

## The Role of Luy Lâu Buddhism on Community Life

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**ABSTRACT:** Luy Lâu, located in present-day Bắc Ninh province, is widely recognized as the earliest center of Buddhism in Vietnam. Once a vibrant intersection of Indian, Chinese, and indigenous religious influences, Luy Lâu Buddhism has played a foundational role in shaping Vietnamese spiritual identity. This article explores the contemporary relevance of Luy Lâu Buddhism in community life, focusing on its religious, educational, cultural, and social functions. Drawing on historical sources, field observations, and community narratives, the study argues that Luy Lâu continues to serve as a moral and spiritual anchor for local populations. Despite the pressures of urbanization and secularization, the region's temples remain vital sites of ritual practice, ethical education, cultural preservation, and charitable engagement. The paper concludes by highlighting the importance of heritage-based spiritual models for sustaining communal well-being and moral continuity in modern Vietnamese society.

**KEYWORDS:** Luy Lâu Buddhism, Vietnamese Buddhism, spiritual heritage, community life, Buddhist ethics, Bắc Ninh

### INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, Vietnam has witnessed dramatic transformations across social, economic, and cultural domains (Quynh & Thanh, 2025a; Quynh & Thanh, 2025b.. Rapid industrialization, urban expansion, and digital modernization have reshaped not only the country's physical landscape but also its social fabric and moral orientations (Nam & Thanh, 2024; Thanh et al., 2023). While such change has created unprecedented opportunities for economic development and global integration, it has also brought with it challenges related to cultural dislocation, intergenerational disconnect, and the erosion of traditional ethical frameworks (Nguyen & Le, 2018). In the face of these shifting dynamics, the Vietnamese public and academic communities alike have renewed their attention to the role of indigenous spiritual systems—particularly Buddhism—in sustaining communal identity, moral reasoning, and cultural continuity.

Buddhism, as the most historically entrenched and culturally integrated religion in Vietnam, offers a vast reservoir of moral philosophy, ritual practice, and social ethics. One of the most significant cradles of Vietnamese Buddhism is Luy Lâu, located in today's Bắc Ninh province in northern Vietnam. Dating back to the 2nd century CE, Luy Lâu served as the capital of the Giao Chỉ commandery under Han Chinese rule and emerged as the earliest documented center for Buddhist learning, transmission, and localization in Vietnam (Gombrich, 2006; Williams, 2009). As a cultural crossroads where Indian Mahāyāna thought, Chinese governance, and local indigenous traditions intersected, Luy Lâu developed into a vibrant religious nucleus that hosted figures such as Mâu Tử, author of the *Lý Hoặc Luận*, and Khương Tăng Hội, Vietnam's first known Buddhist monk and translator (Harvey, 2000).

Over time, Luy Lâu's institutional centrality declined due to shifting political capitals, religious diversification, and wartime disruptions. However, its symbolic and spiritual resonance continues to echo in Vietnam's religious consciousness. Temples such as Chùa Dâu (Dâu Pagoda) and Chùa Tướng, relics from Luy Lâu's golden age, remain active centers of worship, ethical education, and cultural transmission. These sacred spaces continue to attract not only local devotees but also scholars, pilgrims, and tourists seeking to connect with Vietnam's spiritual roots.

In the current context, Luy Lâu Buddhism plays a multifaceted role in community life, transcending its historical function as a doctrinal or administrative center. It serves as a locus of spiritual refuge, a platform for moral education, a space for ritual and cultural expression, and a channel for social outreach and charity. The communal engagement with Luy Lâu temples reflects Buddhism's enduring relevance not merely as a religion of personal liberation, but as a socially embedded tradition capable of addressing collective needs in areas such as emotional well-being, intergenerational harmony, and ethical civic conduct.

Moreover, the continued vitality of Luy Lâu Buddhism offers insights into the adaptability of religious traditions in modern contexts. While contemporary Vietnamese society is increasingly shaped by secular norms, market logic, and globalized lifestyles,

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Luy Lâu remains a living testament to the integrative power of spirituality in local community dynamics. It provides a case study in how ancient religious institutions can evolve to remain culturally resonant, socially responsive, and educationally meaningful in the 21st century.

