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HISTORY AND RELIGION

**BUDDHIST HERITAGE IN THANH HÓA FROM A FOLKLORE PERSPECTIVE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Buddhism, one of the major religions introduced to Vietnam at an early stage, rapidly became an official religion and has exerted profound influence on the social life and cultural identity of the Vietnamese people both in the past and the present. Thanh Hóa is among the earliest regions to have embraced Buddhism and currently preserves numerous invaluable heritages in both tangible and intangible forms. By employing fieldwork methods, participant observation, and interdisciplinary historical approaches - through the lens of folklore studies - this article explores the Buddhist heritage of Thanh Hóa as represented in folk literature and traditional festivals. The findings aim to highlight the distinctive value of Buddhist cultural heritage in Thanh Hóa within the broader flow of Vietnamese Buddhism.

**Keywords:** Buddhist heritage, Thanh Hóa, folklore, syncretism

**1. Introduction**

Buddhism was peacefully introduced into Vietnam around the beginning of the Common Era, during the period of Chinese Han domination, through merchants and Indian missionaries. Due to its compatibility with Vietnamese ways of thinking and sensibilities, Buddhism quickly gained prominence, with the Luy Lâu Buddhist center in Bắc Ninh emerging as a major spiritual hub - once considered comparable to the great centers of Pengcheng and Luoyang in China - and reached its zenith during the Lý and Trần dynasties. According to historical sources, Buddhism arrived in Thanh Hóa as early as the fourth century (Tuấn, 2016, p. 36). Over time, Buddhism has experienced various historical ups and downs: it was once the dominant religion, later coexisted with Confucianism and Taoism under the model of “Three Teachings in Harmony,” and at times yielded to the influence of Confucian orthodoxy. Nonetheless, the philosophy and cultural heritage of Buddhism have left a lasting impact on the spiritual life and socio-cultural development of Vietnamese communities. This influence is evident in oral traditions, historical texts, festivals, religious practices, and belief systems. In several districts of Thanh Hóa<sup>1</sup>, Buddhist temples dating back to the Lý, Trần, and Lê dynasties have been preserved. Although many of these sites have suffered from time and warfare - some reduced to ruins or surviving only in legends and folk narratives - they nonetheless reflect a deep-rooted spiritual legacy. Moreover, the blending of Buddhist and local folk beliefs within festivals and community practices has created a uniquely integrated and vibrant Buddhist heritage in Thanh Hóa.

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<sup>1</sup> This study examines Buddhist heritage in selected districts across the midland, lowland, and coastal regions of Thanh Hóa. Due to limited research conditions, it does not include field surveys of temples and temple festivals in certain mountainous districts - areas primarily inhabited by ethnic minority communities.

## 2. Theoretical approach and research methods

### 2.1. Analytical Approach

This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach to comprehensively identify and assess the value of Buddhist heritage in Thanh Hóa. The research examines tangible heritage, such as temples and pagodas, and intangible heritage, particularly festivals, within the cultural space of Vietnamese villages. It emphasizes the interactive relationships between natural conditions, ecological environments, historical contexts, and folk literature and traditions.

### 2.2. Research Methods

*Documentary Analysis:* The study synthesizes and analyzes secondary sources, including historical texts such as Thanh Hóa Quan Phong, and literary corpora like *Kho tàng ca dao người Việt* (Treasury of Vietnamese Folk Poetry) and *Địa chí Hà Trung* (Hà Trung Gazetteer). These sources are used to compare and contrast data concerning Buddhist heritage in Thanh Hóa, allowing the identification of distinctive features from a folklore perspective.

*Fieldwork and On-site Investigation:* The research involves field visits to various temples in Thanh Hóa, particularly in Nga Sơn and Hà Trung districts, where many ancient temples with valuable architectural, cultural, and literary features are still preserved and reflected in folk traditions. The findings from fieldwork provide empirical insight that complement and verify oral traditions and folk narratives, illustrating the influence of Buddhism and its close relationship with local communities and cultural life.

*Participant Observation:* The researcher directly participated in and studied several folk festivals associated with Buddhist worship, both in general village practices and in specific temple ceremonies, to gain a practical understanding of the rituals and their meanings.

