Buddhist Humanistic Values in Contemporary Vietnamese Family Ethics

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Abstract
Buddhist humanistic values continue to shape contemporary Vietnamese family life, but in a transformed register. Where the extended-household tam đại đồng đường once transmitted compassion, mindfulness, and filial piety, the post-Đổi Mới family inhabits nuclear arrangements, urban migration, and market pressures that require those values to be re-chosen rather than absorbed. This article reads the Vietnamese Buddhist contribution to that re-choosing as a distinctive philosophical anthropology of reciprocal filial relation — different philosophically, not merely culturally, from both Confucian filial piety and modern individualist family ethics. The argument advances three moves: first, reading the four immeasurables (từ bi hỉ xả) as virtue-ethical claims grounded in a Mahāyāna anthropology of dependent origination; second, treating the Sigālovāda Sutta's six-directional household ethic as canonical evidence for mutual obligation rather than unidirectional hierarchy; third, engaging the Yeh–Bedford Dual Filial Piety Model to distinguish reciprocal Buddhist hiếu, which travels well into modernity, from authoritarian Confucian hiếu, which degrades under urbanization and gender-norm change. The Vu Lan / Ullambana festival, with the Mục Liên (Maudgalyāyana) story at its core, serves as the central case study: a site where the widening gap between ritual observance and lived ethical cultivation can be addressed by reanimating ritual as inner cultivation.
Key words: Buddhist family ethics, Vietnam; reciprocal filial piety, Vu Lan / Ullambana, Sigālovāda Sutta, Mahāyāna philosophical anthropology

1. Introduction

The seventh lunar month arrives, and the courtyards of Vietnamese pagodas fill. Vu Lan is being celebrated. Families queue for the rose-pinning ceremony — a red rose for those whose mothers are still living, a white rose for those whose mothers have died — and the Mục Liên story is chanted while votive papers smoulder in the family courtyard. For most Vietnamese, this is the Buddhist family ethic in its most palpable form. And yet behind the festival's beauty there is a question worth letting disturb us: is the ritual still doing its ethical work, or is it slowly becoming an aesthetic performance disconnected from the inner cultivation it was once meant to externalize?

The article that follows is built on three coordinated wagers. First, that Buddhist humanistic values continue to shape Vietnamese family life under post-Đổi Mới conditions — but in a transformed register, no longer guaranteed by the household structures of the *tam đại đồng đường* and increasingly mediated by selective ritual practice rather than inherited household discipline. Second, that the Buddhist contribution to Vietnamese family ethics is not reducible to a Confucian inheritance. Vietnamese family discourse has long conflated Buddhist and Confucian *hiếu*, treating them as a single moral substance flowing through the syncretic frame of *tam giáo đồng nguyên*. They are not the same, and the difference matters: Buddhist *hiếu*, anchored in the Sigālovāda Sutta and the Mục Liên tradition, has a reciprocal-gratitude structure that the authoritarian-deference structure of mandarinal Confucian *hiếu* does not share (Yeh and Bedford, 2003; Schopen, 1984/2004). Third, that the most pressing threat to Vietnamese Buddhist family ethics today is neither secularization nor "Western

individualism" as such but a phenomenon internal to Vietnamese Buddhist practice itself — ritual formalism without inner cultivation.

The existing scholarship clusters into three identifiable camps, and the gap I propose to occupy is a fourth. Vietnamese-language doctrinal-cultural literature (Nguyễn Lang, 1992; Phan Ngọc, 2002; Trần Đình Hượu, 1996) describes Buddhist humanistic values as a stable inheritance but tends to fold Buddhist *hiếu* into a generalized Confucian-inflected discourse on family virtue. International Buddhist Studies (Harvey, 2000; Keown, 2005; Williams, 2009; Schopen, 1984/2004; Cole, 1998; Teiser, 1988) has built a sophisticated picture of canonical filial piety, the householder code, and the Ullambana tradition, but rarely engages contemporary Vietnamese family-sociology data. Vietnamese family sociology (Bélanger, 2000; Hy Văn Lương, 2003; Rydström, 2003; Soucy, 2012) maps the post-Đổi Mới family but treats Buddhism as one cultural variable among many. Few studies bring the three streams into systematic conversation. None, to my knowledge, applies the Yeh and Bedford (2003) Dual Filial Piety Model to differentiate Buddhist from Confucian *hiếu* in the Vietnamese case as a *philosophical-anthropological* distinction rather than a psychological one.

The research question is therefore double: how and to what extent do Buddhist humanistic virtues continue to shape Vietnamese family ethics under post-Đổi Mới conditions, and what conditions make them generative rather than merely vestigial? I approach the question through conceptual analysis grounded in canonical Buddhist sources, framed by the Dual Filial Piety lens read philosophically, and tested against the case of Vu Lan as practiced in contemporary Vietnam.

A brief methodological note. The article is a conceptual narrative review. It does not present new ethnographic data. Where it makes empirical claims about contemporary practice, it draws on published ethnography (Soucy, 2012; Rydström, 2003; Bélanger, 2000; Hy Văn Lương, 2003) and on the public record of Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha publications and state demographic surveys. The Vietnamese-language manuscript that lies behind this English-language article retained four research objectives; the present version reframes those objectives around the central question of how Buddhist *hiếu* operates as a distinctive ethical form in contemporary family life, and treats Vu Lan as the philosophically richest site at which to test the claim.

A second methodological note bears stating. The article holds two registers in productive tension. The Vietnamese-internal philosophical voice — Phan Ngọc on *Việt hóa* and cultural identity, Trần Đình Hượu on tradition and modernity, the Vietnamese-Buddhist articulation Thích Nhất Hạnh has given the *brahmavihāras* — is engaged here at the same level of philosophical seriousness as the international Buddhist Studies and family-sociology literatures. This is deliberate. The article's contribution lies precisely in treating Vietnamese Buddhist family ethics as live philosophical interlocutor, not as cultural object on which Western frameworks are exercised, and not as inheritance to be defended against the encroachments of modernity.

