

Building a New House for the Buddha:
Buddhist Social Engagement and Revival in Vietnam, 1927-1951

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A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2015

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Abstract

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Professor Christoph Giebel
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This study investigates social engagement of Vietnamese Buddhists from 1927 to 1951. It argues that the social engagement was a product of the Vietnamese Buddhist revival – which emerged in the 1920's. During the revival, Vietnamese Buddhists attempted to remake their religion into a this-worldly Buddhism. They established Buddhist associations, periodicals and monastic schools to propagate the Dharma. Their goal was to use Buddhism to effectively deal with the colonization of the country by the French and the challenges posed by colonial modernity.

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List of Buddhist Associations

The All-Vietnam Buddhist Association

Tổng Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam

Established on May 6, 1951 in Hue, Annam, Vietnam

The Annam Buddhist Association

Annam Phật Học Hội

Société d'étude et d'exercice de la religion du bouddhisme en Annam

Established in 1932 in Hue, Annam, Vietnam

Led by the monk Giác Tiên and the layman Dr. Lê Đình Thám

Published the periodical *Viên Âm*

The Cochinchina Buddhist Association

Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Hội

Association pour l'étude et la conservation du bouddhisme en Cochinchine

Established in 1931 in Saigon, Cochinchina, Vietnam

Led by the monk Lê Khánh Hòa and layman Trần Nguyên Chấn

Published the periodical *Từ Bi Âm*

The Tonkin Buddhist Association

Hội Phật Học Bắc Kỳ

Association bouddhique au Tonkin

Established in 1934 in Hanoi, Tonkin, Vietnam

Led by the monk Trí Hải and the layman Nguyễn Năng Quốc

Published the periodical *Đuốc Tuệ*

The Tourrane Buddhist Association

Đà Thành Phật Học Hội

Established in 1937 in Tourrane, Annam, Vietnam

Led by the monk Bích Liên

Affiliated with the Annam Buddhist Association

Published the periodical *Tam Bảo*

The Two-River Buddhist Association

Lưỡng Xuyên Phật Học Hội

Established in 1934 in Trà Vinh, Cochinchina, Vietnam

Led by the monk Lê Khánh Hoà

Published the periodical *Pháp Âm*

Note on Translation and Naming Convention

Some of the Buddhist associations that this study focuses on had multiple names. For instance, the Annam Buddhist Association had one in French and another in Vietnamese. These names also were not equivalent. The discrepancies in translations of these names are important. But this study chooses to translate the commonly used names that appeared in Buddhist periodicals. In addition, this study chooses to drop the term “studies” (học) from the translation to prevent confusion with the field of Buddhist studies and to focus on practice. In English, the term “Buddhist studies” denotes the academic study of Buddhism instead of the act of learning and practicing Buddhism – which the Buddhists inhabited this study strived to do.

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Glossary

Chấn hưng Phật giáo:	Buddhist revival
Giới:	Precepts
Hội Phật Học:	Buddhist Association
Nhà Phật:	House of the Buddha or Buddhism
Nhập gian Phật giáo:	(Socially) Engaged Buddhism
Quốc ngữ:	National language or Vietnamese language
Phật giáo Việt Nam:	Vietnamese Buddhism
Phật tử:	Laypeople, children of the Buddha
Sangha:	The Monastic Community of Monks
Quy y:	Take refuge in the Three Jewels
Tam Bảo:	The Three Jewels – Buddha, Dharma and Sangha
Tu:	Self-Betterment

Acknowledgments

Historians, like runners, are solitary creatures. But I could not have completed this study alone. This was a journey. It began with my wife Vân – who not only introduced me to academia but also encouraged me to pursue it. And along the way, I met many incredible people, made some life-long friends and learned a few important things about life and family.

I would like to thank the Department of History at University of Washington (UW) for the support and guidance. I am indebted to my committee members Christoph Giebel, Raymond Jonas, Charles “Biff” Keyes and Laurie Sears. Also, I owe particular thanks to Francisco “Kiko” Benitez, Sara Van Fleet, Kathie Friedman, Joe Hannah, Judith Henchy, Gene Kim, Vicente Rafael, Christina Sunardi, Lynn Thomas, Jonathan Warren, Sasha Su-Ling Welland and Kathleen Woodward.

I also wish to thank the Center for West European Studies and the Southeast Asia Center at UW for awarding me with multiple Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship for French and Thai at the beginning of my graduate career.

My research abroad was made possible by a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship provided by the U.S. Department of Education. Dissertation write-up was supported by a Graduate School Presidential Dissertation Fellowship and a Society of Scholars Fellowship from the Simpson Center for the Humanities at UW.

The research for this study took place in Vietnam, France and the US. I am eternally grateful to all of those who helped me along the way. In Vietnam, I would like to thank Nguyễn Phương Châm and Lê Hồng Lý at Viện Nghiên Cứu Văn Hóa Việt Nam in Hanoi; Nguyễn Phước Bảo Đàn and Lê Thọ Quốc at Phân Viện Văn Hoá Nghệ Thuật Việt Nam in Hue; Nguyễn Chính Trung, Thích Đồng Bông and Hoàng M. at Chùa Xá Lợi in Ho Chi Minh City; Thích

Không Hạnh and staff at Tu Viện Huệ Quang in Ho Chi Minh City; Thích Nữ Tịnh An and Lê Mạnh Thát at Vạn Hạnh University in Ho Chi Minh City; Cù Thị Dung, Linh, Thành and staff at Trung Tâm Lưu Trữ Quốc Gia 2 in Ho Chi Minh City; Lê Văn Lợi, Nguyễn Văn Thuận and the family of Võ Đình Cường; and the staff at the General Sciences Library in Ho Chi Minh City.

In France, I would like to thank Pascal Bourdeaux, Cầm Tuấn, Nguyễn Phương Ngọc, Trịnh Văn Thảo, Võ Quang Yến and the staff at Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence, Bibliothèque nationale de France and Maison de l'Asie in Paris. In the US, I would like to thank the staff at UW Interlibrary Loan.

I have also benefited from the support and advice from friends and colleagues near and far. I would like to thank Cheryll Alipio, Joe Bernado, Micaela Campbell, McKay Caruthers, Bradley Davis, Dương Bích Hạnh, Đào Thế Đức, Đoàn Thị Tuyền, Chris Grorud, Chi Ha, Shirley Henderson, Hoàng Cầm, Allan Lumba, Marites Mendoza, Nguyễn Dịu Hương, Trung Nguyen, Jon Olivera, Evi Sutrisno, Nu-Anh Tran, and the 2014-2015 Society of Scholars Fellows.

The circuitous itinerary for research was draining. But family, old and new, in Sacramento, Grand Rapids, L.A., Paris, Saigon, Hue and Adelaide kept me going. I would like to thank my parents Minh and Thu Thu; my brother Hiền, his partner Tú Linh and daughter An Chi; my in-laws Thanh, Loan, Ngan and Tran; chú Thành, dì Thái, Ti anh, Ti em and Na; cậu Thuyết and family; cô Tịnh Diệu, bác Hạnh, bác Cê, Bảo, Ân, Nhiên, Belle and May; Crispin and Trang; bác Phó, bác Mỹ, Sô đa and Sylvain; dì Tâm and chú Mỹ; bác Chiến, cô Trang, Huy and Dana; o Thu, chú Ty, Dan and Lou; chú Bê, dì Lan, Be and Albert; dì Hòa, dượng, dì Lan, Sébastien, Mai, Chris, Lin and others in Noisiel; and Phục and the tennis weekend warriors.

Last but not least, I could not have done this without the love and support of my wife Vân. She's my rock. We gave up our apartment in Seattle, packed up our belongings into seven suitcases, and took our six-month old daughter Sophie-Ly to Vietnam and France. We survived! We probably will not do it again with our second daughter Sylvie-Ly (Rainbow), but we can share our stories and a future sans dissertation with her. Both Sophie and Sylvie have taught me that there is life beyond academia, and that being happy is essential to living – and learning.

Dedication

To my wife Khánh Vân.

Introduction

In 1967, Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh coined the term “Engaged Buddhism” (nhập gian Phật giáo) to describe the kind of Buddhism that he hoped to develop in Vietnam. In fact, the term first appeared in his famous book *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* – which offered the Buddhist perspective on the Vietnam War.¹ In his book, Thích Nhất Hạnh, who was a leading peace activist in the Republic of Vietnam at the time, not only outlined a Buddhist proposal for peace but also argued for actualizing an Engaged Buddhism that could “further the cause of peace.”²

The Engaged Buddhism that Thích Nhất Hạnh envisioned was a Buddhism that would “translate the wisdom and compassion that Buddhists strive to develop into concrete action.”³ When asked “Why engagement?” Thích Nhất Hạnh simply answered: “Buddhism has always been engaged.”⁴ While Thích Nhất Hạnh insisted that social engagement had always been the nature of Buddhism, this study demonstrates that, in Vietnam, Buddhist social engagement was instead a product of the Buddhist revival (chấn hưng Phật giáo) – which began in the late 1920’s.

The primary intervention of this study is to treat social engagement of Vietnamese Buddhists as a break from tradition – a cultural change. Most scholarship on Engaged Buddhism typically views the subject as a modern expression of Buddhist spirituality anchored deeply in tradition.⁵ In this view, Buddhism remains a static philosophy rather than a dynamic religion

¹ Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 42.

² Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Vietnam*, 94.

³ Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009), 4.

⁴ Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, 8.

⁵ For example, see *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism*, RoutledgeCurzon Critical Studies in Buddhism (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); Sallie B.

with practitioners actively changing their religion through engaging with social issues.⁶ During the 1920's in Vietnam, a new consciousness emerged due to a variety of economic and social changes brought on by French colonialism. "There was a growing conviction that one's life was not preordained, that one need not eat dirt forever, that one could join with others to force change."⁷ Vietnamese Buddhists, like other revolutionaries at the time, remade their religion to engage with change.

This study also provides a thick historical description of Buddhist social engagement from the mid 1920's to the early 1950's in Vietnam.⁸ In other words, this study traces the development of Vietnamese Engaged Buddhism in its historical context, thereby imbuing Buddhist actions with meaning. To complete my analysis, I use a methodological approach that locates cultural change not in doctrine but in "practice."⁹ I also take into account the epistemic anxieties experienced by Vietnamese Buddhists – which Ann Stoler defined as the "reassessments" that "called into question the epistemic habits on which they were based."¹⁰ I

King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*; Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism*, Topics in Contemporary Buddhism (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005).

⁶ For a critical history of the study of Buddhism in the West, see *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1995). The chapters in this collection not only informed me of the Orientalist history of Buddhist studies but also provided me with a new approach to studying Engaged Buddhism.

⁷ David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 2.

⁸ For more on "thick description," see chapter 1 "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, 2000 ed (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

⁹ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

¹⁰ I applied Ann Stoler's method of reading "along the archival grain" to Buddhist archives. And along the grain, I brought focus to the anxieties experienced by Vietnamese Buddhists, which were not at all in line with the communist master narrative of national liberation. Ann Laura

argue that this cultural change began with such anxieties – which shaped actions through making new meanings – and ended with a selective reading of doctrine to legitimize the change. This methodological approach has been used, for example, by anthropologists and sociologists to theorize other cultural practices, and by historians to examine the relationship between European colonialism and the creation of tradition in Southeast Asia.¹¹

Vietnamese Buddhism

For many scholars, Buddhism entered what we now call Vietnam in the first century by sea via the Indian Ocean and by land via China. The dominant branch of Vietnamese Buddhism was Mahayana (The Great Vehicle).¹² Within the Mahayana branch, the two streams of thought that had the greatest influence on Vietnamese Buddhism were the Pure Land (Tịnh Độ) and Zen (Ch’an, Thiền) traditions. Situating the place of these streams in East Asia, Chappell wrote:

Pure Land and Ch’an [Zen] are often described as the two major poles of Buddhist practice in East Asia. Pure Land devotees emphasize the inadequacies of their own capacities and the futility of their times; salvation can only be achieved at another time (in the next rebirth), in another place (the Western Pure Land), and through another power (Amitabha Buddha). By contrast, Ch’an affirms the completeness of the present moment and human capacities...arguing for the nonduality of oneself and the Buddha, as well as the identity of this realm with the Pure Land. Whereas Pure Land devotionalism calls upon an external power, Ch’an affirms self-reliance and rejects dependence on external religious objects.¹³

Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 4.

¹¹ The theoretical framework of this study builds on theories of culture and practice introduced by Geertz and Bourdieu. See Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*; and Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. This study also relies on the work by Sears to explore the relationship between tradition, colonialism and authenticity. See Laurie J Sears, *Shadows of Empire: Colonial Discourse and Javanese Tales* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

¹² For more on “origins” of Vietnamese Buddhism, see Nguyễn Tài Thư and Minh Chi, *Lịch Sử Phật Giáo Việt Nam* (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1988), 10. Thích Mật Thể, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Lược* (Đà Nẵng: Minh Đức, 1960), XV.

¹³ Quoted in Shawn Frederick McHale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2004), 146.

Similarly to Chinese, Vietnamese Buddhists did not adhere to a singular sect or school of Buddhism. They instead borrowed freely from Pure Land and Zen Buddhism. For popular devotional practice, “most Vietnamese Buddhists followed a simple version of Pure Land doctrine.”¹⁴ In other words, Pure Land had greater influence on popular Buddhism than Zen did.

The monk Thiệu Chử commented:

If one asked Buddhists in our country what school they belonged to, 99 percent would reply that they belonged to the Pure Land school. If one asked what one had to do to be a Pure Land believer, then most would reply: The Saha world [i.e., this world of suffering] is very miserable. One must pray to be reborn out of it to enjoy the pleasures of paradise. If one asks what one must do to be reborn in paradise, the majority will say that you need only pray to the Buddha, pray to be quickly released from this world to go over that shore [i.e., to the Pure Land].¹⁵

Despite its popularity, the Pure Land stream is often slighted for its devotional practices. For instance, scholars in Vietnam “have often presented the Lý and Trần dynasties (1009-1400) as the high point of Buddhist influence, when the dominant ‘schools of Vietnamese Zen were founded.’ From this ‘golden age,’ they argue, Vietnamese Buddhism entered a slow, uneven decline.”¹⁶

Perspectives on Decline

At this point, we must ask, did Vietnamese Buddhism decline? It is difficult to answer this question because it depends on perspective. For revivalists, Vietnamese Buddhism was in great decline. The images that revivalists painted in their literature were of “famous historical pagodas crumbling to dust; the *sangha* [the monastic community of monks] filled with ignorant, superstitious, and money-grubbing monastics; monks forgetting their vows with lifestyles no

¹⁴ McHale, *Print and Power*, 146.

¹⁵ Quoted in McHale, *Print and Power*, 147.

¹⁶ McHale, *Print and Power*, 147.

different from lay people.”¹⁷ Beyond the Buddhist realm, the perception by the public was more severe. People believed that Vietnamese Buddhism could not respond to the crises brought on by “colonial modernity,” especially when compared to the ongoing communist revolution, and that Vietnamese Buddhism was losing its supporters to new popular religious sects, such as Caodaism and Hòa Hảo.¹⁸

The perception held by Vietnamese revivalists, as Thien Do explained, was subjective and ideological. The long history of Vietnamese Buddhism is filled with tropes of “golden ages” and periods of “decline.” For Neo-Confucian court officials, Vietnamese Buddhism had been in decline for “at least four centuries” since the Trần dynasty (1225-1400) due to “the state’s adoption of Confucianism as its central ideology” and only saw “revitalization” in the “late nineteenth century.”¹⁹ But for Zen monks, Vietnamese Buddhism had long been infiltrated by foreign “Tantric knowledge” and popular religions.²⁰ Thien Do, thus, suggested a re-reading of the term “decline.” For him, the term “should read only as ‘ascendancy of neo-Confucianist court officials in political and ideological spheres’ and their privileging of a Zen fundamentalism as part of their centralizing strategy.”²¹

¹⁷ Elise Anne DeVido, “‘Buddhism for This World:’ The Buddhist Revival in Vietnam, 1920 to 1951, and Its Legacy,” in *Modernity and Re-Enchantment: Religion in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), 254.

¹⁸ Following Tani Barlow, I employ the term “colonial modernity” throughout this work to focus on the overlapping of the colonial and modernist discourses. Also, as Barlow suggests, the term offers a different perspective – which not only decenters the location of modernity in Europe and the US but also brings attention to the many forms of modernity developing in Asia. For more, see Tani E. Barlow, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Positions* 1, no. 1 (March 20, 1993): v-vii.

¹⁹ Thien Do, “The Quest for Enlightenment and Cultural Identity: Buddhism in Contemporary Vietnam,” in *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-Century Asia* (London: Pinter, 1999), 255.

²⁰ Do, “The Quest for Enlightenment and Cultural Identity,” 256.

²¹ Quoted in Do, “The Quest for Enlightenment and Cultural Identity,” 258.

Contradictory evidence also complicates the claim of decline by revivalists. As Li Tana noted, not only Vietnamese Buddhism flourished under the Nguyễn patronage during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but also “at times both Lê kings and Trịnh chúa [lords] patronized Buddhism, some enthusiastically.”²² Also, as Thien Do pointed out, many historic pagodas, “98 of 377 pagodas” (25 percent) to be exact, were still receiving “direct attention” from the ruling elite of the Nguyễn dynasty (1802-1945) to at least 1900. And by direct attention, Do meant that the pagodas were “repaired” or given “land to supplement income” or “royal recognition.”²³

In addition, as Thích Nhất Hạnh commented, before the 1920’s and during the revival period, high-ranking monks developed Buddhism by traveling throughout Vietnam and holding well-attended lectures, as well as reprinting sutras in Chinese and translating them into *quốc ngữ* (national language).²⁴ And as Shawn McHale argued, the abundance of Buddhist tracts and sutras published during colonial time preceded the revival, for “the publication of writings that came out of the Buddhist revival was only a part of a larger urge to publish and spread the dharma.”²⁵

Historiography of the Revival

The historiography of modern Vietnamese history tends to focus on the anti-colonial struggle and the communist revolution. From hindsight, this focus reduces the knotty and oftentimes multi-stranded history into a straight and narrow line and legitimizes and prioritizes

²² Li Tana, Cornell University., and Southeast Asia Program., *Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1998), 107.

²³ Do, “The Quest for Enlightenment and Cultural Identity,” 258.

²⁴ Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận*, vol. 3 (Hà Nội: Văn học, 1994), 17.

²⁵ McHale, *Print and Power*, 171.

the role of the communist party. As a result, the impact of any alternative history, such as that of the Vietnamese Buddhist revival, is measured against the nationalist aim of independence then, to no surprise, deemed insignificant.

Scholarship on the Vietnamese Buddhist revival carries this assessment, as it has been brief and dismissive. According to Elise Anne DeVido, “there is no full-length study in any language on the Vietnamese Buddhist revival.”²⁶ The third volume of Nguyễn Lang’s (Thích Nhất Hạnh) *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Lược* (History of Vietnamese Buddhism) came the closest, but it lacks critical analysis.²⁷ Similarly, the recent edited work *Phong Trào Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo* (The Buddhist Revival Movement) by Nguyễn Đại Đồng and Nguyễn Thị Minh reprinted an abundance of Buddhist sources without comments or analysis.²⁸ In fact, Nguyễn Thị Minh used these sources for her dissertation on monastic education reforms born out of the revival. Her dissertation, however, treated the revival as a fragmented movement and, therefore, limited its impact only to monastic education.²⁹ The monk Thích Mật Thể deemed the revival unsuccessful since he overlooked the achievements made by lay Buddhists.³⁰ Trần Văn Giàu’s seminal work *Sự Phát Triển của Tư Tưởng ở Việt Nam từ Thế Kỷ XIX đến Cách Mạng Tháng Tám* (The Development of Ideology in Vietnam from the 19th Century to the August Revolution) only recognizes the place of the revival in intellectual debates while judging it inferior to the

²⁶ DeVido, “‘Buddhism for This World:’ The Buddhist Revival in Vietnam, 1920 to 1951, and Its Legacy,” 252.

²⁷ See Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận*.

²⁸ See Nguyễn Đại Đồng and Nguyễn Thị Minh, eds., *Phong Trào Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo: Tư Liệu Báo Chí Việt Nam Từ 1927-1938* (Hanoi: NXB Tôn Giáo, 2008).

²⁹ See Nguyễn Thị Minh, “Buddhist Monastic Education and Regional Revival Movements in Early 20th Century Vietnam” (The University of Wisconsin - Madison, 2007).

³⁰ See Thích Mật Thể, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Lược*.

communist revolution in terms of ideologies and organization.³¹ Finally, Nguyễn Tài Thư's *Lịch Sử Phật Giáo Việt Nam* (History of Buddhism in Vietnam), though sensitive to the religious context and the multitudes of perspectives, judged the revival "limited," for those who wanted to transcend such limit had to leave Buddhism and join the communist revolution.³²

As for works in English, Alexander Woodside's *Community and Revolution in Vietnam* and David Marr's *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, both share Trần Văn Giàu's evaluation of the revival.³³ In *Community and Revolution in Vietnam*, Woodside devoted a section to the Vietnamese Buddhist revival, so that he could compare it to the communist revolution. Woodside ultimately deemed that "[i]n numbers and in organization, the Buddhist revival was no match for the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao movements; in organizational potency, it was no match for the communists."³⁴ In *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, Marr judged that the Buddhist organizations, which were born out the revival, had "limited national significance," and that as a philosophy, Buddhism only made an impact among Vietnamese intellectuals.³⁵

Finally, Shawn McHale's *Print and Power*, though devoting a chapter to the revival, still examines it within the narrow context of intellectual debates and texts before drawing conclusion that the revival had a "limited impact."³⁶ In sum, by viewing the revival only with reference to the political history of Vietnam during the colonial period, scholars rendered the religious character of the movement invisible.

³¹ See Trần Văn Giàu, *Sự Phát Triển của Tư Tưởng ở Việt Nam từ Thế Kỷ XIX đến Cách Mạng Tháng Tám* (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1973).

³² Nguyễn Tài Thư and Minh Chi, *Lịch Sử Phật Giáo Việt Nam*, 472.

³³ See Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*; Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976).

³⁴ Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*, 193.

³⁵ Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, 306.

³⁶ McHale, *Print and Power*, 7.

National Religion and Colonial Marking

Nationalism was the driving force behind the Vietnamese Buddhist revival. As Confucianism failed as a morality and national ideology to cope with colonial modernity, “many young Vietnamese intellectuals of the 1920’s and 1930’s were researching for a religion to replace Confucianism.”³⁷ Buddhism, for its compassion, seemed like a good substitute at the time.

The relationship between nationalism and Buddhism plays out in the different translations of the term “Phật giáo Việt Nam.” The term can be translated as “Buddhism in Vietnam” or “Vietnamese Buddhism.” The former is the typical choice for translation because it essentializes the “spirit” and unchanging “lineage” of Buddhism being transmitted from India to Vietnam.³⁸ For this study, however, the latter is more fitting because it captures the nationalist imaginings by Vietnamese Buddhists, particularly of the laity, and the colonial marking on these imaginings.

This study is also in conversation with Subaltern Studies, as it attempts to unravel the relationship between Vietnamese Buddhism and French colonialism. In fact, Partha Chatterjee’s *The Nation and Its Fragments* sets the backdrop for this study. In his work, Chatterjee argues that Indian nationalism allowed “no encroachment by the colonizer” on the “inner core of the national culture.”³⁹ Specifically, this study is in dialogue with the following works on Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia – which were, to a certain extent, influenced by Partha Chatterjee’s work – and also with the spectrum of arguments that these works present.

³⁷ Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, 115.

³⁸ For an example, see the translation of Nguyễn Tài Thư, Minh Chi., and Vietnam) Viện Triết Học, *History of Buddhism in Vietnam* (Hanoi: Social Sciences Pub. House, 1992).

³⁹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

First, at one end of the spectrum, Penny Edwards turns Chatterjee's argument on its head. In her work *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945*, Edwards argues that the “[Cambodian] nationalist did not produce a national culture. Rather, the elaboration of a national culture by French and Cambodian literati eventually produced nationalists.”⁴⁰ And to make her argument, Edwards traces the nationalist project of making Buddhism a national religion in colonial Cambodia.

Second, in her work *Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism and Modernity in Sri Lanka*, Anne Blackburn gives colonial subjects more agency than Edwards did. To make her case, Blackburn focuses on Sri Lankan Buddhists, particularly the scholar monk Hikkaduwe Sumangala (1827-1911), and the ways in which Sri Lankan Buddhists would change their expressions according to the closeness of British colonialism. For instance, “in specific contexts where it was virtually demanded by colonial oversight, they would express themselves according to the expectations of a colonial or European vision of religion, politics, or history.” And when they were further away from the center or the colonial government, “novel elements were used in more piecemeal ways, usually in the service of modes of expression that had a longer history of thought and practice.”⁴¹

Third, like Blackburn, Anne Hansen conceptualizes the relationship between the colonized and colonizer as a two-way street. In her work *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930*, Hansen reframes the relationship between Cambodian Buddhist monks and French colonialists as a “collusion.” She explains, “The

⁴⁰ Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 7.

⁴¹ Anne M. Blackburn, *Locations of Buddhism : Colonialism and Modernity in Sri Lanka* (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), xiii.

relationship between colonial policies and ideologies and the emergence of modern Buddhism was part symbiosis, part subversion, part a war of wills and deep ideological commitments, and part collaboration.”⁴²

Finally, at the other end of the spectrum, Justin McDaniel completely disregards the influence French colonialism had, if any, on Lao Buddhism. In his book *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand*, he presents Laos as a special case, where French colonialism was “not an overwhelming and internally consistent colonial ideological machine that attempted to change all modes of Lao intellectual and religious expression.” Rather, many colonial experts, particularly the scholars of the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* (the French School of the Far East), were “not trying to discount the local and the present in favor of the ancient and the pan-Asian. Their concerns were highly local.”⁴³

This study, though finding its place in the middle of the spectrum, adds a different dimension to the relationship between Buddhism and colonialism. Similar to the works by Anne Blackburn and Anne Hansen, this study views the relationship between Vietnamese Buddhism and French colonialism as a two-way street. But unlike the four works mentioned above, this study brings in the laity. In the aforementioned works, the relationship between Buddhism and colonialism is a direct one with Buddhist monks interacting with colonial experts and vice versa. These works ignore the laity, important actors, with members traversing the two worlds. This study treats the laity as intermediaries or mediators who facilitated the interactions between Buddhism and colonialism through their colonial knowledge. Most important, perhaps, members

⁴² Anne Ruth Hansen, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930*, Southeast Asia--Politics, Meaning, Memory (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 110.

⁴³ Justin McDaniel, *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand* (University of Washington Press, 2012), 42.

of the laity in this study were first and foremost nationalists. They hoped a revived Buddhism could become a rallying force to unify the people and save the nation.

Chapter Outline

I have divided this study into three parts. Part 1, with two chapters on “Anxiety,” examines the discourse on what a Buddhist monk must be and do to revive Vietnamese Buddhism. Chapter One, “The Maverick,” explores the emerging discourse on the Vietnamese Buddhist revival during the late 1920’s. I center my analysis on the ideological development of the monk Thiện Chiếu (1898-1974), as he attempted to incorporate ideas from China and France into Vietnamese Buddhism. His aim was to educate Buddhist monks, reorganize the *sangha* and ultimately remake Buddhism into a way of thinking – which is closer to a philosophy than a religion in the conventional sense of religious worship.

Chapter Two, “The True, the Fake and the Foreign,” examines the play between secular critiques and religious anxiety brought about by the revival during the early 1930’s. I focus my analysis on vernacular sources, such as newspapers and periodicals, as they greatly influenced public opinion at the time. The critiques by journalists and intellectuals, though superficial, created epistemic anxieties in Buddhist monks and laypeople and caused them to look inward.

Part 2, with three chapters on “Power,” outlines the power struggle between the laity and *sangha*. Chapter Three, “The Layman and the Abbot,” examines the rise of the laity. By the mid 1930’s, the President of the Cochinchina Buddhist Association (Nam Kỳ Phật Học Hội) Trần Nguyên Chấn abandoned the plan put forth by the monk Thiện Chiếu. Chấn instead applied his knowledge of the colonial government to help Buddhists in the countryside. Chấn effectively grew the association and centralized its place in the revival.

Chapter Four, “The Identification Card,” traces the response from Vietnamese Buddhist monks. Like laypeople, monks were also interested in identifying the “true.” Their method, however, was systematic and Foucauldian in nature. To untangle the relationship between power and language, I examine colonial archival sources in addition to vernacular sources and make them speak to one another. The monks from the Cổ Sơn Môn (Ancient Pagoda) sect envisioned a collaborated effort with the French colonial regime in creating identification cards for Vietnamese Buddhist monks.

Chapter Five, “The Faction,” continues to follow the Cổ Sơn Môn sect in its attempt to reclaim its place in the revival. The sect wanted to take the spotlight from the laity and restore respect to the *sangha*. And by respect, the sect constantly shifted the meaning to denote religious authority, power and money. The sect also asserted that the *sangha*, not the laity, was supposed to lead the revival. Despite such assertion, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect employed similar means.

Part 3, with four chapters on “Institutions,” explores the ways in which Vietnamese Buddhism became institutionalized. Chapter Six, “The Working Model,” studies the institutional make-up of the Annam Buddhist Association (Annam Phật Học Hội). Founded in Hue, Annam in 1932, the association was a success in institutionalizing Buddhism. It saw the revival as a social process and succeeded in encouraging collaboration between laypeople and monks.

Chapter Seven, “The Changing Practice,” examines the changes in practice that the Annam Buddhist Association institutionalized during the 1930’s and 1940’s. These changes were crucial to the development of Vietnamese Buddhism. The association made Buddhism accessible by domesticating the Buddha and broadening the practice of *tu* (self-betterment), so that laypeople could practice Buddhism at home. More importantly, the association transformed the

sangha, realizing the goal of unity, and regulated the monks accordingly, so that the community and its members were apt for social engagement.

Chapter Eight, “The Monastic Schools,” focuses on educational reform by the Annam Buddhist Association during the revival. The association did not perceive a monastic school as merely a place for instructions. It instead viewed the school as a complex social institution, which required an accommodating space, good teachers, eager students, a sufficient budget and an innovative curriculum blending Buddhism with the sciences.

Chapter Nine, “The Association,” describes the effort in uniting Vietnamese Buddhism, which culminated in the creation of the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association (Tổng Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam) in 1951. For many, creating an umbrella Buddhist association to unite Vietnamese Buddhism was the most difficult task for the revival. In 1950, the State of Vietnam under Emperor Bảo Đại sent a Buddhist delegation to the World Buddhist Federation Conference in Sri Lanka. The Buddhist delegation, through lending the State of Vietnam its legitimacy at the conference, had a chance to participate in a moment of Buddhist internationalism and reflect on the aim of the revival. Ultimately, Vietnamese Buddhists saw a need for unity, as they realized that their goal was to propagate the Dharma to the world.

The Maverick

To borrow my advisor’s words, I must say, this story, like other stories, “has no real beginning.”¹ But I choose to focus on the moment in which the Buddhist monk Thiện Chiếu (1898-1974) left the *sangha* in 1933. His departure and entry into the Vietnamese Buddhist revival are perfect bookends for the ideological discourse on the revival.

Thiện Chiếu was one of the early champions of the Vietnamese Buddhist revival. In fact, he is “commonly regarded as the most prominent figure in the revival.”² The proliferation of print materials during the late 1920’s and early 1930’s made Thiện Chiếu a public figure, as he engaged in many public debates in print. These debates were often controversial – and at times polemical. For instance, Thiện Chiếu openly challenged a fundamental Pure Land belief by proclaiming that the material world was “real” instead of “illusionary.”³

This chapter, though touching on the debates, focuses on the different attempts that Thiện Chiếu made to reinterpret Vietnamese Buddhism.⁴ Like his contemporaries, the monk wrestled with the social crisis brought on by colonial modernity. But unlike them, Thiện Chiếu turned to Buddhism for the answer. His pressing questions were: Why did Vietnamese Buddhism decline?

¹ Christoph Giebel, *Imagined Ancestries of Vietnamese Communism: Ton Duc Thang and the Politics of History and Memory*, Jackson School Publications in International Studies (Seattle, Wash: University of Washington Press, 2004), 3.

² K. W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 522. Please note that Taylor miswrote Thien Chieu as Vien Chieu in this volume.

³ Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 522.

⁴ For more on the debates, see Trần Văn Giàu, “Phong Trào ‘Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo’ Và Các Vấn Đề Tư Tưởng Triết Học Mà Phong Trào Ấy Đã Nêu Lên Ở Nước Ta Trong Thời Kỳ Lịch Sử Giữa Hai Cuộc Chiến Tranh Thế Giới,” *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử*, no. 139 (August 1971), 8-21, and no. 140 (October 1971), 7-19.

What was the best way to revive Vietnamese Buddhism to help society? And who should lead the revival?

A Farewell Letter

Three years, that was how long it took the monk Thiện Chiếu to explain his reason for leaving the *sangha*. In 1936, the monk published a book titled *Tại Sao Tôi Đã Cám Ôn Phật Giáo?* (Why Did I Thank Buddhism?) to explain his decision. Thiện Chiếu confessed that the ideas presented in his book were “simple” and his writing “incoherent.” He was “sick” and “bedridden” when he wrote the book. But he no longer “had any regrets” about writing it because he was able to “fully explain” himself.⁵

The book, though cathartic, was Thiện Chiếu’s farewell letter to Buddhism. Demoralized, the monk began the book by admitting defeat. “I had to divorce [myself] from the doctrine and practice of Buddhism because they could not realize the [Buddhist] spirit of ‘Compassion,’ ‘Equality,’ and ‘Freedom,’” he wrote. Thiện Chiếu, however, encouraged those who did not leave the *sangha* to continue “championing ‘atheism,’ defeating exploits of Buddhism, eliminating superstition, and liberating people spiritually.”⁶ “There is no shame in that,” he wrote. But he quickly added, “Why don’t I do that? Because my situation is different.” Thiện Chiếu did not explain his situation. He instead pondered if it were ever possible for anyone to reach Nirvana. Finally, he ended the book by contemplating on the possibility outside of Buddhism and the uncertainty that came with it.⁷

Call for Revival

⁵ Thích Thiện Chiếu, *Tại Sao Tôi Đã Cám Ôn Đạo Phật?*, 5.

⁶ Thích Thiện Chiếu, *Tại Sao Tôi Đã Cám Ôn Đạo Phật?*, 39.

⁷ Thích Thiện Chiếu, *Tại Sao Tôi Đã Cám Ôn Đạo Phật?*, 39.

Almost a decade earlier, in 1927, Thiện Chiếu was a different monk. He was full of zeal for reviving Vietnamese Buddhism. “We have to enter hell to save all mankind” and “All beings deserve to reach Buddhahood” were the mantra that Thiện Chiếu espoused. His positive attitude reflected the time in Vietnam. As David Marr explained, “[b]y the late 1920’s both the mood of self-disparagement and the emphasis on moral rearmament were being replaced by the belief that history was moving in Vietnams’ direction, and that social forces would accomplish what individual regeneration could not.”⁸ Also, Confucianism, though “entrenched in the language, poetry and social life of the Vietnamese,” was “losing its hold,” as “new moral alternatives were available.”⁹ In fact, Thiện Chiếu was the first person to respond when *Đông Pháp Thời Báo* (Indochina Times) published the call for reviving Vietnamese Buddhism by a layman named Nguyễn Mục Tiên on January 5, 1927.

The call for reviving Vietnamese Buddhism began with Tiên musing on the development of a new religious sect in southern Vietnam called Caodaism – which “consisted of mixing nativism and universalism in almost equal parts, by incorporating references to every religious current known to the sect founders into a single doctrine.”¹⁰ Tiên wondered whether he should be happy or afraid about this new sect. “Happy for our people had rejected materialism [and] returned to spirituality,” he wrote.¹¹ “Or afraid for...our people had become so confused in their hearts and minds that they could not distinguish orthodoxy from heresy, [sic] no longer want to

⁸ David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 2.

⁹ Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, 55.

¹⁰ Hue Tam Ho-Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 189.

¹¹ Nguyễn Mục Tiên, “Nên Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo Ở Nước Nhà,” *Đông Pháp Thời Báo*, January 5, 1927, 529 edition, 1. Translated by McHale.

accept the order and discipline of the religions of the world, [sic] but want to create a topsy-turvy religion that's like a French 'Salade russe,' such is the new religion Caodaism.”¹²

Tiên eventually revealed that he had been afraid all along. He criticized Caodaism as a bastardization of Western Spiritism and Eastern spirit medium. This, for him, was a sign that Vietnamese tradition was in decline. He quickly warned that if Vietnamese were not reviving their tradition but instead borrowing “strange and useless ideas from overseas,” they would become a people “without tradition and history.” He urged people to find a way to restore the national spirit, and his idea was to revive Vietnamese Buddhism.¹³

For Tiên, Buddhism had been shaping the Vietnamese national spirit for thousands of years. And to illustrate this relationship, he recalled his childhood memory of visiting a pagoda with his parents. “Pagodas in southern Vietnam are not scenic, but each pagoda has its own setting,” he wrote. “Sometime in the middle of a rice paddy, with rice stalks arching, the pagoda stood alone in serenity.” And at the center of this nostalgic scenery, Tiên located the development of the Vietnamese national spirit. “[How could] anyone, who calls himself Vietnamese, had not experienced this scene, had not bowed in front of the Buddha, [and] during sunset had not approached the pagoda and, upon hearing the compassionate sound of the bell, awaken from mundane dreams,” he wrote. “These sentiments,” Tiên asserted, “for thousand of years had refined our people's spirit to be good-natured and sincere, like [it is] now, thus these recent superstitions, vulgar and insignificant, could never shape us in such a way.”¹⁴

Tiên also believed that Buddhism was capable of connecting the living to their race and nation. This profound impact that Buddhism had on the living, he observed, rested on its

¹² Nguyễn Mục Tiên, “Nên Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo Ở Nước Nhà,” 1. Translated by McHale.

¹³ Nguyễn Mục Tiên, “Nên Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo Ở Nước Nhà,” 1.

¹⁴ Nguyễn Mục Tiên, “Nên Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo Ở Nước Nhà,” 1.

proximity to the dead. “Surrounding the site of a pagoda was usually a graveyard,” he wrote. Again, with sentimentalism, Tiên reasoned that the site of the dead would always affect the observer, so that upon entering the pagoda, he would recognize his sacred responsibilities. After seeing the graveyard, “I bow in front of the Buddha, listen to [the chanting of] sutras,” he wrote. “[And] the more [I] try to awake my mind for enlightenment and vow for compassion, the more [I] understand the responsibilities and obligation one has with his race and nation.” To further illustrate his point, Tiên quoted the French nationalist Maurice Barrès, who was well known for his racist ideas about the nation and the national spirit: “All living was born of a race, of a soil, of a condition, and the spirit does not manifest itself until one is closely connected to his soil and the dead.”¹⁵

With Maurice Barrès in mind, Tiên revealed his master plan for resuscitating the Vietnamese national spirit. Buddhism and Confucianism were the main ingredients of this plan. In fact, they served as the foundation of Tiên’s master plan because “for tens of generations, [they] had formed our character [and] gave our society a distinct morality and ethic.” Specifically, Tiên wanted to “take the compassion of Buddhism and mix it with the morality of Confucianism.” In addition, Tiên wanted to add Western scientific method to the mix, so that it would “fix our nation, in the material way.”¹⁶

Tiên had very high hopes for his master plan. For combining Buddhism, Confucianism and Western scientific method, Tiên believed that Vietnam would be “a strong nation spiritually as well as materially.” “Such a monumental plan,” he wrote, “Vietnamese should not keep away from, [but they] must pursue and eliminate those that promulgate superstition, which confused

¹⁵ Nguyễn Mục Tiên, “Nên Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo Ở Nước Nhà,” 1.

¹⁶ Nguyễn Mục Tiên, “Nên Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo Ở Nước Nhà,” 1.

our mind, diminished our tradition, [and] did not allow our people to unite under one common ideal and hope.”¹⁷

Response

On January 14, 1927, nine days after the call to revive Vietnamese Buddhism by Nguyễn Mục Tiên appeared, *Đông Pháp Thời Báo* published a response from Thiện Chiếu. Unlike Tiên, Thiện Chiếu did not offer any fond memory or anecdote in his response. The monk instead went straight to business.

In his response, Thiện Chiếu argued that the decline of Vietnamese Buddhism began with French colonialism. To illustrate his point, Thiện Chiếu gave a quick history of Vietnamese Buddhism. According to the monk, Buddhism came to Vietnam during the sixth century via China, and it flourished during the Đinh (968-980), Lê (980-1009) and Trần (1226-1400) dynasty with eminent monks, who were well versed in Chinese language as well as the Dharma. And from the sixth to nineteenth century, regardless of Chinese rule, Vietnamese Buddhism kept its luster because Vietnam and China shared “the same language and the same religion.” Thiện Chiếu speculated that this mutuality, in language and religion, eliminated the need to translate sutras from Chinese into Vietnamese. This, however, became a problem when the French arrived.¹⁸

Specifically, Thiện Chiếu located the decline of Vietnamese Buddhism in the French colonial education. Thiện Chiếu explained, “Since France became the protectorate of our nation, bringing us a new culture and a new science...the citizens of our nation steadily favored the new [Western] studies... Naturally, Chinese studies had to decline – this marked the decline of

¹⁷ Nguyễn Mục Tiên, “Nên Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo Ở Nước Nhà,” *Đông Pháp Thời Báo* (Saigon, January 5, 1927), No. 529, 1.

¹⁸ Thiện Chiếu, “Cái Vấn Đề Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo Ở Nước Nhà,” *Đông Pháp Thời Báo*, January 14, 1927, 533 edition, 1.

Buddhism in our nation as well.”¹⁹ In fact, the shift in language occurred when “Governor-General Albert Sarraut introduced radical educational reforms into Indochina in 1918.”²⁰ The new policy “waived tuition for public schooling during the first six years of instruction,” and primary instruction was “exclusively in French and in the recently adopted Romanized Vietnamese script known as *quốc ngữ*.”²¹ The effects were profound. Most significantly, “within a single generation not only were most educated Vietnamese unable to read Chinese or Japanese, but they were incapable of reading anything that any Vietnamese had written during the previous two millennia.”²²

To revive Vietnamese Buddhism, Thiện Chiếu focused on educating the *sangha*. He believed that the monks were the link between the Buddha and his teachings because they carried the responsibility of interpreting the teachings to the laity. And to realize this responsibility, the monks must be “knowledgeable of [Buddhist] doctrines.” Thiện Chiếu also expected them to transcend the boundary of this enormous responsibility. He wrote, “[This responsibility] is not only for Vietnam but also for the world, not only for humans but also for all beings, and not only for the present but also for the future.”²³

Thiện Chiếu envisioned a three-part project to revive Vietnamese Buddhism. First, he wanted to establish a Buddhist publishing house, which would “make it easy to promulgate the Dharma to restore Buddhism and to eliminate superstition.” Second, Thiện Chiếu wanted to build Buddhist studies institutes to properly train monks, who could later “promote” Buddhism.

¹⁹ Thiện Chiếu, “Cái Vấn Đề Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo Ở Nước Nhà,” 1.

²⁰ Vũ Trọng Phụng, *Dumb Luck: A Novel*, trans. Peter Zinoman (University of Michigan Press, 2002), 8.

²¹ Vũ Trọng Phụng, *Dumb Luck*, 8.

²² Vũ Trọng Phụng, *Dumb Luck*, 10.

²³ Thiện Chiếu, “Cái Vấn Đề Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo Ở Nước Nhà,” 1.

Third, Thiện Chiếu called for the translation of sutras into quốc ngữ, so that Vietnamese Buddhism “would not lose its roots in the future.”²⁴

Kindred Spirit

On January 16, 1927, two days after the response from Thiện Chiếu appeared, *Khai Hóa Nhật Báo* (Enlightenment Daily) ran a response from the monk Tụ Lai of the Cổ Sơn Môn (Ancient Pagoda) sect from Thái Nguyên in northern Vietnam. By chance, the monk saw the call for reviving Vietnamese Buddhism by Nguyễn Mục Tiên when he visited the port town of Hải Phòng. The call touched him. “I am full of enthusiasm in my heart,” he wrote. The monk hoped that with the support of intellectuals many more Vietnamese would follow Buddhism.²⁵

Like Thiện Chiếu, Tụ Lai had a plan for reviving Vietnamese Buddhism as well. But his plan was very different. His focus was rather material. He viewed the pagoda as a social space that needed to expand, so that it could encourage more engagement between monks and laypeople. First, Tụ Lai recommended the construction of chapel in pagodas, so that monks could “hold service each night for ten to fifteen minutes for laypeople.” Second, he suggested the opening of Buddhist elementary schools next to pagodas. These schools would obey the law in selecting their teachers, but they would “devote ten minutes each day to learning the Buddha’s teachings.” Third, Tụ Lai proposed that each pagoda should have housing for the homeless and orphans, where they could receive vocational training and education.²⁶

Combining Forces

²⁴ Thiện Chiếu, “Cái Vấn Đề Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo Ở Nước Nhà,” 1.

²⁵ Tỉ Khiêu Tụ Lai, “Về Việc Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo,” *Khai Hóa Nhật Báo*, January 16, 1927, 1640 edition, 1.

²⁶ Tỉ Khiêu Tụ Lai, “Về Việc Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo,” 1.

On January 28, 1927, *Khai Hóa Nhật Báo* published another response from the monk Tỳ Lai. This time, the three-part plan that the monk originally proposed became a seven-part plan. The new plan, in a sense, was an accommodation of Thiện Chiếu's plan for revival, as it addressed the need for translating sutras and educating the *sangha*. First, Tỳ Lai appealed for a greater collaboration between intellectuals and monks, particularly in translating sutras. This collaboration, Tỳ Lai stressed, must extend beyond Chinese language to include French. He wrote, "Hire scholars in French studies to translate the sutras, which Europeans had already translated, into Vietnamese, or the books on Dharma or the origin tale of the Buddha...so that the monks could get a sense of the role of Buddhism in the world, which they could learn and adapt to the context of Vietnam." Second, Tỳ Lai wanted to establish in each pagoda a library, which would have books, in Chinese and French, textbooks and periodicals for monks to learn about the world around them.²⁷

The new plan by Tỳ Lai, though accommodating in nature, did not share the emphasis Thiện Chiếu placed on establishing a Buddhist publishing house and Buddhist studies institutes. For Tỳ Lai, establishing a Buddhist publishing house was superfluous. He instead suggested monks and laypeople develop a relationship with a periodical by buying its copies and purchasing a certain number of pages of the periodical each month to print news and materials on the revival. And for Buddhist studies institutes, Tỳ Lai thought that the monks already had enough education during their three-month summer retreat. "[They] only need to learn Vietnamese and translate sutras into [Vietnamese]," he wrote.²⁸

²⁷ Tỳ Khiêu Tỳ Lai, "Lại Việc Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo," *Khai Hóa Nhật Báo*, January 28, 1927, 1650 edition, 1.

²⁸ Tỳ Khiêu Tỳ Lai, "Lại Việc Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo," 1.

The new plan Tụ Lai drew up was a novel idea. The radical element lied in his strategy for organizing a “Vietnamese Buddhist Association” to oversee the revival effort. To carry out the plan for the revival, Tụ Lai called on Thiện Chiếu to combine forces and coordinate their efforts. He asked Thiện Chiếu to communicate with the monks from southern to central Vietnam, and he would do the same with the monks from northern to central Vietnam. Tụ Lai then asked Thiện Chiếu to “put aside sectarian differences and form a church, combining all of the [Buddhist] sects in our nation into a single organization called ‘Vietnamese Buddhist Association.’” This umbrella organization would “have three divisions, each with its own director and office at the biggest pagodas in Hanoi, Hue and Saigon,” he added.²⁹

The attempt at organizing Vietnamese Buddhism by Tụ Lai, though an afterthought, was the single element that separated him from Thiện Chiếu. For Thiện Chiếu, the revival was a self-imposed intellectual pursuit that the monks must take upon themselves. In other words, it was their responsibility to know and learn about Buddhism. And the monks must be deeply ignorant if they did not see the revival in such light. But for Tụ Lai, the revival was an institutional reform. He saw that the reform must begin with expanding the social space of the pagoda, so that monks and laypeople would have more interactions. And he believed that the creation of the Vietnamese Buddhist Association would yield the necessary top-down management to usher in reform through out the country.

Disappointment

Thiện Chiếu did not mind the differences. He thought that he had found a kindred spirit in the monk Tụ Lai. In May 1927, Thiện Chiếu traveled to Tonkin to meet with Tụ Lai to further

²⁹ Tỉ Khiêu Tụ Lai, “Lại Việc Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo,” 1.

discuss the plan for reviving Vietnamese Buddhism. The colonial government took notice of Thiện Chiếu's trip, but it did not interfere with his plan.³⁰ The meeting, however, was fruitless.

Upon his arrival in Hanoi, Thiện Chiếu came by Bà Đá pagoda to meet Tự Lai. Thiện Chiếu surprised him, but he did not leave a favorable impression. For Tự Lai, Thiện Chiếu looked "strange." He "dropped in without notice." He did "not have a letter of introduction." And he "spoke excessively" about the revival. Out of politeness, Tự Lai listened to what Thiện Chiếu had to say, but he could not speak frankly about his plan for the revival. The two "sat through the night but could not find a common voice."³¹

Disappointed, Thiện Chiếu left Bà Đá pagoda the next morning. The abbot invited him to stay longer, but he declined. Thiện Chiếu did not offer any explanation for leaving so abruptly. Three months later, after the abbot passed away, a disciple of his decided to publish a letter that Thiện Chiếu wrote to the abbot after the trip. The intention was to show how disrespectful Thiện Chiếu was to the abbot. In the letter, Thiện Chiếu expressed great doubt about the abbot and Tự Lai's effort and ability to revive Vietnamese Buddhism. "To revive Buddhism, [we] first must have honesty," Thiện Chiếu wrote. "In *Đông Pháp Thời Báo*, Tự Lai said you had already translated four sutras, which really surprised me, and he also said he cooperated with you, but in retrospect, he did not have any understanding [of the matter], then how could [we] expect success [with the revival]?" At the end of the letter, Thiện Chiếu reiterated his point that no monk in the three regions of Vietnam had responded to the call for reviving Vietnamese Buddhism by Nguyễn Mục Tiên because the monks were ignorant. He wrote, "If [we] do not

³⁰ Note Confidentielle 9494, Note de Service de la Sûreté du Tonkin à le Resident Supérieur au Tonkin (October 14, 1927): 2-3. CAOM, Fonds GGI, Series F-Affaires Politiques, Dossier 65539.

³¹ "Giác Ngộ Online - Những Người Đầu Tiên Khởi Xương Phong Trào Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo ở Việt Nam." <http://www.giacngo.vn/PrintView.aspx?Language=vi&ID=52541B>. Accessed August 8, 2012.

take care of the education of the monks first and instead...worry about raising money [for the revival], from now on the monks will continue to specialize in raising money! Oh, the danger!”³²

Chinese Influence

The trip Thiện Chiếu made to Tonkin, though futile, introduced him to a new perspective on reviving Vietnamese Buddhism. During the trip, Thiện Chiếu discovered the writings of the Chinese monk Tai Xu (1890-1947) – who was a “pivotal figure among Chinese Buddhist reformers in the quest for a new, modern form of Buddhism.”³³ These writings, which were published in the periodical *Hai Chao Jin* (Sound of the Tide), were “intended to address directly the pressing social and spiritual problems of the twentieth century,” as well as resolving them through institutional Buddhism.³⁴ As a result, Thiện Chiếu no longer viewed the revival as restoring Vietnamese Buddhism to its golden age but rather modernizing it, so that Vietnamese Buddhism would be relevant and useful.

Buddhism as Philosophy

To modernize Vietnamese Buddhism, Thiện Chiếu recast it as a philosophy – a way of thinking, so to speak. By doing so, the monk not only removed Vietnamese Buddhism from the criticism that religion was unfitting for modern time but also made the religion relevant to the yearning for agency and self-determination of Vietnamese at the time.

Thiện Chiếu began the task by excavating the word “religion” in the Western context. In an article titled “Phật Giáo Có Nghĩa Là Tôn Giáo Không?” (Is Buddhism a Religion?), the

³² Pháp Tăng Tâm Nhạ, “Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo,” *Khai Hóa Nhật Báo*, August 6, 1927, 1733 edition, 1.

³³ “Giác Ngộ Online - Những Người đầu Tiên Khởi Xướng Phong Trào Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo ở Việt Nam (The Pioneers in Reviving Vietnamese Buddhism).” Accessed August 8, 2012.

³⁴ Don Alvin Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu's Reforms* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 2–3.

monk found a causality, which hinged on obligation and reverence, at the etymological bottom of the word religion: those who were good would reap rewards, and those who were bad would be punished by a god. He wrote:

Religions, whether monotheism or polytheism, have a monopoly of rewarding and punishing, which means good fortune was a reward from divinity, and crisis was a punishment, thus followers of these religions worship the divinity [and] make offerings because they need good fortune...and avoid punishment.³⁵

Thiền Chiếu then argued that the causality that he found in the word religion did not apply to Buddhism. Buddhism, the monk asserted, focused on the mind (tâm). He explained that Buddhism was a state of mind – which must be lucid, present and calm. Thiền Chiếu wrote:

After the Buddha reached enlightenment, for forty-five years, he only preached about the mind. A lucid mind is a mind of Buddha, a confused mind is a mind of all beings. A mind that does not excite, does not hate, does not love...is a mind that escapes rebirth... a mind of Buddha. A mind that excites, loves and hates... is a mind that does not escape rebirth, a mind of beings.³⁶

With the mind in center, Buddhism freed its followers from obligation and reverence. As a result, Thiền Chiếu believed that Buddhists controlled their own destiny, and that agency began with their own thinking. He wrote:

Good fortune is by us, lucidity is by us, confusion is by us, heaven, hell, all beings and the Buddha are all created by us, no one could reward us, and no one could punish us. And the word Buddha means lucidity, and it absolutely does not imply ‘worshipping’ of any divinity or ‘making offerings.’³⁷

Finally, as a philosophy, Buddhism gained a new relevance that it otherwise would not possess as a religion. Buddhism could serve as the cure for social problems brought on by colonial modernity. In a sense, Buddhism would provide Vietnamese a way to think through the colonial crisis. Thiền Chiếu wrote, “Buddhism is a medicine that can cure illness in the mind, the

³⁵ Thiền Chiếu, “Phật Giáo Có Nghĩa Là Tôn Giáo Không?,” *Báo Đông Pháp*, April 19, 1928, 1.

³⁶ Thiền Chiếu, “Phật Giáo Có Nghĩa Là Tôn Giáo Không?,” 1.

³⁷ Thiền Chiếu, “Phật Giáo Có Nghĩa Là Tôn Giáo Không?,” 1.

more modern life becomes, the more serious illness in the mind gets, thus [I am] for sure, regardless how modern [our] life becomes, [we will] always need Buddhism.”³⁸

Revival Mission

After recasting Buddhism as a philosophy, Thiện Chiếu gave the Vietnamese Buddhist revival a purpose. He saw its mission as a fight against inequality. To do so, the monk wanted the revival to advocate atheism, for he saw God as the reason for wars and violence – which as a consequence created inequality. The monk also wanted to promote Mahayana Buddhism as a means to overcome the inequality – and achieve world peace. To convey his ideas, Thiện Chiếu translated two prominent works by Tai Xu: *Vô Thần Luận của Thái Hư Pháp Sư* (Discussion on Atheism by Master Tai Xu) and *Chơn Lý Của Tiểu Thừa và Đại Thừa Phật Giáo* (Basic Principles of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism).³⁹

In *Vô Thần Luận của Thái Hư Pháp Sư*, God was the cause of inequality. In fact, God was the root of all evil – which manifested in “suppression” and “wars.” To make his point, Tai Xu reasoned that the creation of God began with kings. Since kings were the sons of God, they must therefore be invincible. With such claim of invincibility, the kings went to war with each other. For instance, Christianity used this power to suppress, burned and killed numerous people of different faith.⁴⁰ Thus, Tai Xu located the end of all human suffering in the vanquishing of God – or the notion of God. He wrote, “With the basis of monotheism toppled, God and the devil vanished; the roots of ‘inequality’ would disappear, thus all of its branches and extensions, which disrupted mankind, would follow and disappear.” And in this absence of God, people would

³⁸ Thiện Chiếu, “Phật Giáo Có Nghĩa Là Tôn Giáo Không?” 1.

³⁹ Thiện Chiếu finished translating the works by Tai Xu in 1929, but he did not publish them until 1937 because at the time Buddhists seemed to need help fighting superstition rather than inequality.

⁴⁰ Tai Xu, *Vô Thần Luận của Thái Hư Pháp Sư*, trans. Thiện Chiếu (Saigon: Imprimerie My-khouan, 1937), 38–39.

achieve peace and happiness. He wrote, “Thus, the happiness of mankind would improve, arriving at universalism, uniting the world into one family, only to nurture each other, teach each other, love and help each other, and plan for each other to completely reach happiness.”⁴¹

In *Chon Lý của Tiểu Thừa và Đại Thừa Phật Giáo*, Mahayana Buddhism became the solution, the vehicle that bridged inequality. The title of the work seemed to suggest an informative tone and a disinterested position on sectarian differences between Theravada (The Small Vehicle) and Mahayana (The Great Vehicle) Buddhism. But after the work explained the basic concepts of Buddhism, such as “impermanence,” “no-self,” and “Nirvana,” it began to criticize Theravada Buddhism for having a narrow interest. Tai Xu wrote:

They [Theravadins] only save themselves, though having compassion for others, only for this lifetime and that’s it. And for others... [they] let them drown in the sea of suffering! This narrow thinking, this selfishness, is not different from complacency, not having room for any other, that is called Small Wheel.⁴²

Followers of Mahayana Buddhism, however, wanted to help all beings reach enlightenment. Tai Xu reasoned, “Those that follow Mahayana Buddhism want to enlighten themselves as well as others; they not only grasp [the concept] of ‘impermanence’ and ‘no-self’...but also realize the ‘Middle path’ – not rejecting...rebirth nor wanting Nirvana.”⁴³ Thus, in the context of the revival, Tai Xu saw that Mahayana Buddhism was a means to fight inequality for its socially engaged aspect on bringing everyone to enlightenment.

(Mis)translations

To have Vietnamese interested in the revival, Thích Thiện Chiếu published two introductory volumes on Buddhism. First, *Phật Học Tổng Yếu* (Fundamentals of Buddhism), published in

⁴¹ Tai Xu, *Vô Thân Luận của Thái Hư Pháp Sư*, 41.

⁴² Tai Xu, *Chon Lý của Tiểu Thừa và Đại Thừa Phật Giáo*, trans. Thích Thiện Chiếu (Saigon: Imprimerie My-khouan, 1937), 13.

⁴³ Tai Xu, *Chon Lý của Tiểu Thừa và Đại Thừa Phật Giáo*, 14.

1929, was a collection of Thiện Chiếu’s writings and translations of works from the journal *Hai Chao Jin*. Second, *Phật Học Vấn Đáp* (Buddhist Catechism), published in 1932, was a translation of a work by the Theosophist Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907). The two volumes, though sharing a purpose, had different approaches and intended audiences. They also captured a significant shift in Thiện Chiếu’s thinking from restricting the revival to Vietnamese scholars to making it more appealing to the masses.

Buddhist Fundamentals

Phật Học Tổng Yếu began with scathing critique of those who did not learn (học) Buddhism. The title of the critique said it all: “Those Who Do Not Study Buddhism Are All Parasites.” And in some instances, even those who practiced Buddhism were not spared. Laywomen who worshiped Buddha as a god; monks who turned their frock into a business; laypeople who studied Buddhism as a hobby; they were all parasites because they “took more than [they] contributed.”⁴⁴ The worst of all was those that read the critique but did not heed its warning.⁴⁵ Against these parasite figures, the person that sought enlightenment for others emerged as the inverse.⁴⁶ “Even though he is not a scholar, nor a farmer, nor a worker, nor a merchant, he would sail his boat of ‘perfection’ to save those drowning in the sea of suffering,” wrote Thiện Chiếu.⁴⁷

Despite its critical tone, the volume was informative on fundamental concepts of Buddhism, such as karma, Nirvana and Buddha nature. The volume moved through these concepts rather quickly to stress the uniqueness of Buddhism. For instance, Buddhists controlled their own destiny, and everyone could become a Buddha. The book then laid out the new social

⁴⁴ Thiện Chiếu, ed., *Phật Học Tổng Yếu* (Saigon: Đức Lưu Phương, 1929), 6–7.

⁴⁵ Thiện Chiếu, *Phật Học Tổng Yếu*, 13.

⁴⁶ Thiện Chiếu, *Phật Học Tổng Yếu*, 7.

⁴⁷ Thiện Chiếu, *Phật Học Tổng Yếu*, 7–8.

relevance of Buddhism by arguing that studying Buddhism was similar to finding the cure for one's illness. And once the diagnosis was made, one could "follow the Dharma to treat it."⁴⁸

For portraying it as a cure for modern illnesses, the volume gave Buddhism an appeal that was almost universal. But Thiện Chiếu did not intend *Phật Học Tổng Yếu* to be a "popular book" or a book for the general audience. There were many passages and terminologies left untranslated from Chinese. The book, in fact, was meant to introduce Buddhism to Vietnamese "scholars" and to show that "to study Buddhism [one] must learn from China." This intention was not an oversight nor snobbery on Thiện Chiếu's part but rather a matter of practicality. The monk believed that it would take "fifteen years" for the recently established Buddhist schools to produce any talent for the revival and "at least one hundred years" for Vietnamese Buddhism to escape its dependency on Chinese language.⁴⁹ Thus, for an immediate impact, Thiện Chiếu believed that the Vietnamese Buddhist revival had to rely on scholars for their Chinese language skills.

Translation Critique

The appeal Thiện Chiếu made in *Phật Học Tổng Yếu* quickly reached its intended audience. But Vietnamese scholars did not share his ideas about reviving Vietnamese Buddhism. Phan Khôi (1887 – 1959) was the first to review *Phật Học Tổng Yếu*. A "star essayist," Phan Khôi wrote for the periodical *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (Women's News) – which was a "highly successful weekly periodical" in Saigon.⁵⁰ In his critique, Phan Khôi criticized Thiện Chiếu for his dependence on Chinese language, non-faithful translation of original text, and misplaced

⁴⁸ Thiện Chiếu, *Phật Học Tổng Yếu*, 57.

⁴⁹ Thiện Chiếu, ed., *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách: Phật Học Tổng Yếu và Phật Giáo Văn Đáp* (Saigon, 1934), 24–25. This is a collection of the exchanges between Thiện Chiếu and his critics. Many of these exchanges first appeared on newspapers. According to Thiện Chiếu, he published the collection due to requests from readers who wanted to read the exchanges.

⁵⁰ Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, 220.

punctuations. Not once did Phan Khôi address the content of the book nor showed any interest in studying Buddhism. In fact, Phan Khôi stressed that his critique should have been titled “Critique on Translation of *Phật Học Tổng Yếu*.”⁵¹

In his response to the critique, Thiện Chiếu dismissed Phan Khôi’s emphasis on language or translation as mistaking the means for the end.⁵² To illustrate his point, Thiện Chiếu alluded to the Zen teaching of the hand pointing at the moon. “If [we] keep looking at the hand then we will never see the moon... Similarly focusing on language will never reveal the truth,” he wrote.⁵³ But at the end of his response, Thiện Chiếu gave Phan Khôi the benefit of the doubt. He reinterpreted Phan Khôi’s lack of interest in studying Buddhism as a hesitation or restraint since his critique was to appear in a periodical. Thiện Chiếu then urged Phan Khôi to study Buddhism for the greater good. “If those who really wanted to help were hesitating, when [our] society will end inequality [and] people will have truth?”⁵⁴

Phan Khôi, however, had no interest. In his response, Phan Khôi reiterated that he was only interested in the task of translation. And *Phật Học Tổng Yếu* was a good example for him to set a certain standard for translation – which he saw reached beyond the boundary of Buddhism.⁵⁵ But Phan Khôi did remind Thiện Chiếu the importance of having a useful means. Phan Khôi wrote, “When it is still Buddhist studies, the word ‘studies’ implies that one has not reached enlightenment... things must be in the right order.”⁵⁶

⁵¹ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 4.

⁵² Thiện Chiếu, “*Phật Học Tổng Yếu Bị Phê Bình Là Phải!*,” first appeared in *Thần Chung* No. 285 (Jan 2, 1930), No. 286 (Jan 3, 1930) and No. 287 (Jan 4, 1930). Reprinted in *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 21–31.

⁵³ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 28.

⁵⁴ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 31.

⁵⁵ Phan Khôi, “*Mấy Lời Thỉnh Giáo Lại Cùng Sư Thiện Chiếu*,” first appeared in *Thần Chung* No. 290 (Jan 8, 1930). Reprinted in *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 31–35.

⁵⁶ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 32.

The debate between Thiện Chiếu and Phan Khôi ended amicably after two months. But the impression Thiện Chiếu left on Vietnamese scholars, such as playwright Trương Duy Toàn, was a monk full of arrogance. Toàn wrote:

Mr. Phan Khôi only spoke on literature, and [he] spoke sincerely, his words were elegant. But Mr. Thiện Chiếu, though having entered the Zen forest, using the holy water to wash himself, why was he so glib and cunning, always looking for a way to argue, and having such arrogance, saying all the right things but they were so disrespectful?⁵⁷

Toàn then added that the title of the Thiện Chiếu's response, "*Phật Học Tổng Yếu* criticized was indeed right," alone irritated him. He wrote, "Only need to glance at it, one can detect the arrogance. The reader only needed to see the words 'indeed right,' let alone reading all of his responses [to Phan Khôi], [it] would take tens of pages to write [this critique]."⁵⁸

Dialectic Sympathy

Phan Văn Hùm, "a Troyskyist philosophy teacher," who would later replace Phan Khôi at *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, was the only scholar that publically defended Thiện Chiếu.⁵⁹ But the support from Hùm came a year late, for the periodical *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* (The Morning Bell) was shut down when he submitted his response from France. In his response, Hùm offered Thiện Chiếu sympathy for his effort in reviving Vietnamese Buddhism, but he had to intervene because the debate was heading toward a "pen war."⁶⁰ Hùm agreed with Thiện Chiếu that in regard to translation, preserving the meaning was a better practice than staying true to the text. To illustrate his point, Hùm quoted the French intellectual René Guénon. He wrote, "The more

⁵⁷ Trương Duy Toàn, "Chẳng Lẽ Làm Ngơ Với Cuộc Cải Nhau Về 'Phật Học Tổng Yếu,'" first appeared in *Trung Lập* (Feb 1930). Reprinted in *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 44-48.

⁵⁸ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 45-46.

⁵⁹ Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, 222. For more on Hùm, see dissertation by Judith A. N. Henchy, "Performing Modernity in the Writings of Nguyễn An Ninh and Phan Văn Hùm," 2005

⁶⁰ Phan Văn Hùm, "Dịch Sách Phật," first appeared in *Công Luận* No. 2016 (Mar 12, 1931) and No. 2017 (Mar 13, 1931). Reprinted in *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 49-54.

faithful the translation is to the literal meaning, the more it is further away from the truth and mistaking the idea because there isn't any clear equivalent between two different languages.”⁶¹

Phan Văn Hùm also offered a very insightful comment on the debate between Thiện Chiếu and Phan Khôi. He believed that the debate between the two would never end because one was a practitioner and the other a critic. “It is impossible to call a truce between cynicism and belief,” he wrote. In addition, Hùm suggested Thiện Chiếu to adopt the cynicism of a critic for its destructive nature because, in a dialectic sense, destruction would bring construction. He wrote, “The more you [Thiện Chiếu] want to revive Buddhism, the more you should doubt [it]; you should adopt a spirit of destruction to study Buddhism, then use the constructive attitude to rebuild Buddhism like how it was when the Buddha was still alive.”⁶²

Atheistic Buddhism

Khuê Lạc Tử, a former friend of Thiện Chiếu, was the first scholar to challenge him about the content of *Phật Học Tổng Yếu*.⁶³ In the volume, Thiện Chiếu argued that Buddhism was a philosophy. And by philosophy, the monk meant that “Buddhism does not deal with obligation and reverence, does not have creator of all things, and does not venerate any celestial being nor any Buddha outside of the mind.”⁶⁴ If one had to use the word religion to describe Buddhism, the term “atheistic Buddhism,” Thiện Chiếu believed, might be the closest.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 51.

⁶² Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 52.

⁶³ Khuê Lạc Tử, “Nói Về Cái Thuyết Vô Ngã,” first appeared in *Đuốc Nhà Nam* No. 240 (Feb 3, 1931) and No. 242 (Feb 5, 1931). Reprinted in *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 80-83.

⁶⁴ Thiện Chiếu, “Thượng Đế Luận: Ông Khuê Lạc Tử Muốn Nói Chuyện Với Tôi Xin Ra Giữa Công Chúng,” first appeared in *Đuốc Nhà Nam* No. 224 (Jan 15, 1931), No. 225 (Jan 16, 1931), No. 227 (Jan 19, 1931), No. 228 (Jan 20, 1931) and No. 229 (Jan 21, 1931). Reprinted in *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 55-74.

⁶⁵ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 57.

Khuê Lạc Tử thought the argument by Thiện Chiếu was illogical because one could not believe in laws, such as karma, without believing in the existence of a god, who would enforce the law and separate the good from the bad. He wrote, “It is no different from having a court without a judge. And if there isn’t a judge, the bad and the good are the same, the monk Thiện Chiếu was no different from the thugs.”⁶⁶

To end the debate, Khuê Lạc Tử made his critique personal. He questioned the nature of Thiện Chiếu’s monkhood. He noted that Thiện Chiếu had attacked him in other articles, but he did not want to address these attacks because he did not want to bore the reader with all the details. In addition, Khuê Lạc Tử wanted to end the “pen war” with Thiện Chiếu. He quoted a Confucian saying, “for those who do not deserve to be spoken to, if one speaks, words are lost, and for those who do deserve to be spoken to, if one does not speak, it is disrespectful.” In other words, Khuê Lạc Tử believed that Thiện Chiếu no longer deserved respect to be spoken to. He concluded the response with a short poem that questioned why Thiện Chiếu was so “hateful” and “wicked,” among many other things, when he was supposed to be a monk full of compassion. “What a waste of effort in being a monk,” wrote Khuê Lạc Tử.⁶⁷

Dangerous Science

The pen war between Khuê Lạc Tử and Thiện Chiếu sparked another debate. This time, it was with an ally. An intellectual, Dương Văn Xá, who once supported Thiện Chiếu, argued that his critique of science as being dangerous was misplaced.

⁶⁶ Khuê Lạc Tử, “Trả Lời Ông Thiện Chiếu,” first appeared in *Đuốc Nhà Nam* No. 240 (Feb 3, 1931) and No. 242 (Feb 5, 1931). Reprinted in *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 74–83.

⁶⁷ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 82–83.

