



THEATRICALISATION OF RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGY IN VIETNAM: THE CASE OF MỤC LIÊN, THANH ĐỀ PERFORMANCE IN THE NORTHERN DELTA REGION

Nguyen Dinh Lam*

The USSH Hanoi Academic Research Group on Vietnamese Traditional Religious and Belief
Music, VNU-University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi 100000, Vietnam
E-mail: tunglamtongiao@gmail.com

Nguyen Thi Thuy Hang**

Science and Innovation Department, Vietnam National University, Hanoi 100000, Vietnam
E-mail: hangcsk.vnu@gmail.com

Published online: 27 February 2026

To cite this article: Lam, N. D. and Hang, N. T. T. 2026. Theatricalisation of religious ideology in Vietnam: The case of *Mục Liên, Thanh Đề* performance in the Northern Delta region. *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 22 (1): 107–123. <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2026.22.1.6>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2026.22.1.6>

ABSTRACT

In the cultural life of the Vietnamese in Vietnam's Northern Delta, various forms of folk theatrical art, also known as folk performances or pre-theatrical art, continue to exist. These art forms are preserved through numerous cultural activities among the Vietnamese in the Northern Delta and are recognised as valuable heritages created, practised, and passed down by previous generations to the present. The primary creative method in most of these art forms is theatricalisation, particularly of religious and spiritual ideas. These include Buddhist, Confucian, and traditional Vietnamese beliefs, contributing to the development of a unique art form with distinct characteristics rooted in the local community. However, under the strong influence of modern economic and cultural life, these art forms are at risk of disappearing from contemporary society. This study, utilising qualitative research methods such as fieldwork and in-depth interviews with elderly artisans who have the ability to perform these plays well, takes an interdisciplinary approach combining art and religious studies. It focuses on the cultural context and methods of dramatising religious ideas, particularly through the case of the Vu Lan Sutra and the play Mục Liên, Thanh Đề (Maudgalyayana and His Mother) as performed during funerals in the Northern Delta region. The research findings reveal the primary creative methods and distinctive characteristics of this art form, along with the folk messages conveyed by earlier generations to the present. These contributions aid in the preservation and continuation of this cultural heritage in the lives of Vietnamese people today.

Keywords: Religion, theatricalisation, folk performances, *Mục Liên, Thanh Đề*, Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

In Vietnamese art tradition, theatre is one of the art forms created, practised, and passed down by the Vietnamese people very early in history. According to official records (Lam et al. 2022), *Tuồng* and *Chèo* are two traditional theatre genres popular in the villages and communes of Vietnam since the Lý-Trần dynasties. Over the course of history, in the early twentieth century, these art forms came into contact with and were influenced by Western theatre, particularly

French drama, and evolved into modern theatre art, performed in professional theatres as it is today (Loan 1993; Thanh 2007). In addition to theatrical arts, Vietnam's treasure trove of traditional performing arts includes many folk plays, which are considered pre-theatrical forms (Lam et al. 2022).

Over thousands of years of formation and development, traditional Vietnamese theatre has evolved into two types: folk theatre (also known as pre-theatrical art) and professional traditional theatre. With more than twenty years of research on traditional Vietnamese performing arts, authors have determined that these two forms are directly related. Professional theatre developed from folk theatre after modern French theatre and Western theatrical arts were introduced to Vietnam in the first half of the twentieth century, notably through forms such as *Tuồng*, *Chèo*, and *Cải Lương*. Professional traditional theatre clearly demonstrates individual creativity by artists who have been professionally trained in art academies and universities both in Vietnam and abroad. It also reflects a literary quality, with well-defined scripts structured into chapters and acts. In contrast, folk theatre retains the form of opera, with content primarily based on folk tales, created collectively by local communities. These performances serve religious, spiritual, moral, cultural, and customary functions specific to each locality. Folk theatre is typically performed in communal village yards, temple courtyards, or even the yards of farming households throughout Vietnam. Thus, unlike folk theatre, professional traditional theatre has developed folk opera art forms and adapted them for the modern stage, performed in professional venues for commercial and entertainment purposes.

Although the literary content and chapter-based structure typical of professional stage art are less defined in these plays, they have significantly contributed to conveying moral education and traditional cultural identity to future generations. Moreover, folk artisans have demonstrated their talents by dramatising religious thoughts and beliefs, creating folk plays that enrich the artistic life of the country. These unique art forms not only teach positive religious values but also adapt and integrate doctrines into the traditional ethics and culture of the Vietnamese people. Folk plays are often performed during funerals in Vietnam's Northern Delta. Funerals are a deeply rooted tradition with a notable position in the cultural, religious, and ancestral worship practices of Vietnamese people, particularly in the Northern Delta region. Over centuries, Vietnamese people have maintained traditional performing arts within these rituals, where music and performances serve as important cultural symbols. As the saying goes, *Sống dầu đèn, chết kèn trống* (Living with oil lamps, dying with trumpets and drums), whereby the Vietnamese consider the sound of drums and trumpets in funerals as important as the light of a lamp at night and the role of oil in human life; funeral music and folk performances are vital for guiding the deceased to their ancestral world. These performing arts not only express sacredness as part of the musical system tied to the human life cycle, but they also ensure that the steps of funeral rituals are closely interconnected.

The sounds of gongs, drums, and trumpets, the singing-crying (*hát khóc*) songs, and the rhythms of bamboo and rattan musical instruments guide and signal the sequence of ritual steps, from the coffin-entry ceremony (*nhập quan*) when the deceased is placed in a wooden coffin (*quan tài*) to the burial ceremony (*an táng*) when the deceased is laid to rest in the grave. These rituals bring the deceased to their eternal resting place (*an nghỉ cuối cùng*) (Lam 2024). Additionally, folk performances and pre-theatrical arts play critical roles in funerals, teaching the living about traditional ethics, the spirit of filial piety towards parents, and reverence for ancestors. Folk artisans, inspired by Confucianism, Buddhism, and ancestor worship beliefs, create performances that both share the grief of the deceased's passing and showcase a unique artistic identity reflective of each locality's culture.

Plays influenced by religious ideologies were shaped and developed over centuries. Notable examples include *Nhị Thập Tứ Hiếu* (Twenty-Four Shining Examples of Filial People – Confucianism), *Chèo Đò Giáo Ngựa* (Rowing a Boat to Carry Mother Across the River – ancestor worship), and *Mục Liên, Thanh Đề* (Maudgalyayana and His Mother – Buddhism). These plays express the religious spirit and ideology that have been dramatised in this region. Among them, *Mục Liên, Thanh Đề* remains widely performed in the Northern Delta. This play is notable for its profound humanistic and artistic values, demonstrating the creative talents of folk artisans. It conveys Buddhist teachings on the law of cause and effect, as described in the *Vu Lan Sutra*, to educate the living on how to lead virtuous lives, avoid immoral actions, perform good deeds, and spread cultural values, especially within families and communities.