The argument unfolds across seven sections. Section 2 establishes the Vietnamese inflection of Buddhism — *tam giáo đồng nguyên*, the Lý–Trần synthesis, and the Vietnamese philosophical-cultural mechanism of *Việt hóa* — that the rest of the article draws on. Section 3 sets out the Buddhist humanistic virtues and the family-doctrinal anchor in the Sigālovāda Sutta and the Mahāyāna filial-piety sutra cycle, and executes the central philosophical move: differentiating Buddhist from Confucian *hiếu* as two distinct anthropologies of family through the Yeh–Bedford lens. Section 4 turns to the contemporary Vietnamese family and asks how these values manifest under post-Đổi Mới conditions. Section 5 develops the article's strongest critical move — the ritual-versus-lived-ethics gap as a philosophical problem about ethical formation — alongside generational reception, materialism, urbanization, and gender. Section 6 takes Vu Lan as a case study of where the gap can be closed by reanimating ritual through education, mindfulness-based practice, and intergenerational dialogue. Section 7 concludes by drawing three philosophical implications.

2. Vietnamese Buddhism: historical and doctrinal context

This section establishes the specifically Vietnamese inflection of Buddhism that grounds the argument that follows. It is not a survey of Buddhism in general; nor is it a chronological catalogue of dynasties. Its aim is to give the reader exactly the historical and doctrinal vocabulary needed for the philosophical argument that follows: how Buddhism entered Vietnam, blended with Confucian and Daoist currents under the philosophical-cultural mechanism Phan Ngọc (2002) names *Việt hóa* (Vietnamization), peaked under the Lý–Trần in a state-supported and engaged form, and consolidated a distinctive philosophical-anthropological synthesis that today still shapes Vietnamese Buddhist family practice.

Buddhism entered Vietnam in the second century of the Common Era through both routes — the southern maritime route from India via the Funan kingdom and the Luy Lâu center, and the northern overland route from China (Nguyễn Lang, 1992; Taylor, 2013). The dual entry is consequential. Vietnamese Buddhism inherited both Theravāda-tinged early-Buddhist material and Mahāyāna developments, including the filial-piety sutras that would later anchor the Vu Lan tradition (Cole, 1998; Teiser, 1988). The Lý–Trần period (eleventh through fourteenth centuries) saw Buddhism's institutional flourishing as state-supported teaching, with the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử lineage of King Trần Nhân Tông as its emblematic synthesis — a Vietnamese Zen integrating meditative practice, Confucian governance ethics, and the demands of dynastic statecraft (Nguyễn, 1997; Nguyễn Lang, 1992). Cuong T. Nguyen's translation and study of the *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh* gave Anglophone scholarship its first rigorous critical access to medieval Vietnamese Zen texts; the Trúc Lâm patriarchal lineage and the *thiền* tradition it consolidates are the historical anchor for the philosophical-anthropological synthesis the article tracks (Nguyễn, 1997). Read philosophically — and this is the move §2 must perform — the Lý–Trần is not merely the period of Buddhism's political ascendancy but the period in which the Mahāyāna philosophical anthropology of relational personhood (Williams, 2009) was given Vietnamese institutional articulation.

Three concepts now require careful handling. *Tam giáo đồng nguyên* — the doctrine that the three teachings (Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism) share one root — is ordinarily read as descriptive shorthand for Vietnamese religious eclecticism. Read more carefully (after Phan Ngọc's *Việt hóa* thesis), it is a substantive philosophical-cultural doctrine about the convergent telos of Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist cultivation — and a philosophical mechanism by which Vietnamese culture absorbs imported traditions and refits them to Vietnamese moral-anthropological priorities (Phan Ngọc, 2002). For the present argument it does important conceptual work in two directions. On one hand, it explains why Buddhist filial piety in Vietnam has *appeared* indistinguishable from Confucian filial piety: the syncretic frame allows the two to be practiced together, in the same household, around the same ancestor altar. On the other hand, the frame can obscure what is distinctive about each tradition's contribution. Section 3 carves out what is distinctively Buddhist within the syncretic whole; what §2 must do is install *tam giáo đồng nguyên* as a philosophical-cultural doctrine rather than as folk syncretism. McHale (2004) and Kelley (2006) supply the analytical caution: "Confucianism" in Vietnam is not a unified body of doctrine but a fluid moral discourse loosely indexed to Confucian vocabulary, and Vietnamese Buddhism's coexistence with Confucian moral language has not erased its philosophical particularity.

Việt hóa, in Phan Ngọc's (2002) articulation, is the mechanism by which Vietnamese cultural-religious life systematically absorbs and refashions imported philosophical and religious traditions — Confucianism from China, Buddhism from India via China, French ideas under colonialism, Marxism-Leninism, and now globalization. In each

case, the imported material is fitted to the village structure, subordinated to family-relational priorities, blended with existing layers, and put to work within a distinctively Vietnamese moral-cultural framework. Vietnamese Buddhism, on this reading, is not Indian Buddhism in Vietnam, nor Chinese Buddhism in Vietnam; it is a *Việt hóa* synthesis with its own internal coherence, traceable empirically in the additive cultural-religious logic that Vuong et al. (2018) document through computational analysis of Vietnamese folktales — an additive, rather than substitutive, integration of Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist value-layers in the Vietnamese moral imagination.

Trần Đình Hượu (1996), writing in a Vietnamese-internal philosophical register, supplies the third concept. Vietnamese intellectual tradition, deeply shaped by Confucianism (especially Song Neo-Confucianism) and by the Buddhist substrate that preceded and survived Confucian dominance, faces a transition to modernity that cannot be modeled on either pure Westernization or simple preservation. *Đến hiện đại từ truyền thống* — arriving at modernity *from* tradition, not in spite of it — names a third path: critical philosophical engagement with the indigenous heritage and with modern Western thought, in which traditional resources are renewed under modern conditions rather than abandoned (Trần Đình Hượu, 1996). This will matter in §§5–6, when the article asks whether Vietnamese Buddhist family ethics can transform without dissolving.

