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Review Article

The Formation Mechanism of Khmer Moral Conceptions Under the Influence of Theravada Buddhism: A Case Study of Tri Ton Commune, An Giang Province, Vietnam

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Abstract

In the Southwestern border region of Vietnam, Theravada Buddhism has long been the spiritual backbone and cultural bedrock of the ethnic Khmer community, shaping religious practice, interpersonal relations, family life, and collective identity. The article discusses the dialectical mechanism of influence and maintenance of the moral views of the Khmer people in Tri Ton commune, An Giang province through Theravada Buddhism in the setting of a high concentration of Khmer people, 14 Theravada pagodas and the existence of multi-ethnic groups including Kinh and Hoa. The study uses theoretical perspectives of dialectical and historical materialism, ethical philosophy and sociology of religion and employs a fully mixed-method research design. It uses structured questionnaire survey with 200 randomly selected lay residents, semi-structured in-depth interviews with 12 key informants comprising Buddhist monks, temple leaders (Achar), community elders and parents, and direct participant observation during religious ceremonies and communal work activities. The results show that Theravada Buddhist teachings about Kamma and personal responsibility, compassion and non-harm, the Five Precepts, and the path of self-purification are not abstract or imposed from the outside. Instead, they are mediated, interpreted, and continuously reinforced through four interlocking institutional channels: the pagoda (wat), the monastic order (Sangha), the extended family, and traditional hamlet–village structures (phum–srok). Through a four-stage cycle of reception, institutional mediation, internalization, and lived embodiment, these ethical principles are transformed from shared teachings into deeply held personal convictions and consistent patterns of daily behavior.Despite mounting pressures from out-migration, economic restructuring, and generational change, the study reveals remarkably high normative consensus across all measured dimensions, suggesting that Theravada Buddhist ethics remain a vital and resilient spiritual anchor. The research concludes by affirming the decisive role of community-based institutions in moral transmission and offers practical implications for cultural preservation, social cohesion, and inclusive development in Vietnam's multi-ethnic borderlands.

Keywords: Theravada Buddhism; moral conceptions; Khmer ethnic community; institutional mediation; Tri Ton; An Giang; cultural identity.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Morality constitutes one of the most fundamental and pervasive forms of social consciousness, providing the shared standards, values, and judgments that regulate human conduct, sustain interpersonal trust, and ensure the stability of family, community, and broader society (Durkheim, 1995, p. 42). Unlike laws that are enforced through formal sanctions, moral norms derive their enduring power from being internalized as convictions to be lived and defended, rather than merely accepted as rules to be obeyed. Moral conceptions are shaped by the historical, economic, cultural, and religious conditions in which people live. They are not fixed or universal, but change as societies develop and as people experience different social realities. From a dialectical perspective, morality involves not only what individuals know and believe about right and wrong, but also their values, emotions, and everyday behaviour. Although moral beliefs are

shaped by society, individuals may interpret and express them in different ways (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 18). For moral values to be passed on from one generation to another, they need to be demonstrated through everyday practices and familiar examples. The influence of family members and respected community figures can also help individuals understand and gradually adopt these values as personal principles that guide their behaviour (Keown, 2005, p. 29). Among the ethnic communities living in the Mekong Delta of Southern Vietnam, the Khmer have maintained a close relationship with Theravada Buddhism, which has played an important role in shaping their religious beliefs, cultural practices, and community life. Compared with the Mahayana traditions found among some neighboring communities, Theravada Buddhism places greater emphasis on personal responsibility, monastic discipline, and the preservation of the Buddha's original teachings. These values have contributed to the continuity of Khmer religious and moral traditions over generations (Nguyen Hieu, 2016, p. 89; Nguyen Van Kiem, 2018, p. 47). Several Buddhist teachings are particularly relevant to the moral life of the Khmer community. The concept of "Kamma" encourages individuals to recognize the consequences of their actions, while "Karuna" (compassion) promotes concern for others, especially those experiencing hardship. Similarly, "Dana" (generosity) encourages sharing and mutual support, and "Ahimsa" (non-harm) reminds people to avoid causing suffering to others. These principles, together with the practice of self-cultivation, have influenced how Khmer people understand family responsibilities, maintain social relationships, and deal with disagreements within their communities (Harvey, 2013, p. 54).

