



อี่ฉื่อ (義祠) ของจีน: การเปลี่ยนผ่านจากแบบแผนชุมชนบ้านเกิด
สู่แบบแผนพุทธศาสนาจีน

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รับบทความ: 25 มีนาคม 2568

แก้ไขบทความ: 29 พฤษภาคม 2568

ตอบรับบทความ: 30 พฤษภาคม 2568

บทคัดย่อ: บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาการเปลี่ยนแปลงบทบาทของอี่ฉื่อ (義祠) ในบริบทการผสมผสานระหว่างพุทธศาสนาในประเทศเวียดนามและจีน การศึกษานี้ใช้ระเบียบวิธีการทางประวัติศาสตร์และทฤษฎีหน้าที่นิยมเป็นหลักในการวิเคราะห์กระบวนการที่สถาบันทางพุทธศาสนารุกกล้าและเข้าไปแทนที่การบูชาแบบดั้งเดิม ในบริบทที่กว้างขึ้นของการพัฒนาและการเปลี่ยนแปลงทางสังคม ชุมชนชาวจีนโพ้นทะเลในนครโฮจิมินห์มีประวัติศาสตร์อันยาวนาน โครงสร้างสังคมของพวกเขามีรากฐานอยู่บนกลุ่มภาษาห้ากลุ่ม ซึ่งก่อตั้งขึ้นในช่วงยุคอาณานิคมฝรั่งเศสบนพื้นฐานความสัมพันธ์ในภูมิภาค นโยบายของฝรั่งเศสอนุญาตให้แต่ละกลุ่มภาษามีตัวแทนสมาคม เพื่อให้มีโครงสร้างการบริหารจัดการของตนเอง รวมถึงศาลเจ้าสุสานของชาวจีน โดยศาลเจ้าสุสานของชาวจีนดำเนินงานภายใต้ระบบเครือข่ายทางภูมิภาค โดยเน้นกิจกรรมด้านการกุศล เช่น การอุทิศบุญกุศลให้ผู้ล่วงลับและการส่งคืนอัฐิกลับสู่บ้านเกิด เมื่อเวลาผ่านไป ระบบการบริหารของสมาคมเหล่านี้ค่อย ๆ ถูกแทนที่ ศาลเจ้าสุสานเหล่านี้เปลี่ยนจุดมุ่งหมายไปสู่การทำกิจกรรมการกุศล การช่วยเหลือซึ่งกันและกัน การร่วมมือกับโรงพยาบาล และการเข้าร่วมเทศกาลต่าง ๆ เช่น วันสารทจีน (Vu Lan) และเทศกาลโคมไฟ โครงสร้างการบริหารได้เปลี่ยนจากระบบที่ยึดโยงกับภูมิภาคมาสู่การอยู่ภายใต้พุทธศานาฆาณแบบจีน หรือเป็นการผสมผสานระหว่างทั้งสองแนวทางหลักคำสอนของพุทธศานาฆาณ ซึ่งฝังรากลึกในความเชื่อของชุมชนชาวจีน มีส่วนช่วยให้การเปลี่ยนแปลงหน้าที่นี้ดำเนินไปอย่างราบรื่น สอดคล้องกับหลักเมตตธรรมของพุทธศาสนา จากการวิจัยพบว่า หลักคำสอนของพุทธศานาฆาณช่วยให้การเปลี่ยนแปลงเป็นไปอย่างราบรื่น อีกทั้งช่วยรักษาเอกลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรม ขณะเดียวกันก็เปลี่ยนหน้าที่ของชุมชนสู่งานด้านการกุศลอีกด้วย

คำสำคัญ: อี่ฉื่อ; พุทธศานาจีน; นครโฮจิมินห์

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Chinese Yici (義祠): The Transition from the Fellow-Township Model to the Chinese Buddhism Model

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Received: 25th March 2025

Revised: 29th May 2025

Accepted: 30th May 2025

Abstract: This study aims to examine the functional transformation of Chinese Yici institutions within the context of Vietnamese–Chinese Buddhist integration. The study primarily employs historical methodology and functionalist theory to analyze the process by which Buddhist institutions have encroached upon and replaced the functions of traditional worship centers, within the broader context of social development and transformation. The Chinese community in Ho Chi Minh City has a long-standing history. Their social organization is fundamentally based on five linguistic groups, established during the French colonial period on the foundation of regional affiliations. French policies allowed each linguistic group, represented by a respective guild, to have its management structures, including cemetery temples. Chinese cemetery temples operated under a system of regional affiliations, with charitable activities focused on honoring the deceased and repatriating remains to their homeland. Over time, as the guild-based management system dissolved, these cemetery temples gradually shifted their focus towards charitable activities, mutual aid, connections with hospitals, and participation in festivals such as Vu Lan and the Lantern Festival. The management structure transitioned from being regionally based to being under Chinese Mahayana Buddhism or a combination of both. The Mahayana Buddhist tradition, rooted in the distinct beliefs of the Chinese community, facilitated this functional transformation smoothly, aligning with Buddhism's compassionate principles. The research finds that Mahayana Buddhist principles facilitated a smooth institutional transformation, preserving cultural identity while shifting community functions toward charitable work.

Keywords: Chinese Yici; Chinese Buddhism; Ho Chi Minh City

中国的义祠：从同乡模式向中国佛教模式的转变

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收稿日期: 2025年03月25日 修回日期: 2025年05月29日 接受日期: 2025年05月30日

摘要: 本研究旨在考察在越华佛教融合背景下, 中国义祠职能的转变。本研究主要运用历史研究法和功能主义理论, 在社会发展与转型的更广泛背景下, 分析佛教 ji 机构如何逐渐侵入并取代传统祭祀中心功能的过程。胡志明市的华人社区历史悠久。其社会组织基本上是基于五个华人方言群体, 这一体系在法国殖民时期形成, 并以地域生活归属为基础。法国当局的政策允许每个华人方言群体由相应的会馆代表, 并设立自己的管理机构, 包括义祠。华人的义祠运作方式基于地域关系, 其慈善活动主要集中在祭祀先人和将遗骸运送回老乡。随着时间的推移, 随着会馆管理体系的逐渐解体, 这些义祠的功能逐渐转向慈善事业、互助活动、与医院的合作, 以及参与盂兰会、元宵节等传统节庆活动。管理结构也从原来的同乡模式, 逐步转变为由华人大乘佛教(华宗佛教)或二者结合的方式管理。大乘佛教跟华人风俗有关, 其深植于华人社区的独特信仰体系, 使得这一职能转变得以顺利进行, 并契合佛教的慈悲精神。这一转变不仅促进了社区的发展, 同时也在越南社会的整体背景下, 维系了华人群体的文化认同。

关键词: 义祠; 中国佛教; 胡志明市

Introduction

Within Chinese¹ social organizations, particularly in religious establishments, there has been a continuous overlap and integration of different belief systems over time, reflecting the practical religious life of the community. The Chinese population in Ho Chi Minh City today represents a distinctive ethnic group with unique religious practices.

