

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE TRADITION OF “HẬU PHẬT” IN HISTORY

**Abstract:** When mentioning the tradition of “Hậu Phật”, or the custom of offering “Hậu” in the past, people often indicate some concepts related to this custom such as electing Hậu, establishing Hậu, buying Hậu, post-deity, post-Buddha, post-pioneer... Based on the analysis of previous research studies and clarifying some concepts related to the custom as mentioned, this article analyzes the process of development of Hậu Phật in ancient Vietnamese society by factors related to Hậu Phật as offerings of property, offerers, and benefits of Hậu Phật.

**Keywords:** Worship Hậu Phật, Hậu Phật, elected Hậu, establish Hậu

### Introduction

Offering Hậu is one of the long-standing customs of the Viet people<sup>1</sup>. Offering Hậu can be considered a way for people to find a place to worship themselves after they pass away. Worshiping Hậu is familiar and closely associated with the beliefs and activities of the residents of the Vietnam Northern Delta. Any custom, to survive, needs to have adaptations to overcome the changes of society and the times. From a custom mainly reserved for people of the upper class in society, offering Hậu gradually transformed into a custom reserved for the grassroots.

The Việt people follow ancestor-worshiping beliefs and especially value the practice of “burning incense” in worship for the deceased. One of which the Việt people will worry about the most is that when they pass away, no one worships them on death anniversaries; their

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souls would become lonely, wandering; becoming hungry and thirsty ghosts, etc. Therefore, offering Hậu has become one of the ways to seek spiritual support for people in their afterlife. People can practice offering Hậu at communal houses, pagodas, temples, and shrines and the receivers of this offering can be worshiped behind the deities and Buddhas, which is commonly known as post-deity (Hậu Thần), post-Buddha (Hậu Phật), post-pioneer (Hậu Hiền).

The practice of offering Hậu in history is known by thousands of Hậu steles remaining in religious and belief places. Based on these legacies, we can partly imagine the nature of offering Hậu as a reciprocal “exchange” between two parties: the Hậu offerer and the Hậu receiver. This is a very serious agreement when the commitments are engraved on stone steles as evidence. Accordingly, the Hậu offerer wished to be worshiped on the anniversary of his/her death forever; the recipient of the Hậu property must make a covenant with the Hậu offerer that they would be worshiped behind the deities, Buddhas... at pagodas, communal houses, temples, shrines... and must be responsible for fulfilling the commitments made.

Among the various types of offering Hậu, post-Buddha is the most dominant one. This means that making offerings to pagodas with the desire to be worshiped after death has become a popular custom for everyone, from all social classes. As such, research on Hậu steles, the custom of electing Hậu in general, post-Buddha in particular is an attractive topic and has received the attention of many researchers. Some typical research studies can be mentioned here, for instance “Some features of Hậu stele” (Đương Thị The, Phạm Thị Thoa, 1987); “The custom of offering Hậu and erecting Hậu stele in Vietnam in history” (Nguyễn Ngọc Quỳnh, 2003); “Hậu stele in Vietnam” (Trần Kim Anh, 2004); “The custom of electing Hậu of Vietnamese people through stele documents” (Phạm Thị Thùy Vinh, 2006); “Saving for the soul: women, pious donation and village economy in early modern Vietnam” (Philippe Papin, 2015); “Offerings today, worships thousands of years later” (*Electing Hậu in Sino-Nom inscriptions in some localities in the Red River Delta, 1802-1903*) (Vũ Thị Mai Anh,

2016); “The phenomenon of offering Hậu in the 17th-18th centuries (The case of the stele offering Hậu in Tiên Lãng district, Hải Phòng) (Tống Văn Lợi, 2017); “Research on the custom of electing post-Buddha in the Northern Delta in the 17th century” (Nguyễn Hữu Mùi, Lê Thị Thu Hương, 2020); “Further discussion on the time of appearance of the Hậu worship, the Hậu title, and the Hậu stele in Vietnam” (Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, 2022); “The Queen on stone - Portrait of a noblewoman on the sculpture of the post-Buddha in the 16th-18th centuries in Vietnam (Vũ Thị Hằng, 2022).

Recently, the Vietnamica<sup>2</sup> project funded by the European Research Council of the European Union partially focuses on the history of offerings in Vietnam (focusing mainly on the analysis of Hậu steles), and based on this project, some research studies on the practice of offering Hậu in old Vietnam were conducted. The project has not yet ended and only a few works have been published. Hopefully, when this project ends, researchers will have access to more comprehensive research on this practice in Vietnam throughout history. Let's review some of the research related to the practice of offering Hậu that has been published by the project: Belief in worshiping Hậu: Concept, Structure, and Type (Trần Trọng Dương, 2022); Research on post-Buddha steles in Ninh Bình province (Nguyễn Kim Măng, 2022); Method of sending Hậu in Bắc Ninh in the 18th century: Who sent to whom? (Lou Vargas, 2022); Gender and merit: A case study of the Hậu stele in Thái Bình province (Bùi Quốc Linh, 2022); Studying the custom of electing post-Buddha in Thái Nguyên province through stele documents (Nguyễn Hữu Mùi, 2022).