Although previous studies have explored various aspects of Khmer religious and cultural life, such as temple architecture, traditional festivals, and religious practices, the influence of Buddhist teachings on moral awareness and everyday behaviour has received comparatively less attention. More specifically, further research is needed to understand how religious values are passed on through family life, Buddhist temples, and community activities. While existing studies have contributed to our understanding of Khmer cultural heritage, the relationship between religious teachings and people's daily moral practices remains an area that deserves closer examination. Another issue worth exploring is whether shared moral values are maintained as social and economic conditions change (Keyes, 1983, p. 512; Nguyen Van Kiem, 2018, p. 63).

Tri Ton Commune, in the mountainous western border area of An Giang Province, offers a suitable setting for examining these issues. Located in the Seven Mountains region, which has a long history of Theravada Buddhist practice and learning, the commune has a diverse population, including Khmer, Kinh, and Hoa residents. According to local figures, Khmer people account for approximately 47% of the population. This ethnic diversity provides an opportunity to examine how Buddhist values influence community life and how moral beliefs are maintained and shared among different groups. The commune also has 14 Theravada pagodas, which serve not only religious purposes but also play an important role in cultural activities, education, and community relationships. At the same time, Tri Ton is experiencing changes that are common in many rural areas of Vietnam. Young people increasingly leave their hometowns to seek employment in urban areas, agricultural production is becoming more market-oriented, and traditional forms of village authority are gradually changing. These developments raise questions about how local moral values are transmitted and whether they can be maintained under new social and economic conditions. Although concerns about changes in traditional values have been discussed in the context of modernization, empirical studies focusing on ethnic minority communities are still relatively limited (Ho Chi Minh, 2011, p. 124; Pham Minh Hac, 2018, p. 36). Examining the experience of Khmer communities in Tri Ton may therefore contribute to a better understanding of how community-based moral values are preserved, adapted, or transformed during social change.

This research is guided by two interrelated central questions:

1. What specific doctrinal tenets of Theravada Buddhism form the ethical foundation of contemporary Khmer moral conceptions in Tri Ton Commune, and what degree of consensus exists regarding their application?
2. Through what concrete social and religious institutions are these doctrinal principles mediated, interpreted, internalized, and expressed in the daily behavior of community members?

This study draws on dialectical and historical materialism, which views social conditions as an important influence on people's consciousness, while also recognizing that consciousness can influence social practices (Giddens, 2006, p. 342). From this perspective, moral values are not treated as abstract principles that exist independently of society. Rather, they develop within particular social conditions and are maintained through everyday practices and social institutions. The study also draws on the sociology of religion, particularly the work of Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 76), who discuss how shared understandings of reality are established and maintained through institutions, symbols, rituals, and narratives. Within this broader framework, Buddhist ethics provide the main basis for examining Khmer moral values. Particular attention is given to the three aspects of Buddhist cultivation: moral discipline ("Sila"), mental concentration ("Samadhi"), and wisdom ("Panna"). These teachings emphasize intention, personal responsibility, and the reduction of suffering (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2012, p. 91; Rahula, 1974, p.

32). Fieldwork for this study was carried out between January 2025 and February 2026, using a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. The quantitative data came from a structured questionnaire completed by 200 Khmer adults aged between 18 and 75. Participants were selected through stratified random sampling across the six hamlets of the commune. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale to measure respondents' levels of agreement with statements about moral values. The reliability test resulted in a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82, suggesting good internal consistency among the survey items. The qualitative component consisted of 12 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with selected community informants. These included four Buddhist monks, three temple committee leaders ("Achar"), three community elders, and two parent representatives. Their accounts provided further information about how moral values are passed from one generation to another and how community members perceive changes in social life. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in either Khmer or Vietnamese. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic coding. In addition to the interviews, participant observation was conducted during several religious and community activities. These included annual ceremonies such as "Kathina" and "Visakha Puja", weekly Dhamma instruction, and collective community work. Observing these activities helped provide a clearer picture of how Buddhist teachings are expressed in everyday community life. The research received formal approval from the Scientific Council of An Giang University. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent was obtained before data collection. Anonymity and voluntary participation were maintained throughout the research process.

