



## Buddhist Spiritual Culture Reflected in Vietnamese Folk Poetry and Proverbs

Liu Yin Liang <sup>1\*</sup>, Le Van Tan <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PhD Student, Vietnamese Studies, VNU Institute of Vietnamese Studies and Development Science, Vietnam

<sup>2</sup> Associate professor, Doctor, Faculty of Tourism, Vietnam Trade Union University, 169 Tay Son street, Dong Da district, Hanoi City, Vietnam

\* Corresponding Author: **Liu Yin Liang**

---

### Article Info

**ISSN (online):** 2583-8261

**Volume:** 03

**Issue:** 06

**November-December** 2024

**Received:** 10-10-2024

**Accepted:** 13-11-2024

**Page No:** 64-68

### Abstract

This study explores the reflection of Buddhist spiritual culture in Vietnamese folk poetry and proverbs, analyzing how Buddhist ethical and philosophical values are integrated into folk literature. Concepts such as karma, interdependent origination, justice, and self-cultivation have deeply influenced the consciousness and culture of the Vietnamese people over centuries. Using an interdisciplinary approach that combines qualitative surveys and text analysis, the research elucidates how Buddhist values are expressed in folk poetry and proverbs, shaping the cultural and spiritual identity of the Vietnamese. The findings provide a comprehensive perspective on the role of Buddhism in Vietnamese cultural life and affirm the enduring value of folk cultural heritage in the modern context.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.54660/IJSSER.2024.3.6.64-68>

**Keywords:** Spiritual culture; Buddhism; Folklore; Proverb; Vietnamese people

---

### 1. Introduction

Buddhism, originating in India as a religious and philosophical doctrine, was introduced to Vietnam at an early stage, quickly merging with local beliefs to form a unique Vietnamese Buddhist identity. From the early stages of Vietnamese society to the modern era, Buddhism has become an integral part of the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people. Its ethical values and philosophical principles are deeply reflected in folk poetry and proverbs – two forms of folk literature rich in symbolism and closely connected to the community. This raises critical questions about how Buddhist spiritual elements, such as karma, interdependent origination, and compassion, have permeated collective consciousness and are naturally conveyed through folk literature. Furthermore, what role does the integration of these values in folk poetry and proverbs play in preserving Vietnamese cultural identity across generations? This study aims to analyze how Buddhism is expressed in Vietnamese folk literature, thereby illuminating Buddhism's role in shaping traditional cultural values and contributing to the preservation and promotion of this cultural heritage within the context of a modern society, where cultural interactions are increasingly complex. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of Buddhism's enduring influence on Vietnamese folk culture, highlighting both the cultural resilience of Buddhist values and the potential challenges posed by modern globalization.

### 2. Literature Review

Research on Buddhism and Vietnamese folk poetry and proverbs has made substantial contributions to religious studies, folklore, and literary scholarship. These works do not merely catalog or describe elements of Vietnamese folk culture; they also provide in-depth analyses of how Buddhist thought has permeated and influenced the cultural and ethical fabric of Vietnamese society. A prominent example is Nguyen Quy Thanh's work, "Cultural Imprints in Proverbs" (1998) <sup>[17]</sup>, which examines the underlying

---

social and cultural values conveyed through proverbs, identifying a distinctly Vietnamese moral and philosophical perspective. Similarly, Nguyen Van No's "Cultural and National Imprints in the Symbolic Material of Vietnamese Proverbs" (2009) compares symbolic elements in Vietnamese proverbs with those from other ethnic groups, shedding light on how cultural symbols have been shaped by local traditions and Buddhist philosophy.

Further investigations into the Buddhist influence on Vietnamese folk culture include "Discovering Vietnamese Culture through Proverbs" by Ngo Thi Thanh Quy and "Discussing a Spiritual Aspect in Vietnamese Folk Songs" by Phan Thi Phuong. These studies delve into the spiritual and ethical dimensions of Buddhism as they are represented in folk literature, identifying ways in which Buddhist values such as compassion, karma, and interconnectedness are reflected in traditional verses. In addition, Vu Thi Hanh Trang's "Buddhist Culture in Vietnamese Proverbs and Folk Songs" and Nguyen Thi Phuong Anh's "The Cultural Space of the Vietnamese People in the Northern Delta through Folk Songs and Proverbs" lay essential groundwork for understanding the intersection of Buddhist philosophy and Vietnamese cultural identity as expressed through folk poetry and proverbs. These studies collectively affirm that Buddhist teachings have had a significant and lasting impact on the formation of Vietnamese folk narratives and ethical values.

