

The Mông Sơn Thí Thực Ritual in the Context of Contemporary Vietnamese Culture: Social Role, Spiritual Significance, and Cultural Value

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Abstract

The Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual, an integral practice within Northern Buddhism in Vietnam, has transformed from a religious rite into a dynamic cultural and social phenomenon. This study investigates the ritual's social functions, spiritual significance, and cultural value in the context of contemporary Ho Chi Minh City – a space marked by urbanization, religious pluralism, and shifting moral frameworks. Anchored in an interdisciplinary framework that draws from Vietnam Studies, cultural studies, anthropology, religious sociology, and Buddhist studies, the research employs a mixed-methods approach. Qualitative data were collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews with monks, nuns, and lay Buddhists at temples, home altars, and large-scale Buddhist ceremonies. These narratives were analyzed thematically to capture diverse perceptions and lived experiences surrounding the ritual. Quantitative data were gathered through a structured survey involving 800 respondents (400 monastics and 400 laypeople). The sample was determined using Yamane's formula, with data analyzed via descriptive statistics. Findings indicate that the ritual fulfills several interrelated roles: it acts as a spiritual offering to forgotten souls, a moral training space for cultivating compassion and filial piety, and a platform for reinforcing collective



identity and cultural continuity. Moreover, the ritual provides psychological relief for participants, functioning as a form of collective spiritual therapy amidst the anxieties of modern life. This study contributes new insights into how Buddhist ritual practices in Vietnam adapt to contemporary contexts. It highlights the enduring relevance of religious traditions as resources for moral resilience, cultural transmission, and social cohesion in an increasingly fragmented world.

Keywords: *charity for the spirit world; doctrine of compassion; Buddhist education; localized religious practice; Northern Tradition Buddhism*

INTRODUCTION

Buddhism was introduced into Vietnam during the early centuries of the Common Era and has accompanied the nation's historical development ever since. A pivotal moment for the establishment of Northern Vietnamese Buddhism in the southern region occurred in 1698, when Lord Nguyễn Phúc Chu initiated the southward expansion (*Nam tiến*), appointing General Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh to reclaim land and organize administrative divisions. This marked a significant milestone in the presence of Northern Buddhism in southern Vietnam (Anh, 2011). During the rule of the Nguyễn Lords and the subsequent Nguyễn Dynasty, several major temples were constructed in Gia Định—such as Từ Ân, Pháp Vũ, Hưng Long, and Giác Lâm—laying the foundation for a prominent Buddhist center in southern Vietnam (Khải et al., 2017). Northern Buddhism in Ho Chi Minh City follows the Chinese Buddhist Canon translated from Sanskrit and observes the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, with 250 precepts for monks (*bhikṣu*), 348 precepts for nuns (*bhikṣuṇī*), as well as the Bodhisattva vows (Thích Thiện Hoa, 2011). Monastic robes are typically worn in muted colors such as grey-blue or brown, depending on the individual and ceremonial context, and a strictly vegan diet is maintained. One of the most distinctive rituals is the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual, which is regularly performed during evening chanting

sessions and on major occasions such as the Ullambana Festival and large-scale requiem ceremonies (*trai đàn chẩn tế*) (Lang, 2000).

In the Vietnamese people's spiritual life, worshiping wandering souls - those without a place to rest - has become an important part of folk beliefs and religious practices. From the Buddhist perspective, these souls are known as "hungry ghosts" (*ngạ quỷ* or *ngã quỷ*), beings who suffer from hunger and thirst as a result of negative karma in their past lives. To offer deliverance to these souls, the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual was developed and widely practiced within the ritual system of Northern Tradition Buddhism. The Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual was composed by the Venerable Vajra Master Bất Động at Mount Mông Sơn (China). It is a standardized Buddhist ritual designed to offer both material and spiritual nourishment to wandering souls. Beyond being a purely religious act, this ritual embodies profound values related to human existence, ethics, and the spirit of compassion in Buddhism. In Vietnam - particularly in the southern region and Ho Chi Minh City - the ritual has been adapted and richly integrated into Buddhist practices and the cultural life of the community. However, although the ritual is widely practiced within the Northern Buddhist community, especially in major cities such as Ho Chi Minh City, academic engagement with the ritual – particularly from the perspectives of ritual theory and the sociology of religion – remains limited. Up to now, most research has focused on textual studies, canonical scriptures, and Buddhist doctrinal analysis, while examinations of its social functions, the transformation of the ritual in the context of urbanization, and the perceptions of contemporary communities have yet to be systematically explored.

From the late 1970s to the present, numerous studies have explored the belief system surrounding offerings to wandering souls (*cúng cô hồn*) in Vietnam. Hân (1977) examined the Vu Lan festival and Nguyễn Du's liturgy for hungry ghosts, clarifying the origins and

textual transformations of the ritual across different historical periods. The Cultural Gazetteer of Ho Chi Minh City (1987, reprinted in 2018) provides geographical and historical context for Buddhism in the Saigon–Gia Định area, serving as a foundation for contextual analysis. Dũng (1994) offered a general overview of Vietnamese Buddhism since its introduction but did not delve into the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual specifically. Buddhist texts such as *Mông Sơn Thí Thực Yếu Giải* (*Essential Commentary on the Mông Sơn Food Offering Ceremony*) by Thích Phước Thái (2012) and *Mông Sơn Thí Thực Khoa Nghi* (*The Ritual Manual of the Mông Sơn Food Offering Ceremony*) by Most Venerable Bích Liên and Nguyễn Văn Thoa (2014) provide detailed analyses of the sutras, mantras, and ceremonial procedures, though primarily from a doctrinal Buddhist perspective. In Vietnam, Northern Tradition Buddhism has been present for centuries and has deeply integrated into the spiritual and cultural life of the community, especially in the southern region and Ho Chi Minh City (Dũng, 1994; Liên, 2019). According to a study by Hải & Chung (2022), the ritual structure comprises multiple layers of symbolism, including the summoning of spirits, the offering of food to wandering souls, the chanting of mantras, and karmic transference rituals. These elements are not only spiritual in nature but also demonstrate the integration of Buddhism with local belief systems.

Within Vietnamese communities, the ritual of making offerings to wandering souls is not merely metaphysical, but also a socially grounded act rich in ethical and humanitarian meaning (Vu, 2023). Hằng & Anh (2020) note that in the southwestern Mekong Delta, the ritual is held regularly with the purpose of *pacifying restless spirits*, while also conveying core values of traditional morality such as compassion, gratitude, and mutual support. Thus, the ritual serves as a space for *ethical education and for reinforcing the spirit of karmic responsibility* within the community. In addition, works such as *Nhị*

khóa hiệp giải (Explanation of the two daily sessions) by Thích Khánh Anh (1995), *Linh Sơn Pháp bảo Đại tạng kinh* (The Linh Sơn Dharma Treasury Tripiṭaka, 2000-2003), *Phật học phổ thông* (General Buddhist studies) by Thích Thiện Hoa (2011), and *Để hiểu đàn chẩn tế* (Understanding the Ritual of Chẩn Tế Almsgiving Ceremony) by Thích Trí Quang (2018) provide theoretical foundations and ritual forms. However, they still lack sociological analysis and empirical research on how contemporary Vietnamese Buddhist communities actually practice this ritual.

