

## THE BUDDHIST CULTURAL SPACE OF WESTERN YÊN TỬ Trần Lê Bảo<sup>1</sup>

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The cultural space of Western Yên Tử (in Bắc Giang Province) is a harmoniously captivating place, combining the spectacular, mystical beauty of nature with the profound depths of national cultural history. Amid the majestic and pristine scenery, the forests and mountains are imbued with the former Zen realm and Zen ambiance of old. Here, one also finds abundant information about past peoples and eras. Numerous unique spiritual-cultural relics—such as temples, hermitages, towers, and various ancient artifacts—still bear traces, lying hidden across the sacred mountains and primeval forests, scattered throughout the cultural space of Western Yên Tử. This cultural space serves as a museum of spiritual culture, landscape culture, and ecological culture, expressing the ethnic identity, philosophy, and soul of the Vietnamese people, alongside the distinctive mark of Vietnamese Buddhist culture. The Trúc Lâm Zen School, with its philosophy and Buddhist lineage, is the spiritual heart of this cultural space. It has left indelible imprints in both tangible and intangible cultural heritages as well as in communal activities—together forming a cultural space deeply imbued with Buddhist spirituality here.

### 1. Cultural Space and the Buddhist Cultural Space in Western Yên Tử

#### 1.1 Cultural space

A cultural space is a geo-cultural space, also known as a “cultural region.” This space carries both the natural hallmarks characteristic of the region and the cultural features of humankind. The cultural space of Western Yên Tử is located within the cultural region of Bắc Giang Province, on the western flank of the Yên Tử mountain range. The defining natural element is the Yên Tử area, encompassing the Lục Đầu Giang river system and the Đông Triều arc, extending to Chí Linh in Hải Dương. Among these, the Yên Tử Peak stands out as a prominent high point. Of course, the division of this cultural space is merely relative for research purposes; one must also recognize its inherent unity within the overall space of both Eastern and Western Yên Tử.

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The key constituents of this cultural space are the various ethnic communities residing in the geographic area of Bắc Giang Province. Their interplay with nature and society, and their production activities, material culture, and spiritual-religious festivities all represent this cultural space.

## 1.2 Buddhist cultural space

A Buddhist cultural space is one deeply infused with elements of Buddhism. These Buddhist elements are not only seen in the pagodas and shrines scattered throughout Western Yên Tử but are also reflected in spiritual-cultural factors such as the sacred atmosphere and religious faith that permeate community life. A Buddhist cultural space can be regarded as a sacred heritage of belief.

In this context, the Buddhist cultural space includes:

- Primarily, the Trúc Lâm Zen School, with its thought and tradition, representing a spiritual-cultural heritage that directly influenced religious sites—temples, shrines, hermitages, towers—in Western Yên Tử.
- It also comprises the sacred aura and religious faith that dwell in the collective consciousness and devotional celebrations of the local population.

However, within the limitations of time and scope, this article focuses on elucidating the influence of the Trúc Lâm Zen School and the Lâm Tế lineage upon the spiritual-cultural space and the Buddhist reverence that manifests within the collective consciousness and festivals of the Western Yên Tử residents.

## 2. Buddhism and the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen School and Lâm Tế Zen School

It is noteworthy that Buddhism in Western Yên Tử features a Zen lineage rooted in two main sects: the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen School and the Lâm Tế Zen School. Despite similarities and differences, both have profoundly impacted the religious life of this region.

### 2.1 The influence of Buddhism on the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen School

a. **The Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen School** inherited and creatively developed the essence of several Chinese Zen Buddhist schools: Tì-ni-đa-lưu-chi, Vô Ngôn Thông, Trúc Lâm, and Thảo Đường. Emperor Trần Nhân Tông of the Trần Dynasty, after abdicating the throne and becoming a monk (the 18th successor of the Vô Ngôn Thông lineage), “localized” Buddhism by founding the “Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen School.”

