

## The Habit of Burning Votive Paper (Offerings) of the Northern Vietnamese

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**Abstract:** Based on the analysis of written sources and results of field investigations, this article will take the custom of burning votive paper in northern Vietnam as an example to decode the motivation, origin, formation, and development of the custom of burning paper and its relationship with the economic, social, and cultural dynamics and national policies.

Key words: votive paper; the custom of burning votive paper; Vietnamese; Northern Vietnam

### 1. Introduction

The ritual dedicated to the dead always occupies an important position in human life. It is actually a ritual involving the connection between life and death. This type of ritual can be found in almost every social group (Levi-Bruhl, 1922).

In the hearts of the Vietnamese people, whether in the north or in any region, "*uống nước nhớ nguồn* (when you drink water, think of the source, or the spirit of grateful commemoration)" and "*nghĩa tử là nghĩa tận* (the sense of the dead is that of the final)" ethics have always been closely related to lifestyle, thinking, and ethical practice. This concept is not only proven by the food supply organization, but also by burning votive paper products to simulate the daily objects of the dead (Nguyễn Thị Lệ Hằng & Trần Thị Kim Anh, 2017).

There are no exact figures on how many votive paper products the Vietnamese burn each year and how much money they spend on these items. However, it is undeniable that dedication and burning votive paper are very common in the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people. In Vietnam, votive paper and paper products are burnt in ceremonies and festivals held all year round (for example, full moon day and the first day of each month, Lunar New Year), secular events (launching a new business, building a new house, etc.), rites of passage (wedding, funeral, the anniversary of the dead, etc), and ritual activities held in public temples. In the context of the current market mechanism, temples and other religious sites have been restored, and religious activities (especially the habit of burning votive paper) have been developed. The spatial scope of this custom is no longer limited to family anniversary ceremonies but has expanded to the entire society, becoming one of the indispensable factors in many construction groundbreaking ceremonies, even in state-owned organizations. Therefore, the research theme of the votive paper and the burning of votive paper has attracted the attention of many researchers. However, researchers have different views on the phenomenon of burning votive paper, which has caused controversy and multivocality on this issue.

Regarding the topic of the votive paper, we must first mention the work "'Votive paper' for the living, spiritual innovation in the market mechanism" by Nguyễn Kim Hiền (1999). She explains the characteristics and meaning of the custom of dedication paper in the contemporary socio-economic situation in Vietnam by studying religious symbols, combining

some research results on Vietnam's contemporary economy, and studying the phenomenon of "borrowing money" from Goddess of Treasury (Bà Chúa Kho) in Cổ Mễ Village, Bắc Ninh Province. The author believes that the phenomenon of "votive money paper for the living" at Bà Chúa Kho Temple, Cổ Mễ Village, is a kind of spiritual commodity, which reflects the nature of supply and demand in a market economy. The novelty of this phenomenon lies in the fact that votive paper is not only used to make gods for the dead to seek the help of this invisible force but also serves the spiritual and material needs of the "living". Here, the spiritual needs with mysterious beliefs and the practical reason with real social values tend to merge.

Nguyễn Thị Lệ Hằng & Trần Thị Kim Anh (2017) claim that burning the votive paper is not only the "living people" sending property and paper money to the gods and deceased relatives to express their sincerity but also covers the behavior patterns between the living (the secular world) and the gods (the supernatural world) and dead (the underworld). In fact, this is a form of paying tribute to the dead. Its purpose is to reassure the spirit of the living, especially in a society where people cannot predict an unstable and dangerous future. Therefore, buying and burning paper money invisibly links the yin world (the underworld) and the yang world (the secular world).

Tâm Khánh Linh (2018) emphasizes the human virtues of this phenomenon, considering that the burning of votive paper and spirit money is one of the reasonable spiritual needs. Accordingly, burning votive paper evokes the ocean of love and gratitude, connecting the two worlds of yin and yang and connecting the present with the past. Through such activities, it helps the living express their filial piety and gratitude to their ancestors and gods (Bùi Hoài Sơn, 2019).