*Historical Method:* The historical approach is applied from both diachronic and synchronic perspectives. The diachronic analysis focuses on folk literature and festival materials to trace the historical influence of Buddhism on the people of Thanh Hóa. The synchronic analysis offers a comprehensive view of how Buddhist influence has spread, merged, and interacted with local culture through various forms of communal celebration.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1. Buddhist Heritage in Thanh Hóa as Reflected in Folk Literature

As a core component of traditional culture, folk literature not only conveys themes and values associated with truth, compassion, and beauty (Chân - Thiện - Mỹ) but also serves as a repository for preserving, transmitting, and interpreting cultural values across various domains, including beliefs, religion, customs, rituals, and social norms. Within the rich corpus of Vietnamese folk literature, one can find numerous reflections of Buddhist heritage: the doctrines and teachings of Buddhism, images of ancient temples, and familiar sounds such as the resonant chimes of bells, the rhythmic clatter of wooden fish drums, or the recitations of sutras. Visual motifs include scenes of women solemnly carrying offerings to the pagoda while chanting “A Di Đà Phật” with sincere devotion. These cultural imprints gently permeate people’s consciousness, becoming ingrained in their lifestyles and customary practices that persist to this day.

Drawing from folk compositions in the region, the Buddhist temple system in Thanh Hóa emerges as both diverse and widespread, spanning different localities and historical periods. Legends, folktales, and proverbs either directly or indirectly explain the origins and formation of these temples, while also highlighting the contributions of renowned monks and nuns who helped propagate Buddhism. Among the most significant elements of Buddhist heritage - both generally and specifically in Thanh Hóa - are the temples themselves. These tangible cultural relics are deeply embedded in the public consciousness. A temple is not merely a structure; it is a cultural museum that houses scriptures, ritual instruments, and items used for both monastic practice and lay devotion. It is a space for communal gathering and spiritual cultivation.

As noted by Venerables Thích Hạnh Tuệ and Thích Nữ Thanh Quế:

“A Buddhist temple is the site of all religious activities - not reserved exclusively for monks and nuns, nor for the wealthy - but open to all sentient beings, embraced by the Buddha’s compassion.”

Similarly, Đặng Văn Bài (2008, p. 11) states that:

“The Buddhist temple is communal property, belonging to the entire populace and especially the local community, rather than to any single abbot.”

A temple offers inner peace and awakens the Buddha nature within each person. Every pagoda possesses a unique "birth certificate" - a distinct identity that is at once physical and spiritual. In its dissemination of doctrine, Buddhism does not act in isolation; it often harnesses folk literary forms as effective vehicles for conveying its philosophical ideas..

From the perspective of tangible heritage, folk literature - primarily legends and folk verses - does not delve deeply into the architectural or artistic features of Buddhist temples in Thanh Hóa. However, it does provide unique insights into their locations, vernacular names, and origins.

For example, although folk verses are typically brief and lyrical, they still convey essential information, identifying well-known temples in Thanh Hóa:

"It is said that Chùa Sỏi is full of fairies,

Bạch Câu teems with fish, and Thạch Tuyền with mandarins."

(Nguyễn Xuân Kính & Phan Đăng Nhật, eds., 2001, p. 966)

This couplet succinctly reflects the prominence of these locations. Chùa Sỏi, for instance, is the colloquial name for Sùng Nghiêm Tự, a temple located on the slope of Vân Lỗi Mountain (also called Vân Hoàn) in Nga Phương Commune, formerly part of Nga Sơn District. The temple is believed to have been built during the Trần dynasty, as recorded in the stele titled “Sùng Nghiêm tự Vân Lỗi sơn Đại Bi nam”, inscribed in the second year of Thiệu Khánh (1372) under King Trần Nghệ Tông by scholar Phạm Sư Mạnh. According to village elders, the mountain was once close to the sea and often shrouded in vibrant clouds, which led to the poetic name Vân Hoàn, meaning “convergence of clouds.”.

Folk poetry also links temples in Thanh Hóa to royal figures, subtly referencing sacred lands as the birthplaces of great leaders:

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"Here lies the land of emperors,

Whoever returns to Bồng Báo rides a crimson steed."

(Nguyễn Xuân Kính & Phan Đăng Nhật, eds., 2001, p. 1864)

Bồng Báo refers to the ancient land of Bồng Thượng (in present-day Vĩnh Lộc), the homeland of Lord Trịnh. The area is home to many historical and spiritual sites, including Nghè Vẹt and Phủ Trịnh, as well as the ancient temple Lộc Sơn, nestled against Mount Báo and overlooking the Mã River. The temple is steeped in legend and was later renamed Báo Ân (Repaying Grace), reflecting its role in honoring the benevolence of ancestors and deities.

Another verse highlights a favorable geographical site chosen for temple construction:

"In Bồ Village, the royal market resides,

Mật Sơn has its temple, Tạnh Xá its royal tombs."

