winter of the 乙酉 year in the Guangxu reign [1885]).

A bronze bell from the Chinese Assembly Hall is inscribed: “天后元君. 辛巳年仲秋月. 大清奉政大夫加二級林嘉” (Mazu, Original Sovereign. Mid-Autumn of the 辛巳 year [1881], conferred by Senior Official Lin Jia, Second-Rank Minister of the Great Qing).

Both the Fujian and Chinese Assembly Halls preserve ancestral tablets engraved with the phrase: “潮州护国庇民太后元君” (Empress of Chaozhou – Defender of the Nation and Protector of the People), indicating imperial recognition of Mazu’s cult and the formal integration of her worship into the dynastic cultural order.

Furthermore, the reliefs on the walls of the front hall and altars in the Fujian Assembly Hall depict scenes of Mazu rescuing shipwrecked sailors at sea—a popular iconographic theme in Mazu worship across Southeast Asia. These images vividly illustrate the fusion of folk art, popular religion, and collective memory, encapsulating the overseas Chinese community’s migration experiences to Vietnam.

Altogether, this corpus of artifacts serves not only as religious objects but also as invaluable historical evidence, reaffirming the central role of Mazu in the spiritual life of the Chinese diaspora and reflecting the localization and syncretism of this belief system within the broader sociocultural context of early modern and modern Vietnam.

6. Wardrobe cabinet;
7. Mazu altar shrine;
8. God of Wealth altar shrine;
9. Altar shrine of the Ancestral Founders (Tiền hiền).

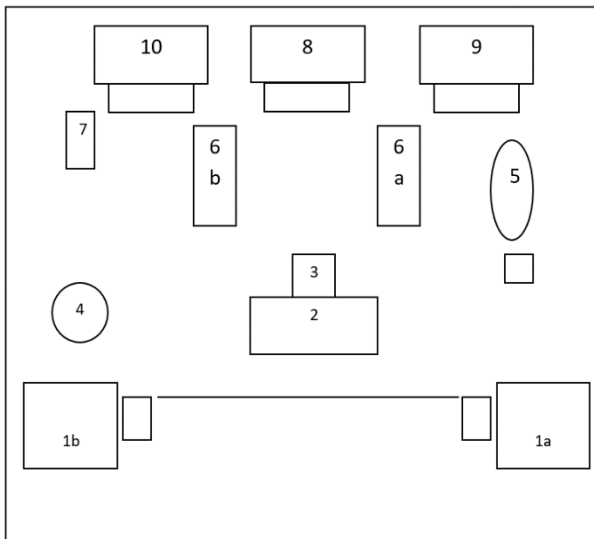
**1.3. Worship Rituals of Mazu**

The worship rituals dedicated to Mazu (Thiên Hậu Thánh Mẫu) are regularly held at the Chinese assembly halls (hội quán) in Hoi An, especially on the first (mùng Một), fifteenth (Rằm) days of the lunar month, and particularly on Mazu’s birthday on the 23rd day of the third lunar month. On these occasions, devotees gather at the assembly halls to offer incense, pray for peace and good fortune

Among the most elaborate ceremonies is the Mazu Festival (Lễ vía Bà) held at the Phuc Kien Assembly Hall and the Chinese Assembly Hall (Ngũ Bang) on the 23rd day of the third lunar month. Historically, Hai Binh Temple of the Minh Huong community also hosted this festival with considerable scale (Hoi An Center for Cultural Heritage Management, 2008) [7]. The main sacrificial ceremony typically takes place between 9 and 10 a.m., with the leader of the Chinese community (bang trưởng) serving as the primary officiant. Offerings include a roast pig (Kim Trư), the “tam sên” set (fish, meat, egg), Phuc Kien-style buns, stir-fried noodles, stewed duck with eight treasures, votive papers, flowers, fruits, and incense.

The ceremony begins with three rounds of bells and drums, followed by three kneeling incense offerings. The officiant then reads the ceremonial prayer (chúc vãn). Next is the incense offering by delegates and devotees, followed by the traditional practices of “xin lộc Bà” (seeking blessings) and “xin xâm” (drawing divine lots). At the close of the ceremony, a knife is placed into the roast pig along with a pinch of raw salt. The event then concludes with a communal banquet and reunion of fellow townspeople (Hoi An Center for Cultural Heritage Management, 2012) [8].