In addition to some comments that burning money is one of the cultural virtues of the Vietnamese people, the others have a negative view of this custom. They say that the cost of providing votive paper and spirit money is wasteful and harmful in many ways (Lê Thị Hồng Phúc, 1998).

The money people spent on spirit money and other paper products all turns into ashes, which really makes people feel wasted. Lê Tâm Đắc (2006) believes that, with the concept of "the underworld is the same as the secular world" people burn and "send" all kinds of votive money and products for their deceased relatives and ancestors in the underworld costly. However, this extreme waste stems from the faith of living people in "the powerful underworld" but also from their face-esteem prestige. In a sense, this has led to a social competition: the more you burn, the more fortune (wealth) you will have (Bùi Hoài Sơn, 2019).

Some Buddhist reformers of the Buddhist Association of Northern Vietnam called for the abolition of this practice (Lê Tâm Đắc, 2006). However, this view has been opposed by those engaged in making and selling votive products and spirit money. It is a fact that votive paper has become commodities, and the craft of making and selling offerings has flourished and has become a stable income industry for some people.

Ignoring the contradictory arguments on this issue, this research will take the habit of burning votive paper in northern Vietnam as an example to decode the motivation, origin, formation, and development of the custom of burning paper and its relationship with the economic, social, and cultural dynamics and national policies. This research is mainly based on the

analysis of written documents and the results of field surveys, with special attention to social concepts related to the habit of burning votive paper.

## 2. Theory and research methods

In this study, my research object is Vietnamese from North Vietnam. This is also a region that manufactures, sells, and burns the most votive money paper. The data used in this study I collected during the field survey in the Red River Delta, including Haiphong City and Thái Bình, Hải Dương, Nam Định, and Thanh Hóa provinces from March 2018 to August 2020. My research sample includes 10 people, aged between 23 and 72 years old, one of whom is a votive paper maker and another one is a seller. Most of the focused conversations with the research samples were recorded and carefully recorded for final analysis to answer the following questions: Why do Vietnamese people burn votive paper for the deceased? The origin of this custom? What psychological motivation does this custom contain? In a period when the economic, political, and social conditions have been greatly improved, why is the custom of burning votive paper still maintained, and even tends to develop? Through the use of participatory observations and in-depth interviews in the community and the use of *Rational choice theory*, this research will address these issues.

Since ancient times, people have believed in the supernatural world. Whether this belief is good or bad, right or wrong, and whether it should be, depends on everyone's perception. In fact, things and phenomena have a duality, and the custom of burning votive paper is no exception. On the one hand, it is positive, so it is actively practiced like "hãy làm cái này cốt để sự vật gì đó xuất hiện" (James Frazer, 2007 [1890]). On the other hand, it is negative and contains something that people should avoid "chớ có làm việc này, sợ rằng sự vật gì đó sẽ xuất hiện" (James Frazer, 2007 [1890]). Therefore, the custom of burning sacrifice is related to faith and behavior. In order to cross the boundaries of such faith and behavior, it is not always possible to use rational knowledge to make judgments. The key is to understand the motivations of their faiths and behaviors and consider what they can bring to us personally and socially. This study uses rational choice theory to consider the motives of the Vietnamese in northern Vietnam to burn votive paper and find out whether these motivations stem from the morale of economic and material life, or from other source of social and spiritual life.

Since the 18th and 19th centuries, *Rational choice theory* has been popular in sociology, philosophy, economics, and anthropology. It emphasizes the role and motivation of profit when people choose to act (Wang, 2014). Therefore, people always tend to seek satisfaction, fulfillment and avoid pain. Appropriate ritual performance can help people achieve the desired curative effect (Frazer, 2007 [1890]). Therefore, during the process of movement and development, people always tend to "làm mềm lòng khối thần thánh bằng cách luôn lọt ngọt ngào của lời cầu khẩn và lễ vật hiến sinh" (Frazer, 2007 [1890]: 102). The special thing about people's faiths and behaviors is that people always consider and brainstorm to achieve the best choice.. These optimizations include not only material factors but also spiritual factors and social benefits (Huỳnh Ngọc Thu, 2014).