The term “theatricalisation” in this study is understood as the process of dramatising Buddhist scriptures and simultaneously developing roles and actors corresponding to the characters depicted in the *Vu Lan Sutra*, transforming it into a form of folk theatre. This art is then practised and performed during funerals and significant religious and spiritual ceremonies within the community, with the aim of promoting moral education, encouraging virtuous living, discouraging evil deeds, and fostering love and filial piety towards parents while they are still alive. Thus, rooted in the philosophy of “cause and effect” and the ethics of “filial piety” as clearly expressed in the *Vu Lan Sutra*, folk artists have employed the language of theatrical art and folk theatre in the Northern Delta region for centuries, making it an important cultural heritage of the local community. The dramatisation process in the play *Mục Liên, Thanh Đề* originates from the ideology, Buddhist scriptures, and religious rituals and beliefs of the Vietnamese people in this region, creating a form of folk theatre rich in cultural identity and imbued with humanistic and educational values for generations of Vietnamese people, as well as for the traditional culture of the region.

The theatricalisation of religious ideas represents a pinnacle in the creation of traditional performing arts, showcasing the ingenuity of previous generations of Vietnamese people. These traditions, passed down to the present generation, remain a vital subject of study for understanding Vietnam’s cultural and artistic heritage. Exploring these practices also fills an important gap in the study of Vietnamese traditional arts and culture today.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theatre is a form of art that incorporates various artistic languages, such as music, dance, fine arts, and literature, to express the ideas of society, community, religion, and individuals. Cartocci (2024) introduced the terms stage and theatricality, which primarily refer to the relationship between performers and audiences, where theatre provides the most direct connection. The highlight of theatrical art is performance, which brings characters to life through specific plays and scenes. As an art form that uses plays and scenes to create conceptual symbols, Robertson (2009) notes that in ordinary language, the terms of the theatrical medium, such as theatricality, drama, performance, acting, and scene, form a vocabulary of conceptual symbols. He also argues that these terms are not merely metaphors; rather, theatricality is a fundamental guiding concept for defining lived experience; it is an ideology. By examining the use of theatrical language as an ideology and analysing how such terms rhetorically define situations, the underlying ideology that the theatrical medium operates within and unconsciously communicates is uncovered (Robertson 2009).

At the *Theatre History Conference* held in 1993, the term *theatricality* gained significant attention, permeating discussions to the extent that it became a key term in theatre history (Fischer-Lichte 1995). Although debates on this concept persist, it is clear that theatricality holds a particularly important position in expressing and representing certain ideas or specific characters. Directly related to the art of theatre, Aristotle's works on poetics emphasised the concepts of tragedy and comedy as important techniques that shape the characteristics of theatrical art (Eco 1977). When studying the concept of *theatricalisation*, discourse is paramount. Berezin (1994) argues that discourse involves role-playing, the transformation of the self and environment into a stage setting, and the proliferation of public and private performances, all of which suggest a broader theatrical influence on art and life. Berezin further asserts that through such behaviours, literary discourse becomes *theatricalised*. This process occurs in all works, though different works offer audiences unique opportunities to express individual and collective identities. Audiences not only dramatise their positions in literary discourse but also create and enact public personae in auditoriums or other public spaces. Berezin (1994) explores how some audiences assume roles inspired by literature, art, drama, or life itself.

Theatre serves a special function as an art form. Beyond its entertainment value, it also preserves and vividly reproduces cultural traditions that might otherwise be forgotten or lost. Theatre historians often consult art history, not only for source material to help reconstruct lost performances but also for methodological insights (Quinn 1995). In dramatising religious ideas, previous generations recognised theatre's importance in teaching moral values through religion. This significance extends beyond Vietnam or any specific continent and includes many other cultures. Religions have used various methods to dramatise doctrines and scriptures, including for the education of young people (Lobingier 1918). Fuist (2014), studying the dramatisation of beliefs, suggests that this concept offers a valuable perspective for understanding the formation and maintenance of collective identity at the interactional level. He concluded that group members use cultural elements, such as humour, boundary objects, audience awareness, language, and style, both consciously and unconsciously to enact ideological performances. These performances situate performers and audiences within systems of meaning and shape collective identities (Fuist 2014). Thus, the theatricalisation of a community's religious or ideological ideas draws upon indigenous cultural heritage, including attitudes, language, and folklore. The relationship between religion and culture is evident in how religion contributes to the creation of culture. Traditional indigenous arts are more clearly expressed in many Asian and Southeast Asian countries. In particular, the performing arts in these countries are distinctly reflective of this connection.

In traditional Japanese theatre, the religious underpinnings of mediaeval Noh theatre and its function as a ritual form are significant. As a multifaceted performing art and literary genre, Noh is understood to have rich and varied religious influences. However, it is often studied as an art and literary form largely divorced from its religious and ritual origins. Jelesijevic (2016) has undertaken a study to recapture some of the religious aura of Noh and to restore its religious efficacy by exploring the ways in which Noh art and performance contributed to the broader religious context of mediaeval Japan. Hubery (2019) has also conducted an in-depth study of Noh with the aim of examining the connection between Noh theatre and Japanese Buddhism. This study includes a chronological exploration of notable periods in Japanese history leading up to the Kamakura and Muromachi periods, when Noh theatre was established. It examines the impact of China on Japanese culture in terms of religion and performance style, referring to developments in theatre and performance and establishing cultural connections between religion and performance – specifically Buddhism and Noh (Hubery 2019).

Traditional Chinese theatre, particularly through opera, also clearly expresses its religious nature. Originating from the Chinese classics, androgyny is associated with the divine in fundamental Taoist texts such as the *I Ching* and the *Tao Te Ching*. According to Ren's (2024) research, in Chinese opera, traditional Chinese philosophy in the *I Ching* describes *yin*, represented by the female, and *yang*, represented by the male, as inseparable and in a state of constant correlation by nature.

In Vietnam, *Chèo* and *Tuồng* are two types of traditional professional stage art. Artists are professionally trained, and the government establishes art troupes from the central to local levels. These traditional genres are based on literary works or stories, using a system of musical melodies to convey the thoughts and customs of the Vietnamese people through characters and roles performed on stage. In particular, *Chèo* stands out with its artistic characteristics that clearly reflect Vietnamese culture and art, as the themes and content are mainly related to farmers and the village and commune communities of Northern Vietnam (Ngu and Kieu 1964; Khoan 1974; Ngu 1996). In this form, themes of religion and belief—especially Buddhist ideology—are commonly portrayed. Alongside *Chèo*, *Tuồng* is another type of traditional theatre, also supported by a government-established system from central to local levels. The ideological themes of this art form primarily relate to the history of dynasties and other social issues (Ky 1973; 1978; 1987; Quang 1995; 2017).