II. CONTENT

2.1 Core Doctrinal Foundations of Khmer Morality

The moral values that influence everyday life and social relationships among the Khmer in Tri Ton Commune are closely associated with the teachings of Theravada Buddhism. Rather than being based solely on local customs or traditional beliefs, these values have developed through long-standing religious practices and the transmission of Buddhist teachings across generations. They influence how people understand right and wrong, assess their own actions, and respond to the behaviour of others. Buddhist teachings also provide moral guidance for individuals as they make decisions and deal with different situations in daily life. In the Khmer community, these teachings are not limited to religious ceremonies or activities at pagodas. They are also reflected in family education, everyday conversations, traditional festivals, and community gatherings. Through these activities, children gradually become familiar with moral values such as compassion, generosity, respect for others, and personal responsibility. Over time, these values can become part of their attitudes and behaviour. Their influence is particularly evident in the way family members interact, how people support one another, and how community relationships are maintained. Thus, Theravada Buddhism represents an important source of moral guidance in Khmer society, influencing both individual behaviour and relationships within the wider community.

The ethical values of the Khmer community in Tri Ton can be examined through four main aspects of Theravada Buddhist teachings. The first is *Kamma*, which emphasizes the relationship between individual actions and their consequences. This teaching encourages people to take responsibility for their behaviour rather than attribute the outcomes of their actions solely to external circumstances. The second aspect involves compassion (*Karuna*), generosity (*Dana*), and non-harm (*Ahimsa*). These values encourage individuals to care for others, share with those in need, and avoid causing harm to living beings. In everyday life, they are reflected in relationships among family members, neighbours, and other members of the community. The third aspect is the Five Precepts (*Panca-sila*), which provide basic moral guidelines for individual conduct. These precepts concern avoiding the taking of life, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and the use of intoxicants that lead to heedlessness. Observing these principles is expected to help individuals maintain personal discipline and contribute to peaceful social relationships. The fourth aspect is the practice of self-cultivation through moral discipline (*Sila*), mental concentration (*Samadhi*), and wisdom (*Panna*). From this perspective, moral development is a gradual process that requires continuous effort, self-reflection, and improvement throughout one's life. These teachings are reinforced through different aspects of community life. Buddhist monks communicate moral principles through Dhamma sermons at pagodas, while respected community members demonstrate them through their everyday conduct. Within families, parents and grandparents pass on moral values through conversations, stories, and personal examples. Participation in religious ceremonies and community activities also gives people opportunities to practise these values in their relationships with others. In this way, the four aspects of Buddhist ethics contribute to the formation and transmission of moral values among Khmer people in Tri Ton across generations.

2.1.1 Kamma and Personal Responsibility

The law of *Kamma* plays an important role in shaping moral awareness among the Khmer community in Tri Ton and is a principle that people of different age groups are familiar with. In Theravada Buddhism, *Kamma* is understood not as fate or predestination, but as the relationship between intentional actions and their consequences. The intention behind an action (*cetana*) is particularly important in determining its moral significance. As discussed by Rahula (1974, p. 33), actions performed through the body, speech, and mind have consequences for the individual. These consequences may influence a person's present

circumstances, character, and future experiences.

An important aspect of this teaching is the emphasis it places on personal responsibility. Rather than encouraging people to accept their circumstances without question, the concept of *Kamma* reminds them that their actions can influence what happens in the future. Harmful actions may lead to negative consequences, while good intentions and appropriate behaviour are encouraged as ways of improving oneself and maintaining positive relationships with others. In this sense, *Kamma* provides a moral basis for individuals to reflect on their behaviour, take responsibility for their decisions, and make choices that they believe will contribute to a better life.

Survey results from Tri Ton reflect near-universal acceptance of this empowering perspective: the statement "Each person must take responsibility for their own actions" received a mean agreement score of 4.79/5.00, with fully 78.5% of respondents selecting "Strongly Agree." Equally notable is the affirmation of human capacity for change: "One can transform one's life through self-cultivation" scored 4.59/5.00, with 97.5% expressing agreement. These figures suggest that the popular misinterpretation of *Kamma* as fatalistic resignation has little purchase here. Instead, respondents embrace the corollary that effort matters, that character can be improved, and that moral effort yields tangible benefits. One monk summarized this teaching in language accessible to every villager: *"The Buddha did not promise to save us; he showed the path. Whether we walk it depends on ourselves"* (In-depth Interview PV07, 2026). This emphasis on personal agency has profound practical implications: it strengthens accountability within families, discourages the shifting of blame onto others, and encourages patience, diligence, and ethical consistency even when immediate rewards are not visible (Gombrich, 1988, p. 68).

