

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Fortune for Sale:
Amulet Agency and Post-Pandemic Precarity in Hanoi, Vietnam

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Anthropology

by

Chari Hamratanaphon

December 2024

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Christina Schwenkel, Chairperson

Dr. Sally Ness

Dr. Muhamad Ali

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The Dissertation of Chari Hamratanaphon is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A million words cannot express my gratitude to Dr. Christina Schwenkel, my advisor and committee chair, for her kind support, heart-warming encouragement, and invaluable contribution to my research project. She is the best teacher I have ever had. Her passion for academic research and her practices of “care” for others have greatly inspired me to become a better anthropologist. I also could not have completed this journey without my defense committee members, Dr. Sally Ness and Dr. Muhamad Ali, who kindly provided their knowledge and expertise. Additionally, I am truly grateful for the *Anandamahidol* Foundation, Thailand, which has generously financed my master’s and doctoral studies for the past six years, without which my endeavor would not have been possible. I am also appreciative of the Center of Idea and Society (CIS) and the Department of Anthropology for their partial financial assistance during my fieldwork.

While I conducted field research in Hanoi, Vietnam, the Institute of Cultural Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Science (VASS), directed by Dr. Nguyễn Thị Phương Châu, Dr. Phạm Văn Dương, and Dr. Hoàng Cẩm, graciously provided me with great support. I appreciate the insightful feedback that all the knowledgeable researchers at the institution have given me on my research project. I am very thankful to Dr. Đỗ Thị Thu Hà, Dr. Vũ Hồng Thuật, and anh Bùi Quốc Linh for offering me useful resources for my research. Specifically, I wish to thank Dr. Hồ Thị Thanh Nga and Miss Hoàng Thị Thu Hằng for their help in facilitating my 15-month field research in Hanoi. Huge gratitude is also owed to my fellow researchers, Mai Minh Nhật, Cathy Kim, Nguyễn

Bằng Giang, and chị Cao Thảo Hương, who always shared with me their helpful opinions.

I cannot express how grateful I am to all interlocutors who participated in my research and willingly assisted me in various aspects. I received not only knowledge from them but also love and kindness. I feel thankful for whatever “destiny” (*nhân duyên*) that brought us together.

In addition, my sincere appreciation goes out to each and every instructor who has taught me how to develop into a competent researcher I am still striving to be. I am wholeheartedly grateful to Dr. Montira Rato and cô Thiwaree Kositthanakiet from Chulalongkorn University, as well as Dr. Rujiwan Laopairoj from Chiang Mai University, for “lighting” my interest in Vietnamese Studies. I appreciate all of my cohort members’ support during this journey, especially the SEASGRAD people, who are always warm-hearted and understanding when I need them. I am personally thankful to Kannikar Satraproong and Olivia Thanawiwat for their emotional support during the final year of my program. I really thank Ichi Ha, Violette Ho, Katew, Ice, Lenk, Prem, em Stamp, em Ly, and em Mai for always being amazing friends, brothers, and sisters.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge all of my family members, who have been cheering me up and are eager for me to return “home” after graduation. I am particularly appreciative of my father, who instills in me the value of kindness, and my mother, who has always been my lifesaver and who embraces every facet of my identity. Everyone’s faith in me has prevented me from giving up.

They are my most powerful amulets.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Fortune for Sale:
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by

Chari Hamratanaphon

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Anthropology
University of California, Riverside, December 2024
Dr. Christina Schwenkel, Chairperson

Amulets are typically perceived as objects imbued with magical powers that bestow on their users protection from life's uncertainties. However, the potency of amulets is contingent upon the contexts in which they are embedded, and it is subject to change across time and space. This dissertation investigates the material biography of amulets by tracing the movements of various devotional objects through different stages in their life cycle, from the sites of their production to those of distribution, consecration, usage, and repurposing. Based on fifteen months of ethnographic research project conducted in Hanoi, Vietnam's capital city, this study examines two main aspects of amulet pathways in the post-pandemic urban environment. First, building on the scholarship connecting post-socialist economic uncertainty and spiritual re-enchantment, I propose that amulets transcend social and economic precarity and play a significant role in highlighting the users' concerns with material insecurity and overall well-being. Moreover, by examining the political economy of amulets, I demonstrate how producers and sellers negotiate, or make use of, precarity in various aspects. Second, the study

touches upon the boundary-crossing nature of amulets as active agents that produce certain affects and effects, rather than passive objects with fixed meanings and interpretations. I suggest that this study reaffirms the observation in scholarship by arguing that amulets transcend the conventional binary oppositions of sacredness versus profanity, spirituality versus science, and good versus evil. As amulets are transacted and circulated among human and non-human forces, the sacred items demonstrate how an object's perceived agency is shaped by diverse, and sometimes contradictory, socioeconomic and political factors, reflecting state policies on superstition, scientific rationalities, and ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, rather than being mere targets of state regulation, amulets advance policies of global capitalist integration by shifting the responsibility for managing precarity from the state to individuals who are left to rely on their perceived magical qualities to navigate uncertainty without questioning existing structures of inequality.

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NOTES ON NAMES, TERMS, OR TRANSLITERATIONS

All Vietnamese names and sites used in this dissertation are pseudonyms, with an intention to protect the interlocutors' confidentiality.

Vietnamese words are written in their original forms, including their original vowels and tone markings. Other foreign words, such as Thai spiritual terms, are transliterated into English, based on the Thai-English transliteration guideline following the standard of the Thai Royal Institute. Certain terms that are widely recognized by non-native speakers, like *Kumanthong* instead of *Kuman Thong*, will be the exception.

While discussing religious establishments in Vietnam associated with popular religion and Buddhism, I adhere to standard convention and refer to Buddhist establishments as “pagodas” and popular religion ones as “temples.” However, Buddhist establishments in Thailand are typically called “temples,” or “Wat” in Thai.

INTRODUCTION

Devotional objects with specific agentive or protective powers known as amulets, talismans, or charms have been used by different societies as a coping mechanism for uncertainty. While many recent studies point out that efficacious objects are modern artifacts that play an important role in modern life and belief systems, the older literature on such objects tends to associate their use with magical or superstitious practices, often among people considered outside modernity and development (Budge 1978; Malinowski 1955). Researchers in Vietnam have found a correlation between the rise in popular religious practices and changes in the country's socioeconomic structure, which has led to an increase in social inequality and precarity (Leshkovich 2014; Minh T.N. Nguyen 2019). Attention to religious revitalization has tended to focus on ritual activities, like spirit possession (Dror 2007; Endres 2011; Norton 2009), worship of gods and goddesses (Lam Minh Chau 2019), and ancestral veneration (Jellema 2007). Research on the relationship between spirituality and materiality frequently focuses on the artisanal production of unique sacred objects like statues or traditional talismans that adhere to certain techniques and traditions under the changing politico-economic context in Vietnam (Kendall 2021; Kendall et al. 2010; Vũ Hồng Thuật 2008). Building on previous research, my study focuses on amulets, a common category of spiritual objects endowed with the supernatural agency to affect outcomes, as part of Vietnamese religious material culture. Most of them are mass-produced and commoditized as sacred goods. I put an effort into comprehending the roles of material objects as a coping mechanism for people

facing precarity, particularly in the context of post-pandemic Vietnam at the period I did my fieldwork.

Amulets are usually defined and categorized in relation to precarity, a social and political condition in which some groups of people suffer from failing support systems and become more vulnerable in various aspects (Butler 2009). Although the concept of precarity initially stemmed from economic discussions, the term goes beyond just an unstable state of labors and financial gains (Choonara 2020; Han 2019). Ann Allison (2014), following Butler, indicates in *Precarious Japan* that the concept of precarity encompasses the issues of societal ignorance, interpersonal disconnection, and dis-belonging. Additionally, amulets, including magical stones, have been seen as a tool to fulfill personal well-being, such as good health, inner strength, or moral obligations, which many people view as part of the “good life” they are expected to maintain in response to the structural sociopolitical values (Fischer 2014; Hess 1993). When I conducted field research during the post-pandemic period in Hanoi, I observed precarity that manifested itself through people’s interactions with amulets when they were produced, consecrated, distributed, traded, utilized, or repurposed. Craftspeople, as amulet makers, believed that amulet making allowed them to survive in the competitive and fluctuating market. Some sellers took advantage of precarity to gain economic benefits and turned their precarious-looking attributes into a selling opportunity, while consumers bought and used amulets to deal with the precarious conditions they encountered.

Amulets are tangible forms of hope that people can buy with money, giving them a variety of solutions to life's challenges. Amulets, however, also reinforce existing power structures. That is, amulet consumption encourages people to rely on the mystical powers of sacred objects to manage precarity, instead of confronting the problematic political and economic structures that put them in precarious positions. Moreover, buying and taking home amulets does not break the cycle of precarity since they are sometimes labeled as superstition (*mê tín dị đoan*) and deception (*lừa đảo*), both of which are strongly related to the trust issue. Partly due to the invisibility of magical powers, buyers cannot be certain whether the sacred objects are effective or not. Most of them rely on information given by experts, such as spiritual masters (*thầy phép*) or Buddhist monks (*su thầy, nhà sư*), which can sometimes contradict one another. For example, while presenting amulets to the public (*đề lộ*) is highly recommended by some sellers, many experts note that doing so may raise the chance of drawing negative energy from outside. Purchasing amulets is thus a risk-taking practice. Amulets play an important role in helping people deal with precarity in the post-pandemic period, but they paradoxically keep them trapped in a never-ending loop of uncertainty. This constitutes one of the main arguments of my dissertation.

There is no fixed meaning for amulets. Like those objects exemplified by Hall (1997) and Kopytoff (1986), humans are the ones who define the meaning of an object because they are involved in its processes of production, distribution, and utilization. In my study, I interpret the commoditized amulets as “boundary-crossing” objects that reaffirms the current anthropological notion that there are no static boundaries of things.

At the basic level, amulets blur the line between sacred objects and commodities as they have become a part of spiritual industries (Jackson 2021; Trương Thị Thúy Hà 2015; Vũ Hồng Thuật 2016). Since amulets are produced and distributed both domestically and internationally, the state of the global economy has a significant impact on the production of amulets (Bùi Quốc Linh 2019). They also transcend the boundaries between online-offline and public-private domains. In the past, for instance, people visited amulet masters (*thầy bùa*) in person to acquire amulets, which were produced in a private sphere. However, many amulets today are mass-produced and publicly traded through online marketplaces.

At the conceptual level, which will be mainly discussed in this dissertation, amulets have transcended the boundaries between sacred-mundane, good-evil, and scientific-spiritual objects. This reflects varying degrees of precarity in post-pandemic Vietnam as well as how people perceive and interact with the objects. First, amulets undergo several processes that transform them into sacred objects. On the one hand, some people regard them as deceptive commodities that are traded for sellers' personal benefit, which contradicts established religious doctrine. On the other hand, many believers trust that the materiality of amulets, along with proper consecration, professional guidance, and their strong "faith" (*niềm tin*) in these objects, can really transform an ordinary object into a sacred one (Kitiarsa 2012; Vũ Hồng Thuật 2016). If blessed, paper amulets scanned from a handwritten form may be perceived as effective as the originals. Second, I note that although many people clearly distinguish between safe and dangerous amulets, it can be challenging to draw that line, particularly when social experiences influence

how amulets are perceived. Ethnic-minority amulets (*bùa dân tộc*) are generally regarded as “vicious amulets” (*bùa ngãi*), even though not all of them are made with malevolent intent. I will argue in this study that people’s perceptions of amulets are heavily influenced by “otherness,” which reproduces Kinh¹ supremacy in both the religious and political spheres. Lastly, whereas amulets are considered spiritual objects possessing invisible power, some believers assert that they are scientific, which emphasizes several scholars’ argument that science and spirituality are not at opposite ends of the spectrum as previously believed (Winichakul 2010). Thus, the boundary-crossing characters of amulets will be another main issue of my study, which may also raise possible issues on the Vietnamese state’s development policies and their influence on religious practices.

By following amulet chains from the production sites to users’ hands, I am interested in how a sacred commodity affects changes in Vietnam’s post-pandemic context and to what extent its potency is tied to its materiality, place of origin, mode of production/circulation, and other social conditions. Therefore, there are two main research questions that need to be addressed. First, what role do amulets serve in post-pandemic Vietnam, in relation to precarity? Second, how do the boundary-crossing attributes of amulets reflect the particular historical periods in terms of society, economy, and politics? It is my primary goal that this research can fill the missing gap in the

¹ *Kinh* people, also recognized as the Viet, are the majority ethnicity that accounts for approximately 85% of Vietnam’s population in the 2024 census. They speak Vietnamese. Though the Vietnamese state has officially announced equal rights for all the 54 ethnic groups, Kinh people are culturally, socially, and politically distinguished from the other minority groups such as Hmong, Cham, Mường, or Thái.

literature on religious materialism in Vietnam, which rarely discusses commoditized amulets despite the fact that these objects are part of people's erratic daily lives. For a larger contribution, I anticipate that this research will provide more material for rethinking conventional dualist boundaries between sacredness and profanity, virtue and evil, and science and spirituality.

Fortune for Sale: Landscape of Amulets in Vietnam

The term "amulet" itself is ambiguous because it has been used synonymously with other terms like "talisman" and "charm," which also allude to animated objects that possess an agency with the ability to ward off evil, attract good fortune, or cause impacts on a person's life. When there is no comparable term to perfectly capture the local interpretation, translating something into English could be problematic. In her research on amulets, Annie Thwaite (2019) suggests that although perceptions of "amulets" have evolved over time, their potency to heal is still a key feature. This healing is centered around two closely related principles of cure and protection, so it can take numerous forms, such as mending a particular illness, warding off an evil force, or promoting good luck. Carolyn Morrow Long (2001), in her research on African sacred goods, uses the term "charm" as a generic designation for a powerful artifact. She indicates that a charm can be any object, including natural substances and mass-produced items, that is "believed to be capable of influencing physical, mental, and spiritual health; manipulating personal relationships and the actions of others; and invoking the aid of deities, the dead, and the abstract concept of 'luck'" (Long 2001, xvi). Rarey (2023) uses

a similar term to refer to agentive pouches filled with substances that could protect enslaved people from physical and spiritual violence, but the author does not explain the choice of terminology.

In Vietnam, scholars, as well as my interlocutors, find it challenging to come up with a proper generic term for such magically potent artifacts. The most often used term, *bùa*, refers to a broad category of amulets, ranging from enchanted papers to human-shaped braided ropes. Vũ Hồng Thuật (2008), for example, uses the term “*bùa*” to refer to handwritten or woodblock-printed paper used for house protection. According to the definition provided by Vietnam’s Institute for Research and Application of Human Potentialities, *bùa* is “a piece of paper or cloth with the magic symbols of sorcerers (*phù thủy*) or ritual masters, which has the power to ward off evil spirits or make people confused and bewildered” (Bùi Tiến Quý, eds. 2015, 25). The same source notes that *bùa* can be alternatively called “*linh phù*,” which refers to a tool that is filled with supernatural energy. *Linh phù* can appear in different forms, materials, and sizes. That is, *linh phù* can be sacred characters written on a piece of paper or those carved on metals, rocks, or wood. In addition, it can be made into accessories for wearing to gain a certain level of intimacy (Bùi Tiến Quý, eds. 2015, 296-298). Another term that is closely related to *bùa* and *linh phù* is “*bùa ngải*,” which Bùi Tiến Quý translates as “amulets and spells” in English. *Bùa ngải* is an item that is made of natural substances, like meat-eating plants. Compared to general *bùa*, *bùa ngải* is more effective, and its user can expect faster results. However, *bùa ngải* is more dangerous since it can cause death. Only a few practitioners know how to make *bùa ngải*, making it become a mysterious object (Bùi

Tiến Quý, eds. 2015, 22-24). According to the abovementioned book, the characteristics of *bùa*, *bùa ngãi*, and *linh phù* are ambiguously and inconsistently defined.

In my field, even though the term *bùa* can be used for both good and bad purposes, some people associate the word with harmful and scary objects and connect such negative connotation to certain ethnic minority groups in Vietnam. According to my interlocutors, amulets in Vietnam can be broadly classified into two groups: those belonging to the Kinh, who make up the country's ethnic majority, and those belonging to the non-Kinh people. Kinh amulets were primarily used for protection or good fortune, which people might carry around in their pocket or put at the doorway, whereas non-Kinh ones were used for love-allusion or retaliation. Afterwards, practitioners have referred to paper amulets as "*linh phù*" (literally, sacred *phù*) or just "*phù*." Many amulet masters with whom I spoke during my fieldwork told me that the terms *bùa* and *phù* shared the same linguistic root. That is, *bùa* was a Vietnamese term, whereas *phù* was Hán-Việt one. Many people indicated that "*linh phù*" and "*bùa*" were interchangeable, although I noticed that they were using the former to avoid the latter term. Sellers from different stores used both words interchangeably when referring to amulet stickers. Currently, qualitative descriptors are added to *bùa* to distinguish between the many types of amulets. Amulets with good intentions are typically referred to as *bùa bình an* or *thẻ cầu an* (literally, peace amulets/peace cards) and *bùa may mắn* (literally, lucky amulets), to differentiate them from *bùa ngãi* or *ngãi* believed to serve bad purposes. The term *bùa* is also used as a generic term to refer to foreign amulets with neutral attitudes that are imported from other countries, mostly Thailand and Cambodia, to sell in Vietnam.

Amulets in forms of accessories are called by their own terms; for example, *vòng may mắn* (literal: lucky bracelets), *vòng phong thủy* (literal: feng shui bracelets), *đây ngũ sắc* (literal: five-color string), and *tràng hạt* (literal: beaded string or rosary). I have included images of these amulets in Appendix C.

In accordance with Long (2001), even though the term “amulet” cannot cover every type of sacred objects I am interested in, I have to use it as a generic term for the benefit of the readers’ comprehension. When I use the term “amulets” in this research, I mean small, portable objects that people carry around for protection, luck, wealth, and love relationships. There are therefore two main determinants of the amulets in my study. First, they must be portable. That is, these amulets should be able to be carried around, attached to their users. Regardless of geographical boundaries, they can move from one place to another as sacred commodities along the amulet supply chain, from production to distribution. Thus, *phong thủy* desk decorations are not considered amulets in my research, but *phong thủy* bracelets are. Second, amulets must possess “potency” to affect changes at some point throughout their biography. Although an amulet may not be regarded as a sacred object when it is produced, it become an “amulet” when someone has faith in it. Due to limited access to certain types of amulets, which are usually used in private spaces, this research largely focuses on amulets that are accessible to the general public and can be purchased from spiritual marketplaces, temples, or pagodas. The research touches upon the issues of vicious amulets (*bùa ngãi*) as well as traditional paper and cloth amulets (*bùa chú*), since they are mentioned by several respondents. They are not, however, the focus of the study.

Many anthropologists propose that value is generated from human acts and relationships when sacred objects are made, distributed, and used, rather than from the objects themselves, while some argue that value is derived from the public performance of commodities as well as other value measurements like authenticity (Geary 1986; Graeber 2001; Kopytoff 1986). In the process of producing, manipulating, and consuming commodities, value is constantly negotiated. Like other commodities, amulets have their own biography. They travel a long journey before reaching consumers' hands. When discussing domestically made amulets, *dâu tằm* bracelet is one example. These bracelets are created by artisans in a craft village using mulberry wood, a natural resource from a Vietnamese forest, and then sold to amulet stores. Unlike domestic amulets, however, amulets nowadays have undergone a convoluted political-economic process. Most of the time, they travel across national boundaries. The fox spirits (*hồ ly*) are originally a common belief in China, while the stones used to make fox amulets come from a stone mine in Vietnam. The belief in maneki-neko cats originated from Japan. Additionally, amulet stickers were initially imported from China, but numerous experts assert that Vietnam copied Chinese products and is currently producing amulet stickers domestically. Global mobility allows amulets to cross national boundaries; amulets may be produced somewhere else in an overseas factory (Cowen 2014). Amulet stickers (*linh phù dán điện thoại*) serve as a good example of amulets that are purchased across the national border from China to Vietnam. The demand for foreign spiritual objects, not only from China but also from other countries with similar cultures to Vietnam, such as Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Tibet, has been increasing rapidly in Vietnam. Recently,

the adoption of foreign amulets from neighboring countries like Thailand and Cambodia has expanded the amulet market in Vietnam (Teekantikun 2020). It is interesting that despite being culturally different from Vietnamese religious concepts, these amulets are widely accepted by believers, possibly as a result of their portability (Csordas 2007).

Amulets have been changed over time in response to social contexts, from intricately crafted pieces that require meticulous attention to mass-produced objects with controversial opinions regarding their efficacy (Vũ Hồng Thuật 2008). The fact that these sacred commodities are not restricted to a single area illustrates the links that exist both between the Vietnamese people and other parts of the world, as well as between the past and the present. Kitiarsa (2010) has a similar suggestion; he argues that religions are being forced to reinvent themselves in reaction to the dynamic market economy and the uncertainty of contemporary life, demonstrating the convergence of the sacred (religion) and profane (economics) domains. In addition, scholars contend that while access to religious knowledge was formerly restricted in order to maintain sacred values, the commercialization of religion allows it to circulate in modern society (Redden 2016; Zaidman 2003). In Vietnam, amulets have been incorporated with economic values while retaining their spiritual values due to their introduction into the capitalist market and sale as spiritual commodities. As studied by Vũ Hồng Thuật (2015) and Trương Thị Thúy Hà (2015), people continue to use traditional amulets in addition to purchasing new ones. New, advanced technology allows amulets from being hand-made to being mass-produced. Vũ Hồng Thuật suggests that many ritual masters quit composing talismans on their own. Instead, they purchase mass-produced ones from stores before activating them

and handing them to their customers. In many cases, traditional forms of amulets are mixed with more modern technology. For example, in order to create paper amulets, the amulets, which are handwritten by ritual masters, are photographed before sellers print them out, laminate them, and then sell them to customers at very cheap prices. After undergoing the consecration process, the newly made amulets are claimed to be as effective as the traditional ones. Consecration helps add sentimental values to the mass-produced objects, which challenges Benjamin's (1969) concept of aura.

Amulets are not isolated entities; rather, they are connected to other networks of spirituality (*mạng tâm linh*), such as fortunetelling or religious practices. Most people do not use amulets alone without attending spiritual ceremonies. Teenagers who play (*chơi*) with stones, for example, usually start their amulet journey with either the tarot or numerology. They have played them both for real as well as for entertainment. Local scholars suggest that some of them use amulets only to “follow the massive trend” (*làm theo đám đông*) rather than for personal needs. Vietnamese teenagers are increasingly turning to tarot reading and amulet-making workshops, which can be found at coffee shops or cozy craft markets. Amulet stores blur the boundary between spiritual and economic spaces when amulet sellers must also serve as spiritual advisors or psychotherapists. Selling amulets is not simply the same as selling other products since they are attached to invisible “fortune.” Sellers negotiate morality and the idea that they are “trading the gods, selling the divines” (*buôn thần bán thánh*), which means they make use of others' beliefs to make profits. As the sale of amulets is based on “trust,” these sellers need to better themselves to achieve a higher spiritual status. This is not only to

improve the sellers' performance but also to help explain why clients see them as confidants rather than as licensed therapists with official medical certification. All of these issues are mirrored in the amulet trade, prompting us to reassess the relationship between people, the Vietnamese socialist state, and "spiritual market" rationalities.

Post-Pandemic Precarity

Amulets are modern objects. The term "modern" in this context does not mean to be the opposite of "traditional," a dualist concept that has long been intensively employed by some scholars (Budge 1978; Malinowski 1955). Instead, I intend to propose that amulets are considered to be "up to date" and serve as a valuable tool for people to cope with precarity in the present era (Jackson 2021). Most scholars working on uncertainty in contemporary Vietnam usually argue that uncertainty permeates people's daily lives, partly because of the Vietnamese Communist Party's launch of *Đổi Mới*, or renovation economic reform, in 1986. Following the implementation of market socialism, a combination of socialist and neoliberal concepts in economic restructuring, the wealth gap and precarity have been increasing over time. This leads to a significant rise in socioeconomic inequality in the socialist-turned-capitalist society. The increased competition has driven people to make their own economic decisions and come up with solutions to meet the human capital demands of the new economy. Given their increased reliance on the global market, most Vietnamese people are worried about this marketization. Numerous people are coping with debt, health issues, and family separation while they strive for a better life in today's society (Leshkovich 2014, 58;

Minh T.N. Nguyen 2019, 16). Additionally, many of them struggle to create senses of self in the face of the conflicting ideologies of socialist collectivism and neoliberalism in many aspects, including economic activities or even romantic relationships (Tran 2018; 2023).

A growth in religious devotion has been attributed to the intensification of market interactions as well as sentiments of risk, uncertainty, and helplessness (Kendall 2011; Leshkowich 2006; Leshkowich 2014; Pham P. Chi 2019; Taylor 2004). Scholars claim that some Vietnamese people turn to religious rituals to help them cope with the economic uncertainty; as Endres (2011, 103-104) points out, spirituality “ha[s] taken on a heightened importance in the contemporary capitalist economy and extended their role to dealing with modernity malcontents.” Many Vietnamese people, particularly traders, go to pagodas to pray for money, safety, and protection (Minh T.N. Nguyen 2019). Furthermore, some of them place miniature shrines in their stalls to aid their commercial success (Leshkowich 2014). Certain deities gain greater popularity in spirit mediumship ceremonies (*lên đồng*) due to their potency in commerce, wealth, and material accumulation. Lam (2019), for instance, finds that many small business owners and petty traders fervently venerate the Mother Goddess Religion (*Đạo Mẫu*). According to the study, these practitioners “borrow” symbolic money from the deities as a strategy to gain economic success and material well-being in their lives. They also negotiate with the goddesses, offering the deities more exquisite, sacred garments for their subsequent visit if they gain financial benefit (Kendall 2011).

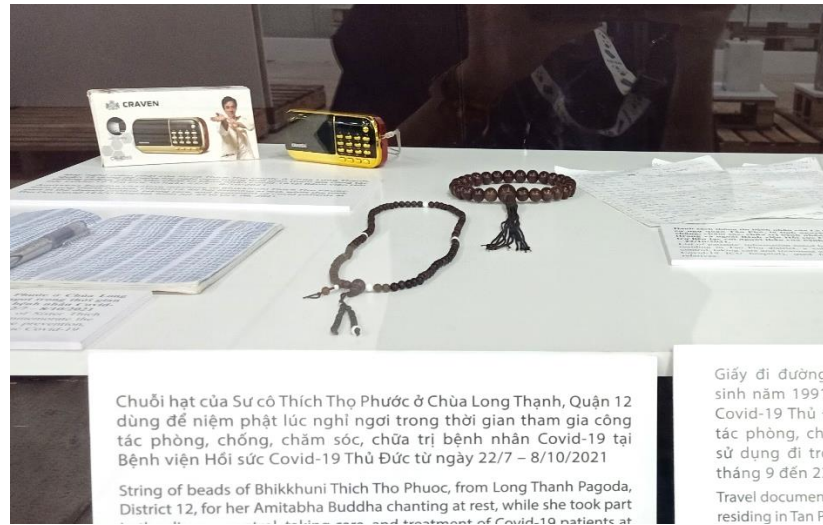


Figure 1: Wooden rosaries displayed at the COVID-19 exhibition, at the South-Vietnamese Women Museum, Ho Chi Minh City² (Photo by the author, January 3, 2023)

It has been over three decades since the economic policy was implemented, thus the claim that *Đổi Mới* is the primary cause of precarity is erroneous in the present era. During my fieldwork, very few people I talked to brought up the economic shifts of the late 1990s. Instead, they discussed how the recent major events, including seasonal floods and, most importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic which started at the end of 2020 and continued until the beginning of 2022, had left the economy in poor shape. Vietnam had experienced two lockdowns and strict travel restrictions, domestically and internationally. Although the country handled the situations quite effectively compared to many other countries, the health crisis had an impact on the nation and made its citizens vulnerable

² The description read: *String of beads of Bhikkhuni Thich Tho Phuoc, from Long Thanh Pagoda, District 12, for her Amitabha Buddha chanting at rest, while she took part in the disease control, taking care and treatment of Covid-19 patients at Thu Duc Covid-19 ICU hospital from Jul 22 to Oct 8, 2021.*

subjects. At the COVID-19 exhibition at the South-Vietnamese Women Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, two wooden rosaries (*chũn hạt*) are displayed within a transparent box, indicating that a female monk relied on religious practices and sacred objects as a way to cope with her anxieties.

People were anxious about such an uncertain situation where their lives were in jeopardy. Many amulet sellers claimed higher sales during the outbreak. News sources state that in early 2020, a new kind of amulets known as “COVID-19 amulets” (*lá bùa chống COVID-19*) was promoted and offered for sale on Vietnamese internet marketplaces. These amulets were said to purify the air and shield the wearers from the coronavirus (Phong Anh 2020). The amulets, which cost between 200,000 and 300,000 VND (8-12 USD), may last for 30 to 60 days each. The police department cautioned people not to trust in the amulets, and they eventually vanished. “Don’t trust them, sister. It is a deception,” said an interlocutor during our discussion on stones that could cure COVID-19. The incident demonstrates that people are concerned about deceit and fake news in addition to health issues during times of crisis.

I did my fieldwork three months after Vietnam reopened its international border in March 2022, when people’s social and economic lives began to stabilize following the COVID-19 pandemic. I could therefore claim that I was conducting research in Vietnam during the post-pandemic period. It was undeniable that the health crisis incident had some sort of “precarity” effect on the Vietnamese people, including my interlocutors and me, if not directly then indirectly. In this dissertation, I will illustrate the precarity of economic, social, and well-being conditions in these contexts and show how amulets

provided solace to those who have struggled to live their everyday lives. Energy stones (*đá năng lượng*), for example, became popular around the same time as the pandemic, while some young sellers told me that they began studying spirituality during the pandemic lockdown to maintain their mental and physical well-being. Not only amulet users and sellers but also producers faced difficulties in their careers due to their inability to export their products. These incidents highlight the aftermath of the pandemic, which, when combined with other socioeconomic factors, contributes to precarity in society.

In this dissertation, I divide post-pandemic precarity into three main aspects: economic, social, and well-being. Economic precarity, which is a prevalent form of precarity in the present world, encompasses financial demands, employment, and the need for profits (Jackson 2021). As a result, various types of money amulets are produced for this reason. Building on Ann Allison's (2014) and Butler's (2009) works, social disconnection is a major component of social precarity. Many of my interlocutors seek social acceptance in order to find a "place" in society, or at the very least, within their families. Similarly, love amulets are used when it becomes more difficult to find a partner and everyone is focused on economic competitions. Again, people's shifting lifestyles and the aftermath of incidents like the COVID-19 pandemic are the main causes of social precarity rather than the *Đổi Mới* policy. Lastly, people's perception of well-being and what constitutes a "good life" is one of the main reasons why they turn to amulets as alternative tools in dealing with such precarity. These three aspects of precarity will be covered together with other issues regarding amulets as recovery devices in the second part of this dissertation.

While discussing religious practices in contemporary society, particularly those involving sacred objects, many scholars play with the opposing concepts of tradition and modernity. Some of them question the degree to which sacredness is still attached to the ideas of traditional production of material objects and their authenticity (Adorno 1991; Benjamin 1969). Although I agree with the claim that religion is neither antithetical to nor independent of modernity (Malinowski 1955; Marx and Engels 1994; Smolkin 2018), I believe that we should put controversial debates about tradition versus modernity aside and start to carefully consider the roles of these religious practices in the present. The focus on material objects in this study will offer interesting new perspectives for a deeper understanding of how religion changes as modernity advances and people struggle to survive. In other words, it facilitates our understanding of “lived religion” in contemporary societies as opposed to religions that exist in isolation from the past (Ivanič 2019). Certainly, I will not contest the existence of precarity before COVID-19 hit Vietnam, but the period of time I spent conducting my field research was a significant historical event that should not be disregarded. I therefore avoid using the problematic term “modern Vietnam” and instead refer to the time following 2022 as “post-pandemic” Vietnam.

Amulets and Boundary Crossing

Amulets and talismans have been referred to as sacred objects imbued with supernatural powers and associated with spirits or divination. In his book on amulets, Budge (1978, 13) describes an amulet as “an object which is endowed with magical power, and which

of its own accord uses this power ceaselessly on behalf of the person who carries it” to protect the wearer and their belongings from evil spirits’ attacks. The author notes that amulet users believe that their amulets hold divine power, while most materials used to make amulets possess certain properties that are advantageous to people. Similarly, the research by Armer (2014) on amulets in Southeast Asia shows that amulets are magical objects with apotropaic abilities believed to be able to fend off negative incidents like health problems or personal attacks. Like other sacred objects, amulets are thought to possess a spiritual agency, which gives wearers the impression that they are blessed and protected by supernatural beings (Kendall et al. 2010; Tambiah 1984). Based on these perspectives, amulets are “spiritual” objects that can be explained by the concepts of sacredness, spirituality, and agency in causing good or bad outcomes.

However, researchers have examined amulets in more expansive sociopolitical contexts, taking into account the ways in which they are produced, distributed, or used by humans. They argue that studying amulets can provide a deeper understanding of certain contexts where they are used. Matthew Francis Rarey (2023), in his historical research, examines African amulets known as *bolsa de madinga*, which are pouch-shaped objects that contain some natural substances and folded magic paper. The author contends that the amulets served as a shield against intimate personal violence, both physical and spiritual, because enslaved Africans wore them. Fjeld and Vasstveit (2023), investigate the use of amulets on children’s bodies in a West Nepalese village. According to their research findings, the main factor that drives parents to put amulets on their children’s bodies is the failure of political systems, which have forced these mountain dwellers to

the fringe, where life is full of uncertainty. The authors propose that amulets act as a stable infrastructure that enables children to live regular lives. Many other scholars similarly regard amulets as a “technology of protection,” that has assisted people in coping with contemporary precarious conditions, such as market instability, rapid social changes, or uncertainties during local and global crises (Armer 2014; Naepimai and Chaisingkananont 2023; Tambiah 1984; Vũ Hồng Thuật 2016). Rasdusdee (2024), for instance, sees modern amulets as a tool for people to navigate through uncertainty and hardship during the COVID-19 pandemic. In short, the aforementioned research indicates that amulets are more than just spiritual objects used exclusively in sacred spaces. Instead, they exist in the social space where sacred and secular elements coexist, reflecting current sociopolitical issues in society. Amulets are boundary-crossing objects in this case, when, on the one hand, the items are believed to ward off evil spirits and misfortune that bring about disasters. On the other hand, they are objects that give people alternative solutions to problems that are influenced by the failures of a larger social structure and violence.

The dual nature of amulets can also be found in the discussion of “sacred commodities,” which generally refers to religious items or services that have been turned into commodities and traded online or offline (Jackson 2021; Kitiarsa 2010; Naepimai 2015; Tambiah 1984; Zaidman 2003). Previously, sacred objects were believed to be produced by highly esteemed spiritual practitioners, stored in sacred spaces, and treated with special care to preserve their sacredness and purity (Douglas 2003; Durkhiem 2001; Kendall 2010). However, amulets are presently available for purchase in the market, even

in mass-produced varieties, to fulfill consumers' needs for both spiritual and aesthetic purposes (Armer 2014; Tantayotai 2022). Certain scholars, like Long (2001), note that market rationales currently have a significant impact on amulet consumption. That is, spiritual practitioners receive the service price, while spirits are "paid" with offerings. According to Jackson (2021, 320), the commercialization of religious beliefs signifies the integration of the capitalist economy into a religio-symbolic order. This highlights the malleability of both the religious and market sectors, which influence and are influenced by each other. With the blurry sacred-profane dividing line in the amulet trade, amulets are objects that possess both elements.

Amulets have also transcended the conventional boundary between religion and science. Owing to the predominance of Western epistemology, science and religion were formerly considered to be distinct disciplines in research (Asad 1993). While science is defined as an organized system that collects quantitative and objective knowledge about the world and condenses it into testable principles, religion is typically seen to address issues of life's purpose, destiny, and subjective experiences of minds (Wallace 2006). However, there have been several initiatives in academia to convey religion and science through various debates, highlighting some themes and concepts that are agreed upon by both parties (Huchingson, ed. 2005; Winichakul 2010). Despite appearing to be classified as religious or spiritual artifacts, amulets possessing magical powers can also be interpreted as scientific. Newton's theory of visible spectrums or vibrations, for instance, has been used by both local scholars and amulet believers to explain the power of amulets (Nguyễn Mạnh Linh 2017). This means that an amulet might have the dual status of a

spiritual and scientific object, which Daston (2000) defines as an object that is placed at the center of scientific inquiry.

Finally, the consumption of amulets raises questions about the distinctions between good and evil. Good and bad amulets are typically distinguished in amulet literature; good amulets are believed to “protect” their owners and bring luck, while evil ones are seen to do harm to other people (Budge 1978; Thwaite 2019). Amulets associated with virtuous figures, like those seen in Buddhism, are perceived to be safe to use (Jackson 2021; Kitiarsa 2010; Tambiah 1984). On the contrary, some amulets are regarded as dangerous to employ, like *Nkisi*, spirited dolls originating in Africa that need to be treated properly because their violence is unpredictable when neglected (MacGaffey 1990). However, in my study, an amulet could be interpreted as both good and evil based on the judgment of certain social groups. In addition, according to my research findings, people are making attempts to negotiate a good-evil boundary in order to justify their own practices. For example, “love amulets” (*bùa yêu*) of *Mường* ethnic groups are usually blamed by Kinh people for their nefarious schemes to entice Kinh men. However, many ethnic practitioners have tried to prove that their amulets are only employed for good purposes, such as mending the strained relationship between a married couple. In this case, the distinction between good and evil is merely a social construct that plays a role in stigmatizing or marginalizing particular social groups.

In conclusion, an object is defined by its relationship with humans within the particular sociopolitical contexts where it exists, as noted by Kopytoff (1986). Here, the complex status of amulets that “hop” in and out of many spheres and across boundaries

might reveal insights about society and people's perceptions of their everyday lives. On the other hand, they are perceived as mundane gifts with psychological function (Kendall 2011; Vũ Hồng Thuật 2008) or as scientific objects that can be explained by the laws of energy (*năng lượng*) and vibration (*sự rung động*). These multiple statuses and the roles of amulets as “boundary-crossing objects” will be further examined in this dissertation.

Methodologies: Biography of Amulets

Stepping into the field, I realized that I could not carry out traditional ethnographic study that would have involved a year-long stay in a single village or community. Both the research objects, amulets, and my field site are moveable. Amulets move both inside and outside, across time and space. There are places of worship other than temples, pagodas, or shrines where amulets can exist. It spreads to marketplaces, private residences, and human bodies in addition to sacred spaces (Jackson 2022). Similarly to what Deleuze and Guattari (1988) call “rhizome,” the places where an amulet travels throughout its biography (Kopytoff 1986; Appadurai 1986) have been linked and interconnected with one another as a big picture. I therefore decided to “move along” with the amulets that interested me, tracking their production, distribution, consecration, and usage. My fieldwork was done in Hanoi, the Vietnamese capital, and other relevant places between June 2022 and September 2023, or roughly 15 months. I followed the amulets to stores, marketplaces, religious sites, mines, fortunetellers' houses, coffee shops, bars, universities, hospitals, tourist attractions, and even tea stalls, as well as online platforms where amulets are available for sale and related online communities exist. People have

stories to tell about their amulets, and amulets themselves have a rich history involving people.

Following Amulets

Starting from the distribution sites, I headed to amulet markets. I asked to work part-time as a volunteer graphic designer and video editor at a small amulet store located next to a famous pagoda in Hanoi's Đống Đa District, in exchange for the chance to observe the store's activities. Besides my main duties, I assisted them with taking care of the store, packing the merchandise, creating tiny handcrafted amulets like the salt bags³ (*túi muối*), and even selling amulets on busy days, particularly on the first or fifteenth day of a lunar month. I kept track of who entered the store while working there twice a week. Working with the store owner, who doubled as a manager and a geomancy master (*thầy phong thủy*), allowed me to directly and more precisely learn clients' ages as well as the difficulties they were facing. The manager supported me by introducing me as a Thai researcher who studied "spiritual culture" in Vietnam and occasionally providing me with additional opportunities to interview his clients informally. Most of the time, I worked as an assistant to the manager's wife, and we often talked about amulet sales and her opinions on several related topics. I sometimes accompanied the manager to his clients'

³ Salt bags (*túi muối*) are a type of amulets that people usually purchase during the Vietnamese New Year's Festival. They are red bags containing rice, salt, fire matches, and an optional printed paper amulet. These items signify material abundance and a warm relationship within the family. Salt bags can be carried with the users or hung in the kitchen.

houses to provide a geomancy service. I also took the time to edit his TikTok videos, in which he discussed the physiology of faces and advised viewers to purchase his amulets. All these activities helped me gain a deeper understanding of people's spiritual practices with which I was initially unfamiliar.

Beyond this store, I had the opportunity to observe and interview many other amulet business owners, both big and small. I obtained their contact details via friends as well as market and fair booths. The pagoda next to the store was one of the sacred places I frequently visited. In addition, to learn about young people's trends, I followed them to "coffeeshop fairs," a popular type of marketplaces among young people. There were always several tarot readers and healing-stone vendors manning booths and waiting for customers at these places. Most sellers moved from one coffee shop to another, depending on the timetable. Mostly on weekends, I would go out to different places and spend time with them. As I met them frequently, they acknowledged me and allowed me to interview them or observe their transactions of amulets. Along with attending amulet workshops like a "spell jar" workshop and following many amulet events on Facebook, I also made connections with others who were drawn to spiritual objects and fortunetelling.

Learning that stone accessories were currently well-liked by both older and younger generations, I visited a number of natural stone marketplaces, including the gemstone market (*chợ phiên đá quý*) near the West Lake area (*Hồ Tây*). Typically, the market was held on Sundays. As I became more acquainted with the people in the market, they suggested that I go to the production sites, which included Lục Yên District, in Yên Bái Province, for natural stones, and different woodturning craft villages for

wooden beads. I made a few trips to Lục Yên to witness the main gemstone market and the process of making geomancy stone statues in the industrial area nearby in order to comprehend the relationships between the locals, ethnic groups, the state, and foreign firms in the area. Regarding the wooden beads, I chose to use Google Maps to locate Nhị Khê Village, a small woodturning village in the outskirts of Hanoi. I asked a motorbike taxi rider to show me around many production sites (*xưởng*), both large and small, within the village. It was slightly difficult for an outsider to enter the village without a guide since most villagers labored inside of their residential houses. Besides, they seemed to be afraid that I was a police officer who was going to check on them. However, many craftspeople were honest and upfront with me about their creations. I occasionally spent time at tea stalls talking to drink vendors or motorbike riders to obtain additional information.

There were two main pagodas where I spent much time due to personal connections; the first was a sizable Buddhist pagoda, located in the tourist district of Hanoi's downtown, and the second was a small pagoda in the suburbs within the old Hà Tây area. I talked to numerous people at the larger pagoda, including amulet sellers, the committee members, academic staff members, Buddhist monks, librarians, and visitors. I sometimes received invitations to eat lunch or supper at the pagoda, where I struck up interesting discussions with Buddhist groups. At the small pagoda, I stayed there for almost two weeks and assisted with chores and events to get a feel for how things were run. I interviewed the female abbot about the amulets she produced and had her consecrate my wooden bracelets. I made multiple one-day journeys to this pagoda for its

ceremonies and joined several of its spiritual excursions. In order to understand how amulets were consecrated differently throughout diverse spaces, I also visited some private shrines of the Mother Goddess Religion located at private houses in Hanoi where spirit mediums and ritual masters held their consecration ceremonies. My participation plan was flexible. I just “went with the flow.”

To get in contact with amulet users was quite tricky for me because, initially, I did not know exactly where to find them. Most amulet users avoided showing their amulets to strangers. They just put them in their pockets. I therefore began by asking strangers I met at random what they were wearing as lucky items, such as necklaces and bracelets. I started wearing some amulets, like wooden rosaries, to draw attention from like-minded people so that I could conduct interviews and observe their spiritual practices. In order to locate young amulet users, I also joined various social organizations, such as English or Thai language clubs, and inquired about amulets during our conversations. I was directed to some foreign amulet traders at those places. Potential interlocutors were also found at temple festivals as well as at spiritual pilgrimages. Social sampling, like the snowball sampling technique, was employed. That is, I relied on interlocutors to suggest other possible subjects to me. This technique was helpful for hard-to-reach groups, such as amulet makers or spiritual masters, but it might necessitate strong social ties between the referrer and the referral (Guest 2015, 245).

The research population of this study comprises a diverse range of individuals who engage in the circulation of devotional objects. Traders, users, makers, pagoda caretakers, state officers, and other Vietnamese people who are open to sharing their

opinions on the use of devotional objects make up the study population. According to my selection criteria, all participants must identify as Vietnamese nationals, regardless of ethnicity and gender, and be at least eighteen years old. As scholars claim that devotional objects, particularly amulets, have been utilized as a coping mechanism for economic uncertainty, this study includes certain people of the Vietnamese society who are economically disadvantaged. Although these people are not the primary subject of my research, their viewpoints will assist me to better understand how the use of devotional objects can index social inequality in the modern era, which will aid in my ability to respond to the research questions. All respondents' rights and welfare have been protected in accordance with research privacy and confidentiality guidelines.

During my fieldwork, I periodically spent time at libraries, including the national library in Hanoi and the library of the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS), which had agreed to support my research. With my status as a foreign researcher, I had access to libraries. When time allowed, I searched via college libraries and online databases for local research works on devotional objects and amulets written in English or Vietnamese. It was vital to get local studies on devotional objects in Vietnam because most of them were not available online outside of the country. I also requested from the libraries materials on state policies regarding religion and state-controlled news articles about the use of devotional objects or other spiritual beliefs. These materials could reflect the relationships between the Vietnamese state, people, and religion under the political discourses of modernity. Sensitive or confidential information was not obtained.

However, library research was not given priority because this study was mostly based on interviews and participant observation.

Learning by Experiencing

Vũ Hồng Thuật (2008), in his article on traditional amulets in Vietnam, states that his research methodology involves doing his own experiments on amulets (*bùa chú*). He reached out to several ritual masters and asked them for amulets so that he could test their efficacy. By doing this, he became closer to the ritual masters as an “insider” and gained a deeper understanding of how amulets worked. I employed comparable techniques, but for different goals. Rather than to prove their effectiveness, my goal was to understand the biography of amulets or how they were made and passed down from one person to the next, until the end of their lives if possible. In other words, I paid more attention to what people were doing around the objects than I did to the objects themselves. I purchased amulets, wore them, collected them, and discussed them with others.

Owning numerous lucky items on my body brought me closer to other amulet users without my having to make an attempt to approach them. Common items I always carried around were a long wooden bead chain (*chuỗi hạt*), a natural stone bracelet (*vòng đá*) in my geomancy-based lucky color, a simple necklace adorned with a Thai-monk pendant, a golden magic sticker (*linh phù*) on the rear of my phone case, and several paper or cloth amulets I would keep in my pocket or notebooks. Whether I was at a language club, at an iced tea stand, or on a bus, people would always strike up a conversation when they saw some of these items. I recall riding a bus to a pagoda in the

Old Quarter area of Hanoi one day. The bus conductor waved at me, grinned, and showed his similar item when he noticed that I had a wooden bead bracelet on my left wrist. It turned out that he was also an amulet user. He turned into one of my key interlocutors who introduced me to a spiritual tour guide, other amulet users, and relevant events. Wearing amulets also allowed me to observe how regular people responded to the items. A middle-aged man at a tea stall apologized as he was about to touch my stone bracelet. He explained that most amulet users typically kept their items untouched to avoid having them tainted by other people's negative energies. This notion surprised me, as I did not previously know it. In addition, carrying amulets around reassured my respondents that I did not view the amulets they were selling or wearing negatively. I therefore easily fit right in as an insider who deserved their trust. I shared my own experiences about amulets while learning from others. When many people asked me whether I believed in amulets, I honestly accepted, "I have mixed feelings about them." I experienced discomfort with the liminal state between believers and non-believers on multiple occasions. For instance, a man approached me and asked if I could suggest any products to help him overcome the problems he was facing. Although the incident was useful to me as a researcher, I needed to tell him honestly that I did not dare to offer him spiritual guidance because I was still a foreign researcher who did not know much about Vietnamese amulets.

When I once lost my mobile phone, which contained much of my research data, I experienced for the first time the feeling of being up a blind alley that many amulet users had described. After spending several hours attempting to find the phone, I then

understood why amulets became a substitute remedy for many people. My Vietnamese friend, who was a fortuneteller, warned me that I would never get my phone back after reading tarot cards. She went on to say that the incident occurred because I was carrying too many amulets at once, which could cause spiritual conflicts. Looking back at my amulet collection, I decided to limit the number of amulets I carried with me at a time. Although I realized that I could not completely comprehend other people's situations, I believed that firsthand experience with amulets was a useful approach for understanding how individuals felt when using them.

Informal In-Depth Interview and Deep Hanging Out

During the fieldwork, I came to realize that spiritual issues were sensitive for some people and that they needed to be trusted enough to share their own experiences or conditions pertaining to amulet use. I therefore chose to hang out with people, accompanying them on pilgrimages, to pagodas, or to their hometowns on special occasions. For instance, I visited a friend's hometown during the Vietnamese New Year's celebration. As per her mother's request, I accompanied her to a village pagoda where I observed people's activities and obtained annual amulets. I occasionally spent the night in pagodas with some friends, having deep conversations about life and spirituality before turning in for the night. All the people above were willing to converse with me about the issues they were experiencing, knowing that their stories would be included in my dissertation. As Allen Tran (2023) notes in his book, one major challenge of interviewing people about their worries is that people do not even know how to describe their current

emotions or the reasons behind their amulet purchases. Deep talks during casual hangouts help fill in the methodological gaps.

Throughout the fieldwork, I interviewed about 150 people in person, semi-structured and unstructured, but only ten to fifteen of them were selected to be key interlocutors. Most semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants whose time was “gold,” such as business owners or amulet sellers who had limited time to grant me an interview or converse with me. However, I conducted unstructured interviews in most cases, including several meetings and hangouts. I found that the latter gave me more insights and a clearer picture of the participants’ experiences and viewpoints, which they usually refrained from sharing in a more formal context. The interviews were also conducted “on the move,” like when traveling by public transport or going to places of pilgrimage. Thanks to technological advancements, I was able to connect with a number of people through social media before scheduling meetings with them. For some respondents who were uncomfortable meeting in person or had limited time, I arranged a few online calls for interviews. All of the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese without the need of an interpreter, creating a more secure environment for respondents to share their experiences. I generally refrained from using a voice recorder during interviews to respect respondents’ privacy, unless they gave their consent. They were all informed that any personally identifiable information, if they shared with me, would be kept confidential, including their real names that would be substituted in my dissertation with pseudonyms.

Participant observation was my primary technique employed during the deep hanging out; I participated in the activities while observing them and collecting field data. The research technique was helpful in my study because it helps build mutual trust and acceptance among the people I would be collaborating with through shared actions, particularly when the topic was spirituality or religion-related (Okely 2012). This method improved the quality of the data collected as well as the interpretation of the data by bringing insights and providing the context for what respondents did not mention in the interviews (Musante 2011). Observing and participating in these activities inspired the formulation of new research questions and led to more in-depth findings, as the focus of the study was put within a larger context.

Positionality and Limitations

Being a PhD student from Thailand, a neighboring country of Vietnam, allowed me to blend in as an “insider” while retaining the positionality of a “close” outsider. One of the greatest benefits of being a Thai researcher was that I could discuss with them our shared practices in Southeast Asia. Given that Thailand is known as a Buddhist nation with the biggest amulet market in Asia, the Vietnamese people were eager to talk about their experiences with amulets without worrying about being judged. They frequently went into additional detail regarding the transnational characters of amulets, discussing how amulets made in Vietnam were exported to neighboring countries in Asia while foreign amulets were imported. When they learned that I was from Thailand, they always wanted me to assist in buying Thai amulets so that they could keep them for personal use or give

them to friends as gifts. My extra role as an amulet dealer allowed me to dive further into amulet transactions and the transnational amulet chain. This has motivated me to include a chapter on transnational amulets, which I did not initially plan to do. I saw my positionality as a double-edged sword. That is, I found some biased information in my conversations with others. Many people tended to talk more about Thai amulet importers instead of bigger ones like the Chinese or the Taiwanese, who possessed greater spaces in the exporting amulet market. Since I was aware of the biases induced by my positionality, I have attempted to analyze the data from a well-rounded perspective and avoid drawing conclusions based only on my own experience as a Thai person who shared some spiritual beliefs with my Vietnamese interlocutors.

As a young woman without a research assistant, I became aware of my limitations in accessing certain restricted areas. Many private houses conducting private rituals for their Vietnamese clients only let male interpreters inside. I also lacked the courage to venture up to several illicit mines or mountainous places on my own. As a result, the small part in Chapter 6 discussing the amulets of ethnic minority communities was mostly based on information from others' mouths or from existing literature. However, as a woman, I was able to win people's trust, particularly when I entered new areas. Many locals were at ease enough to open up to me about some really personal events they had experienced. Numerous amulet sellers informed me that they employed Chinese-Vietnamese methods to "screen" my physiognomy (*nhân tướng*) prior to consenting to interviews. I was told that they felt comfortable having me visit their houses or stores because I was just a young woman with "honest" and "emotionally sensitive" eyes.

Another limitation of my study was that I needed to spend much time building relationships with my interlocutors to the point that they were willing to share their opinions because spirituality was sometimes regarded as a sensitive subject. Besides, it might be challenging to draw a distinction between a “friend” and a “researcher,” or between an “outsider” and an “insider.” That could give my work a biased or sympathetic voice. Like what Hortense Powdermaker (1966) notes in her book *Stranger and Friend: The Way of an Anthropologist*, researchers must constantly negotiate their social relationships while conducting field studies. However, I made every effort to distinguish between the facts that had previously been confirmed by a number of sources and my personal opinions on the incidents or the people I was discussing. Another limitation I encountered was that even some interlocutors found it difficult to fully understand my questions because perceptions of amulets could be somewhat subjective. I therefore depended on the clearest information I could get from them when making the analyses.

Finally, there have been limited anthropological studies concerning the relationship between people, political economy, and amulets in Vietnam. As a result, there is not much literature available for me to reference. Most of the information I have collected from literature concerns the description of sacredness and the customs surrounding the use of amulets. I anticipate that more studies on these subjects will be conducted in the future, which will make a significant contribution to the field of Vietnamese studies.

Chapter Overview

The dissertation is divided into two main sections. The first section, comprising Chapters 1, 2, and 3, will explore the political economy of amulets, focusing on the relationships between amulets and human actors: users, producers, and sellers. The section is expected to illustrate the important roles amulets have played in post-pandemic Vietnam as an alternative mechanism for coping with precarity or uncertain situations. The boundary-crossing attributes of amulets will be covered in the second section, which includes Chapters 4, 5, and 6. This part will discuss the flexible perceptions of amulets among human actors in the politico-socio context of contemporary Vietnam. It will demonstrate how meanings of amulets are shaped and defined by social affection, economic values, and politics of knowledge production.

Chapter 1 will explore the relationship between amulet consumption and precarity in Vietnam, focusing on amulet users. Two major arguments will be made. First, the chapter will illustrate that “precarity” has transcended economic contexts. Building on Ann Allison’s suggestion in *Precarious Japan* that people who are financially secure also struggle to maintain social connection or acceptance, it will argue that people nowadays, regardless of their economic backgrounds, have encountered everyday precarity, which is an ambiguous mixture of financial, social, and well-being concerns. I will point out that, while amulets are a great tool for assisting people in coping with such precarity, they also reproduce a capitalist mindset that forces people back into the loop of precarity and makes them accept the status quo (Purser 2019). Second, based on the sociological concept of *homo-economicus*, the chapter will contend that amulet users who buy

excessively costly amulets without the assurance of their efficacy are neither superstitious nor irrational. Instead, they are rational subjects who negotiate between social obligations and their personal interests.

Chapter 2 focuses on the production of amulets, spotlighting wooden accessories produced in Hanoi's traditional craft villages and stone beads sold at Lục Yên gemstone market in Yên Bái Province. It will elaborate on the producers' struggles to survive in the fluctuating market, where middlepersons have more agency to control market prices, and show how these artisans negotiate "pride" and "profit." That is, while the artisans are "made do" amulet accessories instead of their inherited familial specialties, since the items are easier to sell, they still maintain the pride in their occupation as makers. Moreover, it will contend that the concept of "perfection" evolves after industrialization has shaped the way people create and value their craftworks. Building on Appadurai's (1998) "regime of values" framework, the chapter will illustrate how the values of an object are unstable and prone to sudden changes based on the interactions it has with humans. It will do so by examining the way material and spiritual values are integrated and turn an ordinary object into a marketable amulet.

