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From Indra to Maitreya: Buddhist Influence in Vietnamese Political Thought

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Until the fifteenth century, Vietnam was essentially a Buddhist country. The piety of the dynasties constituted their source of legitimacy, and Buddhism provided a means for royal authority to penetrate and incorporate the local political structure. In the face of the development of social unrest, however, Confucian literati started to voice their concern for the maintenance of order and eventually emerged in the fifteenth century as spokesmen for royal authority, definers of public morality and guardians of the court. As a result, institutional Buddhism lost the court patronage it had previously enjoyed, and henceforth its political influence declined steadily.

The Buddhist concept of political authority

Although Buddhism was originally conceived as a technique for personal salvation, it was rapidly institutionalised as local rulers adopted it as their official state religion. It goes without saying that Buddhism became increasingly political as it served to legitimise the sovereign's rule. Adopted as an ideology, it supplied ingredients for the establishment of a state orthodoxy that was superimposed throughout the realm over all the regional or local cults, which the royal cult of the kingdom gradually absorbed. While accommodating the cults of ancestors and imparting a talismanic magic to its shrines, it also offered the instruments of devotional religion and it provided an abundant literature for the scholastic training of monks.[1]

The institution of the monarchy played a particularly important role in Theravāda Southeast Asia by providing a system of social and political authority that overlapped and transcended the values of Buddhism. Hindu-Buddhist traditions of kingship saw the monarch as a repository of *kamma* (*karma*) linking the kingdom to the cosmos, and as possessing, both in his person and in his office, a relationship to the invisible world by which his body and his actions were made sacred. From this viewpoint, Hindu-Buddhist syncretism seems to have developed further in Southeast Asia than in India itself. Not only were the Hindu gods Indra and Brahmā invoked on the same level as the local guardian spirits, but the association of these deities and Buddha with the cults of kings could lead to a conception of the monarch as the incarnation of a Śiva-Buddha entity, to give only one example. As rulers of the earth, living kings became the representatives of, and part of, the

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1 See for instance, Ian Mabbett, 'Buddhism in Champa', in *Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th Centuries*, ed. David G. Marr and A. C. Milner (Singapore: ISEAS, 1986), p. 307.

divine cosmic ruler; by their ensuing quality of *devarāja*, they could be compared to Śiva, Vishnu and Indra. Moreover, since the populations had often viewed the king as godlike, an imminent Buddha, it came naturally to Buddhist monarchs to proclaim themselves gods.

In this way, metaphysical formulations of Buddhist doctrine which emphasised the determinative influence of *kamma* and religious merit and demerit on human well-being and socio-economic status were used to lend legitimacy to the monarchy. An example is the Mon-Thai state of which Ayutthaya became the capital in 1351. On the one hand, the structure of the Buddhist cosmos – in particular its hierarchical, merit-determined order – was reproduced at the level of human social and political organisation. On the other hand, Ayutthaya inherited from Hindu tradition its *devarāja* concept of divine kingship. The king was considered the receptacle of divine essence, and, as he was sovereign, his absolute power and authority were therefore beyond challenge. Hindu tradition manifested itself in the form of royal ceremonies, such as rituals associated with the oath of allegiance and the coronation of the king. Moreover, Hindu and Buddhist influences converged and achieved a complex reworking of earlier definitions of the monarch's role. The Hindu notion of divine kingship, in its modified form, conceptualised the king as the embodiment of the law and provided him with a majestic aura of mystery and a place in the cosmic order. As for Buddhism, it affirmed the role of kingship as the expression of the *dhamma* and righteousness, and as the fountain of justice, as well as the ordering principle of society. Its moral principles ensured that the king should be measured against the law. Both traditions accordingly concurred in buttressing the political authority of kingship, each giving its own legitimisation to the polity. However, the conception of kingship would progressively shift from one of divine monarchy towards that of the Buddhist *dhammarāja*. Increasingly, kingship would be considered sacred because it symbolised the *dhamma*, the principle upon which the order of the kingdom depended, and it would become less and less dependent on the Hindu myths of divine kingship.[2]

Indeed, Buddhism brought with it a formidable body of opinion concerning the duties of rulers and the criteria by which a 'good' or a 'bad' reign could be judged. Ideally, every king should act not only as a supporter of religion, but also as the epitome of moral and spiritual piety. In so doing, he maintained order in the mundane world and harmony with the unseen one that merited the loyalty and obedience of his subjects. The Buddha's teaching thus stressed that a king should gain the favour of his subjects through the 'four elements of popularity': liberality, affability, justice and impartiality. Throughout his kingdom, the religion and the people should be nurtured, no wrongdoing should prevail, and wealth should be given to the poor.[3] People were taught that devout rulers who governed wisely would be rewarded, but that a king who failed in his duties would ultimately be punished, either by the rejection of his subjects or by reincarnation as a lesser being.

Nevertheless, what amounted to a contractual relationship between rulers and subjects was often obscured by the enhanced status assumed by Southeast Asian kings, to which religion itself made a direct contribution. Besides their divine essence, Theravāda

2 Somboon Suksamran, 'Buddhism, Political Authority and Legitimacy in Thailand and Cambodia', in *Buddhist Trends in Southeast Asia*, ed. Trevor Ling (Singapore: ISEAS, 1993), pp. 101–53.

3 Robert Lester, *Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973), pp. 62–5.

Buddhist rulers inherited the politico-religious notion of *chakravartin* or Universal Monarch who would prepare the world for the coming of the next Buddha. The *chakravartin* was the model of the pious monarch who governed through peaceful means, encouraged the propagation of Buddhism, and very generously secured the prosperity of the clergy.

Yet, the Buddhist concept of political authority suggests that kingship was established because of the imperfections of man and the need for social order. Buddhist kingship was therefore fundamentally based on the concept of righteousness. To maintain his political authority and to regulate state affairs for the benefit of the kingdom and hence to reaffirm and enhance his authority, the king had to be a virtuous ruler, the *dhammarāja* or king of the [Buddhist] law. Thus, the *dhamma* is of universal relevance, applicable as much to individual conduct as to the principles of government.