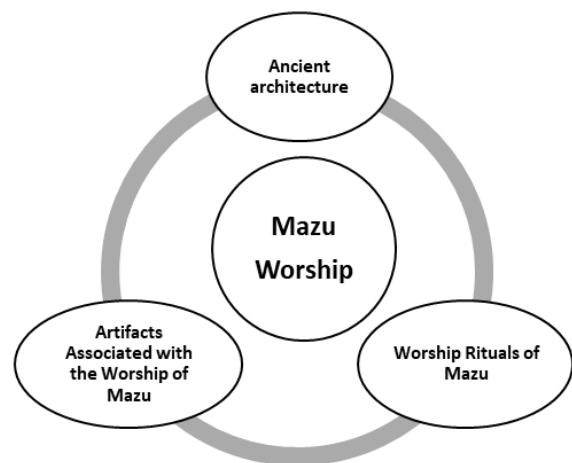
The ritual also includes a structured ceremonial oration comprising three main parts (Nguyễn C.T., 2005) [9]. Altogether, these rituals reflect the close integration of Mazu belief with the cultural and communal life of Hoi An’s Chinese diaspora. It also demonstrates the adaptive nature of this religious practice within the Vietnamese cultural landscape.



**Fig 1:** Layout of the Worship Space at the Chinese Assembly Hall in Hoi An (Source: VTAT, 2024)

1a, b. Altars of Shunfeng Er (順風耳, “Favorable Wind Ears”) and Qianli Yan (千里眼, “Thousand-Mile Eyes”);

1. Ancestral altar and five ceremonial ritual vessels;
2. Altar of Guanyin;
3. Bell and drum stand;
4. Model boat;
5. 6a, b. Eight Treasure Racks (Bát Bửu);



**Fig 2:** Diagram of the Expressions of Mazu Worship in the Chinese Assembly Halls of Hoi An

## 2. Mazu Worship in Chinese Assembly Halls in Hoi An in Comparison with Temples and Assembly Halls in Ho Chi Minh City

### 2.1. Introduction to Temples and Assembly Halls Worshipping Mazu among the Chinese Community in Ho Chi Minh City

Ho Chi Minh City is currently home to the largest Chinese community in Vietnam, with a diverse and rich system of religious and folk worship establishments. According to local surveys, the city has approximately 86 Chinese temples, among which nearly 20 are dedicated to the worship of Mazu—the most revered sea goddess in the Chinese folk religious system.

These Mazu temples and assembly halls are mainly concentrated in districts with historically large Chinese populations such as Districts 1, 5, 6, 11, and Go Vap. Some of the most prominent Mazu worship sites include:

- Mazu Temple – Quang Trieu Assembly Hall (commonly known as “Chùa Bà” at Cầu Ông Lãnh);
- Mazu Temple – Ôn Lăng Assembly Hall (Quan Âm Pagoda, District 5);
- Mazu Temple – Hà Chương Assembly Hall (Chùa Bà Hà Chương);
- Mazu Temple – Tuệ Thành Assembly Hall (Chùa Bà Chợ Lớn);
- Mazu Temple – Tam Sơn Assembly Hall;
- Mazu Temple – Quỳnh Phủ Assembly Hall (Chùa Bà Hải Nam);
- Mazu Temple – Quần Tân Assembly Hall (Chùa Bà Thiên Hậu);
- Mazu Temple – formerly known as Thất Phủ Thiên Hậu Cung (Go Vap);

In addition, several other halls such as Nghĩa An Assembly Hall (Chùa Ông), Nghĩa Nhuận Assembly Hall, and Phú Nghĩa Assembly Hall also include Mazu worship within their ritual practices.

Although these temples and assembly halls differ in terms of architectural scale and decorative style, they all serve as spiritual centers for the Chinese diaspora. These sacred sites play a vital role in preserving community cohesion, maintaining traditional customs, and sustaining the identity of Chinese folk beliefs across generations in Ho Chi Minh City.

### 2.2. Similarities in Mazu Worship among the Chinese Communities in Hoi An and Ho Chi Minh City

A comparative analysis reveals several significant similarities in the practice of Mazu worship between the two major Chinese communities in Hoi An and Ho Chi Minh City, highlighting the enduring presence and cultural integration of this belief system in Vietnam.