## 3. Results and Discussion

The custom of burning votive paper and the notion "the secular world is consistent with the underworld" in northern Vietnam

According to the work *Từ điển Tiếng Việt* (Vietnamese Dictionary) of the author Hoàng Phê (2005), the term *vàng mã* (votive paper) is a combination of the two words *vàng* (gold) and

*mã* (code), referring to paper objects burned to death in accordance with folk customs. Therefore, *vàng mã* are made of paper and have a symbolic meaning. According to folk beliefs, after worship, *vàng mã* (votive paper) must be burned down and poured the wine in so that they can be transformed into "real objects" in the underworld and can be used by the dead. Therefore, "burning votive paper" (*đốt vàng mã*) is also called "transforming votive paper" (*hóa vàng mã*).

According to Chinese historical books and archaeological documents, the custom of burning votive paper is rooted in primitive folk beliefs to pray for the dead. This is a manifestation of the collective unconsciousness of human worship (Li Xianglin, 2008).

*Shuowen Jiezi* (說文解字, *Thuyết Văn Giải Tự*) by Xu Shen (許慎 Hứa Thận), "People finally become ghosts (人所歸為鬼)", that is, after death, humans become ghosts<sup>1</sup>. The devil's world is similar to the secular world, it also needs to organize life activities and money. Therefore, since ancient times, people buried not only property and animals for the dead kings and officials, which is called *jì-qì* (祭器, sacrificial grave goods)<sup>2</sup>, but also alive human, which is called *xùn-zàng* (殉葬, burying alive people together with the dead). In the Han Dynasty (漢朝, 202 BC – 220 AD), instead of *xùn zàng*, the Chinese forced slaves and servants to live permanently in the noble grave area (to take care and perform rituals regularly) and buried paper notes (紙錢)<sup>3</sup> for the dead (also called *yì-qian* (瘞錢, burial money)<sup>4</sup>. In the Tang Dynasty (唐朝, 618-907 AD), the Chinese invented votive paper and burned for the dead, called *míng-qian* (冥錢, ghost money)<sup>5</sup>.

Volume *Wang Yu Zhuan* of the work *Tang Shu* (唐書·王璵傳) wrote that Under the leadership of Emperor Tang Xuan Zong (唐玄宗, 685-762, r. 712-756), Chief History Officer Wang Yu (王璵) made votive paper money for worship and burned it to replace real gold, silver, and other valuables (Li Xianglin 2008). Under the Later Han Dynasty (後漢朝, 947-951), votive paper became less popular; therefore, Wang Lun (王倫, a descendant of Wang Yu 王璵) and his friend intrigued to save and revive the votive paper money industry. They pretended to die and resurrected. Since then, the custom of burning votive paper has permeated the lives of people from nobles to ordinary people (Nhàn Văn Đình & Trần Duy Vôn, 1939; Thích Khánh Anh, 1993).

After careful study, Buddhist scholars in Northern Vietnam confirmed that votive goods were imported from China and were not Buddhist ritual objects (Trí Hải, 1937). Following in the footsteps of the Chinese invasion, the custom of burning votive paper spread to Vietnam.

In fact, the custom of burning votive paper of the Vietnamese is rooted in the belief in soul immortality and the existence of the underworld of ancient Vietnamese, and it still leaves an

<sup>1</sup>Xu Shen (許慎): "鬼——人所歸為鬼 (People finally become ghosts)", <https://kknews.cc/history/yn3l33b.html>. Accessed on September 20, 2020.

<sup>2</sup>*Jì-qì* (祭器, votive items) include various tools used to worship gods, Buddha, or ancestors to pay homage and blessings.

<sup>3</sup>In ancient times, coins were sacrifices used for rituals or funerals, later replaced with "paper notes" (紙錢) in the shape of coins arranged into strings or folded into a gold bar or a silver bar. In many cases, people even printed paper notes like real money in daily life.

<sup>4</sup>*Yì-qian* (瘞錢): burial money.