Currently, the Chinese community in Ho Chi Minh City is undergoing significant changes in their ethnic economic structures compared to the initial period of migration and settlement. The organizational foundations of social and religious institutions have begun to shift in their functions, sometimes overlapping in practice. This study examines these processes, highlighting the functional changes in organizations like the *Yici* (Vietnamese: *nghĩa từ*) (ancestral worship halls) and the encroachment of Buddhism—specifically Chinese Mahayana Buddhism—as it evolves into a new model in Ho Chi Minh City.

This study *hypothesizes* that Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, through a gradual process of vernacular integration (local adaptation), has functionally replaced traditional *Yici* institutions in Ho Chi Minh City. This transformation reshapes the religious and philanthropic roles within the Chinese community while preserving cultural continuity.

Research question: How has Chinese Mahayana Buddhism specifically functionally transformed and absorbed the roles of *Yici* institutions within the Chinese community of Ho Chi Minh City? Additionally, the study explores: What does this transformation reveal about the broader socio-religious evolution of Chinese diaspora organizations in Vietnam?

Methodology: The study primarily employs historical methodology combined with functionalist theory. This approach traces the institutional transformation of Chinese religious organizations, focusing on how Buddhist temples have progressively assumed the social and charitable functions originally held by *Yici*. The analysis is contextualized within the evolving ethnic-economic structures and changing religious practices among the Chinese community in southern Vietnam.

Functionalist theory, with a representative figure in A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, who conducted ethnographic research in Africa and the Andaman Islands of Northwest Asia, is used to interpret social structures and their roles. This theory examines social structures as the overarching forms encompassing society and emphasizes that the functions of social institutions serve to maintain the survival and stability of the society as a whole. The result of social functions is the preservation of a stable social structure.

In the context of the Chinese community in Ho Chi Minh City, changes in the traditional social structure have led to transformations in the associated institutions, along with the functions each institution performs, thus initiating a process of social restructuring. Functionalist theory highlights the importance of exploring and analyzing the relationships among different institutions to understand their respective roles in serving society and individuals.

¹ The term 'Chinese' used in this article refers to the ethnic Chinese community currently residing in Vietnam. While the term 'Hoa' is sometimes used, we have opted for 'Chinese' to ensure the terminology aligns with international ethnographic standards.

Therefore, the shift from a model based on regional or clan affiliations (*đồng hương*) to a Buddhist model in certain institutions reflects the broader process of social transformation within the Chinese community of Ho Chi Minh City.

Literature Review: At present, in-depth and direct scholarly studies focusing specifically on *Yici* (義祠)—a traditional religious and philanthropic institution among the Chinese—remain relatively scarce. Nonetheless, several works provide relevant theoretical foundations and contextual insights that can support further investigation into this institution.

One of the most influential is C. K. Yang’s seminal work *Religion in Chinese Society* (1961), which distinguishes between institutional and diffused religion. Within this framework, institutions like *Yici* are classified as part of diffused religion—informal yet deeply embedded in the fabric of Chinese social life. These institutions, though lacking formal clergy or doctrine, function as central nodes of community cohesion and charitable practice.

Other relevant studies examine how traditional Chinese religious practices adapt to modern social changes. For example, Ji Zhe’s work on *Non-institutional religious practices among Chinese youth* (2006) analyzes how grassroots religious life continues to evolve in response to shifting socio-cultural conditions. Similarly, Yunfeng Lu’s dissertation *Chinese Traditional Sects in Modern Society: A Case Study of Yiguan Dao* (2005) provides insight into how traditional sects transform their functions within contemporary societies.

In the Southeast Asian context, Guangyu Song’s article *Religious Propagation, Commercial Activities, and Cultural Identity: The Spread and Development of Yiguandao in Singapore* (2010) explores the interaction between religious institutions, economic practices, and identity formation. Although *Yici* is not the central focus, these studies offer comparative frameworks useful for understanding institutional transformation in diasporic Chinese communities.

In Vietnam, direct academic inquiry into *Yici* remains limited. A notable exception is the article by Du Quế Tiên and Hồ Minh Quang, titled “*The Clan Organization of the Chinese in Ho Chi Minh City Through the Perspective of Clan Ancestral Halls*” (*Tổ chức dòng họ của người Hoa ở Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh qua bức tranh từ đường*) published in *Journal of Chinese Studies*, Vol 7 (251), 2022. While the article focuses primarily on clan ancestral halls (*từ đường*), it offers important observations about the persistence of ancestral worship and the early forms of *Yici* among Chinese migrants in southern Vietnam.

However, most kinship-related studies tend to conflate concepts such as *tông thân* (direct descendants) and *tông hương* (regional kin), which further complicates the distinction between *Yici* and other clan-based institutions. Importantly, *Yici* should not be seen merely as an extension of kinship mechanisms but as a key component of the traditional guild (*bang hội*) system. Over time, this system has transformed into hybrid religious-charitable structures now associated with hospitals and voluntary welfare networks.

Moreover, in smaller Chinese diaspora circles, distinctions between clan ancestral halls (*từ đường*) and *Yici* are often blurred due to overlapping functions and the fading presence of *Yici* as a visible institution. This study therefore aims to clarify the historical development of *Yici* and examine how Mahayana Buddhism has gradually supplanted its philanthropic roles within a restructured religious and social framework in Ho Chi Minh City.

The History of Chinese *Yici* in Cholon - Ho Chi Minh City

1. The Fellow-Township Social Organizations of the Chinese in Cholon, Ho Chi Minh City:

During the French colonial period, the Chinese community was organized into five *Bang* (guilds or associations), representing five fellow-township groups: Guangdong, Fujian, Chaozhou, Hainan, and Hakka. The governance of the Chinese population was based on the organizational structure of these five groups.