The ritual of *cúng cô hồn* among non-Vietnamese communities is known as the “Hungry Ghost Festival,” which is widely practiced in various Asian countries such as China (S. C. Chan, 2019; Stepanchuk & Wong, 1991), Singapore (H. Y. Chan, 2020; Lim, 2020), Malaysia (DeBernardi, 1984), Thailand (Hackley & Hackley, 2015a, 2015b; Liu & Du, 2025), Cambodia (Arensen, 2017; Holt, 2012) and Laos (Ladwig, 2012b, 2012a). According to Teiser (1988), this ritual originates from the story in the *Ullambana Sutra*, which tells of Maudgalyāyana’s attempt to save his mother, leading to the formation of offerings to the hungry ghosts - spirits who have been forgotten in the afterlife. In a case study conducted in Malaysia, DeBernardi (1984) showed that the Hungry Ghost Festival is not merely a Buddhist ritual but also a cultural space where folk beliefs intersect with political and social symbolism. Among the Chinese community in Penang, the festival is used to assert ethnic identity and communal authority within the context of urbanization. Hackley & Hackley (2015a) studied the Pee Ta Khon ritual (a variation of the Hungry Ghost Festival) in Thailand and demonstrated how people use the ritual to reconcile tensions between modern consumerism and spiritual life. They referred to this as a form of “symbolic reconciliation” between materialism and spirituality through acts such as offerings, paper money burning, and festive celebrations. H. Y. Chan (2020) analyzed the variation of the ritual in

Singapore, where it has been commercialized through *Getai* - outdoor live music performances held to entertain both spirits and the community. This illustrates how Buddhist rituals have become “performative” yet still preserve their function of merit transfer and fostering social cohesion. Ladwig (2012) argued that in Lao and Khmer Buddhism, the Hungry Ghost Festival plays a central role in maintaining social relationships with ancestors and forgotten spirits, especially through collective ghost-offering ceremonies. These events are also opportunities for communities to express filial piety and perform merit-making practices aimed at “karmic purification” for the deceased. Cheng (2020) views the Hungry Ghost ritual as part of “Buddhism without borders” - a form of transnational Buddhism. In Taiwan, the ritual integrates scriptures, performance, and community participation through events such as “The Grand Salvation Ceremony for All Sentient Beings”, affirming the power of collective moral action in modern society. Marouda (2017) conducted an anthropological study in Vietnam, focusing on “philanthropy for the dead” - the act of making offerings as a charitable gesture toward forgotten souls. She describes this as a form of “underworld humanitarianism”, reflecting how Buddhist moral values operate within the framework of modern Vietnamese society. Studies on the Hungry Ghost Festival in communities outside of Vietnam show that this ritual is not merely religious in nature, but also plays an essential role in: Restructuring communal morality (Cheng, 2020; Ladwig, 2012a); Symbolizing ethnic identity and community power (H. Y. Chan, 2020; DeBernardi, 1984); Reconciling spirituality and modern consumerism (Hackley & Hackley, 2015a); Affirming the humanitarian function of religion in the modern world (Marouda, 2017).

Research on the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual in Vietnam and neighboring countries has been relatively rich in terms of textual studies, Buddhist exegesis, and historical-cultural surveys. However,

there remains a lack of systematic analysis on the social role, religious meaning, and contemporary cultural value of the ritual - particularly studies that combine quantitative and qualitative methods within Buddhist communities. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining and clarifying the functions, meanings, and transmitted values of the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual in contemporary Vietnam. Building on this premise, the article proposes to approach the ritual as an expression of the interaction between traditional religious structures and contemporary socio-cultural transformations. This perspective is illuminated through the lenses of ritual theory, post-secularism, and vernacular religion.

Bell (1992) proposed the concept of “ritualization” to emphasize that ritual is not merely the repetitive enactment of traditional behaviors, but rather a process through which power, order, and identity are constituted and reconstituted within a specific community. In the context of Northern Vietnamese Buddhism, the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual can be interpreted as a form of ritualization through which Buddhist practitioners redefine the relationship between the human and the metaphysical realms—particularly with wandering or homeless spirits—while simultaneously reaffirming core Buddhist principles such as karma, rebirth, and compassion. Turner’s (1969) concept of “liminality” is also especially relevant in understanding the ritual’s social function. According to Turner, ritual constitutes a transitional state wherein individuals and communities are temporarily removed from ordinary social structures and enter a highly symbolic space where moral values are restructured and social relations are renewed. The Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual, with its transient, communal, and sacred characteristics, establishes an “in-between” space—a liminal zone—where the living express their responsibility toward the dead, and the community collectively practices compassion beyond the routines of everyday life. From a

classical perspective, Durkheim (2001) argued that ritual serves as a means for society to express the sacred and maintain social solidarity. In the case of the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual, the collective act of offering to hungry ghosts (*cô hồn*) not only reflects personal religious belief but also functions as a performative ritual of social cohesion, rooted in Buddhist ideals of compassion and spiritual equality. In this sense, the ritual transcends its religious function and becomes a “social script” through which the community redefines and reaffirms its collective identity.

In addition to ritual theory, this study approaches the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual as a form of vernacular religion. According to Primiano (1995), vernacular religion refers to religious practices that are constructed and reconstructed by communities of believers within specific local contexts. These practices are often flexible, non-doctrinal, and integrated with indigenous cultural systems. The Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual exemplifies the intersection of Northern Buddhist doctrines with Vietnamese folk beliefs, such as ancestor veneration, the Ullambana Festival, and concepts of *âm dương* (yin-yang) and life-death duality. Rather than strictly adhering to canonical texts, the ritual is practiced by communities with a degree of creativity and adaptation that reflects the particular cultural space in which it occurs. Ladwig (2012a) and DeBernardi (1984) similarly emphasize that Hungry Ghost rituals in Laos and Malaysia are characterized by a high degree of syncretism between orthodox Buddhism and local religious practices, resulting in hybrid ritual expressions. From this theoretical perspective, the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual should not be regarded as a prototypical Buddhist rite, but rather as a syncretic religious practice that reflects the community’s endogenous capacity to localize and adapt religious traditions.

In modern societies—particularly in rapidly globalizing urban centers such as Ho Chi Minh City—the role of religion has not

diminished but has undergone a functional transformation. Habermas (2008) introduced the concept of post-secularism to describe an era in which religion re-emerges in the public sphere as a source of moral reasoning and social healing. Within this context, the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual can be interpreted as a form of collective spiritual therapy—a communal practice through which participants seek spiritual release, cope with the pain of loss, and affirm collective moral values in an increasingly unstable society. From this perspective, the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual is not merely an act of traditional preservation, but a means by which communities regenerate existential meaning in the face of moral crisis, the commodification of belief, and cultural fragmentation.

In summary, the theoretical framework of this study is not intended to merely illustrate existing theories, but rather to provide a critical analytical foundation for understanding the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual as a syncretic religious practice—capable of restructuring social ethics, reaffirming communal identity, and performing therapeutic functions within a post-secular public sphere. The integration of three theoretical lenses—ritual theory, vernacular religion, and post-secularism—enables the analysis of the ritual as a complex, dynamic, and highly adaptive socio-cultural phenomenon in contemporary contexts.

METHOD

This study is conducted using an interdisciplinary approach, integrating Vietnamese Studies, Cultural Studies, Buddhist Studies, Anthropology, and the Sociology of Religion to ensure both comprehensive coverage and analytical depth in examining the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual within the contemporary urban context of Ho Chi Minh City. The research adopts a mixed-methods design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture the breadth of

social data and the depth of symbolic and religious meanings embedded in ritual practices. The theoretical and methodological foundations are drawn from multiple disciplines: Vietnamese Studies provides historical and cultural context; Cultural Studies aids in identifying symbolic value systems; Buddhist Studies offers doctrinal and textual frameworks for analyzing the ritual; Anthropology contributes ethnographic tools and interpretive frameworks for symbolism; and most notably, the Sociology of Religion facilitates an understanding of the ritual's social functions, communal dimensions, and therapeutic roles in modern life. This interdisciplinary research design allows the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual to be interpreted as a complex cultural-religious-social structure, rather than as a purely devotional practice.

Qualitative research methods are employed to explore the ritual's structure, religious experience, and community perspectives. Three primary techniques are utilized: Content Analysis is used to decode the ritual's liturgical texts, including sutras, mantras, and chants, in order to identify the moral and spiritual values conveyed through the ritual discourse. Participant Observation is conducted by attending Mông Sơn Thí Thực rituals at temples, private homes, large-scale requiem ceremonies (*trai đàn*), and lay Buddhist communities across Ho Chi Minh City. This method allows for the naturalistic observation of ritual spaces, roles of key actors (monks, nuns, lay Buddhists), and the collection of non-verbal data such as gestures, attire, and auxiliary rites. In-depth Interviewing involves seven semi-structured interviews with four main groups: monks, nuns, and lay practitioners who regularly participate in the ritual. Respondents were selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques, based on the criterion that they have organized, led, or attended at least three Mông Sơn Thí Thực rituals. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were conducted in temples, private residences, and lay

Buddhist centers in Ho Chi Minh City. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, and later transcribed verbatim for content analysis. The semi-structured interview guide focused on the following thematic areas: personal experiences in participating in or officiating the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual; beliefs about wandering souls, the spirit world, and the ritual's salvific function; perceptions of the ritual's ethical, cultural, and social significance; changes in ritual form over time; and the impact of Ho Chi Minh City's urban context on ritual practice and interpretation.

