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Introduction to the Special Issue: Food Charity, Religion, and Care in Vietnam

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Abstract: *This introduction to the special issue on food charity, religion, and care in Vietnam compares grassroots philanthropy in Vietnam with broader trends toward religious humanitarianism happening across Asia. The co-editors of the special issue examine why food charity has become popular in urban areas like Ho Chi Minh City by exploring how food holds spiritual, moral significance for both donors and recipients. This survey illuminates how grassroots philanthropy in Vietnam can offer a comparative study for spirituality, ethics, and food practices across Asia, as well as religious humanitarianism globally.*

Keywords*: Vietnam, Buddhism, Religion, Charity, Humanitarianism, Philanthropy, Gender, Affect, Emotion, Care*

The Charity Kitchen: Vignette from Co-Editor Le Hoang Anh Thu

I was walking down a busy street in the center of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (hereafter, HCMC) in March 2022 when a red banner caught my eyes. It stood out from an array of boards advertising grocery stores, motorbike wash shops, street vendors, and an elementary school, with big block letters that read "Charity Kitchen—Cook and deliver meals to hospitals and neighborhoods affected by COVID-19."

Figure 1: Boxes of dried goods are stacked around a white marble statue of the Buddha. A charity group has dedicated these pre-packaged foods and hygienic products to a monastery that provides care to elderly people near Ho Chi Minh City. Photo credit: Sara A. Swenson

Following the instructions of the shop owner, I walked into a narrow alley to the Buddhist temple that operated this charity kitchen. I would not have recognized that it was a temple if there had not been a tall brown statue of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, *Quan Âm Bồ Tát* (Sanskrit: *Avalokitesvara*) standing in one corner and a monk sitting at the door. The temple looked more like a fruit barn, as its space was fully occupied by huge piles of dragon fruit. Several middle-aged and older women in their floral pajamas[1] were hastily putting dragon fruits

1 Women in HCMC, especially those from working class backgrounds, usually wear home clothes to run their errands outside of their house, such as to do grocery shopping or to visit neighbors and relatives.

into small nylon bags. Before I could introduce myself, the monk approached me and invited me to join them in dividing 18 tons of dragon fruits into nylon bags that would later be distributed to hospitals in the city. He was in urgent need of volunteers and, therefore, quickly recruited me as an assistant to the temple's charity kitchen. He dragged over a tiny plastic chair and pointed for me to sit down. A woman sitting nearby immediately enrolled me in the "assembly." My task was simple: put three dragon fruits into one nylon bag and put the bag into a big basket that would be taken to a van when it was full.

I later learned that, even though it was located in a nameless alley, this temple oversaw a very broad transnational network of philanthropists, volunteers, and donors. Their network included Buddhists in the neighborhood who came regularly to help prepare charity meals, farmers from whom the temple bought vegetables and fruits for the charity kitchen, and overseas Vietnamese people who were among the donors for its food charity program. It was well connected with many hospitals, orphanages, schools, communities, and neighborhoods inside and outside the city, to which it distributed charity meals every week. During the COVID-19 outbreak in HCMC, even when the city was in strict social lockdown from June to September 2021, the temple's charity kitchen never ceased its activity of distributing free meals to many neighborhoods and hospitals affected by COVID-19. The temple also donated medicine, surgical masks, hand sanitizer, and money to COVID-19 patients in the city.

This temple is only one example of many Buddhist temples, groups, and individuals that distribute charity meals to people in need across HCMC. During the COVID-19 outbreak in HCMC—in addition to the limited support offered by the state that provided financial assistance and food to affected neighborhoods—Buddhism-based charity teams were prominent providers of food and other necessities to the city residents. These charity teams operated under several names, such as "kitchen of love," "meals of love," "charity kitchen," "0-VND meals," and "0-VND supermarket."[2]

Figure 2: Volunteers divide 18 tons of dragon fruits into nylon bags for charity distribution in a Buddhist temple in Ho Chi Minh City. Photo credit: Le Hoang Anh Thu

Although there have been several studies exploring the mushrooming of voluntary and charitable organizations since the state policy renovation (*Đổi Mới*) in 1986 that transformed Vietnam from a centrally planned socialist system to a mixed-market economy (e.g., Luong 2005; Sidel 1997), few studies have focused on religious charity groups. Even rarer are studies on faith-based charitable distributions of food, despite this practice becoming prevalent in Vietnam and especially visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Food is central to religious practices and charitable movements in Vietnam. Buddhist believers, for example, give away food during certain times in the year, such as during the seventh lunar month or the new lunar year. Many temples and Buddhist groups cook hot meals and deliver them to hospital patients. Donors provide food in all forms, from dried goods and raw ingredients to hot meals. In addition to donations, food charity programs require the participation of many volunteers who help prepare and distribute food. Thus, countless charitable activities occur around the

2 VND is shorthand for the national currency, Việt Nam Đồng.

preparation, distribution, and consumption of food by donors and recipients.

