



Buddhist music as a means of preserving and transmitting intellectual heritage in the contemporary context

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Abstract

Music is increasingly being used as a means of supporting the transmission of religious values in the process of innovating Buddhist missionary methods. Research views Buddhist music as a cultural practice that helps preserve and transmit intellectual heritage through community experience. Qualitative methods used in summer retreat programs show that music supports young people in appreciating moral and educational values within a religious practice environment.

Keywords: Buddhist music, dharma propagation, intellectual heritage, moral education, truc lam

Introduction

Rationale

In traditional Buddhist life, missionary activities were primarily carried out through direct teaching in monastic spaces, chanting scriptures, and expounding on Buddhist doctrines. For a long time, these methods played a crucial role in maintaining and transmitting the ethical values and philosophical principles of Buddhism within the community. However, this purely missionary approach is revealing limitations in fostering empathy and spiritual experiences in contemporary society due to the dramatic changes in the media environment and forms of cultural reception, especially among young people.

In reality, those participating in religious activities today not only seek doctrinal knowledge but also want to access spiritual values through cultural practices that are emotionally and aesthetically stimulating. In other words, in the process of embracing religious life, the need to "understand doctrine" gradually becomes accompanied by the need to "feel doctrine." This shows a shift in the method of evangelization from one-way transmission of knowledge to cultural communication focused on experience and community participation. Buddhist music, long found in chanting rituals and religious activities, is beginning to be considered a form of cultural expression capable of conveying ideological values through spiritual experience and aesthetic appreciation. According to Schafer (1977) [6], the acoustic environment not only influences how people perceive space but also contributes to creating special emotional states, especially in circumstances related to ritual and religion.

The transformation of methods of Dharma propagation is not the only issue being raised alongside the risk of "textualizing" Buddhist thought in modern life. Ideological values such as compassion, impermanence, karma, and the spirit of engagement with the world are primarily found in scriptures, commentaries, and academic research. Systematizing and preserving knowledge is necessary, but if it remains only in written form, these values may become detached from the real lives of the community. Only when experienced and practiced in social life does cultural heritage truly exist, rather than being merely preserved as static objects of knowledge (Smith, 2006) [7].

This is clearly demonstrated in the current Buddhist outreach programs for youth. While artistic forms of expression such as music have the potential to stimulate emotions and create direct experiences for viewers, abstract philosophical concepts such as impermanence, karma, and compassion are often difficult to grasp through purely lecturing. According to Boyd and Richerson (1985) [1], cultural values can be better communicated through emotionally engaging practices. This helps recipients understand and internalize ethical values and social beliefs. From this perspective, Buddhist music can be seen as a performance of ideological values, helping to transfer doctrinal content from theory to the life experiences of Buddhists.

Music is increasingly being used as a means of supporting the transmission of Buddhist teachings in current Buddhist propagation practices in Vietnam, especially through summer retreats, Buddhist festivals, and educational activities for young Buddhist followers. Music is not only used in chanting rituals but also in group activities, helping to create a communal religious experience. From a cultural perspective, these musical practices can be seen as a way of expressing Buddhist philosophical values in modern life. This helps maintain and regenerate the intellectual heritage as a "living heritage" within the practicing community.

Overview

Studies such as religious anthropology, ethnomusicology, and cultural studies have long been interested in the role of music in religious practices. Numerous works have demonstrated that music and sound not only support rituals but also contribute to the creation of religious experiences and a sense of community (Feld, 1996) [3]. From this perspective, music can be considered a means of cultural expression capable of conveying belief values through performative practices.

Studies on Buddhist chanting rituals primarily focus on their historical formation, symbolic meaning, and institutional role in monastic life (Nguyen Lang, 2012; Le Manh That, 2025) [4, 5]. On the other hand, most studies have examined ritual music from a ceremonial or doctrinal perspective, but they have not fully considered its role as a means of conveying Buddhist thought to the community within a

modern cultural context. Subsequently, the role of performance practices, such as music, oral tradition, and ritual, in maintaining and transmitting cultural values across generations is increasingly emphasized in research on intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003) [8]. According to this approach, heritage is not only in written or material form but is also recreated through the cultural practices of the community.

Studies concerning the use of Buddhist music as a means of preserving and transmitting intellectual heritage within the framework of cultural management are still quite limited. Interdisciplinary research is needed to clarify the role of music in connecting Buddhist teachings with contemporary cultural life.