<sup>5</sup>*Míng-qian* (冥錢): paper banknotes and similar items that were burned for the dead at the time of sacrifice.

important mark in the current spiritual life of the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese believe that "death is not the end" because life and death are just a repeated cycle. After death, the dead have their own lives, needs, and activities, just like in the secular world. Therefore, the living people try to promote the rebirth of the dead through rituals and dedication. This explains why the Vietnamese use the term "return to the land of their ancestors (về với tổ tiên)" when talking about the dead, instead of the term "dead (chết)" itself. Some families invite the deceased to go home to eat before each meal. At funerals, many families bury real money and valuables for the deceased, burn the paper offerings, and even distribute votive money papers on the funeral route to "share" the wealth with the deceased. On holidays and special occasions (such as the anniversary of the deceased, New Year's Day, Ching Ming Festival, weddings, funerals, building houses, launching new businesses, etc.), the custom of burning votive paper supply regularly is to ensure that the deceased has sufficient wealth and property in the underworld and hope the deceased can "testify and bless" the living. Therefore, people burn votive paper to "*pray to Heaven, Buddha and ancestors for health, good luck, happiness and prosperity for their families and future generations*"<sup>6</sup>.

A common phenomenon in the history of funerals is that people in the world imagine the world of the dead according to the current world, and the Vietnamese in the north are no exception. Those who burn votive paper believe that "*Votive paper is used by loved ones in the underworld*"<sup>7</sup>; therefore, "*burning votive offerings is to provide necessary items for the dead relatives*."<sup>8</sup> Some people even said: "*we burn votive items so that our ancestors have nice clothes and enough belongings. I am afraid they don't have enough precious things to use*."<sup>9</sup> There is also a rather fanciful belief that a votive, after burning, must be watered with alcohol before it can be converted into the underworld currency (Toan Ánh, 1991). Thus, burning the votive paper brings "*a sense of peace*" to the living, because they believe that "*relatives at the underworld will receive such gifts, and will witness and bless them*."<sup>10</sup>

Burning votive offerings not only have spiritual value but also show a sense of family. This is the true respect of the living for the dead while confirming that the dead still exists somewhere. The author remembers that on the anniversary of the death of the grandparents, the full moon, and New Year's Day, the author's mother bought votive coins, clothes, and household items for her ancestors and deceased relatives. She carefully wrote down the names of ancestors and relatives on each piece of clothing. According to her, "*grandparents can obtain the product correctly and avoid losses caused by not having the recipient's name*". After worship, she took them to the front door and burned them. After she put each votive product into the fire, she said softly, as if there were grandparents there: "*I am sending you new clothes and shoes for you to use. This is part of our sincerity. We hope you can witness our lives and bless us*". My mother repeatedly told me that I must burn them all because "*if it is not completely burned, the sent items will be broken (incomplete)*." After burning, she

<sup>6</sup>Quoted from an in-depth interview with Ms. N.T.T, in Haiphong City, 2018

<sup>7</sup>Quoted from an in-depth interview with Ms. N.T.H, in Thanh Hóa province, 2020

<sup>8</sup>Quoted from an in-depth interview with Ms. B.T.D, in Nam Định province, 2020

<sup>9</sup>Quoted from an in-depth interview with Ms. N.T.M, in Hải Dương province, 2020

<sup>10</sup>Quoted from an in-depth interview with Ms. L.T.M, in Thái Bình province, 2020



poured a cup of wine into the votive ashes which, according to her, *"let the offerings be delivered to ancestors"*.<sup>11</sup>

"The secular world is consistent with the underworld (Trần sao âm vậy)" is the verbal statement of the majority of the votive burners interviewed. This habit stems from the theory of samsara (生死輪迴說) and the desire for the transcendence and rebirth of the dead, so that the living can avoid accidents and uncertainties in life. Mrs. Đ.T.Y. shared the spiritual concept related to the custom of burning votive offerings as followed: *"My family and I lead a strong spiritual life. I am affected by my birth family. I remember when I was young, every year during holidays and ancestors' anniversaries, I would help my mother shopping, buying some paper money and offering clothes, and making dedication meals for ancestors. Now, I am married, and I normally purchased votive offerings for ancestors of both sides (laughs)... When we have a filial heart, our ancestors will love and bless us."*<sup>12</sup>