2.1.2 Compassion, Generosity, and Non-Harm

If *Kamma* centers moral responsibility within the individual, compassion (*Karuna*) extends moral concern outward. Compassion in Theravada ethics is not merely emotional sympathy or passive pity; it is active commitment to alleviate suffering wherever it is encountered. Closely linked to compassion is the principle of *Ahimsa*—the resolve to cause no harm, physical or verbal, to any living being. Together, these ideals define the outward orientation of Khmer social morality: how one treats others is not secondary to religious practice but is its very substance. Survey data confirm the centrality of these values: the statement "Living ethically first means not causing harm to others" achieved a perfect 100% agreement rate (mean = 4.75/5.00), while "Forgiveness is necessary when someone who made a mistake repents" averaged 4.78/5.00. Such unanimity is rare in social research and underscores how deeply these norms have become second nature.

Generosity (*Dana*) is an important way in which compassion is expressed in the daily lives of the Khmer people in Tri Ton. In Theravada Buddhism, giving is encouraged not only as a way of helping others but also as a practice that helps individuals develop generosity and reduce attachment to material possessions. Among the Khmer community, this value can be seen in various activities, including offering food to monks, making donations to pagodas, sharing food with neighbours, and helping households facing difficulties. Community support is also evident in collective activities. Local residents often contribute their time, labour, or materials to communal projects, such as repairing pagodas, maintaining roads, and preparing for funerals. These contributions reflect a practice of mutual assistance in which people help one another without necessarily expecting immediate returns. Such behaviour is closely related to the Buddhist belief that generosity brings benefits to both the giver and the receiver (Harvey, 2013, p. 79; Nguyen Hieu, 2016, p. 102). Through these everyday activities, *Dana* helps maintain relationships among community members and encourages a sense of shared responsibility. These practices remain important as economic activities and living conditions in the community continue to change.

2.1.3 The Five Precepts as Shared Social Code

The Five Precepts (*Panca-sila*) provide basic ethical guidelines for lay followers of Theravada Buddhism. They apply to people regardless of their age, educational background, or social position. The five precepts involve refraining from taking life, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and the use of intoxicants that may lead to heedlessness. Each precept is associated with an important aspect of moral conduct, including respect for life and property, responsibility in personal relationships, honesty in communication, and self-control. Following these principles can help individuals regulate their behaviour and maintain positive relationships with others.

The survey findings indicate that these values remain important among the Khmer respondents in Tri Ton. Honesty and truthfulness received the highest average score of 4.78 out of 5.00, followed by self-restraint and anger management at 4.71, and the belief that observing the precepts helps develop self-discipline at 4.70. These results suggest that respondents place considerable importance on honesty, personal conduct, and moral self-control. In community life, behaviours such as lying, stealing, and public drunkenness may receive negative reactions from other residents because they are considered inconsistent with accepted moral standards. In this respect, the Five Precepts influence not only individual behaviour but also expectations about how people should treat one another. They may also help explain the importance attached to resolving disagreements through discussion and reconciliation rather than confrontation in the community (Gombrich, 1988, p. 93; Keown, 2005, p. 41).

2.1.4 The Path of Purification: Discipline, Concentration, Wisdom

Finally, Khmer moral notions are shaped by a realistic, humble view of moral progress: perfection is not anticipated but progress is always possible. The Sila–Samadhi–Panna framework – discipline, concentration, wisdom – is the roadmap for lifelong self-improvement. Discipline restrains harmful actions, concentration calms the mind from anger and distraction, and wisdom sees into the true nature of things, and thus reduces attachment and selfishness. This threefold path is not only for monks; it is the ideal for all lay persons, and it is sought in daily life with patience, mindfulness and reflection (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2012, p. 147).

