

**New Buddhist Movements and the Construction of Mythos:  
The Trúc Lâm Thiền Sect in Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century Vietnam**

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## **APPROVAL PAGE FOR GRADUATE**

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New Buddhist Movements and the Construction of Mythos:  
The Trúc Lâm Thiền Sect in Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century Vietnam

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I hereby declare that this dissertation has not been submitted  
as an exercise for a degree at any other institution,  
and that it is entirely my own work.

I also hereby declare that  
all translations from Vietnamese to English and photos  
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## **ABSTRACT**

### **New Buddhist Movements and the Construction of Mythos:**

#### **The Trúc Lâm Thiền Sect in Late 20th Century Vietnam**

By

Loan Thuy Nguyen

The rise of Buddhist modernism in an increasingly globalized world resulted in the development to new Buddhist movements in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the new millennium. A distinctive feature of many of these new religious movements is the way in which they selectively referenced traditional lineage structures or canonical texts to legitimize their existence, while at the same time disrupting traditional forms of authority in order to appeal to contemporary and transnational audience. This dissertation examines one of these movements; the Trúc Lâm Thiền sect led by Thích Thanh Từ. Founded in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by King Monk Trần Nhân Tông, this Thiền [Chan/Zen sect] sect flourished under three Vietnamese patriarchs with many renowned Thiền masters. The sect subsequently faded over the centuries and then re-emerged as a popular movement in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, calling for a restoration of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Vietnamese-branded Thiền meditation in Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism.

In this dissertation I deconstruct and document the mythos or revised “foundations or origins” of the revitalized Trúc Lâm sect through a detailed study of primary sources and interviews with monastic and lay members. Thích Thanh Từ’s biography, which included a recounting of the sect’s origins was brought into conversation with the history and recorded lineage of the Trúc Lâm Thiền Sect, including the writings of the first patriarch, King Monk Trần Nhân Tông, whose writings greatly

influenced the contemporary movement. In order to further gauge the movement's self-knowledge, in particular their ability to articulate their origins, I interviewed monastic and lay members about Trúc Lâm's origins and the relevance of the movement's approach and philosophy apropos their own Buddhist practice. Analyzing the movement in these ways provided a platform by which to view Trúc Lâm's current mythos as a creative reformulation of the sect's earliest forms in response to shifting contemporary needs.

This detailed analysis of Trúc Lâm's own original myth and foundational texts provided deeper insight into an influential and growing movement within Vietnam's longstanding engagement with Thiền Buddhism. This study also sheds light on the ways in which new Buddhist movements negotiated their traditional roots, Western views of religious practice, and the needs and interests of their practitioners while simultaneously constructing new lines of authority in their quest to propagate the Buddha Dharma in Vietnam and beyond.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

BCE	Before Common Era
CE	Common Era
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
ISKCON	International Society for Krishna Consciousness
NRM	New Religious Movement
USA	United States of America

## INTRODUCTION

In Vietnam, the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm Thiền sect represented a growing Buddhist movement. Founded in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by King Monk Trần Nhân Tông, this Thiền sect flourished under three patriarchs with many renowned Thiền masters. The sect, after subsequently fading when Confucianism became dominant in the royal court,<sup>1</sup> re-emerged as a popular movement in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century calling for a restoration of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Vietnamese-branded Thiền meditation in Thiền Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> By 2001, the sect's strong growth was highlighted by new monasteries filled with hundreds of monks and nuns in Vietnam<sup>3</sup> and was a prominent feature of Buddhism in the West.<sup>4</sup>

Thích Thanh Từ's original lineage, the revived Trúc Lâm doctrine and practice, and the popularity of his movement suggests two areas worth exploring. Firstly, he left his original lineage to find his "true self." After being ordained by Master Thích Thiện Hoa, he studied, taught, and served Buddhism in the Pure Land tradition for more than a decade before deciding to leave on his own and follow meditation instead.<sup>5</sup> After discerning the Way, Thích Thanh Từ formed his own interpretation of Buddhism and chose the Trúc Lâm Thiền lineage to revive.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]* (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 1994), 294.

<sup>2</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]* (Bonsall, CA: Vietnamese Buddhist Meditation Congregation, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Thích An Huệ, foreword to *Vietnamese Zen in the Twentieth Century*, by Thích Thanh Từ, trans. Toàn Kiên et al. (Bonsall, CA: Vietnamese Buddhist Meditation Congregation, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Soucy, "Nationalism, Globalism and the Re-Establishment of the Trúc Lâm Thiền Buddhist Sect in Northern Vietnam," in *Modernity and Re-Enchantment: Religion in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam*, ed. Philip Taylor (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 340–70.

<sup>5</sup> Tu Tam Hoang, "Zen Master Thích Thanh Từ," Vietnamese Zen by Zen Master Thích Thanh Từ, accessed February 14, 2018, <https://www.truclamvietzen.net/MasterTTT.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Tu Tam Hoang.

Secondly, this new interpretation for Trúc Lâm seemed to be an imprecise reflection of the sect's mythic origins.<sup>7</sup> As an example, while Tantric mantras and sutras became more prominent in the sect's daily practice after the death of Trần Nhân Tông,<sup>8</sup> Thích Thanh Từ de-emphasized these practices in the revitalized sect and promoted meditation instead.<sup>9</sup> While placing strong emphasis on the individual and meditation practice, the new interpretation seems reflective of globalized Buddhist ideas that emerged from the Buddhist Reform Movement.<sup>10</sup>

Leading scholars of Buddhism suggest that contemporary Buddhists had to reconstruct their teachings in response to Western modernity, which de-emphasized ritual elements and characterized mythology and devotional practices as “superstitious” while at the same time promoting meditation.<sup>11</sup> Such a reconstruction, according to Peter B. Clarke, marks a move from the credo full of rituals and devotions to “personal experience.”<sup>12</sup> Questions remain, however, concerning the specific ways in which the new Trúc Lâm's mythos was reconstructed from the sect's 13<sup>th</sup> century origins and specific ways in which the newly reinterpreted sect were influenced by Buddhist modernism. This dissertation examines the doctrine and practice of the revived Trúc Lâm Thiền movement led by Thích Thanh Từ. I contend that the Trúc Lâm movement's 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Alexander Soucy, “Contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism,” in *Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism*, ed. Michael Jerryson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 177–95.

<sup>8</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*.

<sup>9</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Ba Vấn Đề Trọng Đại Trong Đời Tu Của Tôi [Three Critical Matters in My Monkhhood Life]* (Đà Lạt: Trúc Lâm Monastery, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Soucy, “Contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism.”