This article seeks to examine the contemporary role of Luy Lâu Buddhism in community life in northern Vietnam. Specifically, it explores how the region's temples function as agents of religious practice, ethical formation, cultural preservation, and social engagement. It further interrogates the challenges faced by these institutions—including secularization, urbanization, and generational disengagement—and proposes strategies for revitalizing their relevance in community development. By doing so, the study contributes to broader discussions on religion's place in public life, particularly within post-traditional societies seeking balance between historical identity and modern innovation.

### Historical Background of Luy Lâu Buddhism

Luy Lâu occupies a foundational position in the historical development of Vietnamese Buddhism. Located in present-day Thuận Thành district of Bắc Ninh province, it served as the capital of the Giao Chỉ commandery during the Han Dynasty and quickly evolved into a vibrant center for political administration, trade, and religious exchange. By the 2nd century CE, Luy Lâu had become the first known gateway for Buddhism into Vietnam, receiving influences from Indian missionaries, Chinese monastics, and indigenous belief systems. This confluence of cultures and philosophies positioned Luy Lâu as a pivotal site for the localization of early Mahāyāna teachings and the integration of Buddhist values into the sociocultural fabric of Vietnamese society (Gombrich, 2006; Williams, 2009).

The early transmission of Buddhism in Luy Lâu was marked by significant intellectual and spiritual activity. Notable among the early figures was Khương Tăng Hội, a monk of Central Asian descent who is credited as Vietnam's first Buddhist scholar and monastic leader. Ordained and educated in Luy Lâu, Khương Tăng Hội later traveled to China, where he played a formative role in the development of Chinese Buddhist monastic codes and meditative practices. His legacy reflects not only the doctrinal sophistication of early Vietnamese Buddhism but also its role in mediating between Indian and Chinese traditions (Keown, 2005). Another key contributor was Mâu Tử, author of *Lý Hoặc Luận* (Discourse on Removing Doubts), which presented a philosophical defense of Buddhism in response to Confucian critiques. His writings demonstrate the intellectual integration of Buddhist ethics into Vietnamese thought during a time of cultural contestation and foreign rule (Harvey, 2000).

As a hub of religious transmission and adaptation, Luy Lâu also became home to some of the earliest temples in Vietnamese history. The most renowned of these is Chùa Dâu (Dâu Pagoda), believed to have been constructed in the 3rd century CE. It functioned not only as a place of worship but as a center for education, scriptural translation, and ritual training. Archaeological evidence—such as stūpa relics, inscriptions, and statuary—attests to the site's prominence and its deep connection to both monastic and lay religious life. These artifacts reveal a remarkable fusion of indigenous aesthetics with imported Buddhist iconography, underscoring the hybrid nature of Vietnamese religious identity from its inception.

Despite its decline as a political and religious capital in later centuries—due to the southward migration of dynastic power and the rise of Thăng Long (modern-day Hanoi)—Luy Lâu retained its spiritual prestige. Its symbolic significance persisted through centuries of change, including during periods of foreign occupation and war. Although many structures were damaged or fell into disrepair, the collective memory of Luy Lâu as the cradle of Vietnamese Buddhism endured in both monastic circles and popular devotion. In the modern era, restoration projects and increased scholarly attention have sought to preserve this legacy, with temples like Chùa Dâu continuing to function as active sites of worship and pilgrimage (Nguyen & Le, 2018).

In this light, Luy Lâu is not merely a historical monument but a living spiritual tradition that links Vietnam's past with its present. Its role in introducing, localizing, and sustaining Buddhism in the Vietnamese context cannot be overstated. The values first propagated through its temples—compassion, mindfulness, ethical reflection—remain central to the moral and spiritual development of communities in northern Vietnam today. As this article argues, understanding Luy Lâu's historical legacy is essential to appreciating its ongoing contributions to community cohesion, religious identity, and ethical life.

