



## THE INFLUENCE OF HOUSEHOLD DEITY BELIEFS ON THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF THE CHINESE COMMUNITY IN BINH DUONG

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### Abstract:

This article not only systemizes the common household deity beliefs and forms of worship but also analyzes the role of these beliefs in the spiritual life of the Chinese community in Binh Duong. Based on ethnographic data and fieldwork conducted in Thu Dau Mot City, Thuan An City, and Dau Tieng District, the article reveals that the household deity system of the Chinese community in Binh Duong combines traditional Chinese religious elements with adaptations to the local context. The deities commonly worshipped in families include Kuan Yin, Kuan Ti, Tsai Shen (God of Wealth), and Earth God... Furthermore, influenced by urbanization, modern life, and changes in the perceptions of younger generations, the form and role of these beliefs are undergoing significant transformations in the way worship is practiced, reflecting the adaptation of the Chinese community to modern society.

**Keywords:** Chinese community; Binh Duong; household deity beliefs; influence; spiritual life

### 1. Introduction

Household deity belief is an important part of the spiritual life of the Chinese, reflecting the relationship between humans and the supernatural world, as well as the cultural traditions of the community. During their settlement in the new land of Binh Duong, the

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Chinese community in Binh Duong has maintained and developed their household deity belief system, with some adaptations to suit local conditions.

The worship of household deities not only expresses respect for ancestors and spirits but also contributes to maintaining cultural identity and cohesion within the community. However, in the modern context, while rituals and worship practices are still maintained, they are also facing many changes due to the influence of urbanization, cultural exchange, and shifts in the perceptions among generations, especially the younger generation, which also partly affects the perceptions of the middle-aged group. Therefore, surveying and analyzing the influence of household deity beliefs on the spiritual life of the Chinese community in Binh Duong not only contributes to identifying the traditional cultural values that are being preserved but also helps to better understand the role of these beliefs in maintaining the cultural identity of ethnic minorities in the current development context.

## 2. Literature Review

The household deity beliefs of the Chinese people in Vietnam have attracted the attention of several scholars in recent years. Works by authors such as the Binh Duong Association of Historical Sciences (2012), Nguyen (2018), and Doan (2020) all affirm that the belief system of the Chinese people has a syncretic nature, combining Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, while also being strongly influenced by local folk elements. Among these, the worship of deities within the family, such as ancestors, the God of Wealth, the Earth God, and the Kitchen God... is considered an important part of their religious life.

The work *The Chinese People in Binh Duong* (Binh Duong Association of Historical Sciences, 2012) mentions the worship space within the family and systematizes some typical forms of worship. Besides this, in-depth works or those with a broader scope of research, such as those by Chamberlain (1987), Huynh (2012), Tran (2015), and Pham (2017), focus more on systematizing types of beliefs in general. Meanwhile, the work of Huynh & Nguyen (2024) makes a comparative correlation with the household deity beliefs of the Vietnamese.

There is still very little specific research on the household deity beliefs of the Chinese people in Binh Duong, especially regarding the influence of these beliefs on their spiritual life. Previous studies have mainly focused on the communal belief system along with large-scale festivals. Meanwhile, the religious life within the family, which most clearly reflects the continuation of culture across generations, has not yet been fully investigated.

## 3. Research Methodology

This study primarily employs qualitative methods to explore the worship of household deities and its significance in the spiritual life of the Chinese community. Techniques include literature synthesis and analysis; participant observation, with notes on altar

arrangements, ritual timing, and practice contexts; and in-depth interviews with Chinese families, focusing on worship rituals, beliefs about household deities, their spiritual role, and changes over time.

To clarify the system and influence of household deity beliefs on the spiritual life of the Chinese people in Binh Duong, we conducted fieldwork from 2022 to 2025 in the areas of Thu Dau Mot City, Thuan An City, and Dau Tieng District. We chose these research sites because they have a relatively large and well-established Chinese community with a long history of settlement and the maintenance of many traditional religious activities. Additionally, these areas have many important places of worship for the Chinese people, clearly reflecting the connection between household deity beliefs and the cultural life of the community. Surveying these locations helps the researcher gain a more comprehensive understanding of the transformation and preservation of household deity beliefs of the Chinese people in Binh Duong in the contemporary social context.

In addition, we also employ the comparative method to examine the worship of household deities among the Chinese and the Vietnamese in the context of co-residence and cultural interaction, as well as the generational differences in perceptions of household deity beliefs within the Chinese community.

#### **4. Research Objectives**

To clarify the role and influence of household deity beliefs on the spiritual life of the Chinese community in Binh Duong in the current context. This includes surveying the current practices of household deity worship among Chinese families in Binh Duong, such as the deities worshipped, the forms of worship, and the spatial arrangement of altars. The study also aims to analyze the role of these beliefs in reinforcing moral values, preserving traditions, and fostering cohesion among family and community members. Additionally, it examines how household deity beliefs have transformed in the context of urbanization, modernization, and cultural integration.

#### **5. Research Results**

##### **5.1. Definition and Role of Belief Systems**

In the scientific research community, the terms “*belief*” and “*religion*” often coexist, and many argue for a clear distinction between these two concepts. The first approach considers religion as a higher level than belief and independent of it; the second approach does not differentiate but collectively refers to them as religion, within which distinctions are made such as: folk religion, primitive religion, local religion, etc. (Phan, 2018, pp. 24-25).