<sup>11</sup> David L. McMahan, “Buddhist Modernism,” Oxford Bibliographies, 2016, <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195393521/obo-9780195393521-0041.xml>; Jose Casanova, “Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective,” *The Hedgehog Review* 8, no. 1–2 (2006): 7–22.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Bernard Clarke, *New Religions in Global Perspective: A Study of Religious Change in the Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 305–6.



century interpretation of Buddhism is a creative reformulation of the sect's earliest forms of cultivation in response to Buddhist modernism.

### **Background of the Study**

The rise of Buddhist modernism in an increasingly globalized world gave birth to new Buddhist movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the new millennium. The teachings of these movements typically transcended cultural and national boundaries and formed a variety of Buddhist schools in different locations.<sup>13</sup> Contemporary Buddhists had to reconstruct their teachings to form various reconfigurations of Buddhism, as the languages and practices of Western modernity became more influential globally.<sup>14</sup> According to Donald S. Lopez, modern modes of monasticism and socially engaged Buddhism are examples of such reconfigurations due to forces of modernity and globalization.<sup>15</sup> Emphasizing meditation and rejecting rituals deemed “superstitious” were common features among these movements.<sup>16</sup> Another distinctive feature of these new movements, however, is the way in which they selectively referenced traditional lineage structures or canonical texts to legitimize their existence, while at the same time disrupting traditional forms of authority in order to appeal to a transnational audience.<sup>17</sup>

Thiền Buddhism, the Vietnamese name for the Chan school of Buddhism that originated in China, is no exception and had to negotiate the forces of modernity and globalization evidenced through the rise of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm Thiền

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<sup>13</sup> Donald S. Jr. Lopez, *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), xxxix.

<sup>14</sup> David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 8.

<sup>15</sup> Lopez, *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West*, xxxix.

<sup>16</sup> J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*.

movement. As suggested by Thích Nhất Hạnh, this branch of Buddhism was established in Vietnam as early as the third century with Kang Senghui (康僧會: Khương Tăng Hội) and his works including *Liu du ji jing* (*A Scripture on the Collection of the Six Perfections: Lục Độ Tập Kinh*) and many other Thiền related writings.<sup>18</sup> Khương Tăng Hội moved to China around the middle of the third century without a clear trace of lineage.<sup>19</sup> Together with the establishment of the Vinītaruci, Vô Ngôn Thông, and Thảo Đường sects by Chan masters in the period from the sixth to the eleventh centuries and their own lineages of great patriarchs and masters, Thiền became an influential Buddhist sect in shaping Vietnamese culture.

Trần Nhân Tông founded a new Vietnamese branded Trúc Lâm sect in the 13<sup>th</sup> century that partly fused the doctrines of the above-mentioned three Chinese-based sects. This new indigenous sect rapidly gained popularity for a while but waned over the following centuries mainly due to its loss of support from the Vietnamese royal court.<sup>20</sup> The import of Chinese Lâm Tế sect in the 17<sup>th</sup> century established by Chan master Nguyễn Thiều,<sup>21</sup> and then Liễu Quán, an indigenous school of Lâm Tế,<sup>22</sup> added further evidence of Chan Buddhism influence in Vietnamese history and culture.

Thiền Buddhism, after being uprooted for over a hundred years,<sup>23</sup> presented a complex picture in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. While being well known as a meditation branch of Buddhism, it was found to be blended with contemporary common Vietnamese

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<sup>18</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 59.

<sup>19</sup> Nguyễn Lang, 59.

<sup>20</sup> Nguyễn Lang, 363.

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan H. X. Lee et al., *Asian American Religious Cultures* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2015), 943.

<sup>22</sup> John Chapman, “The 2005 Pilgrimage and Return to Vietnam of Exiled Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh,” in *Modernity and Re-Enchantment: Religion in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam*, ed. Philip Taylor (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 297–341.

<sup>23</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 3.

Buddhist practices as more focused on rituals and devotions rather than meditation.<sup>24</sup> In line with this finding, Thích Nhất Hạnh, a prominent figure in Thiền Buddhism whose Engaged Buddhism flourished mainly abroad, points out that the contents of the Vietnamese monastic two daily prayers were not from Thiền but mostly filled with Pure Land chants and Tantric mantras.<sup>25</sup>

The late 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm revitalization movement led by Thích Thanh Từ's calls for restoring Thiền Buddhism to its 13<sup>th</sup> century origins gained rapid traction not only in Vietnam but also internationally. Its de-supernaturalized feature and personal-experience meditation approach to emancipate self from the circle of samsara gathered strong support from the public in Vietnam. The sect also established more than a dozen monasteries in the western world to spread Thiền Buddhism outside of Vietnam's borders.<sup>26</sup>

Minimal research, however, has been done on this fast-growing newly established Buddhist movement. Two studies are noteworthy within the existing literature about the sect. In the 1990s, Alexander Soucy visited the Trúc Lâm Sùng Phúc facility in northern Vietnam while it was being renovated by Thích Thanh Từ and reported some interesting findings, both negative and positive, about the new Trúc Lâm.<sup>27</sup> From the locals, the new form of Buddhism being offered at the facility since “taken over by an organization from the south”, refused to conduct funeral services as an example, was read as not responsive

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<sup>24</sup> Cuong Tu Nguyen and A.W. Barber, “Vietnamese Buddhism in North America: Tradition and Acculturation,” in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles S. Prebish, Kenneth K. Tanaka, and Kenneth Ken'ichi Tanaka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 132.

<sup>25</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, “Tương Lai Thiền Học Việt Nam [Future of Vietnamese Thiền],” 1982, <https://langmai.org/tang-kinh-cac/vien-sach/giang-kinh/tuong-lai-thien-hoc-viet-nam/>.

<sup>26</sup> “Trúc Lâm Monasteries,” Trúc Lâm Minh Chánh, accessed January 8, 2019, <http://truclamminhchanh.org/en/Links.aspx?type=links>.

<sup>27</sup> Soucy, “Nationalism, Globalism and the Re-Establishment of the Trúc Lâm Thiền Buddhist Sect in Northern Vietnam,” 348–53.

to their needs. Furthermore, there was some resistance from Buddhist elites in Vietnam against meditation being opened to the laity (especially to women). According to Soucy, however, the movement's monthly all-day program drew a strong support from the surrounding area, evidenced with "a crowd of several hundred lay Buddhists" who "overflow[ed] out the door of the meditation hall on both storeys so that many have to sit on the balcony outside."<sup>28</sup>

The other study on Thích Thanh Từ's Trúc Lâm, conducted by Hoang Trong So in 2002, focused on the sect's mode of meditation practice called 'Hut-Entering'. According on the report, the hut-enterer is provided the opportunity to strictly devote self to the mind-cultivation task for a limited period of time.<sup>29</sup> As Hoang Trong So argues, the practice cannot be found in other Mahayana temples, and therefore is the most peculiar but remarkable element of the sect.