Respondents consistently affirmed that direction matters more than perfection. Acknowledging fault, apologizing sincerely, and resolving to do better next time are themselves virtuous acts. This forgiving yet demanding orientation prevents moralism and judgmentalism while sustaining motivation over the long term. As one elder explained, "The path is long, but every step counts." Such an outlook supports resilience amid hardship and sustains moral effort across the life course.

2.2 Institutional Mediators: From Teaching to Daily Life

Doctrine, however deep, does not automatically become conduct. There is always a gap between the sacred text and lived practice, a gap to be bridged by social institutions. In Tri Ton, abstract teachings are received, interpreted locally in meaningful ways, reinforced by example and expectation, and transmitted to succeeding generations by four interrelated institutions: the pagoda, the monastic order, the family, and the traditional hamlet–village community. Together they form an ecology of moral transmission that is greater than the sum of its parts.

2.2.1 The Pagoda (*Wat*) and the Monastic Order (*Sangha*)

The pagoda is the beating heart of Khmer community life, much more than a sanctuary, it is the center of education, cultural preservation, social gathering and conflict resolution. The fourteen pagodas of Tri Ton are visible markers of the community's spiritual heritage and the towers loom over the landscape as landmarks of collective identity. Children learn the Khmer alphabet and the basic stories of Buddhism; families gather on holy days, monks mediate disputes to provide impartial guidance and the community comes together for major festivals. The pagoda is the place where people come into most direct and frequent contact with moral teaching.

The moral authority of the Sangha or community of monks derives not from power or wealth but from the exemplary simplicity of their lives. Their discipline, their love of study, their availability to villagers all add up to their being respected by all generations. The impact is visible in the survey data: 97.0% of respondents say they often attend pagoda ceremonies (mean = 4.30/5.00) and 87.0% regularly listen to Dhamma sermons (mean = 4.33/5.00). An elder stressed their irreplaceable role: *"Monks and Achar leaders play an indispensable role in guiding people's morals. Regular attendance at the pagoda to listen to Dhamma sermons helps villagers distinguish right from wrong, keep the Five Precepts, and practice compassion in daily encounters"* (In-depth Interview PV01, 2026). The *Sangha* does not command; it reminds, models, and persuades moral authority rooted in trust rather than coercion (Harris, 2005, p. 119).

2.2.2 Family Education and Temporary Ordination (*Buos*)

If the pagoda is the school of moral instruction, the family is its first and most enduring classroom. Moral sentiments respect, gratitude, honesty, kindness—are planted earliest at home, nurtured through daily interaction rather than formal lesson. Parents and grandparents teach by example: caring for elders, sharing food, speaking gently, forgiving quickly. The intergenerational transmission of values is so consistent that respondents rated family influence on moral formation highest of all measures (mean = 4.82/5.00).

A uniquely Khmer institution amplifies family-based education: the tradition of temporary monastic ordination for young men, known locally as *Buos*. Entering the monastery for weeks or months is not merely a spiritual retreat; it is a rite of passage, a way to honor one's parents by transferring merit to them, and an intensive course in self-discipline and humility. One mother described its lasting impact: *"When our son enters the monastery, he learns discipline, humility, and gratitude. He returns not just a son, but a responsible man"* (In-depth Interview PV09, 2026). Upon returning, young men carry the lessons of the precepts, respect, and self-restraint back into their households and workplaces, renewing the community's moral fabric from within.

2.2.3 Hamlet and Village: Collective Norms and Public Opinion

Finally, the *phum* (hamlet) and *srok* (village) provide the social environment where moral norms are constantly affirmed, negotiated, and enforced. In Tri Ton, people live in close proximity; neighbors know one another's families, attend the same ceremonies, and rely on one another in times of need. Collective activities—road-building, temple maintenance, funeral assistance—reinforce mutual dependence and remind individuals that their well-being is tied to the group's. Public opinion (*dusu*) acts as a gentle but powerful regulator: behavior that embodies generosity, filial piety, and honesty is praised and emulated; conduct that is selfish, deceptive, or disruptive elicits quiet disapproval and social correction. The primacy of harmony is widely accepted:

"Protecting community harmony is more important than winning personal arguments" scored 4.60/5.00, with 98% agreement. When conflicts arise, the community prefers mediation and apology over litigation, seeking to restore relationships rather than assign blame.