### The Current Role of Luy Lâu Buddhism in Community Life

#### Religious and Ritual Practices

Luy Lâu's Buddhist temples continue to serve as vital religious centers, sustaining both spiritual devotion and communal cohesion in contemporary northern Vietnam. Far from being relics of a bygone era, these temples remain active sites where ritual practices are performed regularly and meaningfully by local populations. Among the most prominent ceremonies are Vesak (Buddha's Birthday), Ullambana (Ancestor's Day), and Tết (Lunar New Year), each of which attracts large numbers of lay devotees. These occasions are not only expressions of reverence toward the Buddha and filial piety toward ancestors but also moments of ethical reflection and social bonding. Through shared rituals such as offering incense, prostrations, and chanting sutras, participants reaffirm core Buddhist values including compassion, gratitude, and non-attachment.

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In addition to these annual festivals, Luy Lâu temples facilitate daily religious observances that shape the spiritual rhythm of local life. Morning and evening chanting, recitation of the Heart Sutra and other scriptures, and individual prayer sessions are conducted regularly by both monastics and lay practitioners. These practices imbue everyday life with sacred meaning and cultivate habits of mindfulness and moral awareness. For many, participation in such rituals serves as a stabilizing force amid the uncertainties of modern life, offering spiritual refuge, moral clarity, and emotional support. In this way, the integration of Buddhist ritual into ordinary life creates a seamless continuum between the sacred and the secular, embedding religious ethics into community behavior and interpersonal relationships.

Moreover, these ritual practices are crucial in facilitating intergenerational transmission of spiritual values. Elders often bring their children and grandchildren to temple ceremonies, teaching them the significance of Buddhist teachings through embodied participation rather than formal instruction alone. This oral and ritual-based pedagogy ensures that the ethical and cosmological worldviews associated with Luy Lâu Buddhism are preserved and renewed across generations. In this sense, the religious life of Luy Lâu is not merely individual or ceremonial—it is fundamentally communal, dynamic, and pedagogical, reinforcing its enduring role as a cornerstone of community life.

### Ethical and Dharma Education

In addition to its ritual functions, Luy Lâu Buddhism plays a significant pedagogical role in the ethical formation of individuals and communities. Temples in the region serve as informal but deeply impactful centers of moral education, where doctrinal teachings are translated into practical guidance for daily life. Many temples regularly organize Dharma talks led by resident monks and visiting scholars, which address a range of topics including the Five Precepts, the Noble Eightfold Path, and applied ethics in family, social, and professional settings. These talks are often delivered in accessible language and adapted to contemporary concerns, making Buddhist principles relevant to modern challenges such as materialism, social anxiety, and ethical ambiguity.

A particularly important dimension of Luy Lâu's ethical outreach is its focus on youth education. Many temples offer Buddhist classes for children and adolescents, where participants are introduced to foundational concepts such as compassion (*karuṇā*), mindfulness (*satī*), and non-harming (*ahiṃsā*). These classes blend storytelling, chanting, meditation, and community service, fostering both intellectual understanding and emotional embodiment of Buddhist virtues. By engaging children in moral reflection from an early age, temple-based education helps cultivate emotional intelligence, self-regulation, and a sense of ethical responsibility. For many families, such education complements or even compensates for the more performance-driven and secular nature of public schooling.

Furthermore, temples often host lay meditation sessions, which attract not only religious adherents but also urban professionals seeking stress reduction and inner clarity. These sessions emphasize mindfulness training, breathing techniques, and reflective silence, contributing to psychological well-being while reinforcing Buddhist values of attentiveness and non-reactivity. In an age marked by digital distraction and urban competition, such practices offer participants a rare space for introspection and moral recalibration.

The reach of Luy Lâu's Dharma education thus extends beyond theological instruction; it shapes how individuals behave within families, relate to peers and coworkers, and respond to ethical dilemmas in public life. By rooting moral development in both contemplative and communal practices, Luy Lâu Buddhism fosters an ethical consciousness that is at once personal and collective, spiritual and practical. In this way, the temples of Luy Lâu serve as dynamic institutions of moral learning, nurturing the next generation of ethically aware and socially engaged citizens.