(Nguyễn Xuân Kính & Phan Đăng Nhật, eds., 2001, p. 1359)

This verse refers to the region of Bồ Vệ, comprising four villages: Tạnh Xá, Quảng Xá, Bồ Vệ, and Mật Sơn - once part of Thọ Hạc commune in Đông Sơn district, and now within Hạc Thành Ward of Thanh Hóa Province. This area is notably the birthplace of Queen Mother of Emperor Lê Anh Tông. Mật Sơn, with its picturesque landscape, features Kỳ Lân Mountain, shaped like a reclining unicorn, and Ngọc Nữ Mountain, said to resemble a veiled woman. During his southern tour, King Lê Thần Tông ascended the mountain, commissioned the construction of a temple nearby, and had a statue of himself placed there for veneration. That temple, Đại Bi Pagoda, serene and contemplative, eventually became his final resting place. The Bồ Vệ region also contains the tombs of royal consorts, such as those of Empresses and imperial concubines of the Lê dynasty.

In addition to being the ancestral land of the Trịnh lords and the sacred ground of the Lê dynasty's ancestral shrines, Hà Trung - birthplace of many Nguyễn dynasty figures - is also frequently mentioned in folk verses through its ancient temples:

"At Bạch Viên Pagoda, stone bells and bronze gongs resound,

Birds sing, flowers bloom, and dragons and phoenixes fly."

(Địa chí Hà Trung, 2005, p. 484)

Bạch Viên Pagoda, located in Hà Lai Commune, Hà Trung District<sup>12</sup>, is renowned for its beautiful architecture and intricate carvings. It houses a large bronze bell and a massive stone gong, which are signature artifacts of many temples in the region. These sacred instruments not only reflect religious significance but also represent a spiritual space where locals come for contemplation and purification.

Another verse illustrates the intimate bond between temple and village, where the temple name is derived from the village itself - evoking a sense of shared identity and cultural pride:

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<sup>2</sup> Currently located in Lĩnh Toại Commune, Thanh Hóa Province

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"It is said that Gũ Village is a joyful place,  
With a temple to the east and a shrine to the west."

(Địa chí Hà Trung, 2005, p. 484)

Or more lyrically:

"What divine craftsmanship shaped our village?  
A river, a mountain, and in the middle, Lady's Shrine.  
Gũ Pagoda, where Buddha offers blessed fruits,  
Even the immortals descend to stroll our land."<sup>3</sup>

Gũ Pagoda, formally named Dương Hoa Tự, is situated on Mount Gũ in Hà Phú Commune, Hà Trung District. The pagoda was restored in the 19th century and faces westward toward the Lèn River. According to village elders, the pagoda's main hall enshrines the Buddha, but it also includes altars to the Jade Emperor and Confucius - an embodiment of the Three Teachings in Harmony (Tam giáo đồng nguyên), a syncretic religious tradition dating back to the Lý and Trần dynasties.

Moving southward within Thanh Hóa Province, Nông Cống District is known for its mountainous landscape, the highest peak being Mount Nưa - also called Na Sơn - rising 536 meters above sea level and spanning three districts: Nông Cống, Triệu Sơn, and Như Thanh. This mountain range was once the stronghold of Lady Triệu during her uprising, and it is considered a sacred land of remarkable natural beauty. Alongside Na Sơn Động Phủ (Na Shrine) lies Khánh Long Tự, a temple built within a rocky cavern and celebrated in local oral tradition:

"In lofty Nông District, the Na Forest stands,  
Of all temples, Khánh Long is most revered through time.  
A stone gong, a bronze bell, Long Quân to the left,  
Earth deities to the right; the Buddha grants blessings.  
Let us reform, turn to the new,  
I shall recount the temple's tale -  
Founded in Lê Vĩnh Thịnh's reign, its legend lives on..."

(Vương Duy Trinh, 2020, p. 173)

Khánh Long Pagoda, also known as Chùa Nón (Conical Hat Pagoda), was originally located in Cung Hoàng Commune, Cao Xá Canton, Nông Cống District, under the old Tĩnh Gia Prefecture. It now belongs to Cung Điền Village in Minh Nghĩa Commune (formerly part

<sup>3</sup> The folk verse has been orally transmitted in Hà Phú Commune (later merged into Hà Lĩnh Commune, now part of Lĩnh Toại Commune, Thanh Hóa Province), and was provided by folk researcher Vũ Ngọc Định.

of Nông Cống). According to the inscription, the pagoda was constructed in the years 1706–1707, during the reign of King Lê Dụ Tông (Vĩnh Thịnh era). Deeply revered as a sacred site, the temple is believed by locals to have retained its spiritual power over generations.