Amulet sellers and their selling activities will be examined in Chapter 3, which mainly discusses amulet sellers' performativity, based on Goffman's (1959) work on performance. This chapter examines the social performance of different amulet sellers, including male spiritual masters (*thầy*), female spirit mediums (*bà đồng*), and "basket" vendors. It will demonstrate how each group of sellers uses the concepts of spiritual connection, dignity, and pitifulness as sales strategies to gain profits. On the social front,

some sellers claim to be “ritual masters” or “destined mediums” who can provide spiritual guidance to customers in an effort to gain “prestige” (*uy tín*). Being accused of “trading the gods, selling the divines” (*buôn thần bán thánh*), these sellers dispute the claim by emphasizing that their true purpose of distributing amulets is to assist people rather than making profits from their precarious conditions. Conversely, the chapter will also illustrate small vendors who play “below the dignity.” Wearing shabby clothes and carrying small children while peddling amulets at pagodas, these vendors employ their “precarious” appearance as a marketing strategy. Moreover, this chapter will delve into the different ways sellers have used the internet to engage with consumers, including free spiritual workshops, livestreaming, video calls, and online communities. However, as these online activities are usually blamed for deception, they create new forms of anxiety in society.

In Chapter 4, I will present amulets as boundary-crossing objects and discuss the contentious debates around the “sacredness” and “profanity” of amulets, particularly when the objects and related activities have turned into profitable commodities. This chapter will show the ambiguity in how people perceive and interpret “agency” of an amulet, which is greatly influenced by their connection with the object. Such ambiguity is reflected through amulet users’ hesitation when asked to identify the source of their good fortune. In analyzing an amulet’s efficacy, I will propose that sacredness is largely constructed on both sacred and profane factors: magical elements and goodwill. It will illustrate how all perceived sacred and mundane elements work together as an assemblage to transform an ordinary object into a sacred one. Lastly, using the

consecration service, or “*trì chú*,” as an example, the chapter examines ethical conflicts between religious institutions and spiritual industries that arise from their incompatible perceptions of values.

A blurry boundary between science and spirituality is examined in Chapter 5. An example of natural stone amulets, which are either called *phong thủy stones* or energy stones (*đá năng lượng*), will allow us to explore how the conventional concepts of scientific and spiritual objects are combined into one. On the one hand, amulets are magical items that can be explored, defined, and explained by scientific principles, making them “scientific objects” (Daston 2000). Amulets’ users apply various scientific objects to understand the logic of how amulets work. For example, amulets can bring good fortune through the positive energy that operates under the “law of attraction” (*luật hấp dẫn*). On the other hand, amulets are merely spiritual objects that serve the psychological purposes of their users. However, with the politics of knowledge production that is largely influenced by the state’s ideology of “modern citizen,” this chapter will further propose that people utilize science to justify their amulet practices.

“Amulets” (*bùa*) in Vietnam are usually divided into two categories, according to local scholars: good amulets and harmful ones. The topic of the blurry distinction between good and evil amulets is covered in Chapter 6. Ethnic love amulets (*bùa yêu*) and foreign-imported *Kumantong* dolls will serve as examples to show that identical items could be seen as either good or evil, substantially defined by sociopolitical and affective factors. It will argue that levels of “intimacy” (*sự thân mật*) between the users and amulet producers, or consecrators, partly help define meanings of amulets. This

chapter will mainly discuss “ghostly rumors” around evil amulets and propose that amulets are a form of haunting memories that are constructed on both recent and historical social events. For example, *Kumanthong* dolls can be a reflection of people’s moral anxiety around abortion and the notion that child spirits may take deadly revenge if they are mistreated or ignored. In the same vein, rumors about love amulets reflect the interethnic conflicts among different ethnic groups in Vietnamese society while also promoting Kinh supremacy in the political sphere. This chapter will argue that people may view an object as evil if the information about them is unknown or seems unethical to them, and this negative perception is fueled by the state’s opposition to their use.

Although each chapter in this dissertation can be read separately, the overall concepts are all interconnected with one another. The conclusion will revisit two key ideas presented throughout the dissertation, including concepts of precarity and the boundary-crossing nature of amulets.



linh phù dán điện thoại

Phone Amulet Sticker

It is an upgraded and modernized form of paper amulets, that is claimed to help the users overcome various obstacles in life.

↳ collecting debt, increasing income, guaranteeing safe trips

Prices range from 5,000 VND to a few millions after consecration.

\$0.2

CHAPTER 1

I Want to Be Lucky: Amulet Users and Precarity

“Are *dâu tằm* bracelets sold here?” I was working at the amulet store when a woman in her early 30s came in at five o’clock in the afternoon and asked to buy an amulet for her little child. The white mulberry, locally referred to as *dâu tằm*, was believed to possess the ability to ward off evil spirits from young children. Even after receiving what she had asked for, the woman did not seem to be satisfied. She asked the store manager, rather agitatedly, if he knew of any resources that could assist her in settling marital disputes; her husband had not been home for a few weeks, and she was worried that he could be seeing someone else. The store manager, Kiệt, listened intently to her narrative and recommended that she wear a fox stone pendant since the holy fox spirit (*hồ ly*) was the most popular amulet for preserving relationships. Additionally, he suggested that she purchase some amulet stickers to put on her phone cases. He urged me to dash upstairs where the spiritual supplies were kept and bring down the sets of amulet stickers so she could select whatever ones she wanted. Kiệt further advised that three stickers might fit her phone more elegantly, but the woman insisted on obtaining just one marriage-related sticker in addition to the fox pendant. She had already purchased a small golden fortune cat (*mèo thần tài*) sticker online, so it was already there when she took off her phone case to apply the new sticker. Even though the woman was a doctor and did not usually carry her handbag when working in the hospital, Kiệt suggested that she keep her phone with her at all times so that the amulet would be seen by more people and become more

effective. He assured her marital problems would improve in a few weeks, so she could wait and see. With an expression of great relief, the woman nodded in response. She transferred over one million VND (approximately 24 USD) to Kiệt's bank account and departed the store. The sum of money was not insignificant when compared to the current Vietnamese salary base.

The woman's anxiety over different life concerns, such as her son's well-being, her husband's relationship status, and her financial instability, was evident during her store visit and in her amulet purchase. Sacred objects, like amulets, served as a tool both to ease her anxiety and to help find solutions to the problems that seemed to have no answers. Allen Tran (2023), in *A Life of Worry*, points out that anxieties are a collective practice that are influenced by the politico-economic factors of modern life, such as the rapid social transformation or the state's economic policies. According to Tran, a person's anxiety may allude to precarity on a daily basis and have an impact on other social issues in their community (2023, 7). Scholars who work in Vietnam frequently propose that many people have become more reliant on supernatural power to cope with economic precarity, particularly after the launch of *Đổi Mới* policy in the late 1990s. Some of their strategies to deal with the fluctuating and competitive market include going on spiritual pilgrimages to holy places, putting the god of wealth statuettes at their market stalls, organizing spirit-mediumship ceremonies, or borrowing symbolic money from the divines (Lam 2019; Leshkovich 2006; Leshkovich 2014; Minh T.N. Nguyen 2019; Salemink 2008).

Several scholars have noted that material objects that are imbued with power are also widely employed among many Vietnamese people as coping mechanism for anxiety. For example, Soucy (2006) indicates that women may sustain loving ties with their family members and adhere to social norms regarding gender roles by dispersing and consuming blessed items (*lộc*) from pagodas. Additionally, it is noted in the works of Vũ Hồng Thuật (2008), Trương Thị Thúy Hà (2015), and Bùi Quốc Linh (2023) that Vietnamese people expect their usage of sacred items, such as traditional amulets (*bùa chú*) and *phong thủy*⁴ decorations, to improve their lives. Based on my research, a lucky object can be anything as simple as a certain lipstick shade or a laptop color that matches the individual's spiritual element (*mệnh*)⁵. This logic also applies to motorcycles; several interlocutors claimed that their serious car accidents occurred because the colors of their motorcycles did not spiritually fit them. Material items act as extra boosters that can

⁴ *Phong thủy* (English: Geomancy, Feng Shui; Chinese: 風水) is a theory originating from ancient China, specializing in studying the influence of wind direction, water flow, and destiny on human life, misfortune, or happiness. In Vietnam, *phong thủy* principles are promulgated and applied as important guidance in constructions, house decorations, or luck promotion. In terms of amulets, many people believe that wearing accessories with colors and shapes that match (*hợp*) their personal fortunes can attract prosperity. *Phong thủy* experts, called “*phong thủy* master” (*thầy phong thủy*), can be found anywhere, especially in temples, pagodas, and amulet stores (Lê Thu Yến and Đàm Anh Thu 2012).

⁵ This is based on the East Asian concept of the “five elements” (*ngũ hành*); all things and phenomena in the universe are caused by interactions between the five fundamental elements—metal (*Kim*), wood (*Mộc*), water (*Thủy*), fire (*Hỏa*), and earth (*Thổ*). The belief holds that every person possesses one of these particular elements from birth. Carrying lucky objects with a supportive element and avoiding anything with an incomparable element are necessary for a happier, more balanced life. Every element is commonly represented by color (Thích 2012).

actively give users mental comfort and guarantee that their hard efforts will be rewarded. People from different socioeconomic backgrounds, in addition to those with lesser earnings, may also rely on amulets in times of “precarity” (Jackson 2021). In several cases, amulets are seen as an investment to guarantee anticipated results or a brighter future rather than a tool for resolving offhand situations.

Building on the concept of “precarity,” this chapter will mainly discuss the use of commodified amulets as an indicator of the precarity that Vietnamese people in post-pandemic Vietnam are facing. Although precarity seems to be perceived as an ambiguous entity, I will propose that amulet consumption plays a role in coping with precarity from three main aspects: economic, social, and well-being. By examining the three interconnected aspects, I will argue against the economic-based notion of spiritual re-enchantment, which claims that the increasing market uncertainty during the post-*Đổi Mới* era is the primary cause of the rising need for spiritual support in Vietnam, by pointing out that modern precarity extends beyond material concerns (Leshkovich 2014; Taylor 2004; Tran 2014). This chapter will illustrate how amulets help people maintain social connections and nourish their physical and mental well-being. However, using amulets diverts people’s attention from the structural cause of precarity and encourages them to rely on self-responsibility in problem-solving. Building on Foucault’s (2008) lecture of the “economic person” (*homoeconomicus*), the chapter will also demonstrate how amulet users are rational subjects who struggle to maintain a balance between their personal achievement and their social obligations in the face of rapid social transformation.

Seeking Fortunes: Amulets and the Post-Pandemic Precarity

According to scholarship in social sciences, the term “precarity” refers to uncertain and insecure working conditions in labor markets associated with working-class and marginalized laborers, like migrant domestic workers (Akalin 2018; Harris and Nowicki 2018). Precarity is viewed as a byproduct of a deregulated labor market, which results in a range of precarious employment with minimal social security and difficulties making cohesive future plans (Walsh 2019). Although precarity appears to stem from economic factors, discussion around the term spans beyond labor instability, unemployment, and salary-related issues to a more political focus (Choonara 2020; Han 2018; Ettliger 2007). Precarity, according to Judith Butler (2016, ii), is the term used to describe social and political conditions in which “certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” as a consequence of unequal power relations. Butler further describes these conditions as being caused by the state’s inability to provide the populace with necessary protection, leaving them vulnerable. Consequently, precarious persons are those who do not fit the criteria for recognition, including women, queers, the poor, and stateless individuals (Butler 2004). Harris and Nowicki (2018) propose that precarity can be perceived through daily negotiations over mundane routines, while future hopes can produce and reproduce precarious conditions. The political implications of precarity are aptly illustrated by Solange Munoz’s (2018) study of impoverished urban residents of Buenos Aires who had limited access to reliable housing options. People were forced to live with strangers in crowded *casas tomadas*, or unofficial hotels, just to build a place

for themselves in the city in exchange for better economic opportunities, resources, and services. The researcher points out that the issue of precarious housing brings up a more significant political one about urban inequality and social exclusion. The urban residents fall under Butler's definition of precarious subjects, as they were disregarded by the state and society.

Precarity can also be discussed in terms of effects and social connections. Building on Butler's notion, Ann Allison (2014) suggests that interpersonal detachment and unrecognition are among the main causes of precarity in Japan, a top country experiencing extraordinarily fast economic growth. Her research highlights the fact that those who are marginalized or who live with a sense of social dis-belonging can also face a certain form of precarity. Aspirations for money accumulation, driven by global capitalism, sometimes coexist with a need for social acceptance. Minh T. N. Nguyen's (2015) research on rural migrant waste collectors residing in Vietnam's urban centers can exemplify this assertion. The author argues that migrants' precarious livelihood is mainly shaped by two factors: the instability of the global waste trade and the exclusion of these people from participation in urban social and economic life since they do not conform to the state-sanction notion of orders. She claims that the nation's *Đổi Mới* economic transition has left certain segments of its population in a marginalized and vulnerable state, both socially and financially. The study implies that economic precarity is entangled with other forms of precarity in people's daily lives, which manifest themselves through anxieties and other social practices.

A number of scholars have connected economic transitions to an increase in people's participation in religious or spiritual activities. On the one hand, religious organizations and entrepreneurs seize this chance to turn religious beliefs into commodities (Kitiarsa 2010). For example, Comaroff and Comaroff (1999) propose that the dramatic rise of the "occult economy" in South Africa was notable during the country's rapid socio-political-economic transition. Witchcraft traditions were employed as a means of negotiating the free-market system. The authors claim that as global capitalism has left people with uncertainty, engaging in the occult economy appears to offer instant solutions to their financial demands and dreams of becoming wealthy fueled by global capitalism. On the other hand, the commercialization of beliefs gives people a means of gaining more material capital. Peter A. Jackson (2021) studies what he refers to as "cults of wealth" in Thailand, where the middle classes and elites are seeking supernatural assistance to enhance their prosperity by organizing spirit mediumships or using wealth amulets. Jackson argues that these religious expressions are a response to the notion of "success," influenced by neoliberal capitalist ways of living. Jackson's notion is supported by other earlier studies on Thai amulets, which argue that people need religious objects to alleviate their financial anxieties or to guarantee material advantages and that religions are responding to global capitalism by spreading outside of sacred sites (Kitiarsa 2010; Srichampa 2014; Tambiah 1984).

Similarly, scholars in Vietnam usually address the re-enchantment of religious practices in relation to the *Đổi Mới* economic reform, contending that heightened sentiments of risk, uncertainty, and powerlessness, along with intensified market

interactions, have led to a rise in religious devotion (Kendall 2011; Leshkovich 2006; Taylor 2004). These scholars demonstrate that, on the one hand, people are urged to turn to religious pursuits as a coping mechanism for their economic insecurity because of the unstable state of the market. On the other hand, these kinds of actions have fostered the processes of religious commodification, which introduce religions into the marketplace. Lam Minh Chau (2019) notes that the Goddess of Treasury's (*Bà Chúa Kho*) cult began to take shape following the initiation of the *Đổi Mới* economic reform. Believing that the goddess can grant prosperity, many people visit the temple to "borrow a sum" (*vay vốn*) from her for investments in their businesses. They then repay the loan through offerings, giving back as much as or more than the actual profits they have made. Lam Minh Chau indicates that the pursuit of divine power is strengthening rational business strategies during the period. Another scholar, Oscar Salemink (2008), argues that religious practices, like spirit mediumships, are situated within the context of post-socialist Vietnam, which is characterized by risk-taking, uncertainty, and economic aspirations. People seek spiritual security through the means that "not only compensates for the insecurity of the unpredictable market but also creates the social capital necessary for investing confidently in new (or old) enterprises" (2008, 157).

Devotional objects like amulets have been addressed in several works as tools for people to negotiate with the critical economic conditions since the *Đổi Mới* policy was launched. Leshkovich (2014) examines the statuettes of local divines, positioned in a corner of every stall in the Bến Thành Market, and highlights their roles in ensuring economic stability for their proprietors. According to Allison Truitt (2012, 77-78), some

Vietnamese people collected “two-dollar bills” as lucky talismans and gave them as gifts during economic downturns. They also carried “folded banknotes” as blessings (*lộc*) from the divines and used them to buy lottery tickets, believing that the divines would bring them prosperity. Commodification has turned these sacred objects into tradable commodities with a range of options, thanks to technological breakthroughs and an increasingly open market (Trương Thị Thúy Hà 2015). The “two-dollar bills” mentioned in Truitt’s work are also redesigned and offered for sale at common amulet stalls. Instead of going to ritual masters or temple events to obtain amulets, these artifacts provide a simpler way for people from various social backgrounds to solve both their spiritual and material issues.

Obtaining amulets is a strategy used to deal with daily precarity because they are made to fulfill people’s spiritual and worldly needs. While scholars have connected Vietnam’s precarity to the *Đổi Mới* policy, which significantly affected Vietnamese social life, the woman I have mentioned earlier in the chapter introduction implies that focusing solely on *Đổi Mới* as the primary cause of modern-day precarity may cause us to overlook other significant factors. The family separation brought on by their incongruous work schedules, rather than the economic downturn, was the cause of the suffering of this doctor, who was paid a steady salary by the hospital. Removing the focus on the *Đổi Mới* discourse will help us see that financial concerns are not the main cause of people’s precarity. Instead, precarity is an assemblage of issues with everyday living that are interconnected and pertain to the economy, society, and well-being. Different from Butler, who associates “precarious subjects” with socially marginalized and unrecognized

groups of people, I view precarity as a state that affects people of all socioeconomic and background types. The following cases of Khoa and Chung can serve as examples for this argument, showing how precarity is a confusing combination of various life issues that people find challenging to pinpoint.

Khoa, aged 26, worked for the state's public transportation system as a bus conductor. When we first met on a bus, I told him I would get off at a pagoda close to Hanoi's Old Quarter. Upon noticing the wooden prayer beads on my left wrist, he grinned. Khoa showed me a wooden rosary around his neck and invited me to join him at a Vietnamese meditation center (*thiền viện*). I could hardly understand him because he spoke with a lisp. He also lost his walking balance after being diagnosed with liver disease a few years ago. He usually communicated by typing on the phone and gave it to me to read. Khoa shared with me that when he tried to make friends with others, they would constantly reject him because they were unsure of his intentions. Besides his health problems, Khoa faced financial difficulties. Having grown up with wage-laboring parents, he had to work after graduating from high school as a security guard, a construction worker, and finally a bus conductor, a job he held for five years. Khoa thought that even with his multiple part-time jobs and eight hours of work each day on average, his compensation from all sources was still less than the minimum wage. He claimed that all of his suffering was due to his *karma* (*nghiệp*), which was why he had spent the past two years attending numerous religious events and buying various amulets in an effort to draw good fortune.

Khoa would always show me off his new amulets whenever we went out. They ranged from rubber wristbands with Buddhist designs from Tibet to amulet stickers, wooden strings (*tràng hạt*), lucky red bracelets (*vòng đỏ may mắn*), gilded Bodhi leaves (*lá bồ đề*), and an assortment of other items. Besides buying amulets, Khoa registered to receive free amulets online whenever he saw a distribution announcement, as well as visited several well-known temples and pagodas that his friends had advised him to visit in order to obtain amulets. He was unable to articulate his obsession with obtaining or buying amulets other than the desire to be “luckier” (*may mắn hơn*). He also sensed that he was receiving positive energy from amulets; thus, he felt at ease wearing them. Khoa’s fixation on amulets illustrates how some people rely on sacred objects as a coping mechanism for life’s stresses. On the one hand, Khoa believed that wearing Buddhist amulets enabled him to decrease the consequences of his past karma. On the other hand, amulets provided him with peace of mind in other aspects of his life, particularly those pertaining to his health, social life, and wealth. As Khoa pointed out, his unsuccessful life was the result of his past karma and the negative energies existing around him. Coming from a low-income family, Khoa is an example of a “precarious” person in scholarly definitions. That is, he was juggling unstable work, meager income, and social unrecognizableness (Butler 2009; Choonara 2020; Han 2019). People like Khoa are struggling for a better life. They buy amulets in the hope that the items could end their never-ending sufferings.

In contrast to Khoa, who was clearly a member of the underprivileged community, Chung was a 27-year-old software engineer employed by a Hanoi-based

private company. He had a steady job with a higher-than-standard salary. Chung, however, wore a wooden bracelet around his wrist, which he referred to as a “lucky charm” (*vật may mắn*), to deal with uncertainty. The bracelet was bought from the Temple of Literature (*Văn Miếu Quốc Tử Giám*), which he considered a sacred place. Chung had been changing the bracelet every year. Not only was the amulet composed of inferior materials, but he was also concerned that the magical power that had made him “lucky” would fade after a year of use. When I questioned, Chung continued to explain to me what he meant by “lucky”:

Though it was cheap, it somehow brought me luck. ... When I first put it on, everything seemed to work well. Things came to me more easily; I mean job opportunities, good health, and good friends. Really, I have no idea. Now that I have the bracelet, I check myself out more often. I feel like I should make things better. I mean looking inside. Also, before wearing it, my health was just so-so. But things are a lot better now.

[Chung, interviewed in Hanoi on April 9, 2023]

The word “lucky” (*may mắn*) was used by both interlocutors as a broad term to describe their aspirations in life when the anxieties seemed to emanate from all angles and neither of them could clearly identify what they truly expected from their spiritual activities. This unidentifiable source of anxiety pushes people into a vulnerable state, which can be temporarily managed by certain actions or, specifically in this study, possession of objects (Tran 2023). While Khoa’s expectation is clearly implied through the interview that he wanted to overcome his ill health, inability to make friends, and insufficient income, Chung aimed for a guarantee that his career, relationship, and health would be secured. In addition, Chung showed his desire to better himself when he mentioned that the bracelet could help him look “inside” (*bên trong*) and realize that he

“should make things better.” Adding on to Jackson (2021), who mainly discusses the financial role that amulets and other religious practices play, Chung’s and Khoa’s cases demonstrate that precarity is not limited to economic issues. This can be exemplified when both interlocutors used the word “luckiness” (*may mắn*) to explain to me the motivations for their amulet purchases. Financial, social, and well-being uncertainties are all part of modern precarity construction.

If precarity is defined by instability and uncertainty, then both Khoa and Chung were in a state of precariousness, but in different expressions. This supports the notion that amulets, as a form of religious practice, not only play a significant role in serving the needs of the economically disadvantaged but also help other groups of people maintain stability in life and ensure success in the future in a similar way (Lam Minh Chau 2019). According to Jackson (2021, 17), both elites and the middle class use supernatural assistance as a technology to “take advantage and to make the most of the opportunities provided by the modern social order.” Taking a closer look at the *Đổi Mới* discourse, it can be said that Chung and Khoa were not directly affected by the economic reform of the 1990s because the transition took place even before they were born. The two interlocutors were situated in a different environment where market competition, social disconnection, and the pursuit of an idealized good life might be considered normal aspects of daily existence. Since Chung and Khoa anticipated that their amulets, or lucky items, would shield them from any possible discomfort, the amulets are comparable to what Karl Marx (1844) refers to as “opium,” which temporarily relieves suffering or improves quality of life.

It is interesting to note about this situation that both interlocutors acquired each amulet by purchasing it. Chung's assessment of the item, "it was cheap," implies that the efficacy of amulets has been subsumed into a value-based economic debate. Just like any product, the magical power in the bracelets could wear off with time, similarly to the cheap nylon string holding the wooden beads together. In other words, the growth of the capitalized market has made "luck" a commodity we can buy with real money. In the following sections, I will go into more detail about these connections between amulets and precarity that are formed within the post-pandemic context of Vietnam. I will show how precarity is a multifaceted phenomenon that extends beyond problems with money or work. In addition, building on Allison's (2014) and Lam Minh Chau's (2019) works, I will propose that humans are not economic machines that purchase amulets only to profit from them. Rather, they seek to strike a balance between money, relationships, and personal well-being, influenced by today's neoliberal values.

Economic Precarity: Lucky Amulets and the Economic Life

Although there are several factors urging people to engage in supernatural practices, including the use of amulets, it is unavoidable to acknowledge that financial precarity is a major factor in the acquisition of sacred commodities. While I was working voluntarily at Kiệt's amulet store, I noticed that the "business" sticker set (*bộ kinh doanh*), comprising *Thần tài cầm búa*, *Tiền vào như nước*, *Buôn may bán đắt*, and *Ngũ lộ thần tài*⁶ amulets,

⁶ The business set (*bộ kinh doanh*) of amulet stickers contains four stickers with wealth-related elements. They are *Thần tài cầm búa* (literal meaning: the God of Wealth carrying

was the best-selling collection. Kiệt's store could always sell sticker sets, both online and offline, at a predetermined price of 200,000 VND during special occasions. He claimed that these stickers were already sanctified by the Buddhist abbot of the adjoining pagoda. Amulet stickers, which were developed from the traditional *bùa chú* amulets, have gradually gained popularity since their debut in 2019, partly due to their affordable price and their potency, which covers almost all forms of everyday anxieties, including those related to protection, money, fortune, peacefulness, marriage, love attraction, health, promotion, study, dunning, and safe travel. The price started at only 4,000 VND (0.17 USD) for an unblessed one. However, an amulet sticker could reach over a million VND (40 USD) after a full consecration, depending on each ritual master. When describing how popular their amulets were, many amulet sellers used the term “*bán chạy*” (quick sales), which is a metaphor for a situation in which many goods are purchased in large quantities all at once during a short period of time.

Many people had high hopes that these amulet stickers would help them overcome financial difficulties like unemployment and reduced income. I recall working alongside Kiệt, the amulet store manager, to handle the store one cold night at around nine o'clock. After spotting a woman skulking outside, I opened the glass door and invited her inside. The woman told us that she rode a bicycle for 6-7 kilometers from her

a hammer), which depicts a divine character believed to bestow luck upon users holding a hammer; *Tiền vào như nước* (literal meaning: money flows in like water), which represents *Pixiu*, a mystical Chinese animal with a coin in its mouth; *Buôn may bán đắt* (literal meaning: prosperous trading); and *Ngũ lộ thần tài* (literal meaning: five-ways of the God of Wealth) on which have sacred drawing patterns.

place in Nam Từ Liêm District to pray at the famous temple adjacent to our store in Đống Đa District and dropped by to ask if anyone might help her with her financial problems. We learned that this 44-year-old woman was a mother of two children. Her husband worked in construction while she was employed as a laborer. She previously had a more stable job at a company that paid her on a monthly basis. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic struck, she and many other employees were laid off. Even though she tried every other way to earn money, like daily cleaning, she was unable to make ends meet. She had to borrow money from relatives and friends. As her trust was slowly lost, no one wanted to help her anymore. However, after getting money from the loan shark, things got worse. “My kids are really nice,” she said, noting that they never made requests as they were aware of how hard their parents were struggling. “My eldest son is the class president. He is brilliant, although we don’t have money to enroll him in a tutoring program like other kids his age.”

The store manager, acting like an expert, gave her face a cursory glance and concluded that the woman’s life was destined to be difficult, according to her physiognomic traits (*nhân tướng*)⁷. He then advised her to invest in gold and give the house a thorough cleaning in order to provide her with a good *phong thủy* environment. In addition, referring to the amulets as “supplemental medicines” (*thuốc bổ sung*), he urged her to buy amulet stickers, which were the least expensive amulets in the store, and bring them home. The woman decided to buy a financial one and asked to buy three more

⁷ Physiognomy (*nhân tướng học*) is the study of using a person’s facial features to forecast their life.

stickers for each member of her family. “Yes, but I’m worried that they would cost you too much,” Kiệt retorted, but she firmly told him, “It’s okay as long as they could help my family’s situation.” She chose a study amulet (*linh phù văn dương*) for her youngest child, who struggled with illiteracy, a peace amulet (*linh phù bình an*) for her eldest son, who was experiencing an unfavorable *Thái Tuế* year⁸, and a different money amulet (*ngũ lộ thần tài*) for her husband. As she jotted down her family members’ names and birthdates for the consecration service, Kiệt mentioned that the stickers could be applied on phone cases. The woman showed us her cheap keypad phone, which would not fit the stickers, and asked if she could put them in her pocket instead. She made a partial cash payment and promised to pay the remaining amount when she returned to pick them up later in the week.

The woman I met that winter night is an explicit example of economically precarious people who are striving to make ends meet. Her long winter bike ride and her outdated keypad phone imply that she hardly earned enough to afford a better one and live a good life. Her shame as a mother who was unable to support her children’s education was reflected in our conversation. She, despite having a sporadic income and facing severe financial troubles, chose to spend over 400,000 VND (16.57 USD) on the

⁸ Vietnamese popular belief holds that different gods (*vi thần*) take turns to oversee world affairs every year. The year governing god, known as “*niên thái tuế*,” plays a significant role in determining each person’s fate for the year. Everything in the life of a person born in a zodiac year that is not in harmony with the year governing god will not go smoothly; they may face difficulties in various aspects all year long. People in this condition usually conduct rituals at temples/pagodas or carry an amulet known as “*bùa/linh phù thái tuế*.”

amulet stickers for her poor family. The case suggests that obtaining sacred objects, particularly amulets, may be a means for many people to get out of difficult situations.



Figure 2: Amulet phone stickers for sale at Kiệt's amulet store [left]; a store assistant placing amulets on a customer's phone case [right] (Photo by the author, Hanoi, August 2022)

The relationship between financial amulets and economic uncertainty can be explicitly seen after the COVID-19 pandemic hit Vietnam. During the global health crisis, the Vietnamese government implemented a number of policies that played a vital role in the successful control of the pandemic, including social distancing, travel restrictions, and lockdowns, which entailed closing businesses. Despite the government having several solutions to manage the fiscal deficit for resolving urgent issues, such as focusing on effectively implementing domestic stimulus, a large number of workers were still severely impacted by the lower income (Nguyen Huong T. T. et al. 2020). Many of my interlocutors also stated that they temporarily ceased working during the pandemic in response to the travel restrictions, which caused them to make less money than normal. The woman I met at the amulet store was one of these employees who was laid off with her pay placed on hold, leaving her to shoulder the financial burden of her family. When

people began to shun her out of fear that she would ask for money, the financial precarity extended to her social life. However, there was an inverse relationship between people's reduced income and the sales of sacred commodities, particularly amulets. Interviewing many amulet sellers, I found that, compared to previous years, they were able to sell a greater number of amulets during the pandemic. Among the few types that clients ordered the most were financial amulets. "I'm not sure what happened. But I got so many *linh phũ* orders, plenty of them," Hồng, Kiệt's wife, informed me of the rise in sales during the pandemic. Amulet sales, which were trending in the same way across several sites I visited, highlight the critical uncertainty that people were experiencing at the time.

Economic aspects of religions are absorbed into temple operations. The abbot of a Buddhist pagoda located in Hanoi's outskirt area told me that she had given out special "money amulets" (*linh phũ tiền tài*) for people to take. The amulets, also known as "energy money" (*tiền năng lượng*), could be burned in place of ordinary votive papers at this pagoda, serving as symbolic money for both living and deceased people. The amulets were created by combining Buddhist figures and scripts with symbolic images associated with money, such as golden bars. She gave me the following explanation:

Each image on the [paper] amulet symbolizes different things, including the colors and the icons. One side of the amulets portrays the Buddhas who guard the four directions—north, south, east, and west. They draw different kinds of prosperity (*tài lộc*). The other side displays five more Buddha images. One of them is the Golden Treasure Buddha (*tài bảo*). Overall, it's a prosperity-bringing amulet. For those who take one, if their minds focus on money and making money, just gazing at the amulet can help. They can actually look at the figures instead of just a mouth (*mồm*) making a wish out of thin air.

[Thầy Liên Hoa, interviewed on March 26, 2023]

The abbot claimed that money amulets gave people's wishes to become wealthy a tangible manifestation. She also added that a money amulet with its unfamiliar images could arouse people's curiosity about what those symbols mean and pique their interest in learning about Buddhist teachings. Amid economic uncertainties and aspirations for money, the pagoda created its money amulets as a strategy to draw people to religious events like *dharma* teachings or meditation sessions.

The significance of the power of amulets' materiality should be emphasized, as it is seen to have a greater spiritual impact than verbal prayers or wishing (*cầu phước*) at pagodas. This is because symbolic icons, religious figures, and texts on the items visualize users' strong intention to be prosperous. Remarkably, the printed amulets of the pagoda were produced to resemble banknotes and were referred to as "energy money" (*tiền năng lượng*), which denoted both prosperity and wealth. Jackson (2021, 218), in his book, describes *riangs*, a type of Thai wealth amulets in the form of coins, as "ritually empowered objects that signify wealth." He proposes that bringing together wealth-related symbols is believed to increase users' wealth and highlight the monetary value of the items as collectibles. Building on Jackson's notion, Donna Haraway (2016) discusses in her article on situated knowledge that the symbolic material attributes of wealth amulets can be connected to the legitimacy of visual representations. Although Haraway's main purpose is to challenge scientific knowledge production, the article implies how visual representations dominate the way people perceive the world. Based on my research, the combination of cultic scripts and visual images on the amulets played an important role in helping precarious people cope with their difficulties, especially

financial ones. In short, I propose that sensible attributes of amulets, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5, may create perception of the “real existence” of their power and increase their magical potency.

Economic precarity manifests itself through various choices of wealth amulets, such as Trần Temple’s seals (*ấn Đền Trần*), business amulets (*bùa kinh doanh-buôn bán*), metal coins (*đồng xu kim tiền*), or yellow quartzes (*thạch anh vàng*). Foreign amulets from neighboring countries are also imported to help people deal with financial precarity. Examples of these amulets are the Beckoning Lady or *Nang Kwak* (*bùa mẹ ngoắc*), a Thai amulet depicting a female figure dressed in traditional Thai costume with a hand raised in a beckoning gesture, and *Kumanthong*, a spirited doll believed to provide its owner with everything if properly treated like a real child. Among the available options, *tỳ hưu* figures, whether fashioned of natural or synthetic stones, are one of the most popular amulets that are believed to attract wealth. The *phong thủy* auspicious creature with a taste solely for gold and silver known as *tỳ hưu* is believed to promote financial wealth for its owner. Amulet shops usually sell stone *tỳ hưu* as bracelets or rings, with costs varying based on the material used, production difficulties, and sacralization procedure. Instructions are provided to guarantee the efficacy of the objects; for example, the user must activate (*khai quang*) or open the *tỳ hưu* figure’s eyes (*mở mắt*) before use and prevent anyone from touching its head. Although *tỳ hưu* amulets are normally recommended for traders or business owners, common people who seek economic stability do utilize them. The fact that various financial amulet options exist implies people’s needs to address economic uncertainty. While some people use amulets

to resolve offhand situations, many carry them to ensure financial stability or business success, like how female petty traders in Leskovich's (2014) research expected from their daily rituals of worshipping the local deities at their stalls.

Social Precarity: Acceptance, Connection, and Love

While scholars indicate that the *Đổi Mới* reform had left people to struggle with economic uncertainty, making financial instability the main cause of precarity in recent decades, the ethnographic data presented in earlier sections imply that financial issues are entangled with other forms of precarity. The middle-aged woman on the cold winter night, for example, mainly related the details of her financial predicament. The sons' welfare, however, was actually her greatest concern since she feared she would not be able to adequately support their schooling. Leskovich (2006) discusses a similar example involving a Vietnamese businesswoman who, after experiencing success in expanding her business, attributed her prosperity to Buddhist piety. The author notes that the female entrepreneurs she spoke with usually identified themselves as mothers who prioritize the well-being of their families rather than as autonomous business owners seeking to accumulate capital. In this case, precarity is interpersonal, as the feeling of powerlessness (Taylor 2004) actually stems from affection, love, and care.

Đào, a 25-year-old office worker, told me that she bought a necklace with a white *hồ ly* pendant to help calm her mind after breaking up with her boyfriend several years ago. *Hồ ly* is the fox-like *phong thủy* figure that is said to foster attachment for its user. Even though Đào had never considered purchasing amulets that were more expensive

than what a common university student could afford, she did her research, asked friends for recommendations, and read through numerous customer reviews before carefully choosing an online amulet store that best suited her needs. After buying it, she followed all the instructions and gave it a moonlight bath once a month. Although she was not certain whether it was due to the amulet or other factors, she was gradually healed from the relationship's failure throughout her college years.

In Đào's case, she, as an amulet user, was willing to spend a substantial sum of money to get over her mental health issues, despite her tight financial situation. The *hồ ly* amulet can be put in comparison with *tỳ hừu*, a wealth amulet, as they both are produced based on *phong thủy* belief. Kiệt's receipt book, to which I was granted access, revealed that his customers purchased both *hồ ly* and *tỳ hừu* amulets equally. This suggests that emotional precarity is just as significant as financial one. Many amulet sellers I spoke with noted that, even during the COVID-19 crisis, amulets associated with love and marriage remained the second most popular choice among consumers. I learned from a seller that during the pandemic, family separation affected a large number of people, primarily women. Some female customers, she said, worried that their husbands would develop feelings for other women while they were separated. Women were frequently aware of their spouses' infidelity when their covert actions were made public through the travel declaration procedure. When people began to lose "trust" in one another, fueled by mobility restrictions, personal fears turned into a collective social precarity. Allen Tran (2018) proposes in his study on romantic love in Ho Chi Minh City that people struggled to integrate neoliberal reasonings constructed after the *Đổi Mới* reformation into their

relationships and that the fear of losing social connection, recognition, and love has become the main cause of anxiety in today's society. In my study, the launch of the *Đổi Mới* policy was not the only turning point that led to such social precarity. Rather, a variety of social circumstances, such as the state's announcement of travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, contribute to the construction of social precarity. The demands of love amulets amidst the time of global health and economic crises serve as a concrete illustration of how uncertainty about interpersonal relationships can be identified as a main source of precarious conditions.

The notion of "social precarity" in my view stems from people's anxiety about losing their social connections. I believe that many personal anxieties are linked to a larger socioeconomic context, and this can be exemplified by young people's struggles to gain social recognition through their ways of living. According to Ann Allison (2014, 62), "social precarity" is a state in which people lack self-awareness and self-confidence about who they are and where they belong. Allison makes some interesting insights in her book *Precarious Japan* regarding precarity in the well-developed nation of Japan. Building on Butler's (2009) suggestion that the concept of precarity has transcended financial gain, she proposes that many people in Japan are currently suffering from the pains of social loneliness and dis-belonging, which are placed in the socioeconomic landscape of the nation, workplace, and home. She views that Japan is losing human ties, just like many other countries in the globalized world (2014, 18). Many young amulet users in my research also informed me that they used amulets to be "loved" by others and to fix the conflicts with their colleagues at work. This implies that they were going

through similar situations following Allison's notion of social precarity. I will use the case of the 28-year-old programmer Hoa Sen as an example of how amulets are perceived as alternative tools to cope with social precarity in Vietnam.

Hoa Sen and I first met at an English club in Hanoi. He was a reclusive person who became interested in spirituality when his father passed away from cancer. After losing the house and failing to get into the university he had set his sights on, he was locked in grief. Although his main motivation for joining the club was to pursue employment opportunities overseas, his primary concern was for his mother and younger sister and how they would survive without him. In one of our frequent hangouts, Hoa Sen confided his worries to me about getting negative feedback from his aggressive supervisor. When the situation reached its peak a few months later, he called me to announce his intention to leave the office. To my surprise, Hoa Sen asked over the phone whether I could suggest any sutras (*câu thần chú*) or spiritual stones (*đá năng lượng*) to make his colleagues understand his intention to leave without breaking the long-standing interpersonal relationship. He was worried that everyone would despise him because he did not perform as well as he had promised during the job interview and that he had left his coworkers to handle the incomplete project. After returning to his former company, where he felt most at ease, Hoa Sen told me one day:

Actually, I had already decided to quit my job at that moment. But I just wanted to try using spiritual objects once to see if they worked. I think they might be; it's just a matter of whether I believe it or not. ... What I'm looking for when going to work is a nice workplace. Mostly, I mean the supervisor and other colleagues. I had no problems with my colleagues, but it was a bit annoying with my supervisor. ... I had tried everything I could. I even had a private conversation with him. I expressed my worries

about his aggressive behavior towards the staff. He told me that he was aware of it and wanted to fix it, but his personality was very hard to change. I guess he was also under pressure from those above him, so he put that pressure on us. It was just his expression, which was so terrible. I thought, maybe if I used lucky objects, he would settle down a bit.

[Hoa Sen, interviewed on September 9, 2023]

Although early definitions of precarity mostly focused on economic and humanitarian dimensions, such as poor wages and suppressive working conditions, they linked precarity to workplaces (Han 2018; Harris and Nowicki 2018). Hoa Sen's case obviously implies a different form of precarity at work; one is not suppressed economically but rather emotionally. Despite a larger pay than his prior job, the workplace became precarious for him due to the poisonous relationship with the superior. The conflict did not simply arise between him and his immediate boss, but it appeared to have its roots in the hierarchical structure of the governmental organization where he was employed. Seeking to use amulets to patch up his relationship with his boss illustrates his attempt to establish a friendly atmosphere where he might fit in. His behavior also conveys his anxiety over losing connection with his colleagues. According to Allison (2014), people today are experiencing the emotional deprivation brought on by being cut off from human relationships and lacking a supportive network of family and friends to lean on. These people long for social acceptance rather than money; they want to be welcomed into a warm sense of recognition and belonging, just like what Hoa Sen implies in our interview. Hoa Sen needed the supernatural power of amulets to maintain the acceptance that his boss and his colleagues had been putting their trust in him throughout the working period. Middleton (2013), in his article, uses the term "anxious belonging" to

refer to the anxiety that arises from attempting to define who is or is not a part of a social unit, like a nation state. On a smaller scale, we could argue that Hoa Sen experienced similar concerns about “belonging” in the workplace, and this was where amulets came in to support him in managing his social anxiety.

Well-Being Precarity: Amulets and Their Healing Ability

Well-being is an important concept in social sciences that has received extensive study in recent decades. According to Mathews and Izquierdo (2008), scholars have turned their attention to “well-being” because a “good life” is currently more fully characterized by well-being than only incomes and economic conditions. Well-being is a term that is often used interchangeably with other terms, such as *quality of life*, *wellness*, or *life satisfaction*. Mathews and Izquierdo define “well-being” as an “optimal state for an individual, community, society, and the world as a whole.” Well-being is primarily experienced by individuals, and its essential locus lies within individual subjectivity. However, it can be viewed and compared on an interpersonal and cross-cultural level since “all individuals live within particular worlds of others, and all societies live in a common world at large” (2008, 5). The authors claim that although well-being is subjectively perceived, it is culturally bound and largely influenced by the structural arrangements that an individual lives in. That is, people from different societies have different cultural conceptions of a happy life.

Well-being goes beyond physical health, as it also requires careful consideration of people’s internal states of mind, which they must sometimes strive for. Exploring the

concept of a “good life” among German consumers and Guatemala coffee farmers, Fischer (2014) points out that well-being cannot be fulfilled only by material accomplishment. Rather, what keeps people alive is “aspiration,” or a strong sense of hope for a better future that gives them an agency to control over their own well-being. In positive psychology, the term “well-being” extends to humans’ inner potential, fueled by the trend of self-help and self-development projects (Dornisch 2022; Mathews and Izquierdo 2008). These notions are also present in Purser’s (2019) book on mindfulness, which notes that people learn to become “mindful” to achieve personal gratification by purchasing mindfulness courses and materials. In short, many scholarly studies have shown that people put an effort to develop themselves in the ways they believe to give direction to a “good life.”

Amulets play a significant role in helping people deal with their physical and mental health issues, which is comparable to the basic conceptions of well-being (Thwaite 2019). The interlocutors I discussed earlier, Khoa and Chung, also utilized amulets to enhance their well-being. While the bus conductor Khoa told me that his agarwood rosary could both keep him healthy and calm his mind, especially when he smelled or touched it, Chung noted that his wooden bracelet encouraged him to “look inside” and better himself. The notions of “peacefulness” and “looking inside” match well with Mathews and Izquierdo’s (2008) definition of well-being, which includes exploring one’s own inner state of mind. Amulets help people develop the most stable minds, which was usually perceived as a positive quality among young people in my research.

Based on my observations, energy stones (*đá năng lượng*) are currently one of the most popular amulets among young people in Vietnam. They are claimed to support and preserve mental health. Although natural stone use had long been seen as a part of *phong thủy* practice in Vietnam, many young amulet users I spoke with insisted that what they called “energy stones” were different from *phong thủy* stones because their owners could use them to “heal” (*chữa lành*) the pressures they faced in their social and professional lives. My interlocutors claimed that carrying their energy stones not only relieved their stress but also provided them with guidance. Like many other young respondents, Luru, a 24-year-old employee at a Japanese company, informed me that she had been keeping a glass jar filled with natural stones on her working desk. She confided to me that she started seeing fortunetellers and wearing amulets as a means of “escaping” (*trốn*) her hectic schedule and pressing deadlines. As Luru could currently access available information and always desired to understand herself, she believed that spirituality could give her comfort and self-confidence. She gave me the following explanation:

I think things are moving pretty fast in today’s world. We hardly have time to notice anything around us until something bad happens. This makes me suddenly realize I don’t know what I am living for. Taking advantage of this situation, the spiritual market has expanded greatly. Fortunetelling sessions are like a way for us to let go of our feelings because there are certain things we can’t share with our family or friends. The way fortunetellers convey messages is very calm and gentle. It is not disturbing or sensational, but soothing. ... Why don’t I visit a therapist? These kinds of life issues are *not big enough* to need medical care.

[Luru, online interviewed on August 26, 2023]

Besides Luru, many young people I talked to similarly reflected that carrying natural stone accessories with them could help them feel more comfortable (*an tâm*) and

calmer. In addition, many of my interlocutors had doubts about the state's attempts to develop a reliable mental health system. They viewed therapy sessions with overworked psychologists as ineffective and overly costly. Buying an amulet appeared to be a more sensible substitute for lowering stress levels related to work and personal matters.

According to Tran (2014), stress-related problems have become more prevalent in Vietnam in the twenty-first century as a result of the media's extensive promotion of new mental health initiatives. Purser (2019) asserts that stress has pathologized itself into a condition that requires treatment in order to lead a normal life. Luru's view that her stress levels were "not big enough" to warrant medical attention implies that she believed she could handle her stress on her own with the aid of stone amulets and some supernatural support from fortunetellers. Additionally, Luru's interview shows her state of uncertainty in what Neilson (2015) calls "existential anxiety," a severe emotional state of distress induced by the self-reflexive perception of life's fragility. This makes her one of the "lost generation," to borrow Allison's (2014) words. Recalling Fischer's (2014) notion that well-being must be fulfilled by "aspiration," which endows people with the ability to strive towards their goals, we can infer that people like Luru are suffering from well-being precarity, as they cannot envision the future they are living for.

Unlike Luru, many amulet users have a perfect vision of their ideal selves and use their amulets as vehicles to maximize their inner potential in order to drive them to their desired states. One morning while visiting a craft market, I came upon Nga, a 29-year-old female vendor, selling lucky accessories at her stall. All of her products were crafted from unpolished natural stones, and each one came with an intriguing tag describing what

a wearer might expect. For instance, “aquamarine” was advertised as a stone for improving communication abilities and safeguarding inner serenity, making it an excellent choice for teachers or public speakers. I was enthralled with “rose quartz,” which was said to foster self-love and understanding on its tag. Nga informed me that most of her customers were young adults in need of a little “push” (*động viên*) in their lives. By donning these natural stones, one could absorb positive energies from the stones and undergo internal healing (*chữa lành*). There was another amulet stall with a fortuneteller next to Nga’s. After reading my horoscope from a 12-box grid sheet called “*lá số tử vi*,” she told me that my fortune page was missing the water element (*thủy*), so I needed to carry an additional “aquamarine” stone. My life would become even more perfect if I could achieve this.



Figure 3: Amulet accessories made of natural stones with potency tags.
(Photo by the author, Hanoi, April 2023)

What interests me about this is that the meanings attached to these amulets are intended to bestow onto their wearers the attributes that are seen as “good” in today’s

Vietnamese society, such as wisdom (*trí tuệ*), heightened consciousness, or effective communication skills. This shows that those who wear these amulets are making efforts to live “flawless” lifestyles in order to avert terrible situations in the future. The pursuit of perfection is analogous to Michel Foucault’s argument about how people accumulate human capital, the concept of intangible assets that represent the economic value of labor that has been discussed by many scholars. Foucault (2008), in his lecture, reviews that there are two types of human capital: innate and acquired ones. The “innate” human capital, including height, beauty, and genetic intelligence, can be compared to each person’s destiny (*nhân duyên*) recorded on the fortune sheet, which marks their potentials for a “good” life. According to Foucault, the inability to acquire these genetic elements, or “destined fortune” in my case, provokes anxiety (2008, 228). Besides innate elements, “human capital” can be acquired through education and training (Foucault 2008, 227). People invest time and money accumulating their skills and experiences in order to become competitive in the job market. However, what will happen if certain of those human capitals, like several soft skills required to ensure their future, cannot be acquired through education or heredity? This is the point where a precarious state emerges due to a lack of confidence, creativity, or interpersonal skills. Applying the same economic logic, people buy amulets to invest in their own values and to boost their confidence in their ability to work and maintain social relationships. Nga’s products serve as a good reflection of this internal insecurity because they show that people even use amulets to improve their creative or communication skills, which are valued as either advantageous

abilities in today's workforce or crucial components of a successful life, as fantasized by modern neoliberalism.

Purser (2019), in his book *McMindfulness*, intensively discusses mindfulness services in the United States that contribute to privatizing and interiorizing life problems. Purser proposes that when commercialized mindfulness is treated as a basic “coping device” for life issues, it does not offer any potential sociopolitical transformation that could lessen precarity and inequality in society. Purser therefore points out that mindfulness is a form of capitalist spirituality that diverts people's focus from the main sources of precarity. Amulets, like mindfulness, appear to help people deal with the well-being precarity in capitalist society, but the objects themselves also reproduce it by giving people the attributes that are favored by the system and forcing them back into the loop of precarity. Hoa Sen, for example, stated that he had a strained connection with his irascible supervisor and sought stone amulets to help mend the relationship. Upon recognizing the structural power within the company, he blamed himself for ruining a productive workplace by “talking back” to the supervisor. In Luu's case, the stone jar was intended to reduce her stress from her tight work schedule, which prevented her from taking the time to explore her own needs. When examining these, it becomes evident that the amulets are powerless to alter the precarious working conditions of any of their users. Instead, wearing these amulets entices people to accept the status quo, with hopes of improving their emotional stability, reducing stress, or giving them practical skills for the workplace. In other words, the way amulets are consumed implies that people tend to

comply with the conditions rather than questioning, requesting, or opposing the unequal power structure above them (Purser 2019).

Amulet Users as Rational Subjects

Scholars who work on spiritual practices in Vietnam usually propose that the increased intensity of market interactions, combined with increasing feelings of risk, uncertainty, and powerlessness, has resulted in a surge in religious devotions (Kendall 2011; Lam Minh Chau 2019; Pham Quynh Phuong 2009; Taylor 2004). Some scholars have linked this kind of religious fervor with the underprivileged, like female petty traders, whose well-being is closely correlated with economic fluctuations (Leshkovich 2006; 2014). Another group of academic research has shown that middle-class or economic elites also rely on spiritual power to ensure their economic success (Lam Minh Chau 2019; Saleminck 2008). Several research studies have noted the excessive number of offerings that devotees make to appease the Mother Goddesses, with the hope of receiving recompense in the form of financial profits in their actual world (Kendall 2011; Lam Minh Chau 2019; Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2007). This suggests that some of these devotees may, in a way, be financially stable. They are neither undereducated nor financially disadvantaged, as noted by the first group of scholars.

According to my research, amulets are consumed by people of different socioeconomic backgrounds. However, people's unequal access to "sacred amulets," based on their purchasing capacity, contributes to the division between common amulets and superior ones. Consumers who are "well-to-do" (*có điều kiện*) have the means to

purchase a pricier amulet crafted from precious stones, which holds a higher economic value than ordinary products found in the market. Conversely, those who are having financial difficulties are usually conscious of the cost of amulets and only purchase the smaller, less costly ones in order to save money. Besides, it is widely known that people with lower income have limited access to “effective” amulets due to the market mechanism that closely correlates the quality of an amulet with its price. I was once offered an amulet sticker by an amulet master for more than a million VND (approximately 40 USD). He told me that, although he had initially paid 5,000 VND for each of these stickers at a wholesale market, they were currently extremely sacred since they had been absorbing sacred energy in his worship room for a hundred days. When using economic reasoning, it seems absurd to spend one million VND on a small, mass-produced sticker, especially when the spiritual efficacy of the item cannot be verified by practical means. The sale of costly amulets is therefore typically viewed by both the Vietnamese government and non-believers as “deceptive” (*lừa đảo*). Amulet users are simultaneously accused of being superstitious (*mê tín*), unreasonable (*vô lý*), and credulous (*mù quáng*). This raises the question of why amulets are purchased and why people feel the need for them. Besides financial issues, what else urges them to buy an object without guaranteed outcomes?

Humans are economic beings rather than merely working machines, according to Michel Foucault (2008). Before being widely accepted as a theoretical abstraction, the term “economic person,” or *homo economicus*, has been used to refer to the theory that people generally possess an infinite capacity for perfect rational decision-making to serve

their own interests, both inside and outside of economic institutions. The main reason for the criticism of the theory is that it has been unable to account for some irrational decisions that violate economic productivity principles. Studies on gift giving, money donation, cultivation of interpersonal relationships, and consumption for personal fulfillment all support the notion that moral and societal norms have a huge influence on people's decisions (Becchetti 2019; Mauss 2002). Sociologists later adopted the term *homo sociologicus* to describe that humans are interdependent and highly encumbered by interpersonal relationships. Unlike *homo economicus*, they are not totally rational (Anderson 2000; Boudon 2006; Subrt 2015). Rather, humans' decisions are made based on many driving social forces that are frequently beyond control (Ng and Tseng 2008). Scholars contend that monetary or self-interest benefits cannot be the ultimate purpose of human existence. A *homo sociologicus*, for example, willingly commits crimes to fulfill their roles in society.

Regarding amulet consumption, I have found that consumers adopt economic reasoning to optimize the usefulness of amulets; many of them purchase amulets only after carefully assessing their financial and social resources. Building on the concept of *homo economicus*, amulet consumers can be included in the category. One such person is Thu, a 29-year-old woman I first met in Hanoi who worked on a business development initiative in the Netherlands. Thu was born and raised in a pleasant family and was not subjected to many hardships in life, as compared to others. Her sister recently got married and relocated to start a family abroad, leaving her under all the pressure in Vietnam as the last hope for her conservative family to inherit a family profession in academia. Thu, not

knowing what she wanted to do with her life after college, took her father's advice and pursued her master's degree before starting to work at a research institute. Over time, she came to realize that, as opposed to her current career, business and finance were her true passions. When she was awarded a scholarship to train abroad for a year, she thought she had finally found her ideal life. Thu emphasized her desire for independence, even though she was aware that leaving Vietnam would mean losing all of the social connections she had built with people around her. At that moment, Thu could not determine whether to stay in Vietnam and follow in her father's footsteps or to look for work outside of the country. She was so perplexed (*phân vân*) that she visited a fortuneteller, whom she had complete faith in. The fortuneteller, who offered lucky bracelets made of genuine stones on different social media platforms, sold Thu two stone bracelets to try on. Partly due to two life-changing situations she was facing at the time, she felt at ease wearing the amulets. While waiting for an overseas job offer, she traded in the stock market, which saw sharp swings throughout the pandemic. Thu justified her purchase of these bracelets by saying that she was not a big accessory buyer and that they were adorable and reasonably priced. She would purify (*thanh tẩy*)⁹ the bracelets once every three weeks, or whenever she had time. A week after wearing the bracelets, she received a job offer from the Netherlands. Thu, however, accepted that she was unsure if

⁹ Natural stone amulets can be purified by putting them in a dish filled with sea salt (*muối biển*). They will then be exposed to the moonlight or sunlight to obtain the natural "energy" when the moon or the sun has reached its highest point in the sky. Some have compared this process to charging a phone (*sạc pin*), since it is claimed to help restore the efficacy of the amulets. To ensure the desired outcomes, the process should be carried out once every two or three weeks.

her amulets should be credited for that. She thought that one of her many spiritual endeavors, which included fortunetelling, wishing at temples, and releasing fish (*phóng sinh*) with friends, was the cause of her success.