Vietnamese Buddhism prior to the Trúc Lâm school

As far as statecraft and kingship are concerned, Vietnam was by no means a Confucian state during the Trần dynasty (1226–1400), for Buddhism flourished in this country, too. And, although oriented toward Mahāyāna rather than Theravāda, the Vietnamese monarchy was not at this period fundamentally different from that of Ayutthaya. Vietnam was much more monarchical, and Buddhist, than Confucian.[4] Indeed, until the end of the fourteenth century, Vietnamese leaders differentiated themselves from Chinese rulers by granting preeminence to Buddhism over Confucianism. A popular saying of the times captures the early attraction of Buddhism over Vietnamese minds: 'The soil belongs to the king, the pagoda to the village, and the landscape to Buddha' (*đất vua, chùa làng, phong cảnh Bụt*). Many differences existed, of course, between Mahāyāna Buddhism in Vietnam and the Theravāda version practised in other Southeast Asian countries. For one, Vietnamese patterns of cultural borrowing from China structured the evolution of Buddhism in ways different from those at work in Theravāda countries. One should not forget, for example, that this Chinese cultural pull meant that the Vietnamese read Buddhist scriptures and religious tracts written in classical Chinese rather than Sanskrit or Pāli as was the case in Ayutthaya and in other Theravāda-minded kingdoms.

Moreover, the Mahāyāna stream of Vietnamese Buddhism allowed for collective as opposed to purely individual salvation, whereas Theravāda considered salvation to be the reward of an individual's efforts to achieve enlightenment. This gave rise, in particular, to the idea that one could be saved from damnation by merely thinking of Avalokiteśvara the compassionate, as contained in the doctrine of Amitābha or Amida – the belief in the Pure Land (or the Western Heaven, Sukhāvatī), into which the devotee may be reborn through grace by calling upon the Buddha's name. The Pure Land is presided over by the Buddha of Infinite Light, with the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara acting on his behalf. Under Emperor Lý Thánh-tông (r. 1055–72), for instance, it seems that the monk Thảo Đường advocated the practices of enlightenment through intuition and the mind-numbing recitation of

4 R. B. Smith, 'The Cycle of Confucianization in Vietnam', in *Aspects of Vietnamese History*, ed. Walter F. Vella (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1973), p. 9. For a quick look at the evolution of Vietnamese Buddhism, see *Lịch sử Phật giáo Việt-Nam* [History of Buddhism in Vietnam], ed. Nguyễn Tài Thư (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1988); Mai Thọ Truyền, 'Le bouddhisme au Vietnam', in *Présence du bouddhisme*, ed. René de Berval (Paris: Gallimard, 1987); Nguyễn Thế Anh, 'Buddhism and Vietnamese Society Throughout History', *South East Asia Research*, 1, 1 (1993): 98–114; Minh Chi *et al.*, *Buddhism in Vietnam* (Hanoi: Thế Giới Publishers, 1999); Nguyễn Duy Hinh, *Tư tưởng Phật giáo Việt Nam* [Vietnamese Buddhist Thought] (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1999).

Buddha's name as used by the Pure Land sect: 'If you continue to practice *niệm Phật* [recitation of the name of Buddha], your mind will stay in the Pure Land; your heart will join the Amitābha Buddha. Without walking a step, the Pure Land appears in front of you; without waiting for a future life, the blessings of the Western Heaven are yours.'[5]

These doctrinal disparities aside, religious policy as a major and permanent aspect of kingship and statecraft tended in Vietnam, as much as in other parts of Southeast Asia, to institutionalise the social and political elements of the local population as a way of gaining better control over the countryside. The need for links with the supernatural intertwined with the need of the central power to establish itself over the local and potentially competing powers and their cults. As in the other traditional states of Southeast Asia, the answer for Vietnam was the cosmic umbrella of Hindu-Buddhist thought. But, because of the more secular traditions inherited from the long Chinese domination, the rulers were not actually seen as gods, even though such a king as Lý Cao-tông (1173–1210) happened to make a claim to Buddhahood by ordering his subjects to call him Buddha. Rather, they were believed to have holy or quasi-divine characteristics, often expressed in Buddhist terms, which could be identified by signs that included Buddhist portents.[6]

In particular, rulers were deemed to possess immanent spiritual qualities that attracted the attention of local spirits and incited them to manifest themselves. These spirits were venerated because they protected specific localities and placed their space-protecting spiritual power at the ruler's disposal. The contacts with the supernatural being an integral part of Vietnamese kingship, the task of the kings had to be to establish harmony between the country's supernatural and temporal powers and to maintain relations of confidence and loyalty with the different local spirits, in order to incorporate them into the 'centre' and include them in the Vietnamese identity. Beginning in the eleventh century, there was a deliberate attempt to integrate local cults and popular beliefs into a national cult of royal authority so that, as Keith Taylor puts it, the people could 'believe' in their rulers.[7]

On the other hand, the multiplicity of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas found in Mahāyāna provided ambitious rulers with the possibility of aspiring to the status of one of those superior beings themselves, although such superiority would limit itself above all to qualities of wisdom and charity. This explains the strong link in symbol and ritual to Indra, the King of Heaven and of the Gods, in the form of Đế Thích (帝釋, Ch. *Dishi*). Established in 1057 by Lý Thánh-tông, together with the cult of Phạn Vương (Brahmā), the ritual surrounding Đế Thích continued through the Trần dynasty,[8] only to be displaced during the rise of the Confucian state in the fifteenth century. Linked to the name of Đế Thích, officially called *Thiên Vương* (天王 the King of Heaven), are frequent references in the

5 Quoted by Nguyễn Ngọc Huy, 'The Tradition of Human Rights in Vietnam', *The Vietnam Review*, 3 (1997): 28. Belief in the Pure Land (*Tịnh Độ*) and the cult of Amida became widespread under the Lý.

6 See Nguyễn Thế Anh, 'La conception de la monarchie divine dans le Viêt Nam traditionnel', *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*, 84 (1997): 147–57. Later on, this tendency to credit kings with special powers may have contributed to compensating for the limitations which Confucianism placed on the sacral status assigned to rulers, as well as to their exclusion from a political role during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

7 Keith W. Taylor, 'Authority and Legitimacy in Traditional Vietnam', in Marr and Milner ed., *Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th Centuries*, p. 176; Nguyễn Thế Anh, 'The Vietnamization of the Cham Deity Pô Nagar', in *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, ed. Keith W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1995), pp. 42–50.

8 Ngô Sĩ Liên, *Đại Việt Sử ký Toàn thư* [Complete historical record of Đại Việt] (henceforth *TT*), (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1983-5), vol. I, p. 283.

