



## A RATIONAL CHOICE ANALYSIS IN OFFERING THE SPIRIT OF THE NORTHERN BUDDHISM

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### A B S T R A C T

*Offering the spirits in the ritual system of Northern Buddhism is a ritual performed daily for monks and an opportunity for Buddhists to participate in many different purposes. In it, there is an exchange between gain and loss while performing the ritual of offering the spirit. It could be said that based on the concepts and beliefs about ghosts and demons in Mong Son thi thuc - one of the important rites in the customs of Northern Buddhists - these rituals give us a deeper insight into the act of worshiping the souls. This research investigates the rational choice of Northern Buddhists in Ho Chi Minh City-based on Rational Choice Theory. Qualitative research methods such as fieldwork, in-depth interviews, qualitative analysis, and quantitative research by questionnaires have shown that there is rationality in the choice of worship the souls according to Mong Son thi thuc of Northern Buddhists among believers. In other words, there seems to be a desire to receive one or more benefits from this spirit offering. Rational Choice Theory has shown its applicability in the study of rituals, religions in particular, and in the research of the humanities and social sciences in general, which has received little attention in the past.*

### A. INTRODUCTION

With its geographical location located at the trade junction of Southeast Asia, Vietnam has irregularly received a great flow of philosophical and religious ideas from the rest of the world. In particular, Buddhism has accompanied the Vietnamese people for about 2000 years with the main lineages of Buddhism in the North and South Buddhism. In the history of thousands of years, Vietnamese Buddhism has sometimes prospered, and sometimes suffered, but still exists as an indispensable part of the process of accompanying the Vietnamese people.

Buddhism's introduction to Vietnam brought a new aspect to the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people. Over the centuries, Buddhism has spread with the migration and expansion of Vietnamese lands that gradually entered the Central and Southern regions of modern Vietnam. Wherever Buddhism was taken, it left on each land a distinct nuance in worship, in ritual ... Its own characteristics are the Buddhist cultural identity of the region, and also show its development process" (Tran Hong Lien, 1995, p.5). These include rituals with many human values, spiritual values and profound educational implications.

One of the rituals still commonly used during the meditation course to this day is *Mong Son thi thuc*. This rite associated with the custom of worshiping the soul that has partially received Chinese Buddhism and is consistent with the belief of all living beings, and the belief with a soul in the afterlife has appeared very early in Vietnam. Therefore, this rite is welcomed, reserved, and maintained by indigenous people of Vietnam in the ritual system of Vietnamese Buddhism in general and Northern Buddhism in particular.

Ho Chi Minh City, with a history of more than 300 years of establishment and development, has become one of the major Buddhist centers of the country influencing and spreading to almost the entire Southern region. The Northern Buddhism section in Ho Chi Minh City is also part of the history of those thousands of years and also preserves diverse and rich faculties alongside Southern style. In particular, the custom of worshiping the soul according to the *Mong Son thi thuc* has been preserved and promoted in accordance with the cultural identity in Ho Chi Minh City.

Offering the soul according to *Mong Son thi thuc* has been an important ritual in the ritual system of Northern Buddhism in Vietnam. However, when

enquiring about rational choice of believers while practicing the ritual of worshiping the soul according to the *Mong Son thi thuc* based on the views of rational choice theorists, there is little study that can be shown. There are scientific questions on two issues: Firstly, do the Northern Buddhists have rational choices when performing the rituals of Mong Son worship? Secondly, what are the exchanges between which is spent and received in the practice of offering the soul according to the *Mong Son thi thuc*? Therefore we conducted research on this topic in order to find the answers to the above research questions.