The above studies have approached the Hậu offering custom from different perspectives in history. From there, we have a more comprehensive view of Vietnam's economic and social context in history, especially the role of “the treasurer” of women in traditional Vietnamese society. However, many studies have not mentioned the topic related to the development of the Hậu offering custom in general and post-Buddha form in particular.

The article is based on previous research combined with the author group's field research data. In addition to analyzing some related concepts, it will present the formation and development of the post-Buddha tradition concerning the development of the Hậu offering custom in general. The article also contributes to analyzing the significance of the post-Buddha tradition.

### **1. The concept of Post-Buddha and related concepts**

Post-Buddha is a concept related to the practice of offering Hậu also known as the practice of worshiping Hậu that some researchers often use. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify the concepts of Hậu and offering Hậu before understanding the concept of post-Buddha.

Research on the Hậu offering custom generally and post-Buddha particularly currently mainly relies on the study of steles. There are two types of views on the Hậu stele in Vietnam. The first view holds that the Hậu stele must be the type of stele on which the content mentions the word Hậu such as "establishment/ election/ buying/selling" Hậu. The second one asserts that the Hậu stele refers to all types of stele that mention the word Hậu and also the steles of having one's death anniversary done (gửi giỗ). (Đinh Thị Toan, 2016: 8-11) As such, so far there are two kinds of views on the word Hậu. The first believes that Hậu and entrusting one's death anniversary to somewhere else are different. The second considers that the death offerings and Hậu are just different manifestations of the Hậu offering custom. (Trần Trọng Dương, 2022: 33) In the following pages, we will point out some typical researchers holding such kinds of views on the Hậu stele.

#### *The first group*

Dương Thị The and Phạm Thị Thoa believe that the Hậu stele is a stele engraved with the words: Post-Buddha Stele (Hậu Phật bi ký), Post-Deity Stele (Hậu Thần bi ký)... Those who are post-deity, post-Buddha must be those who have contributed to the people (elected as post-deity, post-Buddha); in addition, some spend money to buy the title of Hậu. (Dương Thị The, Phạm Thị Thoa, 1987: 35-36)

With the concept of Post-Buddha, *the Dictionary of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism* defines: “Post-Buddha, a Buddhist term. Refers to the Buddha appearing in the future, that is, the Maitreya Bodhisattva.” (Vũ Thị Hằng, 2022: 41) Trần Thị Kim Anh; however, believes that this concept is not suitable for the case of post-Buddha in Vietnam. According to the understanding of Viet people, post-Buddha, post-deity refers to people who have contributed in terms of money or merit to the village, or religious facilities and are recognized, “engraved on a stele to record their merits and allowed to be sub-worshiped” - worshiped behind the deities and Buddhas at places of worship. If the place of worship is a communal house or temple, it is called post-deity. If the place of worship is a pagoda, it is called post-Buddha. Also according to Trần Thị Kim Anh, from this understanding, different forms of “Hậu” were born and later “Hậu” was used as a noun to refer to those who were established as Hậu. In folklore, there are still some terms to more clearly indicate the nature of this Hậu custom such as cụ Hậu, mua Hậu (buying Hậu), bán Hậu (selling Hậu), bầu Hậu (electing Hậu), lập Hậu (establishing Hậu)... (Trần Thị Kim Anh, 2004: 54-63)

Phạm Thị Thùy Vinh explains the understanding of the word Hậu in three terms: Hậu Thần, Hậu Phật and Hậu Hiền (three types of Hậu popular in old Vietnamese villages) which means being worshiped behind the deities, Buddhas or saints. Hậu Thần was worshiped behind the deities or genius deity (Thành hoàng) at the village communal house. Hậu Phật was worshiped behind the Buddhas at the pagoda. Hậu Hiền was worshiped behind the ancestors/Confucians at the temple... (Phạm Thị Thùy Vinh, 2006: 33-40)

Supporting the viewpoint that Hậu is different from depending on somebody for the anniversary of one’s death, there are also researchers such as Nguyễn Quang Khải, Nguyễn Hữu Mùi (2016), Trần Thị Thu Hường (2020)... (Trần Trọng Dương, 2022: 33) According to these researchers, only those who are elected/purchased the title of Hậu can be called Hậu. Those who only contribute money and property to be worshiped after passing away are not considered Hậu.