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase process outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006):

Phase 1: Familiarization. The researcher repeatedly read the interview transcripts while simultaneously listening to the audio recordings in order to grasp the nuances, metaphors, and underlying emotions embedded in participants' responses.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes. Manual coding was conducted using colored pens and Excel software, with emphasis placed on marking excerpts that reflected beliefs, emotions, or moral-social discourses.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes. Initial codes were grouped into preliminary themes such as "soothing restless spirits," "community-oriented merit transfer," "charity toward the spirit world," and "urbanization and ritual transformation."

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes. Themes were refined through comparison and synthesis, while redundant or unreliable codes were eliminated to enhance coherence and trustworthiness.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes. Each theme was clearly named and supported by illustrative quotations drawn directly from the interview data to ensure transparency and contextual relevance.

Phase 6: Producing the Report. The final analytical results were presented in the discussion section, accompanied by verbatim quotes

to ensure credibility and preserve the authentic voice of the participants.

To enhance generalizability and triangulate preliminary insights derived from the qualitative phase, the research team conducted a complementary quantitative survey. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and a few open-ended items, focusing on participants' perceptions, levels of engagement, and interpretations of the ritual's significance.

The sampling design was calculated based on the total population of Buddhist monks, nuns, and lay practitioners in Ho Chi Minh City, according to data provided by the Ho Chi Minh City Buddhist Sangha ([Giac Ngo Newspaper, 2024](#)), which reports 7,967 Northern Tradition monks and nuns and approximately 4 million lay followers. The sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula:

$$n = N / (1 + N * e^2)$$

Where: n is the required sample size

N is the population size

e is the desired margin of error (calculated as 1 minus the assumed confidence level). For this study, a 95% confidence level was adopted, corresponding to a margin of error of 5% ($e = 0.05$). Based on the formula:

Sample size for monks and nuns: $n = 7967 / (1 + 7967 \times 0.05^2) \approx 381$ (rounded to 400)

Sample size for lay practitioners: $n = 4,000,000 / (1 + 4,000,000 \times 0.05^2) \approx 400$

The total sample thus consisted of 800 individuals, distributed evenly across four groups with an assumed gender balance: 200 monks, 200 nuns, 200 male lay practitioners, and 200 female lay practitioners. A two-step sampling process was employed, combining stratified sampling and controlled convenience sampling. First, the sample was stratified according to religious role and gender into four subgroups, each comprising 200 individuals—ensuring minimal representativeness of social groups directly involved in the Mông Sơn

Thí Thực ritual within the Northern Vietnamese Buddhist community in Ho Chi Minh City. Within each stratum, participants were selected using controlled convenience sampling—that is, individuals who were available and willing to participate, and who met the eligibility criterion of having attended at least three Mông Sơn Thí Thực rituals within one year prior to the survey. This method balanced practical feasibility with the study's requirement for respondents to possess sufficient ritual experience—a central variable of the research. The survey among monks and nuns was conducted during the Rains Retreat (*An cư Kiết hạ*), a period when monastics gather in large numbers at major temples. For lay practitioners, questionnaires were distributed at Buddhist retreats, lay congregations (*đạo tràng*), and religious festivals in Ho Chi Minh City. The timing of data collection was deliberately aligned with the rhythms of religious life to maximize response rates and enhance the reliability of the data. Quantitative data were processed using SPSS software. A triangulation strategy was employed to cross-verify findings from interviews, participant observation, and survey responses, thereby strengthening the trustworthiness and authenticity of the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Role of Hungry Ghost Offerings through the Mông Sơn Thí Thực Ritual

Based on a survey of 800 monks, nuns, and lay practitioners from the Northern Tradition of Vietnamese Buddhism, the author compiled data reflecting the perceived roles of *cúng cô hồn* (offerings to hungry ghosts) as practiced through the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual in their religious life. A total of 434 respondents (accounting for 54.25% of participants) stated that the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual is a means to help hungry ghosts (*ngạ quỷ*) find sustenance and liberation. 295 individuals (36.9%) said that participating in the ritual provides an

opportunity to experience spiritual life and cultivate compassion. 252 respondents (31.5%) believed the ritual plays a role in transmitting Buddhist cultural values. 201 participants (25.1%) noted that it serves as a commemorative ritual to honor the deceased. 180 individuals (22.5%) stated that it plays a protective role in preventing disturbances from restless spirits. Meanwhile, 17 participants (2.1%) expressed other views. The results are summarized in Table 1 and Figure 1 below.

Table 1

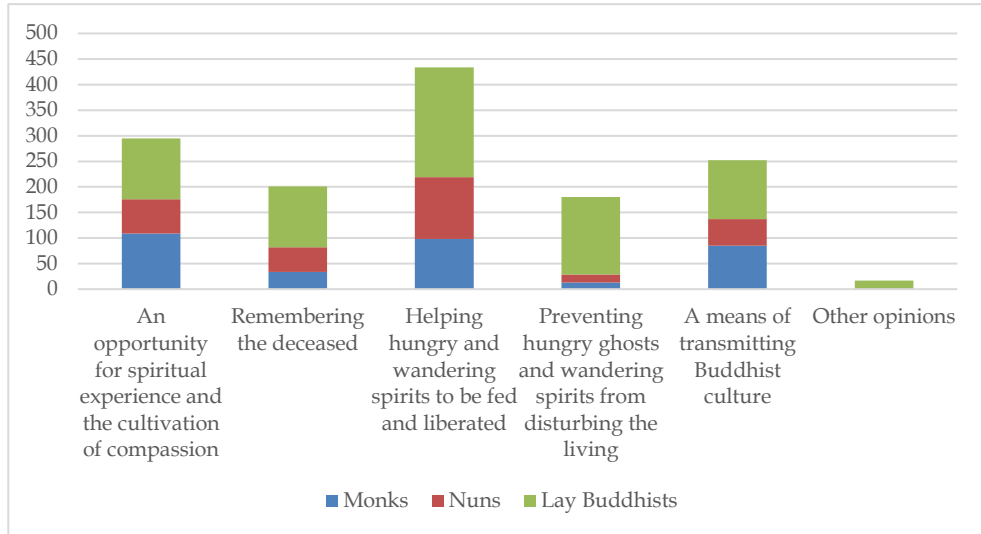
The role of the Mông Sơn Food Offering Ceremony for hungry ghosts in the spiritual and religious life of Northern tradition Buddhist followers in Ho Chi Minh City (number of selections)

	An opportunity for spiritual experience and the cultivation of compassion	Remembering the deceased	Helping hungry and wandering spirits to be fed and liberated	Preventing hungry ghosts and wandering spirits from disturbing the living	A means of transmitting Buddhist culture	Other opinions	Total
Monks	109	34	98	13	85	0	339
Nuns	67	48	121	16	52	0	304
Lay Buddhists	119	119	215	151	115	17	736
Total (percent of respondents)	295 (36,9)	201 (25,1)	434 (54,25)	180 (22,5)	252 (31,5)	17 (2,1)	1379

Source: Primary data. Author’s estimation.

Figure 1

The role of the Mông Sơn Food Offering Ceremony for hungry ghosts in the spiritual and religious life of Northern tradition Buddhist followers in Ho Chi Minh City



Source: Primary data. Author's estimation.

Based on the above survey results, we can make some initial observations regarding the role of *cúng cô hồn* (offerings to hungry ghosts) through the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual in the religious life of Northern Tradition Buddhist followers in Ho Chi Minh City, as follows:

First, this ritual plays a role in fulfilling the spiritual and ceremonial needs of Buddhist practitioners. Belief in polytheism and the worship of various deities, spirits, and ghosts has long been a part of Vietnamese religious life, spanning from the North to the South. The early inhabitants of the Gia Định-Sài Gòn-Ho Chi Minh City region were migrants from various waves of migration, making ritual offerings and ancestral worship especially important in building a new life in an unfamiliar and often dangerous land. The Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual is one of the spiritual ceremonies that local residents have

adopted and preserved to this day because it meets their deep-rooted spiritual needs. Among these needs, the desire to remember and honor the deceased aligns with the Vietnamese tradition of “*drinking water, remember its source*” (*uống nước nhớ nguồn*) - a moral code of gratitude and repayment. Whether the departed were relatives or not, they are still Vietnamese, still descendants of the dragon and fairy (*con rồng cháu tiên*), and therefore worthy of remembrance and respect.