There has been a lot of research completed on the topic of the offering of souls published from many perspectives such as History, Culture, Buddhism, Literature, etc. *Le Vu Lan voi van te co hon* (1977) published by Hoang Xuan Han in the Literature magazine No. 2-1977 gives a summary of the origins of the spirit worship in Vu Lan ceremony and compared Nguyen Du's soul texts printed at different times. The article provides documents about sacrificial articles expressing the Vietnamese tradition of worshiping the soul on Vu Lan's Day from ancient times. *Dia chi van hoa Thanh pho Ho Chi Minh* (1987, republished 2018) edited by Tran Van Giau, Tran Bach Dang, and Nguyen Cong Binh provides significant and systematic documents to help us complete the characteristics of the research area.

This is the basis to help us determine the research site and history of Buddhism in Ho Chi Minh City. *Khai luoc ve Phat giao Vietnam* (1994) by Le Anh Dung is also a work that provides an overview of Vietnamese Buddhism from the time Buddhism was introduced until the French opened fire to invade Vietnam. However, because it is only a summary, it does not go into detail in each period of Buddhism in Vietnam. *Nhi khoa hiep giai* (1995) translated by Venerable Thich Khanh Anh explains the meaning of two most important Kung fu times of the Northern Buddhist monk, the morning and evening Kung fu periods. During the afternoon session, there is an elaborate explanation of the *Mong Son thi thuc*. This is one of the main reference documents for the study of the *Mong Son thi thuc*. *Dao Phat trong cong dong nguoi Viet o Nam Bo-Vietnam tu the ky XVII den 1975* (1995) by Tran Hong Lien is a record and research working on Buddhism of the Vietnamese people in the South in four centuries. The work provides many important documents about the history and activities of Buddhism in the South, including in Ho Chi Minh City. This work helps us to have a lot of materials to understand the Buddhist introduction to the South in general and Ho Chi Minh City in particular.

The work of *Chieu hon thap loai chung sinh* also known as the Ten Types of Living Beings in Nguyen Du, 1996, published by the Literary Publisher, The Center for International Studies is an excellent and classic text in Vietnam's central literary treasures. Nguyen Du has listed ten types of souls that fit the Buddhist point of view. This work is an important resource for studying the soul, the main object of the

actual *Mong Son thi thuc*. *Nghi thuc Chu kinh Nhat tung* (1997) compiled by the Buddhist Church of Vietnam provides rituals that are frequently used in Vietnamese meditation, including ritual offerings according to Northern Buddhism. *Vietnam Phat giao su luan I-II-III* (2000) by Nguyen Lang has contributed to revive the atmosphere as well as the specific appearance of Buddhist activities through the ages. This work helps us to have more information on Buddhist activities in the temple, in the community's life of believers over many periods to base on that research on the origin of real offerings in Buddhist life in Ho Chi Minh City.

*Linh Son Phap bao Dai tang kinh* (2000-2003), also known as *Dai chanh tan tu dai tang kinh*, the new overhaul of the Buddhist scriptures, is the great Vietnamese scriptures published by the Taipei Linh Son Educational and Cultural Association, including 22 sutras. In which, the Tantric sutra has sutra 1313, which is the Buddhist sutras of the mandala to save the demons Diem Khau, and a number of other related sutras. These sutras are directly related to the birth of *Mong Son thi thuc* rite that Mr. Bat Khong compiled on the Mong Son mountain.

*Lich su Phat giao Vietnam* (Complete 3 volumes), (2002) by Professor Le Manh That is a research work that provides documents on many aspects of Buddhism from the origins to the Tran Thanh Tong dynasty (1278). This work contributes to provide a systematic view throughout the ten centuries since Buddhism came to Vietnam. *Phat hoc pho thong I-II-III* (2006) by Venerable Thich Thien Hoa is one of the classic Buddhist literatures of Vietnam. The work not only provides Buddhist knowledge of theory but also supplies information of the Buddhist teachings in daily practice, including the Kung fu afternoon ceremony course that includes offerings. *Mong Son thi thuc yeu giai* (2012) compiled by Thich Phuoc Thai. This work thoroughly explains the meaning of the rituals of worship, mantras of the actual Mong Son ritual, thereby helping us to learn the meaning and value of the *Mong Son thi thuc*. *Mong Son thi thuc khoa nghi (Han van-Dien Nom-Phein am-Chu giai)* (2014) by Venerable Bich Lien and Nguyen Van Thoa (edited). This work is quite meticulous in the research of *Mong Son thi thuc*. The annotations in the book contribute to clarifying the meaning of *Mong Son thi thuc*.