Originally, in his response to Khuê Lạc Tử, Thiện Chiếu asserted that Buddhism was not a religion, and that it could “save the danger of science.”⁶⁸ However, for Xá, science was not responsible for all of the repression and violence that had happened to mankind. He also commented that Buddhism and science were very similar, for they both did not recognize the existence of god, and they both promoted causality.⁶⁹ In fact, Xá asserted, science was an ally of Buddhism in fighting superstitions. “Thus, the view that science is dangerous belongs to an outsider looking in, not knowing the true science,” he wrote.⁷⁰

Xá also seemed perplexed by Thiện Chiếu’s critique of science. He viewed the progress that science had made over the past three hundred years, such as “reducing the influence of religions and the occult,” was much more than that by Buddhism for the past two thousand years.⁷¹ He, thus, begged Thiện Chiếu to reconsider his position. “Since we just began the battle [against religions], you need science to advance to break down the wall that the enemy had built... Why did [you] criticize and eliminate the ally that was advancing [your cause] without giving any reason?”⁷²

In his response, Thiện Chiếu qualified his statement. “If [it] is not nihilistic, then science is not dangerous at all,” he wrote.⁷³ Thiện Chiếu believed that nihilism had been the cause of the wars in Europe with “blood spilt into river, and bones heaped into mountains.” He added that despite its advancement, science could “only serve as a weapon for the wicked,” like the

⁶⁸ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 57.

⁶⁹ Dương Văn Xá, “Khoa Học Không Gì Là Nguy Hiểm,” first appeared in *Trung Lập* No. 6388 (Mar 11, 1931) and No. 6389 (Mar 12, 1931). Reprinted in *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 84-88.

⁷⁰ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 88.

⁷¹ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 84-85.

⁷² Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 87.

⁷³ Thiện Chiếu, “Nếu Không Thiên Về ‘Đoạn Kiến’ Thì...,” first appeared in *Trung Lập* No. 6396 (Mar 11, 1931). Reprinted in *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 88-91.

intelligence of a selfish person, which would “only help him to harm society.” But at the end of his response, Thiện Chiếu acknowledged that responses, such as that by Xá, gave him hope that Vietnamese were not all superstitious or nihilistic – there were Vietnamese who actually understood both science and idealism. Thiện Chiếu, thus, was happy that he no longer needed to speak as an outsider.⁷⁴

Catechism

Three years later, in 1932, Thiện Chiếu published *Phật Học Vấn Đáp* to further introduce Buddhism to the masses. Unlike the first volume, *Phật Học Vấn Đáp* began with a simple question, “Of which religion do you follow?” “Buddhism” was the answer.⁷⁵ From this answer, a discourse between a non-believer and a believer quickly emerged with the latter answering all of the questions the former had about Buddhism in a succinct manner. The discourse covered the life of the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, the rise and spread of Buddhism, and the relationship between Buddhism and science. The format gave the book an accessibility that *Phật Học Tổng Yếu* severely lacked.

The volume marked a shift in Thiện Chiếu’s thinking about whom was capable of reviving Vietnamese Buddhism. The monk no longer wanted to appeal only to scholars. He wanted to broaden his audience. The purpose of the volume, Thiện Chiếu wrote, was to “offer some general knowledge to the laity.”⁷⁶ In addition, the monk hoped that the volume would give those who had “never read a sutra or attended a sermon” a basic understanding of Buddhism. Thiện Chiếu, however, maintained his view of the revival effort and the means to accomplish such task.

⁷⁴ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 91.

⁷⁵ Thiện Chiếu, *Phật Giáo Vấn Đáp* (Saigon: Pagode Hung Long, 1932), 1.

⁷⁶ Thiện Chiếu, *Phật Giáo Vấn Đáp*, III.

To revive Vietnamese Buddhism and “keep [its] role as a life raft in the middle of the sea of suffering,” Thiện Chiếu recommended the *sangha* to promote new ideas and conduct research on Buddhism, collaborate with laypeople and work together instead of letting personal conflict create schism.⁷⁷ In order to accomplish such task, the monk anchored the revival in the “research” of Buddhism in “China, Japan, India, Thailand, Nepal, America and Europe.” What he meant by “research” was a process of learning based on “scientific method” and “historical truth” – which he held was the only way to “promote the meaning of Buddhism” and to “avoid the nonsense added on by later generation.”⁷⁸

Textual Authenticity

Phật Học Vấn Đáp marked a significant departure from Chinese language for Thiện Chiếu. Perhaps, for broadening the audience, Thiện Chiếu had to explore works on Buddhism in other languages to appeal to the masses. Originally written in English then translated into French, *Phật Học Vấn Đáp* offered Thiện Chiếu an alternative. In a sense, the monk found that besides Chinese, French and English were viable options that could reduce mistranslations and bring Vietnamese Buddhism closer to the textual authenticity of Pali. Thiện Chiếu’s critics, however, did not see it that way.

Hoàng Tâm, an editor of the periodical *Đuốc Nhà Nam* (Torch of Vietnam), viewed the shift from Chinese to French in Thiện Chiếu’s translation as an attempt to elude criticism. To stress the importance of his critique, Hoàng Tâm argued that it was necessary to criticize *Phật Học Vấn Đáp*, though a work of translation, because the Vietnamese Buddhist revival was gaining popularity, but Vietnamese Buddhism was “not authentic,” and it lacked knowledgeable

⁷⁷ Thiện Chiếu, *Phật Giáo Vấn Đáp*, II.

⁷⁸ Thiện Chiếu, *Phật Giáo Vấn Đáp*, II.

figures to steer the revival in the right direction.⁷⁹ Within this context, Hoàng Tâm emphasized that translating a work on Buddhism was very different from translating a work of literature because “the wrong translation would muddle the reader, and sometime [it] could lose the sacred meaning of Buddhism.” And to avoid mistranslation, he located the source of Buddhist authenticity in Pali and speculated that the linguistic shift in Thiện Chiếu’s translation was due to his fear of being “criticized by Phan Khôi for the second time.” Hoàng Tâm wrote, “Thus, you [Thiện Chiếu] abandoned Chinese books and use materials from French books – rather than admitting that you were translating them – so that you could freely translate them without fear of repeating all of the faults Phan Khôi had pointed out. But you still could not stay clear of them.”⁸⁰

The critique from Hoàng Tâm meandered from “mismatching proper nouns” to “contradiction in ideology.” The former charge was merely nitpicking, but the latter was a serious blow to Thiện Chiếu’s revival effort. Hoàng Tâm subverted the Zen teaching of “the hand pointing at the moon” to assert that Buddhism, like the hand, was only a means. Hoàng Tâm believed that Thiện Chiếu was “too infatuated with Buddhism” to see it otherwise. He then questioned whether Thiện Chiếu believed in his own preaching that each had to find his own enlightenment. “If you [Thiện Chiếu] accept this [idea]...you cannot be presumptuous and conceited that Buddhism is the only and absolute way to salvation.” To further illustrate his point, Hoàng Tâm compared that “all people are students, and Nirvana is a place of examination. All of the students cannot study at the same place, some study at private school, and some at

⁷⁹ Hoàng Tâm, “Phê Bình Sách ‘Phật-Giáo Vấn-Đáp,’” first appeared in *Phụ trương văn chương Đuốc Nhà Nam* No. 12 (June 18, 1932) and No. 13 (June 25, 1932). Reprinted in *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 92–101.

⁸⁰ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 94.

public school, but when it comes to time for examination, they all have to come to the same place.”⁸¹

To defend his position, Thiện Chiếu published a six-part response. He took Hoàng Tâm’s critique apart – word for word and line for line. The counterarguments that Thiện Chiếu made, though disorganized, were effective, but they lost all impact because the debate had already become a pen war. Thiện Chiếu dismissed not only the critique but also the critic himself. He wrote, “Please do not be mad, I will try to be honest with you: you are not qualified to be a critic, especially of books on Buddhism.”⁸² Then, to ridicule Hoàng Tâm for being out of touch with reality, Thiện Chiếu mocked him for being senile. “What a pity!,” he wrote. “You [Hoàng Tâm] are barely in your fifties but you are already senile. If you are not deaf yet, please listen up.”⁸³ And to render Hoàng Tâm’s critique baseless, Thiện Chiếu characterized it as gibberish. “Please do not listen to Hoàng Tâm talking in his sleep and believe his accusation,” he wrote.⁸⁴

The spiteful nature of Thiện Chiếu’s response confirmed the image of an irreverent monk that Vietnamese critics had all along. The response was also revealing of the frustration that Thiện Chiếu had in reviving Vietnamese Buddhism. For the monk, it had been five years since Nguyễn Mục Tiên’s article appeared, but “throughout Vietnam, no one responded” to the call.⁸⁵ And during this time, Thiện Chiếu observed, “heresy was on the rise, books on Buddhism were published unchecked, Buddhism had declined to its lowest point.” Even the Cochinchina Buddhist Association (Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học) and its periodical *Từ Bi Âm* (*Voice of*

⁸¹ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 100.

⁸² Thiện Chiếu, “Nên Phê Bình Sách Phật,” first appeared in *Công Luận* No. 2406 (Jul 8, 1932), No. 2407 (Jul 9, 1932), No. 2408 (Jul 11, 1932), No. 2409 (Jul 12, 1932), No. 2410 (Jul 13, 1932), No. 2411 (Jul 15, 1932), No. 2412 (Jul 16, 1932) and No. 2413 (Jul 18, 1932). Reprinted in *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 102-125.

⁸³ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 108.

⁸⁴ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 110.

⁸⁵ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 121.

Compassion), Thiện Chiếu believed, did nothing to stop the decline of Buddhism. The monk compared the current situation to that of an “abandoned house” with the “front and back [of the house] looking desolate and neglected,” for “the owner had died.”⁸⁶ In this void, Thiện Chiếu, alone, took upon himself the responsibility of reviving Vietnamese Buddhism. Thus, he was hurt and felt the critics were being “unkind” when they deemed him “arrogant” for “speaking truthfully” about Buddhism in his translations.⁸⁷

Linguistic Orthodoxy

The critique of *Phật Học Vấn Đáp* became very personal when the monk Liên Tôn, the editor-in-chief of *Từ Bi Âm*, published his critique. In the critique, Liên Tôn confessed that he did not see any value in Thiện Chiếu’s work, for “it only further confused the laity.”⁸⁸ He, thus, felt “obligated” to warn the public about the book since people would “waste their effort consulting it.”⁸⁹

The subjects that Liên Tôn chose to address in his critique were translation mistakes, incorrect examples, and mistaken concepts. These subjects might seem unrelated, but they all, at the etymological level, pointed to the Sino roots of Vietnamese Buddhism. For example, Liên Tôn criticized Thiện Chiếu for mistranslating the word “ái” (love) as “lòng tham sống” (desire to live). Liên Tôn showed that the Sino root of the word “ái,” though coupled with other words, always meant “tham” (greed) – which in its totality should mean an overpowering social force

⁸⁶ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 122.

⁸⁷ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 122.

⁸⁸ Liên Tôn, “Biện Chánh Quyển Sách ‘Phật-Giáo Vấn-Đáp,’” first appeared in *Công Luận* No. 2512 (Nov 16, 1932), No. 2513 (Nov 17, 1932), No. 2514 (Nov 18, 1932), No. 2516 (Nov 21, 1932), No. 2518 (Nov 21, 1932), No. 2519 (Nov 23, 1932), No. 2520 (Nov 24, 1932), No. 2521 (Nov 25, 1932), No. 2522 (Nov 26, 1932), No. 2525 (Nov 28, 1932), No. 2526 (Dec 1, 1932), No. 2531 (Dec 2, 1932), No. 2532 (Dec 8, 1932), No. 2534 (Dec 9, 1932) and No. 2543 (Dec 12, 1932). Reprinted in *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 170-214.

⁸⁹ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 170.

rather than the mere desire to live.⁹⁰ By linking Buddhist concepts in Vietnamese to their Sino roots, Liên Tôn not only established a hierarchy in Buddhist thought but also traced the origin of Vietnamese Buddhism to China. In other words, for Liên Tôn, Chinese was the language of orthodoxy for Vietnamese Buddhism.

In his response, Thiện Chiếu countered every issue Liên Tôn had with his translation of *Phật Học Vấn Đáp*. As a result, it was a tedious response, but it was effective, for it limited the “pen war” to specific points and did not allow the debate to stray far from topic. But Thiện Chiếu was waging a different war. As Liên Tôn traced Vietnamese Buddhist concepts to their Sino roots, Thiện Chiếu found French to be an alternative route to authenticity. For instance, to counter Liên Tôn’s critique, Thiện Chiếu traced his translation of the word “ái” to the Pali word “Tanha” and the Sanskrit word “Trishna,” both of which were translated into French as the “désire de vivre” (desire to live).⁹¹ The emphasis Thiện Chiếu had on authenticity was at odds with Liên Tôn’s push for orthodoxy, for Thiện Chiếu assumed the assessment that Vietnamese Buddhism had declined beyond salvage. At the heart of this decline, Thiện Chiếu believed, was a *sangha* that was “outdated.” He wrote, “I must admit in shame that for tens of years being a part of that outdated *sangha*...was like living in a different world, not having any social engagement or world news, while believing that for the rest of [my] life, [I] would be withering away like vegetation.”⁹²

The frustration Thiện Chiếu had with the *sangha* often boiled over into his view of the Vietnamese Buddhist revival. He held every monk responsible for the perceived decline of Vietnamese Buddhism. As a result, the response from Thiện Chiếu, though effective, lost its

⁹⁰ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 183.

⁹¹ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 184.

⁹² Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 23.

impact, for it often veered into personal attack on Liên Tôn. First, Thiện Chiếu dismissed Liên Tôn's critique as an act of "wasting paper" without addressing its content.⁹³ Then, it became personal. Thiện Chiếu dubbed Liên Tôn illiterate for his Sino-centric view of Vietnamese Buddhism. He wrote, "As of now, I just learned that there are illiterates that can have a bachelor's degree in education, receive professorial appointment, and become an abbot [and] an editor-in-chief, there are so many wonders in this world."⁹⁴

The mean-spirited response from Thiện Chiếu, however, did not infuriate any reader this time. In fact, Thiện Chiếu found support for his work. For instance, Vân Hà Khách from Hue not only defended Thiện Chiếu but also criticized Liên Tôn for being rude in his critique. He wrote, "I believe that all critiques, in addition to being accurate, definite, and generous...have to be elegant in order to have any value."⁹⁵ In addition, Vân Hà Khách compared the nature of Liên Tôn's critique to the act of "pushing the already slanted house of Buddhism over into collapse."⁹⁶ Another reader Trúc Viên echoed the need for civility that Vân Hà Khách voiced. He also urged for a Buddhist unity by asserting that "one support beam could not prop up a house that was on the verge of collapsing."⁹⁷

Departure

The public support that Thiện Chiếu received for his revival effort was too little too late. He decided to leave the *sangha* in 1933, a year after he published *Phật Học Vấn Đáp*. In an

⁹³ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 169.

⁹⁴ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 183.

⁹⁵ Vân Hà Khách, "Đối Với Vấn Đề Biện Chánh Quyển Sách 'Phật Giáo Vấn Đáp,'" first appeared in *Công Luận* No. 2505 (Nov 4, 1932), No. 2507 (Nov 7, 1932) and No. 2509 (Nov 9, 1932). Reprinted in *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 215-222.

⁹⁶ Thiện Chiếu, *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 222.

⁹⁷ Trúc Viên, "Cảm Tưởng Đối Với Bài Biện Chánh Của Ông Liên Tôn Trong Số *Từ Bi Âm* 18," first appeared in *Công Luận* No. 2542 (Dec 21, 1932). Reprinted in *Mấy Bài Tranh Biện Về Hai Quyển Sách*, 222-226.

interview with the periodical *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, Thiện Chiếu said, “I saw people suffering, and the situation was heart-breaking, so I thought Buddhism must have a solution to help people. Thus, I ordained and devoted myself to it [Buddhism].” But he confessed that he became “disappointed” and “did not want anything to do with Buddhism anymore.” “I left my robe at the pagoda to return home,” he said.⁹⁸

The reasons that Thiện Chiếu offered for his departure from Buddhism were threefold. First, it was the lack of unity among Vietnamese Buddhist monks and laity. He wrote, “In Buddhism, each had [his] own positionality, thus each leader had [his] own interpretation, creating many factions, which were divisive and in conflict with each other.” Second, it was the Buddhist causality of karma and rebirth. For Thiện Chiếu, this causality was merely an excuse to exploit the laity. When Thiện Chiếu tried to champion “atheism,” he inadvertently created a new faction – which then “created more problems for the proletariat front.” In other words, he detracted attention from the Marxist explanation of the social crisis in Vietnam by championing the Buddhist causality. Third, and the most important reason, it was that “Buddhism, with all its sutras, had no solution to improve this not-so-good society.” Thiện Chiếu wrote, “People are starving, how can [one] believe in idealism? The Buddha back then was starving [himself] to find the truth. Truth was not found, but he was starving to death. Only after [he] had something to eat...[his] mind was lucid, [he] found it [the truth].”⁹⁹

Upon hearing the reasons, the *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* reporter admitted that he had heard of Thiện Chiếu for a long time. But he did not want to make acquaintance with Thiện Chiếu, for the monk was trying to revive Vietnamese Buddhism. But since Thiện Chiếu had left the *sangha*, the

⁹⁸ Q.C., “Một Giờ Tiếp Chuyện Với Ông Thiện Chiếu,” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, December 14, 1933, 228 edition, 8.

⁹⁹ Q.C., “Một Giờ Tiếp Chuyện Với Ông Thiện Chiếu,” 8.

reporter felt an affinity for him. He wrote, “People for not comprehending your understanding and your determination are probably criticizing your departure now, but I am the opposite. Now I have something in common with you. I would dare to give you two words *enlightenment reached*.”¹⁰⁰

A month later, Phan Văn Hùm published a short article in *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* to celebrate Thiện Chiếu leaving Buddhism. Hùm was not surprised at all by the news. In fact, Hùm seemed sure that Thiện Chiếu was bound to leave the *sangha* sooner or later. In the article, Hùm reminisced about the debates and struggles that Thiện Chiếu had with Buddhism. The article began with Thiện Chiếu fighting superstition at Linh Sơn pagoda. Hùm wrote, “At Linh Sơn pagoda, you banned the stupid practice of burning paper offerings to the dead and of worshipping wooden statues. You banished the statue of the Buddha to a corner in the yard.”¹⁰¹ Then, Hùm located the seed of materialism in Thiện Chiếu championing atheistic Buddhism. The article ended with Hùm linking the Buddhist Middle Path to existentialism. Hùm concluded the article that Thiện Chiếu had transcended Buddhism for leaving it. He quoted Jules Lachelier, “To understand an idea, the first condition is to enter it, but the second condition is to leave it.” And he predicted the next ideology for Thiện Chiếu was dialectical materialism.¹⁰²

Phụ Nữ Tân Văn also ran another article on Thiện Chiếu to promote his departure. The article painted Thiện Chiếu as a role model that its readers should follow. The article began by praising Thiện Chiếu for his vision and effort in reviving Vietnamese Buddhism while reminding the reader that Buddhism had no solution for social issues. The editor wrote, “So you [Thiện

¹⁰⁰ Q.C., “Một Giờ Tiếp Chuyện Với Ông Thiện Chiếu,” 8.

¹⁰¹ Phan Văn Hùm, “Thiện Chiếu Hoàn Tục,” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, January 11, 1934, 231 edition, 13.

¹⁰² “Pour comprendre un système, la première condition est certainement d’y entrer, mais la seconde est d’en sortir.” Phan Văn Hùm, “Thiện Chiếu Hoàn Tục,” 13.

Chiếu] promote atheism, but you deemed those that wanted material gains lowly, then how do you hope to help end suffering?” But the article ended by recommending those who sought detachment to rethink their plan and “follow Thiện Chiếu to awaken.”¹⁰³

From this moment on, Thiện Chiếu disappeared from the Vietnamese Buddhist revival and the colonial archives. He became a full-fledge Marxist revolutionary, and his official biography read like that of a Vietnamese communist party member – which is steeped in anti-colonial activities, imprisonment and ultimately liberation by fleeing to Hanoi. For instance, in 1940, Thiện Chiếu participated in the failed uprising in southern Vietnam. For the next two years, Thiện Chiếu went into hiding. In 1942, the French police captured Thiện Chiếu, and he was incarcerated at Côn Đảo until 1945. In 1954, he left southern Vietnam for Hanoi.¹⁰⁴

A decade later, in 1964, Thiện Chiếu finally reflected upon his participation in the Vietnamese Buddhist revival. He believed that, despite the ups and downs, Vietnamese Buddhism would survive with its spirit in the people. He wrote:

If [it] is the dregs of Buddhism, it will rise and fall according to chance, definitely heading to its own demise. If [it] is the essence of Buddhism, it will survive forever in the spirit of the [Vietnamese] people and, with that spirit, advance accordingly to the development of humanity.¹⁰⁵

CONCLUSION: Thiện Chiếu, though departing the Vietnamese Buddhist revival early, deeply shaped its ideological discourse. His attempts at reinterpreting Vietnamese Buddhism gave Buddhists a new horizon to transform the religion, and his ideas created a blue print for Buddhists to institutionalize their revival effort. In fact, the emphasis that Thiện Chiếu had on establishing Buddhist publishing houses, educating Buddhist monks and translating Buddhist

¹⁰³ Huân Minh, ““Phật Giáo Chân Hưng’?,” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, May 18, 1933, 200 edition, extra.

¹⁰⁴ Thích Đồng Bổn, ed., *Tiểu Sử Danh Tăng Việt Nam*, vol. 1 (Ho Chi Minh City: Thành Hội Phật Giáo TP. Hồ Chí Minh, 1996), 489.

¹⁰⁵ Thiện Chiếu, *Di Cảo Của Nhà Sư Thiện Chiếu*, ed. Thích Như Niệm (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Tôn giáo, 2004), 32.

works into quốc ngữ became the main focus for all of the Buddhist associations throughout Vietnam during the 1930's. In the following chapter, I will explore the epistemic anxieties that followed the departure of Thiện Chiếu, as Vietnamese intellectuals grew critical of the Vietnamese Buddhist revival.

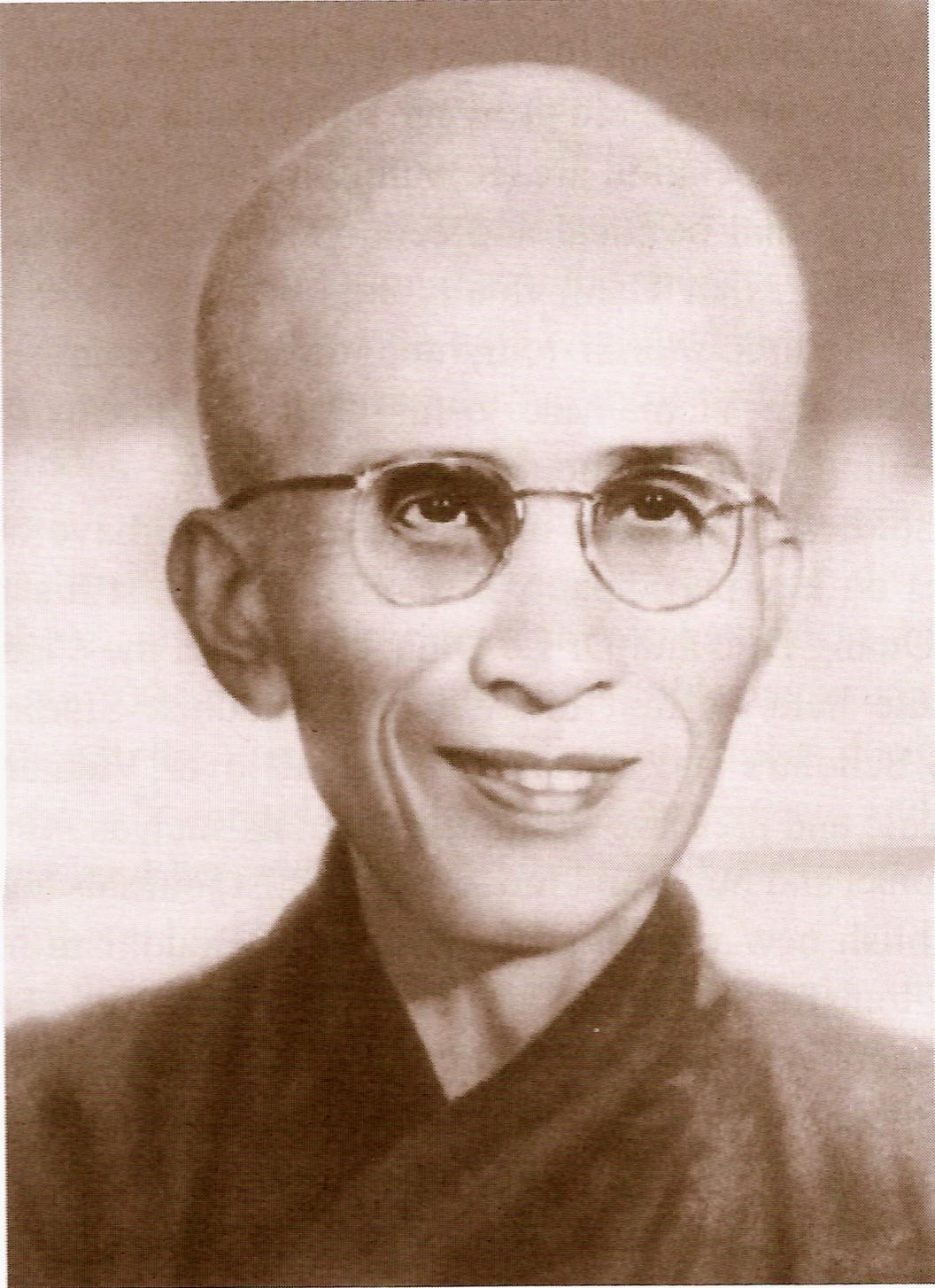


Figure 1: Thích Thiện Chiếu (1898-1974)

The True, the Fake and the Foreign

After Thiện Chiếu's departure in 1933, the Vietnamese Buddhist revival gained an unprecedented popularity. The attention surprised non-Buddhists as well as Buddhists, as they grappled to explain the social phenomenon. For instance, the periodical *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (Women's News) published a series of exposé on the revival. The main question was: Why was the revival flourishing?

The theories that journalists, intellectuals and Buddhists had for the popularity, however strange, did not change the fact that Vietnamese Buddhist revival had become a social force to be reckoned with. As a result, Vietnamese intellectuals grew skeptical of the revival. For instance, they criticized it for promoting superstition. Even though Buddhists responded vehemently, the critique created an epistemic anxiety in them. In a sense, Buddhists began to question themselves: What were the signs of a true monk? How could one identify the fake monks? And what were the "foreign" elements responsible for the decline of Vietnamese Buddhism?

Exposé

The periodical *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* was the first to investigate the popularity of the Vietnamese Buddhist revival. Established in 1929 in Saigon, the periodical "signaled a new phase in discussion of social issues in general and the roles that Vietnamese women might play in particular." In fact, the periodical "served above all as a testing ground for new ideas," such as "dialectical materialism" and "first-hand reporting of the destitute lives of female miners, agricultural laborers, beggars, and prostitutes." The periodical did not focus on the well-educated elites. It instead targeted the "tens of thousands of functionally literate young women

and men emerging from between three and six years of schooling.” The “articles were generally kept brief, the vocabulary unceremonious, the message straight forward.” As a result, *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* was a “highly successful weekly periodical” with a circulation as high as “8,500 copies a week.”¹

The interest that *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* had in the revival also followed the change in its editorial policy at the time. Previously, in May 1931, the periodical focused on the Great Depression by giving attention “to the falling price of rice, to company bankruptcies, to growing unemployment, and to the drop in school enrollments.” However, the periodical was “unable to offer new insights on these very serious developments.” But in early 1933, the periodical experienced a dramatic shift with “a number of younger, more radical women” joining its staff. The new emphasis for the periodical was “on penetrating journalistic encounters with individuals of all classes, forthright sociological discussions of prostitutions, religious escapism and faith-healing, attacks on facism, and critiques of bougeois feminism.”²

The journalist Huấn Minh was focused on the investigation of the revival. He began by interviewing founders of the new Buddhist sects called Minh Lý (Illuminated Enlightenment) and Đạo Phật Thích Ca (The Way of Gautama Buddha). Huấn Minh also mentioned that he spent “two weeks” reading “a tall stack of books” published by the sects.³ The obvious question that he wanted to answer was: “Why is this movement flourishing in Cochinchina?” But this was just a

¹ The discussion in this chapter draws on David Marr’s classic work *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, which is still unsurpassed. David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 220.

² Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, 223-224.

³ Huấn Minh, ““Phật Giáo Chấn Hưng”?,” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, May 18, 1933, 200 edition, 13.

veneer. What lay beneath were complete disbelief and disdain. “Why are there so many intellectuals believing in mysticism?” Huân Minh wrote.⁴

Minh Lý

For the first two articles, Huân Minh tried to describe the new Buddhist sects to the reader. But it was difficult for him to keep an open mind. In the article on the Minh Lý sect, he focused on the practice of “spirited writing” (phép cơ bút). The act involved six to seven members: “one member sits in front of a small table with a stack of white paper while holding...an enormous pencil,” and the others “kneeled in the back” while “chanting a sutra” that called for the Jade Emperor. After a short while, Huân Minh continued, the pencil began to “move, tapping lightly on the table, and drew circles in the air. Then it swooped down and wrote huge words on the paper.” The spirit finally revealed itself, “I am *Tề Thiên Đại Thánh* (The Monkey King).”⁵

Spirited writing was the foundation of the Minh Lý sect. In fact, the pencil, through the practice, told the founding members to “form the sect” and how to “arrange the altar, bow and make offerings.” And the most important thing of all, the pencil told, was to “not forget to pay respect to the important deities in heaven.” Huân Minh, however, did not bother to delve deeper into the meaning of spirited writing or interpret it in its social and religious context, let alone its popularity, since Caodaism, too, relied on this practice to communicate to the heaven. He instead called the practice “child’s play” and dismissed the Minh Lý sect as an “aberration

Đạo Phật Thích Ca

⁴ Huân Minh, “Văn Chương và Triết Lý Của Cuộc Vận Động Tôn Giáo Tại Nam Kỳ: Kết Luận Cuộc Điều Tra,” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, May 25, 1933, 201 edition, 15.

⁵ Huân Minh, “Điều Tra về Phong Trào Tôn Giáo ở Xứ Nam Kỳ,” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, May 18, 1933, 200 edition, 4.

Next on the list was the Đạo Phật Thích Ca sect. In his article, Huấn Minh portrayed the sect as a paradox. But he made sure that the sect was void of intrigue and originality. He deemed it merely a reflection of the society of Cochinchina: a place where “vulgar luxury” was next to “fierce struggle,” and “abject poverty” next to “opulent wealth.”⁶ For instance, as Huấn Minh described, the pagoda of the sect was a house like every other house in a typical neighborhood in Saigon. The only discernible difference was that it had “an altar for the Buddha.”⁷ In addition, the pagoda, like every other pagoda, expected its followers “not to eat meat, practice abstinence, leave their families and do away with love.”⁸ But unlike every other pagoda, it did not support its followers.⁹

In this familiar yet strange setting, Huấn Minh revealed that he had met the sect leader Nguyễn Kim Muôn (Figure 2) a decade ago when Muôn was still working for the Bank of Indochina. But Muôn quit his job on February 1, 1930 and left for Phú Quốc Island in the Gulf of Siam to seek enlightenment.¹⁰ Huấn Minh did not seem curious at all about Muôn’s spiritual quest but rather distracted with the monk’s outer appearance. He described how white Muôn’s teeth were when he smiled, and how his hands were constantly turning the rosary. He then noticed the Buddhist swastika on Muôn’s rosary and likened the monk to a follower of Hitler. In the end, Huấn Minh reduced Muôn to a caricature – or worse, a buffoon full of gibberish. When Huấn Minh asked what impact his sect would have on the people, Muôn answered, “Oh, Lord

⁶ Huấn Minh, ““Phật Giáo Chấn Hưng”?”,” 9.

⁷ Huấn Minh, ““Phật Giáo Chấn Hưng”?”,” 9.

⁸ Huấn Minh, ““Phật Giáo Chấn Hưng”?”,” 9.

⁹ Huấn Minh, ““Phật Giáo Chấn Hưng”?”,” 9.

¹⁰ For more on Nguyễn Kim Muôn, see Shawn Frederick McHale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2004), 143–144.

Buddha! People will go up but down, down but up, up but down!”¹¹ And to reiterate his point, Huấn Minh repeated Muôn’s answer one more time without offering any contextualization.

The Verdict

The conclusion Huấn Minh reached through his investigation seemed predetermined and superficial. He never took the Buddhist sects or the Vietnamese Buddhist revival seriously. He filed the new Buddhist sects into two categories: one believed in an omnipotent being and fate, and the other believed in destroying the “material” in order to free the “spiritual.” Despite these theological differences, Huấn Minh held that the followers of these sects, particularly the intellectuals, were very similar. They all subscribed to religious escapism, as they shared the “attitude of those who were tired of the rat race and had retreated to the spiritual realm to forget.”¹² And these intellectuals, he further asserted, had a faulty understanding of history and science, for they viewed the former as “circular” and the latter as “harmful to people.” Huấn Minh instead saw both history and science as progress because, he argued, viewing history as circular was yearning to return to the Stone Age, and shunning machinery and science was to reject reality. He also added that Buddhism was not in decline. “[Vietnamese] people have always believed in the Buddha, Saints and Deities. Pagodas in the three regions do not have any less visitors.” Huấn Minh maintained that the only difference was that the revival had gained an organization, thus becoming “stronger and bigger.”¹³ However, for having such shaky a foundation, the revival, he concluded, would eventually fail.¹⁴

¹¹ Huấn Minh, “‘Phật Giáo Chấn Hưng’?,” 9.

¹² Huấn Minh, “Văn Chương và Triết Lý Của Cuộc Vận Động Tôn Giáo Tại Nam Kỳ: Kết Luận Cuộc Điều Tra,” 15.

¹³ Huấn Minh, “Triết Lý Và Lễ Phế Hưng Của Cuộc Vận Động Tôn Giáo,” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (Saigon, June 1, 1933), 202 edition, 7.

¹⁴ Huấn Minh, “Triết Lý và Lễ Phế Hưng Của Cuộc Vận Động Tôn Giáo,” 8.

Women's Critique

Huân Minh was not alone with his critique of the Vietnamese Buddhist revival. The critique resonated with the women writers at *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*. In fact, they shared Huân Minh's sentiments, as the revival began to attract women. The stakes, however, were a lot higher for these writers. They were concerned about the wellbeing of the women who joined the new Buddhist sects. This was not groundless since the impression at the time was that "Vietnamese were a lot more superstitious than Europeans, and that women were the worst."¹⁵ Also, the women writers "understood the importance of women being energized and organized."¹⁶ In a sense, for the women writers at *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, the revival was a personal matter rather than a subject of investigation.

Giving up

Nguyễn Thị Kiêm, "the leader of the editorial coup" in 1933, wrote an open letter not only to appeal but also to reason with a friend to leave monastic life.¹⁷ Like Huân Minh, Kiêm saw the act of entering monastic life (đi tu) as giving up on life. She admitted that she did not know how her friend felt about monastic life, but she was certain that her friend's decision was irrational. Kiêm wrote:

Your life as a seamstress was too limiting. It did not bring you any thrill or happiness. Day after day, everything became blain and indistinguishable. Then one day, a [Buddhist] monk came by your house and told you that 'life is full of suffering, people are cruel and cunning,' [and] 'entering monastic life is the root of happiness.' Then you had a chance to visit a pagoda...you were touched. For you were impressionable, the seed of religion sprouted. You shaved your head and ordained without having given much thought about the decision.¹⁸

¹⁵ "Sự Mê Tín Của Phụ Nữ," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, April 17, 1930, 48 edition, 5.

¹⁶ Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, 221.

¹⁷ Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, 224.

¹⁸ Nguyễn Thị Kiêm, "Thơ Cho Bạn Ở Chùa," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, November 2, 1933, 223 edition, 13.

Kiêm perhaps felt that once she presented the necessary rationality, her friend would come to her senses. She also argued that, in the material sense, “entering monastic life was absurd” because her friend renounced a life that the poor fought so hard to attain.¹⁹ And, in the spiritual sense, she added, entering monastic life was to renounce “the joy and responsibility that life reserved for each person.”²⁰

Nguyễn Thị Kiêm then turned her argument for rationality onto the revival. She argued that the act of entering monastic life itself was irrational because most of the monks in Vietnam were practicing Buddhism incorrectly. The correct way, Kiêm maintained, was not to detach oneself from society but rather to engage with it by helping the poor, reforming the bad, and caring for the disabled. Then, she added, if they failed to do that but still renounced their responsibility to their families, “they only wanted to avoid hardship in life, not suffering – entering monastic life meant nothing more than that.”²¹

Leaving the Fight for Women’s Rights

Like Kiêm, Md. Bùi Thị Hòa focused on the detachment aspect of entering monastic life in her article. But she took this aspect beyond social detachment. She instead argued that women, who entered monastic life, were also leaving the fight for women’s rights. Hòa observed that before the revival started, most Buddhist monks were uneducated. “Everyone knew that this kind of monks and nuns did not get much respect,” she commented.²² As the revival became popular, Buddhism gained a new kind of followers. Some of these “modern” monks and nuns could “speak French really well,” and “some could eloquently discuss philosophical and social

¹⁹ Nguyễn Thị Kiêm, “Thơ Cho Bạn Ở Chùa,” 14.

²⁰ Nguyễn Thị Kiêm, “Thơ Cho Bạn Ở Chùa,” 14.

²¹ Nguyễn Thị Kiêm, “Thơ Cho Bạn Ở Chùa,” 15.

²² Md. Bùi Thị Hòa, “Phụ Nữ Đối Với Cuộc Vận Động Tôn Giáo ở Nam Kỳ,” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, November 23, 1933, 225 edition, 13.

issues.”²³ This intellectual shift, Hòa believed, was indicative of their background. Before these new monks and nuns entered monastic life, they were “officials, teachers or administrators.”²⁴

Md. Bùi Thị Hòa, however, found the intellectual shift unfortunate because it drained the women’s movement of talents. They also entered monastic life to forget about their problems, such as terminal illness, unrequited love, and misfortune. This suffering, she argued, was due to society and its “inequality.” Hòa, thus, urged women to “band together to fight inequality,” so that “women could achieve happiness in both the spiritual and material sense.”²⁵

Committing Suicide

Another woman writer named Thu Dân, though sharing the outlook of Nguyễn Thị Kiêm and Md. Bùi Thị Hoà, was inward looking in her article. For Thu Dân, entering monastic life was similar to “committing suicide” because women were rejecting their privileges and not fulfilling their social responsibilities.²⁶ She acknowledged that the global economic crisis, which robbed people of their livelihood, was pushing them to “promulgate the idea of abandoning the material life to seek Nirvana.”²⁷ Also, the situation allowed the evil monks to exploit women. These monks, Thu Dân commented, “did not have to work, but [they] had a house to live in, rice to eat, car and maids.”²⁸ But she maintained that women had their agency. In a sense, since women enjoyed their privileges of having their “rice” and “clothes” produced by the laborers, they must fulfill their responsibilities to “labor with them” and “struggle with them against exploitation and

²³ Md. Bùi Thị Hòa, “Phụ Nữ Đối Với Cuộc Vận Động Tôn Giáo ở Nam Kỳ,” 13.

²⁴ Md. Bùi Thị Hòa, “Phụ Nữ Đối Với Cuộc Vận Động Tôn Giáo ở Nam Kỳ,” 13.

²⁵ Md. Bùi Thị Hòa, “Phụ Nữ Đối Với Cuộc Vận Động Tôn Giáo ở Nam Kỳ,” 14.

²⁶ Thu Dân, “Chị Em Hỡi! Đi Tu Là Một Cách Tự Sát!,” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, April 19, 1934, 238 edition, 8.

²⁷ Thu Dân, “Chị Em Hỡi! Đi Tu Là Một Cách Tự Sát!,” 8.

²⁸ Thu Dân, “Chị Em Hỡi! Đi Tu Là Một Cách Tự Sát!,” 8.

oppression.”²⁹ Women, Thu Dân concluded, owed it to the laborers to “materialize Nirvana on earth.” And to “turn their back, they were making this hell on earth a lot worse.”³⁰

Intellectual Critique

By the mid 1930’s, Vietnamese Buddhists had officially established a Buddhist association in each of the three regions. The Cochinchina Buddhist Association (Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Hội) was established in 1932 in Saigon, the Annam Buddhist Association (Annam Phật Học Hội) in 1933 in Hue, and the Tonkin Buddhist Association (Hội Phật Học Bắc Kỳ) in 1934 in Hanoi. During this time, critics of the Vietnamese Buddhist revival also expanded beyond the writers of *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*. They began to include Vietnamese intellectuals – who had very different opinions about the revival and its mission. The critiques from Phan Khôi and Hoài Thanh best captured the range of criticism at the time. For Phan Khôi, Vietnamese Buddhist associations were not doing enough, but Buddhism still had the power to transform Vietnamese society. For Hoài Thanh, Buddhism had become irrelevant.

Inaction

In 1935, Phan Khôi was no longer the star essayist at *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*. He had moved to Hue and became an editor of the newspaper *Tràng An* (Constant Peace). On May 19, 1935, *Tràng An* had a special issue to commemorate the Buddha’s Nativity and report on the celebration in Hue – which was organized by the Annam Buddhist Association. This issue also included a commentary by Phan Khôi on all of the Buddhist associations and their revival efforts.

²⁹ Thu Dân, “Chị Em Hỡi! Đi Tu Là Một Cách Tự Sát!,” 8.

³⁰ Thu Dân, “Chị Em Hỡi! Đi Tu Là Một Cách Tự Sát!,” 8.

Inaction was the critique that Phan Khôi had of the Buddhist associations. He was disappointed with the revival effort by the Cochinchina Buddhist Association. The association was the first Buddhist association established in Vietnam, and most of its members were government officials, yet it had only renovated Linh Sơn pagoda and published the periodical *Từ Bi Âm* (The Sound of Compassion). These two achievements were not enough for Phan Khôi, as he commented that the association did not “make much noise” or have any impact on Vietnamese society.³¹

Next on the commentary was the Tonkin Buddhist Association. Phan Khôi did not think highly of the association, for it was the newest. He noted that the association created “a lot of noise” by organizing a procession and a lecture series on Buddhism. But he expected that the association would become complacent very soon.

The Annam Buddhist Association was last on the commentary. Phan Khôi criticized the association for being “tedious” with its revival effort. It had only accomplished two “tasks” since its inception: publishing the periodical *Viên Âm* (Sound of Perfection) and organizing the celebration of the Buddha’s Nativity. He was uncertain whether the association would accomplish anything else.³²

Phan Khôi disclosed that he did not follow any religion. The motivation for his critique was merely the desire to see revivalists follow through with their plans. But the expectation Phan Khôi had was very high. He wanted Vietnamese Buddhists to emulate the revival effort in China. He described:

³¹ Phan Khôi, “Sự Hành Động Của Các Hội Phật Giáo ở Ba Kỳ và Cái Hiệu Quả Tương Lai Của Các Hội Ấy,” *Tràng An*, May 10, 1935, 21 edition, 1.

³² Phan Khôi, “Sự Hành Động Của Các Hội Phật Giáo ở Ba Kỳ và Cái Hiệu Quả Tương Lai Của Các Hội Ấy,” 1.

Nowadays in China, Buddhist associations are everywhere. They [the associations] have monks proselytizing. Every summer, they [the monks] urged each other to retreat deep into the forest to study and lecture... And Master Taixu traveled not only all over the country to unite Buddhist associations but also to Europe and America to promote the Buddhism of China.

Phan Khôi acknowledged that it was difficult for Vietnamese revivalists to follow what he described. But he believed that uniting all of the Buddhist associations in Vietnam was within reach. Thus, he did not understand why Vietnamese Buddhists had been in such “deep meditation” and not working toward such goal.³³

Phan Khôi, though critical of the revival, did not give up hope on Buddhism. He believed that Vietnamese Buddhism still had the radical potential to transform society. He recommended revivalists to “establish Buddhist schools” and “send people to lecture on Buddhism.” And in a convoluted fashion, perhaps due to strict colonial censorship, Phan Khôi dispelled myths that the late Governor General Pasquier used Buddhism to lure young people from political activities, and that Buddhism made people lazy. He confessed that he “did not know the intention of Pasquier” in allowing Buddhists to establish associations. But he asserted that Buddhism, even when it prospered, would not have such a negative effect on people. He pointed to history, particularly during the Lý and Trần dynasties, when Buddhism prospered, to illustrate the positive impact Buddhism had on Vietnamese people, such as defeating Chinese invasions. “History is a very strong proof,” he wrote, “no one can argue against, it proved that Buddhism was not ...opium, making people weak.”³⁴

Irrelevance

³³ Phan Khôi, “Sự Hành Động Của Các Hội Phật Giáo ở Ba Kỳ và Cái Hiệu Quả Tương Lai Của Các Hội Ấy,” 1.

³⁴ Phan Khôi, “Sự Hành Động Của Các Hội Phật Giáo ở Ba Kỳ và Cái Hiệu Quả Tương Lai Của Các Hội Ấy,” 1.

Expressing views very different from those of Phan Khôi, Hoài Thanh (1909 – 1982), a literary critic and fellow journalist at the periodical *Tràng An*, had no hope for Buddhism. He, however, reached his conclusion in a different manner. Instead of examining Buddhist associations and their impact, Hoài Thanh focused on the social, political and economic conditions that not only pushed but also pulled people to join the Vietnamese Buddhist revival.

According to Hoài Thanh, the three main causes for Vietnamese to join the revival were: wounded racial pride, desire for new and safe ideology, and economic crisis. First, the popularity of the revival, Hoài Thanh found, had its root in a “wounded racial pride.” He noted that the revival was a “social phenomenon” for Vietnamese intellectuals. They had always been “indifferent to religion.” Suddenly, a “large group [of intellectuals] rushed to study Buddhism, shave their heads, become vegetarians, [and] pray to the Buddha.”³⁵

Hoài Thanh traced the phenomenon to colonial psychology. In a sense, French colonialism created a psychological condition or psychosis where “in contact with Europeans, [Vietnamese] see that whatever it is, [Europeans] are better, from their strong and well-developed bodies to airplane, submarine, and profound theories [and] monumental achievements.”³⁶ Thus, when Vietnamese intellectuals saw “French books and intellectuals praising Buddhism as profound,” they seized the opportunity to prove their self-worth. Hoài Thanh wrote:

Like people drowning, [they] hang on to a piece of driftwood floating in the water while telling themselves and others: ‘We are not completely inferior. We have something good.’ Buddhism is not ours. But more than a thousand years since Buddhism entered our country, which is long enough for our people to have ownership [of it], to flaunt [it] to others and to comfort ourselves and hang on to our pride and self-respect that are diminishing.³⁷

³⁵ Hoài Thanh, “Phong Triều Phục Hưng Phật Giáo,” *Tràng An*, July 30, 1935, 43 edition, 1.

³⁶ For more on colonial psychology, see Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1967.

³⁷ Hoài Thanh, “Phong Triều Phục Hưng Phật Giáo,” 1.

Second, Hoài Thanh observed that French colonialism created an ideological vacuum in Vietnam. In other words, Vietnamese turned to Buddhism because they did not have any other ideology to follow or “worship.” Confucianism had become “too limiting,” and nationalism and socialism were too dangerous because participants were incarcerated and exiled to colonial prisons in Côn Đảo and Lao Bảo. As a result, Buddhism became a “convenient” choice. As Hoài Thanh explained, Buddhists would avoid harassment from the French colonial regime. People who joined the revival also satisfied their ideological needs with a religion that had been proven and “accepted by both East and West.” For those that had a French education, though not spouting Western ideology of “freedom, equality and democracy,” they could use Buddhism to ward off criticism of being “Europeanized.” Vietnamese, Hoài Thanh asserted, also found in Buddhism a pastime that was “harmless” in comparison to social vices, such as gambling and drinking. Finally, Vietnamese found fulfillment and satisfaction in the revival.³⁸

Third, Hoài Thanh believed that the economic crisis of the 1930’s had a great impact on the Vietnamese Buddhist revival. It drove people, particularly the masses, to Buddhism. For Hoài Thanh, this was the precise factor that made the revival into a popular movement. Even though the observation by Hoài Thanh was very insightful, he did not take the masses and their reasons to join the revival seriously. A typical materialist, he rationalized that people joined religions to “buy some sort of happiness that [they] could not find in reality.” In a sense, when the truth alone was not satisfying, “people borrowed fantasies and illusions to replace it [the truth].” Hoài Thanh also hypothesized that if people never had “hunger and cold...sickness, [or] heart-breaking difficulties, perhaps no one would follow religion.” Ultimately, he compared people practicing Buddhism to buying tickets for the Indochinese lottery. He wrote, “People burn

³⁸ Hoài Thanh, “Phong Triều Phục Hưng Phật Giáo,” 1.

incense, people chant sutras like people buying lottery tickets, lucky they win one hundred thousand [piasters], [and] unlucky not winning does not matter.” And if people did not reach Nirvana this lifetime, there would be the next lifetime – or the next lottery drawing.³⁹

Hoài Thanh ended his critique of the Vietnamese Buddhist revival on a gloomy note. He did not share the hope that Phan Khôi had for Buddhism. In fact, he did not think Buddhism had any answer for the current crisis in Vietnam. In a sense, Hoài Thanh believed that Buddhism had become irrelevant. To illustrate his argument, Hoài Thanh referred to the novel *Hồn Bướm Mơ Tiên* (Dreams of the Butterflies) by Khải Hưng – which was first published in 1933. The novel told a story of unrequited love between Ngọc and Lan – Lan due to circumstances ran away from home, pretended to be a man and ordained at a pagoda. The novel ended with Ngọc and Lan accepting their fate that they could love each other, but they could never be with each other. Ngọc pitied Lan, for her “soul is torn between love and religion, both of which are equal in force, thus both were further knotting her mind.”⁴⁰ The irony that Hoài Thanh wanted to point out to the reader was that Ngọc and Lan should have been together, but it was Buddhism that did not allow them this possibility. The conclusion Hoài Thanh reached through his reading of the novel was that Buddhism was “sterile” and “incompatible with life.”⁴¹

To bolster his critique of Buddhism, Hoài Thanh shifted the focus to the practitioners. He clarified that there were two kinds of Buddhism. One was the doctrine, and the other “the Buddhism in life, the Buddhism of the monks and laypeople that has been practiced then and now.” For the doctrine, Hoài Thanh quickly deemed that Buddhism was too confusing. It had too many interpretations that its believers “did not know which way to follow.” In addition,

³⁹ Hoài Thanh, “Phong Triều Phục Hưng Phật Giáo,” 2.

⁴⁰ Khải Hưng, *Hồn Bướm Mơ Tiên* (Saigon: Đời Nay, 1962), 110.

⁴¹ Hoài Thanh, “Phong Triều Phục Hưng Phật Giáo,” 2.

Buddhism had been in existence for 2,500 years, yet people still “could not understand its doctrine.” “Earth might have disappeared, the Sun might have gone cold, before Buddhists could promulgate the doctrine of Buddhism,” he wrote.

For the practice of Buddhism, Hoài Thanh criticized that Buddhists were detached from reality. He retold a story of Buddhists excited with the possibility of leaving their social responsibilities behind to retreat to a pagoda because it would provide them with the living basics of rice and clothing. Hoài Thanh quickly added that “ninety percent of the population” did not even have such basics. He wrote:

Those that had lost themselves in the sutras really placed themselves outside of life, [and] had a wrong perception of life. They live in fantasies and dreams, [and] the reality around them they do not know. How can a religion that does not acknowledge the truth in life, the factors that affect the development of people, save people?

Hoài Thanh ultimately brought doctrine and practice together to strengthen his argument. He examined the notion of “enlightenment” (giác ngộ) – which centered on “knowing” and “doing.” But in practice, he observed, Buddhists only focused on knowing and forgot about doing. And to rationalize this focus, Hoài Thanh asserted, Buddhists manipulated history through a selective reading of doctrine.⁴²

Buddhist Response

Buddhists, particularly those in Hue, found the critique by Hoài Thanh damaging to their revival effort. Typically, the periodical *Viên Âm* would not engage in public debate about Buddhism because it wanted to focus on “action” rather than “talking.” But the periodical immediately responded to the critique by Hoài Thanh because the editors did not want Hoài Thanh to “misguide” those who were “impressionable.” In fact, the periodical used a third of an

⁴² Hoài Thanh, “Phong Triều Phục Hưng Phật Giáo II: Đối Với Phong Triều Này, Thái Độ Của Thanh Niên Nên Thế Nào?,” *Tràng An*, July 30, 1935, 44 edition, 1.

issue, roughly 20 pages, to respond to the critique by Hoài Thanh, as well as offering the Buddhist perspective on the causes for people joining the Vietnamese Buddhist revival.⁴³

Ethnic Pride, Religious Desire and Suffering

The lengthy response began with a piece by the layman Nguyễn Xuân Thanh. “None of the causes was true,” Thanh wrote. He then asserted that wounded racial pride was an “extremely wrong” cause. According to Thanh, the Asian context in which Hoài Thanh situated his observation did not fit the claim because the Buddha was of Caucasian descent, making him “white” (bạch chủng) rather than Asian or “yellow” (huyền chủng), and Buddhism originated from India not Vietnam. In other words, the Asian context was not fitting for identity politics to work because Vietnamese could not identify racially with the Buddha. Thanh, thus, revised the cause Hoài Thanh put forth to suggest that, perhaps, Vietnamese “ethnic pride” was a cause. Thanh instead saw Buddhism as a part of Vietnam and the revival an effort by Vietnamese to preserve what they deemed valuable and belonging to them.⁴⁴

Nguyễn Xuân Thanh also rejected that Buddhism was a convenient ideology. He argued that the desire for worship was not unique to Buddhism. For Thanh, the desire for worship was inherent in all human beings. “It’s the nourishment for the mind,” he wrote. “Thus, people always need far-reaching ideology and mysterious religion to expand their thinking and knowledge.” But Buddhism was more than an ideology. Thanh argued that Buddhism was also a morality – which would cultivate one’s characters to strengthen the bond between new scientific

⁴³ “Đối Với Phần Thứ Hai Của Bài ‘Phong Triều Phật Giáo Phục Hưng’ Trong Báo T.A.,” *Viên Âm*, no. 15 (June 1935): 16.

⁴⁴ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Nguyên Nhon Của Công Việc Chấn Hưng Phật Học (Nhon Xem Phần Thứ Nhất Của Bài ‘Phong Triều Phật Giáo Phục Hưng’ Đăng Trong Báo T.A. Mà Sanh Ra Ý Tưởng),” *Viên Âm*, no. 15 (June 1935): 11.

studies and social responsibilities between children and parents, wife and husband, and subjects and nation.⁴⁵

Finally, to counter economic crisis as a cause, Nguyễn Xuân Thanh pointed out that suffering went beyond the economy. He acknowledged that the economic crisis had an impact on the Vietnamese Buddhist revival. In fact, it “opened the eyes of those who worshiped the power of science” and social Darwinism to “find a different truth that could bring people happiness.” But for Thanh, life had always been an “ocean of suffering.” For example, the First Noble Truth – which explained birth, growing old, illness and death as causes of suffering – could attest to the immense dimension of suffering. Thanh, thus, argued that Vietnamese Buddhists did not wait until the economic crisis to revive their religion because they had always wanted to a way to deal with suffering.⁴⁶

Evolution, Limit of Science, Morality

Nguyễn Xuân Thanh also offered his own causes for why the Vietnamese Buddhist revival became so popular. They were: “the evolution of our people’s understanding of morality,” “science not being able to bring happiness,” and “a morality capable of taming science and molding people’s character.” These causes might seem disparate. But under close examination, they all underlined the utilitarian view that Buddhism was a solution to the social crisis at the time. In a sense, unlike Hoài Thanh, Nguyễn Xuân Thanh was not interested in

⁴⁵ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Nguyên Nhon Của Công Việc Chấn Hưng Phật Học (Nhon Xem Phần Thứ Nhất Của Bài ‘Phong Triều Phật Giáo Phục Hưng’ Đăng Trong Báo T.A. Mà Sinh Ra Ý Tưởng),” 11.

⁴⁶ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Nguyên Nhon Của Công Việc Chấn Hưng Phật Học (Nhon Xem Phần Thứ Nhất Của Bài ‘Phong Triều Phật Giáo Phục Hưng’ Đăng Trong Báo T.A. Mà Sinh Ra Ý Tưởng),” 13.

observing the development of the revival as a social phenomenon but rather was interested in arguing for the application of Buddhism to social issues.⁴⁷

The first cause Nguyễn Xuân Thanh offered to explain the Buddhist revival was “the evolution of our people’s understanding of morality.” This evolution, Thanh held, began with the decline of Confucianism, particularly its education system, and the rise of Western scientific education. He saw the transition between the two educational systems as continuous rather than disruptive with the latter causing the former to gradually decline. To make his case, Thanh traced the evolution from the rise of Confucianism in Vietnam to its decline during the colonial moment. Confucianism and its education system, for Thanh, were restricting because it limited “one’s thinking with a narrow mold.” As a result, Vietnamese thinking and logic had been in decline for the past few hundred years. Also, when Confucianism was at its peak, Buddhism had to retreat to the pagoda because the masses could not comprehend such reasoning. Thus, when Confucianism declined, and the Vietnamese had received a Western education, they gained the “capability to absorb Buddhism.” In other words, Thanh saw the “dynamic” Western education as the catalyst that revealed the potential of Buddhism to Vietnamese – which had been a part of their society all along.⁴⁸

The second cause offered by Nguyễn Xuân Thanh to explain the Buddhist revival showed the limits of science in making people happy. He acknowledged the profound impact science had on humanity. The biggest scientific achievement for Thanh was the elimination of superstition. As a result, people turned to science with hope that it would “create the perfect happiness for

⁴⁷ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Nguyên Nhon Của Công Việc Chấn Hưng Phật Học (Nhon Xem Phần Thứ Nhất Của Bài ‘Phong Triều Phật Giáo Phục Hưng’ Đăng Trong Báo T.A. Mà Sanh Ra Ý Tưởng),” 13.

⁴⁸ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Nguyên Nhon Của Công Việc Chấn Hưng Phật Học (Nhon Xem Phần Thứ Nhất Của Bài ‘Phong Triều Phật Giáo Phục Hưng’ Đăng Trong Báo T.A. Mà Sanh Ra Ý Tưởng),” 13.

mankind.” But science instead created violent wars like World War I and economic crises that were experienced from Europe and the U.S. to Asia. People, thus, blamed science or the application of science for such misery. And since science already “had toppled theism” and “co-opted philosophy,” Thanh urged Buddhists to revive their religion, so that people would have a “foundation to not misuse science.”⁴⁹

The third and final cause that Nguyễn Xuân Thanh put forth for the Buddhist revival was to have a moral sense that could tame science and mold people’s character. For Thanh, science was a great source of anxiety at the time because it had the power to disrupt religions and expose them as superstitions. Thus, to harness the power of science, a religion must be proven true through experiments and the shared usefulness of a sense of morality, so that people would not misuse science. For Thanh, Buddhism was the answer. It was very similar to science because its doctrine was “clear and correct,” and it was based on self-reliance rather than some divinity or superstition. Buddhism also demanded its followers to “cultivate their character” in Buddhist spirituality, such as compassion, which he believed would definitely prevent them from misusing science.⁵⁰

Epistemic Anxieties

The critiques by intellectuals left a deep impression on Buddhists. In fact, Buddhists began questioning themselves. As a result, Buddhists, particularly laypeople, attempted to classify as well as define the *sangha* and the laity, so that they could identify the true and discard the fake. In this process, the true, or forms of truth, because they were so rare, like sieved gold,

⁴⁹ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Nguyên Nhon Của Công Việc Chấn Hưng Phật Học (Nhon Xem Phần Thứ Nhất Của Bài ‘Phong Triều Phật Giáo Phục Hưng’ Đăng Trong Báo T.A. Mà Sanh Ra Ý Tưởng),” 14.

⁵⁰ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Nguyên Nhon Của Công Việc Chấn Hưng Phật Học (Nhon Xem Phần Thứ Nhất Của Bài ‘Phong Triều Phật Giáo Phục Hưng’ Đăng Trong Báo T.A. Mà Sanh Ra Ý Tưởng),” 15.

took on a new status of perfection that all Buddhists must aspire to achieve. And in its shadow, other figures of criminality, such as the neither-monk-nor-layman, “who, lacking a voice, burst onto the public scene nonetheless.”⁵¹ These figures, whether true or not, should be read as signs for the shifting epistemic anxiety that Vietnamese Buddhists experienced at the time.

The True Sangha

To illustrate the reality of Vietnamese Buddhism, the layman Nguyễn Xuân Thanh painstakingly categorized the *sangha* into five groups. And like sieving for gold, Thanh described and, more or less, defined the four groups of monks who were less than stellar before arriving at the figure of a true monk.

The first group was reserved for the opportunist monks. These were the monks who exploited Buddhism. For Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, these monks did not heed the words of the Buddha, as they still carried an enormous greed. He wrote, “They did not keep their precepts, did not study sutras, [and they] only knew how to chant in a perfunctory manner, [but] they still put on the robe and called themselves monks. Yet, they collected a mass following, built a nice pagoda... amassed rice paddies.” The greed these monks possessed did not stop there. They also sold titles, such as “Bodhisattva reborn” and “Buddha’s child,” to patrons who could afford to buy them. The monks also used their patrons to organize ceremonies that would bestow on them a higher status, such as Tăng Càng (royally-recognized monk) and Abbot.⁵²

The second group was for the monks who turned monastic life into a profession. According to Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, these monks kept the important precepts, but they “did not

⁵¹ James Siegel, *A New Criminal Type in Jakarta: Counter-Revolution Today* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press Books, 1998), 4. For an expansion on Siegel's work on criminality, see Vicente L Rafael, ed., *Figures of Criminality in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Colonial Vietnam*, 1 edition (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1999).

⁵² Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Hiện Trạng Phật Giáo Đồ Ở Xứ Ta,” *Viên Âm*, August 1935, 20.

understand” the meaning behind the Dharma.⁵³ For example, “they couldn’t even distinguish Buddhist sutras from those of other religions.”⁵⁴ And when they had disciples, they perpetuated their lack of understanding and their emphasis on ritual. This, Thanh held, was the reason for the “increase in superstition.”⁵⁵

The third group was vastly different from the other two. Yet, they were still not good enough for Nguyễn Xuân Thanh. The monks who belonged to the third group had some education, but they detached themselves from society. This detachment, Thanh believed, was a sign of complete complacency. He wrote, “This group does nothing all day, [they] sleep well then stroll around, sometime to watch the flowers in bloom, sometime to wait for the moon to rise; sometime to recite poetry with a few friends, and play a game of chess to pass the time.”⁵⁶ Thus for this group, Thanh urged the monks to be more socially engaged by “further pursuing their studies in Buddhism” and “participating in reviving Buddhism.”⁵⁷

The monks who belonged to the fourth group were better than those in the previous three groups. But these monks still did not meet Nguyễn Xuân Thanh’s expectations, for they only had self-interested aims. According to Thanh, they “only had one purpose of attaining enlightenment for themselves.”⁵⁸ This narrow focus of self-interest was the precise thing that set them off the right path. Thanh admitted that for these monks, he did not have the right to criticize them, but he encouraged them to cast their interest wider to help others reach enlightenment.

⁵³ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Hiện Trạng Phật Giáo Đồi Ở Xứ Ta,” 20.

⁵⁴ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Hiện Trạng Phật Giáo Đồi Ở Xứ Ta,” 20–21.

⁵⁵ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Hiện Trạng Phật Giáo Đồi Ở Xứ Ta,” 21.

⁵⁶ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Hiện Trạng Phật Giáo Đồi Ở Xứ Ta,” 21.

⁵⁷ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Hiện Trạng Phật Giáo Đồi Ở Xứ Ta,” 22.

⁵⁸ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Hiện Trạng Phật Giáo Đồi Ở Xứ Ta,” 22.

The fifth and final group defined the true monk – perfection. As Nguyễn Xuân Thanh described it, the monks who belonged to this group did not enter monastic life for themselves but rather for others. Their only goal was to help others reach enlightenment. Thanh wrote:

This group is comprised of the venerable monks who had spent a great deal of time studying the Dharma, had made a vow of compassion, had given up their bodies to shoulder the efforts in reviving [Buddhism], had led the masses to enlightenment; had maintained the precepts because of the masses, had ordained because of the masses, only cared about the masses, and had worked on materializing the Dharma until their last breath while not seeing what they did or for whom they did it.⁵⁹

From Thanh’s description, altruism seemed to be the key element in separating the true monks from the rest. This lack of self or “no-self,” thus, not only defined but also separated the “true monks” from the rest to form a “true *sangha*.”⁶⁰

The True Laity

Nguyễn Xuân Thanh also categorized the laity into five groups in the same manner as he did with the *sangha*. The merit seekers constituted the first group. The critique Thanh had for this group was their worshiping of the Buddha as a deity. He wrote, “They only worried about worshiping rather than cultivating themselves; thus for them, the Buddha was an omnipotent figure for people to pray to, to depend on, instead of the highest omniscient figure, who was born to teach...the right path [for all] to liberate themselves.”⁶¹ This practice of worshiping, Thanh maintained, was akin to superstition because it reflected their lack of understanding of *karma*. The law of *karma*, Thanh asserted, held that everything happened for a reason, meaning the present life was a direct result of the past life. This causality, thus, placed the agency of change

⁵⁹ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Hiện Trạng Phật Giáo Đò Ở Xứ Ta,” 22.

⁶⁰ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Hiện Trạng Phật Giáo Đò Ở Xứ Ta,” 22.

⁶¹ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Hiện Trạng Phật Giáo Đò Ở Xứ Ta,” 23.

in the hands of the believers because by cultivating good deeds in this life, Buddhists were actively improving their future lives instead of “begging some deity” to take pity on them.⁶²

The second group belonged to the sensation seekers. According to Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, the inhabitants of this group violated the fundamental Buddhist concept of impermanence. In a sense, they practiced Buddhism to “seek strange signs.” In fact, the sensation seekers interpreted the “dreamscapes” they had as “attainable” (sở đắc). Like the practitioners of Theosophy, some even went as far as interpreting their dreams as times in which they were “spirited away to study with celestial beings” and then used this interpretation to “teach their students and colleagues” without knowing that it was an “illusion” (ma cảnh).⁶³ Thanh cautioned, “Deities...do exist, but Buddhists need to be able to distinguish orthodoxy from heresy...so that they would not be deceived.”⁶⁴

For the third and fourth groups, Nguyễn Xuân Thanh shifted away from Buddhist fundamentals to look at the relationship between practice and theory in Buddhism. For Thanh, focusing on one aspect alone was to practice Buddhism improperly. In a sense, practice and theory must go hand in hand. Thanh, thus, reserved the third group in his assessment for those who favored practice over theory. These Buddhists, Thanh described observed “had a vegetarian diet, chanted prayers, read the sutras to seek the Pure Land, but outside of their meditation, they ignored the Buddha to chase after worries and illusions.” As a result, they could never sustain “mindfulness.”⁶⁵

The fourth group was the inverse of the third one. In a sense, members of this group favored theory over practice. Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, thus, suggested that members of this group

⁶² Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Hiện Trạng Phật Giáo Đồ Ở Xứ Ta,” 23.

⁶³ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Hiện Trạng Phật Giáo Đồ Ở Xứ Ta,” 24.

⁶⁴ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Hiện Trạng Phật Giáo Đồ Ở Xứ Ta,” 24.

⁶⁵ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Hiện Trạng Phật Giáo Đồ Ở Xứ Ta,” 24.

were mostly intellectuals. For example, intellectuals read the sutras and had a fair understanding of the Dharma, but they could not reconcile their “thinking with [Buddhist] ethics,” so that they could further cultivate themselves. Thanh also added that intellectuals studied the sutras to “show off,” which created a disconnect between the Buddha’s teachings and their “intentions.” Thanh warned that this group was adamant about their way of studying Buddhism by criticizing the previous group of having been self-interested with a narrow focus on helping others reach enlightenment.⁶⁶

The fifth and final group of the laity had the perfect understanding of the relationship between practice and theory. For Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, these Buddhists wanted to learn about Buddhism, so that they could follow the right path to practice Buddhism. With such realization, these perfect laypeople wanted to help the true monks in reaching out to the masses and guiding them to enlightenment regardless of the difficulty.⁶⁷

The Fake

Outline

The assessment that Nguyễn Xuân Thanh made of the *sangha* and laity complicated the Vietnamese Buddhist revival and its participants. The assessment, in fact, blunted the intellectual critique by maintaining that there was, however rare, a small group of monks and laypeople who were true to the Dharma in their revival efforts. These true monks and laypeople subsequently became the role model for the revival, as Thanh upheld them as perfection and urged everyone else to emulate them. But this had unintended consequences.

The “true” for being equated to perfection cast a long shadow over the revival. In this shadow, the fake took shape by subsuming anything that fell short of perfection. And the shadow

⁶⁶ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Hiện Trạng Phật Giáo Đồ Ở Xứ Ta,” 25.

⁶⁷ Nguyễn Xuân Thanh, “Hiện Trạng Phật Giáo Đồ Ở Xứ Ta,” 25.

grew with people turning every monk and layman into a suspect of duplicity. In a sense, suspicion gave the fake its depth and various dimensions – which reflected not only the discourse on reviving Vietnamese Buddhism but also the shifting anxiety that Buddhists experienced at the time.

In 1936, the Buddhist periodical *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* (The Morning Bell) defined the fake as a monk who “made a living out of Buddhism.” But the periodical could not provide its readers any means to identify the fake. In fact, the periodical confessed that the fake monk looked like a true monk because he, too, “wore the robe” and “shaved [his] head.” But the fake monk, *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* insisted, “had no monastery” or “master” because he must have “tricked...[the masses] to obtain his pagoda, then proclaimed himself a monk.” This monk, thus, did not have a clear understanding of the sutras nor Buddhist ethics, and he used Buddhism to make money to finance his personal interests.⁶⁸

The fake was also a monk that did not keep his precepts – which separated monks from laypeople. The layman Khánh Vân from Cochinchina explained that the fake monk did not keep his precepts because he based his self-cultivation (tu) on heart and mind (tâm). When Khánh Vân asked where this heart and mind were, the fake monk could not provide an answer – his eyes “turned white” with confusion.⁶⁹ This focus on the heart and mind, Khánh Vân held, was the reason for the decline of Vietnamese Buddhism because the precepts were fundamental to Buddhism. The monks for keeping their precepts became the “embodiment of the Dharma” (Giới

⁶⁸ “Cùng Ông Tịnh Quán Cư Sĩ,” *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, no. 15 (January 9, 1936): 11.

⁶⁹ Khánh Vân, “Phật Giáo Ở Nước Ta Vì Đâu Phải Chịu Cái Hiện Trạng Suy Đồi?,” *Duy Tâm*, no. 18 (March 1, 1937): 303.

