

Buddhism in the Spiritual Life of Ethnic Minorities in Cao Bang Province, Vietnam: Current Practices and Transformations

Ton Quoc Dat

PhD Candidate, Tran Nhan Tong Institute, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam

ABSTRACT: This study examines the role of Buddhism in the spiritual life of ethnic minority communities in Cao Bang Province, Vietnam, with a focus on current practices and ongoing transformations. Using a qualitative document analysis approach, the study draws on national legal and policy documents, provincial reports, academic publications, and Buddhist institutional records to analyze patterns of religious belief, ritual practice, institutional organization, and community participation. The findings indicate that contemporary Buddhist practice among ethnic minorities is characterized by temple-centered worship, participation in festivals and merit-making rituals, the guiding role of monks, and the continued interaction between Buddhism and indigenous belief systems. Rather than displacing traditional spiritual practices, Buddhism has been selectively integrated into local cosmologies, producing hybrid religious forms. The study also reveals significant transformations driven by socio-economic development, state religious policy, modernization, and tourism, which have reshaped patterns of religious participation, moral orientation, and institutional visibility. These transformations highlight Buddhism's adaptive capacity in multi-ethnic contexts while also generating new challenges related to institutionalization and cultural negotiation. The study contributes to the literature on Buddhism, religion and social change, and ethnic minority studies by providing a regionally grounded analysis of religious transformation in a borderland province of northern Vietnam.

KEYWORDS: Buddhism; ethnic minorities; spiritual life; religious transformation; document analysis; Cao Bang Province; Vietnam

1. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism has long been one of the most influential religious and philosophical traditions in Vietnam, exerting a profound impact on ethical systems, cultural practices, and the spiritual life of diverse communities. Vietnamese Buddhism has historically developed through dynamic interactions with indigenous belief systems, Confucianism, and Taoism, forming a distinctive religious landscape characterized by syncretism and cultural adaptability. While the role of Buddhism among the Kinh majority has been extensively examined, its presence and influence within ethnic minority communities—particularly in the Northern mountainous regions—remain comparatively underexplored in contemporary scholarship.

Cao Bang Province, located in the northeastern border area of Vietnam, is a culturally diverse and multi-ethnic locality, with groups such as the Tày, Nùng, Dao, Mông, and Sán Chay constituting a large proportion of the population. The traditional spiritual life of these communities has long been shaped by indigenous beliefs, ancestor worship, shamanism, and folk religious practices closely associated with agrarian livelihoods and the natural environment. In recent decades, however, rapid socio-economic development, state-led religious governance, cultural exchange, and increasing mobility have significantly transformed the province's religious landscape. Within this changing context, Buddhism has gradually expanded its presence through the construction and restoration of temples, the growing activities of monastic communities, the dissemination of Buddhist teachings, and the increasing participation of ethnic minority believers in Buddhist rituals, festivals, and charitable activities.

These developments have led to notable transformations in the spiritual lives of ethnic minority communities in Cao Bang. Buddhism has introduced new forms of belief, ritual practice, and moral orientation, while simultaneously interacting with existing indigenous religious systems to produce hybrid spiritual expressions. Buddhist values such as compassion, moral discipline, altruism, and harmony have increasingly been incorporated into community life, influencing ethical behavior, social relationships, and cultural identity. At the same time, the transformation of spiritual life has been shaped by broader structural factors, including economic modernization, education, digital media, religious policy, and tourism development. Despite the growing visibility of Buddhism in ethnic minority areas, existing studies remain fragmented, often limited to isolated case analyses or policy-driven

Buddhism in the Spiritual Life of Ethnic Minorities in Cao Bang Province, Vietnam: Current Practices and Transformations

discussions, and have yet to provide a systematic, document-based interpretation of contemporary religious practices and transformations in Cao Bang Province.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to examine the role of Buddhism in the spiritual life of ethnic minorities in Cao Bang Province through a systematic analysis of documentary sources. The study focuses on clarifying current forms of Buddhist belief, worship, and religious participation among ethnic minority communities, identifying major transformations in spiritual practices and religious awareness, and analyzing the social, cultural, economic, and institutional factors driving these changes. The study is guided by three central research questions: (1) How is Buddhism currently practiced among ethnic minority communities in Cao Bang Province? (2) What major transformations have occurred in their spiritual life under the influence of Buddhism? and (3) What key social, cultural, and policy-related factors are shaping these transformations?