“I believe that the act of offering to hungry ghosts is, first and foremost, to bring peace to the living. Every seventh lunar month, we must remember our parents’ gratitude. Attending the offering ceremony serves as a way to recall and trace our roots, to express love, gratitude, and filial piety - these should always come first.” (*Excerpt from Interview Transcript 05*)

At the same time, *cúng cô hồn* (offerings to hungry ghosts) through the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual also fulfills the spiritual need of providing “peace for the living.” For the Vietnamese in the past, when arriving in a new land to reclaim and settle, they never knew what might happen to them. Combined with their belief in animism, they felt the need to make offerings so that hungry ghosts (*ngạ quỷ*) or malevolent unseen forces would not harm them. Thus, the ritual of *cúng cô hồn* serves both as a way to nourish and relieve the suffering of the dead, based on the belief that “*what the living do, the dead receive*” (*dương sao âm vậy*), and as a means of calming the minds of the living.

“We offer food with a sincere heart as if we’re feeding them to fullness - and in doing so, we ourselves feel at peace. It’s a hard feeling to describe. As for what happens after that, we don’t really know.” (*Excerpt from Interview Transcript 06*)

Secondly, offering to hungry ghosts through the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual plays an educational and cultural transmission role within both the Buddhist community and the broader population of Ho Chi Minh City. In many temples, the ritual is integrated into daily monastic practice as a required afternoon session. Although each

temple may vary slightly in timing and procedure, this ritual serves as a foundational form of moral education for novice monks and nuns, while also offering practitioners a direct spiritual experience. Through this experience, individuals are encouraged to cultivate compassion and extend care and empathy not only toward fellow humans but toward all beings, sharing in their suffering and misfortune, and thus contributing each day to building a better, more compassionate world. Alongside the transmission of doctrine and monastic discipline, this practice also enables the cultural inheritance of values from one generation to the next, helping to preserve and sustain the profound meaning and spiritual depth of the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual.

“This ritual is part of the afternoon chanting session, which includes a structured set of sutras and mantras. It is a basic and compulsory duty for every monastic practitioner.” (Excerpt from Interview Transcript 04).

“When it comes down to it, performing the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual is a form of spiritual cultivation. Why? Because among the Six Pāramitās of the Bodhisattva path, dāna (generosity) comes first. When we offer the Mông Sơn Thí Thực, we are engaging in the act of giving. And where does this act originate? It arises from compassion, following the vows of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to save sentient beings. In Buddhism, there is a saying: ‘When the dead are liberated, the living will prosper’ (âm siêu dương thới). So when we perform the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual, we are helping the dead to transcend. It is an opportunity to cultivate compassion and extend that compassion to all forms of life.” (Excerpt from Interview Transcript 01).

“It is a form of practice that expresses compassion toward all beings, whether living or deceased. In Buddhism, we often say ‘when the dead transcend, the living will thrive.’ That means by liberating the spirits of the dead, we also uplift the living.” (Excerpt from Interview Transcript 02).

“Every afternoon, we (people in the temple) perform this ritual to radiate loving-kindness. We cultivate to attain liberation, but alongside that, we also extend compassion to the hungry ghosts and wandering spirits so that they no longer suffer from hunger and thirst.” (Excerpt from Interview Transcript 03).

For lay Buddhist practitioners, the *thí thực* (offering) ritual serves as a way to remember deceased loved ones, or more broadly, to offer compassion to all types of *hungry ghosts*, *wandering spirits*, and sentient beings in the surrounding world. Through this, the ritual functions as a form of moral education, reinforcing the Buddhist principle of karmic causality - that good deeds lead to good outcomes, and evil deeds to misfortune. Among these roles, the author argues that the most significant function of offering to hungry ghosts through the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual is that it acts as a kind of “spiritual sedative”. It helps practitioners feel at peace about whether the departed have found tranquility in the afterlife, and simultaneously reassures the living themselves - based on the belief that well-fed *cô hồn* and *ngạ quỷ* (wandering and hungry ghosts) will not disturb the realm of the living.

Third, *cúng cô hồn* (offerings to hungry ghosts) through the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual represents a valuable Buddhist tradition, contributing to the preservation of Buddhist liturgical practices and the dissemination of Buddhism to the broader public. Today, *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* is considered an official and established ritual within the liturgical system of Northern Tradition Buddhism in Ho Chi Minh City in particular, and of Vietnamese Buddhism in general, specifically used for making offerings to *cô hồn* and *ngạ quỷ* (wandering and hungry ghosts). In this context, the ritual provides a systematic and non-superstitious method of performing offerings to spirits - free from mystical or theocratic elements - while embodying the compassionate spirit of Buddhist teachings and delivering a profoundly humanistic educational message.

Survey results from 800 monastics and lay practitioners of Northern Tradition Buddhism in Ho Chi Minh City reveal that the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual holds a profound and multifaceted role in the religious, spiritual, and cultural life of the Buddhist community.

These findings are entirely consistent with and reinforced by, numerous in-depth studies in the fields of Buddhist Studies and Vietnamese folk culture. A large proportion of respondents (54.25%) affirmed that the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual helps hungry ghosts (*cô hồn, ngạ quỷ*) find nourishment and transcendence. This reflects the original and central purpose of the ritual, rooted in the compassionate teachings of Mahāyāna scriptures, particularly the *Ullambana Sūtra* and the *Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva Sūtra*. According to Hải & Chung (2022), the *Mông Sơn* ritual is not only an act of compassion but also a concrete method of transforming karmic suffering for beings trapped in the realms of hungry ghosts and hell.

36.9% of participants viewed the ritual as an opportunity for spiritual practice and the cultivation of compassion. As Thích Nhật Từ (2020) observed, rituals such as *Mông Sơn* help Buddhist practitioners develop their inner selves, strengthen *precepts–meditation–wisdom* (*giới–định–tuệ*), and directly engage with the Bodhisattva path in everyday life. Approximately 31.5% of respondents regarded the ritual as a form of cultural preservation and transmission. This aligns with the analysis by Linh (2022), who argued that Northern traditional rituals like *Mông Sơn* reflect both Chinese Buddhist characteristics and Vietnamese folk adaptations, making them effective tools for cultural education. 25.1% of participants saw the ritual as a means of commemorating the deceased, while 22.5% emphasized its protective function against the disturbances of restless spirits. This view resonates with Thành's (2020) assertion that *thí thực* rituals not only serve as acts of liberation but also act as mechanisms to ease collective fears surrounding the invisible world, thereby contributing to community psychological stability.

From the perspective of modern ritual theory (Bell, 1992; Durkheim, 2001; Turner, 1969), both the quantitative survey results and qualitative data reveal that the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual is not

merely a traditional religious practice, but rather a form of ritualization through which the community redefines moral order, restructures human-human and human-spirit relationships, and expresses cultural and social values within the context of contemporary urban life. Notably, 54.25% of survey respondents affirmed that the ritual plays a vital role in “assisting wandering souls and hungry ghosts to attain liberation.” This finding corresponds with Durkheim’s (2001) analysis of ritual as a manifestation of the sacred – an arena where collective actions are performed to strengthen social solidarity. In this context, the act of offering during the ritual is not solely metaphysical; it is also a social act aimed at fostering harmony between the realms of the living and the dead, between this world and the otherworld.

Meanwhile, 36.9% of survey respondents viewed the ritual as a “spiritual experience and an opportunity to cultivate compassion,” while 31.5% regarded it as “a means of transmitting Buddhist cultural values.” These perceptions are closely aligned with Turner’s (1969) concept of *liminality*, wherein ritual serves as a temporary suspension of ordinary social structures, opening a symbolic space in which individuals can reposition themselves in relation to others, to their ancestors, and to the broader community. Furthermore, the ways in which the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual is practiced in Ho Chi Minh City—from monastic schedules and chanting forms to ritual implements and devotional culture—strongly reflect the characteristics of *vernacular religion* as defined by Primiano (1995). Ritual activities such as offerings during the Ghost Festival (*rằm tháng Bảy*), presenting vegetarian food to the deceased, and burning paper effigies are clear manifestations of syncretism between orthodox Buddhism and Vietnamese folk beliefs—a phenomenon also identified by Ladwig (2012a) and DeBernardi (1984) in their studies of similar Hungry Ghost rituals in Laos and Malaysia. In addition, 22.5%

of respondents believed the ritual could “prevent disturbances by wandering spirits,” indicating that the ritual serves not only spiritual purposes but also functions as a form of communal psychological stabilization. From the perspective of post-secularism (Habermas, 2008), this illustrates how religion continues to fulfill a role of *spiritual therapy* in contemporary settings. Marouda (2017) refers to this phenomenon as *underworld humanitarianism* – a metaphysical form of charity through which the community not only aids forgotten souls, but in doing so, seeks to redeem its own existential anxieties.