Pháp Giới Thế), thus upholding the Buddhist ethics. And without ethics, “rules would have no meaning.”⁷⁰

The Fake in the Flesh

The monk Nguyễn Kim Muôn, leader of the Đạo Phật Thích Ca sect, embodied the figure of the fake for many Buddhists at the time. The Buddhist periodical *Quan Âm* (Guanyin) attempted to unravel the monk’s mystique by exposing his lewd behavior. But it instead sensationalized the monk’s appeal as a sort of sexual danger to women. The series of exposés by *Quan Âm* began with the nun Diệu Lý, one of Muôn’s disciples (Figure 3), revealing her identity as a man. When Diệu Lý went to the market to collect money from a soy-sauce vendor, she was hit by a car and brought to Chợ Rẫy hospital – where they learned of her true sex. According to Diệu Lý, he and Muôn had kept this secret from the other nuns for twelve years.⁷¹

The journalist from *Quan Âm* could not interview Diệu Lý because she kept her silence. And as soon as the news broke, Muôn checked Diệu Lý out of the hospital and brought him back to their pagoda. The journalist, however, insisted that Muôn was the mastermind behind an elaborated con system. According to the journalist, Muôn trained his nuns to be “educated” and “knowledgeable of the sutras,” and they were equipped with a “mysterious” exterior and the “ability to handle laypeople and bureaucrats, if necessary.”⁷² Then, Muôn split the nuns into two teams: one would promulgate his teachings, and the other would gather reconnaissance, such as “financial situation” of the mark and his religious beliefs. This information, the journalist held, gave Muôn the means to “open up people’s pockets.”

⁷⁰ Khánh Vân, “Phật Giáo Ở Nước Ta Vì Đầu Phải Chịu Cái Hiện Trạng Suy Đồi?,” 304.

⁷¹ Đ.P., “Su Muôn Hay Là Một Ác Tăng Trong Truyện Kiếm Hiệp,” *Quan Âm*, no. 10 (August 1940): 12.

⁷² Đ.P., “Su Muôn Hay Là Một Ác Tăng Trong Truyện Kiếm Hiệp,” August 1940, 14.

The next article in the series on Nguyễn Kim Muôn took on a voyeuristic dimension. It attempted to portray the immoral aspect of Muôn's life and his sect. But the angle of observation was that of a Peeping Tom – who was repelled yet fascinated with the sexual freedom and glamour of Muôn's life. The article began by describing a couple dressed in high fashion. They stepped out of their car and entered their villa – which had a swimming pool. Three women came out to greet them by the pool. They all sat around the pool, drinking Cognac. The journalist then revealed that the man was the monk Nguyễn Kim Muôn and the women were his disciples. The journalist then ended the article and suggested the reader to imagine what was to come next, as Muôn and his disciples finished drinking, “stripped off their clothes” and “splashed about in the swimming pool.”⁷³

To further emphasize the immoral aspect of Nguyễn Kim Muôn's life, the series told the sad story of how the family of uncle Five (chú Năm) from Mỹ Tho was exploited by Muôn. One by one, they all fell victim to Muôn's hypnotism and exploitation. It began with uncle Five's daughter in Saigon. She went missing, and his wife left their home to search for their daughter. After his wife left for Saigon, uncle Five received many requests from his wife to wire money for them. He kept wiring her money until he did not have any left to send. At that point, uncle Five decided to go to Saigon to find them. He spent one night in Saigon at the Long Vân pagoda, and that was all Muôn needed to “hypnotize” him, the journalist alleged. The next morning, in front of his wife and daughter, whom Muôn allowed him to see, uncle Five “showed no excitement.” He “did what Muôn wanted him to do,” and he “donated all the money he had.” Uncle Five then “returned to Mỹ Tho and sold all of their possessions.” And within six months, uncle Five and

⁷³ Đ.P., “*Sư Muôn Hay Là Một Ác Tăng Trong Truyện Kiếm Hiệp II - Long Vân Tự*,” *Quan Âm*, no. 11 (October 1940): 10.

his wife lost everything. Muôn then “discarded” (hắt hủi) them. The journalist, thus, lamented what a tragedy for a happy family that had “lost everything and had nowhere to go.”⁷⁴

The series of exposés on the monk Nguyễn Kim Muôn then shifted its focus to his disciple Diệu Minh. She, too, possessed an air of sexual danger and intrigue like her master. Even though the series did not think she was the mastermind, it dubbed her the second in command – whom Muôn would send to attract men in power. Like the character Kiều in the *Tale of Kiều*, Diệu Minh “knew how to use her beauty to attract powerful men...to protect her and Muôn in their wealth and power.” According to the series, Diệu Minh would go as far as Hue to attract her men. She also “dyed her teeth black and changed her accent” to better interact with the people in Hue.⁷⁵ And to cultivate intrigue, she would pull publicity stunts, such as fasting for three months. The journalist deemed that the sole purpose for such stunts was to “make money.” Diệu Minh announced that she would “fast for 21 days, then on the 22nd day, she would die for 100 days then rise from the dead.” This news drew a large crowd of older women to the pagoda. These women then stayed to service Diệu Minh, whom they began to treat as a “living Buddha.”⁷⁶

Buddhism Not Yet Revived

The figure of the fake was the product of the Vietnamese Buddhist revival. Yet, the figure had the potential to unravel the movement. In his assessment of the revival, the layman Ngô Đơn Quế questioned whether Vietnamese Buddhism had been revived. “Already but not

⁷⁴ Đ.P., “*Sư Muôn Hay Là Một Ác Tăng Trong Truyện Kiềm Hiệp II - Long Vân Tự*,” 10.

⁷⁵ “*Sư Muôn Hay Là Một Ác Tăng Trong Truyện Kiềm Hiệp - Sư Diệu Minh*,” *Quan Âm*, no. 12 (November 1940): 21.

⁷⁶ Đ.P., “*Sư Muôn Hay Là Một Ác Tăng Trong Truyện Kiềm Hiệp*,” *Quan Âm*, no. 13 (December 1940): 17.

yet,” he answered.⁷⁷ Quế acknowledged that Buddhist associations throughout Vietnam had been active in reviving Buddhism, for they had “opened Buddhist schools” and “had teachers” for a wide range of classes.⁷⁸ Some associations, such as the Tonkin Buddhist Association, even sent monks to China to study. But Vietnamese Buddhism was not yet revived. For Quế, this was the doing of the fake monks. As he argued, the fake monks would never want Vietnamese Buddhism revived because they would “have nothing left to benefit from.” Thus, the rational course of action for the fake, Quế reasoned, was to stymie the revival effort by others. He wrote:

These monks forbid their followers to buy books that dealt with the Buddhist revival; forbid [them] to become members of Buddhist associations. They also slandered [the revival] and made up stories to forbid [their followers]... They spoke of self-cultivation, but in fact they gambled, drank and had sex.⁷⁹

Quế lamented that the revival would never yield any success or become popular as long as the fake monks were still leading the revival. He, thus, urged young Buddhists to participate in the revival, so that they could replace the fake and lead the revival to success.

The Neither-Monk-Nor-Layman

Two years after the fake appeared, a darker and more complex figure of criminality emerged on the Vietnamese Buddhist landscape. The monk Thích Giác Chánh, editor-in-chief of the Buddhist periodical *Tam Bảo* (The Three Jewels) in Tourane, defined this new figure as the neither-monk-nor-layman when he evaluated the revival in 1938. The assessment that Giác Chánh made of the revival mirrored that by Nguyễn Xuân Thanh. The differences were that Giác

⁷⁷ Ngô Đơn Quế, “Phải Nhờ Các Bạn Thanh Niên Cư Sĩ Thì Công Cuộc Chấn Hưng Mới Mau Phổ Cập,” *Duy Tâm*, no. 27 (December 1, 1937): 141.

⁷⁸ Ngô Đơn Quế, “Phải Nhờ Các Bạn Thanh Niên Cư Sĩ Thì Công Cuộc Chấn Hưng Mới Mau Phổ Cập,” 141.

⁷⁹ Ngô Đơn Quế, “Phải Nhờ Các Bạn Thanh Niên Cư Sĩ Thì Công Cuộc Chấn Hưng Mới Mau Phổ Cập,” 144.

Chánh complicated and increased the groups that Thanh had created from five to seven. He also reversed the order of Thanh's assessment by addressing the good before the bad.

In the assessment by Thích Giác Chánh, the neither-monk-nor-layman figure was the most complicated of all. This figure was so amorphous that Giác Chánh did not know how to categorize him. But the monk was sure that the figure was harmful to both the *sangha* and society. First, this figure was not a layman, for he not only dressed like a monk but also performed rituals like a monk. "He took his precepts, carried his equipment...had his head shaved, had his robe, [and] knew how to chant." Second, this figure was not a monk, for he at times acted like a "shaman" or someone leading a "séance." For example, Thích Giác Chánh wrote, "He does not keep his precepts, acting like a hungry ghost when seeing food and alcohol and like a pervert when seeing women. In addition, [he] is greedy and violent, superficial and stupid, completely not having any quality of a monk." In a sense, this figure was the combination of a fake monk and fake layman as Nguyễn Xuân Thanh had described, but the difference was in the ability of this figure to move between the two realms and subvert all revival efforts.⁸⁰

Thích Giác Chánh concluded his assessment on a grim note. He criticized the fake and the neither-monk-nor-layman figure as parasites of Buddhism, for they "used the Dharma as bait" and "borrowed the figure of the monk to trick" people. Thích Giác Chánh also calculated that fake monks and the neither-monk-nor-laypeople dominated the Vietnamese *sangha*, at least seventy percent of the *sangha* because other kinds of monks made up probably "three tenths" of the Vietnamese *sangha*, and the good monks only "one hundredth."⁸¹

Fear

⁸⁰ Thích Giác Chánh, "Tăng Bảo Thất Thủ," *Tam Bảo*, no. 8 (May 1938): 9.

⁸¹ Thích Giác Chánh, "Tăng Bảo Thất Thủ," 9.

Fear was the underlying factor of the anxiety and criticism that Thích Giác Chánh had of the *sangha*. In a sense, Giác Chánh was fearful of the *sangha* losing its prestige and control over Vietnamese Buddhism. With such a grim assessment, Giác Chánh urged Buddhist monks to accept the fact that the decline of Vietnamese Buddhism was not due to fate or destiny. As he explained, they should “accept that the *sangha* had fallen due to their own doing,” and they should stop blaming the decline of Vietnamese Buddhism on the ignorance of the laity or the fate of Buddhism. Giác Chánh instead suggested that the *sangha* had declined because the fake monks or a foreign religious element had succeeded in “infiltrating and lowering the status of the *sangha*,” so that the masses had “lost their faith in the Dharma.”⁸²

For having externalized the decline of Vietnamese Buddhism, Thích Giác Chánh reasserted the role of the *sangha* in the revival. As one of the three jewels, the *sangha*, Giác Chánh held, must be the leading element of the revival because the monks were responsible for carrying the Buddha and Dharma. He wrote, “The Three Jewels [Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha] are the highest, there cannot be anyone standing higher than these three.” In this context, Thích Giác Chánh criticized Buddhist associations for not respecting the monks. “Buddhist associations are the associations created by laypeople, and laypeople must submit to the Three Jewels, meaning following the instructions of Dharma and Sangha.”⁸³

The reality, for Thích Giác Chánh, was a different picture. He lamented that the Buddhist associations did not distinguish the fake monks from the good monks, for they treated all monks the same. “The Buddhist associations disrespected, ignored and tried to eliminate [the *sangha*], [and] the masses...shared this sentiment.” Thích Giác Chánh also added that the Buddhist associations ordered the good monks around when their ethics and deep understanding of

⁸² Thích Giác Chánh, “Tặng Bảo Thất Thủ,” 10-11.

⁸³ Thích Giác Chánh, “Tặng Bảo Thất Thủ,” 12.

Buddhism qualified them to lead the revival and that the young monks, who had a Western education, had no authority, “like representatives in a totalitarian regime.”⁸⁴

The Foreign

The fake and the neither-monk-nor-lay figure, though corrupt, were merely opportunists who exploited the decline of Vietnamese Buddhism. These figures, Thích Giác Chánh held, were in no way responsible for the decline of Buddhism. In fact, monks and laypeople believed that foreign elements (ngoại đạo) must have been responsible for the decline of Buddhism. They, however, had different speculations for how the foreign had infiltrated Buddhism and caused the decline.

The Buddhist periodical *Ánh Sáng Phật Pháp* (Light of the Dharma) blended domesticity and nature to explain how the foreign entered Buddhism and caused its decline. The periodical compared Buddhism to a house, but this house was in bad shape. The reason for the decline, the writer offered, was due to the construction process or when Buddhism entered Vietnam from China. The woods or construction materials that went into building the house were not all of good quality. Thus, after many years, the woods “rotted,” and the house was “leaning.” Fortunately, the writer commented, the house was still standing because there were at least some good woods used during the construction process.⁸⁵

The Buddhist periodical *Duy Tâm* (Idealism), though agreeing with *Ánh Sáng Phật Pháp* on the foreign, argued that Vietnamese Buddhism was doomed to decline before Buddhism even entered Vietnam. The periodical located the entrance of the foreign into Buddhism in China, and when Buddhism entered Vietnam from China, it came with mysticism. “Buddhism had lost its character and only maintained the religious forms that the superstition from mysticism had upon

⁸⁴ Thích Giác Chánh, “Tăng Bảo Thất Thủ,” 12.

⁸⁵ “Chấn Hưng Phật Pháp,” *Ánh Sáng Phật Pháp*, no. 4 (April 1, 1938): 110.

entering in China thousands years ago.” The writer also held this foreign element responsible for “ruining the mind of the masses, no less than poison, and impeding social progress.”⁸⁶

In addition to China, the foreign also came from France through Theosophy. This was a drastic change for Vietnamese Buddhism. When Thiện Chiếu translated *Buddhist Catechism* by Henry Steel Olcott, a founding member of the Theosophy Society, Theosophy had the potential to deliver Vietnamese Buddhists to orthodoxy without wading through Chinese Buddhism. But in this climate of anxiety, Theosophy became a foreign element that was so well disguised that it required the eye of an expert to identify and remove. When the periodical *Từ Bi Âm* ran its critique of the Theosophical periodical *Niết Bàn* (Nirvana), it recounted an encounter its former editor the monk Lê Khánh Hòa had with Suzanne Karpelès – who not only defined Buddhism in Cambodia but also brought it to the world. In the words of Penny Edwards on Karpelès as director of the Royal Library of Cambodia (1925-1941) and the founder of the Buddhist Institute in PhnomPenh (1930-1941), “Karpelès acted as a broker of Buddhist knowledge between Cambodia and France, and thus contributed to the global spread of Buddhism.”⁸⁷ The monk Lê Khánh Hòa recalled his encounter with Karpelès:

When I was the editor of the periodical *Từ Bi Âm* at Linh Sơn pagoda [in 1932]... I saw the secretary Nguyễn Văn Nhơn shelving magazines and sutras in French at the library... When Md. Karpelès... came to visit the library and saw those magazines and sutras, she immediately pointed them out to me, ‘Those books are Brahman, not Buddhist. Don’t store them here and diminish the status of your association [with them].’⁸⁸

In retrospect, Thích Khánh Hòa lamented that his lack of French and the secretary’s ignorance of Buddhist sutras combined were the reason for such a foolish mistake. He, thus, warned others to

⁸⁶ “Bàn Về Vấn Đề Phật Giáo Tổng Hội,” *Duy Tâm*, no. 34 (December 1938): 420.

⁸⁷ Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007), 189. For more on Karpelès, see Chapter 8 “Holy Trinity: Chuon Nath, Huot That, and Suzanne Karpelès,” pp. 183-209.

⁸⁸ Lê Khánh Hòa, “Chư Phương Lai Cáo: Cái Cảm Tưởng Đối Với Người Chủ Trương Phật Học Mà Chưa Biết Học Phật,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 95 (December 1, 1935): 29.

be careful in distinguishing Buddhist from non-Buddhist materials, so that they would not repeat his mistake.

The warning by the monk Lê Khánh Hòa seemed benign and almost natural. But in the context of anxiety, where the true, the fake and the foreign at times were indistinguishable, this warning became suspicion and, in some cases, slander, which not only consolidated power within the revival but also limited its radical potential.

CONCLUSION: The period that followed Thiện Chiếu's departure saw intellectuals growing skeptical of the Vietnamese Buddhist revival. For example, the women writers at *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* were concerned about the wellbeing of women who joined the revival. And critics, such as Hoài Thanh, deemed Buddhism as irrelevant in solving social crisis at the time. Even though Buddhists responded at length, the criticism created an epistemic anxiety in them. Buddhists, in fact, began to question themselves. They also began classifying the *sangha* and redefining what it meant to be a true monk. In the following chapter, I will shift focus to examine the response from the laity and its subsequent rise to power. Specifically, the chapter will trace changes in practice advocated by the layman Trần Nguyên Chấn, founder of the Cochinchina Buddhist Association, to revive Vietnamese Buddhism.



Figure 2: The monk Nguyễn Kim Muôn – leader of the Đạo Phật Thích Ca sect

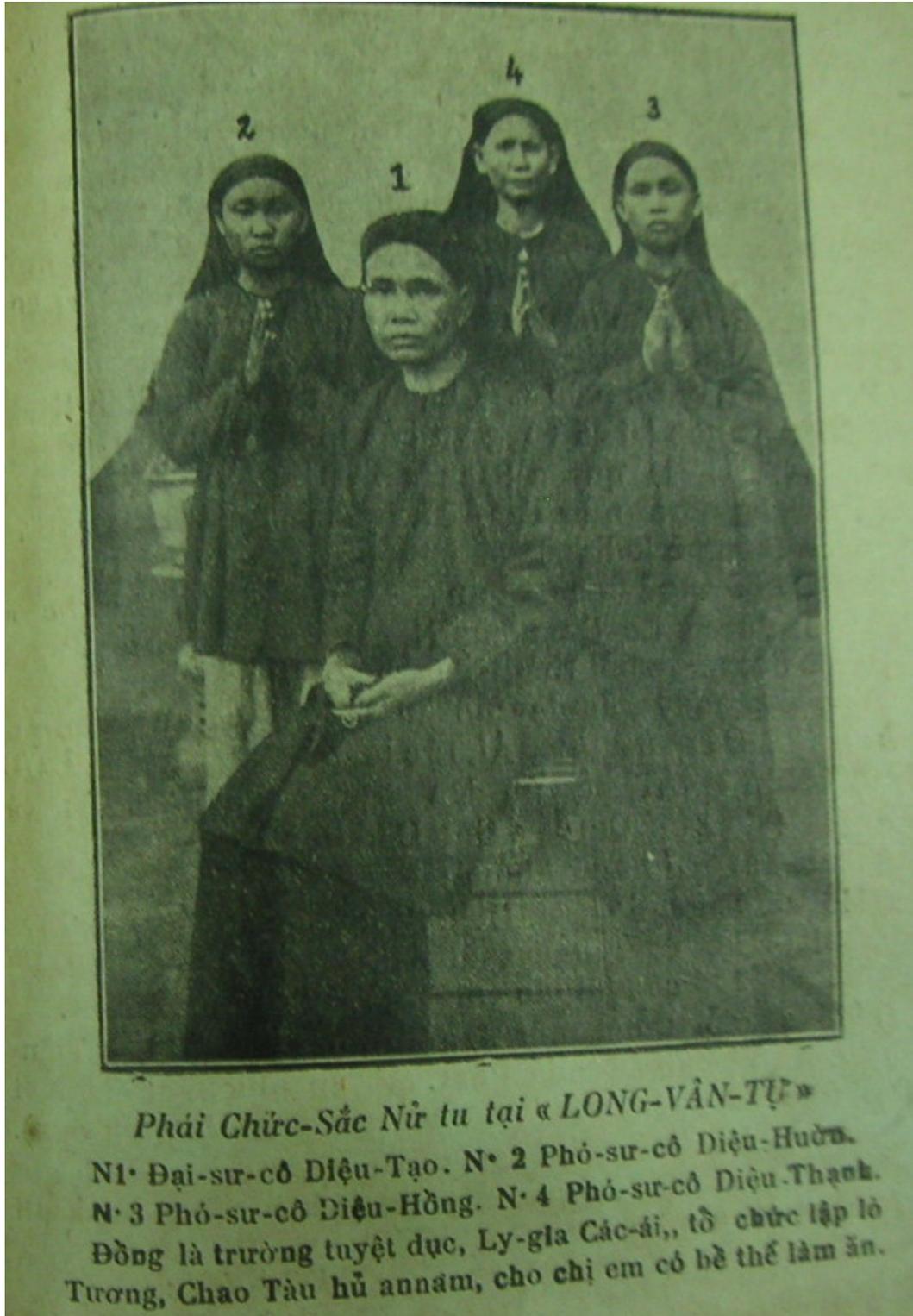


Figure 3: Women Disciples of Nguyễn Kim Muôn

The Layman and the Pope

The layman Trần Nguyên Chấn was one of the first few people to respond to the criticism against the Vietnamese Buddhist revival. His response was action rather than a lengthy article. For example, in 1929, he co-founded the Cochinchina Buddhist Association (Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Hội), the first of its kind in Vietnam, to revive Vietnamese Buddhism. Chấn attempted to materialize the plan that the monk Thiện Chiếu had laid out, but he had to abandon it a few years later. Chấn then utilized his colonial knowledge and personal connection to revive Vietnamese Buddhism. The concerns that Chấn had mainly focused on the laity and defending Buddhism. His inquiries were: How could one help those in the countryside practice Buddhism? What other means could one employ to preserve Buddhism? What change in practice could the laity make to give Buddhism a broader base of followers? Chấn had some successes with his revival effort. But ultimately, Chấn deepened the rift between the *sangha* and the laity, as Buddhist monks abandoned his association to create their own.

Breaking Silence

After four years, the layman Trần Nguyên Chấn finally broke his silence. In an op-ed published in *Từ Bi Âm* (Sound of Compassion) on October 15, 1933, Chấn confessed that he had been “keeping his mouth shut” and “pretending to be deaf” for the past few years because he wanted to focus on reviving Vietnamese Buddhism and developing the Cochinchina Buddhist Association.

Chấn decided to speak against his critics because he believed that his revival effort had paid off. He boasted, “If for the past few years I did not intervene... or singlehandedly dealt with

the difficult problems, Buddhism today would not have been so popular, the pagodas would not have been so peaceful, and the Cochinchina Buddhist Association would not have been welcomed by the masses.”¹

The criticism people leveled against Chấn was that he was “borrowing the name of the Buddha” to exploit people.² In other words, he was using Buddhism for personal gain. These critics, Chấn believed, could not possibly comprehend why someone like him, who had wealth and power, would take on the difficult task of reviving Buddhism. And this suspicion was what united them.

To fight his critics, Trần Nguyên Chấn categorized them into three groups and handled them one by one. The first group he designated to those who were “doubtful” of his revival effort.³ Chấn dismissed them as “not observant enough” to mistake his effort for exploitation and too “dubious” to join the revival themselves. The second group was for those who were “benefiting” from Buddhism. Chấn reasoned that since his revival effort was altruistic, the monks, who benefited from Buddhism, felt threatened. His effort, in a sense, left their “ignorance exposed” “ and “greed unfulfilled.”⁴ And finally, Chấn lumped those who sought fame through the revival into the third group. Chấn harshly criticized both the laypeople and monks in this group, for the former wanted “recognition,” and the latter wanted to use the revival to “carry out their own agenda.”⁵

The categories that Trần Nguyên Chấn created for his critics gave the suspicion that was suffocating the revival a face. But he could not dispel it completely. The alienation that followed

¹ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Lời Tự Bạch Oan Tình,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 44 (October 15, 1933): 24.

² Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Lời Tự Bạch Oan Tình,” 19.

³ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Lời Tự Bạch Oan Tình,” 20.

⁴ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Lời Tự Bạch Oan Tình,” 20.

⁵ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Lời Tự Bạch Oan Tình,” 21.

Chấn's response turned the *sangha* and the laity inward in their revival efforts – thus, limiting their collaboration and impact, if not further driving them apart. Chấn, in fact, had to change his revival plan to accommodate the situation.

A New Vision

Like the monk Thiện Chiếu, Trần Nguyên Chấn originally envisioned the revival as an effort in educating the *sangha*. In 1929, he began his revival effort by building the Linh Sơn pagoda on his private property. Chấn then “found a collaborator” in the monk Lê Khánh Hòa from Bến Tre.⁶ Together, they established the Cochinchina Buddhist Association, the first of its kind in Vietnam. Khánh Hòa served as the President and Chấn a permanent Vice-President of the association.⁷ Chấn also built a library with six reading rooms – which would later double as classrooms for the Buddhist school that he planned to build. The library had “1500 titles from Shanghai” and many others “ordered from France.” And for those who could not read Chinese or French, Chấn and Khánh Hòa published the periodical *Từ Bi Âm* in *quốc ngữ* to teach them the “precepts of Buddhism.”⁸

Four years later, in 1933, Chấn completely scraped his original plan. He never finished building the Buddhist school, and the reading rooms became the printing house for *Từ Bi Âm*. The reasons that Chấn offered were lack of funds and support from the *sangha*.⁹ Chấn then

⁶ H.B., “Une Interview De M. Chan Promoteur De L’oeuvre De La Renaissance Du Bouddhisme,” *L’Opinion* (Saigon, December 16, 1929). Found in CAOM GGI 65539.

⁷ H.B., “Une Interview De M. Chan Promoteur De L’oeuvre De La Renaissance Du Bouddhisme.” Found in CAOM GGI 65539.

⁸ H.B., “Une Interview De M. Chan Promoteur De L’oeuvre De La Renaissance Du Bouddhisme.” Found in CAOM GGI 65539.

⁹ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Ít Lời Bày Tô Về Sự Lập Trường Phật Học,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 70 (November 15, 1934): 19.

added timing, lack of talented teachers and school having a small impact to his reasons – all of which indicated a de-emphasis on the role of education in the revival.¹⁰

Chấn’s new vision instead centered on defending Buddhism. He wrote, “First, reclaim the land that belongs to the pagoda. Second, stop the foreign from taking over pagodas... Third, defend the *sangha* from coercion by those in position of power... [F]ourth, protect laypeople, so that the evil could no longer trick and coerce [them].”¹¹

The Rise of the Laity

The new vision that Trần Nguyên Chấn had for the revival also changed its dynamics. The *sangha* could no longer be at the forefront of the revival. Laypeople, Chấn believed, should take control of the revival. The site for the revival also moved. The countryside became the place where land, politics, and Buddhism intertwined, as Chấn used his connection and colonial knowledge to help Buddhists navigate the colonial system. The revival, as a result, became a fight for land, colonial law and followers.

To assert the role of the laity, Chấn equated the *sangha* to the paternal side and the laity to the maternal side in the house or family of the Buddha (nhà Phật). Chấn held that, traditionally, the maternal side was not as “close” as the paternal side to the Buddha, for the latter had the “great responsibility” of “shouldering the Dharma” and “helping the masses.”¹² But lately, he lamented, “The paternal side had completely forgotten the testament of [our] father [the Buddha].”¹³ Thus, Chấn felt compelled to act in order to help the *sangha* revive Buddhism. In

¹⁰ “Biện Minh Vì Cớ Gì Mà Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Chưa Mở Cửa Phật Học Đường,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 94 (November 15, 1935): 42.

¹¹ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Lời Tựa Bạch Oan Tình,” 25.

¹² Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Vài Lời Biện Bạch Cùng Quý Vị Hội Viên Hội N.K.N.C.P.H. Và Thập Phương Bá Tánh,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 62 (July 15, 1934): 12.

¹³ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Vài Lời Biện Bạch Cùng Quý Vị Hội Viên Hội N.K.N.C.P.H. Và Thập Phương Bá Tánh,” 12.

the context of family matter, Chấn justified his meddling as necessary, as any daughter, “though married off” to a different family, would “extend her hand to help her siblings” who were in crisis.¹⁴

The shift in power, Chấn argued, was necessary. He commented that through his experience in reviving Buddhism he learned that the *sangha* was “indifferent to the Dharma.” He wrote, “[The Sangha] did not want to combine forces with us to take care of the Dharma, so that [we] could show our gratitude to our benevolent father [the Buddha]... instead [the monks] created their own factions to protest against me and hinder... people by not allowing them to buy ‘Tù Bi Âm’ to know the right way to perfect themselves.”¹⁵

Perhaps, there was truth in Chấn’s observation about the *sangha*. But Chấn was not a pleasant person for the *sangha* to work with. He exemplified the shift from seeing Buddhism as a practice to a field of studies. In a sense, by making Buddhism a field of studies, the laity gained the ability to criticize the *sangha* for not knowing about Buddhism in a certain way. As a result, practice was bound to knowledge, as if practice were a reflection of knowledge, or that there were a single correct way to practice Buddhism, rather than that practice had the power to generate and subvert knowledge at the same time.

The laity reveled in the shift of power. They, however, viewed the shift as an obligation to keep the *sangha* in check. For instance, during a bus ride to Saigon, Chấn saw a monk who looked very dapper. He wrote, “The monk was nicely groomed, [he] wore a jet-black scarf... [and] his clothes had a nice turmeric color, and on his feet was a pair of Chinese slippers, and in

¹⁴ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Vài Lời Biện Bạch Cùng Quý Vị Hội Viên Hội N.K.N.C.P.H. Và Thập Phương Bá Tánh,” 12.

¹⁵ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Vài Lời Biện Bạch Cùng Quý Vị Hội Viên Hội N.K.N.C.P.H. Và Thập Phương Bá Tánh,” 13.

his hand was a black umbrella, which looked beautiful.”¹⁶ Chấn thought to himself, “I’m a man, yet seeing the way this monk dresses makes me want to look, let alone women, if they saw this, their heart would react unpredictably.”¹⁷ Chấn felt obligated to confront the monk because he believed that the monk had wasted donations from the laity on frivolous things, such as his clothes, rather than on the revival effort.

As soon as the bus stopped, Chấn confronted the monk. He asked, “Teacher! Since I was a small child, I only learned French, thus not knowing Chinese at all, yet I often hear the word ‘*Bần tăng*,’ but I do not know what it means. Could you explain that word to me?”¹⁸ The monk knew that Chấn was tricking him. Thus, he responded in Chinese. Chấn was rather indifferent. He went on to explain the word to the monk. “The word ‘*Bần*’ means poor, and the word ‘*Tăng*’ means a monk who has accepted his vows and became a bhikkhu. Combining the two words means a poor monk.”¹⁹ Chấn continued to lecture the monk on the relationship between money and suffering, then he criticized the monk for having such luxurious clothing. Chấn ended his lecture by asking the monk, in a condescending tone, whether he agreed with the criticism. It did not matter. The monk walked away, as everyone laughed at him. Chấn succeeded in asserting his authority by humiliating the monk in public.²⁰

The Countryside

With the laity taking control, the Vietnamese Buddhist revival began to move from the city to the countryside. Religious sects and ambiguous figures, such as those criticized by the periodical *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* in the previous chapter, began to fade out of focus. The farmers in

¹⁶ “Người Nhà Chùa Ăn Mặc Trái Phép,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 45 (November 1, 1933): 39.

¹⁷ “Người Nhà Chùa Ăn Mặc Trái Phép,” 39.

¹⁸ “Người Nhà Chùa Ăn Mặc Trái Phép,” 40.

¹⁹ “Người Nhà Chùa Ăn Mặc Trái Phép,” 40.

²⁰ “Người Nhà Chùa Ăn Mặc Trái Phép,” 42.

the countryside of Cochinchina emerged as a new center of the revival effort. As the periodical *Từ Bi Âm* observed, farmers suffered a great deal of “injustice” because they did not have any power.²¹ As a result, farmers could not afford the “stability to perfect themselves (tu).”²² The periodical concluded that it was inevitable for the farmers to “neglect” their belief and to “lose touch” with the Buddhist community, and that gave the foreign (ngoại đạo) the opportunity to “hinder the Dharma.”²³

Trần Nguyên Chấn, “a French citizen” and “Senior Clerk at City Hall in Saigon,” realized that his colonial knowledge and connection to the French colonial regime could help farmers in the countryside.²⁴ The periodical *Từ Bi Âm* explained, “In this extremely competitive world, if [one] does not have enough power to protect the *sangha* and the laity, [one] is not fully materializing the idea of benevolence, thus making it hard to achieve revival.”²⁵ The periodical then praised that since Chấn helped fight injustice done to the *sangha* and the laity, those with power would “stop harassing Buddhists and set precedent for others to follow.”²⁶ “Thus, *Từ Bi Âm* concluded that the revival effort by Chấn was “not commonplace,” and that such defense was a “useful means for the revival of Buddhism.”²⁷

To illustrate the impact that Trần Nguyên Chấn had, the periodical *Từ Bi Âm* briefly summarized the seven cases that he successfully intervened during 1934. These court cases

²¹ “Phương Pháp Cứu Tế Có Ích Cho Cuộc Trùng Hưng Phật Giáo,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 75 (February 1, 1935): 36.

²² “Phương Pháp Cứu Tế Có Ích Cho Cuộc Trùng Hưng Phật Giáo,” 36.

²³ “Phương Pháp Cứu Tế Có Ích Cho Cuộc Trùng Hưng Phật Giáo,” 36.

²⁴ “Citoyen français, commis principal de Ière classe de la minicipalité de Saigon, où il est en sercive depuis le 9 Octobre 1905.” N 4070/S, Note from Saigon Sûreté to Governor General. CAOM, Fonds GGI, Series F-Affaires Politiques, Dossier 65539.

²⁵ “Phương Pháp Cứu Tế Có Ích Cho Cuộc Trùng Hưng Phật Giáo,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 75 (February 1, 1935): 36.

²⁶ “Phương Pháp Cứu Tế Có Ích Cho Cuộc Trùng Hưng Phật Giáo,” 42.

²⁷ “Phương Pháp Cứu Tế Có Ích Cho Cuộc Trùng Hưng Phật Giáo,” 42.

ranged from land dispute to domestic violence, but they all involved Buddhists affiliated with Linh Sơn pagoda. The diverse nature of the court cases showed not only the breadth of Chấn's influence but also the intimacy his influence had with Buddhists in the countryside.

The first two cases dealt with debt and land rights. In the first case, Chấn successfully appealed the Saigon court for the release of Chương Như. A hire hand, Chương Như was “intimidated by his debt collector, lost his case and thrown in jail as the result.”²⁸ In the second case, houses owned by Buddhists in Châu Đốc were built on “bad and toxic land;” thus, they were ordered to vacate their homes. But Chấn intervened to stop the removal of the houses.²⁹

In the third and fourth case, Chấn intervened on religious practices at the village level. The third case took place at Bình Phong Thạnh village in Tân An. There, village officials collected rent from the land that belonged to Bình Cang temple and did not give the temple any fund to conduct ceremonies. For the fourth case, in Nhị Bình village, village officials ordered monks at Kim Thọ pagoda to seek permission each time they wanted to use drums in a ceremony. Chấn, thus, returned the rent back to the temple and abolished the permission for using drums at the pagoda.

The three remaining cases dealt with family matters, such as adultery and domestic violence. They indeed showed the profound reach Chấn had into Buddhist families through his intervention. In the fifth case, a farmer caught a village official (huong hào) having sex his wife. But the farmer was jailed for seven days because the village official told the village head (huong cả) that “the farmer's wife tricked him... while he was on patrol.”³⁰ With Chấn intervening, the farmer was released. Chấn then filed a complaint against the village official. In the sixth case, a

²⁸ “Phương Pháp Cứu Tế Có Ích Cho Cuộc Trùng Hưng Phật Giáo,” 41.

²⁹ “Phương Pháp Cứu Tế Có Ích Cho Cuộc Trùng Hưng Phật Giáo,” 41.

³⁰ “Phương Pháp Cứu Tế Có Ích Cho Cuộc Trùng Hưng Phật Giáo,” 41.

woman was “abandoned and beaten so severely by her husband that [she] spent 23 days in the hospital.”³¹ The district head completely forgot to press charges for nine months until Chấn intervened. Finally, the seventh case dealt with a village official in Châu Đốc that was framed for stealing. The official was acquitted with the help from Chấn.

Reclaiming Land

The success Trần Nguyễn Chấn had with colonial law established a new front for the revival. The focus for this new front was to improve the material conditions of Vietnamese Buddhism through intervention. In a sense, intervention became a new means for reviving Buddhism, as Chấn focused his attention and expertise solely on reclaiming land wrongly taken from pagodas and protecting Buddhists in the countryside from injustice.

Reclaiming land was the most important aspect of Chấn’s revival effort. In its first issue, the periodical *Từ Bi Âm* dedicated a section to Decree 135 on pagoda’s land rights – which the Résident Supérieur of Cochinchina Krautheimer signed on January 1, 1930. The decree was important for Buddhists because it legitimized the separation of the pagoda from the village and ultimately the Nguyễn court.

From the 1800s, the Nguyễn court and Vietnamese Buddhism had a patron-client relationship. In theory, “a man could not become a Buddhist ecclesiastic in nineteenth century Vietnam, exempt from corvee and taxation, unless he secured an ‘ordination certificate’ (đỡ điệp) from the Board of Rites in Hue.” Once the person passed the examination to obtain the certificate, he became a part of the system, for he would “receive official salaries from the court.” In addition, “temples were endowed by the court with ‘lands for incense and fire’ to maintain Confucian-style cults to dead religious dignitaries.” As a result, the Nguyễn court

³¹ “Phương Pháp Cứu Tế Có Ích Cho Cuộc Trùng Hưng Phật Giáo,” 42.

dictated the “numbers of monks and acolytes,” and it “suggested the days for, and the forms of, various temple rituals.” The control of the court was far reaching. For instance, “after 1837 the Imperial Observatory at Hue even marked the calendars to indicate the days when animals could not be slaughtered – and when temples could not hold feasts.”³²

Decree 135 turned the patron-client relationship established by the Nguyễn court upside down. The decree, in fact, gave the abbot the ultimate control of his pagoda. On paper, the decree appointed the abbot as the sole proprietor of the pagoda – who “managed” and “inherited” the donation from the laity. His responsibility was to balance the books on “the land,” “properties donated by the laity” and the “land lease.”³³ The province chief had the right to check the monk’s records and advised the monk on spending.³⁴ But he must keep the village officials from being “too involved” with the affairs of the pagoda.³⁵

The relationship between the pagoda and village officials, however, was messy and tense. The latter, particularly the cult committee, often took the rent from the land lease and left the abbot without any financial means to maintain the pagoda. The cult committee needed the fund to carry out rituals for the village because the village council no longer performed this function. This could be contributed to French colonial legislation that reduced the village council to an administrative body. According to Gerald Hickey, traditionally, for each village, the administration was “in the hands of the Village Council and its representatives in each hamlet, the hamlet chiefs. The vested authority and responsibilities of the Village Council are derived

³² Woodside, “Vietnamese Buddhism, The Vietnamese Court, and China in the 1800’s,” 18-19.

³³ “Tờ Châu Tri Số 135 Của Quan Thống Đốc Nam Kỳ Gửi Cho Các Quan Chủ Tỉnh,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 1 (January 1, 1932): 34.

³⁴ “Tờ Châu Tri Số 135 Của Quan Thống Đốc Nam Kỳ Gửi Cho Các Quan Chủ Tỉnh,” 32.

³⁵ “Tờ Châu Tri Số 135 Của Quan Thống Đốc Nam Kỳ Gửi Cho Các Quan Chủ Tỉnh,” 34.

from two sources – administrative legislation and tradition.”³⁶ In 1904, the French colonial government desired “closer ties between the villages and the central administration.”³⁷ As a result, the colonial government reduced the size of the village council by eliminating all non-administrative positions. “Some of these sacred functions were absorbed by the cult committees, which emerged unofficially in every village subsequent to the legislation.”³⁸

Preserving Buddhism

Trần Nguyên Chấn, to a certain extent, adapted his revival effort to Decree 135. He utilized his colonial knowledge and personal connections to materialize the decree in the countryside, so that Buddhist monks would have money to maintain their pagodas. For Chấn, this was an effective way to preserve Buddhism.

To illustrate Chấn’s effectiveness, the periodical *Từ Bi Âm* reported in full on four court cases that Chấn had intervened. The outcome of these cases was similar with Chấn winning. The strategy, however, was different for each case. The image that the periodical portrayed of Chấn was an expert at negotiating, as Chấn constantly shifted his method from educating the *sangha* on colonial law to compromising with village officials, outmaneuvering them and appealing to colonial government as the last resort.

First, in the case of Long Hưng Tự pagoda in Vĩnh Long, Trần Nguyên Chấn intervened to help the pagoda keep its land. He succeeded, but the impact he had was far greater than the ruling by the court. Chấn made it possible for monks to be assertive and active in the colonial court system by redefining the Buddhist virtue of benevolence as actively protecting Buddhism and the *sangha*. And the more active the monks were, the more benevolent they would be.

³⁶ Gerald Cannon Hickey, *Village in Vietnam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 178.

³⁷ Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, 178.

³⁸ Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, 214.

The Long Hung Tự pagoda in Vĩnh Long received “two hectares of rice paddies” from Mr. and Mrs. PVM when they passed away. The couple also left the local temple “four to five hectares of rice paddies.” But in 1935, with the help of a lawyer, the grandchildren of the PVM’s took legal action against the temple to regain ownership of the land that their grandparents donated. They won the case. With such momentum, the grandchildren then took the abbot Nguyễn Văn Quờn of the Long Hung Tự pagoda to court, so that they could regain ownership of the remaining land their grandparents donated.

By instinct, the abbot of Long Hung Tự pagoda wanted to give the land back to the grandchildren of PVM. But a layperson advised him to see Trần Nguyên Chấn in Saigon. During their meeting, the abbot explained to Chấn that he wanted to give the land back to “fulfill his duty of being ‘benevolent.’”³⁹ Chấn quickly pointed out to the abbot that giving the land back to the grandchildren of the PVM’s was in fact to “wrong the Three Jewels and betray the spirit of [Mr. and Mrs. PVM].”⁴⁰ Chấn then explained that “benevolence” did not mean detachment but rather to “bring happiness and ease suffering of the masses.” He continued, “If [you] want to bring happiness [to the people,] [you] must sacrifice all of [your] energy to make people happy; and if you want to ease [their] suffering, [you] must carry their trouble.”⁴¹ And for Chấn, the more effort the abbot put into doing so, the more benevolent he would become because he was “protecting all of Buddhism and all of the *sangha*.”⁴²

³⁹ “Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Cứu Chùa Long Hưng Tự Ở Tỉnh Vĩnh Long Khỏi Mất Ruộng,” *Từ Bi Âm* (February 1, 1938): 42.

⁴⁰ “Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Cứu Chùa Long Hưng Tự Ở Tỉnh Vĩnh Long Khỏi Mất Ruộng,” 43.

⁴¹ “Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Cứu Chùa Long Hưng Tự Ở Tỉnh Vĩnh Long Khỏi Mất Ruộng,” 43.

⁴² “Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Cứu Chùa Long Hưng Tự Ở Tỉnh Vĩnh Long Khỏi Mất Ruộng,” 43.

At the end of their meeting, Chấn offered to appeal the case. The abbot was extremely happy, as he handed the matter over to Chấn and returned to Vĩnh Long. As a result, on November 3, 1937, the judge of Vĩnh Long court ruled in favor of the pagoda that the grandchildren of PVM had no right to reclaim the land their grandparents gave to Long Hưng Tự pagoda.

Second, in the case of Tam Bửu pagoda in Mỹ Tho, Trần Nguyên Chấn intervened by using his personal connection rather than going through the court. His reason was to settle the dispute without causing more friction between the village and the pagoda. The case was speedy and simple with the pagoda regaining its land use, but it revealed the tension and the complex relationship the pagoda had with the village.

For many years, the village took most of the land that belonged to the Tam Bửu pagoda and rented it out to farmers. It only left a small piece for the abbot. The village normally collected the rent and spent all of it on village matters. But this time, what pushed the monks to take action was when the village collected the rent for the next three years without giving the pagoda a dime. The monks at Tam Bửu pagoda quickly brought the case to Trần Nguyên Chấn in Saigon. Chấn did not take the case to court. He instead used his connection with the mandarin in the area to settle the dispute because he did not want to deepen the rift between the village and the pagoda. After reviewing the case, the mandarin ruled in favor of the pagoda. He ordered the village to give the land back to the pagoda, and reimburse the pagoda the rent it had collected in installments. But the mandarin also made a concession that the pagoda must replace its abbot with someone older and respectable, as the village had demanded.⁴³

⁴³ “Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Cứu Chùa Tam Bửu Ở Quận Chợ Gạo, Tỉnh Mỹ Tho,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 160 (April 1939): 49–50.

Third, in the case of An Long Tự pagoda also located in Mỹ Tho, Trần Nguyên Chấn did not bring the case to court. He instead used his colonial knowledge to outmaneuver the village officials. But this time, the village officials fought back. This case brought the tension between the pagoda and the cult committee to the surface, as it questioned the authority the cult committee had over the pagoda. For Chấn, the pagoda was autonomous because it did not have any support from the village.

The An Long Tự pagoda in Mỹ Tho had five hectares of rice paddies. But the former village official, a member of the cult committee, rented out the land and only gave four piasters a month to the pagoda. As a result, the pagoda “did not have money for renovation,” and it was “left in a dilapidated state.”⁴⁴ The abbot took the matter to Trần Nguyên Chấn. Instead of taking the matter to court, he outmaneuvered the former village official by helping the abbot create a lease with a new tenant NVM.

The former tenant was the first to fight back. He demanded an explanation from the new tenant. NVM explained that the former village official did not have the right to rent out the land because it did not belong to him. NVM then threatened the former tenant that had the abbot not been benevolent, he would have asked the court for the rent for all of those years that the former tenant leased the land from the village official. The former tenant, thus, gave up.⁴⁵

The former village official took the dispute to the Mỹ Tho court. He asked the court to dispose of the abbot of An Long Tự pagoda, so that he could nullify the transfer from the abbot to Cochinchina Buddhist Association – which gave the association the power to oversee the affairs of the pagoda, such as selecting a new abbot. Chấn was quickly subpoenaed. In court, he based

⁴⁴ “Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Lấy Lại Được Năm Mẫu Ruộng Cho Ông Trụ Trì Chùa An Long Tự Cai Quản,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 169 (January 1940): 39.

⁴⁵ “Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Lấy Lại Được Năm Mẫu Ruộng Cho Ông Trụ Trì Chùa An Long Tự Cai Quản,” 40.

his case on two points. First, Chấn argued that An Long Tự pagoda, or any pagoda, was “built by donation from the laity.” Thus, he asserted, the current village official “did not have any right to seek the disposal of the abbot...let alone a former village official.”⁴⁶ He continued, “Village officials can oversee the affairs of the temple but not the pagoda.”⁴⁷ Second, Chấn argued that the legal binding of the transfer between An Long Tự pagoda and Cochinchina Buddhist Association did not concern any other party. Thus, the former village official did not have the right to nullify the transfer.⁴⁸ On December 27, 1939, the Mỹ Tho court ruled in favor of An Long Tự by rejecting the appeal by the former village official. Chấn again single handedly reclaimed not only land for pagodas but also their autonomy.

Lastly, Trần Nguyên Chấn used his colonial knowledge and personal connection to protect Buddhists from abuse. In a sense, Chấn helped them navigate the complex colonial law system and bring their case to a higher court, so that Buddhists could appeal harsh sentencing.

Specifically, in the case of Thành Linh pagoda in Bạc Liêu, Chấn intervened to protect the abbot Lê Quang Mục from abuse by village officials. The abbot built the pagoda with his own money, but according to village rules, he must have a permit for construction to renovate his pagoda. He, thus, asked the village officials to co-sign the permit application, so that the process would be quicker. Once, the abbot received the permit, the village officials “did not provide any

⁴⁶ “Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Lấy Lại Được Năm Mẫu Ruộng Cho Ông Trụ Trì Chùa An Long Tự Cai Quản,” 41.

⁴⁷ “Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Lấy Lại Được Năm Mẫu Ruộng Cho Ông Trụ Trì Chùa An Long Tự Cai Quản,” 41.

⁴⁸ “Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Lấy Lại Được Năm Mẫu Ruộng Cho Ông Trụ Trì Chùa An Long Tự Cai Quản,” 41.

money for renovation but kept the permit,” so that they could “meddle in the affairs of the pagoda.”⁴⁹

On May 10, 1937, the village officials seized the chance to humiliate the abbot when a tenant complained about not being able to rent the land from Thành Linh pagoda. The village officials summoned him, framed him for insulting the village, and requested the Vice Inspector of Cà Mau to arrest the abbot.⁵⁰ The abbot was jailed for “one day and two nights” while the village officials confiscated his personal belonging at the pagoda. They then asked the Vice Inspector to confiscate and sell “41 tons of rice” stored at the pagoda. The Vice Inspector approved the request for he mistook the pagoda as a part of the village. Since his release the abbot “did not return to the pagoda.”⁵¹

To defend their master, the abbot’s disciples hired a lawyer and filed a complaint with the public persecutor about the injustice and humiliation their abbot endured. But the case did not go far. As the last resort, they took the case to Trần Nguyên Chấn in Saigon to seek help. Upon viewing the case, Chấn felt that he “could do no more than the lawyer did,” but he agreed to help.⁵²

On September 1, 1937, Trần Nguyên Chấn met with the lawyer to discuss the case. Then he met with the province chief of Bạc Liêu to present the case. During the meeting, Chấn argued that Thành Linh pagoda was built by donation from the laity. And the document that the village officials used to claim their right was a permit for construction. Chấn then tried to appeal to the province chief by reframing the dispute as a quarrel between village officials and monks. He

⁴⁹ “Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Cứu Chùa Thành Linh Ở Tỉnh Bắc Liêu,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 138 (September 15, 1937): 38.

⁵⁰ “Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Cứu Chùa Thành Linh Ở Tỉnh Bắc Liêu,” 38.

⁵¹ “Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Cứu Chùa Thành Linh Ở Tỉnh Bắc Liêu,” 39.

⁵² “Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Cứu Chùa Thành Linh Ở Tỉnh Bắc Liêu,” 40.

begged the province chief to review the matter. An Inspector Larivière was at the meeting, and he was quite moved by Chấn's argument. He promised to "tell the village to give back the land and the money from the selling the rice to the pagoda."⁵³ Three weeks later, the province chief summoned both the village officials and the monks from Thành Linh pagoda to settle the dispute accordingly.⁵⁴

Sowing the Seed of Buddhism en masse

The success Trần Nguyên Chấn had with reclaiming land for pagodas and protecting Buddhists from abuse brought Cochinchina Buddhist Association recognition and fame. Buddhists from far away were flocking to Linh Sơn pagoda for help. For instance, in the case of Thành Linh pagoda, the disciples traveled 250 miles from Bạc Liêu to Saigon to meet with Chấn rather than seek help from the nearby Two-River Buddhist Association (Hội Lương Xuyên Phật Học) in Trà Vinh.⁵⁵ And in the case of Hội Tôn pagoda in Mỹ Tho, the Résident Supérieur for having heard of Chấn's expertise gave the case over to him to settle the dispute between the village and the pagoda – which had been on going for at least three years.⁵⁶ As a result, the Cochinchina Buddhist Association gained so much power that it could change the practice of Vietnamese Buddhism.

For farmers in the countryside, the recognition and fame that the Cochinchina Buddhist Association had meant protection. In other words, farmers saw the association as a source of power that would protect them and defend them in case of troubles. But to have access to this power, the farmers must convert to Buddhism and become members of the association. For

⁵³ "Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Cứu Chùa Thành Linh Ở Tỉnh Bắc Liêu," 41.

⁵⁴ "Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Cứu Chùa Thành Linh Ở Tỉnh Bắc Liêu," 41–42.

⁵⁵ "Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Cứu Chùa Thành Linh Ở Tỉnh Bắc Liêu," 40.

⁵⁶ "Chùa Hội Tôn Ở Tỉnh Mỹ Tho Giao Cho Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Chọn Trụ Trì Và Xem Ngó Trật Tự," *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 142 (November 15, 1937): 37–38.

instance, Đoàn Ngọc Đê, a Pure Land Buddhist, and 153 of his colleagues in Mỹ Tho took the vow at Linh Sơn pagoda, so that they would “have someone to defend them.”⁵⁷

Between January 1933 and August 1935, the Cochinchina Buddhist Association conducted 36 conversion ceremonies and converted about 11,000 people. In a sense, for two and a half years, the association was converting 300 farmers every month to Buddhism. Each conversion ceremony began with village representatives meeting with Trần Nguyên Chấn in Saigon and asking him to conduct a conversion ceremony. Typically, “whoever wanted to convert to Buddhism must bring some offering to the pagoda and ask the abbot for permission, then [one] can carry out the ceremony in front of the altar for the Buddha.”⁵⁸ But each time, hundreds of people from the same village wanted to convert to Buddhism through Linh Sơn pagoda.

Chấn believed that the old way was not cost effective because it would be “inconvenient and cost too much [money] in travel expenses.”⁵⁹ As a result, Chấn decided to change tradition. He told the farmers to borrow the ground of a local pagoda, where they would gather on the appointed time. Then Chấn and the monks from Linh Sơn pagoda would arrive from Saigon to carry out the ceremony. Chấn believed that “even though the monk and the pagoda were different, the Buddha was the same; if they believed, location did not matter, the Buddha would approve.”⁶⁰

Trần Nguyên Chấn further streamlined the conversion ceremony to overcome distance. Timing became the essence. Chấn, thus, came up with “indirect” conversion ceremony – which,

⁵⁷ “Các Người Tu Theo Pháp Môn Tịnh Độ Ở Cổ Chi (Mỹ Tho) Qui Y Về Chùa Linh Sơn,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 60 (June 15, 1934): 41.

⁵⁸ “Trong Một Ngày Mà 93 Người Ở Quận Chợ Gạo Qui Y Về Chùa Linh Sơn,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 48 (December 15, 1933): 40.

⁵⁹ “Trong Một Ngày Mà 93 Người Ở Quận Chợ Gạo Qui Y Về Chùa Linh Sơn,” 40.

⁶⁰ “Trong Một Ngày Mà 93 Người Ở Quận Chợ Gạo Qui Y Về Chùa Linh Sơn,” 40.

Từ Bi Âm boasted, was “sowing the seed of benevolence in a very easy and convenient way without breaking Buddhist laws.”⁶¹ When a group of 98 farmers in Bình Định province, which was roughly 200 miles north of Saigon, wanted to convert to Buddhism, Chấn and the monks at Linh Sơn pagoda thought they could carry out the ceremony “indirectly” (gián tiếp).⁶² They agreed upon noon on April 3, 1935, when the farmers would arrive at a local pagoda in Bình Định, the abbot of Linh Sơn pagoda “would sit in front of the altar and carry out the ceremony, as if the farmers were there.”⁶³ To legitimize the ceremony, Linh Sơn pagoda would send the new converts certificates that proved they were Buddhists. Also, Linh Sơn pagoda encouraged the new converts pooling their money to subscribe to *Từ Bi Âm*, so that they would have the periodical guiding their practice of Buddhism, “like having the master twice a month for advice.”⁶⁴

The large number of converts and the changes in practice made by Trần Nguyên Chấn, on surface, told a success story in reviving Vietnamese Buddhism. But in reality, the story might not have anything to do with it. In a report on conversion ceremonies in borderland towns with Cambodia, such as Hà Tiên and Châu Đốc, *Từ Bi Âm* wondered whether the “foreigners” whom the Cochinchina Buddhist Association just converted actually cared about Buddhism at all, or they just converted to have protection in case they ran into trouble with the law.⁶⁵ This reflexive moment did not last long, as the report quickly brushed aside the ulterior motive. The report then quickly reasserted its mission in converting people to Buddhism. In a sense, *Từ Bi Âm* saw the conversion ceremony as the place where the seed of Buddhism was sown regardless of intention.

⁶¹ “Pháp Truyền Thọ Qui Giới Theo Cách ‘Gián Tiếp,’” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 81 (May 1, 1935): 44.

⁶² “Pháp Truyền Thọ Qui Giới Theo Cách ‘Gián Tiếp,’” 43.

⁶³ “Pháp Truyền Thọ Qui Giới Theo Cách ‘Gián Tiếp,’” 44.

⁶⁴ “Pháp Truyền Thọ Qui Giới Theo Cách ‘Gián Tiếp,’” 44.

⁶⁵ “Pháp Truyền Thọ Qui Giới Theo Cách ‘Gián Tiếp,’” 44.

“As long as they agreed to stand in front of the Three Jewels and agreed to follow the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, thus the seed of benevolence had been sowed in their subconscious, sooner or later, it would have its opportunity to germinate.”⁶⁶

Revival Business

The revival effort by Trần Nguyên Chấn became questionable when the Cochinchina Buddhist Association had financial gain from its recognition and fame. For instance, when Trần Nguyên Chấn won 13 hectares of rice paddies for its owner Phan Văn Đồi of Bến Tre in a court case, Đồi “donated... money” to the association.⁶⁷ In the case of Huỳnh Thị Ới of Châu Đốc, after Chấn won her case, she donated “50 piasters to the association” and “helped the association each year with an annual membership of 12 piasters.”⁶⁸ And in the case of farmers in Long Xuyên, when Chấn won their case against a mandarin, they donated the association a total of 400 piasters and vowed to donate more money in the future.⁶⁹

The recognition, fame and financial gain that Trần Nguyên Chấn cultivated through his colonial knowledge and personal connection brought the Cochinchina Buddhist Association a monopoly in reviving Vietnamese Buddhism in Cochinchina. In other words, the association did not need to collaborate with other Buddhist associations to revive Buddhism. This subsequently became its downfall, as other Buddhist associations in Cochinchina pushed to unify and create a Vietnamese Buddhist Federation (Phật Giáo Tổng Hội). For instance, when the Two-River

⁶⁶ “Cuộc Truyền Thọ Qui Giới Tại Chùa Đông Thới Ở Tỉnh Gia Định, Tại Chùa Vĩnh An Ở Tỉnh Châu Đốc, Và Tại Chùa Tô Hòa Ở Tỉnh Hà Tiên,” 44.

⁶⁷ “Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Cứu Một Người Tín Đồ Phật Giáo Khỏi Mất 13 Mẫu Ruộng,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 148 (April 1, 1938): 47.

⁶⁸ “Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Cứu Một Người Hội Viên Ở Tỉnh Châu Đốc Khỏi Mất 27 Mẫu Ruộng,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 149 (May 1, 1938): 48.

⁶⁹ “Một Việc Khó Mà Được: Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Cứu 20 Người Phật Giáo Ở Tỉnh Long Xuyên Khỏi Mất 9250 Gia Lúa Và Khỏi Bị Đuổi Đi Ở Chỗ Khác,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 164 (August 1939): 46.

Buddhist Association promoted the idea of a Vietnam Buddhist Federation in its periodical *Duy Tâm* (Idealism), the association questioned whether Trần Nguyên Chấn would support it. The article in fact predicted that Chấn would not support the federation because “working with others would make him sacred of losing his monopoly [in reviving Buddhism].”⁷⁰

The article in *Duy Tâm* also revealed the tension between Trần Nguyên Chấn and other Buddhists since he established the Cochinchina Buddhist Association and the periodical *Từ Bi Âm*. First, Chấn marginalized all dissidents in the association by pushing them out of the association. The first group that Chấn sidelined consisted of young radical monks led by Thiện Chiếu. They left the association to form the Two-River Buddhist Association. Then, a few years later, a group of older and moderate monks, such as Lê Khánh Hòa, followed suite because Chấn refused to open the Buddhist school.⁷¹

Second, Chấn used his connection to suppress other Buddhist associations in Cochinchina. For instance, when the monks in Bến Tre and Trà Ôn wanted to create a League of Buddhist Schools (Liên Đoàn Học Xã), Chấn harassed the monks by filing complaints against the league. As a result, the monks disbanded, for most of the monks no longer wanted to teach.⁷²

Last but not least, Chấn abused his role in the association and periodical. In an article published by *Duy Tâm*, the writer accused that even though the Cochinchina Buddhist Association was “responsible financially” for *Từ Bi Âm*, Chấn held “absolute power” in editing and publishing of the periodical.⁷³ The conclusion that the writer reached was that “Buddhists should not rely on Chấn any longer.” If Buddhists yearned for unity by creating a Vietnamese

⁷⁰ “Phật Giáo Tổng Hội,” *Duy Tâm*, no. 32 (September 1938): 337.

⁷¹ “Phật Giáo Tổng Hội,” 338.

⁷² “Phật Giáo Tổng Hội,” 340.

⁷³ “Phật Giáo Tổng Hội,” 337.

Buddhist Federation, they should “wake up and act upon it with self-reliant strength and fearlessness.”⁷⁴

The Pope – or The Inverse

From the 17th to the 20th of May 1935, the Two-River Buddhist Association celebrated its inauguration. Not long ago, the different groups of monks who left the Cochinchina Buddhist Association formed the association to materialize their revival effort. For the inauguration, the association invited so many guests from all over Cochinchina that it had to erect four thatched houses on its compound to accommodate them. The purpose for this festive celebration was to select “a Buddhist Pope [Đức Giáo Tông] and two Vice-Popes to administer the *sangha*, and from each province of Cochinchina an archbishop (tăng thống) and two administrators (kiêm tăng) to represent ...the province.”⁷⁵

Trần Nguyên Chấn did not approve the election of a Buddhist Pope. He harshly criticized the event as soon as he received the invitation. In an article appeared in *Từ Bi Âm*, Chấn listed four reasons that he opposed the election. The reasons ranged from the *sangha* not having such a capable monk to fill the role to the title Buddhist Pope (Giáo Tông) suggesting a foreign connection to Catholicism.⁷⁶ The various reasons offered by Chấn reflected the competitive nature of the revival among Buddhist associations in Cochinchina and the impossibility of unifying all Buddhist associations in the region.

⁷⁴ “Phật Giáo Tông Hội,” 342.

⁷⁵ “Lễ Khánh Thành Hội Lương Xuyên Phật Học Ở Trà Vinh (Xứ Nam-Kỳ),” 35.

⁷⁶ For more on Vietnamese Catholicism, see Charles Keith, *Catholic Vietnam a Church from Empire to Nation*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

First, Chấn reasoned that since Vietnamese Buddhism had been in decline, “there could not have been a monk who was completely virtuous to fill the role.”⁷⁷ Second, Chấn praised the idea of having a Buddhist Pope but took issue with the responsibility of “administering the *sangha*” of such figure. He asked, “Does this *sangha* include all of the monks in Cochinchina?” For him, if the Buddhist Pope oversaw the *sangha* of Cochinchina, the Two-River Buddhist Association must invite all of the 2,000 pagodas in the region to participate in the election. He asserted that the 126 founding members of the Two-River Buddhist Association did not have the right to determine for the rest of Cochinchina.⁷⁸ He then destabilized the idea of the Buddhist Pope by suggesting that the *sangha* not only should include Annam and Tonkin but also the world. Here, between the provincial reality and worldly aim that the title Buddhist Pope suggested, Chấn refused to support such an idea since it could never materialize its projection.

Third, Chấn made his criticism personal. He questioned the nature of the invitation by the Two-River Buddhist Association. “Why did the association invite us [the Cochinchina Buddhist Association] only to attend the inauguration...but not to participate in the election committee?”⁷⁹ “This election,” Chấn wrote, “is not a democratic one.”⁸⁰ The fourth reason, for good measure, Chấn cautioned the connection between the title Buddhist Pope (Giáo Tông) with the foreign, namely Catholicism and Caodaism. He wrote, “Even if the word ‘Giáo Tông’ had roots in Buddhism...we shouldn’t be too self-fish to reclaim it.”⁸¹

Trần Nguyên Chấn did more than criticizing the Two-River Buddhist Association and the election for a Buddhist Pope. He singlehandedly sabotaged the election. Before *Từ Bi Âm* ran his

⁷⁷ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Cách Sắp Tuyển Cử Giáo Tông Của Hội Lương Xuyên Phật Giáo,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 82 (May 15, 1935): 38.

⁷⁸ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Cách Sắp Tuyển Cử Giáo Tông Của Hội Lương Xuyên Phật Giáo,” 38.

⁷⁹ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Cách Sắp Tuyển Cử Giáo Tông Của Hội Lương Xuyên Phật Giáo,” 39.

⁸⁰ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Cách Sắp Tuyển Cử Giáo Tông Của Hội Lương Xuyên Phật Giáo,” 39.

⁸¹ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Cách Sắp Tuyển Cử Giáo Tông Của Hội Lương Xuyên Phật Giáo,” 39.

criticism, Chấn wrote a letter to the governor of Cochinchina, complaining about the election and its illegitimacy. In the letter, Chấn reiterated his reasons for objecting the election and asserted that the Cochinchina Buddhist Association “would not recognize the Buddhist Pope or his representatives.”⁸² *Từ Bi Âm* promised to print the letter, which was in French, and its translation in *quốc ngữ*, but it never did. The letter eventually appeared six weeks later in the periodical when a reader complained about the Cochinchina Buddhist Association obstructing the election and demanded to see the letter.⁸³ The letter, however, left no trace in the colonial archives in France or Vietnam. Thus, whether Chấn actually wrote a letter to the Governor of Cochinchina to complain about the election of a Buddhist Pope, or he was posturing, we will never know for sure. But whatever he did worked. The election for a Buddhist Pope did not take place.

A month later, in June 1935, the periodical *Từ Bi Âm* explained the episode by running a letter from a reader named Hồ Văn Vinh. The letter took on the form of an overheard conversation between a monk who just returned from the inauguration of the Two-River Buddhist Association in Trà Vinh and a curious bystander. The literary form of the letter gave it a voyeuristic dimension that not only masked *Từ Bi Âm*'s renewed attack on the Two-River Buddhist Association but also misrepresented opinions as facts. The conversation began with the monk explaining to the bystander that the election for a Buddhist Pope was a ploy by the Two-River Buddhist Association to consolidate power. “If [you] do not promise to elect a Buddhist Pope and two Vice-Popes to administer the *sangha*, and elect from each province in Cochinchina an archbishop and two administrators...then how can [you] lure the monks to follow [you]?” the

⁸² “Trả Lời Một Bức Thư Của Người Độc Giả Về Sự Cản Trở Cuộc Tuyển Cử Đức Giáo Tông Ở Trà Vinh,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 85 (July 1, 1935): 31.

⁸³ “Trả Lời Một Bức Thư Của Người Độc Giả Về Sự Cản Trở Cuộc Tuyển Cử Đức Giáo Tông Ở Trà Vinh,” 29.

monk said.⁸⁴ The monk then revealed to the bystander that the Two-River Buddhist Association was very different from the Cochinchina Buddhist Association. He explained, “if [we] do not resort to tricks to win people over but instead following ethics by asking them to contribute money each month...they could only see losing money, thus becoming uninterested.”⁸⁵ The critique ended with the bystander thinking out loud the master plan of the Two-River Buddhist Association when the monk mentioned that unity in the revival was not important. “If what you said is true, then the objective of your association [the Two-River Buddhist Association] is to destroy the Cochinchina Buddhist Association and the periodical ‘Từ Bi Âm,’ [and] it is not to share the revival with each other,” the bystander said.⁸⁶

The Two-River Buddhist Association subsequently abandoned the idea of electing a Buddhist Pope. When the idea resurfaced a year later, it lost all of its momentum, as it remained a working concept. In an article, Thiện Hào from Takéo, Cambodia blamed the decline of Vietnamese Buddhism on Confucianism, for the latter had become the religion of politics and replaced the former. As a result, Buddhism did not have any “leader” or any “power,” as the “Dharma declined, the monks degenerated, and the *sangha* did not have any order.”⁸⁷ Thiện Hào, thus, promptly offered a solution. Even though he wanted to keep politics separated from Buddhism, he suggested Buddhism taking on a structure similar to that of politics, which began with a king. In this top-down approach, the king monk (vua sãi) sat at the top and “oversaw the *sangha* throughout the country, under the king monk is the province monk (phủ sãi)...under the

⁸⁴ Hồ Văn Vĩnh, “Câu Chuyện Giữa Đường,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 84 (June 15, 1935): 25.

⁸⁵ Hồ Văn Vĩnh, “Câu Chuyện Giữa Đường,” 25.

⁸⁶ Hồ Văn Vĩnh, “Câu Chuyện Giữa Đường,” 28.

⁸⁷ Thiện Hào, “Luận Về Vấn Đề Chấn Hưng Phật Học (Ở Nước Ta),” *Duy Tâm*, no. 5 (February 1, 1936): 285.

province monk is the 20-pagoda monk (ba lất sãi)...then a 10-pagoda monk (xà phai sãi)...then for each pagoda, an abbot and vice abbot.”⁸⁸

The most practical advice Thiện Hào offered in his article was the realization that for Vietnamese Buddhism to flourish, it must have patronage from the colonial regime and the royal court. Also, it must have a network of Buddhist schools. Cambodia was his prime example. He wrote, “Buddhism in Cambodia has gained more features than it had before [the revival], such as the Buddhist Association, on the outside [it] had the protectorate government caring [for it], and on the inside [it] had the royal court and its people together providing funding and ideas.”⁸⁹

CONCLUSION: The layman Trần Nguyễn Chấn brought a new vision to the Vietnamese Buddhist revival. He abandoned the plan to educate the *sangha*. His effort instead focused on the laity resided in the countryside of Cochinchina. And his method was intervention through the colonial court of law. Specifically, Chấn wanted to improve the materiality of Vietnamese Buddhism in the countryside by reclaiming land for pagodas, stop the “foreign” from infiltrating Buddhism, defending Buddhism and protecting laypeople from injustice. The effort by Chấn met some success, but it deepened the rift between the laity and the *sangha*. In a sense, Chấn wanted to remove the *sangha* from the revival and placed the laity at the forefront. He even went as far as changing the practice of Vietnamese Buddhism by creating mass conversion to broaden the base of followers. The power struggle subsequently galvanized the monks who left the Cochinchina Buddhist Association to create the Two-River Buddhist Association and organize an event to select a Buddhist Pope. Chấn sabotaged their plan – and derailed any effort to unify Vietnamese Buddhism at the time. In the following chapter, I will further explore the tension between the *sangha* and the laity, as they attempted to revive Vietnamese Buddhism. I will also

⁸⁸ Thiện Hào, “Luận Về Vấn Đề Chấn Hưng Phật Học (Ở Nước Ta),” 286.

⁸⁹ Thiện Hào, “Luận Về Vấn Đề Chấn Hưng Phật Học (Ở Nước Ta),” 286.

shift focus to examine a revival attempt by the Cổ Sơn Môn (Ancient Pagoda) sect in Tonkin, as Buddhist monks tried to systematically map Vietnamese Buddhism.



Cư-sĩ TRẦN - NGUYỄN - CHÂN,
Commis tại Dinh Đốc-ly Thành-phố Saigon.
Phó Nhi Hội-trưởng Bàn Trị-sự Hội Nam-Kỳ Nghiên-Cứu Phật-Học
năm 1931.

Figure 4: Layman Trần Nguyên Chân

The Identification Card

The Cổ Sơn Môn (Ancient Pagoda) sect in Hanoi had a different outlook on reviving Vietnamese Buddhism. Instead of anchoring the revival effort on a single person, the sect saw its task as a systematic approach, in a Foucauldian manner, to identifying the true monks and eliminating the fake monks in the process.¹ To do so, the sect proposed issuing identification (ID) cards only to monks who pledged to keep their vows and agreed with the sect's mission. The sect hoped that the ID card system would help the *sangha* to regain the trust from the laity and foster a community of monks who were qualified to carry the revival effort.