This study holds important academic and practical significance. Academically, it contributes to Buddhist studies, the sociology of religion, and ethnic studies by offering a regionally grounded and systematically documented analysis of Buddhism within ethnic minority communities—an area that has received limited scholarly attention in both Vietnamese and international contexts. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the analytical value of document analysis in reconstructing religious change and institutional development in contexts where large-scale fieldwork may be constrained. Practically, the findings provide useful insights for policymakers, religious organizations, and local authorities involved in the management of religious affairs and cultural preservation in ethnic minority areas. A deeper understanding of current Buddhist practices and their transformations can support the formulation of culturally sensitive religious policies, promote ethical and social values, and enhance social cohesion in multi-ethnic communities. Furthermore, the study offers a valuable empirical foundation for future research on the interactions between religion, ethnicity, and social transformation in Northern Vietnam and comparable settings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly research on Buddhism has developed across several major analytical traditions, including historical studies of Buddhist transmission, examinations of institutional development, and analyses of Buddhism's social and cultural roles in contemporary societies (Harvey, 2013; Lopez, 2019; Strong, 2008). In Southeast Asia, Buddhism has been widely studied as both a religious and cultural system that shapes moral values, collective identities, and social organization (Keyes, 1989; Swearer, 2010). These studies consistently show that Buddhism is not a static belief system but a dynamic tradition that continuously adapts to changing political, economic, and cultural conditions. However, much of this scholarship has focused on dominant ethnic or national groups, while Buddhist practices among ethnic minority communities remain comparatively underrepresented in the literature.

Studies on Buddhism in ethnic minority and highland contexts in Southeast Asia have primarily adopted ethnographic and anthropological approaches, emphasizing religious pluralism, syncretism, and localized adaptations of Buddhist belief and ritual (Michaud, 2016; Scott, 2009). Research conducted in borderland and upland regions demonstrates that Buddhism often coexists with indigenous spiritual systems such as animism, shamanism, and ancestor worship, producing hybrid religious configurations rather than replacing local traditions outright (Endres, 2011; Salemink, 2018). These studies reveal that historical migration, state integration policies, mission activity, and local socio-economic conditions shape ethnic minority engagement with Buddhism. At the same time, Buddhist temples and monastic networks in minority regions have increasingly assumed social roles related to education, charity, and moral cultivation, thereby extending their influence beyond the strictly religious sphere (Taylor, 2014; Swearer, 2010). While these works provide valuable localized insights, they are often fragmented across regions and lack a coherent comparative or longitudinal perspective.

From a theoretical standpoint, the relationship between religion and social change has been a central concern within sociology and anthropology. Classical secularization theory initially predicted that religious influence would decline as societies became more rationalized, industrialized, and scientifically oriented (Berger, 1967). This linear model, however, has been extensively re-evaluated in light of empirical evidence demonstrating the persistence, transformation, and even revitalization of religion in modern societies (Casanova, 1994; Davie, 2015). Contemporary theoretical perspectives conceptualize religion as a flexible social institution that interacts dynamically with globalization, state governance, technological change, and shifting cultural identities (Giddens, 1991; Eisenstadt, 2000). Within this framework, religious traditions are understood not as static inheritances but as evolving systems of meaning that reinterpret doctrines, practices, and moral values in response to new social conditions.

Buddhist studies have increasingly incorporated these perspectives on social transformation. Scholars have documented how Buddhism in modern Asia has undergone significant institutional, doctrinal, and practical adaptations in response to urbanization, marketization, and digital communication (Queen & King, 1996; Jerryson & Juergensmeyer, 2010). These

Buddhism in the Spiritual Life of Ethnic Minorities in Cao Bang Province, Vietnam: Current Practices and Transformations

transformations include reforms in monastic education, the expansion of socially engaged Buddhism, and the growing use of digital media for religious teaching and community formation (Campbell, 2013; Obadia, 2020). In ethnic minority contexts, these processes are further mediated by cultural diversity, historical marginalization, unequal access to resources, and differentiated state policies on religion and ethnicity (Scott, 2009; Salemin, 2018). As a result, the interaction between Buddhism and social change in minority regions follows trajectories that differ substantially from those observed in urban or majority-population settings.