Thus, theatrical art around the world is rich and diverse, formed and developed in association with the historical and cultural context of each country. In Vietnam, however, traditional theatrical art is divided into two basic types: folk theatre and professional theatre. This study focuses on the phenomenon of folk theatre with distinct Vietnamese cultural characteristics, which is especially popular in the villages of Northern Vietnam and performed in communal houses and village pagodas. This art form has not yet received sufficient attention or research necessary to preserve and develop it within contemporary cultural life. The theatricalisation of religious or everyday life is not unique to Vietnam; it is a universal phenomenon with ancient roots. Berezin (1994) observes that theatricalisation, including role-playing, masquerades, masks, and self-dramatisation, has existed throughout history. Although it gained prominence during certain periods, the view of the world as a stage and the concept of role-playing in life have a history as old as theatre itself (Berezin 1994).

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative research method, focusing on in-depth interviews with folk artists who are experienced, talented, and regularly practise performing this type of theatrical art. Alongside this, the study also employs a theoretical approach that identifies religion as the core of culture; religion is considered the central element in shaping the culture of a community. This theoretical perspective significantly contributes to demonstrating and supporting the argument that religion and belief play an important role in the formation and development of this type of folk theatrical art, as well as many other art forms born from religion and belief in Vietnam. It contributes substantially to shaping Vietnam's cultural identity.

This theoretical perspective was developed by Hung Nguyen Quang, based on focused research on three representatives of this school: Max Weber (1864–1920), Christopher Dawson (1889–1970), and Paul Tillich (1886–1965). The core of this theoretical direction is that religion is the core or identity (*căn tính*) of Vietnamese culture, shaping its cultural identity. Vietnamese culture, understood in the broadest sense, is essentially a religious culture (Hung 2016). Accordingly, religion is a core element in forming cultural identity, including folk and traditional

arts. In Vietnam, our fieldwork found that many genres of folk art originated from specific forms of religion and belief. Beyond entertainment, many types of folk art serve specific functions closely associated with the rituals of particular religions and beliefs. Thus, from this theoretical perspective, it is evident that folk theatre and performing arts rooted in religion and belief have contributed to the creation of distinctive and diverse cultural and artistic regions. The identity of Vietnamese traditional culture and art, therefore, can be partly affirmed to have originated from religion and belief.

The data were analysed based on the results of numerous in-depth interviews, which included 25 artisans (A1–A25), 3 local cultural managers (M1–M3), and 3 experts (E1–E3) in related fields. These participants were selected from provinces including Bac Ninh, Hai Duong, Hanoi, Nam Dinh, Thai Binh, and Hung Yen—areas known for their skilled practitioners of folk theatre and traditional funeral music. Additionally, interviews were conducted with local shamans and residents during fieldwork across various localities. The interview materials were processed manually, without the use of software (e.g., NVivo for coding).

Notably, the artisans selected for interviews were required to have directly participated in the practice and performance of this folk theatre art and to be between 50 years old and 80 years old. They possess not only excellent performance skills but also strong memory and a deep understanding of issues related to the formation, development, and creation of this folk theatre form. Likewise, the managers interviewed are individuals who have worked or are currently working as state cultural managers at the commune level. They are highly knowledgeable about local culture and arts and are well-versed in the state’s legal regulations on cultural management and the preservation of local cultural heritage. Similarly, the experts interviewed are researchers with a focus on folk performing arts, especially traditional arts in the Northern Delta region.

It should be noted that, regarding methodology, this research on folk performing arts—specifically the play *Mục Liên, Thanh Đẽ*—which began in 2016, is a new and particularly significant study, as it has never before been seriously examined. In addition to the 25 artisans, in over nearly ten years of research and fieldwork, hundreds of artisans and farmers in the Northern Delta communities were interviewed to ensure accuracy and scientific rigour.

This research is crucial because it aims to preserve and develop this form of folk theatre in light of the risk that it may disappear from contemporary and future social life. Therefore, maintaining the accuracy and integrity of the art form is identified as a primary goal. After this article was written, it was sent to seven well-educated individuals, including scientists and high school teachers in some Northern Delta localities. All were over 70 years old and had witnessed this performance firsthand since childhood, either during family funerals or local community funerals. Their agreement with this article, as well as their suggestions for improvement, played an important role in ensuring the research’s accuracy and scientific ethics. This process supports the proposal to the Government and the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism of Vietnam for a strategy to preserve and develop this folk theatre art in the future.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

***Vu Lan Sutra* with Cultural Practices and Beliefs in Vietnamese Tradition**

The *Vu Lan Sutra*, also known as the *Vu Lan Sutra to Repay Filial Piety*, *Vu Lan to Repay Grace*, or *Vu Lan Bon*, is a Buddhist scripture originating from teachings delivered by the Buddha. It was introduced to Vietnam early on through translation from Sanskrit to Chinese by Trúc Pháp Hộ

(226–303) (Phu 2015). According to *Cao Tăng Truyện*, volume 1, Trúc Pháp Hộ was 78 years old when he passed away during Emperor Huệ of Jin’s flight from Luoyang to Trường An. Historical documents indicate that Sima Ying captured Emperor Huệ of Jin in 303. Amid the chaos in Guanzhong, Trúc Pháp Hộ and his disciples fled eastward. Upon reaching Thăng Trì, they fell ill, and Trúc Pháp Hộ passed away around 303 (Phu 2015). Consequently, the *Vu Lan Sutra* was translated and popularised in Vietnam via overland routes from China. When introduced to Vietnam, the *Vu Lan Sutra* also became an important element in shaping Vietnamese culture. As Hung stated, Vietnamese culture is based on a framework that fuses Confucianism, Buddhism, and indigenous religions and beliefs (Hung 2016).