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Vietnamese historical texts to the term *Thiên* (Heaven), used in the nomenclature of reigns, rituals, temples and places. Of Chinese origin, the term *Thiên* usually refers to the impersonal Heaven of Confucianism with its strong moral connotations, but under the Lý (1009–1225) and the Trần, it relates instead to the Hindu-Buddhist Heaven. Allowing the parallelism between microcosm and macrocosm and encompassing the local cults, the royal cult of Indra linked the earthly king to the celestial and created a positive and intensive relationship between the monarchy and the population, while maintaining social order and bringing prosperity and fecundity.[9] Likewise, members of the Vietnamese aristocracy were brought into the Company of the King of Heaven (*Thiên Vương ban*), interpreted by John Whitmore as a distinguished group of courtiers who participated in the ritual surrounding the cult of Đế Thích: 'By doing so, they would have maintained the central existence of dynastic continuity and upheld the cosmic configuration of the Vietnamese ruler.'[10]

Kingship and Buddhism in fourteenth-century Vietnam

Buddhism, then, was consequently a symbolic representation of both the royal presence and national integration at the same time, as the kings attempted to consolidate their hold over the country. Showing that they belonged to the same tradition as other early Southeast Asian rulers, whose role included teaching and encouraging spiritual well-being, successive Trần rulers worked for the active propagation of the Buddhist doctrine, while establishing their own *Thiền* (Ch. *Chan*, Sans. *Dhyāna*) school known as the Trúc Lâm (Bamboo Grove) school to provide unified Buddhist leadership. Becoming the first Trúc Lâm patriarch, Trần Nhân-tông (r. 1279–93) wrote in his *Thiền tông chỉ nam tự* (Preface to the guide to the Thiền school): 'Serving as the scales of justice for prosperity and as rules for the future is the great responsibility of genies and saints. Why should I not consider the responsibility of genies and saints as mine and the teaching of the Buddha as mine?'[11]

A plenitude of Buddhist experience was soon available in the form of a system of beliefs, methods of meditation, and special rites (including Tantric ones). Trần Minh-tông (r. 1314–29) in particular cast three statues of the Buddha, constructed religious buildings, ordained more than 15,000 monks and nuns, and also had a copy of the Canon printed. The intention behind this aggressive circulation of Buddhist texts was to teach compassion and other moral virtues, to stimulate a surge of religious devotion by inculcating the value of what is known as *phương tiện* 方便, or 'devotional expedients', within the capacity of ordinary people, and perhaps to encourage the people to abandon their traditional

9 The founder of the Lý dynasty adopted *Thuận Thiên* [Conform to Heaven's way] as his reign title (1010–28); the reign title of Lý Thái-tông (1028–54) was *Thiên Thành* [Completion with Heaven's accord] from 1029–34; Thánh-tông (1054–72) took the reign title *Thiên Huống Bảo Tượng* [Heaven confers the precious elephants] in 1069, after having received two white elephants in tribute. The *Complete Historical Record of Đại Việt* notes the building of the pagodas Thiên Đức, Thiên Hựu, Thiên Ninh, Thiên Phù, Thiên Phúc, Thiên Thành, and Thiên Thọ for the cult of Indra, and the casting of statues in gold of Indra and Brahmā in 1016, 1057 and 1134 (*TT*, vol. I, pp. 247, 283, 324). Throughout the Trần dynasty, the ritual concerning Indra and Brahmā was celebrated in the two pagodas Thiên Phúc and Thiên Thọ. See also Nguyễn Duy Hinh, 'Three Legends and Early Buddhism in Vietnam', *The Vietnam Forum*, 13 (1990): 10–23, for other examples of pagodas meant actually to worship Indra, since they were devoted to Buddhist deities deemed to be Indra's incarnations.

10 J. K. Whitmore, 'Elephants Can Actually Swim: Contemporary Chinese Views of Late Ly Dai Viet', in Marr and Milner, ed., *Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th Centuries*, p. 126.

11 Quoted in Minh Chi *et al.*, *Buddhism in Vietnam*, p. 86.

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worship of local spirits. O. W. Wolters infers that this was a deliberate policy of religious activism intended to impose ideological unity on the country under the umbrella of the Trúc Lâm school, the Trần rulers' own creation, and thus to bring the nation into a coherent 'oneness'.[12]

In this way, the Vietnamese court strove during the early decades of the fourteenth century to fuse the dynamic forces of the realm into a new holistic Thiền Buddhism. This holistic movement endeavoured to blend a variety of elements from the multifarious aspects of Vietnamese Buddhist life in view of forming a single Buddhist ruling tradition. The result was to forge disparate elements into a throne-centred whole. The compilation of the classic Vietnamese mythic history *Việt điện u linh tập* (Collection of the invisible powers of Việt) in 1329 fulfilled a specific aspect of this whole; at the same time, it appeared as a reaction to the emergence of the more formal and moralistic Chinese style of history. Taylor rightly points to the spirit world described in this text as 'a protective screen' for the realm, which legitimised the central monarchy and loyal subjects with their contact.[13] The text structured this spirit world and linked it to the overarching Buddhist system of the time. The spirits now served the realm with its monarchy and the Buddhist world as constructed by the Trúc Lâm school. In this formula, time and space, universal and local beliefs came together to form the present whole.

Wolters remarks with good reason that a story of Trần times has to consider the influence of *Thiền* and its meditative way on the emperor's mood.[14] Those who ruled until 1357 left a considerable body of Buddhist literature, and we learn from it that they made a virtue of avoiding prejudice or partiality, of reconciling opposite points of view. However, they did not neglect their official duties. Trần Thái-tông (r. 1225–58) claimed that he had to work hard but managed to steal leisure to study the *Diamond Sutra*, a major source for the basic *Dhyāna* teachings on the extinction of one's conscience, the perception of one's Buddha-nature as a void, the practicability of immediate enlightenment and the relativity of all phenomena.[15] Those who absorbed these teachings could ignore distinctions and especially the distinction among past, present and future. The past was relevant only in terms of the present: 'now' would be when flashes of spiritual enlightenment were achievable and bad *karma* avoided. Such a serene outlook would be compatible with a present-minded and relaxed mode of government, and one would expect those who had mastered meditative techniques to possess immense reserves of confidence in their ability to cope with every situation. This, in turn, generated the energy for charismatic leadership. By affirming action while belittling the ego, Trần Buddhism provided little room for

12 O. W. Wolters, *Two Essays on Dai Viêt in the Fourteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 1988), p. 121. For information on various components of the belief system at this time, see Hà Văn Tấn, 'Inscriptions from the Tenth to Fourteenth Centuries Recently Discovered in Vietnam (July 1991)', in Taylor and Whitmore ed., *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, pp. 51–8.

13 Keith W. Taylor, 'Notes on the *Viêt diên u linh tâp*', *The Vietnam Forum*, 8 (1986): 26–59.

14 O. W. Wolters, 'On Telling a Story of Vietnam in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 26, 1 (1995): 65.