The ID card system, however, became a site where authenticity, power and patronage came into conflict. It also brought into question the control that the French colonial government had over Vietnamese Buddhism. How could one validate religious authenticity? And how could one map a Buddhist national consciousness?

Announcement

On September 9, 1935, the monk Đinh Xuân Lạc, head of the Cổ Sơn Môn sect, wrote to the Sûreté chief in Tonkin. The letter did not seek approval or advice from the colonial government. It instead carried a bold announcement. In the letter, Lạc declared that the monks “who did not hold the ID cards were not part of the sect.” And as a consequence, he could not

¹ The term “Foucauldian” here serves as a reference or an acknowledgement of the influence that Michel Foucault’s works had on my thinking. For this chapter, I drew from Foucault’s *The Order of Things* to examine the categories and classification of Vietnamese monks. The ID cards addressed in this chapter, on surface, are similar to what we use everyday. But the ID cards are also very “foreign” in the sense that they attempted to identify and validate the moral worth of the cardholder. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Reissue edition (New York: Vintage, 1994).

guarantee for their ethics. “I decline all responsibilities of their religious acts, as well as their personal activities,” he wrote.²

Despite such boldness, the monk Đinh Xuân Lạc waited for two months before he presented the ID card system to the public. In an article published in the periodical *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* (The Morning Bell), the monk laid out a five-part plan to revive Buddhism with the ID card system being the essential part. According to the monk, the ID card system would have two types of cards: red and black. The red card was similar to a press pass, which would be issued for “free” to both monks and nuns who were “representing, propagating and writing for *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*.”³ The card would bear a picture of the cardholder, his name and the pagoda of his residence, in Chinese and French, as well as the signature of the monk Đỗ Văn Hỷ, editor of *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, and the mayor of Hanoi. The benefit for carrying the red card, the article asserted, was to “gain assistance from the government while on assignment for *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*.”⁴

The black card, however, was merely an ID card. But what the card identified was not the cardholder but rather his religious character. In other words, the cardholder had the guarantee of the monk Đinh Xuân Lạc for his “vows, ethics” and authenticity of “being a member of...the Cổ Sơn Môn sect.” Thus, with the ID card, “wherever the monk went, he would not be mistaken for a fake monk who had left the *sangha*.”⁵ The black card would bear the same marking as the red card, such as writing in both Chinese and French and the signature of the monk Đinh Xuân Lạc,

² CAOM, Fonds GGI, Series F-Affaires Politiques, Dossier 65539.

³ “Lời Phát Nguyện Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,” *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, no. 11 (November 11, 1935): 9.

⁴ “Lời Phát Nguyện Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,” 10.

⁵ “Lời Phát Nguyện Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,” 10.

as well as the signature of the mayor of Hanoi. And the card would be “made durable [and] firm, [so that it] would last a life time, [thus] everyone should have one.”⁶

To issue the cards, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect needed two 4x6cm pictures from the monks and nuns. The first picture would be for the certificate of the monk’s pledge to keep his vows, and the second for the ID. But for the black card, the sect needed a money order of one piaster to cover certain fees. Fifty cent would go to the production of the card, 20 cent for the certificate, 10 cent for administration fee, and the remaining 20 cent for postage to mail the card to the monk.⁷

The Cổ Sơn Môn sect understood that the ID card system was hard to implement because it cost money. In his article, the monk Đinh Xuân Lạc reasoned that the money was necessary to cover operational cost because there were “thousands if not tens of thousands of monks and nuns” from all over Tonkin who would need ID cards.⁸ Lạc also emphasized that the ID card system would consolidate the *sangha* by bringing these monks and nuns together since the cardholders understood that “the *sangha* was the root” of Buddhism.⁹ Ultimately, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect made a concession that monks and nuns could have the black card for as low as 70 cent instead of one piaster. But they had to pick up the card in person because they had to sign the pledge to keep their vows.¹⁰

Colonial Authority

The mayor of Hanoi had a problem with the ID card system by the Cổ Sơn Môn sect. In fact, the mayor wrote a letter to the editor of *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, in which he requested the editor to print a correction to the original article. The correction, however, was ambiguous. In the letter,

⁶ “Lời Phát Nguyện Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,” 10.

⁷ “Lời Phát Nguyện Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,” 10.

⁸ “Lời Phát Nguyện Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,” 11.

⁹ “Lời Phát Nguyện Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,” 12.

¹⁰ “Lời Phát Nguyện Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,” 11.

the mayor stated that the colonial government “would never interfere” in religious affairs, and that its “only job was to protect law and order.”¹¹ Thus, he asserted, it was “incorrect” for *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* to advertise that the ID cards would bear “the signature...and the seal of the mayor of Hanoi.” The mayor then contradicted himself by “forbid[ing] the sect...to have any fund raising event” until it acquired the legal status of a religious sect from the Résident Supérieur of Tonkin.¹²

The Cổ Sơn Môn sect quickly responded to the letter from the mayor of Hanoi. But its response was equally ambiguous, if not more. The response, which later appeared in *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, laid out a five-part explanation for implementing the ID card system. The response was sound. But each time it broached the subject of French colonial authority over Vietnamese Buddhism, the explanation broke down. In a sense, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect did not know what to make of French colonial authority, and it could not comprehend this authority outside of the patronage relationship that Vietnamese Buddhism had with the Nguyễn court.

The response from Cổ Sơn Môn began by reiterating the need for an ID card system and announcing the correction from the mayor of Hanoi. Then, it became incoherent. The Cổ Sơn Môn sect did not know how to interpret the correction because it believed that no one did anything wrong to correct. The response insinuated that the Tonkin Buddhist Association (Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ) caused the correction by spreading false rumor about the sect. “They must have commented on our work in a wrongful manner...which the mayor must have heard, influencing him...to believe that there must have been something wrong with our announcement

¹¹ “Cải Chính Mấy Chỗ Sai Nhầm Về Bài ‘Lời Phát Nguyên Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,’” *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, no. 13 (December 10, 1935): 10.

¹² “Cải Chính Mấy Chỗ Sai Nhầm Về Bài ‘Lời Phát Nguyên Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,’” 10.

[of the ID card system].”¹³ Then in a convoluted way, the response reasoned that the mayor of Hanoi had to intervene to show that he was impartial. “He had to intervene in our affairs...to show that he would not intervene in our religious affairs. [And] it was not that he favored one side and disliked something about us.”¹⁴ The response also admitted that “we [the Cổ Sơn Môn sect] did not do anything wrong, thus not having anything to worry about.”¹⁵

Authenticity, Power and Patronage

As the response from the Cổ Sơn Môn sect went on to explain the need for an ID card system, the question of authenticity, power and patronage emerged. The authenticity of the ID card system was first to come into focus. The response painstakingly translated the phrase “Vu pour legalization de la signature de...,” which was at the bottom of the ID card, to *quốc ngữ*, in several ways, then to Chinese and back to *quốc ngữ*.¹⁶ What the response tried to emphasize through the various translations and languages was that the signature from the mayor of Hanoi was necessary to “approve” (phê chuẩn) the legality of the ID card and, thus, authenticate the signatures of the editor of *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* and the head of the Cổ Sơn Môn sect on the red and black ID card respectively.¹⁷ And “for the lack of space,” the phrase was best written in French.¹⁸

¹³ “Cải Chính Mấy Chỗ Sai Nhầm Về Bài ‘Lời Phát Nguyện Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,’” 11.

¹⁴ “Cải Chính Mấy Chỗ Sai Nhầm Về Bài ‘Lời Phát Nguyện Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,’” 11.

¹⁵ “Cải Chính Mấy Chỗ Sai Nhầm Về Bài ‘Lời Phát Nguyện Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,’” 11.

¹⁶ “Cải Chính Mấy Chỗ Sai Nhầm Về Bài ‘Lời Phát Nguyện Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,’” 11–12.

¹⁷ “Cải Chính Mấy Chỗ Sai Nhầm Về Bài ‘Lời Phát Nguyện Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,’” 12.

¹⁸ “Cải Chính Mấy Chỗ Sai Nhầm Về Bài ‘Lời Phát Nguyện Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,’” 12.

The need to authenticate the ID cards brought power into question. The red ID card was modeled after the press pass, so that those who were on assignment for the periodical *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* would have assistance from the government. And the black ID card was a means to bring the monks and nuns in Tonkin under the control of the Cổ Sơn Môn sect, as it would identify the true and eliminate the fake from the *sangha*.¹⁹ But ironically, in both cases, the head monk of the Cổ Sơn Môn sect was “worried about counterfeiters,” who could make fake ID cards.²⁰ The solution to this conundrum, the response asserted, was to require the cardholder to “seek the signature of the mayor of Hanoi” as the final step.²¹

The solution that Cổ Sơn Môn reached was problematic. But it revealed how Cổ Sơn Môn saw the colonial government: an absolute power – for it could not be counterfeited. This assumption was only brought into question when the letter from the mayor of Hanoi arrived. For a brief moment, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect played with the idea that the correction request from the mayor might have suggested complete freedom for Vietnamese Buddhism. The response imagined that “the head monk [of the Cổ Sơn Môn sect] can issue the ID card to whomever he wants, he does not need the ‘approval of signature for’ anymore since we can issue the card freely to everyone in the *sangha*.”²² But the response quickly repressed the fantasy and reinterpreted the issue at hand as a matter of respect. The response explained that the Cổ Sơn

¹⁹ “Cải Chính Mấy Chỗ Sai Nhầm Về Bài ‘Lời Phát Nguyện Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,’” 11–12.

²⁰ “Cải Chính Mấy Chỗ Sai Nhầm Về Bài ‘Lời Phát Nguyện Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,’” 11 & 12.

²¹ “Cải Chính Mấy Chỗ Sai Nhầm Về Bài ‘Lời Phát Nguyện Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,’” 12.

²² “Cải Chính Mấy Chỗ Sai Nhầm Về Bài ‘Lời Phát Nguyện Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,’” 12–13.

Môn sect was following Vietnamese tradition in “expressing respect” to the colonial government by including the phrase in French at the bottom of the ID card.²³

The respect that Cổ Sơn Môn sect bestowed on the colonial government was reciprocal in nature. The response reminded the monks and nuns that “the government...will always protect the *sangha* for us to carry out Buddhist work as [it has] in the past.”²⁴ The past that the response spoke of and held the colonial government to was the patronage system Vietnamese Buddhism had with the Nguyễn court during the 1800s. According to Alexander Woodside, the Nguyễn court, though controlling the pagodas and the *sangha* through various measures, “came to their rescue with its patronage.”²⁵ The court “showered” the pagodas with “goods imported from China,” such as clothes, medicines and incense, so that the monks could perform their rituals, which were borrowed from China.²⁶ And in return, the monks “tried to ensure social cohesion... They tried to make their church coextensive with Vietnamese society, to bring everyone within the means of grace. In doing so they repaid the court...with full support of the court’s authoritarian patterns of political order.”²⁷

Colonial Concern

The colonial government did not share the view of the Cổ Sơn Môn sect. In fact, the colonial government did not think very highly of Vietnamese Buddhism in Tonkin. In a report, the chief Sûreté in Tonkin wrote that Buddhism in Tonkin was “mixed with different

²³ “Cải Chính Mấy Chỗ Sai Nhầm Về Bài ‘Lời Phát Nguyện Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,’” 13.

²⁴ “Cải Chính Mấy Chỗ Sai Nhầm Về Bài ‘Lời Phát Nguyện Của Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,’” 13.

²⁵ Alexander Woodside, “Vietnamese Buddhism, The Vietnamese Court, and China in the 1800’s,” in *Historical Interaction of China and Vietnam: Institutional and Cultural Themes*, ed. Edgar Wickberg (Center for East Asian Studies, University of Kansas, 1969), 20.

²⁶ Woodside, “Vietnamese Buddhism, The Vietnamese Court, and China in the 1800’s,” 20.

²⁷ Woodside, “Vietnamese Buddhism, The Vietnamese Court, and China in the 1800’s,” 22.

superstitions” and that the monks “added services to the taste of the worshipers and...took money from them.”²⁸ And whatever interest in Buddhism that the colonial government, the Sûreté in particular, had was self-serving in nature. For instance, the Sûreté took notice of Huân Minh’s investigation of the Buddhist revival in *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, but it only translated the part that concerned the monk Nguyễn Kim Muôn. The reason for this was rather odd, for the report noted that the monk “interrupted his retirement [on Phú Quốc island] at the behest of the [colonial] government.”²⁹

On February 7, 1936, the periodical *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* announced the approval of the ID card system. The announcement was surprisingly short, and it seemed like an afterthought for appearing close to the end of the periodical. The announcement stated that the colonial government had approved the Cổ Sơn Môn sect “for establishing *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* affiliated offices at various pagodas; for having followers gathered at lectures on the first and the fifteenth of each lunar month...and for issuing the ID cards to monks and nuns.”³⁰ In addition, the mayor of Hanoi agreed to lend his signature to authenticate the ID cards.³¹ The announcement ended by urging the monks and nuns to “quickly send their pictures and money to have their cards.”³²

The approval of the ID card system seemed like a sudden change of heart by the colonial government due to Cổ Sơn Môn’s pleading. It actually was more insidious than that. The Sûreté took notice of the Cổ Sơn Môn sect since June 1935, when the monk Đỗ Văn Hỷ sought authorization for publishing *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*. In a report to the chief of Sûreté and the

²⁸ N 6815/S, Note from Service de la Sûreté du Tonkin to le Directeur de la Sûreté Générale à Hanoi (July 3, 1933): 7. CAOM, Fonds GGI, Series F-Affaires Politiques, Dossier 65539.

²⁹ N 766/S, Note from Service de la Sûreté du Tonkin to le Directeur de la Sûreté Générale à Hanoi (May 7, 1933): 1. CAOM, Fonds GGI, Series F-Affaires Politiques, Dossier 65539.

³⁰ “Việc Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,” *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, no. 17 (February 7, 1936): 36.

³¹ “Việc Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,” 36.

³² “Việc Phật Giáo Cổ Sơn Môn,” 36.

Résident Supérieur of Tonkin, the chief of police of Tonkin commented that the reason for Đỗ Văn Hỷ to seek such authorization was to “oppose...[the Tonkin] Buddhist Association which intended to put Buddhist followers under one direction.”³³ The chief speculated that Đỗ Văn Hỷ’s motive was self-interested. He reasoned that if the Tonkin Buddhist Association achieved its goal, the influence Đỗ Văn Hỷ had in Buddhist circles would be “considerably diminished.”³⁴ The chief of police also commented that the Catholic Mission in Vietnam also had an interest in this Buddhist schism. In fact, the chief noted, “the ‘mission’ would support Đỗ Văn Hỷ in his struggle against [Tonkin] Buddhist Association” because if the association was indeed able to unify Buddhism in Tonkin, the work of the ‘mission’ would be potentially disturbed.”³⁵

The colonial government did not see the ID card system any differently from the publishing of *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*. They both were attempts by Cỗ Sơn Môn to spoil the Tonkin Buddhist Association’s plan for unifying Buddhism in Tonkin. In another report to the chief of Sûreté and the Résident Supérieur of Tonkin, the chief of police of Tonkin remarked that the “creation of the identity card...was inspired by the constant worry [of the Cỗ Sơn Môn sect] about who had the leadership of [Buddhists] and how to counter [the Tonkin] Buddhist Association.”³⁶ In a sense, the colonial government could not interpret or differentiate the various attempts to revive Buddhism by the Cỗ Sơn Môn sect beyond its entrenched way of

³³ N 6268/S, Note from Chief of Police of Tonkin to Résident Supérieur of Tonkin and Director of Political Affairs and Sûreté in Hanoi (June 13, 1935): 1. CAOM. Fonds GGI, Series F-Affaires Politiques, Dossier 65540.

³⁴ N 6268/S, Note from Chief of Police of Tonkin to Résident Supérieur of Tonkin and Director of Political Affairs and Sûreté in Hanoi (June 13, 1935): 1. CAOM. Fonds GGI, Series F-Affaires Politiques, Dossier 65540.

³⁵ N 6268/S, Note from Chief of Police of Tonkin to Résident Supérieur of Tonkin and Director of Political Affairs and Sûreté in Hanoi (June 13, 1935): 1-2. CAOM. Fonds GGI, Series F-Affaires Politiques, Dossier 65540.

³⁶ N 10435/S, Note from Chief of Police of Tonkin to Résident Supérieur of Tonkin and Director of Political Affairs and Sûreté in Hanoi (October 3, 1935): 2. CAOM. Fonds GGI, Series F-Affaires Politiques, Dossier 65539.

seeing or governmentality. The ID card system or the publishing of *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, as the colonial government saw, was the same, for each represented an opportunity to control the development of Vietnamese Buddhism in Tonkin.

Buddhist National Consciousness

The Cổ Sơn Môn sect had a much bigger plan for the ID card system than the colonial government could have ever imagined. What the sect envisioned was a network of certified Buddhist agents who would carry out the task of consolidating the *sangha*. These agents would investigate their local pagodas, temples and the monks who oversaw these places. They then would send reports to *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* for publication under a feature called “Memoir” (Truyện Ký). The Cổ Sơn Môn sect hoped that through the periodical these reports would reach a nationwide audience, so that they not only would create a Buddhist national consciousness to bring Buddhists back to the pagoda but also would place the fake monks under national scrutiny.

The four guidelines that the Cổ Sơn Môn sect had for the report were quite simple and practical. In a sense, the main task for the agents was to bring each and every pagoda into the national consciousness by creating a cartography based on status, accessibility and history of the pagodas. The first guideline from the Cổ Sơn Môn sect asked the agents to measure the “current status” or the materiality of the pagoda by estimating “how large its land was,” “how many sections” the complex had, “how much land and the rent collected from it the pagoda had,” and “how many monks or nuns, including novices,” belonged to the pagoda.³⁷

The second guideline was to locate the pagoda on the map in relation to a major city, such as Hanoi or Hue. In addition, this guideline required the agents to describe the route to the pagoda in “distance,” “means of transportation” and “lodging,” so that the reader, if interested in

³⁷ “Truyện Ký,” *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, no. 1 (June 15, 1935): 32.

the pagoda, could plan a visit.³⁸ This guideline, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect emphasized, was the one it “concerned the most” because it would be “important for studying” and “necessary to introduce the national audience” to a new place at their convenience.³⁹

The third guideline had to do with the historical significance of the pagoda. And to measure this, the agent must know when the pagoda was built, how many “declines and renovations” it had endured, and some notable monks who had “made great contribution in building” the pagoda.⁴⁰ Last but not least, the fourth guideline recommended the agents to link the pagoda to its surrounding geography by describing the scenery and foliage.⁴¹

A Stella Example

To illustrate its guidelines, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect used Bà Đá pagoda, its headquarter, as an example. The report on Bà Đá pagoda was quite lengthy, as it ran on four consecutive issues of *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*. First, the report walked the reader from the entrance to the courtyard of the pagoda, so that the reader would have a sense of the expanding space. The pagoda had a “small gate,” but as the reader continued on the path to the courtyard, the space became “bigger and bigger.” And from this center, the reader could see everything:

There, an ancient stupa with incense burning. There, the Three Jewels with splendid light: a Buddha’s image...mediating to find a way to enlighten the living; the complete Dharma with many sutras...There, the monks’ living quarters that could accommodate several hundred monks during the summer retreat...There, the altar hall for venerating the masters that had passed away.⁴²

Second, the report gave the reader the history of Bà Đá pagoda, so that the reader could appreciate its historical significance. Before people began calling the pagoda Bà Đá, it was

³⁸ “Truyện Ký,” 32-33.

³⁹ “Truyện Ký,” 33.

⁴⁰ “Truyện Ký,” 32.

⁴¹ “Truyện Ký,” 33.

⁴² “Truyện Ký,” 33-34.

named Tự Pháp Linh Quang. And the pagoda, the report suggested, was as old as Vietnamese civilization, for it had always been a “famous sight” in the “Thăng Long citadel” – which was built at the beginning of the Lý dynasty (1009-1225).⁴³ Then, during the reign of the Trịnh Lords (1545-1787), the pagoda became known as Bà Đá (Lady of Stone), when people found a stone statue while digging for dirt to embank the citadel.

The history of Bà Đá pagoda then took an interesting turn. The report began to weave the material history of the pagoda with the genealogy of the monks who were in charge of the pagoda. To do so, the report focused on two key moments when the pagoda was destroyed by fire. The first fire was during the year of the Fire Horse (1786), “when the Tây Sơn brothers were fighting with the Lê to capture Hanoi,” the pagoda “burned to ashes.”⁴⁴ The second fire was recent – when the pagoda was under the watch of the monk Đỗ Văn Hy.⁴⁵

Revival Politics

The weaving of material history and genealogy revealed the revival politics of the Cổ Sơn Môn sect. This politics fused the Buddhist concept of impermanence with the call for action, with the former explaining the decline of Vietnamese Buddhism as a part of life and the latter demanding engagement from monks and nuns to revive Vietnamese Buddhism. After the first fire, Bà Đá pagoda was no more than the “earthen floor,” where the pagoda once stood, with “weed growing.”⁴⁶ Against this backdrop, the report reminded the reader of the Buddhist concept of impermanence. “Existence became nothingness. [But] nothingness could not remain

⁴³ “Truyện Ký - Lịch Sử Chùa Bà Đá,” *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, no. 2 (July 1, 1935): 31.

⁴⁴ “Truyện Ký - Lịch Sử Chùa Bà Đá,” 31.

⁴⁵ “Truyện Ký - Lịch Sử Chùa Bà Đá,” 32.

⁴⁶ “Truyện Ký - Lịch Sử Chùa Bà Đá,” 31.

nothingness forever. If there is birth, there must be death, [and] if there is death, there is rebirth.”⁴⁷

To illustrate the rebirth of Bà Đá pagoda, the report showed that in the aftermath of the first fire, a mandarin “weeded the abandoned garden to renovate the sight,” and the local people again “saw the stone statue and made a procession for it.” Despite their effort, they could only create a “make-shift worshipping hall out of bamboo,” so that they could “show respect to the Buddha and have a place only adequate for the laity to frequent and worship.”⁴⁸ From the year of the Iron Snake (1821), the pagoda began to “expand” with the addition of the monks’ living quarters under the monk Khoan Giải, the monk Nguyễn Văn Hợp and the monk Nguyễn Văn Khánh.⁴⁹ The same narrative also applied for the second fire with the monk Đỗ Văn Hỷ leading the revival effort by “managing to fix the damages caused by the fire and improving the worshipping hall.” As a result, followers and monks alike begged the Nguyễn court to bestow on the monk Đỗ Văn Hỷ the status of a royally recognized monk (Tăng Cang).⁵⁰

The revival politics of Cổ Sơn Môn, though recognizing the effort of the laity, placed the monks at the forefront of the revival. And this was where the example report deviated from the guidelines. Instead of connecting the pagoda to its surrounding geography, the report argued that the revival should “only concern the *sangha*,” and only the *sangha* could “sustain the revival effort.”⁵¹ The report reasoned that even though some of the laypeople had made tremendous contribution to Buddhism, they were still “deeply attached” to this worldly. The monks, on the

⁴⁷ “Truyện Ký - Lịch Sử Chùa Bà Đá,” 31–32.

⁴⁸ “Truyện Ký - Lịch Sử Chùa Bà Đá,” 32.

⁴⁹ “Truyện Ký - Lịch Sử Chùa Bà Đá,” 32.

⁵⁰ “Truyện Ký - Lịch Sử Chùa Bà Đá,” 32.

⁵¹ “Truyện Ký - Chùa Bà Đá Ngày Nay,” *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, no. 3 (July 15, 1935): 33.

other hand, “had nothing else” but to focus on their “Dharma work.”⁵² In addition, the report added that the Cổ Sơn Môn sect wanted to select only monks and nuns to work for *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* because only this would guarantee “perfection.”⁵³

The Cổ Sơn Môn sect also rejected the idea that its revival politics were merely aimed at opposing the Tonkin Buddhist Association. The example report recognized that the revival effort from the laity did not “infringe” on the effort by the *sangha*. But the report questioned the motive of the laity, for laypeople “complained about the decline of Buddhism, blamed the decline on the monks for being lazy and stupid, and felt obliged to interfere.”⁵⁴ As a result, the report asked the reader in a rhetorical manner: “How could the *sangha* not wake up on its own...to connect with each other, to correct the religious life and to revive Buddhism to its past glory?”⁵⁵

(Re)vision

The Buddhist national consciousness that the Cổ Sơn Môn sect had envisioned did not materialize under the publishing of *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*. The periodical ceased to exist in 1936 due to financial problem. Only a third of its readers, roughly 833 people, paid their subscription.⁵⁶ This meant that the periodical was “3,000\$ piasters” short to continue its circulation. Finally, *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* announced that it would stop publishing after the 24th issue.⁵⁷

Two years later, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect began to publish its periodical again with the same push to consolidate the *sangha*. The periodical was renamed *Quan Âm* (Guanyin), the female

⁵² “Truyện Ký - Chùa Bà Đá Ngày Nay,” July 15, 1935, 33.

⁵³ “Truyện Ký - Chùa Bà Đá Ngày Nay,” July 15, 1935, 33.

⁵⁴ “Truyện Ký - Chùa Bà Đá Ngày Nay,” *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, no. 4 (August 1, 1935): 34.

⁵⁵ “Truyện Ký - Chùa Bà Đá Ngày Nay,” August 1, 1935, 34.

⁵⁶ “Cùng Các Ngài Chư Giả Tiên Xem Báo ‘Tiếng Chuông Sớm,’” no. 23 (May 5, 1936): 41.

⁵⁷ “Kính Cáo Tạm Đình Bản Báo ‘Tiếng Chuông Sớm,’” *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, no. 24 (May 21, 1936): 27.

bodhisattva who was often associated with compassion, and the feature called “Memoir” on pagodas and temples abandoned its impressionistic approach to take on a journalistic turn with the new label of “Report on Pagoda and Temple” (Phóng Sự Đền Chùa). The guidelines for the report also changed, as they no longer reflected the emphasis on the materiality of Vietnamese Buddhism. This time, the guidelines expanded to include the spirit medium and focused mostly on the morality of the people who oversaw the pagodas and temples.

The new guidelines consisted of five questions that agents must seek answers for. The first question asked agents to identify the pagodas and temples that did not have anyone to overlook the worshipping. The second question asked agents to determine whether the pagoda was a “famous sight.” The third question demanded agents to give voice to the monks, nuns and spirit medium, who were “harassed by village officials.” The fourth question, in a blunt manner, asked agents to determine whether the monk, nun or spirit medium was an “imposter” who was abusing Buddhism or “selling the spirit of a Saint.” Last but not least, the fifth question gave agents the absolute power in judging the monk, nun and spirit medium’s morality, for the agent must evaluate whether they had “good conduct.”⁵⁸

The revision in guidelines and emphasis by the Cổ Sơn Môn sect remained ineffective. The periodical *Quan Âm* could not produce a Buddhist national consciousness. What it showed, as the reports trickled in, was rather a complex relationship Vietnamese Buddhism had with other religious practices at the village level. For instance, in a report on the temple Rao Quang in Hải Phòng, the agent noted that the temple first venerated the mother goddess Liễu Hạnh forty years ago. But since the new spirit medium, who was a Buddhist, took over the temple, he had

⁵⁸ “Hộp Thư,” *Quan Âm*, no. 11 (October 1940): 17.

included Buddhism. The worshipping hall at the temple reflected this history with the inner chamber housing the statue of the Buddha and the outer chamber other deities.⁵⁹

The feature ultimately failed. The popularity that *Quan Âm* achieved blunted the investigative edge of its agents. In a sense, the agents could not go under cover to do their reporting. For example, when agents from the Cổ Sơn Môn sect visited a temple in Bắc Ninh, they could not keep their cover for very long. After just two questions, a follower quickly asked if they were agents from the periodical *Quan Âm*.⁶⁰ Since the spirit medium was absent, the follower became the substitute and praised the spirit medium for having attracted so many followers.⁶¹

The agents also did not have the training or expertise to verify the information that they received from their sources. In a sense, for taking everything at face value, the agents turned the report into a gossip column. It became a means to spread rumor and slanders. In the case of Cổ Lễ pagoda, the periodical *Quan Âm* had to send its agents twice to investigate. The first time, the agent was misinformed by those who disliked the abbot. The second time, the agent found that the abbot was a “genuine” monk, and that the conduct at the pagoda was “strict” and “clear” without anything “illicit.”⁶²

CONCLUSION: The Cổ Sơn Môn sect had a different vision for reviving Vietnamese Buddhism. Its vision was systematic – and Foucauldian in nature. The sect proposed to implement an ID card system, red and black, to identify the good monks in Tonkin. The French colonial government did not approve the ID card system at first. But a few months later, the

⁵⁹ Hải Tân Khách, “Cuộc Thăm Đền Rao-Quang (Haiphong),” *Quan Âm*, no. 14 (January 1941): 20–21.

⁶⁰ “Phóng Sự Đền Chùa - Đi Thăm Đền,” *Quan Âm*, no. 11 (October 1940): 16.

⁶¹ “Phóng Sự Đền Chùa - Đi Thăm Đền,” 17.

⁶² “Phóng Sự Đền Chùa - Chùa Cổ Lễ,” *Quan Âm*, no. 13 (December 1940): 21.

colonial government changed its mind after it saw an opportunity to create schism in Vietnamese Buddhism. For Cổ Sơn Môn sect, the ID card system would have an impact on the national scale. The red cards would work as press passes for Buddhist agents, who wrote for the periodical *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, to map Vietnamese Buddhism and create a Buddhist national consciousness. The black cards would validate the cardholder's ethics. The Cổ Sơn Môn sect subsequently failed to materialize the Buddhist national consciousness with its ID card system because the periodical *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* did not generate enough money to keep publishing. The following chapter will further investigate the Cổ Sơn Môn sect and its attempt to consolidate power in Tonkin. In a sense, the sect embodied the struggle that Buddhists monks had with reviving Vietnamese Buddhism, as laypeople, such as Trần Nguyên Chấn, wanted to place the laity at the forefront of the revival.



Figure 5: An Identification Card by the Cổ Sơn Môn Sect

The Faction

The Cổ Sơn Môn (Ancient Pagoda) sect continued to push its vision for reviving Vietnamese Buddhism. Besides the identification card system, the sect wanted to restore prestige to the *sangha*. In other words, the sect wanted to restore the leading role in the revival to the *sangha*. In the process, the sect eliminated all possibility for collaborating with the laypeople from the Tonkin Buddhist Association. The sect bluntly declined to join the association.

Despite such conflict, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect was not very different from a typical Buddhist association. The sect published the periodical *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* (The Morning Bell) with hopes of bringing the Dharma to the masses. The sect also carried out conversion ceremony. But there were also tremendous differences in the mode of operation and ideology behind converting to Buddhism. How should a Buddhist sect run a publishing house? And how could it bring all Vietnamese into Buddhism?

Buddhism in Name only

Buddhist associations were a novel idea during the 1930's. Each region in Vietnam had at least one association. But the idea was not for everyone. Buddhist associations in fact blurred the line between the *sangha* and the laity. The Cổ Sơn Môn sect was very critical of the idea. The article "Tại Sao Chúng Tôi Không Vào Hội Phật Giáo!" (Why We Do Not Join the Association of Buddhism!), which appeared in *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* on July 15, 1935, said it all. But the reasons that the sect presented in the article and rehashed in subsequent ones told a story fraught with slight and conflict within Vietnamese Buddhism in Tonkin.

The article “Tại Sao Chúng Tôi Không Vào Hội Phật Giáo!” began in a peculiar manner. It stated that the name “Hội Phật Giáo [Bắc Kỳ]” (Tonkin Buddhist Association), which literally meant Association of Buddhism, implied a “religious association of those who had entered the monastic life wanted to organize [and] carry out Buddhist work.”¹ But according to the rules and regulations of the association, this was not the case. The name of the association, the sect charged, was misleading. The association had nothing to do with Buddhism.

Marginalized Sangha

To clarify its charge, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect asserted that the mission of the Tonkin Buddhist Association did not involve any monks. For example, the association wanted to create a “committee for Buddhist studies for members of the association,” “to meet up at the association for lectures on Buddhism” twice a month, to translate the Dharma into lectures and *quốc ngữ*, and “to preserve the pagodas that had not been recognized as historic sites by the École française d'Extrême-Orient [the French School of the Far East].”² In a sense, the mission of the association focused mostly on fostering a Buddhist community among laypeople through social activities. What the sect seemed to imply through its charge was that monks had ownership of Buddhism – and Buddhism could not exist without monks.

The Cổ Sơn Môn sect also had issue with President Nguyễn Năng Quốc of the Tonkin Buddhist Association. In the article, the sect presented excerpts from a speech by Quốc, which was published on December 23, 1934 in *Báo Đông Pháp* (The Indochina Times). These excerpts were to highlight the disrespect Quốc had for the *sangha*. The first excerpt had Quốc blaming the decline of Vietnamese Buddhism on the monks, for they “did not understand the Dharma” and

¹ “Tại Sao Chúng Tôi Lại Không Vào Hội Phật Giáo!,” *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, no. 3 (July 15, 1935): 34.

² “Tại Sao Chúng Tôi Lại Không Vào Hội Phật Giáo!,” 34.

“did not study Buddhism.”³ Quốc did not stop there. He even suggested that the monks entered monastic life “to elude corvée and taxes” and the nuns “to flee their husbands [and] use the pagoda as a place of leisure.”⁴ And the second excerpt had Quốc explaining the purpose of establishing a monastic school to create a new generation of monks that the association could rely on to propagate the Dharma.⁵

The slight that the Cổ Sơn Môn sect experienced fed its anxiety. As a result, the sect suspected that the association was trying to remove the *sangha* from Buddhism. The sect lamented:

The association intends to do religious work of the monks and to reform the ethical codes of Buddhism! Eliminate studying during the summer retreat every year by the monks, create a new school to create a generation of ‘new monks;’ [who] then (do not need masters to give precepts [and] conduct ceremony for vow keeping) pass examination to be appointed to pagodas (which means villages no longer have the right to donate pagodas to the *sangha* and receive a monk to teach novices). [The association] also delegates the right to perform rituals to the funeral houses and hospitals! Because the managing power of the association is held by the board, [the members of which] the association elects completely from the laity! The monks only have four seats [on the board] to consult with translating the sutras!⁶

The picture that the Cổ Sơn Môn sect painted was indeed bleak for the *sangha*. Monks would be reduced to scribes and sidelined in the revival effort while laypeople took charge in reshaping Vietnamese Buddhism.

Buddhism as a Hobby

After addressing the disrespect by Nguyễn Năng Quốc, the article “Tại Sao Chúng Tôi Không Vào Hội Phật Giáo!” took an interesting turn. In a passive aggressive manner, the article began its criticism of the Tonkin Buddhist Association. It caricatured the association as a club of

³ “Tại Sao Chúng Tôi Lại Không Vào Hội Phật Giáo!,” 35.

⁴ “Tại Sao Chúng Tôi Lại Không Vào Hội Phật Giáo!,” 35.

⁵ “Tại Sao Chúng Tôi Lại Không Vào Hội Phật Giáo!,” 35.

⁶ “Tại Sao Chúng Tôi Lại Không Vào Hội Phật Giáo!,” 35.

hobbyists, who did not have any serious commitment to reviving Vietnamese Buddhism. By referencing an article from *Báo Đông Pháp* on Lê Dư, a founder of the association, the article by the Cổ Sơn Môn sect mocked that Dư, who was “not a monk,” stumbled upon a pagoda “by chance,” but since it was “inconvenient” for him to live there, he “had to ‘entice’” his friends to form the Tonkin Buddhist Association. In comparison to Dư and his friends, who had “supreme fame [and] abundant riches,” the monks of the Cổ Sơn Môn sect had nothing to contribute to the association; thus, the sect could not join the association.⁷

Despite mocking the Tonkin Buddhist Association, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect maintained that it did not harbor any ill will against the association. It was rather the association that refused to cooperate with the sect in reviving Vietnamese Buddhism. Following the article “Tại Sao Chúng Tôi Không Vào Hội Phật Giáo!” in *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* was a letter from Nguyễn Năng Quốc responding to the request by the Cổ Sơn Môn sect to promote *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* among members of the association. “The board did not approve,” Quốc wrote. The reason Quốc offered in his letter was that instead of joining forces with the association the Cổ Sơn Môn sect not only formed a different association but also published its own periodical. For Quốc, it was “clear” that the Cổ Sơn Môn sect “created the division” among Vietnamese Buddhism. Quốc also criticized that the monks of Cổ Sơn Môn sect were not obeying the “Six Respect and Harmonies” (Lục Kính Hòa) of Buddhism – which was the code of conduct for the *sangha*.⁸ This division, Quốc held, was against the Dharma and social unity, for “there was only one Buddhism, not two, thus everything must be done in unity.”⁹ Quốc ended the letter with an ultimatum. “There are only

⁷ “Tại Sao Chúng Tôi Lại Không Vào Hội Phật Giáo!,” 36.

⁸ “Một Mối Cảm Tình Của Hội Phật Giáo Đối Với ‘Tiếng Chuông Sớm,’” *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, no. 3 (July 15, 1935): 37.

⁹ “Một Mối Cảm Tình Của Hội Phật Giáo Đối Với ‘Tiếng Chuông Sớm,’” 37.

two roads: one is to cooperate, thus only having one organization reviving Buddhism...two is to let it be, each follows his own road. Right or wrong public opinion will be the judge.”¹⁰

The Cổ Sơn Môn sect insisted that it did not publish the periodical *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* to create division among Vietnamese Buddhism. The sect explained that it sought the permit for publishing the periodical before the association was even formed. The process, the sect recounted, took six months due to colonial rules and surveillance. The sect had to “submit an application to the Résident Supérieur, then wait for the Sûreté (sở Liêm phóng) to do background check on the undersigned...then wait for the government to approve [the application], so that the Gouverneur Général can sign [it].”¹¹ The sect received the permit on January 31, 1935 – which was a little more than a month after the association was formed on December 23, 1934. This meant that the sect began the process to obtain the publishing permit in July of 1934, when the association was not even an idea because it only took Lê Du a few days to form the association in December 1934.¹²

The Cổ Sơn Môn sect also held that the sect did not violate the Six Respect and Harmonies. These rules meant to create equality as well as unity among the monks for their bodies, heart and mind must be in harmony. The monks must be in “harmony [and] respect [each other] (hòa đồng yêu kính) by “outwardly performing good deed...and inwardly conceding to each other.”¹³ But these rules did not apply to the laity. In fact, the monks did not need to obey these rules in dealing with laypeople. Monks and laypeople were not equal.

The Cổ Sơn Môn sect, however, did not rule out the possibility of cooperating with the Tonkin Buddhist Association. But this possibility depended upon a few crucial conditions. First,

¹⁰ “Một Mỗi Cảm Tình Của Hội Phật Giáo Đối Với ‘Tiếng Chuông Sớm,’” 38.

¹¹ “Một Mỗi Cảm Tình Của Hội Phật Giáo Đối Với ‘Tiếng Chuông Sớm,’” 38.

¹² “Một Mỗi Cảm Tình Của Hội Phật Giáo Đối Với ‘Tiếng Chuông Sớm,’” 38.

¹³ “Một Mỗi Cảm Tình Của Hội Phật Giáo Đối Với ‘Tiếng Chuông Sớm,’” 39.

the sect demanded the association to replace its board members with “all monks” and the President with the monk Vĩnh Nghiêm. Second, the sect wanted to demote laypeople to “advisor... [and] support positions” then revised all of the rules and regulations of the association accordingly to those of the *sangha*. Third, and most importantly, the sect wanted the association to relocate its headquarter from Quán Sứ pagoda to Bà Đá pagoda. The relocation, the sect asserted, would help the monks adjust to austerity and “reduce lavish spending,” so that they could save money to translate and publish sutras. When the association met all of these conditions, the sect would “relinquish the periodical ‘*Tiếng Chuông Sớm*’ and uphold the ‘Six Respect and Harmonies’ in dealing with the association and its members.”¹⁴

Disrespect

The Cổ Sơn Môn sect continued to reflect on its reasons for not joining the Tonkin Buddhist Association for several months on *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*. But in subsequent articles, the reflection crystallized into the disrespect the association had for the *sangha*. The sect demanded respect from the association, but what respect meant by respect was constantly shifting. First, the respect that the sect demanded took the form of institutional representation. For example, the sect commented that the board of the association was “full of laypeople,” and that monks did “not have a single position” on the board. This was absurd for the sect because the laypeople were “leading the monks by the nose” (cuối đầu một bọn đạo sư) to revive Buddhism when monks were “the teacher guiding the way.” The sect, thus, interpreted this as the association “despising the *sangha*” and “not taking refuge in the *sangha* (quy y tăng).”¹⁵

Second, respect then came to mean religious authority. The Cổ Sơn Môn sect confessed that they were “embarrassed” because laypeople “held all the power [but they] did not know one

¹⁴ “Một Mối Cảm Tình Của Hội Phật Giáo Đối Với ‘*Tiếng Chuông Sớm*,’” 39.

¹⁵ “Công Việc Tiến Hành Của Hội Phật Giáo,” *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, no. 4 (August 1, 1935): 38.

bit about Buddhist sutras.” “We are heart broken that the Dharma has declined so much that laypeople disrespected [and] treated the monks as common folks, demoting them to the second tier,” the sect lamented. As a result, the sect realized that monks must work to restore the *sangha* to its “supreme position.” The monks then could regain their religious authority, so that laypeople could “take refuge in the *sangha*.” The opposite direction, “monks taking refuge in laypeople,” the sect warned, would not work because it was against the *Tripitaka*. And this would make the *sangha* the laughing stock for non-Buddhists.¹⁶

Third, respect shifted to include power. Besides not having any seat on the board, the monks did not have any influence or power over the mission of the Tonkin Buddhist Association. The Cỗ Sơn Môn sect admitted that the monks could create their own committees under the association, but these committees could “not act upon anything.” The sect then complained that monks were never invited to participate in meetings. The conclusion that the sect drew was that the monks could join the association, but they had “no power to plan, propose, as well as to consult on matters of the association.” They could only oversee the translation of sutras.¹⁷

Finally, the Cỗ Sơn Môn sect equated respect to money. In this final shifting of meaning, the sect was definite in its judgment, as if once respect took on the monetary form, the difference in value spoke for itself. What the sect presented were the salaries of laypeople and monks at the monastic school established by the Tonkin Buddhist Association: “laypeople had the salary of 10\$ piasters, monks had 6\$ piasters.” “It was obvious the association values monks less than laypeople,” the sect concluded.

Restoring Prestige

¹⁶ “Công Việc Tiến Hành Của Hội Phật Giáo,” 38–39.

¹⁷ “Tạ Lòng Gọi Chút: Cùng Ngài Thanh Liên Cư Sĩ,” *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, no. 6 (August 29, 1935): 9.

The disrespect that the Cổ Sơn Môn sect experienced left a profound impact. In fact, the sect was so consumed by the experience that it made respect the focus of its revival effort. The sect vowed to restore the prestige of the *sangha* to what it once was according to the sutras, and the sect would “pursue [this mission] until success.”¹⁸ The sect hoped that once it achieved its mission, all members of the Tonkin Buddhist Association and their family members would be more committed to Buddhism by taking their vows from the monk Vĩnh Nghiêm and other monks from the Cổ Sơn Môn sect.¹⁹

The revival mission of the Cổ Sơn Môn sect, though clear, was limiting in reach. The mission did not allow any meaningful collaboration between monks and laypeople, for it insisted on maintaining the divide between *sangha* and laity – and putting monks before laypeople. When the Tonkin Buddhist Association announced its construction plan to expand Quán Sứ pagoda, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect dismissed the plan as “unnecessary.” “There are plenty of pagodas in Tonkin,” the sect commented. The sect then reminded the association to leave such revival work to monks and focus on its mission: “publishing sutras, translating Buddhist books, creating lectures and supporting poor pagodas” – which the colonial government had approved. The sect reasoned that by fulfilling its mission, the association would benefit laypeople greatly and stop the decline of Buddhism. The sect argued, “Nowadays Buddhism declines, not because of the monks and nuns! It’s the laypeople who do not know Chinese, [and] sutras are in Chinese, [thus] they cannot read and understand Buddhism.” The sect imagined that with more sutras and Buddhist literature being translated in *quốc ngữ*, the association would have enough followers to fill “20 thousand” pagodas.²⁰

¹⁸ “Tạ Lòng Gọi Chút: Cùng Ngài Thanh Liên Cư Sĩ,” 9.

¹⁹ “Tạ Lòng Gọi Chút: Cùng Ngài Thanh Liên Cư Sĩ,” 9.

²⁰ “Công Việc Tiến Hành Của Hội Phật Giáo,” 39–40.

Looking to the Past

With the focus on restoration, the mission of the Cổ Sơn Môn sect was deeply anchored in the past – or how the past was imagined. This orientation did not allow any room for change. And as the fixation on the past took form of a linguistic hierarchy, which reserved Chinese language strictly for monks and relegated *quốc ngữ* to laypeople, the mission of the sect further isolated monks from laypeople. The monks, the sect held, must be “good with Chinese, like Catholic priests must be good with Latin,” because it was the sacred language of the sutras. But the sect did not expect laypeople to know Chinese at all. Since laypeople had to “work” for and “interact” with the colonial government, they only knew French. And these laypeople, the sect speculated, did not let their children study Chinese. The sect, thus, argued that *quốc ngữ* would be the suitable medium for laypeople and their children to learn Buddhism. The sect, thus, urged the Tonkin Buddhist Association to focus on translating sutras into *quốc ngữ* and publishing lectures in its periodical. The sect believed that this task would be the “fastest” way to revive Vietnamese Buddhism. It imagined, “With books [in *quốc ngữ*], those that believed in Buddhism gathered together at night; the elder woman or man with the most power in the household would make their children read [the books] aloud, then explain [them], Buddhism would easily permeate through their mind.”²¹

For focusing on the *sangha* and the past, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect became insular with its revival effort. The view that the sect had of the laity also grew out of touch with reality, as the sect became increasingly dismissive of laypeople and their revival effort. When notable members of the Tonkin Buddhist Association suggested a restructuring of the *sangha* or criticized monks for not keeping their vows, the sect attacked them. The sect called them ignorant for their “lack

²¹ “Công Việc Tiến Hành Của Hội Phật Giáo,” 40.

of understanding of the *Tripitaka*,” and the sect did not even consider these men “followers of Buddhism.” The sect went as far as accusing these members of being con men for tricking laypeople into giving money to the association. “If anything... you consider them [laypeople] stupid men and women, following Buddhism en masse, and you mistake the *sangha* as uneducated... shamelessly base, [sic] you make it into a game, helping the masses with their superstition to take money [from them] for your own entertainment, don’t you?”²²

In the same vein, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect had a very cynical view of the Tonkin Buddhist Association and its revival mission. The sect in fact reduced the mission of the association to merely destroying the *sangha*. In an article, the sect again referenced the criticism Nguyễn Năng Quốc had of monks in a speech, such as “monks not researching the Dharma, not studying Buddhism,” to show the disrespect the association had for the *sangha*. But the sect suspected that the association had a much more sinister plan for spreading such rumor about the *sangha*. First, the sect asserted that the association “used these rumors without any proof to shame the *sangha*, [so that] it could propose to the [colonial] government to establish an association that could examine monks and appoint them, using the opportunity to consolidate the power over Buddhism into the hands of a few laypeople.” Second, the sect claimed that the association aimed to “ruin the trust people had in the Three Jewels to take their money, which would take power away from the monks, so that [the association] could do whatever it wanted.”²³

No Collaboration

The escalating conflict between the Cổ Sơn Môn sect and the Tonkin Buddhist Association ended any possibility for future collaboration between the sect and the association in Tonkin. The conditions for collaboration that the sect previously presented became demands that

²² “Tạ Lòng Gọi Chút: Cùng Ngài Thanh Liên Cư Sĩ,” 10–11.

²³ “Tạ Lòng Gọi Chút: Cùng Ngài Thanh Liên Cư Sĩ,” 12.

the association must meet if it was serious about reviving Vietnamese Buddhism. In a sense, the sect was reclaiming the revival from laypeople. For the sect, the monks were better suited for the leading role of the revival because they made many more sacrifices than the laypeople could ever have for Buddhism. “They left their parents, abandoned the graves [of their ancestors], could not enjoy any delicacy, carried out austere religious practices, [and] became teachers.” Most importantly, monks were first and foremost “religious teachers of all living beings.” Thus, in a Confucian context, they must lead the revival and ultimately their students.²⁴

To strengthen its case, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect put the Tonkin Buddhist Association in its place. The sect recommended the association to behave like other associations, such as the Cochinchina Buddhist Association. And in doing so, the sect confirmed how isolated and ignorant it was to the internal conflict between monks and laypeople, which also plagued other regions of Vietnam. In its recommendation, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect maintained the rigid distinction between monks and laypeople by reminding the association to change its name from “Buddhism” (Phật Giáo) to “Buddhist studies” (Phật Học). The demand, the sect justified, was not at all peculiar because other associations in Vietnam, such as the Cochinchina Buddhist Association and the Two-River Buddhist Association, used Buddhist studies in their names. The sect then singled out the Cochinchina Buddhist Association as the model that the association should emulate. The reason, the sect asserted, was that the Cochinchina Buddhist Association “gave the power to act over to the monks” while the laypeople played the “supporting role to facilitate.”²⁵

Colonial Interference

²⁴ “Tạ Lòng Gọi Chút: Cùng Ngài Thanh Liên Cư Sĩ,” 8–9.

²⁵ “Tạ Lòng Gọi Chút: Cùng Ngài Thanh Liên Cư Sĩ,” 10.

The Cổ Sơn Môn sect did not limit its effort to reclaiming the revival from laypeople. The sect ultimately wanted the *sangha* to have sole control of Vietnamese Buddhism and be free of institutional interference. When the Mayor of Hanoi Virgitti proposed to create a council to manage the pagodas and temples in Hanoi (Conseil d'administration auprès des pagodes), he created quite a stir. The spirit medium in Hanoi banded together and wrote a lengthy letter to Virgitti to protest the proposal.²⁶ But the Cổ Sơn Môn sect was much more fierce and thorough in its response. The sect acknowledged that Mayor Virgitti wanted religious affairs in Hanoi to be “pure,” so that Vietnamese Buddhism could be “free of superstition, [and] commercialization.” But the sect feared that the proposed council would create “seven or eight more Tonkin Buddhist Associations.” As a result, monks would “no longer be teachers of all living beings” but rather “watchmen at pagodas,” whom the association “hired to burn incense.”²⁷ And worst of all, monks would behave like businessmen, for they must keep a “ledger of all transactions coming in and out of the pagoda for the council.”²⁸

In a typical fashion, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect held laypeople responsible for the proposal. It reasoned that laypeople must have been so “jealous of monks” that they misrepresented the *sangha* to the colonial government. The sect did not blame the French colonial government at all for imposing its desire of bureaucratic transparency on Vietnamese Buddhism. Nor did the sect accept any responsibility in the matter. Yet, the sect admitted that the monk Đinh Xuân Lạc, head of Cổ Sơn Môn, and the monk Đỗ Văn Hỷ, editor of *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, were part of a

²⁶ “Requête adressée à plusieurs hauts fonctionnaires du protectorat par un groupe de ‘Ba-Đông’ (gérante des temples buddhiques), pour protester contre le projet du Conseil Municipal de Hanoi envisageant l’institution d’un conseil d’administration auprès temples et pagodes de la ville.” CAOM, Fonds GGI, Series F-Affaires Politiques, Dossier 65540.

²⁷ “Đối Với Cái Dự Án Lập Hội Thiện Quản Trị Các Chùa,” *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, no. 10 (October 27, 1935): 10.

²⁸ “Đối Với Cái Dự Án Lập Hội Thiện Quản Trị Các Chùa,” 11.

subcommittee that formulated the proposal. “They did not know French,” the article said. The monks only understood the proposal when they received a draft of the proposal and had it translated from French into *quốc ngữ*. They quickly held a meeting to alarm other pagodas about the proposal and submitted a response to the colonial government.²⁹

The response from the Cổ Sơn Môn sect, though fierce, was too late. The proposal was already submitted for approval. But the response was revealing of what the sect thought of Vietnamese Buddhist tradition and how the proposed council would ruin such tradition. The Vietnamese Buddhist tradition first and foremost relied on the monk having complete ownership of his pagoda. The sect began its argument by reminding the colonial government that Hanoi was once a village, and every village pagoda began the same way. “The village built the pagoda, [then] the people of the village selected a few hectares of rice paddies, donated [them] to the pagoda, [and] invited a monk to give the pagoda to him.” And once the village gave the pagoda away to the monk, he would have full ownership of the pagoda. The monk had “full authority to decide on the plowing of the field, the yard, and the rituals and worshipping for the villagers.” In a sense, the monk could do whatever he chose with the pagoda, and the “villagers could not interfere.”³⁰

The Vietnamese Buddhist tradition also depended on the implicit trust laypeople had of monks. And the act of merit making best exemplified this implicit trust. To explain merit making, the sect held that all Buddhist monks, regardless of geography and sect, must beg for all of their necessities, so that laypeople could make merit by offering the monks food and basic clothing. The sect emphasized that “everyone accepts the act of making offering to monks as making merit.” But the “Kings, Queens and Princess thought that monks begging for food was

²⁹ “Đối Với Cái Dự Án Lập Hội Thiện Quản Trị Các Chùa,” 11.

³⁰ “Đối Với Cái Dự Án Lập Hội Thiện Quản Trị Các Chùa,” 11.

not compatible with a modern society.” They “decreed that if people wanted to make offerings to monks, they must bring their offerings to the pagoda.” As a result, laypeople began “giving money to monks,” which, the sect held, was also merit making. The money that laypeople gave to monks, however, came with the implicit trust that monks would do the right thing with it. When they made their offerings, laypeople “believed that the monk would use the money to buy offerings for the Buddha, to buy food and clothing, to feed novices, to renovate the pagoda.” In a sense, the pagoda depended on the money laypeople donated – and laypeople depended on monks to make merit for themselves.³¹

Scenarios of Failure

The Cổ Sơn Môn sect strongly believed that the council proposed by Mayor of Hanoi Virgitti would ruin the Vietnamese Buddhist tradition. In its response, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect described five scenarios where the proposed council would damage Buddhism in varying degree. The first scenario had the laypeople not trusting the council. In a sense, the sect imagined that the implicit trust laypeople had in monks that they would “use the money to buy food and clothing” was stronger than that between laypeople and the council.³² However, this would “damage” Buddhism, for it sowed seed of distrust. The second scenario had laypeople not trusting monks. The sect equated the colonial government establishing the council to “telling laypeople not to believe in monks.”³³ For the *sangha* as a part of the Three Jewel, and laypeople not believing in the *sangha*, the sect imagined: “Three Jewel were not complete, Buddhism would not revive.”³⁴

The third scenario was rather subtle and reflexive in its criticism of the colonial government. The Cổ Sơn Môn sect turned the proposal on its head by asking why the colonial

³¹ “Đối Với Cái Dự Án Lập Hội Thiện Quản Trị Các Chùa,” 12.

³² “Đối Với Cái Dự Án Lập Hội Thiện Quản Trị Các Chùa,” 12.

³³ “Đối Với Cái Dự Án Lập Hội Thiện Quản Trị Các Chùa,” 12.

³⁴ “Đối Với Cái Dự Án Lập Hội Thiện Quản Trị Các Chùa,” 13.

government was interfering with Buddhist affairs in the first place when, in regard to “Catholicism, Protestantism and even Caodaism, the city did not interfere with their finances.” But to soften its criticism, the sect turned its questioning inward by suggesting that the council was not a form of discrimination but rather a cause for Buddhists to feel “uneasy.”³⁵

The fourth scenario depicted a crowded house. “A house with...too many owners,” the Cồ Sơn Môn sect explained. The sect speculated that the monks, who had put a lot of effort in maintaining and developing their pagodas, would “not be happy” with the council interfering with their affairs. The council, the sect imagined, would make it “more difficult” for the monks to carry out their work because the council held all the power, but the monk was responsible for the pagoda. Also, with such power, members of the council might “bully” the monks, so that monks would abandon their pagodas, causing them to “be in ruin.”³⁶

The fifth scenario painted the council as an opportunity for laypeople to abuse power. The problem, the Cồ Sơn Môn sect foresaw, had to do with how the council created its subcommittees. The council would place pagodas into zones with each zone having its own subcommittee. This zoning, the sect argued, would disrupt the pattern of worshipping, which was not geographically bound. “People live in this zone would go to a pagoda in a different zone,” the sect asserted. Also, the zoning would give opportunists, mostly men, who would not go to a pagoda for worshipping, a chance to join the subcommittee. As subcommittee members, these men would use their “power” for “material gain” by pressuring the monk into giving them a cut of the offerings. This, the sect emphasized, would undo the purpose for having the council

³⁵ “Đối Với Cái Dự Án Lập Hội Thiện Quản Trị Các Chùa,” 13.

³⁶ “Đối Với Cái Dự Án Lập Hội Thiện Quản Trị Các Chùa,” 13.

because it would create the corruption in religious affairs that the city wanted to avoid in the first place.³⁷

Publishing on Trust

The Cổ Sơn Môn sect did not want to join Hội Phật Giáo – or any other Buddhist association. Nor did it endorse the idea of establishing a Buddhist association. But the sect employed similar means that Buddhist associations, such as the Cochinchina Buddhist Association, used to propagate its revival effort. Most notable was the effort by the sect in publishing its periodical *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*.

The mission for publishing *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* was simple. In the first issue of the periodical, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect stated that it did not want to use the periodical to “vie for fame or vie for fortune.” The sect instead wanted to use the periodical to bring the Dharma first to the monks who “wanted to learn Buddhism,” and second to the laypeople and intellectuals who “wanted to discuss sutras,” so that Buddhism would revive. “Our guiding principle is only that, [and] our aim at the moment is to follow the guiding principle and hope to have some success,” the sect stated.³⁸

The vision the Cổ Sơn Môn sect had for *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, however, was far from simple. It was overly ambitious. The sect named the periodical *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, which literally meant Sound of the Morning Bell, so that the periodical would have a profound impact. The sect wrote, “In the long and dark night, [one] listens to the sound of the morning bell, waking up [his] conscience; [and] in the mundane world, the infinite ‘Sound of the Morning Bell’ of our organization will ring, waking up everyone from the mundane dream. The **Sound of**

³⁷ “Đối Với Cái Dự Án Lập Hội Thiện Quản Trị Các Chùa,” 14.

³⁸ “Lời Kính Bạch Của Bản Chí Đồng Nhân,” *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, no. 1 (June 15, 1935): 4.

the Morning Bell is born, a new realm is also born” (emphasis in original).³⁹ And with such namesake, the sect hoped that the periodical would rid the world of evil and bring the Vietnamese people a new horizon. “The Sound of the Morning Bell has called, thus the deluded must wake up, the stupid must wise up, the greedy must clean up, the weak must get stronger, all of the evil, wicked of our people, like fog, like cloud, clear up under the sun. Our people will have a bright future, loving each other generously, using our strength and wisdom to compete against the world, that is the benevolence that the Buddha gives to everyone.”⁴⁰

With such vision of grandeur, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect was not without worries. The sect acknowledged that monks were only good at “lecturing on the sutras.” And it was the “first time” for the sect to “publish a periodical” and “translate sutras into *quốc ngữ*.”⁴¹ This was what the sect “worried about the most.”⁴² The sect also worried that the masses would not welcome the periodical *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* because people were inclined to believe in “materialism.” “Desire,” the sect reasoned, “would win over ethical thinking... anything that was modern and witty was more fitting than a saying that was serious.” The sect wondered if the periodical addressing the Dharma would make people happy. And ultimately, the sect pondered how to make the periodical “sustainable” while having “a far reaching impact.” The sects hoped that intellectuals would overlook the mistakes in the periodical, and that laypeople would purchase the periodical “twice a month,” so that the sect could sustain its revival effort and continue its work.⁴³

³⁹ “Mây Lờ Phi Lộ,” *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, no. 1 (June 15, 1935): 1.

⁴⁰ “Mây Lờ Phi Lộ,” 3.

⁴¹ “Mây Lờ Phi Lộ,” 3.

⁴² “Mây Lờ Phi Lộ,” 5.

⁴³ “Mây Lờ Phi Lộ,” 5.

The periodical *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* was in circulation only for one year. It ceased circulation in May 1936 due to a “tight budget” – which was a polite way of putting it.⁴⁴ In fact, the Cỗ Sơn Môn sect was “3,000\$ piasters” short of keeping the periodical running.⁴⁵ As of February 23, 1936, the sect just published the 18th issue of *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, but “two thirds of its readers,” roughly 1,667 people, still had “not paid even half a year of subscription” – which was 1\$20 piaster.⁴⁶ The sect was in disbelief. It “did not understand” why its readers were “hesitating” to pay for their subscription when Emperor Bảo Đại not only paid the subscription in full but also gave an extra “15\$ piasters,” and officials, both French and Vietnamese, “gave [the sect] more than the full subscription amount.”⁴⁷ The sect never once wondered whether the price point of the periodical or religious support played a role in the lack of payment. It instead rationalized the lack of payment as the lack of trust in the publishing business. The sect reasoned, “Perhaps a lot of periodicals received money order for annual subscription but after publishing one or two issues were closed or forbidden [by the colonial government]; thus, you [readers]...must wait for us to publish a full year...before you would pay.”⁴⁸

Trust was the foundation of how the Cỗ Sơn Môn sect operated the periodical *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*. To establish its readership, the sect sent people free copies of *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*. But the sect mostly targeted “people from high society (nhà thượng lưu).”⁴⁹ Ideally, the sect hoped that once these people received copies of *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, they would “agree to purchase more issues...and send in a money order,” but if they did not want to purchase, the sect

⁴⁴ “Kính Cáo Tạm Đình Bản Báo ‘Tiếng Chuông Sớm,’” 27.

⁴⁵ “Cùng Các Ngài Chưa Giả Tiền Xem Báo ‘Tiếng Chuông Sớm,’” 42.

⁴⁶ “Cùng Các Ngài Độc Giả Thân Quý,” *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, no. 18 (February 23, 1936): 35.

⁴⁷ “Cùng Các Ngài Độc Giả Thân Quý,” 35.

⁴⁸ “Cùng Các Ngài Chưa Giả Tiền Xem Báo ‘Tiếng Chuông Sớm,’” 42.

⁴⁹ “Cùng Các Ngài Chưa Giả Tiền Xem Báo ‘Tiếng Chuông Sớm,’” 42.

expected them to return the copies that they had received.⁵⁰ The sect adopted this mode of operation because it implicitly believed that “to keep their honor, they [people of high society] would not take anything from anyone even though it would benefit them and harm others.”⁵¹ Thus, when the sect did not have any copies of *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* returned, it kept sending more copies. This economy or mode of publishing perhaps explained the proliferation of Buddhist print matter during the 1920’s to 1945. Shawn McHale addressed the phenomenon at length in his book *Print and Power*, but he could not explain, in a material way, how Buddhists managed to do so.⁵²

Other Buddhist periodicals, such as *Từ Bi Âm*, also operated in a similar manner. And they, too, faced comparable financial distress. But *Từ Bi Âm* survived because it had an association and its due-paying members, particularly the layman Trần Nguyên Chấn, to rely on. To fund its operation, the Cochinchina Buddhist Association issued two levels of monthly membership dues. The first level was 2\$ piasters a month and the second 1\$ piaster a month. In 1936, when the association was desperate for money, it created a new membership level that only cost 0\$60 piaster a month.⁵³ And for paying their dues, all members would get two issues of *Từ Bi Âm* a month – 0\$20 piaster an issue. In addition, the layman Trần Nguyên Chấn would loan the association money when its budget was short. For instance, according to its book, the association was 461\$87 piasters short due to the printing of *Từ Bi Âm* during 1937. Since Trần Nguyên Chấn’s son-in-law owned the printing house, the association could postpone its payment. The President of the association admitted that *Từ Bi Âm* survived because “members of

⁵⁰ “Cùng Các Ngài Chư Giả Tiền Xem Báo ‘Tiếng Chuông Sớm,’” 41.

⁵¹ “Cùng Các Ngài Chư Giả Tiền Xem Báo ‘Tiếng Chuông Sớm,’” 41.

⁵² See McHale, *Print and Power*.

⁵³ “Hỉ Tín: Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Lập Thêm Một Hạng Hội Viên Thường Tá,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 101 (March 1, 1936): 35.

the association paid their fees, readers of *Từ Bi Âm* paid their subscription, people bought Buddhist literature [from the association], Trần Nguyên Chân donated his money, and the printing house owned by Chân's son-in-law donated labor.”⁵⁴

The Cổ Sơn Môn sect did not have an association or due-paying members to rely on when it needed money. To keep publishing *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, the sect had to reduce the printing cost. And to do so, the sect planned to establish its own printing house. The sect begged the readers of *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* to pay their subscription, so that it could own a printing press and type. And with monks working as “writers and pressmen,” the sect boasted that the periodical would “live forever,” for it only had to “worry about ink and paper.”⁵⁵ To make this agenda palatable, the sect equated purchasing copies of *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* to donating money for “printing and propagating the Dharma” (ấn tống) – which, the sect asserted, made the “most merits in Buddhism.” “Building pagodas, making [Buddha] statues, [and] casting bells pale in comparison,” the sect added.⁵⁶

The Cổ Sơn Môn sect began publishing again two years after *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* ceased circulating. In October 1938, the sect introduced the first issue of the periodical *Quan Âm* (Guanyin) – which lasted until February 1943. With the new periodical, the sect also made a few changes in how it operated. The sect reduced the price of each issue by half, from 0\$10 to 0\$05 piaster, as it substantially reduced the page count of each issue by two thirds, from an average of 45 pages per issue to an average of 15 pages. And the sect made the periodical a monthly instead of biweekly. The sect also acknowledged that it had to make the periodical appealing to a wider audience by “having more articles, making it more aesthetically pleasing, [and] having pictures

⁵⁴ “Cuộc Nhóm Đại Hội Của Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 147 (March 15, 1938): 35.

⁵⁵ “Cùng Các Ngài Độc Giả Thân Quý,” 36.

⁵⁶ “Cùng Các Ngài Độc Giả Thân Quý,” 35.

and Chinese characters.”⁵⁷ But most importantly, the sect no longer operated its periodical on trust. It instead asked the reader to “pay first.”⁵⁸

Three Jewels and Five Monks

Besides publishing, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect also converted people in the countryside to Buddhism en masse to build up its support base, making the sect very similar to a Buddhist association. However, the sect saw the conversion ceremony differently. In a sense, the sect viewed it as an opportunity not only to consolidate control over the *sangha* but also to welcome Vietnamese people back into Buddhism.

The goal that the Cổ Sơn Môn sect set was to have every Buddhist in Vietnam taking refuge in the Three Jewels – Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. This aspiration was indeed lofty, but the sect wanted to emulate “Japan, China and Cambodia,” where it believed that all Buddhists must take refuge in the Three Jewels. The sect described, “All of the men, women, elders, children, even the newborns...have to come to the pagoda to have the ceremony where they take refuge in the Three Jewels.”⁵⁹ The sect, thus, held the monks and nuns in Tonkin “responsible...for recommending villagers, first the elders, then...their children and grandchildren to come to the pagoda to have the ceremony for taking refuge in the Three Jewels.”⁶⁰

There was a catch, however. The Cổ Sơn Môn sect held that a ceremony for taking refuge in the Three Jewels must “have five eminent monks sitting under the Buddha,” so that the

⁵⁷ Found on the back of front cover. *Quan Âm*, no. 3 (December 1938).

⁵⁸ Found on the back of front cover. *Quan Âm*, no. 3 (December 1938).

⁵⁹ “Một Phương Pháp Thực Hành Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo,” *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, no. 8 (September 28, 1935): 33.

⁶⁰ “Một Phương Pháp Thực Hành Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo,” 33.

ceremony could “have all the rites and be legitimate.”⁶¹ Unfortunately, there were not a lot of pagodas in Tonkin that had five eminent monks to oversee the ceremony. The ceremony, thus, became “simplified.” The sect announced that from now on all of the pagodas that affiliated with the sect must “all across the board correct the ceremony.”⁶² And for future ceremonies, the sect advised pagodas to hold them in their districts, but they should invite the head monk Đinh Xuân Lạc, the monk Đỗ Văn Hỷ and other monks from Bà Đá pagoda to officiate the ceremony – which would not require any offering.⁶³ Thus, for mandating the five-monk quota, the sect made its monks not only important but also necessary for all future ceremonies that brought new Buddhists into the fold.

Born Again Buddhists

On September 8, 1935, the Cổ Sơn Môn sect had its first mass conversion in Phú Xuyên. The day began at 5am with the monks driving in four separate cars. The image of the four cars traveling to Phú Xuyên, which was 25 miles south of Hanoi, inspired the reporter.

The four cars travel forth, the momentum seems like a bold effort. [It] looks like the water of the Ganges rising, long-lasting, [and] powerful. The Buddhism of our country from this moment on will prosper. Exhaust one’s strength to restore it [Buddhism] to that of the Trần, Lý dynasty or that in Japan at the moment. Make Vietnamese all memorize the Buddhist sutras, all study Buddhist literature, all follow the Buddha’s teaching, so that [our people] will treat each other equal, humane, merciful, benevolent, [and] ethical.⁶⁴

The mass conversion in Phú Xuyên was an important moment for the sect. It allowed the reporter to connect Vietnamese Buddhism to an imagined origin in India as well as the golden age of Vietnamese Buddhism while envisioning a bright future with all Vietnamese practicing Buddhism.

⁶¹ “Một Phương Pháp Thực Hành Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo,” 33.

⁶² “Một Phương Pháp Thực Hành Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo,” 33.

⁶³ “Một Phương Pháp Thực Hành Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo,” 43–44.

⁶⁴ “Đàn Quy Phú Xuyên,” *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, no. 8 (September 28, 1935): 38.

On the way to Phú Xuyên, the group had a few unsuccessful detours, which dampened the mood. But when the group reached their destination, thousands of people were waiting to greet them. The report wrote:

When the cars... were two kilometers from the village, the villagers and the monk Nguyễn Duy Diễm had people holding green parasols, yellow parasols, flags and palanquins, entertainers, dragon dance to welcome [the monks]... The welcoming party... went on for more than a kilometer. Each time [we] reached an altar or a family, a string of firecrackers lit up. The villagers, elders, young men, adults, children that attended the welcome must be three to four thousand people. And those that came from somewhere else lined up for more than three kilometers, reaching five to six thousand people. Each group of people, when they saw the monks passing them, seemed very respectful and chanted 'Namo Amitabha Buddha' (Nam Mô A Di Đà Phật)... A lot of people kneeled down with their hands clasped together...⁶⁵

What the reporter described was a spectacle. If it was true, the welcome that the monks received directly challenged their argument that laypeople were responsible for the decline of Vietnamese Buddhism. Or it at least limited the argument to the city and the circle of intellectuals in Hanoi. Vietnamese Buddhism was doing well in the countryside.