We also have access to the two books, *Du gia trung khoa Mong Son thi thuc khoa nghi* (2015) and *Du gia dai khoa nghi thuc Khanh Son co tu* (2015) compiled by Thich Thien Duc to perform the center and the general herd of diagnosis and experiment. *Dai tang kinh Vietnam Nam truyen* by the Vietnam Buddhist Research Institute in coordination with the Religion Publisher in 2015 has many parts, the sutras talking about the hungry ghosts and the worship of the hungry ghosts. These are sutras belonging to the Theravada Buddhist tradition but provide a source of evidence to illustrate the origin of the offering of the hungry ghosts and spirits in the Buddhist tradition. The Bhikkhu Tri Quang has compiled the book *De hieu dan chan te* (2018) with the main content of

annotation, translation and explanation of the meaning of a diagnostic altar. In an altar, there is always a part of *Mong Son thi thuc* as part of the ritual of searching for the soul. This is a valuable document to study deeply about worshipping the soul according to the real *Mong Son thi thuc*. The Bhikkhuni Hai Trieu Am in *Song chet binh an* (2018) has a guide section, explaining the actual *Mong Son thi thuc*. Tran Hong Lien has a work *Gop phan tin hieu Phat giao Nam Bo (van hoa va xa hoi)* (2019). The work gathers articles on Southern Buddhism in many areas from the history, culture, Buddhist activities of the South and of Ho Chi Minh City.

In addition to the above works, we also have access to many valuable materials from master's thesis such as thesis *Tap tuc tho cung co hon cua nguoi Viet o mien Tay Nam Bo* (2012) by Vu Minh Tuan focusing on discussing the ritual of offering her souls of Vietnamese people in the Southwest region while also specifying the characteristics and role of the worship of Vietnamese souls in the Southwest region.

This paper aims to show whether or not there is a rational choice of Northern Buddhists in Ho Chi Minh City when practicing spirit offerings. At the same time, if there is an exchange to achieve the goal while performing the spirit worshipping ritual, what is the nature of that exchange and what do the Northern Buddhists expect to achieve when performing the spirit offerings?

The Vietnamese dictionary defines evil spirits as "The soul of the dead without relatives of worship" (Prof. Hoang Phe, 2018, p.255). The Book *Nhi Khoa Hiep Giai* demonstrates "they have no relatives to rely on, no friends, are forever in darkness, living forever in the realm of people, getting karmic retribution, suffering from having no one to save them, bad things do not look stately, their lives are often lonely. It means that evil spirits" (Venerable Thich Khanh Anh), 1991, p.481). "Hungry ghosts are hungry demons that roam without shelter, and no one offered to feed them. The bible describes these specimens, the belly is as big as a drum, the throat is as small as a needle. It is greed, glue" (Thich Phuoc Thai, 2012, p.14). "Demons often suffer starvation, due to their previous lives creating evil karma, with many desires". (Thich Quang Do, translated 2000, vol. 3, p.3243).

It can be said that demons or ghosts have different names because the translations of each author are different, but the content of the explanation is the same. Furthermore, they have features in common such as hunger, suffering, no rescuers, and the cause of suffering due to the creation of evil karma from many previous lives.

*Mong Son thi thuc*; "Nghì" is a form that is shown to the outside. "Thức" is a predetermined rules or manners that we need to follow according to the correct dharma during a religious ceremony" (Thich Phuoc Thai, 2012, p. 18). There is a rite in all the rituals of Northern Buddhism to standardize the

actions of everyone participating in the ceremony so that, as a whole, it appears to be solemn and dignified.