As an “economic person,” Thu attempted to maximize her finances to get the most returns on investments by applying the investment logic to her amulet consumption. Since the amulets could be employed as both ornamental and spiritual objects, their spiritual efficacy was not the primary consideration in her decision. Given that her greater aims were to go abroad rather than survive market volatility, Thu decided to give it a try since she thought the price was not too high to invest in. Being an economist by nature and a seeker of well-rounded information, she accepted the risk, stating that she did not anticipate a favorable outcome because she was aware that other factors could influence the result. She understood, for instance, why her lucky bracelets did not work out; the stock market could not be revived due to the severity of the pandemic. Thu considered the amulets as a risky investment, but she thought the risks were worthwhile for the possibility of migration and global mobility as a means of building human capital, which she believed would give her pride and a strong base to stand on. Many interlocutors shared similar opinions regarding what rational and financial factors should be considered when purchasing an amulet. These factors included worth, functionality, and efficiency. All these make them rational subjects rather than superstitious (*mê tín*) people, as blamed by most amulet non-believers.

However, it might not be totally accurate to say that Thu was solely motivated by economic rationales because she was also very concerned about the people around her.

Throughout the interview, Thu expressed her anxiety that she would destroy her family's last hopes of seeing their daughter become a well-known scholar and losing all the social connections they had nurtured for her. She stated that the main reason she went to see the fortuneteller and was persuaded to buy the bracelets was her sense of "confusion" (*phân vân*), which was not actually caused by her uncertainty about finding work or the volatile market. Rather, it stemmed from her struggle to strike a balance between her father's desires and her own. This can be interpreted as a challenge to the "economic person" theory, which holds that social interdependence has minimal impact on people's rationality. In addition, from an economic perspective, spending money on a spiritual item that makes no guarantee about its ability to alleviate social anxiety seems slightly irrational. People, therefore, cannot be classified as entirely rational or irrational using purely economic metrics. According to Ng and Tseng's notion in their article, "an individual can be *homo economicus* in terms of his behavior while retaining the ontological assumptions of *homo sociologicus*" (2008, 267). In Thu's case, she invested in amulets with an economic rationale while also using them to help her deal with the unease she was feeling at the time, which was affected by societal values.

Mai, a young business entrepreneur, experienced anxiety about belonging on a higher level. She was just in her second year of college when I met and talked to her, but she was already working as a tarot reader and managing her own accessory start-up business. Mai was too busy responding to numerous messages from customers on her phone to really listen to our conversation. She informed me that she would always wear an aquamarine bracelet on her left wrist to help her with health issues. She clarified that

she felt out of place in the society she was living in, despite having her family and attending the university. She therefore made an effort to prove herself to the family by working hard and succeeding young. She planned to relocate abroad to continue her education once she got enough money. A few hours of sleep per day would not prevent major health issues in the future. As her business was expanding and she was unable to stop working, her health became worse, and she grew more reliant on tobacco and coffee. After doing some research, Mai bought an aquamarine bracelet when learning that it might be helpful. Her health had considerably improved after nearly a year of wearing the bracelet. That is, she was not worn out as she had been. Mai believed that her amulet had helped her accomplish her career goal. Her sense of not belonging to the society where she was living is similar to the way that Thu, the woman who followed her dream in the Netherlands, felt about her own society.

Apparently, neither Mai nor Thu experiences financial instability. They come from wealthy families and appear to be leading happy lives, pursuing higher education, and having funding to launch a business. Both, however, show the conflicts between the Vietnamese way of life and their identities as citizens of the world with distinct aspirations. Similar problems are found in an earlier study by Allen Tran (2018) on marriage-related anxiety in Vietnam. Tran notes that the anxiety is rooted in the “assemblage” of conflicting models of modern selfhood in Vietnam. That is, while people are obligated by Confucian ideology to respect family moral commitments, the neoliberalism brought about by the economic transition pushes people to prioritize their own needs. This is comparable to the cases of Thu and Mai, who reported their aims to

become “successful early” (*thành công sớm*) so that they could leave their difficult situations and lead the lives they desired. Their disobedience to the moral expectation that young women in Vietnamese culture must listen to their elders causes them to experience a profound identity crisis.

Lam Minh Chau (2019), in his article on the Goddess of the Treasury’s cult in northern Vietnam, explores the worship activities of the devotees, who often offer more generous repayment for the money they have symbolically borrowed to show their faithful heart (*lòng thành*) to the goddess. The author argues that *lòng thành* implies how people’s choices of practice are not fully driven by either superstitions or market logic. According to Lam Minh Chau, the worshippers “are neither robotic doers of market principles nor passive followers of old superstitious traditions in rejection of market transformation” (2019, 114). Rather, they are rational subjects who advocate a peaceful coexistence of religious morality with market-based prosperity. Thu and Mai present a similar notion of how financial needs become entangled with the need for social acceptance through the consumption of amulets. Both market and social rationales have been applied to make decisions in buying amulets. They therefore might be viewed as rational subjects who make their way between the conflicting concepts of moral duty to one’s family and personal interests.

Concluding Notes

“Precarity” is an imprecise term, particularly when discussing the social context in which amulet usage is justified in a particular community. Two major arguments are made in

this chapter. First, the chapter supports Butler's argument by showing that "precarity" has transcended economic contexts and that precarious people are no longer solely low-wage workers or the unemployed. People nowadays, regardless of their economic backgrounds, have encountered everyday precarity, which is a conglomeration of financial, social, and well-being concerns. Amulets are great tools for assisting people in coping with such precarity. However, they also reproduce a capitalist mindset that forces people back into the loop of precarity and makes them accept the status quo. Second, the chapter contends that amulet consumers who buy excessively costly amulets without the assurance of their efficacy are neither superstitious nor irrational. Instead, they are rational subjects who, guided by neoliberal thinking, negotiate between social obligations and their own interests.

chuỗi hạt / tràng hạt

Wooden Rosary

📍 Nhi Khê Craft Village

The rosary is made of wood imported from domestic/international sites.

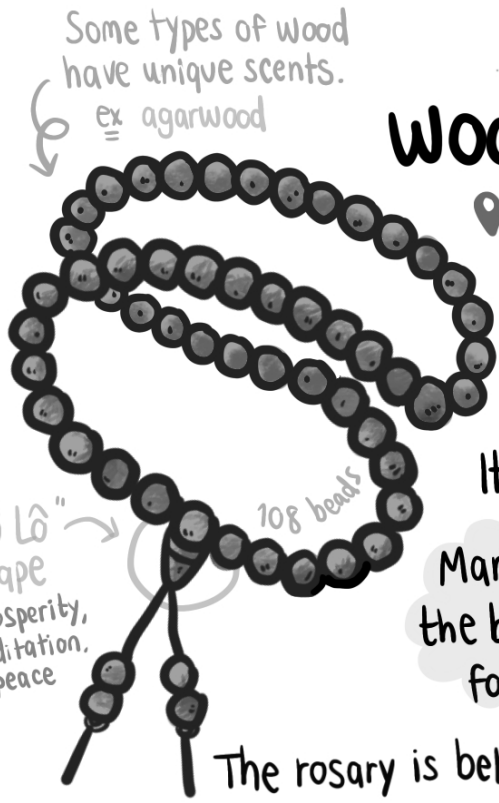
It usually contains 108 beads.

↳ sacred number in Buddhist sutras

Many people count the beads when they chant for concentration.

The rosary is believed to bring peace and health.

« Prices vary based on rarity and preciousness of each wood type. »



Some types of wood have unique scents.
ex agarwood

"Hồ Lô" shape
= prosperity, meditation, peace

108 beads

CHAPTER 2

Amulets as Craftworks: Values, Meaning, and Political Economy of Amulets

In Nhị Khê Village, I heard the sound of wood-cutting equipment echoing from every direction when the local motorbike rider led me to a stop in front of a locked house gate. The gate was opened with a smile by Quốc, a 32-year-old wood craftsman, who heard someone outside shouting his name. He asked us to sit in his small workspace, which had a variety of tools, wood fragments, and logs strewn all over the place. Quốc learned the profession of woodturning from his parents, which had been the main source of income for his family for several decades. Quốc was skilled in working with several types of wood, but his area of expertise was crafting wooden bracelets from *huyết long* wood, which was imported from the central highlands and Khánh Hà Province. Following production, a sizable quantity of the bracelets would be delivered to both domestic and foreign shops.

“The process of turning wood into a tiny bead involves many steps,” Quốc gave me an explanation while putting *Ngọc Am* wood cubes into a dusty bead-shaping machine. A wood log was often chopped into small pieces to begin the process, and those pieces were then sawed into cubes. He then made a tiny hole in each cube and used several machines to turn the wood into beads, smooth them out, and polish them. One by one, Quốc actively crafted each of these beads with his own hands. But he could only make basic beads because of the modest production capacity. The more intricate bead

shapes, such as lotus or Buddha forms, need the costly CNC woodworking machines¹⁰ that are often found in larger workshops.

Although Quốc himself did not view his craftworks as amulets, many of his customers took these wooden bracelets and rosaries as sacred objects for several reasons. According to Quốc, many of these craftworks were made of certain kinds of wood considered sacred. For example, agarwood (*trâm hương*), besides its distinctive scent, acquired spiritual values with time, as evidenced by the appearance of an “annual ring” on each wood piece itself. Older agarwood (*trâm già*) was regarded as more sacred than the younger one (*trâm non*) because it had accumulated more natural power, making it spiritually potent even without religious consecration. In addition, as these items were used in religious activities, they were seen as sacred. Buddhist monks, for example, typically wore 108-beaded wooden rosaries around their wrists when visiting pagodas or used them as focus tools when chanting sutras. Thus, wooden bracelets and rosaries were said to be amulets that gave their wearers mental calm.

In this case, Quốc is an amulet maker. I define “make” in accordance with Ingold’s (2013) definition found in his book *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art, and Architecture*. Ingold notes that “making” is a process of correspondence between the raw physicality of the material characters and the situated agency of the maker. During the making process, the maker interacts with a material that has its own force and flow

¹⁰ The automated Computer Numerical Control (CNC) machines are operated by computers with preprogrammed commands. For images with fine details, artisans typically utilize machines to save time and labor.

through their movements and gestures (2013, 31). Based on his explanation, Quốc was deeply involved in every step of the bracelet-making process, which called for years of experience. Quốc’s hands transformed a hardwood log into wooden beads one by one with the aid of the machines.

However, the material quality and expert craftsmanship of wooden bracelets are not the only factors determining their worth, particularly when Quốc’s traditional craft village is constantly transitioning to a marketplace. As a commodity, a wooden bracelet is traded among a number of couriers, local merchants, retailers, and even other craftspeople who can manufacture a new one. Alternatively, it may be exported from the village to foreign companies with headquarters overseas and then displayed at upscale amulet stores. When a bracelet moves from one sphere to another and from one hand to another, it constantly changes in value as it enters the “regime of values” (Appadurai 1986).



Figure 4: An artisan at work on bead-shaping machine, Nhị Khê Village
(Photo by the author, August 2023)

Natural stone is another popular type of amulet, and it has also an identical life journey. Stones are extracted from quarries and crafted into amulets, including bracelets, necklaces, keychains, or “spell jars,” which are then purchased by customers for multiple applications. Once an amulet made of natural stones is in the hands of a consumer, it may no longer be viewed as merely another product on the market but rather as a status symbol, collectible, gift, bodily adornment, prayer tool, or protection amulet. It may wind up in a collection box, on someone’s wrist, in a temple, or on a worship table in a house. The value of the products will be periodically reevaluated in accordance with the flow of commodities. Kopytoff (1986), through his concept of “cultural biography,” discusses how the meanings and values of an object change depending on the different contexts and socioeconomic interactions it encounters. He contends that every object acquires meanings through the way it is produced, transformed, and used; the processes are all shaped by several socioeconomic circumstances.

This chapter will explore the “biography” of amulets by tracing the political economy of wood and stone amulets produced in Vietnam with local raw materials. These processes include production, circulation, and distribution, which are heavily impacted by local markets as well as inter-Asian economic relations. The chapter is divided into two main parts. The ambivalent configurations of pride and profit in the practices of making are explored in the first part. It will discuss how industrialization and markets affect the way people create and value their craftworks. The second part will examine how the values and meanings of a craftwork develop and emphasize the blurred boundary between material and non-material values by demonstrating their integrated

relationship within Appadurai's (1986) "regime of values" framework. It will specifically highlight how spiritual narratives are used to boost the perceived worth of an ordinary object, turning it into a marketable amulet that contains sentimental values. Building on the theories of values proposed by Hall (1977) and Kendall (2021), the conclusion will illustrate how the values of an object are unstable and prone to sudden changes based on the interactions it has with other people.

Amulets and Vietnamese Traditional Craft Communities

Upon visiting several amulet stores, I have discovered that most lucky bracelets are made by local craftspeople using materials sourced from various parts of Vietnam. Believed to offer tranquility to their users, wooden bracelets (*vòng gỗ*) and Buddhist prayer beads (*tràng hạt*) are typically made in traditional woodturning villages (*làng nghề gỗ*) and then distributed to shops or temples. Parallel to this, vibrant natural stones are extracted from local quarries and carved into necklace pendants or beads in a variety of shapes, including mystical *hồ ly* or *tỳ hưu*¹¹ characters, in an effort to bring good fortune. They are mostly produced in numerous stone workshops (*xưởng đá*) located throughout Hanoi and the surrounding provinces.

¹¹ Vietnamese mythology describes *hồ ly* (Chinese: 狐狸精, English: fox spirit) as a supernatural fox that bestows attractive charms upon its owner, thus enhancing their luck in romantic relationships. Most *hồ ly* amulets are made from natural stones, and each has either one or nine tails. In the amulet stores I visited, they were the most popular amulets, with *tỳ hưu* (Chinese: 貔貅, English: Pixiu), another mystical figure, coming in second. *Tỳ hưu* is renowned for drawing wealth and fortune because it has no digestive system and solely consumes gold.

Located approximately 20 kilometers from the center of Hanoi, Nhị Khê Village, part of Thường Tín Commune, is a traditional woodturning village in northern Vietnam. Nhị Khê has a high number of houses that specialize in manufacturing hand-turned wooden products, ranging from worship items to souvenirs and everyday objects, with full production equipment from basic to advanced, as indicated in earlier studies on craft villages. The woodturning profession (*nghề cổ truyền*) has been handed down through the generations and subsequently given to laborers who are hired on an informal basis through trainings (Nguyen Phuong Anh 2022, 22). Records indicate that since 2013, Nhị Khê Village has had 387 families with more than a thousand workers who make their living solely from the woodturning sector; this industry accounts for 83 percent of the village's total output value (Đinh Hạnh 2019, 109). While many wood-turners prefer to work as skilled laborers for others, some open their own workshops and grow them into larger wood-related businesses. Government policies, together with rural urbanization and high-level commercialization, have directly contributed to the rise in demand for handicrafts on the global market (Gough and Dang Nguyen Anh 2010, 114). In order to satisfy consumers' needs, novel wooden items have been created. Most producers I met claimed that wooden bracelets were among the “easy-to-sell” products in their line.

The production site for stone bracelets where I got the opportunity to actively engage with and witness people's activities was Lục Yên community. It is situated 156 kilometers away from Hanoi in a small quarry area of Yên Bái Province. Many locals in Vietnam have become interested in trading natural stones after the government created an international concession in the late 1990s, allowing large corporations and foreign firms

to exploit local quarries. People have developed the ability to process stones using modern technology to create exquisite accessories, turning this skill into a reliable career. In addition to the sizable gemstone market that has developed in the town center, stone-processing businesses are widely dispersed across the local communities. Many locals have moved to the capital to establish their own stores or production workshops and earn a steadier income. Their products include both semi-precious and precious stones, particularly ruby and spinel, which are indigenous to Lục Yên District (Bùi Quốc Linh 2022; Pham Van Long et al. 2023). Remarkably, after gaining fame as “the land of stone” (*đất đá*), Lục Yên has become a tourist attraction and a hub for the stone trade. To create simpler, more affordable accessories for sale, people import a wide variety of natural stones from both domestic sites (e.g., Nghệ An, Thanh Hóa, and Đà Nẵng) and foreign countries (e.g., China, Laos, and Myanmar). Ready-made stone beads are stitched into bracelets by petty traders and sold alongside jewelry, which generates earnings more slowly (*bán chậm*). The process of creating these stone and wooden bracelets as well as their evolution into sacred objects will be covered in great detail in the following sections.

Profit, Pride, and Perfection of Bead-Making Craftwork

According to scholars, the expansion of a new economy, characterized by intense rivalry in the market and worldwide trade in commodities, forces artisans to modify their production techniques to meet the market demands, so altering the values of their crafts (Kendall 2021). Many researchers also draw attention to the craftspeople’s contradictory

experiences of economic benefits and pride/personal indulgence, which result in their ontological conflicts (Dlaske 2014; Grasseni 2016; Makovicky 2020). For example, while vulnerable artisans must “make do” with their crafts to survive in the market, craft practices can also be seen as a means to pursue their creative passion, preserve their cultural heritage, or empower marginalized groups of people (Dlaske 2014; Schmidt 2020). Makovicky (2020), in her research on the experiences of female lacemakers in post-socialist Slovakia, proposes that the artisans had certain ontological uncertainties regarding the purpose and meaning of their work. That is, while the lacemakers justified their lacemaking by citing the necessity to “make do,” they also viewed it as a happy and alluring kind of self-indulgence. In short, the literature demonstrates two significant shifts in craft practices. First, economic precarity is an important factor that changes artisans into producers who must follow the market to gain profit; second, there are ambivalent combinations of pride and profit in their craft practices.

According to my investigation, the journey of a wooden amulet started in a small production workshop in a little-known traditional craft village, called Nhị Khê. During my interviews with the craftspeople, I also noticed that their descriptions of the wood products they produced were ambivalent. On the one hand, most producers thought of their crafts as just another type of product that needed to be modified to fit the current market trends. Thanks to the commodification of craftwork following the *Đổi Mới* reformation in the mid-1990s, men and women of all ages and skill levels today can equally participate in the industry to survive and improve their well-being amid periods of high economic fluctuation (Nguyen Phuong Le and Nguyen Mau Dung 2011, 9).

Many producers informed me that they were the second or third generation of their parents to follow this career path, and they considered carving wood into goods like bracelets or prayer strings a potential source of income. On the other hand, some artisans told me that they were passionate about what they were doing and were proud of their work.

I once asked the woodturner Quốc if he had thought about changing his profession. “I still have a passion (*đam mê*) in this career,” Quốc remarked, “I might switch to anything else if it can’t make money anymore.” His response perfectly captured his decisions to create crafts, which were driven by his personal attachment to the woodturning industry as well as the market. This raises the question of how other craftspeople, including those of woodturning and stone making, negotiate pride and profit in the face of a shifting economic system, global trade, and a call for mass-produced products.

Economic Power in Retailers’ Hands

I met Thảo, a 39-year-old artisan, in Nhị Khê Village. She was born in the village and had been working as a woodturner from a very young age, like other women who had been taught in woodcarving since the beginning of collectivization (Nguyen Phuong Le 2009, 49). Her family was skilled in crafting wooden beads, bracelets, and prayer strings, particularly from premium fragrant rosewoods (*gỗ sưa*), which they usually sourced from wood suppliers spread over several provinces, including Thanh Hóa, Quảng Nam, Quảng Ninh, Vĩnh Phúc, and Quảng Bình. She claimed that even though creating a wooden bead

was a complex process, it only required rudimentary craftsmanship skills. The wood lumber was cut into desired shapes and sizes by Thảo's husband, who then gave them to her in plastic baskets. One by one, the woman placed them into a drilling machine, which precisely punched holes in the center of each cube. After that, the pierced block would be placed into a bead-making machine that was running nonstop, using the water-dropping technique to cut down on wood dust. As the machine could only produce two beads at a time, Thảo had to divide the double beads into single ones. She then stitched them together after polishing them. By repeating this process, Thảo could produce 20-30 bracelets per day. When she got to the number on the order, she delivered the bracelets to the customers. The rest would be put in the glass showcase in case someone, like me, happened to stroll by and wanted to buy. Thảo told me that she never tried to sell her products somewhere else or advertised them online. Like most producers in the village, Thảo typically focused on producing sizable bracelets and stocking them in designated places, such as their workshops, while they waited for customers. Third-party merchants who resold these products in both domestic and international markets at a significantly higher price made up the majority of customers in this case.

Despite the complexity of the production process, Thảo could not set the price for her own products based on her own needs. Instead, she had to negotiate with the economic agency with independent retailers, who appeared to have greater financial clout. There were two groups of retailers who served as intermediaries between local producers and prospective buyers. The first group was foreign retailers, particularly those from more economically developed countries with similar cultural traits, like China. It

was easy to spot multiple signs describing wooden products for sale in Chinese characters as one approached the village. I once learned via the news that some Chinese retailers were visiting the village to look at valuable goods, like bracelets crafted from rare woods, or illicit goods (*đồ cấm*), like animal horns or tusks. They were usually escorted by the locals. A middle-aged woman who ran a medium-sized workshop in Nhị Khê informed me that most of her customers were Chinese. Before becoming frequent clients, these foreign visitors stopped by the village to check for products and requested for producers' online contact details. Compared to some local retailers who bought inexpensive bracelets to resell at local gift shops, foreign retailers would purchase much pricier goods, such as those made of *trâm* or *sua* woods, to resell in their countries.

The second group was, needless to say, Vietnamese retailers. While many of them purchased only cheap products, like common bracelets and rosaries made from *trắc* and *mun* woods, which ranged in price only from 4,000 to 10,000 VND (approximately 0.20-0.50 USD), to resell in local amulet stores, some ordered more expensive products to sell to foreign customers as part of larger businesses. I first got to know Đen, the owner of a wood company, at Thảo's workshop. He held long-term business visas in Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand, and he had offices in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. That day, Đen dropped by the workshop and asked the woodturning couple to produce bracelets in the styles he desired using pieces of *trâm hương* wood he had brought from Brunei and Malaysia. Đen anticipated that these bracelets would be product samples (*mẫu*) that he would ship to prospective clients in foreign locations, including China, Japan, and Taiwan. If he had a favorable response, he would place larger orders for bracelets to sell

in those countries. Đen used his belief in the spirits within the woods, which set him apart from other woodturners, as a sales pitch. He asserted that valuable wood was considered sacred because it typically flourished in fertile areas where all forms of natural energies—soil, water, sunlight, and nutrients—met. Gathering wood from Southeast Asian countries to make products, Đen targeted East Asian countries as his export routes. He regarded the shared beliefs of geomancy laws (*phong thủy*) and Mahayana Buddhism in Vietnam and other countries as economic opportunities, pointing out the possibility for Vietnamese bracelets to become essential products in international markets (Bùi Quốc Linh 2022). The sales tactics involving religious concepts increased the economic value of the wooden products much higher than the initial cost when he first bought them from the village.

Relying on outside retailers to connect to and engage in a larger market beyond their craft village, many woodturners in Nhị Khê had no choice but to cede their authority to set prices to them. This was made worse by the internal economic competition within the craft community. Khải, a woodturner who worked with a Vietnamese retailer to sell products in Taiwan and Thailand, also ceded his power in managing the business to the retailer. He told me that the retailers needed to handle the taxes and legal paperwork in the destination countries. They knew how to market the products, package them, and transport them to overseas buyers, while producers like Khải preferred not to. Thanks to his retailer, Khải received orders from overseas all year round. He told me that it was typical for these retailers to have to charge more for wooden bracelets since they needed to pay for all of the expenses associated with the overseas transactions.

Regarding Thảo, she accepted personal orders, along with producing bracelets for her workshop's sale. Customers could ask her workshop to create bracelets out of materials they brought with them. For a bracelet made of common wood, the average payment for the entire production process was approximately 100,000 VND (5 USD), excluding the cost of raw materials. It might go slightly higher or lower, depending on the value of wood and the production complexity. Retailers might sell the finished product for a million VND. However, Thảo was happy that her wooden bracelets were being resold at such a high price rather than considering selling goods on her own. "If they could sell them at a high price, they'll come back, which is good for us," she clarified, "Only at a moderate price can we sell them here in the village. If not, customers will visit other village stores to purchase their goods, then we lose customers (*mất khách*)." As members of a craft village, there were restrictions on how they could set prices. Thảo's response reveals her financial reliance on third-party merchants. Having a guaranteed income is preferable to going up against the unpredictability of the market, even the global markets that they eventually want to enter.

Profit: Bead Making as a Way to Survive in the New Economy

Despite being suppressed by the market mechanism both inside and outside the village, most of my interlocutors implied that making wooden beads, which could be used in religious activities, helped them survive in the ever-changing market. In fact, compared to other wooden products they had previously produced, wooden beads were more in demand and simpler to sell (*dễ bán*). Thảo mentioned that she had done bead making for

a long time, but the family's earlier generations seemed not to be very skilled at it. They had changed to making bracelets for a living a few decades ago before Thảo was born. I encountered Thảo's elderly mother-in-law who was cutting wood in the front yard when I was invited for tea at her house behind the workshop. She was crafting wooden cups the way she had been taught when she was young. She stated that her family possessed a long-standing expertise in producing cups and other spiritual objects (*đồ thờ*) as main products. These cups were delivered to several sacred locations, including the famous Perfume Pagoda (*chùa Hương*), to serve as spiritual offerings for the Buddhas or other local deities. However, since wooden beads were simpler to sell in the market, her household decided to abandon the old custom and started creating wooden beads instead. Nhị Khê craft village was initially well-known for its religious artifacts and basic household utensils. To survive in the unpredictable market system, many producers today have substituted new products that are in higher demand for the long-standing family specialties. These new offerings include accessories—more precisely, wooden bracelets, which are a focus of my research.

To prevent rivalry within the village, each household crafts bracelets using different wood species. For example, Quốc specializes in making *huyết long* bracelets, and Thảo is famous for her *sua* products. The aroma, rarity, and natural patterns of the woods all affect the cost of wooden bracelets¹². The market's shift and the growing popularity of woodcrafts are undoubtedly the main causes for the replacement of product

¹² The popular types of wood that are used to make bracelets and rosary strings include *trâm hương* (*Aquilaria Agallocha* Roxb.), *sua* (*Dalbergia Boniana*), *đàn hương*

specialization. These producers have few options for earning money when working in so-called “clusters,” which are semi-closed communities without promoting their own goods. If they do not provide their goods at a discount to wholesale stores, they will have to wait for clients to discover them. Many residents of Nhị Khê Village, like Quốc and Thảo, prioritize their production duties over thinking about expanding their business to boost profit. As Dinh Thi Van Chi (2016) notes, most manufacturers in traditional wood villages, like La Xuyên Village in Nam Định Province, are satisfied with meager profit and cannot imagine great matters with strategic vision. According to my interlocutors, many skilled craftspeople even chose not to launch large businesses since they have neither connection nor accountability for any debts in the future.

Khải, another bracelet maker, was in a similar situation to that of Thảo’s family. His family’s specialty was wooden toys, which they exported to other countries, like Singapore, in addition to selling them locally. Khải proudly showed me a few of his beautifully crafted wooden dolls and then, with regret, told me that his family had stopped making them 20 years ago because the global trend had been changed. He remarked, “We normally follow the market trend. Right now, the market can run out of bracelets more quickly (*bán chạy*), so we just make them.” The main product of Khải’s family at the time of our conversation was *huyết long* bracelets. Using a Vietnamese

(*Santalum Album L.*), *bồ đề* (*Ficus religiosa*), *bách xanh* (*Calocedrus macrolepis*), *huyết long* (*Dracaena cinnabari*), *trắc* (*dalbergia cochinchinensis*), *ngọc am* (*Fokienia Hodginsii*), *dâu tằm* (*Morus alba L.*), *hoàng đàn* (*Chamaecyparis Fenebris*), and *mun* (*Diospyros mun*), to name a few. As my sources were limited to referring to the wood through local names, the scientific names of wood are referenced from Nguyễn Phụng Thoại. 2003. *Tài Nguyên Cây Gỗ Việt Nam*. Hà Nội: Nông nghiệp.

intermediary, he continued to export his goods to other countries, like Thailand and Taiwan. I asked if he would make the dolls once more. Khải informed me that if there were orders, he would be happy to comply.



Figure 5: Wooden dolls produced by Khải’s family (left) and unpolished *trắc* wooden bracelets in a production workshop (right), Nhị Khê Village (Photo by the author, September 2023)

Interestingly, Khải’s eagerness to boast about his wooden dolls seems to be a clear expression of pride, similarly to the way Thảo’s mother-in-law used to speak about the unique products her family previously produced. Both obliquely attributed their inability to continue producing the goods they were so nostalgically proud of to market trends (*xu hướng thị trường*). Their expressions emphasize how the producers’ decisions to keep or to cease producing their products of pride are influenced by market pressure. According to Fanchette (2012, 270), the pace at which woodturners in the village are displacing crafts is a sign of their capacity to rapidly adjust to changing situations and market trends. However, the phenomenon also highlights how vulnerable some crafts are to economic and social conditions, in addition to the remote location of the village

cluster. Wooden beads, which are used to produce amulets, are an economic survival tool for these woodturning artisans.

Pride: Bead Making as Human-Material Engagement

Even though the interviews suggest that many artisans must give up their pride in upholding family legacy and turn to bead making in order to earn more money in the competitive market environment, “pride” can be sensed in the artisans’ act of creating and gifting the wooden beads. Thảo, compared to her mother-in-law who frequently talked nostalgically about carving wooden offerings, viewed that bead making was her daily task, her area of expertise, and her job. One morning in her workshop, Thảo was piercing holes into a stack of wooden cubes. I watched her work in silence, not even talking, for fear that she might be physically harmed if she was distracted by the sharp object. However, Thảo chuckled when she found out my intention. She attributed her extensive experience in this profession to being “familiar” (*quen tay*) with the tool. Additionally, she discussed her injuries in a casual manner, saying, “A customer asked me how I knew where to make a hole without marking anything. I think it’s my experience. But, what’s the deal? This machine can pierce our fingers and cause bleeding if a wooden bead is broken, and we are unaware of it.” After turning off the machine, Thảo held up her right hand and showed me her fingers. The skin’s surface had a scratch on it. It was a recurring scar on her index finger’s second knuckle. Seeing me let out a gasp, Thảo reassured me, stating, “It’s normal (*bình thường*). That’s normal for this job.” She turned her palm over and interlocked her fingers. “My hands are also not beautiful;

they are crooked.” She started making beads when she was young, so I could see that her fingers were not aligned properly. As the juvenile bones were pliable, they curved into this configuration. As Ingold (2013) notes, researchers’ concentration on gestural movements and “inscriptions” on a hand can probably learn more about the hand owner’s condition of tasks. The hands of skilled artisans, in his words, “bear witness to years of repetitive efforts. Not only in touch and gesture, but also in their bumps and creases they can also be told, both as histories of past practices” (2013, 117). Thảo’s crooked fingers serve as a metaphor for her experience, showing that she has mastered her one and only job since childhood.

Despite having to make a large quantity of beads in a single day, these artisans were completely absorbed in every step of the making process; they kept their gaze fixed on the wood pieces as they were fed into the machines. Mastery does not mean that the artisans “do it without thinking,” like robots (Ingold 2013; Makovicky 2020). The scars and scratches on Thảo hands, even with her skill at crafting, imply that makers may have been hurt by their craftwork, showing momentary submission to agency of the vibrant material. From an economic standpoint, bead making may be considered a monotonous and mundane means of subsistence for artisans, particularly in the post-industrialization period. On the other hand, it gives producers a sense of pride.

Thảo and other artisans are only able to sell what their customers need and order them to do. The market has controlled and limited their freedom to design any products. Thảo was required by Đen, her regular client, to make beads as nearly as possible in size and shape to the model that he showed her on his cellphone. Đen was happy with the

outcome and came back to her workshop. However, in her free time, Thảo enjoyed using her imagination for creative side projects. She beamingly expressed her satisfaction when she told me that she had successfully used (*tận dụng*) wood pieces and that nothing had been thrown away. Thảo made spa incenses for herself by sun-drying wet wood dust, made special beads called “*hồ lô*” by drilling the third hole in imperfect beads, made small beads from broken larger ones, and daily gathered small pieces of wood left over after making products for customers to create unique bracelets. When I went to see her one day, she told me with great excitement that after a long time of collecting, she finally had enough fragrant *đàn hương* wood to produce a bracelet that would suit my wrist. She dashed behind the workshop to retrieve a basket containing about twenty wooden beads before sewing them. Thảo gave me the wooden bracelet as a gift, despite the fact that it was made of a pricy kind of wood. The incident caused me to reexamine the meaning of the term “craftwork” (*đồ thủ công*), which I use to describe lucky bracelets. From an economic standpoint, these items can be classified as handmade products, crafted with artisanal methods. However, they also assist the artisans in creating their sense of personal growth, self-worth, and social connections (Pöllänen 2013). According to scholars, individuals may perform economically irrational practices because what they expect to maximize is not material, but sentimental (Graeber 2001; Weiner 1994; Bourdieu 1992). Thảo facilitates connections with her crafts by offering gifts.

I was prompted to consider the significance of Thảo’s actions when I found that other woodturners in the village also offered their bracelets to me for free, even though they were aware that I was simply a researcher who might never return. Numerous prior

anthropological studies note that gifts typically represent “symbolic capital,” which attests to the givers’ superior status (Bourdieu 1992), or serve as a tactical tool for people to gain social position and power. Gift giving is a feature of complex social relations; people must offer, accept, and receive gifts in order to preserve interpersonal connections (Mauss 2002; Yang 1989). In addition, the activity might be interpreted as a protest against social inferiority and powerlessness (Komter 1996; Soucy 2006; Weiner 1994). This is consistent with the findings of de Certeau and Rendall (1984), who argue that people exchange gifts to simplify their lives rather than as a social obligation. As proposed by the aforementioned scholars, the gift-giving practice of the woodturners does not appear to be a means of obtaining social standings or reciprocal obligations. Instead, it is actually a means of empowering the producers. Thảo, for example, wanted to show me her pride in her woodturning skills rather than expecting anything in return. Pride—the emotional significance of woodcrafts—is rarely evident until the products enter the commercial distribution chain. The products that become popularized can be bought anywhere since they are a part of mass culture. As a result, most final consumers are never able to find out who makes or where the bracelets are made. They cannot perceive the sense of “history” and “ownership” that is typically attached to artworks, handicrafts, and collectibles (Benjamin 1969).

Perfection: Handicrafts and the Mass-Produced

Unlike unique artworks bearing licenses, craftworks have become common commodities that meet the needs of potential customers due to the market logic of “perfect products.”

They do not have the delicate handmade feel, but they nonetheless live up to the “standard” that one would expect from a hardwood product. Based on my research, most woodturners have working styles that are heavily influenced by this economic thinking and are relatively market-oriented. According to Đinh Hạnh (2019), people in Nhị Khê Village used to handcraft wood products using various basic tools, including saws, drills, lathes, sweepers, grinders, and mallets. Nowadays, almost all producers have made the investment to buy electric motor-powered machines in order to enhance the quality, productivity, and appearance of their products. Thảo’s brother-in-law, who set up a separate workshop in front of the house, noted that woodturners were able to work more efficiently and easily with motorized machines, which were commonly utilized in the village. They could produce more exquisite, smooth beads in a shorter length of time. The beads of today were of far superior quality and were in more demand from the market than those that had been made by hand when he started this career thirty years ago. This means that, unlike before, today’s beads all appear “the same,” not getting unduly large or small. Although Thảo’s brother-in-law was satisfied with the superior quality of the wooden beads, he conceded that the use of machines in the woodworking industry led to the “popularization” (*báo hóa*) of a formerly rare art form, which had various negative economic impacts on the woodturning community. That is, there were too many products on the market because it was very easy for machines to create beads, and consequently, the price of wood products significantly decreased. Many woodturners lost their incomes while highly trained artisans struggled to make ends meet with their delicate but pricey handicrafts. “In the past, they [people in the village] hired us to make

things for them, but right now they can do it by themselves. They only need to feed the wood into the machines. After then, nobody wants to hire us. So, the wages for us, the woodturners, are getting lower day by day,” he confirmed.

The concept of a flawless product is also present in the context of the stone bracelets that the Lục Yên community sells. While exploring the marketplaces, I discovered that bracelet producers, who were also stone traders, purchased “ready-made” pendants and beads from other sources to assemble bracelets. Round beads were claimed to be shaped (*đục*) by spinning machines and had holes drilled in them at certain factories before being delivered to dealers. Currently, very few people in Lục Yên provided hole-drilling or stone-bead-producing services. When I asked a stone bracelet seller whether she could drill holes and create a bracelet out of the polished fortunate stones I chose, she denied, saying, “Although some people do have drilling machines, it costs around 20,000 VND (1 USD) to drill a hole. Look at the bracelets. How many holes do we need to make a full-round one? Of course, we can’t drill them all ourselves. The stones cost only 200,000 VND a kilogram, but no one is crazy enough to invest in drilling holes in them. It’s not worth it.” Based on the explanation, sellers found that buying ready-made beads instead of handmaking them was far more advantageous for them because it saved them money and time.

Bình, a 50-year-old self-employed stone carver, was a native of the Lục Yên community. Entering his rented workshop at a stone market in Hanoi, I saw stone-making tools all over the table, including a few polishing machines, rulers, lighters, and buckets of water, which were connected to the stone grinder, his main piece of equipment, in

order to keep it from destroying the solid stone. Bình informed me that he started working in 1986, a few years following the arrival of a Thai company in Lục Yên to mine stone under state-granted concessions. He applied to work at that time since the Thai company had brought in several stone technologists and hired locals to work as assistants. One of the technicians, whom Bình referred to as his “teacher” (*thầy*), had taught him how to deal with stones. He spent some time working for the company before quitting to pursue his own interests. Bình claimed that he handled each stone with care due to its value and that he had never fractured a client’s stone. While we were conversing, Bình began working on a rectangular stone he bought from a supplier. He meticulously molded the stone with the grinder into a 3.4-inch pyramid shape and gave it a gradient color. The color of the base was darker than the color of its top. Bình determined it by turning the stone around. Then he informed me that this unique stone might fetch more than 300 USD since it represented the energy balances of Yin-Yang (*âm-dương*). Besides, the stone belonged to the rare “Phantom” category, which was made up of four different types of crystals that had blended into the quartz base. He turned the side that he dubbed some golden alloy (*chất*), which he called “ugly bits,” and gently polished it off against the propeller. After a while, he showed me the polished stone and went on to explain that he had purposefully left certain flaws in there. He said, “Now, it’s okay. Nature can’t be completely perfect. Its flaws also add to its value.”

Resting on Bình’s work table, there was another 4x2-inch rectangular piece of imported marble jade (*ngọc*) from Ghana that measured half a centimeter in thickness. The customer requested that Bình engrave the blessing terms “safe drive” (*lái xe an toàn*)

and “peaceful travel” (*thường lộ bình an*) in Hán characters on both sides of a car-hanging mobile (*khánh treo xe*). He would need about a week to carve it. With the cost of the material excluded, the payout was at least 4 million VND, or around 165 USD. However, Bình’s products were far more costly than the small *phong thủy*-related figurines or necklace pendants with bas-relief images of sacred figures that were mostly designed on computers and cut by special CNC machines and then sold at the Lục Yên stone market. For instance, Bình claimed that small spiritual figures such as *tỳ hưu* or *hồ ly* were sold on the market for between 50,000 and 200,000 VND, including materials, yet they cost slightly less than a million VND for his work. Interestingly, despite Bình believing handcrafted goods to be more beautiful due to their precise production, other stone sellers said that machine-made crafts were superior. For example, many customers considered mass-produced images of *Phật Bản Mệnh*, the eight personal Buddhas that many believers carried around to support them spiritually, to have smoother carvings and to be “correct” to the model, whereas handcrafted images might not be able to preserve such fine details. This does not imply, however, that there were no consumers who would prefer to buy handcrafted products; rather, they must be prepared to pay far more for labor, which was based on the value of each stone input.



Figure 6: Machine-carved images of *Phật Bản Mệnh*, imported from China and displayed for sale at the Gemstone Market, Lục Yên, Yên Bái (Photo by the author, on October 13, 2022)

These examples all show how different parties in amulet chains negotiate “perfection.” Although motor-driven machines were put into use, many craftspeople and artisans could sense a uniqueness in their handcrafted goods, which, as Benjamin notes, are highly valued by true collectors who seek authentic objects. A notable example of this is the pyramid stone pendant made by Bình. He took his time choosing a stone, carving it by hand, and finishing the artwork. Every stone craft was specifically designed to complement the natural qualities of the material, such as its internal substances, color, and shape, as well as certain spiritual implications, like the Yin-Yang rules discussed earlier. More significantly, Bình’s deliberate preservation of some stone defects highlights the stone’s inherent “imperfection,” which has spiritual and economic value. A millennium of history is contained within this pendant, especially considering how the stone was formed, in contrast to ready-made stone beads. Most bracelet buyers, however,

are more interested in items with utility and exchange value than in authenticity, in particular when “the magnitude of value” is used as an economic measurement (Marx 1999). Put another way, sellers look to offer everything that may readily benefit them economically rather than worrying about how particular products are made, but customers often choose a product that fulfills their basic needs at the lowest possible cost. The refusal of bracelet sellers to manually drill holes in stones to create beads is consistent with this economic theory.

The concept of “sameness” comes into play during the high industrialization period when all market commodities are expected to be standardized, similarly to how wooden beads must all be equal (*đều*) in order to be preferred by customers. Adorno (1991, 106-107) addresses similar issues in his famous essay on cultural industry and points out that mass culture reinforces the reproduction of sameness. Anything that deviates from the mainstream or the norms that have already been proved to be perfect, be it a product or a film, is easily accused of inadequacy. The system forbids the attempt at any novel idea that might be risky. He, in line with Benjamin (1969), views this standardization of art as the “degradation of cultures.” That is to say, mass production reduces the value of artworks and crafts from cultural objects to common commodities with exchange values, while it becomes harder for genuine “woodcrafts” created by skilled artisans to thrive in the market. Adorno asserts that people are shaped to value perfection. As a result, ideal forms of art that are widely embraced are “inscribed in the cultural heavens” and are not subject to increase or change (1991, 108). Machine-carved images of *Phật Bản Mệnh* support Adorno’s argument that sellers and consumers may

find CNC-produced Buddha images more appealing than handcrafted ones because they are more similar to the ideal representations of Buddha that the public is familiar with. Repetitive reproduction makes them “accurate” to the ideal art.

Many economists believe that the low performance of small-scale production of craft villages in Vietnam is caused by their repetitive product designs (Tran Dan Khanh and Thi Dung Mai 2023). Building on Adorno’s (1991) theory, it is possible that the primary barrier preventing the creation of new products or modifications to existing designs is the reproduction of “sameness.” However, we may view them as a means of risk management in business. People like Thảo, for example, choose to consistently make wooden bracelets and beads since they are easy to sell, allowing her to guarantee stable earnings without taking any economic risks. She can use the wood she collects to serve her social needs and enjoys crafting other items as a side pastime at the same time. Her pride in producing “innovative” items demonstrates that she is neither alienated from her work nor entirely forced into undesirable labor as a result of industrialization (Marx 1844). Instead, she is attached to her craftworks in different ways and in different contexts.

Spiritual Bracelets, Customization, and Neo-craftwork

Several anthropologists who study commodities have long debated the concept of “value.” Appadurai (1986) asserts that commodities are the outcome of intricate social interactions, both shaping and being shaped by politico-economic forces. When they enter other cultural arenas, they are dynamically commoditized and de-commoditized in

diverse directions. While some scholars propose that value is derived from the public performance of commodities as well as other value measurements, others contend that value is generated from human relationships when sacred objects are made, distributed, and used (Geary 1986; Graeber 2001; Kopytoff 1986).

One of the characteristics that keeps an object out of circulation is its association with sacredness, power, and ancestral history. Weiner (1994) raises an example of kula shells in the Trobriand Islands to show how “chiefly shells,” the large and astatically valuable shells, might be owned by one kula elite and be out of circulation for a few ten years. She views that the rare shells possess a high “symbolic density,” which makes them valuable both socially and politically in relation to the social hierarchy. Conversely, many scholars point out the erratic shifts in value found in objects with a high cultural density. Kendall (2021), in her research on sacred masks and statues, suggests that a sacred object may occasionally be inconsistent in addition to shifting toward disenchantment. She raises an example of *Changsung* masks, which were originally created as common souvenirs but were later reappropriated and used in museums or athletic events due to their distant connection to historical idolatrous practices in village traditions. Subsequently, they turned into sacred representations of Korea’s national spirituality. On the contrary, sacred masks used in Bali rituals have been commodified into souvenirs and are currently traded freely in stores. This challenges Wiener’s notion that an object’s sacredness could keep it out of circulation.

An object believed to be endowed with spiritual energy usually possesses at least two distinct values: spiritual and economic/material values, depending on how people

engage with it (Davenport 1986). Based on studies on commodified amulets (Bowman 2013; Jackson 2021; Kitiarsa 2010), they show that sacredness, in addition to being unable to prevent an object from commercialization, can actually serve as a factor that helps boost up its economic value. As the preceding sections demonstrate, most producers, including woodturners and stone artisans, view the products they create as having more “economic value” than spiritual significance, even though their craftworks have given them a sense of “pride” and emotional attachment. Working on the feng shui stone market in Vietnam, Bùi Quốc Linh (2022) examines three social groups involved in the production and consumption of stone sculptures, including miners/crafters, distributors, and consumers, and suggests that stones, for local miners and craftspeople, only have a positive economic impact. Nonetheless, he notes, “[The Merchants] do not merely sell a product, but the underlying ideas of spirituality, as well as the anticipated values for its lucky owner... Since feng shui stone objects are highly personal, their values are determined by how compatible they are to the user and how strongly the user believes in their power” (Bùi Quốc Linh 2022, 57). A similar case is mentioned in Sotkiewicz’s (2014) study on amulets of the Central Sahara. The study reports that blacksmiths frequently include magical and mystical embellishments into their jewelry or ornamental goods, claiming that the objects possess both practical and spiritual functions. That is, they might assist in warding off “evil eyes” and spirits of the desert. She notes that younger craftspeople occasionally are not even aware of all the meanings of the ornaments they use to decorate their craftworks (Sotkiewicz 2014, 232). In short, the study discovers that stone products are associated with spiritual beliefs, which may raise

economic values. Both stone and wooden bracelets are mundane items produced as accessories or souvenirs but subsequently have spiritual meanings attached to them, which are promoted by merchants or retailers. This section will examine how different values have been created, attached, and changed based on the status of objects. It will achieve this by examining how an amulet travels from its original production sites to sellers' hands, where it is either advertised or altered to have more "underlined" spiritual values to gain more economic benefits.

Spiritual Bracelets: Craftwork and the Equipment of Spiritual Values

"You can become lucky by wearing this wooden bracelet." I still recall that Thảo told me of this when we first met. She was in her workshop producing wooden beads before she came to me, who was waiting outside the shop. Thảo added that wooden bracelets could be worn as either accessories or amulets for protection. I took one of her bracelets and smelled it. She said that, due to their association with Buddhism, these wooden amulets had to be sewed in a specific quantity in order to ensure their spiritual efficacy.

According to Buddhist beliefs, prayer strings (*chuỗi hạt, tràng hạt*) are a tool that helps people meet their spiritual needs. They are traditionally made from Bodhi seeds or brown natural wood. The legend narrates that the Buddha (*Phật Thích Ca*) advised King Tỳ Lư Ly (Pāli: *Viḍḍabha*) to daily pray using a 108-bead rosary string in order to free himself of irritations, while a Buddhist sutra also mentions the benefit of counting the beads to control restless and unpeaceful minds (*sự loạn tâm*) (Pháp Vương Tử 2020). The prayer strings serve as cognitive objects for prayers (Krátký 2012), and the number 108

represents its ability to eliminate 108 afflictions (Nặc Bồ Vương Điện 2011). People therefore believe that wearing wooden rosaries or bracelets will bring them health and tranquility. Thảo, who was not familiar with Buddhist teachings, limited her explanation to stating that she often used an odd number of beads for shorter bracelets and 108 beads for longer strings. Besides, since the term “*sinh-lão-bệnh-tử*” (birth, old age, illness, and death) refers to individuals’ life-cycle states in Buddhist teachings, people typically favor bracelets with numbers that fall into the “birth” position and avoid those that fall into the “death” position in order to ensure good fortune and prosperity. Although Thảo did not mind the number as long as her bracelet fitted the wearer well, she did concede that many customers could find the bracelet’s length bothersome. Thảo told me that she had some knowledge of *phong thủy*, or geomancy, as it related to increasing sales. If someone inquired about her bracelet’s effectiveness, she would “explain it casually” (*giải thích sơ sơ*) to convince them.

When asked about the spirituality of woods, most producers were essentially clueless. Quốc mentioned that these woods might represent “wood” (*mệnh mộc*) in the five elements, each of which had a unique quality. That is, they attracted coolness, comfort, and liberty; this aligns with the Buddhist teachings, which encourage followers to “let go” (*buông bỏ*) of material possessions more than they do with hefty, hard stones. Quốc, though, was unsure about the process. Instead, he recommended that I take some bought bracelets to a temple and ask the monk to bless them by reciting the *sutra* (*trì chú*) in them, which would increase their spiritual potency (Lý Cư Minh 2014). This type of amulets appeared to be made without a specified process, which sets it apart from other

sacred objects in Vietnam that have been mentioned by various scholars. Vũ Hồng Thuật (2008; 2016) points out that care must be taken throughout the entire process of producing woodblocks for amulets. A precise place and time must be chosen for the creation of woodblocks, and the creators must abstain from all unfavorable actions (such as eating dog meat or having sex) on the day they create expected talismans. Similarly, Kendall (2011) notes that many carvers of religious votive figurines “adhere to old artisanal workshop taboos and punctuate the carving process with appropriate petitions to the spirits and offerings,” while some artisans have rationalized the process and produced less expensive ready-made figurines for the Hanoi market. This indicates a decrease in the producers’ concern about the spiritually pure production process of their craftworks. From Kendall’s note, the craftspeople in Nhị Khê Village appear to belong to the second category. According to Quốc’s mention regarding the sacralized process, a bracelet will only have spiritual value if it undergoes temple rites rather than coming from him as the maker or from the production process itself.

Stone bracelets are also subject to the “*sinh-lão-bệnh-tử*” rule. I once went to a stone market in Hanoi and stopped by Hằng’s stand. She was resewing a tiger-eye bracelet for a male customer. When the buyer arrived, the bracelet was already being made, but he insisted on having precisely fifteen beads in it. After receiving a warning from Hằng that fifteen beads might not fit, he opted to enlarge the string by adding another big golden *tỳ huu* adornment. Following his departure, Hằng informed me that the customer had a preference for the “*bệnh*” position. Given that people generally thought the “*sinh*” position was better, this was an unusual number. Even though she

personally did not believe in the number rules, she concluded that the number was “fine as long as it is easy to sell” (*dễ bán thì được rồi*). Hằng was always prepared to re sew bracelets or insert lucky charms to make her customers satisfied. Some sellers suggested that the “*sinh-lão-bệnh-tử*” rule could alternatively be replaced by the “*xuân-hạ-thu-đông*” (Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter) regulation, which signified four seasons in Vietnam. Believers might choose their number according to their birth year or the spiritual meaning of each season. The spiritual attributes of stone bracelets would not be mentioned by petty traders at the stone market unless customers specifically inquired about them.

Hoàng, a woodturner from a craft village in Thường Tín District, also exhibited his bracelets at the stone market. His family ran a sizable production workshop (*xưởng sản xuất*) where they crafted wooden bracelets and Buddhist rosary strings for decades. Having saved up enough money to establish a company, his family employed several wage laborers and artisans to make bracelets, while he and his wife were responsible for selling products in several high-end marketplaces, including Doji Tower. Hoàng asserted that the product designs were created by his wife. To make them more appealing, the wife added some natural stones and charms instead of sewing the beads in the conventional way. I watched Hoàng sell one of his bracelets when a buyer came by to look it over and inquired about the wood’s efficacy (*tác dụng*). In response, Hoàng convinced him that its unique aromatic scent could help ward off evil spirits and transfer positive energy to the wearer. When the wearer felt low in energy, they would feel better after smelling the natural wood, which had no side-effect health consequences. Hoàng

and other sellers accepted that they had learned about the spiritual significance of bracelets from customers in order to better meet their needs.

Details on the spiritual efficacy of wooden and stone bracelets have been added as a special attribute of the products. Fundamental beliefs like Buddhist teachings or *phong thủy* principles manifest themselves in the shape of bead numbers, natural characteristics of raw materials, colors, and lucky charms, which elevate ordinary accessories into objects of sacred values. These values, however, differ based on individual perception. In other words, buyers may view bracelets as amulets, accessories, or both. In addition, the “belief” surrounding bracelets is similarly erratic, as demonstrated by the bead numbering system’s “*sinh-lão-bệnh-tử*” and its variant, “*xuân-hạ-thu-đông*.” The bracelet adjustments made by Thảo, Quốc, Hoàng, and Hằng show that understanding spirituality can improve sales opportunities, but it is merely an added component. These producers-turned-sellers continue to market the products as accessories rather than amulets. In the next section, I will go into more detail about how “amulets” are created using the same raw materials—wood and stones—and how the values of an item shift differently from this case.

Spiritual Narratives and Values

I went to a “spell jar” workshop at a coffee shop in the old quarter area of Hanoi one Saturday morning. The event had been promoted as giving participants the chance to create and personalize their own “spell jar” of natural stones (*lọ đá may mắn*), which might grant their wishes, under the intimate guidance of spiritual specialists. Lê Minh, the originator, was a stylish woman in her mid-20s. Beginning with her fascination in natural

stones and their spiritual meanings, she launched a modest line of stone amulets in 2019 and gained a following as a part-time fortuneteller. She sold energy stones, bracelets, *phong thủy* pendants, lucky accessories, and spell jars. As it was an experimental workshop, there were only four of us there—two high school students, one college student, and me. Tens of colorful stone bowls and other natural materials, such as herbs, rice, and dried flower petals, were arranged in front of us at the table, as shown in Figure 7. Lê Minh started by introducing that the spell jar was a type of amulet that could bring good fortunes. She then explained to us the meanings of each material. Most materials used to make spell jars were gathered locally in Vietnam, adhering to Western notions about natural stones. Lê Minh additionally related to us other anecdotes of her customers who had purchased her spell jars. One story included a Vietnamese female student who took the Korean language competency test twice but failed; she eventually passed the exam after she had the spell jar with her in the exam room. We started purifying a tiny jar on our own after witnessing her do it with the smoke of imported Palo Santo wood. We added stones and other materials to the jar in different layers, based on our own needs. Everyone finished their “crafts” in about twenty minutes. I filled twenty percent of my little jar with lapis lazuli, which was said to help with learning and studying. I noticed that the others had used a different ratio while adding the same stones to their jars. They were all unique in their appearance.

Following the trend of “energy stones” (*đá năng lượng*), the amulets that are said to give positive energies, spell jars are another sort of amulets that have recently been introduced to Vietnam’s craft markets and gained popularity among various groups of

young believers. Spell jars range in height from a few centimeters to several inches. Most of them are offered for sale online or in a few niche markets. The filler materials are mainly small semi-precious stones (*đá bán quý*), typically polished in their natural shapes. According to Lê Minh, she ordered the stones from several sources, including the Lục Yên community in Yên Bái Province. After visiting a number of the households in the community that had started wholesale stone shops, I discovered that these stones were really inexpensively sold by the kilogram. Although tiny stones were too small to be turned into pendants or bracelets, they were pretty enough to fill spell jars.



Figure 7: Various kinds of natural stones and the customized spell jars, at the Spell Jar Workshop, Hanoi (Photo by the author, April 2023)

Another person selling similar stone jars was Hoàng, a 21-year-old college student. He launched the business after doing research for two years. Unlike Lê Minh,

Hoàng sold larger jars containing a single type of stone. Before delivering each item to the customer, it would be tied with a ribbon and packaged in a lovely box. He told me that it was his passion, so he made an effort to be meticulous in every step of the making process, as described in the following detail:

I'm passionate (*đam mê*) about colorful stones. This hobby began when I visited the mine in Nghệ An, my hometown. Known as Quỳnh Châu quarry, it's one of the biggest quarries in Vietnam. There were lots of lovely stones in the quarry when I entered. I saw the place as a site where I could buy the stones at a much lesser price because it's the source (*nguồn*). The stones are usually very dirty after they finish crushing them. I have to soak the stones in water mixed with salt and dry them under direct sunlight for a month. For what? Sunlight helps them absorb positive energies called "purification" (*thanh tẩy*). I'll burn them with agarwood powder to remove any invisible bad energy before placing them in the jars. When selling, I sell the whole lot. One box has a jar with dried flowers and stones in it.

[Hoàng, interviewed on September 19, 2023]

Producing stone jars is said to be a labor-intensive procedure demanding a great degree of passion and creativity, unlike the mass-produced stone bracelets sold in the Lục Yên market and the wooden products with repetitive designs seen in traditional craft villages. The products have more values than merely functional significance since they are associated with narratives, or spiritual narratives in this case. More importantly, as the niche crafts are branded, they contain the "licenses" of the producers.