The social structure of the Chinese community in Cholon was organized into closed, insular groups within the framework of regional associations, known as Chinese guilds (“*Bang*” in Vietnamese). These associations corresponded to sub-ethnic or regional affiliations, including the *Congrégation de Canton*, *Congrégation de Foukien*, *Congrégation de Hainan*, *Congrégation de Hakka*, *Congrégation de Tewchou*. Each Chinese guild was structured hierarchically, with personnel organized as follows: a leader (*chef*), a deputy leader (*sous-chefs*), a supporting committee, and general members. Connections within the Chinese guilds were maintained through a network of shared regional ties, and the leader's authority was nearly absolute.

The Hakka guilds and Fujianese *guilds* followed similar patterns, though on a smaller scale. The Hainanese *Guilds* was less prominent in Cholon, resulting in a comparatively simpler organizational structure.

The connections among Chinese individuals within each *Guilds* were formalized through agreements and legal mechanisms that bound members together.

Thus, Chinese guilds (“*hội quán*” “*Bang*” in Vietnamese) extended beyond their religious roles, functioning as administrative units with significant authority. They facilitated the sponsorship of Chinese immigrants and oversaw factories, workshops, and a range of companies that emerged along the port. This growth, driven by a substantial influx of coolies, transformed Cholon into a port city managed under the *Bang* system.

The organization of the *Bang* groups established key units such as guild halls (*Hội quán*)—the main centers for community activities. Each *Bang* maintained its own hospital, school, *Yici* (ancestral worship hall), and cemetery. The *Yici* in Ho Chi Minh City represented such a fellow-township structure, managed by the guild halls.

Although this model no longer formally exists today, it continues to serve as the foundational framework for Chinese regional associations in the old Cholon area.

This mechanism persisted throughout the French colonial period, aligning with the fellow-township culture of the Chinese community. While some organizations have lost their original functions, the fellow-township framework remains a central mechanism, and traces of the *Bang* associations are still evident.

2. *Yici* in Cholon - Ho Chi Minh City

Each Chinese guild operated with a system robust enough to meet the internal needs of its members. This included the establishment of an administrative office (typically housed within a communal hall), a Chinese guild-affiliated hospital, a Chinese guild-affiliated school, and a Chinese guild-affiliated ancestral shrine (*Yici*). Notably, the ancestral shrine was a distinctive institution within the social structure of the Chinese community in Cho Lon, serving as a sacred space for ancestor worship and as a facility for repatriating the remains of deceased members to their homeland.

The Chinese groups established *Yici*, which served as spiritual spaces for honoring deceased members of their respective communities. Historically, their primary function was tied to the fellow-township framework. While the guild hall acted as a workplace or administrative center, the *Yici* represented a spiritual connection for the Chinese community after death.

The Chinese in Vietnam (as well as in other Southeast Asian countries) were organized and managed based on their communities of shared hometowns. Each group maintained its own cemetery and *Yici*, where deceased fellow-townspeople were buried and collectively venerated.

Typically, a *Yici* was established as a place for communal worship. For the early Chinese settlers—migrants seeking to establish livelihoods far from their homeland—these structures were vital landmarks, continuously reminding them of their ancestral roots and nurturing connections, solidarity, mutual support, and the continuity of traditions.

The term “*ci*” refers to a place of worship, while “*yi*” emphasizes its purpose as a space created by and for fellow-townspeople living far from their native land. Initially, *Yici* were solely used for religious worship. Over time, they evolved to serve additional roles, such as functioning as makeshift hospitals that provided free medical care for disadvantaged members of the guilds. After 1975, greater emphasis was placed on the healthcare role, leading to the reduction and transformation of *Yici* spaces.

The following *Yici* were established by various fellow-township groups:

The Fujian Chinese: The Fujian Chinese community established the Phước Thiện Nghĩa Từ (福善義祠). While the exact year of its construction remains unclear, an inscription on the pair of couplets at the temple's entrance—dated to the 30th year of the Guangxu Emperor's reign (1887)—suggests that the temple was built to host ritual ceremonies and house over 200 ancestral tablets of the deceased buried in the cemetery of the Fujian Chinese.

Over time, the *Yici* became integrated with the Phước Kiến Hospital (Hôpital de Fou-kien) and the Phước Thiện Medical Institute (福善醫院), which was established in 1901. By 1978, the hospital facilities

associated with the *nghĩa từ* were developed into Nguyễn Trãi Hospital, and the *Yici* was separated from the guild hall management. In 2005, the *Yici* was returned to its original management and underwent restoration to resume its traditional functions, though many of the original artifacts were no longer preserved.

The charitable role of the *Yici* has always been a priority, as evidenced in historical records such as *Fujian Cultural Documents* (Fujian Wenxian She, 1968). Today, the *Yici* continues to operate a funeral home for the Fujian group and maintains its philanthropic activities. These include providing free medical consultations, distributing medicine, preparing herbal treatments, and donating clothing and essential supplies to the impoverished and elderly.

Currently, the *Yici* is managed by the administrative boards of the Nhị Phủ, Ôn Lăng, Hà Chương, and Tam Sơn guild halls (Fujian group). The temple committee organizes ancestor worship ceremonies during the spring and autumn festivals, events that regularly include representatives from the District 5 government.

Table 1 Chronological of Phước Thiện Nghĩa Từ (福善義祠)

Year / Period	Key Events	Managing and Operating Units
1887 (estimated)	Possible construction of the Phước Thiện Nghĩa Từ; establishment of the Fujian Chinese community.	Fujian Guild
Before 1901	Served as a site for the worship of over 200 ancestral tablets of Fujian Chinese, associated with the community cemetery.	Congrégation de Foukien (Fujian Congregation)
1901	Establishment of the Phước Thiện Medical Institution; integration with the Fujian Hospital.	
1963–1968	Charitable role of Fujian Chinese community leaders documented in contemporary sources.	Lý sự hội Phúc Kiến (Fujian Management Council) (unofficial, primarily maintained by individual council heads)
1978	The hospital was converted into Nguyễn Trãi Hospital; the ancestral shrine ceased operation and was detached from the guild hall.	Nguyễn Trãi Hospital, Local Government
2005	The shrine was returned to the Fujian Chinese guild, restored, and reinstated for its original spiritual functions.	Nhị Phủ, Ôn Lăng, Hà Chương, and Tam Sơn Guilds.
Present	Functions as a funeral hall and charitable center under the management of Fujian Chinese guild associations.	