*Mong Son* is a mountain in the west of Danh Son District, Chau Nha An, Sichuan province, China. This is the place where Shaman Bat Dong resides, practices and composes the authentic *Mong Son Rite*. "Thì" means "to give alms". It has three meanings: self-giving or giving away personal possessions; Dhamma is to bring the Buddha's teachings and give it to everyone; fearlessness is to grant fearlessness to all people, and all species. "Thực" is simply food which every species eats in order to survive. "Thí thực" means that giving alms food to others" (Thich Quang Do, translated 2000, volume 5, p.5689). So "thí thực" is actually the giving of food, which includes the meaning of the material food and the spiritual food. In conclusion, the *Mong Son thi thuc* is actually a form and method created by Kim Cang Bat Dong Shaman and Vajra Real Shaman to give both physically and mentally food to the soul and hungry ghost.

Northern Buddhism; There are a lot of ways of understanding of Buddhism, but we only come out here to understand what we see fit to the subject and have no intention of opposing opposition. Buddhism was spread widely of ancient India in two main directions. According to Hoa Linh Thoai, (Online Buddhist Dictionary, North Cardboard item), one branch went to the South, to countries such as Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, etc. This branch is variously known as Southern Buddhism, Southern or Theravada Buddhism which is based on the Pāli Buddhist scriptures. Therefore, it is also called the Pāli branch of Buddhism. Buddhism practised in Mongolia, Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, is called Northern Buddhism, Northern, or the Northern tradition. This branch of Buddhism is based on the Buddhist scriptures in Sanskrit, so it is also called Sanskrit Buddhism.

There are some researchers who believe that there are signs of Buddhism was introduced into Vietnam from the 3rd century (BC) in the Do Son area (Hai Phong city), accompanied by some Indian monks, and traders who came to trade in Vietnam. Thus, it can be said that no matter what time Buddhism was introduced into Vietnam, it must be affirmed that Buddhism is a religion introduced into Vietnam very early in comparison to other religions and has attachment and harmony with the tradition, culture, and identity of the Vietnamese nation, accepted by the Vietnamese to survive and develop to this day" (Minh Nga, 2020, Deputy Director of the Department of Buddhism, Government Committee for Religious Affairs)

In Vietnam, there are two traditions of Northern and Southern Buddhism simultaneously, "*Mong Son thi thuc*" ritual is actually in the rituals system of Northern Buddhism in terms of lineage according to the above geographical path. We do not mention here Traditional Buddhism here but follow the Tibetan

school because it has its own distinctive features (Nguyen Tan Khang, 2018, p.465).

Rational Choice Theory; Rational Choice Theory, also known as reasonable choice theory, is the typical representative of this school of thought, and includes Adam Smith (1723-1790), David Ricardo (1772-1823), John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), James George Frazer (1854-1941), Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), Claude Lévi Strauss (1908-2009) and a number of other prominent scientists.

Reasonable choice theory has its roots in Philosophy, Economics and Anthropology in the eighteenth-nineteenth century. "Some Philosophers have said that human nature is selfish to seek satisfaction and avoid suffering" (Le Ngoc Hung, 2002, p. 305). "Bronislaw Malinowski has carried out important studies showing that community life has the basic characteristic of giving and receiving gifts, an interaction according to the principle of mutual benefit ... In personal social interactions, there is the tendency to repeat which behaviors gives them satisfaction" (Le Ngoc Hung, 2002, p.310-311).

The rational choice theory states that "people engage in religion that is involved in a process of exchange. However, this exchange is not really a physical one but a "symbolic" one. When participating in this exchange, human costs may be tangible, but rewards are often intangible such as encouragement, trust, a sense of serenity ... after attending rituals. or religious activities" (Pham Minh Anh, 2016, p.116).

Applying rational choice theory to this research, we want to find out what the real "exchange process" is when the followers of the perform. Finally, it comes to the conclusion whether worshipping the soul according to the actual Mong Son thi thuc of the Northern Buddhists is a rational choice or not. This study also based on the propositions of rational choice theory to explain the data from the survey results, interviewing the Northern Buddhists to prove that the Northern Buddhists had the reason when choosing to worship the soul according to the real Mong Son thi thuc.