The three articles in this special issue focus particularly on the charitable preparation and distribution of food from Buddhist temples, grassroots groups, and individuals in HCMC and adjacent provinces. Food has rich social and religious significance as a medium of care and nurturance. The authors of this special issue examine how food conveys care and morality while facilitating community relationships among grassroots charities in Vietnam. This special issue aims to contribute to the understanding of the role of religion in the waves of popular volunteerism that have swept the country since the 1990s. The articles explore the question of how sharing food through charity should be considered in relation to social responsibilities, agency, religion, and moral obligations to fellow citizens in Vietnam's contemporary society. The authors seek to understand how food charity connects people across social strata and manifests citizens' moral agency by analyzing the experiences of both donors and recipients.

Context: Faith-Based Charity in Vietnam

The transition to a market economy since the Renovation in 1986 has led to several significant changes in Vietnam's socioeconomic situation. While transition has brought greater economic freedom and expanded the market (London 2014, 90), it has also witnessed the state's declining involvement in the financing of welfare programs. Since the early 1990s, the Vietnamese state has retreated from its dominant roles in welfare institutions and shifted the responsibilities of payment for welfare services to households, the private sector, and faith-based associations (Hoang et al. 2018, 1077; London 2014, 98; Salemink 2006, 105). The state undertook a massive retrenchment of welfare provisioning, especially in healthcare and education (London 2014, 98; Luong 2005, 127). Meanwhile, the private sector mostly caters to the stable-income and middle-class groups, which leaves lower-income populations with a greater burden in affording several basic welfare services. Along with this retrenchment, the state has offered growth incentives to private social service sectors, such as voluntary cooperatives and organizations, while retaining its management and control to ensure that these social organizations do not pose any political challenges to the state (Luong 2005, 125; Sidel 1997).

Amid the proliferation of voluntary and charitable associations, religious-based groups stand out for their social contributions while being "loosely, if at all, connected to the national associations" (Luong 2005, 124). Studying village-based associations in northern Vietnam, Luong (2005, 126) shows that Buddhist communities are the most resilient voluntary groups. Meanwhile, in southern Vietnam, donating to charity has been a longstanding tradition. This practice dates back to the pre-1975 period (when North and South Vietnam were reunified) and continues to benefit from a steady flow of remittances from overseas, as well as a highly developed private sector (Luong 2005, 129).

Among religious-based associations, Buddhist groups have made several significant contributions and are considered "the most common alternative social services in the community" in Vietnam (Tu 2017, cited in Hoang et al. 2018, 1076). In a context of public distrust toward both public and private secular humanitarian organizations and limited options for charity donations, faith-based charities and voluntary groups have received much higher donations for their social activities than organizations run by the government (TAF & VAPEC 2011, cited in Hoang et al. 2018, 1076). Moreover, Buddhist groups have strong community connections and fundraising capacities. Their services are accessible to vulnerable groups, which in turn renders them an important player as the most available social services for many communities in Vietnam's society.

Several studies have highlighted the activities of religious groups in welfare provisioning, especially in health and education (e.g. Hoang et al. 2018; Luong 2005). However, most of these studies fo-

cus on organization-based activities, such as those conducted by Vietnam's state-managed National Buddhist Sangha or prestigious temples, rather than those conducted by grassroots faith-based groups or individuals (Le 2020, 6). A close-up analysis of these religious charity groups—including an examination of how they combine religious beliefs with their volunteer and donation practices—has been rather absent in the literature. Some rare exceptions are studies on mental health care and elder care provided by Buddhist temples (e.g. H. Nguyen 2016; D.M. Nguyen 2020). Although grassroots activities have not received sufficient attention from scholars, they have often been featured and recognized for their work and contributions on national media platforms in Vietnam (Le 2020, 6). Several television programs and YouTube channels feature charitable groups that distribute free meals to the poor and those in need. Some examples are "Kitchen of Love" (*Bếp Yêu Thương*) and "The Miracle" (*Điều Kỳ Diệu*), programs featuring food charity groups in various provinces in Vietnam, broadcasted by Ho Chi Minh City Television (HTV).