Western researchers often do not distinguish between the concepts of religion and belief. Their concept of belief is often understood as “*popular religion*”, which can be seen as common forms of religion in a simple manner, originating from customs and practices,

and not necessarily following a convention or orthodox path (Dang, 2012, pp. 89). If understood in the second approach, it is heavily influenced by Western theories, making it difficult to align with the philosophy of Eastern spiritual life. In this study, we also agree with the first view, considering religion and belief as two independent concepts, with religion at a higher level than belief.

The theoretical foundation of this study is primarily based on Malinowski's functionalist theory, which is applied to analyze the role of household deity worship as a factor contributing to the maintenance of cultural and moral stability within the family and the Chinese community. The term function, as used by Malinowski, refers to the satisfaction of basic biological needs of individuals through cultural means. According to him, every culture, in its process of development, forms a system of balance and stability, in which each component of the culture performs a distinct function. If any of these balancing elements is eliminated, the entire cultural system of the ethnic group risks falling into decline and disintegration. Malinowski also asserted that traditional culture is a collective adaptive response to the surrounding environment. Therefore, if tradition is destroyed, social organization will inevitably collapse (Faculty of Anthropology, 2013, p. 43).

Clearly defining the role of beliefs, closely linked to spiritual life, they significantly influence and govern many human activities. All beliefs and religions have psychological and social functions. The psychological function is to satisfy human needs, a place to place faith in the help of supernatural forces. The social function is to reinforce rules, moral standards, and maintain the cohesion of community members (Faculty of Anthropology, 2013, pp. 205-206).

The beliefs of the Chinese community can be divided into two groups: community beliefs and household deity beliefs. Community beliefs are forms of worship and spiritual practices that are collective in nature. The Chinese people have established many places of worship to venerate their various deities. Household deity beliefs or Family deity beliefs are the deities worshipped within the family, and are a part of folk beliefs, often informal (non-religious) but very common and enduring within the community. Beliefs within the family include ancestor worship and the worship of deities who protect the household. Within the scope of this research, we will only focus on understanding the household deity beliefs of the Chinese community in Binh Duong.

## **5.2. The Household Deity Belief System of the Chinese People in Binh Duong**

In general, the household deity beliefs of the Chinese people in Binh Duong are very diverse, which partly reflects their worldview. If you enter a Chinese's home, you will first encounter the deities outside the house, including: Door Gods, Tian Guan Ci Fu, and the Earth God at the Doorway. Inside the house, you will find a main worship space. In the center are the Buddhas, Kuan Yin; on either side are the personal guardian deities, most commonly Kuan Ti, the Purple Planet and the Nine Heavens Mysterious Woman. Next to this is the ancestral altar, and lower down, near the ground, is the altar of the God of Wealth and the Earth God. Finally, there is the kitchen with the altar of the Kitchen

God. In addition, *"worshipping what one believes in"* is also a recent trend among the Chinese people in Binh Duong. Besides continuing traditions, they may also integrate the worship of deities they particularly revere, such as Buddha, Pak Tai, Emperor of the North, Ben Tou Gong. However, this section will only present the common forms of worship within Chinese families in Binh Duong that we have recorded.

### **5.2.1. Worship in the front area of the house**

#### **a. Door Gods**

Door Gods or deities who guard the door are usually placed on either side of the entrance of a Chinese temple to guard against evil spirits entering. The Chinese people believe that these two door gods are Qin Shubao and Hu Jingde (Yuchi Gong), two generals of Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty (Maspero, 2000, pp. 208-209). Today, we can easily see images of these two generals when visiting Chinese temples (except for Buddhist establishments, which have their own door guardians). In Binh Duong, the custom of worshipping Door Gods is very rare, mainly appearing among the Teochew dialect group, but in the form of wall-mounted incense bowls on either side of the main door. The Chinese people simply light incense daily; there are no offerings of food or other items. However, the form of two wall-mounted incense holders hung in front of the doors of the Hokkien people has a different interpretation: if looking at the house from the outside, the incense bowl on the right is for worshipping heavenly soldiers and the incense bowl on the left is for worshipping wandering spirits, with the right one being higher than the left.

#### **b. Jade Emperor and Heavenly Official Bestows Blessings**

The Jade Emperor is the supreme deity, ruling the entire celestial realm and all the gods and is highly revered by the Chinese people. The belief in the Jade Emperor originates from the worship of nature, specifically the sky (Doan, 2020, pp. 48).

The custom of worshipping Heavenly Official Bestows Blessings (Tian Guan Ci Fu) is actually the worship of the Three Great Emperors or Three Emperors Gong. These include: the Heavenly Official - who bestows happiness; the Earthly Official - who forgives sins; and the Water Official - who resolves calamities. The belief in the Three Officials originates from the worship of Heaven, Earth and Water, a personification stemming from old Taoist rituals dating back to the Yellow Turban Rebellion. The sick often repented their sins to Heaven, Earth and Water (Maspero, 2000, pp. 280). The Chinese people often have the custom of making offerings on major holidays: the 15th day of the first lunar month (Shangyuan Festival), the seventh lunar month (Zhongyuan Festival) and the tenth lunar month (Xiayuan Festival), corresponding to the birthdays of the Heavenly, Earthly, and Water Officials. The most important is the first festival; it is said that on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, the Heavenly Official descends to the mortal realm to judge people's blessings (Huynh & Nguyen, 2024, pp. 162). Therefore, in front of Chinese homes, there is often an altar to Tian Guan Ci Fu, signifying the prayer for blessings and peace.