### Cultural Preservation

Luy Lâu's Buddhist temples are not only centers of spiritual devotion but also vital custodians of Vietnam's tangible and intangible Buddhist heritage. Architecturally, historic sites such as Chùa Dầu (Dầu Pagoda) stand as living monuments to the country's earliest encounters with Buddhism, preserving elements that date back as far as the 3rd century CE. These structures house a remarkable array of murals, statuary, ancient stūpas, ceremonial artifacts, and stone inscriptions, many of which reflect a syncretic fusion of Indian Mahāyāna iconography, Han Chinese aesthetics, and indigenous Vietnamese symbolism. The preservation of these elements offers not only a visual narrative of Vietnam's religious evolution but also a material anchor for the community's spiritual identity.

The role of Luy Lâu temples in cultural transmission extends beyond their architecture. Through the ritual use of ancient chants, conservation of sacred texts, and maintenance of ancestral worship practices, these temples function as repositories of intangible cultural heritage. Annual festivals and temple fairs serve as especially important vehicles for cultural continuity. Events such as the Lễ hội Chùa Dầu (Dầu Pagoda Festival) draw large crowds of local and international visitors, featuring traditional music, calligraphy demonstrations, lantern ceremonies, Buddhist storytelling, and processions. These events not only promote religious

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devotion but also invigorate communal pride and intergenerational memory, reinforcing the shared identity of residents within the spiritual landscape of northern Vietnam.

Moreover, Luy Lâu's cultural preservation efforts contribute to the region's spiritual tourism economy, attracting pilgrims, scholars, and heritage tourists interested in Vietnam's Buddhist history. The convergence of educational, religious, and touristic functions transforms temples into interactive cultural institutions, where visitors engage with both ancient traditions and living practices. In this respect, Luy Lâu operates as a "living museum" of Vietnamese Buddhism, where heritage is not merely archived but actively practiced and reinterpreted by the community.

Through the conservation of both sacred art and embodied ritual, Luy Lâu Buddhism ensures that cultural memory is not lost to modernity but sustained and revitalized for future generations. This enduring role in cultural preservation strengthens not only religious identity but also national heritage, positioning Luy Lâu as an essential node in Vietnam's spiritual and historical topography.

### .Social Engagement and Charitable Activities

In alignment with the Mahāyāna Buddhist ideal of the bodhisattva—a being who postpones personal liberation in order to alleviate the suffering of others—Luy Lâu's temples have long embodied a tradition of engaged Buddhism. This tradition finds renewed relevance in the contemporary context, where Buddhist compassion is increasingly expressed through practical, community-oriented service. Monastic communities and lay volunteers associated with Luy Lâu temples are actively involved in a wide array of charitable initiatives, demonstrating that spiritual development in this context is inherently tied to ethical action and social responsibility.

Among the most visible expressions of this compassion are food donation programs, which provide rice, vegetables, and essential supplies to low-income families, elderly residents, and individuals affected by economic hardship. During periods of natural disaster—particularly the annual floods that affect parts of northern Vietnam—Luy Lâu temples coordinate with local relief agencies to offer emergency aid, including clean water, medicine, and temporary shelter. In the area of education, temples regularly organize scholarship drives and school supply distributions to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds, thereby reinforcing the Buddhist commitment to equity, knowledge, and community upliftment.

Health-related outreach has also become a significant component of Luy Lâu's social engagement. Some temples host free medical clinics, offering basic health screenings and consultations for residents who may lack access to formal healthcare services. These clinics often operate in collaboration with Buddhist medical practitioners and are supplemented by spiritual counseling and rituals for healing. In response to the growing mental health needs of young people and caregivers, Luy Lâu temples have begun to introduce mindfulness-based stress reduction programs, drawing on traditional Buddhist meditation techniques to promote emotional regulation, reduce anxiety, and enhance psychological resilience.