The Cantonese Chinese: The Cantonese Chinese community established two main institutions: Tuệ Nghĩa Từ (穗義祠) (1863) and Quảng Triệu Thiện Nghĩa Từ. These locations host annual ancestral worship ceremonies, including rituals during the Qingming Festival (清明節, *Thanh Minh*) and the Yulan Festival (盂蘭盆, *Vu Lan*) for fellow-township members.

Over time, Tuệ Nghĩa Từ, located within Nguyễn Tri Phương Hospital, was renamed Đại Từ Liên Xã. However, it still retains the original commemorative inscription, “*Tân kiến Tuệ Nghĩa Từ bia ký*” (Stone stele engraving on the new construction of Tuệ Nghĩa Từ). The stele notes that it was established during the winter of Ất Sửu², the fourth year of the Tongzhi Emperor's reign (1865), two years after construction began.

Forty-two years later, in March 1907, a major epidemic struck Cholon, leaving many without access to medical care. Under the leadership of Hoắc Thiệu Hùng, the head of the Quảng Triệu guild, along with merchants such as Phùng Dẫn Sơ, Trần Duy Hữu, Diệp Bá Hành, and Lý Trác Phong, a petition was submitted to the French colonial government to rebuild Tuệ Nghĩa Từ as a charitable convalescent home to care for the ill. Initially, the facility was modest, with funding provided entirely by the Quảng Triệu guild of Saigon–Cholon. By the end of 1921, with the establishment of additional charitable hospitals by the Quảng Triệu guild, the facility was officially renamed Quảng Triệu Hospital during an inaugural ceremony. (See Table 3)

The Teochew Chinese: The Tượng Nghĩa Từ (橡義祠), established in 1881 (*Chinese Golden Book*, 2007: 71), is currently located within the premises of An Bình Hospital and managed by the administrative board of the Teochew Chinese community. Historically, most deceased Teochew Chinese individuals had their ancestral tablets enshrined here. These tablets often include the native places of the deceased, such as Bát Ấp, Triều An, Triều Dương, and Trùng Hải, reflecting their origins.

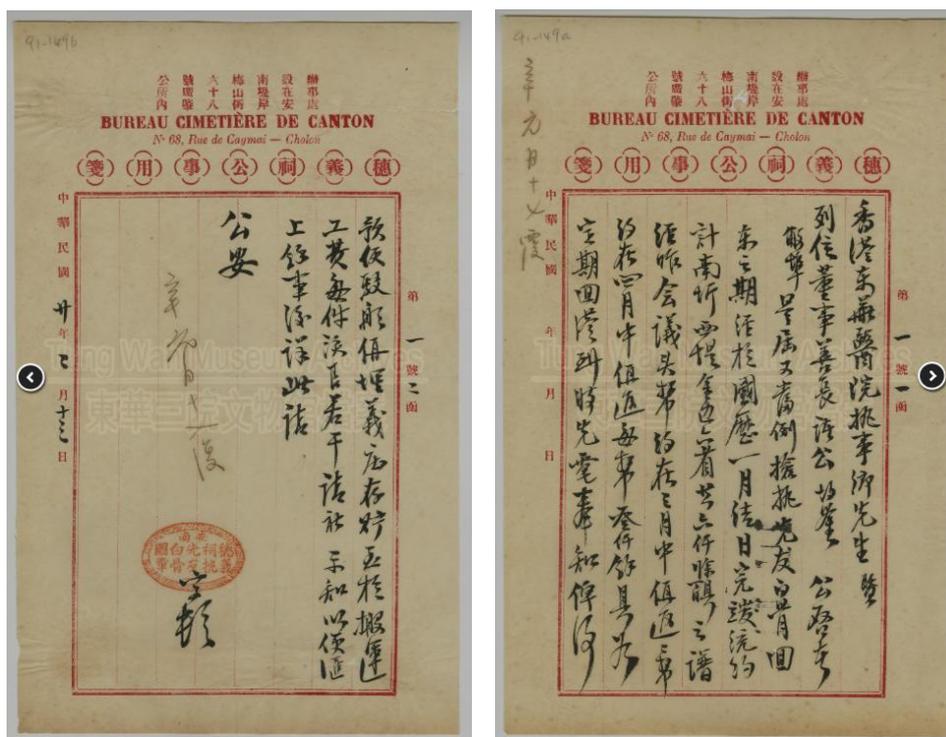
The primary function of *Yici* was to foster a spiritual connection among fellow-countrymen and to address philanthropic needs such as medical care and the repatriation of remains to their homeland.

During the French colonial period in Cholon, the Cantonese and Teochew communities were the most prominent groups. Their *Yici* served as the key units for providing charitable services, paralleling the role of similar institutions within Chinese communities worldwide. Funding, management, and rituals at these *Yici* adhered strictly to the regulations set by the guild associations. (See Table 4)

The Teochew Association (*Congrégation de Tewchou*), with its religious foundation at the Nghĩa An Guild, incorporated the Teochew office, the Teochew hospital (1915), which later became An Bình Hospital, and the Tượng Nghĩa Từ, a place of worship located within the hospital. This unit also handled the repatriation of Teochew Chinese corpses to the Donghua Hospital in Hong Kong. The large Guangdong Association (*Congrégation de Canton*) at the time had its religious center at the Tuệ Thành Guild, which integrated the Guangdong office, the Guangdong hospital, and the Tuệ Nghĩa Từ, Quảng Triệu Thiện Nghĩa Từ - the two main institutions responsible for repatriating the corpses of Guangdong Chinese to the Tung Wah Hospital in Hong Kong. (See Figure 1)

² Ất Sửu (1865) refers to a year in the traditional sexagenary cycle (Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches), a calendrical system historically used in China, Vietnam, and other East Asian cultures.