## Research Questions

This study examines how the 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm Thiền sect reconstructs its original mythos in response to modernity.

The project deconstructs the mythos and revised foundations of the revitalized Trúc Lâm sect to provide a response to the following questions:

1. What is the recorded Trúc Lâm lineage from its 13<sup>th</sup> century establishment and the sect's history up to the time of Thích Thanh Từ?

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<sup>28</sup> Soucy, 348.

<sup>29</sup> Hoang Trong So, "Hut-Entering: A Study of the Peculiar Mode of Practice in Vietnamese Ch'an System of Monasteries and Nunneries," *Society for the Study of Pali and Buddhist Culture*, no. 16 (December 2002): 1–14.

2. How did Thích Thanh Từ incorporate, reference, and reinterpret this recorded lineage and history? And what elements are novel to his presentation of the new Trúc Lâm?

3. How do monastics and lay people from within the new Trúc Lâm articulate the origins of their sect and Trúc Lâm's current views on meditation?

### **Methodology for the Proposed Study**

In this dissertation, I seek to deconstruct the mythos and revised foundations of the revitalized sect through a detailed study of primary sources and interviews with monastic and lay members. Thích Thanh Từ's biography, which included a recounting of the sect's origins, was brought into conversation with the history and recorded lineage of the Trúc Lâm Thiền sect, which mainly focused on the writings of the first patriarch, King Monk Trần Nhân Tông, whose writings greatly influenced the contemporary movement. In order to further gauge the movement's mythos from the perspective of its members, I also interviewed monastic and lay members about the origin of Trúc Lâm and the relevance of the movement's approach, as well as the philosophy of their own Buddhist practices. The qualitative approach with a set of questions and free-text responses best suited this goal. During my visits to Trúc Lâm's facilities for interviews, I observed, participated and reported on the sect's activities. However, it was not the intent of this study to fully engage in long-term ethnographic observation. Analyzing the movement short-term provided a platform to view Trúc Lâm's current interpretation of Buddhism as a creative reformulation of the sect's earliest forms in response to the forces of modernity.

### *Interview Sites and Subjects*

The subjects for the interview portion of the current study ranged from ten to 14 men and women, which ideally consisted of an equal ratio of monastics and lay people. However, it turned out to be more monastics than lay people since meditation monasteries are mostly for monks and nuns under religious vows who permanently live on-site, and lay people only visit the sect's facilities for retreats. Site visits and interviews were conducted at six local Trúc Lâm monasteries (Thường Chiếu, Linh Chiếu, Chánh Giác, Chơn Không, Viên Chiếu and Tuệ Quang) around the sect's headquarters in southern Vietnam where Thích Thanh Từ lived, and three of its international monasteries located in the United States (Đại Đăng, Chánh Tâm and Chân Giác).

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The data was collected exclusively through site observation and the qualitative investigative method of interviewing. The interviews were conducted with standard questions in Vietnamese, simple and easy to understand in order to allow the interviewees to comfortably share their practices, activities, as well as their knowledge about the old and new Trúc Lâm sect. The interviews were recorded, and recordings were held only by me. Even though the results of the research study will be public, the participants' names will not be disclosed.

To maximize the validity and reliability of data from the the interviews, I established trust and credibility from the beginning of each interview. The purpose of the meetings and the data collection process were also clearly stated by me and well understood by the participant before any questions were asked. The participants' clarity

about the nature and confidentiality of the data collected was also a crucial factor in raising the validity level of the information they shared.

### **Scope and Limitations**

This study examines the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm Thiền sect movement led by Thích Thanh Từ in terms of the sect's origins and a Buddhist modernist framework through primary sources and interviews with monastic and lay members of the sect in southern Vietnam and the United States. The doctrine and practice of the movement are investigated. All other aspects of the movement, such as political or financial, are outside the scope of this research.

The major limitation of the study is the nature of the data that is comprised of personal perceptions in a non-pluralistic society. In the environment where, as reported by the U.S. Department of State, the Vietnamese government continues to restrict the activities of religious groups in education and health,<sup>30</sup> the participants may have been reluctant to respond candidly to the interview questions. The sample chosen for the study also contributes to the limitation of the data collected. Because this study relies on the limited sample of monastic and lay members of the sect and their availability at the sect's monastic centers during my scheduled visits, it may not be fully representative of the entire sect. While the interview pool is somewhat non-random and relatively small located in southern Vietnam and the United States, insight gained from the data collected hopefully reflects Trúc Lâm followers' views of themselves, the contemporary status of their sect, and its origins ("mythos"), as well as what it means to practice Thiền Buddhism today.

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<sup>30</sup> Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor U.S. Department of State, "International Religious Freedom Report for 2016 - Vietnam," U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Vietnam, August 18, 2017, <https://vn.usembassy.gov/international-religious-freedom-report-2016-vietnam/>.

## Significance and Contribution

Established and with vigorous growth in Vietnam since the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Thiền Buddhism reached its *Golden Age* in the 13<sup>th</sup> century but faded away afterwards, yielding to Pure Land and Tantric traditions. The late 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm Thiền sect claiming to restore Thiền Buddhism to its glorious 13<sup>th</sup> century origins represents a fast-growing and influential newly established Buddhist movement.<sup>31</sup> This detailed analysis of Trúc Lâm's own origins and foundational texts provides deeper insight into the sect within Vietnam's longstanding engagement with Thiền Buddhism.

Furthermore, while extensive studies have been dedicated to the Buddhist modernism phenomenon and its associated new religious movements born out of the forces of modernity across the world in this globalization era, minimal research, however, has been conducted about this new 20<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist movement in Vietnam. This research project provides a deeper understanding of how the new Thiền movement is influenced by modernity forces in this globalization era. It also sheds light on the ways new Buddhist movements negotiate their traditional roots, Western views of religious practice, and the needs and interests of their practitioners in addition how they document the way new lines of authority are produced in their quest to spread the teaching of the Buddha Dharma.

Besides relying on published primary sources for information, data from the field works provides insight into the reality of the sect. The perspectives of the Trúc Lâm followers, both monastic and lay, collected through the face-to-face interviews shed light on their assumptions and advocated values toward the sect's doctrine and practice.

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<sup>31</sup> Hoang Trong So, "Hut-Entering: A Study of the Peculiar Mode of Practice in Vietnamese Ch'an System of Monasteries and Nunneries."



Artifacts from direct observations of Trúc Lâm facilities provide further understanding of the sect through the followers' revelations of what they espouse.