Despite this expanding body of literature, significant research gaps remain with regard to Buddhism in the spiritual life of ethnic minorities in specific provincial and borderland contexts. First, most existing studies prioritize national-level analyses or focus on historically prominent Buddhist centers, leaving mountainous and peripheral regions underrepresented. Second, much of the current scholarship relies heavily on field-based ethnographic data, with limited integration of policy documents, institutional records, and historical archives that are necessary for tracing longer-term patterns of religious transformation. Third, there remains a lack of focused analysis on how Buddhist beliefs, rituals, and moral values are currently being reinterpreted and transformed within ethnic minority communities under the combined influences of modernization, state governance, tourism development, and cultural exchange.

Moreover, few studies explicitly examine Buddhism in ethnic minority areas from the dual perspective of current practices and ongoing transformations. Existing research tends to either document traditional spiritual life or analyze religious change at the macro-policy level, without sufficiently connecting institutional change to everyday religious practice. As a result, the micro-level processes through which Buddhism is being localized, negotiated, and transformed in the daily spiritual life of ethnic minority communities remain insufficiently theorized and empirically documented. Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts a document-based analytical approach to examine Buddhism in the spiritual life of ethnic minorities in Cao Bang Province, thereby contributing to a more systematic understanding of religious change in multi-ethnic and borderland contexts in contemporary Southeast Asia.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative document-based research design in order to systematically examine Buddhism in the spiritual life of ethnic minorities in Cao Bang Province. Document analysis is particularly appropriate for this study because it enables the structured interpretation of policy texts, institutional records, and academic materials that reflect both formal religious governance and lived religious practices over time. As a qualitative method, document analysis allows for the identification of meanings, patterns, and transformations embedded in written sources, thereby supporting an in-depth understanding of how Buddhism is practiced and transformed in ethnic minority contexts.

The data sources for this study comprise four main document categories. First, official legal and policy documents related to religion, ethnic affairs, cultural preservation, and social development were collected in order to examine the institutional and regulatory framework shaping Buddhist activities in ethnic minority areas. Second, provincial and sectoral reports issued by relevant authorities were analyzed to capture local-level developments in religious life, temple construction, religious participation, and cultural programs in Cao Bang Province. Third, academic sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and doctoral dissertations, were used to establish the scholarly context, theoretical foundations, and comparative perspectives for the study. Fourth, documents produced by Buddhist institutions—such as temple records, organizational reports, training materials, and public communications—were examined to understand the internal organization, activities, and outreach of Buddhist communities in ethnic minority regions.

Documents were selected based on several strict criteria to ensure relevance and analytical rigor. First, only documents that directly addressed Buddhism, ethnic minority communities, religion–society relations, or cultural transformation were included. Second, priority was given to sources published within the past two decades in order to reflect contemporary transformations while still allowing for limited historical comparison. Third, all documents were required to meet standards of institutional legitimacy or academic credibility, such as being issued by recognized state agencies, Buddhist organizations, or established academic publishers and journals. Fourth, documents were screened for internal consistency, clarity of authorship, and verifiability of information to minimize the risk of bias or misinformation.

The analytical procedure followed a systematic multi-stage process. First, all selected documents were organized into a structured database and classified according to source type, publication period, and thematic relevance. Second, an open coding process was applied to identify key concepts, recurring themes, and analytical categories related to Buddhist practices, spiritual beliefs, ritual activities, institutional roles, and transformations in ethnic minority communities. Third, these codes were refined through thematic analysis to develop higher-order analytical themes, such as religious adaptation, syncretism, community

Buddhism in the Spiritual Life of Ethnic Minorities in Cao Bang Province, Vietnam: Current Practices and Transformations

participation, moral education, and the influence of policy and modernization. Fourth, a comparative analysis was conducted across different document groups and time periods to identify continuities and changes in Buddhist practices and spiritual life. This multi-layered procedure allowed the study to move from descriptive patterns to an interpretative understanding of religious transformation.