Three features of Vietnamese Buddhism follow from this synthesis and the rest of the article will draw on each. First, *syncretic adaptability*: the willingness to absorb and harmonize with surrounding traditions without insisting on doctrinal exclusivity, documented historically in the early-twentieth-century An Nam Phật Học Hội revival within which Buddhist humanism was articulated as a distinctive modern position (McHale, 2004). Second, *engaged orientation — nhập thế*, "entering the world" — Vietnamese Buddhism's resistance to the world-renouncing tendency, its insistence that monastics and laypeople alike are responsible for the social order, and its alignment with the engaged-Buddhism tradition more broadly (Queen and King, 1996). Third, the *strong female element*: the predominance of women in Vietnamese Buddhist devotional life, documented ethnographically by Soucy (2012) and decisive for §§4–5's analysis of how Buddhist family ethics is actually carried in contemporary practice. None of these three features is a free-standing cultural fact; each follows from the philosophical-anthropological synthesis Vietnamese Buddhism articulated under Lý–Trần and continues to elaborate today.

3. Buddhist humanistic virtues and family doctrine: theoretical apparatus

This section installs the philosophical-conceptual core of the article. It does two things simultaneously. It sets out the Buddhist humanistic virtues that the rest of the article will track in contemporary Vietnamese family practice, and it makes the central philosophical move — the differentiation of Buddhist from Confucian *hiếu* through the Yeh–Bedford lens read as a philosophical-anthropological distinction.

Begin with the four immeasurables — *brahmavihāra* in Pāli, *tứ vô lượng tâm* in Vietnamese Buddhist articulation: *từ* (loving-kindness, *mettā*), *bi* (compassion, *karuṇā*), *hỉ* (sympathetic joy, *muditā*), *xả* (equanimity, *upekkhā*). Together they constitute the doctrinal core of the Buddhist humanistic ethic. Drawing on Harvey (2000) and Thích Nhất Hạnh (1998, 2007), these are not abstract virtues but household-applicable cultivations. Harvey's reading is decisive philosophically: Buddhist ethics is fundamentally a virtue ethics; the precepts function as training rules supporting the cultivation of stable virtuous dispositions, not as deontic commands (Harvey, 2000). Keown (2005) extends the analysis: Buddhist ethics is a virtue ethics in the Aristotelian sense, with the cultivation of character as its central concern. Thích Nhất Hạnh's *Teachings on Love* anchors the *brahmavihāras* in the everyday relational geometry of the family — between parents and children, between spouses, between siblings, between in-laws — in a Vietnamese-Buddhist register that the international

literature has rarely engaged this directly (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2007). His doctrine of *tiếp hiện* (interbeing) reframes filial piety, marriage, and parent–child relationships in terms of mutual constitution rather than hierarchical role: persons do not exist in isolation and then enter relations; persons are constituted by their relations (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998). To these four I add three supporting commitments. *Sati* (mindfulness, *chánh niệm*) is the cultivated discipline of attentive presence to body, feeling, and mental states — without which, on Thích Nhất Hạnh's account, no virtue is genuinely lived (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998). *Dāna* (giving) is the practical specification of *karuṇā* in material-relational form. The Madhyamapratipad (Middle Way) and *anattā* (non-self, *vô ngã*) frame the philosophical-anthropological commitments behind the virtues. *Anattā* is not a metaphysical denial of personhood but the philosophical claim that there is no isolable, self-existent self — and the philosophical claim is what gives *karuṇā* and *mettā* their proper register. Compassion is not the supererogatory feeling of one fixed self for another fixed self; it is the proper expression of recognizing that persons are constituted relationally (Williams, 2009; Becker and Hamblin, 2021). Becker and Hamblin's recent argument that Buddhist virtue ethics offers an alternative anthropology of *interdependent personhood* — identity as relational nexus rather than bounded self — supplies a contemporary methodological analogue: Buddhist virtue ethics deployed as resource for philosophical-anthropological work on a contemporary social-philosophical problem (Becker and Hamblin, 2021).

The pivotal move now: the Sigālovāda Sutta (DN 31) as the canonical anchor of Buddhist householder ethics. The young householder Sigāla is found by the Buddha worshiping the six directions in fulfillment of his late father's dying instruction. The Buddha reinterprets the six directions as the six categories of social relationship — parents (East), teachers (South), wife and children (West), friends (North), workers and servants (Nadir), and ascetics and brahmins (Zenith) — and lays out reciprocal duties owed to and by each (Walshe, 1995). The structure is symmetrically reciprocal. Children are to support parents in old age, perform their duties, maintain the family lineage, prove themselves worthy heirs, and make offerings on their behalf after death. Parents are to restrain children from evil, encourage them in the good, train them in a profession, arrange suitable marriages, and hand over the inheritance at the appropriate time (Walshe, 1995, Sigalovada Sutta). The same five-and-five reciprocal structure obtains across the wife–husband, friend–friend, employer–employee, and ascetic–layperson axes — suggesting that the Buddha's social ethics is generally a reciprocity ethics. Read philosophically, this is filial piety as *covenant*, not as one-way deference. The sutta is canonical evidence of a distinctively Buddhist *philosophical anthropology of family*: persons stand in reciprocal six-directional relation rather than in unidirectional hierarchy, and the just relation is the one in which both parties acknowledge what the other is owed — the acknowledgment being constitutive of, rather than added to, the relation itself.

To this canonical anchor I add the Mahāyāna filial-piety sutra cycle — the *Ullambana Sūtra*, the *Sūtra on the Profound Kindness of Parents and the Difficulty of Repaying It* (*Fumu enzhong nanbao jing*) — that flowed from India through China into Vietnamese Buddhism. Cole (1998) reads these texts as a distinctively East Asian Buddhist construction of the mother–son bond in which the mother's bodily suffering in pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation imposes an unrepayable debt that only Buddhist ritual offerings, notably during the Ghost Festival / Vu Lan, can begin to discharge. The result, on Cole's reading, is a Chinese (and through *Việt hóa*, Vietnamese) Buddhist filial piety that is *more*, not less, demanding than its Confucian counterpart, and that operates on a different axis: gratitude for maternal bodily suffering rather than role-conformity to patrilineal hierarchy (Cole, 1998).