Ms. N.T.L. has the same mentality as Ms. Đ.T.Y. (quoted above). She said her family also buys various votive offerings for the dead every year, hoping that the cancestors can live well in another world. When the author asked: "Do you think your ancestors received the sacrifice you burned?", she did not hesitate and answered immediately: *"This practice has become a habit, what people do, I do it! If I have done it, I will feel more at ease, because I think that 'You'll experience sacredness if you venerate the god(s), and you'll enjoy protected comforts if you comply with sacred taboos (Có thờ có thiêng, có kiêng có lành!)'". Not burning? That is not possible! I will feel uneasy and anxious! Especially I feel insecure. If I don't do it or do it indecently, my ancestors will get angry, and that's not good at all!"*<sup>13</sup> People burn votive offerings for the deceased not only because of faith, respect, and gratitude but also because of psychological fear.

Passed down from generation to generation, the spiritual life is closely related to daily life. They often act to embody spiritual idealism by mean of 'giving – receiving' sacrifice. Therefore, buying, offering, and burning votive objects are not only expressions of gratitude or loyalty to gods and deceased ancstors but also related to very specific human psychological motivations. In the past, people just wanted to buy some votive papers and some offerings for the gods and ancestors to express their "sincerity"; however, today, many people think that "if they burn more offerings they will have greater fortunes", so they increase the scale of burning votive offerings. Especially in today's relatively well-off material life and increasing social risks, people are paying more and more attention to this custom. *"Nowadays, the economic conditions are different than before, so people want to buy more sacrificial goods for their deceased ancestors. In the past, people just bought some paper clothes and some votive money for their ancestors, but now they buy other things, such as paper shoes, hats, TV, refrigerator, air conditioner, washing machine, etc."*<sup>14</sup>

Mr. N.V.H, 36, a votive product maker in Quảng Thanh (Haiphong City), said: *"Like other products, the votive product design and model must be changed every year to meet the new tastes of consumers."*<sup>15</sup> The variety of types of votive products and the waste expressed in the

<sup>11</sup> Author's fieldwork notes, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted from an in-depth interview with Ms. Đ.T.Y, in Thái Bình province, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted from an in-depth interview with Ms. N.T.L, in Thanh Hóa province, 2019

<sup>14</sup> Quoted from an in-depth interview with Ms. N.T.T, in Haiphong City, 2018

<sup>15</sup> Quoted from an in-depth interview with Mr. N.V.H, Haiphong City, 2020.

large volumes of ash-burned votive products not only confirm the belief in living in a powerful "underworld", but also show the polarization of rich and poor in contemporary Vietnamese society.

The society is divided between the rich and the poor. As a result, the styles and types of votive product markets are also diversified, and prices are also different, which suits the tastes and needs of the rich as well as the poor. Therefore, the rich often purchase expensive offerings, while the poor use cheap and less valuable objects. Ms. T.T.U, 40 years old, a shopkeeper at Thanh Lãng Market (Haiphong City), said: *"Affordable families often buy expensive votive items such as buildings, cars, motorbikes, jewelry, even brands, etc., while the poor often buy simple paper clothes, shoes, gold coins, and so on."*<sup>16</sup> This may make some poor people who are unable to buy and burn delicate and expensive offerings for their ancestors feel sad. An old woman said: *"When they (the deceased ancestors) were still alive, they did not live a rich life, and now, after death, they still don't have a good house and new furniture."*<sup>17</sup> Therefore, many people are not afraid to "spend much money to buy expensive offerings for their ancestors"<sup>18</sup>.

The buying and burning of a lot of votive paper (even with very expensive votive products) has generally brought votive production and business into the Vietnamese market economy, becoming an important commodity of the spiritual market. The votive market for "the underworld" is "increasingly diversified. The concept of "each period has its own timely products (*thời nào thức ấy*)" and "the secular world is consistent with the underworld (*trần gì âm đấy*)"<sup>19</sup> create jobs and increase income for people engaged in votive production and sales. Mr. N.V.H, 36 years old, a votive products maker in Quảng Thanh (Haiphong City), shared: *"My family has a tradition of manufacturing and selling votive products, which has been passed on for three generations. In recent years, although I have heard people calling not to burn votive items at temples and reduce the amount of burned votive paper at home, my job (votive manufacturing and sales) has not been affected much (laughs). In particular, paper offerings for temples and shrines have increased significantly. On holidays, such as the full moon in July, the number of booking customers is too crowded, and I have to hire many part-time employees to make and deliver the goods."*

He continued: *"No matter how life changes, people are still burning votive products. People can't give up it, just because activities for the living may be roughly organized, but for ancestors and gods, it must always be thoughtfully performed"*<sup>20</sup>.