To further contextualize these works, this section addresses key conceptual frameworks, such as "culture," "spiritual culture," and "Vietnamese identity," which are central to understanding the broader implications of Buddhist influence. Traditionally, "culture" (文化) is understood as "education through civilization," shaping moral and aesthetic values within a society. In the Vietnamese context, "spiritual culture" encompasses not only religious beliefs but also ethical values and metaphysical perspectives that have been deeply shaped by Buddhism. Buddhist principles such as karma, compassion, and mindfulness are intricately woven into the collective consciousness of the Vietnamese people, guiding moral actions and social interactions. This spiritual culture reflects a synthesis of Buddhist values with indigenous beliefs, creating a unique Vietnamese cultural identity that is both ethically oriented and spiritually profound.

An overview of Vietnamese Buddhism further illustrates its central role in shaping cultural life. Buddhism in Vietnam, introduced centuries ago, adapted and integrated into local customs, producing a distinctive form of Vietnamese Buddhism. Major traditions such as Zen, Pure Land, and the Four Gratefulnesses (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, and Humanity) contribute to a spiritual framework that emphasizes moral rectitude, social harmony, and respect for nature. The influence of Buddhism extends beyond the religious domain, permeating Vietnamese art, philosophy, and education. The architectural beauty of temples, the moral teachings embedded in folk tales, and the principles of kindness and humility all attest to the pervasive impact of Buddhist values on Vietnamese cultural heritage.

Despite the depth of previous studies, many works have examined Buddhist influences in isolation, focusing either on religious practices or folk expressions without an integrated interdisciplinary perspective. This study, therefore, adopts an interdisciplinary and area studies approach, drawing from

religious studies, cultural anthropology, and literary analysis to comprehensively investigate the presence of Buddhist spiritual elements in Vietnamese folk poetry and proverbs. By employing this holistic framework, the research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of Buddhism's role in shaping Vietnamese cultural identity and preserving traditional spiritual values across generations.

Ultimately, this study aims not only to expand knowledge about the relationship between Buddhism and Vietnamese folk culture but also to offer a theoretical foundation for the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. In a modern world increasingly influenced by globalization, traditional values face challenges from cultural homogenization. This research underscores the resilience of Buddhist values within Vietnamese folk literature, affirming their importance in sustaining a distinct Vietnamese identity and offering insights into how these values can be maintained and adapted in contemporary society.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative surveys and literary text analysis to explore the reflection of Buddhist spiritual culture in Vietnamese folk poetry and proverbs. Data were collected from two main sources: field surveys and existing literature. During the field surveys, the research team conducted interviews with individuals and groups in areas rich in folk cultural traditions to gather additional examples of Buddhist-themed folk poetry and proverbs. Published materials, including collections of folk poetry and proverbs as well as previous studies, were also utilized as supplementary data sources.

Data analysis was carried out using content analysis, focusing on how Buddhist spiritual elements such as karma, interdependent origination, and compassion are expressed and represented in folk literature. An interdisciplinary approach was applied to integrate perspectives from Vietnamese studies, cultural studies, and literary analysis, providing a comprehensive view of how Buddhism influences cultural identity and thought within Vietnamese folk expressions.

## 4. Research Results and Discussion

### 4.1. On the Concept of Karma

The theory of karma is a central aspect of Buddhist belief, playing a pivotal role in understanding the connection between human actions and the consequences they experience in life. Karma suggests that every action we take brings about corresponding consequences, and we will experience those outcomes either in this life or in future incarnations.

Vietnamese folk poetry and proverbs are often used in social communication, conveying knowledge and life experiences of the people. Many proverbs clearly reflect the principle of karma by recounting the consequences of actions. The virtuous reap goodness, Those with kindness receive blessings from the heavens. The virtuous reap goodness, Those who act evil invite punishment upon themselves.

(- Ở hiền thì lại gặp lành,  
 Những người nhân đức trời dành phần cho.  
 - Ở hiền thì lại gặp lành,  
 Hễ ai ở ác tội dành vào thân.)

The concept of karma in Vietnamese folk poetry closely parallels the scientific principle of cause and effect. In science, every action has a corresponding cause and consequence. If we act in a certain way, a predictable result will occur. This is consistent with the idea of karma as expressed in Vietnamese folk poetry.

From the analysis above, we can see that karma in Vietnamese folk poetry is not merely a spiritual aspect but can also be understood and analyzed from a scientific perspective. The resemblance to the principle of cause and effect in science, its objectivity and non-religious nature, along with the practical and ethical significance of karma in folk poetry, are important factors in understanding and applying this philosophy to daily life.