Schopen's (1984/2004) refutation of the older "Sinicization" thesis is decisive here. Earlier scholarship widely held that Buddhist filial piety was a Chinese accretion

absorbed under Confucian pressure. Schopen demonstrates, on the basis of Indian Buddhist inscriptional evidence and overlooked Vinaya passages, that filial piety was integral to *Indian* Buddhist practice from the earliest period for which we have evidence. Indian Buddhist monastics dedicated merit to their parents, supported them financially, and treated filial obligation as a structural feature of monastic and lay life (Schopen, 1984/2004: 56–71). The "Sinicization" thesis must be reversed. Chinese Buddhism inherited a robust filial-piety tradition from India and elaborated it in distinctively East Asian forms; Vietnamese Buddhism inherited the elaborated forms and *Việt hóa-*ed them again. The Buddhist–Confucian differentiation Lan draws is therefore not a contemporary analytical artifact. It rests on two genuinely independent philosophical anthropologies of family that took separate roots and only later converged in East Asian transmission. The Mục Liên (Maudgalyāyana) story, narrativized in the *Ullambana Sūtra* and dramatized annually in the Vietnamese Vu Lan festival, is the imaginative anchor: a son's compassionate effort to liberate his suffering mother, mediated by the Sangha, enacted through ritual offering. Section 6 returns to this story; here it functions as the textual frame.

Now the central philosophical-anthropological move. Yeh and Bedford (2003) distinguish two empirically separable dimensions of filial piety: **reciprocal** filial piety — gratitude, affection, voluntary care for parents grounded in the experience of having been raised by them — and **authoritarian** filial piety — obligation, deference, suppression of individual will to the authority of elders, conformity to ascribed family roles. The two dimensions correlate only weakly and have substantively different psychological consequences. Reciprocal filial piety is associated with higher subjective well-being, greater autonomy support, and more flexible family functioning; authoritarian filial piety is associated with rigid family relations and, under conditions of social change, with intergenerational conflict (Yeh and Bedford, 2003). Bedford and Yeh's (2019) retrospective extends the model: reciprocal filial piety travels well across cultures and modernizes; authoritarian filial piety degrades under conditions of urbanization, individuation, and gender egalitarianism.

The model is empirical psychology, but its philosophical importance is deeper. Yeh and Bedford show that what we have called "filial piety" is not one thing but two — and behind each dimension, a distinct view of what a person *is* in relation to parents. Reciprocal filial piety treats the filial relation as gratitude-grounded, voluntary, and compatible with personal autonomy; authoritarian filial piety treats it as role-obligation, hierarchically prior to the individual, binding regardless of affective ground. These are not just two psychological dimensions; they are two *philosophical anthropologies of family*. The reframing is what gives the article its philosophical edge over the existing literature, which routinely conflates the two traditions under the syncretic banner of *tam giáo đồng nguyên*.

The mapping onto the Vietnamese case follows. Confucian *hiếu*, especially in its mandarinal-Neo-Confucian form structured by the five relationships and the *tam tòng* expectations for women, skews authoritarian: hierarchical position grounds obligation, deference grounds the relation, and the household's structural patriliny is what makes the relation intelligible (Kelley, 2006). Buddhist *hiếu*, anchored in the Sigālovāda's reciprocal six-directional ethic and in the Mục Liên story's logic of *bao hiếu* — repaying parental kindness through compassionate practice rather than hierarchical compliance — skews reciprocal. The two streams have coexisted for centuries within Vietnamese family practice; *tam giáo đồng nguyên* permits exactly this coexistence. But they are not the same thing. They presuppose different *philosophical anthropologies* — different accounts of what a person is, how persons stand in family relation, and what ethical formation requires. The difference matters for whether Vietnamese family ethics modernizes well under contemporary conditions.

A final note completes the apparatus. Marx and Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) supplies the structural-historical account of the

family as economic and reproductive institution shaped by historical conditions of property — an account that aligns with the Vietnamese state-academic register, accommodates the Đổi Mới-era transformation from extended to nuclear family, and gives the article a serviceable structural frame for the changes §§4–5 will document. But the structural frame cannot, on its own, account for the moral-cultivative work that Buddhist family ethics performs *within* whatever structural form the family takes. To address that work I complement the structural frame with the Vietnamese family-sociology literature (Bélanger, 2000; Hy Văn Lương, 2003; Rydström, 2003), which maps the empirical conditions under which Buddhist humanistic values are received, transmitted, and contested in contemporary households. Marx and Engels handle structure; the family sociologists handle lived practice; Buddhist virtue ethics is the philosophical-anthropological content that operates within whatever structural form holds.

4. Buddhist humanistic values in the contemporary Vietnamese family

This section moves from philosophical scaffolding into contemporary practice. Each subsection reads a Vietnamese family practice as philosophical evidence of (or pressure on) the reciprocal Buddhist anthropology installed in §3. Empirical anchors from published ethnography supply the conditions; the philosophical analysis is what they are evidence *of*.

4.1 Compassion and tolerance in intra-family relationships

Begin with the everyday geometry: a parent and an adolescent child arguing over screen time and study hours; a married couple negotiating long working hours and the redistribution of housework after a child arrives; adult siblings disputing eldercare and inheritance after a father's stroke; a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law sharing an apartment in a Hanoi housing block under the renewed pressure of urban multigenerational coresidence. *Karuṇā* and *upekkhā*, on Thích Nhất Hạnh's articulation, are practical resources for de-escalating exactly these conflicts (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2007). Soucy's (2012) ethnography documents women in particular mobilizing compassion-language in the everyday work of family negotiation — a pattern in which Buddhist devotional vocabulary functions as a livable household ethic rather than as a doctrinal ornament.