Objectives

This study aims to clarify the role of Buddhist music as a means of preserving and transmitting ideological values in modern religious life, based on the issues mentioned above. The research examines how music can support the preservation of Buddhist philosophical content, convey ethical values, and recreate religious experiences within communities, particularly in missionary activities for young people.

Theoretical foundation

1. Intellectual heritage as a form of intangible cultural heritage

The concept of intangible cultural heritage has been used more widely in cultural studies in recent years to emphasize the role of living practices in preserving and transmitting cultural values over time. According to the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage of 2003 [8], heritage includes expressions, practices, knowledge, and skills recognized by a community as part of its cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003) [8]. These elements often exist and are maintained through oral tradition, performing arts, rituals, and social customs.

According to this view, values such as compassion, impermanence, karma, and the spirit of engagement with the world are part of the Buddhist intellectual heritage. These values are not only presented in scriptures or commentaries but are also performed in cultural practices within religious life. In other words, ideas are not only “stored” in texts but are also “practiced” through certain forms of cultural expression. If heritage is not considered a static object to be preserved, then it should be understood as a continuous cultural process that is recreated through the experiences and customs of the community (Smith, 2006) [7].

Ritual music in the Buddhist context can be considered one of the forms of expression that helps preserve and transmit ideological content through collective aesthetic and emotional experience. Chanting, praise, and ceremonial music not only perform ritual activities but also express philosophical values within the religious practice space. From this perspective, Buddhist music is considered a kind of “embodied heritage,” in which values are conveyed through the sensory and bodily engagement in the ritual practice rather than through theoretical explanations.

This suggests that the preservation of Buddhist intellectual heritage must be achieved through vibrant cultural practices, in which music is used as a means of connecting religious knowledge with community experience.

2. Theory of cultural transmission

In cultural studies and anthropology, cultural transmission is often understood as the way values, beliefs, and social norms are passed from one generation to another through social communication and practices. Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman (1981) [2] argue that cultural transmission occurs not only through language and formal education, but also through symbolic practices such as art, music, and ritual.

From this perspective, music is a particularly effective medium for cultural transmission, allowing abstract values to become emotional and aesthetic experiences. Boyd and Richerson (1985) [1] emphasize that when cultural values are expressed in an emotionally charged way, they tend to be better received and internalized. This helps participants not only understand but also “feel” the meaning of social norms. Communicating ethical and philosophical values in Buddhism is not only done through doctrinal lectures but also through rituals and community cultural activities. Music used in chanting rituals, Buddhist songs, and group activities at retreats can be considered a means of conveying ideological content in a more accessible and less imposing way. Participation in musical activities allows participants, especially young people, to naturally access Buddhist values and form a spiritual connection.

From a cultural transmission perspective, music not only supports rituals but also serves as a means of connecting personal experiences with religious knowledge. This allows Buddhist music to be approached as a culturally-oriented tool for evangelization, helping to transform doctrinal content into important practices in community life.

3. The theory of sacred sound space

A new method for studying the role of sound in cultural and social life was established by Schafer (1977) [6]. According to this method, the acoustic environment is not merely a collection of auditory components; it also influences how people understand and interact with their surroundings. Sound, especially music, can play a significant role in creating sacred spaces in religious contexts.

Feld (1996) [3] demonstrated that sounds used in religious rituals have the potential to stimulate collective emotions and create a sense of community through shared auditory experience. The ringing of bells, gongs, chanting melodies, and hymns in Buddhist practice are not only ritualistic but also help create a solemn atmosphere, allowing participants to transition from a worldly state to a spiritual one.

From this perspective, music is an important part of the “sacred space,” where sensory experiences allow for the perception of ideological values. Factors contributing to a shared emotional environment where moral values and philosophies of life are vividly portrayed include the repeated sounds in rituals, the rhythm of chants, or the resonance in ceremonies.

Therefore, research on Buddhist music related to sacred sound spaces can help clarify the role of music in preserving and transmitting the intellectual heritage of Buddhism in modern cultural life.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to determine the role of Buddhist music as a cultural practice in preserving and transmitting ideological values in modern religious life. The research focuses on analyzing musical practices within specific Dharma propagation spaces using three main

methods: document analysis, participatory observation, and semi-structured interviews. This is conducted within a theoretical framework of cultural heritage.

First, document analysis is used to systematize sources related to Buddhist music, chanting rituals, and studies related to modern Dharma propagation activities. Referenced documents include Buddhist scriptures, studies on Buddhist rituals, guides for activities in retreat programs, and texts related to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. These sources are analyzed to form the theoretical foundation for the study and provide a basis for comparison with practical data.