The articles collected here contribute to this existing literature by exploring the Buddhist charitable distribution of food from an ethnographic perspective. As Leung and Caldwell explain, food is "central to most occasions for learning and making social relationships" (2019, 4). Food indeed can foster "ethnographic encounters" between researchers and their local interlocutors through its exchanges during fieldwork. These articles feature several ethnographic encounters between the authors, Buddhist charity donors, and recipients. Following a range of food charity programs in HCMC and nearby provinces, the authors in this volume provide an in-depth examination of the motives behind these activities; how they reveal HCMC dwellers' socioeconomic and religious perceptions of food; as well as various food issues faced by vulnerable populations, ranging from food deprivation and food safety to food and material abundance.

Food and Moral Concerns in Vietnam and Beyond

Marshall Sahlins (1972, 220; cited in Leung and Caldwell 2019, 9), contends that the exchange of food always has a "moral purpose," as food is central to social relations. Food thus constructs personal and collective ties, through which moral meanings and connections are made. Expansive studies in the anthropology of food and power further examine how practices of cooking, eating, and sharing food both construct and challenge social hierarchies around gender, class, and ethnicity (see Mintz and Du Bois 2002). As Nir Avieli notes, the culinary sphere serves as "an arena in which cultural production [takes] place" (Avieli 2012, 13). As illustrated in this special issue, not only does food given in charity define the ties between donors and recipients—and thus, between social groups and classes—it also reveals the interactions between people involved in charitable practices with a wide array of moral discourses at play in contemporary Vietnam.

Previous studies have shown that these moral concerns revolve around Buddhist concepts of merit and karma as well as secular concerns such as social hierarchies, connections between social groups, and citizens' expectations toward the state's duties of care (see, for example, Le 2020; Nguyen 2020; Swenson 2020). As explored in this special issue, the interweaving of charitable food and morality involves a wide variety of secular concerns about food and materialism such as issues of food poverty and safety, materialism, and over-consumerism in post-socialist Vietnam. The authors illustrate the moral meanings of food through the gendered and religious dispositions of Buddhist charity donors and recipients, which in turn shapes their exchange of care.

Embedded in Vietnam's food system, it is not surprising that concerns about food safety found in the country's foodscape manifest in the activity of cooking for charity. Having experienced food scarcity and hunger during the war and post-war periods

(Ehlert and Faltmann 2019, 7; Le 2018, 60), contemporary Vietnam is facing a new set of challenges that come with emerging food abundance and mass agricultural production, such as widespread concerns about food safety due to overuse of chemicals during food production, lack of traceability of food origins, social stratification through food consumption (Ehlert and Faltmann 2019, 11), and the questionable quality of imported food (Figuié et al. 2020, 152–3; Swenson 2020, 45).

Meanwhile, past concerns about food security (Ehlert and Faltman 2019, 2) persist in society, especially among vulnerable social groups, thus sprinkling modern-day materialism and food abundance with moral ambiguities. As shown in Le Hoang Ngoc Yen's ethnographic study of a Buddhist temple that treats patients with chronic and terminal diseases using a macrobiotic diet, problems with the food production system and materialistic ways of life are perceived by many as revealing a moral crisis in society. These issues are condemned as the root causes of several severe illnesses and health problems experienced by Vietnamese people such as obesity, diabetes, depression, organ failure, and cancer. Le Hoang Ngoc Yen's paper highlights the interconnection between seemingly scientific questions about nutrition and food hygiene and a number of questions about the morality of Vietnamese society. Food, its safety, and its nutritional values in the eyes of consumers—especially those with chronic and fatal diseases—become the embodiment of moral values in society. Dirty food is conceptualized as a symptom of moral deficiencies caused by rapid economic development and industrialization that have led to a human obsession with wealth, greed, and gluttony. Practitioners therefore follow a macrobiotic diet not merely as an alternative source of nutrients, but also as a "moral project" to cultivate themselves amid the allegedly moral downturn of Vietnam's society.