The term "passion" (*đam mê*) was also used by Quốc, the woodturner in Nhị Khê Village, to describe his work, as he said, "I still have a passion (*đam mê*) in this career, but I might switch to anything else if it can't make money anymore." Unlike Hoàng, Quốc's use of the term implies a different connotation, indicating that he was under pressure to follow his passion instead of doing things that make money. Conversely,

Hoàng viewed his artistic craftmaking as a source of both profit and pride, a means to self-provision (Schmidt 2020). This type of production is being referred to by some scholars as “neo-craftwork,” which is defined as “innovative craftwork practices characterized by a notion of passion” that “allow[s] workers to fruitfully marry cultural exploration with the pursuit of personal interests and a striving for authenticity and self-affirmation, as well as representing a specific engagement in material and discursive practices” (Gandini and Gerosa 2023, 12). Neo-crafts enable the producers to generate memories and personal significance, allowing them to reflect and create their identity and place in society (Quinn 2022; Tharakan 2011). In Hoàng’s case, we can notice a high degree of producers’ engagement with their carefully crafted goods, in contrast to some woodturners in Nhị Khê Village who are “familiar” with their work but lack enthusiasm because it has been their long-standing profession to earn a living. Although those traditional craftworks do not really “alienate” craftspeople from the products, they deter them from being very innovative in their product development due to the repetitious nature of the production process.

Spiritual narratives, which are qualitative features above and beyond the practical features of products, play an important role in persuading “new economy” customers to purchase them (Quinn 2022). Grasseni (2016), in his study on cheese in Lombani, Italy, argues that there is little connection between the transformation of an ordinary cheese into a “food heritage” and the cheese itself. Rather, the primary causes of the elevated values of cheese are the highlighted cheese sensorium (aroma, taste, and texture) coupled with the imagined narratives of being “marginalized mountain people” (2017, 154).

Therefore, the meanings of cheese, for the author, are all reinvented, negotiated, and performed. The spiritual products in my research bear a striking resemblance to cheese in Grasseni's work. Lê Minh and Hoàng both exploit "spirituality" as a selling pitch to attract customers, using a combination of certain long-standing spiritual beliefs in Vietnam and new ideas from around the world. Their narratives, which explain the meanings of the stones and tell magical stories about them, greatly increase their sales as customers are more attracted by the narratives, novelty, and spiritual benefits they could get from the products (Zaidman 2003). In the case of the Spell Jar Workshop I attended, the customers might even participate in the creation and personalization of the products as a sort of self-entertainment.

Marketing spirituality has a direct connection to how sacred objects are valued. These makers creatively repurpose machine-polished stones they purchase in kilograms into various forms of products with spiritual values, which they then sell for a premium. While Lê Minh and Hoàng sell similar products, the items themselves are distinct. Lê Minh called her products "spell jars" that could make the dream come true and gave believers opportunities to learn about and make their own amulets. Hoàng defined his products as "stone jars" (*lọ đá*) that could attract positive energy; he added dried flowers and placed them in luxurious boxes, so the products served all the spiritual, aesthetic, and social functions. He noted that the customers might carry the jars with them, put them on a working/studying desk, or give them as gifts to other people. In contrast to the mass-produced stone bracelets sold in Lục Yên or the wooden bracelets made in Nhị Khê, these jars challenge the idea of standardization (Grasseni 2016). That is, the makers do not

need to follow any guidelines for perfection to sell their products. In these cases, spirituality is a main element that the customers consume rather than merely an additional marketing tactic. The spiritual values become exchange values, returning to the market logic.

Concluding Notes

“Values” are attached to things, yet numerous scholars argue that values are bestowed upon objects as a result of interactions with humans in various situations rather than things having a fixed value. Regarding “meaning” and “value,” Hall (1977, 3) argues in his well-known work *Representation* that the way objects are portrayed and integrated into our daily activities determines their meanings. This aligns with the claims made by Kopytoff (1986, 67) and Kendall (2021) that the values of a commodity are constantly evolving due to its interactions with humans during its creation, adoption, circulation, redefining, and use. The interlocutors in this chapter all imply that raw materials like wood or stone that Hall employs to exemplify his point can be viewed straightforwardly as natural elements, raw resources, or anything else. Many woodturners see wood as a representation of experience that has been passed down through the years, while many others see bracelets as nothing more than sellable items that enable them to generate steady earnings despite their vulnerability to the volatile market. The values of various spiritual products are varied, even among the same group of people. Examining the producer groups, for example, the products may be spiritual gifts for Hoàng, craftworks imbued with agency for Bình, valuable collectibles for Đen, or amulets for Lê Minh.

They all have distinct meanings and values based on their social and emotional attachments to the objects.

This chapter has shown how technological progress and commercial forces can transform ordinary craftworks with material functions into spiritual objects, like amulets. Spiritual values have been employed either as primary marketing points of sacred commodities or as a by-product function attached to the items. In any case, under market capitalism, these unique values can also be seen as a component of the “economic values” of a commodity. That is, customers are willing to pay more for the more spiritual values the products are claimed to possess. In contrast to Marx’s market logic, people in the new economy value qualitative attributes over the purely material function of an object (Quinn 2022); one of the attributes they are searching for can be a spiritual element. In the case of amulet crafts, especially the creative ones like the spell jars or handmade accessories, people “consume” spirituality. This denotes a close relationship between the spiritual and economic values of sacred goods.

However, it is challenging to predict how this interaction between spiritual and economic values will evolve, as it is not constant. Prior research on amulets typically shows that sacred commodities are the outcome of a one-way process of commoditization that converts sacred objects into goods for sale. For instance, Thai Buddhist talismans that have been consecrated by well-known monks are traded and circulated in the market sphere as sacred commodities with powerful economic power (Jackson 2021; Kitiarsa 2010; McDaniel 2015; Soontravanich 2013; Tambiah 1984). In Vietnam, traditional paper amulets are similarly mass-produced, enabling ritual masters to purchase and

utilize them at their convenience (Vũ Hồng Thuật 2008, 2013). When examining the directions of value change, it becomes clear that these products have already been “sacred” before they were commercialized. However, like what Kendall (2021) argues, my research shows that the value change is not linear; rather, it occurs randomly, spiking in and out anytime the objects move into new contexts. Thảo’s wooden bracelets, for example, had a high economic value when they were made in the workshop, but they also acquired a greater sentimental value when she decided to give one to me as a gift and involved me in her social sphere. When they were bought by Đen or other retailers, the bracelets’ values turned from being spiritual items to being economic ones, or the mixture of both, depending on each seller’s sales strategy. As Appadurai (1986) suggests, the “regime of values” is erratic and variable. These lucky objects are not an exception; their story does not end here; it continues until they are entirely removed from human interactions.

Salt Bag

túi muối

abundance

warm

relationship

One red bag usually contains salt, rice, matches and a printed paper amulet.



People mostly purchase Salt bags during the lunar new year (Tết) and bring them along, or hang them in the kitchen.

CHAPTER 3

The Play of Prestige: Spiritual Marketplace and Social Performativity

“Do I look nice?” asked Kiệt, the manager of the amulet store where I voluntarily worked. He turned around to give me a better look at his appearance, which was different from his usual look. His face was adorned with golden-framed spectacles that gave him an aged appearance, and a taut *tỳ hưu* ring was fastened around his middle finger. His hairline was shaped up to broaden the forehead area, which was regarded as a lucky trait as listed in physiognomic principles. I gave a nod of affirmation. After readjusting the suit and checking himself once more, he sat down at the counter and pressed the “record” button. As a tactic to market his sacred products, Kiệt would daily make a short fortunetelling video or livestream on TikTok, offering spiritual advice to his followers. Kiệt claimed that dressing nicely contributed to his prestige (*uy tín*) as a *phong thủy* master, and it helped boost sales once people started to trust (*tin tưởng*) him. The term “prestige” here, Leshkovich (2014, 65) defines it as a male attribute. In contrast to female petty traders who always lower themselves to clinch a sale, most Vietnamese men with such prestige found it painful to do so. Kiệt was not an exception. Although he could be generally regarded as an amulet seller, he preferred being viewed as a moral spiritual master who helped others by selling sacred objects.

During Kiệt’s video recording sessions, his wife, Hồng, would usually pack things into boxes for delivery. I could hear her pulling the sealing tape from the second floor. She would typically sit at her place in front of the computer and scroll down the screen to

view the online orders. Her working tools consisted of five iPhones, each with active customer messages that she needed to respond to right away. The couple worked on their separate areas within the shop. Kiệt never disclosed to anyone, aside from his full-time workers, that Hồng was his wife of the same age. He clarified that, in his opinion, a married couple should not collaborate in a professional setting since it would reduce the store's prestige. As a result, Hồng had been portrayed as a common assistant, whose name was unknown by customers. To maintain the store's hierarchical organization, Kiệt asked me to keep this a secret.

The term “prestige” (*uy tín*) came up fairly frequently in my daily conversations about the amulet business, and the amulet-seller couple applied every strategy possible to protect it. The upstairs area was the couple's secret space for storing their goods, handling orders, and packing. It was clearly marked off from the area downstairs, where customers could walk by and watch the activities inside. At the same time, the thin line between concealment and exposure was obvious. Kiệt's intended portrayal reminds me of Goffman (1959), who proposes the idea that people engage in “impression management,” or the deliberate presentation of oneself to others in different social interactions. They play roles, take on specific actions, and use different props to leave an impression on their audience. Similarly to the stage-play metaphor, Kiệt and Hồng “performed” when selling their amulets in order to gain consumers' trust.

Many scholars have been interested in the concept of performance and performativity. In Goffman (1959)'s book, the term “performance” is used to describe human social behaviors in the metaphorical context of stage plays. However, the term is

also applied to other forms of social interactions beyond the parameters of the theater (Johnson 2019). A number of scholars propose that performances are socially constructed and reinforced by different institutions through “citational practices” (Hollywood 2002). Building on Austin’s (1962) concept of performative utterance, Judith Butler (1996) argues that gender is not an innate essence; rather, it is produced through people’s frequent participation in social performances. In other words, Butler views all of people’s actions, words, gestures, and desires as performative. People learn to perform gender in accordance with social norms and expectations, and that shapes how they understand their gender identity. The construction of social norms is similar to Bourdieu’s (1992) notion of “habitus,” or the acquired sets of dispositions, as an individual adapts to the social world.

The concept of performance is applied to understanding many social issues. In the context of Vietnam, many anthropologists propose that state policies and discourses have largely contributed to the construction of certain performances in the country, particularly when they intersect with gender aspects. For instance, Alexander Soucy’s (2006) work on religious activities notes that Vietnamese women are typically viewed as spiritually active at pagodas, while men are reluctant to engage in these activities because asking a supernatural force for assistance is a sign of feminine frailties. It is socially expected of women to take care of their family members through wishing for them and giving them *lộc*, or blessed objects (Soucy 2006). Leshkovich (2014), in her study of the gender performances of petty traders at Bến Thành Market, also notes that the state’s Marxist policies and later market-oriented development took part in defining petty bourgeoisie as

inherently feminine. Most marginalized traders were women, and their husbands usually claimed that they were merely helping out (*làm phụ*). However, Leshkovich argues that the female traders used essentialist logics as a “consciously chosen performative strategy” to negotiate the socioeconomic uncertainty in post-socialist Vietnam (2014, 75). As I will discuss later in this chapter, Kiệt and Hồng employed unique marketing strategies to sell their products, based on their perceived gendered attributes. Besides the couple, I have observed that other groups of people who depended on amulet sales, including female spirit mediums and elderly women who peddled things in baskets on the street, also put on a performance to sell their sacred goods.

Building on Goffman (1959)’s theory of social performance, this chapter will focus on the economic activities that took place both inside and outside of Kiệt’s *phong thủy* store and explore “performative” strategies used by different groups of amulet sellers to sell their products. Based on the ethnographic evidence, this chapter is divided into four main sections. The first section will examine the performativity of male amulet sellers who act as ritual masters on the social front, directing customers spiritually to build trust and boost sales through the performance of dignity. The second section will discuss the female sellers’ performativity in challenging the prevailing, predominantly male spiritual realm. That is, many amulet sellers may influence their consumers’ behavior by claiming to have a strong destined root (*căn số*) with the god or goddesses. The third section will demonstrate how certain street vendors used “precariousness” as a selling tactic to attract customers, while recipients showed their sympathy through emotive practices of giving. The cases of online performances of alleged fraudulent

amulet sellers are presented in the final section. This chapter aims to show how various seller groups exploit the concept of “precarity” to gain financial benefits. Additionally, it will highlight the relationship between sellers and customers as well as the status of amulets, which has been fluctuating based on the performances of main actors.

Playing with Dignity: Male Performativity and Amulet Selling

Kiệt was among my initial interlocutors following the start of my fieldwork. When I first walked into his small amulet store to inquire about amulet stickers, Kiệt, as the store manager, was on the third floor before his wife, Hồng, called him to come downstairs. When he found out that I was a foreign researcher, he was eager to help and let me observe all activities in the store as long as I worked twice a week for him on a voluntary basis. Certainly, I happily concurred. Part of my duties was to edit his two-hour livestream videos into short TikTok clips to show his professionalism and depth of expertise as a *phong thủy* master. His major goal was to hook up the audiences, who were his future clients. After editing multiple videos, I noticed that the respectable “Master Kiệt” (*thầy Kiệt*) who appeared on the screen was relatively different from Kiệt, who was sitting in front of me, smoking and laughing at funny videos. Kiệt had a “secret self” that he kept hidden when no customers were nearby or behind the camera. He presented himself in a different way based on the social setting and the individuals he was engaging with.

Erving Goffman (1959) suggests in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* that people present themselves strategically while confronting others in different

social interactions, and this shapes how others perceive them. Connecting this to a theatrical performance, Goffman divides the performance into two parts: the front stage (social front) and the backstage. The “front stage” is where people assume their social roles in line with the collective expectations through their carefully constructed appearances, speech patterns, expressions, and gestures, while the “backstage” is a safe space where people act more naturally and authentically. Building on Goffman’s theory, this section will discuss amulet sellers’ performance, through Kiệt and Hồng as key interlocutors, to illustrate how performativity helps to earn trust among consumers, giving them power to freely define and assign values to sacred commodities.

Acting Like a Master: Prestige and the Social Front

The Vietnamese term “*thầy*” (master) refers to experts in various professions who possess extensive knowledge and skills. In general, *thầy* can be interpreted as a contraction of “*thầy giáo*,” which literally means “(male) teacher(s).” However, in religious contexts, “*thầy*” usually refers to spiritual leaders who are skilled in performing particular rites, such as Buddhist monks (*su thầy*), ritual masters (*thầy pháp*), amulet masters (*thầy bùa*), and *phong thủy* masters. My experience has shown me that calling someone “*thầy*” conveys a sense of respect. Most people typically place their trust in “*thầy*” and follow their advice when engaging in spiritual activities. While I was staying in a pagoda in Hanoi, I saw many people visiting an elderly man whom they called “*thầy*” and asking him to assist them with their spiritual issues. Small issues like strange dreams about deceased family members and bigger problems like where to dig a pond in the village’s

communal house were among the issues they were facing. Generally speaking, a master or *thầy* was typically considered a true practitioner, someone who not only possessed greater knowledge but also consistently carried out good activities. Some masters claimed to be connected to the divine.

Kiệt, the male amulet seller and store manager, referred to himself as a “master” (*thầy*), and other people also called him in the same way, although his background was almost irrelevant to divinity. Kiệt earned his bachelor’s degree in construction engineering. During his college years, he worked as a part-time salesman for amulets. He therefore had the opportunity to learn some basic spiritual principles from several masters. Kiệt and Hồng sold amulets online through their Facebook page before they successfully opened their joint store¹³ in 2018. While developing the business, Kiệt provided spiritual services that he learned on his own, such as reading physiognomy or going to a house for a geomancy assessment, in addition to selling amulets. Kiệt watched numerous TikTok videos about *phong thủy* and noted how each successful master conveyed their ideas. He watched them multiple times before recording his own videos on similar subjects. Kiệt modified the other masters’ speech patterns, contents, and attires to suit his own styles, all of which were modeled after the videos he had watched earlier.

¹³ The store was previously opened in another location before the couple moved it to the current place, located adjacent to a famous pagoda. In response to both market demands and spiritual trends, the store offered a variety of amulets, including stickers, lucky bags, two-dollar banknotes, and *thái tuế* cards, besides their main line of accessories and stone-made *phong thủy* statuettes. Kiệt normally set up a table on the sidewalk in front of the store on the first and fifteenth days of each lunar month, which were Vietnamese holy days, and sold their products at a discount.

This was in line with the suggestion made by many scholars that performances are citational and repetitive practices (Austin 1962; Butler 1996; Hollywood 2002; Nakassis 2016). Nakassis (2016), who studies stylistic performances of young Indians, argues that in creating a remarkable identity, one needs to make sure that their performance is not too similar to what is cited. However, in this case, I noticed that Kiệt attempted to emulate the cited masters as much as possible since those approaches had been shown to be effective in winning followers' trust. He also arranged a towering stack of *phong thủy* books on the shelf behind the main counter to symbolize his expertise in the field.

Besides presenting himself as a conscientious *phong thủy* learner, Kiệt tried to emphasize his spiritual specialness by giving false information about himself to customers. For instance, he frequently told others that he was born in 1987, a dragon year, which was linked to strength, ambition, and intelligence. This is because many Vietnamese people believe that a person's birth year greatly influences their destiny. Similarly to Goffman's (1959) notion that people typically "hide" things backstage, Kiệt's true birth year was kept a secret. He claimed that he wanted people to perceive him as slightly older because people generally did not trust (*không tin tưởng*) young individuals working in the spiritual industry. According to Goffman (1959, 35), a person's performance is "socialized to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented," and performers typically select, rather than create, a "suitable front" for themselves among other references to take on (1959, 27-28). Kiệt's portrayal of a middle-aged, educated man possessing a unique spiritual quality mirrors the stereotyped image of a *phong thủy* expert within Vietnamese society. All of this is

done to earn his “prestige” in order to convince potential customers to buy his products. The notion of role selection from Goffman’s theory of performance is very evident in Kiệt’s backstage actions.

Both permanent and part-time employees of the amulet store were mandated to refer to Kiệt as “master” to highlight his special role. Upon my visit to the store one day, Hồng introduced me to a new graphic designer, who was born in 1994. As I realized we were all the same age, he chuckled and replied, “Yes, Kiệt too.” Hồng then cautioned him, saying, “Remember to address him as *Master Kiệt* whenever you talk with customers.” Remarkably, in some situations, anyone can assume the position of a *master* as long as they perform certain prescribed behaviors and speech patterns. Kiệt instructed his staff workers to impersonate him behind the screen—the front stage—since he was being texted by numerous people in the chat. I once met a college student who Kiệt had hired as a new part-time employee. Her job was to respond to the messages on TikTok, and Kiệt was in charge of training her. He advised her to imitate his speech style by imagining that she herself was a “*phong thủy* master” (*thầy phong thủy*). He instructed her to use the pronoun “*anh*” (older brother) when speaking to younger clients, omitting the polite final particle “*ạ*” from the phrase. He further clarified this by saying, “This *ạ* represents that we are *under* them, but actually we are *masters*.” Additionally, Kiệt preferred the girl to end the sentence with the informal personal pronouns *anh* (older brother), *em* (younger sister or brother), and *chị* (older sister) to create both reliability and friendliness. A similar linguistic strategy was employed by the female petty traders in Leshkovich (2014)’s study, but in the opposite direction. When the female traders used

language to generate sympathy, Kiệt used it to emphasize his masculine superiority. This is a good example to demonstrate not only how the role of master was deliberately crafted for business purposes but also how it indicates a symbolic boundary between the “front” and “back” social lives, which is invisible to the audience.

Moral play is also employed in the performance of prestige. Kiệt, like many other amulet masters, chose to identify himself as a spiritual master or consultant who assisted people in overcoming their difficulties rather than as a common amulet seller. This action transforms customers into the status of precarious people who are “saved.” Below was a conversation between Kiệt and a 23-year-old male truck driver who showed up on his TikTok livestream. After reviewing the driver’s physiognomy, Kiệt advised him to purchase an amulet, noting that the man had numerous “bad points” (*điểm xấu*) on his face.

Kiệt: Generally speaking, your *cung phu thê*¹⁴ is terrible, so your family issues can’t be good. I think you should get married a bit later. Roughly the age of 28 or 29 is better. Although you might hate it, I hope saying this can help you understand more. I would say you just do whatever you can. Don’t expect to cooperate with others or rely on others to help you with your task. ... Oh, pay attention when you drive! You are not that lucky, so you can’t go carelessly.

A: I’m really unlucky (*đen*).

Kiệt: Your physiognomy (*tướng diện*) isn’t suitable for selling. Besides, I strongly advise that you should get (*thỉnh*) a Guardian Buddha¹⁵ pendant. I mean, there are eight Buddhas who protect

¹⁴ *Cung phu thê* is a particular facial area that represents a person’s marital relationship.

¹⁵ The eight Buddhas who sustain the twelve zodiac animals are referred to as Guardian Buddhas. Each person holding a different zodiac sign will have a corresponding Guardian Buddha that is unique to them. An individual is therefore born with a personal Guardian Buddha who constantly guards and blesses him/her.

us. If you have one with you, it will then help you to get better. Don't think that I'm trying to sell you something here. I said this because I know what's best for you.

A: That's OK. I drive on the street every day. I also want to carry some amulets (*bùa*). I mean lucky amulets (*bùa may mắn*) or peace amulets (*bùa bình an*) for myself. But I'm not sure what or where to buy.

Kiệt: Alright, so your work now is to add friends with me. Then type in the chat window, "Master Kiệt has already read for me." Next, type down your birth date, so my assistant can help you get the best thing.

Based on the above conversation, Kiệt created an impression on the truck driver by reading his physiognomy and making professional suggestions, using several difficult technical Hán-Việt terms to demonstrate his knowledge in the field. His amulet business was clearly aided by his elevated status as an omniscient and generous master over an unlucky young man. His generosity also legitimized him to sell amulets without being accused of "selling the divine" (*buôn thần bán thánh*) for personal benefits since he sold them to help fellow humans. The narratives of "help" were also included in the selling script, which was prepared for the part-time staff to read in the store's special events. The script stated, "These bracelets are made by disabled people. Purchasing these lucky bracelets is like supporting the disabled." Although it was confirmed that Kiệt did, in fact, employ the disabled to make bracelets for him, he did not hesitate to disclose this information to promote his favorable reputation as a generous master. It is a part of his front-stage performance.

One day, while Hồng and I were seated at the counter, she stated, "I can also read physiognomy," and she asked me to look straight at her so she could analyze my face. She playfully imitated her husband's speaking style and said that I might be unlucky in

finances. She declined my request for an amulet recommendation, saying, “No, I just learned it from the backdoor. Getting advice from the master would be more accurate. He is definitely better than me because he has researched and studied it firsthand.” She concluded, “Things will be valuable when the master says it. People trust him. It’s like you and me. When you complete your doctorate and claim to have worked on amulets, people will believe in you more than me, who is just an employee. But, actually, how could you possibly know it better than me—a professional *phong thủy* seller?” In addition, she was confident that they could defeat other competitors because, “Kiệt is a *phong thủy* master. Other people just sell their goods, but we could provide spiritual consultation.” In the conversation, Hồng described her husband as a respectful and generous master, and she contrasted him to herself as a professional amulet seller. She showed that although common people, like herself, could exactly imitate what Kiệt always said to believers, they tended to trust the “master” more. Selling amulets with a master’s charisma provided them with an economic edge over rivals, since it fostered trust in the master, persuading others to heed his spiritual advice.

Information Game: Power/Knowledge and Power Asymmetry

Sáng walked into Kiệt’s store one afternoon to pick up his stone orders. I initially believed him to be just another regular customer, but it soon became apparent that he was also an amulet master (*thầy bùa*) with a number of followers. He claimed to be thirty-seven years old, but he had begun his spiritual journey at the age of sixteen. Given his ability to communicate with the divines and his spiritual connection to them (*có căn số*),

he came to realize that his life was destined to embrace this journey. Different from Kiệt's self-portrayal, he asserted that he possessed a unique capacity for conversing with ghosts (*ma*) and spirits (*vong hồn*). He gained the abilities to perform whatever task that people asked of him, including fortunetelling, producing amulets, writing *sớ*¹⁶, and conducting ritualistic activities, as a result of his spiritual connection. He asserted that the divines (*nhà ngàì*) had taught him the magic in the dream so he could create amulets to help people, suggesting his destiny as a master. He also claimed that drawing more than a hundred different types of paper amulets (*phù*) by hand was not difficult for him and concluded, "You'll never find a how-to book if you go look for one. They are totally confidential. They are spirituality." I inquired as to whether I might watch his amulet-making process. Unsurprisingly, he refused, claiming, "This working process is special knowledge (*pháp môn*) and can't be shared. I and the other masters are the only ones doing rituals together. Sister, it's the secret that can't be told to outsiders. Nobody dares to tell. It is dangerous. You might even die from it. You'll never know what will happen if you get deep into it."

I later contacted Sáng once again and requested to buy a study amulet this time. He advised me to spend between 2.5 and 3 million VND (100-120 USD) on a set of paper amulets. The amulets were said to be *phù âm*, or spirit-related amulets, which needed to be sacralized through an extremely difficult process. Sáng stated that two masters

¹⁶ *Sớ* is a ritual petition written in traditional Chinese script called "*chữ nho*." It contains the personal information of the individual who performs the ritual and their requests from the deities. People usually put the letter together with their offerings on the altar before burning them at the end of the ritual.

performed the activation ritual, requiring more than ten million VND (405 USD) of offerings, which included food, flowers, and votive papers. “It required both vegetarian and non-vegetarian offerings,” he further explained. “We needed to request for four hours and practiced for seven days. Still, there was no guarantee that it would be successful. If it wasn’t working, then we needed to go through the whole process again. The chance was 50/50.” If I wanted a less expensive amulet, Sáng recommended *phù dương*, a type of amulet that was made entirely of magic and necessitated fewer procedures and offerings. This *phù dương* would cost me about 500,000 VND (20 USD), which was still expensive compared to similar-looking paper amulets on the street.

When I questioned him about how he determined the price of each amulet, he replied that there was no precise method. It mostly depends on the money he spent on offerings and his customers’ faith. Sáng clarified his meaning that before delivering the amulets to customers, he needed to “*luyện phù*,” which involved placing them at the proper time and place and concentrating the mind (*trì tâm*) on them for a hundred days. Showing me laminated printed amulets that were stored in a plastic bag beneath his worship table in his house, he continued, “Initially, each of these amulets costs about 5,000 VND (0.2 USD). When they are sacralized here, I’m not even sure how much they cost me to change the offerings every day to have the god bless them. This is why the price increases.” Additionally, Sáng handed me an amulet sticker, which he spent at least four hours consecrating, as a souvenir (*đồ lưu niệm*) for my visit. Again, he asserted that the spiritual value of the sticker was elevated by the laborious activation process. He was

therefore unable to charge only 50,000 VND (2 USD) for each like those amulet stickers available at Kiệt's store and elsewhere.

The notion of “invisibility” is explicitly present in the above situation as all the information is left unclear. The entire amulet-making procedure is “hidden” from customers—common people who are not destined by the divines to do the sacred duties—although the process itself is the main measurement to evaluate the spiritual and economic values of the amulets they expect to buy. This similar remark of restricted access to information is mentioned by Goffman in his book, which he refers to as the “information game.” He describes the term as “a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery” (1959, 8). Although the definition is ambiguous, it suggests that people tend to control the flow of information, strategically reveal or conceal certain details about themselves, and manipulate others' perceptions to forward their own agendas. This represents a complex interplay between the power system and knowledge production, which is consistent with Foucault's well-known theory of *power/knowledge*. Foucault (2008) proposes that power functions not only through coercive force but also through accepted and institutionalized knowledge; knowledge is a form of power. However, he argues that power relations also influence how knowledge is produced, organized, and disseminated. Concrete examples of power/knowledge can be found across various societal domains, including the medical, educational, and legal systems, that symbolically shape how people perceive reality.

According to my conversation with Sang, despite his extensive explanation of the amulet production process, customers are not allowed to witness what actually transpires

in order to determine whether purchasing certain sacred objects is truly worthwhile. Amulet masters/sellers, like Sang, have complete control over the information conveyed to customers, which leads to the state of power asymmetry between them. Sang’s so-called “special power,” which he claimed to have received from the divines, is a means of differentiating a destined person, who knows all about spirituality, from ordinary people who see and feel nothing at all. Customers lack the necessary information to assess whether the sellers are telling the truth. As information is unavailable to them, customers are forced to trust the words of the “master(s)” out of fear that bad things will happen to them if they disobey spiritual guidance. This is similar to how Sang impliedly threatened me, saying, “You might even die from it. You’ll never know what will happen if you get deep into it.” Taking a broader view, it appears that sellers’ control over knowledge is another mechanism that drives the entire spiritual market. That is, most customers simply buy items because that is what they are instructed to do, and the explanations provided by sellers or masters have influenced their perceptions of what constitutes “fortune.”

Similarly, Kiet always encourages consumers to pick up his products a few days after purchase, explaining that effective amulets need to go through a blessing (*tri chu*) ritual performed by Buddhist monks. Customers, however, are unable to determine whether or not the amulets they have purchased are indeed blessed. Tra My, a 32-year-old former amulet business owner, along with providing life-coach sessions for restless individuals seeking meanings in life, confessed that she used to “violate” her customers’ trust when she was busy by failing to have the amulets consecrated before sending the items to them. However, there was no way the customers would have known the truth.

Sáng's role as a master not only provides him with the power to completely control how people perceive spirituality but also gives him the authority to manipulate the price of a commodity, which is supposed to be determined by the market system. As I personally experienced, Sáng offered to give me an amulet sticker for free, claiming that it took him a long time to activate the item. However, he charged exorbitant prices to others for the same product. Similarly to Sáng's explanation of price valuation, Trà My told me that amulets were "priceless" (*vô giá*), which might present opportunities for sellers to make large profits. She stated that amulet sellers might charge whatever price they pleased for their products. The sellers' credibility was taken into consideration when setting the price. "If people trust you, they will buy your products," she clarified. "I once paid 20,000 dong for an amulet sticker that I later sold for 200,000-300,000. Also, I could sell a 100,000-VND agarwood bracelet I bought directly from the producer for at least 1 million. So, the longer I sold amulets, the more money I could make. People buy *you*, not your *things*. You sell yourself too." She acknowledged to me that she thought her face had a trustworthy quality. However, she confessed (*sám hối*) that she felt guilty about raising the price when Khoa, whom I addressed in Chapter 1, purchased a wooden rosary from her. The discussion with Trà My illustrates how the value of a sacred product can be highly flexible, depending more on sellers' satisfaction than the market price. It also confirms how positive social fronts provide amulet sellers with the freedom to assign values to an item, which largely benefits them as they navigate through the fluctuating market system.

Unidentified Assistant: Women's Supporting Role as a Team Member

In certain societies, women are connected with the market and trading activities, or even perceived as natural traders (Mintz 1971). According to Leshkovich (2014), essentialism, which associates women with small-scale trading and men with larger businesses, is a widely held belief in Vietnam. The practices at Kiệt's store, where female staff were given preference during big-sale events, support these notions. On Vietnamese holy days, Kiệt often hired female college students to work part-time in front of his amulet store, where he would put up booths and sell spiritual objects at a discount rate. These young women were required to wear red *áo dài*¹⁷ uniforms, with the store's logo on the back, and use the script provided by the manager to invite customers to look at their products. Kiệt informed me that he had chosen solely female students to serve as the sellers, stating the following:

Women's characteristics are more suitable for a sales job that needs gentleness, patience, and diligence. Our customers come from different social backgrounds, so women are more suited to handle them. Men tend to be too hot-tempered and lazy. They are better suited for those jobs that require decision-making skills. This is a *phong thủy* principle.

[Kiệt, interviewed in Hanoi on November 24, 2022]

Many Vietnamese, who have been influenced by the Daoist ideology of *âm* and *đương*, or yin and yang in Chinese thought, have formed a dualistic social expectation on gender roles. The *âm* principles associate femininity with coldness, darkness, subtleness, quietness, and calmness, while the *đương* principles link masculinity with heat,

¹⁷ *Áo dài* is widely accepted as a traditional dress in Vietnam. It usually consists of a long tunic over loose pants. Many Vietnamese wear *áo dài* on formal occasions and festivals.

brightness, boldness, loudness, and directness. Men are therefore expected to play more “active” roles, whereas women are typically perceived as “passive” (Endres 2015, 195). Every activity inside Kiệt’s store reflects this gendered principle pragmatically. I would occasionally hear Kiệt berating his wife for speaking harshly to customers or filling an empty stock without consulting him first. In Kiệt’s perspective, Hồng, as well as other female workers, were expected to always be gentle, patient, and hardworking, as qualified women, particularly in front of the “audiences” and outside “observers” involved in their business transactions, while it was common for men to be hot-tempered.

A further excellent illustration of the dualistic distinction between genders is the spatial arrangement of the store, offline and online. Hồng’s workspace was on the dusty second floor of the physical store. She usually sat amidst straggling cardboard boxes and rolls of sealing tape, relying on the dimmed light from an old PC computer to see the parcels she was packing. Hồng, hiding in the shadowy area, only descended to the light-filled, tidy first level only when Kiệt was out of the store. Regarding the “online stage,” Kiệt’s images, which were practically featured on every social media platform, directly depicted the store and all available products. Acting as a *phong thủy* expert, he spoke confidently and extensively, suggesting amulets that would be appropriate for each customer. Contrarily, Hồng only ever took pictures of the actual products, occasionally modeling them with her hand. Even though she made the largest contribution to overall sales, she went unnoticed by most customers since she shared promotional pictures and wrote captions under Kiệt’s account.



Figure 8: Kiệt and part-time female staff getting ready for the sales booth
(Photo by the author, Hanoi, August 2022)

“It is me who does A to Z,” Hồng mentioned in a conversation with me, emphasizing her crucial roles in keeping the business running. Like many other women, Hồng was socially subjugated and burdened by the “second shift” (Hochschild 1989). Every morning, she dropped her two-year-old son off at the kindergarten before heading to the shop to greet customers, take orders, respond to messages, schedule counseling sessions, take and post pictures on social media, package items, and send them to the post office at the end of the day. In order to keep up with all the new orders, Hồng responded to messages simultaneously on up to five different cell phones. She returned home to take care of the family at 5 p.m., which was the time when Kiệt normally took turns working the night shift to livestream as part of his “branding” strategy. Importantly, Hồng became an essential part of the store’s business transaction due to her unrecognizable roles in “doing A-Z.” I was requested to assist with a bi-monthly sales event of the store one day.

It turned out that Kiệt had canceled when I got there. Unusually, Hồng was upstairs with her little son, and Kiệt told me that Hồng was unable to focus entirely on selling since their son needed to be brought to the store due to his mother-in-law's unexpected illness. Realizing he could not manage selling without Hồng, he grumbled, "It's *ngày rằm*¹⁸, but we can't sell anything at all. What a waste!"

Scholars have been debating the change in gender roles that has occurred since the introduction of capitalism. As Haukanes (2001) notes, state policies have forced women into compulsory workforces in numerous post-communist countries. This results in women's conflicting responsibilities for family care and wages, which scholars refer to as the "double burden." Besides having to handle household duties, women face discrimination in the workplace with poor wages. In addition, women's intellectual abilities appear to be devalued, and their skills are not adequately recognized (Roudakova and Ballard-Reisch 1999). Women in Vietnam have also been burdened by the country's transition to a market economy. Leshkovich (2014)'s study on female petty traders in Bến Thành Market shows the struggles of women after the state's *Đổi Mới* reform in 1986, when they gradually became the main source of income. They still needed to continue their "care" for the family members at the same time (Soucy 2006). This is consistent with the common perception that traditional feminine qualities like caring, kindness, and self-sacrifice are characteristics of women everywhere, not only in Vietnam (Roudakova and Ballard-Reisch 1999, 28). Hồng's profession as an amulet

¹⁸ *Ngày rằm* is the fifteenth day of each lunar month. Many people conduct rituals, such as praying at pagodas or worshipping their ancestors at home, on this day.

seller aptly embodies the double burden of women. That is, women are socially expected to support their husbands in earning additional income while simultaneously taking care of household chores, while men are free to concentrate solely on their businesses. Hồng once mentioned that it was acceptable for Kiệt to spend the entire week sleeping in the store since he was “working hard” for the family; this aligns with the belief that men are the “breadwinners” (Stockman et al. 2016).

The incident where Hồng had to take her son to the store on a big day for sales implies the clashing care-work obligations as well as the problematic relationship between the couple when their former “separate spheres” for men and women had merged into one. When they were at the store, Kiệt performed as Hồng’s employer. His frustration stemmed from the fact that he could not entirely blame Hồng for her inability to work as an employee because, in the private realm, he was still a husband and a father. As Stockman et al. (2016) point out, women are assumed to take care of the household and children first, with “work” coming in second. Therefore, they typically receive less favorable treatment at work. In this case, Kiệt attempted to conceal his marriage and push his wife to the position of an unidentified female assistant who complied with all of his demands in order to “perform” his elevated status as a business owner, despite the fact that they were both co-owners in a sense. As a result, many female amulet sellers are forced to accept their inferior status in the business success due to social expectations. They need to devalue their years of sales expertise and overvalue the wisdom of the male “master” for a sustained business advantage.

Hồng's low-ranking position is comparable to anesthesia, which involves administering a medication to dull pain during surgery and is often handled by a doctor with a higher ranking. Despite having the ability to perform the task, nurses are not favored to do so because of the perception that their level of medical expertise is less (Goffman 1959, 28). Notably, Hồng appeared content to contribute to the business through her subpar performance as a "team member," despite her below-the-dignity performance, and it was crucial to project Kiệt's positive images as the store's representative in order to achieve the goals shared by both of them. In other words, performing as an unknown assistant required her to choose a suitable front to elicit her desired social reactions.

"Special Women": Spiritual Performance and Gendered Embodiment

Through a researcher friend, I got to know Mộc, a female executive owner of a high-end *phong thủy* accessory brand. Due to her hectic schedule as a businesswoman and spirit medium (*bà đồng*) in the Four Palaces (*Tứ Phủ*), a major denomination of the Mother Goddess Religion (*đạo Mẫu*) in Vietnam, she was one of my most hard-to-reach interlocutors. Finally, she agreed to do an interview with me for a short thirty-minute time slot. Mộc had approximately five staff members working in a well-organized office in an upscale condominium in Hà Đông District. With a warm smile, Mộc invited me into her workspace. Her company's logo, which frequently appeared in her videos, was displayed on the wall behind her desk. After responding to some of my queries, Mộc asked me if I could livestream while we were talking. She enthusiastically put up a

tripod, greeted her online followers, and introduced me as a PhD student from the United States who was currently in her workplace to interview her, who was also pursuing a master's degree in cultural studies. I realized at that point that I had become one of the “supporting” characters in her performance. The narratives about her educational background and academic affiliations of herself as a former master's student in Humanities were told to create her image as a knowledgeable expert.

Mộc claimed that her business acumen was closely linked to her spirituality, particularly as a result of her religious practices as a child of Mother Goddesses. Mộc was highly esteemed among her disciples (*con nhang đệ tử*), and she was requested to conduct spirit possession rituals almost every week. The customers gave her great remarks after she blessed several amulets. Hence, she perceived this as a business opportunity, as she described:

I never thought of becoming a company owner. I'm a child of Mother Goddesses (*con nhà mẫu*), and I usually perform the spirit possession (*hầu*) rituals. I have had a destined connection (*có duyên*) with *phong thủy* accessories for a long time. I have accessories on my hands, around my neck, and everywhere else. One day, I wore a bracelet made of green stones. A woman who attended the same ritual approached me. I had no idea. Perhaps I looked shiny (*tỏa sáng*) or beautiful that day. But after seeing me sitting in front of the mass, the woman followed me and asked if I might sell her the bracelet. At first, I hadn't intended to sell it, but she insisted on buying it. So, my mind immediately began to think that the bracelet might be trying to find its owner (*vòng tìm chủ*). I then decided to tell her a price. The woman could accept (*đáp ứng*) the given amount, so it was her destiny to have it. After that, everything I wore on my body was bought. Everyone told me how lucky they were after wearing my accessories. And from that, I developed a business mindset.

[Mộc, interviewed in Hanoi on August 23, 2023]

Mộc added that she used all of her skills to purify (*thanh tẩy*) each amulet before giving it to the purchaser. Moreover, she performed spirit possession rituals (*tiến lễ hầu thánh*) to transfer the energy into amulets. The rituals were conducted at least once a month to bless (*trì chú*) and activate (*khai quang*) amulets and other sacred products. Most of these rituals were publicized via Mộc's personal social media accounts. Mộc told me during our conversation that she could "feel" the energy of amulets because of her connection with the divines. She gently held my bracelets in her hands after asking me to remove them. She continued by saying that one of my bracelets was "smiling" at her and that the other one was trembling, which somehow signified my lack of confidence.

In contrast to Hồng's experience of having to "suppress" her own abilities and rely solely on male experts to project a trustworthy image in the eyes of the public, many choose to identify as naturally talented persons with special connections with higher non-human entities. "Spirit root" (*căn*) is a prerequisite for becoming a spirit medium in Vietnam. This indicates that they were implanted with a mediumship from a past incarnation and are destined for it (Endres 2016). As claimed, the medium's unique abilities stem from their roles as the deities' servants. More importantly, they are able to "trao duyên" or "gieo duyên" to other people. "Trao" means to exchange, and "gieo" means to spread, while "duyên" (or *duyên phận*) means fate or fortune. Therefore, the act of gifting religious objects to others, such as prayer books or amulets, is referred to as "trao duyên" or "gieo duyên." It alludes symbolically to the connection and exchange of the giver's and recipient's invisible fates, which provides them with the chance to learn about or empathize with each other. Alternatively, some amulet sellers describe the terms

as a means for them to “send goodwill” (*gửi lòng tốt*) to other people. The terms, along with the concept of “bracelets seeking owners” mentioned by Mộc, then characterize amulet purchase in a spiritual perspective. That is, a specific amulet would be most effective for the person who is destined to obtain it.

A 31-year-old amulet business owner named Nhân Hà, who described herself as a “master” (*thầy*) with several years of Buddhist practices, also noted the connection between divinity and amulets. After receiving an amulet blessed by Tibetan Buddhas or those divines in the Four Palaces, the woman stated, “If a bracelet doesn’t fit you, or a customer doesn’t have enough destined attachment (*không đủ duyên*), it will break as soon as you wear it. This is because the divines don’t grant it.” The cases of Mộc and Nhân Hà highlight the important role played by these female sellers as a “medium” between divine power and customers. Their ability to “transfer” energies (*truyền năng lượng*) and “bless” amulets also contributes to their social and economic advancement, bringing them on par with male spiritual experts like Kiệt and Sáng. Many anthropologists have found similar manifestations in mediumship cases both inside and outside of Southeast Asia, where most spirit mediums are women, transgender, and homosexual men (Patamajorn 2008). Accordingly, researchers in Myanmar contend that being a spirit medium, or “*nat kadaw*,” provides marginalized women and sexual minorities with a safe haven where they can achieve economic and social advantages and better living conditions, as well as access to transgressive opportunities that defy the hetero-patriarchal society they live in (Coleman et al. 2018; Purday 2013). Endres (2016) notes that women in Vietnam are carving out alternative roles that exceed the duties

associated with the Four Palace mediumship. Certain female mediums (*bà đồng*) elevate their social reputations by providing their followers with a diverse range of ritual services pertaining to worldly concerns. However, Endres points out that these female spirit mediums still rely on the generous donations of their followers to fund their ritual projects, although their offered services appear to have an entrepreneurial bent. Different from Endres's remark, MỘC and Nhân Hà in my research navigate their venue as businesswomen. These women demand payment for their labor, products, and spiritual talents. In contrast to other street vendors of amulets, MỘC's price to the woman who inquired about buying her bracelet demonstrates her autonomy in setting prices and fees without referencing the market price. The incorporation of spirit mediumship into the business has allowed them to acquire the trust of their clientele. In MỘC's invitation for an activation ritual, the terms "*khách hàng*" (customers) and "*đệ tử, con nhang*" (disciples) were both used to refer to customers, signifying the complex relationship that goes beyond just an economic transaction. Customers do not truly hold power in this capitalist system. Faith and trust in the special sellers turn customers into the ambiguous position of disciples, upending the established power structures in the marketplace. In short, this emphasizes the financial and social advantages that the women gain from performing the double roles of businesswomen and spirit mediums.

The notion that spiritual power may elevate women's status in society is disputed by several scholars. Ahmad et al. (2023) discover that certain women in Chitral, Pakistan, develop healing power and become spirit mediums (*Pari khan*) after being possessed by spirits. Similar to other places, these women earn recognition and position in their local

community due to their spiritual power and connection to supernatural beings. Since the spirit mediumship gives women the ability to make significant sums of money through financial transactions, it not only encourages women's economic independence but also turns males into dependents on women's earnings, upending the patriarchal relationship. However, the researchers do note that the power that the women possess is not their own, but rather a gift from spirits. As a result, the status quo of men is not challenged by the spiritual power, and women's social and psychological deprivation under the oppressive social conditions is still ignored. The women's acquisition of power in Chitral, as reported by Ahmad et al. (2023), is similar to my interlocutors' experience. That is, the amulets sold by MỘC and Nhân Hà would be effective only when the gods actually "grant" the blessings. Unlike Bomfim (2019, 57), who argues that women's status as mediums allows them to circumvent all the conditions that guaranteed the monopoly of male religious leaders, including education and social recognition, the women in my study add value to their products by sharing their training histories, which they purposefully represent through social media platforms or interview articles discussing their business establishment. These female entrepreneurs invest in multiple spiritual trainings in addition to selling amulets. A few of them, like MỘC, provide spiritual workshops to teach how to calculate lucky numbers or tell fortunes. These training and educational backgrounds help these women transform from amulet sellers into spiritual mentors.

Lastly, I have noticed that these female mediums or religious practitioners who run sizable amulet businesses have combined "divine power" and feminine

characteristics. That is, most amulets they offer for sale are “lucky” accessories like rings and bracelets. Most of them stated that, as women, they had been involved in accessories prior to starting their businesses. MỘC, for example, reflected that she wore her accessories everywhere, but she was unsure whether she looked “shiny (*tỏa sáng*) or beautiful” that day so that the female stranger wanted to buy her stone bracelet. The term “beautiful” (*đẹp*) that appeared when MỘC made reference to her appearance implies her feminine attributes that complement the item. This logic can also be used to explain Nhân Hà’s or HỒNG’s connection to sacred objects. Nhân Hà claimed that she enjoyed buying lucky accessories while in college, which was why she decided to study alternative *phong thủy* in order to design and create bracelets that corresponded with each customer’s fortune. According to Pinthongvijayakul (2019), who conducted research on spirit mediums in Thailand, mediumship is associated with women’s “soft hand,” which accounts for the sexual division of labor in ritual domains. That is, women are more suitable for the role of spirit medium than men since the exquisite craftsmanship needed to create flowers and offerings potentially excludes males from reaching the mediumship stage. This idea of “soft hand,” as suggested by the author, proposes “a corporeal affinity between the female body and the disembodied spirit.” MỘC, in my research, emphasized how she “shone” when she wore the accessories all over her body, and everything she wore was sold out. Apparently, women wearing an excessive number of accessories make them appear “feminine” enough to keep males out of the beauty industry, and the female figure enables them to overcome male sellers. Even Kiệt, the amulet store manager, was dependent on HỒNG to model their products with her hands so that they could be shared as

advertisements on social media. In short, although female performers benefit from their status as spirit mediums, they employ several strategies to ensure and maintain the prestige bestowed upon them. These tactics include referencing their educational background, positioning themselves as a “teacher” or a “master,” and fusing the idea of divine power with the feminine form.

“Beneath” the Dignity: Performing Precariousness as Sales Strategies

Goffman (1959, 35) proposes in his writing on role performance that people carefully craft their appearance, demeanor, and communication to “fit into social understanding and expectations of the society in which it is represented.” In other words, they “perform” to influence others’ perceptions of them and make a good first impression on the targeted audience. In the previous sections, the cases of amulet sellers who establish credible personas of spiritual experts to attract potential customers and, occasionally, followers (*đệ tử*) are examined. For these individuals, dignity is a key factor for a successful business. However, dignity is not always a suitable representation for every performer. For instance, Hồng, one of Kiệt’s team members and also his wife, performs in the beneath-the-dignity role known as “*infra dignitatem*” to highlight the greater status of the reliable seller. In this session, I will explore another set of amulet sellers who perform a “beneath-the-dignity” act, dramatizing their inferior status as sales strategies to sell their amulets, as well as the notion of collective humanitarianism reflected through the charity giving as part of the Vietnamese socialization project.

Kiệt's store was next to a well-known pagoda that was frequented by large crowds, particularly during the Vietnamese holy days (the first or the fifteenth of each lunar month). In front of the pagoda, women, the aged, and the crippled sat side by side and pleaded with passersby to "help" them buy their goods. Packed in their resembling plastic baskets were tissue paper packets, candies, nail clippers, toothpicks, keychains, lighters, wooden bracelets, and so on. A 75-year-old vendor, Sừu, was seated on the ground. She, just like the others, was from Thanh Hóa, one of the poorest provinces in northern Vietnam. Usually, Sừu and the others went to Đồng Xuân Market to buy pre-prepared baskets and rented a small room close to the pagoda for the night. Sừu was allowed to sit inside the pagoda since she was very old. But occasionally, I would find her sitting on the wet floor in the middle of a torrential downpour. The old woman's inability to walk a long distance due to her aged body and poor health made it harder for her to make more money. I once purchased a wooden bracelet from her. She told me that her friends purchased these bracelets from a wholesale store around the sacred Quán Sứ Pagoda area and then praised me for buying one. "Very few people buy my items," she reflected. "Rich people have no sympathy for us. They are unaware of our difficult conditions. Only middle-income and poor people like us help one another."



Figure 9: Sứu’s basket, with a few bracelets on the right for sale
(Photo by the author, Hanoi, April 2023)

Sứu would say the same things to passersby: “Grandchild, please buy to help me (*Cháu ơi, mua giúp đỡ bà nhé*),” or, “Miss, support me (*Cô ơi, ủng hộ bà*).” Many pagoda visitors, both men and women, did stop by. Besides regular purchases, customers usually gave her a higher amount than the original price. I reluctantly used the word “customers” in this context since their role appeared to be more philanthropic. People frequently gave her their food offerings (*lộc*), which had previously been blessed by the gods, or tiny amounts of money, without getting anything in return. I sometimes sat with her at the pagoda gate and listened to the stories of her unhappy family. The old woman narrated that her family was so poor that none of her children had access to basic education. Her son, like other unemployed villagers in the province, was a farmer who subsisted on fishing and rice farming. It was not until after our several meetings that she

brought up her other family members. I found out that one of her grandchildren worked at a bank, and the rest were currently studying in Hanoi. She asked me one afternoon to translate a label on a vitamin box imported from Korea, which she said that her daughter “regularly” bought for her with care. It was the first time I realized that she was not as abandoned as I had assumed. Rather, her “suffering” life narratives omitted the fact that she was cared for by family members who had steady jobs.

It is usual in Hanoi to see women, children, and the elderly selling “amulets” and other tiny trinkets as they stroll around religious spaces and tourist attractions. Time, place, and social status of these underprivileged vendors all have a big impact on people’s decision to purchase their goods, which are driven more by moral judgment than by material necessity. Some old vendors claimed that they exclusively “sold” goods at this Buddhist pagoda on specific days of the month when visitors came to perform rituals (*làm lễ*), which were believed to bestow good fortune on the devotees and their families. Donations are typically made as part of the Vietnamese merit-making custom during certain sacred times. Buddhism has recently been linked to social works in Vietnam. As a result, numerous Buddhist-based organizations have been serving as mainstream alternatives to social services in the communities, helping vulnerable members of society and addressing other social issues that the Vietnamese government has identified. Buddhism’s philanthropic endeavors are based on the concept of “giving” (*dana*¹⁹), which represents individuals’ sense of compassion and the act of using their resources to

¹⁹ “Giving” (*dana*) in Buddhism refers to both material giving (*Amisa-dana*) and Buddhist doctrine giving (*Dhamma-dana*).

assist those in need without expecting anything in return (Dove 2017; Huynh et al. 2002; Vu Hong Van 2020). Material giving seems to be the easiest form for laypeople to practice (Hoang et al. 2019). Like in Myanmar and Thailand, a large number of Buddhists in Vietnam engage in charitable giving as a means of gaining merit (*lấy phước*), believing that it will bring them good fortune (Soucy 2006; Swenson 2020).

Among those who offered money to the unsightly vendors was Hồng, Kiệt's wife and amulet seller. She believed that human conditions were the consequence of the past life, saying, "If we do bad deeds in this life, we will suffer in the next life. So, we laypeople should lead moral lives. If I spot any poor people, I'll just give them money. It isn't necessary to give much, perhaps only 50,000 dong. Just give them as much as we can (*có bao nhiêu thì cho bấy nhiêu*).” Hồng's remark regarding her charitable deeds emphasizes the relationship between the old vendor and her customers in this case. In many customers' eyes, sellers are recipients of their donation, which is explicitly different from the master-disciple relationship discussed in the preceding section.

In addition to the religious incentive for donating, scholars propose that charitable endeavors may be viewed as social responsibility, which results in a collective debate on morality. In the context of Myanmar, Dove (2017) argues that giving trends are also a strong response to immediate needs that are unfulfilled by the government support because of the low levels of state investment in basic human welfare and the widespread deprivation within the country. According to Dove, many donations are motivated more by the "warm glow" and the desire to do "the right thing" than by the desire for socioeconomic recognition. This is in contrast to Lamont's (1992) findings that most rich

white Americans are more likely to “give” in order to validate and legitimize their social position to gain symbolic power. Swenson (2020; 2021) notes that in the case of Vietnam, specifically, the state policy shift after the socialization (*xá hội hóa*) phase required people to succeed in self-governing in accumulating human capital while simultaneously fulfilling community needs as moral and ethical citizens. Charity has grown in popularity as a way for people to direct private funds toward non-state humanitarian organizations that respond to appeals from the state for mutual support. In other words, donations and charity work have helped lessen the state’s social burdens (Nguyen Thi Minh Ngoc 2009). People have a moral obligation to provide at least a portion of their private capital to help those in need, which exceeds the Vietnamese state’s financial capacity. This is consistent with Nguyen Ngoc Nu’s (2015) study, which indicates that the primary motivation for financial donations in Vietnam is altruism—a moral act to advance the well-being of other persons. The moral action serves as an example of how neoliberalism in Vietnam operates through the redistribution of wealth to the community rather than opposing the collective (Schwenkel and Leshkovich 2012).

The way people perceive a person’s social class can be used as a sales strategy. Huynh et al. (2022) note that the poor, the ill, and the homeless with low levels of material capital are seen as meritorious recipients for *dana*, or giving, in Vietnam, while children, the elderly, and women are typically classified as socially vulnerable. This makes them the main targets of charity and donations. Sừu, the basket vendor, identified herself as a poor, old, and sick woman who could only be understood and supported by “the poor,” not by selfish, rich people. Her depressing life stories and vulnerable look

allowed this old woman to obtain significant advantages; she was permitted to sit in the pagoda area and receive donations from pagoda visitors as she requested. This brought to mind another woman who approached my group at Hùng Temple (*đền Hùng*), Phú Thọ Province, with a basket full of bracelets in various designs. Her bracelets were made of plastic, imitation stones, or cheap wood and were priced between 10,000 and 20,000 VND (0.5-1 USD). My 22-year-old interlocutor, Lan, picked a bracelet at random out of the basket and gave her the cash. The old vendor turned to face me and said, “Miss, please support me. Kindly buy a few more.” She kept moving in the direction of other group members after I bought her another bracelet. Seeing that Lan already had one wooden prayer string on her wrist, I questioned her why she had purchased the bracelet. It was merely to “help” the elderly woman, she claimed. People found it difficult to ignore the terms “help” (*hộ, giúp, giúp đỡ*) and “support” (*ủng hộ*), which were mentioned frequently in the sellers’ requests. While some individuals were uneasy about being “forced” (*bị bắt buộc*) to buy and were dubious about the existence of any underground organizations behind the sales, many of my interlocutors viewed “buying” as a charitable deed to help others in lower social classes.