(1) Worship spaces and Mazu’s hierarchical position within the temple pantheon

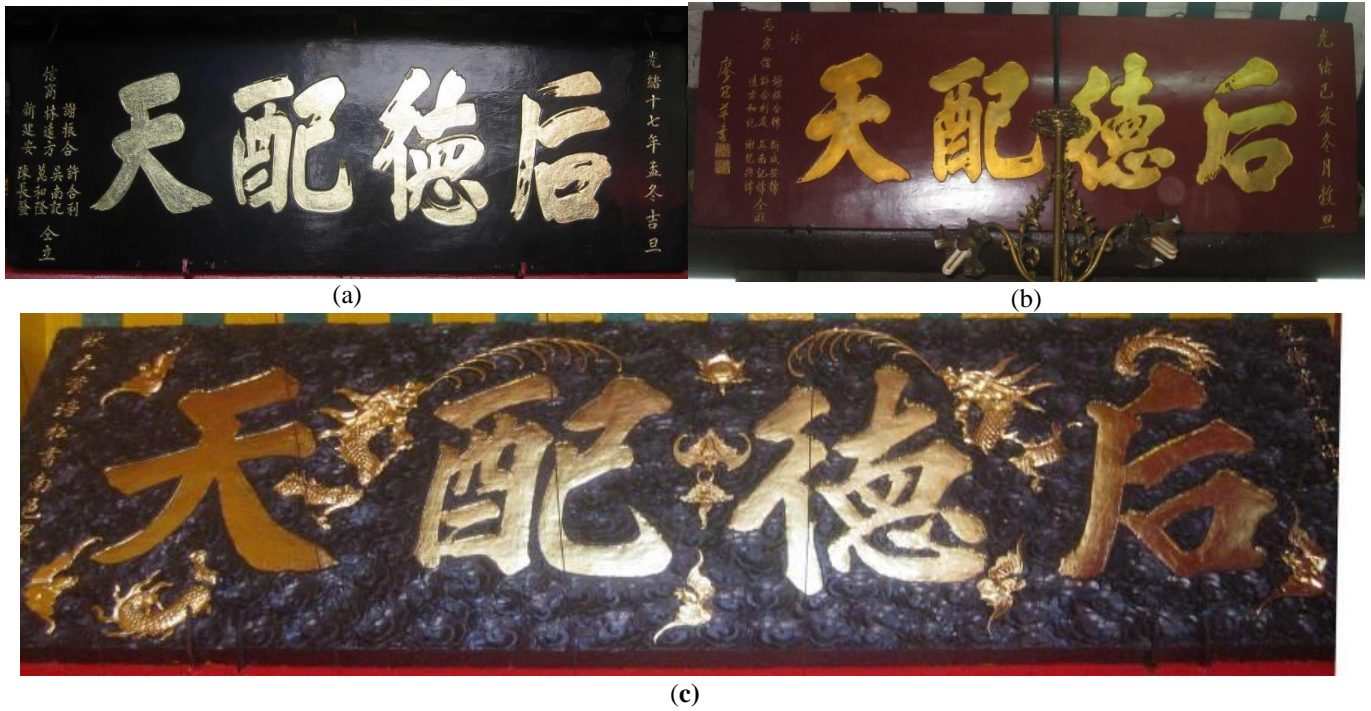
In both Hoi An and Ho Chi Minh City, Mazu is venerated either as the principal deity (zhushen 主神) or as an auxiliary deity (peizhu 配祀). When serving as the main goddess, her altar is placed centrally in the main hall (zhengdian 正殿), symbolizing her supreme spiritual authority. In the case of ancillary worship, Mazu is positioned on either the left or right wing altars but still within a highly respected sacred space. She is often worshipped alongside deities such as Caishen (Tài Bạch Tinh Quân) and Jinhua Nainai (Kim Hoa nương nương), as observed in Fukien Assembly Hall (Hoi An), and Tue Thanh and Quang Trieu Assembly Halls (Ho Chi Minh City).

Architecturally, these temples and assembly halls are typically located in densely populated urban centers, near rivers or main thoroughfares, enhancing accessibility for worship and community gatherings. Both localities display a consistent Chinese traditional architectural style, with spatial layouts in the shape of “口” (kou) or “國” (guo), featuring an open-air courtyard (tianjing 天井) at the center.