To ensure analytical reliability and methodological rigor, several strategies were applied. Data triangulation was performed by comparing information across different types of documents, including legal texts, institutional reports, and academic studies. Consistency checks were conducted by cross-referencing key findings across multiple independent sources. In addition, analytical transparency was maintained by clearly documenting the procedures of selection, coding, and interpretation. Ethical considerations were also strictly observed. All documents used in the study were publicly accessible or formally published sources, ensuring that no confidential or personal data were involved. Proper attribution and citation practices were followed in accordance with APA standards to respect intellectual property and academic integrity. Through these methodological safeguards, the study seeks to produce a reliable and ethically sound analysis of Buddhism in the spiritual life of ethnic minorities in Cao Bang Province.

4. CURRENT BUDDHIST PRACTICES AMONG ETHNIC MINORITIES IN CAO BANG

Current Buddhist practices among ethnic minority communities in Cao Bang Province display a patterned combination of institutional Buddhism and localized spiritual expression shaped by socio-cultural conditions and state religious governance. Documentary evidence indicates that Buddhist belief and worship among ethnic minorities are primarily expressed through temple-centered devotional activities, merit-making practices, and participation in major Buddhist festivals. Common individual practices include incense offering, sutra chanting, prayer for health and family well-being, and merit transfer for deceased relatives. These forms of worship reflect a lay-oriented mode of Buddhist practice that emphasizes practical spiritual benefits and moral cultivation rather than doctrinal study, a pattern consistent with broader trends in Southeast Asian popular Buddhism (Harvey, 2013; Swearer, 2010).

Religious rituals and community-based Buddhist activities play a central role in sustaining religious life among ethnic minorities in Cao Bang. Major Buddhist festivals such as Vesak, the Ghost Festival, and Lunar New Year observances attract increasing participation from ethnic minority believers, alongside traditional memorial rites connected to ancestor veneration. In addition to large-scale festivals, local communities engage in smaller ritual programs such as peace prayers, agricultural blessing ceremonies, and family protection rites. Beyond ritual worship, Buddhist institutions have extended their activities into the social sphere through charitable initiatives, disaster relief, blood donation campaigns, and moral education programs. These activities reinforce the social presence of Buddhism and enhance its role as a source of ethical guidance and social solidarity, a feature widely observed in contemporary socially engaged Buddhism across Asia (Queen & King, 1996; Obadia, 2020).

Temples and monks occupy a pivotal position in organizing and sustaining Buddhist practice among ethnic minorities in Cao Bang. Temples serve not only as sacred spaces for ritual performance but also as centers for religious education, cultural exchange, and community gathering. Monks guide lay believers in ritual observance, deliver sermons during festivals, and provide moral counseling in both personal and communal matters. In ethnic minority areas, monks often act as cultural intermediaries who adapt Buddhist teachings to local linguistic, cultural, and spiritual contexts. Documentary sources further suggest that monastic involvement in philanthropy, education support, and poverty alleviation has strengthened the social legitimacy of Buddhist institutions and expanded their influence beyond strictly religious domains (Swearer, 2010; Taylor, 2014).

The interaction between Buddhism and indigenous belief systems constitutes a defining characteristic of contemporary religious life among ethnic minorities in Cao Bang. Rather than replacing traditional spiritual practices such as ancestor worship, spirit veneration, and shamanistic rituals, Buddhism has been selectively integrated into existing local cosmologies. Many households maintain both ancestral altars and Buddhist devotional spaces, reflecting a hybrid religious orientation. Indigenous ritual specialists continue to perform functions related to healing, spirit communication, and protection from misfortune, while Buddhist monks conduct merit-making and moral instruction rituals. This syncretic configuration illustrates the adaptive flexibility of Buddhism and supports theoretical interpretations that view religious change in minority contexts as a process of negotiation and hybridization rather than linear replacement (Endres, 2011; Salemink, 2018; Scott, 2009).