Figure 1 Letter from Bureau Cimetière de Canton, Cholon, Annam, to Tung Wah Hospital on 12 March 1931 (東華三院文物館, 1931)



Based on a report published in a newspaper, it can be observed that the number of corpses (comprising immigrants) was remarkably large:

公啟者：是屆本義祠執運先友骨殖回東。頭幫經於陰曆三月廿九由西貢輪船運返三千四百八十九具；其第二幫由陰曆五月十五金陵輪船運返三千三百九十六具。統交港東華醫院代理，凡各縣、各鄉、善堂、書院、社學，即可到香港東華醫院保領，並每具本義祠津貼銀二元。此佈 己未年六月初四日 安南廣肇、穗義祠謹啟 (Xianggang Huazi Daily Newspaper, 10 July 1919)

(This notice pertains to the transportation of the remains of esteemed ancestors from the communal ancestral shrine back to their homeland. The first shipment, comprising 3,489 sets of remains, was transported by ship from Saigon on the twenty-ninth day of the third lunar month. The second shipment, consisting of 3,396 sets of remains, was transported on the fifteenth day of the fifth lunar month aboard the Kim Lãng vessel. All remains were entrusted to the Tung Wah Hospital in Hong Kong as the designated representative. Relevant districts, villages, charitable guilds, libraries, and educational institutions are invited to claim the remains from the Tung Wah Hospital in Hong Kong. A financial subsidy of two silver dollars per set of remains will be provided by the communal ancestral shrine. Dated the fourth day of the sixth lunar month in the year Kǐ Mù³, Respectfully issued by An Nam Quảng Triệu and Tuệ Nghĩa Từ)

³ Kǐ Mù (1919) refers to a year in the traditional sexagenary cycle (Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches), a calendrical system historically used in China, Vietnam, and other East Asian cultures.

The Hainan Chinese: The Hainan Cemetery Temple, established by the Hainan Chinese community, remains the only group in Ho Chi Minh City with its own dedicated cemetery. In the 1980s, the Quỳnh Phủ Guild Hall, representing the Hainan Chinese, acquired a large tract of land on the outskirts of the city near the Binh Dương province border and developed it into a private cemetery. Since then, the ancestors of the Hainan Chinese have been venerated at a temple located within the cemetery grounds.

From a management perspective, the Board of Trustees of the Quỳnh Phủ Guild Hall has worked in collaboration with the cemetery management to establish stringent regulations governing burial and tomb construction. In 2009, the temple was rebuilt by the Board of Trustees. Despite its remote location, representatives of the Hainan Chinese community organize annual spring and autumn ancestral worship ceremonies, conducted according to Buddhist rites.

Table 2 Chronology of Hainan Cemetery Temple

Year / Period	Key Events	Managing and Operating Unit
1980s	Quỳnh Phủ Guild Hall (Hainanese Chinese) acquired land near Binh Dương province and established a private cemetery with a temple on site.	Quỳnh Phủ Guild
2009	Hainan Cemetery Temple rebuilt by the Quỳnh Phủ Guild Hall Board of Trustees.	
Present	Hainan Chinese organize annual spring and autumn Buddhist ancestral worship ceremonies at the temple despite remote location.	

The *Yici* of the Chinese community represents a spiritual model of fellowship. From a cultural transition perspective, its philanthropic functions have facilitated connections with Buddhism in its contemporary development, leading to changes in its structure and organization. Each *Yici* can be seen as a spiritual mechanism of fellowship: enshrining the deceased members of the group and arranging the repatriation of remains to their homeland when needed. Today, much of these functions have undergone significant transformation.

Chinese Buddhist Sect in Ho Chi Minh City

Along with the influx of Chinese immigrants to Cholon during the migration from central Vietnam to the southern regions, both Vietnamese and Chinese people arrived in Vietnam at various times. Buddhist history records the presence of many Chinese monks who came to Vietnam to propagate the Dharma nearly two millennia ago. Particularly in Saigon—Ho Chi Minh City—Buddhism has left a significant mark

in the Chinese community for almost 300 years. Many older Chinese people still recall several important places like Nhị Phủ Temple, Ôn Lăng Assembly Hall, and Thất Phủ Quan Wu Temple, where Buddhist monks temporarily resided.

Before 1930, Chinese Buddhist monks practiced primarily in temples associated with specific sects, and there was no formal Buddhist association.

In 1945, Venerable Thống Lương and Thanh Thuyền established Nam Phổ Đà Pagoda (District 6). During the same period, other temples were built, such as Trúc Lâm Pagoda (District 11) by Venerable Lương Giác, Hoa Nghiêm Pagoda (Bình Thạnh District) by Venerable Thọ Dã (1952), Từ Ân Pagoda (District 11) by Venerable Hoàng Tu (1955), Vạn Phật Pagoda (District 5) by Venerable Diệu Hoa and Đức Bốn (1959), and Thảo Đường Pagoda by Venerable Diệu Nguyên (1960) in District 6.

Thus, in the mid-20th century, Chinese Buddhism experienced a revival and growth within the Chinese community, laying the foundation for the formation of the Chinese Buddhist Pagoda of Vietnam in 1972, headed by Venerables Siêu Trần and Thanh Thuyền. For the first time, Chinese Buddhist monks in Vietnam had a formal organization with legal standing. The association had regulations, bylaws, and held its inaugural congress to form the Central Executive Committee on May 20, 1973.

In terms of worship, the Three Buddhas represent the main deities, placed alongside five other statues at the outermost table (these five deities are distinct from those worshiped in Vietnamese temples): Phổ Hiền, Di Lặc, Quan Âm, Văn Thù, and Địa Tạng Vương Bodhisattva. Chinese Pagoda also venerates the statue of Di Lặc Buddha and Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế (the Jade Emperor).

A distinctive feature of Chinese temples is the merit stone tablets, which record the names and contributions of donors who funded the construction and restoration of the temples. Depending on the language group, each temple has its own particular style of chanting and ritual instruments used.

On major religious holidays, Chinese temples also host large rituals such as the Three Thousand Buddhas Ceremony, the Ten Thousand Buddhas Ceremony, and the Lương Hoàng Ceremony.

The influence of folk customs and beliefs is deeply integrated into the worship rituals in Chinese Buddhist temples. This integration forms the basis for the transformation of social functions of the temples, with a gradual change process.

One of the most unique aspects of Chinese Buddhist Sect is its charity and social work. Many associations have been formed to support the community since its early days in Vietnam, such as the Sư Trúc Hiền (District 5). The main activities of this association include charitable work, providing funeral services, and organizing traditional music teams for religious festivals and funerals. The Minh Nguyệt Cư Sĩ Lâm Buddhist Association, headquartered in District 5, has branches throughout the southern region, including Sóc Trăng, Bạc Liêu, Cà Mau, Cần Thơ, Sa Đéc, and Đà Lạt. The association's "Hộ Niệm" (spiritual support) team was formed to perform memorial services for families of Hoa Buddhist sect members who have passed away, offering prayers and ceremonies at ancestral altars and cemeteries.