### **Contents and Organization of this Study**

This research project, in five chapters, deconstructs and compares the doctrine and practice of the late 20th century Trúc Lâm Thiền movement against the sect's original mythos and Buddhist modernism, and presents its results. The first chapter reviews the contemporary state of research on the influence the forces of modernity and globalization have had on religion as well as the new religious movement born out of such forces, including Buddhist modernism. The second chapter addresses the first research question concerning the recorded lineage and history as well as the original mythos of Trúc Lâm Thiền sect from its 13<sup>th</sup> century establishment, with emphasis on its first three patriarchs before the sect faded away. The third chapter discusses the discourse related to the doctrine and practice of 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm, as well as construction of its mythos. The fourth chapter addresses the third research question on the Trúc Lâm followers' perspective of the revitalized sect through face-to-face interviews with its present-day monastic and lay followers using the described research methodology.

Finally, the fifth chapter synthesizes and analyzes the data provided in the three chapters prior in order to address the part of the second research question on how Thích Thanh Từ incorporated, referenced, and reinterpreted the sect's original mythos. The chapter also addresses the other part of the second research question concerning which of Thích Thanh Từ's elements are novel to his presentation of the new Trúc Lâm and the extent to which each of the reinterpreted elements is influenced by the forces of modernity and globalization discussed in the first chapter. Finally, the fifth chapter

synthesizes and analyzes the data provided in the three chapters prior in order to explain how Thích Thanh Từ incorporated, referenced, and reinterpreted the sect's original mythos. The chapter also focuses Thích Thanh Từ's elements are novel to his presentation of the new Trúc Lâm and the extent to which each of the reinterpreted elements is influenced by the forces of modernity and globalization discussed in the first chapter. The entire chapter addresses the second research question. The conclusion section presents a summary of research findings as well as suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Modernity, Globalization and Buddhism

This research study deconstructs the new interpretation of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm Buddhist Movement in Vietnam and investigates its features in terms of the sect's original mythos and the forces of modernity and globalization. This chapter reviews the contemporary state of research on the societal forces of modernity and globalization as well as their influence on religion which resulted in the birth of new religious movements, in which Buddhist modernism is a part of.

### Modernity and Religion

Modernity, as David L. McMahan defines it, “generally refers to the gradually emerging social and intellectual world rooted in the Protestant Reformation, the scientific revolution, the European Enlightenment, Romanticism, and their successors reaching up to the present.”<sup>32</sup> Gerald Delanty writes that the idea of modernity involves “the interpretation of the present time in light of historical reinterpretation. It refers too to the confluence of the cultural, social, and political currents in modern society.”<sup>33</sup> Consequently, by favoring the new beginning over the recent past, modernity is a process in which society constantly renews itself to relieve the tension between varying dynamics.<sup>34</sup> In such process, as Agnes Heller argues, “everything is open to query and to testing; everything is subject to rational scrutiny and refuted by argument.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Gerard Delanty, “Modernity,” in *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 3068.

<sup>34</sup> Delanty, “Modernity.”

<sup>35</sup> Agnes Heller, *A Theory of History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 41.

Martin Heidegger defines modernity as a post-medieval historical era,<sup>36</sup> in which, according to classical sociologists Max Weber, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel, the forging of Western industrial societies occurred.<sup>37</sup> However, seeing a diversity of modernities even in the West,<sup>38</sup> many contemporary scholars challenged the notion of a “singular modernity.”

According to John Rundell, many scholars, such as Agnes Heller, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, Charles Taylor, and Johann P. Arnason, theorize the notion of “multiple modernities” which “conceptualizes the modern period as one of the multiple irreducible dimensions and contours including the regional and historical ones.”<sup>39</sup> As Eisenstadt observes, the reasoning for this theory is that, “while the spread or expansion of modernity has indeed taken place throughout most of the world, it did not give rise to just one civilization, or one pattern of ideological and institutional response, but to at least several basic versions which in turn are subject to further variations.”<sup>40</sup> On the same notion of multiple modernities, Jose Casanova argues that, instead of ‘merging’, Western modernity was assumed to be continuous with Western tradition, but other civilizations would also maintain an essential continuity with their respective traditions while modernizing themselves more like the West.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Heidegger: Off the Beaten Track* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 68.

<sup>37</sup> Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, “Modernity and Modernization,” International Sociological Association, 2010, <http://www.isa-sociology.org/publ/sociopedia-isa>.

<sup>38</sup> Eisenstadt.

<sup>39</sup> John Rundell, “Modernity, Aesthetics, and The Human Condition: An Interpretative Essay,” in *Aesthetics and Modernity: Essays by Agnes Heller*, by Agnes Heller (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 25.

<sup>40</sup> Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, “Civilizations,” in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 527.

<sup>41</sup> Casanova, “Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective.”

Despite differences in how modernity was defined, secularization played a major role in transforming the modern world. Secularization is, in Peter L. Berger's words, "the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols."<sup>42</sup> Such cultural transformation "may be observed in the decline of religious contents in the arts, in philosophy, in literature and, most important of all, in the rise of science as an autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective on the world."<sup>43</sup> In terms of societal transformation, according to Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, many renowned sociologists agree that during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the secularization of society was evident through bureaucratization of institutions, rationalization of people and society, and urbanization of communities: these social transformations were key historical evolutions that transformed medieval agricultural societies into modern industrial nations.<sup>44</sup> The rationale for these deep changes is that rationality and the scientific method which emerged in the European Age of the Enlightenment already weakened the foundations of religion, and by extension, the supernatural, the mysterious, and the magical.<sup>45</sup> As Michele Dillon reports, the works from the founders of sociology, Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Emile Durkheim, reinforced the idea of rational worldview and considered religions to be non-rational elements of society that would gradually fade in importance.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, many leading sociologists, most notably Peter L. Berger<sup>47</sup> and Thomas Luckmann<sup>48</sup> in the 1960s and

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<sup>42</sup> Peter L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1967), 113.

<sup>43</sup> Berger, 113.

<sup>44</sup> Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>45</sup> Norris and Inglehart, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Michele Dillon, "Sociology of Religion," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 3873.

<sup>47</sup> Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*.

1970s advanced the rationalist arguments further by even predicting that secularization was an inevitable byproduct of modernization which would necessarily lead to a decline of religion. In Peter L. Berger's words, 'God is dead'.<sup>49</sup>

The secularization thesis of modernity was empirically concluded to be false by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>50</sup> As Peter L. Berger admits, the main reasoning behind the earlier false thesis that we lived in a secularized world was that even though modernization had some secularizing effects on the societal level, such effects were not necessarily linked to secularization on the level of individual consciousness.<sup>51</sup> Empirically, "certain religious institutions have lost power and influence in many societies, but both old and new religious beliefs and practices have nevertheless continued in the lives of individuals, sometimes taking new institutional forms and sometimes leading to great explosions of religious fervor."<sup>52</sup>

At the societal level, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt argues that the secularization feature of modernity already led to tremendous changes to the world, such as the development of tendencies towards democratization and to rational secular policies in arenas such as education, family planning, and the like.<sup>53</sup> On religion, in Jose Casanova's view, religious traditions were forced to adjust to modern conditions by reformulating their traditions for modern context. Giuseppe Giordan further argues that the social changes in Western society after World War II, which accelerated particularly in the 1960s, forced traditional

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<sup>48</sup> Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

<sup>49</sup> Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*, 118.