Just like the petty traders in Leshkovich (2014)’s work, these amulet vendors accept their precarious conditions and emphasize them in their business performance in an effort to elicit “sympathy” from the audiences, who are influenced by religious principles and the state’s appeals for mass humanitarian efforts. This is also best

illustrated by the seasonal amulets known as salt bags (*túi muối*)²⁰, which are widely distributed during the Tết festival around Hanoi. Although salt bags are available everywhere, many people, including mothers carrying their infants, small children, and elderly women, prefer to purchase them from wretched-looking vendors in front of religious sites. While in Trấn Quốc Pagoda, I noticed women and children hawking salt packets in the pagoda area. A middle-aged woman came to buy amulets from a small vendor who looked to be about 6-7 years old. She softly said, “Let me help you buy one (*Bác mua cho con một cái nào*),” highlighting her kind intention behind her purchase. Precariousness performed by women, children, and the elderly then becomes an effective selling tool in the informal spiritual marketplace in my study because of this feeling of “sympathy,” an emotive and uncontrollable response to sufferings or negative impacts on others’ well-being, which also affect one’s own welfare (Fairbairn 2009; Maibom 2009). In other words, sympathy can be viewed as an act of maximizing one’s own utilities by helping others, driven by motives other than self-interest and rationality (Fischer 2014, 74). It is a moral duty that appears to be a value of modern citizenship (Hume 2000). This moral act is less sensitive to the givers’ social positions (Sanghera 2016; Sayer 2010) because it requires people to give away only little amounts of money, between 1,000 and 50,000 VND (0.04 and 2 USD). Similarly to Swenson (2020)’s argument, people perform this deed out of any sense of social reciprocity, which is different from the gift-giving

²⁰ “Salt bags” (*túi muối*) are a common type of amulets sold during the New Year’s Festival, or *Tết*. Typically, the little red bags containing salt, rice, and matches stand for wealth, plenty, and warmth. People usually hang them in their houses, workplaces, or cars, or carry the bags with them for a year to draw good luck.

practice (Mauss 2002), since it is unlikely that donors and recipients will cross paths again. Rather, it is one of the simplest means by which they can carry out their duties as moral subjects to the state and to religious institutions.



Figure 10: A mother with little children and a boy selling salt packets at a pagoda (Photo by the author, Hanoi, January 2023)

The act of buying amulets from street vendors is driven by people's affect rather than economic rationality. That is, many people view amulets as a medium to help the underprivileged rather than being objects that they intended to buy. Mazzarella (2017; 2020) defines the term "affect" as an intimate and impersonal emotion, which is shaped by the blended innermost personality and social routines. Raising an example of the ritual mediation of *mana*, mentioned in Emile Durkheim's (2001) work, he shows how, despite being intimately experienced, *mana* is part of the social form. Mazzarella also proposes that the marketing of many branded products also operates on the basis of affects, with

buyers being more motivated to buy based on the structural property of the objects and their current circumstances than on the intrinsic value of the items (2020, 299-300). Fischer (2014) exemplifies such affect-intensive purchases by describing a German egg buyer's case and pointing out that consumers are willing to pay more for bio eggs, which are said to be more environmentally friendly. He proposes that people's preference for bio eggs is a social obligation that adds to the vague notion of collective goods, which is typically propagated through German political discourses. In addition, he illustrates how the sociocultural significance of bio eggs, in addition to their physical properties, contributes to their meaning. In line with Fischer's arguments, I regard amulets as a medium of emotional expression rather than as tradable items in an economic sense. In this case, the affective practices are shaped by the sociopolitical context of post-*Đổi Mới* Vietnam, where Vietnamese citizens are urged to assist the underprivileged in society to maintain collective goods.

It appears that amulets, like bracelets or salt bags, have a versatile function since people purchase them for their sympathetic pushes rather than for their own spiritual purposes. For example, according to a female volunteer at Kim Liên Temple who distributed "salt bags" during the Tết festival, the items that visitors received from the temple after making a donation were "*lộc*." They had been blessed through the chanting before being delivered to remind people of performing good deeds. Conversely, the ones being sold in front of the temple displayed distinct spiritual attributes (*tính chất tâm linh*). The volunteer concluded, "If people buy them outside, they don't expect any spiritual value. Mostly, they buy the items to help. When they see little kids or old people selling

these things, they buy them for the labors. We help buy their items (*mua hộ*) when we see people struggling and feel pity for them. We can at least help them a little.” In this case, amulets serve as a conduit for laypeople to fulfill their humanistic and religious obligations rather than being goods that offer spiritual comfort. At the same time, they are proper items that allow marginalized sellers to more easily profit from their “beneath-the-dignity” performance, even though they have less social and economic capital than other middle-class amulet sellers. In short, the objects shift their roles and meanings in response to the performance of human actors associated with them, who are sellers/recipients and customers/donors in this case.

Deceitful Performance?: Online Amulet Selling, Risk, and Anxiety

“When I first started my business, I didn’t have a store or a company,” said Mịch, the aforementioned CEO of a high-end *phong thủy* amulet company. “I brought many products back home and livestreamed. I livestreamed every day.” Initially, a large portion of her clientele consisted of Vietnamese expatriates living abroad, particularly in Japan, who used social media as a communication tool. She added that those people reached out to her because they felt lost (*hoang mang*) and scared after experiencing unexpected occurrences away from home. She gave the explanation that her success in the amulet business came from her customers’ trust, concluding, “Right at that time, I responded to their demands, and I got their trust and their support.” This allowed her to launch her own brands and businesses with a large workforce. A number of Vietnamese amulet sellers I spoke with viewed the internet as a channel to expand their sales prospects, which were

previously constrained by physical spaces and attendant costs (Agarwal and Jones 2022). As the internet facilitates the growth of the amulet trade through transnational flows, amulets are currently available to a wider range of international consumers (Greiner 2015; Jekel 2002; Naepimai and Chaisingkananont 2023; Possamai 2022; Zhang 2017). In other words, the internet is a potent commercial medium (Baffelli et al. 2013; Evolvi 2022).

Many amulet sellers performed in front of the camera to gain trust, which led to the increasing sales of spiritual products. Mộc utilized the livestream method to expand her amulet market, which enabled her to reach out to potential customers residing in different places. The amulet store manager Kiệt dressed up before starting livestreaming every night, while Nhân Hà had a tripod ready in her worship room to record videos of herself conducting rituals or responding to spiritual inquiries, which she then shared on Facebook. These sellers performed to be spiritual masters and related different stories to emphasize the advantages of their “assistance” from the heart. However, playing the role of a “master” can sometimes cause cautious mistrust, as there are many sellers around Vietnam who also advertise themselves as *phong thủy* masters (Phan Vũ Mạnh Đức 2013). My research indicates that many amulet believers and the general public may become anxious about online amulet sales and the “master” performance. These anxieties include deception and disclosure of personal information.

Fraud and Fake: Amulets and Authenticity

The Vietnamese state-sponsored newspapers have reported many social media groups engaged in the buying and selling of amulets, alleging that many people have been duped by scammers acting as “amulet masters” (*thầy bùa*) and offering their services to help them. They abruptly cut off all contact channels and disappear after requesting victims to send money in advance (Trần Thanh Thảo 2022; Trần Trân 2023). In 2020, for example, a gang of scammers printed out pictures associated with amulets, wrapped red threads around them, and delivered them to customers using the guise of an ethnic artisan. This resulted in the deception of several victims and the misappropriation of 2.7 billion VND within a month (Thái Bá 2020). In 2022, a despondent woman’s relationship ended after learning that a talisman had cursed her. In order to have shamans in Malaysia and Thailand perform rituals for her, she was required to send over 24 billion VND (Đan Thuần 2022). Moreover, in 2023, a group of youngsters played as “masters” (*thầy*) and offered low-quality amulets for sale on Facebook, with prices ranging from 200,000 to 2,000,000 VND. They were arrested for embezzling over a billion VND from thousands of victims nationwide (Hoàng Lam 2023). These cases do not include minor frauds that escaped journalistic attention. Fraudsters’ identities are usually anonymous on the internet, making it difficult to identify them.

These news articles, portraying the detrimental effects of online amulet markets, have terrified many Vietnamese believers and pushed them into a state of insecurity. While I was conducting my fieldwork, several interlocutors cautioned me about believing in online spiritual services. Many brought up the fraudulent case of “Miss H,” who

claimed to the victim that his house was cursed by talismans (*bị yểm bùa*) and that she needed to conduct rituals to restore his family's peace, demanding 180 million VND (7,200 USD). People's anxieties about purchasing fake amulets online were heightened by the criminal news and comments from others who had had the same experience. Another amulet user I spoke with, Thuận, expressed doubts about the authenticity of the *mẹ ngoắc* (*Nang Kwak*) figurine he purchased online from a "master." For the first few months after receiving it, he stated, the figurine seemed to function effectively. But upon closer inspection, he found out that the texture of the amulet was made of plastic—a material that was not originally utilized to produce amulets. He surmised that the figurine might have been mass-produced somewhere in Vietnam or China and was not blessed by any Buddhist monks. When he attempted to contact the master on Facebook, the person vanished. After reading numerous online reviews about the fake amulets each consumer had bought from the same master in the amulet Facebook group, he came to the conclusion that he had been duped. Thuận lost all pleasant feelings for the *mẹ ngoắc* figurine he owned after the disappearance of the amulet master, coupled with the notion that his amulet should not be made of plastic. Regardless of the authenticity of the figurine, Thuận's concern about the amulet implies that purchasing foreign amulets online can potentially induce anxiety. The internet makes many online customers feel insecure since they are unable to touch and sense the products beforehand. What they encounter is only the "master" speaking to them or answering their questions through online platforms.

Taking into account the cases, two main factors of amulet sales that cause anxiety the most among amulet consumers, particularly those who buy culturally unfamiliar products online, are disconnection and inadequate information. First, every consecration ceremony for amulets sold online is conducted in a closed, private area that is hidden from view and out of the reach of online shoppers. Second, the dominance of knowledge by sellers raises concerns. Many customers rely exclusively on online amulet sellers and ritual masters for guidance on how to use and care for the amulets correctly, which leads to an unequal power in giving meaning to spiritual goods (Zaidman 2003). Even if buyers are being duped, it is very unlikely that they will be aware of it. Referring back to Goffman's (1959) concept of the "information game," people who consume amulets in this situation face some anxiety due to their "not-knowingness" about unknown powers, as well as the genuineness of the masters they do not directly meet. The fragmented and inadequate information about amulets causes anxiety among consumers. Many sellers, like Kiệt, therefore, choose to rent a physical store instead of going fully online, which would help them reduce costs, since it helps assure customers that they are not scammers or deceivers.

Disclosure of Personal Information

People in the digital age are typically privacy-conscious and want to be sure that their personal information, including date of birth, address, and family members, is safe.

According to Pink et al. (2018), living with data can cause anxieties; many of their interlocutors organized information on a daily basis and actively used new technologies

to make sure their data was safe, which helped them feel secure in the face of uncertainty. Similarly, Leszczynski's (2015) study on "anxieties of control" shows that people's attitudes toward the privacy risks associated with state-sponsored data surveillance practices are conflicted because they have limited understanding of how and by whom their data is used. Leszczynski draws attention to the growing infrastructure of big data surveillance as well as people's efforts to manage their own personal data flows at source. Both studies emphasize that as the information is directly tied to personal risks, consumers expect it to be kept confidential.

Working closely with many amulet sellers in Hanoi, I found that people were largely unaware of privacy while giving personal information to "spiritual advisors," such as fortunetellers or *phong thủy* masters, since the information was typically required to conduct spiritual activities. Different from in-person consultations at the physical location where all personal information is requested and kept confidential, using the internet raises the risk of information leakage because all personal information submitted online may be disclosed to "cyber-authority" (Jakobsh 2006) for specific purposes. As mentioned earlier, I worked voluntarily at Kiệt's store; one of my tasks was creating videos from Kiệt's livestreams, which were supposed to be continuously re-aired on TikTok so that viewers of his profile account could view them whenever they wanted. Every livestream session would feature a "lucky" person whose physiognomy would be read for free online. During the TikTok livestream, the person would be asked to introduce themselves and give the date of birth of each family member. To ensure an accurate outcome, that individual also needed to provide Kiệt with information about their location and personal

conditions, such as jobs, relationships, and monthly income. Every livestream was captured and stored in the archives, from which Kiệt later retrieved them. Following the editing process, the videos that contained highly personal information were shared and replayed on public social media sites like TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube, encouraging new types of sensory interactions between viewers and Kiệt and his amulet store. The information provided for spiritual analyses legitimizes Kiệt's status as a trustable and prestigious *phong thủy* master, but it also puts the owner of the information at risk.

The act of providing personal information to Kiệt implies the unequal power relation between amulet sellers and customers. While a large number of people are afraid that their personal information would be stolen and used inappropriately, as stated in the aforementioned studies, most customers were willing to give their personal details to Kiệt, a *phong thủy* master. This was not a unique instance in one store. Mộc, the businesswoman, also revealed her customers' personal information in several livestreamed videos. When I was interviewing her, she set up a camera to stream our talk and use me to promote her reliability. During the talk, Mộc shared a story of a Vietnamese woman who lived in Japan, demonstrating how she utilized spiritual power to help that woman find her lost wallet. She gave the woman's identity right away and then read aloud all of the messages that had been exchanged between them to the camera. Neither Kiệt nor Mộc sought consent from the subjects before disclosing their personal details or recounting their experiences. Kiệt assured me that everything was fine when I inquired, saying, "They all knew that they were on camera. TikTok and the livestreams are open to the public (*công khai*) anyway. So, we can use the recordings."

Kiệt's opinion implies the blurry boundary between "public" and "private" aspects of spiritual acts conducted online. On the one hand, online consultations took place on the internet, which many scholars define as a public communicative space that allows the unrestricted flow of information (Bula 2023, 11). It is decentralized, participative, unregulated, and egalitarian and is not confined to formal institutions recognized by state authorities (Bräuchler 2007). On the other hand, an online consultation can be interpreted as a private and intimate conversation between the spiritual master and the customer, as the livestreaming system mutes and obscures other viewers. The disclosure of personal information was enabled by the customers' trust in the spiritual master (Brown 2013, cited in Leszczynski 2015). Due to the unregulated nature of the internet and the associated economic benefits, private information flows on public cyberspace in an uncontrollable way. This may give rise to various criminal risks, particularly those involving online deceptions, which are a prevalent concern among Vietnamese people today (Giang Hoàng 2016; Hoàng Lam 2023). The concern was implied through my conversations with many people as well as the state-sponsored press, which frequently warn people not to divulge personal information to any online amulet sellers or spiritual practitioners.

Murguia (2015) studies *Youvebeenleftbehind.com*, an innovative technology with a service that enables subscribers to send encrypted emails to those who are, in the words of the New Testament, "left behind" in an effort to provide them with chances to survive in an uncertain future. The researcher argues that, although the website was created to help people deal with anxieties, the way technology works can even pose bigger risks

related to information exploitation and identity theft. This also holds true for the case of amulets discussed in this section. Whereas many believers see amulets as an alternative tool to cope with uncertain circumstances they are experiencing, buying them online may cause them additional anxieties, particularly those about personal information leakage and authenticity. Consequently, we may contend that the internet, as an amulet commercial instrument, is a double-edged sword that either helps consumers or places them in a state of information precarity.

Concluding Notes

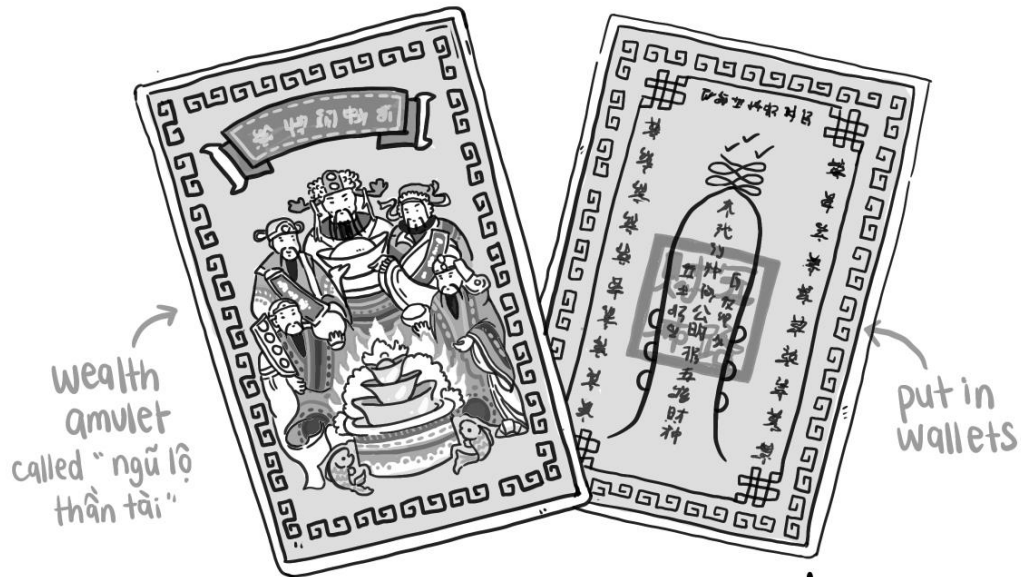
This chapter has examined the social performance of different amulet sellers, including male spiritual masters (*thầy*), female spirit mediums (*bà đồng*), and vulnerable “basket” vendors. Building mainly on Goffman’s (1959) theory, I illustrate how each group of sellers uses the concepts of spiritual connection, dignity, and pitifulness as sales strategies to achieve their economic goals. I argue that these groups of people can successfully navigate the unstable market system because of their front-stage performance, either with or without team members’ help. I demonstrate in the first section how the male amulet sellers performed the role of prestigious amulet masters who devoted their lives to aiding precarious people in order to gain trust and boost sales. I contend that many buyers are forced to depend on the sellers to direct their spiritual endeavors and set amulet prices due to the sellers’ “information game,” with no assurance of favorable outcomes. This implies the power asymmetry in a spiritual economy between sellers and buyers. The second part shows how the supposed divine connections that the female sellers possessed

raised their status to that of a “master” (*thầy*). In addition, feminine embodiments were used to emphasize the efficacy of the amulets they offered. The utilization of street vendors’ “precariousness” to gain economic advantages is demonstrated in the third section. It highlights people’s practice of showing compassion towards the supposedly impoverished amulet vendors to negotiate personal benefits and collective goods while upholding the state’s promoted values.

The three examples demonstrate how, when intangible factors like divinity or sympathetic feelings are taken into consideration, the market price does not always determine the value of commodities. In addition, the way the sellers perform their roles has a significant impact on the relationship between people and the flexible status of sacred objects. A seller may be regarded as a master, a god’s servant, or a beneficiary of merit-making, whereas a buyer can become a disciple, a donor, or someone who is rescued via generosity.

The last section explores how the general public views the amulet sellers’ online activities, such as livestreaming and offering spiritual advice, as deceitful. Even while the sellers used the title “master” to elevate themselves, stories about amulet fraud cast doubt on these masters’ genuineness and caused buyers to feel uncertain. This section also highlights the potential hazards associated with using customers’ personal information to validate the sellers’ master status. As a result, even though many people purchase amulets in an attempt to reduce their anxiety, new forms of anxiety often surface during the amulet transaction, trapping them in the loop of precarity. By examining the social performance of the sellers in this chapter, I intend to provide light on a more complex

network of relationships between humans and objects, as well as other social issues like fraud, in modern-day Vietnam.



Printed Paper Amulet

Paper amulets are mass-produced.

They are printed out and laminated.

People usually buy them at amulet shops or temples.

Although each piece is cheap, it can go up to a few million VND if consecrated.

or
online
platforms

CHAPTER 4

Sacred and Profane: The Negotiation of Faith

I lost my mobile phone while traveling to Vân's house. It fell out of my backpack when I was riding a pillion on a motorcycle taxi, and I did not realize it until I got to the destination, which was around eight o'clock that evening. My 25-year-old respondent, Vân, was a fortuneteller. She warned me as she read the tarot card that I would never get the phone back. She also said that this loss was probably a consequence of my carrying too many amulets with me, which included two consecrated amulet stickers from Kiệt and Sáng that were attached to the back of my phone. According to Vân, the amulets I collected might work against one another's power and cause a bad effect. She consoled me by saying the Vietnamese proverb "*của đi thay người*" (Objects are gone in substitute of humans.), indicating that the misfortune I was destined to experience had been replaced by the lost object. She believed that some positive things would come after the loss.

According to Vũ Hồng Thuật (2016), a Vietnamese scholar studying traditional amulets in Vietnam, although amulets can bring good fortune to their owners, using many amulets at the same time might lead to conflicts (*sự xung đột*). It is seen as improper use of amulets, which can cause detrimental effects on users. Unlike the others who blamed my carelessness for the incident, Vân's mention implied that my amulets had agentive qualities that not only acted against one another but also affected me. In other words, amulets can exercise their power over humans and surrounding objects. According to

Gell (1998), sacred objects are merely “secondary agents,” deriving their agency from other entities, like the producers or the divines they represent. However, the amulets in my study acquire their agency from various sources. On the one hand, they receive blessings from respectable groups of people who hold a higher spiritual authority, like high-ranking monks (*su thầy*) or spiritual masters (*thầy phép*). On the other hand, objects have developed an intrinsic power of their own and function independently without human intervention.

Amulets imbued with intrinsic power can be considered as tangible symbols of hope that people can hold in their hands. As many scholars suggest, hope emerges in a context of uncertainty and unpredictability, while people aspire for a better life (Gibson 2019; Haug 2020; Jansen 2021; Kleist and Jansen 2016; Miyazaki 2006). Lybbert and Wydick (2018) propose that people often experience hope as a combination of two types of hope: aspirational hope and wishful hope. The first is oriented towards human self-efficacy, whereas the second is dependent on external sources that go beyond an individual’s control. Since amulets assist people in coping with precarious situations outside their agency to control, they fall under the category of wishful hope in this instance. When amulets are viewed in the context of commercialization, people’s attempts to acquire the most powerful amulets correspond with their negotiating strategies with the distribution of agency. People borrow an agency from the sacred objects they have invested in to guarantee the consequences they expect.

I consider amulets as agentive objects. However, the term “agentive” does not simply mean that amulets are always associated with magical power. It is possible to

view a lucky bracelet as both a transcendental item and an ordinary accessory at the same time. Even though some interlocutors noted that sacred elements were required to make an object potent, many told me that only “faith” (*niêm tin*) was sufficient. This concept of “sacredness” and “profanity” has long been a topic of discussion among anthropologists. Durkheim (2001), for example, clearly draws a dividing line between the two. In contrast to *profane*, which is referred to as part of everyday life, he describes *sacred* as something that is intrinsically potent with connection to divinity. Sacred, according to Durkheim, is usually preserved in sacred environments, and it necessitates special behaviors and conditions, like taboos, since it is easily contaminated with the impure. On the contrary, many anthropologists challenge the sacred-profane dichotomy, as it appears that there is no clear-cut boundary between sacred and secular activities. Max Weber’s important work (2001) explains how religion and economy are intertwined together. Raising certain sects of Protestantism as examples, he argues that religious ethics and ideals can help a believer become a rational economic man who serves the economic system while working hard can provide Christians with psychological assurance that they will be favored by God. Digital religion, religious paintings, and sacred commodities are some of the instances where sacredness and profanity are integrated into each other (Ben-Lulu 2021; Campbell 2012; Jackson 2021; Kitiarsa 2010). Vũ Hồng Thuật (2016; 2018) also notes the dual characteristics of Vietnamese amulets. That is, amulets have a psychological function in a secular sense by relieving their users’ anxieties, which bolster their religious, cultural, and educational beliefs. In a spiritual sense, the objects assist their users in balancing the energy surrounding and inside their bodies. His example of

house protection amulets (*bùa trấn trạch*) shows that amulets are expected to ward off evil spirits from the users' houses.

Amulets in my study are consistent with the latter category of scholars. My research indicates that there is much ambiguity between the sacred and profane natures of amulets. For example, the amulet store manager, Kiệt, regarded amulets as mundane commodities that might be bought, stocked, and showcased. Cheaper wooden bracelets that were advertised as having already been blessed by a reputable Buddhist abbot were set out on the pavement for consumers to view all day. The dusty pavement and economic transactions can be viewed as “impure” for the sacred (Douglas 2003). However, putting the bracelets up for sale on the street is acceptable to many people since they also have a status of being mundane. As a result, amulet trade has ignited several ethical and political discussions about the commercialization of sacredness in modern-day Vietnam (Kendall 2011). From the perspective of religious organizations, selling amulets, for instance, is considered to be “trading the gods, selling the divines” (*buôn thần bán thánh*), which refers to dishonestly profiting off people's faith. Accordingly, the state sees this via the lens of “superstition” (*mê tín dị đoan*). The boundary between the sacredness and the profanity of amulets is negotiated among different social groups and is difficult to pinpoint.

In this chapter, I aim to reaffirm the non-dichotomy between the sacred and profane natures of amulets, which are usually linked to supernatural powers. By exploring the statuses of amulets, I will propose that amulets can be interpreted as both sacred and profane objects, depending on how people produce, distribute, and use them.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section will address amulets as “agentive” objects, showing the sacred-profane ambiguity when interpreting the agency of amulets. The second part will then focus on how the “sacredness” of an amulet is built upon two factors: sacred elements and “faith,” which endow it with sacred status even without special arrangements. The last section will demonstrate how amulets, as sacred commodities that hold both sacred and mundane statuses, have become a subject of controversy among different social groups. I will accomplish this by bringing up the example of a consecration ritual known as “*trì chú*,” which has been performed differently by different organizations, both with and without money involved, and pointing out how such a service may result in a more significant ethical dilemma. In addition, it will examine how the term “faith” (*niêm tin*) is used to explain the sacredness of amulets as a means for people to negotiate the blurry boundary between sacredness and profanity. It will argue that people are given a sense of agency by the discourse on faith, which increases the possibility of hope, despite their current uncertainty.

Agentive Amulets: The Sacred-Profane Ambiguity of Agency

Anthropologists have been interested in material objects that are associated with human culture, dating back to the colonial era, when anthropologists explored, gathered, and exhibited artifacts from primitive societies in museums (Brody 2010; Hall 1997; See 2017). When material objects appeared to have certain intrinsic features that had an impact on humans, materialist scholars started to question the “politics of matter.” Some have noted that thinking about matter, materiality, and politics was beyond the scope of

the mainstream constructivist approach. The new materialist approach thus emerged as part of an ontological or material turn in the field. The significant distinction between the old and the new approaches is how they see the *active* and *passive* roles of material objects in social processes (Wolfe 2017, 216). Old materialism is oriented around humans as active agents who can produce, transform, exchange, consume, or possess material objects. This concept of objects' passivity can be found in several studies on commodities, which view objects as human production (Woodward 2007). On the contrary, the new materialists have proposed new approaches to decenter humans by shifting their focus to the intersubjectivity of humans and nonhumans, such as animals, objects, and natural components, rather than treating humans as the primary actors for every social event (Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010, 8; Kohn 2013). Scholars have always been interested in how matters are *vibrant* beings, which constantly change, interact, and respond with other things, such as natural forces or human actions. Ingold (2007) uses the example of wet rock to demonstrate this point; when a wet rock naturally dries up, its surface changes, but its shape remains the same. Thus, the rock, as an object, transforms over time. A frequent illustration of dynamic changes is natural decay, signifying the temporality of all things, whether or not they are human-made (Bennett 2010; Hodder 2012).

The notion that objects can possess an agency is not new, nor is it limited to the latest materialist research. Fundamental anthropological works have long been recording the magical power of material objects that play a role in human relationships. For example, Malinowski (1955) notes that in the Trobriand culture, people used objects like

canoe-making charms when they felt vulnerable. The magical items helped people cope with their anxieties about nature. Lévi-Strauss (1963) illustrates that *totems*, which are material representations or spiritual objects associated with indigenous clans, and the ideologies behind them assisted in creating and organizing human social structure as well as establishing external norms or regulations on human actions as part of groups. Likewise, Durkheim (2001) notes that collective consciousness as a core of human society becomes real only when settling upon sacred material objects, like totems. Gell (1998), in his well-known work *Art and Agency*, demonstrates that art objects can function as potential social agents with their own innate efficacy and agency that influence social processes. Using Hindu God statues as an example of the complex relationship, he argues that the spirited objects contain an “Index of Agency” that prompts people to react to and believe in them. Every devotee “allows his or her attention to be attracted to Index, and submits to its power, appeal, or fascination, responding to the [spiritual] agency inherent in Index” (Gell 1998, 31). This represents the impact of the statues in guiding human spiritual perceptions and actions. This similar spiritual agency can be found in devotional objects, like amulets, which give people the impression that they are blessed and protected by supernatural beings (Budge 1978; Kendall et al. 2010; Tambiah 1984). Considering these classical works, the supernatural power residing in these spirit-based objects gives them “agency,” in the sense that they direct people’s actions and emotions without them even realizing it.

Similarly to Gell’s example of the divine statues, amulets in my study are believed to contain intrinsic power that enables them to take actions or have both positive

and negative effects on people. At the gemstone market, I talked to a middle-aged woman who wore a medium-sized bracelet on her left wrist. The bracelet was crafted from a natural golden hair rutilated quartz (*thạch anh tóc vàng*), which commanded a premium price compared to other quartz varieties. As she showed it to me, she said, “Many people have asked me why I wear this ugly-looking bracelet. But I think it and I share a bond (*sự gắn bó*).” She further explained that she had already lost this bracelet five times, but it had always found its way back to her every time. She once left the bracelet behind in a hotel far from home, but the receptionist promptly sent it back to her. Another incident was when she sold it to someone else, but the buyer returned it a month later since it did not “match” (*hợp*) her in any way. Consequently, the woman had been wearing it because of the mysterious bond she felt with the bracelet. Although the woman wore the bracelet for *phong thủy* purposes, she never had it blessed. She therefore thought that, if not a coincidence, the power that always returned the object back was inherent in the object itself.

Several scholars note that intentionality is a factor that differentiates superior human agency from nonhuman agency (Bennett 2010, 36). The abovementioned woman interpreted the return of the bracelet as its own intention, saying, “I think it and I share a bond.” Similarly, many interlocutors believed that amulets *might* have the ability to “choose” their owners, as they remarked, “They *may* persuade people to like and buy them.” They also surmised that this was the reason why many sellers advised their customers to choose amulets based on their own preferences rather than adhering to spiritual precepts, implying the intentional agency of amulets in influencing the

relationship between humans and objects. Marx (1999) terms such mystical essence of commodities in attracting buyers “commodity fetishism.” He views that the attraction is defined by an obscure hierarchy of values that rates one thing higher than another rather than an agentive power of the objects themselves. It is ambiguous whether the agency of amulets originates from their sacred or mundane qualities when considering their acts of “returning” or “making buy.” The woman at the gemstone possessed a bracelet that had never been consecrated, but held two statuses: an ordinary bracelet made of valuable stones and a *phong thuy* object with magical power. Consequently, the intrinsic power of the bracelet or its precious materiality might have had a role in the hotel staff’s decision to return it to her. Even for the woman herself, it is challenging to pinpoint the origin of the agency, whether it be sacred or mundane. In other cases, it is also unclear if the customers’ sense of “like” is influenced by the magical power or the material appearances. Such ambiguity can be sensed through the usage of “may” (*chắc*) in my interlocutors’ explanation about intentional power of amulets.

Based on the concept of intentionality, amulet accessories were sometimes reported to unexpectedly break (*đứt*) when someone put them on. My interlocutors interpreted the “breaking” incidents differently. On the one hand, some believers indicated that supernatural power caused the bracelets to break. They said that if the individual’s fortune did not align with the internal energy of that sacred object, or if the divines disapproved of the person possessing the sacred object, it might shatter. Nhân Hà, the female master addressed in Chapter 3, once showed me a bracelet tray on her worship table. She placed the objects there in order for them to absorb the sacred power from the

Buddha sculptures or sacred energies from her rituals performed in the room. She noted that the bracelet would be ripped as soon as the wearer put it on if it did not spiritually fit the wearer or the wearer did not have enough fortune (*không đủ duyên*), concluding, “It’s because the greatly divines (*các ngài*) do not agree to give it to that person.” However, “breaking” was regarded as a frequent incident that could occur without any spiritual interference. When I voluntarily worked at amulet shops and gemstone stalls, I was always instructed to make a tight knot after sewing a bracelet since the slick string was prone to breaking. Customers were usually given a spare string and a needle in case their bracelet broke. This corresponds to the notion that material objects are vibrant; they constantly change and decay (Hodder 2012). Like the “returning” case, the materiality and supernatural power of the bracelets were both claimed to cause the breaking incidents. This shows how the sacred and profane elements of amulets meld together. In short, amulets as “things” are agentive in both sacred and profane ways.

Sacred objects have “agency” to influence the way people think and take certain actions, such as refraining from breaching taboos (Gell 1998). Many anthropologists have suggested that several practices must be followed to keep sacred objects separated from the secular spheres (Douglas 2003; Durkheim 2001). Amulets in my study are not an exception. Based on my interlocutors, amulets could cause some negative consequences if someone broke certain rules. For instance, if the amulet producers neglected to keep themselves clean or if they consumed forbidden food like dog meat on the amulet-making day, the amulets they made might lose their efficacy (Vũ Hồng Thuật 2016). People were instructed to refrain from several behaviors to maintain the sacredness of the amulets they

obtained. For example, they had to remove their amulets when using bathrooms or engaging in sexual activities²¹. Some people believed that touching certain parts of amulets would lessen their efficacy; the owners should therefore keep others away from touching them. These “to-do” and “not-to-do” rules were maintained by those who believed in the spiritual power of amulets to some extent.

I once offered a mass-produced black-bead bracelet with a golden *tỳ huu* pendant I bought from somewhere to Sừu, the old basket vendor addressed in Chapter 3, who was sitting in a pagoda. I had been talking to her for several months, so we became acquainted with each other. Normally, she accepted practically everything I brought her, including some small gifts and the sanctified offerings (*lộc*) from the altar. This time, though, she resisted grabbing the bracelet when she spotted me removing it from my backpack. The old woman explained that a spiritual accessory could not be given to someone else after being worn or intended to be worn because it could bring misfortune. I asserted that I just bought it to support (*ủng hộ*) another vendor and did not intend to use it. Then, Sừu gave in. She put the bracelet in her basket with the intention of reselling it to someone else and making money. What fascinated me was that the moment I gave her the bracelet, she instantly believed it to be a sacred object. The very same bracelet, which I had denied having previously owned, was transformed in a matter of seconds from a sacred to an ordinary commodity. If the bracelet was resold, the profane commodity might end up

²¹ This logic is applied only to Buddhist amulets. Conversely, sellers usually advise their customers to wear the fox amulet (*hồ ly*) when having sex since it may foster a stronger affection between the couple.

back in the same loop and reclaim its former status as the sacred item, needing extra care and regulations to be followed. A bracelet can be viewed as an everyday accessory, a sacred object, or both at the same time, implying fluidity and temporality of sacredness. Explicitly, this reaction toward the bracelet affirms the agency of objects, which influences human actions and shapes their relationship with nonhuman subjects they interact with, with or without magical power involved.

Although taboos are believed to be socially constructed (Douglas 2003), there are different “degrees” of strictness in how people uphold them, which is different from the necessity of keeping sacred objects apart from daily activities, as Durkheim points out in his work. Many interlocutors warned me not to touch their amulets because I could transfer any contaminated energy to the items, yet I was surprised to meet some believers who let me touch their amulets freely. Some respondents who used amulets claimed that they had to take particular steps to ensure the efficacy of their amulets. For instance, they had to purify (*thanh tẩy*) their stone amulets by periodically letting them dry for a certain period of time in the sunlight or moonlight once every few weeks. While some of them strictly followed the sellers’ instructions, others admitted that they had never followed them at all or that they had only carried out the process when it was convenient for them. Without special care, many respondents were dubious if their objects still held magical power; however, they continued to wear them as everyday accessories, perhaps holding some residual sacredness. This suggests that the concept of sacredness is fluid and temporary. In conclusion, the degrees of sacredness and mundaneness seem to manifest

themselves on a spectrum rather than in complete opposition to each other. The two elements work together in making an object—amulet—agentive.

Sacred Assemblages: The Entanglement of Matter and Mind

“Sacredness” is a term used to describe the attribute of something said to be sacred and worthy of respect, especially due to its association with divinity. Sacredness and agency, which I covered in the previous section, are not the same concepts in this research. That is, whereas the term “agency” describes an ability to cause effects (Bennett 2010; Gell 1998; Latour 1999), “sacredness” refers to perceived special power or significance of certain things, places, and people, with religious undertones (Boz and Zehra 2023; Fahm and Muhammad 2024). For instance, an amulet has an agency because it has the power to alter someone’s thoughts, acts, or behaviors. However, people believe that amulets can bring them good fortune because the items are sacred (*linh thiêng*). Generally speaking, an amulet can exercise its agency since people believe in its sacredness. Besides, sacredness is, in some senses, a complex construct made up of various sources of agency. The two concepts are closely mingled into each other.

Sacredness includes the belief that an amulet can grant wishes, provide protection, or bring good fortune, depending on its users’ intentions. The level of sacredness of an object can be determined by the degree to which it has the potential to alter someone’s fate and the extent to which people can witness or sense that power. Annie Thwaite (2019), after examining ten amulets from a museum collection, concludes that what defines an object as sacred includes inscriptions that signify prophylactic power,

proximity to the body, or, as Graeber (1986) also notes, the rarity and authenticity of that object. Some amulets are valued for their rarity, while others are associated with religious and spiritual potency. Thwaite contends that these objects “gain potency and value precisely by combining several elements together.” She also indicates that although new materials emerged, like plastics, many other elements remained constant. During my research, I found that it was not always easy to identify the source of sacredness. Certain interlocutors highlighted that the material of an amulet itself was the source of sacredness, while others pointed out that the creation of sacredness involved amulet makers, consecrators, origin sites, and divine connection. However, most of the time, they claimed that sacredness originated from the *combination* of several sacred sources.

Lan, my young interlocutor with whom I frequently hung out, always had a pendant necklace around her neck when we met. The pendant was made of silver and had the six-syllable mantra “*Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*” [literally, “The jewel is in the lotus.”] engraved in a circle around machine-carved sacred characters representing the sacred *Siddham*²² script “*Hrīḥ*” [literally, “inner wisdom, conscientiousness”]. Even though Lan did not fully comprehend its meaning, she took it as a protective amulet, given to her by the pagoda she felt affiliated with. Owing to the fact that the female abbot considered the amulet to be given (*trao duyên*) only to “dedicated practitioners,” Lan was pleased to

²² *Siddham* is one of the scripts used to transmit the Buddhist tantra texts through Sanskrit mantras. Many Vietnamese pagodas that have embraced Tibetan Buddhism typically use *Siddham* scripts in conducting religious activities as well as training their disciples. The scripts are commonly found on Buddhist amulets available in the marketplace.

possess it. In other words, the amulet made her feel like being a part of the pagoda. When we went on spiritual trips together, I found that many other frequent visitors also donned the same pendant. After realizing that I was interested in learning more about her amulet, Lan took me on her motorcycle, and we rode for an hour straight to the pagoda in the outskirts of Hanoi, which I later frequently visited. Lan told me that her life was changed by learning about Vietnamese spirituality (*tâm linh đất Việt*) at this pagoda after she and a friend became stranded there during the COVID-19 lockdown.



Figure 11: Lan’s pendant with the *Siddham* script “*Hrīḥ*,” encircled by the six-syllable mantra “*Om maṇi padme hūṃ*” (Photo by the author, March 21, 2023)

I asked the 53-year-old female abbot, Thầy Liên Hoa, about the silver pendants she gave to Lan and other dedicated practitioners. She mentioned that she sent the factory the desired design and placed an order for them to make the products for her. Before

gifting them, she recited Buddhist sutras in them. She always taught the recipients how to practice (*tu tập*) correctly, adhering to the pagoda's advice. "When people see that we sacrifice something for them, they have faith (*niêm tin*)," concluded the abbot.

The silver pendant was not the only type of amulets that Thầy Liên Hoa had initiated to produce for the pagoda. A wide range of sacred items were available, including auspicious red cloth (*vải đỏ che tượng*), paper amulets (*linh phù*), and sacred water. In fact, the abbot told me that everything in this world contained energy (*linh khí*) and could affect other people and things. Even mundane items, like clothes, bracelets, or necklaces, had energy. All of those were created from natural materials being extracted from a certain area that had been subjected to various energy sources and combinations (*sự trùng hợp*) throughout thousands of years. However, dedicated practitioners and sacred surroundings might also contribute to the increased sacredness of the objects. Any high-ranking practitioner might imbue the artifacts with their sacred energy and merit (*phước bảo*) through rituals performed at the appropriate time and place, therefore transforming them into sacred amulets. Thus, in Thầy Liên Hoa's opinion, the sacredness (*sự linh thiêng*) of an object was made up of two main elements: the object itself and the "merit" of the donor that was transferred to the object.

Upon examining the conversations, it becomes clear that the sacredness of Lan's silver pendant is based on various factors that are closely associated with both magical/religious elements and personal faiths. On the one hand, Lan wore the amulet because she believed that she would be protected by the sacred elements that were incorporated into the amulet, including the Buddhist symbols, six-syllable sutras, and the

holy blessings of the esteemed abbot she highly respected. On the other hand, the spiritual value of the amulet stemmed from her close relationship with the pagoda and her faith in it, which she believed would help improve her life. I will explore these two aspects in the following sections to illustrate how matter and mind co-construct “sacredness,” which is typically agentive without the need for magical symbols.

Magical Matters: Sacredness Through Sacred Symbols

Peter A. Jackson (2021), in his book *Capitalism Magic Thailand*, indicates that intricate semiotic integrations of symbols complicate Thailand’s prosperity cults. He describes the integrations as the ways in which people incorporate religious figures, images, texts, and cultic objects from diverse strands of prosperity into their worship practices. Jackson adds that in order to assure the efficacy of ritual objects, all the sacred elements are united into one single thing during production. In my research on amulets, I have found that sacred elements play a significant role in shaping people’s perceptions of an amulet’s sacredness. Lan’s silver pendant, for example, is made of materials that are imbued with intrinsic energy. In addition, the religious inscriptions and symbols engraved on the pendant, along with the sutras chanted by the abbot to consecrate the object, all add to its perceived sacredness.

First, silver is the material that holds power. Slightly different from the concepts in animism that view nature as having spirits residing inside it (Arhem and Sprenger 2016), sacred objects do not necessarily contain souls or their equivalents. Rather, as the abbot noted, they can be ordinary objects like stones and clothes that accumulate enough

energy to take actions or cause impacts on other things. Being a part of nature, silver, the material foundation of the pendants, also possesses this agentive energy. Even though everything is believed to contain some sort of energy, Thầy Liên Hoa chose silver to create the special pendants because of its high cost, which represents the pagoda's "sacrifice" (*hy sinh*) for the recipients and motivates them to better themselves. This makes the amulets even more agentive and meaningful as they play an important role in attracting people to practice religious activities.

Second, the combination of texts, images, and other references as part of a larger semiotic system also contributes to the construction of sacredness (Jackson 2021; Kitiarsa 2010). Examining Lan's pendant, one side features the *Siddham*-script mantra "*Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*," while the other side portrays a lotus image with the script "*sa*" in the center. Similar Buddhist-related symbolic images can also be found in ritual objects or pagoda decorations. Lan told me that the character *sa* on the pendant represented the "seed" (*chủng tử*)²³ of Guanyin Bodhisattva (*Quan Thế Âm Bồ Tát*), the most venerated Buddhist figure of the pagoda. Lan claimed that wearing the pendant necklace gave her a sense of the goddess's protection. In this case, the amulet acts as a mediator between its owner and its place of origin. Zahavi (2019, 77) discusses in his book Heidegger's concept of *de-distancing*, which is a way to bring things closer together, regardless of their actual physical distance. In other words, people's perception of distance from an intentional

²³ In certain Buddhist sects, the term "seed" (*chủng tử*) refers to a symbolic character that serves as a bridge between practitioners and certain Buddhas or Bodhisattvas who exist in the spiritual realm. For example, the character *sa* links to Guanyin's protection and mercy.

object tends to be erased when they engage with it, whereas the perceived nearness of a place depends on the relationship between people and the place. Lan’s amulet encapsulates the “sacredness” of the pagoda.



Figure 12: The front side of the money amulet, distributed at Thầy Liên Hoa’s pagoda (Scanned image by the author)

The use of symbolic images or texts is also shown in other amulets of the pagoda. For example, the money amulet (*linh phù tiền tài*), mentioned in Chapter 1, features many symbols related to financial prosperity. Figure 12 shows the money amulet portraying the images of five Buddhist “Treasure Gods” (*Bảo tàng thần*; Sanskrit: *Jambhala*), who specialize in helping practitioners become wealthy or rescuing them from financial hardship. The yellow background represents various material forms of prosperity, such as gold coins and diamonds. The red outer corner contains a long row of Buddhist sutras written in *Siddham* scripts, along with visual elements of the world’s “Seven Treasures” (*thất bảo thế gian*) and the two “precious figures” (*nhân vật trân quý*), which represent wealth, based on Tibetan Buddhist texts. The abbot claimed that

although the money amulet was just a regular piece of paper with printed designs, combining “good things” (*điều tốt*) might help bring positive outcomes to its users.

Lastly, sacred environments, such as religious rituals, have a significant role in elevating the sacredness of amulets. The paper amulets, for example, were usually kept in the *Quan Âm* tower of the pagoda to absorb the sacred energy, blessed by the abbot, before being used in rituals or distributed to people. The abbot recited sutras in every piece of amulet she handed the followers of the pagoda. In addition to the two well-known sutras, “The Great Compassion Mantra” (*Chú Đại Bi*) and “Shurangama Mantra” (*Chú Lăng Nghiêm*), a consecrator may choose to recite other ones when blessing sacred objects. It is told that a consecrator must be a high-ranking practitioner with “merit” (*phúc phần, phước bảo*) from long-term religious practices, such as a Buddhist monk or a ritual master. I once asked Thầy Liên Hoa whether she might bless a wooden bracelet I had purchased from Nhị Khê Village. After taking my bracelet in her hands and giving it a light squeeze, the abbot faced away from me. She then chanted silently while closing her eyes. It took her three to five minutes before she turned back and handed the bracelet back to me. The abbot added that reciting sutras or consecrating objects varied, depending on whether one followed Buddhism or the Mother Goddesses as their source of beliefs. However, the basic process remained the same: the consecrator would worship (*cúng*), recite a sutra (*trì chú*), and then activate (*khai quang*). The moment the abbot consecrated my wooden bracelet, which I had received as an ordinary present, it became a transcendental item. In short, magical elements are believed to be fundamental necessities in making an amulet spiritually potent.

Dedicated Mind: Goodwill as a Foundation of Sacredness

Building on the previous sections, discussions regarding the sacredness of an amulet take into account not only sacred elements attached to the object alone but also the “mind” of the individuals who interact with it. According to Thầy Liên Hoa, besides the energy contained in the amulet, the merit from human actors’ dedicated practice was significant. This merit, originated in the practices of doing good deeds and sharing good thoughts with others, was imparted during the entire amulet production, consecration, and distribution process. This shows how closely humans and objects are related in creating “sacredness,” even without supernatural power (Hodder 2012).

Although the paper amulets at Thầy Liên Hoa’s pagoda were claimed to be sacred due to the Buddhist-related scripts and symbols, as well as the sutras recited before they could be used, I found that “human actors” were also significant in the production of sacredness. The paper amulets were assembled by Công, a 28-year-old graphic designer, with the help of the abbot and another *phong thủy* master. Công was not employed directly as a designer or an amulet producer. Instead, he was among the Buddhist practitioners who voluntarily offered their assistance. Công dropped out of college during his first year in search of a deeper purpose in life. When he eventually located the pagoda, he became the abbot’s disciple. Due to his design skills and experience working at his brother’s T-shirt factory since high school, he was chosen to be the lead designer for the amulet project. He told me that the designing process was challenging because, before starting to work on the designs, he had to intensively study all of the Buddhist symbols and sacred characters. The designs had to go through several rounds of revisions

under the close supervision of the abbot and the *phong thủy* master. He thought that the designer's state of mind partly contributed to the sacredness of the paper amulets. In order to stay focused, Công claimed to have locked himself in the room while working on the designs. Công also refrained from doing bad activities during that time, as he anticipated completing the task with good intentions (*lòng tốt*). He believed that an object would be able to attract good things if it had good meanings, and the giver had goodwill toward the recipient.

People who contribute to sacredness, whether as producers, designers, or consecrators, are considered ethical humans. According to Kendall (2011) and Vũ Hồng Thuật (2016), traditionally, the producers of spiritual objects must keep themselves pure and respect certain taboos when creating amulets. For instance, they cannot engage in sexual activities or consume dog meat since doing so will contaminate the produced objects. In today's market economy, few producers, unlike the craftspeople highlighted in Chapter 2, are aware of or concerned about such taboos (Kendall 2011). However, in Công's case, producers are important. He claimed that he needed to have pure intentions, focus on his creations, and continue to act morally while creating. He believed that these noble aspirations permeated the finished designs and turned them into sacred objects.

The logic of "good intention" holds true for both believers and non-believers of supernatural power. When I participated in several community service events organized by a young Buddhist association, I got to know a group of young Vietnamese people. They engaged in a variety of social activities, including facilitating blood donation events, teaching English to the elderly, picking up garbage in public areas, releasing fish,

organizing weekly meditation camps, and building roads. This association aims to generate quality human resources in order to advance global peace and society. These young people called the monk leader “Master” (*su phu*) as he had imparted multiple lessons to them. The Master established a large pagoda in Vũng Tàu Province in Southern Vietnam and started to draw followers with his practical and logical teachings. Numerous young people joined, and youthful disciples of the association dispersed across the country. I found that many young people I interviewed viewed amulets as objects without intrinsic power. Rather, they served as a medium to convey the givers’ goodwill, which contributed to their sacred and valuable status. Some of the young respondents informed me that although many Vietnamese people usually regarded amulets as sacred objects consecrated by Buddhist monks or ritual masters, they had realized after hearing their Master say that amulets could not benefit them; only their own good deeds could. Therefore, amulets were merely mundane objects that served as a reminder of Buddhist teachings and their commitment to doing good deeds, particularly within the community. Nhung, a 26-year-old practitioner, told me that even a poem on a small piece of paper the Master gave to the young disciples could be regarded as an amulet for them. They would keep the paper on their house altar after obtaining it. They would feel lucky, not because they possessed superpowers, but rather because it was like receiving good wishes from others, particularly the monk master, under the same gift-giving rule. That is, gifting was the act of imparting to others something the giver valued.

Apart from their role in conveying goodwill, amulets, for many practitioners, are useful in reminding people to follow their own religious principles by performing good

deeds. Cúc, a 24-year-old Buddhist I spoke with at the meditation camp, shared her belief that amulets could never bring luck (*sự may mắn*). Rather, it came from the law of cause and effect (*luật nhân quả*), as she stated:

You will find luck when you do good deeds for everyone, instead of carrying lucky things. I believe that everything depends on your efforts. It's not something you get from heaven; you must work for it. Luck doesn't come naturally; it means you have to help lots of people and eventually get help from others. That's what we call luck.

[Cúc, interviewed in Hanoi on February 6, 2023]

Although Cúc personally did not carry any amulet, she noted that many others around her did, including her parents. She believed that one of the main purposes of amulet distribution at pagodas was to remind people of the Buddhist teachings, as well as to inspire them to perform good deeds. A true practitioner, for Cúc, would instruct amulet recipients to make merit to repent and live a moral life in order to make up for their good fortune. I conversed with numerous young people who shared this belief: Buddhist amulets helped calm their minds and served as a metaphorical reminder of religious principles. In their views, what exactly protected amulet wearers was not the objects themselves, but the merit of their own actions.

The term “goodwill” reminds me of Mauss (2002)’s concept of *mana* since they are both referred to as a medium of energy that demands reciprocal action from the recipient. Mauss uses the Samoan gift culture on a Polynesian island as an example. He points out that each gift is thought to contain the spiritual essence of the giver, *mana*. This *mana*, which is defined as “magical, religious, and spiritual power,” must be returned to the gift giver at some point. Given that the active spirit energy is expected to

return to its origin, it might be morally wrong and hazardous to keep a gift unreturned. However, “goodwill” mentioned by my interlocutors differs from *mana* in that it is not returned to the giver in the form of a gift but rather is symbolically transmitted to a wider society through good deeds. In addition, “goodwill” is unrelated to magic. Weiner (1994) discusses the concept of “cultural density” in her article and defines it as a charismatic value that is accumulated through an object’s association with the owner’s social statuses or histories, making it difficult for the object to be exchanged, sold, or traded with impunity (1994, 394). Mentioning “goodwill” as something residing in amulets implies that many practitioners view amulets as “dense” with sentimental value. In this case, goodwill can be considered a non-magical element that confers value on an object, making it “sacred.”

The goodwill or good intentions that are transferred from givers to recipients through amulets imply human-object entanglement in causing impacts, which is one of the key ideas proposed by new materialist scholars. They indicate that humans, as part of complex systems of social relationships, coexist with other things, like objects or natural elements, in the form of entanglements (Ferrando 2013; Hodder 2006). Such a relationship is frequently explained through Deleuze and Guattari’s (1988) concepts of “rhizome,” which describes a linear, non-hierarchical network that is connected without any nodes of origin, and an “assemblage,” which refers to a flexible and dynamic cluster of elements. Not only are humans and things interdependent in initiating social events, but they also co-produce one another (Appadurai 1986; Hodder 2012). On the one hand, amulets in my study are typically seen as having a sacred agency to intervene in

circumstances beyond human control, such as unexpected accidents, poverty, or health problems. On the other hand, human actors, such as producers, givers, or users, also contribute significantly to such agency. Some of these human actors lack supernatural power, but their goodwill, good intentions, and faith are believed to be the sources of sacredness. To conclude, the sacredness of amulets is constructed on the assemblage, or “distributed agency,” of several human and nonhuman actants (Latour 1999) as well as perceived sacred and profane elements.

Trì chú for 50K: “Trading the Gods, Selling the Divines” Controversy

Many scholars indicate that one way to pull out an object from the sacred sphere is to put it into the market for sale (Kopytoff 1986). Weiner (1994), for example, notes that an object can retain its cultural “density” as long as it is kept away from trade; that is, the longer it is kept out of other people’s hands, the more value it probably gains. However, amulets might be regarded as sacred commodities in today’s society (Kitiarsa 2010). In other words, they are commodities with sacred power that can exercise their agency on other things, particularly in helping users achieve their goals. Through commodification, people can now buy not only amulets but also all spiritual services to ensure the desired outcomes. Economic values are being used to gauge the potential efficacy of amulets. Many spiritual masters I met attempted to convince me that a costly amulet was more spiritually effective than a less expensive one since it had undergone several more elaborate ceremonies.

While many believers perceive the necessity of “paying” for such rituals, some consider them to be unacceptable forms of religious practices. The proper treatment of amulets has been the subject of debate. Many of my interlocutors, for instance, viewed amulet trade as a deceitful act of making profits on people’s beliefs, particularly when the amulets had been consecrated. The sacred and profane aspects of an object are not on opposite sides of each other, as was previously discussed in this chapter. Rather, they reach the point where various social groups may view them differently, which could cause conflicts. Therefore, I will use the example of the “consecration service” (*dịch vụ trì chú*) in this section to illustrate how the commercialization of amulets and religious rituals may lead to disputes among those social groups, as well as how believers navigate through the controversy.

The Consecration Service

Many interlocutors indicated that a common object needed to be blessed with sacred words, such as those found in Buddhist sutras or divine mantras, in order for it to possess the high potency of warding off evil energy or drawing good fortune to its possessor. The act of consecration was referred to as “*trì chú*.” “*Trì*” literally means “to maintain” or “not forget,” while “*chú*” refers to sacred words. The practice of *trì chú* is basically meditation, recitation, and mindfulness practice. According to Vajrayana Buddhism (*phật giáo mật tông*), *trì chú* can be practiced at any time of day, beginning with opening the eyes, cleaning teeth, or eating. Reciting these “secret” voices of Buddhist figures, like Buddhas (*Phật*) or Bodhisattvas (*Bồ Tát*), and deities (*thần linh*), accurately with heart,

will provide the reciter with special power (*công năng*) to heal and ward off evil spirits. *Trì chú* is different from the practice of reciting the Buddhas' names called *niệm Phật*, which is associated more with tranquility and is believed to transport the reciter to the realm of Amitabha Buddha in the afterlife.