The concepts in the *Vu Lan Ullambana Sutra* are central to Buddhist scriptures and philosophy. The sutra’s characters, particularly Thanh Đề and her son, Mục Liên (Maudgalyāyana), illustrate the profound significance of the law of causality and emphasise filial piety as a core value for Buddhists. The sutra’s content can be summarised as follows:

When Maudgalyāyana achieved enlightenment, becoming a spiritually awakened person in Buddhism (noted for his mastery of supernatural powers), he sought to save his parents from the cycle of suffering. Using his divine vision, he located his mother and saw that she had been condemned to the realm of hungry ghosts. Filled with sorrow, Maudgalyāyana sought guidance from the Buddha. The Buddha advised that the only way to save his mother was to “rely on the supernatural power of monks and teachers in the ten directions” and to prepare offerings, including “hundreds of foods and colourful fruits”, along with other ritual items to seek their protection. Through the power of collective prayers and rituals, Maudgalyāyana could hope for his mother’s liberation over seven lifetimes. Following this guidance, he performed the prescribed rituals to save his mother. (Quang 2005: 3–47; Vietnam Buddhist Sangha 2009: 2–59)

Because Thanh Đề was greedy and cruel during her lifetime, she accumulated significant negative karma. As a result, she faced severe consequences after death: she was condemned to hell, reborn as a hungry ghost, and suffered constant hunger and thirst in the great hell. Meanwhile, Maudgalyāyana, through his holy nature and commitment to Buddhism, became an enlightened person and one of the 10 great disciples of the Buddha.

From a textual perspective, the *Vu Lan Sutra* highlights Mục Liên (Maudgalyāyana) as the first to perform rituals to save his mother, Thanh Đề. These rituals were subsequently passed down to future generations as ceremonies known as *Trai Đàn Chẩn Tế*, *Chẩn Tế Cô Hồn*, or the *Cầu Siêu* ceremony. These rituals have been practised by Vietnamese communities, including those in royal dynasties, for centuries. Expert opinions support that the *Trai Đàn Chẩn Tế* ritual reflects the ideological influence of the sutra, aiming to liberate souls and simultaneously educate the deceased while cautioning the living about morality and the law of causality (Lam 2014).

The influence of the *Vu Lan Sutra* on the *Trai Đàn Chẩn Tế* ceremony is evident in historical records. As early as the twelfth century, the practice was documented in official texts. The book *An Nam Chí Lược* noted: “On Trung Nguyên Day, the Vu Lan Bon festival was established to offer sacrifices and pray for the dead, regardless of the expense” (Tac 2002: 72).

Similarly, *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* recorded: “In Hội Tường Đại Khánh, year 9 [1118], [...] in autumn, month 7, [...] the Trung Nguyên festival coincided with the Vu Lan Bon festival [to pray for the dead] for Queen Mother Linh Nhân” (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences 1998: 289). The text further states that in the same season: “Autumn, month 7 (1128–NDL), Trung Nguyên festival: the king sat in Thiên An Palace, and the mandarins presented congratulatory petitions. Because [that day] was the Vu Lan festival [32a] for the Trai Đàn Chẩn Tế ceremony for King Nhân Tông, there was no banquet” (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences 1998: 289).

During the Trần Dynasty, the *Trai Đàn Chẩn Tế* ceremony continued to be observed in the royal court. For example, in February 1278, when Queen Thiên Cảm passed away, King Thánh Tông held a vegetarian feast in the palace and sent his son, King Nhân Tông, to invite Tuệ Trung to participate (Lam 2008).

By the mid-seventeenth century, this ritual had continued to develop more fully. Giovanni Filippo De Marini's notes from 1641–1658 state:

When the king arrived at the place where the ritual was performed, the monks as well as the mandarins in the court began to pray. Then, the king respectfully bowed to the souls. There was a detail that he used a bow to shoot five symbolic arrows at the deceased princes (symbolising religious beliefs). Next, they began to worship on the altars with incense smoke, praying to the generals who died protecting their country. (Sica 2013: 79)

Participant E2 added that, until the first half of the twentieth century, this ritual was still preserved and developed. This is demonstrated by the fact that, during the reign of Emperor Tự Đức, books related to worshipping practices from the Water and Land Department continued to be printed in Hán-Nôm script and circulated in pagodas and among the people. Thus, once religious thought has permeated a culture and become an important part of cultural practice, it functions like a continuous flow, maintained and promoted from generation to generation. As Hung has commented, these religious ideas themselves are the most powerful elements that create “national character”; they have their own laws of development and their own coercive power (Hung 2016: 53–54).

Based on the teachings of the *Vu Lan Sutra*, today, many families in the Northern Delta region, in particular, organise *Trai Đàn Chẩn Tế* (Way of the Ghosts) ceremonies or prayers for deceased family members, sometimes for the entire clan. This ritual is commonly performed in many pagodas throughout most months of the year, especially during the seventh lunar month. The local M2 noted that every year, many people bring offerings to Buddhist pagodas to seek the supernatural power (*tha lực*) of monks who have practised for many years. These monks are believed to help guide deceased relatives to a better world after death. Participant E1 emphasised that the teachings of the *Vu Lan Sutra* influence the lifestyle of Vietnamese people, particularly in the Northern Delta region. Many people consciously cultivate and practise morality during their lives, hoping to support their grandparents and parents after their passing.

Based on this study's observation, the *Vu Lan Sutra* has made an important contribution to encouraging Buddhist farmers to honour their grandparents, parents, and others around them while they are still alive. Thus, *Trai Đàn Chẩn Tế* is a significant ritual directly influenced by the *Vu Lan Sutra*. It has been practised by Vietnamese people for centuries, predating the performance of *Mục Liên*, *Thanh Đê*, which later became popular in Northern Vietnam. This ritual has played a vital role in promoting Buddhist ethics and shaping both traditional and modern Vietnamese values.

From the research presented, which is based on official historical documents, it can be concluded that the *Trai Đàn Chẩn Tế* ritual originates from the teachings of the *Vu Lan Sutra* and the foundational ideologies of Buddhism. This ritual has existed in Vietnam for thousands of years, dating back to the Lý and Trần dynasties. Through various historical periods and dynasties, it has been maintained, preserved, and developed into the present day. Importantly, official historical records demonstrate that the concepts of the *Vu Lan Sutra* and “offering sacrifices for the dead” hold deep cultural significance for the Vietnamese people, from the royal court to the common folk.

It is also worth noting that the *Trai Đàn Chấn Tế* ceremony is still practised in pagodas following Northern traditions. In addition to chanting and purely Buddhist rituals, this ceremony incorporates elements of traditional Vietnamese culture, including dance, music, and drama. The *Vu Lan Sutra* has even been adapted into scripted performances passed down through generations in the Northern Delta region.

The traditional play *Mục Liên, Thanh Đề*, also known as *Mục Liên Saves His Mother*, has become a notable folk-art phenomenon. It not only conveys moral and philosophical ideas but also employs vivid dramatisation through its characters, traditional Vietnamese costumes, music, and fine arts. This play effectively communicates messages of cause and effect while advising people to live virtuously and maintain good morals. It also enriches the spirit of filial piety, which is central to the tradition of ancestor worship among the Vietnamese people in this region.