Placing these studies in a broader regional context—academic work on food and morality in Asian countries has similarly discussed the connections between food, the construction of citizenship, and national identities. Promoting a specific food is often part of the nation-building process. Essays in Leung and Caldwell's (2019) edited volume contend that the consumption of milk, rice, soybean products, and so on is not merely a dietary practice but is even promoted as a moral duty that citizens should perform to respond to their nation-state's agenda. For example, in "Rice as Self" (2019, 23), Francesca Bray maintains that domestic rice is protected against imported rice in Japan and Malaysia because this staple food is believed to be the embodiment of the nations' spiritual and moral essences. By eating domestic rice, citizens construct themselves "socially, physically, spiritually, and morally." Likewise, the consumption of milk and meat as part of daily diets in China and Vietnam is paralleled by the pursuit of modernity, wealth, and power (Ehlert 2019, 117; Fu 2019, 47; Leung 2019, 230). By the same token, soybean milk and vegetarian diets have been promoted in China as "a moral food choice for a modernizing Asian nation" rather than depending intensively on meat-based diets as in the West. On the other hand, soybean-based diets have also been encouraged to maintain China's agricultural and dietary traditions (Fu 2019, 51; Leung 2019, 234).

The articles in this special issue contribute to the discussion by exploring the religious-based moral meanings that Buddhist charity donors bestow on their benevolent works and food. The authors highlight the spiritual and emotional aspects of the process of preparing charitable food for Buddhist charity donors. Moral concerns revolving around food are densely connected to religious values, such as Buddhist teachings of compassion, Buddhist cosmologies about trans-temporal and trans-species kinship, and karmic and merit transmission between lifetimes. Most focused on how Buddhist moral values are infused in food charity practice is Sara Swenson's paper, which features charitable groups and temples that distribute food to vulnerable groups in HCMC. She compares the moral terms that they use to differentiate their projects from one another, and then analyzes how descriptions of charity that emphasize selflessness and empathic giving correlate

with broader nationalist discourses on morality. The author contends that Buddhist charity groups act in accordance with the state's encouragement toward the socialization of care. Socialization emphasizes individuals' responsibility to not only care for their families but also to have compassion for disadvantaged groups in society (see M.T.N. Nguyen 2018).

In addition, the articles in this collection contend that Buddhist volunteers believe that their spiritual and emotional labor bestows their food with moral purity, which in turn offsets several commonly found concerns about food safety and hygiene in Vietnam. Food safety and how Vietnamese consumers tackle this issue to gain trust and confidence in food have attracted substantial academic attention (e.g., Ehlert & Faltmann 2019; Faltmann 2019, Figuié et al. 2019; Kurfurst 2019). A recurrent theme in this research is the issue of trust, be it trust in the food industry or the state. Concerns about food safety centers mostly on the use of artificial chemicals and their residues in ingredients (Figuié et al. 2020, 155). Previous studies have explored the tactics that Vietnamese buyers—most of whom are women, as they are primarily responsible for preparing household meals—employ to overcome their distrust of the food system. For example, Vietnamese women purchase food from the early morning "wet" market to obtain the freshest products, from supermarkets or from their usual retailers, as familiarity with a vendor is sometimes the hallmark of good food quality (Figuié et al. 2020, 156–8). Meanwhile, middle- and higher-income groups opt for organic products (Faltmann 2020).

These special-issue articles highlight the spiritual dimensions that Buddhist followers attribute to widespread concerns about food safety and morality. Dirty food and the overuse of chemicals in production processes do not merely indicate ethical violations in the agricultural and food industries, but they also conceal potential karmic consequences for both producers and consumers. Nevertheless, charity donors in Le Hoang Anh Thu's paper believe that their wholehearted labor and purity of thought will send positive energy into the food that will be passed on to the recipients. Thus, charity cooks' virtues contribute to the development of healthy and safe food despite the widespread issue of dirty food in Vietnamese society. Similarly, Sara Swenson's paper highlights Buddhist volunteers' belief in the effect of the emotional dispositions of charity donors on the holistic well-being of recipients. By comparing Buddhist concepts of "karma" among different charity groups in HCMC, she points out how the nuances of this term translate into different motives and moral meanings that these groups assign to altruism. Likewise, Le Hoang Ngoc Yen highlights Buddhist macrobiotic practitioners' beliefs in merit-making food. They posit that, by consuming certain foods while steering clear of others, patients can avoid bad karma transmitted through the food production process and, in turn, accelerate their recovery.