*The second group*

In old Vietnamese society, someone who had no descendants would go to a pagoda and contribute a certain amount of property to the pagoda to ask for his/her death anniversary after they passed away. This worship, according to Hà Văn Tán, is Hậu worship. (Hà Văn Tán, 2005: 192-193) Hậu means “after/later”; a death anniversary on behalf of descendants.

Nguyễn Ngọc Quỳnh argued that offering Hậu is a form in which one offers his property (rice field, money, gold, and materials for worship services, etc.) to different worshiping facilities of the village (communal house, pagoda, temple, and... etc.) for to be worshiped for a long time after his/her death. One can be self-offering, but can also buy Hậu in the needs of the locality. Buying Hậu often occurs when the locality needs a public amount of spending but has not found a source of funding, and someone willing to spend to help the village would become Hậu and also enjoy the benefits like other Hậu offerings. In addition to buying Hậu, there is a form of Hậu election. People conduct Hậu elections for whom with meritorious services to the community, or doing many blessings and good things. Electing Hậu is a form of collective gesture to those individuals. “According to the rules, post-Deities are those voted to be worshiped in communal houses, temples, shrines, ancestral houses, and mausoleums; Post-Buddhas are those voted to be worshiped in a pagoda.” (Nguyễn Ngọc Quỳnh, 2003: 63-69)

Trần Trọng Dương in his study: “Hậu worship beliefs: Concept, Structure, and Type” analyzed the concept of Hậu worship from the perspective of “practicing beliefs”. Accordingly, a series of ideas related to the practice of Hậu worship, such as Hậu worship beliefs, supporters, belief community, worshiping facilities, Hậu rank, Hậu ritual, sacred object, merit, and negotiation... have also been defined and pointed out. Consequently, “The Hậu worship beliefs is the phenomenon of co-worshiping those who have passed away into the sacred space based on their contributions or their relatives to the belief community, the social community.” (Trần Trọng Dương, 2022: 21- 22)

Vũ Thị Mai Anh in the study “Offerings today, worshiping thousands of years later: Electing Hậu in Han Nom inscriptions in some localities in the Red River Delta, 1802-1903” said: Offering Hậu is a form of contributing assets in different forms (money, rice fields) to the village, to religious facilities or a local organization, or to the family to be elected Hậu and to be worshiped for a long time after his/her death. Cases of entrusting a death anniversary are still considered Hậu offerings. (Vũ Thị Mai Anh, 2016: 103)

Along with the viewpoint that entrusting death anniversary and Hậu are two different manifestations of the Hậu worship custom of researchers: Vũ Ngọc Khanh (2003), Philippe Papin (2008, 2015), Dương Văn Hoàn (2021), Bùi Quốc Linh (2022)... (Trần Trọng Dương, 2022: 33) According to these researchers, not only those who are elected or buy the title of Hậu are called Hậu, but those who only contribute money and property to entrusting death anniversary are also considered Hậu.

In addition, some researchers when studying the concept of post-Buddha also rely on the explanations directly recorded on the stele: “post-Buddha means the person behind the Buddha to enjoy the offerings of fans” and give their definition: “Post-Buddha are those who are entrusted their death anniversary in the worship space in the pagodas”, or post-Buddha is “those who are entrusted their death anniversary behind the Buddha in the pagoda.” (Vũ Ngọc Đinh, 2023)

In this article, we apply the second group’s point of view. The concept of post-Buddha refers to those who have contributed in different forms (merits or assets) to the community and the pagoda and are committed to long-term worship in the sacred space of the pagoda after their death forever. Those who entrust their death anniversary to the pagoda and are elected to the post-Buddha title are called post-Buddha.

Another often-mentioned concept is the concept of establishing Hậu (lập Hậu). In this article, we apply Vũ Thị Mai Anh’s concept: “Cases that are established as Hậu include both the person elected as Hậu and the person who submits Hậu.” (Vũ Thị Mai Anh, 2016: 41)