(2) Inscriptions and ritual objects honoring Mazu’s divine virtues

Both cities preserve ritual plaques (hoành phi) and couplets (liễn đối) with similar or identical Chinese inscriptions. The phrase “後德配天” (Hòu dé pèi tiān – “Her virtue equals Heaven”) appears in multiple sites, including Fukien and Trung Hoa Assembly Halls (Hoi An) and On Lang Assembly Hall (Ho Chi Minh City). Likewise, “海國慈航” (Hǎiguó cíháng – “Her mercy guides ships in the vast ocean”) is found in Fukien Assembly Hall (Hoi An) and On Lang Assembly Hall (Ho Chi Minh City). These inscriptions extol Mazu’s compassion, spiritual power, and protective role over the Chinese diaspora.

Spirit tablets in Hà Chương, Ôn Lăng (Ho Chi Minh City), and the Fukien and Trung Hoa Halls (Hoi An) bear imperial-style honorifics, such as “護國庇民太后元君” (Imperial Bestowal of ‘Supreme Lady Who Protects the Nation and Shelters the People’). The stone stele erected in 1871 at Hà Chương Temple notes: “Mazu helped the nation and saved its people and thus deserves eternal veneration; her fame has shone brightly across the seas for over a thousand years since the Song dynasty...”



(Source: Vo Thi Anh Tuyet, 2023, 2024)

**Fig 3, 4 and 5:** Horizontal Plaque Inscription “后德配天” (Hậu đức phối thiên – “Her Virtue Equals Heaven”): (a) Chinese Assembly Hall, (b) Fujian Assembly Hall (Hoi An), (c) On Lang Assembly Hall (Ho Chi Minh City)

### 3. Ritual paraphernalia and representations of maritime legend

Model boats (shunfeng chuan 順風船) are a shared element in both regions, symbolizing Mazu’s protection over sea voyages. All three Mazu-worshipping assembly halls in Hoi An display such boats, as do Hà Chương, Tue Thanh, and Thát Phủ Temples (Gò Vấp) in Ho Chi Minh City. These models are often adorned with flags bearing the inscription “普度眾生” (“To save all beings”) and used in processions

during Mazu’s birthday festival.

Both regions preserve ritual tablets, stele, and reliefs that depict Mazu rescuing ships in distress—a popular theme in Southeast Asian Mazu art. For instance, Tuệ Thành Hall houses a 1988 stele titled “The Legend of Mazu” (天后傳說), similar in content to tablets at Trung Hoa Assembly Hall (Hoi An) (Li, T., & Nguyen, C. T. (Eds.), 1999) <sup>[10]</sup>. Such iconography reflects not only the religious narrative but also the diasporic memory of Chinese migrants crossing the seas.



(Source: Vo Thi Anh Tuyet, 2023, 2024)

**Fig 6, 7:** The Altar of Mazu at the Phuc Kien Assembly Hall in Hoi An and the On Lang Assembly Hall in Ho Chi Minh City

### 4. Ritual and festival activities dedicated to Mazu

Daily worship at these temples continues to attract local devotees and visitors. Major ritual events occur during lunar holidays such as the 1st and 15th of each month, the Lantern Festival (15th of the first month), Ghost Festival (15th of the seventh month), Double Ninth (9th of the ninth month),

Winter Solstice, and most significantly, Mazu’s birthday on the 23rd day of the third lunar month.

Elaborate festivals are held in both locations, with Tuệ Thành Hall (Ho Chi Minh City) and Fukien Hall (Hoi An) serving as prominent centers. Rituals include incense offerings, recitations of supplication texts (chúc vãn), lion dances,

Teochew and Cantonese opera, and communal charity activities such as lantern auctions, scholarship donations, and rice distribution to the poor. In the past, celebrations lasted several days, including Mazu parades through the streets with music and festive crowds. Today, while these events are more localized, their spiritual and communal significance remains deeply rooted in cultural life.

### 2.3. Differences in Mazu Worship between the Chinese Communities in Hoi An and Ho Chi Minh City

In addition to notable similarities, Mazu worship in Hoi An and Ho Chi Minh City also reveals significant differences, shaped by distinct local contexts, community dynamics, and

historical developments.

#### First, in terms of scale and number of worship sites

Ho Chi Minh City has a considerably higher number of temples and assembly halls dedicated to Mazu than Hoi An. These sites are often grand in scale, richly decorated, and located within densely populated Chinese neighborhoods such as District 5. In contrast, Hoi An preserves only three major Mazu worship sites—Fujian, Chinese, and Quang Trieu assembly halls—concentrated within the old town. While more modest in size, these halls possess exceptional architectural and historical value.