The term “*trì chú*” refers to the act of someone, usually a high-ranking spiritual practitioner, blessing sacred artifacts, such as amulets, by continually repeating a sutra or mantra to transfer their own sacred energy into the objects. My interlocutors stated that the consecration process was significant because it had the power to elevate mundane objects to sacred status. Different from Benjamin's (1969) theory of diminished aura in mass-produced artwork, mass-produced amulets were effective as long as they had been blessed through the ritual. When I visited a village pagoda in Hanoi's Hà Tây area with an interlocutor during the Vietnamese New Year's Festival, a female monk named Mỹ gave me a mass-produced necklace, which she called “*lộc*.” Mỹ informed me that this kind of amulet was typically purchased (*thỉnh*) in bulk from a wholesale store before the New Year. The amulets would then be put on the altar, where they would absorb several daily sutra chants. Their sacredness would increase with the length of time they spent on the altar. The monk noted that even though these necklaces could be bought everywhere at a very cheap price, they would never be sacred (*hiệu nghiệm*) until they were blessed with sutras. Several people approached the pagoda with their own amulets, like lucky bracelets, and begged her to sanctify them. The monk would recommend they leave the objects there for a week or maybe a month; they might then take the items home after that.



Figure 13: Mass-produced amulets distributed by Mỹ during the Vietnamese New Year's Festival (Photo by the author, Hanoi, January 2023)

Each consecrator has a different consecration procedure. It took barely a day, or perhaps ten minutes in many pagodas, to place amulets on the altar as opposed to weeks. My bracelet was blessed by a monk who told me that his consecration process was quite simple. Typically, the consecrator would choose a few passages from a sutra that they learned by heart (*học thuộc*) to repeat multiple times while spinning the bracelet in one hand. Buddhist Bodhisattvas' names could be found in every sutra. For example, the *Pháp Hoa Sutra* had Guanyin's name, whereas the well-known Great Compassion Sutra (*Chú Đại Bi*) contained 84 names. Bringing the bracelets to the worship table was not necessary, but the consecrator had to “focus” (*tính tâm*) during the process. According to other monks I interviewed, common people might consecrate their objects on their own by reciting the sutras, but the process required a deep consciousness (*chánh niệm*), which

was not easy to achieve. Most people therefore decided to have Buddhist monks perform it for them to guarantee that the amulets would be effective.

Amulet consecration was not usually free of charge, which was why I referred to the process as a “service.” Sellers in many amulet stores would include the consecration service in the amulet costs as a promotional tactic. Kiệt’s store, for example, usually advised its in-person customers to leave the products for three to five days after their purchase, guaranteeing that the items would be blessed by the abbot of the nearby pagoda. In case people brought their objects to be consecrated at pagodas, amulet owners were typically expected to make financial donations to that certain pagoda. Many locals advised me to donate at least 50,000 VND (2 USD) each time, even though there was no fixed minimum amount. The staff at each pagoda I visited instructed me to write down my name, birthdate, and phone number on a sheet of paper, which I would then give to the monks for consecration. Normally, the staff would give me the picking-up date and time before telling me to put money in the donation box, with the amount determined by my faith (*tùy tâm*). This was the procedure that was consistently carried out at pagodas. My interlocutors stated that most people were willing to pay because each pagoda did not ask for much money. Additionally, the money they donated would go straight to the pagoda, as part of their merit-making practices.

“You Must Pay for Trì chú:” The Concepts of Money in Amulet Trade

Most Buddhist pagodas I visited asserted that a big donation was not required for consecration; however, several ritual masters mentioned that money was necessary

because the process involved many offerings, timings, and the consecrator's extensive ritual-conducting experience. According to the amulet master Sáng, ordinary people themselves could not consecrate objects since the process required a special person who was destined to fulfill their role. Nonetheless, money and helping people were inextricably linked. He repeatedly mentioned that although he was assigned by the divines to help people, there were certain expenses that they needed to pay. The cost of amulets was set not only based on the material used but also on the entire amulet-making process. This covered additional expenses for offerings as well as the cost of the makers' practice time. Sáng confirmed, "In fact, spirituality has no price; the divines give it to us. The price I set is based on the money I pay to perform rituals and my value as a master. I calculate the price by considering each requester's faith (*niêm tin*)."

He added that the amulets needed to be "trained" (*luyện phù*) for hundreds of days in a sacred space at the appropriate time before they could be put up for sale.

According to Sáng, a consecration ritual alone typically required at least four continuous hours to complete with the master reciting Buddhist sutras, summoning deities, and activating the objects, all of which were not as easy as what the monks assured me. Sáng believed that those pagodas that spent only a short period of time did not actually perform any sacred rituals that could make amulets powerful. Instead, they merely feigned blessing them to appease the believers. Upon my visit to his house, he showed me a crate box containing several plastic bags with mass-produced amulets, like laminated paper amulets and amulet stickers, inside. He indicated that although these amulets might only cost 5,000 VND a piece, the price might increase significantly when

they were consecrated due to the expense of the rituals. Compared to Kiệt's amulets, his objects were far more valuable since it took him a long time to get them ready for sale. Kiệt might also conduct a modest ritual, like asking a monk to bless his products in order that he could sell them quickly (*bán nhanh*). Sáng concluded, "If Kiệt puts in as much work as I give, how can he sell an amulet for only 50,000-100,000 dong? How can he make profits?"

Vi, a 30-year-old spirit medium, was often requested by her customers to consecrate sacred objects, including amulets. According to Vi, every item needed to be separately blessed and customized to fit each buyer's fate. Besides, to make the amulets sacred, one might ask for the sacredness from the divine (*xin vía*) and a part of the consecrator's merit. Vi shared with me that her customers always voiced complaints about the excessive cost of her rituals. However, she had to set a high price because she worked meticulously, and she paid a large sum of money to study spirituality and receive training from many Taiwanese ritual masters. Vi showed me a book outlining the various ways to consecrate amulets and explained how to bless each one. She even used her personal money to hire translators to translate the entire book from Chinese to Vietnamese in order to conduct proper rituals. She noted that people might have to pay more money if the process was more complicated. She received payment for her spiritual expertise and mastery.

Sáng's and Vi's cases indicate that the market logic is ingrained in their religious practices, since economic terms like "profit," "investment," and "price" had frequently come up in our conversations about amulets and the consecration service. While amulets

are claimed to be a tool given by the divines to save precarious people, they cannot be provided for free because the materials, labor, and expertise involved should be financially compensated, according to market principles. Daily offerings, which should be taken as ritual masters' spiritual duty towards the divines, are reevaluated in terms of money. The blurry boundary between sacredness and profanity here is not new, as it has long been discussed by many scholars who worked on sacred commodities. These scholars point out how the market logic gives religions a "living" dimension and encourages significant transformation towards both people and society. In the case of Nichiren Buddhism in Japan, for example, Choudhury (2018) notes that sacred commodities support people's inner revolution and positively elevate them to achieve a higher state of life. Similarly, Redden (2016) proposes that commodification allows religious artifacts and knowledge to circulate into the marketplace, making religion more accessible. Kitiarsa (2010) also views the commercialization of religious goods as a new bridge connecting religious tradition and modern society and enhancing the fluidity and dynamic nature of religion.

The idea that money and sacredness are inextricably linked has ignited several debates over the commercialization of faiths. It is the money issue that leads to controversy in the amulet trade, but not all forms of money are problematic. It is advised that amulet owners bring their items to be blessed at pagodas and also donate some money to the places. However, in this regard, people have the power to decide how much they want to donate. Besides, since visitors are encouraged to place money in the donation box, there is no sense of "personal" profit in the services provided by pagodas;

donations go straight to the pagodas as collective organizations. What makes off-pagoda consecration services different is that they have no fixed cost. When referring to amulets, some interlocutors used the term “no price” (*vô giá*), emphasizing that sellers are free to set the service cost based on the degree of each customer’s trust in them.

Selling amulets and related services is negatively viewed by many people at the local level. While working at Kiệt’s amulet store, I met a part-time student employee. We were packing the salt bags for sale one day when she quietly told me, “I don’t like doing this. If I can choose, I won’t sell spiritual products because it’s like trading the gods, selling the divines (*buôn thần bán thánh*).” The idiom was not unfamiliar to me. My interlocutors stated that it described the improper action of profiting from people’s beliefs, and it was unacceptable, particularly when an amulet was offered for sale after being blessed by monks or amulet masters. Although the consecration of amulets is an acceptable practice, many people view it as a terrible or even deceptive act when done for financial gain. The 70-year-old female librarian in charge of a pagoda’s library informed me that her pagoda usually offered a consecration service to visitors. She clarified that the monk did so to make people feel at ease and not fall for other shady amulet masters’ tricks. In other words, if believers arrived at the pagoda and did not get what they wanted, they would go to find other masters and fall prey to them.

The concept of “deception” usually emerges when people receive items or services that seem to have much lesser economic value compared to the money they have paid for. In his book, Rarey (2023) uses the example of *bolsas de madinga*, which are African amulets in the form of pouches containing some natural substances and a piece of

folded magic paper, and were traded and distributed during the eighteenth century, to illustrate how spiritual and economic values can be in conflict. Accusing a male amulet seller of religious crimes sanctioned by the church, inquisitors examined his amulet's contents and referred to them as "insignificant" things. The author notes that the terms used by the inquisitors showed that they did not value the apotropaic attributes of "things" inside, in contrast to enslaved clients who were willing to pay the prices to protect them from manifold danger. Rarey's example demonstrates well the conflicts between sacred and economic values that are perceived by different groups of people and potentially initiates social controversy on whether making profits on "invisible things" is ethically valid or not. I usually received negative reactions from friends when I showed an amulet phone sticker that I got from Sang, the amulet master, which could cost up to a million VND after consecration. Many people labeled the action as "deception" (*lura đao*) since the original price might cost only 2,000-5,000 VND per piece.

Many practitioners I talked to had tried to distinguish themselves from those who profited from consecration services. A devoted Buddhist practitioner, Van, told me that several *phong thuy* companies approached her to perform fortunetelling at their events, but she refused since it went against her morality (*đao đuc*) to profit from people's religious beliefs. Van sometimes gave away her handwritten paper amulets or wooden rosaries she used for her daily chants as auspicious gifts. She clearly clarified that she would not do those to further her own financial benefits. Van's actions show her attempts to preserve amulets and other sacred activities only in the sacred domain, supporting her perception that the sacred and the economic transaction should be kept apart. Many

people associated with religious organizations shared Vân's belief that the amulet trade was unethical. Thầy Liên Hoa, the abbot of the pagoda I frequently visited, discussed the commercialization of amulets with me. Giving out amulets, in her opinion, was a way to "spread love" (*lan tỏa sự yêu thương*) and transfer goodwill (*gieo duyên*), which was different from doing business. Besides noting that the commercialization of an amulet would cause it to lose its sacredness, the abbot concluded, "Spiritual value can't be evaluated by economy."

Thầy Liên Hoa's and Vân's remarks reflect a clear sacred-profane (economy) boundary as perceived by the monk at Vân's pagoda, which differs from Sáng's and Vi's rationales that view sacred objects and money as interconnected. At this point, we can observe that different people interpret the status of amulets, whether they are sacred or profane, in different ways. People's consumption of amulets, which implies their double status, is another way to sense this. On the one hand, many interlocutors stated that they bought amulets with the hope that their sacred power would grant them good fortune or turn their out-of-control wishes into reality (Long 2001; Jackson 2021). On the other hand, amulets are treated as ordinary commodities when the decision to buy is made based on the market logic, not by intrinsic value. Many interlocutors referred to their rational logic in their amulet consumption practice as "believe, but not being credulous" (*tín, mà không mê*) to show that they believed in amulets but would never fall into deceptive traps. In this regard, consumers negotiate the spiritual and economic values of amulets in addition to their agency. In conclusion, the amulet scenarios covered in this

chapter can help exemplify how different social groups negotiate the fluidity of sacredness and profanity.

Concluding Notes

Challenging the notion that these objects are categorized as sacred domain, this chapter primarily argues that amulets retain double status of sacredness and profanity at the same time, depending on how each individual interacts with them. I have attempted to show throughout the chapter that there is no clear-cut boundary between sacredness and profanity. Instead of being diametrically opposed to each other, they are entwined to varying degrees along a spectrum. I accomplish this by discussing issues around amulets, including agency, sacredness, and commodification, and demonstrating how different groups of people negotiate or navigate through them.

In the first section, I explore the “agency” of amulets and point out the sacred-profane ambiguity in interpreting it, since amulet users show hesitation when asked to identify the source of agency. The second section focuses on the two main factors that significantly contribute to the construction of sacredness: magical elements and goodwill. I show how all perceived sacred and mundane elements work together as an assemblage to transform an ordinary object into a sacred item by using Lan’s silver pendant as an example. Finally, I show in the last section how varying degrees of sacredness and profanity could lead to controversy and disputes amongst members of society, particularly over ethical issues. It is my aim that this chapter will offer another illustration

to contribute to the anthropological discourses on sacred and profane subjects that are intertwined in many social situations.



Stone Bracelet

It is usually made of natural stones.

Many people choose the color based on their personal element

or the potency each color symbolizes.

phong thủy
principle

CHAPTER 5

They Say, “Amulets Are Scientific”: Validating Practices Through Science

I stood in front of Kiệt’s amulet store one day, waiting for someone to unlock the front door, as I had an afternoon appointment with Kiệt, the store owner and manager. Then a man who might be older than seventy walked past me. Upon realizing that I was snapping pictures of the vinyl board advertising amulet stickers available at the store, he abruptly stopped and said, “Carry this [amulet sticker]; no more fear of COVID.” I initially assumed he meant it seriously, but it turned out that his comment was satirical. “Believe in this thing, [you] die,” he clarified. “It’s superstitious (*mê tín*). We must follow science, right? [We must] go to the doctor so that we can heal.” I argued that these amulets might help some people feel more at ease in difficult situations. He then said, “It’s deception (*lừa đảo*),” shaking his head in displeasure and turning to go. His dissatisfaction signifies his perception that amulets are a harmful and deceitful superstition that contradicts science. His use of the COVID-19 pandemic as an example implies that, in his view, using amulets is not a solution but a path to “death” on a larger scale.

Influenced by modernist discourses, religions have been seen as a binary opposition of science (Malinowski 1955). The dichotomous concept has emerged in tandem with the growth of the global economy and Western colonization (Hemphill and Blakely 2015). While spirituality is viewed as illogical knowledge from bygone eras, science has the most legitimacy among all knowledge forms thanks to its objectivity, methodical approach, and repeated experimentation (Formosinho et al. 2014; Gauchat

2023). Many scholars believe that a key element contributing to the legitimacy of scientific knowledge is its intimate connection to the state's political authority, which strives for modernity and has resulted in the secularization of religious practices on a large scale (Smolkin 2018; Kiong and Kong 2000). The Vietnamese state, which has embraced scientific Marxist philosophy, is one of the nations that view scientific advancement as a major milestone that will eventually lead them towards modernity (Trịnh Đình Bảy 2002). Although the Vietnamese post-socialist state does not outright forbid people from engaging in spiritual activities, it has discouraged them from spending time and money on certain practices, such as burning votive papers, fortunetelling, or conducting excessive spirit-mediumship rituals, in order to free up resources for other national development projects (Taylor 2007). State-sponsored media has adversely portrayed the consumption of certain amulet kinds, like the seal from Trần Temple (*án đền Trần*)²⁴, as superstitions (*mê tín*) that should not be followed. In other words, amulet consumption is essentially characterized as a superstitious practice that opposes the desired scientific advancement of Vietnamese society.

²⁴ The seal of Trần Temple (*án đền Trần*) is a type of paper amulets, distributed specially in annual ceremonies of Trần Temple, located in Nam Định Province of northern Vietnam. It is a yellow paper amulet with a red-inked square stamp of the temple's sacred seal. Vietnamese state authorities have announced through media that the distribution of *án đền Trần* is expected to maintain the nation's historical and cultural significance rather than to encourage superstitions. However, according to my interlocutors, many people see the sealed paper as a sacred object and believe that obtaining one can bring them good fortune and help them get promotions in their careers. The sealed paper has also been scanned and printed as mass-produced objects to be sold in different amulet stores in Vietnam.

However, many respondents in my study challenged the religion-science dualism based on their interpretations of amulets. Some identified themselves as practitioners of both. While rituals were practically necessary to guarantee the efficacy of their amulets, some amulet users employed scientific frameworks to comprehend their own practices. That is, they viewed their usage of amulets, particularly those crafted from natural stones, as both spiritual (*tâm linh*) and scientific (*khoa học*). For instance, they believed that amulets functioned by facilitating the circulation of energy (*năng lượng*) between the objects, the users' bodies, and the surroundings. The entire energy transfer process was controlled by the vibration (*sự rung động*) and the psychological “law of attraction” (*luật hấp dẫn*), which held that both positive and negative ideas could influence people's experiences. This energy was believed to heal both users' “inside” or mental health and “outside” or physical health in order to preserve their personal well-being. Besides, this energy had the power to draw in good fortune. For many young users, using amulets could be seen as part of individualized spirituality that could be practiced separately from formal religious activities. Some scholars note that this spiritual trend in Vietnam coincides with the emergence of other new trends in other regions of the world, and younger generations—millennials and Gen Zers—are primarily responsible for the adoption of these practices (Epafra et al. 2021; Han and Nasir 2015; McCleary 2019; Rainwater 2019; Swaminathan 2020; Vũ Long 2023).



Figure 14: Energy stones (*đá năng lượng*), available at a craft market
(Photo by the author, Hanoi, September 2023)

A type of amulets that are usually explained as both spiritual and scientific objects are stone amulets, made of natural stones (*đá tự nhiên*), as shown in Figure 14. These stones are referred to with different terms, depending on how people interpret and their purposes of using them: *phong thủy* stones, lucky stones (*đá may mắn*), energy stones (*đá năng lượng*), purifying stones (*đá thanh tẩy*), and healing stones (*đá chữa lành*). Natural stones are associated with both Eastern feng shui, which has a long history in Vietnam, and Western crystal healing practices. They also possess qualities that are both scientific and spiritual. From a scientific perspective, these materials are natural and can be categorized into several sorts of stones based on their geographical origins. They are tangible items that are used in the cutting, polishing, and mining processes (Hess 1993, 47). Simultaneously, they also contain invisible power that can soothe or heal their users' bodies and minds. I am interested in analyzing the boundary-crossing status of the material and the way the users negotiate the meaning of their practices.

Focusing on stone amulets, this chapter will examine their ambiguous status as both spiritual and scientific objects as well as their perceived psychological roles in assisting people in navigating the precarious conditions of well-being. It will show how amulets, which are typically referred to as “spiritual products” (*vật phẩm tâm linh*), are interpreted using scientific frameworks and how, under the modernization discourse of the Vietnamese state, people use the “science-ness” to validate their practices. This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section will provide background information on stone amulets and discuss their boundary-crossing status. The second section will examine how amulets become “scientific objects” (Daston 2000) as a result of attempts to comprehend and explain the objects using scientific methods. I will specifically draw attention to how people interpret amulets using scientific frameworks like “energy” and “vibration.” The last section will cover how amulet sellers employ the connection between amulets and science to validate their practices and overcome societal dualistic bias. I hope this chapter will give insights into the dual character of amulets, which challenges the science-religion dichotomy in the study of sacred objects.

Stone Amulets and the Boundary-Crossing Identities

Natural stones are used to make several sacred objects, or amulets, in Vietnam. Natural stones in my definition can be considered “amulets” since they are potent objects that users must carry with them and require specific rituals or treatments to be effective. According to *phong thủy* beliefs, stones are objects that have been absorbing energy underground for thousands of years, endowing them with the power to alter both their

surroundings and the destinies of humans who carry them. As stated in Chapter 2, natural stones used to create amulets are either excavated from local stone mines, particularly those in Đà Nẵng Province and Lục Yên Province, or imported from other countries like China. Natural stones are transformed into various forms of amulets, including stone bags (*túi đá may mắn*), stone bracelets (*vòng đá, lắc tay đá*), stone rings (*nhẫn đá*), and stone pendants (*mặt đá*), and offered for sale at amulet stores. In addition, for both aesthetic and spiritual purposes, people carve natural stones into a variety of mythical figures and symbols that are believed to bring good fortune, such as *tỳ hưu*, *hồ ly*, the Personal Buddha (*phật bản mệnh*), or the Future Buddha (*phật Di Lặc*), equipped into their accessories. Not every amulet labeled “natural stones” in the market is composed of a single stone. Rather, some are formed by machines from stone powder (*bột đá*), mixed with different colored chemical substances to hold the particles together. This offers less expensive alternatives for stone amulets. They are referred to as “industrial stones” (*đá công nghiệp*) and believed to have less spiritual power than truly natural stones.

Following *phong thủy* principles, ritual masters or amulet sellers usually recommend their customers to select amulets based on their personal elements (*mệnh*), which are metal, water, wood, fire, and earth, calculating from each customer’s birth year. Each of the five elements is represented by certain colors or shapes, and there are compatible and incompatible colors for each element, as shown in Figure 15. People with the fire element at birth, for instance, would prefer pink, red, and purple. Additionally, the colors of the wood element, like green, can also be used since the wood element is compatible (*trùng hợp*) with fire. On the contrary, fire people must avoid the colors of

the water element, like black and blue, which are incompatible (*trương khắc*) with fire. The color principle is a significant factor in people's selection of amulets. Therefore, the very first question that part-time workers at Kiệt's store were taught to ask customers when they stopped by to look at stone bracelets was, "Which element are you?" (*Anh/chị mệnh gì ạ?*), or "Which year were you born?" in order to select an amulet that best aligned with each user's fate. There are further guidelines people follow while choosing amulets; for example, it is advised that users get their fortunes read before personalizing their stone amulets. When chosen correctly, stone amulets are believed to generally improve their users' fortunes; however, when picked incorrectly, the amulets may be ineffectual or even have the opposite effects. Amulet users have the option to have Buddhist monks or ritual masters consecrate their stone accessories. Although most people refer to these accessories as "spiritual products" (*vật phẩm tâm linh*), several *phong thủy* masters explain how a stone amulet functions based on the scientifically verifiable Daoist principle of *âm-dương*²⁵ energy balance. Some interlocutors noted that certain natural rules applied when using natural stones, and people had been using them for thousands of years with great success.

²⁵ *Âm-dương* (yin and yang) is a cosmological concept describing two complementary sources of power. *Âm* element, represented by the color black, is defined as feminine, gloomy, and submissive. Conversely, *dương* element, represented by the color white, is associated with masculine, light, and active. An individual needs to keep a good balance between the two in order to maintain a proper order of the body.

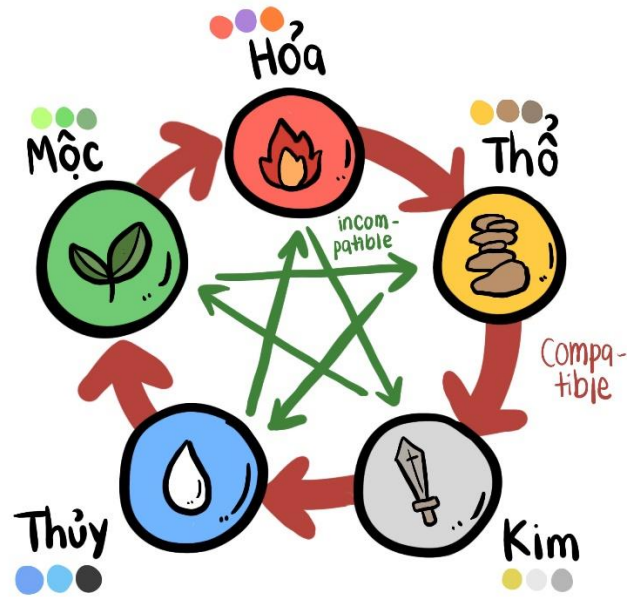


Figure 15: Five-element diagram, showing compatible and incompatible colors (Illustration by the author)

Natural stones, as amulet materials, can also be interpreted outside of the Chinese *phong thủy* influence. Using stone amulets as “healing” aids is another popular trend that stems from the similar concept that stones hold “energy.” When visiting craft markets, one may come across multiple stalls offering polished (*đá mài*) and unpolished (*đá thô*) natural stones in a variety of types and colors. Sellers may use them to make accessories or sell them in jars, with the premise that the stones can heal the users internally in various aspects depending on the types of stones. Natural stones are also called “energy stones,” a term that is relatively new in Vietnam. Energy stones are usually employed as a tool in conjunction with other Western healing practices, including Reiki, numerology, and tarot reading (Nguyễn Mạnh Linh 2017). For instance, before starting to read their tarot cards, the readers use energy stones to purify (*thanh tẩy*) the cards in order to ensure

that bad energies are removed. In addition, some people believe that placing natural stones on their work desks or in their bedrooms can help them draw good energy and soothe their souls. The meaning associated with each type of stones is mostly related to personal development. For instance, smoke quartz (*thạch anh khói*) helps reduce stress; strawberry quartz (*thạch anh hồng*) helps balance emotions; amethyst (*thạch anh tím*) helps foster creativity and organize thoughts; and aquamarine (*đá aqua*) enhances communication skills. Different people choose stones according to different principles. Many of my respondents favored unpolished stones over polished ones since they believed that the less time the stones were contacted by humans and machines, the purer energy the objects could retain.

According to my interlocutors, the use of “energy stones” was introduced in Vietnam as an alternative form of spiritual practice and was not associated with any of the country’s institutionalized religion. It was an individual activity that was quite popular among youths, with no actual sacred place where people could congregate to perform rituals. Although many of the people I spoke with believed that the objects already had power, customers might choose to have their stones consecrated. Some interlocutors claimed that the trend of using energy stones began with the growing interest of the young middle class in individualist values, such as self-fulfillment, personal development, or mental healthcare. Some, however, contended that this spiritual practice lacked profundity and was only a superficial knowledge of present trends, or “running after the crowd” (*chạy theo đám đông*).

Although several interlocutors made an attempt to distinguish between energy stones and *phong thủy* stones so that I could comprehend them, the distinction was not clear. According to some respondents, for example, while *phong thủy* stones focused on adjusting the external environment to provide prosperity and good fortune to practitioners, energy stones were utilized to heal the internals. Besides, many people noted that the concept of *phong thủy* represented the East, while “energy stones” were symbols of Western spirituality. Some practitioners of both asserted that their methods were superior to the others in terms of science. However, since the materials—natural stones with residing energy—were the same, most concluded that the two titles only indicated what humans utilized them for. Actually, many stone sellers informed me that natural stones could be freely interpreted depending on each individual’s “faith” (*niềm tin*). Natural stones were associated with complex layers of meanings, and customers were offered choices based on which one best suited their requirements. It was flexible and subjective to identify a natural stone as East or West, external or internal, spiritual or scientific. A stone vendor explained to me as follows:

You can choose [natural stones] that fit your personal element (*mệnh*), or you can pick one depending on what outcomes you wish. For example, agate (*mã não*) can help with your study and communication, helping you do it better. Stones are scientific; they contain a substance. When you rub a stone with your body, you will then feel the coolness. It transfers energy to your body and health. It’s nothing to do with West or East.

[A stone seller at the Book Street Market, interviewed on September 10, 2023]

Owing to the dominance of Western epistemology, science and religion were once thought to be distinct disciplines in research (Asad 1993). Religion is typically seen as addressing issues of life’s purpose, destiny, and subjective experiences of minds, whereas

science is defined as an organized system that collects quantifiable and objective knowledge about the world and condenses it into testable principles (Wallace 2006). However, the discussions I had with numerous Vietnamese interlocutors reveal how people view science and spirituality as being intertwined. The seller's argument, quoted above, claims that the stone amulets significantly undermine the distinction between spirituality and science.

First, natural stones have spiritual power and an extraordinary healing capacity that may be experienced through their material characteristics, which are connected to science. The stone seller at the Book Street Market claimed that natural stones had the power to grant users' wishes for favorable results, such as luck, health, safety, love, tranquility, or financial success. At her amulet booth, the name of each stone sort was listed with an illustration of the expected outcome next to it. A number of anthropological studies on religions mention people's practices of making a wish in the hopes that invisible subjects will grant their requests (Lam Minh Chau 2019; Minh T.N. Nguyen 2019; Soucy 2007). As an illustration, Pham Quynh Phuong (2009) connects the worship of Mother Goddesses and Trần Hưng Đạo, the Vietnamese hero deity, to people's desires for bodily and material well-being, while Soucy (2006; 2007) notes that Vietnamese people distribute blessed objects, or *lộc*, which they obtain from pagodas, and practice Buddhist meditation as a means of wishing for harmonious relationships, tranquility, and good health. In this sense, as a component of people's spiritual practices, stone amulets that are said to help boost their fortune should also be regarded as spiritual objects. Moreover, as described by the seller, people can select stone amulets based on their

personal elements (*mệnh*), which are typically used by Buddhist monks, spirit mediums, and ritual masters who perform religious rituals. Thus, it is possible to argue that amulet efficacy imparts spiritual qualities.

However, the seller identified her stone products as “science” (*khoa học*) and used material attributes of the stones as evidence of their efficacy. From a material standpoint, natural stones are extracted from nature and go through a systematic process of mining, cutting, and polishing. In line with scientific theories of energy circulation, the temperature of the stones can be sensed by human bodies and altered upon touch. At that point, the seller’s use of the word “energy” becomes ambiguous. This is because, in a sense, energy has the potential to grant wishes or internally heal the bearers of the stones. But in the other sense, the seller said that this energy also originated from a geological “compose” inside the stones, which might have beneficial effects on human bodies. The fluid perception of stone amulets and their “energy” align with several academic endeavors to convey religion and science through diverse discussions, highlighting certain concepts and themes that are agreed upon by both parties (Huchingson, ed. 2005). In other words, natural stones represent a harmonious compromise between the materialistic and spiritualistic worlds (Hess 1993, 47).

Stone amulets also break the conventional dichotomy between Eastern spirituality and Western science. Thongchai Winichakul (2010), in his book chapter, notes that knowledge was considered in the bifurcation of science and spirituality when modern science was first introduced in Asia. Early scholars viewed Eastern power as rooted in religion and the focus on the inner self, while Western power was mostly based on the

physical sciences and the external world. From a scholarly perspective, Winichakul suggests that the dichotomy fails because there is never a clear-cut separation between the material and the spiritual in transcultural processes, as a local agency is always involved in the translation, interpretation, adaptation, modification, and selection of elements from one culture to make them suitable for another. Stone amulets, in this case, support Winichakul's viewpoint by highlighting the fact that their efficacy is not tied to any Western-Eastern concepts but derives from a mixture of different sources. The attribute of the stones, as natural substances, leaves them more open to individual interpretation, as they are less influenced by cultural conventions compared to other amulets, like paper talismans (*bùa chú*). Their values and meanings are rendered unclear, which makes room for alternative explanations and faiths.

It is worth noting that not only amulets crafted from natural stones, but also certain types of amulets are regarded as both spiritual and scientific objects. I recall conversing with my 68-year-old neighbor, who had a strong background in food chemistry, when we were seated at a tea stall. The man raised the example of silver accessories as we were discussing amulets. He claimed that many Vietnamese believed that wearing silver accessories on children's bodies could ward off evil spirits (*đuổi vong âm*), as viewed from an idealist viewpoint (*duy tâm*²⁶). The belief could be found among

²⁶ According to Nguyễn Vi Khải (Bùi Tiến Quý eds. 2015, 75), “*duy tâm*” or idealism is a philosophical concept often used to refer to a view that consciousness, thoughts, feelings, and symbols are things that come first and exist independently outside of humans. These intangible factors determine the material world. My interlocutors usually employed the term to contrast with “*duy vật*” or materialism.

the Kinh people as well as ethnic minority groups. However, he pointed out that there was a scientific explanation for why silver was effective in preventing illnesses in children. That is, silver had been shown in research to have a physiological effect of preventing colds. I questioned which of spirituality and science he thought was the real motivation for the practice. “Both,” he said, implying that in his opinion, spirituality and science are not mutually exclusive. Rather, both are valid explanations for the phenomena. Silver is a natural material that can be examined geologically and is believed to have healing abilities like stone amulets. This emphasizes that, in many cases, amulets transcend the boundary between science and spirituality since people’s perceptions of objects are influenced by both concepts.

Stone Amulets as Scientific Objects

The term “spiritual products” (*vật phẩm tâm linh*) is commonly used to refer to amulets, seemingly designating them as spiritual objects. I noticed that many amulet sellers likewise portrayed natural stones in a similar way. I came across a few stone shops, both online and offline, titled by English words that alluded to the supernatural, such as “miracle,” “mystic,” or “spell.” I once asked Nga, the shop owner mentioned in Chapter 1, about her decision to include the word “miracle” in her shop name. In response, she said, “I want it to be a little mysterious (*huyền bí*), like in a fairy tale. I think it matches spiritual (*tâm linh*) products in our store. I also included a unicorn in the logo.” This implied that the spiritual aspects were put upfront as the main selling point of the products. However, speaking with Nga and other sellers, I noticed that the term

“science/scientific” (*khoa học*) was frequently used when they explained how stone amulets worked. The amulets became “scientific objects” as a result.

In Lorraine Daston’s (2000) book *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, the term “scientific objects” is defined as objects that draw scientific attention or that are put into scientific inquiries. A scientific object typically contains four essences: salience, emergence, productivity, and embeddedness. Among the factors that make an object scientific are oddities—unusual, rare, or even miraculous properties that vary from the typical course of nature. Besides, scientific objects must possess the capacity to surpass expectations established by the existing paradigm of thought and action as they grow entwined with cultures, material practices, and theoretical derivations. Daston (2000, 13) claims that “scientific objects can pass away as well as come into being.” That is, an object can be investigated as a scientific object after it has undergone scientific scrutiny, but most of the time it reverts to its previous status as an ordinary object that no longer sparks curiosity. Among other examples, Daston (2000, 17) introduces “preternatural objects,” describing them as something “though not less naturally.” That is, despite their apparent extraordinary nature, the objects were distinguished from supernatural. The examples she provides include hidden occult properties of certain animals, plants, or minerals. She notes that although the objects of preternatural philosophy piqued scientific curiosity and many made an effort to explain them, the solutions of mysteries can never come to an end. The objects came into scientific study before being largely ignored by scientists who turned to other subjects that would yield more academic utilities. Daston

concludes that “preternatural objects continued to exist, but they were no longer scientific objects.”

The phrase “though not less naturally” conjures up images of stone amulets for me. We can find natural stones in nature. There is nothing “odd” about them, except the fact that they are said to possess extraordinary healing power and some other potencies. Stone amulets in my research qualify for Daston’s definition of “scientific objects” since many of my interlocutors showed their interest in comprehending amulets in a scientific way. They tried to clarify how the items worked or observed them for a period of time to prove their efficacy. There are various issues when considering stone amulets as scientific objects. How can people comprehend amulets based on scientific frameworks? How do the biographies of stone amulets, which bear resemblance to Daston’s notion of preternatural objects, change after they are identified as scientific objects? This section will present certain scientific frameworks that my interlocutors used to comprehend stone amulets, as well as how some amulets “failed” to meet scientific standards and reverted to the status of quotidian objects.

Stone Energy and Its Vibration

I first met Hiền one day at around 8:30 p.m. when she walked into her own bar. She was a stylish woman with her hair tied in a ponytail and an oversized black T-shirt on. Hiền neither used nor sold natural stones; she described herself as a healer who employed stones as a tool to assist others. She explained to me that spiritual experiences could be categorized into five levels, using the scientific theory of brainwaves: Alpha, Beta, Delta,

Theta, and Gamma. While normal people could only sense the first three levels, she claimed to have reached the greatest level, which allowed her the power to communicate with invisible entities. Since each stone had a unique form of energy (*năng lượng*), Hiền was able to determine which stone matched a person thanks to her ability. She had been giving stones to her friends so that they could make some changes in their lives. The friend who first introduced me to her, for example, was given a black-haired quartz because she struggled with emotional balance. Hiền was glancing at me when she suggested that I carry moonstones (*đá mặt trăng*) to intensify my pure energy.

Whereas the abilities like communicating with the invisible are usually categorized as spirituality, Hiền's explanations of brain waves and energy circulation show that she perceives the phenomena with scientific frameworks, which blurs the boundary between spirituality and science. The ability allows her to see unique characteristics of each stone type and pick the correct one for each person. Not only Hiền but also many interlocutors, including those who used *phong thủy* stones and energy stones, also shared the similar concept that "energy" was the essence of the stone's ability to change someone's life. As claimed by many respondents, natural stones possessed inherent energy that provided them strength. The energy originated from nature; it was gradually accumulated within the stones over thousands of years as the stones were formed underground. Each stone had a unique energy level, which could both improve health and help adjust people's personal balance. It was believed that coming into contact with humans caused a stone to lose its energy because a crucial quality of stone energy was its transferability. While positive energy was transferred from the stone to its user, it

was receiving negative energy from that person. Hiền indicated that unpolished stones had the highest energy because they had never interacted (*tác động*) with humans, technology, or machines. Based on a similar logic of energy loss, stone users were advised to “charge the battery” (*sạc pin*) by purifying the stones with sunshine or moonlight once every few months. The notion of charging implies that stone energy is comparable to that of electronic gadgets, discovered and used by scientific innovators.

Stone users define the term “energy” differently, but they all make reference to science when describing the essence of their practices. Trà My, a 32-year-old life consultant who had enrolled in several spiritual classes, both Eastern and Western, had a stone necklace hanging around her neck when we first met. She told me that everything in this world, even the amulet she was wearing, contained energy. The act of carrying objects around our bodies stimulated an “energy exchange” (*truyền năng lượng*) process. The more time and closeness we spent with the objects, the more energy they absorbed from us, and vice versa. She raised an example of her agarwood (*trâm hương*) bracelet, explaining that the scent and color of the wood were influenced by its owner. This implied that Trà My’s wooden bracelet and those of others might have different scents, although they were made of the same kind of wood. This was the result of the wood absorbing its owner’s personal energy. Trà My, like many other interlocutors, insisted that energy existed since it could be sensed through physical changes on sacred objects, such as color and scent, which aligned with the scientific process that valued objective and observable experiment results. I was requested to “touch” several interlocutors’ energy stones to sense the coolness that the stones gave off onto my hand. They believed

that energy was scientific since it could be sensed by the body, particularly through the senses of sight, smell, and touch.

As my interlocutors claimed, when objects met, their energies reacted to one another. They defined this phenomenon using terms from modern physics such as “attractive force” (*lực hút*) and “vibration” (*sự rung động*). I ran upon the 28-year-old computer engineer Hoa Sen at an English Club in Hanoi. Hoa Sen had a fondness for science. He loved science books as a child and went on to study information technology in college. At the same time, he was a committed follower of Buddhism who chanted the Buddhist sutra *chú đại bi* for five rounds every day for thirty minutes before going to bed. Hoa Sen highlighted some connections between spirituality and science. For example, as many Buddhist learners suggest (Puaksom 2024; Wallace 2006), the Buddhist *sutra* (*kinh Phât*) mentioned many phenomena that were subsequently uncovered by science. Speaking especially of amulets, Hoa Sen believed, based on scientific reasoning, that sacred objects might bring good luck because everything was powered by energy and vibration. Anything that emitted energy had the ability to influence other people or other things. He clarified his meaning as follows:

Is attractive force (*lực hút*) familiar to you? I am thinking about the planets that spin around one another, like the Earth around the Sun. I believe everything has energy that draws in others. So, when they are near an energy source with the same frequency and a certain degree of power, they can affect one another. The energy and vibration found in sacred objects are identical to what we study in physics. Every object in the world has vibration, as the Buddha explained, and these vibrations cause waves (*sóng*). We get energy when we consume something. A motionless object can also generate energy. And everything vibrates. I personally think spirituality is part of science, although some people don't believe so.

[Hoa Sen, interviewed in Hanoi, on September 9, 2023]

Hoa Sen's viewpoint clearly demonstrates how scientific knowledge has influenced people's perceptions of the operations of amulets and spiritual phenomena. Human interaction with sacred objects is comparable to that of the Earth and the Sun. "Energy," for Hoa Sen, was the center of both spirituality and science. Interestingly, Hoa Sen believed that spirituality was something that science had not yet fully understood. He explained spirituality to me using scientific frameworks, which made it seem more logical for him.

In fact, the notion that amulets store and transfer energy is not new. The long-existing principles of *phong thủy* are also based on the concept of "qi" (氣) in Chinese or "khi" in Vietnamese (Esposito et al. 2009; Jin and Juan 2021), which is simply an all-pervasive energy that animates everything and connects humans, nature, and the universe. According to Matthews (2019, 46), life is "regulated by, or lived in accordance with, [qi] patterns and movement." While acknowledging that feng shui is not outside of science, Matthews argues that despite *qi* being a material force analogous to Newton's force of attraction, feng shui holds a pseudo-scientific status. That is, feng shui still fails to live up to scientific standards due to its lack of experimental evidence supporting the concept of *qi*, unlike ideas of energy that have been proven in academic fields. Guo (2023) makes a similar argument to Matthews's in that feng shui emphasizes mysticism above knowledge in order to achieve utilitarian purposes. Using *qi* as an example, he argues that the fundamental concept of *qi* has not been adequately defined and cannot be tested or falsified, unlike "energy" that has been defined, measured, and mathematically formulated in science. Guo therefore believes that *qi* is not the same as "energy" in

modern physics. Finding out whether or not “energy” is a scientific concept is not my goal in this instance. Rather, I believe that there have been many discussions in academia and in people’s daily lives on the scientificity of “energy” in *phong thủy* ideology.

Upon meeting many *phong thủy* masters, I learned that, in contrast to other unproven forms of spirituality, *phong thủy* principles were perceived as founded in scientific rationality. Some used tools to prove that *khí*, the energy, might be seen in a physical form. One afternoon, Sáng, the ritual master mentioned in Chapters 3 and 4, walked into Kiệt’s amulet store with a metal tool called “energy dowsing rod” (*que cảm xạ năng lượng*). It was made up of two metal sticks that were loosely linked at a joint and perpendicular to each other, as shown in Figure 16. Sáng claimed that his tool could measure the level of yin and yang (*âm và dương*) energy²⁷ within an object and determine whether it had been consecrated (*trì chú*) or not. When using, the vertical stick needed to be held firmly, and the horizontal stick would rotate when it sensed energy. The stick turned left, signifying Yin energy, as Sáng directed the instrument toward a stone tiger figurine on the counter. The stick swung to its right as Kiệt swapped out the stone tiger for another sanctified amulet sticker, implying that consecration processes could transform the characteristics of the energy within the objects in a positive way. When I met Sáng another day, he confirmed with me that natural stones, in general, had collected

²⁷ Yang energy (*dương khí*) is a positive, dynamic, and accumulative energy, such as warmth, sunlight, and fast movement. In contrast, Yin energy (*âm khí*) refers to a negative, non-dynamic, conservative, and non-accumulative energy, such as coldness, moonlight, or slowness. Both opposite types of energy always coexist in unity in all things. They complement each other to create a balance of existence (Bùi Tiên Bùi Tiến Quý, eds. 2015, 67).

energy for thousands of years under the ground. However, for him, activation rituals were required to stimulate the stones' energy, which is different from Hiền's idea that the stones must be kept away from humans' interference to maintain the pure energy.

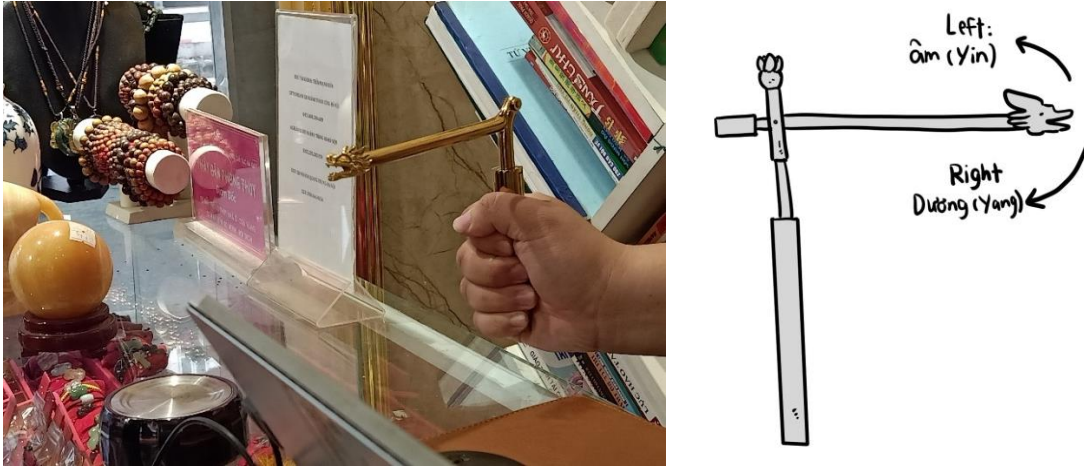


Figure 16: Sáng's metal tool (*que cảm xạ*)
(Photo and visual record by the author)

The above incident depicts Sáng's effort in trying to measure energy with a physical tool in order to demonstrate its existence, akin to the method used by scientists to study energy. This endeavor contradicts the arguments made by Matthews (2019) and Guo (2023) that there is insufficient experimental support for the concept of *qi*.

Vietnamese books regarding stone spirituality that had been published in the last fifteen years similarly appear to bring more scientific knowledge into the *phong thủy*-related discussions. Nguyễn Mạnh Linh (2017)'s book *Ứng dụng năng lượng đá quý trong phong thủy và trị liệu* [Applying Gemstone Energy in *Phong Thủy* and Therapy], for example, affirms that the energy of different stone types could be explained by Newton's

theory of visible spectrums and Raman graph²⁸. Geological information of each stone type, such as stiffness, density, and refraction, is presented along with *phong thủy* concept of five elements (*ngũ hành*), the stones' spiritual efficacy, and proper healing spots. All of these highlight people's effort to comprehend stone amulets using scientific frameworks and methods.

"Failing" Scientific Standard

While some amulet believers reject the items' efficacy after a period of trying to comprehend them, many others use scientific frameworks and techniques to study their amulets. One key measurement of whether an amulet is effective is "the change" it causes after usage. Phuong, a 20-year-old college student in business management, was among those who had questioned and tried to explain her own amulets in a scientific way. In order to prepare for the entrance exam, Phuong's mother glued a paper amulet (*bùa*) on her studying desk during her last year of high school. After passing the exam, Phuong was accepted to a university in Hanoi. She had been doubting whether or not the paper amulet contributed to her accomplishment. Her mother continued to give her amulets later on. Phuong showed me several amulets she kept beside her bed pillows when I visited her house in a Hanoi outskirt. Among them was a golden Bodhi leaf from a pagoda, which her mother believed would bring her luck. Under her mattress was also a

²⁸ Raman spectroscopy is an analytical technique that measures the vibrational energy modes in a sample of molecule, stone, or crystal. The technique has been applied to certain fields, including environmental chemistry, archeology, and forensics (Mulvaney and Keating 2000).

knife said to ward off nightmares. Phuong tried leaving the knife there for years, but her nightmares persisted. Then, with little interest in the knife amulet, she concluded, “I don’t believe in it. I still dream about random things (*mơ lung tung*) even when I have it.” Phuong also wore a stone bracelet around her wrist, but she saw it as just an ordinary accessory rather than a potent object. I found that many people used experimentation to determine whether or not they believed in amulets. In Phuong’s case, after years of sleeping on the knife amulet she tried placing beneath her mattress to see how it worked, she concluded that it was unreliable. The knife amulet as a scientific experiment then reverted to the status of an ordinary object in its user’s eyes.

Another interlocutor who mentioned amulets and scientific proof was Tùng, a first-year college student in international economics who had a passion for science. He was born and raised in a small family of five in a village in Nam Định Province. His father moved to Hanoi and opened a rice shop in a market, while his mother, who had a deep interest in spirituality, founded a small pharmacy in the village. Tùng showed me the amulet his mother had given him when I visited his house, as shown in Figure 17. His mother obtained it from a pagoda. This amulet was made up of two small pieces of red cloth and yellow paper with writing on the paper in scripts typically used in certain Buddhist sects. The red cloth (*miếng vải đỏ*) is a common type of amulets in Vietnam. It is usually cut from a larger red cloth that is used to wrap statues in Buddhist pagodas prior to an activation ritual known as “*lễ hô thần nhập tượng*,” which calls spirits to reside within the statues. After each ritual, the Buddhist monk or ritual master will cut the cloth into small pieces and give them to all attendees. It is believed that this red cloth will

bring them good luck in life, and giving children the red cloth will make them excel in school. For Tùng, he had not yet come to believe in the power of amulets with no proof. He gave the example of someone who wore amulets to encourage studying. He was certain that the amulets might not be effective if the wearers were not focused in class or did not do their parts. However, despite showing the feeling of indifference toward his amulet, Tùng informed me that he had been keeping the old amulet in his room because there was also no proof that he would be safe after dissolving it. Put differently, he did not rule out the potential that the amulet contained invisible power. During one of our conversations, Tùng brought up energy stones, mentioning that several of his friends were using them. He claimed that he did not believe in stone amulets because no scientific framework could prove the power of the stones.



Figure 17: Tùng’s amulet, comprising small pieces of red cloth and yellow paper
(Photo by the author, at Tùng’s house, August 2022)

Our conversations reflected Tùng’s opinion on both scientific and spiritual aspects of amulets, particularly his own amulet. On the one hand, Tùng tried to find a proper

explanation for the amulet, but he could not determine if it worked or not. On the other hand, he did not entirely exclude the chance that the amulet contained some sort of power. Here, “power” refers to neither spirituality nor science. Instead, the cases show Tùng’s attempts to understand the amulet he was given by applying spiritual and scientific frameworks.

Rethinking “Scientific Objects”

This section has mainly demonstrated the relationship between amulets, particularly stone amulets, and scientific frameworks and methods on two sides. On one side, many amulet believers interpreted their amulets based on scientific frameworks of energy and vibration, seeing the “power” in their amulets as both spiritual and scientific. Therefore, spirituality and science are two sides of the same coin. Furthermore, I have shown how tangible and sensorial experiences were interpreted as evidence of an amulet’s power. Sàng, for example, measured the amulet’s energy using the metal instrument and displayed it in a tangible way that was visible to others. On the other side, some amulet users observed their items for a period of time before abandoning their attempts to explain them or coming to the conclusion that amulets lacked the ability to bring about any changes, as in the cases of Tùng and Phương, who rejected the power of their amulets. Daston (2000), in her discussion of the biographies of scientific objects, argues that the status of a scientific object is temporary. That is, it can fluctuate between being of scientific interest and not anytime. Besides, a scientific object can typically revert to the status of a quotidian object. Daston uses “preternatural objects,” such as the extraordinary

power residing in natural substances, to exemplify the argument. She illustrates that these objects were disregarded by philosophers since they ultimately led to nothing.

Considering an amulet as a “scientific object,” all the cases I have presented in this chapter represent how objects deemed spiritual, like stone amulets, are included in scientific investigations. The section shows different consequences from the examination of amulets using scientific frameworks.

Many people used scientific frameworks and methods to interpret stone amulets from different perspectives, as demonstrated by the explanations of energy and vibrations offered by Hiền, Trà My, Hoa Sen, and Sáng. These individuals found a compatibility between the power of natural stones and science, which continued to pique their curiosity. Thus, stone amulets persisted as scientific objects. Conversely, Phuong’s and Tùng’s amulets failed to uphold their scientific status when they were examined and evaluated. However, the two cases are slightly different. In Phuong’s case, after observing the amulets her mother had given her, she came to the conclusion that they were ineffective in bringing about any changes. Her amulets “slipped back” into the status of quotidian objects, just like the stone bracelet she wore. However, in Tùng’s case, there was no way to determine or prove if his amulet actually possessed any power at all. He neither accepted nor disputed the power of his amulet. Similarly to Daston’s example of preternatural objects that were left unsolved, the scientific status of Tùng’s amulet “passed away” because its efficacy remained unexplained. In other words, the investigation yielded no definitive results, which was reflected in his unclear actions. He declared his disbelief in the invisible power of the amulet while also expressing fear

about discarding it. To conclude, these different “biographies” of amulets as scientific objects reflect how scientificity in an object is prone to instability since it is influenced by each individual’s experiences, earlier conceptual frameworks, and other cultural factors.

Stone Healing: Validating Spiritual Practices Through Science

“I don’t think Sáng’s metal tool is real.” Shortly after Sáng left the store with his golden energy-measuring rod, Kiệt made a comment. Although Kiệt believed that science and spirituality were complementary to each other, he considered Sáng’s method to be essentially superstitious. He noted, “Real *phong thủy* is less superstitious. It is scientific. It has specific rules for things.”

Kiệt’s reaction to Sáng’s method and his assertion that *phong thủy* is more scientific imply that the practices with a stronger scientific bent are more valid and legible in his eyes. When reviewing the interviews from the preceding section, it seems that many amulet practitioners would much rather discuss the scientific side of amulets, especially stone amulets, than their spiritual one. This raises a question of why they would rather associate their amulet practices with science than spirituality and whether any sociopolitical factors play a role in this preference. After examining several conversations about amulets, I found that in Vietnam, the topic of spirituality was closely linked to the concept of superstitions (*mê tín dị đoan*). In addition to Kiệt’s remark regarding Sáng’s method, the 70-year-old man I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter responded in a way that reflected this viewpoint. When he noticed that I was drawn to the amulet sticker, he abruptly said that it was superstitious and advised me to

adhere to science. Upon closer inspection, it can be seen that the Vietnamese state was the main actor in promoting the anti-superstition campaign as the country moved toward modernity. In addition, they usually “warned” people about religious practices that, in their opinion, could sometimes be credulous (*mù quáng*). In this last section, I will use the example of stone healing practices to show how people have subtly adapted to the state’s modernity-driven discourse, which contributes to the promotion of “science” over “spirituality” in contemporary Vietnam.

Science and the Vietnamese State’s Discourse of Modernity

Following the socialist models in other countries, Vietnam is a socialist nation that has strived to achieve modernity along the Marxist-Leninist direction (Ngô 2016). Marxist ideology, which places a strong emphasis on modernity, secularism, and science, makes socialism essentially a modernist movement because it is driven by the vision of scientific advancement (Esposito et al. 2009; Nguyễn Thái Sơn 2000). Based on this logic, religion is viewed as a false consciousness and a threat to modern development (Smolkin 2018; Taylor 2007). This is not only because religion is not scientific but also because it is similar to “opium,” which deters people from resisting oppression (Marx and Engels 1994). Then, religion is set in opposition to scientific modernity in a socialist state like Vietnam. When religions were oppressed and disregarded prior to 1990, Vietnamese authorities widened the chasm between the secular state and religions in an effort to modernize the country (Nguyen Quang Hung et al. 2020). The Vietnamese state’s anti-religious policies were similar to the Soviet Russia’s anti-religion campaigns and

promotion of scientific atheism through propaganda media and school training programs to eradicate religion in the 20th century, but all of these attempts failed because atheism was unable to provide people with a sense of emotional fulfillment (Smolkin 2018).

Hoàng Văn Chung (2022) argues that it is inaccurate to refer to Vietnam as an atheist country based solely on its socialist label after the era of religious oppression. The Vietnamese state began implementing more accepting policies toward religions in the late 1990s, and it also adopted a cooperative approach for setting up religious organizations (Nguyen Son Nam, 2023). The Vietnamese Communist Party declared in a series of documents that religion was a mobilizing tool that was beneficial for national development and people's right to practice any religion was preserved. However, as Taylor (2007) notes, the relationship between the secular state and religions is still problematic. Faith remedies and other non-scientific practices like fortunetelling are blamed for contributing significantly to poverty. The state encourages people to reduce expenditures on religious rites to conserve material resources for other development projects (Kendall 2011; Kwon 2007; Schwenkel 2018). In response, a large number of religious adherents have conformed to the state's modernist direction by declaring themselves as "religious unaffiliates," which has helped them avoid social prejudice and state suspicion. The gap between the scientific state and non-scientific religion complicates how people define and practice spirituality in a way that complies with the state's definition of modernity.

A state's "modern" citizen is perceived and defined in different ways but is typically associated with individualism, rationality, and science. Nguyễn Thái Sơn (2000)

uses governmental documents and Marxist principles as a basis for his study of the relationship between humankind and the modern scientific revolution in Vietnam. He claims that Vietnamese people can be categorized into two opposite groups: traditional and modern. Traditional people (*người truyền thống*) are hardworking, unified, and patriotic, but they also have limited learning capacity since they lack a competitive spirit. In contrast, modern Vietnamese (*người hiện đại*) are practical individuals who know how to use their “scientific knowledge” and other skills to make plans a reality. Despite the shortcomings of being attached too much to materialistic values and personal interests, modern people are democratic, egalitarian, creative, and realistic. As Nguyễn Thái Sơn suggests, the ideal population of the socialist state must be created by maintaining a balance between modernity and tradition. By his definition, modernity is characterized by rationality, practicality, and science-based practices. In a similar vein, Trịnh Đình Bảy (2002) discusses the concept of “belief” (*niềm tin*), which can be classified into two categories: religious beliefs (*niềm tin tôn giáo*) and scientific or non-religious beliefs (*niềm tin phi tôn giáo*), which he defines as the impetus behind practical human activities that are built upon a materialistic worldview and scientific knowledge. He also notes that if these beliefs are properly promoted and supported by science, they could aid in the development of the country. Trịnh Đình Bảy’s work highlights the potential for Vietnamese citizens with scientific worldviews to contribute to national development. Both aforementioned works reflect a strong implication of Marxist scientism, underlining how “science” is perceived as a state-level modernization tool. That is, the state has drawn a distinct line separating traditional/religion and modern/science. Although both

traditional and modern practices have their advantages, science and rationality are emphasized as the necessary basis for modernity, which the state aspires to.