Taken together, current Buddhist practices among ethnic minorities in Cao Bang Province reflect a dynamic configuration in which institutional Buddhist structures, community participation, and indigenous belief systems coexist and interact. These practices demonstrate both continuity with long-standing spiritual traditions and increasing integration into formal Buddhist organizational life. Through worship, ritual participation, monastic guidance, and community-based activities, Buddhism functions

Buddhism in the Spiritual Life of Ethnic Minorities in Cao Bang Province, Vietnam: Current Practices and Transformations

not only as a system of belief but also as a moral and social institution that contributes to ethical regulation, social cohesion, and the ongoing redefinition of cultural identity in multi-ethnic communities.

5. TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

The spiritual life of ethnic minority communities in Cao Bang Province has undergone significant transformations under the combined influence of shifts in religious consciousness, socio-economic development, state governance, and modernization. One of the most notable changes concerns shifts in religious belief and participation. Documentary sources indicate that religious engagement among ethnic minorities has shifted from primarily household-based, ritual-specialist-centered practices to more organized forms of participation associated with Buddhist institutions. While traditional beliefs centered on spirits, ancestors, and nature remain influential, Buddhism has increasingly become an important reference for moral orientation, life-cycle rituals, and communal religious activities. Participation in temple worship, merit-making ceremonies, and Buddhist festivals has expanded, reflecting a transition from exclusively local spiritual systems toward more institutionalized and trans-local religious networks. This transformation is consistent with broader regional patterns showing the growing prominence of institutional Buddhism in shaping popular religiosity in Southeast Asia (Harvey, 2013; Swearer, 2010).

Socio-economic development has played a central role in reshaping the spiritual life of ethnic minority communities. Improvements in infrastructure, education, healthcare, and income levels have gradually altered both the material conditions and value orientations of local populations. Economic diversification and increased mobility have reduced the degree of isolation that previously characterized many ethnic minority areas, facilitating greater exposure to mainstream religious institutions, media, and national cultural frameworks. As living standards improve, religious practice increasingly emphasizes ethical cultivation, psychological well-being, and community service rather than solely ritual protection from misfortune. Documentary evidence further suggests that the expansion of education has contributed to more rationalized understandings of religious belief, encouraging selective engagement with both Buddhist teachings and indigenous spiritual practices. These trends align with theoretical perspectives that conceptualize religious transformation as closely intertwined with processes of social differentiation and modernization (Giddens, 1991; Eisenstadt, 2000).

State religious policy has also exerted a significant influence on contemporary transformations in spiritual life. The formal recognition of Buddhism as a legally protected religion and the institutionalization of religious management frameworks have created both opportunities and constraints for religious practice in ethnic minority areas. Policy documents emphasize the protection of freedom of belief while simultaneously promoting religious activities that support social stability, national unity, and ethical education. In Cao Bang Province, the legalization of temples, the registration of religious personnel, and the incorporation of Buddhist activities into officially sanctioned cultural events have contributed to the formalization and visibility of Buddhist life among ethnic minorities. At the same time, the regulatory environment encourages the integration of religion into broader development and governance objectives, shaping the content and public presentation of Buddhist activities. This policy-driven institutionalization reflects broader patterns observed in state–religion relations in contemporary Southeast Asia (Casanova, 1994; Taylor, 2014).

Modernization and tourism have further accelerated transformations in the spiritual life of ethnic minority communities. The development of cultural and spiritual tourism associated with temples, festivals, and historical religious sites has introduced new economic and symbolic dimensions to religious practice. Buddhist rituals and festivals increasingly function not only as spiritual events but also as cultural performances embedded in regional tourism strategies. Media technologies, including social networks and digital communication platforms, have expanded access to Buddhist teachings, ritual broadcasts, and religious information, facilitating trans-local forms of religious participation that extend beyond village boundaries. These processes have contributed to the reconfiguration of religious space and time, as spiritual life becomes increasingly mediated by modern communication, mobility, and market-oriented cultural production. Scholars have noted that such transformations often generate both opportunities for religious revitalization and tensions related to commodification and the standardization of religious expression (Campbell, 2013; Obadia, 2020).