**Table 1:** Thien Hau Temples and Assembly Halls in Ho Chi Minh City and Hoi An

Location	Heritage Site	Founder Community
Ho Chi Minh City	1. That Phu Thien Hau Palace	That Phu
	2. Thien Hau Temple – Quang Trieu Assembly Hall	Guangdong
	3. Thien Hau Temple	Guangdong
	4. On Lang Assembly Hall	Fujian (Tuyền Châu Prefecture)
	5. Thien Hau Temple – Ha Chuong Assembly Hall	Fujian (Chương Châu Prefecture)
	6. Thien Hau Temple – Tue Thanh Assembly Hall	Guangdong (Guangzhou Prefecture)
	7. Thien Hau Temple – Tam Son Assembly Hall	Fujian (Phúc Châu Prefecture)
	8. Thien Hau Temple – Quynh Phu Assembly Hall	Hainan (Quỳnh Châu Prefecture)
	9. Thien Hau Temple – Quan Tan Assembly Hall	Hakka (Khách Gia)
	10. That Phu Thien Hau Temple	That Phu
Hoi An	1. Chinese Assembly Hall	Five Bangs (Ngũ bang)
	2. Phuc Kien Assembly Hall	Fujian
	3. Quang Trieu Assembly Hall	Guangdong

(Source: Compiled by Author, 2024)

#### Second, regarding pantheon integration and ritual statuary

Due to the more diverse pantheon of deities worshipped at Chinese temples in Ho Chi Minh City compared to Hoi An, Mazu (Thiên Hậu) in the former is often venerated alongside numerous other deities such as the Chief God of Blessings and Virtue (Phúc Đức Chính Thần), the God of Wealth (Tài Bạch Tinh Quân), Lady Kim Hoa (Kim Hoa Nương Nương), Lady Dragon Mother (Long Mẫu Nương Nương), and the God of Literature and Civil Service Examinations (Văn Xương Đế Quân). In contrast, in Hoi An, Mazu is typically worshipped in conjunction with the God of Wealth, Lady Kim Hoa, Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva (Quan Âm Bồ Tát), the Ancestral Founders (Tiền hiền), and the Six Princes of the Lu Clan (Lục Tánh Vương Gia). The presence of Mazu worshipped alongside Tiền hiền in the Chinese Assembly Hall and the Lục Tánh Vương Gia in the Fujian Assembly Hall reflects a distinctive characteristic of Chinese assembly halls in Hoi An. The Lục Tánh Vương Gia are six generals of Min (Fujian) origin, loyal to the Ming dynasty, who resisted the Qing takeover and died in battle while supporting the "anti-Qing, pro-Ming" movement (Hoi An Center for Cultural Heritage Management, 2008) <sup>[11]</sup>.

The veneration of the Thousand-Mile Eye (Thiên Lý Nhân) and the Wind-Following Ear (Thuận Phong Nhĩ) is another unique feature of Mazu worship in Hoi An, as compared to Ho Chi Minh City. Each assembly hall in Hoi An typically houses at least four statues: the Fujian Assembly Hall contains six, while both the Chinese and Quang Trieu Assembly Halls house four statues each. Some of these statues are particularly large and distinctive, such as the pair of wooden statues placed on either side of the main altar

entrance at the Fujian Assembly Hall. Each statue measures approximately 1.8 meters in height and 70 centimeters in width.

#### Third, in ceremonial practices and festivals

Mazu festivals in Ho Chi Minh City are generally more elaborate and diverse. In addition to Mazu's birthday (23rd day of the 3rd lunar month), some temples observe rituals such as the Ascension Festival, the Opening Seal Ceremony (28th day of the 12th lunar month), and the practice of borrowing money from Mazu for prosperity. In contrast, Hoi An's ceremonies are typically more intimate and community-centered, focusing on offerings and charitable acts during Mazu's birthday. In addition to the main rituals commemorating Mazu's birth on the 23rd day of the third lunar month and her ascension on the 9th day of the ninth lunar month, the Thiên Hậu Temple at the Tue Thanh Assembly Hall (Hội quán Tuệ Thành) also holds a special seal-opening (khai ấn) ceremony on the 28th day of the twelfth lunar month (Tran, H. L., 2007) <sup>[12]</sup>. Among all Mazu temples in Southern Vietnam, this is the only site where such a ritual is performed. Furthermore, the Chinese community in Ho Chi Minh City maintains a custom of "borrowing money" from Mazu during the Lantern Festival (Tết Nguyên Tiêu), in the hope of securing good fortune in business. Notably, at the Thiên Hậu Temple (also known as the Temple of the Holy Mother – Miếu Thánh Mẫu) in Ho Chi Minh City, Bà Chúa Xứ—a Vietnamese local goddess—has been incorporated into the altar and is worshipped alongside Mazu.