At times, temples in Thanh Hóa are not directly named in folk verses, but instead are symbolically evoked through Buddhist philosophy, especially in relation to life's hardships or historical military expeditions through treacherous terrain:

"Drifting past the Thần Phù Gate,

The virtuous will float, the unworthy will sink."

(Nguyễn Xuân Kính & Phan Đăng Nhật, eds., 2001, p. 1396)

This folk verse alludes to the perilous Thần Phù Estuary - also known as Thần Đầu Gate - once a dangerous maritime passage with sharp, submerged rocks and violent waves. Situated at this location is Hàn Sơn Pagoda, constructed in 1797 in the village of Chính Đại, Nga Điền Commune, Nga Sơn District (now part of Nga An Commune, Thanh Hóa Province). The pagoda stands near this infamous estuary, which featured prominently on the southward migration route of Vietnamese settlers and soldiers. Over time, Thần Phù inspired numerous legends and historical tales. The verse cleverly employs Buddhist moral imagery - "virtuous" and "unworthy" - to reflect the spiritual philosophy of karma and human conduct, while simultaneously invoking the symbolic presence of the ancient temple in this sacred and dangerous landscape. Thus, the blending of geography, history, and Buddhist ethics vividly illustrates the religion's far-reaching influence on everyday life.

The folk verses cited above belong to a broader thematic category that reflects local history and landscapes - more specifically, they serve as cultural lenses through which to view the Buddhist temples of Thanh Hóa. Although not every temple mentioned in these verses is among the most prominent or architecturally grand, their presence in oral traditions attests to the deep affection and spiritual intimacy the local people have for these sacred spaces. To them, a temple is as familiar and essential as a home - offering refuge in times of hardship or emotional distress. These verses not only describe the sanctity or beauty of temple locations but also help define and identify Buddhist heritage in Thanh Hóa through the lens of ca dao (folk poetry).

In addition to ca dao, Buddhist temples in Thanh Hóa also appear in local legends - often imbued with mysticism and spiritual depth. These narratives do more than provide descriptive detail; they breathe life into the Buddhist heritage of Thanh Hóa by embedding the temples within the collective memory and imagination of successive generations. Such legends frequently explain the origins or names of temples through motifs involving divine battles, celestial beings, or the supernatural intervention of historical figures who receive spiritual aid in order to overcome adversity, protect the nation, or bring prosperity to their homeland. These stories are preserved through oral tradition and are sometimes woven into historical texts, stele inscriptions, and local chronicles - blurring the line between myth and history.

In Thiệu Hóa District, a well-known legend recounts a fierce wrestling match between two giant deities - Ông Vồm from Thiệu Hóa and Ông Bưng from Hoàng Hóa. Both were colossal figures of extraordinary strength. After seventeen evenly matched rounds, Ông Vồm began to tire, allowing Ông Bưng to lift him high into the air and slam him into a cliff, where his massive body became embedded in the rock and turned to stone. Since then, the

surrounding rivers, temples, and village names have borne Ông Vòm's name. In the local belief system of Thiệu Khánh Commune<sup>4</sup>, there is a persistent association between this myth and a half-carved Buddha statue embedded in the cliff face of Mount Vòm (also known as Mount Bàn A). This connection illustrates the cultural assimilation of Buddhist imagery into indigenous legend and reflects the intimate interplay between Buddhist faith and folk aspirations.

The motif of divine intervention (âm phù) is among the most prevalent in legends explaining the origins of sacred religious sites, particularly Buddhist temples. This narrative device reflects the richness of folk imagination and embodies deeply humanistic values - expressing the people's desire for spiritual protection during times of hardship or uncertainty. In many stories, monarchs receive divine guidance through dreams - visions of supernatural forces helping them defeat foreign invaders or avert disaster. In gratitude, they commission the construction of temples as offerings of thanks. One such legend describes the founding of Long Cầm Pagoda on Mount Ốc Sơn<sup>5</sup>, tied to a dream of King Lý Thái Tổ during his southern military campaign<sup>6</sup>. Another recounts the establishment of Tường Vân Pagoda (Chùa Giáng) in Vĩnh Lộc, following a dream of King Trần Duệ Tông while he camped near Mount Đùn before battle. In the vision, a golden cloud resembling a flowing silk ribbon appeared and later manifested during the actual combat, sowing confusion among the enemy and enabling a decisive Trần victory. In response, the king built a temple and named it Tường Vân, meaning "Auspicious Cloud," to honor the divine omen he believed had secured his triumph (Giáo hội Phật giáo Việt Nam tỉnh Thanh Hóa, 2022).