<sup>50</sup> Peter L. Berger, *The Desecularization of The World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999), 2.

<sup>51</sup> Berger, 2.

<sup>52</sup> Berger, 2.

<sup>53</sup> Eisenstadt, "Modernity and Modernization," 7–8.

religions to ease up on the symbolic boundaries of their beliefs that in the end gave birth to new religions.<sup>54</sup>

Social transformations, issues and adjustments caused by the initial forces of modernity did not stop there. From the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond, as Shmuel N. Eisenstadt asserts, there appeared a new phase in the continuous reformulation of modernity, in which new institutional and ideological trends of interwoven globalization phenomena challenged earlier modes of modernity.<sup>55</sup>

### **Globalization and Religion**

Globalization, originated after World War II, is a process with the vision of a globalized world, where events would be experienced instantly even by people in spatially distant locations through access to digital communicative technologies. The concept has become one of the central ideas of contemporary social science.<sup>56</sup> According to Larry Ray, the setup of the international organizations and regulatory systems such as the United Nations, General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (now the World Trade Organization), the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank after World War II marked the beginning of the modern globalization concept. The end of the Cold War was the prelude to its maturity, a 'borderless' world in which the major division between the West and the East would no longer exist was a possibility. Extending further on this globalized world vision, Peter Beyer discussed globalization with a core hypothesis that increasing globality would gradually turn the world into a common social environment

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<sup>54</sup> Giuseppe Giordan, "Religious Cults," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 3882.

<sup>55</sup> Eisenstadt, "Modernity and Modernization," 7.

<sup>56</sup> Larry Ray, "Globalization," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 1956.

shared by all people on earth,<sup>57</sup> or as Roland Robertson calls it, the ‘world society’ without the assumption that nationally constituted societies would disappear.<sup>58</sup>

John Foran argues that, as a process intensifying connections between many parts of the world, globalization was one of the primary forces of modernity.<sup>59</sup> According to Foran, the combined ‘global modernity’ process, as some theorists called it since modernity today is global, has further impacted the already deeply changed world politics in economic, political, and cultural terms caused by earlier mode of modernity. According to James A. Beckford, globalization enhanced “the growing frequency, volume, and interconnectedness of movements of ideas, materials, goods, information, pollution, money, and people across national boundaries and between regions of the world.”<sup>60</sup> The growth of global brands and media that carried both cultural and economic significance seen in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is an example of globalization effects.<sup>61</sup> As shared by Daniel Yergin, there appeared an economic reality of a ‘world society’ in which...

... traditional and familiar boundaries are being surmounted or made irrelevant. Companies and investors operate in a 24-hour world. Currency traders see the same information at the same time, and can act on it simultaneously, whether they are in Singapore, London or New York (assuming only that they are all awake at the same time). Billions of dollars move at the push of a button. Global branding is the great game. Work is networked among North America, Europe and Asia via computer. And even the very idea of a corporate headquarters is beginning to become a

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<sup>57</sup> Peter Beyer, *Religion and Globalization* (London: Sage Publications, 1994), 7.

<sup>58</sup> Roland Robertson, “Globalization, Politics, and Religion,” in *The Changing Face of Religion*, ed. James A. Beckford and T. Ludemann (London: Sage Publications, 1989), 8, 10–23.

<sup>59</sup> John Foran, “Revolution,” in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 3921.

<sup>60</sup> James A. Beckford, “New Religious Movements and Globalization,” in *Global Social Movements*, ed. Robin Cohen and Shirin Rai (London: Athelone Press, 2000), 170.

<sup>61</sup> Ray, “Globalization,” 1956.



metaphysical concept; increasingly, the corridors in which managers run into each other are not physical but electronic.<sup>62</sup>

Besides creating imperialistic economic expansion, globalization also presented new challenges to modernized societies. Among the emerging challenges, as Shmuel N. Eisenstadt observes, on top of dealing with issues caused by earlier modes of modernity, existing policies could not cope adequately with the new problems associated with the global modernity processes.<sup>63</sup> Evidence of globalization also included violence, genocides, and dislocation of large populations.<sup>64</sup> Another example of globalization challenge includes, as Roland Robertson suggests, the state-religion tensions across the world arisen from the “politicization of religion” and the “religionization of politics.”<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, the development of new patterns of inter-civilizational relations, and far-reaching changes in the international systems and shifts of hegemonies within them are other examples of new challenges caused by the process of global modernity.<sup>66</sup>

The forces of global modernity have also caused further changes in the religious realm. Religion still existed, as Peter Beyer asserts, as “modernity and globality do not result in the disappearance of religion either in terms of importance for the conduct of social life or in terms of visibility on the social landscape.”<sup>67</sup> According to Erwin Fahlbusch, instead of “withering in the face of science .... religion has proved itself to be quite robust – capable of renewal, reinvigoration, and even reinvention in ways that most

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<sup>62</sup> Daniel Yergin, “The Age of ‘Globality,’” *Newsweek*, May 18, 1998, <https://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-20645578.html>.

<sup>63</sup> Eisenstadt, “Modernity and Modernization,” 7–8.

<sup>64</sup> Eisenstadt, 7.

<sup>65</sup> Robertson, “Globalization, Politics, and Religion.”

<sup>66</sup> Eisenstadt, “Modernity and Modernization,” 7–8.

<sup>67</sup> Beyer, *Religion and Globalization*, 225.

scholars could never have imagined.”<sup>68</sup> As noted by Thomas Robbins, globalization tended “to increase religious diversity within societies and to implicitly deregulate religious markets.”<sup>69</sup> Peter B. Clarke further observes that globalization partially offset the differences in the kinds of religious innovations that contemporarily appealed to North and South, East and West.<sup>70</sup> An example of the offset through global modernity was Christian churches, including but by no means limited to the Roman Catholic Church, that ceased to be unidirectional from the dominant western core to the rest of the world and then turned into a complex and worldwide network of non-governmental organizations and transnational social movements.<sup>71</sup> According to Linda Learman, as the extension of world interdependence and the rate of world consciousness increased, there appeared both transnational and cross-cultural religious movements resulting from globalization.<sup>72</sup> On the same notion, Massimo Introvigne adds that some newer religions have emerged since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in an increasingly relaxed Western religious market where heresy was no longer persecuted.<sup>73</sup>

### **New Religious Movements (NRMs)**

Many terms have been popularly used to describe the emergence of new religious movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mainline Christians and scholars began to use ‘cults’ or ‘sects’ in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to describe the newly emerged unorthodox religious

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<sup>68</sup> Erwin Fahlbusch, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 897.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Robbins, introduction to *New Religious Movements in the Twenty-First Century: Legal, Political, and Social Challenges in Global Perspective*, ed. Phillip Charles Lucas and Thomas Robbins (New York: Routledge, 2004), 6.