Karma in Vietnamese folk poetry provides us with profound insights into the relationship between actions and consequences. It contributes to building a kind society and encourages each of us to act ethically and responsibly toward our own actions: "Sow the wind, reap the storm". (*Gieo gió gặt bão.*)

This proverb implies that our actions will bring about corresponding results in the future. If we act well, we will reap good rewards. Conversely, if we act badly, we will face unwanted consequences. Through this expression, the proverb teaches that positive actions lead to happiness, while negative actions cause suffering. Another proverb states:

A new coat for life. (*Áo mới choàng cả đời.*)

This proverb emphasizes reciprocity and justice. According to the law of karma, every action we take will be repaid in some way. If we do good, we will benefit in the future. However, if we commit wrongdoing, we will have to endure the consequences. This proverb advises us to live rightly and do good deeds to ensure a fair and fulfilling life. Vietnamese folk poetry and proverbs have seamlessly incorporated Buddhist karma into everyday life. These proverbs are not only expressions of wisdom and profound philosophy but also practical advice for leading a positive and ethical life. They remind us of personal responsibility and the impact of our actions on our lives and futures. Through these proverbs, the concept of karma in Buddhism has become an inseparable part of Vietnamese thought and philosophy.

#### 4.2. On the Concept of Interdependent Origination (nhân duyên)

In a certain aspect, interdependent origination (nhân duyên) is closely related to karma, although they have distinct differences. Interdependent origination is a crucial concept in Buddhist thought, emphasizing the interconnectedness and interaction among all living beings in the universe. This theory suggests that no individual exists independently; rather, we are all connected through a complex web of relationships.

According to Buddhist philosophy, interdependent origination extends beyond a single lifetime, persisting through multiple reincarnations. It is not limited to human relationships but also includes connections between humans and natural elements, animals, and even transient phenomena. We all experience these interdependent relationships, and each connection holds significance and impacts our lives. This theory also posits that we have the ability to change and improve our relationships through the application of karmic principles and compassion. By practicing compassion and right actions, we can create

positive, healthy connections while reducing harmful or painful ones. In Buddhism, interdependent origination is not merely a religious belief but also a way to perceive and understand our surrounding environment. It encourages us to live responsibly and empathetically toward others while being mindful of how our individual actions impact the greater network of relationships.

One prominent manifestation of interdependent origination in Vietnamese folk poetry is the connection and interaction between humans and nature. Folk verses often depict humans' dependence on the natural environment and the relative relationships among natural elements. For example, in the verse:

Spring rain fills the ponds. (*Mưa xuân nước đọng đầy ao*)

Through such expressions, the ancients show the interconnectedness between the spring rain and the ponds, demonstrating the constant interaction among natural elements.

Secondly, interdependent origination is reflected in the relationships between individuals. Folk poetry often describes meetings, interactions, and emotions between people. A typical example is the verse:

Meeting is fate, Love and destiny remain, life never fades.

*Gặp nhau là định mệnh,*

*Duyên phận trời định, tình đời chẳng phai.*

This verse suggests that meetings between two people are not merely coincidental but part of a predetermined fate. It illustrates a belief in the power of destiny and love as manifestations of interdependent origination.

Thirdly, interdependent origination in folk poetry is also expressed through the concept of retribution and karma. Folk verses often mention the idea of receiving rewards or punishments based on one's actions. For example, the verse "You reap what you sow" reflects the belief that good deeds will bring positive results and vice versa. This shows the principle of justice and karma within interdependent origination.

The concept of interdependent origination in Vietnamese folk poetry focuses on spiritual and ethical dimensions. Folk verses often advise people to follow moral principles and summarize these ideas through proverbs. For example, the verse "In this world, nothing is easy; Don't deceive others, avoid hardship" warns against deceit and encourages adherence to ethics while steering clear of immoral actions.

Thus, interdependent origination in Buddhism is a concept of connection and interaction not only between individuals but also between humans and the natural environment. It encourages us to live responsibly and compassionately, and to be aware of how our personal actions affect the broader network of relationships. Interdependent origination is a traditional concept in Vietnamese culture, emphasizing that every event, encounter, and relationship in life is interconnected by the law of interdependent origination. Through Vietnamese folk poetry, we can find many expressions of this concept, highlighting its deep influence on Vietnamese folk thought and philosophy. This article will analyze and present some notable expressions of interdependent origination in Vietnamese folk poetry.