***Mục Liên, Thanh Đề* in Northern Delta Funerals**

Mục Liên, Thanh Đề is staged based on the *Vu Lan Sutra*. This play is popular in the Northern Delta. Although the timing of performances varies by locality, most are held at night, after 10 p.m. Once there are no more groups visiting the deceased, the artisans in the funeral troupe or local villagers organise a “stage” to perform *Mục Liên, Thanh Đề* on a mat in the yard, in front of the deceased’s coffin.

Mục Liên, Thanh Đề, as the name suggests, is only performed at the funerals of older women, typically aged 65 years old to 70 years old or above. Funeral music groups, also known as “funeral brass bands”, generally perform this play due to the “professionalism” of the artisans. However, many villages have an “offering incense” (*dâng hương*) group that regularly organises performances for elderly women in the village when they die, marking their “return to the ancestors”. The performance centres on the excerpt of *Mục Liên* saving his mother and includes three parts: (1) *Giáo đầu* (“opening”); (2) *Con đường cứu mẹ* (“the way to save mother”); and (3) *Giải cứu cho mẹ* (“rescue for his mother”).

The creativity and dramatisation of the *Vu Lan Sutra* is most clearly shown in the way the characters and roles are constructed. From this sutra, folk artisans have turned the story into “chapters” or “episodes”, featuring four main actors and approximately three to seven supporting actors, depending on the locality. These supporting actors play the role of demons in hell. Artisan A15 explained that depending on the performance time and the family’s economic conditions, the play can be held for a long or short period. Participant M1 added that many localities now require funerals to be concluded by 10:00 p.m., so some families request that the play *Mục Liên, Thanh Đề* be performed briefly, focusing mainly on the detail of *Mục Liên* saving his mother, requiring only two characters: *Mục Liên* and *Thanh Đề*.

In addition to the two main characters, who represent the core teachings of cause and effect in the *Vu Lan Sutra*—namely *Mục Liên* and *Thanh Đề*—the play also includes a character to perform the *Giáo đầu* scene, introducing *Thanh Đề*’s life and the process of Maudgalyāyana saving his mother.

Another important role in the play is the ferryman. In Buddhist scriptures, *Mục Liên* (Maudgalyāyana) uses his supernatural power to see how his mother suffers, but in this folk play, the ferryman’s name is not clearly identified. It is understood that this person has the ability to take Maudgalyāyana across the “sacred river” to meet his mother and find a way to save her. Although this detail is not commonly included in all Northern Delta sub-regions, surveys

indicate that many villages still preserve it. Participant E2 believes this is a creative expression connecting the characters in the play to the cultural life of rice farmers and agricultural tradition in the region. That is also important evidence affirming the creative role of farmers, as well as folk artisans in Vietnamese villages, in shaping traditional Vietnamese culture. As Taylor (1998) affirmed, a focus on the concept of the Vietnamese village reveals that a rural peasant society is the primary symbol of Vietnam. The countryside is seen as representing the true Vietnamese identity, in contrast to urban intellectuals, merchants, and traders. It is believed that if one understands the village, one also understands the nation. The emphasis is on the village as a place where an authentic Vietnam can be found (Taylor 1998).

In constructing the roles, the folk artisans tried to make the characters of Mực Liên and Thanh Đề as close as possible to real life in the folk tradition. The dialogues between Thanh Đề and Mực Liên are simple and relatable, making the performance accessible to all. Participant A12 shared that when playing the role of the mother, the actor must convey the pain of suffering and the regret for living an evil life while in the human world, which caused her to fall into hell after death. This helps the audience—the funeral attendees—feel the sorrow. The son, Mực Liên, also expresses the pain of separation and the infinite pity upon witnessing his mother’s suffering in hell.

The process of creating and dramatising the *Vu Lan Sutra* through the performance not only builds each character but also highlights the performers’ creative talent in engaging with the “audience”—the family members and neighbours of the deceased. This interaction makes the performance a creative collaboration between the artisan, the performers, and the local community. This creativity aligns the folk performance with the *Chèo* stage art performed in communal house yards in the region. Participant E3 believes that, like the four-sided “stage” (a mat used by the Vietnamese) in the communal house yard for *Chèo* performances, the art form continues to evolve. The community, as the owner of this art, determines whether these performances will be preserved or not. The *Mực Liên, Thanh Đề* play, which has survived for centuries, affirms its vitality and essential role in the cultural and religious life of the community. Furthermore, E3 stated that this is a characteristic of folk art, where all types of art are created, refined, and passed down by the indigenous community for practice, enjoyment, and preservation.

The dramatisation of the *Vu Lan Sutra* in this play carries a strong educational message. It emphasises the principles of cause and effect and filial piety towards parents, rooted in Buddhist ideology, and aligns with the Vietnamese tradition of ancestor worship, particularly in the Northern Delta. This play is especially meaningful when performed in a sacred space like a funeral, during a ritual for a specific deceased person. The mournful scene, combined with the *Chèo* melodies and folk songs such as *Xa mạc* and *Bồng mạc*, helps the living reflect deeply on their responsibilities towards their parents while they are still alive. Participant A17 believes that the theme of cause and effect in the play helps the audience realise how their good or bad deeds in daily life will impact their future and their families. This awareness encourages them to avoid evil and to perform good deeds. Next, A18 added that during the performance, the children and grandchildren of the deceased woman express their deep sorrow, and the audience sympathises with the family’s loss. This is an important environment for the creation and development of cultural identity, with the aim of uniting families and communities. Ancestor worship in Vietnam binds family members and clans together according to patriarchal principles, where the eldest son plays the primary and most important role in each family. In principle, each family and clan builds a shrine in the village. Many clans have recorded genealogies, and each clan possesses its own resources. Religion plays a decisive role in uniting the clan and the village (Hung 2016).

In addition to character portrayals, the theatricalisation of the *Vu Lan Sutra* ideology is skilfully expressed by folk artisans in costume design, music, lighting, and dance. The character playing Thanh Đè wears a brown skirt and shirt, reflecting the traditional costumes of Vietnamese women from the ancient Northern Delta. Mực Liên wears the costume of a nun, in line with the traditional attire of nuns in the North. Participants A9, A14, A22, and A23 noted that the actor portraying *Giáo đầu* (the narrator who summarises the play) wears a brown *áo dài*, similar to what Buddhist followers wear when visiting a temple. The *Giáo đầu* may also wear a white mourning scarf on his head, both to express sympathy for the deceased and to link the play to the funeral setting. Here, the white scarf worn on the head is not only a symbol of sharing and connection between the artist or performer and his family and audience, but also an important emblem rooted in indigenous religion. In the past, mystical and religious forces, as well as ideas of moral duty based on these forces, have always been the most important factors governing this way of life (Hung 2016).