The rational choice theory states that when an individual participates in a religion or more specifically a religious ritual, it means that participating in a process of exchange or in other words an action, interaction that mutually beneficial. We place this process of "win-win" in the propositions of rational choice theory to consider the choice of Buddhists participating in the Mong Son thi thuc of Northern Buddhist in Ho Chi Minh City. If the practice of worshipping the soul according to Mong Son thi thuc of Northern Buddhists in Ho Chi Minh City satisfies the propositions of the rational choice theory, it is possible to initially conclude the choice. Offering the soul is a rational choice.

## B. METHOD

Qualitative research plays a crucial role in the whole study, because the methods used in the article such as Content Analysis, Participant Observation, and In-depth Interviewing are all approaches that produce qualitative results. Content Analysis helps us analyze the content in the research process of theoretical issues that create a premise for the research.

We used the Participant Observation method in this article to survey the ritual of worshipping the soul according to the Mong Son daily rituals in the temples, hermitages, houses, in the altar and during rituals at people's homes on the occasion of the Full Moon. Thereby, we were able to attend the ceremonies together, observe them in detail, observe the specific cultural and religious life of the Vietnamese people, and especially research hypotheses from the perspective of "Insider".

By applying the Observe-Attendance Method, we can approach many participants of the rituals such as monks, nuns, and Buddhist followers. Thereby, it is possible to conduct interviews based on the application of in-depth interviewing to record the perceptions of the people attending the ceremonies through the in-depth interview notes. That is a significant source of documents contributing to the clarification of the research topic. In-depth interviews help us to collect information from people who perform and participate in the ritual of soul offered by "Mong Son thi thuc" such as monks, Buddhists, etc. These are the direct participants involved in the ceremony so that they not only provide in-depth information, but also contribute to enriching the content.

*Quantitative research:* "Quantitative research can be construed as a research strategy that emphasizes quantification in the collection and analysis of data" (Alan Bryman, 2012, p.35). To shed light on the content that needs to be studied and to increase the persuasiveness we apply quantitative research in this study. This topic uses the method and techniques of investigation by questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed by us with different types of questions and scales around the study subject.

From identifying the subject of the study and the scope of the study we proceed to select the sample based on the formula:

The formula for calculating sample size according to Yamane (1967-1986):

$$n = \frac{N}{(1+N \cdot e^2)}$$

In it:

n is the sample size to be calculated

N is population size (overall)

e is the desired level of error [as a percentage from the formula (1 - assumed reliability)]. Here we choose a 95% reliability that corresponds to the desired margin of error of 5%. Applying the above formula, there will be  $e = 1 - 95\% = 0.05$ .

According to data published from the Ho Chi Minh City Buddhist Association for the 2012-2017



term, the whole ho chi minh city has 1,046 northern monastic institutions including 7,967 monks and nuns and about 4,000,000 Buddhists. (Enlightened Newspaper, 2017). Apply according to the formula for calculating the sample size above we have:

$$\text{Sample size Increase, Ni: } n = \frac{7967}{(1+7967*0,05^2)} = 381$$

$$\text{Buddhist sample size: } n = \frac{4000000}{(1+4000000*0,05^2)} = 400$$

In particular, for the convenience of the survey process we round the number of survey samples Increased, Ni to 400. Thus, the total number of samples to be surveyed is 800 samples. Gender variation affects the survey results, so we proceed to divide by the ratio of men and women. However, the exact statistics that divide the sex between men and women we have not found, so the division of the survey by gender is only relative to the assumption that the sex ratio is the same. The subjects of the survey were monks who gave 200 votes, nuns 200 votes, male Buddhists 200 votes and Female Buddhists 200 votes.