#### b. Core Teachings of the Zen School

Zen Buddhism teaches “Bản lai vô nhất vật” (“Originally, there is not a single thing”) and “Bản vô phiền não nguyên thị Bồ Đề, Phiền não tức Bồ Đề” (“Originally, there is no affliction—

Affliction is, in fact, Bodhi”). Zen places great emphasis on the “mind” of each person: the awakened mind becomes Buddha. Unlike Tịnh độ tông (the Pure Land Buddhism), which relies on the power of Amitābha (an external force), Zen Buddhism extols “self-power” (internal strength) for practitioners to cultivate and achieve enlightenment. Vietnamese Zen, which inherits Chinese Zen, integrates Pure Land teachings as well, forming a blend known as “Zen-Pure Land integration” (Thiền - Tịnh hợp nhất).

The “tùy duyên”<sup>2</sup> and “hòa quang đồng trần”<sup>3</sup> concepts in Trúc Lâm Zen have profoundly influenced Vietnamese Buddhist life.

## 2.2 The Lâm Tế Zen School

### a. Propagation of the Lâm Tế Zen School

The Lâm Tế Zen School was introduced into Vietnam from China mainly during the Trần Dynasty and the Lê Trung Hưng period. To adapt to local culture and customs, the Lâm Tế Zen School underwent fundamental modifications, no longer retaining the same radical style of completely destroying conceptual attachments. Vietnamese Buddhism in general and Vietnamese Lam Te Zen in particular are never copies of Chinese Buddhism or Chinese Lam Te Zen. Instead, it is a selective adaptation, reshaped to suit the national culture, tradition and philosophy.

Beyond inheriting the distinctive methods of the Lâm Tế tradition, the Vietnamese Lâm Tế Zen School developed a new Zen identity for Vietnamese Buddhism, especially in the southern regions of old Đại Việt. This demonstrates the accommodating spirit of Buddhism: “Bất biến nhi tùy duyên”<sup>4</sup> (“Unchanging in essence while adapting to conditions”). Thus, one clearly sees the harmonious blending in Lâm Tế Zen with Vietnamese traditional culture: the convergence of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and ancestor worship, together with Zen-Pure Land-Mantra (Mật) dual cultivation.

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<sup>2</sup> Tùy duyên is a key concept in Buddhism that can be understood as “to accord with conditions; to follow destiny; to let things run their natural course.” It carries the idea of accepting and harmonizing with the natural course of events, rather than forcing things against their natural flow.

<sup>3</sup> Hòa quang đồng trần can be understood as “**hòa ánh sáng cùng với bụi**” translates to “**Merging light with dust.**” It means harmonizing with the mundane world without setting oneself apart in an eccentric way. This phrase originates from Lao Tzu's saying, “**Hòa kì quang, đồng kì trần**” (Harmonize one’s light and blend with the dust).

In Buddhism, this phrase is used to describe how Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, in their effort to save sentient beings, conceal their radiant wisdom and temporarily take on transformation bodies as skillful means to be born into the defiled, troubled world. By doing so, they establish connections with sentient beings, gradually guiding them toward the Dharma. (<https://phatgiao.org.vn/tu-dien-phat-hoc-online/hoa-quang-dong-tran-k34469.html>)

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**b. Openness and Inclusiveness of Lâm Tế Zen**

Upon entering Vietnam, Lâm Tế Zen further encouraged a tripartite integration of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism (Tam giáo đồng nguyên – Three Teachings), combined with ancestor worship. This formed a new belief system and contributed to a distinctive Zen identity in Vietnam.

The core of Vietnamese Buddhism is Zen. Regardless of their chosen practice, many Buddhists still identify themselves as belonging to a particular Zen lineage, often referring to their teachers as Zen masters. This phenomenon has held true throughout the history of Vietnamese Buddhism.

Moreover, when Lâm Tế Zen took root in Vietnam, it skillfully merged with traditional practices to create Zen-Pure Land-Mantra dual cultivation. Practitioners in a single day might incorporate all three methods: Zen, Pure Land recitations, and mantra recitations for mental tranquility. Each approach bolsters the other. This integrated approach has been highly popular from ancient times to the present day and is considered a principal practice within the Vietnamese Lâm Tế lineage. Yet at the heart of Lâm Tế Zen is the method of meditative inquiry—particularly through “công án” (koans)—while “shouting” and “staff blows” are specialized skillful means to break through conceptual barriers. This adaptability has rendered Lâm Tế Zen an invaluable spiritual heritage of the Vietnamese nation, transmitted and preserved to the present.