The Chinese people in Binh Duong do not set up Jade Emperor altars in their homes, but every year on the 9th day of the first lunar month, the Jade Emperor's feast day, it is an important occasion for them to pray for peace and prosperity. Tian Guan Ci Fu is usually worshipped on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month, with offerings mainly consisting of fruit and fresh flowers. In reality, some Chinese families worship Tian Guan separately, while others worship him together with the Jade Emperor. Therefore, on the Jade Emperor's feast day, they often set up an altar in front of their house or make offerings directly at the Tian Guan Ci Fu altar. They believe that Tian Guan Ci Fu is an intermediary deity who bestows blessings according to the Jade Emperor's decree, so worshipping them together reflects the connection between the two deities in their faith.

Many Chinese people easily confuse the altar of Heavenly Official Bestows Blessings with the belief in the Jade Emperor. These two beliefs are not entirely the same but are closely related. The Jade Emperor is the supreme deity, ruling the entire celestial realm, while the Heavenly Official is only in charge of bestowing blessings, being one of the three Great Emperors.

### **5.2.2. Worshipping inside the house**

#### **a. Kuan Yin**

Also known as the Buddha Mother, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, the Buddha Mother Kuan Yin, is a Bodhisattva of Buddhism and folk beliefs, highly revered by the Chinese people. She is the embodiment of compassion, rescuing from suffering and disaster and protecting people, especially women and children. There are many different theories about the origin of Kuan Yin; one theory suggests that she was originally a male Bodhisattva but transformed into a female Bodhisattva upon entering China. Another story recounts that she was the third daughter of King Miaoshan (Tran, 2015, pp. 189-190). The most common form of Kuan Yin worshipped by the majority of Chinese people is a white or wooden statue of Kuan Yin, seated on a lotus pedestal, holding a vase of holy water. The Kuan Yin altar in the home is often placed in the center of the house, facing the main door. The Chinese people worship Kuan Yin on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month and on the 19th day of the second lunar month (her birthday), with offerings mainly consisting of fruit, fresh flowers, and tea, and no meat.

#### **b. Kuan Ti**

Also known as Guan Gong, Guan Yu, Guan Sheng Di Jun (Saintly Emperor Guan), he was a military general during the Three Kingdoms period. He, along with Liu Bei and Zhang Fei, swore brotherhood, and from then on, he assisted Liu Bei in restoring the Han Dynasty, achieving many feats. The reason Kuan Ti could become a legend is due to various cultural factors throughout history, literary-historical-philosophical traditions, embellished stories, the tradition of hero worship, reverence for spirits and this custom also adopted many cultural elements from other beliefs such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and folk beliefs, so that the image of Kuan Ti gradually transformed

into an omnipotent deity (Le, 2020). The Chinese people worship Kuan Ti as a symbol of integrity, loyalty, and bravery. He is often co-worshipped with two figures, Guan Ping and Zhou Cang, so they are also called the holy trinity. Kuan Ti is worshipped on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month, the 13th day of the first lunar month (anniversary of the Peach Garden Oath), and the 13th day of the fifth lunar month (his birthday). Offerings include fruit, flowers, and incense. On major worship occasions, roasted meat, steamed buns and glutinous rice cakes are added, but no roosters are offered. Businesses light incense every morning, and drink stalls might add a cup of coffee or fruit.

### **c. The Purple Planet**

This is an important deity in Taoism and Eastern spiritual culture. He is considered the central ruler, governing the Purple Palace Enclosure. This belief is linked to astronomy, Taoism and imperial power.

The Great Emperor of the Purple Palace is actually the North Star (Polaris), a fixed star that therefore carries the special significance of imperial authority. Ancient Chinese people conceived of five directions: east, west, south, north and center. Each direction corresponded to a color and a type of sacred creature. The area surrounding the North Star was called the Purple Palace Enclosure, the place where supreme powers resided, the forces that maintained the cosmic order, and this order reflected the virtues of the emperor (Chamberlain, 1987, pp. 62-67).

Chinese emperors often called themselves the Son of Heaven, believing that the order of the universe reflected the order of society. Consequently, the Purple Palace Enclosure became a royal symbol, and the Great Emperor of the Purple Palace also became an important deity. The image of the Great Emperor of the Purple Palace worshipped by the Chinese people is depicted as a child, with one hand holding a sword bearing the Bagua symbol to ward off evil, and the other hand holding the character 正 (zheng), symbolizing righteousness. He sits on a sacred creature called the Bai Ze, which can understand human speech and has knowledge of all things. The Chinese people in Binh Duong also hang pictures of the Purple Emperor in front of their houses, a practice known as “*Purple Emperor Wards off Evil*”.