From both the survey data and scholarly literature, it is evident that the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual is a comprehensive practice - spiritual, cultural, and social. It creates a sacred space that connects human beings with dimensions beyond everyday reality - with ancestors, with lonely spirits, and with the pure essence within themselves. The role of the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual, when examined through the combined lenses of ritual theory, vernacular religion, and post-secularism, is profoundly multidimensional: it addresses metaphysical anxiety (by making offerings to *cô hồn*), reinforces communal ethics (by transmitting compassion), and contributes to social stability (by alleviating fear, anxiety, and psychological tension).

The Meaning of Hungry Ghost Offerings through the Mông Sơn Thí Thực Ritual

Based on a survey exploring the meaning of *cúng cô hồn* (offering to hungry ghosts) through the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual in the lives of Northern Tradition Buddhist followers in Ho Chi Minh City, the author compiled the following responses (Table 2 and Figure 2): 382 respondents (47.8%) stated that they were able to cultivate seeds of compassion through performing the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual. 300 respondents (37.5%) said that the ritual expresses gratitude toward the deceased. 288 individuals (36%) indicated that it is a way to practice the Buddha’s teachings and experience spiritual life. 282 participants

(35.3%) viewed the ritual as an act of helping and sharing with hungry ghosts and suffering spirits in accordance with Buddhist compassion. 179 people (22.4%) believed the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual has educational significance, reflecting the law of karma and cause-effect. Finally, 14 respondents (1.7%) expressed other views.

Table 2

The Meaning of the Mông Sơn Food Offering Ceremony in the Spiritual and Religious Life of Northern Tradition Buddhists in Ho Chi Minh City (Number of Responses)

	Expressing gratitude to the deceased	Sowing the seed of compassion through the act of food offering	Helping and sharing the suffering of hungry wandering spirits in the spirit of Buddhism	Practicing the Buddha's teachings to experience spiritual life	Educational significanc, reflecting the law of cause and effect	Other opinions	Total
Monks	93	105	68	101	45	1	413
Nuns	75	108	49	56	27	0	315
Lay Buddhists	132	169	165	131	107	13	717
Total (percent of respondents)	300 (37,5)	382 (47,8)	282 (35,3)	288 (36)	179 (22,4)	14 (1,7)	1445

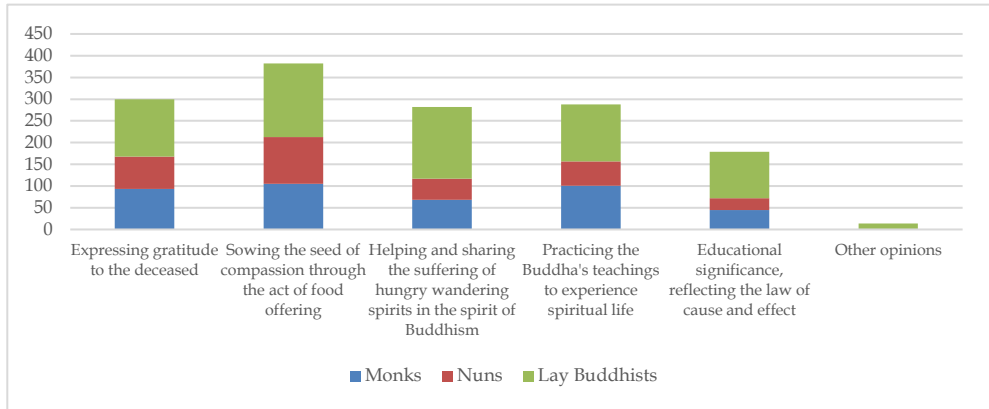
Source: Primary data. Author's estimation.

The *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual is performed as an expression of gratitude - to one's ancestors, grandparents, parents, and all those who have directly or indirectly contributed to the formation and development of the practitioner. During the ceremony, the practitioner offers flowers, fruits, and other offerings to symbolize their gratitude to the departed. This expression of gratitude extends further to countless generations who have gone before - those who built and defended the country, who fought for national independence and freedom. Such gratitude makes no distinction of race, political affiliation, or religious belief - all can become recipients of this reverence through the ritual. Above all, offering to the hungry ghosts through the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual reflects the Vietnamese culture of filial piety - remembering and honoring one's elders, "eating

the fruit, remembering the one who planted the tree,” and “drinking water, remembering its source.”

Figure 2

The Meaning of the Mông Sơn Food Offering Ceremony in the Spiritual and Religious Life of Northern Tradition Buddhists in Ho Chi Minh City



Source: Primary data. Author's estimation.

Thí thực means giving one's food and material possessions. But it does not stop there. The “*thí*” (giving) here also includes dharma-giving (*pháp thí*) - sharing the Buddha's teachings to relieve suffering - and fearlessness-giving (*vô úy thí*) - generating peaceful energy and sharing it with all beings still trapped in suffering. The deeper meaning of *giving* lies in preventing the seeds of greed, selfishness, and stinginess from taking root in oneself. At the same time, it allows the seeds of compassion, empathy for the suffering of all beings, and selfless love to sprout. It means opening one's heart - to give, to share, to feel the pain of others, of all sentient beings.

“Offering food to wandering spirits (*cúng thí thực cô hồn*) is also a form of *dāna* (generosity) - it helps us learn to think of others and eliminate greed, stinginess, and miserliness.” (Excerpt from Interview Transcript 07).

The *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual reflects compassion and empathy for beings still trapped in suffering, and more broadly, compassion for all sentient beings. From the choice of offerings - entirely vegetarian, non-violent, and free from killing - to the intended recipients - hungry ghosts, wandering spirits, and tormented beings without discrimination - the ritual demonstrates ethical compassion in action. Beyond giving food, the practitioner also guides these beings toward Buddhism, toward the path of ending suffering and turning away from evil.

“Some people help the living. Others want to help the dead. Offering to the dead is like doing charity for those who have passed away.” (Excerpt from Interview Transcript 06).

“Offering food to spirits is an expression of loving-kindness. Just as we give to those we can see, we should also give to those we cannot. The Buddha said this world is a realm where ordinary and enlightened beings coexist. The sutras speak of hungry ghosts. Just like temples offer charity to the poor, we also give to the unseen. To practice is to have loving-kindness toward all beings. Whether they receive the offerings or not, the act of giving daily still cultivates compassion.” (Excerpt from Interview Transcript 05).

“This is like doing charity to develop compassion. For wandering souls and hungry ghosts, we make offerings to nurture our own compassion. In Buddhism, the mind of compassion is essential. If we harbor hatred, karmic obstacles will arise.” (Excerpt from Interview Transcript 03).

Offering to the hungry ghosts through the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual carries profound educational value. For practitioners, it is a chance to recite the Buddha’s words, to experience spiritual life, and to open the heart, sowing seeds of peace and sharing with all beings. For the younger generation, it is an opportunity to learn about gratitude toward their ancestors, who worked to build the life and form they now enjoy. It also teaches youth about the cultural values of solidarity and compassion - “*a morsel when hungry is worth a feast when full*”, or “*the healthy leaf covers the torn one*”. They are further immersed in Buddhist teachings of compassion and equality - toward all beings,

whether similar or different, whole or physically impaired. As for the spirits and ghosts - the ritual introduces them to Buddhist scriptures, sharing the ideal of liberation from suffering through spiritual cultivation and ethical living. First, they are saved from the torments of hell through compassion; then they are nourished physically through offerings; and finally, they are guided to liberation through chants, sutras, and verses that carry profound spiritual meaning.