Despite its long history, the custom of burning votive offerings has flourished according to history, economic development, and people's living standards. During the wars against the French and the US, people encountered many difficulties in their lives, and the burning of votive paper was restricted. However, since the day of liberation, especially since the opening of the market, the people's economic life has improved, and the custom of burning votive paper has widely increased (Thế Vinh 1999).

<sup>16</sup>Quoted from an in-depth interview with Ms. Đ.T.U, Haiphong City, 2018.

<sup>17</sup>Quoted from an in-depth interview with Ms. N.T.T, Haiphong City, 2018

<sup>18</sup>Quoted from an in-depth interview with Ms. N.T.T, Haiphong City, 2018

<sup>19</sup>Quoted from an in-depth interview with Ms. N.T.H, Haiphong City, 2019

<sup>20</sup>Quoted from an in-depth interview with Mr.N.V.H, Haiphong City, 2020.

Until the mid-1990s, economic revival and development were clearly proportional to the custom of dedication. Along with the custom of burning votive paper, the industry of making votive also undergoes a supply-demand division. As a result, what was once called "superstition" now has an opportunity to grow, is fixed on the tax bill, and the place where it is produced is called the "handicraft village" by the state.

Regarding the waste of money, environmental pollution, and the insecurity risks of free-votive burning religious institutions, the National Buddhist Association of Vietnam issued an official letter No. 31/CV-HDTS in February 2018, proposing to eliminate votive paper burning in Buddhist places of worship<sup>21</sup>. The Government's Decree 158/2013 / ND-CP stipulates that for the act of burning votive at inappropriate places on festivals and historical and cultural sites, a warning or a fine of 200,000 VND<sup>22</sup> to 500,000 VND will be imposed<sup>23</sup>. However, the current law does not completely prohibit the votive burning in religious institutions such as temples, pagodas, shrines, or in the family, so the production, sales, and burning of paper offerings by the Vietnamese in the north is maintained and has a trend of development.

In recent years, burning votive paper has developed rapidly and has become a commodity deeply involved in the spiritual life of the people. Nowadays, among Vietnamese families in the north, votive burning not only appears on the Lunar New Year Festival, on the death memorial days of the ancestors, on the first and the fifteenth day of each month (lunar calendar) but also on every day in temples, shrine ceremonies and even in some public state-sponsored events and agencies. It can be said that votive dedication is at the center of important ceremonies in today's Vietnamese social life. The rise of burning paper seems to be similar to Vietnam's socio-economic transformation and the improvement of people's living standards. This is also understandable, because "prosperity may drive the rise of social propriety (*phú quý sinh lễ nghĩa*)". When people's lives become better, they will worship and sacrifice more to the gods and ancestors to seek their blessings and blessings. Especially in high-risk societies, it has laid a good foundation for people to believe in protecting and blessing supernatural powers and thus consolidate more qualified spiritual needs. This is also consistent with the Vietnamese concept "You'll experience sacredness if you venerate the god(s), and you'll enjoy protected comforts if you comply with sacred taboos (*có thờ có thiêng, có kiêng có lành*)".

In fact, spiritual needs reflect the real world people live in. At the same time, people always establish this spiritual need according to their real-life needs. To explain this spiritual need, the Vietnamese have established discourses on the power of faith, which may stimulate the desire for peace and protection. At the same time, in order to practice and maintain this custom, they attached the custom to the traditional "spirit of grateful commemoration (uống

21 The ban on the burning of votive paper in places of worship requires the participation of all-level state departments, Retrieved December 12, 2020, from <https://dangcongsan.vn/tu-tuong-van-hoa/cam-dot-vang-ma-o-cac-co-so-tho-tu-can-su-vao-cuoc-cua-cac-cap-cac-nganh-474742.html>

<sup>22</sup> 22,330 VND = 1 USD.