In principle, the Purple Planet is not considered a Door Gods. This is because the Purple Planet is always hung higher up, never at the lower part of the house. There are the following interpretations: As a star, the Purple Planet is the head of all stars; the Purple Planet governs destiny, has Zuo Fu (Left Aide Star) and You Bi (Right Aide Star), and with the support of Tian Ji (Heavenly Machine), it is the destiny of the Son of Heaven. Therefore, the Purple Planet Tablet hung in front of the house is essentially the deification of the Purple Planet star, accompanied by the words: “*The Purple Planet Direct Influence*”. The meaning is integrity, avoiding bad luck and epidemics. Because great wealth shines upon it, poverty naturally stays away. It has an active meaning, while Door Gods are passive (Personal conversation, DHHB, male, 40 yrs old, Taoist, Ho Chi Minh City, July 18, 2024)

The Purple Planet is worshipped on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month, and on the 18th day of the fourth lunar month (his birthday). Offerings usually include fruit, flowers, and incense.

#### **d. Ancestor worship**

Ancestor worship is a common form of household belief within the Chinese community. This belief is influenced by Confucian ideology and “*sacralized*” under the impact of Taoism and Buddhism (Nguyen, 2018, p. 79). The living have the custom of worshipping the spirits of the deceased to pray for protection and blessings, with the altar serving as a place for ancestors to return and reside. In simpler terms, ancestor worship stems from filial piety, a collection of rituals expressing respect and reminding people of the principle of “*when drinking water, remember the source*”.

The ancestral altar of the Chinese people in Binh Duong is very simple, usually placed at the same level or lower than the deity altar, in the center of the main house. Unlike the Vietnamese, who often display photographs, the Chinese people use only a red ancestral tablet with gold lettering, written in the traditional way from right to left. The system of ancestors worshipped includes:

- 1) Direct ancestors, who are deceased grandparents and parents. Usually, worship extends only to the great-grandfather or grandfather generation, with their full names and dates of death recorded so that descendants remember the anniversary of their passing;
- 2) Lineage ancestors, the founders of the lineage or those with great contributions. There is usually an “*Ancestor Tablet*” inscribed for the worship of the lineage's ancestors; whichever their surname, they worship the ancestor of that lineage.

The Chinese people worship ancestors on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month, with offerings of fruit and fresh flowers. On death anniversaries, more cooked dishes are added; besides remembrance, it's also an occasion for family members to gather. Additionally, the Chinese people light incense daily as a way of remembering their ancestors.

#### **e. The God of Wealth and the Earth God**

The God of Wealth (Tsai Shen) is believed to be the deity who brings wealth and prosperity to people. The purpose of worshipping this deity is to hope for business prosperity, family wealth and peace, and the preservation of property. The name “*Tsai Shen*” is a title and symbol; the system of the God of Wealth among the Chinese people is also very diverse, including the Military God of Wealth group and the civil God of Wealth group; and the *Xie Tsai Shen* (who blesses those who do business through dishonest means)... (Huynh & Nguyen, 2024, pp. 141). The God of Wealth most commonly worshipped by the Chinese people is the superior God of Wealth on Earth.

The Earth God also known as Tu Di Gong, Tu Di Shen, is the deity who governs and protects the land in a certain area. The worship of this deity aims to protect the home, prevent the intrusion of evil spirits, bestow blessings, and support the family in their



business and development. In Chinese beliefs, the origins of the Earth God are diverse and complex. The Earth God is often called Hok Tek Cheng Sin, a more respectful title for this deity. According to the author Dang, a large part of the Chinese community concretizes Hok Tek Cheng Sin into Ben Tou Gong, an important belief in their spiritual life. In addition, the Chinese people also consider the Earth God as one of the Gods of Wealth, a concept originating from traditional agricultural thinking and the philosophy of the Five Elements, in which *"Earth generates Metal"* (land produces gold, silver and wealth) (Dang, 2014). For example, in the homes of the Chinese people, there will be an Earth God altar in front of the house, usually placed close to the ground, with the parallel sentences *"The Earth God at the door receives the God of Wealth"*, thus showing the function of the Earth God in welcoming wealth into the home.

Most Chinese homes in Binh Duong have a shared altar for the God of Wealth and the Earth God. These two deities are considered to have a similar status, which is why they are often worshipped together (Binh Duong Association of Historical Sciences, 2012, pp. 306)

The Chinese people worship the God of Wealth and the Earth God on the 1st and 15th of the lunar month with fruit and flowers. The God of Wealth's feast day, often celebrated on the 10th of the first lunar month instead of the 5th, involves more elaborate offerings (roasted pork, seafood, etc.), especially for businesses, and the adoption of the Vietnamese custom of buying gold for wealth. Some families also observe the Earth God's feast day on the 2nd of the second lunar month with similar offerings at outdoor altars.