The philosophical claim, however, is not that *karuṇā* is a sentiment that helps families get along. It is that *karuṇā* is a virtue-ethical disposition presupposing a particular philosophical anthropology of relational personhood — persons constituted in interdependent relation (Williams, 2009; Becker and Hamblin, 2021) — without which "compassion" reduces to private charity. When a Vietnamese mother holding her temper with an exasperating teenager and saying, in effect, "I am cultivating *từ bi* here," what she is doing philosophically is not regulating affect; she is acting from the recognition that persons in family relation are mutually constituted and that the relation does not survive instrumental treatment of the other. The reciprocal anthropology of §3 is the philosophical condition of the practice.

I note also the limit. Compassion-talk can become a vehicle for one-sided forbearance — asking women in particular to absorb conflict rather than to name it (Soucy, 2012). The reciprocal anthropology is undermined when *karuṇā* is operationalized as women's labor while the relational symmetry of the Sigālovāda goes unspoken. The virtue is a resource; it is not a guarantee.

4.2 Filial piety as reciprocal practice — philosophical centerpiece

This is the subsection that does most of the philosophical work. Drawing the Yeh–Bedford lens directly into contemporary Vietnamese family life, I argue that the reciprocal-skewed Buddhist *hiếu* embodies a different *philosophical anthropology of*

family than the authoritarian-skewed Confucian *hiếu* — and that the Buddhist anthropology maps remarkably well onto the post-Đổi Mới family.

Bélanger (2000) and Hy Văn Lương (2003) document the structural picture. The extended *tam đại đồng đường* household is no longer institutionally guaranteed; patrilocal coresidence, the principal driver of three-generation households, has weakened sharply in the South and is weakening unevenly in the Red River Delta (Bélanger, 2000). Adult children increasingly live separately from elderly parents, often working in industrial parks far from natal villages; remittances are sent home; visits at Tết and on parents' death-anniversary days mark the continuing relation. The moral logic of "honoring parents" must therefore be *performed* through deliberate gestures — regular visits, financial support, ritual participation, mindfulness practices — rather than absorbed as a household given.

What is at stake is not simply a coping strategy. It is a question of philosophical anthropology: which *kind of person* is being formed, and on which philosophical conception of relational personhood does that formation rest? Reciprocal Buddhist *hiếu* — gratitude for the gift of life, voluntary care, the *bao hiếu* logic of Vu Lan — instantiates a philosophical anthropology in which filial relation is constituted by gratitude and chosen reciprocity. It is suited to conditions in which obligation must be re-chosen rather than enforced. The migrant adult child sending remittances home and returning for Vu Lan and Tết is enacting a reciprocal *hiếu*; that the household form has changed has not made the relation impossible. Authoritarian Confucian *hiếu*, by contrast, instantiates a philosophical anthropology in which filial relation is constituted by hierarchical position — and depends on residential and patriarchal structures the nuclear family has eroded. Where the household form no longer underwrites the role-hierarchy, the role-hierarchical anthropology lacks structural traction (Bedford and Yeh, 2019).

This is not a moral judgment in favor of Buddhism over Confucianism. The two have coexisted in Vietnamese family practice for centuries and will continue to. It is a philosophical-anthropological observation: the reciprocal anthropology is structurally better positioned to inhabit the household forms that actually exist now (Bélanger, 2000; Bedford and Yeh, 2019). And this observation goes beyond the existing Vietnamese-language literature, which has tended to read the reorganization of the family as a threat to "Vietnamese family values" understood as a single moral substance. The article's claim is finer-grained: one of the two anthropologies that have coexisted under *tam giáo đồng nguyên* — the reciprocal Buddhist anthropology — has more to offer the contemporary family than has been recognized; the other — the authoritarian Confucian anthropology — is precisely what is being eroded. Distinguishing the two makes the diagnosis intelligible.

4.3 Simplicity, generosity, and mindfulness against consumerism

Dāna (giving) and the Middle Way provide an internal Buddhist critique of the materialist-consumerist drift that Vietnamese Buddhist commentators and, in a different register, Nguyễn-Võ Thu-Hương (2008) have identified as a pervasive contemporary pressure on family ethics. Mindful consumption, simplicity in household practice, the discipline of giving without expectation — these are practices that Vietnamese Buddhist families continue to deploy, and that Harvey (2000) explicitly articulates as virtue-ethical responses to consumer modernity.

Read philosophically, the simplicity-and-*dāna* register is not just Buddhist anti-materialism. It is an internal philosophical critique of a competing anthropology — consumer-individualist subjectivity, in which the person is constituted by accumulation and self-curation rather than by relational interdependence. Becker and Hamblin (2021) make the analogous critique for sustainability ethics: the implicit anthropology of the rational utility-maximizing individual is itself the obstacle, and Buddhist virtue ethics offers an alternative through the *brahmavihāras* and the doctrine of interdependent

personhood. The same diagnosis pattern applies in the family-ethical domain. Where the household is organized around acquisition, status display, and the curation of family lifestyle as performance, the relational-interdependence anthropology of Vietnamese Buddhism is under philosophical pressure — not just sociological pressure.

4.4 Child-rearing, environment, and civic spillover

Buddhist family ethics is not bounded by the household. Rydström's (2003) ethnography of moral formation in rural northern Vietnam shows how Buddhist, Confucian, and ancestor-venerative practices mingle in the everyday formation of children — and how children educated in these practices carry their habits of attentiveness and reverence into school, neighborhood, and (eventually) civic life. Read philosophically, the spillover follows from the relational anthropology itself: if persons are constituted by their relations, family-formed virtue cannot be confined to family relations; it carries into the broader social fabric.

The first precept against killing extends, in contemporary Vietnamese Buddhist sermons, into ecological reverence. The *nhập thế* tradition (Queen and King, 1996) extends *dāna* and *karuṇā* into civic engagement — the post-Đổi Mới Vietnamese Sangha's substantial work in disaster relief, education, and welfare is a contemporary articulation of the engaged-Buddhism orientation that Trúc Lâm institutionalized historically and Thích Nhất Hạnh's School of Youth for Social Service revived in the mid-twentieth century. The bridge from household to community is a philosophical-anthropological bridge: the same reciprocal anthropology operates across both registers.