At 2 pm, the ceremony began. Candles lit the worship hall of Sùng Chân pagoda. And the smell of incense burning filled the space. On the altar, red and gold votive papers were interspersed between a vase of lotus flowers and a platter of five kinds of fruits. In front of the altar, seven to eight hundred participants sat in rows. Each held a stick of incense. A sudden drum roll followed by a bell ringing interrupted the air. An eight-piece band began to play music, as the five eminent monks of the Cổ Sơn Môn sect walked into the hall. First, the monks performed the ceremony for the Buddha. Then they explained to the participants the meaning of taking refuge in the Three Jewels. Finally, the head monk Đỗ Văn Hỷ lectured the participants on the five precepts – which forbid Buddhists from committing murder, theft, lust, lying and drunkenness – and how Buddhists must behave in regard to their families and society. The head

⁶⁵ “Đàn Quy Phú Xuyên,” 40.

monk also reminded the attendants to read the periodical *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* to learn more about Buddhism.

The jubilant atmosphere of the conversion ceremony in Phú Xuyên was not the only marked difference from that conducted by the Cochinchina Buddhist Association. First, for the Cổ Sơn Môn sect, taking refuge in the Three Jewels was salvation. The sect viewed “life and death” as a “big ocean,” in which the Three Jewels was a “boat” that living beings could “entrust themselves to [and] rely on” to reach the “shore of salvation” or Nirvana.⁶⁶

Second, and more importantly, the sect did not consider the conversion ceremony as a beginning or a sowing of Buddhist seed in the convert’s mind, as I have discussed in Chapter Three, but rather a returning to Buddhism.

Having returned to rely on Buddha, [one] makes the Buddha a teacher to follow from this moment (the ceremony) until death, [and one] cannot rely on other religion... Having returned to rely on [Dharma] the miracle of the Buddha, (meaning all kinds of Buddhist sutras)... [one] makes the miracle of the Buddha the teacher, leading the way for himself, from now on until death [one] cannot rely on sutras of other religion. Having returned to rely on Sangha (monks that have kept all their vows), [one] makes the *sangha* his teacher, guiding the way, from now...on until death, [one] cannot rely on representatives of other religion, meaning those do not keep their vows cannot represent the Buddha to propagate the Dharma.⁶⁷

By interpreting the word *quy y* as “return to rely on” or “return to take refuge in,” the sect, though anchoring its outlook in the past, created a new possibility for the revival. In Chinese, the word *quy y* (歸依 or 皈依, pronounced *guī yī*) meant “to return” and “to rely on.”⁶⁸ And in Sanskrit, it (शरण, pronounced *śaraṇa*) meant “shelter,” “house,” “refuge” and “protection.”⁶⁹ Thus, by combining these meanings, the sect imagined that all Vietnamese were Buddhist at one

⁶⁶ “Một Phương Pháp Thực Hành Việc Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo: Đàn Quy Tây Đẳng,” *Tiếng Chuông Sớm*, no. 9 (October 12, 1935): 43.

⁶⁷ “Một Phương Pháp Thực Hành Việc Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo: Đàn Quy Tây Đẳng,” 43.

⁶⁸ <http://www.hanviet.org>. Accessed September 22, 2013, 5pm.

⁶⁹ <http://dictionary.buddhistdoor.com/en/word/225824/sarana>. Accessed September 22, 2013, 5pm.

point. And by projecting this vision onto the past, the sect made possible the hope for restoring Vietnamese Buddhism or returning all Vietnamese to Buddhism.

CONCLUSION: The Cỗ Sơn Môn sect asserted its role in the Vietnamese Buddhist revival by rejecting the Tonkin Buddhist Association. The conflict that the sect had with the association put the power struggle between the *sangha* and the laity on public display. Also, the conflict revealed that for the sect, reviving Vietnamese Buddhism was to restore the prestige that the *sangha* once had. Despite such conflict, the Cỗ Sơn Môn sect was not very different from a Buddhist association. The sect relied on publishing the periodical *Tiếng Chuông Sớm* and converting Vietnamese to Buddhism to propagate the Dharma. But the sect saw publishing and converting very differently. The sect ran its publishing house on trust; thus, the sect ran the publishing house out of business. For conversion, the sect did not see that they were converting Vietnamese to Buddhism but rather returning them to Buddhism. The sect believed that at one point in the past, all Vietnamese were Buddhists. For the next three chapters, this study will focus on the theme of institutions. The following chapter will examine the Annam Buddhist Association as a working model, for it made possible the collaboration between monks and laypeople. Specifically, the chapter will trace the impact that the Annam Buddhist Association had on the revival.

The Working Model

The Annam Buddhist Association (Annam Phật Học Hội), though modest in size, was an institutional success during the Vietnamese Buddhist revival. The association made possible collaboration between monks and laymen by turning its revival effort into a social process. To do so, the association built its administration on various committees that included laymen and monks. The association also established membership dues, so that it could generate a steady revenue stream to fund its operation. To expand its reach, the association developed a network of affiliated associations to carry its vision in the provinces. The association then relied on lecturers traveling to the provinces to lecture on Buddhism, to explain the vision of the association and to gain new members. The concerns that the association faced were: How could the association expand its reach while centralizing control? How could the association attract new members? And how should the association adapt its message about reviving Vietnamese Buddhism with lecturers traveling further away from Hue?

Administration

The success that the Annam Buddhist Association had in fostering collaboration between monks and laymen relied on several factors. First, the association created an administrative structure that incorporated both monks and laymen into different committees. Second, the association began to collect dues from its members, so that it could generate a steady stream of revenue to support its plan. And third, the association had a group of lecturers traveling throughout Annam to proselytize. With such administrative features, the association was able to

create a network of affiliated Buddhist associations in Annam that could systematically change the practice of Vietnamese Buddhism.

Different Visions

Vietnamese Buddhist associations, though sharing the mission of reviving their religion, had different visions. In fact, they employed various approaches to reviving Vietnamese Buddhism. Some adopted a materialist approach while others turned to doctrine for answers. However, success, such as that by the Annam Buddhist Association, relied on the right mixture of materiality and ideology with monks and laymen collaborating in reinterpreting Buddhism and its practice.

Established in 1929, the Cochinchina Buddhist Association (Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Hội) was the first Vietnamese Buddhist association. Its vision for the revival was to provide monks and laymen access to Buddhism. The association was very ambitious. It planned to “renovate” Linh Sơn pagoda located in Saigon, to build and maintain a library at the pagoda, to “purchase sutras in French and Chinese language to add to the library,” to translate sutras from Chinese into *quốc ngữ* and to establish a monastic school.

The Cochinchina Buddhist Association, in a sense, viewed access to Buddhism in a materialist way, as it planned to expand the capacity of Linh Sơn pagoda to propagate the Dharma. Also, in doing so, the association attempted to turn the pagoda into a prominent center of Buddhism. But it could not materialize its vision. The association instead shifted its focus to helping only laymen – which I have shown in chapter 3. In fact, the association could only maintain Linh Sơn pagoda and translate sutras into *quốc ngữ*. As a result, the vision that the

association had become very provincial in focus, for it was limited to Linh Son pagoda and its lay members.¹

The failure of the Cochinchina Buddhist Association to include monks in its vision prompted the establishment of the Two-River Buddhist Association (Hội Luỡng Xuyên Phật Học) in 1935. According to the periodical *Duy Tâm* (Idealism), numerous monks left the Cochinchina Buddhist Association because it “did not open the monastic school.” When they established the Two-River Buddhist Association, the monks wanted to open a monastic school to instruct monks according to the Dharma, a library stocked with sutras and Buddhist reading materials, and a lecture hall for monks to give laypeople a better understanding of the Dharma. Even though the monks of the Two-River Buddhist Association succeeded where the Cochinchina Buddhist Association had failed, they shared the provincial outlook. The monks turned their mission inwards without any collaboration with laymen, for they believed that only monks could revive Buddhism.²

Unlike the Buddhist associations in Cochinchina, the Tonkin Buddhist Association (Hội Phật Học Bắc Kỳ) in Hanoi saw its revival effort as collaboration between monks and laymen and between Buddhist associations. In the periodical *Đuốc Tuệ* (The Torch of Wisdom), the association recommended that monks and laymen “must advise each other, push each other to better understand Buddhism, practice Buddhism correctly to help themselves and others.” The association also envisioned itself “connecting with Buddhist associations in central and southern Vietnam,” so that they could “dedicate” themselves to Buddhism.

¹ “Điều Lệ Của Hội ‘Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học,’” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 1 (January 1, 1932): 36.

² Trần Văn Giác, “Bài Diễn Văn Của Ông Trần Văn Giác Thông Phán Hội Hưu, Đọc Bữa Khai Đại Hội ‘Luỡng Xuyên Phật Học,’” *Duy Tâm*, no. 2 (November 1, 1935): 66.

The Tonkin Buddhist Association, however, projected its vision onto the past. Its approach was a single-minded pursuit of correcting “bad practices” or restoring authenticity to Vietnamese Buddhism. To search for the right practice, the association recommended monks and laymen returning to doctrine and “searching the sutras” for answers. Since Vietnamese no longer used *chữ Nôm* (demotic script) or Chinese, the association established the periodical *Đuốc Tuệ* to bring people translation of sutras in *quốc ngữ* and consequently a deeper understanding of Buddhism. The association hoped that through reading the periodical Buddhists would correct their practices. As a result, the association, though yearning for change, eliminated the possibility for new interpretation of doctrine or new roles for both monks and laymen.³

The Annam Buddhist Association (Annam Phật Học Hội) was the only Buddhist association that succeeded in encouraging collaboration between monks and laymen. The association saw its revival effort as a social process. Established in 1932, the association was the second Buddhist association in Vietnam, and its vision was to “study and exercise Buddhism.” To carry out its vision, the Annam Phật Học Hội had a six-part plan: to “organize celebrations,” “lectures” and “classes” for members; to “create monks who could later propagate the Dharma;” to “build pagodas that conformed to Buddhist rules,” a “library” and a “reading room;” to translate sutras and publish the translation in *Viên Âm* (The Sound of Perfection); to support monks; and to organize charity events.

The Annam Buddhist Association not only expanded the pagoda but also made it sociable, so that monks and laymen would have the opportunity to engage one another. The library, the reading room and the translation office would make the pagoda appealing to monks since they provided the monks with access to Buddhism and a means to propagate the Dharma.

³ Dương Bá Trạc, “Vi Sao Mà Hội ‘Phật-Giáo Bắc Kỳ’ Sáng Lập? Vi Sao Mà Báo Đuốc Tuệ Ra Đời?,” *Đuốc Tuệ*, no. 1 (December 10, 1935): 7.

But for laymen, the celebrations were the attractions. By making the pagoda appealing to monks and laymen, the association succeeded in creating a social space for both to engage one another as well as work with each other in organizing charity events and celebrations and learning the Dharma.⁴

Administrative Structure

The collaboration between monks and laymen at the Annam Buddhist Association began at the administrative level. With laymen working for the colonial government, the association benefited from their expertise and colonial know-how in establishing an administrative structure that was not only legible to the colonial government but also effective. The administration that the laymen created had four distinct components: the board (tổng trị sự), the religious committee (ban chứng minh), the propagation committee (ban hoằng pháp) and the general committee (tổng hội đồng). Even though monks and laymen took on different responsibilities, the various committees made the administrative structure inclusive.

The board sat at the top of the administrative structure of the Annam Buddhist Association. Consisted of twelve members pulled from different committees, the board managed the day-to-day business of the association. The three most important members were the president, the religious advisor and the censor. The president, nominated by the general committee for a one-year term, would enforce the rules and regulations of the association in every decision made by the board. The religious advisor, who was typically a monk, would advise the board on religious matter, so that decisions made by the board would stay true to the

⁴ “Những Khoản Cốt Yếu Trong Điều Lệ Của Hội An Nam Phật Học,” *Viên Âm* 21 (June 1936): 59.

Dharma. The censor, who was also a teaching monk or laymen, would check all lectures, articles and letters by the association to make sure that they conformed to Buddhist doctrine.⁵

Under the board were three different committees. They were the religious committee, the propagation committee and the general committee. The religious committee was consisted of eight to ten monks who were at least 50 years old, “ethically pure” and dedicated to the Dharma. The committee had the power to veto any decision by the board if it did not follow the Dharma.

The propagation committee was consisted of lecturers (giảng sư). In order to be a lecturer, the candidate must received approval from the board, and the position was for life. These lecturers were responsible for preparing materials for lectures, writing articles for the periodical, and traveling to affiliated associations to proselytize.

The general committee incorporated all monks and presidents from all the affiliated associations. Each affiliated association could have at least three voting seats on the general committee: the religious advisor, the president and a representative for every 200 members. The committee held the power to “establish or disband an affiliated association, elect board members, approve financial decisions by the board, decide on measures put forth during bi-annual meetings, set the association’s budget, pass or veto changes in the rules and regulations of the association.”⁶

Membership and Voting Right

To fund its operation, the Annam Buddhist Association initially created a three-tier membership to generate revenue. The membership categories were: A for monks, B for laymen, and C for general patrons. The monks had to share the financial burden of the association, as their monthly dues were either 0\$10 or 0\$20 piaster a month – the latter came with a subscription

⁵ “Annam Phật Học Hội - Điều Lệ Và Qui Tắc,” *Viên Âm*, no. 35 (March 1939): 55.

⁶ “Annam Phật Học Hội - Điều Lệ Và Qui Tắc,” 52–53.

of *Viên Âm*. Category B for laymen was more complicated, as it had five sub-categories with different dues. The dues showed a preference for lay members to pay a lump sum for their membership fees since four of the sub-categories suggested a one-time payment ranging from 20\$ to 100\$ piasters and only one with a monthly due option. For category C, the patrons could pay 0\$30 piasters for every quarter or a lump sum of 10\$. Unlike members of category A and B, the general patrons did not have any voting right, and they could only enjoy the services, such as lectures and celebrations, provided at the pagoda.⁷

In 1938, five years after its establishment, the Annam Buddhist Association still could not generate enough revenue to materialize its vision. Its finance in fact was very bleak. For example, the association could only give scholarship to 15 of the 45 students who were enrolled in its elementary school. And the association could not afford the travel expenses to send lecturers proselytizing throughout Vietnam. The association had to limit the travels by lectures to Annam. The periodical *Viên Âm* also was not doing well. Since the association stopped requiring its members to buy *Viên Âm*, the readership had dropped considerably.⁸

A year later, in 1939, the Annam Buddhist Association completely revised the categories of its membership to generate more revenue. The association kept the original categories A, B and C for its membership, but it incorporated monks and certain laymen into category A. The association also put the financial burden squarely on laymen by eliminating the monthly due for monks. For category B, the association added another sub-category that offered members with a monthly payment for their dues. For category C, the association allowed anyone to become

⁷ “Những Khoản Cốt Yếu Trong Điều Lệ Của Hội An Nam Phật Học,” 60–61.

⁸ “Bài Diễn Văn - Đọc Trong Lúc Khai Mạc (Tổng Hội Đồng Ngày 14 Août 1938),” no. 32 (September 1938): 49–46.

member as long as the person could pay a one-time fee of 1\$ piaster. For these patrons, the only right they had was to attend lectures at the pagoda.⁹

The Annam Buddhist Association, though expanding its membership base, exerted more control over its members and affiliated associations. The association began reserving voting right for members of category A and certain members of category B who had joined the association for more than ten years. Other members of category B could attend annual meetings and voice their concerns, but like members from category C, they could not vote on any measures.¹⁰

Besides restricting voting power, the association gave the board, which resided in Hue, the power to fundraise. Affiliated associations, however, must submit a proposal to the board for approval in order to fundraise more than 100\$ piasters. As a result, in the process of expanding its base, the association centralized its power by limiting voting right of its members and giving the board in Hue the power to determine the livelihood of its affiliated associations through fundraising.¹¹

Proper Conduct

With a broad-based membership, the Annam Buddhist Association began to define and regulate the “proper” conduct of its members. The association issued 17 regulations that defined self-cultivation and interactions between its members. For self-cultivation, members first and foremost must fulfill their responsibilities as Buddhists. For the first and the fifteenth day of any lunar month, members must “visit the association’s pagoda and pray with others.” They also must “attend lectures” and “classes led by a teaching monk” at the association, so that they could

⁹ “Annam Phật Học Hội - Điều Lệ Và Qui Tắc,” 48–49.

¹⁰ “Annam Phật Học Hội - Điều Lệ Và Qui Tắc,” 49.

¹¹ Nguyễn Đình Hoà, “Tờ Thông Đạt Tổng Trị Sự Cho Các Tỉnh Hội Về Vấn Đề Quyên Tiền,” *Viên Âm*, no. 34 (January 1939): 54.

develop a better understanding of Buddhism. And in regard to ethics, members must obey the common Buddhist laws of not killing, lying, fornicating and drinking.¹²

For interaction with others, members of the Annam Buddhist Association must display the utmost respect for Buddhism and monks when they entered the pagoda. They must “dress appropriately” when they visited the pagoda. During lecture, members must “keep quiet and listen,” and if they had questions, they must wait until the lecture ended. When members met with monks and lecturers, they must be respectful. And when members met with each other, they must be “civil” and “act accordingly to social rules.” For those that failed to follow such regulations, their actions would be met with punishment. The mild offenders would be reprimanded and have to repent in front of the altar for the Buddha. And the severe offenders would be banned from the association.¹³

Propagation

To broadcast its vision, the Annam Buddhist Association utilized lecturers who traveled throughout the region. The lecturers also tried to entice people to join the association by explaining the benefits and support that they would receive from the association. Most importantly, the lecturers brought a message about reviving Vietnamese Buddhism to the provinces with them. The message, however, was constantly shifting, as the lecturers traveled farther away from Hue.

Traveling Lecturers

The administrative structure and broad-based membership allowed the Annam Buddhist Association to establish a network of affiliated associations in the region. To bring its vision to

¹² “Annam Phật Học Hội - Qui Tắc,” *Viên Âm*, no. 35 (March 1939): 67.

¹³ “Annam Phật Học Hội - Qui Tắc,” 67–68.

the provinces, the association relied on its lecturers, who were traveling throughout the region, from Vinh to Nha Trang, roughly 620 miles in distance. Like salesmen, the lecturers traveled from town to town, initially in pair, to lecture on Buddhism and explain to people the vision of the association and the benefits of becoming members.

Initially, lecturers were responsible only for giving talks twice a month at Từ Quang pagoda in Hue. But as the Annam Buddhist Association grew, the lecturers began to travel to the provinces in the region. From 1933 to 1935, the association had three lecturers: Thích Mật Nguyễn, Thích Mật Khê and Lê Đình Thám. They took turns to lecture on the first and fifteenth day of the lunar month at Từ Quang pagoda. And their lectures ranged from Buddhist ethics to Buddhist metaphysics.

From 1935 on, the association added more lecturers, such as Thích Đôn Hậu, Thích Chánh Thống and Lê Mai Đình, to accommodate affiliated associations in Thanh Hóa, Vinh, Tourane, Faifoo, Nha Trang and Phan Thiết. The typical itinerary for traveling lecturers was to have them canvas as many locations as possible in one trip. For example, in August 1937, Thích Mật Nguyễn traveled to Thanh Hóa and Vinh to give his lecture on “Why [We] Have to Revive Buddhism.” He had 64 people attending the lecture in Thanh Hóa and 72 people in Vinh. At the same time, Thích Đôn Hậu traveled to Tourane (Đà Nẵng) and Faifoo (Hội An) to give his lecture on “Where Is the Road to Happiness?” Compared to Thích Mật Nguyễn, he had a lot more people attending his talks: 242 people in Tourane and 151 people in Faifoo.¹⁴

More importantly, traveling lecturers were devoted teachers first and foremost. When Thích Mật Khê passed away in May 1935, the periodical *Viên Âm* ran a biography, portraying the monk as a bodhisattva – who devoted his life to Buddhism. According to the biography, from

¹⁴ “Tờ Trình Về Việc Hoằng Pháp Ở Các Chi Hội,” *Viên Âm*, no. 27 (August 1937): 57–59.

the beginning of the association, Thích Mật Khế “traveled to lots of places to teach the Dharma” to accommodate the growing demand for studying Buddhism from members. As a result, there were many members in Tourane and Hue that gained a better of understanding of Buddhism, including those who once criticized Buddhism. And fifteen minutes until the end, Thích Mật Khế asked others to place a statue of the Buddha in front of him, so that he could chant “Nam Mô A Di Đà Phật” (*Namo Amitābhāya*, Homage to [the Buddha of] Infinite Light). His master Thích Giác Tiên quickly penned a poem for him, in which he alluded that Thích Mật Khế had achieved enlightenment “without spending fifty years” traveling to teach others, like the Buddha did. Thích Mật Khế passed away at the age of thirty-one.¹⁵

The traveling lecturers had a tremendous impact on the development of the Annam Buddhist Association. The lecturers brought freshness to Vietnamese Buddhism, which members found appealing. For example, after Thích Mật Nguyễn lectured on the revival at the affiliated association in Vinh in August 1937, the president of the affiliated association wrote a letter to thank him and the association for helping them see a new light in Buddhism. In the letter, he wrote that the lecture was something that the members “had never seen in Vinh.” The president hoped that those who attended the lecture would “encourage friends and strangers to participate in propagating the Dharma.” He also wished that the affiliated association in Vinh would have the official approval from the colonial government to operate officially.¹⁶

The traveling lecturers also helped the Annam Buddhist Association with acquiring approval from the colonial government for the affiliated associations. In a sense, the lecturers collaborated with the Sûreté in exchange for good recommendation. To operate legally, each

¹⁵ “Sự Tích Thầy Giảng Sư Thích Mật Khế,” *Viên Âm*, no. 12 (December 1934): 55.

¹⁶ Tôn Thất Khâm, “Letter from Members of Affiliated Association in Vinh to the President of Annam Phật Học Hội,” *Viên Âm*, no. 27 (August 1937): 60.

Buddhist association must seek approval from the Résident Supérieur. And having a good recommendation from the Sûreté would greatly influence the decision by the Résident Supérieur. For instance, in May 1936, the Résident Supérieur de Annam gave the association the approval to establish an affiliated association in Đồng Hới because the Sûreté gave the association a “favorable recommendation.”¹⁷

To reciprocate, the traveling lecturers from the Annam Buddhist Association performed surveillance for the Sûreté. For instance, in April 1939, “upon the demand by the Service (Sûreté),” Lê Đình Thám traveled to nine meeting halls in Quảng Ngãi to speak to Caodaists about the “errors and contradictions” of their religion.¹⁸ At the time, the Sûreté tracked the movements and political activities of many Caodaists, such as the revolutionary Nguyễn An Ninh, because they were radical and nativistic.¹⁹ In a report to the Résident Supérieur, the Sûreté praised that the visit by Thám had “produced, without doubt, a positive affect” on the people in the province because Caodaists were easily “influenced by magic” and superstition.²⁰

Associated Benefits

The traveling lecturers also promoted the Annam Buddhist Association in the provinces. They explained the importance and benefits of joining the association. In a sense, practicing Buddhism was not enough. Buddhists should join the association, so that on a personal level they

¹⁷ Note Postale No 1727. Secret. From Chief of Sûreté in Annam to Director of Political Affairs and Sûreté in Hanoi and copied to Chief of Police of Hanoi, Saigon, Phnompenh, Vientiane (June 4, 1936): 9. CAOM. Fonds GGI, Series F-Affaires Politiques, Dossier 65457.

¹⁸ Notes mensuelles sur la situation politique en Annam. Secret. Activités politiques et autres constatées en Annam au cours du mois d’avril 1939 (April 1939): 2-3. CAOM. Fonds GGI, Series F-Affaires Politiques, Dossier 65460.

¹⁹ Ho-Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, 189–190.

²⁰ Notes mensuelles sur la situation politique en Annam. Secret. Activités politiques et autres constatées en Annam au cours du mois d’avril 1939 (April 1939): 2-3. CAOM. Fonds GGI, Series F-Affaires Politiques, Dossier 65460.

would receive a better understanding of Buddhism and support for their practices. And on a social level, as members of the association, they could combine their resources to improve society and protect Vietnamese Buddhism.

Membership for the Annam Buddhist Association had always been a hard sell, so to speak. Comparing to other associations, the association had the smallest number of members. The reason was not due to the lack of faith in Annam but rather that Buddhists were not aware of the benefits in joining the association. In his lecture, “Joining the Buddhist Studies Association Has What Benefits?” Lê Mai Đính directly addressed the issue. He confessed that the title of his lecture ironically was “the “answer” often given by Buddhists in Annam when he recommended them to join the association. The answer, Lê Mai Đính thought, was “normal.” But due to the revival effort, he wanted to “clarify” the importance of joining the association, so that Buddhists in Annam would “no longer have doubt” about the association and its effort in reviving Buddhism.²¹

To give context to his lecture, Lê Mai Đính first explained the scope of Buddhism then emphasized the importance of reviving it. For Đính, Asia, particularly Vietnam, had three distinct religions: Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. First, Daoism dealt with “abstract” matter (hình như thượng), as it taught people detachment to reach the otherworldly. Second, Confucianism dealt with “concrete” matter (hình như hạ), such as politics and self-perfection. Thirdly, and most importantly, Buddhism covered both Daoism and Confucianism, as it “combined both abstract and concrete matter.”²² And the proof lied in history with the prosperity of Vietnam coinciding with the golden age of Buddhism. Unfortunately, Vietnamese Buddhism had been in decline. And the reason, Đính simply suggested, was a lack of “display,” for

²¹ Lê Mai Đính, “Vào Hội Phật Học Có Lợi Ích Gì?,” *Viên Âm*, no. 26 (July 1937): 55.

²² Lê Mai Đính, “Vào Hội Phật Học Có Lợi Ích Gì?,” 54.

Buddhism was like a “precious gemstone, which had been stored away in a box too long for people to remember its beauty.”²³

In the revival context, members of the Annam Buddhist Association would receive many benefits. These benefits extended beyond the material to the “spiritual” and the individual to “society” since they were to “benefit oneself as well as others” (tự lợi lợi tha). In his lecture, Lê Mai Đính defined “benefit oneself” (tự lợi) as actions that not only benefiting the individual but also not causing harm to others. Đính also emphasized that the individual should not hesitate or avoid helping others in situation that would cause damage to himself and his belongs. For “benefit others” (lợi tha), Đính defined it as the desire to share one’s fortune or wealth with others or the wish by the individual that others would be able to enjoy his fortunate circumstances. More importantly, to “benefit oneself,” Đính cautioned, must be coupled with “benefit others” because “benefit oneself” alone at best was “selfishness,” which would “not bring any benefit to society,” and at worst “self-destruction.”²⁴

The most notable benefit for members of the Annam Buddhist Association was the elimination of “greed, anger [and] delusion” (tham, sân, sy). These three “poisons” were the root of all suffering since “the beginning of time.” And to eliminate the three poisons, Buddhists should join the association because it would provide them the necessary environment to do so. First, according to Lê Mai Đính, the association would serve as a place that was “stable” and “reliable” for Buddhists to build their understanding of Buddhism. Second, the association would provide not only lectures on Buddhism, which were “precise and clear,” but also contact with

²³ Lê Mai Đính, “Vào Hội Phật Học Có Lợi Ích Gì?” 55.

²⁴ Lê Mai Đính, “Vào Hội Phật Học Có Lợi Ích Gì?” 56–57.

monks and other laypeople, so that “every single thought was purely religious,” and “all actions were toward religion.”²⁵

The second benefit was becoming “children of the Buddha” (Phật tử). In his lecture, Lê Mai Đính explained that the term “children of the Buddha” was more than a title or status. The term in fact helped Buddhists refrain from behaving badly. Đính quickly offered his personal experience as proof. He recounted that since he had joined the association, the term had reminded him to “act appropriately” when his illusion “pushed him to behave badly.” Đính concluded that he still had not completely eliminated the three poisons of greed, anger and delusion, but the term children of the Buddha, though superficial (hình thức bề ngoài), curbed his misbehavior and reinforced Buddhist thinking, for it “prevented desire, bit by bit,” and “made a habit out of it.”²⁶

The third benefit for members was support from the Annam Buddhist Association. Lê Mai Đính acknowledged in his lecture that many Buddhists found it unnecessary to join the association. They often reasoned that Buddhist practices or “self-perfection,” such as “fasting” and “chanting,” did not need membership for the association. In a sense, one could practice Buddhism at home by himself. Đính refuted such reasoning as “lack of understanding of the Dharma.” He argued that according to Mahayana sutras, the “Dharma demanded both causes and conditions (nhân duyên).” In other words, Đính explained that practices that one conducted were merely “seeds” (huân tập or Vāsanā). And for these seeds to germinate, one must have “outside support” or conditions. The association, he asserted, would provide the necessary support by

²⁵ Lê Mai Đính, “Vào Hội Phật Học Có Lợi Ích Gì?” 57.

²⁶ Lê Mai Đính, “Vào Hội Phật Học Có Lợi Ích Gì?” 58.

placing practitioners under direct guidance of Buddhist monks, who could point them to the path of enlightenment.²⁷

The benefits that Annam Phật Học Hội offered its members also extended beyond the individual to the social. To argue for such impact, Lê Mai Đính broadened the scope of his lecture. He reminded listeners that a “worthy Buddhist was also an honest member of society,” implying that the benefits Buddhists received from the association would have a social impact. Specifically, Đính saw Buddhism as a substitute for Confucianism as the new morality for Vietnamese society. As a result, Buddhism would moderate the impact of Westernization and help it develop Vietnamese society. Lê Mai Đính imagined that with a revived Vietnamese Buddhism, “each family would have a good person,” “each village... a good family,” and “the nation... hundreds of thousands of good people.”²⁸

To end his lecture, Lê Mai Đính argued that it was a patriotic duty for Vietnamese to become members of the Annam Buddhist Association. To make his case, Đính referenced a speech that the Minister of Public Education Phạm Quỳnh gave when he visited the Buddhist schools in Hue. The aspects of the speech that Đính emphasized and selected were the impact of Buddhism on the “moral foundation” of Vietnamese society and the need to protect Buddhism. According to Đính, the Minister saw Buddhism as the “spirit of Vietnamese people.” Thus, the conclusion Đính drew from the speech was that becoming members of the Annam Phật Học Hội was protecting Vietnamese society from foreign encroachment.²⁹

²⁷ Lê Mai Đính, “Vào Hội Phật Học Có Lợi Ích Gì?” 59.

²⁸ Lê Mai Đính, “Vào Hội Phật Học Có Lợi Ích Gì?” 60.

²⁹ Lê Mai Đính, “Vào Hội Phật Học Có Lợi Ích Gì?” 61.

Shifting Message

Besides selling the association, the traveling lecturers carried a message about reviving Vietnamese Buddhism from the Annam Buddhist Association with them to the provinces. The message, however, was constantly shifting. At first, the message introduced Buddhism as a new house for Vietnamese with *karma* as the cornerstone. The lecturers also portrayed the Buddha as a loving father then mother and people as children of the Buddha in this new house. As the lecturers began to travel to the provinces, the message began to shift its context and meaning. Buddhism became a new ideology fitting for Vietnamese. The traveling lecturers then reinterpreted the concept of *karma* to emphasize action and engagement. The traveling lecturers, though having different approaches, agreed that only active engagement would bring about social change.

The House of the Buddha

Before the lecturers began to travel to the provinces, they portrayed Buddhism as a new house for Vietnamese. And *karma* was a corner stone of this new house. In his lecture on *karma*, which appeared in the first issue of *Viên Âm*, Lê Đình Thám explained the importance of understanding *karma* (nhon quả) or cause and effect. “We today encounter suffering or enjoy happiness, thus we should clearly examine the reason for such happiness and suffering,” he said.³⁰ As a fundamental concept, *karma* connected past, present and future, for the present was the direct result of past actions. Even though the concept of *karma* was essential to Buddhism, Thám saw it as an introduction to Buddhism. He hoped that his lecture would convince people that Buddhism could replace Confucianism. With such hope, Thám compared Buddhism to a

³⁰ Lê Đình Thám, “Nhon Quả Luân Hồi,” *Viên Âm*, no. 1 (May 1933): 25.

“new house that was organized and clean.”³¹ He then promised that in future lectures, he would introduce everyone to the Buddha or “head of household” (chủ nhà) of this new house.³²

With people becoming Buddhists or entering the house of the Buddha, the Buddha became more than just an owner. In fact, traveling lecturers of the Annam Buddhist Association began portraying the Buddha as an all-knowing father. In his lecture on self-perfection (tu), the monk Thích Mật Khế described the five different “vehicles” (thừa) or means to reach enlightenment. They were the human vehicle (nhơn thừa), the practice of ethics and meditation (thiên thừa), the practice of renunciation and the Four Noble Truths (thanh văn thừa), the practice concerned with dependent arising (duyên giác thừa) and the practice of Six Perfections (bồ tát thừa). To help listeners make sense of the five vehicles, Thích Mật Khế compared the Buddha and the five vehicles to a father with five sons and their different means of transportation. The father wanted to help his sons travel to Hanoi, where he once lived and often missed, so that they could see Hanoi. For the son “who wanted to arrive in Hanoi quickly,” the father advised him to take “the train” because it would “travel directly to Hanoi.” For the sons who did not want to travel fast, the father gave one a one-horse carriage to travel to Nghệ An and the other a two-horse carriage for Thanh Hoá. And for the son who rather visited Saigon, the father had to convince him to stay put in Hue and wait for his opportunity to travel to Hanoi. In a sense, for knowing his sons so well, the father could give each of them the appropriate means of transportation to reach the destination.³³

The lecturers also painted the Buddha as a loving father. In his lecture on Pure Land, Lê Đình Thám described the Buddha with four distinct attributes: benevolence (từ), compassion

³¹ Lê Đình Thám, “Nhơn Quả Luân Hồi,” 31.

³² Lê Đình Thám, “Nhơn Quả Luân Hồi,” 31.

³³ Thích Mật Khế, “Trạch Pháp Tu Tâm,” *Viên Âm*, no. 2 (January 1934): 22.

(bi), joy (hi) and equanimity (xả). To give meaning to the attributes, Thám contextualized them in a parents-children relationship, so that Buddhists could see how loving and caring the Buddha was. First, he compared benevolence to unconditional love with the parents loving their children whether they were “good,” “bad,” “wise” or “foolish.”³⁴ Benevolence was also caring, as parents wanted to make their children happy. Second, compassion, Thám depicted, was the pity parents had for their sick children. The Buddha’s pity, however, was much larger than that of typical parents because it was salvation for people suffering from old age and death. Third, Thám specified that the joy the Buddha had was not joy itself but rather the joy he could give to people. To illustrate his point, Thám compared the joy to parents indulging their children to make them happy when the children were sick. Thus, Thám asserted, in recognizing this indulgence from the Buddha, “people were happy.”³⁵ Fourth, Thám did not extend the parents-children relationship to explaining equanimity. He perhaps could not do so, for it would weaken his argument. Thám explained that the Buddha’s equanimity was derived from the realization that “thinking” shaped reality.³⁶ The Buddha was indifferent to any specific reality because he cared for one person as he would all people. In a sense, the Buddha, Thám claimed, did not have any favorite, which many parents could only claim.

With the Buddha as their father, Vietnamese Buddhists became his children. Lê Đình Thám expected Buddhists to listen to the Buddha, like children listening to their parents. He explained that when they thought of the Buddha (niệm Phật), they should think of the four attributes of benevolence, compassion, joy and equanimity. In fact, Thám wanted people to think of the love the Buddha had for them when they chanted “Nam-mô A-Di-Đà Phật.” He explained

³⁴ Lê Đình Thám, “Pháp Môn Tịnh Độ,” *Viên Âm*, no. 6 (April 1934): 19.

³⁵ Lê Đình Thám, “Pháp Môn Tịnh Độ,” 20.

³⁶ Lê Đình Thám, “Pháp Môn Tịnh Độ,” 20.

that, in the Chinese context, the phrase “Nam-mô A-Di-Đà Phật” meant “submitting” (quy y) to the Buddha. As a result, the word “Nam mô” could also mean “taking refuge in” and “relying on.” But unlike the Cổ Sơn Môn sect, Thám did not ask people to return to Buddhism. He instead interpreted this “relying on” in the parents-children context. In a sense, “children when young,” Thám asserted, “must rely on their parents to stay out of danger.” Thus, Buddhists must rely on the Buddha when they could not tell right from wrong.³⁷

Not all Buddhists wanted another father figure in their lives. Some in fact questioned whether the Buddha could love one and all living beings the same way because, as Lê Đình Thám suggested, the Buddha could only help those who chanted his name. In response, the monk Thích Mật Nguyễn turned the Buddha into a loving mother. He referenced the sutra *Concentration of Heroic Progress* (Kinh Lăng Nghiêm) to show that, “like a mother,” the Buddha always “loved his children.” The concern, Thích Mật Nguyễn argued, was whether the children could reciprocate the love of their mother. He explained that “the Buddha, like a mother, always thought of his children.” But this thinking and love, Thích Mật Nguyễn added, would “not matter much” if the children were “too indulgent in debauchery to care for their mother.”³⁸

Thích Mật Nguyễn put the responsibility squarely on the children. He explained that if the children could “think of their mother, like she would think of them,” they would forever be children and mother to each other. “If people thought of the Buddha [and] chanted his name, like children thinking of their mother, they would meet the Buddha if not in this life time then the next.”³⁹ In a sense, Thích Mật Nguyễn, though addressing the concern, expected Buddhists to fulfill their filial piety because like a mother, the Buddha would never stop loving them. “The

³⁷ Lê Đình Thám, “Pháp Môn Tịnh Độ,” 20.

³⁸ Thích Mật Nguyễn, “Tịnh Độ Quyết Nghi,” *Viên Âm*, no. 8 (1934): 11.

³⁹ Thích Mật Nguyễn, “Tịnh Độ Quyết Nghi,” 11.

Buddha always wanted to guide people to enlightenment,” he said. “It’s rather the people who were ignorant, following their illusion...instead of letting the Buddha guide them out of rebirth and to Nirvana.”⁴⁰

Lecturers, such as Lê Đình Thám, expected much more than filial piety from Buddhists. Thám in fact believed that Buddhists had duties to repay their parents, society, the state and the Dharma. First, Buddhists had to be pious to their parents. Piety, Thám asserted, was “first and foremost” in Buddhism for both monks and laypeople.⁴¹ Buddhists had to “love their parents” and “repay the merits done by their parents.”⁴² Second, Buddhists had to repay society. For Thám, the division of labor that society created made life easier because people did not have to do everything themselves. But for society to work, people had to fulfill their responsibilities. They could not be “parasites of society.” Buddhists, Thám asserted, must “work diligently” and “fulfill their responsibilities according to their positions.”⁴³ Third, Buddhists had to repay the state. Lê Đình Thám reasoned that the state was responsible for keeping the nation at peace. The state defended the “exterior from foreign invasion” and “keeping the interior in order,” so that people could “live and work in peace and contentment.” Thám then advised that for Buddhists to repay to the state they must not work against “public order and public interest.”⁴⁴ Fourth, Buddhists must exercise the Dharma. For Thám, fulfilling the first three duties was not enough. People would reborn as people if they only fulfilled the first three duties. Exercising the Dharma was the only way that would bring people closer to reaching Buddhahood. Thám reasoned that for being born as human, people should cherish the opportunity to “read the sutras” and “listen to

⁴⁰ Thích Mật Nguyên, “Tịnh Độ Quyết Nghi,” 11.

⁴¹ Lê Đình Thám, “Bổn Phận Người Học Phật,” *Viên Âm*, no. 10 (1934): 11.

⁴² Lê Đình Thám, “Bổn Phận Người Học Phật,” 12.

⁴³ Lê Đình Thám, “Bổn Phận Người Học Phật,” 13.

⁴⁴ Lê Đình Thám, “Bổn Phận Người Học Phật,” 14.

the teachings of the Buddha.”⁴⁵ Thus, Buddhists should strive to perfect themselves, so that they would not disappoint the Buddha, who spent forty-nine years teaching people.

Situated Context

Once the lecturers began traveling to the provinces, the emphasis on parents-children relationship and filial responsibilities was no longer important. Their task was to show that Buddhism was much more advanced than Western ideas, such as equality and materialism. In his lecture on “True Equality,” Chính Túc argued that the idea of equality, particularly from the West, was not new. It actually had been in existence in Asia for 2500 years through the teaching of the Buddha. Chính Túc also criticized that the Western notion of equality was not true equality because it had its own limits, such as class, nation and race. In a sense, the idea was still bound to and driven by self-interest. In Buddhism, equality, however, existed in the mind. And this was the true equality because it was not based on “greed, anger and delusion.” For this true equality to reveal itself, Chính Túc advised Buddhists to “destroy” or detach from the following: self, creation myth, racial differences, ignorance, fate, progress, others and other-worldly.⁴⁶

Lecturers began to abstract the word Buddha into a concept to denote enlightenment. The word no longer specified a person or a parental figure but rather a concept that Buddhists should strive to achieve. In a lecture titled “Buddha,” the monk Thích Đôn Hậu did not once mention the Buddha but rather the meaning of the word. He explained that the word denoted “awakened” in Sanskrit. And by awakened (giác), Thích Đôn Hậu meant the one who had awakened from his sleep as opposed to those who were still in deep sleep or “delusion” (mê).⁴⁷ Thích Đôn Hậu also added a disclaimer that the word Buddha was “absolutely perfect.” In a sense, words could not

⁴⁵ Lê Đình Thám, “Bổn Phận Người Học Phật,” 14.

⁴⁶ Chính Túc, “Chơn Bình Đẳng,” *Viên Âm*, no. 14 (April 1935): 4–17.

⁴⁷ Thích Đôn Hậu, “Phật,” *Viên Âm*, no. 14 (April 1935): 18.

capture or convey its meaning. But the monk was aware of his precarious position. He acknowledged that he had to use words because people could “not reach Buddhahood” if they could only “vaguely imagine the meaning of the word Buddha.”⁴⁸

Despite making Buddhism more abstract, traveling lecturers reminded people that Buddhism was fitting for Vietnamese. In his lecture, Lê Mai Đính offered his personal observation that Buddhism had become a part of Vietnamese culture. During his travels, Đính saw that every village had a pagoda and many people called themselves children of the Buddha. Even though Đính deemed them not “true” children of the Buddha because they did “not visit a pagoda for a whole year” and did “not know anything about the sutras,” he acknowledged that they “sometimes revealed characters and feeling...fitting with Buddhist teaching.”⁴⁹ He, thus, concluded that Buddhism was fitting. More importantly, Đính saw Buddhism as a necessary filter to neutralize Westernization. For Đính, Confucianism and Buddhism were the two main factors that shaped the characteristics of Vietnamese and made them “calm” (tĩnh). Thus, those who were clamoring for equality and freedom by breaking the law were the “Westernized minority.”⁵⁰ Đính, however, did not discredit them out right but rather encouraged them to incorporate Buddhism into their thinking. With Buddhism incorporated, “the further the wave of materialism reached, the more peaceful it became...the more content people would be.” Đính ultimately hoped that with Buddhism, people would achieve “world peace” (thế giới đại đồng).⁵¹

⁴⁸ Thích Đôn Hậu, “Phật,” 19.

⁴⁹ Lê Mai Đính, “Bài Diễn Văn Của Ông Lê Mai Đính Đọc Ngày Mồng Tám Tháng Tư Trong Dịp Lễ Khánh Đản Đức Phật Thích Ca,” *Viên Âm*, no. 25 (June 1937): 14–15.

⁵⁰ Lê Mai Đính, “Bài Diễn Văn Của Ông Lê Mai Đính Đọc Ngày Mồng Tám Tháng Tư Trong Dịp Lễ Khánh Đản Đức Phật Thích Ca,” 15.

⁵¹ Lê Mai Đính, “Bài Diễn Văn Của Ông Lê Mai Đính Đọc Ngày Mồng Tám Tháng Tư Trong Dịp Lễ Khánh Đản Đức Phật Thích Ca,” 17.

Religious Ideology

The new context allowed traveling lectures to transform Buddhism into an ideology. First, they advocated Buddhism as a path to happiness. In his lecture, “Where Is the Path to Happiness?” Thích Đôn Hậu presented Buddhism as the only choice that could lead people to happiness because it correctly identified the causes of suffering – greed, anger and delusion.⁵² But the lecture did not start in such way. The lecture began with Thích Đôn Hậu criticizing other ideologies, such as materialism, philosophy, science, and Christianity, and point out their shortcomings. For instance, Thích Đôn Hậu discredited the Christian heaven as a non-lasting satisfaction because it depended on the “externals” (ngoại cảnh) rather than internal. He gave an example of people thinking that living in a “house with tile roof” would be better than in a “thatch hut.” But when people had the chance to live in the “house with tile roof,” it was “not different.”⁵³ They were still unhappy.

Buddhism, Thích Đôn Hậu asserted, was the answer to modern problems. Like a doctor (ông lang), Buddhism examined the causes of suffering before prescribing any medicine. Otherwise, if the doctor merely prescribed medicine for the symptoms, the patient might “not get better,” which could be life threatening. According to Thích Đôn Hậu, the medicine that Buddhism prescribed, so to speak, was the correct identification of causes for suffering and ways to eliminate them. After addressing the diagnostic, Thích Đôn Hậu offered a four-part solution. The first part was to recognize that “there was no true self” (không có thật ngã) because sensory

⁵² Thích Đôn Hậu, “Đâu Là Con Đường Hạnh Phúc (Bài Giảng Tại Faifoo Ngày 25 Août 1937),” *Viên Âm*, no. 27 (August 1937): 4.

⁵³ Thích Đôn Hậu, “Đâu Là Con Đường Hạnh Phúc (Bài Giảng Tại Faifoo Ngày 25 Août 1937),” 9.

experience was incomplete.⁵⁴ The second part was to accept that “there was no absolute truth” (không có thật vật) because truth was relative.⁵⁵ The third part was to realize that reality depended upon perception (vạn pháp duy thức), which relied strictly on experience. The final part was to be mindful. The last part was crucial to the whole process because it reminded people that once they believed or attached themselves to what they experienced, other parts would unravel, as truth would appear and perception became reality.⁵⁶

Besides guiding people to happiness, Buddhism taught them selflessness. In a subsequent lecture, Thích Đôn Hậu defended Buddhism from the charges that it was a “nihilistic religion” (đạo hư vô) for those that were “lazy, depressed, selfish, not fitting with this era of being modern, active, diligent,” and that Buddhism could “only benefit the individual but not all mankind.”⁵⁷ For the monk, Buddhism was in fact far better than other religions because it did not distinguish between the self (tự) and the others. In other words, it was true altruism – “self benefit and benefit for others” (tự lợi lợi tha). To explain his idea, Thích Đôn Hậu first tied all actions to interests or benefits whether for the individual, family, society or nation. He then blamed “self-benefit and harm for others” (tự lợi hại tha) for everything destructive in the world, such as “discrimination,” “deception,” “robbery,” and “wars” between nations and classes.⁵⁸ In a sense, Thích Đôn Hậu saw the conflict in interests between the self and the others as the cause for suffering because in the end, no one really benefited from this conflict. The monk instead suggested a dialectical way of viewing the conflict, for the self and the others defined each other. “Thus, removing the others makes the self a part of the others, [and] removing the self makes all

⁵⁴ Thích Đôn Hậu, “Đâu Là Con Đường Hạnh Phúc (Tiếp Theo và Hết),” *Viên Âm*, no. 28 (n.d.): 5.

⁵⁵ Thích Đôn Hậu, “Đâu Là Con Đường Hạnh Phúc (Tiếp Theo và Hết),” 8.

⁵⁶ Thích Đôn Hậu, “Đâu Là Con Đường Hạnh Phúc (Tiếp Theo và Hết),” 9–10.

⁵⁷ Thích Đôn Hậu, “Tự Lợi Lợi Tha,” *Viên Âm*, no. 29 (May 1938): 14.

⁵⁸ Thích Đôn Hậu, “Tự Lợi Lợi Tha,” 15.

the others a part of the self.”⁵⁹ In other words, for defining each other, the self was a part of the others and vice versa. As a result, “doing good for the others is doing good for the self, [and] harming the others is also harming the self.”⁶⁰ At the end of the lecture, Thích Đôn Hậu hoped that his conception of altruism would catch on with “one person teaching ten, and ten teaching one hundred, then gradually the nation, all over the world,” ending all wars and bringing “world peace.”⁶¹

Buddhism brought true enlightenment. In his lecture on the Dharma, Lê Đình Thám compared the Buddhist notion of enlightenment to the discovery of quinine in treating and preventing malaria. He described the process of discovering the use of quinine in different stages by someone with malaria. First, the person discovered that quinine helped with the fever induced by malaria. Second, the person learned more that quinine could also prevent malaria. Thám also compared enlightenment to other scientific discoveries, such as the chemical formula of water. In a sense, scientific discoveries could be considered “enlightenment” because people were less ignorant than they were before. But scientific discoveries were still limited and too specific to their circumstances and applications. This, for Thám, was “not true enlightenment.”⁶² True enlightenment was all-knowing. An enlightened being, Thám described, was someone who knew “all things correctly, eliminated all causes of...suffering, no long had sorrow or delusion.”⁶³

True enlightenment, however, demanded engagement. In the same lecture, Lê Đình Thám explained that there were two types of enlightened beings. The first type was “content with his own enlightenment and did not think about others.” The second type instead wanted to help

⁵⁹ Thích Đôn Hậu, “Tự Lợi Lợi Tha,” 17.

⁶⁰ Thích Đôn Hậu, “Tự Lợi Lợi Tha,” 18.

⁶¹ Thích Đôn Hậu, “Tự Lợi Lợi Tha,” 18–19.

⁶² Lê Đình Thám, “Phật Pháp,” *Viên Âm*, no. 33 (November 1938): 5.

⁶³ Lê Đình Thám, “Phật Pháp,” 5.

others reach enlightenment. But ultimately, the “prestigious title” Buddha could only be given to those that had “reached enlightenment, helped others reach enlightenment and completed his teaching” (tự giác giác tha, giác hạnh viên mãn).⁶⁴ Thám explained, “Enlightening oneself [makes him] different from those who are still ignorant, enlightening others [makes him] different from an Arhat [who is content with his own enlightenment], [and] completed his teaching [makes him] different from a Bodhisattva [who has renounced Nirvana to help others reach enlightenment].”⁶⁵

The engagement that Lê Đình Thám suggested was purely intellectual. It in fact demanded a positive (re)thinking of *karma*. In his new lecture on *karma*, Lê Đình Thám abandoned the emphasis on *karma* as an explanation of causality for past, present and future. He instead focused on the aspect of self-determination (tự tâm) and its relationship with thinking. In other words, people could change their *karma* by changing their thinking. “Our self-determination changes due to our thoughts,” he explained. “Prior thoughts shape and mold later thoughts, if [we] have good thoughts, then [our] disposition will become good... good seeds bears good fruit, [and] fruit gives seeds.”⁶⁶ To conclude his lecture, Thám reminded those in the audience that they were students of the Buddha. Their task was to learn from the Buddha how to eliminate thoughts stemmed from “greed, anger and delusion” and to foster thoughts that would help others and liberate themselves from “sexual desire” and materialism. “Everyday, practice such thinking then one day [one] will be merciful and enlightened like the Buddha,” he said.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Lê Đình Thám, “Phật Pháp,” 6.

⁶⁵ Lê Đình Thám, “Phật Pháp,” 6.

⁶⁶ Lê Đình Thám, “Đạo Lý Nhơn Quả,” *Viên Âm*, no. 34 (January 1939): 11.

⁶⁷ Lê Đình Thám, “Đạo Lý Nhơn Quả,” 12.

Social Applications

The traveling lecturers, though portraying Buddhism as an ideology, yearned for applications. First, for the monk Thích Trí Quang, Buddhism had to compel Buddhists to take actions. And to do so, he reinterpreted the concept of *karma* as “action with intention” by using the word *ngiệp* rather than *nhơn/nhân quả*. “*Nghiệp* has to be actions with intention,” he said in his lecture. “Because only such actions will have meaningful results.”⁶⁸ To explain his interpretation, Thích Trí Quang quickly addressed the misconception of *karma*. He advised Buddhists to “correct” the “misunderstanding” that interpreted *karma* as “fate” (*ngiệp dĩ*) and linked it to “past actions.”⁶⁹ This misunderstanding, Thích Trí Quang held, limited the possibility of change. “As a result, the typical idea born out [of the misunderstanding] is that the present is completely the result of past actions, [it] cannot be changed...[and] improved,” he added. More importantly, Thích Trí Quang emphasized that the misunderstanding discredited “human agency” (*nhân lực*) for “not being able to influence the present.” “This is a mistake,” he said.

To challenge the misconception of *karma*, Thích Trí Quang centered his interpretation of *karma* on agency. He asserted that “action of each individual had a direct impact on [his] life,” and that “actions by the masses will completely change a society.” This, Thích Trí Quang believed, showed that “social change could only come from actions by the masses.” In a sense, the interpretation by Thích Trí Quang adhered to the causality principle of *karma* by linking actions to social change. The interpretation, however, reoriented the usage of *karma* from a passive rationalization of the present as result of past actions to an active engagement with the present to bring about change for the future. He deemed that only those who understood his

⁶⁸ Thích Trí Quang, “Sức Mạnh Của Nghiệp,” *Viên Âm*, no. 89–90 (March 25, 1950): 21.

⁶⁹ Thích Trí Quang, “Sức Mạnh Của Nghiệp,” 22.

interpretation of *karma* truly believed in the “power of *karma*.”⁷⁰ To end his lecture, Thích Trí Quang recommended Buddhists to believe in the “power of action” and “realize the influence thinking has on action.”⁷¹

Second, Buddhism would bring peace. In his lecture, Thích Minh Châu reminded Buddhists that for “2500 years” of its existence, Buddhism had “never caused a conflict” or “war.” The reasons, he explained, were its emphasis on enlightenment, liberation, compassion and equality. The focus on peace was utmost important because the First Indochina war (1946-1954), which was ongoing at the time, had been tearing the social fabric of Vietnam for five years.⁷² Thích Minh Châu told a parable that showed poison could become medicine in the hands of a good doctor and vice versa. In a sense, the purpose of the parable was to deemphasize the importance of materiality and place blame for the devastation of war solely on people. “People [if] ignorant can turn vegetation and mountains into weapons to kill people, people [if] lucid can turn the universe into a thing that can prolong one’s life,” he said. Thích Minh Châu, thus, asserted that in Buddhism people were the “center of society,” and that to “improve society, [they] must begin with improving people.”⁷³

Like Thích Trí Quang, Thích Minh Châu centered social change for peace on engagement. But his brand of engagement, though abstract, was far less theoretical. It merely asked Buddhists to engage with society directly. In his lecture, Thích Minh Châu brought back the image of the house. But this house was denoting society rather than Buddhism. “In a dark house, we cannot stand outside begging,” he said. “[If we] want the house to be bright, we have

⁷⁰ Thích Trí Quang, “Sức Mạnh Của Nghiệp,” 24.

⁷¹ Thích Trí Quang, “Sức Mạnh Của Nghiệp,” 24.

⁷² See William J Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), 62–92.

⁷³ Thích Minh Châu, “Một Vài Đặc Điểm Của Đạo Phật,” *Viên Âm*, no. 102–103 (January 1951): 17.

to open the doors, so that the light of truth can shine in, we have to enter the house and turn on the light.”⁷⁴ In a sense, for Thích Minh Châu, Buddhists had to actively engage with society to bring about social change. They could not change society by detaching themselves from it.

Third, the ultimate aim of Buddhism was to transform reality into a utopia or “this-worldly Pure Land” (nhân gian tịnh độ). In a lecture on the fundamentals of Buddhism, a lecturer neatly summarized “the essence,” the “useful means” and the “applications” of Buddhism. In a sense, the lecture was an attempt to synthesize the shifting context and message that the traveling lecturers had been bringing to the provinces. However, the lecture ended by reaching beyond the typical social applications of Buddhism. “The aim of Buddhism is to establish for all mankind a world that was true, good and beautiful (thế giới chân thiện mỹ).”⁷⁵ Despite the lofty aim, the lecturer acknowledged that the “true, good and beautiful world” he intended to build had to come from reality. The aim, thus, was not to reject reality but rather to transform reality into Pure Land. “Clean water cannot exist outside of muddy water,” the lecturer said. “It depends on the clever act of filtering by people.” This filtering act, the lecturer asserted, was precisely the “good” part that made up Pure Land and “embodied” by the bodhisattva who actively engaged with society.⁷⁶

CONCLUSION: The Annam Buddhist Association was an institutional success during the Vietnamese Buddhist revival. At the foundation of this success was an administrative structure that included both laymen and monks. For having different committees, the administration enabled laymen and monks to engage one another and collaborate, making their revival effort a social process. In addition, the association installed membership dues, so that it could fund its

⁷⁴ Thích Minh Châu, “Một Vài Đặc Điểm Của Đạo Phật,” 17–18.

⁷⁵ “Căn Bản Phật Học,” *Viên Âm*, no. 118 (January 1952): 7.

⁷⁶ “Căn Bản Phật Học,” 7.

operation. Members in return could attend lectures and celebrations that the association organized throughout the year. To extend its reach, the association had lecturers traveling throughout Annam. The lecturers not only brought Buddhism to the provinces but also the vision for reviving Vietnamese Buddhism of the association. The lecturers began with introducing people to Buddhism and portraying the Buddha as a loving parent and Buddhists as his children. Then the lecturers adapted their message to show Buddhism as a new ideology, which could replace Confucianism, with social applications. Despite various interpretations, the message remained constant that social engagement would bring change. The following chapter will further investigate the vision that the Annam Buddhist Association had for reviving Vietnamese Buddhism. In the chapter, I will examine the changes in practice and the reorganization of the *sangha* that the association performed.



Figure 6: Thích Mật Khê (1904-1935)

The Changing Practice

By focusing on practice, the Annam Buddhist Association asserted its revival effort as a social movement. The association also distinguished its effort from an intellectual debate on Buddhism. The typical view that intellectuals had at the time was that Buddhism was not a religion. For instance, the writer Hoài Thanh viewed Buddhism as a philosophy.¹

The changes in practice that the Annam Buddhist Association carried out during the 1930's and 1940's were crucial to the development of Vietnamese Buddhism. The association made Buddhism accessible by domesticating the Buddha and broadening the practice of *tu* (self-betterment), so that laypeople could practice Buddhism at home. More importantly, the association transformed the *sangha* into an idea of unity and regulated the monks accordingly, so that the community and its members were apt for social engagement. The problems that the association faced were: How could the association promote Buddhism? How could the association reorganize the *sangha* effectively? And how could the association create a new generation of monks who could carry out social engagement?

Celebrating Buddhism

The Buddha's Nativity

To promote Buddhism, the Annam Buddhist Association organized a celebration of the Buddha's birthday. The celebration was the first of its kind, for Hue had "never experienced such a celebration." The newspaper *Tràng An* (Perpetual Peace) commented that "Buddhism needs the promotion" because it did not have the reach or impact that other religions did. The newspaper

¹ Hoài Thanh, "Đạo Phật Của Tôi," *Tràng An*, May 10, 1935, 21 edition, sec. Phụ Trang.

also speculated that the celebration would not be typical because the purpose was to “excite those that worshiped the Buddha.”²

The newspaper *Tràng An* also helped prepare people in Hue for the celebration. Before the celebration happened, the newspaper dedicated an article to informing people the importance of and proper social conduct for the celebration. The article reminded its readers that the celebration was not about “fun.” The celebration in fact had a profound meaning because the Buddha, “like Jesus Christ, was born to *save the world*” (cứu thế) (emphasis in original). The article also recommended people in Hue to put on their best behavior for the celebration. For instance, the article advised people not to gamble, not to loiter, and not to sell or consume dog meat as they normally would for other celebrations. People instead should keep “quiet” when they went out, and if they stayed in, they should stay “tranquil to hear the bell [from the pagoda] ringing.”³

The celebration for the Buddha’s birthday took place at Diệu Đế pagoda on May 9 and 10, 1935 – or the seventh and eighth day of the fourth month of the lunar calendar. On May 9, 1935 at 7.30 pm, monks, nuns and laypeople walked in procession from Báo Quốc pagoda to Diệu Đế pagoda, which were two and half miles apart. Along the route, people flew their flags and adorned their houses with light. People were also flocking to Báo Quốc pagoda to view the procession. The crowd grew larger and larger every step of the way. The atmosphere was festive.⁴

The procession had several parts. At the front of the procession was a big lantern with “The Buddha’s Birthday” written on it. Following the lantern was a group of dancers who were

² Tiêu Diêu Tử, “Lễ Khánh Đản Đức Phật Thích Ca,” *Tràng An*, May 14, 1935, 22 edition, 1.

³ “Nhân Dân Thành Phố Huế Đối Với Ngày Lễ Vía Phật,” *Tràng An*, May 3, 1935, 19 edition, 1.

⁴ V.T., “Lễ Vía Phật Ở Huế Trong Ngày Mồng Bảy và Sáng Mồng Tám,” *Tràng An*, May 10, 1935, 21 edition, sec. Phụ Trang.

performing the Six Offerings (Lục Cúng) – flowers, incense, lantern, tea, fruits and music. Behind the dancers was a group of fifty young children, all were carrying lotus shaped lanterns with the phrase “*Namo Amitābhāya*” written in Chinese. Accompanying these children were monks, nuns and laypeople. At the end of the procession were two floats: one with a statue of the Buddha as a child, and the other with flowers.

At 9 pm, the procession arrived at Diệu Đế pagoda. The crowd swelled, and only half of the people could enter the yard of the pagoda. Bell and drums began to sound, and a monk spoke over the PA system to announce the beginning of the ceremony. The monks started the ceremony, and laypeople entered the main hall to bow to the Buddha. The ceremony ended two and a half hours later.⁵

On May 10, 1935, the celebration became a royal event. Emperor Bảo Đại attended the celebration with his entourage. Twenty royal guards were at the pagoda to keep the crowd in order, so that the Emperor’s car could enter the pagoda. People were pushing each other and the guards to catch a glimpse of the car. Outside of Diệu Đế pagoda, cars were honking, bells on pushcarts were ringing, and children and adults were screaming. Inside the pagoda, it was quiet. The organizers had erected two tents in the yard for guests. The tents were packed with guests, “like two cans of sardines.”⁶

At 9pm, to begin the night program, Lê Đình Thám gave a short speech on Buddhism and its impact on psychological development. Emperor Bảo Đại and his entourage then led a group of forty children into the yard. The children were singing along with piano music, as they entered the yard. Fifteen minutes later, the Résidence Supérieure of Annam arrived with two princes

⁵ V.T., “Lễ Vía Phật Ở Huế Trong Ngày Mồng Bảy và Sáng Mồng Tám.”

⁶ Tiêu Diêu Tử, “Lễ Khánh Đản Đức Phật Thích Ca Đã Cử Hành Được Mọi Phần Chu Đáo,” *Tràng An*, May 14, 1935, 22 edition, 1–2.

from Laos. Once the guests had taken their seats, President of the Annam Buddhist Association Nguyễn Khoa Tân gave his speech and thanked all of the guests – including colonial officials from the Sûreté (Colonial Police). Children then sang and danced to celebrate the Buddha’s birthday. The night ended at 11 pm.⁷

The celebration was a hit. The newspaper *Tràng An* congratulated the association for having “finished the task,” as if the association could “accomplish whatever it wished.” The newspaper also hoped that it would see an even bigger and more successful event next year.⁸

Buddhist Wedding

The Annam Buddhist Association opened up its pagoda to welcome Vietnamese society into Buddhism. The association in fact wanted to turn the pagoda into a center of people’s social lives. The event that best exemplified this incorporation was the wedding of Lê Đình Thám’s daughter at Từ Quang pagoda in August 1940.

The wedding, first and foremost, was a spectacle. It drew a large crowd of spectators to Từ Quang pagoda, for it was the first of its kind. At 7 pm, the crowd grew so much in size that the main hall did not have enough space for everyone. At 8 pm, the bride and groom arrived with their families, in two separate lines. The people who were at the front of the lines were holding lanterns, and others were carrying fruits and flowers to offer to the Buddha and a box containing the wedding rings. The families then flanked the altar, as the bride and groom offered two bouquets of flowers to the Buddha. The ceremony then began. The monks recited their request (sớ) to the Buddha then lectured the couple on their new social roles in regard to each other, their

⁷ Tiêu Diêu Tử, “Lễ Khánh Đản Đức Phật Thích Ca Đã Cử Hành Được Mọi Phần Chu Đáo,” 1–2.

⁸ Tiêu Diêu Tử, “Lễ Khánh Đản Đức Phật Thích Ca Đã Cử Hành Được Mọi Phần Chu Đáo,” 2.

parents and their help. The ceremony ended with the couple putting the wedding rings on each other's hand.⁹

The wedding then became a text for others to emulate and perform at the pagoda. The reporter from the periodical *Viên Âm* (The Sound of Perfection) made sure to note this purpose. “We are Buddhists, thus, whatever rites that are important in our lives must be held at the pagoda to show our utmost respect [for the Buddha],” the reporter wrote. “[We] also need to have a ceremony that is fitting for others to emulate according to their situations.” Thus, the reporter spent a great deal of time in describing the ceremony and transcribing the request to the Buddha and the lecture on the new social roles for the bride and groom.¹⁰

Moreover, the wedding, though a text itself, needed other texts for legitimacy. The article in *Viên Âm* also included a transcription of the request (sớ) to the Buddha as well as a translated excerpt from *Kinh Thiện Sinh* (Sigalovada Sutra) – which was pulled from *Kinh Trường A-Hàm* (The Long Discourses of the Buddha or Digha Nikaya). The request to the Buddha served as a statement of authority in legitimizing the marriage between Lê Đình Thám's daughter and her groom, as it named the Buddha as the source of power and the monks his witnesses. The request also expressed the wish from the monks for the couple to have “harmony,” “fortune,” “happiness” and wellbeing.¹¹

The excerpt from *Kinh Thiện Sinh* stipulated a social contract between husband and wife, children and parents, and masters and servants. The excerpt was partial, for it only focused on relationships relevant to the wedding. The excerpt, however, showed that the monks were

⁹ “Lễ Thành Hôn Tại Chùa Hội Quán,” *Viên Âm*, no. 40 (September 1940): 24–25.

¹⁰ “Lễ Thành Hôn Tại Chùa Hội Quán,” 24.

¹¹ “Lễ Thành Hôn Tại Chùa Hội Quán,” 26.

attempting to articulate a new social structure not only anchored in matrimony but also in Buddhist morality.

At the top of the social structure were the Three Jewels and Five Precepts. In a sense, husband and wife were first and foremost Buddhist. They had to “think of the Buddha,” “chant” his name, and “follow” his teachings. To follow the Dharma, they should not do any thing “wicked,” “do good,” and find “tranquility in their thinking.” And to follow the Sangha, the couple should be “careful in finding [their] teacher and friends” because they should not be close with people who were “bad” and “wicked.” In addition, the couple had to obey the Five Precepts. They had to abstain from killing, from taking what was not theirs, from sexual misconduct, from false speech, and from consuming alcohol.¹²

Next in the social structure were the reciprocal duties that parents and children, husband and wife, and masters and servants must perform. For children, they must help their parents with money and housework work. They also had to make their parents happy by buying them gifts and offering them their own belongings if necessary. For the parents, they must reciprocate the love from their children in a similar way. They also had to find a mate for their children and save their money, so that their children would have inheritance.¹³

The duties for husband and wife, and masters and servants, however, were not symmetrical. The husband only had five duties to perform toward his wife. He had to love his wife, treat her with respect, buy her gifts and trust her. He also must give her control over household matter. The wife instead had double the duties to perform: six of them toward the husband and four for household matter. She must always love her husband, respect him, think fondly of him, greet him with happiness and be truthful to him. For household matter, she must

¹² “Lễ Thành Hôn Tại Chùa Hội Quán,” 26–27.

¹³ “Lễ Thành Hôn Tại Chùa Hội Quán,” 27–28.

take care of the house, cook, save money and look after the children. And as masters, the husband and wife had five duties toward their servants. They had to give the servants work according to their strength, allow them to eat on time, have enough rest and medicine when ill, and do not overwork them. Yet in return, the servants did not have any duties to perform.¹⁴

Purifying the Pagoda

Besides creating new practices, the Annam Buddhist Association attempted to “purify” existing ones. The association in fact wanted to remove all elements deemed non-Buddhist in practices performed at pagodas. In a sense, the association envisioned the pagoda serving as an example for worship that laypeople could replicate.

In a letter to the association, Lê Đình Thám and the monk Đắc Quang laid out their plan for purifying the pagoda – which President Nguyễn Đình Hồ approved soon after and recommended all affiliated associations to follow.¹⁵ The first recommendation was to remove non-Buddhist deities, such as Thánh Mẫu (Lady of the Realm) and Quan Công (General Zihuang), from the pagoda. Thám and Đắc Quang reasoned that these deities did not “deserve merit” to be worshipped with the Buddha, and that the pagoda was a good place to start the purification process by rearranging the altar “correctly.”¹⁶ They recommended that the pagoda should only worship a handful of Buddhas, such as Phật Dược Sư (The Medicine Buddha) – who

¹⁴ “Lễ Thành Hôn Tại Chùa Hội Quán,” 27.

¹⁵ Nguyễn Đình Hồ, “Nghị Định Số 18,” *Viên Âm*, no. 42 (November 1940): 25–26.

¹⁶ Lê Đình Thám and Đắc Quang, “Thơ Của Thầy Đạo Hạnh Cố Vấn Đắc Quang và Ngài Giáo Lý Kiểm Duyệt Lê Đình Thám Gởi Cho Tổng Trị Sự Trình Xét Việc Thờ TỰ, Cúng Cấp, Trì Tụng Ở Các Hội Quán Hội Annam Phật Học,” *Viên Âm*, no. 42 (November 1940): 25.

were relevant to Mahayana Buddhism. And the reincarnation of these Buddhas should be excluded from worship, so that the pagoda would “not be any less solemn.”¹⁷

The second recommendation in the letter was banning the practice of burning votive paper and offering for the dead at the pagoda. Thám and Đắc Quang made the concession to allow laypeople to offer fruits and vegetarian food to the Buddha. But they deemed burning votive paper and offering for the dead “heresy.” They reasoned that the act of burning votive paper and offering for the dead went against the concept of *karma* and rebirth. Had those who made the offering believed in rebirth, they would know that the “wandering souls” (vong linh) or ghosts could only benefit from “chanting” (chú nguyện) not paper offering.¹⁸

The third and final recommendation was a strict usage of Buddhist sutras. At the end of the letter, Thám and Đắc Quang urged monks and laypeople to stop using “illegitimate” (ngụy tạo) sutras. They in fact advocated a strict usage of the *Tripitaka* and its translation published in *Viên Âm* for chanting. Other non-Buddhist sutras, such as *Kinh Ngọc Hoàng* (Sutra of the Jade Emperor), should “not be chanted” because they did not adhere to “orthodoxy” (chánh pháp).¹⁹

Bringing Home the Buddha

With the pagoda purified, the Annam Buddhist Association extended its reach into laypeople’s homes. The association encouraged laypeople to bring the Buddha into their homes for worship. In other words, the association wanted laypeople to turn their homes into private

¹⁷ Lê Đình Thám and Đắc Quang, “Thơ Của Thầy Đạo Hạnh Cố Vấn Đắc Quang và Ngài Giáo Lý Kiểm Duyệt Lê Đình Thám Gởi Cho Tổng Trị Sự Trình Xét Việc Thờ Tự, Cúng Cấp, Trì Tụng Ở Các Hội Quán Hội Annam Phật Học,” 25.