The concept of “Zen-Pure Land dual cultivation” has long been recognized among Vietnamese Zen masters. For instance, as early as in the time of Venerable Thông Biện, the Lotus Sutra was frequently chanted. Later, Emperor-turned-Zen Master Trần Nhân Tông advised in his work *Cư Trần Lạc Đạo Phú* (“Dwelling in the World, Enjoying the Way”): “*Tịnh độ is a pure mind; do not question about the Western Paradise. Amitābha is one’s own awakened nature; do not tire yourself searching for the Land of Ultimate Bliss.*”

In summary, with the principle “tùy duyên nhi bất biến, bất biến nhi tùy duyên,” Buddhism in general and the Lâm Tế Zen School in particular have clearly illustrated this spirit. Their selective cultural adaptation has allowed Lâm Tế Zen to take root and blend with Vietnamese cultural traditions. This mirrors the concept “Phật pháp tại thế gian, bất ly thế gian giác” (“Buddhism is in the world; enlightenment is inseparable from worldly existence”). Such integration has become a hallmark of an inclusive Zen philosophy, making it easier for practitioners to adopt and apply in their daily spiritual lives for the benefit of themselves and others. Hence, this school has endured and continues to flourish robustly to this day.

### 3. Zen Thought and Its Influence within the Western Yên Tử Cultural Space

Together with the “tùy duyên” ethos of Trúc Lâm Zen or the motto “tùy duyên nhi bất biến, bất biến nhi tùy duyên” of Lâm Tế Zen, and the principle of “hòa quang đồng trần” in Trúc Lâm or “Phật pháp tại thế gian, bất ly thế gian giác” in Lâm Tế, these core ideals have profoundly shaped the Buddhist landscape of Western Yên Tử. Their influence manifests in the solemn atmosphere at temple gates and the deep reverence for Buddhism in the hearts of the Western Yên Tử residents.

#### 3.1 The distribution of Buddhist sites in Western Yên Tử

Historically called Linh sơn (“Sacred Mountain”), Yên Tử ranks among the four “blessed sacred lands” of Giao Châu (the old name for parts of Vietnam). In many mountainous settings, spiritual energy is believed to concentrate at mountain peaks and in bodies of water. In the Yin-Yang interplay, the mountain’s shape (Yang) and water (Yin) help balance energy, fostering a healthy body and a lucid mind, conducive to sudden enlightenment. Furthermore, Buddhism—especially Zen—requires a “tranquil space” for practice. Yên Tử Mountain is situated neither too far from nor too close to village life, enabling monastics to quickly enter meditative states while remaining accessible to the surrounding community. The calmness of the Yên Tử forests, so pure and quiet, is an ideal realm for Zen masters and disciples to attain tranquility. The quest for serenity demands that practitioners cultivate a contemplative, self-emptying approach to reach enlightenment.

Moreover, with the expansion of the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen School, the growing ranks of clergy and lay Buddhists necessitated the building of new temples and hermitages to support religious practice.

Such requirements guided the selection of temple sites and shaped temple architecture in alignment with the Zen Buddhist principle of “hòa quang đồng trần” (Merging light with dust) and “Phật pháp tại thế gian, bất ly thế gian giác” (“Buddhism is in the world; enlightenment is inseparable from worldly existence”).

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen School underwent a revival. Existing temples were restored or rebuilt, often on a larger scale. Within the Western Yên Tử area in Bắc Giang Province, the temple system expanded significantly, exemplified by sites like Vĩnh Nghiêm Temple, Hồ Bắc Temple, Bình Long Temple, Cao Temple, Hang Non Temple, Hòn Tháp Temple, Yên Mã Temple, Hang Dong Temple, Ổ Lợn Temple, Am Vãi Temple, Đòng Vành Temple, Chi Tác Temple, and Bồ Đà Temple, among others.

The vast array of spiritual-cultural landmarks—temples, shrines, and hermitages—attests to the extensive reach of Zen Buddhist thought and the bond between Zen Buddhism and the

Western Yên Tử community. As the old saying goes, “Phật pháp tại thế gian, bất ly thế gian giác.”