Situating food charity in the wider moral context of nation- and citizen-building, Le Hoang Anh Thu explores the analogy that female donors make between cooking for recipients and cooking for their own families and how this cross-contextual comparison situates the act of cooking within Vietnam's moral discourse. Perceiving their charity work as taking care, not only of their families, but of everyone in society, female donors see the significance of their everyday work—which is cooking—extended far beyond the domestic space and reaching out to a much wider social context. Their works are praised by the country's media as acts of sustaining "the fire" both of their homes and of the country. Not only does charity food alleviate the suffering of the poor and the needy, but it also sustains the strength and solidarity of the nation in times of hardship. In Le Hoang Ngoc Yen's paper, patients undertaking macrobiotic treatment see a macrobiotic diet as a "return to the root," to the pre-industrial past when Vietnamese people were allegedly healthier and did not suffer from so many chronic and terminal diseases as they currently do. Opting for macrobiotic food, rather than industrially produced food, these practitioners cultivate an alternative subjectivity, as opposed to the one made by greedy and consump-

tion-oriented citizens that they believe many modern Vietnamese people have become.

The Need for Ethnography in Studies of Humanitarianism

In addition to engaging with issues of religion, morality, food security, and nation building, the arguments and findings presented in this special issue are significant for studies of religious humanitarianism transnationally. By offering close ethnographic studies of grassroots movements, the authors demonstrate how philanthropy operates on a spectrum from informal to formal—spanning spontaneous acts of care and bureaucratically organized movements.

Local cultures—including religions—have concepts of subjectivity, care, and ethics that fundamentally shape altruism. Ethnographic research traces these subtle connections, illuminating how dominant religious traditions in any given region affect the organization, function, and reception of humanitarian projects, even when these projects are seemingly secular. Non-religious or state-run facilities like hospitals, orphanages, and assisted-living centers receive support from donors and volunteers motivated by religious values that may go undocumented in studies that lack a qualitative research component. Similarly, informal groups bolster and intersect with formal organizations in ways that are largely invisible through top-down research on humanitarianism at the national or international level. The articles in this special issue offer a model for examining the intersections between religious and non-religious social services, proving the need to include ethnography among standard research methods for exploring the large-scale transformations accompanying development and globalization. As Philip Fountain and Levi McLaughlin write, "Ethnographic accounts are more than just thick descriptions: they produce new interpretive and critical possibilities" (2016, 2). The new critical possibilities produced through this collection reveal how grassroots food charities may particularly appeal to those of previously underrepresented demographics—such as working-class volunteers, women, and people with terminal illness. The articles gathered here offer new analyses of how marginalized communities respond to economic transformations in Vietnam by engaging in food charity. These articles also show how the religious values and practices of grassroots food charities may affect the very realization of national trends—like the privatization of social services, deepening income disparity, and rapid development—as they unfold on the ground.

Grassroots Charity and Industrialized Philanthropy

By centering on grassroots charity, these studies complicate and expand existing narratives around the popularization of philanthropy in Asia. As pre-

viously noted, many studies have surveyed the rise and spread of modern, institutionalized humanitarian organizations across East and Southeast Asia. For example, Robert P. Weller, C. Julia Huang, Keping Wu, and Lizhu Fan's book, *Religion and Charity: The Social Life of Goodness in Chinese Societies* argues that communities in mainland China and the Chinese diaspora support a general shift toward what they call "industrialized philanthropy" (2017, 2). They define industrialized philanthropy by the three common features of (1) large-scale programming, (2) rationalized, bureaucratic systems of operation and leadership, and (3) an emphasis on the self as an autonomous moral subject (Ibid., 2). This third aspect of industrialized philanthropy accompanies a move away from community-based care toward more anonymized giving. For example, rather than providing mutual aid through a village temple or family network, industrialized philanthropy may mobilize cosmopolitan volunteers to serve communities of virtual strangers.[3] By distancing donors from recipients, industrialized philanthropy promotes a universalistic sense of doing good by being a good person, distinct from moral systems defined among long-term community and family relationships (Ibid., 122).