2.3 The Dialectical Mechanism of Moral Formation and Discussion

Bringing these threads together, the formation of Khmer moral conceptions in Tri Ton is best understood as a continuous, four-stage dialectical cycle in which doctrine and practice mutually shape one another:

Stage	Process	Key Agents
Reception	Encountering core teachings through sermons, texts, ritual, and monastic example.	Monks, pagoda educators.
Mediation	Translating abstract doctrine into familiar norms through family instruction, *Buos* ordination, and hamlet expectations.	Parents, elders, community leaders.
Internalization	Norms become personal conscience, self-identity, and moral conviction through repeated practice and social validation.	Individual reflection, peer reinforcement.
Embodiment	Values expressed in daily conduct: filial care, honesty in work, generosity toward neighbors, forgiveness in conflict.	Every community member.

Figure 1: The Dialectical Cycle of Moral Formation

All survey means exceed 4.3/5.00, indicating a remarkably robust, widely shared moral framework that remains intact despite external pressures. This finding challenges the common assumption that modernization inevitably erodes traditional values (Weber, 1978, p. 1209). In Tri Ton, Theravada ethics persist not because they are insulated from change, but because they are institutionally embedded—lived within structures that adapt while preserving core teachings. The pagoda–family–hamlet network creates redundancy: if one channel weakens, others reinforce.

Significant challenges do remain. Labor migration separates youth from elders and pagoda life; digital media exposes younger generations to alternative values; economic pressure can prioritize income over communal obligation. Yet even among respondents under 30, agreement with core Buddhist moral statements remained high, suggesting values endure even as participation patterns shift. Comparison with Keyes' (1983, p. 521) classic study in Northeastern Thailand confirms that Buddhist morality thrives where it is inseparable from village life; Nguyen Hieu (2016, p. 132) similarly emphasizes that Khmer culture is lived, not merely archived. This study advances understanding by explicitly mapping the transmission mechanism and quantifying normative consensus, providing a baseline against which future shifts can be measured.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study explores how Theravada Buddhism continues to influence moral values and everyday practices among the Khmer community in Tri Ton Commune, An Giang Province. The findings suggest that religious teachings do not shape morality simply by imposing a fixed set of rules. Instead, Buddhist values are gradually absorbed into daily life through personal beliefs, family relationships, and community interactions. Central to this process are the teachings of *Kamma*, which encourage individuals to take responsibility for their actions; compassion and non-harm; the Five Precepts as guidelines for everyday conduct; and the pursuit of moral self-improvement throughout life. These values are maintained and passed on through four closely connected social institutions: the pagoda and monastic community, the extended family, temporary ordination, and the hamlet–village community. As people encounter, interpret, and practise Buddhist teachings in different social settings, religious principles gradually become personal convictions and influence how they behave, make decisions, and interact with others.

The strong agreement among respondents across the survey measures suggests that Theravada Buddhism continues to play an important role in the spiritual and social life of the Khmer community in Vietnam's Southwestern borderlands. Beyond its religious significance, it contributes to maintaining social bonds, preserving cultural identity, and shaping people's sense of moral responsibility. Although modernization has brought changes to community life, particularly through migration, generational differences, and exposure to new value systems, the traditional ways of passing on Buddhist moral teachings have not simply faded away. Instead, they have gradually adjusted to changing social conditions. For this reason, continued attention to these community institutions is important. Supporting educational activities at pagodas, encouraging families to maintain their cultural practices, and strengthening community ties at the hamlet level can help preserve these values while responding to the needs of contemporary society. Such efforts should be understood as part of a broader approach to inclusive and harmonious development rather than merely an attempt to preserve the past (Pham Minh Hac, 2018, p. 58).

Future studies could broaden the scope of this research by examining Khmer communities in different

parts of the Mekong Delta, particularly through comparisons between rural and urban areas. Further attention should also be given to the ways migration and interactions among different ethnic groups influence moral values and everyday social practices. Such research would help clarify which traditional values continue to be maintained, how they change over time, and what challenges may affect their transmission to younger generations. These questions deserve further consideration as Vietnamese society undergoes ongoing social and economic changes.

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