<sup>70</sup> Clarke, *New Religions in Global Perspective*, 4.

<sup>71</sup> Peter Beyer, “Globalization and Religion,” in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 1981.

<sup>72</sup> Linda Learman, ed., *Buddhist Missionaries in the Era of Globalization* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>73</sup> Massimo Introvigne, “The Future of Religion and the Future of New Religions,” Center for Studies on New Religions, accessed February 3, 2018, [https://www.cesnur.org/2001/mi\\_june03.htm](https://www.cesnur.org/2001/mi_june03.htm).

factions.<sup>74</sup> On differences between the two terms as understood by social scientists in the 1960s, according to J. Milton Yinger, ‘cults’ were typically used for “groups that are similar to sects, but represent a sharper break, in religious terms, from the dominant religious tradition of a society.”<sup>75</sup> There appeared at the beginning of the century, as J. Gordon Melton observes, ‘strange’ religious groups such as Christian Scientists, Spiritualists, Mormons, and Theosophists, then joined by the likes of Father Divine’s Peace Mission and Jehovah’s Witnesses in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>76</sup>

The term ‘cults’ used by the scholarly community with a value-free meaning became more and more problematic against the strong negative connotations from the parallel efforts of Christian critics of ‘cults’ as heresies and the criminologists’ investigation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century religious groups with a criminological tradition.<sup>77</sup> The problem was further intensified with the “cult wars” in the 1970s and 1980s in which some NRMs were accused of violent, sexual and brainwashing acts, as well as the movements that led to the deaths of members such as the Branch Davidians in 1993, Heaven’s Gate in 1997, and the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments in Uganda in 2000.<sup>78</sup> Up to some point the pain of using the term seemed unbearable, as Eileen Barker puts it, “to label a movement a cult can be to suggest that it is a dangerous pseudo-religion with satanic overtones which is likely to be involved in financial rackets and political intrigue, to indulge in unnatural sexual

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<sup>74</sup> Introvigne.

<sup>75</sup> J. Milton Yinger, *Religion Society and the Individual* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 154–55.

<sup>76</sup> J. Gordon Melton, “The Rise of the Study of New Religions,” Center for Studies on New Religions, 1999, [http://www.cesnur.org/testi/bryn/br\\_melton.htm](http://www.cesnur.org/testi/bryn/br_melton.htm).

<sup>77</sup> Introvigne, “The Future of Religion and the Future of New Religions.”

<sup>78</sup> Eileen Barker, “The Not-So-New Religious Movements: Changes in ‘the Cult Scene’ over the Past Forty Years,” *Temenos - Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 50, no. 2 (2014): 235–56.

practices, to abuse its women and children, and to use irresistible and irreversible brainwashing techniques in order to exploit its recruits.”<sup>79</sup>

When Eileen Barker popularized the use of “new religious movements,” scholars unanimously accepted this term, as well as “new religions” for the larger and more established traditions among the newer religions.<sup>80</sup> According to Massimo Introvigne, however there was never any real agreement on definitions and parameters of these two replacements.<sup>81</sup> The issue of boundary of term NRMs arose when some “new religions” included only 20<sup>th</sup> century groups, while some would also count those founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some used other replacements, such as ‘alternative religions’ by Timothy Miller<sup>82</sup> and David V. Barrett,<sup>83</sup> and ‘minority groups’ by James T. Richardson.<sup>84</sup>

The boundary of what constituted NRMs has been another debate among scholars of religion. In identifying NRMs, J. Gordon Melton suggests, “those religious groups that have been found, from the perspective of the dominant religious community (and in the West that is almost always a form of Christianity), to be not just different, but unacceptably different.”<sup>85</sup> However, on the issue of ‘young’ or ‘new’, Eileen Barker raised the question of when a new religion would stop being considered ‘new’ with her observation: “In the first century, Christianity was new, in the seventh century Islam was new, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Methodism was new, in the nineteenth century the Seventh-day

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<sup>79</sup> Barker, 236.

<sup>80</sup> Introvigne, “The Future of Religion and the Future of New Religions.”

<sup>81</sup> Introvigne.

<sup>82</sup> Timothy Miller, *America’s Alternative Religions* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>83</sup> David V. Barrett, *The New Believers: A Survey of Sects, Cults and Alternative Religions* (London: Cassell, 2001), 9.

<sup>84</sup> James T. Richardson, “Regulating Religion: A Sociological and Historical Introduction,” in *Regulating Religion: Case Studies from Around the Globe*, ed. James T. Richardson (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2004), 1–22.

<sup>85</sup> J. Gordon Melton, “Perspective: Toward a Definition of ‘New Religion,’” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 8, no. 1 (2004): 73–87, <https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2004.8.1.73>.

Adventists, Christadelphians and Jehovah's Witnesses were new; in the twenty-first century the Unification Church, ISKCON and Scientology are beginning to look old."<sup>86</sup> On this 'newness' issue, Eileen Barker suggests, "it can be useful for purposes of discovering similarities and differences between and within NRMs if one were to define the movements as those religions that have a predominantly first-generation membership."<sup>87</sup>

On the nature of NRMs, William H. Swatos observes that there was a complex of factors associated with the surge in their number, bearing an extraordinary level of diversity in ideologies.<sup>88</sup> Eileen Barker estimated in 1999 that NRMs numbered in the tens of thousands worldwide; most had only a handful of members, while others had hundreds or thousands, with some who claimed millions.<sup>89</sup> On the notion of diversity, Bryan Wilson asserts that "Chief among the miss-directed assertions has been the tendency to speak of new religious movements as if they differed very little, if at all, one from another. The tendency has been to lump them altogether and indiscriminately to attribute to all of them characteristics which are, in fact, valid for only one or two."<sup>90</sup> Agreeing with Wilson, David V. Barrett notes that since NRMs differed from one another on many issues and characteristics, generalizations tended not to be very helpful when

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<sup>86</sup> Eileen Barker, "What Are We Studying? A Sociological Case for Keeping the 'Nova,'" *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 8, no. 3 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2004.8.1.88>.

<sup>87</sup> Barker, "The Not-So-New Religious Movements," 239.