## 2. The development of the Hậu offering custom and the post-Buddha tradition in Vietnam

As mentioned, most studies on the Hậu offering custom in general and the Post-Buddha tradition, in particular, must mainly rely on the study of Hậu steles because Hậu steles are the products of the Hậu offering custom. This is almost the most complete source of documents that helps us visualize the appearance of the popular Hậu worship custom in history. Currently, there are two sources of Hậu stele research that Vietnamese researchers often use: The first is the collection of stele and bell texts collected in about 40 provinces and cities, mainly in the Red River Delta, conducted by the French Institute of the Far East (École française d'Extrême-Orient - EFEO) since 1914. This collection of documents is quite large, including 10,417 inscription units with about 20,980 copies. The second is the collection of stele inscriptions at the Institute of Sino-Nom Studies (a unit of the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences) carried out in the second half of the 20th century (nearly half a century after the end of EFEO's collection). In this collection, up to 2013, the Institute had collected about 37,500 inscriptions). (Vũ Thị Mai Anh, 2016: 30) It is worth noting that the two institutes have not yet comprehensively compared the inscriptions of these two independent collections. Many researchers often use the collection of EFEO. In the EFEO's collection, Hậu inscriptions account for about 50% of the total number of inscriptions). (Vũ Thị Mai Anh, 2016: 41) This shows that worshiping Hậu and erecting Hậu steles may have become a popular custom in all old Vietnamese villages, most popular in the Red River Delta. Steles areas are often concentrated in the delta provinces, such as Hanoi, Bắc Ninh, Bắc Giang, Hưng Yên, Hải Dương, Hà Nam, Nam Định, Thái Bình, Hải Phòng, Vĩnh Phúc (Trần Kim Anh, 2004: 54-63)... These are also the localities with a large proportion of Hậu steles. For example, according to statistics on steles in the lower section of the Thái Bình River in the 16th-18th centuries, Hậu steles account for more than 63% of the total number of steles surveyed (168/266 steles). (Vũ Đường Luân, 2008: 53) Studying the custom of electing Hậu through Sino-Nom inscriptions in 10 localities in the Red

River Delta over the past 100 years, from 1802 to 1903, it was shown that the Hậu steles accounted for nearly 60% (214/372 steles) in the 19th century. (Vũ Thị Mai Anh, 2016: 51)

However, there is no research confirming the exact time of the appearance of the Hậu offering custom in Vietnam. Through the sources of stele documents found, from the Lý-Trần dynasties, the foundations of the Hậu offering custom were formed and based on the economic - cultural - religious - belief foundations of the Sui - Tang dynasties. Specifically, there was mention of the offering of Lê Hầu in the stele of *Cửu Chân quận Bảo An đạo tràng chi bi văn* (engraved in 618). By the end of the 15th century, offering Hậu was legalized in state documents with the “Hậu” title. Offering Hậu was most developed in the 17th-18th centuries. By the 19th century, offering Hậu was popularized, for all classes in society to attract “offerings of wealth.” (Trần Trọng Dương, 2022: 32)

The Hậu title here refers to those who were elected as Hậu and were committed to worship in religious facilities after their death. According to some researchers, the earliest book mentioning the election of Hậu is probably the *Hồng Đức Thiện Chính Thư* dated the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This book records 82 laws of the Lê Thánh Tông period, Hồng Đức era (1470-1497), including regulations on post-deity and post-Buddha. However, the book is not the original, but only a copy by later generations, with many additional contents added from the Mạc Dynasty onwards (1541-1560). (Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, 2022: 62-63) Therefore, it is possible that the regulations on post-deity and post-Buddha in the book were also added later. (Phạm Thùy Vinh, 2006: 33; Vũ Thị Mai Anh, 2016: 96) With that suspicion, Trần Thị Kim Vinh examined the steles in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and found that there were no steles in those two centuries that recorded any types of Hậu offerings in the localities. Thus, she concluded that the practice of electing the Hậu in general only appeared from the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Phạm Thị Thùy Vinh, 2006: 33) meaning that the Lê Trung Hưng onwards. Specified name of a reign's years was “Quang Hưng (1578-1600); Hoằng Định (1600-1619); Vĩnh Tộ (1619-1629);

Đức Long (1629-1635); Dương Hòa (1635-1643)...” (Trần Thị Kim Anh, 2004: 54-63) The practice of offering Hậu, with its traces expressed through the Hậu stele, developed explosively during the Chính Hòa era (1680-1705) through diverse expressions in content and high aesthetic value.

Some other researchers, through the remaining Hậu stele inscriptions, believe that the Hậu statues and stele inscriptions recording the practice of offering Hậu appeared earlier, around the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, (Nguyễn Ngọc Quỳnh, 2003: 65; Vũ Thị Hằng, 2022: 23) or even from the 15<sup>th</sup> century as mentioned in the book *Hồng Đức Thiện Chính Thư*. It is a fact that the establishment of Hậu steles never stopped until the Nguyễn dynasty and even in 1946, 1947, 1953, 1958, and 1972 to 1977 Hậu steles still appeared. )Trần Thị Kim Anh, 2004: 54-63; Philipe Papin, 2015: 82-102)

If before 1645, the offering form without reward was dominant, then later, the form of “offering with reward” became dominant. P. Papin explained that this was due to the emergence and development of a new form of “offering with reward” - electing Hậu (Bầu Hậu). Concretely, 38% of offering steles belonged to the group of offering without reward; 19% with spiritual reward (worship, rituals); And 43% with reward - electing Hậu (receiving the title of Hậu and having death anniversary done) in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Bầu Hậu had become dominant, accounting for 80% of offering activities, twice as much as in the previous century. (Philipe Papin, 2022: 17-19)

Thus, the custom of offering Hậu in Vietnam arose from the worship of meritorious people at religious facilities from the Ly-Tran dynasties, then continuously developed and became a popular custom in society in the 17<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The manifestation of the strong development of the custom of offering Hậu in history is the emergence of the Bầu Hậu form with commitments to long-term repayment to those who are awarded the title of Hậu, that is, elected as Hậu and are committed to repaying, engraved on stone stele.