Participant M2 explained that, depending on the locality, some funeral troupes now wear performance costumes in a variety of colours, but in many places, the folk still maintain traditional costumes, as the performances are not for entertainment. In Bắc Ninh and Hưng Yên, some places continue to use ancient costumes or traditional colours, while in Bắc Giang and Thái Bình, many places have adopted more colourful and modern costumes. In recent years, the costumes used in these performances have changed, not because traditions are being abandoned, but due to practical needs and the “customer psychology” of the families hiring the funeral troupes. Some families have complained in the past that despite paying a lot of money, the ceremony was not performed properly. The changes and adjustments to the performance props of funeral performers must also align with the social context and the evolving tastes of the community over time. This environment serves as a space for creating, practising, and teaching cultural identity to the community, even influencing the professional identity of each rural farmer. Hung Nguyễn stated that, even in choosing a career, the fate of that career is shaped by the spiritual characteristics created by the environment—specifically, the educational direction fostered by the religious atmosphere of one’s hometown and family (Hung 2016).

In addition to the costumes, the music and sounds used in the performance are creatively and theatrically associated with each specific role, making them unique. The characters playing the role of demons also wear masks in the shapes of buffaloes, horses, and other fierce demonic figures. This makeup style appears in the scene where Thanh Đè is tortured in hell. At the same time, the folk music artisans are quite talented with melodies, using eerie and sad tunes through instruments like the *Đàn bầu* (*Độc huyền cầm*) and the Erhu.

In discussions with A2, A4, A5, and A6, the author discovered a growing trend of modernising the sounds and music used in performances, particularly funeral music. To meet the current demand for “bread and butter”, especially with the competition between funeral music groups in many regions, these artisans are compelled to diversify their performance styles and repertoire to build a competitive “brand”. They use modern techniques such as advanced sound and lighting systems to enhance their influence and brand.

The author, Nguyen Dinh Lam, has recorded many unique genres of singing and speaking, four of which are particularly prominent: (1) *Sử dẫu*; (2) *Đàn thảm*; (3) *Kể thập ân*; and (4) *Kể hạnh*. The *Kể hạnh* melody is also used in the funerals of older women (commonly referred to as *các già*), who organise a *đội cầu* to perform on the way to the cemetery (burial site).

These four melodies are now remembered by only a few artisans and are rarely used in funeral ceremonies. Participants A1, A22, and A24 believe that this situation stems from several main reasons. First, it can be attributed to local authorities’ efforts to reduce “backward” cultural

elements in religious life, including funerals. Most village authorities now limit funeral music performances to no later than 10:30 p.m., while typical excerpts usually last from four to six hours, with performances sometimes extending until dawn the next day. This time constraint is a fundamental reason for shortened performances, leading to the gradual loss of certain musical melodies. This study believes that this change in the management of local performance times shows that the influence of Confucianism remains strong in these areas. As reality has shown, Confucianism not only shaped Vietnamese cultural institutions—one of the hallmarks of Vietnamese culture—but also established Vietnamese social institutions, the foundation of Vietnamese society (Hung 2016).

Furthermore, most funeral music practitioners today are younger artisans, with only a few seasoned ones or those with long family traditions in funeral music. As a result, learning and practising funeral music and folk performances tends to focus primarily on the drum and trumpet tunes, rather than a more thorough study of the full range of musical styles.

Therefore, to authentically portray each character in accordance with indigenous folk cultural traditions, the specific musical melody for each role is crucial. In discussions with E1, it was determined that many ancient *Chèo* melodies are borrowed and used in this art form. It seems very likely that these ancient *Chèo* melodies are still preserved in the performance *Mục Liên, Thanh Đề*. However, many younger artisans, when practising folk performances in funerals, tend to use *Chèo* melodies that resemble modern *Chèo* rather than the traditional ones their ancestors sang. Participants A7 and A24 mentioned that they found this style of singing easier and better to perform than the songs their grandfather and father used to sing.

Through research in this area, and considering the central region's historical context, which was home to an ancient agricultural civilisation tied to religious centres like Luy Lâu, Thăng Long, and Nam Định—developed strongly since the early centuries AD—this study found that this performance bears a strong imprint of Buddhism and the ancestor worship tradition of the Vietnamese people. This influence is clearly evident in the performance styles and melodies used, which share distinct similarities with chanting styles and other genres of Buddhist music in the region.

DISCUSSION

Religion and belief are important elements of culture, contributing significantly to the construction of cultural identity—particularly in traditional arts and folk theatre. In Vietnam, each region has its own cultural characteristics, and studies decoding these phenomena have discovered the decisive role of religion and belief (Hung 2016). In the Northern Delta region of Vietnam, each village seems to worship its own village god, and thus, they have relatively unique customs and identity regulations, resulting in a correspondingly unique cultural identity. A folk proverb, one that most people in the Northern Delta can say, “Each village beats its own drum, each village worships its own saint”, affirming the important role of indigenous beliefs and religion in shaping cultural identity.

Mục Liên, Thanh Đề performance is a type of folk theatre that originated from funeral rituals, a form of indigenous belief among the Vietnamese people in this area. Buddhist ideology, through the *Vu Lan Sutra*, has affirmed the significant role of religious ideology and belief in the formation and development of this play in particular, as well as in many other forms of folk art associated with religion in the Northern Delta region of Vietnam. The ideology and scriptures of religion and belief are considered a vital source of “scripts” for farmers and communities in

this region to create and stage plays and operas, helping to build and express a unique cultural identity. They are also an important means through which generations of Vietnamese people in this region practise and transmit their cultural traditions and ethics to future generations.

Theatricalising the ideology of a religion, a literary work, or many other types of artisan works has been performed by folk artisans for centuries in many cultures around the world. A notable example of this is the theatricalisation of Buddhist ideology, as seen in the case of the *Vu Lan Sutra* with the play *Mục Liên, Thanh Đề*. This work is a remarkable success in terms of creativity and in harmonising the Buddhist ideology with the indigenous beliefs of ancestor worship among the Vietnamese people. In particular, the phenomenon of theatricalising the *Vu Lan Sutra*, rooted in folk performing arts and indigenous culture, marks a successful continuation of artisan creation and the preservation and teaching of traditional art to future generations.

The development of each type of folk and traditional art, including the *Mục Liên, Thanh Đề* play, is naturally linked to its historical context, in line with the process of modernisation and industrialisation (Lam 2024). This transformation occurs in various aspects, such as the modernisation of scripts, costumes, sound, lighting, and more. This is a necessity of the times that every country and culture must confront in the face of the global trends in culture, science, and technology. Vietnam is no exception to this rule. These traditional art forms, whether professional or still in folk form, have been, and continue to be, influenced by the social context as they seek opportunities to remain relevant and thrive in contemporary cultural life (Lam 2024). In fact, after years of field research on folk performing arts, it is clear that this transformation is evident across most ethnic groups, especially in the changes to costumes, the theatricalisation of performance forms, and the modernisation of folk art to support the growth of community tourism in the mountainous provinces of Vietnam.