#### **f. The Kitchen God**

This is the deity who manages the kitchen and household affairs. The Kitchen God's altar is usually quite simple, often just a small shelf placed in the kitchen, with a red piece of paper or a spirit tablet inscribed *"Determining Fortune Kitchen God"*. Fieldwork results indicate that, in certain locations today, worship practices have become more formalized, reflected in the addition of decorative elements such as parallel couplets or a statue of the Kitchen God on the altar. The Chinese people worship the Kitchen God with the meaning of a guardian deity in the house, recording the merits and faults of family members and reporting to the Jade Emperor at the end of the year. The Chinese people worship the Kitchen God on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month, with offerings of fruit and fresh flowers. The most important worship is on the 23rd day of the twelfth lunar month, the day to see off the Kitchen God to heaven. Offerings on this day may include various sticky rice flour cakes, sweet soup, and a paper crane or a paper horse for him to ride to heaven. This symbolizes the horse carrying the Kitchen God on the ground, and then riding the crane to fly to heaven. (Huynh & Nguyen, 2024, pp. 53).

### **5.3. The Impact of Household Deity Beliefs on the Life of the Chinese Community in Binh Duong**

Beliefs are a vital guide for the spiritual lives of the Chinese people, who trust that living well brings divine blessings, influencing their behavior, lifestyle, and faith. They

maintain traditions, especially household deity worship, which the home helps preserve, reflecting their worldview and connecting generations spiritually within families and the community.

The act of worship alone partly helps the Chinese people feel at ease spiritually; they believe that solemn worship will bring them many blessings. According to a Teochew-origin Chinese person's sharing: *"If you pay attention to houses with altars, they look warmer inside, it feels like being protected. So I still try to preserve this tradition, hoping my family will have more luck."* (Personal conversation, L.C.M, female, 60 yrs old, Restaurant owner, Phu Cuong Ward, Thu Dau Mot City, February 4, 2025).

A typical example is ancestor worship. They always consider filial piety very important, believing that when grandparents and parents pass away, their spirits remain to bless the family. According to a Hokkien-origin Chinese person's sharing: *"For me, ancestor worship is very important. Simply put, without ancestors, there wouldn't be us. Later, when I buy my own house, the first thing I will do is set up an ancestral altar for grandparents and parents."* (Personal conversation, L.P., female, 31 yrs old, Personal import business, Chanh Nghia Ward, Thu Dau Mot City, February 25, 2025).

According to our observations, the offering rituals in Chinese families in Binh Duong have somewhat simplified. Maintaining tradition is still valued, but it is adjusted to suit contemporary socio-economic conditions. All the people we interviewed agreed that *"offering what one eats"* is also a reasonable approach, fitting the socio-economic situation and avoiding waste.

Offerings on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month are simple: fruits and fresh flowers. On deity anniversaries or major holidays, a few cooked dishes may be added, but some principles must be followed, such as vegetarian food for Buddhist deities and no roosters for Kuan Ti... Additionally, the Chinese people in Binh Duong also offer dried goods or canned foods, as they believe that offerings that have been in contact with the deities are imbued with sacredness and they can save or prepare these according to their preferences.

According to a Hokkien-origin Chinese person's sharing: *"Worshipping helps my mind become more peaceful. If worshipping made you rich, there would probably be many rich people."* (Personal conversation, L.N.N, female, 25 yrs old, Office worker, Chanh Nghia Ward, Thu Dau Mot City, December 2, 2023).

According to a Cantonese-speaking Chinese person's sharing: *"There are so many worship days in my house, I have to write them down in a notebook to remember. Now that I don't have as much energy as before, I reduce whatever I can. If we make many offerings and then throw them away, it feels sinful."* (P.H, female, 63 yrs old, Housewife, Chanh Nghia Ward, Thu Dau Mot City, August 19, 2024).

According to a Cantonese-speaking Chinese person's sharing: *"Now there are very few people at home, the children and grandchildren work far away. If we make many offerings, we can't finish eating them, and throwing them away is wasteful; that feels even more sinful."* (Personal conversation, N.H.Y, female, 60 yrs old, Drinks stall owner, Dau Tieng District, February 8, 2025).

The exchange and contact between different cultures is the meeting, sharing, borrowing, and mutual influence between two cultures, which is also the reason for cultural transformation (Pham, 2013, pp. 212-213). It can be seen that when the Chinese community co-resides with the Vietnamese for a long time, Chinese culture has also somewhat changed to become more suitable. For example, in the past, the Chinese people often made offerings to the Kitchen God on the 23rd or 24th of the twelfth lunar month, with the saying: *"Officials third, people fourth, boat people fifth"*, meaning officials offered on the 23rd, commoners on the 24th, and those living on boats on the 25th (Tran, 2016, pp. 32). Through fieldwork surveys in Chinese households living in Binh Duong, nowadays, most of them have chosen the 23rd as the main offering day, popularly known as the day to see off the Kitchen God to heaven. The day to welcome the Kitchen God back is usually on the 4th of the first lunar month, but later, to simplify things, they often welcome him back on New Year's Eve.

Another case is the celebration of the anniversaries of the God of Wealth and the Earth God, which has also changed somewhat. The Chinese often combine the worship of the God of Wealth with the Earth God, as they believe these two deities always go hand in hand in governing wealth and land. Traditionally, the Chinese celebrated the God of Wealth's anniversary on the 5th day of the first lunar month, but later they often celebrate it on the 10th day. The offerings are very solemn, generally including roasted pork, sponge cake, steamed buns (meaning prosperity), seafood (shrimp, crab), fruits and various vegetables (meaning wishing for luck and smooth progress in work and business). Currently, the custom of buying gold on the God of Wealth's anniversary (the 10th day of the first lunar month) is gradually becoming popular, especially among young people and business households. Although this is not a core traditional custom in the Chinese belief of the God of Wealth, it clearly shows a cultural exchange with the Vietnamese, reflecting cultural influence and adaptation in the modern context. Field survey results also show that up to 83.3% of interviewees said they bought gold on this occasion, indicating the strong spread of this custom in current religious practices. In addition, Chinese families in Binh Duong still maintain the Earth God's anniversary on the 2nd day of the second lunar month, on which day they usually make offerings at the Earth God altars in front of their houses, with offerings similar to those made on the God of Wealth's anniversary.