15 In the Preface to his *Kim cương Tam muội kinh Chú giải* (Notes on the Diamond Sutra), Trần Thái-tông wrote: 'The character accumulates in the depths of our conscience, the true spirit is placid, the concept of fullness and incompleteness is annihilated… Deprived of comprehension, man will not be able to understand the reason for all this. This is not brought together, nor dissipated. It is not lost, nor does it remain. Our eyes see neither its form, nor its silhouette, and our ears do not perceive its echo. It is neither existence, nor nothingness, neither religion, nor the world. It exists independently, in a supernatural way. Outside of it, there is nothing. Thus, it is the unique character of Vajra [Diamond]' (quoted in Minh Chi *et al.*, *Buddhism in Vietnam*, pp. 96–7).

arbitrary despotism.[16] On the contrary, from the concept of leadership based on the cultivation of a loyal following rather than on obedience mechanistically rendered by subordinates flowed an increasing reliance on those personal qualities that attracted devoted supporters. In other words, leadership had to be won and could not be taken for granted.

Its nature notwithstanding, Trúc Lâm was in fact a politically committed form of Buddhism, and the Trần rulers' activism distinguished this school from the Chan school in China and from *Thiền* thought in Vietnam during the Lý period, despite a common doctrine. According to Trần Nhân-tông, Buddhism should serve society as much as it should serve spiritual life. When the first Trần emperor, Thái-tông, made known his desire to give up his throne to embrace a monk's life, he was admonished by the master Viên Chung: 'Being the king of a people, one cannot follow one's own desire. One must take as one's desire the desire of the people; one must take as one's aspiration the aspiration of the people.'[17] Biographies of eminent monks as recorded in *Thiền uyển tập anh* (Compendium of outstanding figures of the *Thiền* garden), a work composed around 1337, describe a kind of Buddhism which was a mixture of meditation, asceticism, thaumaturgy, magic and ritualism yet remained very engaged with the world.[18]

In Chinese Buddhism, there were two possible courses of action: 'participation' in worldly affairs and hermitlike 'abstention' from them. They were usually kept rigorously separate from each other as two mutually exclusive categories, rather than being dynamically combined. Conversely, what filters through Trần Buddhist texts is that their authors believed they possessed the theoretical licence to engage in a life of both private 'spiritual experimentation' and practical politics, basing the latter upon the former. This synthesis of 'participation' and 'abstention' was to constitute an integral part of Vietnamese political thought.[19] This perhaps counterbalanced what could be considered as nihilistic elements in the teachings of Buddhism.

The *Thiền uyển tập anh* text also reveals the possibility for religious men to overcome the most obvious shortcoming of Buddhism – its essentially otherworldly orientation – so that they could take an active interest in political matters. This was made feasible through an ingenious interpretation of the Buddhist idea of salvation inherent in the notion of the Bodhisattva[20] in order to authorise the concept that it was the duty of those 'deferred' Buddhas to assist the ruler of the country by becoming his advisors. The eminent monks in Vietnam appeared thus as self-conscious and responsible cultural witnesses who were always ready to respond to the call of their country. They found in Buddhism the resources

16 Nguyên Ngoc Huy, 'Tradition of Human Rights', p. 32.

17 Quoted by Nguyên Hoàng Anh, 'Le bouddhisme dhyāna Truc Lâm', *The Vietnam Forum*, 5 (1985): 38.

18 Cuong Tu Nguyen, 'Rethinking Vietnamese Buddhist History: Is the *Thiên Uyên Tập Anh* a "Transmission of the Lamp" Text?', in Taylor and Whitmore ed. *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, p. 102. A translation and commentary on the text are in Cuong Tu Nguyen, *Zen in Medieval Vietnam: A Study and Translation of the Thiền Uyển Tập Anh* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

19 In the nineteenth century, the Emperor Minh-Mạng (r. 1820–40) would put it like this: 'To reconcile the two aspects of participation in the world of men and abstention from the world of men, in order to create a special way of life for Buddhists: an emperor could be a monk and a monk could be a secular leader of his country.' (Quoted by Alexander Woodside, in *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History*, ed. David J. Steinberg *et al.* [Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987], p. 38).

20 Beings who have already achieved salvation, the Bodhisattvas postpone their entering nirvana as, moved by compassion for the sufferings of mankind, they descend again into the world to work for the salvation of mankind.

not only for their own spiritual cultivation, but also for fulfilling the common historical, social and cultural aims of the people. For them, studying the *dharma*, investigating the scriptures, and performing religious activities for the masses were integral parts of a composite worldview. This, in truth, does not in the least contradict the Buddhist ideal, since the Bodhisattva's path toward enlightenment included not only the acquisition of wisdom (*jñāna*) but also the acquisition of merit (*punya*). This consisted of activities such as attaining true knowledge of reality, preaching the *dharma*, explaining the subtle shades of meaning contained in the teachings, employing proficient means in prescribing religious practices, making offerings, practising compassion and cultivating all sorts of meritorious actions.[21]

This approach was not without its problems, some of them rather arduous. However much the monks were valued as advisors, they still could not compensate for the inherent deficiencies of Buddhism as a state religion.[22] With the consolidation of royal power, the disadvantages of relying on Buddhism for political purposes became more apparent. Although the Buddhist salvation doctrine rationalised social commitment and political activism, it provided no real guidance for the exercise of power, or for its delegation. Moreover, despite its apolitical orientation which so attracted the rulers, it could unwittingly undermine the authority of the throne. Official historians in Vietnam tended to deplore the influence of Buddhism on their rulers because they believed that Buddhism encouraged too relaxed a style of government. These Confucian scholars would argue, for example, that amnesties made nonsense of the law by introducing an element of arbitrariness into its application. In pardoning an enemy of the state and letting him go free, a Buddhist king would subordinate the interests of the state to the dictates of the religion, an unforgivable breach of his duty. Lý emperor Thái-tông (r. 1028–54), had pardoned the district chief Nùng Trí Cao for a crime. Lê Văn Hưu, in his late thirteenth-century work *Đại Việt Sử ký* (Historical record of the Great Viêt), wrote disapprovingly that the emperor had been so infatuated with Buddhism that his belief in the merits of compassion led him to forget the great duties incumbent upon a monarch in maintaining political order.[23]

The fifteenth-century Confucian historiographer Ngô Sĩ Liên also complained that Lý laws were too influenced by Buddhism. Reacting on the light punishment meted out for murder (a mere 100 blows, 50 characters tattooed, and hard labour), he wrote: 'For killing people there must be execution; that has always been the rule. [Under the Lý] the crime of murder was punished as any other crime. Thus they did not distinguish between degrees of wrong, losing the weightage of light and heavy.'[24] Lê Văn Hưu further disagreed with the wealth lavished on Buddhist foundations, objecting that Lý support for Buddhist temples had actually distracted the people's attention away from loyalty to the throne.[25]

In reality, it did not take long for increasing socio-economic problems to arise to shake confidence in the efficacy of the Trần political construct. From 1343 onwards the

21 Cuong Tu Nguyen, 'Rethinking Vietnamese Buddhist History', p. 114.

22 The fact that Buddhist monks disavowed society's claims on them, including the claims of blood ties, should also be taken into account. They thus proclaimed themselves to be outside the realm of the king's subjects, outside the reach of his laws, and to be ruled by a power higher than the king, since the only laws they could live by were the laws of the monkhood or *vinaya*.