Summer retreat programs for Buddhist youth also utilize participatory observation methods. It is also employed in chanting ceremonies at some monastic institutions. Throughout this process, researchers directly participate in various activities involving music, such as chanting, singing Buddhist songs, and group activities using music to support the transmission of teachings. Researchers can record how music is used to create a religious atmosphere by participating in these practice spaces. They can also record how participants, particularly young people, respond to these forms of expression.

The research also examines chanting ceremonies in Buddhist festivals to explore the role of ritual music in creating sacred spaces and shaping community experiences. During the observation process, field notes focused on sound structure, chanting rhythm, community participation, and the emotional expressions of the participants. This allowed for the discovery of a connection between the use of music and the reception of ideological values in religious life.

Semi-structured interviews were used in conjunction with attendance observation to gather opinions from two main groups: monks and nuns directly involved in Dharma propagation activities, and Buddhist youth participating in retreat programs. Interviews were conducted in person and included open-ended questions related to participants' experiences with musical activities, their perceptions of the role of music in accessing teachings, and the extent to which these practices influence their attitudes and perspectives.

Interviews with the monks and nuns focused on their opinions regarding the use of music in Dharma propagation and changes in the way teachings are conveyed in the modern context. Meanwhile, interviews with Buddhist youth aimed to understand their level of reception and perception of Buddhist ethical values conveyed through music compared to traditional teaching methods.

It is noteworthy that the field data was primarily collected from Dharma propagation programs that the researcher directly participated in coordinating and organizing. This not only provided a practical approach but also ensured continuity in the observation and data recording process. Furthermore, research ethics were adhered to throughout the study, such as ensuring that participants were interviewed anonymously and that collected information was used solely for research purposes.

The study was able to approach the issue from multiple perspectives thanks to the combination of the above methods. This helps to clarify the role of music as a cultural practice in preserving and transmitting Buddhist thought in the modern world.

Results and Discussion

1. Buddhist music in preserving ideological content

Field observations at summer retreats and chanting ceremonies show that Buddhist music not only supports rituals but also directly supports and conveys ideological content in religious life. Philosophical values such as impermanence, compassion, and karma are expressed through Buddhist chants, praises, and songs. They can also be felt through the music, melodies, and collective atmosphere in which they practice.

For example, in summer retreats, the content of evening chanting sessions often includes sutra recitation aimed at helping young people become aware of their responsibility for their actions, thoughts, and words based on the Buddha's teachings on the three karmas (body, speech, and mind). The sutra passages are repeated at a slow pace, emphasizing the cultivation of virtuous intentions, speech control, and self-regulation, allowing participants to remember and reflect on how to behave in daily life. Furthermore, Buddhist chants and songs related to the Four Gratuities also help children become aware of their responsibilities towards their parents, teachers, homeland, and community. Values such as filial piety, gratitude, and social responsibility are felt through collective experience in the soundscape created by the wooden clappers, bells, and chanting. In this case, ritual music can be considered a means of "embodying" Buddhist ethical principles; it brings the teachings of the three karmas and the Four Gratuities into practice for young people in the modern world.

Buddhist songs used in group activities at retreats also often have themes of compassion and moral responsibility towards the community. Singing these songs together not only connects people but also increases awareness of ethical values through a resonant experience. The familiar melodies repeated in various activities gradually become a means for participants to remember and reproduce ideological content related to their daily lives.

Notably, a similarity can be seen with the "living in the world and finding joy in the Dharma" philosophy of the Truc Lam Zen sect in some Dharma propagation activities that incorporate songs related to the engaged spirit of Buddhism. Simply put, the lyrics, close to modern life, describe the spirit of living in the world while maintaining inner peace. In this case, music acts as a form of performing the thought, allowing collective aesthetic and emotional experiences to access philosophical content that is inherently abstract.

From the perspective of preserving intellectual heritage, Buddhist music supports the preservation of doctrinal content in cultural practices and texts. Intellectual heritage can continue to exist as a "living heritage," which can be recreated and transmitted through community experiences in modern religious life.

2. Music as a means of conveying ideas

Field data shows that music helps shift doctrinal content from theoretical awareness to emotion and behavior. Summer retreat participants often access doctrinal content through lectures and musical activities. Unlike theoretical lectures, music-related experiences tend to leave a deeper impression in interviews.