According to a Cantonese-speaking Chinese person's sharing: *"People say offering gold is so that at the end of the year it will generate profit and bring more wealth, like buying gold low and selling it high, so you have a little extra profit. If not, you can consider it as buying to save, and sell it later if you need it for something."* (Personal interview, C.M.N., female, 32 yrs old, Elementary school teacher, Thu Dau Mot City, February 16, 2023)

In a multi-ethnic (multi-cultural) household, housework is often the responsibility of women. In families where the father is Chinese and the mother is Vietnamese, worship rituals are often more influenced by Vietnamese culture. Based on the results of the interviews, 33% of the young people have fathers who are Chinese and mothers who are

Vietnamese, and the mothers usually take charge of the worship in the family, leading to many changes in the worship rituals.

According to a Hokkien-speaking Chinese person: *"When I was little, at my grandparents' house, I saw very elaborate worship, with a lot of everything. Later, when we moved out to live separately, my mother mainly took care of the household chores. My father and I go to work and are not at home; we only help out when we have holidays during festivals."* (Personal conversation, H.D.D.B, male, 31 yrs old, Office worker, Thu Dau Mot City, October 10, 2024).

Another reason may stem from the family model. In families where children and grandchildren live with grandparents and parents, contact with and reception of cultural traditions often occur more frequently. Conversely, for families where children and grandchildren live far from grandparents and parents – due to work, study, or migration – the ability to access and practice traditional cultural values is often limited. Survey results show that when presented with images of common deities in Chinese household beliefs, up to 70% of those in the younger age group could not recognize or accurately identify the deities. This partly reflects a decline in the ability to receive and maintain religious knowledge between generations.

According to a Hokkien-speaking Chinese person: *"Having to both study and work to cover living expenses means I don't have much time to help my family with worship rituals, so I haven't learned much about them."* (L.D.K, Male, 24 yrs old, Office worker, Thu Dau Mot City, June 20, 2023).

Areas lacking sufficient job opportunities often lead young people to work far from home, which also contributes to the reduced inheritance of traditional values. According to a Teochew dialect Chinese person sharing: *"The conditions where I live aren't that good, so I have to go away to study and work. At home, my parents tell me what to do, and I just do it; I don't ask much"* (Personal conversation, T.T.Q.A, female, 20 yrs old, Student, Long Hoa Commune, Dau Tieng District, March 15, 2024).

According to a Cantonese dialect Chinese person sharing: *"Now the young ones at home all go away to study, so they don't know much. I think when they want to know, they will ask."* (D. N. T, female, 40 yrs old, Restaurant owner, Dau Tieng District, July 6, 2024).

However, all the young people agreed that later, when they have time or when the time is right, they will try to learn about these cultural aspects to continue maintaining the traditions. According to a Hokkien dialect Chinese person sharing: *"I only know how to follow the customs that have always been in my family and it will be the same later. I will make time to learn."* (Personal conversation, L.N.B, female, 20 yrs old, Student, Thu Dau Mot City, August 22, 2024).

In the current process of integration, the Chinese community in Binh Duong is gradually coming into contact with advanced cultures, especially the younger generation, so they no longer place as much emphasis on matters of faith in a "superstitious" direction. The demarcation between legitimate beliefs and superstition needs to be placed within a specific socio-cultural context, avoiding one-sided accusations. The mass media, with its beneficial information, also partly influences the

middle-aged group. A typical example can be seen in the homes of the Chinese people, where they believe that the house is linked to the family's fortune and business. Therefore, they often paste various kinds of amulets in front of their houses, fearing that evil forces or bad omens will enter. The use of these amulets is not for "suppression" in a negative sense, but rather like creating an invisible fence to protect the house. In Binh Duong, the Chinese people have some types of amulets such as "peace" and "bagua" (eight trigrams), which can be obtained from local temples and pasted in front of doors, room entrances and windows. Some older people are now also gradually eliminating outdated customs. According to a member of the Phước An Temple's Management Board sharing: *"In the old days, people used to ask for amulets to burn and drink to treat illnesses, but I don't think this is good for health. Society is also gradually progressing, so people have abandoned this unhealthy custom."* (L.P, male, 64 yrs old, Chinese language teacher, Chanh Nghia, Thu Dau Mot City, August 22, 2024)

In another instance, during our attendance at the Mazu festival in Binh Duong, the local people had a custom of snatching ash from incense to bring home for good fortune, leading to some unsightly scenes. The temple's Management Board actively campaigned to eliminate these practices of competing for luck, considering them to detract from the sacredness of the belief.