23 *TT*, vol. I, p. 273.

24 Ibid., vol. I, p. 319.

25 Ibid., vol. I, p. 242.

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annals repeatedly refer to disturbances in the countryside, sometimes prolonged ones: bands of starving people took up arms, and monks and dependants of the princes were mentioned as being among the insurgents. The situation inside the country was already disturbed even before Emperor Minh-tông died in 1357. In a political culture where almost everything depended on the calibre of the ruler, we can suppose that the country went into rapid decline under the impotent and dissolute Dụ-tông (r. 1342–69). Village unrest became chronic, while to the south the neighbouring Cham were on the offensive. In 1379 the rebel Nguyễn Bổ, using magical arts, styled himself 'king'. In 1389 the monk Phạm Sư Ôn raised an army of vagabonds, assumed a title, and occupied the capital for three days.[26] Uprisings continued until the end of the century. Local leaders rallied followers, attracted entourages and arrogated for themselves imperial rank and court symbols. Rebels also tapped sources of supernatural power.

In this context, while the yearning for stability was intense as anxiety increasingly underscored the need for good government, Emperor Minh-tông's religious outlook, detached from phenomenal things such as rural unrest, caused serious problems when it came to ruling. The annalist tells us that members of his entourage complained that people were illegally forsaking their villages and that officials were not taking up their duties. 'Why worry?' was the gist of his reply, a vivid glimpse into the Trần family's relaxed management of affairs. By the end of the 1330s, however, Minh-tông was apparently willing to consider alternative approaches, and to listen to those of the Vietnamese literati who felt a compelling necessity to cope with the events and problems that faced them.[27] These men set about to propose new expedients for dynastic survival, in order to preserve the existing order and to set its relations right. Since they lived in a Buddhist age, they were not anti-Buddhist *per se*; rather, they wished to remove what they saw as the baleful results of an overly strong link between Buddhism and the state. They did not call for ridding the realm of Buddhist belief; they only wanted to connect trends within the management of the state and thereby solve the destabilising problems of the time. This first generation of the new classical school of thought saw a direct link between their own epoch and the classic Antiquity of China with its sage kings. They believed that the teachings and actions of these figures could be brought to bear on their own times. Such a scholar as Chu Văn An (?–1370), employed as tutor for Minh-tông's son, recommended that his students use the Chinese texts, concentrate on Antiquity and how it applied to the present day, and be aware of the problems of the Buddhist present in which they lived.[28]

Hence, a different conceptualisation of time began to take shape: whereas there had been indifference to the past in earlier periods, Vietnam now required a 'past' as a critique of the present and as a way of defining its goals for the future.[29] Changing conditions had indeed made nonsense of the notion of changelessness. Lê Quát, one of Chu Văn An's students, criticised Buddhists of all social classes because of their belief in the redemption concept. He wrote:

> The Buddhists take misfortune and happiness to move the hearts of the people, and how fervent are their followers! From royal kinsmen above to common folk below, all

26 Ibid., vol. II, pp. 166, 179.
27 John K. Whitmore, 'Chu Van An and the Rise of "Antiquity" in Fourteenth-Century Đai Viêt', *The Vietnam Review*, 2 (1996): 50–61.
28 Ibid., p. 57.
29 Wolters, 'On Telling a Story', p. 71.

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> give alms to further the Buddha's business and although they come to the end of their money and goods, they still are not stingy. As they make offerings in the pagoda, their hearts are blissful as if they held in their hands a binding contract for automatic redemption that was due and payable in the future… Wherever people live, there is a Buddhist pagoda. When pagodas collapse, they are rebuilt; when they chip, they are repaired. Buddhist buildings equal half the population's dwellings… I know a little of the way of Confucian virtuous men to use in educating the people, but it has not been able to provide for such unanimous faith as has Buddhism.[30]

Lê Quát was not alone in regretting the absence of Confucian schools. Trương Hán Siêu (?–1354), a scholar-official under Emperors Anh-tông (r. 1294–1314) and Minh-tông, also reacted strongly against the influence of Buddhist institutions on the countryside and its population.[31] Attacking lazy and cunning monks who enticed villagers from their home, Siêu cited Mencius to deplore the lack of village schools that would teach the people their social duties.

Those literati began thus a process that would continue through the fourteenth century and into the fifteenth: John Whitmore demonstrates that the ideology of Antiquity started in the age of holistic Buddhism, developed through the years of crisis during the Cham wars, reached its pinnacle in Hồ Quý Ly's state of Đại Ngu (see below), and continued into the early Lê dynasty.[32] Emerging as an effort to deal with the extension of the many complexities that appeared then, this fourteenth-century ideology served historically as a transition from Vietnam's Hindu-Buddhist age into that of the Chinese model, when Confucian influence would become the ideology that eventually filled the vacuum after *Thiền* could no longer provide rulers with a framework for conceptualising their mission as sovereigns.

The demise of Buddhism as state ideology

The end of Trần rule came as the dynasty fell into decadence and when a commoner, Hồ Quý Ly, was allowed to become the all-powerful Court Adviser. Hồ Quý Ly used Confucian teachings to train a body of officials loyal not to the Trần court but to himself as patron of the Confucian ideology; with their support he seized the throne. Amid Cham invasions and peasant rebellions, some of the reforms he launched to deal with the crisis were aimed at the Buddhist community. After having defrocked many of the monks and drafted them into the army to fight the Cham, on the grounds that they had participated in lawless gangs in the countryside, in 1396 Hồ Quý Ly sought to purify Buddhist doctrine and to exert increased structural control over Buddhism itself. All monks under fifty had to return to secular life, while civilians who possessed a thorough understanding of the doctrine were to become officials in the Buddhist hierarchy. The remainder of the monks were to be temple servants and placed under strict monastic control. Acting against local autonomy, Hồ Quý Ly endeavoured to reassert central authority and its control over the resources of the countryside, and to buttress the decaying state ideology by seeking legitimacy not via traditional indigenous patterns, but through a selective interpretation of the Chinese classics.[33]

30 *TT*, vol. II, p. 153.
31 Wolters, *Two Essays on Dai Viêt*, pp. 17–18, 27–8, 33, 108, 121–2.
32 Whitmore, 'Chu Van An', p. 59.
33 See John K. Whitmore, *Vietnam, Hô Quý Ly, and the Ming (1371-1421)* (New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 1985).