The distribution of survey slips to monks and nuns was conducted between June 2019 and August 2019 at monasteries listed in the subjects section and scope of the study. This is the time of settling down of the Northern Monks and Nuns, so it is very convenient for surveying. For Buddhists, we hand out survey slips divided into several batches at the religious teachings lasting from June 2019 to February 2020.

### C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first proposition, “The individual hypothesis: All social phenomena are the result of the combination of actions, beliefs or attitudes of individuals” (Nguyen Xuan Nghia, 2008, p.71).

When participating in the ritual of worshipping the soul according to the *Mong Son thi thuc*, the devotees must coordinate actions from the preparation of offerings, to coordinate in the use of methods such as bells, bamboo tocsin, musical stone, unified during ritual practice such as when to stand, kneel, to prostrate, recite and solmizate etc. At the same time, most of Northern Buddhists, when participating in worshipping the spirit according to the *Mong Son thi thuc*, must have faith in the presence of the realm of forsanke spirits and ghosts. From the starting point of belief in the realm of ghosts and existence of hungry ghosts, it leads to a belief that ghosts and souls will receive the offerings and transcend once they hear the sutras. From having faith in what you are doing that you are expressing respectful attitude, arousing compassion for the real offering to the soul and the hungry ghost.

The second proposition, “The postulate of perception: understanding individuals' actions, beliefs or attitudes reconstructs their meaning for individuals” (Nguyen Xuan Nghia, 2008, p.71). Through

understanding what you are doing, believing in what you are doing and having an attitude consistent with what you are doing, believers can perceive the meaning of worshipping the spirit according to the real *Mong Son thi thuc*, including showing gratitude to the deceased, sowing the seeds of compassion through almsgiving, sharing difficulties with the spirit world, hungry ghosts, practicing the Buddha's teachings to experience spiritual life and understanding the law of cause and effect.

The third proposition “The hypothesis of rationality: the individual believes the action because of belief, or the action makes sense for the individual, or in other words the main cause of the action, faith lies in the meaning that individuals attribute to them.” (Nguyen Xuan Nghia, 2008, p.71). At first it seems that this proposition falls into the state of repeated argument because that human action is reasonable repeatedly explains it as plausible. However, because the Northern Buddhists feel that the offering of the spirit is meaningful to themselves as the second postulate proves they believe in what they do, and these meanings are the reasons that motivate them to continue repeating the act of offering souls in the future.

“People often believe in something they will do it without waiting for testimonials. Therefore, the act of offering real alms is also within the scope of their beliefs. In Buddhism, not everyone makes offerings because of different conceptions and beliefs. Furthermore, people often live by experience but rarely live by logic. For example, when they finish worshipping, they feel secure and at peace, then they continue to worship, but if they feel insensible, they will stop it. Or, after they finished worshipping, they feel that they can do business and do more favorably, then they will believe and continue to worship” (Excerpt of Interview Minutes 04).

The fourth postulate, “Consequence theorem: the meaning of action for the agent is always in the effect of the action” (Nguyen Xuan Nghia, 2008, p.71). Through surveying the devotees' feelings when participating in the *Mong Son thi thuc* (see Table 1 and Chart 1), we found that the devotees achieved what they wanted. The things they want are always meaningfully positive to them and also the reason for them to repeat the act of offering souls in the future.

**Table 1. Perceptions after participating in the ritual worship of Mong Son customs of Northern Buddhists in Ho Chi Minh City (people and percentage).**