In recent years, the custom of "snatching wandering spirits' offerings" has tended to become distorted, as seen in images and information spread on social media, particularly prevalent in Ho Chi Minh City. This custom usually takes place during the full moon of the seventh lunar month (the Zhongyuan Festival), when the Chinese organize quite large offerings to wandering spirits. They believe that only by offering solemnly and thoughtfully will the spirits not cause trouble. Meanwhile, in Binh Duong, there is no recorded situation of "snatching wandering spirits' offerings"; the Chinese here also do not "throw money" after the offerings. According to a Hakka dialect Chinese person sharing: *"Nowadays, the customs for offering to wandering spirits are mostly not very different. A simple offering table is mainly about sincerity. The offerings can include roasted pork, boiled chicken, fruits, cakes, candies, plain porridge (for spirits who cannot chew), fresh milk (for child spirits)."* (Personal conversation, T.T.D., male, 58 yrs old, Driver, Phu Cuong Ward, Thu Dau Mot City, August 19, 2024).

Business owners often have the custom of making offerings to wandering spirits every month, but there are also Chinese families who do not emphasize this matter. According to a Cantonese dialect Chinese person sharing: *"My family's view is not to make offerings to the deceased, because we believe that if you offer, you have to do it continuously; it's better not to offer at all and just not pay attention to it."* (Personal conversation, N.V., female, 40 yrs old, Drinks stall owner, Thuan An City, July 13, 2024)

When a Chinese family wants to open a shop but lacks sufficient capital, the Chinese hometown association often joins hands to build a support fund. Afterwards, they have the habit of going to support newly opened shops of fellow hometown members, spreading the news as a way of helping each other, embodying the spirit of mutual assistance and affection. Conversely, dishonest business dealings will lead to

misfortune and a lack of community support. The most common deity worshipped in Chinese-owned businesses in Binh Duong is Kuan Ti, as a symbol of integrity. The Chinese value honesty and reputation in business. He is revered by merchants as the Military God of Wealth, patronizing those in trade.

According to a Cantonese dialect Chinese person sharing: *"Our family has been in business for over 100 years, which is three generations. Worshipping Kuan Ti right in our business area at home is to pray for his blessing for good business and also because we don't do business by deceiving people, because if we did, he wouldn't bear witness."* (Personal conversation, N.V., female, 40 yrs old, Drinks stall owner, Thuan An City, July 13, 2024).

According to a Cantonese dialect Chinese person sharing: *"Our altar is simple, just the character for "God" (Shen) but we implicitly understand it to be Kuan Ti. Since we started worshipping him, besides helping our family be peaceful, our business has also been smooth."* (Personal conversation, N.H.Y, female, 60 yrs old, Drinks stall owner, Dau Tieng District, February 8, 2025)

Kuan Ti is worshipped on the first and fifteenth of each lunar month and on the 13th day of the first lunar month (Peach Garden Oath anniversary) and the 13th day of the fifth lunar month (his birthday). Nowadays, the worship rituals have also been greatly simplified by the Chinese, with offerings consisting only of fruit, flowers, and incense. On major worship occasions, roasted meat, steamed buns, and glutinous rice cakes are added, but no roosters are offered. Businesses light incense every morning for Kuan Ti, the God of Wealth and the Earth God, praying for good business, with very simple offerings such as a cup of coffee, a cup of tea, or some fruit.

Speaking of business and trade, one must mention the development of the market economy in areas where the Chinese people live. In their spiritual life, new Gods of Wealth may be formed, a trend of "God of Wealth transformation" (Pham, 2017, p. 124). Transformation in beliefs is inevitable when people face difficulties in life. Arising from practical needs, they often entrust themselves to deities. Almost all the requests from the people we interviewed were for luck, family well-being, career advancement, wealth and health. For example, Kuan Ti, originally a symbol of loyalty and integrity, is now worshipped by many hoping for protection, prosperity and business protection. , the God of Wealth and the Earth God, originally associated with agricultural concepts (Earth generates Metal), is increasingly identified by the common people with deities who generate wealth. Kuan Yin, besides the meaning of protection and peace, is now often associated with wishes for fortune, wealth, and success for children in their studies and smooth business dealings. Similarly, Mazu, originally a sea goddess protecting seafarers, is now attributed with many new functions, and the Chinese people's business community in Binh Duong has great faith in her. She is also worshipped in many families as a guardian deity. This shows that the functions of deities are assigned by humans, causing worship rituals to focus more on the pragmatic elements of society, sometimes overshadowing the original values.

A deity to whom society ascribes more functions reflects the spiritual needs in life. If in the past Kuan Yin was a deity who brought peace to the family, now she is an

omnipotent saint; Kuan Ti's power has also been broadened. While the middle-aged group most commonly prays for family peace and luck, the younger group has other specific goals.

According to a Hokkien dialect Chinese person sharing: *"Besides burning incense to ask the deities to bless my family with peace and protection from disasters, I also pray for smooth studies and exams."* (Personal conversation, L.T.N., female, 20 years old, Student, Thuan An City, August 15, 2024). According to a Cantonese dialect Chinese person sharing: *"Every time I light incense, I always pray to Kuan Ti to bless my work to be smooth sailing and bring much luck."* (Personal interview, C.M.N., female, 32 yrs old, Elementary school teacher, Thu Dau Mot City, February 16, 2023).