#### 4.3. On Injustice and Resolution

Buddhism plays an essential role in addressing the issue of

injustice in Vietnamese folk poetry (ca dao). In Buddhist culture, fairness and justice are held as supreme values. Buddhism encourages people to treat each other with compassion, avoiding causing harm or injustice. Vietnamese folk poetry expresses the hope for redressing wrongs and achieving justice. In many folk poems, there are images of truth being revealed and wrongfully accused individuals being vindicated. For example, the verse “Oan trái đến lúc phải ra” (Injustice will eventually be revealed) implies that the truth will emerge, and the wronged person will be liberated. Buddhism also encourages prayer and forgiveness as ways to resolve injustices. In Vietnamese folk poetry, verses such as:

“Lòng tha thứ nặng trời cao” (Forgiveness weighs heavy in the heavens)

Or:

“Cầu xin Phật Thích Ca tha oan” (Praying to Buddha for forgiveness)

These verses reflect the belief in the power of prayer and forgiveness in resolving wrongs. Genuine sincerity will be forgiven. People turn to the heavens and Buddha with deep reverence and sacred intentions. It is believed that only through this sincere devotion can individuals find release from their suffering and receive just reparation. Ultimately, this is a form of faith and a necessary consolation that helps soothe and heal the spiritual wounds individuals endure through various circumstances and eras of life.

Vietnamese folk poetry reflects how Buddhism addresses the issues of injustice and redress. Buddhism serves not only as an inspiration but also as a driving force in the search for justice and truth. The hope for redress, compassion, prayer, and forgiveness are crucial values in resolving injustice within Vietnamese folk poetry.

#### 4.3.4. On Self - Cultivation and Training

The concept of self-cultivation, or tu tập, refers to self-improvement, training, and refining one's character and actions. This is a significant aspect of Buddhist thought, and it is also clearly reflected in Vietnamese folk poetry, which mirrors the life philosophy and cultural traditions of the Vietnamese people throughout history. Below are some examples of the idea of self-cultivation and training in Vietnamese folk poetry and proverbs: “Gió thổi mạnh cây đứng im” (When the wind blows strong, the tree stands firm). This proverb conveys the idea that when faced with challenges, one must remain patient and calm, without wavering or retreating. It emphasizes that one must possess great willpower and discipline to hope for positive outcomes in any field of life. Another familiar Vietnamese proverb that touches upon self-cultivation, particularly in terms of ethics, is: “Ăn quả nhớ kẻ trồng cây” (When eating fruit, remember the one who planted the tree).

This verse underscores the importance of gratitude. Individuals should remember and appreciate those who have helped them and honor the efforts of others. “Ăn không hóa độc, nói không hóa ma” (Eat carefully to avoid poison, speak wisely to avoid evil).

This proverb reminds us of the significance of actions and words. We should choose our food wisely and speak kindly, not only to protect our health but also to maintain inner purity and create a positive environment. “Đi một ngày đàng, học

*một sàng khôn*” (A day's travel brings a basket of wisdom). This proverb encourages continuous learning and the pursuit of knowledge. Each day presents an opportunity to gain new insights and become wiser.

The concept of self-cultivation and training in Vietnamese folk poetry often focuses on personal character, virtues, patience, gratitude, and an awareness of individual responsibility within society. These philosophies are passed down from generation to generation and play a significant role in shaping ethics and values in the daily lives of the Vietnamese people.

#### 5. Conclusion

This study highlights the depth and diversity of Buddhist spiritual culture as reflected in Vietnamese folk poetry and proverbs. Concepts such as karma, fate, retribution, and self-cultivation are not merely present but have been deeply internalized and vividly conveyed through folk literature, offering profound spiritual messages to the community. Through these folk verses, Buddhism transcends its role as a mere ideology and becomes an integral part of the Vietnamese spiritual life, naturally absorbed and expressed in a manner as close and harmonious as the people's relationship with nature and their living environment.

Given this enduring influence, it is evident that Buddhism has become an essential element of Vietnamese spiritual culture since ancient times, contributing to a unique cultural identity. In the current context of modernization and globalization, this cultural identity not only warrants preservation but also promotion, serving as a sustainable and meaningful cultural heritage for future generations.