4.5 Adaptive transformation under digital and urban conditions

The final subsection acknowledges that Buddhist humanistic virtues are themselves being transformed by the contemporary conditions in which they operate. Digital Buddhist content — online dharma talks, social-media Vu Lan campaigns, Plum Village livestreams — is reaching audiences that the institutional Sangha cannot reach. Urban temple membership is reorganizing around weekly classes and weekend retreats rather than territorial-village affiliation (Soucy, 2012). These are adaptations, not deformations.

But the question §5 will press is sharper: where does adaptation tip into hollowing out? When a teenager watches a five-minute Vu Lan reel on TikTok, pins a virtual rose to her profile picture, and never enters a pagoda — has she received the philosophical-anthropological commitment the festival was designed to transmit, or has she received its aesthetic shell? The line is not clean. It is philosophical, not technical, and §5.1 will return to it.

5. Tensions and contemporary challenges

This section names the obstacles. The thesis depends on demonstrating that Buddhist humanism's effectiveness in contemporary Vietnamese family life is not guaranteed and is being eroded along several axes. Each obstacle is a *philosophical* tension or pressure, not merely a sociological condition.

5.1 The ritual–lived-ethics gap as a philosophical problem about ethical formation

This is the article's strongest critical move. Contemporary Vietnamese Buddhist family practice exhibits a widening gap between *ritual observance* — Vu Lan attendance, monthly ancestor offerings, lunar New Year temple visits, full-moon and new-moon observances — and *internalized ethical cultivation* — the *brahmavihāras* practiced as habits of mind, mindfulness practiced in everyday relational conflict, *dāna* practiced as ongoing generosity. The ritual is more visible than ever; the inner cultivation that ritual was meant to externalize is increasingly thin (Soucy, 2012).

The article's claim is that this is not merely a sociological observation. It is a *philosophical* problem about how ethical formation works. Buddhist virtue ethics — Harvey (2000), Keown (2005), Becker and Hamblin (2021) — treats ritual practice and inner cultivation as mutually constitutive. Ritual without internalized virtue is empty performance; internalized virtue without ritual lacks the embodied scaffolding through which virtue is sustained across time, generations, and conditions of pressure. The gap between the two therefore signals a breakdown in the philosophical-anthropological architecture by which Buddhist householder ethics forms persons.

Rydström's (2003) reading of Vietnamese moral formation as *embodied* practice — how to sit, how to speak, how to address kin, how to manage one's body in space — sharpens the philosophical stakes. If the reciprocal anthropology of Buddhist family ethics has to be formed in bodies, gestures, postures, and daily handling of elders, then the gap between the Vu Lan ritual and the everyday eldercare practice is not just a question of inconsistent religiosity. It is a question of whether the embodied practice of the ritual moment carries over into the embodied practice of household relations — or whether the ritual has detached from the formation it was supposed to scaffold.

The danger is not that ritual will disappear. Vu Lan's public visibility is greater than ever; temple courtyards are full; the festival has been folded into a generalized "cultural heritage" frame protected by government cultural agencies. The danger is that ritual will persist as form while losing the philosophical-anthropological work it was designed to do — an *aestheticized* Vu Lan rather than a *cultivative* one. Trần Đình Hượu's (1996) framing of modernity as the critical renewal of tradition rather than its negation is the philosophical apparatus the article needs here: the response to ritual formalism is not to abandon ritual but to recover the philosophical-anthropological work it performs. §6 will sketch how.

5.2 Generational reception gaps

Three Vietnamese generations now share family households, often uneasily. Elders raised before Đổi Mới carry a Buddhist habitus formed in village and parish life; the middle generation experienced the Đổi Mới transition and the introduction of mass urban migration; the youngest generation is fully digital-native, urban, and exposed to global youth culture (Hy Văn Lương, 2003; Soucy, 2012). Buddhist family ethics has to travel across these three generations — and the channels by which it traveled in earlier eras (household devotion, daily ritual, grandmother-led religious instruction) are weakened (Rydström, 2003).

The diagnosis is not that the youngest generation has rejected Buddhism. It is that the transmission infrastructure has thinned. Where formation once happened by household contagion — children growing up watching grandmothers' daily practice, learning sutra recitation by ear, picking up the seasonal rhythm of pagoda visits — the transmission now requires more deliberate scaffolding. Without the scaffolding, the philosophical-anthropological commitments of the Buddhist household ethic are increasingly treated as one option among several rather than as the ethical air the family breathes.

5.3 Materialism, consumerism, and digital culture

The contemporary Vietnamese family operates inside a market environment that pushes against simplicity and *dāna*. Nguyễn-Võ Thu-Hương's (2008) analysis of neoliberal subjectivity in post-Đổi Mới Vietnam describes an ethos in which personal consumption, status display, and self-actualization compete with — and often override — the inward-attentive, simplicity-oriented Buddhist register. Digital media compounds the pressure. Social-media Vu Lan content circulates as hashtag-friendly aestheticized devotion, easily consumed without reflection. Read philosophically, this is a competing philosophical anthropology — consumer-individualist subjectivity, in which the person is constituted by accumulation and self-curation — and the Buddhist tradition must answer it philosophically rather than merely deplore it sociologically.

The Becker–Hamblin (2021) move on sustainability anthropology is the methodological parallel: the diagnosis is anthropological, and so is the response.