¹⁸ Lê Đình Thám and Đắc Quang, “Thơ Của Thầy Đạo Hạnh Cố Vấn Đắc Quang và Ngài Giáo Lý Kiểm Duyệt Lê Đình Thám Gởi Cho Tổng Trị Sự Trình Xét Việc Thờ Tự, Cúng Cấp, Trì Tụng Ở Các Hội Quán Hội Annam Phật Học,” 26.

¹⁹ Lê Đình Thám and Đắc Quang, “Thơ Của Thầy Đạo Hạnh Cố Vấn Đắc Quang và Ngài Giáo Lý Kiểm Duyệt Lê Đình Thám Gởi Cho Tổng Trị Sự Trình Xét Việc Thờ Tự, Cúng Cấp, Trì Tụng Ở Các Hội Quán Hội Annam Phật Học,” 26.

pagodas, so that they could worship the Buddha daily. In a letter to members of the association, President Nguyễn Đình Hoè argued that laypeople would benefit greatly from having the Buddha in their homes because they would be reminded to “think of the Buddha” and to act their role as “students of the Buddha.” The president also commented that not many laypeople had an altar for the Buddha in their homes because they misunderstood the Buddha.²⁰

The president first tried to debunk the typical misconception that the Buddha would not like a layperson’s home. He asserted that unlike other deities, the Buddha would not discriminate their homes. To support the claim, Hoè pointed out that the Buddha “left his palace for the jungle” in search of enlightenment. In addition, Hoè reminded laypeople that the Buddha was also a caring person, as he took care of animals and people whom he encountered along the way during his travels.²¹

Nguyễn Đình Hoè then addressed the anxiety laypeople had in having the Buddha in their homes. People simply thought that their homes were not good enough for the Buddha. Again, Hoè reminded the reader that for having reach enlightenment, the Buddha could make anywhere into Nirvana. Hoè also restated the motto that the Buddha would not mind entering hell to save people. He then extrapolated that the Buddha would not mind any home belonged to a member of the association because it could not possibly be worse than hell. Hoè, however, warned that even though the Buddha would not mind anyone’s home, the layperson should set up the altar in the most respectable place in his home.²²

²⁰ Nguyễn Đình Hoè, “Thông Tư Của Tổng Trị Sự Annam Phật Học Hội về Việc Thờ Phật Trong Nhà,” *Viên Âm*, no. 62 (1943): 21.

²¹ Nguyễn Đình Hoè, “Thông Tư Của Tổng Trị Sự Annam Phật Học Hội về Việc Thờ Phật Trong Nhà,” 21–22.

²² Nguyễn Đình Hoè, “Thông Tư Của Tổng Trị Sự Annam Phật Học Hội về Việc Thờ Phật Trong Nhà,” 22.

The final fear that Nguyễn Đình Hoè confronted in his letter was the lack of money. He asserted that the Buddha was an all-powerful being. “He would not need anything,” Hoè wrote. Thus, Hoè redirected the discussion from the material to the spiritual. He in fact showed that instead of offering “incense, candle, flowers and fruits,” laypeople could offer their devotion and dedication to following the Buddha’s teachings.²³

The letter from Hoè, however, ended on an ironic note. The purpose of the letter was to encourage laypeople to take the Buddha home, so that they could practice Buddhism daily. But Hoè warned that laypeople should not discriminate against other people’s Buddha. In a sense, to promote Buddhism, the Annam Buddhist Association democratized worship by allowing laypeople to take the Buddha from the pagoda into their homes, but the process then privatized the Buddha by turning worship into a domestic fetish.

Bettering Oneself

The new practices that the Annam Buddhist Association tried to instill in its members went beyond worship. The association focused on the self by broadening the practice of *tu* or self-perfection to include laypeople. *Tu* or *đi tu* used to strictly indicate ordaining or becoming a monk. But during the 1940’s, the lectures and articles that the association ran in *Viên Âm* showed a strong effort in redefining the concept of *tu* and its practice to make it more inclusive. *Tu* then indicated self-betterment, and anyone could *tu* at anytime and anywhere. Moreover, *tu* also had a social impact because, the association argued, social change began with self-betterment.

The suggestion to broaden the practice of *tu* first appeared in the periodical *Ánh Sáng Phật Pháp* (The Light of the Dharma), published in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in 1938. It was a response to the comment, “I Cannot *Tu* Yet” (Tôi Tu Chưa Được). In the response, the monk

²³ Nguyễn Đình Hoè, “Thông Tư Của Tổng Trị Sự Annam Phật Học Hội về Việc Thờ Phật Trong Nhà,” 22.

Huệ Bảo argued that it was always the right time to *tu*. And to make his case, Huệ Bảo not only argued for the impact *tu* had on society but also redefined what the practice meant. The impact on society, Huệ Bảo asserted, was immediate. His conception of society was a “wheel” and people “components.” And for society to function efficiently, each component had to be “reliable” and “clean” – in a moral sense. He made the recommendation that “everyone should *tu*,” so that they could continuously “foster” and “improve” their “body and mind.”²⁴

To redefine *tu*, Huệ Bảo first broadened the concept while limiting it by defining its inverse. The broadening of *tu* hinged on a moral returning or a correction of what was wrong. “*Tu* is to correct the wrong [and] return to the right, avoid the fake [and] seek truth,” he wrote. “*Tu* is to fix bad habits and characteristics and make them good.” Huệ Bảo also saw *tu* as an act of safeguarding the self or the mind from certain vices. He wrote, “*Tu* is to train the mind, like an army, so that [it] was fitted for battle against invaders: greed, anger and illusion, which are ruthlessly destroying mankind.”²⁵ And the inverse of *tu* for Huệ Bảo was precisely detachment. He did not want *tu* to be associated with the image of someone “shaving [his] head, wearing the brown robe, hiding in a quiet place, chanting sutra all day...ignoring responsibilities in regard to family and society.” More importantly, Huệ Bảo argued that those who *tu* could “not be weak and corrupt” but rather those who “had strength to cope with difficulties” because they had to engage with society.²⁶

The first attempt that the Annam Buddhist Association made to broaden the practice of *tu* came six years later in 1944. It was during a lecture by Nguyễn Xuân Cán, the president of an affiliated association in Phan Rí. The lecture by Cán, though late, was a lot more encompassing

²⁴ Huệ Bảo, “Tôi Tu Chưa Được,” *Ánh Sáng Phật Pháp*, no. 6 (June 1, 1938): 194.

²⁵ Huệ Bảo, “Tôi Tu Chưa Được,” 195.

²⁶ Huệ Bảo, “Tôi Tu Chưa Được,” 195.

than the response by the monk Huệ Bảo. Cán in fact argued that anyone could *tu* at anytime and anywhere. To make his case, Cán followed the roadmap that Huệ Bảo had laid out by redefining *tu* as a correction of bad habits. “*Tu* means to correct, to foster, to rid the bad, [and] to improve the good,” he said. But Cán did not stop there. He then specified *tu* as a correction of the mind (tu tâm) and transformed *tu* into a mental activity. And as a mental activity, *tu* could happen anytime: *tu* did not need the right “time,” *tu* was not “limited” to the right “age,” and *tu* did not wait for the right “opportunity.”²⁷

With *tu* as a mental activity, Nguyễn Xuân Cán also argued that anyone could *tu* anywhere. To make his case that anyone could *tu*, Cán told a personal story. He retold the criticism that was often leveled at him in regard to *tu*. “Those people cannot *tu*, their clothes are too fine, [they] have horses and cars, big houses, and plenty of land, [I] don’t understand how they can *tu*,” he recounted. Cán quickly pointed out that it was a typical misconception to associate *tu* with a purging of material possession. Materialism, in fact, was irrelevant because *tu* was a mental activity. Anyone, “from mandarins to citizens, from rich to poor, whatever status, and whatever situation, could *tu*.”²⁸ And in the same swoop, *tu* was free from the pagoda. Again, for having made *tu* a mental activity, Cán made the notion applicable to any location. In a sense, *tu* was no longer anchored to a certain location. One no longer needed to “stay in one place to *tu*.” People no longer needed to find a “desolate place” to *tu*, or did they need to “go up the mountain” or “enter a pagoda to *tu*.” People in fact could *tu* in the comfort of “their homes,” and they could “*tu* in the city.”²⁹

²⁷ Nguyễn Xuân Cán, “Bài Giảng Của Đạo Hữu Nguyễn Xuân Cán Chi Trưởng Chi Hội Hải Tân Tại Phan-Rì,” *Viên Âm*, no. 73 (1944): 14.

²⁸ Nguyễn Xuân Cán, “Bài Giảng Của Đạo Hữu Nguyễn Xuân Cán,” *Viên Âm*, no. 73 (May 1944): 14.

²⁹ Nguyễn Xuân Cán, “Bài Giảng Của Đạo Hữu Nguyễn Xuân Cán,” 15.

Huệ Bảo and Nguyễn Xuân Cán, though redefining *tu*, did not articulate a guideline for its practice. “How could one *tu*?” To answer the question, the monk Thích Thiện Siêu made *tu* a personal responsibility. In his lecture, Thiện Siêu argued that *tu* was beyond a correction of bad habits but rather self-betterment, so that one could help others. Thus, people had to make *tu* the “root of society,” else they could not help others because without *tu*, they would be “corrupted.”

To assert his argument, Thiện Siêu criticized the typical misconception of *tu* that it was for the weak, and that it had no impact on society. First, he argued against those who thought *tu* was too hard because they would have to “leave their families, [sic] society to force themselves into a limiting mold, [sic] closing their eyes and plugging their ears in regard to all situations, discarding all desire to *tu* passively.” Thiện Siêu responded to this type with a simple rhetorical question: “*Tu* like this would bring benefit for whom?” He also added that this form of *tu* would be fitting only for elder people. Second, Thiện Siêu addressed those who thought “*tu* was a good thing to do, [sic] a foundation for benevolence and peace...but they would only think of *tu* when peace had already been achieved.”³⁰ He reasoned that *tu* was the most important when peace was not achieved.³¹

Besides making *tu* a personal responsibility, Thiện Siêu reframed *tu* as both action and speech. More importantly, he identified the goal for *tu* as eliminating selfishness. First, he followed Huệ Bảo and Nguyễn Xuân Cán in defining *tu* as a correction of bad habits. But he recognized that everyone was inherently good. In a sense, the correction of bad habits was merely a returning to the good. To illustrate his point, Thiện Siêu compared the correction of bad habits to the process of cutting and polishing “a diamond in the rough” to realize its beauty.³²

³⁰ Thích Thiện Siêu, “Bài Giảng - Chữ Tu Trong Đạo,” *Viên Âm*, no. 82 (August 1949): 18.

³¹ Thích Thiện Siêu, “Bài Giảng - Chữ Tu Trong Đạo,” 19.

³² Thích Thiện Siêu, “Bài Giảng - Chữ Tu Trong Đạo,” 19–20.

Second, Thiện Siêu defined its limit: *tu* was not a mental activity, as Nguyễn Xuân Cán had claimed. To challenge Cán's claim, Thích Thiện Siêu questioned: “What is *tu tâm*?” “And how could one *tu* in such a way?” “No one could really answer,” he said. For him, *tu tâm* was an excuse to “refuse the practice of *tu* all together.” However, Thiện Siêu did not deny the mental aspect of *tu*. It indeed required reflection and self-criticism in order to “see clearly the bad, wicked, evil,” so that one could “little by little *tu* to achieve perfection.”³³ Thiện Siêu saw *tu* as a “correction of both action and speech,” for the body would “kill, steal and fornicate” while the mouth would “lie, slander and flatter.” Finally, Thiện Siêu identified the distinction between the self and the world or, simply put, selfishness, such as “putting barrier between oneself and everything else, putting oneself first...[and] using oneself as the standard,” as the cause of “suffering.”³⁴

The plan for eliminating selfishness, Thiện Siêu suggested, had two means: one was to do no harm and the other was to do good. To do no harm, one should “eliminate bad habits that harm others and oneself.” And to do good, one should “foster good habits that help oneself and others.” For example, one could do “charity work” as doing good for oneself and others. Thiện Siêu did not have a preference for any means in practicing *tu*. He in fact saw them as equal, for they both encompassed the broad practice of *tu*. Thiện Siêu also challenged the misconception that those who ordained needed to practice *tu* more than laypeople. He quickly reminded the reader that “if one did not *tu*, one was letting selfishness free to be in control, causing boundless suffering.”³⁵

³³ Thích Thiện Siêu, “Bài Giảng - Chữ Tu Trong Đạo,” 20.

³⁴ Thích Thiện Siêu, “Bài Giảng - Chữ Tu Trong Đạo,” 22–23.

³⁵ Thích Thiện Siêu, “Bài Giảng - Chữ Tu Trong Đạo,” 25.

In 1952, as the First Indochina War (1945-1954) intensified, *tu* came to gain a peace-making dimension. In an article, Chon An systematically addressed the question whether *tu* was an obstacle for life. The article expertly condensed all misconceptions addressed by Huệ Bảo, Nguyễn Xuân Cán and Thích Thiện Siêu, such as *tu* was not appropriate for young people, and challenged them head on. For instance, the article asserted that “*tu* was not preventing young adults from having an active life but rather reminding them to *tu*...to prevent careless actions.”³⁶ Here, Chon An made an interesting argument that no one had made in regard to *tu*. For him, *tu* had always been a broad practice. He explained or rationalized that the need to constantly (re)defining *tu* was due to the decline of Buddhism. “Buddhism in our country at the end of the 13th century ... had already begun to decline.”³⁷

To conclude his article, Chon An argued that “*tu* was an utmost important factor in having a peaceful and happy society.” He did not go into specific detail. He instead asked the reader to practice *tu* at the minimum by following the Five Precepts. Then he suggested the reader to carry out the Four Useful Means – “charity work, benevolence, kind word, and unity.” Chon An marveled at the thought of having a society full of people who would practice *tu* by conducting themselves in such manner. He, thus, praised that unlike Confucianism, Buddhism not only had ideology but also practice, so that laypeople, from young to old, could perform their belief.³⁸

Regulating the Sangha

The immediate changes that the Annam Buddhist Association carried out seemed to aim at laypeople. But that did not mean the association left the monks alone. The association in fact

³⁶ Chon An, “Tu Phải Chăng Là Một Sự Chướng Ngại Cho Việc Đời?,” *Viên Âm*, no. 115 (May 31, 1952): 7.

³⁷ Chon An, “Tu Phải Chăng Là Một Sự Chướng Ngại Cho Việc Đời?,” 8.

³⁸ Chon An, “Tu Phải Chăng Là Một Sự Chướng Ngại Cho Việc Đời?,” 9.

wanted to reorganize the *sangha*, as it created new rules and codes of conducts for monks. More importantly, the association institutionalized the rules and classification, so that the monks, particularly those who were a part of the association, were not only knowledgeable of the *Tripitaka* but also morally sound to propagate the Dharma.

Disciplinary Committee

The Cổ Sơn Môn (Ancient Pagoda) sect was first in articulating the need to reorganize the *sangha* in Vietnam. As I have shown in chapter 5, the sect wanted to restore the prestige that the *sangha* once had. However, the sect did not think the reorganization had anything to do with monks. The sect instead argued that laypeople were responsible for the decline of Vietnamese Buddhism, for they “disrespected the monks.”³⁹ In a sense, laypeople must relearn how to respect monks. The sect, thus, viewed its revival effort as a campaign to reassert the superior position of the *sangha* in Vietnamese Buddhism. As a result, the sect alienated members of the Tonkin Buddhist Association and ended any possibility for monks and laypeople to collaborate.

Unlike the Cổ Sơn Môn sect, the Annam Buddhist Association saw reorganizing the *sangha* as a collaborative effort. The association in fact put pressure on the monks to discipline one another while asking laypeople to shun those that did not keep their precepts. To keep pressure on the monks, the association recommended each pagoda to create a disciplinary committee. The committee would have twenty nominees for five seats. And the sole purpose of the committee was to observe and enforce the precepts on the monks. At the end of the year, members of the committee or “disciplinary monks” (luật sư) would review the file for every monk in the pagoda, including his vows and report card, and sign off on the report card if they deemed him morally sound. For the provinces, the association recommended a simpler structure.

³⁹ “Công Việc Tiến Hành Của Hội Phật Giáo,” 38–39.

Each pagoda instead of having a committee should only have a disciplinary monk. The monk would recommend those who broke their precepts to the committee at the province for review and disciplinary measures.

In addition to the disciplinary committee, the Annam Buddhist Association also proposed to form a ritualist (thầy cúng) classification. These ritualists only had “a few precepts to obey,” and they knew “how to chant.” More importantly, they lived at home or at their own pagodas and “worked in making offerings.” For the association, ritualists were not monks, and they could not wear the robe. But the association recognized that they fulfilled a social role by performing rituals for laypeople. Thus, the association intended to use the term to label the monks who could not keep their precepts and demote them to mere religious workers.⁴⁰

To add more pressure on the monks, the Annam Buddhist Association asked laypeople to withhold recognition. The association recommended laypeople to not recognize the monks who did not obey their precepts as monks. These monks were “worse than laypeople,” for they “lied.” The association also asked laypeople to “destroy all certificates” (điệp) issued by the corrupt monks. The association reasoned that these certificates would not have any value since corrupt monks had no power or authority to represent the laypeople in front of the Three Jewels. The association went as far as asking the laypeople to report on corrupt activities that they witnessed. This form of surveillance, the association claimed, was better than then building a pagoda or casting a Buddha statue because it made the monks “less likely to break their precepts” and “protected the Dharma.”⁴¹

Community, Harmony and Unity

⁴⁰ “Chỉnh Đốn Tăng Già,” *Viên Âm*, no. 14 (April 1935): 48–49.

⁴¹ “Chỉnh Đốn Tăng Già,” 49–50.

In 1936, the effort to reorganize the *sangha* by the Annam Buddhist Association had a new direction. The association no longer pushed to identify or discipline the morally corrupt monks. It instead abstracted the term “*sangha*” (chúng) to emphasize “community, harmony and unity.” And to ensure the new meaning, the association created extensive policies from organization to ranking, responsibilities, election, and testing. In a sense, the association was not creating “community, harmony and unity” by allowing room for differences but rather forcing differences to conform to its vision.

The two-part article by Châu Hải best captured the shift in direction by the Annam Buddhist Association and laid out a framework in terms of policies to transform the *sangha* into “community, harmony and unity.” To justify the need for policies, Châu Hải indirectly challenged the Cổ Sơn Môn sect by arguing that Vietnamese Buddhism did not have a *sangha*. Châu Hải began his argument by suggesting that any four laypeople who “kept their unity while practicing the Dharma and benefit for oneself and benefit for others could be considered the *sangha*.” However, he did not think the idea was possible at the time, for laypeople had too much “sadness” (phiền não). Then, Châu Hải criticized monks at the time for not keeping their precepts. “There were not many monks who left their material possessions, but there were many who could not leave their families, thus not being able to keep the Six Harmonies (lục hoà) to be considered *sangha*,” he wrote.⁴²

Disunity was central to the argument Châu Hải made. To support his claim, Châu Hải offered his observation. Even at pagodas where the monks kept their precepts, the abbot (trụ trì) ruled like a tyrant. The abbot “decided on whom to raise at the pagoda and whom to evict without consulting with the rest [of the monks].” He also could “spend money on whatever he

⁴² Châu Hải, “Chơn Tăng Già Luận,” *Viên Âm*, no. 23 (October 1936): 33.

wished without consulting the rest [of the monks].” The disunity became a much graver problem when the abbot passed away. The new abbot would implement his rules and became another tyrant. As a result, other monks would rather leave the pagoda and establish their own because “not many people would submit to the tyranny of the new abbot.” “We could see this disunity in an area as small as five to ten hectares there would be two to three pagodas, and each pagoda only had a few monks,” Châu Hải said.⁴³

To foster unity, Châu Hải called for collaboration between monks and laypeople. He in fact believed that monks and laypeople could work together because they all needed the *sangha* to lead them to enlightenment. Also, this collaboration would transform the *sangha* into its true meaning of “community, harmony and unity,” so that the *sangha* could be the “foundation for self-betterment and studies” and the “institution for Dharma work.”⁴⁴

Besides calling for collaboration, Châu Hải laid down an extensive framework in terms of policies to organize the *sangha* for unity. The framework for organization had 118 rules, which regulated not only morality but also the body of the monk, and the rules were divided into four categories of importance. “Most Important Rules” (Qui điều tốt nặng) was the first category, and it was the shortest. The category had four fundamental rules of: not killing, not fornicating, not lying and not stealing. The consequence for breaking any of these rules was permanent expulsion from the *sangha*.⁴⁵

“Important rules” (Qui điều nặng) was the next category. It had 20 rules, which regulated the relationship between the monk and the Three Jewels, the government, the abbot and his superiors. In a sense, the monk had to obey the hierarchy of Buddhism, government and

⁴³ Châu Hải, “Chơn Tăng Già Luận,” October 1936, 34.

⁴⁴ Châu Hải, “Chơn Tăng Già Luận,” October 1936, 35.

⁴⁵ Châu Hải, “Chơn Tăng Già Luận,” October 1936, 35–36.

superiors. Breaking any rule would result in public shaming with the monk repenting in front of the *sangha* and bowing in front of the altar for the Buddha for one month. In addition, the monk would be demoted to a lower rank. And if the monk were to break two rules in one month or four in six months, he would be expelled from the *sangha*.⁴⁶

“Moderately Important Rules” was the third category. And it had 30 rules. These rules focused on the monk’s behavior toward women, alcohol, drug, gambling and dancing. In a sense, they regulated the monk’s behavior in regard to social vices. If the monk were to break one rule, he would repent in front of the *sangha* and bow in front of the altar for the Buddha for 15 days. And if he broke one rule twice in 15 days or four different rules, he would have to repent in front of the *sangha* and bow in front of the altar of the Buddha for one month, as well as being demoted.⁴⁷

“Slightly Important Rules” (Qui điều nhẹ) was the last category. Even though it was the least important category, it had the most rules – 64 rules total. And these rules set the daily code of conduct from praying, studying, sleeping, sitting, standing, walking, eating, dressing, talking and acting. In a sense, these rules, though the least important, had the most impact on the monk, for they regulated the body of the monk in regard to practicing Buddhism. For example, in sleeping, he should not lay on his right side, like the Buddha did when he reached enlightenment. In sitting, he should always sit in the lotus position with his legs folded together. In walking, he should only swing one arm, and his eyes should look down at the road, three to four meters in front of him. And in dressing, he should wear the color that signified his appropriate ranking. If

⁴⁶ Châu Hải, “Chơn Tăng Già Luận,” 36–38.

⁴⁷ Châu Hải, “Chơn Tăng Già Luận,” October 1936, 39–41.

the monk were to break one rule from this category 15 times a month, he would have to repent in front of the *sangha* and bow in front of the altar for the Buddha 15 days.⁴⁸

To enforce the rules, Châu Hải created a ranking system to promote monks according to their obedience. The ranking system had six categories: novice monk (dự nhập tăng), novice student monk (dự học tăng), training-conduct monk (tập hạnh tăng), needing-conduct monk (cần hạnh tăng), pure-conduct monk (tĩnh hạnh tăng) and venerable (thượng tọa tăng). And for each category, there were two tracks: one for those that entered the pagoda at a young age and the other for those that entered the monastic schools. For instance, the training-conduct monk category would have two types. The first type was a training-administrative monk (tập sự tăng), denoting those that had been a part of the *sangha* for two years but did not receive a monastic education. The second type was a training-student monk (tập học tăng), denoting those that had finished four years of schooling. Ultimately, the goal for all of the monks was to become a proselytizing monk because whether the monk ordained as a young age or entered the monastic school, he had to pass an exam.

The ranking system, though clear and simple, had its own preferences. First, it preferred the monks who had a monastic education, for it only took 10 instead of 20 years for a novice-student monk to become a venerable. In a sense, if the Cổ Sơn Môn sect were to adapt the ranking system, their monks would be at a disadvantage because they did not have a monastic school. Second, the ranking system preferred the monks who had been a part of the *sangha* for at least 20 years. To offset the emphasis on monastic education, Châu Hải required the monk to be at a certain age before graduating to the next ranking. In a sense, he intended the age requirement to assure that each monk spent a certain amount of time serving the *sangha* and being a part of it

⁴⁸ Châu Hải, “Chơn Tăng Già Luận,” October 1936, 41–45.

before becoming a venerable. For instance, a pure-conduct monk could only become a venerable at the age of 50. Thus, the emphasis on age should not be read as a preference for maturity but rather a safety feature to guarantee the monks who did not have a monastic education spent at least 20 years in a *sangha* observing the 118 rules set by Châu Hải.⁴⁹

And to democratize his vision, Châu Hải proposed to distribute the power evenly and stipulate responsibilities. First, Châu Hải saw the role of the abbot to be fulfilled by a committee of three members, so that power was equally distributed. The three members were: a president (thống lý) who managed the day-to-day business of the *sangha*; a controller (trì pháp) who managed the practice of the Dharma; and an enforcer (giám sự) who enforced the rules and disciplined those who did not follow the rules. Second, the monks would elect a new president every year during the twelfth month of the lunar calendar. Third, for a monk to become a proselytizing monk, he must pass a two-part exam. The first part was a written exam. And the second part was an oral exam with three different committees, and each portion was three hours long. Last but not least, the committee would determine the responsibilities for each monk in the *sangha*.⁵⁰

How to Be a Monk

To have unity in the *sangha*, the Annam Buddhist Association used moral precepts (giới luật) to distinguish good monks from bad. In a sense, the association saw moral precepts as the foundation of Buddhism. But for not having enough good monks, the association began to soften its stance by advocating that bad monks could reform if they would obey the moral precepts. In addition, moral precepts became the root of serenity and wisdom. With the First Indochina War intensifying in 1950, the association became absolute in its policy and interpretation of the moral

⁴⁹ Châu Hải, “Chơn Tăng Già Luận,” *Viên Âm*, no. 24 (December 1936): 21–23.

⁵⁰ Châu Hải, “Chơn Tăng Già Luận,” December 1936, 24–26.

precepts. The association was firm that moral precepts were unchangeable and timeless to discourage monks from participating in politics and the military. A year later, with the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association forming, the Annam Buddhist Association redefined and institutionalized the monks' role as preserving the Dharma and proselytizing. And to ensure the new role, the association regulated the material conditions of every monk's life.

Moral Precepts and Engagement

The Annam Buddhist Association saw the moral precepts as the foundation of Buddhism. In a sense, for the association, practicing Buddhism began with observing the precepts. And without precepts, the *sangha* was a lawless place. The association lamented that the monks in Vietnam did “not have a clear understanding of the Dharma, did not observe their precepts...bought their titles of Venerable (Hòa Thượng), Zen Master (Yết Ma), Preceptor (Giáo Thọ),” and that most of their “students did not observe the Five Precepts.” As a result, the association observed that the *sangha* was a “strange” place with monks “openly having wives and children, openly eating meat and drinking alcohol...then receiving titles from others and transmitting precepts to others.”⁵¹ For these monks, the association asked them to disrobe or “leave the *sangha*” (xã giới) and return to their layman lives because they were “shaming” the *sangha*.⁵²

To bring order to the *sangha*, the Annam Buddhist Association wanted to build the foundation of Buddhism itself. The association planned to organize a precept-taking ceremony (giới đàn). The association would select ten monks from the three regions, who “understood precepts” and had “maintained” them since ordination, to officiate the ceremony. The candidates who would be taking the precepts could select different levels of precepts to take. The first level

⁵¹ “Phật Học Hội Sẽ Lập Giới Đàn Chăng?,” *Viên Âm*, no. 14 (April 1935): 31.

⁵² “Phật Học Hội Sẽ Lập Giới Đàn Chăng?,” 31.

was the Five Precepts (Ưu Bà Tắc Giới). The association encouraged “all laypeople” to participate in the ceremony as long as they understood the significance of the precepts. The second level was the Ten Precepts (Sa Di Giới). For this level, the association required the monk candidates to have a “clear understanding of the explanation of the precepts.” And they must “explain thoroughly the meaning of the precepts in front of the officiators.”⁵³

For the remaining three levels, the Annam Buddhist Association tested the candidates before allowing them to take their precepts. For the third level, the candidates would take the precepts to be an Honorary Bodhisattva (Danh Tỳ Bồ Tát Giới). The ten officiators would question the candidates to see whether they “had a strong belief, truly vowed to protect the Dharma and would do good deeds for mankind.”⁵⁴

For the fourth level, the candidates would take the Bhikkhu precepts (Tỳ Kheo Giới) – 227 precepts for monks and 311 for nuns. Since their goal would be proselytizing, the requirement was for them to “clearly understand” sutras to explain Buddhism to laypeople. The sutras, all seven of them, covered meditation practices, application of meditation, perception, consciousness, Buddha nature, and skillful means.⁵⁵ The candidates must “correctly answer” the questions from the officiators as well as their cohort in order to take the precepts.⁵⁶

For the last level, the candidates would take the True Bodhisattva precepts (Chơn Thiệt Bồ Tát Giới). The testing for this level was the hardest and most complicated, as it had three

⁵³ “Phật Học Hội Sẽ Lập Giới Đàn Chăng?,” 32.

⁵⁴ “Phật Học Hội Sẽ Lập Giới Đàn Chăng?,” 32.

⁵⁵ The seven sutras: *The Concentration of Heroic Progress* (Thủ Lăng Nghiêm Kinh or Śūramgama-samādhi-sūtra), *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* (Kinh Viên Giác or Đà fāngguǎng yuánjué xiūduōluó liǎoyì jīng), *The Diamond Sutra* (Kinh Kim Cang or Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra), *The Thirty Stanzas* (Tam Thập Tụng Duy Thức or Vijnaptimatratā-trimsika), *The Eight Kinds of Consciousness Chant* (Bát Thức Qui Củ Tụng), *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* (Đại Thừa Khi Tín Luận or Mahāyāna Śraddhotpāda Śāstra), and the *Lotus Sutra* (Diệu Pháp Liên Hoa Kinh or Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-Sūtra).

⁵⁶ “Phật Học Hội Sẽ Lập Giới Đàn Chăng?,” 33.

parts. The first part was a writing exam. The candidates, in public, “drew one of the seven sutras...closed their eyes and opened up a chapter, any chapter.” The officiators would discuss and create a prompt, which the candidates must respond within three hours. The officiators would grade the exam based on three criteria: 20 points for content, 10 points for explanation of terminologies and 10 points for intelligence. The candidates must have at least 20 points to pass and move on to the next part.⁵⁷

The next part was an oral exam. The candidates must answer questions based on their writing exams. The officiators would create the questions, and the focus of these questions would be on the meaning of Buddhism. In addition, the officiators would “question over and over” to see whether the candidates “truly devoted themselves to Buddhism (phát Bồ ĐỀ Tâm).” The candidates must receive 10 points to pass the oral exam.

The last part was a lecture. This part was optional, as it was only for those who wanted to become lecturers. For this part, each officiator would select a topic from the seven sutras, and the candidates would draw from the chosen topics. They only had 15 minutes to prepare for their lectures. After the lecture, the candidates must answer questions from the attendees thoroughly. The candidates again must receive 10 points to pass, and whoever had the most points for this part would be the lead lecturer of their cohort.

Reforming Monks

In 1940, five years after proposing to organize the precept-taking ceremony, the Annam Buddhist Association softened its stance on observing precepts. The association did not have enough candidates for the ceremony because its monastic school could not produce that many monks. As a result, the association no longer recommended monks who did not observe precepts

⁵⁷ “Phật Học Hội Sẽ Lập Giới Đàn Chăng?,” 33.

to leave the *sangha*. It instead advocated them to stay and turn their lives around by observing the precepts.

To illustrate the softer approach, the association ran a tell-all lecture by a Chinese Zen Master named Tỳ Châu which was first published in *Hai Chao Zin* (Hải Triều Âm or Sound of the Tide). The piece began with a confession. Tỳ Châu told that before he decided to ordain, he saw that monks did “not have any worries” and did “not have to work hard.” He admitted that he wanted the “easy life” of a monk without the burden of marriage and children. He also told that, he thought, the task of a monk was to chant, and that “knowing how to chant was enough to have spending money.”⁵⁸

The monk Tỳ Châu, however, changed his view on monkhood a few years after he ordained. He began to take an interest in the Dharma. After a decade of being a monk, Tỳ Châu became an abbot, but he never once had a chance to learn about the moral precepts. Upon meeting the monk Qui Nguyên, who was lecturing on precepts, Tỳ Châu invited him to his pagoda to give a lecture. When Qui Nguyên arrived at Tỳ Châu’s pagoda and heard his story and interest in taking precepts, he confessed that he, too, did not know much about precepts. “I too have committed sin,” he said. “I gave the lecture for the sake of giving a lecture, people listened in the same way, but you want to learn about the precepts in a serious manner, which I cannot lecture about.” The monk Qui Nguyên proposed to repent by cleansing himself for seven days, then he would lecture on the precepts. Tỳ Châu acquiesced.

To end his lecture, Tỳ Châu encouraged not only monks but also laypeople to observe the precepts. He compared the precepts to “family rules,” and whether a “person,” a “family” or a

⁵⁸ Tỳ Châu, “Lịch Sử Xuất Gia Của Tôi,” *Viên Âm*, no. 39 (August 1940): 2.

“nation” followed these rules, each would “have humanity.”⁵⁹ More importantly, he emphasized that, like family rules, the moral precepts were the “right way” (chánh đạo). The concern, Từ Chân warned, should not be about finding the right path but rather “not walking forward fast enough” while on it.⁶⁰

Reinterpreting Precepts

In 1950, the Annam Buddhist Association further softened its stance on observing moral precepts. Even though the association still held the moral precepts as the foundation of Buddhism, it no longer associated observing precepts with bringing order to the *sangha*. The association in fact saw observing precepts as a practice that would bring serenity and wisdom. The association also streamlined the precept-taking ceremony, so that more monks and laypeople could begin observing the precepts.

To refashion observing precepts as a practice, the association traced the linguistic meaning of the word “giới luật” to its Sanskrit root. In an article, the monk Thích Trí Thủ explained that “giới,” in Sanskrit, was Sila, which meant “restraining” oneself from doing bad. In a broader context, “giới” denoted the “means to help Buddhists live a tranquil and honorable life by preventing and eliminating bad thoughts...and cruel actions.” Then, “Luật,” in Sanskrit, was Upalaksa – which meant distinction. But the Vietnamese meaning of the word was derived from the Chinese translation that meant “rules.” In sum, “giới luật” meant “norm, framework, rules [that] the Buddha according to the truth created...to control and manage *karma*.”⁶¹

With its root established, Thích Trí Thủ began to build a new interpretation of “giới luật.” The new interpretation emphasized that observing the moral precepts not only would bring

⁵⁹ Từ Châu, “Lịch Sử Xuất Gia Của Tôi,” 6.

⁶⁰ Từ Châu, “Lịch Sử Xuất Gia Của Tôi,” 7.

⁶¹ Thích Trí Thủ, “Giới Luật,” *Viên Âm*, no. 89–90 (March 25, 1950): 14–15.

serenity and wisdom but also would have an impact on *karma*. First, Thích Trí Thủ placed the word “giới” (restraint) in a new context by combining it with “định” (serenity) and “huệ” (wisdom). The new word “giới định huệ,” though having three elements, stood on “giới.” In a sense, precepts were “the only basis for serenity and wisdom: without precepts, serenity and wisdom would not form, like not having a foundation, palaces and castles would have to fall.” Thus with precepts, serenity would come with from “restraining one’s body and mouth from committing a crime, as well as calming the mind by ridding distractions.” Also, with precepts, wisdom would come as the product of serenity, for “only when the water stood still, the moon’s reflection would appear.”⁶²

Second, Thích Trí Thủ showed the impact observing precepts have on *karma*. According to him, for observing precepts, a monk could change his past, present and future. He compared observing precepts to a scientist discovering something new. In a sense, monks could change “ignorance” or “suspicion” formed in the past to affect the present. In regard to the present, *karma* was a good indication of past actions. With the past changed, monks would be able to “bring calmness” to the present. For the future, Thích Trí Thủ compared monks to an artist or a student who was diligently practicing his craft. With their craft mastered, monks would have “a bright success in the future.”⁶³

In addition to reinterpreting “giới luật,” Thích Trí Thủ streamlined the practice of observing moral precepts. First, Thích Trí Thủ made the practice similar for everyone. He did not suggest practice accordingly to the different levels of intelligence and commitment of the practitioners. He instead saw the practice of observing precepts as following four basic teachings. First, Buddhists must “avoid all cruel and inhumane actions” (chư ác mạc tác).

⁶² Thích Trí Thủ, “Giới Luật,” 17.

⁶³ Thích Trí Thủ, “Giới Luật,” 17.

Second, Buddhists must “do all good deeds” (chúng thiện phụng hành). Third, Buddhists must “do right in regard to *karma*” (tự tịnh kỳ ý). And fourth, Buddhists must “have pure thought” (thị chư Phật Giáo).⁶⁴

Second, Thích Trí Thủ made the initiation process easier. He did not recommend the precept-taking ceremony – which required 10 morally righteous monks. He instead reduced the process to its functionality: one could only take precepts from another who was more morally righteous. In this passer-receiver relationship, the passer must be a level above the receiver. For instance, for those who had taken the Bhikkhu precepts, they could pass the Five Precepts and the Ten Precepts to others. Else, the initiation process would be “illegal,” and the “precepts would not materialize.” In regard to the receivers, they must “repent” before they could take their precepts. In other words, they must make themselves “empty,” so that they could take on the precepts. And the initiation process must take place in front of the Three Jewels.⁶⁵

The practice of observing moral precepts became rigid when the First Indochina War intensified in late 1950.⁶⁶ During this intense period with the French attempting to reestablish its colonial regime, the Annam Buddhist Association forbade monks from participating in “politics” and “military.” The association saw monkhood as an act of transcendence, for the monk “vowed to leave the narrow limits of family and nation.” In a sense, becoming a monk was to transcend all boundaries and become a “person who belongs to...mankind” – which meant monks only recognize suffering to “eliminate” it. Politics, however, went against the idea of transcendence because politics created conflicts that aligned with “interests of a class or a group.” In a sense, to

⁶⁴ Thích Trí Thủ, “Giới Luật,” 15–16.

⁶⁵ Thích Trí Thủ, “Giới Luật,” 19.

⁶⁶ For more on the First Indochina War, see Duiker, *Sacred War*.

participate in politics was to “limit oneself,” “alienate oneself” and “oppose others whom they were supposed to help.”⁶⁷

Similarly, the military also went against the idea of monkhood. The association saw the military as an “act against the respect for life” even in the case of self-defense. The association recognized that in the case of self-defense, Buddhists had to give up their lives to protect others. But this exception only applied to laypeople because they did not embody the Dharma. In a sense, monks embodied the “vow to respect all living beings.” Thus, monks should only participate in the “economy, culture and society” – not politics or the military.⁶⁸

Besides forbidding monks to participate in politics and military, the Annam Buddhist Association made the moral precepts absolute or timeless. To make its point, the association argued that the moral precepts were not “dogmas the Buddha laid down” let alone “regulations of a bureaucracy.” They were “the path that many had practiced to achieve enlightenment. The Buddha created the precepts to retell what he did and what he did brought result.” In a sense, the moral precepts had a “value that was unchangeable in space and time.” The association gave an example that the “precept of no killing,” which was to show “respect for life,” would “never lose value regardless of time.” Thus, the association concluded that they “could not eliminate or change” the precepts.⁶⁹

To put an end to the debate on changing moral precepts, the Annam Buddhist Association harshly criticized those who wanted to change the moral precepts. The association in fact recommended them to leave the *sangha*. Its reason was simple: “Only those who no longer

⁶⁷ Cao Khanh, “Thái Độ Chân Chánh Của Người Phật Tử,” *Viên Âm*, no. 92 (May 24, 1950): 9–10.

⁶⁸ Thích Trí Sơn, “Những Hành Động Cần Xét Lại,” *Viên Âm*, no. 98 (November 17, 1950): 9–10.

⁶⁹ Thích Trí Sơn, “Những Hành Động Cần Xét Lại,” 10.

wanted to be a monk – which required no hair, no family, no meat, no fortune telling – wanted to change the moral precepts.” The association also refuted the excuse of “times have changed” because monks did not change regardless of the times. And to conclude, the association quoted the Buddha’s last words. “After I reach Nirvana, you my children must respect the moral precepts...They are your teachers. And to keep these precepts...[you] cannot mix magic, do fortune telling...do not participate in politics...”⁷⁰

New Responsibilities

In 1951, Buddhist associations in Vietnam were preparing to unite and establish the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association. With unity in the air, observing moral precepts was no longer the sole focus in reviving Buddhism. Social engagement became increasingly important. The Annam Buddhist Association, thus, distilled the monks’ role into two main responsibilities: preserve the Dharma and promote Buddhism.

The Annam Buddhist Association first articulated the monks’ new role at a precept-taking ceremony in Cochinchina. In a speech, the monk representative from the association asserted that monks had to take an “active role” in “promoting” and “maintaining” Buddhism. “This responsibility rested heavily on [their] shoulders,” he said. The urgency was born from his concern that people did not have access to Buddhism. The representative then suggested that monks needed to fulfill their new role by improving not only their conduct but also their wisdom. The representative was not clear on how the monks could improve the latter, but he offered that being a monk was to guide people to enlightenment, and to do so they must have wisdom. In addition, he warned that monks should not get complacent with their tasks as either a lecturer (giảng sư) or an enforcer (pháp sư). He suggested that monks should be flexible by playing all of

⁷⁰ Thích Trí Sơn, “Những Hành Động Cần Xét Lại,” 11–13.

these roles, so that they could help guide people to enlightenment. And only with such ability, monks then could revive Buddhism.⁷¹

To crystallize the monks' new role, the Annam Buddhist Association went a step further. The association institutionalized the new role by publishing a booklet titled *Sangha*. In this booklet, the association outlined what it meant to be a monk – the process of ordination, the purpose of such process, the community of monks, the social status of a monk, and finally the responsibilities of a monk.

The booklet reiterated the monks' new role as “preserving Buddhism” and “teaching [the Dharma] to society.” The booklet explained that preserving Buddhism encompassed three parts: “maintaining, protecting and defending the Dharma.” And this responsibility, the book held, demanded the monks to devote their whole lives by “leaving everything behind, not caring in the face of danger...sickness...death.” For the other responsibility, the booklet advised the reader to focus on “the cause” rather than “the effect.” Thus, the booklet argued, “to rid society of suffering, monks must teach the Dharma to everyone to reform bad deeds and do good.” Finally, the booklet required monks to have a giver mentality. In other words, the new monk was someone who “paid their old debt to society and would not incur any new debt.” Thus, the booklet warned, monks must live in a sufficient way: “eat, dress and live ...enough” while “focusing on the single task of teaching the Dharma to everyone.”⁷²

How to Behave

To enforce sufficiency, the Annam Buddhist Association began to regulate the material conditions of a monk's life. The association in fact instructed monks on how to construct a

⁷¹ “Diễn Văn Của Đại Biểu Tăng Già Trung Việt Đọc Trong Dịp Lễ Truyền Giới Ở Nam Việt Ngày 16-7 Năm Tân Mão,” *Viên Âm*, no. 105–106 (July 1951): 67–68.

⁷² “Tăng Bảo,” *Viên Âm*, no. 107 (August 10, 1951): 21–22.

pagoda, how to venerate the Buddha, how to dress, how to live, and how to interact with others. For the pagoda, the association instructed that monks should build pagodas for the single purpose of “proselytizing” (hoằng pháp). This requirement also applied to all properties and things that belonged to the pagoda. In a sense, the pagoda must serve as a place to store sutras, a place for monks and laypeople to learn the Dharma, and a place for all Buddhist matter.

For the veneration of the Buddha, the Annam Buddhist Association recommended simplicity and representativeness. The association preferred that the pagoda should only have one statue of the Buddha or of the Amitaba Buddha. Statues of other Buddhas, the association held, would create confusion in laypeople because there would be too many statues. The association also frowned upon specific incarnations of the Buddha because they were too specific and did not represent all of his good virtues.⁷³

The statue, the association advocated, should represent the three virtues of “Most Merciful, Most Compassionate, Great Wisdom, [and] Great Courage” (đại từ, đại bi, đại trí giác, đại hùng lực). The association also placed great pressure on those who made the statues by requiring them to understand the meaning behind the details. For instance, “the curls in his hair represented that the Buddha always acted according to the Truth, and the lotus represented the Truth.”⁷⁴

For the practice of venerating the Buddha, the association reminded the monks that the statue of the Buddha embodied the Buddha. In a sense, the monks must respect the statue as they would the Buddha. Thus, when the monks had a ceremony, they should only offer “incense” and “flowers” to the Buddha. If they really desired to offer more, they could use “fruits.” The

⁷³ “Tăng Bảo (Số 2),” *Viên Âm*, no. 108 (September 8, 1951): 17.

⁷⁴ “Tăng Bảo (Số 2),” 18–20.

association commented that a respectful bow from a layperson or a good advice from the monk was worth more than a table full of offerings.⁷⁵

For the dress code, the association took a different approach. The association did not instruct monks on what they should wear for specific occasions. The association instead explained the potential the robe represented. Like a “fertile field,” the robe signified that the wearer or the monk had the “ability to sow seeds of merits for others.” The association also told a story from a sutra in which a lion restrained itself from attacking a hunter because he was wearing the robe that he took from a monk. The point of the story, the association implied, was that monks should never take off their robes because others respected the robe, and the robe was the constant reminder of their task in representing the Buddha and eliminating suffering.⁷⁶

For the living arrangement, the association preferred that each pagoda would have four monks living together. The reason, the association explained, was to ensure democracy. Else, each monk the association feared would become a dictator. The association acknowledged that many pagodas could not house four monks. It thus recommended monks to find a place to meet regularly, so that they could discuss and vote on certain issues. In addition, the association also recommended the monks to appreciate their bodies because they embodied the chance of living. The monks should help novices learn the Dharma, proselytize and bring compassion to their surrounding.⁷⁷

Last but not least, for interactions with others, the Annam Buddhist Association centered its recommendation on three principles. First, monks had to have a daily routine in “self-betterment and learning.” Second, monks must vow that they would not eat if they did not do

⁷⁵ “Tăng Bảo (Số 2),” 20–21.

⁷⁶ “Tăng Bảo (Số 2),” 23.

⁷⁷ “Tăng Bảo (Số 2),” 24–25.

anything. Third, monks must read the chant titled *Impermanence* (Vô thường) before bed every night.⁷⁸

The day had gone
Life had reduced
Like fish with less water
What is happiness?
Living beings
Must push forwards
Like fighting fire
Must remember impermanence
Must not act rashly⁷⁹

The first two principles focused on usefulness and practicality. In a sense, monks must make themselves useful to society. But for the last principle, the chant reminded monks of the urgency in engaging with society. With the three principles combined, monks must apply themselves or make themselves useful while acknowledging not only the urgency but also the ephemeral nature of actions.

CONCLUSION: The Annam Buddhist Association carried out several key changes in the practice of Vietnamese Buddhism during the 1930's and the 1940's. The association made it possible for laypeople to practice Buddhism outside of the pagoda by turning their homes into private pagodas. The association also regulated the *sangha* and monkhood by installing policies and testing, so that the monks were obeying their precepts. The association, however, softened its original approach, as the monastic school could not produce enough monks. Ultimately, the association reduced the responsibilities of monks and prioritized social engagement. The following chapter will examine the monastic school that the Annam Buddhist Association established. My analysis will trace the changes in curriculum and admissions process to show a new generation of monks and the impact that the school had on Vietnamese Buddhism.

⁷⁸ “Tăng Bảo (Số 2),” 27.

⁷⁹ “Tăng Bảo (Số 2),” 28.

The Monastic Schools

The Annam Buddhist Association was not the first Vietnamese Buddhist association to establish a monastic school.¹ However, the association was the only one that succeeded in maintaining a monastic school and made an impact on monastic education during the 1930's and 1940's. In fact, the association created a blueprint for other Buddhist associations to follow in establishing a monastic school. In its plan, the association not only described the essential components that made up a school, such as the space, teachers, students and curriculum, but also detailed a budget for others to fundraise. For example, the Tonkin Buddhist Association adapted the curriculum to open its own school.

More importantly, the Annam Buddhist Association made possible the idea that a monastic education could revive Vietnamese Buddhism. In fact, the monks who received their education from these monastic schools became the leading figures of the Buddhist Struggle Movement during the 1960's. Despite its success, the Annam Buddhist Association faced similar issues that other associations had. How could the association make the school sustainable financially? What was the goal of the monastic education? And what means could the school employ to make its training more efficient?

Failed Attempt

¹ For general description of monastic education for each region, see Minh Nguyen, "Buddhist Monastic Education and Regional Revival Movements in Early Twentieth Century Vietnam" (The University of Wisconsin - Madison, 2007).

The Cochinchina Buddhist Association was first in attempting to establish a monastic school. The association failed miserably.² The exact reasons for the failed attempt were not clear. They actually changed over time. This shifting of reasons, though ambiguous, was illuminating of the dynamics of the Vietnamese Buddhist revival as well as the expectations that the laity had of the *sangha*.

Reasons

In an article published in *Từ Bi Âm* (The Sound of Compassion) on November 15, 1934, the layman Trần Nguyên Chấn blamed the failed attempt at establishing a monastic school on “the lack of funding,” “the noncooperation from the *sangha*” and “the lack of success in proselytizing.” On the surface, these reasons seemed valid and justifiable. But under scrutiny, they unraveled and revealed the tension among Buddhist associations, the mistrust between the laity and the *sangha* and the impact of epistemic anxieties, which I detailed in Chapter Two.

Trần Nguyên Chấn explained that the lack of funding was due to the worldwide “economic crisis.”³ Members of the Cochinchina Buddhist Association, who were once “enthusiastic” about the revival, could no longer pay their membership dues. And the readers of the periodical *Từ Bi Âm* could not pay their subscription.⁴ As a result, the association did not have any “surplus” in its budget to establish the monastic school, as it had originally planned. But once Chấn revealed his grand design for the monastic school, there would never be a surplus big enough to materialize such design.

As the article showed, Trần Nguyên Chấn refused to dream small when it came to establishing a monastic school in Cochinchina. He did not want to establish a monastic school

² Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Ít Lời Bày Tỏ Về Sự Lập Trường Phật Học,” 19.

³ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Ít Lời Bày Tỏ Về Sự Lập Trường Phật Học,” 19.

⁴ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Ít Lời Bày Tỏ Về Sự Lập Trường Phật Học,” 20.

like the one in the village – where “a teacher was hired to teach a few novices.”⁵ For Chấn, the association had a “reputation” to upkeep in Saigon. He wrote:

The school at its smallest has to have at least three classes, with each class having at least thirty to forty students; and for each class, [we] have to select a teacher [who is] knowledgeable of the sutras and [has] a good understanding of the precepts, completely virtuous, and knew how to write an essay, so that first to teach his students and second to be their role model.⁶

The grand design that Chấn had in mind would require a lot of money to “build the school,” “to feed the students” and “to pay the teacher...and staff.” Chấn even admitted that there would not be enough money to materialize such school.⁷

The second reason that Trần Nguyên Chấn offered for the failure was the noncooperation from the *sangha*. He speculated that the noncooperation was due to the indifference by monks to the decline of Vietnamese Buddhism. During the early 1930’s, when Chấn sought support from monks in Cochinchina for his revival effort, the response he received was: “Let’s wait and see.”⁸ But it had been three years. “The more I wait the more absent you are. The more I remember the more you forget,” Chấn lamented.⁹

The article continued with Chấn sharing that his concern about the noncooperation from the *sangha* was rather power – or how the monks perceived him to have absolute control over the Cochinchina Buddhist Association. He commented that the monks did not like the success that he had with the revival effort. Chấn then accused the monks of “using trickery to create conflict”

⁵ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Ít Lời Bày Tỏ Về Sự Lập Trường Phật Học,” 19.

⁶ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Ít Lời Bày Tỏ Về Sự Lập Trường Phật Học,” 20.

⁷ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Ít Lời Bày Tỏ Về Sự Lập Trường Phật Học,” 20.

⁸ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Ít Lời Bày Tỏ Về Sự Lập Trường Phật Học,” 20.

⁹ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Ít Lời Bày Tỏ Về Sự Lập Trường Phật Học,” 21.

with him, so that he would be “disheartened” and “gave up” his revival effort for “Buddhism to dim again” and the monks to “have their old way back.”¹⁰

To make his case, Trần Nguyên Chấn argued that his official title with the association was Second Vice President – which did not have any power. He ceded the President and First Vice President position to the monks. “What monopoly [of power] do I have?” Chấn asked. Chấn then put the monks in their place by reminding them that he was the only one that was capable of dealing with the officials and helping laypeople. “If it were not for me then who could take on that responsibility for the association, because you [monks]...entered the monastic life from childhood to adulthood, [you] don’t know what laws are, what arguing is, how you can say that you can take care of these matters.”¹¹

For the third reason, Trần Nguyên Chấn deemed that proselytizing was unsuccessful in reviving Vietnamese Buddhism. The epistemic anxieties had an impact so profound on the revival effort that Buddhists could only think of short-term goals. For Chấn, Vietnamese Buddhism was cut off from the masses by other religions. He explained, “[Buddhism was] obstructed by Caodaism in the front...cut off by the fake monks in the back, blocked by the Six-Direction Sect (Lễ Bái Lục Phương) on the right, and barricaded by Theosophy and Brahmanism on the left.” As a result, “pagodas did not have any visitor, the Buddha did not have any worshipper, and the *sangha* did not have anyone thinking of.”¹² In this “life-and-death” situation, Chấn reasoned that he could not wait to raise money for the school then train monks to proselytize because the school would take “a few years to complete” and the monks “nine to ten

¹⁰ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Ít Lời Bày Tỏ Về Sự Lập Trường Phật Học,” 21.

¹¹ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Ít Lời Bày Tỏ Về Sự Lập Trường Phật Học,” 21.

¹² Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Ít Lời Bày Tỏ Về Sự Lập Trường Phật Học,” 22.

years to finish” their education.¹³ His immediate solution, thus, was to use *Từ Bi Âm* to popularize Buddhism and fight against superstitions.

Revision

In 1935, a year later, the failure to establish a monastic school by the Cochinchina Buddhist Association resurfaced. This time, the criticism came from the periodical *Duy Tâm* (Idealism). In defense, the association provided new reasons in an article published in *Từ Bi Âm* on November 15, 1935. Two of the reasons, which dealt with the size of the school and the effectiveness of *Từ Bi Âm* in reviving Buddhism, seemed to have been carried over from the article by Trần Nguyên Chấn from a year ago. But the other two reasons directly placed the blame on the *sangha* for not having monks who could serve as teachers as well as students for the monastic school.

First, the Cochinchina Buddhist Association explained that it did not have enough qualified candidates to teach at the monastic school. Having the right teachers was extremely important to the association. Like “brick makers,” teachers would only produce “useless things” if they “set the molds incorrectly and bake [the clay] carelessly.”¹⁴ The ideal candidate for the association did not change much from a year ago. But this time, the association elaborated on the difficulty in searching for such a candidate.

The central issue in regard to finding qualified teachers was knowledge of Chinese language. According to the association, Cochinchina “absorbed Western culture so early on that it did not have a lot of people that knew Chinese [language] left.”¹⁵ In a sense, not a lot of monks

¹³ Trần Nguyên Chấn, “Ít Lời Bày Tỏ Về Sự Lập Trường Phật Học,” 23.

¹⁴ “Biện Minh Vì Có Gì Mà Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Chưa Mở Cửa Phật Học Đường,” 42.

¹⁵ “Biện Minh Vì Có Gì Mà Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Chưa Mở Cửa Phật Học Đường,” 42.

understood Buddhist sutras, for the sutras were written in Chinese. The few older monks who knew Chinese language, the association found, did not interact much with society and only cared for their own enlightenment. “They did not care about learning to shoulder the responsibility of proselytizing.”¹⁶

Yet, the association berated the younger monks, who were in touch with society, for not following tradition. The young monks, the article commented, “forgot their monastic vows, tenaciously followed the trend of materialism, promoted modernism, [but they] were hazy with the sutras.”¹⁷ What the young monks cared to do, the article added, was “to speak of news around the world, not chanting the sutras, or finding teachers that could help shine light on their thinking.”¹⁸

Second, the Cochinchina Buddhist Association believed that it did not have enough qualified students for the monastic school. For Vietnamese Buddhism was in decline, the article argued, there were not enough good monks. And the current monks acted very much like the younger monks that the article criticized. “They lost their manner, did not know anything about learning, [they] stayed at the pagoda but they would not abstain from eating meat, not learning the rules, [and] when they go out, they wear a white tunic with short sleeves with a beret on their head, no different from other people.”¹⁹ The article, thus, posed a rhetorical question: “Opening

¹⁶ “Biện Minh Vì Có Gì Mà Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Chưa Mở Cửa Phật Học Đường,” 42.

¹⁷ “Biện Minh Vì Có Gì Mà Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Chưa Mở Cửa Phật Học Đường.”

¹⁸ “Biện Minh Vì Có Gì Mà Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Chưa Mở Cửa Phật Học Đường,” 43.

¹⁹ “Biện Minh Vì Có Gì Mà Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Chưa Mở Cửa Phật Học Đường,” 43–44.

up a school to teach members of the *sangha*, but most of them behave in such a way, then whom would the school teach?”²⁰

Colonial Substitute

A month later, in December 1935, the abbot of Linh Sơn pagoda Lê Phước Chí joined the discussion in defense of Trần Nguyên Chấn. In an article published in *Từ Bi Âm*, the abbot deemphasized the importance of a monastic education by holding it secondary to a colonial secular one. Lê Phước Chí explained that he saw monks first and foremost citizens (quốc dân). The process for a person becoming a monk, the abbot envisioned, began with a “citizen... leaving [his] family to join the Buddhist realm.” And after receiving some training, the citizen became a monk.²¹

Following this progression, the abbot Lê Phước Chí argued that the “education for monks” must be “based on the education for citizens.”²² He further elaborated that he only welcomed the citizens that had developed a sense of morality and disciplines through their colonial secular education into the *sangha*. And those that did not receive a good education would “not be allowed into the *sangha*.”²³ Ironically, the abbot also acknowledged that not all monks received a colonial secular education because it “was not universal.”²⁴

The new discourse surrounding the failure of the Cochinchina Buddhist Association to establish a monastic school shed light on the role and focus of monastic education in the revival. The association and the abbot did not believe that a monastic education had the radical potential

²⁰ “Biện Minh Vì Cớ Gì Mà Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Chưa Mở Cửa Phật Học Đường,” 44.

²¹ Hoà Thượng Lê Phước Chí, “Bàn Về Học Tăng Ở Trên Nền Quốc Dân Giáo Dục,” *Từ Bi Âm*, no. 95 (December 1, 1935): 14.

²² Hoà Thượng Lê Phước Chí, “Bàn Về Học Tăng Ở Trên Nền Quốc Dân Giáo Dục,” 14.

²³ Hoà Thượng Lê Phước Chí, “Bàn Về Học Tăng Ở Trên Nền Quốc Dân Giáo Dục,” 14.

²⁴ Hoà Thượng Lê Phước Chí, “Bàn Về Học Tăng Ở Trên Nền Quốc Dân Giáo Dục,” 16.

to transform men and instill in them a sense of responsibility. If anything, they limited monastic education to a subject of studies – which was secondary to a secular colonial education. And it was the colonial government’s responsibility to educate and instill morality in young Vietnamese men.

Other Attempts

Pipeline System

Not all Buddhist associations agreed with the Cochinchina Buddhist Association that the colonial government should be responsible for educating Vietnamese youth. But these associations faced similar problems, such as funding, in establishing a monastic school. For the Buddhist Association of Mutual Assistance (Hội Phật Học Tương Tế) in Bà Rịa, the solution was to mandate monastic education by making it part of its rules and regulations.

The Buddhist Association of Mutual Assistance envisioned a pipeline system of elementary schools (trường sơ học) at the village level feeding to a tertiary school (trường đại học) located at the association’s headquarter in Bà Rịa. According to the new mandate, the association would establish an elementary school at every affiliated pagoda that had more than twenty students. At these schools, monks and laypeople would receive the same education – which covered the Chinese classics and Buddhist sutras. At the end of the school year, the students had to pass their examination to move up and, ultimately, attend the tertiary school in Bà Rịa. The teaching responsibility at each school fell on the abbot, as he became the appointed teacher for the school. And if the abbot could not fulfill his teaching responsibility, the association would dispatch a teacher, who had gone through the monastic education system, to

the village. Once the students finished their education, the association would assign them to other schools in the village.²⁵

The pipeline system that the Buddhist Association of Mutual Assistance envisioned seemed sufficient and sustainable. But the association could not establish a firm foundation for the system to grow. In a sense, the association mistook the top for the bottom, as it only funded the students at the tertiary school. The students at the elementary schools were left on their own without any financial support. Also, the schools at the village were responsible for “traveling fees, living stipend, medicine and taxes” of their teachers. As a result, the schools at the village level could not produce enough qualified students to feed to the tertiary school.²⁶

Buddhist Infusion

Similar to the Buddhist Association of Mutual Assistance, the Two-River Buddhist Association (Hội Phật Học Luống Xuyên) envisioned monastic schools as a system. But the association wanted to adapt the system that the colonial government already had in place. What the monk Huệ Quang, the editor in chief of *Duy Tâm*, imagined was a three-tier system. At the base, the provinces would be responsible for primary education. In the middle, cities in Cochinchina, such as Saigon, Mỹ Tho and Cần Thơ, would administer secondary education. And finally, Hue and Hanoi would direct tertiary education.²⁷

To adapt the colonial system, the monk Huệ Quang infused the curriculum with Buddhist elements and sought funding from the laity. For the curriculum, the association held that “even though every class must have three periods on Buddhism each week, every Thursday and Sunday

²⁵ “Qui Điều Nội Trị,” *Bác Nhã Âm*, no. 1 (March 15, 1936): 28–30.

²⁶ “Qui Điều Nội Trị,” 29.

²⁷ Huệ Quang, “Phật Pháp Muốn Giác Ngộ - Tất Cả Chúng Sinh Hoàn Toàn (Là Câu) ‘Phật Pháp Bất-Ly Thế-Gian Giác,’” *Duy Tâm*, no. 31 (July 1938): 297.

there must be a lecturer (giảng sư) to speak on Buddhist morality.”²⁸ This was to ensure that student monks would carry out their task in “popularizing Buddhism” and that laypeople would “avoid superstitions.”²⁹

The Buddhist Association of Mutual Assistance hoped to raise money for its school system through the laity. But instead of asking for charity, the association divided the estimate budget into shares, like those of a corporation, so that the laity and other organizations could participate in the revival by purchasing shares to fund the schools. Each share was worth “10\$ piasters” with many members purchasing “five to seven shares each.”³⁰ Also, the association recommended pagodas to house the schools and to utilize the staff in order to save money on construction and overhead cost.³¹

A year later, in 1938, the association revised its initial vision to reflect a shift in focus and to have more flexibility. Monks were no longer the aim of the monastic school system. The association wanted to focus on instructing novices. Even though the association acknowledged that the monks were “representatives of the Buddha” and “guides with torches” to lead people out of darkness, the association recognized that children were the future. “Children were pillars of future society. If the children were weak, then society [would be] feeble, if [they are] strong,

²⁸ Huệ Quang, “Phật Pháp Muốn Giác Ngộ - Tất Cả Chúng Sinh Hoàn Toàn (Là Câu) ‘Phật Pháp Bất-Ly Thế-Gian Giác,’” 297–298.

²⁹ Huệ Quang, “Phật Pháp Muốn Giác Ngộ - Tất Cả Chúng Sinh Hoàn Toàn (Là Câu) ‘Phật Pháp Bất-Ly Thế-Gian Giác,’” 298.

³⁰ Huệ Quang, “Phật Pháp Muốn Giác Ngộ - Tất Cả Chúng Sinh Hoàn Toàn (Là Câu) ‘Phật Pháp Bất-Ly Thế-Gian Giác,’” 298.

³¹ Huệ Quang, “Phật Pháp Muốn Giác Ngộ - Tất Cả Chúng Sinh Hoàn Toàn (Là Câu) ‘Phật Pháp Bất-Ly Thế-Gian Giác,’” 298.

then society [would be] powerful, [and if they are] intelligent, then society would be civilized and good.”³²

To accommodate the new shift in focus, the Buddhist Association of Mutual Assistance lessened its emphasis on a Buddhist curriculum. Due to the lack of Buddhist schools and teachers, the association recommended novices to attend any school possible – religious or secular. For the novices who lived far from a school, the pagoda should hire a “tutor...to teach *quốc ngữ*, French and Chinese.” If the pagoda could not afford a tutor, the novices should attend the village school to learn *quốc ngữ* and French, then “learn the sutras at night.”³³

Gender Critique

Amid the fervor to establish a monastic school system, a critique on gender emerged. During the inauguration of the monastic school established by the Two-River Buddhist Association in December 1935, a nun named Thích Nữ Diệu Hường spoke of gender inequality. In her speech, she congratulated her male counterparts for having a “magnificent” monastic school.³⁴ She then explained that women, too, “wanted to seek enlightenment.”³⁵ Unfortunately, women could only “avoid worrisome, stay far from the hustle and bustle of big cities, [and] hide themselves” without really understanding the Buddhist causality of rebirth. She added, “Then how would [they] one day escape the misery of rebirth?”³⁶ On the behalf of all the nuns, Thích

³² “Muốn Có Tăng Tài Cần Phải Đào Tạo Ngay Các Đạo Tiểu Trong Mỗi Chùa,” *Duy Tâm*, no. 38 (July 1939): 59.

³³ “Muốn Có Tăng Tài Cần Phải Đào Tạo Ngay Các Đạo Tiểu Trong Mỗi Chùa,” 60.

³⁴ Thích Nữ Diệu Hường, “Lời Yêu Cầu Của Cô Thích Nữ Diệu Hường Đọc Bữa Khai Trường Hội Lương Xuyên Phật Học,” *Duy Tâm*, no. 3 (December 1, 1935): 133.

³⁵ Thích Nữ Diệu Hường, “Lời Yêu Cầu Của Cô Thích Nữ Diệu Hường Đọc Bữa Khai Trường Hội Lương Xuyên Phật Học,” 133.

³⁶ Thích Nữ Diệu Hường, “Lời Yêu Cầu Của Cô Thích Nữ Diệu Hường Đọc Bữa Khai Trường Hội Lương Xuyên Phật Học,” 134.

Nữ Diệu Hường asked the association as well as Buddhists to grant their wish of having a monastic school for nuns.³⁷

Three years later, in 1938, the Two-River Buddhist Association still could not build a monastic school for nuns. In an anonymous letter, a group of nuns reiterated the desire for a monastic education that Thích Nữ Diệu Hường had expressed in her speech. But the letter took a different approach. It was blunt in addressing the gender inequality in Vietnamese Buddhism. To illustrate the inequality, the letter described that when women entered the monastic life, they continued to “boil water [to] make rice, stitch robe [sic] mend shirt [and] suffer inequality.”³⁸ The letter went on to argue that like monks, nuns would benefit from a monastic education. The letter ended by begging the association and Buddhists in Cochinchina to establish a monastic school for nuns. The nuns even offered “their bodies to be used...for the foundation of the school.”³⁹

New Outlook on Revival

The different attempts at establishing monastic schools showed that education had achieved a new importance in the Vietnamese Buddhist revival. Buddhists no longer envisioned the revival as a task to restore Vietnamese Buddhism to its golden age but rather to prepare the younger generation of monks and nuns for the future. This shift in outlook centered on a relevant education for novices. As a result, a monastic education became a possible path to enlightenment – or perhaps, one could reach enlightenment through learning.

Compatibility

³⁷ Thích Nữ Diệu Hường, “Lời Yêu Cầu Của Cô Thích Nữ Diệu Hường Đọc Bữa Khai Trường Hội Lương Xuyên Phật Học,” 134.

³⁸ “Ý Kiến Ni Lư,” *Duy Tâm*, no. 32 (September 1938): 354.

³⁹ “Ý Kiến Ni Lư,” 358.

The Annam Buddhist Association was the association that made the shift possible. The association argued that the monastic education must be updated, so that it would have relevance to propagate the Dharma. In an article published in the periodical *Viên Âm* (Sound of Perfection), the layman Tâm Bình suggested that “the way Buddhism propagated in the past, in regard to the today’s education, is no longer suitable; thus, [we] have to change and fix [it].”⁴⁰ He explained that Vietnamese had abandoned Confucianism, which had been the foundation of “reason, custom, politics, [and] literature” for thousands of years, for new Western ideologies (*tân học*). But for the past forty to fifty years, Tâm Bình added, Vietnamese had not been able to “absorb the impact” of these new ideas.⁴¹ The situation, he assessed, was “unsettled” for the old way had “dimmed,” but the new way had not been “formed.”⁴²

To advocate for Buddhism, Tâm Bình argued that the religion could be the solution or the bond between Confucianism and new Western ideologies. It could “counterbalance [them] both...to create a new morality and philosophy stable enough for the way of the heart and mind (*phong tục nhơn tâm*),” for it was “effortlessly utilitarian” (*viên dụng vô ngại*) and “encompassed all ideologies in the world.”⁴³ And once the way of the heart and mind had “acquired the supremely profound ideology of Buddhism,” Tâm Bình continued, the “education of the nation would only improve each day.”⁴⁴

In the meantime, Tâm Bình viewed Buddhism as a moral compass to guide people to goodness. For him, the situation was so turbulent that even with the help of Confucianism, people could not make sense of the new Western ideologies, which were constantly changing. To

⁴⁰ Tâm Bình, “Thế Gian Thuyết,” *Viên Âm*, no. 2 (January 1, 1934): 33.

⁴¹ Tâm Bình, “Thế Gian Thuyết,” 33.

⁴² Tâm Bình, “Thế Gian Thuyết,” 33.

⁴³ Tâm Bình, “Thế Gian Thuyết,” 33.