#### References

1. Anh NTL. The influence of "mind" in Buddhism on the spiritual culture of the Vietnamese people today. *Religious Studies Journal*; 2008;(5).
2. Anh TT. Traditional Vietnamese attitudes toward nature and society through proverbs and folk sayings. Hanoi: Cultural Information Publishing House; c2009.
3. Anh NTP. Cultural space of Vietnamese people in the Northern Delta through folk poetry and proverbs [PhD thesis]. Hanoi: Institute of Vietnam Studies, Vietnam National University; c2017.
4. Codiere L. On Vietnamese traditional culture and beliefs. Hanoi: Cultural Information Publishing House; c1997.
5. Dan NN. Human ethics in Vietnamese proverbs and folk poetry. Hanoi: Youth Publishing House; c2000.
6. Duy ND. Spiritual culture. Hanoi: Hanoi Publishing House; c1996.
7. Duy ND. Southern Vietnam's spiritual culture. Hanoi: Hanoi Publishing House; c1997.
8. Duy ND. Forms of belief and religion in Vietnam. Hanoi: Cultural Information Publishing House; 2001.
9. Dao HM. Approaching proverbs from a cultural perspective. *Journal of Folk Culture*; 2006;(1).
10. Hinh ND, Hanh LD. Buddhism in Vietnamese culture. Hanoi: Cultural Information Publishing House - Institute of Culture; c2011.
11. Hoa LN, editor. Folk beliefs in Vietnam. Hanoi: Cultural Information Publishing House; c2001.
12. Kinh NX, Nhat PD, Tai PD, Loan NT, Trang DD. The treasury of Vietnamese folk poetry. Vol. 1. Hanoi:

- Cultural Information Publishing House; c2002.
13. Kinh NX, Nhat PD, Tai PD, Loan NT, Trang DD. The treasury of Vietnamese folk poetry. Vol. 2. Hanoi: Cultural Information Publishing House; c2002.
  14. No NV. Symbols in Vietnamese proverbs. Hanoi: Vietnam National University Publishing House; c2009.
  15. No NV. Cultural and national imprints in the symbolism of Vietnamese proverbs (based on comparisons with other ethnic proverbs). *Linguistics Journal*; 2009;(3).
  16. Phuong PT. On a spiritual aspect in Vietnamese folk poetry. *Journal of Language and Life*. 2010;3:34-7.
  17. Thanh NQ. Cultural imprints in proverbs. *Journal of Folk Culture*. 1998;4:76-9.
  18. Trang VTH. Buddhist culture through Vietnamese folk poetry and proverbs [Master's thesis]. Ho Chi Minh City: University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University; c2014.
  19. Ge L, Zhao B, Zhang H, translators. *Festivals and Songs of Ancient China*. Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press; c2005.
  20. Hao T. *Study on Chinese Folk Gods: Kitchen God, Earth God, and City God*. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House; c2003.
  21. Lefebvre H, Liu H, et al., translators. *The Production of Space*. Beijing: Commercial Press; c2021.
  22. Huang M, Lin L. Daoism and Vietnamese traditional culture. *Southeast Asian Studies*. 2003;(8):40-2.
  23. Lin Y, editor. *General Anthropology*. Beijing: Central University for Nationalities Press; c1997.
  24. Luo C. *Vietnamese Traditional Culture and Folk Literature*. Kunming: Yunnan People's Publishing House; c2004.
  25. Malinowski B, Li A, translator. *Magic, Science, Religion, and Myth*. Beijing: Chinese Folk Literature and Art Publishing House; c1986.
  26. Tylor EB, Lian S, translator. *Primitive Culture*. Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House; c1992.
  27. Xia Z, editor. *Cihai Dictionary*. Shanghai: Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House; c1999.
  28. Eliade M, Wang J, translator. *The Sacred and the Profane: Introduction*. Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House; c2002.
  29. Yu R. On the influence of Daoist Feng Shui concepts on Vietnamese society. *Studies in Religion*. 2016;(2):55-60.
  30. Yu R. *Daoism in Southern Vietnam*. Jinan: Qilu Publishing House; c2017.
  31. Zhu J. A comparative study of Man Niang and Mazu in Chinese and Vietnamese goddess beliefs-Using Biography of Man Niang and Mazu legends as examples. *Mazu Culture Research*. 2020;(1):55-60.
  32. Steward J, Zhang G, translator. *Theory of Cultural Change*. Taipei: Yuan-Liou Publishing Co., Ltd.; c1989.
  33. Xu F. Comparative study on the Kitchen God beliefs of the Han and Vietnamese peoples. *Southeast Asian Studies*. 2006;(3):87-91.
  34. Zhang L. Examining the relationship between Vietnamese Kitchen God and Earth Deity. *Journal of Zhejiang Sci-Tech University (Social Science Edition)*; 2017:96-103.