Taken together, transformations in the spiritual life of ethnic minorities in Cao Bang Province reflect a complex interaction between continuity and change. While indigenous belief systems remain deeply embedded in everyday life, Buddhism has increasingly assumed a more formalized, visible, and socially expansive role within ethnic minority communities. These transformations are not the result of a single factor but emerge from the intertwined effects of socio-economic change, state religious policy, modernization processes, and the expansion of cultural and tourism networks. The evolving spiritual landscape thus illustrates how religion adapts to structural transformation while continuing to serve as a central framework for meaning, morality, and community cohesion in multi-ethnic contexts.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that Buddhism has become an increasingly important component of cultural identity among ethnic minority communities in Cao Bang Province. Rather than functioning solely as an imported religious system, Buddhism has been selectively localized and integrated into existing cultural frameworks, contributing to the reconfiguration of ethnic identity amid social transformation. The coexistence of Buddhist practices with indigenous belief systems reflects a dynamic process of cultural negotiation in which ethnic minority communities reinterpret religious meanings to align with local values, cosmologies, and historical experiences. This pattern supports broader theoretical perspectives that conceptualize religious identity as fluid, relational, and continuously reconstructed through interaction with social change and institutional forces (Eisenstadt, 2000; Salemink, 2018; Scott, 2009). In this sense, Buddhism in Cao Bang does not replace ethnic cultural identity but becomes embedded within it, contributing to a composite spiritual identity that is both locally grounded and connected to wider Buddhist networks.

Beyond its identity-forming function, Buddhism also performs significant social and moral roles within ethnic minority communities. Documentary evidence suggests that Buddhist teachings related to compassion, nonviolence, moral discipline, and altruism increasingly influence ethical attitudes and social behavior. Through ritual participation, charitable activities, and moral instruction, Buddhist institutions help regulate social conduct and promote community harmony. These functions are particularly salient in rural and mountainous areas where formal welfare systems may be limited and where religious institutions often serve as important sources of social support. This finding is consistent with existing scholarship on socially engaged Buddhism, which emphasizes the expanding role of Buddhist organizations in education, social welfare, disaster relief, and community development across contemporary Asia (Queen & King, 1996; Swearer, 2010). In Cao Bang, Buddhism operates not only as a belief system but also as a moral and social institution that reinforces solidarity, mutual assistance, and collective responsibility.

At the same time, the growing public presence and institutionalization of Buddhism among ethnic minorities also give rise to emerging challenges. One major challenge concerns the tension between religious authenticity and instrumentalization. As Buddhist activities become increasingly linked to state cultural programs and tourism development, there is a risk that religious practices may be reshaped to meet administrative or commercial objectives rather than spiritual needs. This process may lead to the standardization or commodification of rituals, potentially weakening their original religious meanings (Campbell, 2013; Obadia, 2020). A second challenge relates to intergenerational differences in religious orientation. Younger generations, shaped by education, mass media, and digital culture, often engage with Buddhism in more selective and individualized ways, which may alter patterns of transmission and communal participation over time. A third challenge involves the ongoing negotiation between Buddhism and indigenous belief systems. While syncretism has enabled religious coexistence, it can also generate tensions concerning ritual authority, spiritual legitimacy, and the preservation of traditional practices.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Buddhism in the spiritual lives of ethnic minorities in Cao Bang Province is best understood as a dynamic, socially embedded process rather than a fixed institutional presence. Its role in shaping cultural identity, regulating moral life, and supporting social cohesion highlights its adaptive capacity in multi-ethnic and rapidly changing contexts. At the same time, emerging challenges underscore the need for careful governance, culturally sensitive religious management, and continued scholarly attention to the long-term implications of religious transformation in ethnic minority areas. This discussion reinforces the view that religious change must be analyzed within broader structures of identity, power, and socio-economic development, rather than as an isolated spiritual phenomenon.

7. CONCLUSION

This study examined Buddhism in the spiritual lives of ethnic minorities in Cao Bang Province using a qualitative document analysis approach, with a focus on current practices and ongoing transformations. The findings indicate that Buddhism has become an increasingly visible and institutionalized component of spiritual life in ethnic minority communities. Contemporary Buddhist practice is characterized by temple-centered worship, participation in religious festivals and community rituals, the guiding role of monks, and the continued interaction between Buddhist teachings and indigenous belief systems. Rather than replacing traditional spiritual practices, Buddhism has been selectively integrated into local cosmologies, giving rise to hybrid religious forms that reflect both continuity and adaptation. At the same time, the spiritual life of ethnic minorities has undergone notable transformations marked by expanding religious participation, growing institutional organization, and the increasing influence of socio-economic development, state religious governance, modernization, and tourism.