Theatricalising religious ideology through the play *Mục Liên, Thanh Đề* also affirms the flexible creativity of the ancestors, who transformed difficult and complex Buddhist philosophical concepts into simple, easily understandable ideas for the people, especially in an area where many farmers were illiterate. The Buddhist law of cause and effect is not difficult to grasp, but its expression in classical language, especially considering the historical and translated nature of the language, makes it harder to understand. Therefore, theatricalisation is a highly effective way to educate religious ethics. In this case, the play focuses on a few characters and their dialogue about committing evil deeds and experiencing the painful consequences of suffering in hell. This has helped people deeply understand moral and cultural values, particularly the filial piety of children towards their parents. Participant E3 further commented that dramatising religious classics through the play *Mục Liên, Thanh Đề* also affirms the ability to adopt and embrace noble and positive ideas for the continuous development of society throughout history, as well as the responsibility of earlier generations in shaping the ideology and ethics of future generations. This innovation is not only suitable for Vietnamese culture but also enhances the Vietnamese tradition of ancestor worship, a custom that has been shaped and developed over millennia.

The creation and theatricalisation of the play *Mục Liên, Thanh Đề* have also enabled artisans to create and successfully preserve many unique art forms for the nation. This may explain why some regions use only *Chèo* singing in the play, while other areas continue to use ancient melodies. Despite the disappearance of some ancient singing melodies in certain regions, the shift towards using *Chèo* melodies, such as *Đò đưa*, *Quá giang*, and *Đường trường*, alongside changes in performance methods and costumes, are fundamental reasons why *Mục Liên, Thanh Đề* faces the risk of hybridisation and disappearance. In the past, performers mainly wore brown *áo dài* made from “earth brown” fabric (also known as film fabric), but today some “funeral bands” have adopted costumes from professional *Chèo* troupes. Furthermore, current

cultural policies need to be further developed to improve the preservation and promotion of the precious artisan values passed down by previous generations. This will contribute to preserving and building a Vietnamese culture with a strong identity. At the same time, competition in the funeral music profession has led to hybridisation and the potential disappearance of these performances from social life. Many localities have completely banned these performances due to the use of loudspeakers, which have caused noise and air pollution for local residents. Participant M1 shared that in the past, when a village held a funeral, one had to approach the family to hear the sound of trumpets and drums. Today, one can identify the location of a funeral from the entrance of the village because funeral music troupes use loud sounds.

Through field research, it was found that many artisans recognise the value of the performances in preserving and educating traditional culture. This discussion serves as a warning that can contribute to the restoration and maintenance of traditional music and performance genres in funeral practices.

The most significant change in Vietnamese funeral performances is the reduction in excerpts and the theatricalisation of performance forms, along with other changes in performance style and costumes. These changes are potential factors contributing to the risk of hybridisation and disappearance of this art form in contemporary cultural life. The replacement of ancient singing melodies with newer *Chèo* melodies is also a fundamental change, marking one of the most notable shifts in the funeral performances today.

Buddhism, when introduced to Vietnam, has integrated with indigenous beliefs to create and enrich Vietnamese cultural identity. Buddhist ethics, through various forms of education, including art, have become an important means of building Vietnamese ethics over the centuries. This is one of the important contributions of Buddhism that the Vietnamese people have recognised. On the other hand, the indigenous culture of the Vietnamese people, when integrated with Buddhist ideology and ethics, has also enriched the Buddhist treasure of humanity.

CONCLUSION

Theatre has a history of existence, along with its artisan and social functions, as well as the system of moral, educational values and religious beliefs it contains (Ngu and Kieu 1964; Khoan 1974; Ky 1973; 1978; Berezin 1994; Fischer-Lichte 1995; Quang 1995; 2017; Quinn 1995; Ngu 1996; Eco 1977; Robertson 2009; Lam et al. 2022; Cartocci 2024). In general, theatricalisation is an art form with the important function of conveying the messages of a religion or specific ideology through the creativity of a community or individual within a particular time and space.

With the tradition of ancestor worship and the practice of filial piety towards grandparents and parents that have been built and upheld over thousands of years of history, generations of Vietnamese people have learned to apply and transform foreign religious ideas to deepen their traditions. Based on the foundation of traditional folk performing arts, the play *Mục Liên, Thanh Đề* has truly become an important heritage in the cultural life of the Vietnamese people in the Northern Delta region for many centuries. The play not only serves to educate filial piety across generations but also contributes to the creation and preservation of traditional musical melodies within this art form.

It should be added that for the Vietnamese, art is life; folk art is not only associated with the life cycle of the Vietnamese but also has a function in religious ceremonies, in labour as well as in most of their cultural and spiritual activities. Therefore, if lullabies are for newborn children, then drums and trumpets as well as performing arts will be important means to bring the dead back to their ancestors, according to the folk philosophy of the Vietnamese in the region.

Building upon the nation's traditional performing and theatrical arts, the ability to develop, construct, and “Vietnamise” characters in the *Vu Lan Sutra* to promote morality and preserve national art, *Mục Liên, Thanh Đề* is considered a typical example of pre-theatrical artisan creation. It was created by previous generations and laid an important foundation for the development of other plays such as *Nhi thập tứ hiếu, Chèo đò giáo ngựa*, and *Chú tàu nghe kèn*, plays that developed based on the ideological foundation of indigenous religions and beliefs. The messages conveyed by previous generations in these plays through creative methods represent an important legacy for future generations of Vietnamese people to study in depth from a specialised and interdisciplinary perspective.

Through field research, this study discovered key issues in the study of the theatricalisation of religious classics in the Northern Delta. Research on the unique characteristics of this art form has helped clarify the methods, creative abilities, and the “Vietnamisation” of valuable religious ideas, enriching the cultural identity of the nation. At the same time, this research provides support for the policy of preserving and promoting this functional art heritage in the cultural life of contemporary Vietnamese people. Additionally, the analysis of changes in funeral music, particularly the performance of *Mục Liên, Thanh Đề* in the Northern Delta region, is an important issue to address before further research on related topics aimed at preserving traditional art heritage in contemporary cultural life. This includes continuing research on the characteristics and artisan content of the detailed structure of each genre of folk performance and theatre in Vietnam.