There is a question among the many known forms of Hậu (Hậu Phật, Hậu Thần, Hậu Hiền, Hậu Tộc,...), which form of Hậu appeared

first, which form appeared later. According to Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, the worshiped form behind Buddha emerged from the Ly dynasty; Worshiping behind deities and Confucians appeared from the Tran dynasty. Then, it gradually developed into the form of offering Hậu. (Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, 2022: 60)

*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (Complete Annals of Đại Việt) recorded an event of post-Buddhist worship during the Ly dynasty: “Giap Tuat, Thien Thanh 4<sup>th</sup> year (1034)... At that time, two monks, Nghiêm Bảo Tính and Phạm Minh Tâm, burned themselves to make seven treasures (seven precious things in the Buddha realm). The King issued an edict to keep those seven treasures at Trường Thành Pagoda to worship.” (Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, 2022: 60) The Ly dynasty’s Hậu Phật stele is still found in the *Cố Việt Diên Phúc Tự* stele (now in Cảnh Lâm village, Tân Việt commune, Yên Mỹ district, Hưng Yên province) built in Đại Định 18<sup>th</sup> year (1157), recording the event of “placing a statue of Đỗ Pháp Thi [ancestor of Grand high-ranking mandarin (Thái úy) Đỗ Anh Vũ] in the Tam Bảo (Three Jewels section) corridor of Diên Phúc pagoda.” (Đuong Văn Hoàn, 2022: 94) Regarding the memorial service at the pagoda, the *Diên Khánh* stele, dated the 4<sup>th</sup> year of Hồng Đức (1473), recorded an event in the 3rd year of Thiệu Long (1260), when a childless couple built a small temple to worship a Buddha statue. After the couple passed away, a monk came to look after the temple. Since then, people have continuously donated rice fields to the pagoda to have their death anniversary done. (Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, 2022: 60)

According to Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, the Thành hoàng (a tutelar genius) belief in Vietnam appeared very early, around the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and developed in the 11<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> centuries with evidence being the appointment of Tô Lịch as Thành hoàng through the dynasties, recorded in *Việt Điện U Linh Tập*, or *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* reported the event of setting up an altar to worship Đô đại Thành hoàng (the great tutelary genius) in 1449. The worship of post-Confucian scholars was also recorded in *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư*; for example, the event of Chu Văn An being worshiped in the Temple of Literature in 1370. (Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, 2022: 61-62)

The custom of offering Hậu probably originated from the offering to the pagoda and the desire to have the death anniversary done because the pagoda has been associated with the Vietnamese people very early before the communal house and other sacred spaces were formed and became the center of the traditional Vietnamese village. For Buddhists and devotees, offering assets, items, food, and drinks to the pagoda, no matter how little or much, is common and appropriate. In Vietnam, recording the merits of those who have contributed large amounts of property to pagodas has also appeared since the Ly-Tran dynasties. Perhaps later, Buddhist monks found it necessary to have a certain reward for those, so they added the provision of long-term worship at the pagoda after death and carved the merit stele. This practice is partly to show gratitude, but on the other hand, it is also a way to encourage others to make donations. What could be more sacred than enjoying respect in the same space as the Buddha? This practice helps to enhance the significance of the offering activity. Gradually, people saw the benefits of this practice and actively asked to have their death anniversaries done at the pagoda for themselves and their relatives, especially families without descendants. Therefore, having the death anniversary memoried at the pagoda became increasingly popular, and later, it became a core part of the Hậu election. Hậu election is a more developed form of the death anniversary activity; therefore, the form of worshiping behind Buddha, the post-Buddha tradition, was born. Later, because of its effectiveness and because the village communal house became the center of village activities bit by bit, the villagers used this form to express their gratitude for the offerers or the contributors to the village. Therefore, the post-deity form was born.