The findings of this study carry important academic and practical implications. From an academic perspective, the study contributes to Buddhist studies, the sociology of religion, and ethnic studies by providing a regionally grounded analysis of religious change in a multi-ethnic and borderland context. By employing document analysis as the primary methodological approach, the

Buddhism in the Spiritual Life of Ethnic Minorities in Cao Bang Province, Vietnam: Current Practices and Transformations

study also demonstrates the value of documentary sources for examining long-term patterns of religious transformation, especially in settings where large-scale fieldwork may be limited. From a practical perspective, the results offer useful insights for policymakers, religious organizations, and local authorities involved in the management of religious affairs and cultural preservation in ethnic minority areas. A clearer understanding of how Buddhism is practiced and transformed can inform more culturally sensitive religious policies, support ethical education and community development initiatives, and contribute to social cohesion in multi-ethnic communities.

Despite these contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. The exclusive reliance on documentary sources means that the analysis reflects officially recorded practices and institutional perspectives more strongly than everyday lived religious experiences. As a result, variations in individual beliefs, informal ritual practices, and local-level religious negotiations may not be fully captured. In addition, while the study focuses on Cao Bang Province as a representative multi-ethnic and mountainous region, the findings cannot be automatically generalized to all ethnic minority areas in Vietnam, which display considerable historical, cultural, and religious diversity.

Future research should therefore complement document-based analysis with field-based qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, and community-level case studies, to capture the lived dimensions of religious practice and belief more fully. Comparative studies across different northern mountainous provinces would also be valuable for identifying regional similarities and variations in the interaction between Buddhism and ethnic minority spiritual life. In addition, further research could explore the long-term impacts of tourism development, digital media, and youth engagement on religious transmission and cultural identity. Such directions would not only deepen understanding of Buddhism in ethnic minority contexts but also contribute more broadly to the study of religion and social transformation in contemporary Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

REFERENCES

- 1) Berger, P. L. (1967). *The sacred canopy: Elements of a sociological theory of religion*. Anchor Books.
- 2) Campbell, H. A. (2013). *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*. Routledge.
- 3) Casanova, J. (1994). *Public religions in the modern world*. University of Chicago Press.
- 4) Davie, G. (2015). *Religion in Britain: A persistent paradox* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- 5) Eisenstadt, S. N. (2000). Multiple modernities. *Daedalus*, 129(1), 1–29.
- 6) Endres, K. W. (2011). Performing the divine: Mediums, markets, and modernity in urban Vietnam. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 70(2), 371–395.
- 7) Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford University Press.
- 8) Harvey, P. (2013). *An introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, history and practices* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- 9) Jerryson, M., & Juergensmeyer, M. (2010). *Buddhist warfare*. Oxford University Press.
- 10) Keyes, C. F. (1989). *Thailand: Buddhist kingdom as modern nation-state*. Westview Press.
- 11) Lopez, D. S., Jr. (2019). *The story of Buddhism: A concise guide to its history and teachings*. HarperOne.
- 12) Michaud, J. (2016). *Historical dictionary of the peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif* (2nd ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.
- 13) Obadia, L. (2020). *Global Buddhism: Missions, mindfulness, and the media*. University of California Press.
- 14) Queen, C. S., & King, S. B. (Eds.). (1996). *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist liberation movements in Asia*. State University of New York Press.
- 15) Salemink, O. (2018). *The ethnography of Vietnam's central highlands: A historical contextualization, 1850–1990*. University of Hawai'i Press.
- 16) Scott, J. C. (2009). *The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia*. Yale University Press.
- 17) Strong, J. S. (2008). *The experience of Buddhism: Sources and interpretations* (3rd ed.). Thomson Wadsworth.
- 18) Swearer, D. K. (2010). *The Buddhist world of Southeast Asia* (2nd ed.). State University of New York Press.
- 19) Taylor, P. (2007). *Modernity and re-enchantment: Religion in post-revolutionary Vietnam*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- 20) Taylor, P. (2014). *The Khmer lands of Vietnam: Environment, cosmology and sovereignty*. NUS Press.



There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.