⁴⁴ Tâm Bình, “Thế Gian Thuyết,” 33.

illustrate his point, Tâm Bình compared people's mind to a "sheet of white paper," which was flanked by two bottles of ink, red and black, denoting good and bad, at each side. And, he warned, the sheet of paper was bound to touch either bottle of ink, but once it touched the black one, it would "not be able to avoid immorality and depravity."⁴⁵ In this situation, Tâm Bình envisioned, Buddhism would serve as a moral "compass" that people could "rely on to avoid taking the wrong path."⁴⁶

Finally, Tâm Bình argued that Buddhism was compatible with science. He noted that young Vietnamese were "interested in science," and science "emphasized experiment" and "reason."⁴⁷ This scientific way of thinking, Tâm Bình commented, was a good fit for Buddhism because Buddhism, too, focused on finding out causes or how things worked. But most importantly, Tâm Bình saw Buddhism as complimentary to science, for its benevolent nature would curb the tendency to abuse or misuse science for evil.⁴⁸

School Components

In addition to Tâm Bình's ideas, the Annam Buddhist Association put forth a comprehensive plan for establishing a monastic school. The plan covered not only the logistics for operating a school but also the curriculum to be taught at the school. The association also called for collaboration between pagodas and Buddhist associations in establishing monastic schools. But ultimately, the plan was meant to be a blueprint for any pagoda at any place to open a school and begin instructing their monks and novices.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Tâm Bình, "Thế Gian Thuyết," 34.

⁴⁶ Tâm Bình, "Thế Gian Thuyết," 34.

⁴⁷ Tâm Bình, "Thế Gian Thuyết," 34.

⁴⁸ Tâm Bình, "Thế Gian Thuyết," 35.

⁴⁹ "Thế Gian Thuyết - Cách Tổ Chức Phật Học Đường," *Viên Âm*, no. 8 (1934): 37.

The plan began with the materiality of a monastic school. According to the plan published in *Viên Âm*, a monastic school should have three basic elements: a space, a teacher and students. For the space, the article recommended a “pagoda with a lot of space,” and it should be at a location with “good weather to reduce illness.”⁵⁰ More importantly, the article recommended a pagoda with good ethics. In a sense, the abbot of the pagoda, though uneducated, must be “genuine” and “take great pains in keeping his vows,” so that it would create trust in the laity and a good learning environment.⁵¹

The plan then placed great emphasis on selecting the right teacher for the school, for “whether the students succeed or fail depends solely on the teacher.”⁵² The ideal teacher, the plan suggested, must have “an open mind (phát bồ đề tâm), be knowledgeable of the Tripitaka, have a pure heart (giới thể trong sạch), and be persistent in self-betterment (tu hành tinh tấn).”⁵³ The plan also suggested that each class should have a main teacher and a teaching assistant – whose role the abbot could fulfill if he had a sufficient education.⁵⁴

For the students, the plan strictly recommended young children. These children should “look intelligent and gentle,” and they should be between “the age of 10 and 12” and from good families.⁵⁵ Each class should consist of “thirty to forty students,” and each year they should move up one class.⁵⁶ However, those who were mediocre in their learning ability should end

⁵⁰ “Thế Gian Thuyết - Cách Tổ Chức Phật Học Đường,” 37.

⁵¹ “Thế Gian Thuyết - Cách Tổ Chức Phật Học Đường,” 37.

⁵² “Thế Gian Thuyết - Cách Tổ Chức Phật Học Đường,” 37.

⁵³ “Thế Gian Thuyết - Cách Tổ Chức Phật Học Đường,” 37.

⁵⁴ “Thế Gian Thuyết - Cách Tổ Chức Phật Học Đường,” 38.

⁵⁵ “Thế Gian Thuyết - Cách Tổ Chức Phật Học Đường,” 38.

⁵⁶ “Thế Gian Thuyết - Cách Tổ Chức Phật Học Đường,” 38.

their education and return home. And for this plan to be viable, each school should begin with having only one class and slowly expand by adding one class at a time.⁵⁷

The plan also outlined a budget, so that pagodas could seek support from laypeople. The operational budget was at least 1060\$ piasters a year for hiring a teacher, maintaining the living quarters for students, and feeding 40 students. The cost for hiring a teacher and preparing the living quarters for the students, the plan figured, would cost 100\$ to 150\$ piaster a year. And each student would cost about 2\$ to 3\$ piasters a month – or 24\$ to 36\$ piasters a year. For having such a definite budget, the plan could offer the laity many options to fund the students. For instance, laypeople could fund a student for 10 to 15 years until he finished his education, or two or three laypeople could co-fund one student. The bottom line was that as long as there were “forty laypeople,” who could fund the students, any association could open a monastic school.⁵⁸

The curriculum was the last part of the plan. A complete education would take a student 15 years to finish – in three different levels with equal length of five years. The first level was primary education (tiểu học). This level began with learning quốc ngữ, the life of the Buddha and mathematics. The level also covered fundamental sutras used by the Pure Land sect, such as *Amitayurdhyana Sutra* (Vô Lượng Thọ Kinh) – which “focuses reaching Nirvana through chanting.”⁵⁹ At the end of this level, the novice could take his ten precepts. The second level was secondary education (đại học), and it focused strictly on discourses, such as the *Lankavatara Sutra* (Lăng Già Kinh) – which describes the various levels of consciousness and shows that text

⁵⁷ “Thế Gian Thuyết - Cách Tổ Chức Phật Học Đường,” 38.

⁵⁸ “Thế Gian Thuyết - Cách Tổ Chức Phật Học Đường,” 38.

⁵⁹ Nguyễn Tường Bách and Thích Nhuận Châu, *Từ Điển Phật Học* (Ho Chi Minh City: Nhà Xuất Bản Thời Đại, 2010), 753.

does not have much importance on proselytizing.⁶⁰ At the end of this level, the student could take the rest of his precepts to become a Bhikkhu or a monk. The final level was for “deep learning” (tham cứu). It covered more sutras and discourses, so that the student could develop a deeper understanding of Buddhism and its practices, such as incantations.⁶¹

The curriculum also had a disciplinary component. In fact, the curriculum ended with a zero-tolerance policy on the observance of Buddhist code of conduct (The *Vinaya*). The students were expected to follow the code for the duration of their education, and anyone who broke this code would be “expelled immediately.”⁶² In a sense, this policy reiterated not only the importance of the code of conduct but also the desire to rid the *sangha* of the fake monks and regain trust from the laity.

Visits from Tonkin

The curriculum that the Annam Buddhist Association developed greatly impressed the monk Trí Hải from the Tonkin Buddhist Association. Upon visiting the monastic schools in Hue, Trí Hải commented that the curriculum was very “different” from a traditional education, for it was not limited to literary discussion but rather “included science and philosophy” – similar to the education found at colonial schools. In addition, the teaching method made the subjects “easy to understand.”⁶³ What impressed Trí Hải most was how instructions were divided into distinct periods. Trí Hải could not help but to reflect upon the education in Tonkin. In comparison to what he saw, he noted that the method of teaching and learning in Tonkin had been “too difficult

⁶⁰ Thích An Định, “Học Thuyết Duy Tâm Qua Lăng Kinh Kinh Lăng Già,” accessed July 12, 2013, <http://www.quangduc.com/a3948/hoc-thuyet-duy-tam-qua-lang-kinh-kinh-lang-gia>. Accessed July 12, 2013 at 14:02:04.

⁶¹ “Thế Gian Thuyết - Cách Tổ Chức Phật Học Đường,” 39–40.

⁶² “Thế Gian Thuyết - Cách Tổ Chức Phật Học Đường,” 40.

⁶³ Sa Môn Trí Hải, “Mấy Ngày Đi Huế,” *Đuốc Tuệ*, no. 17 (April 7, 1936): 10.

to understand [and] hard to complete.”⁶⁴ He wished that the monks in Hanoi would “renovate the monastic education system [in Tonkin] to train monks for proselytizing Buddhism later on.”⁶⁵

Six months after the initial visit by the monk Trí Hải, the Tonkin Buddhist Association sent the monk Tổ Liên to Hue for a visit in October 1936. His mission was to study the curriculum used by the monastic schools in Hue, so that he could later implement it at the schools in Tonkin. Tổ Liên stayed for three days, as he visited all of the schools, including the one for nuns, to observe various classes.

The first place Tổ Liên visited was Tây Thiên pagoda. This was the school site for both the tertiary (đại học) and secondary education (trung học). What Tổ Liên noted were the rigorous practices of public speaking and writing that the students undertook. Every Sunday, each class had to nominate a student to give a sermon in a public place before they began their learning – which encompassed the Chinese classics and philosophy. And each month, each class must produce two newspaper issues. Despite the rigorous nature of the program, the students had fun. When one of the newspapers stopped publishing, the students had the chance to commemorate its end with a limerick. The monk Tổ Liên in fact participated in the exercise.⁶⁶

The second place Tổ Liên visited was Trúc Lâm pagoda. This was the site for the primary education. Tổ Liên observed that there were roughly “fifty students,” and they were all “novices.” Here, Tổ Liên noted how the monk Trí Độ, who had taught at the Teacher’s College, was such a great teacher for making learning fun. He wrote:

Everyday at ten o’clock, he writes the lesson of the day on the board, then explains it word by word, sometimes it would take an hour for explaining just a few sentences; when he explained the word Karma, it was reasonable and very fun, making the whole class

⁶⁴ Sa Môn Trí Hải, “Mấy Ngày Đi Huế,” 10.

⁶⁵ Sa Môn Trí Hải, “Mấy Ngày Đi Huế,” 10.

⁶⁶ Sa môn Tổ Liên, “Đi Tham Cứu Trường Phật Học Ở Huế,” *Đuốc Tuệ*, no. 45 (October 20, 1936): 6.

clapping and laughing like firecrackers; when he was lecturing, he made a lot of gestures, each gesture fit with each sentence, then [he] asked the students if they understood, if the students said yes then he would move on to the next sentence.⁶⁷

The last place Tô Liên visited was Từ Đàm pagoda. This was the site for the school for nuns. This school had forty students, three headmasters and two teachers. The headmasters and teachers were of royal family – two of the headmasters were wives of Emperor Thành Thái (1889 – 1907), both of whom had ordained, and two of the teachers were laywomen. The curriculum, Tô Liên noted, was similar to that of the schools for monks. The only difference was the addition of home economics. Again, what impressed Tô Liên at the school was the teacher and nun Diệu Không. He wrote:

I got to see the teacher Diệu Không on many occasions because each day she drove to Tây Thiên pagoda to listen to the abbot lecturing to the students in the tertiary school, she was probably in her early 40's, but she was very knowledgeable of Buddhism, Confucianism, Western studies, when she sat in the classroom and had discussion with me, her language was very erudite, and her reasoning was very succinct and clear, which impressed me very much.⁶⁸

Education for Proselytizing

The ideas that the layman Tâm Bình put forth were later revised to further emphasize the usefulness of Buddhism. In a speech at the reception for the Minister of Education Phạm Quỳnh, the editor in chief of *Viên Âm* Lê Đình Thám broadened what a monastic education could be by equating it to a moral education (đức dục). By doing so, Thám made the monastic education appealing to monks as well as laypeople. In his speech, Thám argued that since the trend was to follow new Western ideologies, “it was unnecessary to return to the old morality,” which was based on Confucianism.⁶⁹ However, he held that new Western ideologies still needed a moral education, and that it “was not easy to build a new moral foundation.”⁷⁰ Thus, Thám recommended that instead of building a new moral foundation, they should “collaborate [and]

⁶⁷ Sa môn Tô Liên, “Đi Tham Cứu Trường Phật Học Ở Huế,” 6.

⁶⁸ Sa môn Tô Liên, “Đi Tham Cứu Trường Phật Học Ở Huế,” 6.

⁶⁹ Lê Đình Thám, “Bài Chúc Từ Của Ông Lê Đình Thám Trong Dịp Tiếp Rước Cụ Thượng Thơ Bộ Giáo Dục Tại Annam Phật Học Đường,” *Viên Âm*, no. 26 (July 1937): 14.

⁷⁰ Lê Đình Thám, “Bài Chúc Từ Của Ông Lê Đình Thám Trong Dịp Tiếp Rước Cụ Thượng Thơ Bộ Giáo Dục Tại Annam Phật Học Đường,” 14.

enrich the old foundation” with Buddhism because it would take “less effort” but have “more of an impact.”⁷¹

The impact that Lê Đình Thám hoped for was beyond the monastic school. The point of a monastic education or a moral education, Thám held, was to “propagate the Dharma.”⁷² This emphasis ultimately became the measuring stick for the monastic education by the Annam Buddhist Association. In a letter to her master, a nun, who was a student at a school established by the Annam Buddhist Association, mulled over the application of Buddhism. What perplexed her most was something that her teacher once asked, “‘The Dharma is not about the text, but [it is] not outside of the text,’ then where is the Dharma?”⁷³ The question, the nun confessed in her letter, baffled her. She wrote:

This question had my mind all mixed up, I have on many occasions used all of my mind to search [for an answer] during sermon, and at times I asked the Buddha to help me understand [the question] quicker, then at times I was mad that I was too stupid for reading a sutra or fixating on just a sentence for the whole day without giving up, [but] the more I thought about it the more confused I got, and the more confused [I got] the more worried [I became].⁷⁴

The response she received from her teacher was to stop thinking so hard about the question because as the teacher explained, learning was like “firewood” – it could not make the fire by itself.⁷⁵ The nun had “to find the fire herself to know the heat of the fire.”⁷⁶

Finding the fire or her interpretation of the Dharma, the nun realized, was important to proselytizing. At the moment, the nun’s knowledge of Buddhism could not convince others to

⁷¹ Lê Đình Thám, “Bài Chúc Từ Của Ông Lê Đình Thám Trong Dịp Tiếp Rước Cụ Thượng Thơ Bộ Giáo Dục Tại Annam Phật Học Đường,” 14.

⁷² Lê Đình Thám, “Bài Chúc Từ Của Ông Lê Đình Thám Trong Dịp Tiếp Rước Cụ Thượng Thơ Bộ Giáo Dục Tại Annam Phật Học Đường,” 15.

⁷³ “Kính Bạch Ny-Cô Nguyệt Ánh,” *Viên Âm*, no. 28 (September 1937): 55.

⁷⁴ “Kính Bạch Ny-Cô Nguyệt Ánh,” 55.

⁷⁵ “Kính Bạch Ny-Cô Nguyệt Ánh,” 56.

⁷⁶ “Kính Bạch Ny-Cô Nguyệt Ánh,” 56.

follow Buddhism. People, her teacher commented, would criticize her for “speaking like a parakeet which could mimic human speech.”⁷⁷ In other words, she was merely regurgitating what she just learned from the school without truly understanding its content. At the end of the letter, the nun vowed to study until her teacher felt she was ready for proselytizing others.

Proselytizing became the educational mandate for the Annam Buddhist Association. In September 1937, with 100 students enrolled, the association streamlined its curriculum with each level having a specific focus that reflected the overall emphasis of proselytizing. For instance, the primary education followed the secular colonial education for having more general electives, such as geography, in addition to Theravadin doctrines and meditation, so that students could relate to laypeople. The secondary education focused on Mahayana doctrines, East-West philosophy and public speaking, so that the monks and nuns learned the means to proselytize. At the tertiary level, the sole focus was to help the students find different means to propagate the Dharma. Last but not least, the education for nuns covered the first two levels, but for the last one, the nun students would join their male counterparts.⁷⁸

New Facility

The emphasis on proselytizing became the drive for the Annam Buddhist Association to build a new facility in January 1939. At the groundbreaking ceremony, the President of the Annam Buddhist Association Nguyễn Đình Hoà asserted that the association had to build a new facility to ensure the continuation of Buddhism. In his speech, Hoà explained that he was “worried that the future [of Buddhism] would lack people [monks] to propagate the Dharma.” “The revival effort of today, however big,” he said, “would follow the passage of time and

⁷⁷ “Kính Bạch Ny-Cô Nguyệt Ánh,” 55.

⁷⁸ “Thanh Niên Học Tăng,” *Viên Âm*, no. 28 (September 1937): 45.

collapse.”⁷⁹ This failure, Hoè maintained, was not only “mistreating the work by the monks” but also “committing sin against the Three Jewels.” Thus, Hoè declared, the association had put “all of its effort” into “creating talents” for the future, and that the association was very “concerned” about building a new facility for the monastic school.⁸⁰

The Annam Buddhist Association actually wanted to begin construction on the new facility a year earlier, in 1938. But the association did not have enough funding. The concern with having a new facility at the time was not solely about ensuring the future of Buddhism, as Hoè had explained in his speech. It was also about control. The new facility would allow the association to have all levels of the monastic school in the same location, so that the association could manage and standardize the teaching to create capable teachers of monks (pháp sư), who “could shoulder the responsibility of propagating [the Dharma].”⁸¹

The construction plan for the new facility began in 1939. But due to the lack of funding, the construction was piecemeal in fashion. In his speech at the groundbreaking ceremony, the Vice President of the Annam Buddhist Association Đặng Ngọc Chương described the horrible living conditions of the monks at Báo Quốc and Tây Thiên pagoda. At Báo Quốc pagoda, the monks, who were students in the primary level, lived in “huts” around the pagoda, which were “dim and cramped.” And the places for “eating, sleeping and learning were all mixed up,” which broke “sanitary rules and Buddhist code of conduct.”⁸² At Tây Thiên, in addition to the lack of space, the elements caused a lot of sickness among the students, who were in secondary level.

⁷⁹ Nguyễn Đình Hoè, “Bài Chúc Từ Đọc Trong Lúc Làm Lễ Đặc Viên Đá Đầu Tiên Của Các Phật Học Trường Tại Tổ Đình Báo Quốc,” *Viên Âm*, no. 34 (January 1939): 45.

⁸⁰ Nguyễn Đình Hoè, “Bài Chúc Từ Đọc Trong Lúc Làm Lễ Đặc Viên Đá Đầu Tiên Của Các Phật Học Trường Tại Tổ Đình Báo Quốc,” 45–46.

⁸¹ “Phật Học Đường,” *Viên Âm*, no. 30 (June 1938): 64.

⁸² Đặng Ngọc Chương, “Bài Diễn Văn Thứ Hai Đọc Trong Lúc Làm Lễ Đặc Viên Đá Đầu Tiên Của Các Phật Học Trường Tại Chùa Báo Quốc Ngày 27 Novembre 1938,” *Viên Âm*, no. 34 (January 1939): 48.

Thus, the association wanted to establish a center (tổng cuộc), “consolidating all of the schools into one area, not far from the city, with good air, quiet [surrounding], convenient for studying and self-betterment.”⁸³ The association decided on Báo Quốc pagoda as the site for the new facility for it met with these conditions. And construction would “begin with the classrooms, living quarters, dining hall, bathrooms, sport fields, then gardens.”⁸⁴

The new facility also gave members of the Annam Buddhist Association the possibility to dream of a new horizon for their revival effort. In his speech at the graduation ceremony for students in the primary level, the President of General Administration Committee (Tổng Trị Sự) Trần Đăng Khoa reminded the students of what the association could be. “[It] would be a one-of-a-kind organization of propagating the Dharma in this land,” he said. “Every year, [it] would produce monks who were truly monks, with enough talent and strength, to propagate the Dharma in society.”⁸⁵ But such dream, Khoa realized, could only come “after [he] renovates the monastic school, sets up regulations, determines the curriculum; after reorganizing the Sponsor Committee... who had not minded the cost in supporting students with their living expenses; after building the classrooms, living quarters, bathrooms, library.”⁸⁶

The dream that Trần Đăng Khoa spoke of was built on shaky ground. In an announcement, the new President of General Administration Committee Ung Bằng reminded members of the association and readers of *Viên Âm* that the sole goal of the association was to “propagate the Dharma,” and the foundation of this goal was the monks who could carry out

⁸³ Đặng Ngọc Chương, “Bài Diễn Văn Thứ Hai Đọc Trong Lúc Làm Lễ Đạc Viên Đá Đầu Tiên Của Các Phật Học Trường Tại Chùa Báo Quốc Ngày 27 Novembre 1938,” 48.

⁸⁴ Đặng Ngọc Chương, “Bài Diễn Văn Thứ Hai Đọc Trong Lúc Làm Lễ Đạc Viên Đá Đầu Tiên Của Các Phật Học Trường Tại Chùa Báo Quốc Ngày 27 Novembre 1938,” 49.

⁸⁵ Trần Đăng Khoa, “Lễ Phát Thưởng Cho Học Sinh Trường Tiểu Học Ngày 5 Février 1939 (17 Tháng Chạp) - Bài Đáp Từ Của Tổng Trị Sự,” *Viên Âm*, no. 36 (May 1939): 20.

⁸⁶ Trần Đăng Khoa, “Lễ Phát Thưởng Cho Học Sinh Trường Tiểu Học Ngày 5 Février 1939 (17 Tháng Chạp) - Bài Đáp Từ Của Tổng Trị Sự,” 20.

their work without any worries. “Anyone who could think,” Ưng Bằng added, “would never build a monumental tower on soft ground.”⁸⁷ What Ưng Bằng alluded to was the lack of financial support for the monks to focus on studying and carrying out their task. In a sense, the lack of financial support would make the monks hesitate to fulfill their task. For instance, the monastic school was “cramped” and “under constant worry” of not having enough money from its affiliated members.⁸⁸ The student monks at the school “would hesitate to think about the future [in proselytizing].”⁸⁹ A teacher monk with education and ethics, who wanted to help, “would not scarify for the association if the association could not support him.”⁹⁰ And a layman, who was intelligent and wanted to ordain, would waver because the association was not financially sound. The solution that Ưng Bằng reached was to “establish a trust for the monastic school and the *sangha* to propagate the Dharma in the future.”⁹¹

Reassessment

The dream that Trần Đăng Khoa had was unattainable. In 1943, after 10 years, the monastic school had not produced a single teacher of monks (pháp sư) through its program since it would take the students 15 years to complete the program. What the school had were 50 students. Twenty-two of those students had finished six years of primary education and three years of secondary education, and they just took their entrance exam for the tertiary level. The result was negligible. Only six students passed the exam, and only four of those who failed were

⁸⁷ Ưng Bằng, “Lời Thông Báo Cùng Toàng Thể Hội Viên Hội Annam Phật Học,” *Viên Âm*, no. 57 (February 1943): 2.

⁸⁸ Ưng Bằng, “Lời Thông Báo Cùng Toàng Thể Hội Viên Hội Annam Phật Học,” 2.

⁸⁹ Ưng Bằng, “Lời Thông Báo Cùng Toàng Thể Hội Viên Hội Annam Phật Học,” 2.

⁹⁰ Ưng Bằng, “Lời Thông Báo Cùng Toàng Thể Hội Viên Hội Annam Phật Học,” 2.

⁹¹ Ưng Bằng, “Lời Thông Báo Cùng Toàng Thể Hội Viên Hội Annam Phật Học,” 31.

allowed to retake the exam.⁹² In a sense, after ten years, the monastic school had ten students who were almost ready to carry out the task of propagating the Dharma.

Lowered Expectation

The curriculum, though rigorous and demanding, was not the only factor that kept the students from advancing. The absolute observance of Buddhist code of conduct was the most important aspect of the school. In a sense, code of conduct trumped education. In a speech at the year-end celebration, the President of the Annam Buddhist Association Ưng Bằng reminded the students of the hard work and sacrifices that their teachers had put into the school. For instance, the monk Trí Độ had to travel to Cochinchina to find a copy of some sutras to review it before he could teach it. By mentioning this, Ưng Bằng hoped that the students would emulate their teacher. Ưng Bằng also admitted that they were “careful” and “reserved” with grading the exam not because they wanted to make the exam difficult but rather because they wanted make sure that the students were “capable of carrying out the task of propagating the Dharma in the future.”⁹³ Ưng Bằng ended his speech on a stern note. He expressed that the association “would always respect the monks, like bodhisattvas.” But if the students could not keep their precepts, he rather had them quit the school. “If any of you feels that *karma* would not allow you to keep your precepts,” he said, “we recommend you to leave your cohort to protect their names.”⁹⁴

Unlike Ưng Bằng, Lê Đình Thám was more perceptive toward the students and their anxiety about the exam in his speech at the year-end celebration. In a sense, he tried to advise the students, particularly the six students that just passed the exam, on what they could expect from the last phase of their education and what they should rely on to carry out the mission of the

⁹² Lê Đình Thám, “Lễ Phát Nguyên Tinh Trì Giới Sa-Di Của Các Thầy Cao Đẳng Học Tăng Trường Bảo Quốc,” *Viên Âm*, no. 59 (April 1943): 11.

⁹³ Ưng Bằng, “Bài Diễn Văn Của Cụ Hội Trưởng,” *Viên Âm*, no. 59 (April 1943): 17.

⁹⁴ Ưng Bằng, “Bài Diễn Văn Của Cụ Hội Trưởng,” 17.

Annam Buddhist Association. Thám first tried to ease the anxiety that the exam had created among the students. The monastic school organized its classes around the students' learning strength, but these classes did not have any marked differences in appearance. But the exam had created a tertiary class, which was "separated" from the rest of the school with "stricter code of conduct" and "its own uniform." This new difference in appearance had made those who failed the exam "anxious" and "uncomfortable."⁹⁵ Also, it contradicted the school's emphasis on the code of conduct, which Ứng Bằng reminded the students in his speech. Thám explained that those that passed the exam were the first or rather the "beginning" of a *sangha* that could propagate the Dharma, the association had to be "careful," so that they could build a "solid foundation to later support the monumental tower."⁹⁶ In addition, Thám reasoned that the code of conduct that the school wanted to instill in the students were not those of society but rather of the Dharma. This, Thám asserted, could only come from "an equivalent awareness of the Dharma."⁹⁷

After easing the anxiety among the cohorts, Lê Đình Thám addressed the anxiety the students might have had with working with laypeople to fulfill the mission of the association. Instead of taking a side, Thám skillfully promoted collaboration between the *sangha* and the laity by using the Dharma as a guide. First, he described the scenarios that the students might encounter when working with laypeople. For instance, the monks might have to follow directions from laypeople, who might not know the Dharma as well. This, Thám predicted, would place the monks in a predicament of breaking Buddhist rules while following directions from laypeople or creating division among the association for refusing to follow directions from laypeople. Also,

⁹⁵ Lê Đình Thám, "Cụ Hội Trưởng Đọc Diễn Văn Xong Ông Kiểm Duyệt Giáo Lý Tiếp Lờì," *Viên Âm*, no. 59 (April 1943): 18–19.

⁹⁶ Lê Đình Thám, "Cụ Hội Trưởng Đọc Diễn Văn Xong Ông Kiểm Duyệt Giáo Lý Tiếp Lờì," 19.

⁹⁷ Lê Đình Thám, "Cụ Hội Trưởng Đọc Diễn Văn Xong Ông Kiểm Duyệt Giáo Lý Tiếp Lờì," 19.

the monks would need help from the laypeople to carry out their task, for they might have been detached from society for too long. Second, Thám reminded the students that even though their anxiety might be “reasonable,” they needed to remember that the focus was the Dharma. “[The] Annam Buddhist Association,” he said, “is an association of Buddhist learning, the association views the Dharma as the guide...the laity is not in charge, the *sangha* is not in charge, only the Dharma has the power to dictate the activities of the association.”⁹⁸

A year later, in 1944, with the lack of result, the Annam Buddhist Association changed the curriculum of its monastic school to speed up the process. The new curriculum still carried the focus of creating monks who were capable of propagating the Dharma, but it would only take the students six years to finish, with two years at each level. What the association eliminated from the curriculum were the general electives, which were supposed to help students relate to laypeople. And what the association added was a definite expectation of the monks to produce more students who were capable of propagating the Dharma. The new curriculum allowed the newly graduated monks to stay at the association for three years to “research the Tripitaka” and prepare before they had to leave to teach at a monastic school.⁹⁹ What the association expected them to fulfill at their posts was to create another generation of students who were capable of reaching the tertiary level. Only under this condition, the monks would receive the title “Headmaster Bonze of the Annam Buddhist Association.”¹⁰⁰

Admissions

The new curriculum also required a new kind of students. To prepare for the 1945 school year, the Annam Buddhist Association began an application process a year early to fill the 30

⁹⁸ Lê Đình Thám, “Cụ Hội Trưởng Độc Diễn Văn Xong Ông Kiểm Duyệt Giáo Lý Tiếp Lờì,” 21.

⁹⁹ Lê Đình Thám, “Phổ Cáo,” *Viên Âm*, no. 73 (May 1944): 20.

¹⁰⁰ Lê Đình Thám, “Phổ Cáo,” 20.

spots it had. The new students that the association sought must be at least 16 years of age. They must be able to pay 25\$ piasters a month for living and studying expenses. And most importantly, they must have a certain level of education. To be specific, the new students must “have finished elementary school...knew how to read and write in classical Chinese, [and] have the ability to translate a few sentences from classical Chinese into *quốc ngữ*.”¹⁰¹

The final stage of the admission process was the entrance exam. The entrance exam had three parts for those that had finished their elementary education and five parts for those that did not. For those that had finished elementary school, the exam would cover three topics: dictation in classical Chinese, which would count twice in the total grade; an exercise translating classical Chinese into *quốc ngữ*; and an essay in *quốc ngữ*. For those without an elementary education, they would have two more subjects on the exam: dictation in *quốc ngữ*, which would count twice in the total grade; and an exercise translating *quốc ngữ* into classical Chinese.

The demand for success had a great impact on the Annam Buddhist Association and its schools. The curriculum became shorter, nine-years shorter, so that the school could produce more monks quickly to propagate the Dharma. As a result, the association could no longer keep its schools open to every student who wanted a monastic education. It had to be selective in its admissions process to ensure a certain success. In addition, the admissions process turned the secular colonial education into the foundation of the monastic school for every applicant must have completed his colonial elementary education at the least.

The School in Tonkin

On December 14, 1936, two months after the monk Tố Liên visited the monastic school in Hue, the Tonkin Buddhist Association opened its monastic school. It took the association

¹⁰¹ Lê Đình Thám, “Phổ Cáo,” 21.

roughly a month to plan and execute. The President of the Tonkin Buddhist Association Nguyễn Năng Quốc initiated the planning by assigning Tô Liên to visit the monastic school in Hue. After two weeks, Tô Liên returned to Hanoi to present his finding and the curriculum he observed in Hue. Quốc and everyone else at the association “admired” the curriculum, and they were “determined to adapt the curriculum... to open a monastic school in Tonkin.”¹⁰²

The monastic school in Tonkin officially began instructions a day after its opening. The school had enrolled a total of 70 students: 20 entering the tertiary level and 30 the secondary level at Sờ pagoda, and the remaining 20 primary level at Quán Sứ pagoda. The association did not seem happy with the enrollment number because affiliated associations in the provinces could not do a lot of recruitment with such a short notice. But the association was optimistic that enrollment would reach 100 in the spring of next year.¹⁰³

Expectations

On opening day, Nguyễn Năng Quốc gave a welcome speech to all the guests and students. But it began in a very odd way. “Today,” he said, “is not the opening day of the monastic school at the Sờ village here, and today is also not the day that this school had been established to begin instructing the *sangha*.”¹⁰⁴ For Quốc, the monastic school had been established a year ago. But the school had to close because it could not provide living expenses for its students.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Phan Trung Thứ, “Bài Đáp Từ Của Sư Cụ Chùa Sờ, Chánh Đốc Học Trường Phật Học, Do Sư Ông Trương Vĩnh Tường, Thư Ký Hội Phật Học,” *Đuốc Tuệ*, no. 62 (June 1, 1937): 16.

¹⁰³ Thái Hòa, “Ngày Lễ Khai Trường Phật Học Của Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ,” *Đuốc Tuệ*, no. 53 (January 15, 1937): 12.

¹⁰⁴ Nguyễn Năng Quốc, “Về Lễ Khai Giảng Trường Phật Học Của Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ - Bài Diễn Thuyết Của Cụ Hiệp Tá Nguyễn Năng Quốc Hội Trưởng Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ,” *Đuốc Tuệ*, no. 62 (June 1, 1937): 19.

¹⁰⁵ Phan Trung Thứ, “Bài Chúc Từ Lễ Khai Giảng Tăng Học Của Cụ Chánh Đốc Học, Đọc Tại Hội Quán Hanoi Ngày Mồng Một Tháng Một Ta,” *Đuốc Tuệ*, no. 53 (January 15, 1937): 16.

Despite the odd opening, Nguyễn Năng Quốc softened his tone to show gratitude. He was in fact glad that the school reopened because education was the key to the revival and continuation of Vietnamese Buddhism. In a sense, for Quốc, before the monastic school opened, the monks saw education as “memorizing Buddhist sutras as much as possible, and for non-Buddhist texts, no one paid any attention.” This perception of education, Quốc held, was the reason for the decline of Vietnamese Buddhism. The monks could not explain the sutras “clearly and explicitly” to laypeople because “in regard to social problems (việc đời), they were not knowledgeable.” As a result, the “majority” of laypeople “could not understand the doctrines,” and Vietnamese Buddhism “declined unceasingly.”¹⁰⁶

Nguyễn Năng Quốc ended his speech with extremely high expectations of the student monks at the monastic school. First, he asked the student monks to use Christian missionary priests as the measuring stick for their success at the school. Quốc praised that for “being fluent in three to four languages,” the Christian missionary priests could speak of many issues, so that people would be “impressed and follow them immediately.” But that was not all. Quốc also praised their know-how in dealing with social issues, in an “immediate” manner, rather than “feeling resigned” like Buddhist monks.¹⁰⁷

Second, Quốc envisioned the nation of Japan as the goal for the student monks to achieve. In a sense, Japan presented Quốc the proof that Buddhism and modernity could co-exist and thrive. He was every impressed with the fact that Japan had “sent monks to study abroad in India and Western Europe to study Buddhist doctrines and propagating the Dharma

¹⁰⁶ Nguyễn Năng Quốc, “Về Lễ Khai Giải Trường Phật Học Của Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ - Bài Diễn Thuyết Của Cụ Hiệp Tá Nguyễn Năng Quốc Hội Trường Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ,” 24.

¹⁰⁷ Nguyễn Năng Quốc, “Về Lễ Khai Giải Trường Phật Học Của Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ - Bài Diễn Thuyết Của Cụ Hiệp Tá Nguyễn Năng Quốc Hội Trường Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ,” 25.

everywhere.”¹⁰⁸ Quốc, thus, called the student monks to “follow this example” if they wanted “their lives to have value and to make Buddhism glorious.”¹⁰⁹

Anxiety

The reporter of the periodical *Đuốc Tuệ* (Torch of Wisdom) Thái Hòa, however, disagreed with Nguyễn Năng Quốc on the decline of Vietnamese Buddhism. His view was rather materialist. In his coverage of the opening ceremony of the Tonkin monastic school, he argued that the monks did not have time or money for a monastic education. The reasons for such restriction were: Vietnamese Buddhism having too many ceremonies and rituals, and the monks having to fend for themselves. The picture that Thái Hòa painted in his article was indeed severe. He wrote:

A monk without any possession (vô sản) only has a few brown shirts [when he] accepts to oversee a dilapidated pagoda, a few abandoned rice paddies, a few huts, [sic] internally [he] has to worry about the livelihood of himself and his disciples, the ceremonies and the renovation of his pagoda, [sic] externally he has to maintain relations with the villagers, contribution to [his] sect.¹¹⁰

Thái Hoà, thus, concluded that the monk would “not have time for research and studying,” and when he realized this, “his hair was already gray” – it was too late.¹¹¹

Joy

The monks, on the other hand, did not dwell on the decline of Vietnamese Buddhism during the ceremony. The opening of the monastic school in Tonkin brought them happiness. The monk Tô Liên was overwhelmed with joy for the opening of the school changed his outlook

¹⁰⁸ Nguyễn Năng Quốc, “Về Lễ Khai Giải Trường Phật Học Của Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ - Bài Diễn Thuyết Của Cụ Hiệp Tá Nguyễn Năng Quốc Hội Trường Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ,” 25.

¹⁰⁹ Nguyễn Năng Quốc, “Về Lễ Khai Giải Trường Phật Học Của Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ - Bài Diễn Thuyết Của Cụ Hiệp Tá Nguyễn Năng Quốc Hội Trường Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ,” 25.

¹¹⁰ Thái Hòa, “Ngày Lễ Khai Trường Phật Học Của Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ,” 13.

¹¹¹ Thái Hòa, “Ngày Lễ Khai Trường Phật Học Của Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ,” 13.

on Vietnamese Buddhism. In his speech, he reminisced that many people had tried but failed to revive Vietnamese Buddhism, and the “lack of internal organizing” and “external support” had made young monks, such as himself, “hanging on to cowardice and maintaining stupidity.”¹¹² As a result, when the monastic school in Tonkin finally opened, he was “overjoyed, like those who had lived in a house that was cramped and hot suddenly were allowed to entered a luxurious place, [and] those who had been on a road that was narrow and dark had someone guiding to the righteous one.”¹¹³ Tô Liên, thus, called for collaboration among the student monks but warned that they must find the “right teacher” (đắc sư) and the “right cohorts” (đắc hữu) in order to “materialize [their] goal” (đắc thực).¹¹⁴

Similar to the monk Tô Liên, the monk Trí Hải welcomed the opening of the monastic school in Tonkin. He in fact found satisfaction in the opening of the school. Trí Hải acknowledge that education was very important, particularly to monks, because “they were representatives of Buddhism,” and Buddhism would “exist or extinct, develop or decline because of the monks.”¹¹⁵ He yearned for the opportunity to learn. He wrote:

We view education today not very different from those who are starving wish for rice, [those who are] thirsty wish for water, [those who are] cold wish for clothing, [those who are] sick wish for medicine; these necessary wishes never cease, as a result, like a rice paddy suffering a long drought, the rice stalks do not wither away but always wait for the rain to saturate [the field with water] but instead it only had a few scattered rain drops.¹¹⁶

¹¹² Sa môn Tô Liên, “Bài Chúc Từ Khai Trường Phật Học Bắc Kỳ Của Ban Học Sinh Đọc Tại Chùa Quán Sứ,” *Đuốc Tuệ*, no. 54 (February 1, 1937): 4.

¹¹³ Sa môn Tô Liên, “Bài Chúc Từ Khai Trường Phật Học Bắc Kỳ Của Ban Học Sinh Đọc Tại Chùa Quán Sứ,” 4.

¹¹⁴ Sa môn Tô Liên, “Bài Chúc Từ Khai Trường Phật Học Bắc Kỳ Của Ban Học Sinh Đọc Tại Chùa Quán Sứ,” 4.

¹¹⁵ Trí Hải, “Bài Chúc Từ Của Ban Tiểu Học Đọc Tại Chùa Quán Sứ Hôm Khai Trường Ngày Mồng 1 Tháng 11 Năm Bính Tý (1936),” *Đuốc Tuệ*, no. 56 (March 1, 1937): 5.

¹¹⁶ Trí Hải, “Bài Chúc Từ Của Ban Tiểu Học Đọc Tại Chùa Quán Sứ Hôm Khai Trường Ngày Mồng 1 Tháng 11 Năm Bính Tý (1936),” 5.

With such yearning for education, Trí Hải admitted that he was bewildered when he learned that Annam and Cochinchina had opened their own monastic schools, yet Tonkin did not open one. Thus, he was deeply satisfied with what the future might bring when the monastic school finally opened in Tonkin.

The Headmaster Phan Trung Thứ shared the joy of the monk Tô Liên and Trí Hải. But Thứ was rather radical than exuberant in his remark. For Thứ, through learning one could think himself to enlightenment because the understanding of the sacred began with the mind. In his speech, Thứ reminded the student monks that their sole responsibility was to learn. In learning, he saw the potential to “open up the mind,” so that one could “understand deeply the spirit and doctrine of the Buddha.” He also saw learning as a means to “better oneself and to correct bad habits, so that [one] would not lose [his] way.” Thứ’s thinking about learning hinged on the conceptualization of the mind as a thing. “This thing [the mind],” he said, “though valuable, without effort in renewing, would become useless.” Like food, learning was the “best nutrient” for the mind.¹¹⁷

Curriculum and Admissions

The curriculum that the Tonkin Buddhist Association implemented at its monastic school carried the essential elements of the one developed in Hue. The curriculum maintained the length of 15 years and the various levels of instructions. More importantly, it preserved the emphasis of blending Buddhist studies with other subjects. For instance, in addition to Buddhist sutras, student monks would learn mathematics and quốc ngữ during the primary and secondary level then East-West philosophy during the tertiary level. But there were also changes. The Tonkin Buddhist Association added a postgraduate level to the curriculum and varied the length of each

¹¹⁷ Phan Trung Thứ, “Bài Chúc Từ Lễ Khai Giảng Tăng Học Của Cụ Chánh Đốc Học, Đọc Tại Hội Quán Hanoi Ngày Mồng Một Tháng Một Ta,” 27.

level with elementary level (tiểu học) at four years, secondary level (trung học) three years, tertiary level (đại học) three years and postgraduate level (cao đẳng) five years.¹¹⁸

The most significant change that the Tonkin Buddhist Association made to the curriculum was its orientation. The association did not continue the effort in broadening monastic education into a moral one to include laypeople, as Lê Đình Thám advocated. The association instead looked to revive the past, so that it could equip the past with modern tools. According to the Headmaster Phan Trung Thứ, the school would restore the “Five Sciences” (Ngũ Minh) taught in “ancient Tibet” in its curriculum.¹¹⁹ The Five Sciences were medicine (y phương minh), technology (công xảo minh), reason (nhân minh), linguistics (thanh minh) and hermeneutic (nội minh).¹²⁰ With “Buddhist sutras as the base,” Thứ added, the Five Sciences curriculum would include Confucianism and East-West philosophy.¹²¹ Thứ hoped that every student who had “followed primary level to tertiary level would have the means to deal with modern life and popularize Buddhism.”¹²²

The Tonkin Buddhist Association kept the school open to most monks. The requirements the association had for admissions were age and nomination. Students must be between the age of 13 to 20 for elementary level and 20 to 30 for secondary level, but the tertiary level did not have an age limit. In addition, to be considered for admissions, the students must be nominated by local Buddhist associations affiliated with the Tonkin Buddhist Association. The local

¹¹⁸ Phan Trung Thứ, “Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Hội Trương Trình Phật Học,” *Đuốc Tuệ*, no. 50 (November 24, 1936): 6–8.

¹¹⁹ Phan Trung Thứ, “Bài Chúc Từ Lễ Khai Giảng Tăng Học Của Cụ Chánh Đốc Học, Đọc Tại Hội Quán Hanoi Ngày Mồng Một Tháng Một Ta,” 17.

¹²⁰ Nguyễn Trường Bách and Thích Nhuận Châu, *Từ Điển Phật Học*, 396.

¹²¹ Phan Trung Thứ, “Bài Chúc Từ Lễ Khai Giảng Tăng Học Của Cụ Chánh Đốc Học, Đọc Tại Hội Quán Hanoi Ngày Mồng Một Tháng Một Ta,” 17.

¹²² Phan Trung Thứ, “Bài Chúc Từ Lễ Khai Giảng Tăng Học Của Cụ Chánh Đốc Học, Đọc Tại Hội Quán Hanoi Ngày Mồng Một Tháng Một Ta,” 17.

associations must “evaluate the conduct and intelligence” of the prospective student monk and nominate him for the appropriate level.¹²³ But the application must bear the signature of a venerable monk, which would serve to “authenticate” the nominee.¹²⁴ For those that were not nominated by the local associations, they could seek private enrollment. Regardless of rank, their applications must have the signature of their masters.

Sponsor Committee

The lack of funding for the monastic school had always been a constant source of worry for the Tonkin Buddhist Association. Only a year ago, the association had to close its school due to the lack of funding. Headmaster Phan Trung Thứ still remembered the event, as he and other members of the association pushed to create a committee to sponsor the monastic school. The sponsor committee that Thứ and others had in mind would be consisted of all abbots from Tonkin. In a sense, every abbot in Tonkin would automatically be a “member of the committee.”¹²⁵ And as members, these abbots would pay a yearly due, or they could “donate more [than their due] to help raise the next generation to continue Buddhism in the future.”¹²⁶ The sponsor committee was also open to laypeople that wanted to provide support. But in essence, the duty to fund the monastic school fell on the *sangha*.

By envisioning each abbot as a committee member, the Tonkin Buddhist Association seemed to have made the task of supporting the monastic school mandatory to all monks in Tonkin. To sweeten the deal, the association created regulations to cede some power to the committee and limit membership due at 3\$ piasters a year for 12 years or a total of 36\$ piasters.

¹²³ Phan Trung Thứ, “Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Hội Trương Trình Phật Học,” 9.

¹²⁴ Phan Trung Thứ, “Bắc Kỳ Phật Giáo Hội Trương Trình Phật Học,” 9.

¹²⁵ Phan Trung Thứ, “Bài Chúc Từ Lễ Khai Giảng Tăng Học Của Cụ Chánh Đốc Học, Đọc Tại Hội Quán Hanoi Ngày Mồng Một Tháng Một Ta,” 16.

¹²⁶ Phan Trung Thứ, “Bài Chúc Từ Lễ Khai Giảng Tăng Học Của Cụ Chánh Đốc Học, Đọc Tại Hội Quán Hanoi Ngày Mồng Một Tháng Một Ta,” 16.

This amount was the minimal cost to support one student monk to finish his elementary education, which the association estimated at 1\$ piaster a month for three years.¹²⁷

Further, there were benefits to being a member of the sponsor committee. These benefits, however, varied greatly based on the amount that the member donated. In addition to the amount of 36\$ piasters, the other amount that the Tonkin Buddhist Association calculated was 300\$ piasters or 3\$ piasters a month for 12 years. This amount of 3\$ piasters a month would support a student monk in elementary level and another in secondary or tertiary level simultaneously for the completion of their education.

The benefits that the Tonkin Buddhist Association promised to members of the sponsor committee were ritual services, such as well-being chanting and funeral ceremony. In a sense, the student monks still had to work for their education, but their work became collective and centralized. For members who paid the basic amount of 36\$ piasters, 3\$ piasters a year for 12 years, or a one-time payment from 50\$ to 300\$ piasters, they could request a student monk to come chant for them at their residence or at the monastic school when they were sick. And in the case of death, the monks at the school would “chant the *Flower Ornament Sutra* (Kinh Hoa Nghiêm), which had 83 tomes, perform a week long of chanting prayers, and upon the 49th day after death chant prayers and funeral oration.”¹²⁸

The Tonkin Buddhist Association also welcomed big donors by promising more monks and longer services. For those who donated from 200\$ to 500\$ piasters, monks and laypeople alike, in addition to the basic service, the school would dispatch a monk with offering to the private residence in the case of death. Also, upon the 49th day after death, the whole student body and staff at the school would begin chanting *The Sutra of the Fundamental Vows of the Earth-*

¹²⁷ “Khoản Lương Học Phí,” *Đuốc Tuệ*, no. 50 (November 24, 1936): 10.

¹²⁸ “Phật Học Bảo Trợ Điều Lệ,” *Đuốc Tuệ*, no. 53 (January 15, 1937): 41–42.

store Bodhisattva (Kinh Địa Tạng). And for those that donated from 600\$ to 1,000\$ piasters and above 1,500\$ piasters, the school would add monks from 5 to 10 affiliated associations to the student body and chant more sutras, such as the Lotus sutras.¹²⁹

For those who did not have money, the Tonkin Buddhist Association welcomed their labor. If they fulfilled their end of the bargain, they would enjoy the same membership and services promised to someone who donated 300\$ piasters. What they had to do was to volunteer to help the school for 11 years and sign up 100 new members to the sponsor committee or three monks who would donate 300\$ piasters each.¹³⁰

The idea of establishing a sponsor committee by the Tonkin Buddhist Association seemed far-fetched at the time. Based on some simple calculations, the school needed at least 1,440\$ piasters to support the 70 students that it had enrolled for one year.¹³¹ This amount meant that the association must have at least 480 due-paying members on its sponsor committee. But Headmaster Phan Trung Thứ had high hopes that the monks in Tonkin would collaborate and join the sponsor committee. He noted that since the school could open so quickly, the “monks must have welcomed” the idea, and that the “laypeople must have approved” it, too.¹³² For example, Thứ mentioned when the abbot at Bích Lư pagoda in Hanoi passed away, his disciples

¹²⁹ “Phật Học Bảo Trợ Điều Lệ,” 42.

¹³⁰ “Phật Học Bảo Trợ Điều Lệ,” 42.

¹³¹ For elementary level, the 20 students would cost 1\$ piaster a month. And for the secondary and tertiary level, the 50 students would cost 2\$ piaster a month. The total for one year would be: ((20 students x 1\$ piaster/ month)+(50 students x 2\$ piasters/ month)) x 12 months/ year = 1,440\$ piasters/ year. Since each fee-paying member would pay 3\$ piasters a year, it would require 480 members: 1, 440\$ piasters/ 3\$ piasters per member = 480 members.

¹³² Phan Trung Thứ, “Bài Chúc Từ Lễ Khai Giảng Tăng Học Của Cụ Chánh Đốc Học, Đọc Tại Hội Quán Hanoi Ngày Mồng Một Tháng Một Ta,” 16–17.

donated 300\$ piasters to pay respect to their master. He hoped that others would use this as a model to emulate.¹³³

Pressure

The ambition to revive Vietnamese Buddhism by the Tonkin Buddhist Association put a lot of pressure on their students to succeed. The student monks must attend their classes all year long, and their typical day would be 18 hours long – beginning at 4 A.M. and ending at 10 P.M.¹³⁴ They were only allowed to have four days off a month – two days in the middle of the month and two days at the end.¹³⁵ And there was no summer break.

Before the Tonkin monastic school officially began, students were already complaining that the curriculum was “too strict” and the Headmaster “too harsh.” The complaint from the student monks bothered Nguyễn Năng Quốc so much that he decided to address the issue in his speech during the opening ceremony of the school. “I am surprised,” he said in response. But what surprised Quốc was the act of complaining rather than the content of the complaint. Quốc quickly reminded the student monks that in the old day, “when a student entered the school, [he] had to obey the rule of conduct by his teacher.” To bolster his point, Quốc referenced the Confucian saying, “One has to learn manners before letters.”¹³⁶

The Tonkin monastic school did not seem as fun as the one in Hue. The code of conduct was very strict. What Nguyễn Năng Quốc had in mind were mutual responsibilities found in the *Sigalovada Sutra* (Kinh Thiện Sinh) that both students and teachers must uphold. For the

¹³³ Phan Trung Thứ, “Bài Chúc Từ Lễ Khai Giảng Tăng Học Của Cụ Chánh Đốc Học, Đọc Tại Hội Quán Hanoi Ngày Mùng Một Tháng Một Ta,” 17.

¹³⁴ “Thì Giờ Học Hằng Ngày,” *Đuốc Tuệ*, no. 50 (November 24, 1936): 13.

¹³⁵ “Quy Giới Tiểu Tiết Công Trường,” *Đuốc Tuệ*, no. 50 (November 24, 1936): 14.

¹³⁶ Nguyễn Năng Quốc, “Về Lễ Khai Giảng Trường Phật Học Của Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ - Bài Diễn Thuyết Của Cụ Hiệp Tá Nguyễn Năng Quốc Hội Trường Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ,” 21.

students, their responsibilities were mostly giving their teachers the utmost respect and trying their best to study. The student monks had to obey the five following rules:

First, [they] have to respect their teachers; second, [they] have to do exactly what their teachers told them to do; third...[they] have to put their best effort in everything that they do; fourth, [they] have to be studious without getting bored; and fifth, when their teachers makes any mistake, they have to respect their teachers and praise the good things their teachers did rather than speaking ill of their teachers.¹³⁷

But under close examination, the five rules that the student monks must uphold seemed very similar to Confucian code of conduct, for students could not correct their teachers. In a sense, instruction or learning was a one-way street.

Similarly, for the teachers, their responsibilities were to help the students learn and succeed. The teachers had to obey the five following rules:

First, they cannot be tired of teaching and must help their students to understand [the subject matter] quicker; second, [they] have to make their students get better quicker than others' students; third, [they] have to make their students remember everything that they have seen and known; fourth, [they] if students have any doubt or difficulty, [they] have to clarify; and fifth, [they] have to make their students more intelligent than they are.¹³⁸

The responsibilities ascribed to the teachers seemed ideal. But in the context of the revival, the rules were rather competitive, as the teachers must make their students better than those taught by others. Ultimately, the rules reflected the drive to revive Vietnamese Buddhism, as the teachers must reproduce another generation of teachers of monks that would outperform and outlast themselves, so that they could propagate the Dharma.

The strict rules at the monastic school in Tonkin were necessary for success. According to Nguyễn Năng Quốc, the strictness at the school was not to “benefit the teachers” or to “put the

¹³⁷ Nguyễn Năng Quốc, “Về Lễ Khai Giải Trường Phật Học Của Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ - Bài Diễn Thuyết Của Cụ Hiệp Tá Nguyễn Năng Quốc Hội Trường Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ,” 23.

¹³⁸ Nguyễn Năng Quốc, “Về Lễ Khai Giải Trường Phật Học Của Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ - Bài Diễn Thuyết Của Cụ Hiệp Tá Nguyễn Năng Quốc Hội Trường Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ,” 23.

students at a disadvantage.”¹³⁹ It was rather to guarantee success: students would be better than others’ students, and that one day the students would be better than their own teachers. Quốc, thus, promptly commented that those that could not handle the strictness were not serious enough in propagating the Dharma.¹⁴⁰

Progress

At the end of 1938, two years since its opening, the monastic school in Tonkin administered the first examination of its student monks. Before the headmaster and teachers at the school presented the results to the association, they reviewed the results and ethics of all the students. The association was “happy” with the results, but it still held that studying was secondary to ethics. The reason was that “studying to sharpen the mind without keeping any precept is not completely embodying the Dharma.” As a result, the association proceeded to organize a ceremony (giới đàn) for the students to take their precepts.¹⁴¹

Two years later, on January 6, 1940, the Tonkin Buddhist Association held the precept-taking ceremony for its student monks at Quán Sứ pagoda. Participated in the ceremony were nine students taking their Bhikkhu precepts, twelve students the ten precepts for novice monks, five students moral rules for Bodhisattva, and thirty students the five precepts.¹⁴²

CONCLUSION: The Annam Buddhist Association succeeded in creating a blueprint for establishing monastic school in Vietnam. The association made possible the idea that monastic education could revive Vietnamese Buddhism. In a sense, monastic education became important

¹³⁹ Nguyễn Năng Quốc, “Về Lễ Khai Giải Trường Phật Học Của Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ - Bài Diễn Thuyết Của Cụ Hiệp Tá Nguyễn Năng Quốc Hội Trường Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ,” 23.

¹⁴⁰ Nguyễn Năng Quốc, “Về Lễ Khai Giải Trường Phật Học Của Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ - Bài Diễn Thuyết Của Cụ Hiệp Tá Nguyễn Năng Quốc Hội Trường Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ,” 23.

¹⁴¹ “Trường Thuật Đàn Giới Truyền Thụ Y Bát Cho Các Học Sinh Tăng Tại Chùa Quán Sứ,” *Đuốc Tuệ*, no. 123 (January 1, 1940): 28.

¹⁴² “Trường Thuật Đàn Giới Truyền Thụ Y Bát Cho Các Học Sinh Tăng Tại Chùa Quán Sứ,” 29.

in producing monks who could propagate the Dharma. Almost immediately, the Tonkin Buddhist Association sent a delegate to Annam to study the schools and curriculum, so that the association could establish its own school in Tonkin. The success that the monastic schools in Annam and Tonkin had, however, was very modest since the curriculum required 15 years to finish. Also, the efforts by the students were interrupted by the Second World War and subsequently the First Indochina War (1946-1954). Nevertheless, the schools created a cohort of monks from different regions in Vietnam, such as Thích Thiện Hoa, Thích Trí Quang and Thích Tâm Châu, who later served as leaders of the Buddhist Struggle Movement in the Republic of Vietnam during the 1960's. In the following chapter, I will examine the establishment of the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association in May 1951. By accomplishing such unity, Vietnamese Buddhists achieved the impossible. The chapter will trace the conditions, such as nation building and Buddhist internationalism, which facilitated and ushered in the establishment of the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association.

The Organization

The All-Vietnam Buddhist Association symbolized unity for Vietnamese Buddhism. During the 1930's, Vietnamese Buddhists had various visions for the organization. These visions represented various ways to organize. Despite their differences, these visions had the single aim of creating an organization that could standardize the practice of Vietnamese Buddhism and steer the revival. However, organizational limits did not allow Vietnamese Buddhist associations to reach beyond their region to connect with others. In 1951, unity finally came due to the World Buddhist Conference in Sri Lanka. During the process, Vietnamese Buddhists encountered numerous problems. How could Vietnamese Buddhists unite their religion? What did unity mean for various actors? What was the mission of the organization? And what would unity bring for the future of Vietnamese Buddhism?

The Most Difficult Means

On May 6, 1951, representatives of Buddhist associations from Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina met at Từ Đàm pagoda in Hue. They stood in front of the altar for the Buddha and vowed in unison:

We, your children...vow to unite with each other in order to actualize and propagate the Dharma, lead ourselves, people and all living beings, to the Great Compassion, the Great Wisdom and the Great Courage of the Buddha.

Today, the first of the fourth month of the lunar calendar [the Buddha's birthday], we your children vow to unite all of our ideologies and actions to establish the 'All-Vietnam Buddhist Association.'¹

¹ "Tuờng Thuật," *Tập San Phật Giáo Thống Nhất*, no. 1 (August 3, 1951): 15.

The meeting at Từ Đàm pagoda lasted for 4 days, from May 6 to May 9, 1951. The representatives elected officials, created committees, and established the mission of the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association (Tổng Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam). They ultimately accomplished the impossible by uniting Buddhism in Vietnam.

Establishing the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association was an impossible task. In his speech during the open ceremony of the Two-River Buddhist Association (Lưỡng Xuyên Phật Học Hội) in May 1935, the monk and the President of the association Huệ Quang confessed that reviving Vietnamese Buddhism was extremely difficult. The three most effective means that Huệ Quang saw were: establishing an All-Vietnam Buddhist Association, publishing a Buddhist periodical, and establishing monastic schools. Even though the three means to revive Buddhism all had advantages and disadvantages, the monk admitted that establishing an All-Vietnam Buddhist Association was the “most difficult.” He was afraid that monks could “not agree” with each other to establishing such an organization because of “faction,” “abuse of one’s power,” “personal interest” or “fame.” Thus, Huệ Quang suggested that establishing monastic schools was the most practical because Vietnamese Buddhism needed more qualified monks who could later continue the revival task.²

Other members of the Two-River Buddhist Association, however, did not agree with the monk Huệ Quang. They instead saw a necessity in having a centralized organization that could bring unity to Vietnamese Buddhism. But this unity had different meaning for each of them. First, for layman Lê Văn Xuân, unity meant standardizing the practice of Buddhism, particularly in the translation of sutras. In his article published in *Duy Tâm* (Idealism), Lê Văn Xuân lamented that even though the revival had made a lot of progress, a closer look would show that

² Hoà Thượng Huệ Quang, “Bài Giảng Khai Hội ‘Lưỡng Xuyên Phật Học’ Hôm Rằm Tháng Tư Annam Năm Ất Hợi Nhằm Ngày 17 Mai 1935,” *Duy Tâm*, no. 1 (October 1, 1935): 25.

the Buddhist associations were not united. Each translator had “his own perspective” on Buddhism, and each published the translated materials in his own way.

The differences in perspectives and translations, Xuân held, created a “dizzying effect” on the reader because they “did not know what to believe in.”³ In a sense, Xuân did not see the interpretative differences as an inherent pluralism but rather mistranslations that would create anxiety in the reader. He, thus, recommended Buddhist associations to unite and create a “board” (hội đồng), so that they could have the same rules and regulations to follow. Specifically, each time any association translated some sutras, the association would present its translation to the “board.” And “whatever sections the board approved would be published into books.” Xuân also envisioned each region in Vietnam having its own board not only to govern the practice of translation but other activities in regard reviving Vietnamese Buddhism.⁴

Second, for the layman Cố Đạo Trân, unity meant the end of infighting among the monks and laymen. In his lecture at the association, Cố ĐạoTrân praised the achievement of the revival in term of organizing. But in regard to the *sangha*, Cố Đạo Trân assessed that it had not had much improvement. This lack of improvement Cố Đạo Trân blamed on the infighting and the narrow focus on one’s pagoda. He saw monks and laymen neglecting their responsibilities with the association, ignoring their novices, focusing only on their pagodas. Cố Đạo Trân, thus, ended his lecture by recommending both monks and laymen to view unity as their responsibilities (sự nghiệp). They were responsible for their own advancement in learning Buddhism. And they were also responsible for their families and society.⁵

³ Lê Văn Xuân, “Chấn Hưng Và Tương Lai Của Phật Giáo,” *Duy Tâm*, no. 9 (June 1, 1936): 524.

⁴ Lê Văn Xuân, “Chấn Hưng Và Tương Lai Của Phật Giáo,” 525.

⁵ Cố Đạo Trân, “Người Học Phật Phải Biết Việc Cần Yếu Nên Làm,” *Duy Tâm*, no. 15 (December 1, 1936): 138–139.

Third, for the reader Quỳnh Sơn, unity meant collaboration among Buddhist associations. In a similar fashion, Quỳnh Sơn acknowledged that Vietnamese Buddhism seemed to have revived, but it did not have unity. In his letter to the editor, Quỳnh Sơn observed that all of the Buddhist associations claimed that they “all pursued the same goal” and “followed the same direction.” But he sensed a division, like a “curtain of cloudiness,” which separated the associations and displaced the “accommodating collaboration” among them. Quỳnh Sơn, like Lê Văn Xuân and Cố Đạo Trân, urged Buddhists to work together to revive Vietnamese Buddhism. He warned that as “children of the Buddha,” they “inherited an old house from the Buddha,” which was “rotting away.” Thus, as “pious children,” he begged, they had to “unite to plan the renovation of the house” before it fell apart.⁶

A Call for Action

The Tourrane Buddhist Association (Hội Phật Học Đà Thành) had a plan for uniting Vietnamese Buddhism. The association first published its call for unity in its periodical *Tam Bảo* (Three Jewels) on March 15, 1937. The call for unity listed the rise of materialism, the inaction of the monks, the ignorance of laymen, the development of heresy and the ineffectiveness of Buddhist associations as the motivation. But the association went a step further. It called all Buddhists to create a Vietnam United Buddhist Association (Việt Nam Phật Giáo Liên Hiệp Hội). The association hoped that the new organization would bring unity to the revival and the *sangha*, so that Vietnamese Buddhism would revive.⁷

Heeding the call, the monk Hải Đức from Kim Quang pagoda responded with a lengthy letter of emotional support. The monk began his letter by emphasizing how moved he was

⁶ Quỳnh Sơn, “Phật Giáo Hiện Thời,” *Duy Tâm*, no. 16 (January 1, 1937): 223.

⁷ Cư Sĩ Đồng Hiệp Thập, “Tấm Lòng Thành Khấn - Lời Yêu Cầu Của Hội Đà Thành Phật Học Xin Tăng Già Trong Nước Tổ Chức Hội Liên Hiệp,” *Tam Bảo*, no. 3 (March 15, 1937): 8.

reading the call to create a Vietnam United Buddhist Association. After reading the call “three times,” he felt so compelled to act that he wrote the letter to support the call.⁸ First, to lend his support, Hải Đức asserted that the call to create a Vietnam United Buddhist Association was the “prescription of a conscientious doctor.” The problem, he diagnosed, had to do with the “internal organs being damaged, [and] the external toxic air created more harm.”⁹ In other words, he saw the *sangha* not functioning and the criticism people had of the *sangha* making monks even more isolated.

Second, the monk reassured the reader that creating a Vietnam United Buddhist Association was only “natural” because only such an organization would have the power to “unite the *sangha*, centralize the revival effort to build Buddhism, [and] have the necessary means to support each other.” He ended his letter by asking the reader “Buddhists are whom? Who are Buddhists?” must “stand up” and support the call.¹⁰

Vietnam – Buddhism – United

Two months later, in July 1937, the periodical *Tam Bảo* published the first sketch for a Vietnam United Buddhist Association. The plan came from a monk named Giác Phong. In his plan, Giác Phong made it clear that he wanted to restructure the *sangha*, and that the role of the *sangha* was to lead the revival. He did not think laymen could handle such role because they were still attached to their “mundane lives.”¹¹ In a sense, laymen could not bring liberation to others because they themselves still had many ties to this worldly. Giác Phong then laid down his

⁸ Hoà Thượng Hải Đức, “Phật Tử Là Ai? Ai Là Phật Tử?,” *Tam Bảo Tạp Chí*, no. 4 (May 1937): 3.

⁹ Hoà Thượng Hải Đức, “Phật Tử Là Ai? Ai Là Phật Tử?,” 4.

¹⁰ Hoà Thượng Hải Đức, “Phật Tử Là Ai? Ai Là Phật Tử?,” 9.

¹¹ Giác Phong, “Luận về Vấn Đề Lập Chương Trình Tổ Chức Hội Việt Nam Phật Giáo Liên Hiệp,” *Tam Bảo Tạp Chí*, no. 5 (July 1937): 10.

plan for the Vietnam United Buddhist Association in four distinct parts: name, mission, structure and organization.

The order of his plan, Giác Phong reasoned, mattered. In a sense, the parts carried an inherent flow. The name of the organization mattered the most because it “represented the ideology and put [the organization] in direct contact with the public.” Then, the mission of the organization served as the “absolute foundation,” so that the revival effort carried out by the organization “fit with the name of the organization.” And to materialize the mission, the organization must “have a structure.” Finally, for its members to follow the structure, the organization must organize itself according to the municipal structure of village, province and region, so that their revival effort would be “systematic.”¹²

Name

For the name of the organization, Giác Phong preferred the name Việt Nam Phật Giáo Liên Hiệp (Vietnam – Buddhism – United) because it captured the scope of his vision. He picked the word “Việt Nam” to denote a national aim. But this, he clarified, was not to differentiate. Rather Giác Phong wanted to eliminate “sectarian” and “regional” differences by expanding the focus to national. Next, Giác Phong selected “Phật Giáo” (Buddhism) instead of “Phật Học” (Buddhist Studies).¹³ This selection, he explained, emphasized that the mission of Buddhism was to help others, and that the *sangha* must lead the organization. Finally, the word “Liên Hiệp” (United) was to “connect all in the nation” and to “share the work” of the revival. To sum up his

¹² Giác Phong, “Luận về Vấn Đề Lập Chương Trình Tổ Chức Hội Việt Nam Phật Giáo Liên Hiệp,” 25.

¹³ Giác Phong, “Luận về Vấn Đề Lập Chương Trình Tổ Chức Hội Việt Nam Phật Giáo Liên Hiệp,” 14.

vision, Giác Phong reiterated that the name of the organization meant to “unite both the *sangha* and the laity in Vietnam to carry out proselytization of Buddhism.”¹⁴

Mission

Giác Phong envisioned mission of the Vietnam United Buddhist Association to support the *sangha* and be socially engaged. He further detailed this section in four parts. For him, the most pressing issue was to “reorganize” the *sangha* and “unite the monks and nuns in the three regions [of Vietnam].” And in order to do so, monks must answer to the organization. For example, the pagoda belonged to the organization, so that the abbot could “only use the property for activities that would benefit Buddhism” and “not for personal gain.” Also, when the abbot passed away, he could not appoint the successor. The organization instead reserved the right to do so because, Giác Phong reasoned, the organization would “provide” for the pagoda in case of emergency.¹⁵

The second and third part of the mission also focused on the *sangha*. For the second part of the mission, Giác Phong wanted the organization to establish monastic schools for monks and nuns. He envisioned the monastic schools to provide its students more than “doctrines.” Giác Phong explained that for “modern time” the focus on doctrines did not suffice due to the development of “science” and “philosophy.” Thus, the monastic education must address such development. Giác Phong also recommended the *sangha* to hold lectures and promulgate the Dharma through printed texts. In a sense, the organization must have a means for the *sangha* to

¹⁴ Giác Phong, “Luận về Vấn Đề Lập Chương Trình Tổ Chức Hội Việt Nam Phật Giáo Liên Hiệp,” 15.

¹⁵ Giác Phong, “Luận về Vấn Đề Lập Chương Trình Tổ Chức Hội Việt Nam Phật Giáo Liên Hiệp,” 15-16.

“promulgate” the Dharma “directly” through holding lectures in villages and remote places and “indirectly” by publishing periodicals.¹⁶

For the third part of the mission, the monk Giác Phong wanted the organization to build facilities for monks. These facilities would serve as a place for winter and summer retreat when monks had to contemplate in isolation for three months. They also would serve as housing for elderly monks, so that they did not to work so hard to make a living during old age. For Giác Phong, if the organization wanted to attract “talents,” it had to be able to “provide for its monks.”¹⁷ The organization had to “provide housing, food and schooling” when the monks were just novices. When the monks graduated and went to the villages around Vietnam, the organization had to continue to support them. And when the monks finished serving the organization, it had to take care of the monks during old age.¹⁸

For the last part of the mission, Giác Phong envisioned a more socially engaged Buddhism. He saw the Vietnam United Buddhist Association extending its focus to the laity by building orphanages and organizing relief efforts. For the orphanages, the monk saw the orphanages to “foster” not only young children but also adults who needed help and “did not have any family.” And for the relief efforts, the monk saw the organization “collecting donations from its members” or “sending its members to collect donations” from all over Vietnam.¹⁹

Structure

¹⁶ Giác Phong, “Luận về Vấn Đề Lập Chương Trình Tổ Chức Hội Việt Nam Phật Giáo Liên Hiệp,” 16-17.

¹⁷ Giác Phong, “Luận về Vấn Đề Lập Chương Trình Tổ Chức Hội Việt Nam Phật Giáo Liên Hiệp,” 17-18.

¹⁸ Giác Phong, “Luận về Vấn Đề Lập Chương Trình Tổ Chức Hội Việt Nam Phật Giáo Liên Hiệp,” 18.

¹⁹ Giác Phong, “Luận về Vấn Đề Lập Chương Trình Tổ Chức Hội Việt Nam Phật Giáo Liên Hiệp,” 18.

The structure of the Vietnam United Buddhist Association for Giác Phong was composed of two branches. One was “Actualizing the Dharma” (Hoằng Pháp) and the other “Supporting the Dharma” (Hộ Pháp). And the tie that bound the two branches together was the single demand of the former staying “ethical” and the latter “selfless.” This demand was essential to the working of the organization because it transcended the division of labor: *sangha* actualizing the Dharma and laity supporting the Dharma.²⁰

To actualize the Dharma, Giác Phong tasked the *sangha* with four duties. The first duty was “translating sutras into *quốc ngữ*” and “instructing novices.” The second was to propagate the Dharma by “holding lectures, publishing newspaper articles and establishing libraries.” Third, the monks had to carry out organizing. Giác Phong recommend that after they finished their lectures, the monks had to select those among the attendees that were “inclined to form a Buddhist study group” and later “become members of the organization.”²¹ Lastly, the monks were responsible for arranging ceremonies. They had to “arrange the altar in the pagoda and planned the sermons.”²²

To support the Dharma, Giác Phong organized the laity into six subcommittees with specific responsibilities. The “economic subcommittee” oversaw the finances of the Vietnam United Buddhist Association. The committee would “manage all of the properties, handle all expenses, and find means to raise revenue for the organization.” The “support committee” would “look after the support for the novices, monks and nuns in retreat, elderly monks and take care of those who were sick.” The “construction committee” would “see the construction of the

²⁰ Giác Phong, “Luận về Vấn Đề Lập Chương Trình Tổ Chức Hội Việt Nam Phật Giáo Liên Hiệp,” 19.