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The Ming occupation of Vietnam (1407–28), with its imposed assimilation policy, reinforced the underlying intellectual impetus of Confucianism that was already perceptible under Hồ Quý Ly's anti-Buddhism measures. It opened Vietnamese society to a greater degree of Confucianism and to bureaucratic patterns of government. It thus prepared the ruling elite of the new Lê dynasty (1428–1788) for the full adoption of the political and cultural model of contemporary Ming China, once the Chinese themselves had been driven out. The Lê consequently broke with the Buddhist tradition of the Lý and the Trần, moving to replace Buddhism as the court-favoured ethical system and weaken its hold over the population by encouraging the dicta of Confucianism via a Sinicised bureaucratic apparatus.

Like Theravāda Buddhism elsewhere in mainland Southeast Asia, Confucianism strove to exert its moral view over the localities that had to this point preserved their own cultural patterns. The result appears to have been a certain clash between the rigidities of the moralistic ideology and the flexibilities of the indigenous cultural system. This clash may be seen in the attempts of the central government to control the spirit cults of the countryside and to curb the vagabonds, those individuals not tied down to a specific village. At the same time, legal principles were more tightly applied. The Lê Code supported the orthodox structure of imperial order long known in China. The authority of the emperor was reinforced by punishment of the ten heinous crimes. Aspects of criminal procedure were modified to favour the state when the crime constituted a political act challenging the dynasty.[34] Provisions relating to the security, prestige and power of the emperor had as their ultimate purpose the preservation of imperial supremacy. While their substance would be natural in any monarchical state, the specific form they took in Vietnam was heavily influenced by the examples in the Chinese codes. Indeed, Lê lawmakers relied even more than their Chinese counterparts on criminal law to support Confucian morality and public authority in Vietnam.[35]

It should be stressed, however, that not until Lê Thánh-tông's reign (1460–97) did Confucian orthodoxy in state ideology reach full bloom. Under his predecessors, it remained a rather pale imitation of the Chinese imperial order model; kingship was still presented theoretically as an office where rules must prevail over the sovereign's personal will. On the other hand, the concepts of reciprocity and doing good for others contained in the two virtues exalted by Mencius, *nhân* (Ch. *ren* 仁, or virtue of humanity) and *nghĩa* (Ch. *yi* 義, or righteousness), were not seriously at variance with the ethic of Buddhism which had been so much a part of Vietnamese culture to that point. In addition, the work of Mencius with his right to 'revolution' was completely consistent with the traditional Vietnamese theory of kingship whereby leaders had to be worthy of their followers.[36]

34 Nguyên Ngoc Huy, 'Tradition of Human Rights', p. 43.

35 Nguyên Ngoc Huy and Ta Van Tài, 'The Vietnamese Texts', in *Laws of South-East Asia. I: The Pre-Modern Texts*, ed. M.B. Hooker (Singapore: Butterworth, 1986), pp. 454–5, 472.

36 Lê Thánh-tông himself, the main proponent of orthodoxy, remained convinced that the emperor's legitimacy rested on the people's happiness. In his poem 'The Conduct of Kings', he left his thoughts on the nature of kingship as a dedicated service:

> Ponder the ruler's way with utmost care,
> Feed men on earth, fear Heaven throned above.
> Protect the realm – walk in the ancients' steps,
> Cleanse cravings from the heart – go on no hunt.
> Wide choice of talents spreads the scholars' faith,
> Weapons in plenty build the soldiers' pride.

Moreover, if the Lê rulers were generally harsher in their government than their Lý and Trần predecessors, the concern was mainly to compel the people to adopt the circumspect code of personal behaviour associated with the Chinese orthodox classic, the *Li ji* (禮記 Book of Rites), a product of Han imperial orthodoxy. Neither personal power nor lust should divert subjects from the path of morality. This concern for morality, which found its expression especially in the contempt for a life of greed and monetary gain, could draw sustenance from the Buddhist tradition of purifying the heart by rejecting all desires and conventions. Thus China's imperial orthodoxy could enter Vietnam more as a moral posture and less as a political technique made necessary by the demands of creating an empire.

At any rate, Buddhism lost the court patronage it had previously enjoyed. An edict of 1461 drastically limited its expansion by forbidding the building of new temples and pagodas.[37] During the following century and a half, Buddhism seems to have received no encouragement from the court and so disappeared altogether from the royal record. Yet, it did not completely die out, but remained alive among the people, albeit in a rather syncretic form. In the early decades of the seventeenth century, it was to give signs of reawakening after a long period of dormancy. By the 1630s, for example, Buddhist monks had even found their way into the royal palace of Lê Thần-tông (r. 1619–43), said to be the reincarnation of Lý Nhân-tông who had lived five hundred years earlier. As Ralph Smith comments, other religions could continue to grow outside the Confucian hierarchy, because Confucianism was by its very nature incapable of absorbing the mass of the populace into its fold.[38]

Meanwhile, even after Lê Thánh-tông's reforms, orthodox Confucian beliefs did not prove solid enough to bolster a stable government, and were therefore unable to provide the country with unified rule under one dynasty. Shortly after his death in 1497, Vietnam entered a period of dissension and civil war lasting until 1802. These centuries of crippled central government resulted from the deep Vietnamese preference for strong charismatic leaders at a time when none was available. In the absence of one with great virtue, authority went to those who could muster armies. Even among the many pretenders who emerged to seek power at this time, military officers from the Trịnh and Nguyễn families emerged to rule.

Therefore, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the realm was divided between the Trịnh lords north of the eighteenth parallel and the Nguyễn lords to the south, each party acknowledged the monks' long-lasting influence in the countryside and accordingly endeavoured to win them over to its respective cause by making concessions to Buddhism.[39] In the south especially, the Nguyễn expressed their will of

Light your jade torch and see your subjects' needs,
May we and all our neighbors live at peace

(Huynh Sanh Thông, *The Heritage of Vietnamese Poetry* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979], p. 33).

37 *TT*, vol. II, p. 397.

38 R. B. Smith, 'Thailand and Vietnam: Some Thoughts towards a Comparative Historical Analysis', *Journal of the Siam Society*, 60, 2 (1972): 6.

39 The lord Trịnh Giang took different measures in favour of Buddhism, by sending a mission to obtain Buddhist texts from China (1734), by using forced labour to erect many pagodas (1736), and by forcing the court to make donations towards a large image of Buddha for the Quỳnh Lâm pagoda (1737) (*Khâm định Việt sử Thông giám Cương mục* [Complete Mirror of Viêt History] [henceforth *CM*] [Hanoi: NXB Giáo dục, 1998], vol. II, pp. 495, 500).