For the Chinese people, each person has a personal guardian deity, also known as a life-protecting spirit, reflecting the individual's need for faith in seeking peace and protection. In Binh Duong, Kuan Ti is often seen as a common life-protecting spirit for men; for women, deities like Kuan Yin, the Nine Heavens Mysterious Woman, or Mazu are widely revered; for children, the Purple Planet is the deity believed to protect and guide them.

According to a Cantonese dialect Chinese person sharing: *"Worshipping the Purple Planet brings health to the children in the family, making them not cry much and grow quickly."* (Personal conversation, L.N.H, female, 59 yrs old, restaurant owner, Thuan An City, August 22, 2024)

However, the worship of this deity within the family is rarely encountered. As we presented, assigning more functions to one deity is a current trend. Many families believe that Kuan Yin, the Nine Heavens Mysterious Woman and Mazu are also holy mothers capable of protecting women and children. According to a member of the Lai Thieu Mazu Temple's Management Board: *"Mazu herself is a protective mother; she has the power to bless many things in life."* (Personal conversation, V.B.T, male, 70 years old, retired, Thuan An City, August 22, 2024)

In addition, according to a Hokkien dialect Chinese person sharing: *"My family worships Mazu for the purpose of blessing peace, protecting the family and blessing our business."* (Personal conversation, L.C.M, female, 60 yrs old, Restaurant owner, Phu Cuong Ward, Thu Dau Mot City, February 4, 2025).

Through fieldwork surveys of Chinese people in Binh Duong, it can be observed that the custom of worshipping Door Gods is now mainly maintained among the Teochew dialect Chinese group. According to an anthropology expert researching ethnic cultures, with many research works on the Chinese people in the Southern region stating: *"Whenever the Chinese people have major worship occasions, they often stick incense into the potted plants in front of their houses; that is what remains of the Door Gods."* (Personal conversation, P. A., male, 80 years old, Lecturer, Ho Chi Minh City, July 15, 2024).

Based on fieldwork data, the custom of Door God worship among the Chinese people in Binh Duong is gradually fading due to several reasons:

- 1) Changes in perceptions and beliefs; they no longer see this as a mandatory element but rather as a custom. This is especially true for the younger generation of

Chinese people, partly due to being busy and partly because it wasn't passed down from the previous generation.

- 2) The influence of modern feng shui; the Chinese people in Binh Duong tend to use feng shui items such as amulets, bagua mirrors, gourds, the Purple Planet Tablet, etc. These items seem to replace the position of the Door Gods because, according to folk belief, "*When the god rises by one foot, the demon rises by ten*", so other measures are needed. Borrowing forms of Heavenly Generals or various sacred animal treasures hung in front of the house aims to threaten demons (Huynh, 2012, pp. 155).
- 3) Changes in housing architecture; young Chinese people prioritize aesthetics and believe that pasting Door God pictures does not fit with modern architecture.
- 4) Cultural exchange with the Vietnamese, which also leads them to simplify worship within the family.

## 6. Conclusion

Through the presentation of some forms of worship in the household deity beliefs of the Chinese people in Binh Duong today, their worldview in spiritual and cultural life can be seen. These cultural aspects have accompanied them throughout their history. The household deity beliefs of the Chinese people in Binh Duong are a combination of elements from Buddhism, Taoism and folk beliefs, while also adopting cultural aspects from other ethnic communities, especially the Vietnamese people in the area, to become a distinct cultural feature. In worshipping household deities, the Chinese people in Binh Duong maintain and promote unique religious values, with characteristics such as the veneration of ancestors, respect for deities, and the connection between generations within the family.

Household deity beliefs contribute to improving spiritual life, are educational, and connect generations. However, alongside the positive aspects, there are still issues of the "*increasing power*" of deities, typically the trend of "*God of Wealth transformation*" with deities like Kuan Ti and Mazu increasingly emphasized, reflecting the pragmatism of society. Additionally, changes in worship, especially the simplification of rituals, show the adaptation of the Chinese community in the modern context. Particularly among the younger generation of Chinese people today, they are gradually reducing the rules in worship. According to research results, some reasons for these issues include:

- 1) Multi-ethnic marriages, for example, in families with a Vietnamese wife, worship in the family is often the wife's responsibility, and cultural exchange can lead to certain changes;
- 2) The transmission of tradition between generations, where grandparents and parents do not pass it on to their children and grandchildren. Family structures where children and grandchildren, for various reasons, live far from family, unlike families where they mostly live together, also partly affect their ability to access and practice traditional cultural values;



- 3) The increasing trend of modernization, with the majority of young people today being exposed to modern trends, especially Western culture, which significantly influences how they perceive and practice traditional cultures, including spiritual beliefs.

Despite facing the changes of society, household deity beliefs still maintain an important role in the consciousness of the Chinese people, with the home being the best place to preserve cultural identity. The transformation of household deity beliefs shows a flexible adaptability, thereby contributing to maintaining harmony between the past and the present in the Chinese community in Binh Duong.

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

This research was conducted entirely by the authors. The authors affirm that the study was carried out independently, in a transparent manner, and was not influenced by any external factors. The authors declare that there are no personal, financial, or other conflicts of interest related to this work.

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