23 Luật Việt Nam (Vietnam Laws): "Cấm đốt vàng mã - Luật có nhưng chưa đủ! (The ban on burning votive paper: law but not enough)", Retrieved December 12, 2020, from <https://luatvietnam.vn/tin-phap-luat/cam-dot-vang-ma-luat-co-nhung-chua-du-230-15797-article.html>



nước nhớ nguồn)" and "if you pay sacrifice to gods, gods will be by your side" (祭如在, 祭神如神在) to show their sincerity to gods and ancestors.

It is undeniable that the person who burns, makes, and sells votive paper must believe in the support of supernatural forces. However, in the supply and demand market economy, in parallel with inherent spiritual factors, the expectation of "luck and wealth" of all three partners (votive maker, seller, and buyer) in the custom of burning votive paper has clearly shown signs of economic factors. Therefore, votive products and the custom of burning votive products are not only used as sacrifice to gods and the dead but also show the interests and material wishes of the participants.

### **Conclusion**

Since ancient times, the Vietnamese people have attached great importance to family roots and respect for ancestors and gods. This is also one of the important prerequisites for importing and developing the custom of burning votive paper in Vietnam. Traditional customs are the products of constant invention, and the custom of burning votive paper in northern Vietnam is no exception. Therefore, if the habit is not placed in the context of its birth and function, it cannot be decoded.

At present, there are two different views on the custom of burning votive paper. Those who agree said that burning votive showed the love of the living to their ancestors. As "prosperity may drive the rise of social propriety (phú quý sinh lễ nghĩa)", it is understandable that the living people buy and burn various votive offerings for their dead relatives in order to pray for protection and complete life. Because those who learn to respect and pay courtesy to supernatural powers may lead a peaceful life, avoiding risk and uncertainty. However, from an economic perspective, critics believe that the burning of votive paper is a remnant of the old society and one of the causes of backwardness and poverty. The author does not support this view, because, in fact, the places where people burn more paper are not poor, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore. Even in Vietnamese communities in the United States or some other countries in the world, they still burn offering products for the dead in family memorials or public temple ceremonies. Burning paper money is not the result of backwardness or poverty, but the result of development. Because "prosperity may drive the rise of social propriety", when people are rich and have ample material life, they will pay more attention to spiritual activities, so it is reasonable to see the rise of this custom.

The custom of burning votive paper vividly shows conflict and pressure. In the current context, the behind-the-scenes tension surrounding the transformation of this custom creates confrontation, pressure, and tension between individuals and society. Many people raised the question of whether to keep or abolish this custom. In fact, it has been deleted in the past. However, the ban cannot destroy the demand for burning votive paper. Even now, there are still some ideas to reform the model of votive products. For example, the designer Hùng Dingo's idea of reducing the size of dedicated products (compared to the past) not only ensures spirituality but also saves costs, especially to ensure minimal environmental pollution when burning. However, no matter how substitutes are used, spiritual needs still exist. As long as there is a spiritual need, people still burn votive paper.

By studying the performance and role of the votive burning custom in the spiritual life of Vietnam, we can understand why this custom can spread for so long. So far, the ancients

chose to accept and pass on the burning of the votive paper. Therefore, it must have values to a certain extent. However, any abuse may also cause damage. Therefore, burning the votive paper is a good habit or a bad habit, it depends on each person's point of view and behavior. The analysis in Vietnam's recent tradition and modern conceptual framework is consistent with the modernization and development policy of "building and advancing a progressive Vietnamese culture while preserving the national identity (*xây dựng một nền văn hóa tiên tiến đậm đà bản sắc dân tộc*)". In this trend, traditional customs in general, votive paper burning in particular, should not be completely eliminated but should be carefully studied, thoroughly understood, and alternatively screened because it involves the spiritual life, a very sensitive area under the background of international economic integration and cultural globalization.

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