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emancipation from the North by placing themselves under the aegis of Buddhist spirits not enfeoffed to the Thăng-long court. In 1601 the construction in Huế of a seven-story *stūpa* dedicated to the Heavenly Mother (*Thiên Mụ*), the Nguyễn tutelary divinity, was ordered, no doubt with these political ideas in mind.[40] The lord Nguyễn Phúc Thần (1648–87), for one, was remembered as a notable Buddhist who gave protection to a number of monks who fled from China after the fall of the Ming.

Yet, while the central government was fragmented, the elite devoted to Confucian principles strengthened its position.[41] In 1663, working via the emperor Lê Huyền-tông (r. 1663–71), the lord Trịnh Tạc proclaimed the edict of the 'Forty-seven Rules for Teaching and Changing the People' in order to impose Confucian moral values on the society at large, especially the notions of loyalty and familial obligations.[42] Besides enjoining proper behaviour in accordance with the Confucian concepts of the 'three bonds' and 'five human relationships', the edict resolutely censured heterodox practices. Only persons authorised by the throne could become Buddhist monks or nuns, and no new Buddhist temples could be built. Books containing Buddhist, Taoist and other unorthodox doctrines could not be printed or sold. With orthodox teachings gaining more importance, laws and regulations reflected more and more the orthodox approach to public power. The pride the government took in its Confucian ideology was asserted with the choice of the title 'Everlasting Prosperity' *(Vĩnh Thịnh)* for the first period of Lê Dụ-tông's reign (1705–29). By the same token, the ruler was hailed as a 'superior man' (*quân tử*, Ch. *junzi*) sent by Heaven to rule, radiating moral virtue from the throne, invigorating everything and making the blessings of peace possible, while 'with propriety, righteousness, and officials who knew virtue, the people would come to follow good customs'.[43] Nevertheless, orthodoxy was observed only among an official elite at a distance from the daily lives of the ordinary people.

Maitreya and the expectations of the weak

In such a context, Buddhism could also provide the inspiration for popular rebellion against lay authorities. Significant threats to the ruler's position came especially from individual religious leaders who stood at the periphery of the officially sponsored order and whose status was often derived from indigenous traditions. At times of social disruption, those leaders could be seen as an alternative and legitimate authority. The belief that even a person of humble origins could acquire extraordinary powers and claim a special relationship with the supernatural could give rise to sudden eruptions of localised religious movements with prophecies, dreams, magic, amulets and claims of invulnerability and secret revelations serving as powerful weapons. Thus in 1516, at a time of dynastic decline under the reign of the king Lê Tương Dực (1510–26), a rebellion led by a pagoda-keeper Trần Cao broke out in Hải Dương province. Declaring himself a

40 Nguyễn Thế Anh, 'Vietnamization of the Cham Deity', p. 49; Tạ Chí Đại Trường, *Thần, người và đất Việt* [Spirits, men, and territory of Viêt] (Westminster, CA: Văn Nghệ, 1989), pp. 227–8.

41 See Keith W. Taylor, 'The Literati Revival in Seventeenth Century Vietnam', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 18, 1 (1987): 1–23.

42 Nguyễn Thế Anh, 'State and Civil Society under the Trinh Lords in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam', in *La société civile face à l'État dans les traditions chinoise, japonaise, coréenne et vietnamienne*, ed. Léon Vandermeersch (Paris : EFEO, 1994), p. 375.

43 *Đại Việt Sử ký Tục biên (1676-1789)* [Continued historical record of Dai Viêt] (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội 1991), p. 59.

descendant of the Trần dynasty and the incarnation of Đế Thích (Indra), Trần Cao performed miracles and acquired tens of thousands of followers. So potent was his appeal that he was for a short time able to call himself king of Đại Việt (Vietnam).[44]

Such figures could also be nurtured by the messianic tradition found in Buddhism. What was commonly expounded was the doctrine of the descent to earth of Maitreya – the messiah Buddha of the future, who was believed to be living in the 'heaven of the satisfied gods' before his incarnation on earth – and the arrival with him, after some cosmic convulsions, of a politically, economically and religiously reordered universe. Those who would listen to Maitreya's final sermon at that moment would attain *nirvāna* in this life rather than after an infinite number of rebirths. Although Buddhist texts specified that aeons must pass before Maitreya's appearance, there were recurring rumours that this might occur much earlier than originally foretold.

Most of the time this doctrine remained no more than the undeveloped core of a religion which sought individual and familial happiness, for Maitreya symbolised the aspirations of Vietnamese Buddhists for salvation and rebirth in his Pure Land. But it could also coexist with an ideological commitment to the appearance of a descendant of a discarded dynasty, who supposedly manifested himself suddenly in order to overthrow the corrupt established order. When such a 'supplement' was added to the doctrine, the messiah Buddha quickly became the god of bloody rebellions. These rebellions could be compared to the protest movements in Theravāda countries led by 'holy men' regarded as possessing sacral power (*phumibun* in Thai or *weikza* in Burmese), who could accuse rulers of failing in their duties.[45]

As a matter of fact, rebellions proliferated throughout the eighteenth century. A certain renewed growth of Buddhist activity during this period was indicative of the stresses and strains among the rural population and of popular dissatisfaction with elite efforts to strengthen Confucianism. Buddhist temples frequently served as foci of discontent, where monks sometimes organised their followers into armed militias. Rebels often challenged accepted Confucian values, mocked scholars, abused mandarins and even made fun of the emperor. The educated bureaucracy, however, generally considered that the cause of the prevailing social ills was a collapse of properly ordered human relationships which Confucianism had raised to cosmic principles. In this manner, a profound misunderstanding occurred when the heterogeneous religious culture patronised by the Tây Sơn movement succeeded in taking control of all of Vietnam at the turn of the eighteenth century. In particular, the ideology advocated by the scholar Ngô Thì Nhậm, who suggested many policies to the Tây Sơn, did not seem to be easily acceptable: aiming at combining Confucianism and Buddhism, it asserted that the two doctrines were necessary to man, that they were similar in principle and differed only in ways of coping with events.[46]

It was most certainly in reaction to the measures taken by the Tây Sơn regime during its short life span that the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945) again made Confucianism central to its administrative structure, in a stricter manner perhaps than the Lê in the fifteenth