The individualistic moral selfhood promoted by industrialized philanthropy resonates with international trends toward globalization, hyper-mobility, and urbanization. As upwardly mobile workers find themselves far from home, pursuing business and education opportunities, volunteering becomes one way to meet others with shared interests and values. Large-scale humanitarian organizations thus introduce and reifying this new sense of individual moral selfhood, as volunteers model it together, for one another. Weller et al. explore this phenomenon through the case of Taiwan's international Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi organization (Ibid., 105–106), which has gained branches and grown in popularity among the Taiwanese diaspora population.

Weller et al.'s theorization of industrialized philanthropy is applicable to many contemporary contexts in comparison with the Chinese societies featured in their study. Fountain and McLaughlin trace a similar rise in professionalized, institutionalized forms of religious philanthropy to provide disaster-relief in Asia (2016). They describe how local, faith-based charities have become increasingly modernized and professionalized as they move to address the aftermath of natural disasters. These changes include increasing levels of bureaucratization as governments begin to regulate and audit faith-based efforts at organizing aid (Ibid., 14). The increasing rationalization of religious charity identified by Fountain and McLaughlin parallels the transformations described by Weller et al. Hiroko Kawanami likewise identifies a shift in how charity is given among Buddhist communities in Burmese Myanmar. Kawanami notes that Buddhist groups have adopted more programmatic forms of giving following the model of international humanitarian aid organizations that arrived after the 2008 Cyclone Nargis (2020, 140). Finally, Nattaka Chaisinthop's research on Buddhist humanitarianism in Thailand examines how a boom in volunteer programs is tied to changing concepts of moral citizenship and nationalism (2014). In each of these cases, the development of formalized charity is tied to the same themes of globalization and modernization described by Weller et al., on a range of scales.

Implicitly present in many studies of industrialized philanthropy is the theme of class: upward mobility, travel, and education facilitate the international connections that fuel large-scale humanitarianism. Increased leisure time and financial resources have enabled such programs to develop with support from wealthy donors and volunteers—particularly, in the case of Tzu Chi, among middle-class women (Huang and Weller 1998, 392). At the same time, experiences of urban alienation, "moral breakdown" (Zigon 2007), exposure to political struggles (Chaisinthop 2014), and a perceived decline in traditional forms of care[4]—drive volunteers to seek new forms of moral identity. While charity provides a way to gain social capital and assert status—as Jeffrey Samuels

3 Weller et al. trace these shifting histories of religious philanthropy in Malaysia, Taiwan, and China (2017, 20–53).

4 Di Febo 2020 analyzes how a perceived breakdown in traditional forms of care drives new Buddhist charity practices in Japan.

notes in his study of Sri Lankan Buddhist relief work in Malaysia (2016, 69)—it is also a way of building community and seeking belonging amid rapid cultural, political, and economic change.

The articles in this special issue expand studies of philanthropy through and beyond the industrial by shifting the focus toward the margins of society. These studies foreground groups who have not yet accessed upward mobility, higher education, or whose demographic positions make it much harder to improve social status due to factors like gender, sexual orientation, or physical ability. Women, working-class lay people, low-ranking nuns, and people with terminal illnesses become leading voices in these articulations of non-industrialized philanthropy. These voices offer an alternative perspective on how the same trends toward urbanization, modernization, and globalization manifest differently among diverse demographic groups. Rather than reinforcing concepts of autonomous moral selfhood or rationalized universal goodness, these articles show how the positionality of volunteers profoundly affects their understandings and experiences of morality. Positionality thus powerfully impacts the way charity is interpreted, organized, and performed at the grassroots level, through the lens of "lived religion" (Orsi 2010).

Grassroots Food Charity and Lived Religion

The concept of "lived religion" is vital to broadening research on religious humanitarianism because it emphasizes how beliefs and practices shape whole experiences of the world, from the mundane to the extraordinary. Rather than limiting religion to the realms of systematic philosophy or institutionalized traditions, this approach encourages an analysis of religion in minute daily interactions. Approaching food charity as lived religion further emphasizes how food is fundamentally social. Food mediates relationships and power dynamics by illuminating who gives and who receives, who makes and who consumes. Because food is vital to life, access to food is inherently an ethical issue. People engage with religions to both explain and determine these dynamics, especially as religions provide cosmological frameworks for understanding the nature of nourishment, embodiment, and care.