Charitable work has been greatly promoted in Chinese Buddhist temples, stemming from the belief that charity earns merit for future generations. In District 5, where many Chinese people and Chinese Buddhist temples are located, many notable individuals are known for their charitable efforts. For example, Venerable Tuệ Độ at Quan Âm Pagoda has over 1,000 members, and Venerable Tôn Thật at Từ Đức Temple serves as the head of the charity committee for the *Giác Ngộ* Newspaper. In December 1998, a large charity event was organized to assist poor patients, with donations collected from philanthropists. The proceeds were used to provide aid to the homeless and destitute.

The characteristics of Chinese Buddhist Sect in the southern region are still preserved today, forming a distinctive lifestyle within the Chinese community in southern Vietnam, particularly in Ho Chi Minh City. The term “Chinese Buddhist Sect” is used to distinguish this specific school from other Buddhist sects present in Saigon before 1975. Today, under the leadership of Venerable Đức Bốn, Hoa Buddhist Sect is part of the Vietnam Buddhist Church.

Functional Transformation: From Clan-Based Worship to Charitable Models

Post-1957 to 1975:

Under the administration of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), Chinese individuals were required to adopt Vietnamese citizenship, leading to the gradual dissolution of the administrative functions of Chinese social organizations in Southern Vietnam. These legal changes redefined the identity of the Chinese diaspora, integrating them into the broader Vietnamese national framework. Distinctive cultural features of the Chinese community diminished, and its insular nature waned. Clan associations began undergoing transformations during this period.

Post-1975:

The fundamental structures of Chinese organizations underwent significant shifts. Cemeteries, once regarded as the exclusive “property” of these associations, were increasingly integrated into broader mutual aid activities and healthcare operations. Buddhist practices began merging with the previous functions of these cemeteries, leading to notable transformations. Clan associations ceased direct management of cemeteries, and the tradition of repatriating remains to ancestral homelands became obsolete. Consequently, these associations adapted to new communal needs.

The integration of Buddhist and folk practices became more pronounced over time. Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, closely tied to the cultural practices of the Chinese diaspora, facilitated the preservation of cemetery-related activities. Some cemeteries transitioned away from serving clan-based functions to becoming mere burial grounds, while others evolved into Buddhist charitable temples.

1. Charitable Activities of Tuệ Nghĩa Từ - Đại Từ Liên Xã with Chinese Buddhist Support

Tuệ Nghĩa Từ transitioned into a charitable hospital and was renamed Quảng Triệu Thiện Đường (廣肇善堂) before eventually becoming a Buddhist temple known as Đại Từ Liên Xã (大慈蓮社). Currently, this site is located within the Nguyễn Tri Phương Hospital premises on Nguyễn Trãi Street.

The transformation into Đại Từ Liên Xã was significantly influenced by the efforts of Venerable Thích Phước Quang (1908–1988). Born as Tiêu Mao on April 28, 1908, in Tân Hội Village, Vạn Linh District, Guangdong, China, he was ordained in 1960 at Giác Nguyên Pagoda in Khánh Hội, under the guidance of Venerable Thiện Tường, who bestowed upon him the dharma name Phước Quang. Recognizing his Chinese heritage, his mentor permitted him to follow Mahayana Buddhist practices to foster connections with Chinese Buddhists and inspire their faith.

Venerable Phước Quang's perseverance in spiritual practice earned him significant respect within the Chinese Buddhist community. By late 1961, he established Từ Đức Tịnh xá as a spiritual hub for Chinese devotees. In 1962, he received full ordination as a Bhikkhu at Tứ Diệm Pagoda in Trà Vinh. This enabled him to organize religious and philanthropic initiatives, including Quan Âm Relief Charities, Đại Từ Liên Xã.

By 1970, prominent Chinese clergy in Vietnam prepared to form the Vietnamese Chinese Mahayana Buddhist Association, with Venerable Phước Quang playing a leading role. In 1972, during the First General Assembly of the Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam, he was appointed Head of the Central Finance Department and elevated to the rank of Venerable (Thích Đồng Bổn, 1995).

Today, Đại Từ Liên Xã operates within the Nguyễn Tri Phương Hospital, symbolizing the Buddhist integration of traditional cemetery functions. It has shifted from a clan-based communal structure to an open, inclusive space for Buddhist practice. Patients and their families seek solace here, drawing spiritual strength that enhances treatment outcomes.

Practical initiatives include offering monthly vegetarian meals (on the 1st and 15th lunar calendar days) to healthcare workers, patients, and their families, promoting peace and resilience amidst life's challenges. The association also organizes ancestral worship ceremonies during spring and autumn, maintaining a connection to cultural traditions.

As such, Tuệ Nghĩa Từ has not only welcomed Fujianese Chinese devotees but has also served as a regular venue for Buddhist activities, focusing primarily on charitable work and providing vegetarian meals to patients at Nguyen Trai Hospital. During the Republic of Vietnam period, the Chinese guilds (bang) began to disintegrate, and Tuệ Nghĩa Temple ceased its activities. The initial stewardship of the temple by Venerable Thích Phước Quang at that time laid the foundation for subsequent generations, who have since continued to uphold the Buddhist ideal of compassionate giving to the broader community. Ancestral rites dedicated to the Fujianese, once a central practice of the temple, have not been abandoned but are now conducted by the management boards of the Fujianese guildhalls, limited to two seasonal ceremonies—spring and autumn—as a continuation of tradition.

Table 3 Chronology of Tuệ Nghĩa Từ – Đại Từ Liên Xã (The Cantonese)

Year / Period	Key Events	Managing and operating unit
1863	Establishment of Tuệ Nghĩa Từ, the primary ancestral hall of the Cantonese Chinese community.	Quảng Triệu Guild
1865	Completion and inauguration of Tuệ Nghĩa Từ.	