Alongside the motif of protecting the nation (hộ quốc), the aspiration to bring peace to the people (an dân) has always been a core concern of enlightened monarchs. According to legends and oral traditions in Nga Thạch Commune, in the first year of the Nguyên Phong era (1251), the Lèn River burst its banks, flooding vast areas and plunging residents into hardship. Epidemics soon followed. In response, King Trần Thánh Tông personally traveled to the flooded region to supervise the construction of dikes and rescue the population. The ponds and lakes that dot the area today are believed to be remnants of those ancient floods. In gratitude for divine protection during this crisis, the king ordered the construction of temples and shrines in Nga Thạch, including Thạch Tuyền Pagoda (with Thạch meaning "stone," symbolizing stability, and Tuyền meaning "stream," representing continuity). These acts exemplify the Buddhist ideals of compassion and protection through state patronage.

The founding of temples during the Lý and Trần dynasties in association with national defense and public welfare demonstrates the flourishing of Buddhism during these periods. The enduring Buddhist spirit - rooted in compassion - left a profound imprint on the spiritual lives of the Vietnamese people in general, and the residents of Thanh Hóa in particular. It is through such temples and stories that Buddhism extended beyond doctrine, becoming a guiding force in community life.

<sup>4</sup> Thiệu Khánh was formerly a commune of Thiệu Hóa District. On February 29, 2012, it was incorporated into Thanh Hóa City; on February 1, 2021, it became Thiệu Khánh Ward; and as of July 1, 2025, it is part of Đông Tiến Ward, Thanh Hóa Province

<sup>5</sup> Formerly part of Hà Phong Commune, which later became Hà Trung Township of Hà Trung District, and from July 1, 2025, it will be designated as Hà Trung Commune, Thanh Hóa Province.

<sup>6</sup> In the 11th year of the Thuận Thiên era (1020), King Lý Thái Tổ led a military expedition to conquer the southern territories. He stationed his troops on Mount Ốc Sơn. One night, the king dreamed of a local deity who appeared and promised to support him in the campaign. The expedition ended in victory. Upon returning to the capital, remembering the dream and in gratitude for the divine assistance, King Lý Thái Tổ ordered the construction of a temple on Mount Ốc Sơn, naming it *Long Cầm* ("Long" meaning dragon, and "Cầm" meaning gratitude).

Beyond motifs of divine intervention and state protection, many temples in Thanh Hóa are also linked to tales of celestial beings - reflecting folk desires for a peaceful, modest life. These temples often reside within legendary natural landscapes and are subtly connected to Taoist elements. For instance, Tiên Pagoda, along with Đồng Vua Lake and Thông Cave Shrine, forms a mystical complex in Nga An Commune, Nga Sơn District. It is central to the famous legend of Từ Thức Meets the Fairy Giáng Hương. Similarly, Du Anh Pagoda, located in a stunning natural complex that includes Xuân Đài Mountain, Hồ Công Cave, and Trác Phong Mountain in Ninh Khang Commune, Vĩnh Lộc District, was originally built during the Lý dynasty. It was later expanded and renamed Du Anh<sup>7</sup> by King Trần Nghệ Tông in honor of Princess Du Anh, who recovered from illness there using medicinal herbs found in the cave. These temples, set amidst spectacular scenery, blend sacred architecture with ethereal beauty, attracting pilgrims and visitors alike.

In Thanh Hóa, Mậu Xương Pagoda (formally Tuyết Sơn Phong Tự), located in Quảng Xương District, possesses a particularly distinctive origin. It is intimately tied to the development of a localized belief system known as Nội đạo tràng (the Inner Esoteric Sect). According to legend, the pagoda gained royal recognition when King Lê Thần Tông personally inscribed the phrase “Nội đạo chính tông” (Legitimate Esoteric Doctrine) in praise of the sect after its practitioners successfully cured the king’s mysterious illness. The founding legend centers on Trần Ngọc Lành, a virtuous figure born through divine petition to the noble Quỳnh Lâm lineage. In a vision, he encountered the Medicine Buddha (Dược Sư Lưu Ly Quang Như Lai) and vowed to renounce worldly ties to dedicate himself to spiritual service. He was entrusted with the sacred task of subduing malevolent spirits and was initiated into secret esoteric practices, receiving mystical seals and incantations from the Buddha. Trần Ngọc Lành, along with his three sons, pursued a virtuous path, performing good deeds and rejecting fame and wealth. Upon their passing, they were deified. He was honored with the title Phục Ma Thượng Đẳng Phúc Thần (Supreme Demon-Subduing Deity) and worshipped at Mậu Xương Pagoda. The pagoda's altar venerates not only the Buddha but also the Liệt Thánh (Deified Saints) of the Nội đạo tradition and the Holy Mother Liễu Hạnh<sup>8</sup>.