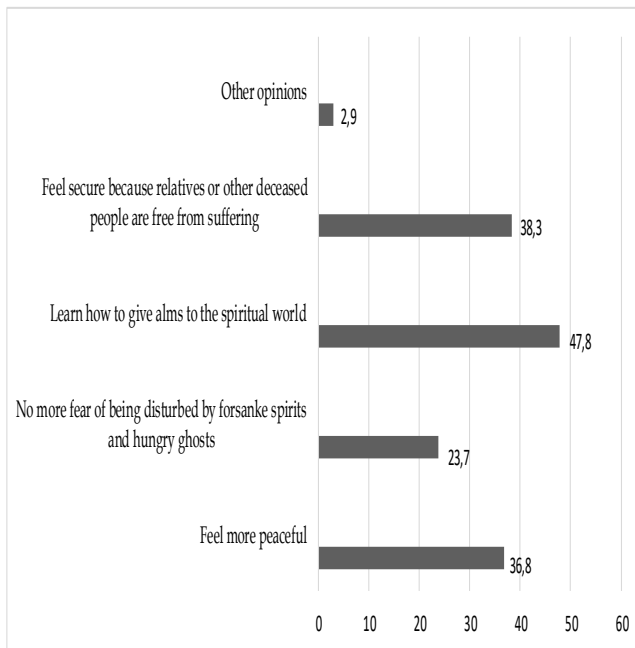
	Feel more peaceful	No more fear of being disturbed by forsanke spirits and hungry ghosts	Learn how to give alms to the spiritual world	Feel secure because relatives or other deceased people are free from suffering	Other opinions
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<b>Monks</b>	65 (32,5%)	17 (8,5%)	98 (49%)	93 (46,5%)	4 (2%)
<b>Nuns</b>	52 (26%)	32 (16%)	119 (59,5%)	69 (34,5%)	0 (0%)
<b>Buddhists</b>	178 (44,5%)	141 (35,3%)	165 (41,3%)	144 (36%)	19 (4,8%)
<b>Total</b>	295 (36,8%)	190 (23,7%)	382 (47,8%)	306 (38,3%)	23 (2,9%)

Source: Nguyen Tan Khang

**Chart 1: Impressions after engaging the Mong Son worshiping ceremony of the Northern Buddhism in Ho Chi Minh City (%).**

Source: Nguyen Tan Khang



The fifth postulate, “The egoistic proposition: in the consequences of an act, only those consequences related to the individual are interested in the individual” (Nguyen Xuan Nghia, 2008, p.71). In the case that the Northern Buddhists feel more peaceful after participating in the ritual of worship, they will give priority to the security of participating in the donation of the soul. In other cases, if they encounter uncertainties about the ghost or ghouls. Yet, after offering the soul, they find that they are not disturbed by the ghost, for them to worship the soul according to the *Mong Son thi thuc*. That is the function of dispel the devil. Additionally, in the case they sacrifice their souls for business purposes, they make offerings to the souls because they are afraid of being disturbed by the ghosts that might make their business not going smoothly. In short, the consequences of any act of offering to the soul related to Buddhist followers own interests since they prioritize caring about it over other issues.

The issue of selfishness in ritual participation and religious rituals has been identified by Edward Tylor when he studied primitive religions. “In prayer, a wish is asked to be fulfilled, but this desire is limited to

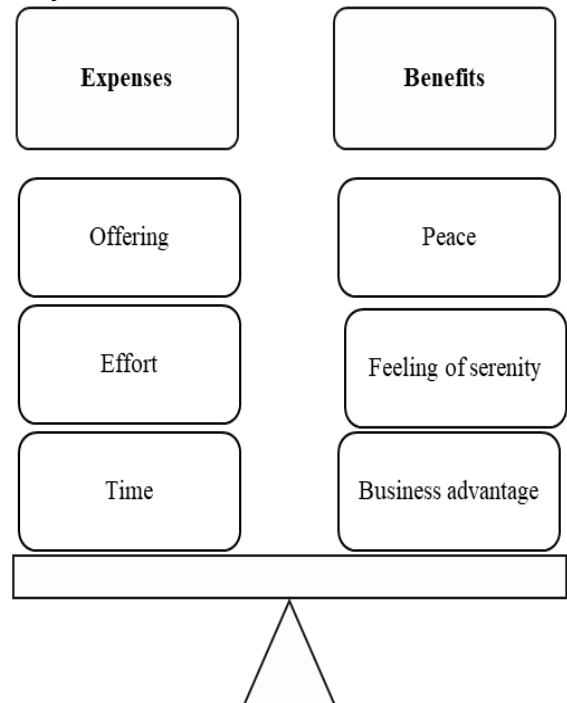
personal interests. It is only at later higher levels of morality that worshipers begin to add requests for help in doing good and avoiding evil. In that way, prayer becomes an instrument of morality” (Edward Tylor, 2019, p.818).