Offering to Hungry Ghosts through the Mông Sơn Thí Thực Ritual reflects the Buddhist concept of karmic law - that good deeds lead to favorable outcomes, and evil deeds lead to suffering. This serves as a reminder for people to accumulate merit and practice virtue, to avoid being reborn as tormented hungry ghosts (*ngạ quỷ, cô hồn*), which are often associated with greed and stinginess. According to Buddhist belief, offering food to hungry ghosts is a good karmic act that will bring blessings, such as beauty, abundance, and freedom from deprivation in future lives.

“When we make offerings to the hungry ghosts, we are giving to them, which means we are creating merit. When we have merit, good things happen to us. That is the law of cause and effect.” (Excerpt from Interview Transcript 03).

The entire *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual is aimed at benefiting the deceased, especially hungry and wandering spirits, bringing them peace and relieving their loneliness through the energy of compassion generated during the ceremony. In turn, the living feels reassured, knowing that their departed loved ones suffer less from hunger and sorrow. Some also believe that appeasing these spirits prevents them from causing misfortunes to the living.

Based on a survey of 800 monastics and lay practitioners of Northern Tradition Buddhism in Ho Chi Minh City, this study shows that the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual is not just a symbolic religious practice, but a deeply philosophical expression of Mahāyāna Buddhist values: compassion, gratitude, karma, and the spirit of liberation from

suffering. These findings are well supported by recent scholarly research. With 47.8% of respondents selecting this view, the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual is clearly regarded as a means to cultivate compassion - a fundamental ethical pillar in Buddhism. As Trần Thị Kim Nhung (2020) emphasizes, *thí thực* is not merely material charity but also an internal transformation and a karmic opportunity that benefits both the giver and the recipient (Nhung, 2020). 37.5% believe that the ritual expresses gratitude to the deceased - a central factor in the Vietnamization of Buddhist rituals, particularly concerning ancestor worship. Trần Văn Lợi (2012) points out that *thí thực* rituals in Vietnam are not only directed toward suffering beings but also serve as “ritual diplomacy” - maintaining the sacred connection between the living and the dead (Lợi, 2012). This contributes to the unique character of Northern Tradition Buddhism in Vietnam. Approximately 36% of respondents see the ritual as a form of practicing the Dharma. This aligns with the view of Thích Minh Thành (2020), who argues that rituals like *Mông Sơn* are not merely ceremonial but are actually practical Dharma methods, helping practitioners develop concentration, mindfulness, and wisdom through meditative focus during the ritual (Thành, 2020). 35.3% agree that the ritual is a concrete act of compassion and relief from suffering. According to Hải Lê Hoàng & Văn Chung (2022), *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* embodies the spirit of *mahākaruṇā* - the great compassion to rescue beings with no refuge, suffering in the three lower realms. The ritual is not superstitious; on the contrary, it is a Mahāyāna expression of egolessness and altruism (Hải & Chung, 2022). Though a smaller proportion (22.4%) emphasized it, many respondents agree that *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* serves an educational function regarding karma and moral causality. The ritual teaches both participants and observers that every deed - good or bad - leaves consequences, thereby enhancing individual and collective ethical awareness (Nguyễn Thị Thùy Linh, 2022).

In the context of urbanization and religious pluralism in Ho Chi Minh City, the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual is not merely a devotional act, but also performs vital functions of moral reconstruction, symbolic expression of compassion, and the reshaping of public spiritual space. As such, the analysis of its significance must move beyond metaphysical interpretations to consider it as a *symbolic social practice*, in line with the arguments of Bell (1992) and Turner (1969).

First, from a religious perspective, the ritual embodies beliefs in karma, rebirth, and the potential for salvation through meritorious offerings. This view positions the ritual as a concrete manifestation of the Northern Buddhist triad of compassion (*karuṇā*), wisdom (*prajñā*), and merit transfer (*pariṇāmanā*), while simultaneously constructing the relationship between the living and the dead according to a moral-religious structure. This aligns with Durkheim's (2001) conception of ritual as a collectively enacted moral space that produces metaphysical order.

Second, in terms of moral and social significance, the ritual serves as a vehicle for spiritual education and communal ethics. Qualitative interview excerpts reveal insights such as: "Each time I chant the Mông Sơn ritual, I am reminded to live more compassionately" and "It's not just about feeding the wandering souls; it's also about saving ourselves from selfishness." From Turner's (1969) perspective, these are expressions of moral liminality, where individuals temporarily step out of everyday social roles and enter a community of ethical reflection, where humanistic values are foregrounded. The ritual thus becomes a moralized space—a site not only for prayer, but for ethical introspection and accountability.

Third, the ritual carries strong cultural and identity-based meanings by reaffirming the linkage between Northern Vietnamese Buddhism and layers of indigenous Vietnamese folk beliefs. The ways in which Vietnamese communities adapt the ritual—from spirit

processions, vegetarian offerings, and animal release (phóng sinh) to burning paper offerings—demonstrate its localized character, consistent with Primiano's (1995) notion of vernacular religion. The ritual's significance lies not in its doctrinal purity, but in its capacity to integrate and reflect community-specific values. This dynamic is also observed by DeBernardi (1984) in the Hungry Ghost Festival in Malaysia, which she interprets not merely as a religious rite, but as a socio-political symbol.

Finally, in the contemporary urban context of Ho Chi Minh City, the ritual also fulfills a function of *collective spiritual therapy*. According to Marouda (2017), offerings to wandering souls represent a way for society to confront and manage metaphysical anxieties—those that cannot be resolved through rational or technical means. Interviewees reported feeling “relieved” or “less afraid” after participating in the ritual. These responses serve as compelling evidence that the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual operates as a *social soothing mechanism*—a function often overlooked in modern religious studies. This role is fully consistent with Habermas's (2008) concept of post-secularism, in which religion re-enters the public sphere as a source of moral authority and healing.

From both the survey and the supporting academic literature, it can be affirmed that the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual is not merely a part of Buddhist liturgy, but a “living entity” that embodies ethical, philosophical, educational, and cultural dimensions. Its continued presence in the religious life of Northern Tradition Buddhists demonstrates the enduring vitality and adaptability of Buddhism within contemporary Vietnamese society.

The Value of Offering to Hungry Ghosts through the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* Ritual

The value of the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual lies in its profound spiritual and cultural significance within the religious life of Northern

Tradition Buddhist followers in particular and of the Vietnamese people in Ho Chi Minh City in general. This value was documented through survey results collected from members of the Buddhist community (see Table 3 and Figure 3).

A total of 495 respondents (61.9%) stated that the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual is valuable because it helps them cultivate compassion, develop generosity, aspire toward truth-goodness-beauty, and deeply absorb the Buddhist teaching of loving-kindness. 285 participants (35.6%) said that the ritual's value lies in fulfilling their need for worship, prayer, and experiencing spiritual life. 252 respondents (31.5%) believed the ritual holds value as it is a fine tradition - a beautiful cultural feature of Vietnamese Buddhism. 223 people (27.9%) noted that the ritual is valuable because it brings peace of mind to the living. 169 respondents (21.1%) shared that the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual is meaningful in educating compassion and helping those in hardship. Finally, 16 participants (2%) offered other opinions regarding the ritual's value.