#### Fourth, in terms of cultural adaptation and localization

In Ho Chi Minh City, the incorporation of Vietnamese

elements is seen in practices such as worshipping the Vietnamese deity Ba Chua Xu alongside Mazu, indicating syncretic integration of local spiritual traditions. In Hoi An, although traditional Chinese rituals are well-preserved, many aspects of worship—such as altar layout, costume, and ceremonial language—have undergone Vietnamese localization, reflecting a deeper cultural assimilation over time.

### **Fifth, in the functions and nomenclature of religious institutions**

Worship sites in Ho Chi Minh City are commonly referred to with the compound term “temple–assembly hall” (e.g., Mazu Temple – Tue Thanh Assembly Hall), and are often simply called “temples” (mieu), emphasizing their religious function. In contrast, Hoi An’s institutions are usually referred to only as “assembly halls” (hoi quan) or “pagodas” (chua), highlighting their multifunctional roles not only as places of worship but also as community centers, trade hubs, and cultural heritage sites. This distinction in naming and institutional role represents a key difference between the two urban Chinese communities.

## **3. General Reflections**

### **3.1. Mazu Worship as a Distinctive Cultural Symbol of the Chinese Community**

According to Chinese folklore, Mazu (天后聖母), whose real name was Lin Mo (林默) and commonly referred to as Mo Niang (默娘), was born on the 23rd day of the third lunar month in the year 960, during the reign of Emperor Taizu of the Song dynasty, on Meizhou Island in Fujian Province. Legend has it that she did not cry at birth, a sign of divine presence. From an early age, Mo Niang exhibited extraordinary intelligence, compassion, and moral integrity. At the age of 13, she was taught esoteric Taoist practices by a hermit; by 15, she had secluded herself in the mountains for spiritual cultivation; and at 16, she acquired a magical copper talisman, granting her the power to calm storms and rescue shipwrecked sailors. In 978, she passed away at the age of 28, leaving behind a legacy of miraculous deeds. After her death, successive Chinese dynasties—Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing—bestowed 28 posthumous imperial titles upon her, recognizing her sacred role in maritime life (Huynh, N. T., *et al.*, 2006) <sup>[13]</sup>. Mazu is revered as the guardian goddess of seafarers, merchants, and maritime traders (Ngo, D. T., 2010) <sup>[14]</sup>.

In Vietnam, especially in two major Chinese-settled areas—Ho Chi Minh City and Hoi An—Mazu worship was introduced and preserved early on. As the Chinese community sought to build their livelihoods in new lands, they brought with them their cultural traditions, among which Mazu worship occupied a central place. In their assembly halls and temples, although multiple deities are venerated, Mazu and Guan Yu (Lord Guan) are the most prominent figures and are usually enshrined in the main sanctuary. From a spiritual and religious perspective, Mazu worship is one of the most widely practiced and trusted belief systems among the Chinese community (Ngo, H. T., 2006) <sup>[15]</sup>.

### **3.2. The Role of Mazu Worship in Defining the Functions of Temples and Assembly Halls**

The Chinese assembly hall (會館/會館), or “assembly hall”

in English, is a unique communal institution established by Chinese immigrants based on regional or dialectal affiliations. These halls served not only as venues for community gatherings but also functioned as administrative centers, repositories of communal documents and assets, and hubs for religious and social activities (Huynh, N. D., 2005) <sup>[16]</sup>. According to scholar Dao Trinh Nhat (Dao, T. N., 2016) <sup>[17]</sup>, Chinese assembly halls in southern Vietnam and Southeast Asia more broadly fulfilled a range of roles: they operated as extended families, clan associations, trade guilds, and even informal judicial forums. In Hoi An, these assembly halls held both administrative and religious functions. As the center of a dialect-based community, the assembly hall also took responsibility for funerals, managing schools, hospitals, cemeteries, and resolving internal disputes as well as conflicts between the hall and the broader Chinese community. Assembly halls were often located within existing temples (Li, T., & Nguyen, C. T. (Eds.), 1999) <sup>[18]</sup>. This is clearly evidenced in the 1741 (Hoi An Research Group, 2014) <sup>[19]</sup> stone stele titled “Regulations of the Maritime Trade Assembly Hall” (Dương Thương hội quán công nghị điều lệ), which states: “Within the assembly hall, we revere and worship Mazu (Thiên Hậu Thánh Mẫu).” This affirms that from its inception, Mazu worship was closely tied to the institutional role of the assembly hall. These spaces were thus both centers of governance and sites of annual rituals that fostered community cohesion.