44 *CM*, pp. 64–73.
45 See, for example, Chatthip Nartsupha, 'The Ideology of Holy Men Revolts in North East Thailand', in *History and Peasant Consciousness in South East Asia*, ed. Andrew Turton and Shigeharu Tanabe (Osaka, National Museum of Ethnology, 1984), pp. 111–34.
46 See Minh Chi *et al.*, *Vietnamese Buddhism*, pp. 162–5.

century, because it was conscious of the urgent need to reconstruct the social and political order in view of reinforcing its control over the society. Already under Gia-Long, the founder of this dynasty, different edicts meted out severe punishment for Buddhist and Taoist practices. The Nguyễn court feared Buddhism less as a highly organised political rival than as an indirect ideological competitor that could undermine its intricate bureaucratic order. It thus embarked upon a policy of religious control. To enforce orthodoxy, it manipulated the recruitment of monks and priests, imposed increased bureaucratic control over the organisation and size of the Buddhist clergy through the supervision of doctrinal examinations, limited the number of temples that were built and the amount of land they were given, and managed the distribution of cultic and scriptural materials that were channelled through the court. In particular, the government had a monopoly over the issuance of ordination certificates to Buddhist monks. The court itself paid the salaries of the head monks at the major temples, who were dubbed *tăng cang* (monk-controllers), implying clearly that they were government-appointed supervisors of the Buddhist church.[47]

Considered in terms of an organised institution, Mahāyāna Buddhism occupied a much more modest place in nineteenth-century Vietnamese society than Theravāda did in Burmese, Siamese or Cambodian societies. The heavily patronised Vietnamese Sangha became little more than a political instrument of the Nguyễn emperors. By itself, it was poorly organised. There was no hierarchy of temples controlled by a central monkhood as well as by the court, unlike Theravāda countries, where the ecclesiastical hierarchy was for the most part organised territorially, and the Sangha, reformed into a unified order under royal command, had been transformed into a popular force far outweighing any local spirit cult in spiritual potency.[48]

However, the orthodox ethic of subservient loyalty to the emperor did not appeal to all the Vietnamese people. Popular resistance to this imperial order resting on Legalist theories as well as on Confucian propriety came to light in the 1850s in a religious sect called the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương or 'Miraculous Fragrance of the Precious Mountain'. (The name was derived from a prediction by the preeminent sixteenth-century scholar Nguyễn Bỉnh Khiêm, who prophesied the birth of a Son of Heaven near a precious mountain or river in the Mekong Delta.) Formed through dynamics similar to those which produced the White Lotus and the Taiping movements in China, this sect combined Buddhist teachings, old Vietnamese prophecies and charismatic leadership to offer an alternative to orthodoxy. It was opposed to the basically optimistic Confucian view that the emperor's rule was benign and beneficial, providing instead an apocalyptic vision of history based on the doctrine of Maitreya's descent, even though the Maitreya ideal was not principally linked to the fear of apocalypse.

According to this interpretation, the cosmos evolved in a series of cycles, each of which included phases of prosperity, decay and ruin. At the end of each cycle, when ruin, disaster and wickedness had taken over, there would be an apocalyptic event – a flood perhaps, or a cosmic conflagration or a huge typhoon – that would engulf the world and cleanse it of evil. All wickedness would disappear, and only what was good and virtuous

47 Ta Van Tài, *The Vietnamese Tradition of Human Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Institute of East Asian Studies, 1988), p. 155.
48 See Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 28–30.

would remain. The forces of the cosmos would rearrange themselves and a new era of peace, prosperity and virtue would begin. It was believed that the present era, ruled over by the historic Buddha Gautama, was about to end, and that it would be replaced by the era of Maitreya, the future Buddha, who would descend to usher in a new millennium of peace and prosperity. The exact location of his descent was to be a desolate hilly area near the Cambodian border in south-western Vietnam.[49]

The founder of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương was Đoàn Minh Huyên, an inhabitant of An Giang province, then a pioneer region, which was a meeting ground for various ethnic, cultural and religious groups and thus a fertile place for heterodoxies to flourish. Claiming that the Buddha of the Western Heaven had appeared to him, he formulated his own religious principles and preached them to others. He was given the title of *Đức Phật Thầy Tây An* or Reverend Buddha Teacher of the Western Land of Peace. His message provided a belief system whereby Buddhist serenity could be achieved as part of a secular life. He announced that with the approach of the apocalypse and the end of the Mahāyāna era, only the good would be saved and allowed to enter the Buddha's Western Paradise. There would be a great assembly, the Dragon Flower Congress (*Hội Long Hoa*), during which human sins and merits would be judged. Presiding over the congress would be an Enlightened King (*Minh Vương*); those with virtue would be selected to be his blissful subjects in paradise. Those wishing to prepare themselves for that final judgement day needed only to follow the religious path of cultivating benevolence and studying Buddhism; neither priests nor pagodas were necessary for salvation. Each individual could control his or her own life to attain worthiness and only had to fulfill the four obligations: to ancestors and parents; to the nation; to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha; and to all people. In place of loyalty to the emperor was devotion to the nation, while Buddhism and compassion replaced the Confucian ethic of loyalty to superiors only. Đoàn Minh Huyên thus modified traditional Buddhist teachings to require a political commitment to the nation as part of the faith. In so doing, he evoked memories of Lý and Trần monarchs.

What the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương movement had to offer to the inhabitants of what was essentially a frontier area was an ideology of moral, social and cultural integration, an ideology that made sense of the hardships and dangers experienced by these pioneers and provided them with hope for the future. A reaction to the rigid monasticism of nineteenth-century Buddhism, this ideology was presented as a return to the original purity and simplicity of the religion, whereas the myth of the millennium was a powerful incentive to attract pioneers and to give them the courage to remain in this inhospitable region. Although these unorthodox pioneers did not openly challenge the authority of the emperor, they put Maitreya – and the prophets who claimed to be the reincarnation of Maitreya – above him. That in itself made them liable to repression as heretics. However, given the limited resources of the traditional state, it was not an easy matter to prevent people from pursuing a religious life in these remote places.

The Nguyễn emperors were nonetheless well aware of the fact that the seeds of millenarian movements could find an extraordinary breeding ground in these areas burdened with the effects of ethnic heterogeneity. For this reason, they sought to envelop Buddhist temples in a maze of restrictions and prohibitions, hoping to prevent their

49 Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); *idem.*, 'Perfect World and Perfect Time: Maitreya in Vietnam', in *Maitreya, The Future Buddha*, ed. Alan Sponberg and Helen Hardacre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 154–70.

religious and cultural deviations from becoming too great a potential threat to the established order.[50] As a result of this imposed ideological straitjacket, Vietnamese Buddhism in the second half of the nineteenth century lacked the institutional or organisational coherence essential to permit it the slightest independence or political vigour.

50 Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, p. 30.

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