Table 3

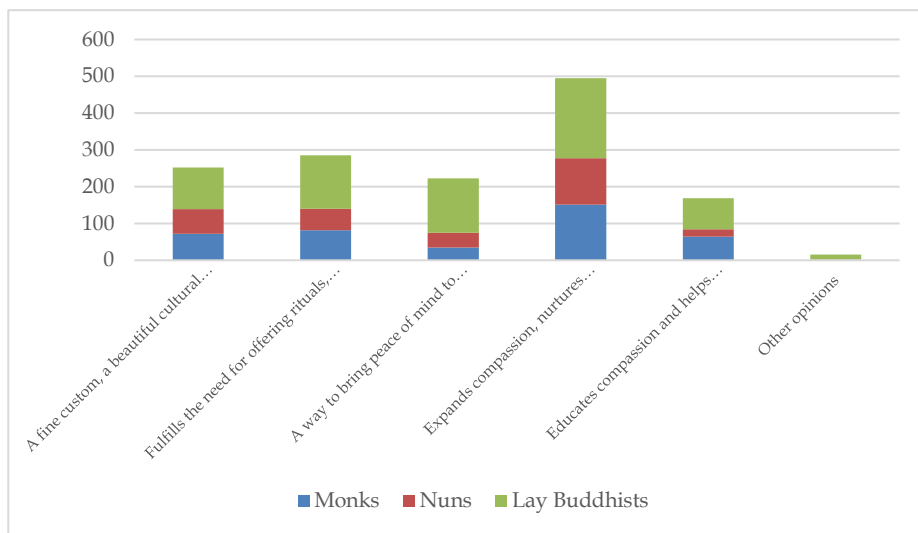
The value of the Mông Sơn Food Offering Ceremony in the spiritual and religious life of Northern Tradition Buddhist followers in Ho Chi Minh City (number of responses)

	A fine custom, a beautiful cultural practice	Fulfills the need for offering rituals, prayers, and spiritual experiences	A way to bring peace of mind to people	Expands compassion, nurtures generosity, aims toward the values of truth-goodness-beauty, and embodies the Buddhist teaching of compassion	Educates compassion and helps those in difficult circumstances	Other opinions	Total
Monks	72	82	35	151	64	1	405
Nuns	67	58	40	126	20	1	312
Lay Buddhists	113	145	148	218	85	14	723
Total (percent of respondents)	252 (31,5)	285 (35,6)	223 (27,9)	495 (61,9)	169 (21,1)	16 (2)	1440

Source: Primary data. Author's estimation.

Figure 3

The value of the Mông Sơn Food Offering Ceremony in the spiritual and religious life of Northern Tradition Buddhist followers in Ho Chi Minh City



Source: Primary data. Author's estimation.

Based on the survey results, the value of offering to hungry ghosts through the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual can be summarized as follows:

First, it is important to recognize that this ritual, as practiced in the Northern Tradition of Buddhism in Ho Chi Minh City, represents a refined custom and a beautiful cultural expression not only of Northern Vietnamese Buddhism but also of Vietnamese Buddhist culture as a whole. The ritual is conducted in a harmonious and non-violent manner: all offerings are vegetarian, and the performance involves Buddhist ritual instruments and melodic chanting, creating a distinct and diverse form of "Buddhist music." Moreover, the ritual blends the Buddhist doctrine of compassion with Vietnam's traditional value of "remembering the source when drinking water"

(gratitude toward ancestors). This fusion elevates the significance of the ritual beyond the boundaries of Buddhism, attracting participation even from non-Buddhists.

“In Buddhism, gratitude and repaying kindness are core values. Practicing offerings like this helps us reflect on ourselves - to understand that if we don’t cultivate spiritual practice, we could fall into realms of suffering. The method of sharing and spreading compassion to others is a practical path of cultivation.” (Excerpt from Interview 02).

Aside from its cultural significance, the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual also holds deep spiritual value. First, it fulfills the spiritual needs of monastics, lay followers, and even non-Buddhists by providing a space for worship, prayer, and spiritual experience. Second, it helps ease the minds of those mourning the loss of loved ones - whether due to war, accident, or illness. Historically, kings and emperors often ordered monks to conduct large-scale *Chẩn tế* (charity offerings) rituals to pray for fallen soldiers, and victims, and peace for the nation. Third, some people perform the ritual out of the folk belief that hungry ghosts and restless spirits must be fed in order not to disturb the living.

“The act of making offerings is more spiritual than material. Whether it works or not is uncertain, but what’s important is the peace of mind it gives us. Just like we need food and water, the dead do too. We offer for our ancestors, but we also offer to those wandering, forgotten souls.” (Excerpt from Interview 04)

The ritual also carries social and ethical value. It offers participants a chance to open their hearts, practice generosity, and align themselves with the Buddhist values of truth, goodness, and beauty. While the deceased benefit from food offerings, the living experience psychological relief. The ritual becomes an expression of compassion across the realms of the living and the dead, and more broadly, of kindness toward all suffering beings.

“The spirits are guided through the chanting of Buddhist scriptures to gain wisdom and liberation. There’s a saying: ‘One cannot practice the Dharma on an empty stomach’ - so we offer food first, then Dharma teachings to help them awaken (Excerpt from Interview 01). Offering food is just the beginning. What truly matters is helping the spirits find light in the Dharma, take refuge in the Triple Gem, and begin the path of transformation and liberation.” (Excerpt from Interview 07).

The educational value of the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual is reflected through the meaning it embodies. Practitioners of the ritual cultivate compassion and empathy toward the beings the ceremony is intended for, which in turn inspires acts of generosity and assistance to those in suffering. The offering is made entirely with vegetarian food, reflecting respect for all forms of life by avoiding the killing of animals for ritual purposes. Moreover, the ritual serves as a reminder to honor the contributions of ancestors, national heroes, and all those who came before, as well as to express compassion toward those enduring hardship.

Survey results from Northern Tradition Buddhist followers in Ho Chi Minh City continue to affirm the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual’s profound, practical, and multi-layered significance in religious and cultural life. With over 60% of respondents acknowledging its role in cultivating compassion and practicing Buddhist teachings, the ritual is not merely ceremonial, but a comprehensive ethical, cultural, and spiritual value system. With 61.9% of respondents choosing this option, the ritual clearly demonstrates its central role in nurturing and developing compassion - a core principle of Mahāyāna Buddhism. According to Thích Nhật Từ (2020), the ritual enables practitioners to engage in acts of giving - not for karmic rewards, but to internalize non-self and deeply empathize with the suffering of all beings. Offering to the invisible beings - hungry ghosts - represents the unconditional nature of Buddhist compassion. 35.6% of participants stated that the ritual fulfills their personal spiritual needs. This reveals

a key intersection between Buddhism and local folk beliefs. Nhung (2020) noted that rituals such as *Mông Sơn* function as “transformational rituals,” providing a space for practitioners to face fear and insecurity and to seek peace through chanting offerings, and meditation. 31.5% of followers considered the ritual to be a beautiful cultural tradition, aligning with the findings of Linh (2022), who affirmed that *Mông Sơn* represents a fusion of Northern Tradition Buddhism and local indigenous beliefs. Linh suggested that preserving and maintaining this ritual is equivalent to preserving a deeply rooted “humanitarian custom” within the community. 27.9% of respondents believed that the ritual is not only for the dead but also serves to reassure the living. This reflects a key socio-psychological mechanism analyzed by Lợi (2012), who viewed the ritual as a form of collective therapy: “The ritual allows people to face death with serenity and agency”. Approximately 21.1% of participants emphasized the ritual’s educational value - an increasingly recognized component of modern Buddhism. According to Hải & Chung (2022), the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual serves as a tool to teach children and new practitioners about karma, cause and effect, compassion, and responsibility toward marginalized beings. From the survey findings, it can be concluded that the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual represents a complex sacred structure that interweaves: Buddhist ethics (compassion, giving), personal spirituality (dedication, meditation), Vietnamese cultural identity (beautiful customs), and social functions (psychological healing, communal education). These overlapping values have enabled the ritual not only to endure but also to evolve and adapt within the context of modern society.

From a socio-cultural perspective, the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual embodies multiple interwoven layers of meaning, reflecting both the depth of traditional religiosity and its adaptability to modern society. It serves as a space where Buddhist moral values are collectively

expressed, reinforced, and transmitted. Core principles of Northern Buddhism—such as compassion (*karuṇā*), non-self (*anātman*), and merit transference (*pariṇāmanā*)—are not only chanted, but also *ritualized* (Bell, 1992) through concrete acts such as offerings, recitations, mantras, and vows for the benefit of the deceased. This illustrates that the ritual not only affirms individual belief but also constructs a shared moral framework—aligning with Durkheim’s (2001) notion of ritual as a mechanism for shaping social morality.

The Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual as practiced in Vietnam—specifically in the context of Ho Chi Minh City—is not a replica of its Chinese counterpart, but rather a localized adaptation of Northern Buddhism integrated with Vietnamese folk spirituality. Elements such as outdoor offerings to wandering souls, humble vegetarian meals, the burning of paper effigies, spirit processions, and floating lanterns on rivers exemplify a high degree of *vernacularization*. According to Primiano (1995), it is precisely through such processes that *vernacular religion* emerges—not confined to canonical texts but lived through culturally embedded practices. Thus, the ritual possesses not only spiritual value but also functions as collective memory, where national identity is expressed through form, language, music, and symbols. Its varied modes of practice testify to the ritual’s capacity for cultural-social adaptation—what Ladwig (2012b) describes as *local adaptations of Buddhist ritual*. Documenting these variations allows for a better understanding of the ritual’s dynamism and flexibility—key features of intangible cultural heritage.