### **3.2 Fundamental changes in architectural forms for spiritual practice**

Initially, Buddhist practice in Yên Tử was austere. Early practitioners chose caves or rock overhangs or built small huts as hermitages, living ascetically on wild vegetables and leaves and paying little heed to material comforts. However, after the emergence of the Trúc Lâm Zen School, embodying the “tùy duyên” approach and an easygoing attitude toward daily life—“Eat when hungry, sleep when tired”—temples and shrines spread widely throughout Western Yên Tử on a larger scale. This growth affirms the importance and far-reaching influence of the Trúc Lâm Zen School during the Lý and Trần Dynasties. The Buddhist cultural space of Western Yên Tử not only meets the requirements for environmental diversity but also fulfills the spiritual and practical demands of Zen Buddhism. Consequently, from ancient times, this region has drawn kings, government officials, Zen masters, and their disciples who sought to practice and attain Bodhisattvahood—a prime example being King-turned-Zen Master Trần Nhân Tông.

## **4. Characteristics of the Buddhist Cultural Space**

**4.1 Architecture and landscape of Vietnamese temples** in general, and the temples and hermitages in Western Yên Tử in particular, are deeply influenced by Buddhist culture—from conceptual foundations to function, scale, structure, and more. Though serving multiple functions, they primarily offer both a setting for religious activities and a place for aesthetic and spiritual enjoyment. As a result, temple landscapes often combine religious culture and environmental culture, much like in many great civilizations of the world. The transformation from purely religious architecture into a site that also offers aesthetic pleasure has been a protracted historical process, developing in tandem with the “Vietnamization” of Buddhism in Vietnam.

### **4.2 Architecture in Yên Tử’s temples and hermitages**

The temples and hermitages in Yên Tử and Western Yên Tử manifest a unique and sacred style of religious architecture. Several notable features are reflected in the principles guiding site selection, interior layout, exterior landscape, overall scale, and artistic arrangement.

#### **a. Site Selection for Temples and Shrines**

Cultural space in temples reflects the interplay between nature, society, Buddhism, and faith. Consequently, selecting a site for a temple is of utmost importance. Its position is ideally close enough to residential areas for monastics and laypeople to interact, yet still quiet and scenic, beneficial for contemplative practice. Zen schools often favor elevated, secluded, breezy locations with pleasing vistas.

## **b. Spatial Layout of Zen Temples and Shrines**

Temple architecture is a creative, integrated whole, harmoniously uniting artistic principles and religious views. A fundamental concept is that the overall layout follows the terrain and coexists symbiotically with nature—“ Although it is man-made, it seems to be born from nature.”

From a functional standpoint, the layout of a Zen temple typically comprises religious areas, living quarters, entrance areas for guests, and scenic areas for enjoyment. The main religious section includes the main hall, stupas, towers, and pavilions for worshipping the Buddha and conducting Buddhist rituals. The main hall—called the Đại Hùng Bảo Điện (“Great Hall of Mighty Heroism”) or simply Đại điện (“Great Hall”)—is centrally located, housing statues of Shakyamuni Buddha and his principal disciples, Ānanda and Kāśyapa, where monastics gather for morning and evening devotions.

The Đại Hùng Bảo Điện rests in a central, solemn position that is quiet and secluded, evoking a sacred Buddhist atmosphere. Meanwhile, the living quarters—such as the abbot’s room, monks’ rooms, dining hall, and kitchen—are arranged nearby, along with accommodations for lay devotees and visitors. Gardens, ornamental rocks, miniature ponds, and bonsai trees are often incorporated into the temple design, forming a miniature landscape that blends seamlessly into the broader natural environment.

The core axis of most Zen temples features a north-south or east-west orientation, with the main hall as the central pivot. This arrangement lends formality and can adapt to local geography, optimizing both feng shui and aesthetic balance. The symmetrical designs and layering align with the mountainous terrain, all conveying a solemn reverence for the Buddha and other venerated figures.

In addition, the temple landscape merges solemn religious architecture with flexible secular elements. Beyond functioning as a place of worship and beauty, the architecture must also embody the cultural essence of Zen Buddhism. This includes walls that demarcate sacred space, walkways that guide the circulation of visitors, and decorative features—even ornamental trees—imbued with Zen symbolism.