5.4 Urbanization, mobility, and time scarcity

Adult children working in industrial parks far from home villages; multigenerational households fragmented across provinces; long working hours; commuting time eating into family practice (Bélanger, 2000; Hy Văn Lương, 2003). These are the structural conditions, and they bear directly on whether Buddhist family ethics can be enacted at all. The Marx–Engels structural account remains analytically useful — the family form does follow the conditions of production — but the answer is not to abandon Buddhist humanism in the face of structural pressure. It is, with Trần Đình Hượu (1996), to find new vehicles for transmission in which traditional resources are renewed under modern conditions rather than preserved unchanged or jettisoned. The structural conditions are real, but they are conditions; what fills them, philosophically, is the question §6 takes up. A grandmother in a Hà Nội apartment block who video-calls her grandchildren in Ho Chi Minh City every Sunday morning, who keeps the family's monthly ancestor-offering schedule in a calendar app, and who organizes a video Vu Lan participation when no one can make it home — she is not preserving tradition in a museum. She is doing exactly what Trần Đình Hượu's *đến hiện đại từ truyền thống* names: arriving at modernity *from* tradition, with traditional resources working under modern conditions.

5.5 The gender question

Vietnamese Buddhist family practice is overwhelmingly carried by women (Soucy, 2012). This is at once the tradition's resilience and its vulnerability. As women's labor-market participation rises and gender norms shift, the question is whether Buddhist family practice will be reorganized as a shared household discipline or will simply contract as women's available time contracts.

The Yeh–Bedford framework helps. Reciprocal filial piety is more compatible with gender-egalitarian family arrangements than authoritarian filial piety — which often shifts disproportionate eldercare and ritual burden onto daughters-in-law (Bedford and Yeh, 2019). Bélanger's (2000) data ground the structural-philosophical point: the patrilocal-coresidence pattern is the structural condition under which the gendered burdens fall, and the gendered burden is what the authoritarian-anthropology household imposes on women. Buddhist *hiếu* has the conceptual resources to be reciprocal — and Cole's (1998) analysis of the gendered Buddhist filial-piety rhetoric has its own complications, since the *Fumu enzhong nanbao* tradition's valorization of maternal bodily suffering imposes its own heavy normative weight on mothers. The philosophical-anthropological question is whether contemporary Vietnamese Buddhist family practice realizes the reciprocal resources of the tradition or reproduces the authoritarian-and-gendered shadows. The question is not academic. It is the question on which the next generation's Vietnamese Buddhist family ethic will turn.

6. Adaptation, renewal, and the path forward — Vu Lan as case study

This section is the constructive payoff. It takes the Vu Lan / Ullambana festival as an extended case study of how the ritual–lived-ethics gap identified in §5.1 can be closed — not by abandoning ritual but by reanimating it through education, intergenerational dialogue, and the recovery of inner cultivation.

Begin with the textual genealogy. Teiser's (1988) *Ghost Festival in Medieval China* is the standard scholarly anchor: the festival developed in medieval China as a ritual synthesis drawing on Indian Buddhist sutra material (the *Ullambana Sūtra* and related filial-piety texts), indigenous Chinese ancestor-veneration practices, and Daoist concerns with the welfare of the dead. The Mục Liên (Maudgalyāyana) story is its imaginative core: the monk descends to the hells to liberate his suffering mother

through the merit of the assembled monastic community. Cole (1998) extends the picture: the elaborated Mahāyāna filial-piety sutra cycle, transmitted to Vietnam through both the southern and northern routes (Nguyễn Lang, 1992), gave the festival its emotional and rhetorical power.

Read philosophically, the Mục Liên story is *not* a story of unilateral filial obedience. It is a story of *bao hiếu* — gratitude expressed as compassionate practice, mediated by community, with the mother's liberation as the goal rather than the son's hierarchical correctness. This is reciprocal filial piety in narrative form (Teiser, 1988; Cole, 1998). The mother's suffering is not a hierarchical fact about her position in the family; it is a karmic situation that calls for compassionate response. The son's response is not the role-conformity of a patrilineal heir; it is the *karuṇā* of someone who has recognized that persons in family relation are mutually constituted. The Sangha's mediation is not the imposition of a hierarchy of merit; it is the institutional embodiment of the relational anthropology the festival presupposes. Through Phan Ngọc's (2002) *Việt hóa* lens, the Vietnamese accretion of the rose-pinning ceremony — red rose for those whose mothers live, white rose for those whose mothers have died — gives the festival its instantly recognizable visual signature and folds the medieval Chinese textual heritage into a distinctively Vietnamese family-relational expression.

Now to the contemporary gap. Vu Lan is more publicly visible than ever. Temple courtyards are full; social-media campaigns proliferate; government-affiliated cultural agencies treat the festival as protected heritage. Yet the festival has become exposed to the formalist drift identified in §5.1: attendance without doctrinal preparation, rose-pinning without reflection on what one is grateful for, ancestral offerings without the inner cultivation that would make the offering meaningful (Soucy, 2012). The Mục Liên story circulates as a cultural narrative without the philosophical-anthropological commitment it once carried.

What would it look like to close the gap? Three directions of renewal sketch the constructive response.

The first is *family education* that integrates temple, school, and household. The Buddhist Sangha and engaged-Buddhist organizations have begun to develop pre-Vu Lan teaching materials that prepare families to enter the festival with doctrinal understanding rather than aesthetic consumption. These programs treat Vu Lan not as a one-day event but as the culmination of a year-long cultivation cycle — *karuṇā* and *mettā* practiced through the year, surfaced into ritual visibility once a year. The conceptual scaffolding is the engaged-Buddhism (*nhập thế*) framework (Queen and King, 1996), which has long held that Vietnamese Buddhism's vocation is the cultivation of dharma in the world rather than withdrawal from it. Family education in this register is not religious instruction added to secular schooling; it is the deliberate scaffolding of a philosophical-anthropological formation that the household-contagion model can no longer be assumed to perform.

The second is *mindfulness-based family practices* of the kind Thích Nhất Hạnh (1998, 2007) has long promoted. Plum Village's family retreats, sutra-recitation circles, and the "Five Mindfulness Trainings" offer ritual forms that are simultaneously practices of inner cultivation. They are exportable into household discipline — short morning sittings, mindful meals, weekly family dharma reading — and they reanimate ritual by making inner cultivation visible *as* ritual. The doctrine of *tiếp hiện* (interbeing) supplies the philosophical anchor: when the family eats a meal together in mindful silence and then articulates gratitude for what each member has given the others, the ritual is performing the relational anthropology rather than ornamenting it (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998).