Stone Healing: Not Spirituality, but Psychology?

The state's anti-superstition campaign underlines its effort in putting practices that cannot be assessed by science into the categories of wasteful superstition (Kendall 2011; Malarney 2002; Roszko 2010; Schlecker and Endres 2011). Endres (2020) defines "superstition" in Vietnam as "a concept that encompassed all beliefs and practices considered as irrational," which challenges the Communist Party's vision of a new civilized life. The regulations over spiritual practices, which were strengthened during the 1960s and 1970s, have made some activities not legit in society. Examples of these include fortunetelling and spirit mediumships, which have been considered "unscientific" practices that are conducted to take advantage of people's concerns, and this is harmful to the nation (Endres 2020, 256).

In some way, spiritual practices are still seen as harmful superstitions today. A Vietnamese scholar, Vu Xuan Doan (2019), examines and divides Vietnamese traditions into three categories: fine customs, unsound customs, and bad trends. Amulets are listed under the "unsound" ones, which he describes as "those associated with superstition and appear as a challenge for the government and mass organization" and "not suitable for modern life" (2019, 78). Raising an example of Liên Phái Pagoda in Hanoi, which only provided a small quantity of amulets to householders in need, he suggests that these practices be properly carried out in accordance with the state regulations. This is

demonstrated in his article published in the state-sponsored journal. Rational discourse gives the state the authority to regulate and judge what the citizens should do in order to achieve the state's objective of nation-building. The groups of people who are mostly blamed for engaging in superstition are women who lack access to modern scientific knowledge. However, as touched on in Chapter 3, studies indicate that many spiritual practitioners are admired for their high educational credentials and apparent mastery of scientific principles (Taylor 2007).

As shown in the previous section, non-believers in amulets apply scientific thinking to evaluate the efficacy of amulets, making them skeptical of elements that cannot be proved by science. On the contrary, amulet believers view their own spiritual practices through a scientific lens because, as Haraway (2016) notes, they are formed by situated knowledge—the idea that scientific knowledge has the highest value in the sociopolitical context in which they live. In other words, people appear to believe that emphasizing the scientific aspect would justify their amulet practices and shield them from being labeled as traditional or superstitious.

Stone amulets and stone healing are excellent examples of how certain practices can be validated by science, although they still contain some spiritual elements. The term “healing” (*chữa lành*) refers to the process of purifying one's inner self in order to better their life in specific aspects. Stone amulets have been promoted as a healing tool because many Vietnamese people exhibit a strong interest in spirituality and participate in spiritual classes like Reiki, yoga, or meditation with the goal of cultivating their inner spirits (*trình thần*) and healing themselves of everyday hardships. While several people

who identified themselves as “fortunetellers” had been using energy stones to help soothe their clients, particularly anxious teenagers who needed someone to listen to them, many of them tried to convince me that the practice was scientific because it was more psychological than supernatural.

Thóc, a 25-year-old founder of a stone shop, started learning tarot reading, which has grown in popularity among Gen-Zers. She explained that tarot reading was a form of psychology that enabled individuals to release what had been holding on their minds, while natural stones helped boost up certain aspects that users wanted to improve. She claimed that young people were more interested in healing than those in other age groups because today’s world was “*loạn*,” a state when things were constantly changing and getting more precarious (*bấp bênh*). They needed healing from many wounds they had, but no one was willing to listen to them or offer them remedies. She then came to the conclusion that tarot reading and energy stone usage were methods with psychological undertones (*tính chất tâm lý*). She added that by utilizing stones, people could reflect on the parts of themselves they wished to improve. Thóc emphasized the psychological function of natural stones in instilling inner strength in their users, encouraging them to believe in their own capabilities, which fostered a sense of individualism. Many respondents claimed that natural stones worked on the psychological logic of “the law of attraction” (*luật hấp dẫn*), which states that everything is possible as long as one has faith in it.

In an attempt to make their healing methods more scientific, many stone sellers distinguished natural stones from other types of amulets, which were more readily

connected to supernatural power, spirits, or divinity. Lê, a 28-year-old vendor of natural stones at a craft market, also offered tarot-reading service. Her method involved determining which *chakra* each customer was deficient in and advising them to bring the right kinds of stones to balance out the imbalances. For her, natural stones had power, but they had to match each user's fortune. Upon questioning Lê about the distinctions between energy stones and other kinds of amulets, including paper amulets (*bùa chú*), she clarified that *bùa chú* needed an amulet master (*thầy bùa*) to produce, activate, and deactivate (*giải bùa*). After doing it once, most people were inclined to continue doing it for the rest of their lives because their amulet granted their wishes. In contrast, her method of filling the *chakra* with stones did not need superpowers or any kind of divine connection (*căn số*); instead, it required her experience and psychological skills in reading her customers, such as the ability to read a person's personality by looking them in the eyes. Lê concluded that the stones were merely a supplementary (*bổ sung*) for people's lives. Since they were a part of nature, they gave people a little more comfort.

Upon examining the conversation above, it is evident that although Lê was mentioning the use of "*chakra*," a Hindu/Buddhist term that refers to various energy points in human bodies, she was trying to avoid drawing any connections between *chakra* and other supernatural powers by clarifying that only solid experiences were necessary. She minimized the significance of natural stones and called them "supplementary" natural boosters that gave stone users more psychological comforts than granting wishes. In addition, by associating traditional paper amulets with greed while mentioning that people were likely to continue to rely on the objects for a lifetime, Lê implied that her

stone products stood on the opposite side. In other words, her stones were not superstitious and were safe to use. This portrayal of stone amulets as scientific, non-superstitious, and realistic aligns nicely with the state's anti-superstition ideology.

In addition, I found that the modernization discourses that associated science with modernity influenced customers' decisions to buy amulets, or at least what they called them. A 25-year-old office worker named Hùng found himself in a precarious situation after being laid off by a company. He told me that his greatest issue in life was experiencing an "existential crisis," to use his English term, rather than getting fired. This indicates that he lost himself in contemplation of the meaning of life due to his fear of not living long enough to experience what he desired. Hùng owned a smokey-quartz stone keychain, which was claimed to reduce stress. During our conversation, Hùng used energy stones and *phong thủy* stones as examples to explain why he chose to carry the former. He mentioned that it was scientifically proven that the energy stones could provide him with a psychologically comfortable (*an tâm*) and peaceful sensation. He clarified that he meant a practice with rules and order (*trình tự*) when he used the term "science." The printed instructions attached to the energy stone package, for example, were written in bullet points or a concise paragraph detailing the uses and advantages, while *phong thủy* stones seemed less structured to him. Hùng asserted that the mechanics of energy transfer between objects were connected to the effectiveness of energy stones. He expressed, "I know it's not really scientific, but at least there's something scientific about the way it's exhibited." In short, Hùng felt more connected to science when he interpreted his stone keychain as an energy stone.

Talal Asad (1993) refutes in his book the notion that religion and Western modernity are irreconcilable, arguing that religion is instead a dynamic force that engages with modernity in various ways. However, modernity and its form of knowledge have changed the way religion is understood and practiced. He points out that religion is seen as distinct from science in the modern world in the sense that it asks about a wider entity, non-hypothetical truths. As a result, science has become basic to the structure of modern lives, both individually and collectively, and religion is currently viewed as optional. He notes, “Scientific practices, techniques, and knowledges permeate and create the very fibers of social life in ways that religion no longer does” (Asad 1993, 49). My field research supports Asad’s claims. People’s explanations of energy and vibration emphasize that they do not “perform” in an irrational way; rather, they are shaped by the knowledge system to be seen as such, provided that they share some characteristics with those specified in modern science. In Hùng’s view, science was more reliable compared to spirituality. He subsequently chose to present the scientific side of his stone keychain although he accepted that the item could not be fully identify as a “scientific object.” In this case, science is therefore employed to validate certain socially stigmatized activities that are encouraged by the state’s knowledge production.

State organizations themselves are unable to break free from the higher forms of knowledge, not simply at the local level where modernization discourses constrain them. Spirituality is brought up in scientific discourse at the state level. During my fieldwork, I was invited to attend an academic conference, organized by the Institute for Research and Application of Human Potentialities - IHP (*Viện Nghiên cứu và ứng dụng tiềm năng con*

người), an official research institution founded in 2012 under the Ministry of Science and Technology to conduct scientific research on spirituality (*ngiên cứu khoa học tâm linh*). The conference covered spiritual practices, such as *phong thủy*, fortunetelling, amulet making, and other paranormal phenomena like auras (*hào quang*) and spiritual healing, that were previously considered superstitious in Vietnam (Taylor 2007). A number of ritual masters, *phong thủy* experts, and Buddhist monks attended the event as well as gave presentations, demonstrating Vietnam's efforts to interact with the scientific community.

One of the projects sponsored by the institution was the mission of the psychics (*nhà ngoại cảm*) in locating the skeletons of deceased soldiers during the wars by communicating with spirits. Vietnamese research institutions have been conducting a scientific experiment on these psychic activities, carefully documenting the success rate of each case and publicizing the results through official documents and academic conferences. According to Schlecker and Endres (2011), soul calling was once stigmatized as “unscientific superstition,” which contradicts the new socialist visions, but later became legitimated and widely accepted after the government's research.

Many scholars who focus on state-legitimized psychic activities propose that the phenomenon has challenged the epistemological and political orders in Vietnam. For instance, Schlecker and Endres (2011, 3) note that psychic specialists are currently “situated in relation to official distinctions between legitimate knowledge practices and claims to truths” (2011, 3). Similarly, Hoàng Văn Chung (2022) points out that the state's mission on psychics serves as an illustration of how Vietnam is not an atheist nation,

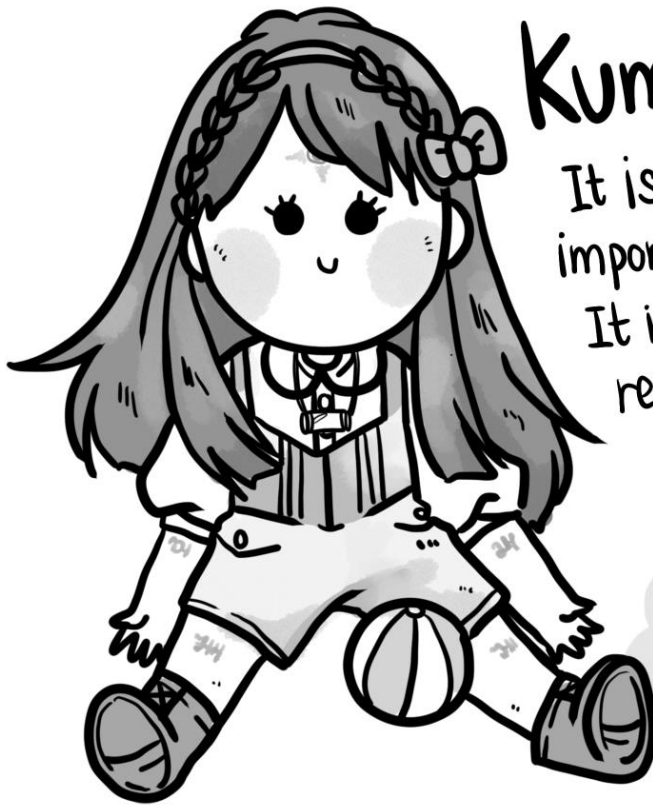
given that it also values spiritual pursuits. Nonetheless, even while using scientific frameworks to explain invisible events appears to blur the conventional boundary between science and spirituality, I believe it also highlights science's superior status at the state level. My interlocutors' efforts in putting amulets into scientific dialogues are good examples of this politics of knowledge production.

Concluding Notes

“In science, there is spirituality. They are two things that cannot be separated from each other, just like *âm* and *đương*, yin and yang,” Kiệt, the amulet store owner, once explained to me when I inquired him about the scientificity of his products. This is a perfect sentence to conclude what I have been showing throughout this chapter.

Prior representations of science and religion/spirituality as binary oppositions have been seen in both academic circles (Asad 1993; Malinowski 1955) and in people's sociopolitical lives. I have shown in this chapter how amulets, particularly stone amulets, have a boundary-crossing quality in that they are neither entirely spiritual nor scientific. Both aspects are interconnected and have influenced how people perceive amulets. First, I use the example of stone amulets to illustrate such fluid identities, highlighting how their use subverts the spiritual-scientific dichotomy. Second, building on Daston (2000)'s concept of “scientific objects,” I investigate how people interpret and assess amulets using scientific frameworks and methods, and I suggest that the scientific degrees of amulets are erratic, with the ability to “pass away” or persist depending on different factors. Finally, I demonstrate how Vietnamese sociopolitical discourse on science and

modernity influences the way people interpret amulets, implying that “science” is a means for people to validate their practices that the state sometimes considers superstitious. I truly hope that this chapter will provide fresh viewpoints to academic debates over sacred objects that are no longer restricted to the realms of religion or spirituality.



Kumanthong

It is an amulet doll imported from Thailand.

It is said to fulfill any request made by its owner in return for good care.

Many scary rumors about the doll spread in society, One of which is that it killed its 'parent:'

www
↑ owner

CHAPTER 6

Ghostly Rumors: Haunted Amulets, Memories, and Otherness

“Are you familiar with this?” Cô An asked while sitting in her office on the second floor of a pagoda, holding up a baby doll that had some recognizable scripts etched on its body, forehead, and limbs. The inked inscriptions were washed away, making them hard to read. However, I quickly discovered that they were Khmer scripts, which had been used mostly in Thailand to consecrate sacred objects, like amulets.

“Is it a *Kumanthong*?” I inquired, although I was certain. Cô An informed me that she was clueless about the identity of the doll. This doll was one among those that were discovered abandoned at the pagoda and picked up by the abbot. He then gave it to Cô An since she appeared to enjoy playing with dolls. The doll had been placed in an interior corner of her work desk for the past few years, since 2018. Her nephew, Long, who sold amulets at the same pagoda, told me that many visitors brought these infant-looking dolls to the pagoda. Nevertheless, not all of them returned with their dolls; their “children” dolls were left behind. Long added that Vietnamese local wisdom held that one way to make sure an undesirable animated object would not harm its owner was to leave it at a Buddhist pagoda. For example, when new Buddha images were put in place of older ones, people acted in the same way. Given that the dolls were made of rubber, the pagoda usually threw them away or sent them to the trash collector to be properly recycled.

Cô An remarked, “I feel bad for it,” and asked me what she needed to do with the doll. I finally looked up information about *Kumanthong* dolls on Google for her.

According to a Vietnamese website, *Kumanthong* doll owners might provide them with sustenance, such as milk or snacks, and nice attire. Good things the owners wished for would come true if they treated the dolls with the same kindness and care that they did for their real children. However, if they took the opposite action, their lives would ultimately fall apart. Cô An accepted the information provided. She believed that the doll was fine as nothing bad had happened to her since she kept it in her office. Accordingly, she cleaned off some grimy spots from the doll and wrapped its torso and head with a piece of decorative pink ribbon. She named the doll “*An Lạc*,” a Vietnamese Buddhist term that had a special meaning of having a tranquil body and mind.



Figure 18: “*An Lạc*,” Cô An’s doll, covered in pink ribbon
(Photo by the author, Hanoi, October and December 2023)

Cô An placed a box of milk next to the doll, so I inquired whether she would worship it. She said no, and added, “I’m just afraid that the baby will get hungry.” She gave the doll’s head a tender stroke. Three days later, I returned to her office and saw that the doll had more elaborate and colorful accessories on it. Some fresh snack packs and a

milk box with a straw were already in place. The doll was still in the inside corner of her desk. Evidently, Cô An treated her doll like a child and handled it with the utmost care.

Partly due to their anthropomorphic features, dolls are commonly thought to possess a “dual nature,” allowing them to be used both by children in their plays and by adults in their religious practices (Chernaya 2014; Daniels 2010; Fookien and Mikota 2018; MacGaffey 1990). Although Cô An stated that she “played” (*choi*) with her doll by taking care of it, it appeared that she did so partly because she was concerned about the invisible child spirit residing in the doll. The name for the doll and her caring practices shifted the object from a stagnant doll to a living entity, which strengthened the affective connection between the lady and the object (Caffoe 2020). Cô An’s conversation implied a “dual” character of the doll, as a spirited object, that it could be perceived as either good or evil, depending on how people interact with it. On the one hand, spirited dolls were acquired to support people by granting them wishes in exchange for good care. Cô An, for example, viewed her doll as “unharmful” because nothing bad had happened to her since she got the doll. On the other hand, the fact that spirited dolls were abandoned at the pagoda implied that their owners were afraid of the harmful spirits inside the dolls that would impact them.

In Vietnam, there have been “ghostly rumors” circulating that *Kumanthong* dolls attacked or killed their owners. Newspapers reported that one of the rumors concerned a young woman who died by falling from the 17th story of an apartment in Ho Chi Minh City in February 2019 (Phong Anh 2019). My interlocutor told me that, based on the last messages she sent to her friend and a *Kumanthong* doll the police found in her room,

rumors had spread out that she was killed by the doll she raised. Partially thanks to these ghostly rumors, the dolls were regarded by many of my interlocutors as vicious amulets (*bùa ngải*) that are spiritually scary. I called these narratives “rumors” since almost none of my interlocutors who seemed to enjoy discussing the amulets’ ghostly effects had ever seen any of these objects.

These ghostly rumors resemble the accusations that people frequently level against the amulets made by ethnic minority groups residing in Vietnam’s mountainous areas, who are typically viewed as “uncivilized others” in society. Many of my interlocutors mentioned love amulets (*bùa yêu*) made by the Mường and Thái ethnic groups that manipulated the cursed individual’s mind and caused a severe mental disorder in many Kinh-Vietnamese people, who are the ethnic majority in Vietnam. In official documents, love amulets are also categorized as evil (*tà*) amulets, which stand against good (*chánh*) ones (Bùi Tiến Quý eds. 2015, 296). The ritual masters of those ethnic minority groups had refuted the accusation, stating that their amulets were made for ethical purposes, but the rumors have persisted. Tai interlocutors described experiencing social discrimination because of the association their communities had with “vicious amulets,” although they were largely unaware of what the amulets actually looked like. This begs the question regarding the boundary between the goodness and evilness of the objects. What are some sociopolitical factors that determine whether an object is good or evil? What can the ghostliness of an object inform us about a certain society?

Scholars have long disputed about “ghostly matters” in association with accusations of witchcraft and sorcery and point out that rumors typically start to circulate

when people are suspicious of one another or struggle to understand unexpected events (Brison 1992; Forth 2009; Stewart and Strathern 2004). They further suggest that ghost stories about haunted items are not only reflections of the uncertain society at a particular moment but also traces of past violence, traumas, and injustices that still continue to haunt people in the present and the future (Cutter 2012; Davis 2005; Good and Good 2020; Gordon 1997; Liu Han-ying 2022). In this chapter, I will address the concepts of “good” and “evil” amulets, emphasizing that people’s perceptions of amulets as good or evil are likely to be influenced by the sociopolitical contexts in which they are placed. There will be three main sections in this chapter. The first section discusses protection amulets that are believed to ward off evil spirits or deadly incidents. It also shows how the sense of “intimacy” (*sự thân mật*) shapes a user’s trust in an amulet or its maker. In the subsequent sections, I will scrutinize the “rumors” around two types of presumed vicious amulets (*bùa ngãi*), namely the foreign-imported *Kumanthong* dolls and the love amulets crafted by the ethnic minorities of Thái and Mường in the mountainous regions. Building on Gordon’s works on haunting, I will demonstrate how ghostly rumors around amulets in Vietnam are woven from the haunting memories of affection. That is, dread of *Kumanthong* dolls is a re-constructed form of fear of child spirits, particularly in relation to aborted fetuses (Hüwelmeier 2022). However, the rumors about ethnic amulets are partly based on people’s cultural unfamiliarity with the sources of objects, especially those made by “uncivilized others” who reside geographically far away (Scott 2009; Winichakul 1994). I will argue that concerns over the amulets of ethnic others reflect

how the political supremacy of the Kinh, Vietnam's ethnic majority, has a significant influence on the country's religious territory.

Warding Off Evil: Stories of Good Amulets and Moral Spiritual Masters

Amulets have long been recognized all across the world as having protective functions that can shield users from invisible unknowns, evil spirits, and negative energies (Budge 1978, 2). They originate from human fears. The Tuareg community in the central Sahara, for example, create talismans to ward against desert spirits and Jinn-ghosts, who enjoy manipulating their victims by driving them into mental illness (Sotkiewicz 2014).

Amulets are also said to be used by people in Mesopotamia, dating back to approximately 3000 B.C., or by the Asante people of modern-day Ghana, as deterrents against “evil eyes” and their psychological effects (González-Wippler 1991; Owusu-Ansah 1983). These emphasize the main function of amulets: protecting their owners from evil power and spirits.

In the case of Vietnam, many scholars have studied traditional hand-written paper amulets known as “*linh phù*” or “*bùa chú*,” which are claimed to contain energy that can help ward off evil spirits and grant their owners anything they wish (Nguyễn Tiến Đích 2012; Thái Thường Lão Quân n.d.; Tiêu Diêu Tử 2007; Trần Lang 2022, Trương Thị Thúy Hà 2015). People use these amulets by burning, drinking, and washing the body with water that has been mixed with the ashes of the burnt items. They may take their amulets around or keep them at home, depending on each type of amulet. For instance, people affix house protection amulets (*bùa trấn trạch*) to the walls of their houses to

ward off evil spirits (Vũ Hồng Thuật 2008). To shield children from evil spirits that induce nightmares and illness, the Vietnamese people typically tie bracelets made of white mulberry wood (*vòng dâu tằm*), silver, or amber (*hồ phách*) imported from Russia on their children's wrists. The use of these amulets reflects people's subliminal fear of evil forces, and amulets stand against evilness.

Many interlocutors stated that they carried amulets to shield themselves against spiritual threats. While joining a spiritual trip to Thanh Hóa Province, I got to know Ngọc, a 28-year-old eyelash technician. Ngọc related a story about carrying an amulet (*bùa*), which she described as "very sacred" (*thiêng lẫm*), in her purse during her amateur technical days. She had not yet started her own beauty salon at the time, so she mainly traveled to her customers' houses to provide eyelash extension service. She was informed by a customer who was a spirit medium (*bà đồng*) that she was being followed by a spirit (*vong âm*). The spirit medium asked whether Ngọc wanted to witness it firsthand. Ngọc was possessed by the ghost as soon as she consented, despite her being conscious. She raised her arms, sensing the spirit in control of her body. The boy-like spirit asked her to assist in freeing itself after claiming to be her unborn brother. Upon her mother's verifying the death of her son, Ngọc hurried to a Buddhist pagoda and met a ritual master (*ông thầy pháp sư*) who made an amulet for her. It was just a small bag containing tobacco leaves and a folded banknote, which had been on the altar before. The master added that carrying the amulet with her could help ward off evil spirits (*tà ma*) and bad energy (*khí xấu*), as well as attract prosperity (*hút tài hút lộc*). Following the advice, Ngọc had better job luck and never again encountered spiritual difficulties. After two

years of her use of the amulet, Ngọc could launch her own eyelash shop. “Whenever I bring the amulet with me, my store is filled with customers,” she excitedly described her good fortune. “If an appointment is canceled, someone else will call to take the void immediately. I sometimes forget the amulet at home, and then I find that my shop appears to be completely empty. So, I’m sure that my good fortune comes from the amulet. She intended to “return merit” (*trả lễ*) to the Four-Palace Goddesses²⁹ (*tứ phủ*) to express her gratitude for the goddesses’ assistance in her situation.

Many respondents told stories of receiving amulets from respectable ritual masters and how the sacred objects saved them from critical accidents caused by their special spiritual foundation. The 29-year-old Min showed me the wooden rosary she had concealed under her shirt. She said that ever since her birth, she had been spiritually weak (*vía yếu*) and had a history of frequent illnesses and life-threatening health issues. She also had the ability, which she did not want to use, to hear the dead speak (*nghe người âm nói*). She felt more at ease after wearing the rosary her male friend gave her; it had been thoroughly consecrated by a revered Buddhist monk in Tibet. She never took it off and wore it with her at all times. Another person who received an amulet from a recognized ritual master was Cường, a 25-year-old writer. When we first met, he showed me the yellow cloth amulet (*lá bùa*) with red *Hán-Việt* scripts written on it, which he always carried in his backpack. It was wrapped in a clear plastic bag, and I was not allowed to

²⁹ *Tứ Phủ*, or the Four Palaces, is a branch of the Mother Goddess Religion, a popular religion in Vietnam. Four Palaces represents four regions of the universe, including the heavenly region (*Thiên Phủ*), mountainous region (*Nhạc Phủ*), river region (*Thoải Phủ*), and the ground (*Địa Phủ*). Each region is protected by certain goddesses in the pantheon.

touch it. Cường described how he frequently became ill and had weird dreams for all of his life. He believed it was a health problem, but it was not. The foster mother of his best friend was a fortuneteller. She gave him the cloth amulet and emphasized that the amulet would shield him from harm in difficult situations. He questioned a few spiritual specialists about the amulet since he was dubious, and they all confirmed that the amulet was extremely sacred and was made specially for him. Whether by coincidence or not, Cường survived two car accidents without suffering serious injuries. In the hope that it might protect him from unknown dangers, he continued to bring the amulet with him when he went to study overseas.

The abovementioned narratives suggest that each interlocutor shared similar experiences with spirit-related phenomena caused by evil spirits, misfortunes, and tragic mishaps. While Ngọc was plagued by her deceased family member, Cường and Min possessed special spiritual traits that resulted in unidentifiable health problems. Despite their variations, these amulets allude to their fears of erratic non-human entities that cause evil consequences. Scholars from the late 1900s have suggested that fear of spirits is a form of basic insecurity that “primitive” people experienced when they could not rely on their own abilities to handle an issue, like when fishing in open waters where danger is unpredictable (Budge 1978; González-Wippler 1991; Malinowski 1955). However, fear of spirits still exists today and continues to have a significant influence on other aspects of life, particularly health and well-being. Besides protecting the owners from the negative energy, the amulets facilitated the success of Ngọc’s new business and saved Cường from car accidents. Thus, people’s motivations to carry amulets stem from a

mixture of fear toward both spiritual and secular uncertainties threatening their lives and the effects of erratic social conditions, such as global mobility and economic fluctuations. With their efficacy in protecting their owners from danger and unknown entities while also providing them with material rewards, these amulets are not on the same side as evil powers.

Users' trust in the source of protecting power, which gives them a sense of comfort, intimacy, and safety, contributes to the effectiveness of these amulets. The trustworthiness of the human giver is also important in making amulet users perceive the items as safe and usable. Taking into account all three cases above, their amulets were associated with Buddhism or the local Mother Goddess Religion (*Đạo Mẫu*), both of which the three interlocutors had faith in. Additionally, Min received the wooden rosary from her friend, a Tibetan Buddhist practitioner. Her trust in him was reflected when I asked her for more details about her experience with the rosary. Refusing to elaborate, Min diverted the inquiry to her friend, who she thought was better knowledgeable about the creation and sanctification of amulets. Cường was another person who mentioned his relationship with the amulet giver, his best friend's foster mother. He explained what his amulet meant to him as follows:

They [amulets] are very personal. They've already connected with individuality (*liên kết với cá nhân*). They must possess a certain level of intimacy (*sự thân mật*), which those sold at temples do not have. That is, we carry them along as something that is already associated with us, not just a tool. What does intimacy mean to me? After all, we need to know who makes them and for what purposes. We must be aware of their previous journey (*hành trình*), like how this amulet was created just for me.

[Cường, interviewed on phone, on September 26, 2023]

Cường thought that the amulet he received from his friend's foster mother was far more enticing than other amulets available in the market because it was specially crafted to fit his personal spiritual identity, fostering a sense of intimacy. As mentioned, he felt more intimate knowing who made the item. Ngọc also felt the connection, vowing to “return merit” (*trả lễ*) to the goddesses who had blessed (or channeled their power via) the amulets and rescued her from difficult situations.

As touched upon in Chapter 3, “trust” plays a crucial role in amulet transactions. As Cường pointed out, in order for people to confide in an amulet and use it to satisfy their spiritual needs, it is necessary to make known all aspects of its “journey,” including the maker and the reasons behind its creation. Knowing that the amulet producer was a benevolent person, the amulet was crafted based on a known religious belief, and it was intended to protect its user, my interlocutors feel safe using their own amulets. In other words, the degree to which an amulet is considered beneficent depends on how much its user trusts the source of power. This sense of intimacy between the user, the producer, and the amulet is rarely found when it comes to foreign-imported amulets and amulets made by ethnic “others” in Vietnam.

Ghostly Rumors: Encountering Haunted Amulets in the Field

In the preceding chapters, I have mostly addressed the active roles that amulets play in supporting their users and assisting them in coping with economic, social, and well-being precarity, which makes amulets appear to be beneficial for many people. Not all amulets are perceived to be benevolent. People frequently asked me to clarify what I meant when

I used the generic term “*bùa*” for amulets in my interview questions. They indicated that the term had two meanings. First, *bùa* might be good amulets, like peace amulets (*bùa bình an*), which assisted in warding off evil spirits, and lucky amulets (*bùa may mắn*). Second, *bùa* might also refer to tainted amulets that harmed or negatively affected other people. They typically called these vicious amulets “*bùa ngái*.” Some interlocutors made lighthearted fun of me by warning me not to drink the water given by strangers since I might get cursed through it. These amulets were like ghosts. People told me rumors about them, but almost all of the respondents had never seen them.

Anthropologists have been studying rumors to determine what purposes they serve and what insights they may reveal about different societies around the world (Hammarlin 2019). Mullen (1972) defines a rumor as a piece of information that does not necessarily have an elaborated narrative element. Many rumors arise from a specific anxiety about unusual events, disasters, or social crises. A rumor can be defined as a form of “urban legend,” a story about an unusual event that many believe happened but is untrue, or “unverified or uncertain information that is important to large numbers of people” (Coast and Fox 2015, 223). Rumors, as scholars suggest, represent people’s attempt to ascertain the truths about incidents in order to make judgements about social norms, values, and other people’s morality (Scheper-Hughes 2002, 195). While Stewart and Strathern (2004, xi) indicate that rumors typically arise in environments where fears and uncertainties emerge, James C. Scott (1985) argues that they are subliminal indicators that normative rules within a community have been broken. They are cognitive

devices that enable people to explain unconnected events and predict similar occurrences (Mullen 1972, 109).

It becomes more complicated when rumors overlap with “ghost stories,” narratives that are linked to supernatural phenomena, ghosts, and haunting spirits. De Antoni (2011) studies the creation of tourist haunted places in contemporary Kyoto. She argues that haunted places are created by rumors that emerge from complex chains of translation among different actors and mediators. Ghost stories always appear at the intersection of remembering and forgetting, which can be used to discuss human relationships to the dead and to the past (Tamás 2013). One concept that scholars in social sciences have been using to comprehend such ghostly narratives is “hauntology³⁰.” The concept explores the idea of the past continuing to exert an influence on the present. It involves examining how traces of the past, mostly traumatic memories, continue to shape and influence our understanding of the present and future. In other words, the past is not completely erased but rather “haunts” people as time passes by, often in ambiguous, unsettling, or unresolved ways.

³⁰ The term was first used by Jacques Derrida in his book *Spectres of Marx* (2006), discussing how Marx’s communism cannot be got rid of and continually haunts the West. In the work, he implies that “spectres” (or ghosts) are subjects that are neither present nor absent, or neither dead nor alive. In this case, ghosts and haunting in Derrida’s concept give us a more phenomenological sense than a supernatural one (Satkunanathan 2020, 45). Later, the notion of “haunting” has been applied in various fields of research to understand different social issues, including memory on violence (Good and Good 2020; Gordon 1997), displacement (Liu Han-ying 2022), resistance (Yonucu 2023), or bodily uncertainties (Overend 2014).

Avery Gordon (1997) describes haunting as a multifaceted phenomenon that involves the lingering presence of unsolved history, which is not limited to supernatural occurrences but encompasses a broader range of social dynamics. For Gordon, ghostly haunting is a form of social figuration; it is a “very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening,” and investigating haunting can lead to the dense site where history and subjectivity make social life (Gordon 1997, 8). Haunting takes place in relation to “events that sometimes go unremembered or bodies that are sometimes haunted by stereotypical cultural baggage, and the weight of a culture sometimes sits too heavily on the ethnic subject’s identity.” Ghosts are social figures that tell us what is missing (1997, 63; 207). In brief, ghosts are a site of memory, while a close examination of “haunting” gives us access to the unresolved social issues or past circumstances (Tamás 2013).

Borrowing the term “ghostly” from Gordon (1997)’s book entitled *Ghostly Matter*, I intend to use the term “ghostly rumors” instead of the more general term “ghost stories” because the stories I collected from the field were referred to as “*tin đôn*” (rumors). Most of the time, the narrators of these rumors had never even seen the “scary” amulets with their own eyes but rather heard about them through others. While the amulets themselves were absent in public space, they were present in rumors that haunted people. Many interlocutors reported that they heard the rumors from either someone they knew or internet sites that were usually brief, vague, and unconnected. They might be just random sentences talking about their male neighbor getting cursed by the mountain people’s love amulet (*bùa yêu*) before he disappeared, or some girls who were mentally

ill after bringing weird dolls back from Thailand's trips. With all these concepts around ghosts, the following sections will then explore "ghostly rumors" within the hauntology framework, which I believe can help us comprehend memories and traumatic experiences that are haunting people in different forms.

Don't Mess Up with It: Ghostly Rumors About Dolls

"My mom forewarned me not to bring weird stuff from Thailand home," Minh Quang, a third-year university student, told me while we were hanging out one day. He narrated how his mother was extremely concerned that he might bring strange Thai spiritual artifacts back to Vietnam after his conference travel to Thailand a week ago. When he asked why, she told him that a neighbor had traveled to Thailand and returned with a doll. The person gradually became insane (*bị điên*) and lost the ability to properly communicate with others. She had just recently healed after her family riotously asked various shamans to come ward off the evil spirit. As Minh Quang's mother thought sharing further details about the occurrence would bring bad luck, she refrained from doing so. "The doll might probably be *Kumanthong*," she merely stated.

At the beginning of 2017, the practice of "raising" the spirited dolls, called *Kumanthong*, as babies appeared in several provinces in Vietnam. It started with a small group of people before spreading to different areas across the country³¹ and reaching its

³¹ The practice of the child spirit worship has also spread to other Asian countries, like Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China, as a result of growing international mobility and media consumption (Wu 2014, 129-131).

peak later in 2019. Originally, the term *Kumanthong* was coined from two Thai words, *kuman* (boy; Sanskrit: *kumāra*) and *thong* (gold, golden), referring to a type of Thai talisman created from bodies, body parts, or substances extracted from undelivered fetuses, embodied with child spirits. Later on, small, mass-produced figurines or dolls have been used to substitute the human elements (Sinnott 2022). If properly “raised” (*nuôi*), the child spirits are said to bring protection, good relationships, and prosperity to their guardians or “parents” to repay for their gratitude. The word *Kumanthong* used among Vietnamese devotees, however, does not refer to the same *Kumanthong* in Thailand. When getting assimilated into Vietnam, the concept of *Kumanthong* got mixed up with another kind of Thai amulet called *Luk Thep* (literally, Child Angels), which were modified from American Reborn Dolls³² and were first introduced in Thailand around 2015. *Luk Thep* dolls became one of the most popular foreign amulets in Vietnam a few years after losing their attraction in Thailand (Teekantikun 2020).

Besides picking up from shops in Thailand, devotees can obtain the dolls from Vietnamese agents, online and offline. Tuấn Vinh, a college student, told me that he was hired to work as an interpreter in a condominium unit full of *Kumanthong* dolls for sale. Customers who purchased a spirited doll had the option to customize the doll’s appearance, including choosing the age of the child spirit they wished to adopt, as well as the doll’s clothes and hairstyle. Although the cost was quite reasonable, it varied

³² A reborn doll is a handmade doll that has been transformed to resemble a real baby. The practice of creating and playing with reborn dolls gained popularity in the United States in the 1990s (White 2010).

depending on the doll's size (small, medium, and large) and material. The least expensive and smallest one was approximately 500,000 VND (20 USD). Silpakij Teekantikun (2020), a Thai researcher, once witnessed a Thai ritual master “transfer” a child spirit from one doll to another before sacralizing (*làm phép*) it as requested by a Vietnamese customer in Ho Chi Minh City. He notes that people's reactions to the dolls' use are both positive and negative; although some locals view the dolls as superstitions, many appear to believe in them. The fear expressed by Minh Quang's mother shows people's concerns for their own safety when confronting unfamiliar objects that seem to be imbued with unknown power.

My interlocutors claimed that people enjoyed spreading rumors and listening to gossip about celebrities who were raising spirited dolls in order to succeed. Some popular plots of rumors about *Kumanthong* I personally encountered in Vietnam included a dog howling at a child's doll because it smelled ghosts and a janitor quitting her job after seeing a doll kept in an apartment room, in addition to the stories of someone going crazy after bringing back a doll from Thailand. It was also informed on a different level that the dolls killed many people who had mistreated them after consuming blood and becoming powerful enough to attack humans, all based on unexpected incidents they learned about from the news and movies. The rumors about *Kumanthong* dolls fit the definition of rumors as “unverified” information about current circumstances that cause people anxieties (Coast and Fox 2015; Forth 2009; Mullen 1972; Perice 1997). I was frequently asked about *Kumanthong* dolls, but it seemed that not even those who asked had really

seen any. Most people I talked to admitted that the stories they had told me were merely “rumors” (*tin đồn*).

Dolls as Representations of Child Spirits

In many societies, dolls are not simply toys but enigmatic objects that serve to connect humans and supernatural entities; they have long been used as amulets or talismans that produce desired effects for the owners (Fookan and Mikota 2018; Kendall 2022; MacGaffey 1990). For example, *Imon Ningyo*, small dolls made by female family members, were often carried by Japanese soldiers on their bodies or attached to their weapons in the 1930s to spiritually protect them and reassure links between the distant soldiers and home (Schattschneider 2005). What distinguishes dolls from other spirited objects is their human shape, which gives them an in-between character; they are objects with personhood. Although the human owners ask them to perform tasks, they possess their own free will. Daniels (2010), in his study on Japanese dolls, suggests that it is not easy for people to dispose of a doll, due to the doll’s spiritual appearance and its affectionate connection with humans. Similarly, MacGaffey (1990) notes that *Nkisi* (plural: *Minkisi*), the spirited dolls that originated in Africa, must also be handled humanely since their violent tendencies become unpredictable if they are mistreated.

Certain kinds of dolls that are treated as sacred objects can be found in many spiritual spaces in Vietnam. For example, wooden dolls in traditional costumes are placed

in the Mother Goddess³³ worship halls (*nhà thờ mẫu*) to symbolize the divines' servants. Amulet stalls at similar sites widely sell pink male baby dolls, known as *trợng cậu*. People use these baby dolls, together with seven golden coins symbolizing seven souls (*vía*) of a male and/or baby bracelets, as worship objects in rituals to ask for sons (*lễ cầu con*) from the divines. After burning the spiritual petition (*sớ*) at the end of the rituals, worshippers usually take the baby dolls back and place them on the top of their beds, pampering (*cưng nựng*) them like their own babies until the wives get pregnant (Thái Mạc 2020). *Kumanthong* dolls, a novel type of spirited doll in Vietnam, are a good allegory for the abovementioned amulet dolls. On the one hand, they are asked to do things on behalf of their owners or provide the owners with good fortune while being violently unpredictable if mistreated. On the other hand, the dolls are pampered as dependent children in need of adult caretaking (Sinnott 2014). My interlocutors indicated that the dolls were scary because they contained child spirits, and the assumption that the objects were unethically made from human fetuses made them even more of an ideal haunting subject for ghostly rumors.

³³ The Mother Goddess Religion (*Đạo Mẫu*) is a popular religion in Vietnam with many followers. It has been spread through commercial routes since the 16th century (Dror 2007). It is believed that people can request anything they wish from the goddesses in the pantheon through the act of spirit mediumship, borrowing spiritual money, or obtaining amulets from Mother Goddess temples.



Figure 19: *Tượng cậu*, among other kinds of amulets for sale (Photo by the author, Bảo Lộc Temple, Nam Định, August 2022)

The Vietnamese media represents the reciprocal relationship between the child spirits in *Kumanthong* dolls and their believers with a strong sense of family bonds, particularly the bond between mother and child. The spiritual roleplaying is also explicitly shown in the 2021 film *The Guardian (Thiên thần hộ mệnh)*. The protagonist, Mai Ly, purchased a spirited doll from a monk to emulate her successful colleague, who inexplicably committed suicide in a bathtub next to a gorgeously dressed *Kumanthong* doll. Mai Ly carried her doll around and used the words “*mẹ*” (mother) and “*con*” (daughter) during her one-sided dialogues with the doll. She believed that the child spirit helped attract a string of good fortune and could do everything for her, including murders. Based on my observations, Vietnamese devotees, similar to Mai Ly, usually addressed their dolls as “sons” or “daughters” and referred to themselves as “mothers” or “fathers,” emphasizing how people appeased the spirits like parenting their children. For

example, one of the online advertisements that I had collected included images of different spirited dolls with a caption “*Tụi con chờ ba mẹ đón ạ*” (We [children] are waiting for fathers and mothers to pick us up) and claimed to help support the parents throughout the child-raising process (*quá trình nuôi con*). Although the Vietnamese term “*đón*” can refer to an action of picking up someone, it can also mean adoption. Megan Sinnott (2014; 2022) discusses the notion of “adoption,” which differentiates spirited dolls from other kinds of amulets. These parent-child relationships are an exchange of sentimental responsibilities that goes beyond just a transactional connection (Sinnott 2014, 314; 2022, 218); the parents need to take care of the spirits, while the spirits are expected to repay for the moral debts and gratitude. My interlocutor, Tuấn Vinh, told me that the spirited dolls in the store where he worked could be selected based on their attributes and age ranges, like in an adoption.

Kumanthong dolls are associated with a tie between foster parents and adopted children, with an implication of child exploitation. A five-episode web drama entitled *Kumanthong* (Vietnamese: *Cừu đen*), launched on YouTube in 2019, narrated a story of a married couple buying a doll from an impostor-style ritual master who spoke odd Thai sentences to solve their business problems. As they worshipped it on a regular basis, their financial situation improved significantly. However, one day, their daughter was attacked and abducted by the unseen force. The husband confessed that he let the doll drink his blood in order to aid the success of his illegal business, not realizing that the blood would turn the once-kind spirit into a vicious one. The doll’s possessing child spirit turned out to be their own child who had been aborted several years ago. The web drama was inspired

by a lengthy ghost story, or someone might call it ghostly rumors, written by an anonymous author on the internet. It emphasizes several important themes related to violence around mother and child, including immorally intentional abortion and the concept of child spirits as innocent victims. This corresponds to what an interlocutor shared with me about her feelings towards *Kumanthong*; she felt bad for the child spirits inside the dolls because they were exploited by people and were therefore unable to be released (*siêu thoát*) and reborn.

Haunted Dolls - Haunting Child Spirits

As Gordon (1997) argues, “ghostly matters” are historical since they emerge from unresolved past circumstances and violent history. The close connections between the spirited dolls, child spirits, and the issues around children, such as abortion, abandonment, and exploitation, which have been portrayed in Vietnamese media, have urged me to consider what “unresolved” situations in Vietnam might be reviewed through the haunting acts of *Kumanthong* dolls. During my fieldwork, I found that discussions about *Kumanthong* dolls would sometimes lead to analogies with the notion of child spirits known as “*vong nhi*,” which refer to infants who die from either fetal death, abortion, or other causes. According to a Vietnamese belief, the spirits of aborted children remain with their abusive mothers and family members, remaining “demanding, jealous, and angry (Nguyễn Thị Lệ Hằng and Trần Thị Kim Anh 2017, 21). Additionally, these spirits possess spiritual powers that, in order to exact revenge, can cause someone to die or develop strange illnesses, leaving them bewildered and babbling until they lose

their mind (Hòa Thượng Tuyên Hóa 2017). Different coping mechanisms are used by mothers who have had abortions to deal with their guilt. In her article, Gertrud Hüwelmeier (2022) notes that, in order to deal with the experience of having an abortion, guilty mothers go to the maternity hospital in Hanoi to worship at a sacred banyan tree known as “*Cây đa nhà Bờ*” and ask for forgiveness. Some perform a worship of their children at home, while many attend ritualistic fetus/child spirit worship massively conducted by venerable monks in Buddhist pagodas. Researchers Nguyễn Thị Lệ Hằng and Trần Thị Kim Anh (2017) note that the practice of “*cúng vong thai*,” or fetus worship, originated in Southern Vietnam in the late twentieth century. It was prompted by the spiritual demands of some community members who were forced to abort unwanted fetuses at home, in hospitals, or in private medical facilities. After abortion, these women visit pagodas to pray for the rebirth (*cúng cầu siêu*)³⁴ of the stillborn fetuses, repenting for what they have done and sympathizing with their children’s fate. Currently, numerous online resources offer ritual instruction to worship such aborted children. Guilty mothers are advised to prepare flowers, candies, milk, and unisex

³⁴ A similar ritual is also found in several East Asian countries that share the equivalent notion of child spirits (Moskowitz 2001). For example, in Japan, a Buddhist ritual called *Mizuko kuyō* is performed to represent parental guilt for abortion and to comfort the souls of aborted, stillborn, and miscarried children. Jekel (2002) argues that the ritual was a result of the family planning context, when the Japanese government in the 1930s turned towards a pro-natalist policy and the only options to terminate unwanted pregnancies were abortion, infanticide, adoption, and child abandonment, which rose dramatically. Like in Vietnam, the aggrieved soul of an aborted child is blamed for any kind of suffering, whether it is illness, financial trouble, or any other kinds of misfortune of family members. Therefore, Jekel (2002) suggests that such rituals give parents possibilities to ease the suffering of both their aborted children and themselves.

clothing for the spirits and express their guilt to them by reading a repenting passage as follows:

... My child, I am aware of the mistakes I made to you in the past. I could never have imagined that the things I did would cause us, both father and mother, and you so much grief and suffering and make you become a soul that is lonely, resentful, miserable, hungry, thirsty, and cold. ... Please forgive me, and please do not feel animosity (*oán hận*) towards me anymore. It is true that no matter what the reason, this evil karma cannot be tolerated. Cause and effect are my own doing. I only know how to repent (*sám hối*) to all the child spirits (*vong nhi*), trying to accumulate virtue every day and dedicating all the merits to you...”³⁵

While Buddhist moral principles of “karma” are contested, the precept corresponds to the fear that some child spirits may “hate” their mothers for killing them and bring about bad luck, such as ruining the mothers’ businesses, which exposes the vulnerabilities of these guilty mothers. It shows how women who chose to terminate their pregnancy are haunted by their past actions, as Leshkovich (2012, 522), in her work on infant abandonment in Vietnam, argues that child-abandoning women are actually victims suffering from structural inequalities that have “denied her and others the ability to express appropriate maternal femininity and moral personhood.”

Thầy Liên Hoa, the Buddhist abbot mentioned in Chapter 4, shared with me that she employed baby-like dolls as mediums for child spirits to enter and participate in the annual wishing ceremony for child spirits (*lễ cầu siêu cho vong nhi*) at her pagoda. Several child spirits could reside in a single doll. While showing the dolls in the storage room to me, she revealed that one of her disciples had brought back a *Kumanthong* doll

³⁵ Translated from the Vietnamese version retrieved from <https://tamlinh.org/bai-cung-cau-sieu-cho-cac-vong-nhi.html>.

from Thailand and had become possessed by the spirit inside the doll. She made a joke that if the possessed woman asked for help, she would ask those dolls in the storage room to fight back against that *Kumanthong* doll, and her dolls would undoubtedly prevail.



Figure 20: Dolls in the storage room of a Buddhist pagoda in Ứng Hòa District, to be used as spiritual receptors for child spirits in the wishing ceremony (*lễ cầu siêu*) (Photo by the author, Hanoi, May 2023)

Given that *Kumanthong* dolls are purportedly created from infant corpses, the above analogy with *Kumanthong* spirits raises the idea that the rumors surrounding these dolls may be related in some way to the locals' unease about the newborns' deaths. The connection between the Thai-spirited dolls and the abortion issue in Vietnam is explicitly shown in the 2019 film *Kumanthong*, when the vicious spirit in the doll turned out to be the main couple's own aborted child. This shows that what scares people might not only be unknown powerful amulets but also an uneasy feeling towards abortions, partly

shaped by Buddhist values. The relation between the dolls and abortion is also mentioned by Teekantikun (2020), who notes that several female consumers substituted *Kumanthong* dolls for their miscarried or aborted children.

Many interlocutors viewed these foreign-imported amulets as a potential threat since, according to local beliefs, these spirits might become extremely powerful when they were furious. The abbot's analogy between the Thai *Kumanthong* dolls and the dolls used in rituals demonstrates how *Kumanthong* dolls represent the underlying moral concerns around abortion that have long existed in Vietnamese society (Hüwelmeier 2022), but in a new way. People's fears are also brought on by the high abortion rate and the prevalence of child abandonment, as reflected through the annual wishing ceremony, or "*lễ cầu siêu*," performed specifically for child spirits and the voluntary initiatives targeting abandoned children. In this case, rumors about *Kumanthong* dolls fall under the category of "diving rumors," which Scheper-Hughes (2002, 171) defines as a form of rumor that "appears and disappears, then reappears at intervals of time." When diving rumors resurface, they might take on new forms or be combined with other rumors in contexts that differ from their initial appearance (Forth 2009). The recent rise in popularity of *Kumanthong* dolls among the locals is merely the material rebirth of long-standing child spirits in Vietnam. The fear of children's vulnerabilities persists; it only waits for the proper moment to erupt again.

Rumors of Love Amulets: Amulets, Disappearance, and the Vicious Others

“Kinh people don’t have amulets!” A middle-aged man aggressively responded to my use of the term “amulets” (*bùa*) in describing what I was researching in his community.

“Only the ethnic people (*người dân tộc*) in the mountainous areas have such things,” he added. I clarified to him what kind of amulets I meant, which was quite different from what they had in mind. This harsh reaction is not uncommon among many Kinh people, identified as the ethnic majority of the country. Such attitudes toward the amulets, however, cannot be sensed when mentioning Buddhist amulets from Tibetan pagodas or Western amulets like energy stones (*đá năng lượng*) and orgonite pyramids, which are also regarded as “foreign” by the locals. Throughout my field study, I have heard numerous rumors about ethnic minorities in Vietnam, particularly the Thái and Mường ethnic groups, who are said to produce amulets with the power to harm others, exact revenge, or drive people insane, although relatively few respondents have ever seen them. The Kinh Vietnamese commonly refer to these amulets as vicious amulets (*bùa, bùa ngải, ngải*). It is said that if a person is cursed by an ethnic amulet, only the person who crafts it will be able to deactivate it. My interlocutors stated that these amulets were always described as strong (*mạnh*) and scary (*đáng sợ*), even to the point that “if they want me to die, I will suddenly die.” Wondering why ethnic minorities’ amulets are labeled as “scary,” I will explore in this section ghostly rumors about ethnic love amulets (*bùa yêu dân tộc*) and show how the ongoing interethnic conflict in Vietnamese society

fuels people's anxieties and negative perceptions about ethnic amulets, which are reflected in the rumors.

In Vietnam, the lands of the Thái and Mường, located in Hoà Bình, Sơn La, and Phú Thọ, are famous places for the mysterious art of talismans (Nguyễn Thị Suối Linh 2019). According to scholarly research, the focal point of these highland groups' spiritual lives is the ritual specialists known as “*bố mo*” or “*ông mo*” (which are equivalent to “*thầy mo*” in Vietnamese), who play a crucial role in village rituals (Grigoreva 2017). More than a hundred *thầy mo* have been recognized in Hòa Bình (Dương Đình Tường 2016). These specialists may create talismans with a paranormal ability, mainly for healing or protection purposes. For instance, following funerals, *thầy mo* will make small talisman bags called “*túi khốt*,” which contain objects endowed with superpowers, such as a few rough natural stones, dried seeds, or small plant roots, and give them to family members to take home. The sacred objects are not supposed to be touched by outsiders, and it is believed that the loss of the talismans is a portent that the family is likely to fall apart (Vũ Văn Hợp 2012). Amulets in the highlands can be ambiguously distinguished from one another. According to Nguyễn Thị Suối Linh (2019), the main types of amulets include *bùa*, *ngãi*, *thớ*, *trù*, and *chài*. She clarifies that *bùa* can be interpreted in a broad sense; it is a piece of paper with a word inscribed for the purpose of protecting the holder. *Ngãi* is a particular kind of talisman that has the ability to harm people or force them to do what the owner commands. *Thớ* is a metal stick that is poked into another person's body to cause harm or coerce them into taking particular action. *Trù* or *nguyên* is the spellcasting to bring misfortune onto someone. Lastly, *chài*, *nèm*, *mắn*, or *ém* are methods

of manipulating people's emotions (*tình cảm*) with objects like feathers, stones, ceramics, needles, clothing, chopsticks, or human hair. To enable their owners to attain predetermined aims, these talismans must be paired with the ritual specialists' incantations (*chú ngữ*) to gain power from a supernatural force.

The most well-known amulets produced by ethnic minorities in Vietnam are "love amulets" (*bùa yêu*); their owners are said to be successful in achieving the romantic relationship they desire. Some examples of this include making someone fall in love, preventing family separation, or maintaining relationships between couples (Đương Đình Tường 2016; Lê Trang 2010). It is said that in order to make love amulets, which take the shape of bags loaded with salt and rice or roughly crafted anthropomorphic figures, ritual specialists, who have extraordinary powers to manipulate spirits, must search for and worship the skulls of people who die from lightning. However, some love amulets are simply composed of ginger, wormwood, white salt, filtered water, food, and tobacco (Đương Đình Tường 2016). The targeted male's object, like a garment or a piece of hair, is also needed for a ritual. Rumors about love amulets typically concern soldiers who were deployed on military missions (*ngũ vụ*) to mountainous regions and fell in love with local women. Due to the love spells, the men could not leave after finishing the task; some of them did make it back to the city, but they finally went insane. Besides soldiers, Kinh visitors may also be the targets. A businessman in Hanoi informed me that his friend was cursed by an ethnic girl's love amulet (*bị bỏ bùa yêu*) on a vacation trip to a mountain in Lào Cai Province. After he got home, his stomach twisted and started to hurt. He could not get the girl off his mind. All the symptoms vanished when he returned to

see her, but every time he visited his wife at home, the sickness reappeared. The man therefore moved in an insane manner. With the help of a ritual master, he managed to deactivate the amulet (*giải bùa*), but no Kinh master possessed the necessary expertise to cure him completely. Several people made similar reports. The noodle vendor, Hân, told me that one of her neighbors became insane (*bị điên*) after visiting a mountainous place. He had returned home for a few months before going for a nighttime stroll. After years of being the subject of ghostly rumors in the community, he just disappeared and was never seen again.

While some Kinh Vietnamese avoid mountainous areas, many seek spiritual support from the ritual specialists of the ethnic minorities. Văn, a college student, told me that many Kinh guests traveled great distances from other provinces to see her grandfather, a Thái ritual specialist in Yên Bái, to request ethnic amulets. Some even picked him up in their cars and asked him to perform rituals at their places. Bích, the female librarian, told the story of a friend who was going to Hòa Bình to obtain an ethnic talisman (*bùa dân tộc*). The friend's husband was not so decent at the time, and he mistreated his wife. After ascending the mountain, the wife located an ethnic ritual specialist and asked him to make an amulet (*yểm bùa*) for her. He accepted, asked her to bring back something personal from her husband, and issued a warning, telling her to adhere to the ritual instructions precisely to ensure that the talisman would function effectively. If she failed, her husband might lose his mind (*bị điên*). The wife decided to stop doing it after she became frightened. Bích expressed fear upon hearing this and reiterated her deep belief that the ghostly rumors about ethnic talismans were real, saying,

“If the stories are not real, why do they still exist until now?” That was also confirmed by a young researcher who was listening to our conversation. He added that the persistent rumors of numerous males going missing at the borders contributed to the proof that they were really “cursed” by those ethnic minority people.