These programs reflect an innovative blend of ancient wisdom and contemporary application, positioning Luy Lâu Buddhism not as a retreat from worldly concerns, but as a dynamic force of public service and social healing. Through these initiatives, temples become not only centers of worship but agents of social transformation, demonstrating how spiritual institutions can address the concrete needs of marginalized populations while cultivating moral and emotional well-being within the broader community.

In sum, the social engagement of Luy Lâu Buddhism illustrates a living interpretation of core Buddhist values—generosity (*dāna*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and mindful action (*sammā kammanta*)—manifested in service to others. This ethical orientation reinforces the idea that Buddhist practice is not confined to the meditation hall or altar, but is most fully realized in acts of selfless service and communal care.

### Challenges and Limitations

Despite its historical prestige and ongoing contributions to community life, Luy Lâu Buddhism currently faces a range of structural and sociocultural challenges that threaten to limit its effectiveness and long-term sustainability. One of the most pressing issues is the impact of urbanization and secularization, which have dramatically altered the socio-religious landscape of contemporary Vietnam (Hanh et al., 2025; Thanh, 2024). As younger generations become increasingly oriented toward global consumer culture, digital media, and academic or professional advancement, traditional religious knowledge and practices are often seen as peripheral or irrelevant to modern life. While temple festivals such as the Lễ hội Chùa Dầu continue to attract large crowds, this participation is often ritualistic and symbolic rather than grounded in doctrinal understanding or sustained ethical engagement. As a result, there is a marked decline in religious literacy, particularly among youth, which raises concerns about the continuity of Buddhist moral education and its transmission across generations (Nguyen & Le, 2018).

Compounding this issue is the limited institutional capacity of many Luy Lâu temples, especially in terms of funding, infrastructure, and human resources. Conservation of ancient pagodas, preservation of sacred artifacts, and organization of educational or charitable programs all require substantial financial and logistical support. Yet many temples operate on modest donations from

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local residents, which are often insufficient to meet the demands of heritage protection, outreach, and modernization. Without strategic investment, there is a risk that the architectural and cultural integrity of Luy Lâu's Buddhist heritage will continue to deteriorate, reducing its capacity to function as a site of both spiritual and historical significance.

Furthermore, there exists a notable disconnect between state cultural policy and religious institutions, particularly in areas related to heritage management and community development. While the Vietnamese government has made efforts to recognize and promote traditional culture, including Buddhism, this support is often channeled through bureaucratic frameworks that may not fully align with the rhythms, needs, or theological orientations of local temple communities. As a result, opportunities for collaboration—such as co-managed educational programs, cultural festivals, or conservation projects—are frequently underdeveloped or inconsistently implemented. The lack of integration between secular governance and religious leadership poses a serious limitation to realizing the full community potential of Luy Lâu Buddhism.

Finally, the challenges of modernization also extend to internal dynamics within the Buddhist Sangha. Some temples may struggle with generational leadership gaps, insufficient training for monastics in community engagement, or resistance to new technologies that could otherwise be used for outreach and education. Without addressing these internal and external challenges holistically, the transformative potential of Luy Lâu Buddhism in community life may remain partially untapped.

### Recommendations for Enhancing Luy Lâu's Role

To address the aforementioned challenges and ensure that Luy Lâu Buddhism continues to thrive as a dynamic force in community life, several strategic recommendations are proposed. These approaches aim to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity while fostering intergenerational continuity, institutional resilience, and cultural sustainability.

**First**, there is a critical need for **religious education reform**. While Luy Lâu temples currently offer Dharma classes and monastic instruction, the scope and reach of these initiatives remain limited. It is essential to develop **accessible, age-appropriate, and culturally relevant Buddhist education programs** that can be implemented in both temple settings and public schools. Such curricula should emphasize not only doctrinal knowledge but also practical ethics, emotional intelligence, and civic responsibility—values that align closely with Buddhist teachings. Integration of Buddhist moral education into school-based character development programs could provide students with a more holistic understanding of spiritual and social ethics.