Year / Period	Key Events	Managing and operating unit
1907	Reconstruction of Tuệ Nghĩa Từ as a charitable convalescent facility following a major epidemic.	Congrégation de Canton (Cantonese Congregation)
1921	Renamed Quảng Triệu Hospital, expanding its charitable medical services.	
1960–1972	Venerable Thích Phước Quang led the Buddhist transformation and philanthropic activities at the site.	Chinese Mahayana Buddhist
Present	Đại Từ Liên Xã, located within Nguyễn Tri Phương Hospital, operates as a Buddhist charitable organization that integrates spiritual care with traditional ancestral rites. It provides vegetarian meals to patients and staff and organizes seasonal worship ceremonies, representing its evolution from a clan-based hall to an inclusive Buddhist community center.	Chinese Mahayana Buddhist, Tuệ Thành Guid, Nguyễn Tri Phương Hospital

2. Activities of Tượng Nghĩa Từ: Integration of Buddhism and Folk Beliefs

Often referred to as An Bình Cemetery Temple, Tượng Nghĩa Từ is located within the grounds of An Bình Hospital, District 5. The site preserves numerous historical artifacts, including worship items, horizontal plaques, and couplets. As An Bình Hospital undergoes reconstruction, plans are in place to renovate the cemetery temple to continue serving the community.

In 1998, the Vạn Duyên Dharma Assembly, disrupted earlier due to war, was reestablished. The assembly, organized during the Year of the Tiger (Mậu Dần), was a joint effort of the Chinese Mahayana Buddhist Association and An Bình Hospital (formerly Lưu Nghĩa Hospital, which had hosted the original Vạn Duyên activities). Before 1975, these assemblies honored martyrs, disaster victims, and ancestors while offering rites for the deceased. The hospital arranged a temporary wooden memorial pavilion over its swimming pool, opposite Tượng Nghĩa Từ. The first official post-war assembly was highly successful, raising over 5 billion yuan for charitable purposes (You Zi'an, 2019).

Principles for the Vạn Duyên Dharma Assembly:

- Organized by the Chinese Mahayana Buddhist Association and the local Chinese community.
- Held every five years to accommodate the financial capacities of local Chinese social organizations.
- Structured with three altars: one for Buddhism, one for Taoism, and one for ancestral worship.
- Avoid scheduling during the Vu Lan Festival to respect similar events hosted by various guild halls.
- Annual and Special Ceremonies.

The temple hosts the Vu Lan Festival on the 11th day of the 7th lunar month, often led by invited monks. For example, in 2017, the festival took place at Long Hoa Pagoda. Participants offered vegetarian food to the poor, and free meals were provided during the event. Following the ceremony, attendees received tickets to claim gifts the next day.

The Teochew Chinese community holds regular ancestral worship ceremonies during the 7th lunar month and the 9th day of the 9th lunar month. Monks and nuns from Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan frequently visit for these ceremonies, as they are descendants or relatives of those enshrined at Tượng Nghĩa Từ. Additionally, the site hosts supernatural liberation ceremonies in the 1st and 7th lunar months.

After 1945, temples such as Tượng Nghĩa Từ, Tuệ Nghĩa Từ, and Quảng Triệu Thiện Đường no longer maintained the practice of repatriating the remains of deceased Chinese migrants to their homeland. Ancestral worship was at times suspended but later revived. What sets Tượng Nghĩa Từ apart is its integration of ancestral veneration with Buddhist practices. The Teochew Chinese in Ho Chi Minh City mostly follow folk beliefs closely linked to Buddhism, or are themselves Buddhists, with some leaning toward Taoism. Since 1998, Buddhist and syncretic folk rituals—such as prayer ceremonies, requiem rites, and the Vu Lan (Ullambana) Festival—have been encouraged, underscoring the temple’s enduring ritual and commemorative significance.

Tượng Nghĩa Từ is a hub for activities blending Mahayana Buddhism and folk rituals, under the auspices of the Chinese Mahayana Buddhist Association and the Nghĩa An Guild Hall. The collaboration between the Teochew Chinese community and Buddhist institutions has strengthened the role of this site as both a spiritual and cultural center.

By merging Buddhist practices with ancestral veneration and folk traditions, Tượng Nghĩa Từ exemplifies the integration of religious and communal activities, enriching the cultural tapestry of the local Chinese diaspora.

Table 4 Chronology of Tượng Nghĩa Từ (The Teochew Chinese)

Year / Period	Key Events	Managing and Operating Units
1881	Establishment of Tượng Nghĩa Từ, ancestral hall of the Teochew Chinese community.	Teochew Guild
1915	Establishment of Teochew Hospital (later An Binh Hospital), integrated with Tượng Nghĩa Từ.	Congrégation de Tewchou (Teochew Congregation)
1931	Recorded transport of thousands of Teochew Chinese remains from Cholon to Tung Wah Hospital in Hong Kong, with financial subsidies for repatriation.	
French colonial	Served as a major site for ancestral tablet enshrinement, medical charity, and repatriation of remains to China, alongside Cantonese institutions.	
1975 (before)	Vạn Duyên Dharma Assembly held annually at the site, honoring martyrs, disaster victims, and ancestors.	Chinese Mahayana Buddhist

Year / Period	Key Events	Managing and Operating Units
1998	Reestablishment of the Vạn Duyên Dharma Assembly after disruption by war, organized by the Chinese Mahayana Buddhist Association and An Binh Hospital.	Chinese Mahayana Buddhist Association, An Binh Hospital.
Present	Tượng Nghĩa Từ now functions as a spiritual and cultural center not only for the Teochew Chinese community but also for the broader local Chinese community. It blends Mahayana Buddhist practices, folk rituals, and ancestral worship; hosts annual ceremonies such as the Vu Lan Festival and other ancestral rites with participation from monks and nuns from Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan. The temple is currently undergoing renovation alongside hospital reconstruction.	Chinese Mahayana Buddhist Association, An Binh Hospital, Khánh Vân Nam Viện, Nghĩa An Guild.

3. Activities of the Hakka Cemetery Temple – Quan Âm Pagoda

The Hakka Chinese: Due to limited resources, the Hakka community's *Yici* was not as well-developed and initially only included a cemetery. In 1999, the Khách Gia Công Từ⁴ (客家公祠) was inaugurated within the grounds of the well-known Quan Âm Pagoda in District 8. It became the primary site where the ashes of deceased Hakka individuals were enshrined.

During the early years, the Gongci (Vietnamese: *Công từ*) also accepted the ashes and ancestral tablets of Vietnamese families. However, due to spatial constraints, the administrative board of the Sùng Chính guild hall later decided to limit admissions to Hakka Chinese only.