The sixth hypothesis, “The cost-benefit proposition: every action includes expenditures and advantages and individuals always decide in the direction of action to maximize the difference between expenses and profits” (Nguyen Xuan Nghia, 2008, p.71). We consider the actual act of worshipping souls according to the *Mong Son thi thuc* in terms of costs and benefits. In terms of costs, for example, in case of families who have to worship the ghosts due to the afraid of their businesses being disturbed by them, they have to spend time, effort to prepare and costly offerings such as white porridge, salt, rice, water, incense, lights, flowers, and fruit.

In terms of benefits, they will achieve peaceful mind at first during the worship time. Furthermore, after the worship time with belief in what they have done, if the business goes well, their faith will continue to be strengthened, security, a sense of peace of mind is maintained.

Thus, in this case, the trade-off between costs and benefits is the exchange between material and spirit, or in other words, costs spent visible, but benefits are invisible (see figure 1).

**Figure 1. Simulation of the cost and benefits of offering Mong Son worship of Northern Buddhists in Ho Chi Minh City.**



Source: Nguyen Tan Khang

Thus, when looking through the prism of the rational choice theory, it can be said that in the case that individuals who make real sacrifices put their own interests first, the choice of spirit offerings according to the law. *Mong Son* formula is really a rational

choice. This conclusion is because in some cases, we do not have faith in the realm of forsake spirits and ghosts, engaging the worship because of tradition without understanding the symbolic meaning of the *Mong Son thi thuc*. In fact, it is not a rational choice. Although rational choice theory is often criticized for the majority of research interest at the individual and microscopic level rather than research at the social and macroscopic level. At the same time, rational choice theory has also been criticized for its emphasis on economic "cost-benefit". However, when researching on the specific religious ritual practices worshipping spirits according to the *Mong Son thi thuc*, we found that it is possible to study rational choice theory on macroscopic level because most of Bac Truyen pagodas offer food every day and there are many real alms held in which a community of people sharing the same religion, participating in the same religious belief. In addition, when applying rational choice theory in the study of religious behavior, we will find that the exchange relationship between costs and benefits is not only material but also mental change. The survey results have shown that there is a consideration between what is spent and what is gained when the Northern Buddhists perform the ritual of offering the souls according to *Mong Son thi thuc*. It means that there is a choice based on obtainable benefits when offering of the soul.

#### D. CONCLUSIONS

The survey results have shown that there is a consideration between what is spent and what is achieved when the Northern Buddhists perform the ritual of offering the spirit according to Mong Son Thi Thuc rite. The results also of this study have shown that there is a rational choice, that is, there is a balance between gain and loss when Northern

Buddhists perform the ritual of offering spirits according to the Mong Son Thi Thuc rite. It means that there is a choice based on obtained benefits when performing offering of the soul. When encountering uncertainties and insecurity in life related to spirituality and demons, the Buddhists tend to come to offer alms to the soul by the Mong Son thi thuc of giving food to "be safe". Although rational choice theory is widely studied in economics, but when it is applied to religious research, it can also be achieved when explaining the individual's choice in religious acts. Through this research, Rational Choice Theory is also emphasized and applied as a typical example in ritual research, religion in particular and anthropological research in general. More broadly, Rational Choice Theory can be applied and has a certain place in the study of human behavior in the field of social sciences and humanities.

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**List of abbreviations:** The article has no abbreviation.

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**Author's contribution statement:** This is my research. All materials and research results in the article have been collected through scientific activities such as fieldwork, in-depth interviews, questionnaire surveys and document research. The references and citations in the research are cited and referenced in accordance with the regulations.

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