Food appears as a key component of lived religion in Le Hoang Ngoc Yen's article, "Eat, Pray, Heal? – Prescribing Macrobiotic Foods in a Vietnamese Temple." The selection of ingredients, as well as their sourcing and preparation, is a means of healing through the macrobiotic diets prescribed by Brown Rice Temple's leading monk. Her work offers a close ethnographic study of how Buddhist theories of emotion, embodiment, and materiality all manifest through the foods delivered to cancer patients seeking care. The patients and monastics she met during fieldwork historically attribute macrobiotics to Zen Buddhism, noting that the diet requires balancing *yin* and *yang* elements typically associated with Daoism. The perfect confluence of these cosmological systems further shows how religions, on the ground, may draw from multiple historical, philosophical, and practical sources simultaneously. Rather than parsing these sources, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of religion and social movements like food charity by considering why labeling something "Buddhist" is important to local groups in any given context.

Le Hoang Anh Thu's article, "Keeping Alight the Kitchen Fire: Food Charity and Communal Solidarity in Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam)," takes an alternative approach to lived religion by proposing that women gain social capital and agency through participating in Buddhism-based food charities. Her research highlights how women's socialization to domestic care both inspires their interests in charity and shapes their programming styles. Le Hoang Anh Thu's work neatly complements research by C. Julia Huang on middle-class women's involvement with Tzu Chi and industrialized philanthropy more broadly. While Huang analyzes the class dynamics of leisure time and femininity on women's volunteering in international Buddhist organizations, Le Hoang Anh Thu's article foregrounds working class

women involved with local, informal groups. She argues that women's volunteerism blurs distinctions between domestic and public labor as women apply their cooking skills and perceived nurturing instincts to caretaking beyond the home. State media portrays this labor as a source of civic pride and solidarity, elevating gendered domestic work to the level of a nation-building project. As women prepare food for charitable distribution, they draw on Buddhist concepts of the mind and emotion to imbue their meals with moralized affects of pure compassion. These affects are also determined by feminized ethics of how to care for one's family. Altogether, Le Hoang Anh Thu's work demonstrates how the socialization of women in Vietnam influences their interpretations and application of Buddhist ethics through food charity. In turn, Buddhist ethics of food charity take on a distinctly feminine quality as they are enacted through domestic models of care. Through this article, scholars may surmise that Buddhism also affects Vietnamese nation-building projects, at large, by subtly shaping women's philanthropy.

Sara Swenson's article, "The Merit of Meat: Karma as Social Fact among Food Charities in Vietnam," explores the theme of lived religion by comparing how different understandings of karma motivate a variety of charity programs among volunteers. Her work traces how leaders and participants in each group hold distinct interpretations of karma that correspond to conflicting choices to serve meat or not when providing free meals to homeless people and cancer patients. These tensions show how the social positions and life experiences of volunteers lead them to a variety of experiences with Buddhist ethics, further emphasizing the importance of resisting meta-narratives when describing regional trends toward religious humanitarianism. She extends this argument beyond scholarly treatments of Buddhism to advocate for more nuanced approaches to religious humanitarianism at large. The article critiques Didier Fassin's argument that international humanitarianism is generally rooted in Christian concepts of compassion and sacrifice. Fassin proposes that humanitarianism thereby imposes an unfair burden of debt and gratitude on recipients, for whom reciprocity is structurally impossible. Conversely, Sara Swenson argues that this analysis occludes the possibility for alternative understandings of giving and reciprocity based on non-Christian religious cosmologies. In the context of her own research, Buddhist teachings suggest different dynamics between nature, subjectivity, and ethics that affect how reciprocity functions. Scholars must attend to ways religious cosmologies influence seemingly universal acts like sharing food in order to perceive how diverse worldviews lead to different concrete, material outcomes over time. Even seemingly small programming distinctions, such as whether to serve meat with free meals or not, can begin to affect broader social phenomena like market trends.

Overall, this special issue offers research on Buddhism and food charity in Vietnam as a blueprint for future research on religious humanitarianism internationally. Each of these articles models how to analyze "lived religion" in scholarship on food, development, and philanthropy. The specific articles offer additional insights on how gender, health, class, and spirituality affect experiences of social change as globalization and urbanization transform daily life across Asia. These studies compel more serious treatment of grassroots charity movements as essential to contemporary humanitarianism at both local and global levels.

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