### **3.3. The Sacred Space of Mazu Worship: Symbolism and Material Testimony**

At Mazu-worshipping sites in both Ho Chi Minh City and Hoi An, the goddess is typically enshrined at the center of the main sanctuary in a solemn and dignified setting. Her image is often that of a benevolent, gentle Chinese woman, reflecting vernacular iconography. This popularization of her image facilitates a closer connection between deity and devotees and emphasizes her role as a compassionate protector.

The worship space is richly decorated with ritual objects such as altars, stone steles, incense burners, bells and drums, reliefs, and boat models. Above and around the altars hang horizontal plaques and couplets extolling Mazu’s virtues. Common honorifics include:

- 天后聖母 (Heavenly Empress and Holy Mother), found on embroidered altar cloths, incense burners at the Quang Trieu Assembly Hall, and plaques in the Fujian and Chinese assembly halls;
- 天后元君 (Heavenly Empress Sovereign), as inscribed on the bronze bell in the main sanctuary of the Chinese Assembly Hall;
- 天后宮 (Heavenly Empress Palace), prominently displayed on two plaques in the Fujian and Chinese Assembly Halls, and repeatedly cited in the aforementioned 1741 stele.

Some scholars argue that the term “Palace” (宮) originally referred to the entire temple structure but later came to denote specifically the main sanctuary housing the principal deity (Tran, H. L., 2005) <sup>[20]</sup>. Other epithets include 天后娘娘 (Heavenly Empress Lady), seen on the stele in the rear veranda of the Fujian Assembly Hall.

These artifacts are not only evidence of religious devotion but

are also of high artistic, sculptural, and historical value, forming an aesthetically rich and culturally significant ritual landscape.

### 3.4. Mazu Worship as a Site of Sino-Vietnamese Cultural Exchange

Though originating in China, Mazu worship has undergone significant cultural adaptation in Vietnam, especially through its integration with local religious practices, notably the Vietnamese Mother Goddess cult. The shared symbolism of a female protective deity facilitated the acceptance of Mazu among the Vietnamese population. As a result, Mazu became not only a guardian of maritime trade for the Chinese community but also a deity of prosperity, fertility, and childbearing, often equated with Bodhisattva Guanyin—a savior figure in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

This transformation illustrates the dynamic process of Sino-Vietnamese cultural interaction. In new cultural contexts, Mazu evolved from a maritime goddess into a deity associated with commerce and fertility, worshipped by both Chinese and Vietnamese devotees (Ngo, H. T., 2006) <sup>[21]</sup>. In both Ho Chi Minh City and Hoi An, many Vietnamese households and religious institutions also include Mazu in their pantheon.

Mazu's role has expanded to encompass a range of spiritual functions. She is revered for blessing pregnant women, protecting children, and promoting general well-being—paralleling the functions of local birth goddesses (Bà Mụ) (Ngo, D. T., 2012) <sup>[22]</sup>. In many temples, Mazu is venerated alongside Guanyin Bodhisattva, either in adjacent altars or in “Buddha in front, deity behind” configurations. All three Mazu-worshipping assembly halls in Hoi An feature such pairing. In Ho Chi Minh City, similar arrangements are found in temples like the On Lang Assembly Hall, Nhi Phu Temple, Ha Chuong Assembly Hall, and Nghia Nhuan Assembly Hall. In some cases, Guanyin is worshipped outdoors or through images hung on interior walls.

Mazu is also often worshipped with other female deities, such as Bà Mụ (Goddess of Childbirth), the Five Elemental Goddesses (Ngũ Hành Nương Nương), the Nine Heavens Mysterious Woman (Cửu Thiên Huyền Nữ), and fairy maidens (Tiên Cô), forming a complex pantheon of feminine divinity. Consequently, worshippers—especially women—frequent these temples in greater numbers than men, particularly during festival days and ritual events.

Today, Mazu temples and assembly halls in Ho Chi Minh City and Hoi An function not only as centers of Chinese religious life but also as inclusive spiritual spaces for Vietnamese devotees. They stand as powerful symbols of cultural hybridity and mutual respect between two ethnic communities. The rituals held therein are more than religious performances; they are integral to the cultural and social life of heritage cities like Hoi An and multicultural metropolises like Ho Chi Minh City.