The third is *intergenerational dialogue* that honors the full Buddhist *hiếu* covenant. The Sigālovāda Sutta's six-directional ethic explicitly assigns parents *and* children obligations toward each other: five duties from each side (Walshe, 1995). A Vu Lan that is doing its work treats the festival as the moment at which both directions of the

covenant are remembered and recommitted. Children remember what they have received and pledge how they will repay; parents remember what they have given and recommit to the cultivation of children's minds. This is reciprocal filial piety enacted in real time, and it is the philosophical-anthropological core of the festival as the article reads it (Yeh and Bedford, 2003; Bedford and Yeh, 2019). The Vietnamese particularity of the rose-pinning ceremony, on this reading, is not a sentimental family-album moment; it is the ritual marker of a relational situation whose ethical weight every participant is invited to acknowledge.

Acknowledge what cannot be willed into being. The structural conditions of contemporary Vietnamese family life — geographic mobility, time scarcity, market pressure — will not be reversed by ritual reform. But within those conditions, the article's argument is that Buddhist humanism has the conceptual resources to remain ethically generative if its ritual forms are carried by inner cultivation rather than consumed as aesthetic spectacle (Trần Đình Hượu, 1996). Vu Lan is the test case. If Vu Lan can be closed back onto its ethical work, much else can follow.

7. Conclusion: a philosophical anthropology of reciprocal filial relation

The conclusion does not summarize. It draws three philosophical implications and points beyond.

The first is descriptive-philosophical. Buddhist humanistic virtues continue to function as a resilient ethical reservoir in Vietnamese family life under post-Đổi Mới conditions. The reservoir is not full; it is not draining; it is being slowly reorganized. Reciprocal Buddhist *hiếu* is, perhaps surprisingly, well-suited to the nuclear-family arrangements that have replaced the *tam đại đồng đường*. The relational-gratitude anthropology travels across distance, across digital media, across the structural conditions of urban migration — because what it requires of persons (gratitude, voluntary care, affective recognition) remains coherent under autonomy and individuation (Bedford and Yeh, 2019). It is *authoritarian* filial piety that fares badly under contemporary conditions, not Buddhist filial piety properly understood. Distinguishing the two is what makes the diagnosis intelligible.

The second is critical-philosophical. The most pressing threat to Vietnamese Buddhist family ethics is internal — the widening gap between ritual observance and lived ethical cultivation. This is not a critique that can be made from outside the tradition. It must be made from within. Buddhist virtue ethics has the doctrinal-conceptual resources for self-correction (the *brahmavihāras* as virtue-ethical cultivations; the Sigālovāda's reciprocal six-directional covenant; the Mục Liên story's logic of *bao hiếu* as compassion mediated by community), and the Vietnamese contribution to this self-correction — through engaged-Buddhist family education, mindfulness-based household practice in the Thích Nhất Hạnh tradition, and the renewal of Vu Lan as cultivation rather than spectacle — is potentially significant for Buddhist communities elsewhere as well. The critique is not pessimistic; it is the recovery of a philosophical-anthropological commitment that the formalist drift has obscured.

The third is theoretical-philosophical, and the boldest move. Applying the Yeh–Bedford Dual Filial Piety Model to the Vietnamese case as a *philosophical-anthropological* diagnostic shows that the long-running scholarly habit of folding Buddhist and Confucian filial piety into a single undifferentiated "Asian" filial piety obscures a difference between two *philosophical anthropologies of family*. Vietnamese Buddhist family ethics is not a cultural variant of a generic East Asian filial morality; it is a distinctive philosophical anthropology of reciprocal filial relation, grounded in the Mahāyāna anthropology of dependent origination (Williams, 2009), articulated canonically in the Sigālovāda's six-directional reciprocal household ethic (Walshe, 1995), narrativized in the Mục Liên story and dramatized in the Vu Lan festival (Teiser, 1988; Cole, 1998), and sustained in contemporary Vietnamese practice through the

engaged-Buddhist tradition (Queen and King, 1996; Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998, 2007) and the Vietnamese-internal philosophical apparatus of *Việt hóa* and tradition–modernity (Phan Ngọc, 2002; Trần Đình Hượu, 1996). Vu Lan, on this reading, is *philosophical evidence* of a particular philosophical-anthropological commitment — not a cultural illustration. The Vietnamese case is the test case at which the difference between two anthropologies of family becomes visible, and the philosophical contribution is what the test makes available for comparative philosophical-anthropological work elsewhere.

The article closes with an honest statement of limitations. This is a conceptual narrative review, not an empirical study. I have not presented new ethnographic or survey data; the empirical anchors are drawn from published ethnographies and demographic studies. Future research should include mixed-methods studies of Vietnamese Buddhist family practice across regions and generations, longitudinal tracking of Vu Lan participation and its correlation with other measures of family functioning, and comparative work with other Theravāda-and-Mahāyāna-blended Southeast Asian contexts (Thailand, Cambodia, Laos) and with the Vietnamese diaspora. The philosophical apparatus the article installs — Buddhist virtue ethics, the Mahāyāna anthropology, the Sigālovāda's reciprocal covenant, the Yeh–Bedford lens read philosophically, the *Việt hóa* and tradition–modernity apparatus of Phan Ngọc and Trần Đình Hượu — is what the Vietnamese case adds to international Buddhist Studies, family sociology, and East Asian psychology alike. The seventh-lunar-month courtyard with which the article opened is not a closing image. It is an opening: a ritual whose philosophical-anthropological work is still being done, by Vietnamese families and by the philosophical reflection that takes their practice seriously.

Declaration on AI Use

AI-assisted tools (including Grammarly and Gemini 3.1) were used during manuscript preparation for initial brainstorming, annotated outline suggestions, language editing and refinement. The author takes full responsibility for the content, interpretation, and integrity of the research.

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