Compared to ca dao, legends provide a more diverse and detailed portrayal of the tangible Buddhist heritage in Thanh Hóa. These narratives not only describe the origins and evolution of temples but also illustrate early signs of cultural syncretism - specifically the blending of Buddhism with Taoism and indigenous spiritual beliefs. Many of these legends embed Buddhist symbols within local cosmologies, creating a multidimensional understanding of temple spaces that is both spiritual and historical.

Although the folk narratives presented here account for only a fraction of the broader temple system in Thanh Hóa, they nonetheless reveal the region’s rich and continuous Buddhist tradition across historical periods. These stories - drawn from legends and ca dao - are invaluable cultural resources that contribute to the planning and restoration of temples in a way that preserves their authenticity and local character. They also provide critical knowledge

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<sup>7</sup> Du Anh Pagoda, also known as Thông Pagoda, is an ancient temple located at the foot of Xuân Đài Mountain - a beautiful limestone range in Vĩnh Lộc District, Thanh Hóa Province. The pagoda is associated with the legend of King Trần Nghệ Tông bringing Princess Du Anh to the temple for worship and recuperation. The princess was treated with medicinal herbs from Hồ Công Cave and eventually recovered. Deeply moved, the king donated funds to renovate the pagoda into a three-hall structure (tam tòa), with Princess Du Anh personally overseeing the construction. Since then, the temple has borne her name. Hồ Công Cave is linked to the legendary figure Hồ Công, a divine herbalist said to cure ailments and sleep inside a gourd. He was later deified and became a statue enshrined in the cave

<sup>8</sup> In the past, the Buddhist Sangha did not recognize Mậu Xương Pagoda as an official Buddhist temple in the sense of being a legitimate site for Buddhist religious practice.

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for cultural management agencies, helping inform policies, design heritage dossiers, and develop sustainable strategies for safeguarding and promoting Buddhist heritage sites. From a folklore perspective, it is evident that Buddhist thought has deeply influenced cultural and social development in Thanh Hóa, particularly through the central role of temples as sites of religious activity. These temples have shaped everyday life for local residents, reinforcing the enduring presence of Buddhism in the broader flow of Vietnamese cultural history.

### ***3.2. Buddhist Heritage in Thanh Hóa as Reflected in Folk Festivals***

Buddhist festivals - commonly known as temple festivals (hội chùa) - are key expressions of Vietnam's intangible cultural heritage. In Thanh Hóa, the most prominent Buddhist festivals include the Thượng Nguyên festival (celebrated on the full moon of the first lunar month), Vesak (commemorating the Buddha's birth), and Vu Lan (the festival of filial piety). These events are deeply rooted in the agricultural rhythm of local life. For example, the Thượng Nguyên festival, held during a period of relative rest after the Lunar New Year, reflects villagers' prayers for peace, prosperity, and favorable weather. Vesak, celebrated on the fifteenth day of the fourth lunar month, marks the Buddha's birth and symbolizes the arrival of truth and light into the world. Vu Lan, rooted in the story of the monk Mục Kiền Liên (Maudgalyāyana) saving his mother from suffering, embodies gratitude and devotion to parents and ancestors. These festivals are celebrated annually at Buddhist temples throughout Thanh Hóa, forming the spiritual core of communal religious life.

Like other traditional Vietnamese festivals, Buddhist temple festivals unfold within sacred spatial contexts that blend religious solemnity with communal participation. The temple - home to statues of the Buddha, bodhisattvas, and revered monks - is not only a place of worship for ordained monastics and lay practitioners, but also a cultural and spiritual center for the broader community. Through ritual activities, Buddhist festivals serve to affirm collective faith, reinforce moral values, and bring people together. Temples, therefore, function as both religious institutions and spaces of cultural cohesion - where spiritual practice, learning, and social interaction are intertwined.