## 4. Conclusion

### 1. Mazu Worship as a Cultural and Historical Emblem of Chinese Migration to Vietnam

The worship of Mazu represents one of the most distinctive and enduring expressions of Chinese spiritual culture throughout the migration and settlement process in Vietnam. The establishment of Mazu temples and assembly halls in urban centers such as Hoi An and Saigon–Ho Chi Minh City

not only reflects religious devotion but also marks the deep-rooted presence of the Chinese community in the historical and sociocultural evolution of Vietnam. From an initial state of “diaspora in a foreign land,” the Chinese gradually integrated into local society, establishing a significant economic and cultural position in their new homeland. Mazu worship thus became a spiritual bridge and a symbol of ethnic identity, leaving an indelible imprint on the settlement history of Chinese communities along the Southeast Asian coast. From a historical-anthropological perspective, Mazu belief plays a vital role in preserving collective memory and reinforcing the identity of Chinese diasporic groups (Tan, C. B., 1983) <sup>[23]</sup>.

### 2. Mazu Temples and Assembly Halls as Comprehensive Religious–Social Institutions

Chinese temples and assembly halls are not merely religious structures; they function as multifaceted community institutions that connect spiritual life with social organization. The centrality of Mazu worship in these institutions reveals a profound link between religious belief and social structure, serving as places of worship, community gatherings, education, commerce, and cultural preservation. Historical artifacts such as stone steles, inscribed plaques, statuary, and honorific epithets not only hold cultural–historical value but also reflect the tightly knit organizational structure, rich ideological content, and the long-standing continuity of Chinese guild systems from the 17th century to the present.

### 3. The Diverse Expressions of Mazu Worship in Hoi An and Ho Chi Minh City: A Reflection of Urban Histories

From the perspective of religious anthropology, Mazu worship practices in Hoi An and Ho Chi Minh City exhibit significant differences in scale, ritual structure, and sociocultural meaning. Hoi An, as a heritage town, preserves a more solemn, traditional form of worship, where Mazu assembly halls function as spaces of sacred memory and cultural continuity. In contrast, Ho Chi Minh City—an expansive, multi-ethnic commercial metropolis—presents Mazu worship in a more communal, large-scale, and syncretic form, integrating Vietnamese cultural elements into Chinese religious practice. These variations underscore the adaptability and resilience of Mazu belief across divergent urban contexts without suggesting conflict but rather cultural dynamism.

### 4. Mazu Worship as a Manifestation of Sino–Vietnamese Cultural Syncretism

One of the most salient findings of this research is the high level of cultural interaction between Mazu worship and local Vietnamese belief systems. In Vietnam, Mazu is not maintained as an isolated religious entity but is often “folkified” and venerated alongside Guanyin Bodhisattva and indigenous female deities such as Ba Mu, the Five Elemental Ladies (Ngu Hanh Nuong Nuong), and Cuu Thien Huyen Nu. This form of religious syncretism exemplifies Vietnam’s flexible and inclusive spiritual landscape, where foreign and local traditions coalesce. Once solely a maritime guardian for the Chinese, Mazu has evolved into a benevolent deity associated with fertility, prosperity, and compassion, widely venerated by both Chinese and Vietnamese populations.

Ritual practices such as the “Buddha-before-Goddess” format and the pairing of Buddhist and folk ceremonies throughout the lunar calendar further illustrate this rich, interactive religious ecosystem.

### 5. Safeguarding Mazu Worship: A Heritage Preservation Imperative in the Modern Era

In the context of globalization and rapid urbanization, Mazu worship stands not only as an integral component of the Chinese community’s intangible cultural heritage but also as a shared cultural asset of historic cities such as Hoi An and Ho Chi Minh City. The preservation, academic study, and promotion of Mazu temples contribute to maintaining cultural identity within increasingly modernized urban environments and play a crucial role in developing sustainable models that integrate culture, tourism, and community. This presents an important lesson for local governments, scholars, and civic groups in engaging with heritage: to not only conserve but also revitalize and disseminate heritage value within contemporary and future urban spaces. Mazu worship today is no longer solely “a heritage of a single community,” but, in alignment with UNESCO’s vision, part of “the heritage of humanity” (UNESCO, 2003) <sup>[24]</sup>.

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