Qualitative data reveal that many lay practitioners perceive the ritual as a form of healing—not only for the spirits of the dead but also for themselves. Interview excerpts include phrases such as “I felt more at peace,” “It helped release resentment in my heart,” and “I am less afraid of death.” These sentiments indicate that the ritual functions as a form of *collective therapy*, echoing Marouda’s (2017) concept of

underworld humanitarianism. In an urban society marked by pressure, fragmentation, and individualization, the ritual opens a sacred communal space where people reconnect, share, and rediscover meaning. From a post-secular perspective (Habermas, 2008), this suggests that religion—through ritual—remains a potent cultural force capable of fostering social cohesion and spiritual well-being, even in modern communities.

Notably, large-scale Mông Sơn Thí Thực ceremonies also attract participants who are not Buddhist—ranging from foreign visitors and university students to members of other religious groups. This indicates the ritual's potential to function as a *cultural window* through which Vietnamese religion is presented to both domestic and international audiences. The ritual's public, visual, and communal nature allows it to convey messages of compassion, filial piety, and interfaith peace through symbols and embodied performance. As Turner (1969) observes, this is the moment when ritual transcends religious boundaries to become a *drama of society*—a performative stage where the community enacts and projects its identity to the world.

The values embedded in the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual can thus be conceptualized along four key axes: moral, cultural, therapeutic, and dialogical. At a time when religion faces the risks of commodification or confinement to the private sphere, this ritual offers an integrative model—preserving spiritual depth while generating observable and measurable social value. Therefore, the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual is not merely a traditional rite but a highly adaptive social practice that aligns with the needs of contemporary spiritual life.

CONCLUSION

In the context of contemporary Vietnamese culture, the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual is not merely a purely religious practice but a vivid expression of ethical, cultural, and spiritual values within the Northern Tradition Buddhist community. Through the combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, this study demonstrates that the ritual not only addresses the profound spiritual needs of its practitioners but also helps shape and regenerate traditional cultural values - especially the Mahāyāna Buddhist principles of compassion, filial piety, gratitude, and karmic causality. Building on the theoretical frameworks of ritual theory (Bell, 1992; Turner, 1969), vernacular religion (Primiano, 1995), and post-secularism (Habermas, 2008), this study argues that the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual should not be understood merely as a devotional event, but rather as a social space in which the community reconstructs its collective identity, moral order, and shared emotional experience.

Firstly, the *Mông Sơn Thí Thực* ritual clearly embodies the role of “underworld charity” - an act of unconditional giving toward those forgotten by society and collective memory. The act of giving to *cô hồn* (wandering souls) and *ngạ quỷ* (hungry ghosts) is not just ceremonial worship, but a practical method for inner transformation. It reduces greed, anger, and delusion (*tam độc*), while simultaneously nurturing compassion in both the practitioner and the broader community. This is precisely an expression of *underworld humanitarianism*—a metaphysical form of compassion through which the living confront existential anxieties via concrete, communal, and therapeutic ritual acts.

Secondly, the ritual plays an essential role in preserving and transmitting localized Buddhist culture in Vietnam. Through this ritual, generations of followers - both monastic and lay - are immersed in Buddhist philosophy via concrete spiritual experiences rooted in

the unique socio-cultural context of Ho Chi Minh City. In this urban setting, where Northern Vietnamese Buddhist tradition intersects with rapid urbanization and the growing influence of global cultural flows, the ritual not only survives but is *indigenized* in distinct ways—from the liturgical language and ritual symbols to its communal modes of organization. With deeply localized elements such as the burning of paper offerings, the construction of ritual altars, and outdoor ceremonies, the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual stands as a paradigmatic form of *vernacular religious practice*, in which Buddhism both integrates with and restructures indigenous spiritual identity. The ritual thus becomes a “school of ethics,” conveying values such as honoring ancestors, empathizing with others, and practicing non-self and altruism.

Thirdly, the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual serves a crucial social function: it provides emotional consolation to the living, helping to alleviate anxiety, fear, and uncertainty about the invisible world. It also contributes to collective psychological stability in a rapidly changing modern society. The *liminal* nature of the ritual creates a temporary space in which individuals can suspend their everyday social roles and enter a moral community, where spiritual healing is facilitated through chanting, almsgiving, and the transference of merit. As such, the ritual becomes a “collective spiritual therapy,” where the community gathers to focus on transcendent values through chanting, ritual performance, and merit dedication.

Lastly, this study reveals that the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual is a prime example of Buddhism’s adaptability and resilience in the face of urbanization, modernization, and globalization. The ritual’s flexibility, its integration with local cultural elements, and its appeal to both Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike reveal it as a form of *syncretic ritualization*—a site where religious traditions are restructured to meet contemporary spiritual needs in a post-secular

society. Its continued existence and widespread resonance do not stem from rigid tradition but from its ability to integrate, transform, and creatively evolve to meet contemporary spiritual needs - affirming the vitality and humanitarian spirit of Vietnamese Buddhism.

Based on the above findings, it can be affirmed that the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual should be recognized as a dynamic cultural-religious heritage—one that is both sacred in nature and capable of fulfilling ethical, social, and therapeutic functions. Continued research, preservation, and promotion of this ritual—especially in urban centers such as Ho Chi Minh City—are essential not only for the Buddhist community, but also for understanding and reinforcing the cultural and spiritual foundations of contemporary Vietnamese society.

Although this study employed a mixed-methods approach to examine the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual within the contemporary cultural context of Ho Chi Minh City, several limitations should be acknowledged and addressed in future research. First, the quantitative sampling process used controlled convenience sampling. While this method was appropriate for field conditions and ensured that participants had sufficient ritual experience, it may have introduced sampling bias, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings to the broader Northern Vietnamese Buddhist community across the country. Second, data collection was concentrated in Ho Chi Minh City—a metropolis characterized by high population density, elevated educational attainment, and advanced levels of modernization. As a result, the findings may not fully capture the diversity of ritual practices in rural, mountainous, or culturally distinct regions. Third, the qualitative phase was relatively limited in scope, with only seven in-depth interviews conducted, primarily with individuals who are deeply engaged in the ritual. Consequently, perspectives from those less involved, neutral, or even critical of the

ritual were not sufficiently represented, which may have reduced the multidimensionality of the analysis. Finally, the study did not engage in discourse analysis or media studies approaches to explore how the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual is represented, narrated, or symbolized in public spaces, digital platforms, or mass media.

Based on these limitations, future research could explore several promising directions: Conducting cross-regional or inter-sectarian surveys to compare differences in ritual practice and reception across geographical areas and Buddhist traditions (e.g., Mahāyāna, Theravāda, Mendicant sects). Expanding the scope through media anthropology by examining how the ritual is mediated and performed on social media platforms, YouTube, and live-streaming environments—where it is increasingly *mediated* and *aestheticized* in the digital age. Undertaking discourse and semiotic analyses to investigate how communities reinterpret key concepts such as *cô hồn* (wandering spirits), *cúng thí* (ritual offerings), *merit*, and the *spirit world* within contemporary moral and social frameworks. Applying a historical-critical approach to trace the transmission, transformation, and vernacularization of the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual in Vietnam, thereby constructing a deeper historical-cultural context for its current practice. These future directions will not only broaden the explanatory scope of the ritual through sociological, anthropological, media, and historical-religious lenses but also reaffirm the Mông Sơn Thí Thực ritual as a living cultural heritage with remarkable adaptability to contemporary Vietnamese society.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: N.T.K.; Data curation: N.T.K.; Formal analysis: N.T.K.; Funding acquisition: N.T.K.; Investigation: N.T.K.; Methodology: N.T.K.; Project administration: N.T.K.; Resources: N.T.K.; Software: N.T.K.; Supervision: N.T.K.; Validation: N.T.K.; Visualization: N.T.K.; Writing – original draft:

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was reviewed and approved by the Scientific Research Ethics Committee for Theses and Dissertations of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City.

Informed Consent Statement

All participants were fully informed and voluntarily consented to participate after understanding the objectives and procedures of the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest related to this research.

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