Altogether, the Western Yên Tử Buddhist cultural space, shaped by Zen philosophy yet grounded in daily life, creates an environment that is simultaneously solemn, devout, restful, and appealing to both faithful Buddhists and curious travelers.

## **5. The Buddhist Cultural Space of Western Yên Tử and Religious Faith**

Religious faith is a psychological state of belief, admiration, and reverence directed toward a particular object of devotion. In the context of Zen Buddhism, it entails veneration of Buddhist



deities. This faith, partly ingrained in the Vietnamese psyche, is also nurtured by Zen teachings. It manifests in people's inner attitudes and outward expressions, permeating their cultural lives.

## 5.1 Vietnamese Identity and Zen Buddhist Culture

### a. Similarities between Vietnamese Mindset and Buddhism

- *Compassion at the Core:* Buddhism emphasizes compassion for all sentient beings; likewise, the Vietnamese have long cherished the virtue of mutual affection and community support. Buddhist teachings on kindness align well with the cultural tradition of the Vietnamese.
- *Nonviolence:* Buddhism advocates respect for life and discourages killing. Likewise, Vietnamese culture prizes peace, opposes warfare, and fosters goodwill with neighbors.
- *Almsgiving (Dāna):* Buddhism teaches the virtue of generosity. Vietnamese sayings like “A morsel in hunger is worth a bundle when full” and “The kindly are rewarded by Heaven” mirror this principle.
- *Freedom from Preconceptions:* Buddhism underscores the principle of cause and effect, highlighting individual responsibility for creating one's own karma and destiny. This stands apart from Confucian “Heaven's Mandate,” suggesting some are born to nobility or poverty by divine decree. Conversely, Vietnamese belief is that no one remains poor forever; fortune can change.

### b. Buddhist Ways of Living Harmonize with Vietnamese Life

- *Communal Spirit:* Vietnamese people value close-knit communities and neighborly support, mirroring Buddhism's emphasis on universal compassion.
- *Simplicity and Adaptability:* Vietnamese culture favors a simple, sincere lifestyle—one that resonates with Buddhism's message of purity and detachment (“*cư trần lạc đạo*,” meaning “dwelling in the world, content in the Way”).
- *Living in Harmony with Nature:* Vietnam's landscape is predominantly agricultural—rice fields, forests, bamboo hedges. Buddhism teaches a “*tùy duyên*” approach, encouraging respect and protection of the natural environment.
- *Calm Outlook:* Zen philosophy teaches equanimity, neither clinging to extremes. The Vietnamese share a similar resilience and optimism in the face of adversity.



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### **c. Enduring Impact of Zen Buddhism on Vietnamese Culture**

The foundation of Buddhism’s long-standing companionship with the Vietnamese nation is the principle “tùy duyên bất biến”. Adaptation promotes cultural assimilation, but “unmoving essence” ensures that fundamental Vietnamese cultural roots are maintained. Because Buddhism can harmonize with the cultural fabric of local societies, it is embraced as a humanistic spiritual reality. This synergy is especially visible in the devoted Zen mindset of the faithful, expressed as a beautiful tradition—particularly during Buddhist festival seasons.

#### **5.2 Reverence within Temple Grounds**

For both Vietnamese people at large and the Western Yên Tử community in particular, devotion to Zen Buddhism is profoundly ingrained. This is especially evident in the periodic and annual Buddhist festivals held at Western Yên Tử temples.

On the first and fifteenth days of each lunar month, many Buddhists and local residents go to the temple—an act of religious devotion that, even if partly for sightseeing, immerses them in a serene, sacred atmosphere. Personal worries often fade in this tranquil space. Gestures of placing one’s palms together and silently wishing for blessings before the Buddha convey a reverential faith and hope for peace in the present and the future. Such acts offer psychological relief to both regular devotees and occasional visitors alike.

Reverence for Buddhism intensifies most vividly during festivals at Western Yên Tử temples, where the faithful gather in large numbers.