The form of worshiping persons who continued building the village (Hậu Hiền - post-Pioneer) was born after the establishment of Hội Tu văn (Association of the intellectuals, retired mandarins, and village officials of a village, inter-villages, and a district) in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. (Trần Thị Kim Anh, 2004: 54-63) Then, this custom became popular in society and other forms of Hậu arose such as Hậu Tộc, Hậu Thôn, Hậu Ngõ, Hậu Giáp, Hậu Hương, Hậu Tô (profession)... in

different worship spaces. During the Lê Trung hưng (the middle Lê dynasty) period, economic development and stability led to the emergence of the form of buying and selling Hậu titles. The reason was that when many villages needed funds but did not have the source, the village officials set a price to sell Hậu to those who had assets and were in need. Buying and selling Hậu became an effective form of attracting finance and brought practical value to buyers and sellers. Of course, the emergence of buying and selling Hậu also brought about many vices such as non-compliance with the signed agreements, and the dynasties had to issue orders related to buying and selling Hậu.

### **3. Post-Buddha concerning offerings**

#### ***3.1. Forms of Offerings***

The custom of offering Hậu in Vietnam is a unique one. A person who wants to have the title of Hậu, to be worshiped behind Buddha, Confucians, Pioneers, etc. must first offer a certain amount of property to the community and the worship facilities. Each locality has different regulations regarding the money or property that must be spent to become a post-Buddha. Except for those who have contributed merit and are unanimously elected by the community as Hậu, the remaining cases must offer a certain amount of property. The offer of property to Hậu is usually in two main forms: money or rice fields. It is possible to rely on this contribution to assess the economic situation of each locality at each stage. The more people donate money and assets, the more materials the village has to repair and build new religious and belief facilities and even welfare projects to serve people's lives.

It is necessary to distinguish between two forms of offerings: offerings without reward, and offerings with rewards. (Philippe Papin, 2022: 12-20) For the form of offerings without reward, the donor may only have his or her merits recorded on steles to be passed down to future generations. In the form of offerings with rewards, the donor or the donor's relatives will also receive rewards depending on the merits of his/her relatives: only receiving spiritual benefits such as death anniversary, or more solemnly, being elected to the title of post-

Buddha. Perhaps the fundamental difference between these two forms of offerings with rewards is that cases of offerings with rewards but without being elected to Post-Buddha mostly only bring benefits mainly to the donor or their family; In cases those whose offerings are reciprocated but being elected to Post-Buddha not only brings benefits to the individual and family of the donor, the village community also enjoys those benefits. (Philippe Papin, 2015: 82-102)

Studying the steles of offerings in Vietnam in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the time when the offering activities for electing Hậu flourished, Phillippe Papin said that the type of offerings without rewards decreased from 68% to 36% of the total types of offerings from the beginning to the end of the century. In contrast, the group of offerings with rewards increased 25 times, from 32% to 64%. More specifically, out of 1,028 steles with reward, up to 713 steles had the content of electing Hậu (69%). In Bắc Ninh alone in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, electing Hậu accounted for 80% of the offering activities and nearly doubled compared to the previous century (Philippe Papin, 2022: 16-17). In the 19th century, Hậu steles in the Red River Delta accounted for 80% of the steles in total (372/458). (Vũ Thị Mai Anh, 2016: 49)

Studies have shown the development and popularity of the form of offering Hậu in general, including the Post-Buddha form. First of all, those who give Hậu offerings at the pagoda would have their offerings engraved on a stone stele right in the pagoda space - the place that would take responsibility for worshiping them. More specifically, those who are elected to the title of post-Buddha would receive more benefits than those who only have engaged in offering rewards but are not elected to be post-Buddha. Perhaps the most special thing is that the election post-Buddha is committed to being engraved on a stone stele as evidence; is committed to having a long-term death anniversary; and even benefits from the community's sacrificial activities while alive. In addition, those elected Post-Buddha can also have round statues or bas-reliefs carved at the pagoda.

Here, it is necessary to mention the case of those who make offerings and are rewarded by receiving the title of Hậu (including

post-Buddha, post-Deities, post-Pioneer,...). In terms of form and level of contribution, the position of Hậu can be divided into three categories as follows: 1) People who have made important contributions to the religious community in the village, or country (sacrificing for the community in wars; helping people reclaim land, establish villages, pay taxes, cure diseases, debts, lawsuits, and miscellaneous corvées...; building and renovating religious and belief facilities (communal houses, pagodas, temples, shrines...) or public works (bridges, markets, wells, ferries, ponds...); 2) People who are elected Hậu thanks to the contributions of relatives; 3) People who buy Hậu themselves. (Trần Trọng Dương, 2022: 28-31)