<sup>88</sup> William H. Swatos, "New Religious Movements," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, accessed April 30, 2018, <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/ency/nrm.htm>.

<sup>89</sup> Eileen Barker, "New Religious Movements: Their Incidence and Significance," in *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, ed. Bryan Wilson and Jamie Cresswell (New York: Routledge, 1999), 15–32.

<sup>90</sup> Bryan Wilson, "Why the Bruderhof Is Not a Cult," Scribd, accessed May 22, 2018, <https://www.scribd.com/document/115621228/Why-the-Bruderhof-is-not-a-cult-by-Bryan-Wilson>.

studying NRMs.<sup>91</sup> Some might be novel in origin, and some existed as split-offs distinct from a pre-existing wider religion.<sup>92</sup>

According to Peter B. Clarke, in response to the challenges posed by the modernizing world, some NRMs emerged embracing individualism, some seeking a tightly knit collective units,<sup>93</sup> and some, as Eileen Barker reports, claiming to be returning to the origins of their tradition.<sup>94</sup> NRMs with ‘novel origins’, like Aetherius Society, Raëlians, and Scientology, claimed to have revealed radically new truths about other worlds and Beings unknown to the human race.<sup>95</sup> To many split-offs, newness or innovation did not necessarily mean the introduction of new doctrines or ritual practices, according to Peter B. Clarke, but often had more to do with orthopraxy than orthodoxy, like Engaged Buddhism in Vietnam and Thailand which was not doctrinally speaking unorthodox, as were Protestant Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Raja Yoda in India.<sup>96</sup> Some claimed to ‘return to origins’ as Eileen Barker observes, “Krishna devotees trace their lineage of Vaishnava Hinduism through an unbroken chain of spiritual masters, most notably the sixteenth-century monk, Lord Chaitanya, to Lord Krishna himself,” and “members of Soka Gakkai chant the mantra revealed by the thirteenth-century Buddhist monk, Nichiren Daishonin.”<sup>97</sup> Some others recombined and reinterpreted existing texts, claiming their myths, doctrines, and rituals were not new, but rather just the revival

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<sup>91</sup> Barrett, *The New Believers*, 9.

<sup>92</sup> Swatos, “New Religious Movements.”

<sup>93</sup> Clarke, *New Religions in Global Perspective*.

<sup>94</sup> Eileen Barker, “But Who’s Going to Win? National and Minority Religions in Post-Communist Society,” *Facta Universitatis* 2, no. 6 (1999): 49–74.

<sup>95</sup> Barker, 52.

<sup>96</sup> Clarke, *New Religions in Global Perspective*.

<sup>97</sup> Barker, “But Who’s Going to Win? National and Minority Religions in Post-Communist Society,” 52.

of some forgotten truths.<sup>98</sup> According to Oliver Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, “the foundational canon of Christianity not only refers to numerous events in the Hebrew Bible, but has appropriated the entirety of its predecessor’s scriptures as the Old Testament,”<sup>99</sup> is an example of such revivals. From Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe’s perspective, despite bearing a wide variety of doctrines and practices, NRMs “attempt to revive existing religious traditions through practical innovations and new expressions of traditional piety. They do not, however, seek to fundamentally change a tradition or incorporate radically new beliefs.”<sup>100</sup> Additionally, according to Peter B. Clarke, modern NRMs commonly shared a feature – “the stress placed by modern NRMs on the central role of lay people in their own spiritual advancement, while deemphasizing the significance of the role of the cleric.”<sup>101</sup>

Besides creating split-off NRMs from traditional Christianity in the West, David L. McMahan suggests that the forces of global modernity also caused Buddhism in the West to become interfused with modernity in the West, as evidenced by the emergence of Buddhist modernism since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>102</sup>

### **Buddhist Modernism**

Buddhist movements arose after the historical Gautama Buddha passed away. The origins of such movements stemmed from differences in language, doctrines, teachers, recognized authority, or nearby non-Buddhist religious traditions.<sup>103</sup> While expanding

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<sup>98</sup> Oliver Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7.

<sup>99</sup> Hammer and Rothstein, 7.

<sup>100</sup> Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe, “New Religions and the Social Bond,” *The International Scope® Review* 5, no. 9 (2003): 133.

<sup>101</sup> Peter Clarke, *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>102</sup> McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 8.

<sup>103</sup> Cristian Violatti, “Buddhism,” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, accessed January 1, 2018, <https://www.ancient.eu/buddhism/>.

into new territories with different indigenous thoughts and ways of life, Gautama Buddha's teaching has many times been interpreted different ways, thus creating different Buddhist traditions. Within the first millennium following his death and considering only the regions around Buddha's birthplace (China and Sri Lanka, for examples), many Buddhist schools emerged, each with its own distinctive interpretations and practices among which Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana were dominant. Furthermore, in David L. McMahan's words, "In all of the geographic areas where Buddhist traditions have emerged, the Dharma has been understood in terms of the categories, practices, conventions, and historical circumstances of particular peoples at specific times."<sup>104</sup>

The late 19<sup>th</sup> century marked the beginning of Buddhism exposure to many Western cultures in the Southeast Asia Buddhist countries.<sup>105</sup> According to David L. McMahan, Buddhist modernism (also referred to as 'modern Buddhism' or 'Protestant Buddhism') was co-created by educated, reform-minded Asian Buddhists and Western Orientalists as a form of resistance to the forces of European colonization and Christian missionization in the region and also an appropriation of Western philosophy, religion, social forms, and ways of life.<sup>106</sup> Lay meditation, and the rise of women as accomplished meditators and increasingly, as scholars of Pāli as we have seen in today's society are examples of social changes resulting from that beginning.<sup>107</sup> During the colonial period, however, most Christian missionaries were more concerned with proving Buddhism

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<sup>104</sup> McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 18.

<sup>105</sup> Juliane Schober, "Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Southeast Asia," in *Buddhism in the Modern World*, ed. David L. McMahan (New York: Routledge, 2012), 10–27.

<sup>106</sup> McMahan, "Buddhist Modernism."