Temple festivals in Thanh Hóa follow the general pattern of Vietnamese Buddhist celebrations, but each also reflects the unique cultural traditions of its host community. While rooted in Buddhist liturgy, these festivals often incorporate elements from indigenous belief systems, creating a syncretic form of folk Buddhism that is accessible and meaningful to the local populace. From a folklore perspective, Buddhist festivals in Thanh Hóa typically adhere to the structure of traditional village festivals. Common ritual stages include the mộc dục (ritual bathing of sacred statues), kiệu rước (processional parades), tế nữ quan (offerings by women in ritual roles), as well as theatrical performances and folk games. These festivals mobilize both the temple and the surrounding community, expressing cultural values through participation and performance. Moreover, they often carry the imprint of wet-rice agriculture, as seen in water-related rituals, market-based interactions, and temple festivals embedded within village festivals (hội làng)...

One of the most distinctive expressions of Buddhist folk ritual in Thanh Hóa is the water procession (rước nước) - a ceremonial act tied to agricultural fertility and spiritual renewal. While not all temples conduct such rituals, the water procession at Báo Ân Pagoda in Bồng Báo (celebrated annually on the 27th to 29th days of the second lunar month<sup>9</sup>, with the main ceremony on the 28th) has been preserved for centuries. The ritual is preceded by a

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<sup>9</sup> Traditional Vietnamese festivals are scheduled according to the lunar calendar. Therefore, in this article, lunar months are capitalized.

floating lantern ceremony and followed by ceremonial dances such as the *sênh tiền* performance, which honors the Mother Goddess. On the day of the procession, five elaborately decorated boats sail onto the river to gather water, marked by symbolic bamboo poles (*cây nêu*) and accompanied by traditional songs and chants. One such chant reflects the sacredness of the ritual:

"Hò khoan - khoan khoan - hò khoan!

We offer water to Buddha and the Mother,

So that all beings may be blessed...

Ơi khoan, hò khoan - khoan hò - hò khoan!

We row to the Quần Tiên inlet,

And return to Báo Ân's sacred shore..."<sup>10</sup>

These verses not only serve a performative function but also carry rich cultural symbolism. In this context, water is offered to bathe the Buddha and the Mother Goddess, and by extension, to bless the land with harmony, abundance, and agricultural prosperity - echoing the traditional agrarian wisdom: "First water, then fertilizer, followed by hard work and good seeds." The water procession thus exemplifies the fusion of Buddhism and local belief, with Buddhism sometimes receding into the background to allow indigenous ritual forms to take center stage.

Another distinctive feature of Buddhist temple festivals in Thanh Hóa is their integration with village festivals (*hội làng*), particularly in communities with deep historical and cultural roots. These hybrid celebrations often honor local heroes or deified figures alongside Buddhist rituals. For example, the traditional festival of Duy Tinh Village - held at Sùng Nghiêm Diên Thánh Pagoda in Văn Lộc Commune<sup>11</sup>, Hậu Lộc District - takes place annually on the 8th and 9th days of the second lunar month. Both the temple and local residents participate actively, preparing offerings, fruit trays, ceremonial cakes, processional palanquins, flags, and traditional attire. A central ritual is the *kiệu rước* (procession), in which a person carries a board inscribed with the title "Most Sacred High Deity" (*Thượng đẳng tối linh thần*), followed by an escort of sword bearers, flag bearers, musicians, and a palanquin for the revered Lady Hoàng Cầm Linh Nhâm. The procession begins and ends at the temple, circling the village and culminating in a solemn communal offering ceremony (*đại tế*). Another example is the Kỳ phúc Festival in Vĩnh Gia Village, held at Gia Pagoda in Hoàng Phượng Commune, Hoằng Hóa District. Taking place on the same dates, this festival commemorates national heroes such as Tô Hiến Thành and Trần Khát Chân. The procession begins at the shrine dedicated to these historical figures and proceeds along the northern bank of the Mã River to Gia Pagoda, where villagers offer incense and prayers for peace and prosperity. The procession then continues through the village, blessing the entire community and invoking well-being for the new year. After the solemn rituals, the festivals shift to the *hội* (festive) phase, featuring traditional games and performances that foster community bonding and cultural pride. These include tug-of-war contests, swings, human chess, and folk theater, along with music and dance performances. Such activities evoke the atmosphere of a

<sup>10</sup> Fieldwork data.

<sup>11</sup> In 2019, Văn Lộc Commune was merged into Thuần Lộc Commune, Hậu Lộc District; it is now part of Thuần Lộc Commune, Thanh Hóa Province.

traditional Vietnamese village, where spirituality and joy intertwine. These festivals illustrate how Buddhism in Thanh Hóa has taken root in village life, adapting to local customs and values. They also reflect the principle of “village rules, village spirit” (người làng, lệ làng), showing how Buddhist practices are both sustained by and integrated into the communal fabric.