To continue promoting Buddhist ethics and traditional Vietnamese arts with rich identity, the Vietnamese government and people need to respect and constantly preserve Buddhist heritage along with traditional arts, contributing to maintaining the quintessence of human culture and indigenous culture to preserve good cultural values for future generations of Vietnamese people. This is also the message and contribution that this research aims at.

Religion and beliefs are the core of culture and art, and art born from religion is especially important for maintaining and promoting the traditional cultural identity of indigenous communities in the Northern Delta region in particular, and Vietnamese culture in general, past, present, and future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the folk artists, cultural managers in the localities, and experts in traditional art research in Vietnam for facilitating the completion of this research. The authors would also like to thank the peer reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions, which significantly contributed to the quality of the article. Additionally, the authors wish to express their gratitude to Vietnam National University, Hanoi, for providing funding for this research, which has made a vital contribution to the preservation and promotion of Vietnamese cultural identity in contemporary cultural life. This study is solely funded by Vietnam National University, Hanoi, under project number QG-25.160.

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

This research was conducted based on international academic ethical standards and Vietnam National University, Hanoi. An evaluation committee was established by the Director of Vietnam National University, Hanoi, and the research was accepted on 23 December 2024, under code: QG-2025.160. Participants were fully informed of the study's objectives and their rights, with guaranteed anonymity and data security compliant with Vietnam's personal data protection law.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

NOTES

* Associate Professor Dr. Nguyen Dinh Lam is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Vietnamese Studies and Language, and also lead of the USSH Hanoi Academic Research Group on Vietnamese Traditional Religious and Belief Music, VNU-University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH-VNU). He teaches Vietnamese traditional performing arts at the USSH-VNU. With more than 20 years of experience in academia, he has published several articles on traditional music and performing arts in Vietnamese religion.

** Dr. Nguyen Thi Thuy Hang, corresponding author, is a lecturer and researcher with over 10 years of research experience in cultural philosophy. She is currently a researcher at the Science and Innovation Department of Vietnam National University, Hanoi. She has published several articles on Vietnamese cultural philosophy and traditional arts.

REFERENCES

- Berezin, M. 1994. Cultural form and political meaning: State-subsidized theater, ideology, and the language of style in fascist Italy. *American Journal of Sociology* 99 (5): 1237–1286. <https://doi.org/10.1086/230411>
- Cartocci, C. 2024. The rise of the concept of “the theatrical” outside the performative arts. MA diss., Ca’ Foscari University, Italy.
- Eco, U. 1977. Semiotics of theatrical performance. *The Drama Review* 21 (1): 107–117. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1145112>
- Fischer-Lichte, E. I. 1995. Theatricality introduction: Theatricality: A key concept in theatre and cultural studies. *Theatre Research International* 20 (2): 85–89. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883300008294>
- Fuist, T. N. 2014. The dramatization of beliefs, values, and allegiances: Ideological performances among social movement groups and religious organizations. *Social Movement Studies* 13 (4): 427–442. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2013.832189>
- Hubery, R. 2019. What are the impacts of Buddhism on the Japanese performance style of Noh theatre? MA diss., University of Huddersfield, UK.
- Hung, N. Q. 2016. *Religion and culture: Basic theory and solutions to exploit religious cultural values to serve the development of Vietnamese society today*. Hanoi: Publishing House for Knowledge.
- Jelesijevic, D. 2016. Rituals of the enchanted world: Noh theater and religion in medieval Japan. PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, US.
- Khoan, V. K. 1974. *Research on Cheo theatre*. Saigon: Publishing House for Sacred Fire.
- Ky, H. C. 1987. Some points about Tuong scriptwriters. *Stage Magazine*, February 1987, 77: 41.
- _____. 1978. *Ancient Tuong*. Hanoi: Publishing House for Culture.
- _____. 1973. *Preliminary history of Tuong art*. Hanoi: Publishing House for Culture.
- Lam, N. D. 2024. Changes in funeral music practices of Vietnamese people in the Northern Delta, Vietnam. *Harmonia: Journal of Arts Research and Education* 24 (1): 18–35. <https://doi.org/10.15294/harmonia.v24i1.47436>
- _____. 2014. *Music in Buddhist rituals in Hanoi*. PhD diss., Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam.
- _____. 2008. Buddhist music in the ritual of praying for the dead. *Journal of Culture and Arts* 288: 56–60.
- Lam, N. D., Tam, L. T. T., Thu, T. T. and Dinh, L. K. 2022. *Traditional Vietnamese performing arts: An interdisciplinary approach*. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishing House.
- Loan, T. 1993. *Brief history of Vietnamese music*. Hanoi: Hanoi Conservatory of Music.
- Lobingier, E. E. 1918. *The dramatization of Bible stories: An experiment in the religious education of children*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ngu, T. V. 1996. *On the art of Cheo*. Hanoi: Vietnam Music Institute.

- Ngu, T. V. and Kieu, H. 1964. *Research on Cheo theatre*. Hanoi: Publishing House for Culture.
- Phu, W. 2015. Ulan Sutra: Research on the origin of Chinese and Nikaya texts. *Giac Ngo Online*, 17 January 2015. <https://giacngo.vn/kinh-vu-lan-khao-ve-nguon-goc-han-tang-nikaya-post28491.html> (accessed 15 March 2025).
- Quang, M. 2017. *Research on Tuong art*. Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House.
- _____. 1995. *Characteristics of Tuong art*. Hanoi: Publishing House for Stage.
- Quang, T. 2005. *Vu Lan Sutra*. Hanoi: Publishing House for Religion.
- Quinn, M. 1995. Concepts of theatricality in contemporary art history. *Theatre Research International* 20 (2): 106–113. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883300008324>
- Ren, S. 2024. Gender performance on the stage of Chinese opera: A historical analysis of the cross-dressing repertoire. *Performance Research* 29 (1): 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2024.2408112>
- Robertson, J. L. 2009. *Theatrical ideology: Toward a rhetoric of theatricality*. MA diss., Brigham Young University, US.
- Sica, M. 2013. *Italian travelers on a journey to discover Vietnam*. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishing House.
- Tac, L. 2002. *An Nam Chi Luoc*. Hue, Vietnam: Thuan Hoa Publishing House and East-West Language and Culture Center.
- Taylor, W. K. 1998. Vietnam studies in North America. Keynote speech no. 2. Paper presented at the First International Conference on Vietnamese Studies. Ba Dinh Hall, Hanoi, 15 July to 17 July.
- Thanh, T. N. 2007. *Notes on culture and music*. Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House.
- Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences. 1998. *Complete annals of Dai Viet*. Translated from the engraved version of the 18th year of *Chinh Hoa* (1679), vol. 1. Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House.
- Vietnam Buddhist Sangha. 2009. *Vu Lan Sutra and filial piety*. Hanoi: Religion Publishing House.