#### **5.3 Notable Festivals in Bắc Giang – Western Yên Tử**

##### **a. Typical Festivals**

These include Từ Hải Temple Festival, Thổ Hà Communal House Festival, Bồ Đà Temple Festival, Xương Giang Festival, Suối Mỡ Temple Festival, Vĩnh Nghiêm Temple Festival, Dành Temple Festival, Vòng Communal House Festival, Tiên Hạc Festival, and others. Although each differs in its venerated figures, time and place, scale, and festivity, all preserve deep-rooted Buddhist devotion in participants’ consciousness, especially during the festival’s ritual segment.

##### **b. Two Representative Zen Buddhist Festivals in Bắc Giang – Western Yên Tử**

- **Bồ Đà Temple Festival**

Bồ Đà Temple is a major Buddhist center in Bắc Giang belonging to the Trúc Lâm Zen lineage (also known as “Trúc Lâm tam tổ,” referencing the three founding patriarchs: Trần Nhân Tông as the first patriarch, Pháp Loa as the second, and Huyền Quang as the third). The festival takes place from the 16th to the 18th of the second lunar month at Bồ Đà Mountain in Tiên Sơn Commune, Việt Yên District. Built during the Lê Trung Hưng period (under King Lê Dụ Tông, 1705–1728), Bồ Đà Temple now remains an important site, preserving significant cultural traditions. Visitors to the festival not only learn more about Trúc Lâm Buddhist teachings but also enjoy ancient Vietnamese architectural styles. The festival is enlivened by sweet Kinh Bắc folk melodies of quan họ love duels.

- **Vĩnh Nghiêm Temple Festival**

Also known as the La Festival, it is held on the 14th day of the second lunar month at Đức La Hamlet, Trí Yên Commune, Yên Dũng District. Built in the Lý-Trần era (12th–13th century), Vĩnh Nghiêm Temple is a large, ancient site of considerable cultural value, belonging to the Trúc Lâm Zen tradition. On the day of festival, monks and devotees from various regions convene to chant sutras and recite the Buddha’s name in the main hall, while local people and visitors flock there to pray for blessings for the new year.

These two festivals, among many others in the Zen Buddhist cultural spaces of Western Yên Tử, demonstrate the profound influence of Zen Buddhist culture on local life.

Sacredness is the core of these festivals, with communal devotion to the Buddha alongside other revered deities, establishing a solemn mood that envelops the entire ceremony. Such gatherings represent the collective’s faith, seeking peace and happiness from the Buddha. Festivals also unify communities, spreading the compassionate love of the Buddha. Merging into the festive atmosphere, people rediscover optimism, enhance moral values, and together steer themselves toward the good and away from evil. In this Buddhist cultural space, the community preserves and passes down shared cultural traditions.

Festivals also encourage new cultural creations, reflecting the community’s constant drive to improve and enrich life. With the help of modern communication technologies, Buddhist teachings can now reach the public more widely and effectively. Larger, more organized festivals draw numerous pilgrims, creating opportunities to promote Buddhist teachings and

local culture to the entire nation and to international visitors. Still, it is crucial to guard against the misuse of religious practices for commercial gain, which could distort the wholesome Buddhist values cherished by Western Yên Tử communities.

## Conclusion

The Zen Buddhist cultural space of Western Yên Tử is a vivid embodiment of the ideologies and doctrines of the Trúc Lâm and Lâm Tế Zen schools.

Initially, this cultural space is visible through its physical spiritual-cultural expressions—temples, shrines, and hermitages. Each has been shaped by Zen philosophy, from site selection to the design of interior and exterior landscapes, striking a delicate balance between religious life and the secular world. This Zen Buddhist cultural space carries a distinctively Vietnamese character, testifying to the presence, ingenuity, and inheritance of Zen Buddhism in this region.

The Zen Buddhist cultural space has also spread deeply into the religious consciousness of the Western Yên Tử community, visible in people's moral conduct and their devotion to the Buddha, promoting goodness and avoiding evil. This Zen Buddhist faith has evolved into a treasured custom for local residents. Most notably, at the annual Zen Buddhist festivals, this devotion is the unifying thread that ties the community together, allowing sacred rituals to be performed solemnly and communal festivities to be enjoyed collectively—providing psychological release and equilibrium to every individual and the community as a whole.

Finally, the Zen Buddhist cultural space of Western Yên Tử has recorded numerous invaluable cultural heritages of regional and national importance that must be safeguarded and further developed in our contemporary era.

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