Many teenagers say that instead of relying on abstract concepts presented in lectures, songs containing doctrinal content help them remember and connect Buddhist ethical

values to their lives. This shows that music can act as a bridge between awareness and emotion, allowing viewers not only to understand but also to feel ethical values.

This is a chain of transformation from awareness to emotion and from emotion to behavior. Music allows viewers to access doctrinal content in a more open emotional state. This makes it easier for them to internalize these values in their daily lives. Participation in collective musical activities has been shown to influence how participants behave in social relationships, such as enhancing patience or empathy for others.

From this perspective, music can be seen as a means of empathizing with ideas, helping to translate doctrinal content from theoretical knowledge to meaningful practical experiences. This also aligns with the view that intellectual heritage is a constantly changing cultural process that is recreated through community experiences and customs.

3. The role of music in Buddhist moral education for young people

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Management Implications

Research on the role of music in preserving and transmitting Buddhist philosophical values shows that approaching music as a cultural practice is significant for rituals. This also indicates that approaching music as a cultural practice is important. Accordingly, the research offers several management suggestions to enhance the use of music as a tool for Dharma propagation and moral education in the community.

The content of Buddhist chants and songs used in Dharma propagation activities must be standardized, especially in programs for young people. In reality, many modern Buddhist songs have diverse content, but they lack a common doctrinal message or one that is appropriate for each target audience. Philosophical values such as compassion, impermanence, and the spirit of engagement with the world can be conveyed consistently and easily

through the use of music in Dharma propagation programs. This not only enhances the effectiveness of moral education but also helps maintain standards in conveying Buddhist content through artistic forms of expression.

Furthermore, digitizing Buddhist ritual music is also a direction that needs attention in the context of the strong digital transformation taking place in many cultural fields. Traditional chants, ritual music, and Buddhist songs can be recorded, stored, and disseminated through digital platforms, facilitating easier access for the community. This not only helps preserve musical practices at risk of disappearing but also expands the reach of Buddhist philosophical values in modern life, especially for the younger generation.

In addition, incorporating music into Buddhist education programs for teenagers can also be considered a management method to enhance the effective transmission of moral values. Activities incorporating music can help participants directly experience ideological content through emotions and collective participation, rather than simply accessing doctrines through lectures. This aligns with current trends in cultural education, which emphasizes the role of experience in shaping students' awareness and attitudes.

Finally, from the perspective of intangible cultural heritage management, building a database of Buddhist music can be considered a long-term solution to support the preservation and promotion of ideological heritage. This database could include traditional chants, ritual music, and Buddhist songs with doctrinal content. It would be categorized by theme and purpose. In this case, music is not only considered a ritualistic element but also a cultural source that supports and disseminates ideological values, including the "living in the world and finding joy in the Dharma" spirit of the Truc Lam Zen sect initiated by Tran Nhan Tong.

Overall, the above suggestions suggest that approaching Buddhist music from a cultural management perspective can help protect and promote the intellectual heritage in modern society, allowing Buddhist values to be maintained and revived within the community.

Conclusions

The transmission of Buddhist philosophical values cannot be limited to mere preaching or the preservation of traditional texts in contemporary society, where religious and cultural approaches are changing. This research finds that when Buddhist music is considered a performance-based cultural practice, it can help preserve and transmit philosophical content within modern religious life.

Ethical and philosophical values such as engagement with the world, compassion, karma, and impermanence can be emotionally conveyed through music in chanting rituals and in youth outreach programs. The doctrinal content is transformed from theoretical knowledge into practical application in community life through this process. This allows the philosophical heritage to continue to exist as a form of "living heritage" in the modern world.

The integration of music into group activities, particularly in summer retreats for youth, demonstrates its potential to support Buddhist moral education. These communal musical experiences not only provide participants with a natural approach to teachings but also help them internalize moral values by actively participating in cultural practices.

From a cultural management perspective, using Buddhist music to protect and promote the intellectual heritage

creates new approaches to Dharma propagation. In this case, music is not merely a ritual aid but also a means of connecting communal experience and religious knowledge, helping to maintain and revitalize intellectual values in modern culture. This is also important for continuing the spirit of "living in the world and finding joy in the Dharma" of the Truc Lam Zen school, which is to transform Buddhist values into practices applicable in modern society.

Overall, research on the role of music in Buddhist missionary activities clarifies the cultural function of Buddhist musical activities. These studies also provide a new way to manage modern religious activities and promote the intellectual heritage.

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