The Dangerous Others, Interethnic Conflicts, and the Shift in Power Relations

Given the ghostly rumors about ethnic amulets, their makers are mostly referred to as a collective rather than as an individual in two senses. First, the storytellers would typically mention that amulets originated from “the ethnic people” (*người dân tộc*) in the mountainous regions, but few can pinpoint which ethnic group they are referring to. Thus, rumors represent the dichotomy between the Kinh and the non-Kinh, which encompasses all ethnic minorities as a collective. Second, the strange occurrences brought on by the vicious amulets appear to be the fault of the entire ethnic minority population. Different from Kinh amulets, ritual masters (*thầy mo*) had a very minor role in love-amulet rumors. Instead, the main antagonists who cursed Kinh men with amulets were “ethnic girls” (*cô gái dân tộc*). The unspecified producers or users of the sacred items, shaped by the scattered and ambiguous rumors, have caused fears and spiritual anxieties among the lowland Kinh. These anxieties lead to bigger interethnic conflicts in Vietnam, such as discrimination and occult accusations (Stewart and Strathern 2004). As the rumors spread, some ethnic minority employees are allegedly targeted for discrimination at work by their Kinh colleagues due in part to the fact that they come from the amulet-making communities.

A 26-year-old man named Đăm was born and raised in the Black Tai (*Thái Đen*) ethnic community in Son La Province. Đăm told me that when he first arrived in Hanoi to further his study, people usually assumed that he knew magic spells and talismans (*bùa-chài*) just because he was a member of an ethnic minority. Besides, the ethnic minorities have fewer opportunities for employment as a result of the cultural stigma attached to their identity. Đăm told his story as follows:

When people from my hometown come down, like they are going to work, and Kinh people know they are ethnic people (*người dân tộc*), they will always ask, like “Do you know talismans?” or, “Do you know how to speak Kinh language?” Like this. It still happens now. People from my hometown go everywhere because they work as laborers. There are some places that won’t accept ethnic people to work because they are afraid of talismans and spells. And they think that ethnic people don’t know how to speak the standard language. But all these are not true. People from my hometown are very good at speaking the standard language, and they don’t know anything about talismans. ... I think rumors about talismans are a big factor contributing to discrimination against ethnic groups. It is because the Kinh are scared. They are scared of being cursed by talismans, so they don’t allow us to work. They don’t want to get close to us. They don’t dare to talk to us. The Kinh are always like this.

[Đăm, interviewed on September 10, 2023]

Despite the Vietnamese government’s policies in integrating ethnic minorities in mountainous areas into its nation-state, interethnic tension between the Kinh and non-Kinh persists at different levels (Duiker 2017; Keyes 1984). Research indicates that ethnic minorities in Vietnam experience discrimination from governmental organizations in every aspect of their lives. Besides the land issues, ethnic people’s unequal access to healthcare, education, and even the placement of trading stalls in the market contribute to their mistrust of the government (Jones et al. 2002, 71). The research conducted by van de Walle and Gunewardena (2001) also notes that most Kinh bureaucrats tend to argue

that the main obstacles to the state's development policies are the ignorance, superstition, and irrationality of the minority. The Kinh majority pushes the minority to the periphery and associates them with occultism and backwardness under the theory of ethnocentrism (Kim 2003). Đăm's experience of discrimination is a glaring example of the prejudice that ethnic minorities face in Vietnam. Based on Đăm's interview, Kinh employers always assumed that ethnic people's knowledge was limited, they could not speak standard Vietnamese fluently, and they had a strong association with the occult, including witchcraft and vicious amulets, just because they were from the highlands. These views, which date back to a time when the uplands were seen to be an alien world populated by people who lived differently, are constantly bolstered by writers, journalists, and official entities who supply the inhabitants of the lowlands with a steady stream of misinformation (Kim 2003).

Since the ethnic amulet producers are "uncivilized outsiders," the concept of "otherness" appears to help explain the amulet rumors in this case. Many anthropologists have been discussing the relationship between rumors and otherness, emphasizing the shared identities of those who spread rumors and those who are the target of rumors, typically "others" inside the group (Bonhomme 2012; Coast and Fox 2015; Forth 2009; Scheper-Hughes 2002). People propagate unverified information based only on their imagination because they do not fully understand what "the others" do, which widens the gap between them and those "others" (Scheper-Hughes 2002, 67). In other words, "otherness" creates and is created by rumors. For instance, Forth's (2009) study on rumors in Indonesia reports that human skulls, body parts, or blood were sought and

buried beneath the foundations of large modern buildings to make the structure solid and durable, and most headhunters were members of other ethnic groups. He notes that rumors emerged from disputes between different ethnic groups as well as anxieties about two categories of outsiders: Western colonizers and other ethnic groups residing in the same country. When it comes to amulets, Vietnamese society views ethnic minorities as “outsiders,” similarly to the notions in Forth’s research. However, as Đăm’s interview reveals, while the Kinh Vietnamese employ the concept of *us* and *them* to explain their connection with other ethnic groups, many minority groups share similar ideas about the Kinh. Đăm, for example, repeatedly stated that “they” or “the Kinh” were “always like this,” implying that in his opinion, the Kinh Vietnamese were also seen as others.

From the locals’ viewpoint, love amulets are not common (*phổ biến*) in their communities, and only a limited number of people are skilled in making them. Rumors of the love amulets, according to Đăm, may have evolved from the magical practice called “*koãm măn*” among some Black Tai ritual masters (*một* or *mỏ*), who possess mystical power and the ability to order spirits (*quỷ*) to do anything they want, both morally and immorally. Hoàng Trần Nghịch (2016) classifies the Tai’s spells and talismans into two types: good ones (*điều thiện*) and evil ones (*điều ác*). Examples of amulets that have been researched by scholars include supporting amulets (*bùa hộ mệnh; hộ gia, hộ của cái gia súc*), amulets to ward off evil spirits (*bùa trừ ma*), agriculture amulets (*bùa vãi gạo*), love amulets (*bùa yêu*), hatred amulets (*bùa ghét*), and healing amulets (*bùa chài chữa bệnh*). Although Đăm had heard that someone in his village possessed magical abilities, he admitted that he had never in his life seen any amulets other than protection string (*dây*

buộc)³⁶, not to mention vicious amulets (*ngải, chài*). However, the general public still views non-Kinh amulets as evil, while Kinh amulets, which are obtained from organized establishments like Buddhist pagodas, are associated with good fortune and protection (*bùa may mắn*). This illustrates the distinctions between the known and the unknown, the organized and the unorganized, and the safe and the dangerous, which contribute to the persistence of ethnic prejudices.

Here, I contend that the notion of good/bad amulets supports the Kinh supremacy in Vietnamese religious spheres. That is, religious practices associated with the Kinh are accepted in the general public, whereas non-Kinh objects are typically viewed as threats. This is also true with *Kumanthong* doll worship, which is outside of the three Chinese-influenced teachings (*tam giáo*) that the Kinh have embraced, including Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, as well as other recognized local faiths. The spiritual master Sáng once drew a comparison between ethnic amulets and imported *Kumanthong* dolls in terms of their scariness. He then assured me that the local Vietnamese gods would never allow these child spirits to cross the border into Vietnam, saying, “It was like the enemy coming to our house; are you going to let them in? Definitely not. In a spiritual sense, too, how can *Kumanthong* enter Vietnam, which is protected by Mother Goddesses?”

³⁶ Strings (*dây buộc*) are common forms of amulets used in Black Tai communities. Anyone who needs spiritual assistance to overcome a difficulty goes to ritual masters (*một/mo*). For example, when a child gets sick, the ritual master needs to conduct a ritual, reading magical spells (*câu thần chú*) and then tying the sacred string for the sick person. People believe that the string can ward off evil spirits that possess (*nhập*) them.

Sáng's opinion explicitly implies how some people use Kinh-based nationalism to interpret non-Kinh amulets as an invasion that needs to be prevented.

In recent years, along with the Communist Party and State's directives and policies, ethnic minorities' festivals, customs, and cultural practices have all received significant attention, restoration, and promotion (Hoang Duc Thanh and Nguyen Van Tinh 2023). Numerous state-sponsored academic studies about ethnic-minority amulet making as a heritage culture that should be preserved or promoted (Grigoreva 2017; Luong 2011) have played a significant role in shaping people's perceptions of the occult identities of these formerly marginalized and discriminated-against groups. Many writers have worked to dispel ghostly rumors about ethnic talismans (Nguyễn Hữu Lễ 2020); however, the image that these objects are portrayed in public reports emphasizes the role of talismans as merely cultural artifacts, which devalue and disregard their spiritual significance. For many researchers, many mystical cultures of ethnic minorities are considered outmoded, although they are fascinating, and this slows down social and economic growth (Nguyễn Thị Suối Linh 2019). Scholarly writings also suggest that non-Kinh people are untrustworthy. Hoàng Trần Nghịch's (2016) work, for example, describes ethnic amulets as "idealistic illusions" that rely on the adept performances of ritual masters to "make it seem like a real miracle to outsiders" (2016, 9). Thus, the in-depth analyses of ethnic talismans within the country are like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they make marginalized ethnic traditions more widely acknowledged. On the other hand, these writings reproduce unfavorable stereotypes of ethnic minorities as superstitious, backward, and deceptive. The Kinh's religious purity is thus shielded by

these works from the perceived “uncivilized” practices of the others, bringing them closer to the paths of modernity and progress that the socialist state is promoting, as addressed in Chapter 5.

However, how do all these interethnic conflicts relate to the ghostly rumors about the amulets? Many scholars have proposed that rumors typically spread when the social norms of a community are disrupted or broken, leaving its members in a state of uncertainty (Scheper-Hughes 2002; Stewart and Strathern 2004). In this case, it is a normative rule that ethnic minorities have been treated like second-class citizens due to the Kinh bureaucrats’ dominant position in the power structure of Vietnamese society. However, the norm is being challenged by the fact that many Kinh people are reaching out to the ethnic ritual masters to ask them to solve their problems with talismans that were previously thought to be irrational and by the fact that ethnic minorities possess special power that could have an unpredictable and significant impact on them. Therefore, it is likely that losing control over the minorities contributes to people’s feelings of uncertainty, which are expressed through rumors.

Going Insane and Disappearing: Rethinking Haunting Memories

My observations indicate that ghost stories concerning the supposedly evil amulets usually center around two themes: insanity and disappearance. It is commonly believed that someone went insane after carrying a *Kumanthong* doll home. In the case of love amulet rumors, the Kinh male characters all “disappeared” after the ethnic spells caused them to become mentally ill. Avery Gordon (1997, 63) argues in her book that a ghost “is

primarily a symptom of what is missing.” She lays out the statement before discussing the state-forced disappearance of the reactionary groups in the context of Argentina, a country with a lengthy history of military regimes, privilege, dictatorship, and the establishment of a repressive tradition. An individual’s disappearance is closely linked to past or ongoing violent acts, most of which are committed by powerful people. She does, however, point out that it is challenging to discern between the actual and the imagined, between what is known and unknown, and between truth and lies because disappearance cannot be viewed as a major historical fact. This partially results in a state of nervous exhaustion, which is shown through the existence of ghostly haunting (2008, 64). Gordon’s statement has encouraged me to consider the purportedly evil amulet rumors. What role does the “disappearance” play in people’s perception of these amulets as evil and perilous?

I have demonstrated that many people are anxious about *Kumanthong* dolls and regard them as “evil” because they associate these dolls with the prevalent local beliefs about child spirits. Since their parents have either abandoned them or exploited them as a form of violence, these child spirits are said to be dangerous. From a different angle, the fear of these child spirits reflects moral concerns over abortion, partly shaped by Buddhist ideology. The foreign-imported *Kumanthong* dolls are a solid representation of such anxieties that have subtly haunted people from the past to the present and contribute to the creation of ghostly rumors.

Anxieties about the love amulets have arisen from the lack of mutual understanding among Vietnam’s various ethnic groups, particularly the Kinh and other

ethnic minorities. My interlocutors claimed that in addition to having dissimilar cultures and worldviews, they were geographically separated from one another. When I discussed with my Black Tai interlocutor Đăm about the ghostly rumors of love amulets, he responded as follows:

When the soldiers came back from the battlefield, many of them suffered from mental disorders (*bị thần kinh*). How did they get these? We don't really know the truth. But most people thought that these [mental illnesses] were caused by the people on the mountain having "put" talismans (*thả bùa*) within them. Then they started saying things like, "Don't go up there," and, "Avoid mountainous areas."

[Đăm, interviewed on June 5, 2023]

Đăm expressed his belief that the origins of the rumors might be traced back to the war years, when Kinh soldiers either disappeared in the forest or returned to the city with mental health issues. To paraphrase Đăm, I do not intend to make any assertions on warfare. Instead, I aim to show that mountainous regions are isolated, unknown, and inaccessible spaces with limited state control (Kim 2003; Scott 2009), which can make the people in the lowlands feel frightened. Consequently, the areas are ideal for rumors to "fill in the blanks." The fantasy perception toward the vicious "others," represented through the lustful and untruthful images of ethnic women, helps link the men's disappearance with the local use of love amulets, which are said to produce inside the Tai communities. The fact that no one is truly sure what happened to the men who disappeared in the mountainous areas makes us think of how fragmented a ghostly rumor is; it is built on the basis of "known and unknown" facts and may not come to any clear conclusions. This places people in a situation where they are unable to "distinguish between truth and lies," in Gordon's words.

Ghostly rumors are automatic responses of many Vietnamese people when they encounter unusual phenomena they are unfamiliar with, particularly when they are inundated with unidentified sources of information. When I conversed with people about *Kumanthong* dolls and ethnic love amulets, I felt a sense of unfamiliarity that was different from the benevolent amulets I discussed at the beginning of the chapter. As I have suggested, an amulet can be perceived as good if its user is informed of the producer's identity and the ethical motivation behind creating the amulet. Regarding *Kumanthong* dolls and ethnic love amulets, the situations are going the other way; their information is unknown to most people in society. First, these amulets are made or sacralized in inaccessible places, such as a remote village amidst mountains or a customer-only private condominium unit. Second, it is presumed that the producers have immoral motivations for making the amulets. For example, according to my interlocutors and the Vietnamese films, *Kumanthong* dolls are produced based on the exploitation of vulnerable child spirits to further human greed, whereas the ethnic love amulets are intended to sabotage relationships and entice someone without their consent. Finally, the amulets are composed of myths that most people are unfamiliar with, like Thai magic or ethnic sorcery. My Vietnamese interlocutors frequently asked me questions concerning Thai amulets, such as what they were, how they worked, and whether they were dangerous, just like what Cô An questioned me on her doll given by the abbot. In addition, my sources claimed that Thai and ethnic amulets were "too strong" and were cursed with special methods, making it impossible for Vietnamese ritual masters (*thầy phép*) to deactivate (*giải*) them. One could only locate spiritual masters from the original

communities to assist in deactivating the objects. These viewpoints clearly demonstrate people's concerns toward spiritual items that they were unsure how to handle. Thinking more deeply, this implies the detachment amongst members of different sociocultural groups, as a form of affective precarity, in modern-day Vietnam.

The state's negative attitudes toward ethnic and foreign-imported amulets also play a significant role in reproducing the social group distinctions. Many scholars have cited religious prohibitions in several countries that forbid the practice of what they refer to as "superstition" and have indicated that social media constitute a "grey market" or "unofficial spaces" for religion and spirituality with an ambiguous legal status (Naepimai 2015; Zhang 2017). I note that the state has made attempts to discourage people from consuming foreign and ethnic amulets. For instance, many state-sponsored online newspapers regularly associate these amulets with fraud and superstition under headlines like "Thai love charms for sale on Vietnamese Facebook: Be careful not to get caught in a scam trap" (Giang Hoàng 2016). These online articles label the victims as gullible people (*người nhẹ dạ cả tin*) who are easily hooked (*mắc câu*) and classify their amulet practices as "superstitions" (*mê tín dị đoan*) (Minh An 2021; Trần Minh 2024). In addition to the state's initiatives, a number of well-established religious institutions regularly release online posts or videos of Buddhist sermons to attack these foreign amulets, claiming that they endanger the Vietnamese beautiful tradition (*văn hóa tốt đẹp*) and current religious system, which includes Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. The Vietnamese state's response to foreign amulet consumption bears some similarities to the Muslim countries of Southeast Asia, as studied by Han and Nasir (2015). The practice of

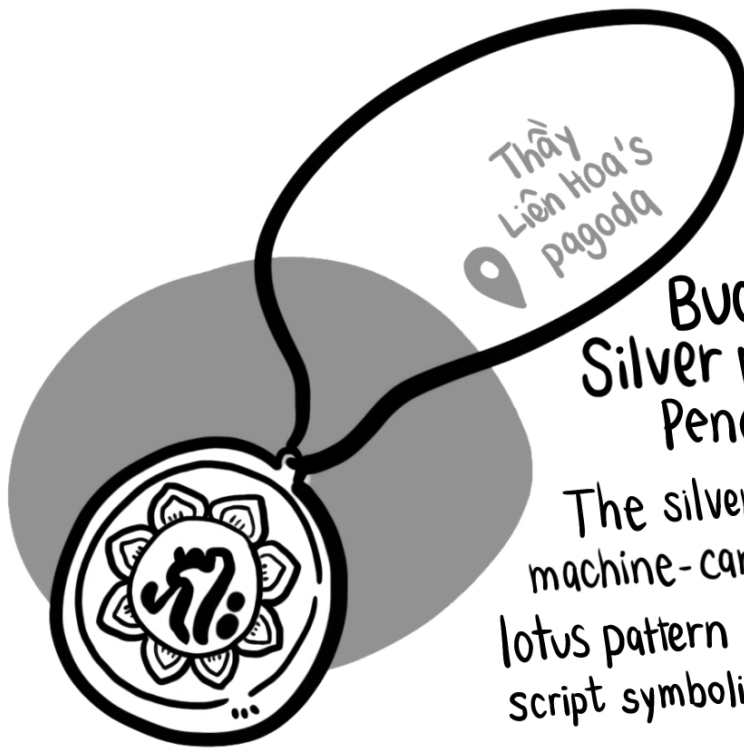
“Fatwa-shopping,” or surfing the internet for religious rulings that align with their beliefs, has alarmed the governments of these nations because it encourages people to adopt viewpoints that diverge from the official state ideology and complicate religious management.

Concluding Notes

In this chapter, I have explored how people’s ideas about benevolent and malevolent amulets are shaped by the sociopolitical factors, which can be explained by “intimacy” (*sự thân mật*) between the people and the sources of amulets. The first part illustrates the concept that protection amulets stand against evil spirits and shows how an amulet can be interpreted as “good” and “safe” depending on how much information about the object is apparent to the user. In the latter part, I examine ghostly rumors around two different types of amulets: the foreign-imported *Kumantong* dolls and the love amulets (*bùa yêu*) of the ethnic minority. I propose that ghostly rumors about the love amulets persisting in Vietnamese society are a form of haunting that are constructed on both recent and historical social occurrences. These rumors reveal people’s anxieties in the context of uncertainty when some haunting problems have not been resolved. In my discussion of *Kumantong* dolls, I show that concerns about the dolls are a reflection of the persistent moral concerns about abortion and the notion that child or fetus spirits (*vong nhi*) may turn hostile if they are mistreated. Regarding ethnic love amulets (*bùa yêu dân tộc*), I argue that ghostly rumors about them reflect the lack of understanding among different ethnic groups in Vietnamese society. The public worries have been aroused by the Kinh’s

shifting power structure, from being more rational and educated to being vulnerable and in need of spiritual assistance from ethnic masters. I conclude by arguing that people may view amulets as evil if the information about them is unknown or seems unethical to them, and this negative perception is fueled by the Kinh-dominated government's opposition to their use. While Kinh amulets are perceived as good, safe, and civilized because they are mostly associated with Buddhism, non-Kinh amulets are seen as wicked, dangerous, and backward. The Kinh's supremacy and purity are reserved through the perception of amulets as good or evil.

Building on the concept of hauntology, it appears that the spectral elements in the analyzed ghostly rumors are ambiguous, scattered, and unconnected. As Derrida (2006) indicates, haunting is historical, but it is not dated. The amulet rumors show how concerns about social issues, whether they relate to children or other ethnic "others," keep haunting and triggering people's anxiety in an unpredictable time. They can wait to manifest in a different form, like child spirits, or they can be continuously replicated over an extended length of time, similarly to those ethnic love spells. This chapter clearly demonstrates how examining ghostly rumors allows us to comprehend uncertainties from a different angle. Like what Gordon (1997, 63) notes, "haunting recognition is a special way of knowing what has happened or is happening."



Buddhist Silver Necklace Pendant

The silver pendant is machine-carved with a lotus pattern and ॐ: (hrīh) script symbolizing **Quan Âm**
= Goddess of mercy

CONCLUSION

Thầy Liên Hoa, the abbot, asked me if the woman who gave me the wooden bracelet was in her 40s while gently gripping it in her hand. My eyes widened as I pondered how she could have known. It actually came from Thảo, an artisan in the woodturning village. I could not shake the memory that Thảo's mother-in-law, another craftswoman with whom I had spoken earlier, passed away before I could go back to the village to bid farewell. The abbot smiled and told me that while she was holding the bracelet, the image of an 80-year-old woman working in her workplace was also visible to her. "I was able to sense (*cảm nhận được*) her," she said with a smile.

I thanked the abbot, fastened my backpack straps, and prepared to return to inner Hanoi. This was my last visit to her pagoda. I would be leaving my field in a week, and I felt oddly empty. The abbot stopped me and then handed me a tiny red bag. Inside was a necklace with the silver Buddhist pendant, which most disciples received from the pagoda and took as personal amulets. Remembering that she had once told me it was pricey, I sputteringly declined. However, the abbot explained, "It has a high material value (*giá trị vật chất*), but its spiritual value (*giá trị tinh thần*) is even higher. I give it to you because it's destined (*có duyên*)." She insisted that I should keep it, saying, "You'll need to travel everywhere. Then take the Quan Âm's compassion (*lòng từ bi*) with you." She then emphasized that the goddess would always grant me success if I acted rightfully.



Figure 21: Workstation of the 80-year-old interlocutor, mentioned in my conversation with the abbot
(Photo by the author, Nhị Khê traditional craft village, July 6, 2022)

In this concluding chapter, I bring in the above conversation since it touches upon several important issues discussed throughout this dissertation. It speaks about the political economy of amulets, their roles in helping people cope with precarity, and the boundary-crossing characteristics of these devotional objects. It also shows how examining the life paths of an amulet can provide a wealth of information about the hopes and hardships of those it comes into contact with, as well as the sociopolitical contexts in which it lives. In addition to the concepts addressed in the dissertation, I intend to bring up some broader intellectual questions about amulets that transcend the Vietnamese context. These include three aspects of amulets; they are neoliberal tools, memory archives, and multisensory objects.

Recovering Device: Amulets, Neoliberal Ethos, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Although the power of an amulet appears to be primarily derived from divinity, spirits, or natural energy, the amulet user is also expected to carry out specific tasks to fully benefit from it. Speaking to Thầy Liên Hoa, on the one hand, the silver pendant was infused with Quan Âm's compassion, which had the potential to grant the wearer their wishes. On the other hand, she asserted that the wearer needed to perform their social roles in a righteous way to obtain what they had asked for. This logic reminds me of Weber's (2001) notion of salvation through hard work. Weber argues that religions reinforce capitalist logic by emphasizing that if people work hard, they are likely favored by God and rewarded with material gains. In rethinking amulets, this also calls into question the connection between amulets and neoliberal economic ethos. How does the existence of amulets reinforce neoliberal ideology that focuses on personal actions and material outcomes? How do they become involved with the state's political power?

In my study, amulets allow us to understand how devotional objects have become involved in contemporary economic and political systems. Purser (2019), in his book *McMindfulness*, argues that mindfulness services help privatize precarious conditions that people experience. As a "coping device," the packages depoliticize life's challenges by encouraging people to take such problems as their personal failures and to develop skills to maximize their happiness, which are anchored in the ethos of neoliberalism. Just like mindfulness, amulets are a coping mechanism for anxieties, the precise origins of which many users are unable to pinpoint (Tran 2023). Similarly, many amulets I encountered are marketed as self-help aids that people acquire as "supplements" (*bổ sung*) to deal with

their personal life problems, giving them aspirations that keep them going (Fischer 2014). A common goal for amulet users is to accumulate what scholars refer to as “human capital,” which is associated with the neoliberal concepts of self-development. An example of this is the energy stones (*đá năng lượng*), mainly discussed in Chapter 5, which are promoted as boosters or healers for people’s internal problems rather than as tools to manage external forces that might affect their fortune. It is anticipated that the potency of stones will improve certain internal qualities, including enhancing communication skills, encouraging self-love, maintaining consciousness, or managing volatile emotions. These are qualities of a successful person from a neoliberal perspective.

I previously assumed that amulets had to be restricted by the state’s superstition laws, briefly discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, but I was mistaken. Most interlocutors shared with me that the police would never detain amulet sellers unless they committed “terrorism” (*khủng bố*) or mass deceit. Similarly to the African porches described in Rarey’s (2019) book, amulets are no longer major issues that need to be tightly regulated, compared to the 1990s situation (Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2007; Malarney 2002; Schlecker and Endres 2011). More importantly, it appears that the state benefits from amulets transacted within its governing borders. As noted by Butler (2016) and others, precarity has political implications because it is a reflection of the state’s governance failures. However, amulet consumption shows that people’s stresses have been privatized, and they tend to see their problems as something they must be responsible for rather than blaming external factors, like problematic power structures or economic systems. As noted earlier in Chapter 1, a

woman who lost her job during the COVID-19 pandemic looked for amulets to help her cope with financial difficulties, instead of seeking compensation from the company that fired her with an unpaid salary. She also attributed her youngest son's illiteracy to bad fortune rather than questioning the educational system. Referring back to Marx (1844), who describes religion as an "opium" for the oppressed, amulets are likewise "opium" in contemporary society. They assist consumers in managing precarious conditions by relying on their supernatural powers, but they do not address or solve the root causes. In other words, amulets "reproduce" precarity in society.

Since my field research was conducted right after Vietnam reopened its borders following the COVID-19 pandemic, it is inevitable to discuss the role of amulets as tangible "recovering devices" that aid the traumatized population in coping with the negative effects of the pandemic, which have a significant influence on people's social and economic lives. According to news reports, paper amulets that were advertised as offering COVID-19 protection (*lá bùa chống Covid-19*) first surfaced for sale on social media at the beginning of 2020. Many families with infants sought these amulets in a panic to protect their loved ones (Phong Anh 2020). Although it was suspected of being a deception, the incident shows how people became vulnerable during that moment.

Another example is the Buddhist rosary used by a female monk while she was hospitalized during the pandemic, which I mentioned in the introduction. The rosary illustrates the value of religious objects that support people in maintaining their mental well-being in times of adversity. The aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic may last for years, and amulets have been continually used to recover people from the crisis. Many

people have continued to struggle financially in the post-pandemic period because they had used up a large portion of their savings during the pandemic.

Like commodified mindfulness (Purser 2019), amulets can be viewed as “market palliatives” due to their widespread availability on the market as pandemic recovery tools. Unlike other commodities, many amulet sellers reported a rise in sales of certain amulet types. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the increased sales reflect the heightened demand for emotional support to cope with precarious conditions during the crisis. For example, the sales of love-related amulets reflect the affective disconnections among couples, partly due to the state’s travel restrictions. Similarly, amulets with money themes were popular during the pandemic to ensure economic stability. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, while some sellers faced commodity shortages as a result of the global disruption of amulet chains, many benefited from the explosion of online sales, which gave them new avenues for distributing their products. The concepts of transnational amulets and the disruption of global amulet chains during the pandemic are also interesting to explore.

Neoliberal logic of self, which emphasizes enhancing and maximizing a person’s internal potential, has been strengthened during the pandemic. Pandemic-related anxieties about one’s well-being were likely to drive people to engage in wellness practices like yoga or tarot reading as healing processes. Many sellers informed me that some people were able to “explore” their internal sides (*khám phá bên trong*) during the COVID-19 lockdowns, whereas others claimed to have more time to learn about the amulets they had been interested in. The pandemic trends of self-improvement, self-realization, and self-

responsibilities have increased people's sense of individualism, which deflects them from questioning external conditions that may affect them. This, again, contributes to the reproduction of precarity that is ingrained in the economic and political structures of society.

From a neoliberal perspective, Vietnam offers an illustration of a location where amulets are employed as recovering tools, which benefits the state in maintaining its power during the pandemic crisis. Amulets, with or without notice, reproduce precarity and subject people to an invisible form of control (Purser 2019). Here, the pandemic is another significant turning point, which calls for further study on amulets and their roles as “recovery devices” for coping with the precarity caused by this worldwide health crisis.

Amulets as Archives of Memories

Thầy Liên Hoa's statement, “I was able to sense her,” addressed at the beginning, as well as the wooden bracelet Thảo gave me, triggered my memories of Thảo's mother-in-law, who was actively crafting her wooden candle holders when I stopped by for interviews, as discussed in Chapter 2. The bracelet's existence also reminded me that the bracelet itself was the “afterlife” of the family specialty—worshipping items (*đồ thờ*)—which were part of their pride for generations. The ability of a bracelet to tell stories of change within a woodturning family, which also contributes to a broader image of the craft community, highlights another important role of amulets as memory “archives” that collect people's stories of happiness, crucial transitions, and life crises.

According to scholars, some objects are affective, as they are tied to certain places or events. Tiya Miles (2022) mainly proposes in her book entitled *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake* that objects can serve as archives of untold stories that are suppressed in official records. She uses a single object—a sack—to illustrate the history of slavery in the 1850s. The sack once contained pecans, a bundle of hair, and a dress. A female slave gave it to her daughter before being sold in the marketplace. The author suggests that the sack and the embroidered messages on it help crystallize memories of deep trauma and the history of violence. It conveys stories of the slave trade and forced family separation, as well as reflecting narratives of love and care as a “sentimental object.” According to Miles, the sack thus turns into a useful carrier of information and memories (2021, 19).

Like the sack, amulets have the ability to serve as archives of memories, both individually and collectively. Amulets are attached to people, particularly those who give and produce them, as well as life events when the amulets are obtained. Most of my interlocutors were able to recount in detail how they obtained their amulets, although they had got them a long time ago. This is due to the fact that amulets are, in many cases, strongly linked to significant events or figures. For instance, Cường, presented in Chapter 6, described to me the two incidents in which he was shielded by the amulet power. In addition, he could still vividly recall the words of the master, who was his best friend's foster mother, when she gave him the amulet. One college student shared with me that he had been carrying a necklace that his deceased grandmother had given him as an amulet. He felt that wearing the necklace was like bringing his loved one with him, even though

it did not initially have any sacred connotation. Here, amulets have evolved into a memory-collecting site. This role of amulets is also elaborated in a number of modern Vietnamese media, including films and games. Vietnamese traditional amulets are used as the main story-telling devices in the horror game “Blood Field” (*Cổ Máu*), launched in 2023. Players gradually discovered the violent backstory behind the death of a pregnant woman who resided in the house with her husband by tracking and gathering birth-related amulets left in a haunted house. This calls into question how different kinds of amulets evoke different sorts of memories or how memories are represented through sacred objects.

Amulets typically serve as a mediator between their users and the places where they are acquired; as a result, they often contain memories of those places. Zahavi (2019, 77) addresses in his work a phenomenological concept of “de-distancing.” De-distancing is a mode of bringing things closer to one another, regardless of physical distance. In other words, when people interact with something, their perception of distance tends to decrease due to the intentional object. While the closeness of a place is based on the relationships between people and the place, objects embody this relationship. Here, when people carry amulets around, they bring their places of origin with them. The distance between people and the sacred places is de-distanced when they can recognize where the amulets are obtained, giving them a sense of protection even though they are still far away from those places. The logic is applicable to anyone who has moved overseas. When Cường traveled to Canada to complete his doctoral studies, he carried his amulet with him. He told me that he no longer carried it around and instead stored it in his

luggage because he was worried about losing it. Cường accepted with me that he did not know how a Vietnamese amulet would work in a foreign country, but it was from Vietnam, and he believed that it could still bring him luck. In this case, Cường's amulet activated those memories, bringing him closer to his hometown. As discussed, amulets are more than just material objects that people purchase or get from temples. They can instead be viewed as active agents that engage with humans' minds to create perceptions of places (McCormack 2003; Thrift and Dewsberry 2000). This can raise potential questions about amulets and phenomenological explanations of memories and places.

In many cases, personal memories attached to amulets can provide a larger picture of society at particular moments. According to Mary Beth Mills (1995), villagers in northeastern Thailand hung red garments in front of their houses as a defense against widow ghosts, which led to male members dying inexplicably. This case speaks about the vulnerable contexts of international wage laborers and urban mobilities. Like the red garments, I have shown how amulets can trigger collective haunting memories from the past, as discussed in Chapter 6 on evil amulets. The disappearance and mental insanity of Kinh soldiers after visiting mountainous regions are the subject of rumors about ethnic love amulets (*bùa yêu*), while imported *Kumanthong* dolls evoke the long-standing violence, abortion, and child spirits in Vietnamese society. The emergence of some amulets, such as COVID-19 protection amulets, can also tell stories about the historic moment of a global health crisis when people were in vulnerable situations. In the same vein, as mentioned in the first part of this dissertation, foreign financial amulets imported at certain moments may tell us about the increased market instability and the

development of international mobilities in the supply chains, which also impact how other commodities travel (Cowen 2014). Referring back to Miles (2021), it is interesting to investigate amulets and question what these sacred objects may tell us about memories, traumatic histories, or stories of care in a particular society, in addition to the current precarious condition that has been examined in this dissertation.

Senses of Sacredness: Opening Multisensory Potentialities

When discussing amulets, anthropologists typically define them mainly through their visual appearances, including size, form, color, symbolism, and inscriptions. However, how do people really “feel” amulets sensorially? Going back to the conversation with Thầy Liên Hoa, the abbot held my wooden bracelet in her hand to sense it, and memories or “power” were perceived through a simple touch. Similarly, when I was in the field, many interlocutors answered my questions by asking me to feel, smell, touch, or even taste amulets to prove their power. Amulets in my study, then, exercise their agency through sensory that goes beyond visual appearances.

Touching is an important way for people to sense amulet powers. Taking into account the natural stones addressed in Chapter 5, the users can actually feel the flow of good energy by touching a stone bracelet and sensing the temperature that is transferred between their bodies and the amulet. In introducing *walking methodology*, amelia camielle smith (2024) notes the role of the human body as a “point of contact” between different senses as she follows the creeks, emphasizing intersubjectivity and entanglement between humans and nature. She argues that human beings and places are inextricably linked.

When rethinking amulets, objects are typically viewed as a center of different forces, including human and nonhuman agents, such as spirits, deities, and natural energy. However, in this study, I add that none of these forces can ever be sensed without human bodies. According to my research, most interlocutors were advised to always carry amulets on their “bodies” to ensure their efficacy, except when going to prohibited spaces or engaging in specific activities. Building on smith’s notion, this intimacy implies that human bodies can also serve as points of contact, using sensory acts to detect objects. Interestingly, amulets are sometimes forbidden from being touched in order to preserve their purity because human contact is seen as contaminating them (Douglas 2003; Durkheim 2001). Dedicated practitioners’ touches, however, are generally accepted as a means of transferring positive energy to amulets. Separating touches into the good group and the bad group demonstrates the hierarchical nature of senses across time and space, which deserves more research.

Besides touching, certain types of amulets can be smelled and even tasted. People’s perceptions of things, themselves, and social environments are significantly influenced by scents (Low 2009). The sacredness and economic values of amulets can sometimes be determined by their scents. I have learned from speaking with the craftspeople in Nhị Khê Village, mentioned in Chapter 2, that every kind of hardwood bead has a distinct scent. For example, the scent of older agarwood (*trâm già*) is stronger than that of younger agarwood (*trâm non*). Typically, the scent matches the texture and pattern of the wood. That is, older woods usually have more annual rings, which are visually appealing, and can be sensed by touching or seeing. The scent and pattern of the

wood's texture are typically used as proof that the tree has lived long enough to absorb different sources of natural energy, adding to its spiritual value. At the same time, the economic/exchange value of the wood is determined by the amount of time spent growing the tree (Marx 1999). Regarding tasting, at Thầy Liên Hoa's pagoda, the blessed water from rituals were distributed to participants, so that they could drink it or take a bath for good luck. The same logic applies to blessed items (*lộc*) that people obtain at spirit mediumship ceremonies or temple altars (Soucy 2006). Domestically, people will "eat" the blessed fruits, snacks, or cooking ingredients, which is believed to bring peace and prosperity to their families. According to records, some traditional paper amulets (*bùa chú*) are also said to be ingested or diluted with water and consumed to cure some symptoms (Tiêu Diêu Tử 2007). Đăm, the Black-Tai interlocutor I mentioned in Chapter 6, also shared with me the story of him drinking magical water activated by the ethnic practices called "*koãm măn*," which helped take out a fish bone stuck in his throat for three days. In this context, smelling and tasting are then crucial senses that can provide us with more insights into how values and powers of amulets are perceived and negotiated.

Although most scholars do not explain amulets from an auditory perspective, I noticed that surrounding sounds might affect the way people perceived the amulets they obtained. Anthony Jackson (1968), in his work that highlights the contrast between noise and silence in rituals, believes that noise and silence in rituals symbolize different things. For example, he notes that funerals are not allowed to have noise and that many switch-overs in moods and themes of music are employed as markers of various stages in transition rites. In the same vein, Buddhist-related music, including chanting sounds or

spiritual tunes, was played in many amulet shops, while many amulet masters chose to perform consecration rituals and give amulets to their customers in quiet spaces, like their private prayer rooms, which provided them with a sense of sacredness. It is interesting to consider the role that noise and silence play in creating an amulet agency.

Amulets, in my research, serve as a research subject that challenges the domination of visual practices that are influenced by western epistemology (Haraway 2016). Thinking about the hierarchy of senses in western epistemology, hearing, touch, smell, and taste are considered as lower specialized senses compared to sight (Pink 2015). However, in the case of amulets, they have become important senses that people rely on in evaluating and experiencing a sacred object. The multisensory perception of amulets exemplifies how different senses cannot be separated from one another. The assemblage of senses decenters and complexifies the visuals. As Pink (2015, 20) notes in her book, “exploring people’s multisensory relationships to the materialities and environments of their everyday lives and to their feelings about them offers a remarkably rich and informative source of knowledge for academic and applied researchers alike.” Investigating the senses of “sacredness” of an object can then similarly provide insight into how objects, humans, and places are inhabited in the more-than-human world.

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APPENDIX A

Glossary

This dissertation includes a number of terms, particularly Vietnamese words, which may require more clarification. Most Vietnamese words are written in their original forms, including their original vowels and tone markings. Except for names of people and places, they are primarily italicized. Certain words that are generally used, like dong (*đồng*: Vietnamese currency, VND) or Kinh, are used freely in the dissertation. It should be noted that Vietnamese words do not have plural forms.

The terms are listed in alphabetical order below.

Terms	Explanation
<i>Âm - Dương</i>	A concept found in Daoist philosophy. It can be translated as <i>yin</i> and <i>yang</i> in Chinese ideology. The <i>âm</i> principles are associated with coldness, darkness, subtlety, silence, and calmness, whereas the <i>dương</i> principles are associated with heat, brightness, boldness, loudness, and directness. The two elements coexist and complement each other to keep the world in balance.
<i>Bà đồng</i>	Female spirit mediums, while the term <i>thầy đồng</i> for male spirit mediums. These mediums are destined to serve the divines, mostly from the Mother Goddess Religion's pantheon, by worshipping them and conducting spirit mediumship rituals. With the special connection, many mediums offer other spiritual services, such as fortunetelling and amulet consecration.
<i>Bùa</i>	A general term for paper and cloth amulets. Traditionally, ritual masters have always written them by hand. The updated versions are mass-produced in various forms. <i>Bùa</i> can be broadly classified into two types: good (<i>chánh</i>) and evil (<i>tà</i>) amulets. Most <i>bùa</i> expires in three, six, or twelve months.

<i>Bùa dân tộc</i>	A general term for amulets from ethnic minority communities.
<i>Bùa ngải, ngải</i>	A kind of amulet composed of natural substances, such as bones or meat-eating plants. Compared to common amulets, they are believed to be more effective, and their users can anticipate faster results. <i>Bùa ngải</i> are viewed as harmful by many people due to their ability to inflict death or exact revenge. Only a few practitioners know how to make <i>bùa ngải</i> , turning them into mysterious objects. <i>Ngải</i> are frequently associated with ethnic minorities or foreign countries, like Thailand or Cambodia.
<i>Đạo Mẫu</i> (Mother Goddess Religion)	A popular religion in Vietnam with many followers. It has been spread through commercial routes since the 16 th century (Dror 2007). According to my interlocutors, people believe that they can request anything they wish from the goddesses in the pantheon through the act of spirit mediumship, borrowing spiritual money, or obtaining amulets from Mother Goddess temples.
<i>Đổi Mới</i>	The Vietnamese state’s policy launched in 1986. It marked a significant shift in the Vietnamese economy from a centralized system to a “socialist-oriented market economy,” fusing socialist practices with neoliberalism.
<i>Đồng</i>	Dong, or VND, which is the Vietnamese currency. One USD is worth about 25,000 dong.
<i>Kinh</i>	The Kinh people. The dominant ethnic group of Vietnam, known as Kinh or Viet, make up about 85% of the country’s population, according to the 2024 census. They speak Vietnamese. Although the Vietnamese state has officially declared equal rights for all 54 ethnic groups, the Kinh people are distinct from other minority groups, such as <i>H’mong</i> , <i>Chăm</i> , <i>Mường</i> , or <i>Thái</i> , in terms of culture, society, and politics.
<i>Linh phù</i>	An alternative term for <i>bùa</i> . <i>Linh phù</i> literally means “sacred paper,” as explained by amulet specialists.

<i>Mệnh</i>	Personal element. Based on the concept of the five elements (<i>ngũ hành</i>): fire, water, wood, metal, and earth, people are thought to be born with a predominant element. The personal element is calculated from each individual's birth year. Many amulet users would choose amulets that match their personal element to ensure the desired outcomes.
<i>Ngũ hành</i>	The five elements, comprising fire, water, wood, metal, and earth. According to <i>phong thủy</i> philosophy, a phenomenon arises from the interaction of the five elements. Through color representation, each of the five elements can be either compatible (<i>hợp</i>) or incompatible (<i>khắc</i>) with the others. For example, fire is red, pink, and purple, whereas water is black, white, and blue. Fire is compatible with earth, but not with metal, as shown in more detail in Figure 15. The five elements and the color principle are significant factors in people's selection of amulets.
<i>Phong thủy</i>	The Vietnamese term for Chinese geomancy (feng shui; 風水), which has greatly influenced numerous Vietnamese customs and practices. The essence of <i>phong thủy</i> is the flow and balance of energy that can have an impact on human life. Many amulet sellers, posing as <i>phong thủy</i> masters, usually advise their customers to use or carry sacred objects to draw luck, prosperity, desired relationships, etc.
<i>Thầy</i>	The pronoun or informal title for a male teacher, male lecturer, and Buddhist monk. It can also be translated as “Master” in the religious field, bringing a sense of prestige and respect.
<i>Tứ Phủ</i> (The Four Palaces)	A branch of the Mother Goddess Religion, a popular religion in Vietnam. The Four Palaces represent four regions of the universe, including the heavenly region (<i>Thiên Phủ</i>), mountainous region (<i>Nhạc Phủ</i>), river region (<i>Thoải Phủ</i>), and the ground (<i>Địa Phủ</i>). Each region is protected by certain goddesses in the pantheon.

APPENDIX B

List of Interlocutors and Their Profiles

In order to address security concerns, pseudonyms are employed throughout the dissertation to protect the indexical personal identities of the respondents with whom I engaged in field research. To aid the readers in understanding the context, I provide below, in alphabetical order, a brief profile of each mentioned interlocutor. Their ages were as of 2022, the year I conducted my fieldwork.

Name (Pseudonym)	Chapter	Relevant Information
Bích	6	A female librarian, aged around 40 years old. She related the story of a friend who traveled to Hòa Bình to get an ethnic talisman (<i>bùa dân tộc</i>) to resolve difficult issues involving her and her spouse.
Bình	2	A 50-year-old self-employed stone carver, originally from the Lục Yên community. He rented a workshop in a stone market in Hanoi where he made and repaired stone accessories for his customers.
Cô An	6	A 55-year-old lady who served as a committee member of a famous Buddhist pagoda in Hanoi. She was a dedicated Buddhist practitioners who carried different types of amulets on her body.
Công	4	A 28-year-old graphic designer, who voluntarily worked with Thầy Liên Hoa, the abbot, and another <i>phong thủy</i> master to create paper amulets for the pagoda. He was a Buddhist practitioner and worked at his older brother's T-shirt factory for a living. Công dropped out of college during his first year in search of a greater purpose in life and discovered it at Thầy Liên Hoa's pagoda. His mother was also a dedicated practitioner.

Name (Pseudonym)	Chapter	Relevant Information
Cúc	5	A 24-year-old Buddhist practitioner and member of a Buddhist association. Cúc usually participated in or even led volunteer activities, such as cleaning up rubbish, teaching English for the elderly, or organizing meditation sessions at pagodas.
Cường	6	A writer, aged 25, who experienced strange dreams and health issues as a result of his purported connections with a deity in the Mother Goddess Religion. Cường received a cloth amulet from his best friend’s foster mother and believed that it shielded him from negative consequences.
Đăm	6	A 26-year-old office worker who was born in the Black Tai (<i>Thái Đen</i>) ethnic community in Sơn La Province. He left the community when he was about ten years old to pursue his study in Hanoi.
Đào	1	A female office worker, 25 years old, who had broken up with her boyfriend and purchased a necklace featuring a white heart pendant as a calming aid.
Đen	2	The owner of a woodworking company. He had offices in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi and possessed long-term business visas in Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand. He employed craftspeople from Nhị Khê Village to produce goods for him, which he then exported to overseas customers.
Hân	6	A 52-year-old noodle vendor. She used to sell flowers and fruits, but she was never able to make much money. She attributed her life’s misfortunes to her past abortion. Living in her community, Hân frequently heard people tell stories about ghosts, one of which included her male neighbor who went insane after visiting a mountainous area.
Hăng	2	A female retailer, aged 30, who sold stone accessories in a stone market in Hanoi. She was able to serve her customers’ spiritual needs by using her general knowledge of stone potencies.
Hiền	4	A bar owner in her 30s who described herself as a “healer” and helped others with their spiritual issues by using natural stones.

Name (Pseudonym)	Chapter	Relevant Information
Hoa Sen	1, 5	A programmer, aged 28, who claimed to be a Buddhist practitioner. He became interested in spirituality, which included fortunetelling, physiognomy, and Chinese <i>Falun Gong</i> , after his father passed away from cancer and he was not accepted into his top choice university. Hoa Sen worked for the government, but he did not get along with his supervisor. He searched for an amulet to help fix the situation.
Hoàng	2	A woodturner from a craft village in Thường Tín District who displayed and sold his bracelets in a stone market in Hanoi. His family operated a sizable production workshop where they crafted wooden bracelets and Buddhist rosary strings for decades.
Hồng	1, 3	Kiệt's wife, aged 28. She was in charge of their amulet store every day from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. She also handled all online orders, product packaging, and customer delivery. Hồng began selling amulet accessories with her husband's assistance in her early 20s.
Hùng	1	A 25-year-old office worker who was laid off by his company. He went through an "existential crisis," in which he lost himself in contemplation of the meaning of life out of fear that he would not live long enough to try all the experiences he wanted to.
Khải	2	A male woodturner in his 40s, who specialized in making wooden bracelets. He worked with a Vietnamese retailer to sell products in Taiwan and Thailand.
Khoa	1	A 26-year-old bus conductor employed by the state's public transportation agency. He was deeply involved in spiritual pursuits, such as going on spiritual trips, freeing animals, and attending meditation sessions. He also bought several kinds of amulets in the hopes of becoming "lucky." He faced several precarious conditions, including poor health, low income, and fractured family relationships.

Name (Pseudonym)	Chapter	Relevant Information
Kiệt	1, 3, 4, 5	<p>Hồng’s spouse, aged 28, who was the owner and manager of the <i>phong thủy</i> amulet store where I voluntarily worked. After graduating with a degree in engineering, he opened a modest online amulet store, which he then expanded into a larger physical store. Most stone products were imported from the mines in his hometown of Lục Yên, Yên Bái Province. He also ordered several mass-produced amulets to sell in his store. Besides selling amulets, Kiệt, referring to himself as a “master” (<i>thầy</i>), provided geomancy examination and physiognomy services for his customers.</p>
Lan	4	<p>A fourth-year college student, majoring in Chinese. Due to the travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, she spent a year in Thầy Liên Hoa’s pagoda in an outskirt of Hanoi, where she was able to study Buddhism and explore spirituality. Lan always wore a pendant necklace that Thầy Liên Hoa gave her.</p>
Long	6	<p>A male amulet seller. He was hired by a Buddhist press to sell amulets at a famous Buddhist pagoda in Hanoi, where its office was located, to get additional incomes to support the organization. Long is Cô An’s nephew.</p>
Luu	1	<p>A 24-year-old employee at a Japanese company. She kept a glass jar filled with natural stones on her work desk. She revealed that she began seeing fortunetellers and wearing amulets as a way to “escape” her demanding job life.</p>
Mai	1	<p>A 20-year-old college student who worked as a tarot reader and managed her own accessory start-up business. Her hectic schedule left her feeling anxious and sleep deprived. Her condition improved when she started wearing an aquamarine bracelet.</p>
Min	6	<p>A 29-year-old woman who joined a spiritual trip to temples in Thanh Hóa Province. She claimed to have had a bad life impact from her ability to communicate with the dead. She always wore a wooden rosary that her friend, the spiritual tour guide, had gotten for her from a Tibetan Buddhist monastery.</p>

Name (Pseudonym)	Chapter	Relevant Information
Minh Quang	6	A third-year university student who always carried several kinds of amulets. His mother was deeply worried that he would return to Vietnam with weird Thai spiritual objects after his conference trip to Thailand.
Mộc	3	A 32-year-old female executive who owned a high-end <i>phong thủy</i> accessory brand. Her association as a spirit medium (<i>bà đồng</i>) with the Four Palaces (<i>Tứ Phủ</i>), a significant branch of the Mother Goddess Religion (<i>Đạo Mẫu</i>) in Vietnam, sparked her interest in amulets. Her customers included the Vietnamese residents both inside and outside the country.
Mỹ	4	A female monk of a small village pagoda located in Hanoi's Hà Tây area. I found her distributing amulets to the villagers visiting her pagoda during the New Year's Festival.
Nga	1, 5	A 29-year-old female vendor who sold lucky accessories both online and offline, primarily at craft markets. Her handcrafted products, such as necklaces and bracelets, were made from unpolished natural stones. Teenagers were her target audience. Nga launched her business during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Ngọc	6	An eyelash technician, aged 28, who joined a spiritual trip to Thanh Hóa Province. She mentioned that she used to carry a "very sacred" amulet to protect herself from evil spirits and bad energy, as well as draw luck.
Nhân Hà	3, 4	A 31-year-old amulet business owner. She identified herself as a "master" (<i>thầy</i>) after practicing <i>Vajrayana</i> Buddhism for several years. She applied a Taiwanese fortunetelling method to customize amulet accessories for customers and claimed to be able to channel sacred energy from the Buddhas into amulets.
Phuong	5	A 20-year-old college student in business management. She possessed several amulets at home, most of which her mother gave her. However, she did not seem to believe in the items because there was no concrete proof to support their efficacy.

Name (Pseudonym)	Chapter	Relevant Information
Quốc	2	A 32-year-old woodturner with expertise in crafting <i>Ngọc Am</i> wood bracelets. He learned the profession of woodturning from his parents, and it had been his family's main source of income for decades.
Sáng	3, 4, 5	A well-known amulet master (<i>thầy bùa</i>) and ritual master (<i>thầy cúng</i>), aged 37. He had started his spiritual journey when he was 16 years old. He claimed that helping people was his destiny due to his spiritual connection and capacity to communicate with the divines. He also asserted that his rituals could make the amulets he sold extremely sacred.
Thảo	2	A 39-year-old artisan in Nhị Khê Village. She was born and raised in the village and began her career as a woodturner at a very young age. Her family specialized in making wooden beads, bracelets, and prayer strings, particularly from premium scented rosewoods (<i>gỗ sưa</i>).
Thầy Liên Hoa	4, 5, 6, conclusion	The 53-year-old female abbot of a Buddhist pagoda in Hanoi's outskirts. She collaborated with another <i>phong thủy</i> master to educate people on Vietnamese spirituality (<i>tâm linh đất Việt</i>). She also launched a number of initiatives to aid her followers in comprehending spiritual principles that blended Buddhism with indigenous beliefs. These included organizing spiritual trips to temples and producing paper amulets called "energy money" (<i>tiền năng lượng</i>).
Thu	1	A 29-year-old woman who worked for a business development initiative in the Netherlands. She was a researcher for a governmental academic institution when I first met her. Thu was born and grew up in an upper-middle-class family. She was expected to inherit her family's academic career, which she did not want to.
Trà My	3, 5	A life consultant, 32 years old, who had taken various Eastern and Western spiritual courses. She used to be an amulet seller, offering wooden rosaries, bracelets, and amulet stickers. Feeling guilty of profiting off other people's faiths, Trà My quit selling amulets and turned to Buddhist practices.

Name (Pseudonym)	Chapter	Relevant Information
Tuấn Vinh	6	A 21-year-old college student majoring in Thai. He was hired as an interpreter by an amulet seller to assist Thai masters in communicating with Vietnamese customers who were considering purchasing Thai amulets.
Tùng	5	A first-year college student in international economics, who was passionate about science. He was born and nurtured in a small family of five in a village of Nam Định Province. He did not always get along with his mother, who was deeply spiritual. Tùng's mother gave him an amulet, which he did not dare to discard, although he disbelieved in it.
Vân	4	A 25-year-old fortuneteller and dedicated Buddhist practitioner. She was approached by several companies to leverage her spiritual abilities to boost sales, but she turned them down. According to her reading of my fortune, bad incidents I encountered might be caused by any conflicts among the amulets I carried.
Vi	4	A female spirit medium, 30 years old, who provided customers with amulet consecration and activation services.

APPENDIX C

Amulets from the Field



Spell jar
(Lo spell jar)
spell jar workshop + tarot reading

Lucky stone jar
(Lọ đá may mắn)
Lục Yên Gemstone Market

Buddhist keychain amulet
(Móc chìa khóa)
- Short string is attached -
a luxury amulet store in Hanoi, 200,000 VND (10 USD)

Prosperity Amulet
(Bùa Ngũ lộ thần tài)
owned by Khoa

Golden Bodhi Leaf
(Lá Bồ đề vàng)
owned by Khoa

Thái tuế keychain
(Móc khóa Thái tuế)
Kiet's store

Red cloth
(Vải đỏ)
Distributed at Thầy Liên Hoa's pagoda

Red cloth and coins
(Vải đỏ và đồng xu)
owned by Văn

Golden turtle
(Rùa vàng)
Imported from Japan

Two-dollar note
(Tờ 2 đô la)
Kiet's store, imported from USA and China
- Popular during Vietnamese New Year Festival (Tết) -
Year of the Cat

Printed paper amulet
(Bùa/phù)

Wooden machine-carved Guan Yin
(Quan Âm)
Nhi Khê Village

Natural stone bracelet
(Vòng đá)
Tiger-eye stone (đá mắt hổ)
Gemstone market

Livestock amulet
(Bùa chăn nuôi)



Peace amulet set (Bộ bùa bình an)

- Laminated printed paper -
- In front of a pagoda's gate
(20,000 VND = 1 USD)



Peace amulet (Bùa bình an)

- Distributed at the worship building of a pagoda
(suggested donation)

Success/ job promotion amulet (Phù công danh)

- Consecrated by Sáng -
(Flexible price starting from 300,000 to 3,000,000 VND)



Lucky amulet (Bùa cầu may mắn)

- Received from cô An during the New Year festival
- Sold at pagoda -
(200,000 VND = 10 USD)

Gold coins (Đồng xu)

- Come with the paper amulet in a set -

Phone amulet sticker (Linh phù dán điện thoại)

- Job success / Công danh sự nghiệp -



- An amulet store next to cô An's pagoda
20,000 VND (1 USD)



Beckoning Lady amulet (Bùa Mẹ Ngọc)

- A pagoda in Thailand



Peace amulet (Bùa bình an)

- Distributed at a pagoda
- Wesi Lake, Hanoi

NEW house

Blessed money (Tiền lộc)

- Spiritual trip in Thanh Hoa, the tour guide put it on altars and distributed it after the trip



Baby-boy dolls (Tương cầu)

- Used to request for children!



Study amulet

Cloth amulets (Lá bùa)

- A temple in Nam Dinh

Safe travel amulets

Business amulet

House protection