For most local residents, the temple is simply recognized as Quan Âm Pagoda, similar to other temples in the city. It functions as a place where ashes can be interred or as a charitable site where food and rice are distributed to the needy during special occasions, such as the Lantern Festival.

The activities surrounding the Hakka group's Gongci highlight the final phase of institutional transition. Unlike other Chinese subgroups in Chợ Lớn, who had established *Yici* and other communal assets and institutions, the Hakka underwent this process more gradually. By the time their Gongci was founded, the guild system had largely collapsed, and traditional hometown-based management had been replaced—often subtly—by religious institutions. From the outset, the Hakka Gongci was integrated into Quan Âm Pagoda. Ritual and worship practices were placed under Buddhist administration, and the hall's primary function shifted toward charitable activity.

Today, identifying the Hakka Gongci is challenging. The temple is a syncretic space, combining multiple cultural elements: it is a Mahayana Buddhist temple, a site for the Hakka Gongci, and incorporates

⁴ Công từ: An Alternative Term for *Yici*

influences from the Four-Faced Buddha cult, introduced via Thailand. Clearly, in the case of a relatively young *Yici*, regional and kinship identity no longer dominates; the emergence of overlapping religious elements reflects the evolving spiritual needs of the Chinese-Vietnamese community today.

Table 5 Chronological of Hakka Gongci (*Khách Gia Công Từ*, 客家公祠)

Year / Period	Key Events	Managing and Operating Units
1999	Khách Gia Công Từ established within Quan Âm Pagoda, District 8.	Quan Âm Pagoda, Sùng Chính Guild.
Early 2000s	Initially accepted ashes and ancestral tablets from both Hakka and Vietnamese families.	
Around 2006	Admissions restricted to Hakka community due to space constraints.	
Present	Functions as part of Quan Âm Pagoda and a charitable site during festivals .	

Conclusion

The Chinese Mahayana Buddhist tradition has played a significant role in fostering the spirit of mutual assistance within the Chinese community in Vietnam. Through its integration with guild halls and former community institutions, the transformation of functions has been appropriate, reflecting the broader impact of government policies on social life.

After 1957 - 1975, the Chinese guild system (*bang hội*) in Ho Chi Minh City—including its associated *Yici*—virtually collapsed. For a period, many of these temples were left in disuse. Over time, however, several *nhĩa từ* gradually underwent functional transformations, managed through cooperation among Buddhist institutions, local authorities, and the remaining guild associations. The longstanding *yici* of various guilds evolved to incorporate philanthropic and Buddhist elements. The Phước Thiện Nghĩa Từ of the Fujianese guild, for example, was integrated into a hospital and its charity network, and eventually ceased to function in its original role once guild administration was no longer active. In contrast, the Tuệ Nghĩa Từ of the Cantonese guild transitioned to a Buddhist model under the guidance of Venerable Thích Phước Quang, becoming a site of religious charity now known as Đại Liên Xã. The Tượng Nghĩa Từ of the Teochew guild similarly became a vibrant center for Buddhist rituals, including major *pháp đàn* ceremonies and Vu Lan festivals. Thus, the *nhĩa từ* established before the French colonial era have largely ceased to serve their original purpose of repatriating remains and worshipping the deceased within the framework of native-place associations—a key feature of the *tongxiang* (fellow-countrymen) model. Instead, these sites have been redefined through their connections to hospitals, charitable outreach, and Chinese Mahayana Buddhist practices in Ho Chi Minh City. This transformation is even more evident in the post-colonial *nhĩa từ* built by the Hakka and Hainanese communities, which were incorporated directly

into temples from the outset, expanding their religious scope far beyond ancestral worship. The newly established *Yici* of Chinese communities, such as the Hakka *công từ*, did not undergo a historical transformation of function, thus further reflecting the final stage of institutional transition. While regional or kinship ties remained the basis for gathering in the traditional model, they were now closely associated with spiritual and religious worship. The operation of these *công từ* was often integrated as part of Buddhist temples. Additionally, there have been new forms of institutional and religious integration, which, however, fall beyond the scope of this study.

The policy shift from recognizing ethnic Chinese residents as *Hoa kiều* (overseas Chinese) to imposing Vietnamese citizenship, coupled with the state's refusal to acknowledge the properties of Chinese guilds (*bang hội*), and particularly the restrictive economic measures targeting foreigners under the First Republic of Vietnam from 1957, significantly accelerated the assimilation of the Chinese population in southern Vietnam. During this transitional phase, many non-religious sites such as *Yici* inevitably fell into disuse. The Chinese society in Saigon at the time underwent dramatic transformation and rupture, producing considerable instability amid this partly coercive process of assimilation. Following 1975, successive waves of Chinese emigration to third countries, combined with severe economic hardship, especially in the commercial sector, plunged the Chinese community in Ho Chi Minh City into a prolonged crisis. Ancestral shrines and *Yici* institutions struggled to function, gradually losing their ritual and spiritual significance. Sacred objects and worship materials were often damaged, displaced, or lost. In this context, from the 1990s onward, the adoption of Mahayana Buddhist institutional models and philanthropic programs emerged as a pragmatic adaptation for the Chinese community, long characterized by folk religious practices closely aligned with Mahayana Buddhism. These transformations facilitated the repurposing of former *Yici* into religious-philanthropic spaces, integrated with hospitals and Buddhist organizations, thereby restoring communal relevance under new socio-religious frameworks. The resilience of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism in southern Vietnam offered an enduring foundation for these adaptations. These transformations, rooted in belief systems, have avoided political shocks during times of change. Cemetery temples, once assets of guild halls, cater to spiritual needs aligned with Buddhist principles, allowing a seamless transition without drastic alterations.

The recent reclamation of *Yici* by Chinese guild halls is largely symbolic rather than a return to their former roles as assets of *bang hội* or institutions of native-place association. These ancestral shrines have evolved into philanthropic centers linked to hospitals, while newly established ones are often integrated into Buddhist temples, serving the broader Chinese community rather than specific dialect groups. In the contemporary context, this transformation represents a culturally sensitive strategy to preserve Chinese ethnic identity through Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. It strengthens communal ties via religious and charitable activities, maintains Chinese cultural heritage in Ho Chi Minh City, and reflects a broader post-war Southeast Asian trend toward voluntary assimilation.

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