²¹ Giác Phong, “Luận về Vấn Đề Lập Chương Trình Tổ Chức Hội Việt Nam Phật Giáo Liên Hiệp,” 20.

²² Giác Phong, “Luận về Vấn Đề Lập Chương Trình Tổ Chức Hội Việt Nam Phật Giáo Liên Hiệp,” 21.

organization, such as building pagodas and schools.” The “monitor committee” would “watch and check activities of all members of the two branches and criticize individual mistakes.” The “external affair” committee would “deal with the government, other religions and the people.” Last but not least, the “aid relief” committee would “organize all details in regard to charity.”²³

Organization

The final part of Giác Phong’s plan was organization. In this part, the monk saw the expansion of the Vietnam United Buddhist Association as a grass root movement. The expansion would begin with a single monk. The monk would give lectures to laypeople and select those from the attendees who were interested in the organization. With such group of selected few, the monk then could expand into a “Dharma study group.” Once members of the study group took their vow and became members of the Vietnam United Buddhist Association, the monk could turn them into a “small association” (tiểu hội). As the monk continued to give lectures, he could form as many small associations as possible. Then, the monk could form a “province association” (tỉnh hội) – which would be constituted of representatives from the small associations. Once the monk achieved such scale, Giác Phong recommended members of the province group to create a “board” to help with “actualizing” and “supporting the Dharma” by sending people to nearby provinces to proselytize. And overseeing the province associations for each region was a “big association.”²⁴

Six Committees

²³ Giác Phong, “Luận về Vấn Đề Lập Chương Trình Tổ Chức Hội Việt Nam Phật Giáo Liên Hiệp,” 21.

²⁴ Giác Phong, “Luận về Vấn Đề Lập Chương Trình Tổ Chức Hội Việt Nam Phật Giáo Liên Hiệp,” 24.

Three months later, in October 1937, the periodical *Duy Tâm* published a different plan by the monk Huệ Quang. The monk finally changed his mind and, like the monk Giác Phong, began to advocate for establishing an All-Vietnam Buddhist Association. But unlike Giác Phong, Huệ Quang did not recommend creating a brand new structure. He instead suggested combining the existing associations from the three regions to form a governing body.

The first step in creating such organization, Huệ Quang argued, was to have a “conference” in Annam. Since each association would be responsible for its own travel expenses, Annam was the ideal location for being the “middle” of Vietnam. The second step was for each association from the three regions to send two representatives, “a monk and a layman,” to the conference. And finally, the task of the representatives was to elect officials for the governing body.²⁵

For the conference, Huệ Quang divided it into six parts or six committees for the representatives to elect. The first committee was to be the “censorship committee” (ban kiểm duyệt). This committee was responsible for “reviewing” all translations of sutras before they went into publication and existing publications. The second committee was the “education committee” (ban đạo sư giáo dục). This committee would be consisted of monks who would “train” the teachers at the monastic schools, “draft curriculum” for the schools, and “publish Buddhist textbooks” for the schools.

The third committee was the “disciplinary committee” (ban luật sư). This committee would also be consisted of monks, who would inspect each and every Buddhist facility, such as pagodas and associations. The fourth committee was the “lecturer committee” (ban giảng sư).

²⁵ Huệ Quang, “Vấn Đề Phật Học Tổng Hội,” *Duy Tâm*, no. 25 (October 1, 1937): 38.

This committee would be consisted of lecturers traveling to different provinces or wherever had the need for lectures on Buddhism.

The fifth committee was the “support the Dharma committee” (ban hộ pháp). This committee, Huệ Quang recommended, should be strictly reserved for government officials who supported Buddhism. The reason was simple: government officials had “direct contact” with “the [Nguyen] court” and the French colonial “government.” In a sense, as Huệ Quang acknowledged, only with the “support” of the court and the colonial government, Buddhists could “successfully revive” their religion and “brought to light” those who exploited Buddhism for personal gain.

Last but not least, the sixth committee was the “inspection committee” (ban thanh tra). This committee would be the only one where monks and laymen worked together. Members of this committee would inspect not only the finances but also the ethics of the monks at each and every pagoda. In addition, this committee would intervene when the abbot was not an ethical monk or when a pagoda submitted a complaint.²⁶

Spectral Presence: Figure, Institution and Nation-State

A year later, in October 1938, the plan for establishing an All-Vietnam Buddhist Association received a new imagining. The layman Tự Giác Cư Sĩ from Hue detailed his plan in a long letter to the editor – which the periodical *Viên Âm* (Sound of Perfection) ignored, but the periodical *Duy Tâm* published. In his letter, Tự Giác Cư Sĩ imagined the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association as a figure, an institution and a nation-state. In a sense, the association had to function in different registers to fully materialize its mission. In addition, Tự Giác Cư Sĩ brought a new dimension to the planning. He saw publishing and collecting membership dues as possible

²⁶ Huệ Quang, “Vấn Đề Phật Học Tổng Hội,” 39.

revenue streams that could sustain the operations and support the social engagement of the association.

Tự Giác Cư Sĩ began the letter by imagining the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association as a figure. The layman assumed that the relationship between an institution and its leader was dialectic. In other words, having established an association, for the layman, “meant having a leader.” And from this leading figure, “order” and “rules” would propagate. Without such figure, Tự Giác Cư Sĩ lamented that Vietnamese Buddhism would suffer from the lack of directions, “like walking in the field in pitch black, without torches or light, as well as any sound for guidance.”²⁷

The layman then shifted his imagining. He recast the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association as a powerful institution. The association would standardize the practice of Vietnamese Buddhism by creating a “common set of regulations” – which smaller associations in the provinces would follow. Tự Giác Cư Sĩ also added that even though each association in the province would operate “independently,” the “regulations” would serve as the “common” point for all associations.²⁸

Tự Giác Cư Sĩ finally envisioned the All-Vietnam Buddhism Association functioning like a nation-state. In a sense, the layman derived the working of the association from that of a nation-state. Like Huệ Quang, Tự Giác Cư Sĩ saw the association consisted of committees. But for Tự Giác Cư Sĩ, the association only needed two committees: a “standing committee” (ban thường trực) and a “board” (ban quản trị). For the former, the layman tasked its members, who were strictly monks, with publishing a periodical to propagate the Dharma, and for the latter, the layman demanded its members, who were also laymen, to be both ethical and well connected to

²⁷ Tự Giác Cư Sĩ, “Phật Giáo Tổng Hội,” *Duy Tâm*, no. 33 (October 1938): 379.

²⁸ Tự Giác Cư Sĩ, “Phật Giáo Tổng Hội,” 379.

the colonial government. His reason for such structure was quite simple, since “a nation having the legislative branch and the executive branch, the association must have two committees.”²⁹

With nation-state in mind, Tự Giác Cư Sĩ emphasized the importance of *quốc ngữ* (national language). For certain nationalist intellectuals at the time, *quốc ngữ* was the linguistic possibility that could bring about a new and independent Vietnam.³⁰ TỰ Giác Cư Sĩ broadened this possibility by applying it to Buddhism. And to a certain extent, the layman saw *quốc ngữ* as the only linguistic medium for Buddhism, as only through *quốc ngữ*, should Buddhists learn about “the origin of Buddhism” and “the fundamentals of Buddhism.” His reason was that learning *quốc ngữ* would pay dividend in the long run, for “spending three months learning *quốc ngữ* would be more beneficial than learning the sutras,” and “learning *quốc ngữ* would make learning the sutras easier.”³¹

World Peace and Internationalism

The apparent aim of the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association was to unite Vietnamese Buddhism. But the ambition that Vietnamese Buddhists had for the association lied beyond their nation. They dreamed of Buddhist internationalism, where Buddhists from around the world collaborated with each other to actualize Pure Land on this worldly. Vietnamese Buddhists in fact aspired to bring world peace and connect the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association with the World Buddhist Federation – which the monk Taixu established in China in 1923.³²

²⁹ TỰ Giác Cư Sĩ, “Phật Giáo Tổng Hội,” 381.

³⁰ For more on nationalism and *quốc ngữ*, see Kim Ngoc Bao Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

³¹ TỰ Giác Cư Sĩ, “Phật Giáo Tổng Hội,” 382.

³² For more on the World Buddhist Federation, see Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism*, 107–114.

The drive for world peace by Vietnamese Buddhists was due to the imminent World War II. In a letter to the editor, first appeared in the newspaper *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn* (Cochinchina News) then the periodical *Duy Tâm*, the writer D.S.H. lent support to the plan put forth by the monk Huệ Quang. He urged Vietnamese Buddhists to materialize such plan because with the imminent war, Vietnamese Buddhist associations had to “propagate” Buddhist ideas of “compassion, equality and freedom” to create “a new life,” which would bring “world peace.” He also lamented that the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association should never function like the League of Nations because the league failed to stop the war.

For the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association to accomplish world peace, the writer D.S.H. offered three recommendations in his letter. First, the association should not be self-righteous. “To materialize Pure Land in this worldly,” the association should not consider its action “right” and that of others “wrong” because they all shared the same mission.³³ Second, the association should not become a status. In other words, D.S.H. wrote, “The Buddhist association should not be the place that doles out ranking and titles to satisfy the desire for illusional fame.” Also, D.S.H. added that the association should “not become a business that sells ranking or titles to make a profit.” Third, D.S.H. asserted that the association should follow the Buddhist idea of altruism or “no-self,” as the Buddha had instructed, because otherwise, the association would not be Buddhist in nature.³⁴

Alone, the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association could not achieve world peace. The association had to connect with the World Buddhist Federation. This was the assessment made by a monk named Liên Tổ. In his letter to the editor, the monk acknowledged that he had read

³³ D.S.H., “Từ Đường Hoà Bình Ở Bên Hồ Geneve Đến Các Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam,” *Duy Tâm* 28, no. Feb 1938 (n.d.): 157.

³⁴ D.S.H., “Từ Đường Hoà Bình Ở Bên Hồ Geneve Đến Các Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam,” 158.

the plan by the monk Huệ Quang, the letter by D.S.H. and other writings on uniting Buddhism in Vietnam. Liên Tổ did not offer any concrete plan to revive Buddhism in Vietnam or to accomplish world peace. But for the monk, Buddhism did not belong to any single nation or a group of people. In a sense, he saw Buddhism or the “house of the Buddha” as an inheritance that the Buddha bequeathed to all of his children.³⁵

To join the World Buddhist Federation, the monk Liên Tổ called for the creation of the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association put forth by the monk Huệ Quang. In a sense, creating the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association was a means rather than an end. He lamented that Vietnamese monks had been “silently sitting, isolating themselves, and not letting their disciples collaborating with Buddhist associations.” The monk also added that the *sangha* had to take actions. They could not let the laymen represent Buddhism or “lead the household” of the Buddha because this would turn monks into “impious sons,” who indeed “deserved to be disgraced.” The monk Liên Tổ, thus, imagined that once they could establish the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association, they could “join the World Buddhist Federation” and “make acquaintance” with its members to bring about world peace.³⁶

Organizational Limits

The letter to the editor by D.S.H. created a stir among Vietnamese Buddhists. The letter in fact brought them to action. But it also exposed the organizational limits of Vietnamese Buddhism. The Two-River Buddhist Association was first to respond to the letter. The association reprinted the letter in its periodical *Duy Tâm* and called for a conference on uniting Vietnamese Buddhism. Yet, the agenda for the conference was on establishing a monastic school, a committee on translating sutras and a Buddhist periodical. Also, the participants of the

³⁵ Liên Tổ, “Đồng Thịnh Tương Ứng,” *Duy Tâm*, no. 31 (July 1938): 304–305.

³⁶ Liên Tổ, “Đồng Thịnh Tương Ứng,” 307.

conference were regional, for they were from “miền trong” or southern Vietnam.³⁷ In a sense, the association realized its limits in uniting Buddhism in Vietnam. First, the association had to address immediate institutional needs. Second, the association had to organize regionally.

Three years later, in December 1941, the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association still remained an idea. In an article, the monk Thái Không blamed the lack of success solely on monks whom he accused of “dividing the inheritance” of the Buddha.³⁸ To make his case, Thái Không reminded the reader that the purpose of the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association was to “promote Buddhism” and to “teach people the Dharma.”³⁹ Thái Không then rhetorically asked the reader, “Why did we [monks] ordain? Why did we build pagodas? And why are we learning the dharma?” Without the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association, he wondered whether the monks ordained to have a place to live, built pagodas to perpetuate superstition, and learned the Dharma to brainwash others. He, thus, asserted that the monks, children of the Buddha, “destroyed the Dharma” by dividing their inheritance because they could not establish the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association or unite Vietnamese Buddhism.⁴⁰

The Foreign

The materialization of the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association needed a foreign catalyst. The trip to India and Sri Lanka for the World Buddhist Conference gave Vietnamese Buddhist monks, particularly Thích Tố Liên from Hanoi, a chance to imagine Vietnam as a Buddhist nation and experienced a moment of Buddhist internationalism.

³⁷ “Phật Học Tổng Hội,” *Duy Tâm*, no. 28 (February 1938): 155.

³⁸ Thái Không, “Nhắc Lại Vấn Đề Phật Giáo Tổng Hội,” *Duy Tâm*, no. 43 (December 1941): 248.

³⁹ Thái Không, “Nhắc Lại Vấn Đề Phật Giáo Tổng Hội,” 248.

⁴⁰ Thái Không, “Nhắc Lại Vấn Đề Phật Giáo Tổng Hội,” 249.

Political Motive

Sending a Buddhist delegation to India and Sri Lanka for the World Buddhist Conference was an idea by the State of Vietnam. The state, however, had no interest in Buddhism. Its motive was purely political. In fact, by sending a Buddhist delegation, the state hoped that it could garner international attention and legitimacy for its nation-building effort.

On March 23, 1950, the Governor of Tonkin (Thủ Hiến Bắc Việt) Nguyễn Hữu Trí sent the President of the Tonkin Buddhist Association a brief official letter. In the letter, Trí announced that the government planned to send a Buddhist delegation to India in May. He requested that the association nominate a monk with “considerable knowledge” of Buddhism to be part of the delegation. Trí also noted in the letter that the government would provide an English translator and pay for all expenses.⁴¹

The monk Tổ Liên was first to read the letter. When he gave it to Bùi Thiện Cơ the President of the association, he asked Cơ to pass on the following to the search committee. “If the committee nominates me, please decline [the nomination] for me, because I just became ill and, more importantly, I am very busy with work,” said Tổ Liên.

The search committee, however, did not agree with Tổ Liên. As the Head of the Association of Monks and Nuns of Tonkin and Vice-President of the Tonkin Buddhist Association, Tổ Liên was the “appropriate” nominee. The committee also reasoned with Tổ Liên that he should not decline the nomination because it would make Vietnamese Buddhists seem “unsympathetic” to world Buddhism.⁴²

⁴¹ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan: Cuộc Hội Nghị Phật Giáo Thế Giới Tại Colombo Từ Ngày 25-5 Đến 8-6-1950* (Hà-Nội: Đúc-Tuê, 1950), 9.

⁴² Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 10.

The monk Tổ Liên was obliged to accept the nomination. He asked Bùi Thiện Cơ to respond to the letter from Nguyễn Hữu Trí. Tổ Liên also expressed to Cơ that the association had the right to nominate him. But he had not decided whether he wanted to be a part of the Buddhist delegation to India. He wanted to wait until he arrived in Saigon to make that decision. What he wanted to make clear to the government was that: “Buddhism never involves politics, [sic] if necessary, I will attend [the conference] only on the premise of Buddhist matter. If this is met, then I will go [to the conference], if not, I will return [to Hanoi].”⁴³

On May 1, 1950, the monk Tổ Liên left Hanoi for Saigon. Upon his arrival, he met with Đỗ Hùng, who was a representative of the Official Delegation of the Government of Bảo Đại. During the meeting, Tổ Liên asserted that even though the government selected the Buddhist delegation, its mission was to “reconnect spiritual and cultural tie between Vietnam and India and other nations.”⁴⁴

The monk Tổ Liên then promptly offered the itinerary for the trip when Đỗ Hùng asked. First, the delegation would visit the Maha Boddhi Association in Calcutta, India. There, the delegation would ask the association to host a talk on the history of Vietnamese Buddhism, visit historic Buddhist sites, visit and give books on Buddhism in Vietnam to Buddhist associations in India, and buy books on Buddhism from these associations. Second, the delegation would visit Sri Lanka for the World Buddhist Conference, which began on May 25, 1950. Tổ Liên wanted the delegation to participate in establishing a World Buddhist Federation. In addition, he felt that Sri Lanka also had a long history of Buddhism. Last but not least, if the delegation had time, it would visit Burma and Thailand to survey the development of Buddhism in these countries.⁴⁵

⁴³ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 11.

⁴⁴ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 20.

⁴⁵ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 20–21.

After laying out his plan for the delegation, the monk Tố Liên reasserted his stand to Đỗ Hùng. “We are a Vietnamese Buddhist delegation,” he said. “Not a Buddhist delegation sent by the government.” Tố Liên wanted to “avoid any speculation that the delegation had a political motive.” Thus, he gave Đỗ Hùng an ultimatum. “If we the Buddhist delegation go [to India] with such mission, I then would accept the responsibility as the leader.” Đỗ Hùng agreed and assured the monk that the government had always envisioned the mission of the delegation in such way and hoped that the delegation would succeed its mission.⁴⁶

The monk Tố Liên, however, did not finish. He questioned the selection of a Khmer monk named Thạch Bích to join the delegation. “Vietnam did not lack monks,” he said. “Why select a Cambodian monk to join a Vietnamese Buddhist delegation?” Tố Liên acknowledged that Buddhism did not discriminate. But from the “this-worldly perspective,” Tố Liên believed that “distinction of skin color and ethnicity” was necessary in regard to “nationality.” In a sense, he did not want the Khmer monk to misrepresent the Vietnamese Buddhist delegation, for “people would mistake it [the delegation] as an Indochinese Buddhist one.” This distinction, for Tố Liên, matter a lot more during this time of turmoil.⁴⁷

Again, in a polite manner, Đỗ Hùng assured the monk Tố Liên that Thạch Bích was indeed Vietnamese. Đỗ Hùng explained that the government selected the Khmer monk as a “representative of ethnic minorities in Vietnam.” Then Hùng admitted that he, too, had the same concern about Thạch Bích when he first met the monk. But Hùng learned from the monk that he was Vietnamese, but he ordained as a Khmer monk. Đỗ Hùng even presented to Tố Liên a record that listed Thạch Bích as a Vietnamese citizen.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Tố Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 21.

⁴⁷ Tố Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 21–22.

⁴⁸ Tố Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 22.

The explanation from Đỗ Hùng persuaded the monk Tố Liên. But it was revealing of the government's plan for the Buddhist delegation. The mission for the delegation, Đỗ Hùng imagined, was purely political. Hùng ultimately wanted to use the delegation to lend legitimacy to the State of Vietnam with Emperor Bảo Đại as Head of State. In a letter to Emperor Bảo Đại, Hùng wrote that "whatever religious character it has, the Buddhist delegation is essentially political in nature." In a sense, the Buddhist delegation would serve as a "statement to the world of the existence of cultural ties between Vietnam and other countries of Southeast Asia." In addition, the delegation would "respond to the secret wish of India that seeks to restore Buddhism to fight Marxist materialism then attempt to regain its influence in its followers." Last but not least, Hùng wanted the delegation to confirm, if interviewed by the press, that Vietnam was a Buddhist nation with "three quarters of Vietnamese as Buddhists," "pagoda and monks in every village," and "laypeople fasting on the first and fifteenth ever month of the lunar calendar." And this Buddhist Vietnam, Hùng held, could "only survive in a nationalist Indochina" – as opposed to a communist one led by Hồ Chí Minh.⁴⁹

Religious Imagining

Despite its political intention, the trip abroad to India and Sri Lanka allowed the monk Tố Liên a chance to reflect on Vietnamese Buddhism and to imagine its future. In fact, the act of flying alone gave the monk a sense of empowerment, as he saw himself in light of the Chinese monk Đường Tăng (Xuanzang, 602 – 664AD), who made a seventeen-year trek overland to India. In this space of looking back while projecting forward, the monk Tố Liên found inspiration and confirmation for the revival effort happening in Vietnam.

⁴⁹ TTLTQG II, Phòng Phủ Thủ Tướng Quốc Gia Việt Nam, Hồ Sơ 2924, Hồ sơ v/v gửi Phái đoàn Phật giáo Việt Nam sang Ấn Độ và Phái đoàn Phật giáo Việt Nam tham dự Hội nghị Phật giáo Quốc tế họp tại Colombo năm 1950, 4-6.

Flying West

At 7.30 A.M. on May 3, 1951, the Buddhist delegation boarded an airplane and left Saigon for Calcutta, India. During the flight, the sameness of things, which Thích Tổ Liên saw from the window, confirmed his Buddhist belief in equality that differentiation created suffering. From his seat, Tổ Liên looked out the window, and he saw “the mountains, villages, as well as citadels and houses, have become so tiny.” The scenery reminded him of a saying by Confucius: “From the top of Mount Taishan, everything seems small.” What the monk meant was that from his current vantage point, which was several times higher than Mount Taishan, he saw things for what they were. “All things, from big to small, are now just indistinguishable images in my eyes,” he wrote. And for things being indistinguishable, Tổ Liên saw “equality” much clearer. He wondered why people had to differentiate, so that they would “disagree” and “usurp” each other. The tendency to differentiate, for Tổ Liên, was the cause for mankind to continue to suffer.⁵⁰

The flight to India also allowed the monk Tổ Liên to imagine himself as the famous Chinese monk Đường Tăng. In a sense, like Đường Tăng, Tổ Liên was on a mission to connect with India. During the flight, when the Khmer monk Thạch Bích asked him, “Have you read *Journey to the West*?” Tổ Liên not only recollected Đường Tăng’s journey to India but also imagined his trip to India in such light. For Tổ Liên, Đường Tăng served as a diplomatic tie for China, as each nation that he passed if not paid respect to the Tang dynasty then to the monk himself. In addition, Tổ Liên focused on the determination that Đường Tăng had for the trip. Tổ Liên recollected that Đường Tăng disobeyed the emperor’s edict, which forbid him and his colleagues to travel to India due to fear of the monks’ safety, and forged on with his journey

⁵⁰ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 24–25.

alone without his colleagues. He quoted Đường Tăng, “I have made up my mind, [and] I have decided on my path, I will not yield, or mind the danger, wild animals, not afraid of the wind, fog, snow or sand, and not need an edict from the Emperor, I only need to rely on the Buddha.”⁵¹

The War at Home

The Buddhist delegation arrived in Calcutta nine hours later. Even though India was the birthplace of Buddhism for Tổ Liên, the place became a site for the monk to reflect on the state of Vietnamese Buddhism. In a sense, India made the monk look inward to find inspiration to carry on his revival effort.

The mission of the Buddhist delegation was to connect Vietnamese Buddhism to Indian Buddhism, but the Indian officials whom the monk Tổ Liên met had war on their mind. The Franco-Việt Minh War (1945-1954) preoccupied them. For instance, the first question the governor of Bengal asked Tổ Liên during their meeting was, “In Vietnam, had the Franco-Vietnam War finished?”⁵² For Tổ Liên, the war occupied an ambivalent place.

First, the war gave the monks in northern Vietnam a chance to organize and unite Buddhism. In August 1945, Tổ Liên was in the hospital, recovering from stomach surgery. But he left the hospital early because the “revolution led by Hồ Chí Minh” briefly liberated Hanoi and gave Buddhist monks a chance to organize themselves. With such a small window of opportunity, Buddhist monks in northern Vietnam quickly established a provisional organization. Within ten days, the organization “dispatched seven delegations” to thirteen provinces to announce a conference on uniting Buddhism in northern Vietnam. As a result, Tổ Liên was nominated as the Vice-President of the organization.⁵³

⁵¹ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 28–29.

⁵² Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 43.

⁵³ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 51.

Second, the war also delayed the development in uniting Vietnamese Buddhism. The Franco-Việt Minh War intensified in 1950, as the French colonial army tried to recapture the area along the border with China from Việt Minh's control. The effort to unite Buddhism in northern Vietnam was developing, but the people of Hanoi, Buddhists or not, had to abandon their effort. Most of the city inhabitants left the city (*chạy giặc*). Only a few monks, including Tô Liên, stayed behind in the city at Quán Sứ pagoda. The monk realized that they were in danger, but he prayed and hoped that the Buddha would shelter them and guide them. Tô Liên was happy that he survived the intense fighting to be in India.⁵⁴

Vietnamese Buddhism

Besides the Franco-Việt Minh War, the monk Tô Liên talked about Vietnamese Buddhism. For the monk, India was the birthplace of Buddhism. Thus, here, at the origin, his task became asserting a Vietnamese Buddhist identity while proving a connection, however tenuous, between the center and the margin.

First, to establish a Vietnamese Buddhist identity, the monk Tô Liên imagined that Vietnam was a “Buddhist nation.” The monk did not define what he meant by a Buddhist nation, nor did he have any facts to support his point. However, he offered some typical observations:

In Vietnam, there are not very many villages that do not have pagodas, sometimes there are villages that have 2 to 3 pagodas. Each pagoda, from abbot to novice, has at least 3 people. A lot of pagodas have thirty monks. Thus, the number of monks and nuns in Vietnam is not small.⁵⁵

This materiality for the monk Tô Liên made Vietnam a Buddhist nation. But for the past 300 years, the monk acknowledged that Vietnamese Buddhism had “declined” due to “internal

⁵⁴ Tô Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 51–52.

⁵⁵ Tô Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 50.

instability” and “foreign invasion.” However, Buddhism only “deteriorated” in doctrines. The people’s “faith” in Buddhism “remained the same.”⁵⁶

Second, the monk Tô Liên maintained a connection between Vietnamese Buddhism and Indian Buddhism. He began by arguing that Buddhism did not arrive in Vietnam via China but rather India. The monk admitted that at the end of the second century, a layman named Mậu Bác came to Vietnam from China to proselytize. But Buddhism did not take roots in Vietnam until the year 225, when the monk Khang Tăng Hội came to Vietnam from India. As a result of this encounter, Vietnamese Buddhists had a “*sangha*,” and Vietnamese Buddhism had a “system” and “organization” with the “*sangha* leading the effort to proselytize.” And since that moment, Vietnamese had venerated Khang Tăng Hội as the “originator who brought Buddhism to Vietnam.”⁵⁷

The monk Tô Liên also elaborated, or rather extrapolated, on the nature of Buddhism taking roots in Vietnam. In a sense, the monk wanted to confirm that Buddhism entered Vietnam peacefully. For Tô Liên, Buddhism could not have entered Vietnam via conquest, for the victors would have violently imposed their religion on new peoples and lands that they had conquered. Buddhism instead entered Vietnam through exchange in commerce between two peoples through a long period of time. Tô Liên quickly pointed out that Vietnam was the intersection between India and China, but the overland route from India to Vietnam was “more favorable” than that from China to Vietnam. And since Buddhism fit with the peaceful personality of the Vietnamese, it became the dominant religion from the beginning.⁵⁸

Inspiration

⁵⁶ Tô Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 111.

⁵⁷ Tô Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 50.

⁵⁸ Tô Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 106.

Besides meetings and talks, the Vietnamese Buddhist delegation made pilgrimage to historic Buddhist sites in India. To the monk Tổ Liên's surprise, most of the sites were left in ruin, for Indian Buddhism did not have many followers. In fact, the monk learned that Indian Buddhism was also experiencing a revival. Despite such circumstances, Tổ Liên found inspiration, particularly from his visit to Song Lâm (Kushinagar) where the Buddha passed away or entered Nirvana, to continue his revival effort.

The site Song Lâm housed a large statue of the Buddha lying on his side with his eyes open. Upon seeing the statue of the Buddha, the monk Tổ Liên felt “as if he [the Buddha] looked at him, full of compassion, not much different from a father looking at his son who just returned [home] from a long trip.” In response, the monk found an overwhelming sense of guilt and sadness. He looked into eyes of the statue. But he felt like an “impious son, who left this father to become a vagabond” then only returned home due to defeat.⁵⁹ He cried.

Oh benevolent father! When you were still alive, preaching the Dharma, saving living beings, this son of yours was still caught in the net of suffering, creating ties of *karma* that was bound to many cycles of reincarnation. Now, I had the chance to become a person, with the fortune of learning the Dharma, but benevolent father [you] have passed away for more than two thousand years already... Today, I could visit the traces of you, worship in front of you, I offer you all of the love and suffering that living beings and I have and wish for your help.⁶⁰

The guilt and sadness that the monk Tổ Liên felt, however, was fleeting. Perhaps, visiting the site Song Lâm was cathartic, for the monk had been carrying the burden of reviving Vietnamese Buddhism. In this moment, the monk imagined the Buddha speaking to him in response to his wish and gave him the inspiration to continue his effort. The Buddha spoke:

Oh, my son! I too have to obey the rule of impermanence, meaning, like you, if there is coming together (hợp), then there must be dissolve, if there is life, then there is death; but living is borrowing and death is returning. My being though has returned to Nirvana, my

⁵⁹ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 82.

⁶⁰ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 82–83.

teaching is still present in the world, the Dharma is my being, as well as yours...If you listen to me, actualize the Dharma, of course you will always see my being. Listen to me, you will save yourself and living beings, meaning I will save you and others.⁶¹

Buddhist Family

On May 23, 1950, the Vietnamese Buddhist delegation left India for Colombo, Sri Lanka. The purpose for the visit to Sri Lanka was to attend the World Buddhist Conference. But for the monk Tổ Liên, Sri Lanka presented a future that Vietnam could aspire to be as a Buddhist nation. In a sense, unlike India, Sri Lanka was a site that helped shape Tổ Liên's vision of the future and affirm his revival effort.

For his time in Sri Lanka, the monk Tổ Liên stayed with the Hewavitarne family. He praised this family for their Buddhist values, such as simplicity and benevolence. Their generosity really touched him. And through this family, the monk saw the working of Buddhism in family life. A minister and Vice-President of the Maha Bodhi Association, the husband Mr. Raja Hewavitarne volunteered his time at the Maha Bodhi Association. He also spent a lot of time driving Tổ Liên and others around town and introduced them to the Sri Lankan culture and Buddhism. His wife managed the household. She got up early everyday to cook even though they had 2 servants. And she never raised her voice at them. What moved Tổ Liên the most was when he saw her getting up at 3 A.M. to cook for a charity event at the Maha Bodhi Association. For children, Tổ Liên was impressed with how they helped with daily household chores.⁶²

Merit Making

The Vietnamese Buddhist delegation also made trips to various Buddhist sites during the World Buddhist Conference. On the way to these sites, their car broke down several times and

⁶¹ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 83.

⁶² Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 133–135.

finally quit working. These mishaps, though delaying the itinerary, put the monk Tố Liên in touch with Sri Lankan Buddhists and their merit making practice. For a Mahayana monk, Tố Liên was not familiar with the practice, but through interacting with various Buddhist figures in Sri Lanka, he saw the respect Sri Lankans had for monks and the possibility of Vietnamese monks occupying such role in the future.

The series of issues that the car had began with an accident. The car that was carrying the Vietnamese Buddhist delegation collided with another car. As a result, the front wheels were damaged. The driver fixed the wheels, but the radiator broke after 20 kilometers. While the delegation was waiting for the tow truck, a passing car stopped to help. A father and son stepped out of their car and chanted a sutra for the delegation. They would have offered the delegation a lift to the nearby auto shop, but they had errands to run.⁶³

The delegation spent the night at a town called Nivekara. They did not intend to spend the night here, but the town was the nearest place with an auto shop that could fix the car. Upon arriving at the hotel, the monk Tố Liên found “200 people” from all walks of life came to the hotel to make merit. After making merit, the people surrounded the monk and only dispersed after the monk Tố Liên spoke to them.⁶⁴

The car was soon fixed. The delegation continued their journey. But after 50 kilometers, the car broke down again. This time, they stopped at a food stall on a side of the road. Upon seeing monks entering, the vendor put down white cloth for them to sit on. He also poured them fresh orange juice to drink. When the translator Phạm Chử asked to pay for the orange juice, the vendor did not accept his money. The monk Tố Liên felt bad, for he had the orange juice and the vendor did not seem to have any money. The vendor explained that “monks were children of the

⁶³ Tố Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 185–186.

⁶⁴ Tố Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 187–188.

Buddha,” and that “even though the children of the Buddha had the drinks, the Buddha would pay for them.” And if he were to accept the money from the monks, he would “lose merit.” In a sense, what the vendor meant was that the Buddha would pay for the drinks that the monks consumed by giving him merit.⁶⁵

The car finally broke down the last time. Unfortunately, it was raining. As the delegation tried to remove the luggage from the car, a guard on a bridge down the road saw them. He ran to the car and climbed on it to remove the luggage in the pouring rain. He then brought the luggage to his house, which was nearby. His wife brought out the chairs for the monks. His father also offered his chair. Then the guard served everyone tea with sugar. Tổ Liên was touched by the act, for he saw that the guard was “poor” but acted with such “generosity.”⁶⁶

A new car was sent to pick up the delegation and deliver them to their destination. While the monk Tổ Liên was waiting for the new car to arrive, he reflected and imagined that perhaps the Buddha had caused those mishaps for him to have a deeper understanding of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.⁶⁷

The Mahi Bodhi Association

Mr. Hewavitarne introduced the Vietnamese Buddhist delegation to many Buddhist places in Colombo. The place close to his heart was the Mahi Bodhi Association. This single association was responsible for propagating Buddhism in Sri Lanka and carrying out social engagement. Its tasks involved both the *sangha* and the laity, as the association tried to improve society. In addition, the aim of the association was to transcend Buddhism beyond its national borders and create a Buddhist internationalism. The tasks and aim of the Mahi Bodhi Association

⁶⁵ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 190.

⁶⁶ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 194.

⁶⁷ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 195.

were not strange to Tổ Liên. They not only confirmed the revival effort that he had experienced or witnessed in Vietnam but also expanded his vision.

First, Mr. Hewavitarne showed the monk Tổ Liên the role of the *sangha* in the Maha Bodhi Association. He drove the monk to the publishing house and the monastic school. Both organizations functioned similarly to those in Vietnam, and they were under strict supervision of the *sangha*. For the publishing house, the monks in Sri Lanka published a weekly periodical with the readership of 6,000 people. They used a total of six printing presses, which they owned. According to Mr. Hewavitarne, the propagation of the Dharma was “steady” because the association owned the printing presses, which was effective in keeping cost down.⁶⁸ And for the monastic school, Mr. Hewavitarne showed a collaboration effort between the association and the government. The school had 3 levels with 20 teachers and 800 students. The students were only responsible for food. The school operated on a budget of 10,000 rupees with the government subsidizing 40 percent of the budget.⁶⁹

Second, Mr. Hewavitarne introduced the monk Tổ Liên to the social engagement carried out by the laity of the Maha Bodhi Association. The engagement mostly focused on a youth group, three care facilities, a hospital and a vocational school. With 1,500 members, the youth group aimed to train their members to “have purity that brings value to the life of others.”⁷⁰ For the care facilities, the association used them to provide shelter and services to orphans, the elderly and poor children. These facilities also worked in conjunction with the hospital. However, the hospital was financially independent, for its founder the monk Dharmapala established a trust of 60,000 rupees in 1912. And finally, the vocation school provided English

⁶⁸ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 214.

⁶⁹ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 216.

⁷⁰ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 216.

language lessons and vocational training to children, who were as young as 8 years old. The school had the staff of 32 teachers, whose salaries were paid for by the government. What touched the monk Tổ Liên the most during his visit was seeing the children at the vocational school reciting the Five Buddhist Precepts every morning before they began their classes.⁷¹

Third, Mr. Hewavitarne told the monk Tổ Liên about the Maha Bodhi Association's plan for creating a Buddhist internationalism. Under construction was a guesthouse that the association would use to host Buddhist guests from around the world. In addition, the association planned to rebuild its office in London, so that it could continue its effort in propagating Buddhism in Europe. The association in fact asked the attendees of the World Buddhist Conference to donate money for the effort. But the question everyone had was, "Why should we help the association to develop in Britain?" Tổ Liên, thus, intervened. He reasoned with others to exercise "selflessness." Had the Buddha recognized national borders, "would our nation would have Buddhism now?" He asked.⁷²

Conferencing for World Peace

At 4 P.M. on May 25, 1950, the World Buddhist Conference began. The opening ceremony was held at the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy. The scene was overwhelming for the monk Tổ Liên. The temple was packed with cars and people. The road that led to the temple had "waves of the five colors" representing the Buddhist flag – blue, yellow, red, white and orange, as each car carried at least one to three flags. And on both sides of the road, people of "all skin colors" were celebrating the event. People were "polite" and "happy," as they wore their national costumes, like "angles" in heaven.

⁷¹ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 218–219.

⁷² Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 221.

All 26 Buddhist delegations from around the world stood on the stage and together read their vow to the crowd.

Together we vow to unify Buddhism, unite Buddhists...to lead Buddhists around the world to follow the Dharma...We hope the spirit of benevolence, mercy, cheerfulness, non-discrimination of the Buddha will have the strength to guide peoples and governments not only to believe but also to materialize a benevolent and equal path to ... a bright life, wash away all of the greed, anger and delusion, so that the love and friendship between peoples will take place...so that world peace will materialize. To achieve this great goal, there must be a great structure, a perfect program, to give to an organization to lead. Thus, we decide to establish the World Buddhist Federation.⁷³

Following the vow, the monk Tổ Liên read his speech to represent Vietnamese Buddhism. He vowed:

[We] will together apply the vow and make it happen, so that the spirit of Buddhism will be brighter each day in Vietnam. It will be an effort with the World Buddhist Federation, and my success will depend on the Buddha's blessing for the support from the government and the people and Buddhist organizations of Vietnam.⁷⁴

The vows and speeches from different Buddhist delegations echoed the theme of Buddhist internationalism. This was precisely the goal of the conference, for it attempted to create an opportunity for Buddhist delegations from around the world to meet and exchange information about their Buddhist movements. Also, the conference hoped that through these meetings, Buddhist delegations would be able to create an organization to unite Buddhist forces around the world, so that they could help all Buddhists find a skillful means to deal with suffering.⁷⁵

The conference marked a turning point for Buddhism. It was evident in the speech by the monk Tổ Liên and his determination to connect Vietnamese Buddhism with Buddhism around the world. Even the translator Phạm Chử noticed such change. In his report, Phạm Chử remarked

⁷³ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 144.

⁷⁴ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 144–145.

⁷⁵ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 223–234.

that, “for the first time in Buddhist history, Buddhists around the world worked together to find a way to unify all the Buddhist forces around the world.” He also noted that the Buddhists “succeeded to a certain extent,” and that from this point on, the World Buddhist Federation would “exist and operate like other international organizations.”⁷⁶

Despite such remarkable change, the translator Phạm Chử and the monk Tổ Liên both had issues with the conference. For Phạm Chử, the issues were internal, as they dealt with the Vietnamese Buddhist delegation. In his report, Phạm Chử commented that delegation was so understaffed that its members could not participate in many important committees. He also complained about the monk Tổ Liên and the monk Thạch Bích. The former did not know English, so that he needed Phạm Chử to translate every speech and conversations he had with other delegations. And the latter did know Vietnamese nor Buddhism, so that he could “not help the delegation” and “became a burden” for the delegation.⁷⁷

For the monk Tổ Liên, his issues dealt with the lack of organization of the conference. First, Tổ Liên protested against the fact that the different Buddhist delegations could not nominate or vote for the President or Secretary of the World Buddhist Federation. The Maha Bodhi Association for being the host organization already nominated their members for such positions before the conference began. Second, Tổ Liên criticized the conference for allowing each delegation to spend too much time reporting on their successes in reviving Buddhism and not having the authority to verify such successes. He wanted the conference to produce concrete action plans, so that he could apply them to Vietnam upon his return. And finally, he took issue with the conference not being well organized. He harshly remarked, “Did we travel thousands of

⁷⁶ TTLTQG II, Phòng Phủ Thủ Tướng Quốc Gia Việt Nam, Hồ Sơ 2924, Tờ Trình Tổng Quát về Hội Nghị Phật Giáo Hợp tại Colombo từ 25-5-1950 đến 8-6-1950, và các Hoạt Động của Phái Đoàn Việt Nam tại Hội Nghị Đó, 32.

⁷⁷ TTLTQG II, Phòng Phủ Thủ Tướng Quốc Gia Việt Nam, Hồ Sơ 2924, 34.

miles to here [Sri Lanka] to have fun? Our Vietnamese people are suffering, we cannot have fun...your lack of experience inadvertently derailed the conference.” In fact, Tổ Liên hoped to establish subcommittees, so that practical conversations would emerge around concrete topics. According to Tổ Liên, his criticism gained clout, for a local newspaper ran his comment. As a result, five committees, which focused on rules and regulation, unification and unity, propagation, social engagement and proselytizing, quickly formed.⁷⁸

The clear success of the Vietnamese Buddhism delegation was fulfilling its political mission. In other words, the monk Tổ Liên and the translator Phạm Chử succeeded in asserting a Vietnamese national identity on the Buddhist global stage. The issue whether Vietnam was a country emerged when Tổ Liên participated in drafting the charter for the World Buddhist Federation. According to the charter, each “nation” could nominate one representative for the World Buddhist Conference. Unfortunately, the committee on unification did not recognize Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia as three separate nations. The committee saw the nations as Indochina, which should have warranted only one representative. Being diplomatic, Tổ Liên first agreed that the charter was reasonable in granting each nation a seat. The monk, however, disagreed with not granting Vietnam a seat. “Vietnam is an independent nation, not a nation under Indochina,” he stated. The translator Phạm Chử also spoke against the misrecognition. He even threatened to leave the conference. “The country of Vietnam has gained independence, thus Vietnamese Buddhism should have the right to have its own representative, if our demand is not met, our delegation will withdraw, because 18 million Vietnamese followers of Buddhism will

⁷⁸ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 227.

not allow Vietnam to be listed as a part of Indochina,” said Phạm Chử. To their surprise, the committee on unification quickly agreed and allowed Vietnam to have its own representative.⁷⁹

Returning Home

On June 8th, 1950, the Vietnamese Buddhist delegation returned home. The monk Tổ Liên did not waste any time in carrying out the mission of the World Buddhist Federation to unite all Buddhist forces around the world. First, the monk reported on the World Buddhist Conference in Sri Lanka. He published speeches read by different delegations, such as Japan and Pakistan, at the conference in the Buddhist periodical *Phuong Tiên* (The Vehicle). He also wrote about the issues he had with the conference and how the Vietnamese Buddhist delegation resolved them.

Second, the monk Tổ Liên called a meeting to dissolve the Buddhist Monks and Nuns Association in Northern Vietnam. The association was created to help monks and nuns transition back into the pagodas and monkhood in the wake of World War II. Tổ Liên, though the President, believed that the association had served its purpose. He, thus, wanted to return the power to the *sangha* of Northern Vietnam.

Tổ Liên strongly believed that dissolving the association was following the mission of the World Buddhist Federation. His vision was to combine local Buddhist organizations in each region, unite regional Buddhist associations, then join the World Buddhist Federation. In addition to unity, Tổ Liên believed that the shift from “association” (Hội) to “*sangha*” (Tăng già) would purify monkhood. The monk reasoned that anyone could join an association. The word “*sangha*” instead turned the community of monks into an “organization” (cơ quan), which not

⁷⁹ Tổ Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, 231.

only could lead laymen but also had the power to include or exclude monks who did not obey its rules.⁸⁰

Third, the monk Tô Liên established an office to represent the World Buddhist Federation. Two months after the conference, the Federation sent the monk a package, including a letter by the General Secretary J. G. Fernando, a list of members and committees and the charter of the Federation. In the letter, General Secretary Fernando urged Tô Liên to “establish a local office quickly.”⁸¹ As a result, Tô Liên established an office in Hanoi at Quán Sứ pagoda and sent a letter to Buddhist associations throughout Vietnam to announce the news.

The response to the news was almost immediate. Almost three weeks later, the President of Southern Vietnam Buddhist Association (Hội Phật Giáo Nam Việt) Nguyễn Văn Khỏe wrote the monk Tô Liên a letter to congratulate him. In fact, Khỏe acknowledge “Tô Liên’s hard work” in “building the foundation for the World Buddhist Federation and honoring Vietnamese Buddhism.” More importantly, Khỏe expressed a shared desire to organize Buddhists globally as well as locally, as he hoped that Buddhists could “unite into a solid block with a system and regulations.” Khỏe also agreed that the office should be located in Hanoi, for it would be convenient for Tô Liên to work during this fledging period.⁸²

The immediate impact of the World Buddhist Federation on Vietnamese Buddhism was difficult to gauge. The idea of the organization, however, encouraged a sense of unity among Vietnamese Buddhists. In a sense, the organization seemed to promise a bright future for a Vietnam oriented in Buddhism. In fact, for the Buddhist periodical *Phuong Tien*, the charter of the World Buddhist Federation promoted four important points. First, the organization

⁸⁰ “Hội Nghị Tăng Già Bắc Việt,” *Phuong Tien*, no. 27 (September 26, 1950): 39.

⁸¹ “Bản Dịch Lá Thư Ông Tổng Thư Ký Hội Phật Giáo Thế Giới Gửi Thượng Tọa Tô Liên Trưởng Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam,” *Phuong Tien*, no. 30 (November 10, 1950): 16.

⁸² Nguyễn Văn Khỏe, “Bức Thư Nam Việt,” *Phuong Tien*, no. 31 (November 24, 1950): 15.

encouraged unity through promoting “non-discrimination based on race,” “non-sectarian differences” and equality. Second, the organization planned to unite the different ideologies and actions to actualize the Dharma. Third, the organization served as a foundation to build “morality and peace for mankind.” And fourth, the organization would train youth to create a “good generation for the future.”⁸³

The periodical *Phuong Tien* also imagined that the World Buddhist Federation would have a great impact on the people and government of Vietnam. In an article, the writer Phổ Hoá reasoned that, for Vietnam, religion had “rooted deep in the mind” of the people, and that the trajectory of the government at any period had followed that of religion. The writer asserted that “if united,” Vietnamese Buddhism would become a force to reckon with since it would amount to “two thirds” of the world population. The writer ended the article by urging Buddhists to establish an in-country office for the World Buddhist Federation, so that monks could materialize the mission. He imagined the Federation would help produce more monks, establish orphanages, bring Buddhism into schools and standardize the renovation of pagodas.⁸⁴

In another article published by *Phuong Tien* five months later, the writer Nguyễn Khánh Vân echoed the impact articulated by Phổ Hoá. But for Vân, the scope of the impact was global. To reach such conclusion, Vân reasoned that unity brought by the World Buddhist Federation was inevitable because “disunity was death.” Vân then suggested that unity should mean the combination of the *sangha*, laity and practices. With such vision, Vân imagined Buddhists could

⁸³ Phổ Hoá, “Sự Thành Tựu Đầu Tiên Của Hội Phật Giáo Thế Giới Sẽ Là Một Cơ Sở Để Xây Dựng Hoà Bình Cho Nhân Loại Trong Hiện Tại và Tương Lai,” *Phuong Tien*, no. 32–33 (December 23, 1950): 4–6.

⁸⁴ Phổ Hoá, “Hiến Chương Phật Giáo Thế Giới Ra Đời Có Ảnh Hưởng Gì Đến Dân Tộc và Nền Chính Trị Việt Nam,” *Phuong Tien*, no. 32–33 (December 23, 1950): 11–18.

bring world peace if they could follow the direction of the Federation to carry out the “single idea of relieving suffering” for themselves and others.⁸⁵

Renewed Interest

Besides the monk Tố Liên, Thích Trí Quang in Central Vietnam was also campaigning to unite Vietnamese Buddhism. The periodical *Viên Âm* published his call for unity. Thích Trí Quang began the call by clearly stating his aspiration for unity. “Uniting Buddhism, this has been an aspiration from long ago, this aspiration is the only one of all of us Buddhist monks as well as laypeople,” he wrote. The call, however, had a different take on explaining or rationalizing the disunity of Vietnamese Buddhism. For Thích Trí Quang, Vietnamese Buddhists could not unite in the past because of the colonial “division” of Vietnam into three regions. To illustrate his point, the monk used the image of a house of three brothers of the same parents. “The house was divided into three for the brothers, thus naturally the three brothers were disconnected with each only caring for his own [section],” he wrote. “The house of Vietnamese Buddhism was divided because of the division of Central, Southern [and] Northern.”⁸⁶

The political landscape in Vietnam, however, had changed. This “current situation” for Thích Trí Quang demanded unity. He reasoned that if Buddhism “did not have unity, [it] could not exist.” And without unity, Buddhism “could not keep its spirit.” The monk did not have any anecdote or evidence to support his claim. He reflected that from the collective experience of past decade, Buddhists must “combine forces,” so that they could be “self-sufficient and neutral.” Thích Trí Quang also warned of the “thorns and obstacles” arising with the current

⁸⁵ Nguyễn Khánh Vân, “Vấn Đề Thống Nhất Phật Giáo,” *Phương Tiện*, no. 41–42 (May 6, 1951): 6–7.

⁸⁶ Thích Trí Quang, “Hãy Bước Tới Phật Giáo Toàn Quốc,” *Viên Âm*, no. 99 (December 16, 1950): 3.

political situation. He quickly listed them: “parochial thinking, historical discrimination, pride, power struggle, fame and self-interest.”⁸⁷

The call ended on a positive note. Thích Trí Quang asserted that if Buddhists wanted unity, they could make it happen. He was sure that all of their efforts in uniting Buddhism in Vietnam depended on Buddhists “making concessions for each other” and their “aspiration” for unity. He left the reader with the image of the house. “If the house collapsed, the three divisions would not survive,” he wrote. “Buddhism in Vietnam decayed because of disunity, then how can Buddhism in the provinces could survive isolation?”⁸⁸

The Conference

On May 6, 1951, Buddhist representatives from Annam, Tonkin and Cochinchina gathered at Từ Đàm Pagoda in Hue. For the next four days, the representatives participated in a conference to unite Vietnamese Buddhism. After many discussions, they agreed to “unite all ideologies and forces” of Buddhist monks and laymen to form an umbrella organization called All-Vietnam Buddhist Association. They also agreed that this organization should have a steering committee with both monks and laymen: the former keeping the mission in line with the Dharma, and the latter managing daily operations. Ultimately, the representatives hoped that the organization would join the World Buddhist Federation and represent Vietnamese Buddhism. These agreements marked a historic moment in Vietnamese Buddhism, for Vietnamese Buddhism had been united as well as World Buddhism.⁸⁹

Conferencing for Unity

⁸⁷ Thích Trí Quang, “Hãy Bước Tới Phật Giáo Toàn Quốc,” 4.

⁸⁸ Thích Trí Quang, “Hãy Bước Tới Phật Giáo Toàn Quốc,” 5.

⁸⁹ “Hội Nghị Thống Nhất Phật Giáo Việt Nam,” *Viên Âm*, no. 104 (May 13, 1951): 3.

Almost a month before the conference, Buddhists representatives in Annam, Tonkin and Cochinchina published a call for unity. Like previous ones, this call reiterated the urgency in uniting Vietnamese Buddhism due to political upheaval of the time. More importantly, the call proposed a time, location and agenda, so that all *sanghas* and Buddhist associations could “combine into a united force.”⁹⁰

The conference to unite Vietnamese Buddhism had a similar format to that of the World Buddhist Conference. During the first day, Buddhist representatives read their vow together and reported on their regional progress of reviving Vietnamese Buddhism. They also decided on the election process, so that they could nominate and vote for their candidates. The second and third day of the conference saw a shift to organizational matter. For each day, the representatives met in the morning and the afternoon to “discuss and vote” on the plan to unite Vietnamese Buddhism. The representatives also organized a Central Committee (Ban Quản Trị Trung Ương) to run the association. This single committee had sixteen members, and they would oversee the administration, finance, cultural activities, youth program, and publishing of the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association. For the last day of the conference, the representatives reflected on the progress and encouraged one another to carry out the plan through their speeches.⁹¹

Imagining the Future

The goal of the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association was to actualize and propagate the Dharma. But representatives from each region of Vietnam had different visions of the future. For the monks from Cochinchina, they envisioned a future with harmony where monks and laymen

⁹⁰ “Lời Hiệu Triệu Thống Nhất Phật Giáo,” *Tập San Phật Giáo Thống Nhất*, no. 1 (August 3, 1951): 12.

⁹¹ Tông Hồ Cầm, “Trường Thuật,” *Tập San Phật Giáo Thống Nhất*, no. 1 (August 3, 1951): 18–23.

worked together. In his speech, the monk representative from Cochinchina imagined Buddhist monks and nuns socially engaged. He spoke:

We no longer see monks being isolated in inactivity but rather engaging with darkness, suffering in the world, like Buddhas or Bodhisattvas, who entered hell to lead people to light. Outside of the hours for chanting and meditating, we see monks serving as teachers at schools for young children or at Buddhist schools...and the nuns look after orphans, take care of the sick or heal the social scars by their hands, smiles with endless compassion, like that of the Buddha.⁹²

The representative also saw laypeople as part of this picture. He added:

Each person is a person of diligence, then from the village to the nation each place would be full of diligence, [people] everywhere would have good habits, united in speaking, helping each other, [and] the evil spirit would decline, like darkness pushed back by light.⁹³

For Tonkin, the monk representative Trí Hải spoke of equality with people being treated the same as children of the Buddha. The monk asserted that this had been a Buddhist tradition since the Lý and Trần dynasties. He said:

During the period, from the emperor to the commoners, from monks to laymen, everyone shared the same respect for Buddhism and practice three words: Compassion, Wisdom, and Courage that the Buddha had taught, thus there was a saying ‘One comes to the door of the house of the Buddha will be treated like a member of the family...as siblings, [Buddhists] should always love each other, use wisdom to treat each other, join together to progress, defend the house with courage, and enjoy the merit together.’⁹⁴

After Thích Trí Hải, the monk Thích Trí Quang represented Annam to speak. In his speech, he spoke of unity. He imagined a future where people worked together and put aside their differences. He said, “We unite Buddhism because in this period of religious ideologies, conflict of class interest, only Buddhism is the religion that could eliminate the dividing

⁹² “Diễn Văn Của Phật Giáo Nam Việt,” *Tập San Phật Giáo Thống Nhất*, no. 1 (August 3, 1951): 25–26.

⁹³ “Diễn Văn Của Phật Giáo Nam Việt,” 26.

⁹⁴ Thích Trí Hải, “Diễn Văn Của Phật Giáo Bắc Việt,” *Tập San Phật Giáo Thống Nhất*, no. 1 (August 3, 1951): 27.

differences, fill the pits of conflict, [and] always represents a life of harmony in the endless compassion.”⁹⁵

In addition to the monks, representative of the Buddhist Youth Family also gave a speech. The youth representative imagined with Vietnamese Buddhism united, the Buddhist Youth Family would have a bigger family. “We are so used to the togetherness and fun of the Buddhist Youth Family, we hope that Vietnamese Buddhism will become a great family.” The representative then envisioned camping trips with other Buddhist Youth Family members at landmarks throughout Vietnam. He said:

We will meet others in South North during the big conferences, or during the big camping trips at Hương Tích or Bút Tháp, at Giác Lâm or Giác viên, and the singing voices of Buddhist Youth Families will combine into one powerful rhythm, like the color of the uniforms that we are wearing will seep into the villages far and near on this beloved strip of land of Vietnam.⁹⁶

Lastly, the Central Committee gave a speech to commemorate the moment of unity. For the committee, uniting Vietnamese Buddhism was the greatest achievement in the history of Vietnamese Buddhism. But it also warned that Buddhists must scarify themselves to protect this unity. He said:

We hope that you representatives will courageously flatten all ideas or forces that will divide our unity and will serve at the front on the path to real unity that we have planned for the past few days.

We had the chance to create it [unity], thus we are determined to scarify everything to materialize and protect it as we have promised in front of the Buddha.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Thích Trí Quang, “Diễn Văn Của Phật Giáo Trung Việt,” *Tập San Phật Giáo Thống Nhất*, no. 1 (August 3, 1951): 28.

⁹⁶ “Thống Nhất Phật Giáo,” *Viên Âm*, no. 113 (May 1, 1952): 10.

⁹⁷ “Thống Nhất Phật Giáo,” 10.

Practicing Unity

With unity reached, the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association made it their goal to practice unity. The association ultimately wanted to change certain practices of Vietnamese Buddhism, so that these practices would align with those set by the World Buddhist Federation. For the year 1952, the association urged Vietnamese Buddhists to take pride in their religion, fly the Buddhist flag, and celebrate the Buddha's birthday on the correct date.

In a feature article, the periodical *Viên Âm* urged Buddhists to take pride in their religion. In a sense, the article reasoned that displaying pride for one's religion was a positive behavior. The article was direct in its approach: "You must be candid in showing that you are a Buddhist in any situation."⁹⁸ But the article was also situational, as it coached the reader how to express their religious belief in different circumstances. First, the article addressed the lack of confidence. The article asserted that those who thought they were inappropriate to represent Buddhism were indeed inappropriate.

Second, the article attacked the fear of being criticized. The article situated the potential criticism in two different scenarios. The first one dealt with those who were not Buddhists. For the article, these non-Buddhists were indeed "rude," and they were "not worth the attention." The second scenario involved Buddhists criticizing each other. The article harshly frowned upon this kind of criticism because it was not different from "criticizing self-betterment, necessity, honesty, respect, and in a sense the Buddha."⁹⁹

⁹⁸ "Hãy Tỏ Ra Mình Là Phật Tử," *Viên Âm*, no. 105–106 (July 11, 1951): 58.

⁹⁹ "Hãy Tỏ Ra Mình Là Phật Tử," 59.

Third, the article urged those who did not take pride in Buddhism due to their professions. The article instead explained that displaying pride in Buddhism was an “ultimate expression,” and that it was necessary.¹⁰⁰

Lastly, the article warned the intellectual type to push their interest in Buddhism beyond the superficial level of “approval” and “sympathy.” The article speculated that intellectuals wanted to keep themselves “open” to different people and beliefs. “This,” the article stated, “should not be done, for we are not being true to ourselves and it could be misinterpreted as being opportunistic.”¹⁰¹

In addition to the situational coaching, the article outlined seven methods to express the Buddhist faith. These ways could be categorized roughly as material, social and behavioral. The first method was the surest and easiest way to display the Buddhist faith. The article suggested Buddhists to wear a small statue of the Buddha. The second, third and fourth method fell into the social category, for they encouraged appropriate interactions with Buddhists and non-Buddhists. For instance, the second and third method promoted cordial greetings in the presence of Buddhist monks and laypeople. The fourth method delineated clear social responsibility that Buddhists had in regard to their religion. The article warned Buddhists not to follow or repeat the speech or actions of non-Buddhists, particularly when they harmed Buddhism. The last category of behavioral captured the advocacy of self-betterment. The fifth method was to fast twice a month during the full moon and the first day of every lunar month. The sixth method was to chant a sutra loudly with family members before bed. The article in fact suggested Buddhists to sit in their beds and chant. The last method was to visit a pagoda at least once per month.

¹⁰⁰ “Hãy Tỏ Ra Minh Là Phật Tử,” 59.

¹⁰¹ “Hãy Tỏ Ra Minh Là Phật Tử,” 61.

To proudly display the Buddhist faith, the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association turned to the Buddhist flag. The periodical *Viên Âm* in fact published a translated article from the World Buddhist Federation, so that Vietnamese Buddhists could understand the meaning of the flag and feel confident in flying it. The article glossed over the historical significance of the flag. It in fact did not mention that Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907), a founder of Theosophy, assisted in designing it in Sri Lanka during the late 1880's. The article, however, chose to focus on the design and the mission of the flag.

The Buddhist flag was simple in design. It had six stripes: "blue, yellow, red, white, orange, and the combination of these colors. The blue stripe lies next to the flag pole, and the stripe with all of the colors at the other end." The colors of the flag symbolized not only "the aura and spirit of the Buddha, but also the state of the revival of Buddhism in modern time."¹⁰² In a sense, the flag represented unity of Buddhism in the world.

More importantly, the article associated the flying of the Buddhist flag with world peace. The vision of unity that the article painted was global in scale.

We hope that wherever this flag flies will have a sense of peace, happiness and wisdom, whether Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, India, China, Vietnam or Japan, or in Europe, the Americas, Africa, or on the islands in the Pacific Ocean, Atlantic Ocean, Indian Ocean; when all of the places, from cities to the alleys in the world are saturated with such a sense, all of the conflicts will end and peace will be actualized.¹⁰³

And the article urged Buddhists to see the flag as a conquering marker of peace. In a sense, the flying of the Buddhist flag would demarcate the peaceful land from that which was not, so that Buddhists could actualize peace there.

With the flag in hand, and the mission of peace... heart, we must cross forests, oceans, from this land to that land, from this country to that country, from this region to that

¹⁰² "Cờ Phật Giáo Thế Giới," *Viên Âm*, no. 111 (February 1952): 3.

¹⁰³ "Cờ Phật Giáo Thế Giới," 3.

region, and from this life to the next life, until the mission with such boundless compassion spreads throughout the world and peace returns to mankind.¹⁰⁴

Lastly, the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association recommended Vietnamese Buddhists to stop celebrating the Buddha's birthday on the eighth day of the fourth month of the lunar calendar. The association instead recommended Buddhists to celebrate the Buddha's birthday on the fifteenth day or the full moon of the fourth month of the lunar calendar.¹⁰⁵ The periodical *Viên Âm* published a lengthy article to explain the change. The article in fact listed the different birthdates that the Buddha had over the years since each Buddhist sutra had a different interpretation or reading of time. For instance, according to the article, the *Phật Bát Niết Bàn* (The Great Discourse or the Maha-Parinibbana-sutta) had all of the important days, such as Buddha's birthday and the day of reaching Enlightenment, on the eighth day of the fourth month of the lunar calendar. But to unify Buddhism, the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association wanted to follow the standards set by the World Buddhist Federation. The article, thus, promoted a Sri Lankan interpretation. And a Vietnamese monk named Pháp Châu, who had studied in Sri Lanka for a long time, had verified the authenticity of such source. According to Pháp Châu, the Buddha was "born, ordained, reached enlightenment and died on the full moon of the fourth month" of the lunar calendar. The year of his birthday was "563 BC." The Buddha then "ordained at the age of 29," "reach enlightenment at the age of 36" and "died at the age of 80 in 483 BC."¹⁰⁶ As a result, in the name of unity, the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association eliminated all biographical discrepancies in the life of the Buddha, so that Vietnamese Buddhism and world Buddhism had the same standards of celebration and practice.

¹⁰⁴ "Cờ Phật Giáo Thế Giới," 3.

¹⁰⁵ "Lời Nói Đầu," *Viên Âm*, no. 114 (May 31, 1952): 5.

¹⁰⁶ Lê Đình Thám, "Ngày Tháng và Năm Giáng Sinh và Nhập Diệt Của Đức Phật Thích Ca," *Viên Âm*, no. 114 (May 31, 1952): 8.

CONCLUSION: Vietnamese Buddhists finally united their religion. They accomplished the impossible by establishing the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association. During the 1930's, Vietnamese Buddhists showed that they had different visions for the organization. And also, after Buddhists established the organization, they had different visions for the future. The differences no longer mattered because of a foreign catalyst. In a sense, for being a part of the World Buddhist Federation, Vietnamese Buddhists could put their differences aside to focus on propagating the Dharma to the world. This foreign made the national possible. With the new focus, Vietnamese Buddhists began to standardize the practice of Vietnamese Buddhism, such as flying the Buddhist flag and changing the date of the Buddha's birthday. The All-Vietnam Buddhist Association, though short lived, gave Vietnamese Buddhists a sense of unity and confidence, which later translated into their protest against the Republic of Vietnam and the Vietnam War during the 1960's.



Figure 7: Thích Tổ Liên (1903-1977)



Figure 8: Members of the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association in 1951

Epilogue

On June 11, 1963, an elderly Vietnamese Buddhist monk named Thích Quảng Đức burned himself to death at a busy intersection in Saigon. His act not only stunned the world but also left an indelible image on the Viet Nam War. This was partly due to the iconic photographs taken by the Associated Press reporter Malcolm Browne. These photographs, though documenting a death so intimately, did no more to it than merely tracing its fiery outline on the body of the Buddhist monk. Even a day later, when the photographs circulated throughout the world, all that was known about the Buddhist monk remained insignificant and read like a police report. “A 73-year-old Buddhist priest,” David Halberstam wrote, “committed suicide to dramatize the Buddhist’s protest against the Government’s policies on religion.”¹

The biography of Thích Quảng Đức, which the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Church published soon after his death, did not differ much from the report by Halberstam.² The biography described Thích Quảng Đức’s life as an ordinary life of a Buddhist monk.³ At the age of seven, Thích Quảng Đức became a novice, and at the age of twenty, he was ordained. After ordination, Thích Quảng Đức then traveled throughout Vietnam, particularly southern Vietnam, to propagate Buddhism. The biography, in fact, glossed over his life to focus on his death and its impact since it was his death that moved the world and, ultimately, brought his life into focus.

¹ David Halberstam, “DIEM ASKS PEACE IN RELIGION CRISIS; But Buddhists Still Protest Dispute Seems Worse No Easing in Dispute Demonstration Defies Ban,” *New York Times*, June 12, 1963, 3.

² For a detail account of the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Church, see James Forest, *The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam : Fifteen Years for Reconciliation* (Alkmaar NE: International Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1978).

³ For more on Thích Quảng Đức, see Lê Mạnh Thát, ed., *Bồ Tát Quảng Đức: Ngọn Lửa và Trái Tim* ([Ho Chi Minh City]: NXB. Tổng hợp Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2005).

Thích Quảng Đức's death by fire made him a Buddhist saint since his death was not only the performance of perfection (dāna) but also a miracle. His heart would not burn when his body was taken for cremation outside of Saigon. Tens of thousands of people flocked Xá Lợi pagoda each day to worship before the heart – which was “preserved in a glass chalice.”⁴ His ashes were distributed to pagodas throughout the country. The saffron robes, which were used to carry his body from the street intersection to Xá Lợi pagoda, were “cut into tiny swatches and distributed to Buddhist followers everywhere” since they were said to “have miraculous healing properties.”⁵

What the biography did not mention was that Thích Quảng Đức's death was a planned event. It was not a spontaneous act of martyrdom that the photographs by Malcolm Browne seemed to suggest. In a sense, the unfolding of Thích Quảng Đức's death revealed nothing about his life but rather the complex relationship between American reporters and Vietnamese Buddhist monks at the time. And to reduce this relationship to mere one-sided exploitation was to completely miss the circumstances that set the stage for Thích Quảng Đức's self-immolation.

For months, American reporters, such as Halberstam, Sheehan and Browne, frequented Xá Lợi pagoda because there was a rumor that Vietnamese Buddhist monks would either disembowel or burn themselves publicly to protest religious oppression by the Diệm regime. The goal of the American reporters was to take pictures of these events since they would sell newspapers. Halberstam explained, “[It] was the nature of the game.” Thus, when Herndon, who was “pinch-hitting” for Sheehan in Vietnam, forgot his camera at home on June 11, 1963, he

⁴ Malcolm Browne, *The New Face of War* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 262.

⁵ Browne, *The New Face of War*, 262.

knew that he had just “lost the Pulitzer.” He did indeed. Browne won the Pulitzer in 1964 for the photographs he took of Thích Quảng Đức’s self-immolation.⁶

The relationship that Vietnamese Buddhist monks had with American reporters was different. The Buddhist monks would use the American reporters as decoys to lure the secret police away from the pagoda, so that they could demonstrate. The Buddhist monks also used the reporters to voice their struggle. The night before the immolation, Thích Đức Nghiệp – the primary spokesman of the Unified Buddhist Church – called Malcolm Browne to inform him of Thích Quảng Đức’s self-immolation. In addition, Thích Đức Nghiệp and a few other monks orchestrated the whole plan. The monks arranged for the car, the driver, the gasoline and the human chain that would stop the police from extinguishing the fire burning on Thích Quảng Đức’s body.

With the American reporters and Vietnamese Buddhist monks setting the stage, Thích Quảng Đức played his part perfectly. Yet no one wondered, “Was he a mere pawn in this game? What did he die for?” In one of the poems he left for his disciples, Thích Quảng Đức expressed that the intention of his self-immolation was to benefit Vietnamese Buddhists. He envisioned his body burning like “a lamp shining into darkness,” which would lead those that were lost to shore. As his body burned, the smoke, like the fragrance of burning joss sticks, would bring calmness and inform those who were “ignorant” of the Diệm regime’s repression of Buddhism. Once the body stopped burning, the ash, Thích Quảng Đức imagined, would “fill the gap of

⁶ William W Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War*, 1st ed (New York, N.Y: Times Books, 1995), 316.

inequality” between Buddhism and Catholicism. Thích Quảng Đức then hoped that his spirit would continue to help Buddhists by awakening others.⁷

In the wake of Thích Quảng Đức’s self-immolation, the Diệm regime intensified its violent repression of Vietnamese Buddhism. The police raided pagodas, and the monks took to the “barricades.”⁸ A new generation of monks, such as Thích Trí Quang and Thích Nhất Hạnh, seemed to emerge. They were far from the stereotypical image of disengagement. In fact, the new monks were enigmatic yet problematic for the Diệm regime, for they could lecture on the Dharma yet discuss this-worldly events and incite laypeople to protest.

The monks who led the Buddhist Struggle Movement during the 1960’s were the product of the Buddhist revival. The Buddhist associations, the monastic schools and the changes in the practice of Vietnamese Buddhism finally produced a group of monks who were capable of remaking their religion to engage with change. These institutions also produced a new generation of laypeople who could collaborate with monks to propagate the Dharma. And in the face of violence, engagement became struggle.

Thích Quảng Đức’s self-immolation became the defining moment of the Buddhist Struggle Movement in the Republic of Vietnam during the 1960’s. But the act as well as the movement hovered above history, like an anomaly, for they seemed to lack a situated context that could anchor them and render them meaningful. Recent scholarship acknowledged the connection between the Buddhist Struggle Movement and the Buddhist revival, but it did not

⁷ Quốc Tuệ, ed., *Công Cuộc Tranh Đấu Của Phật Giáo Việt Nam: Từ Phật Đản đến Cách Mạng 1963* ([Saigon], 1964), 113.

⁸ Jerrold L. Schecter, *The New Face of Buddha; Buddhism and Political Power in Southeast Asia* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1967), 198.

center the analysis on the continuity of the Buddhist revival.⁹ But we know better. Social engagement began with the Buddhist revival.

⁹ See Edward Miller, “Religious Revival and the Politics of Nation Building: Reinterpreting the 1963 ‘Buddhist Crisis’ in South Vietnam,” *Modern Asian Studies*, August 8, 2014. In the article, even though Miller acknowledged the connection between the Buddhist Struggle Movement and the Buddhist revival, he interpreted Buddhist actions in the framework of “politics of nation building” instead of Buddhist social engagement. Despite its teleologic approach, the article by Miller provides a wealth of sources on the Buddhist Struggle Movement as well as the Buddhist revival. It also gives a very good summary of the events unfolding in the Republic of Vietnam during 1963.

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