### **3.2. People who make offerings**

Research on the Hậu offering custom in Vietnam showed that the offerers are both men and women. However, the number of female Hậu offerers is larger than that of male Hậu offerers. Women are always the ones who contribute large amounts of money when the village is in need. Research in Thái Bình province shows that in popular Hậu forms such as post-Buddha, post-Deities, and post-good Deities, the offerers are more female than male. Especially, in the post-Buddha form, women donated 2.1 times more than men (Bùi Quốc Linh, 2022: 11). Research on Hậu steles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in 10 villages in the Red River Delta showed that 183/214 (nearly 86%) of money and rice field contributions were from women. In addition, of these 183 contributions, 83 were to the pagoda and only 49/183 were to the communal house by women. It can be assumed that the pagoda is a religious space frequented by women and therefore women also prefer to offer Hậu at the pagoda. The communal house is often considered a place for men to discuss village affairs. Hence, women offer Hậu at the communal house less than men. (Vũ Thị Mai Anh, 2016: 132-135)

The active participation of women in the offering showed the role of “the treasurer” of women in the family and their role in the activities at the pagoda in particular and in the village community in general. They also played a significant role in creating resources for

society, contributing to the overall development of the whole community.

The offering person usually makes the offering to the Hậu for himself or herself alone. This ratio is almost the majority in some recent studies. Research on Hậu steles in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Bắc Ninh province showed that the Hậu offering for a single individual accounts for 77% of the total. Meanwhile, the steles offered to the Hậu for two people account for only 19%. Furthermore, when considering the number of elected Hậu out of the total number of Hau steles, the person elected to the Hau alone accounts for two-thirds; the remaining one-third is for groups of two, three, or more people. (Lou Vargas, 2022: 80) The 19<sup>th</sup>-century stele establishing the Hậu also showed a similar situation. Accordingly, nearly 50% of people offered for themselves; one-fifth offered for themselves and their relatives; one-third received offerings from their relatives. (Vũ Thị Mai Anh, 2016: 135-139) Relatives here are mainly those are close by blood, such as husband/wife offering to each other or children; children offering to parents, grandparents, and paternal uncles; sons-in-law offering to parents-in-law; some even offer to their adoptive parents, etc.

Another aspect to consider is the circumstances of offerers and whether there have been any changes over time. Studies on the Post-Buddha tradition show that from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the offerer was often the wealthy, or relatively special personal circumstances, or both. They could be eunuchs, who needed to find a place to lean on after death. They could be plentiful officials who made offerings for the village to spend on common village activities, repairing pagodas and other worshiping structures. They could be devout concubines donating money for the construction and repair of pagodas and helping people in difficult times. They could also be comfortable and ordinary people. Most Hậu offerers were childless, either had no sons or their sons died early. Later on, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the activity of electing Hậu became more and more popular. Many well-off people wanted to be worshiped at the pagoda for a long time after their deaths. They mainly offered Hậu for their family and relatives more than they did for

themselves. Of the total forms of Hậu (including post-Buddha), offering for others increased from 20% in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to 29% in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and jumped to 51% in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Lou Vargas, 2022: 84) Therefore, the form of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hậu election lost the solemnity of the previous centuries. The steles recording the offerings with rewards were simplified, more economical, no longer had many words, and were no longer as large and beautiful as the previous centuries; the manifestations of the presence of Hậu such as sculptures and statues of Hậu also no longer appeared as much and were as artistic as the previous centuries. The word Hậu was later understood more simply and popularly than before. It simply means people who were “respected by the community and cared for by the collective after their death.” (Vũ Thị Mai Anh, 2016: 219)

### **3.3. Benefits of being a post-Buddha**

Becoming a post-Buddha, being worshiped in the sacred space of the pagoda behind the Buddha was an honor for individuals. Depending on the property offered, the Hậu offering person would receive different rewards, but most people expect to receive spiritual compensation after death. After death, they desired that their souls would be able to lean on the Buddha, continue to listen to the sutras, and study Buddhism. This is especially meaningful for those who have no one to worship them after death.

Offering Hậu at the pagoda was divided into two main forms: having the death anniversary done (the number increased in the later centuries) and electing Hậu. Both of these cases can be considered as forms of “service contracts” between two parties. The party in need of the service would make offerings of whatever, e.g. money, rice fields, land, etc. in exchange for spiritual benefits with the service provider. Spiritual benefits include enjoying worship rituals; having sacred symbols in the pagoda space; and receiving the title of post-Buddha (for those elected Hậu). (Trần Trọng Dương, 2022: 31)

Worship rituals are a signification part of the post-Buddha tradition. Those who have their death anniversary done and those who are elected to the Hậu would enjoy the same memorial worship rituals

organized by the community as stated in the commitments recorded in the Hậu stele. In addition to the worship rituals, post-Buddha also enjoys other rituals such as the sacrifice ceremony upon death, the joint worship ceremony at the Hậu stele location, the ceremony at the ancestor house during festivals, the New Year and Full Moon worship, other rituals of the pagoda or being given a feast when alive, having a birthday (usually rare and only for people of high status, offering a lot of property)... (Vũ Thị Mai Anh, 2016: 220-235; Trần Trọng Dương, 2022: 28-30) Thus, apart from enjoying spiritual benefits, the post-Buddhas also enjoy material benefits.