**Second**, Luy Lâu should be more fully integrated into Vietnam's **spiritual tourism and heritage development strategy**. As a site of significant religious and historical importance, it holds immense potential for **ethical and sustainable tourism**. Local authorities, in partnership with religious leaders and tourism agencies, should work to design visitor experiences that are both educational and respectful of the site's sacred atmosphere. This could include curated temple tours, multilingual interpretive signage, mindfulness retreats, and heritage festivals that highlight the region's spiritual traditions. In doing so, Luy Lâu can serve as a model for balancing tourism development with cultural preservation and religious integrity.

**Third**, special attention must be given to **youth engagement**. In order to revitalize religious literacy and participation among younger generations, Buddhist institutions at Luy Lâu should harness the power of **digital media and social platforms**. This includes the creation of short educational videos, interactive apps, podcasts, and social media campaigns that present Buddhist teachings in a format that is relatable and engaging for digital-native audiences. Additionally, temples should organize **youth retreats, meditation camps, and volunteer Dharma service programs** to provide experiential learning opportunities. Such initiatives can foster a sense of spiritual community and ethical agency among young people who may otherwise feel disconnected from traditional institutions.

**Finally**, the long-term vitality of Luy Lâu Buddhism will depend on the establishment of **formal partnerships between the Buddhist Sangha, local government authorities, and civil society organizations**. These **state-religious collaborations** should aim to coordinate efforts in heritage preservation, education reform, and community service delivery. Joint funding mechanisms, shared governance structures, and policy frameworks that respect religious autonomy while promoting public benefit can enhance the sustainability and public relevance of Buddhist institutions. In particular, partnerships with cultural NGOs could bring technical expertise, financial resources, and global visibility to Luy Lâu's revitalization efforts.

Together, these strategies offer a roadmap for enhancing the role of Luy Lâu Buddhism in contemporary community life—one that is rooted in tradition, responsive to change, and inclusive of diverse stakeholders.

## CONCLUSION

Luy Lâu Buddhism remains a cornerstone of spiritual vitality, cultural identity, and social solidarity in northern Vietnam. While rooted in nearly two millennia of history, its significance transcends the past, manifesting in the lived experiences of contemporary communities who continue to find meaning, guidance, and belonging within its sacred spaces. Rather than functioning as a static relic of historical memory, Luy Lâu represents a living religious tradition—one that actively shapes the moral character of



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individuals, reinforces intergenerational ties, and promotes community resilience through education, cultural preservation, and compassionate action.

The multifaceted role of Luy Lâu Buddhism—as a site of ritual practice, ethical instruction, cultural transmission, and social service—demonstrates the enduring relevance of Vietnamese Buddhist values in addressing the complexities of modern life. In a rapidly transforming society marked by urbanization, globalization, and shifting moral landscapes, Luy Lâu offers a compelling example of how ancient spiritual institutions can evolve without eroding their doctrinal essence. Through its festivals, Dharma teachings, charitable outreach, and architectural heritage, Luy Lâu continues to embody the core tenets of Buddhist compassion (*karuṇā*), mindfulness (*satī*), and ethical action (*sammā kammanta*).

However, the preservation and revitalization of Luy Lâu's role in community life require proactive and inclusive strategies. These must involve educational reform that makes Buddhist ethics accessible to younger generations; sustainable tourism models that honor the sacredness of the site; digital innovations that communicate timeless wisdom through contemporary media; and robust collaboration between religious institutions, state agencies, and civil society. Only through such integrated efforts can the full spiritual, cultural, and social potential of Luy Lâu Buddhism be realized.

In sum, Luy Lâu stands not merely as the historical cradle of Vietnamese Buddhism but as a dynamic, adaptive force for communal flourishing. Its continued relevance in the 21st century reaffirms the proposition that spiritual heritage, when actively nurtured and wisely applied, can serve as a profound resource for ethical renewal, cultural continuity, and social well-being.

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