From a functional perspective, Buddhist temple festivals in Thanh Hóa serve multiple cultural roles. First and foremost, they fulfill religious and spiritual functions, creating sacred spaces for ritual practice, moral instruction, and communal prayer. These festivals embody the syncretic nature of Vietnamese religious culture, where Buddhism blends seamlessly with local belief systems to form a living, breathing tradition rooted in everyday life. Beyond the spiritual, temple festivals also serve recreational purposes. Participants often regard them as occasions to release the stresses of daily life, reconnect with neighbors, and immerse themselves in collective joy. The lively atmosphere of the *hội* phase - with its games, food, music, and laughter - makes the temple not only a site of veneration but also a place of festivity and togetherness.

Among the most unique festivals in Thanh Hóa is the celebration at Tậu Pagoda in Xuân Phả Village, located in Xuân Trường Commune, Thọ Xuân District. Held annually on the fifth day of the Lunar New Year, the festival is especially famous for its distinctive folk performance known as Trò Xuân Phả. Trò Xuân Phả is a vibrant form of intangible heritage with deep historical and symbolic significance. It includes a series of masked dances and dramatic sketches representing historical events, diplomatic exchanges, and cultural contact with neighboring kingdoms. Notable performances include the Chiêm Thành Dance, Hoa Lãng Play, Ai Lao Dance, Ngô Quốc Play, and Lục Hồn Nhung (also called Tú Huân Play). These performances reflect both national identity and cross-cultural understanding, as well as martial valor and artistic creativity. The Tậu Pagoda festival also coincides with the opening of the Neo Market - the first market day of the year in the region. The saying “Mồng 5 chùa Tậu / Mồng 6 chợ Neo” (Tậu Pagoda on the fifth, Neo Market on the sixth) has been passed down for generations, reflecting the seamless integration of religious, cultural, and economic life. While the market’s function may not be as economically central as others (like Chợ Viềng in Nam Định), it nonetheless serves the practical needs of festivalgoers and locals, reinforcing the economic dimension of temple festivals.

Most temple festivals in Thanh Hóa occur during the early months of the lunar year, aligning with traditional customs of *du xuân* (spring outings) and *trẩy hội* (pilgrimage). These events exhibit a dynamic blend of Buddhist solemnity, local spirituality, village customs, and marketplace energy - creating an atmosphere that is both sacred and accessible. As cultural products, these festivals fulfill various roles: religious, recreational, and economic. Their cyclical and regenerative nature gives them resilience across generations. Preserving and promoting temple festivals not only enriches spiritual life but also contributes to sustainable cultural tourism.

For cultural management agencies, Buddhist temple festivals represent vital resources for heritage conservation, policy planning, and community development. When documented and staged appropriately, they can become part of official heritage dossiers at the local and national level. Moreover, dynamic conservation - maintaining tradition while allowing organic evolution - ensures that temple festivals continue to speak meaningfully to present and future generations, while resisting distortion by commercialism or superstition.

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#### 4. Conclusion

From everyday practice to enduring heritage, Buddhism in Thanh Hóa reveals a landscape that, while perhaps less prominent than that of northern Buddhist centers, is arguably more diverse due to its deep integration with folk beliefs, mythologies, and local festivals (Giáo hội Phật giáo Việt Nam tỉnh Thanh Hóa, 2022, p. 188). Drawing on sources from folk literature and traditional festivals, this study shows that although the intangible Buddhist heritage found in literary and ritual expressions may not be as extensive as its material counterpart, it nonetheless provides a remarkably comprehensive picture. Temples in Thanh Hóa appear throughout folk poetry and legend, with origins and names that reflect distinct historical and cultural contexts. These temples serve as markers of different periods in the development of Vietnamese Buddhism, and their existence is not only grounded in physical geography but also shaped by spiritual belief and collective imagination. While some temples may no longer sustain regular festivals due to various historical and social factors, those that do continue to host traditional celebrations embody unique local characteristics and diverse cultural functions. From a folklore perspective, the Buddhist heritage of Thanh Hóa sheds light on the mechanisms and meanings of religious syncretism. Moreover, it affirms the spiritual and cultural value of this heritage - not only within the province but also as a part of Vietnam's broader Buddhist tradition.

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*\* Notes: The study was published in Vietnamese in the Proceeding of Conference on 40 years of development and growth of Thanh Hoa Buddhist Sangha (01/11/1984 - 01/11/2024) (revised and extended version).*

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