The sacred symbol in the pagoda space is also one of the rights of those who have the death anniversary memoried service and are elected to the Hậu. In addition to the stele with names such as the post-Buddha stele or the stele recording the commitment to elect the Hậu, the death anniversary, birth and death dates to be passed down to future generations, Hậu is also visualized by carving round statues, carving reliefs; having a tomb tower built; placing a memorial tablet in the pagoda grounds... This sacred symbol can appear at the same time, for example, statues and reliefs often go with a stele. The group of round statues and steles are often related to people with great contributions such as royalty and mandarins.

Depending on each pagoda and the number of offerings, the sacred symbols of the Hậu are placed in different locations, such as in an independent tower, a separate section, or a bronze tower; have a separate grave on the pagoda's land; placed in the Patriarch worship compartment, in the corridor in front of the Three Jewels, in the Mother's worship room; facing the Three Jewels or the room behind the Three Jewels; placed in a separate stele house; placed in a separate shrine. (Trần Trọng Dương, 2022: 27)

So how can Hậu's rights be guaranteed and properly complied with? People must base the records on the written commitment between the community, the pagoda, and those who offer Hậu. These commitments may have been written on paper, but later, for fear of loss, misplacement, or damage, people carved on steles and erected

them right on the pagoda grounds. Inscribing the commitment on the stele, apart from being a symbol of Hậu, also has a deeper meaning of preserving it for a long time, reminding the community and the place of worship to properly comply with the committed contents. This is a sacred document that transcends space and time. This document is not only a commitment to the deceased, but it is also a reminder to the living and the next generation under the witness of deities, Buddha... (Trần Trọng Dương, 2022: 27)

### **Conclusion**

In our opinion, the most important thing that the post-Buddha tradition could suggest is to remind people of the traditional moral values in the Vietnamese family. Vietnamese people especially value ancestor worship. Ancestor worship is the expression of gratitude of descendants to their predecessors who have contributed to building and nurturing the lives of the next generation. Accordingly, children must be responsible for fulfilling their filial piety to their parents during the times when their parents are alive until they pass away. They must know how to show love for their parents by taking care of and supporting them when they are old; burying and worshiping them when they pass away.

In Vietnamese families, the ancestral altar is always placed in the most solemn position. No deity worshiped at home is placed on the same level as the ancestors. The fact that descendants offer Hậu for their ancestors, grandparents, and parents at pagodas shows the filial piety of descendants towards their fathers and grandfathers. Many families even offer Hậu at pagodas for close relatives such as aunts and uncles, or siblings to pay respect to each other; parents pay respect to their children who died early; or husbands and wives pay respect to each other, pay respect to their ex-wives/husbands... This shows the close bond, gratitude, and love between family members, and between blood relatives. In later centuries, the practice of children and grandchildren paying respect to their fathers and grandfathers at pagodas has become more and more popular. This proves that Confucian moral values in Vietnamese families are still maintained persistently.

With the moral of “Be grateful for what you have”, the Hậu steles are a way to acknowledge and express gratitude to those who have contributed to the village community. The erection of steles, recording virtues, and achievements, and honoring post-Buddha is the most solemn way to express the respect of the living generation and the next generation for those who have contributed. The post-Buddha tradition also shows the flexibility in attracting money and assets from the people of the village in the past. Offering Hậu is an open act, not constrained by any model. The nature of offering Hậu is just like a “service contract” that the two parties (one is the village community and another is the people who need to offer Hậu) reach an agreement. Villages set their regulations for buying, selling, electing, and establishing Hậu without any interference from the State. The State only intervenes when the buying/selling of Hậu causes some bad things such as villages not complying with the commitments made, and greedy people hoarding Hậu’s assets for personal use... Offering Hậu, therefore, brings benefits to both sides. People’s spiritual wishes are satisfied, and the locality receiving the offering would have financial resources to solve the work serving the majority of the people. Selling Hậu also partly shows the responsibility of those in charge in the village for taking care of the people’s lives./.

*(Translated by Nguyễn Bình)*

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#### NOTES:

- 1 The Kinh ethnic.
- 2 Vietnamica is the abbreviation of the European project on historical research and digitization of Vietnamese stele documents funded by the European Research Council of the European Union for a period of 5 years from 2019-2024. This is a research project focusing on the Hau stele documents to learn about the history of offerings in Vietnam; digitizing Vietnamese documents archived in Europe and Vietnam;... The agencies participating in this research include the Francophone University Organization; University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi; Institute of Sion-Nom Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences... (according to Sino-Nom Studies Journal, No. 02 (171)/2022).

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