<sup>107</sup> Steven Collins and Justin McDaniel, "Buddhist 'nuns' (Mae Chi) and the Teaching of Pali in Contemporary Thailand," *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 6 (November 2010): 1373–1408.



wrong than understanding it,<sup>108</sup> thus constructing a conceptual framework reflecting the colonial ideology of power, control, and exploitation,<sup>109</sup> to hegemonically legitimize their textual translations and theories while limiting the opinions and work of local Asian scholars.<sup>110</sup> The situation created diverse patterns of Western understanding of Buddhist thought in a tradition of misrepresentation and often contradictory, sketchy and inaccurate.<sup>111</sup>

Heinz Bechert, perhaps the first to identify Buddhist modernism as a distinct 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon, through his 1966 seminal work *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravāda-Buddhismus*, outlined several general features that encapsulated it and laid the groundwork for thinking about Buddhist modernism more generally.<sup>112</sup> These features included, as examples, according to Russell Webb, a process of de-mythologization and reinterpretation of Buddhism as ‘scientific religion’ with emphasis on equality and self-exploration.<sup>113</sup> Bechert was then joined by late 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars such as Donald S. Lopez, Jr. and David L. McMahan, among many others for an understanding of this global phenomenon through the recent discourse of interpretations and developments of Buddhism associated with Western values and perspective.<sup>114</sup>

According to David L. McMahan, Buddhist modernism was forms of Buddhism emerged out of an adaptation with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of

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<sup>108</sup> James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 55.

<sup>109</sup> Jeffrey R. Timm, review of *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*, by Donald S. Lopez, *Philosophy East and West* 47, no. 4 (1997): 588–95, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1400304>.

<sup>110</sup> Charles Hallisey, “Roads Taken and Not Taken in The Study of Theravada Buddhism,” in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 37.

<sup>111</sup> Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 55.

<sup>112</sup> McMahan, “Buddhist Modernism.”

<sup>113</sup> Russell Webb, “Obituary: Heins Bechert,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 22, no. 2 (2005): 211–16.

<sup>114</sup> Lopez, *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West*, xxxix.

modernity.<sup>115</sup> During such process of adaptation, however, as McMahan further suggests, the reinterpreted hybrid forms of Buddhism did not simply conform to new contexts but rather engaged in a process of reconfiguration and negotiation, and thus not reducible to Western modalities.<sup>116</sup> Socially engaged Buddhism, for instance, both espoused and condemned various features of modernity such as “opposing western economic imperialism and militarism while employing western notions of women’s rights and individual freedom.”<sup>117</sup>

Donald S. Lopez suggests that modern Buddhism has developed, not into a universal Buddhism, but into a kind of transnational Buddhist sect with a variety of Buddhist schools in different locations, “an international Buddhism that transcends cultural and national boundaries, creating . . . a cosmopolitan network of intellectuals, writing most often in English.”<sup>118</sup> These intellectuals are the focus of Donald S. Lopez’s *A Modern Buddhist Bible*, and include ones from the formative years of modern Buddhism such as Soyen Shaku, Dwight Goddard, D. T. Suzuki, and Alexandra David-Neel, as well as more recent figures like Shunryu Suzuki, Sangharakshita, Alan Watts, Thich Nhat Hanh, Chögyam Trungpa, and the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. Despite coming from varying sources with different purposes and bearing discernable forms of interpretation, and in many cases not fully compatible with one another, Buddhist schools influenced by modernism tended to emphasize ideas and values in traditional forms of Buddhism which seemed to be compatible with certain features of modernity and de-emphasized the

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<sup>115</sup> McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 6.

<sup>116</sup> David L. McMahan, “Modernity and the Early Discourse of Scientific Buddhism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, no. 4 (2004): 899, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfh083>.

<sup>117</sup> McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 14.

<sup>118</sup> Lopez, *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West*, xxxix.

incompatible ones.<sup>119</sup> Such compatible features include ancient texts, meditation (in contrast to devotional and ceremonial actions), rationality (science), egalitarianism, and participation of women (equality) and lay persons (in contrast to focus on monasticism), while the incompatible ones consist of mythology (ritual elements, “superstition”, rebirth, karma), icons, clerical hierarchy, and traditional cosmology.<sup>120</sup>

A distinctive feature of many of these new Buddhist movements was the way in which, even though creating their own independent organizations disrupting the existing traditional forms of authority in order to appeal to a transnational audience, they selectively referenced traditional lineage structures or canonical texts to legitimize their existence. According to David L. McMahan, while often claiming going back to the “pure” original Buddhism from the Gautama Buddha himself, the advocates of Buddhist modernism reformulated Buddhist concepts in the categories, discourses, and vocabulary of Western modernity.<sup>121</sup> Nichiren Buddhism, the largest Buddhist sect in Japan with renowned figures like Soyen Shaku and D. T. Suzuki, and Fo Guang Shan of Humanistic Buddhism in Taiwan are examples of this distinctive feature. As for the Nichiren sect, while it claimed following the Dharma’s Lotus Sutra, its interpretation of the sutra advocated social change through “human revolution”.<sup>122</sup> Furthermore, having its own official laymen's association, called Hokkeko,<sup>123</sup> to serve its new interpretation of Buddhism. Fo Guang Shan based in Taiwan with Hsing Yun, originally the 48th patriarch

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<sup>119</sup> Christopher W. Gowans, *Buddhist Moral Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>120</sup> McMahan, “Buddhist Modernism.”

<sup>121</sup> McMahan.

<sup>122</sup> Maria Immacolata Macioti, *The Buddha Within Ourselves: Blossoms of the Lotus Sutra*, trans. Richard Maurice Capozzi (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), 73: “It is a matter of a ‘human revolution’ that begins with the individual, extends to the family, and then, if possible, spreads to entire nations; social peace would come about as the summation of many single “human revolutions.”

<sup>123</sup> Daniel B. Montgomery, *Fire in the Lotus: The Dynamic Buddhism of Nichiren* (London: Mandala, 1991), 186.

of the Linchi (Rinzai) Chan school and an early founder of the movement,<sup>124</sup> strived to maintain the idea of transcendence of Buddhism and Dharmic aspects of ritual by emphasizing the importance of serving the living in Buddhist practice, rather than placing focus on the traditional Buddhist rituals for the dead.<sup>125</sup>

Another feature of Buddhist modernism is its claim of being compatible with modern science.<sup>126</sup> By categorizing the more recent Buddhist modernism development in the last three or so decades as post-modernism, Martin Baumann delineates Buddhism's changes, adaptations and innovations further, "if modernist Buddhists have de-mythologized and rationalized traditionalist Buddhism, one may say that post-modernist Buddhist practitioners secularize and psychologize modernist Buddhism."<sup>127</sup> According to Baumann, the approach of the global lay Insight Meditation Society (Vipassana) promoting psychological healing and awakening through meditational practice, and Chögyam Trungpa's Shambhala Training designed as a secular path for the cultivation of a contemplative life are evidence of post-modern Buddhism. As James William Coleman reports, most Vipassana students in the West focused mainly on meditation practice and a kind of down-to-earth psychological wisdom.<sup>128</sup> Soyen Shaku, with *The Law of Cause and Effect as Taught by the Buddha* speech,<sup>129</sup> and Anagarika Dharmapala, with his declaration that the Gautama Buddha rejected the notion of a "supreme Creator" due to

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<sup>124</sup> "Fo Guang Shan Monastery Worldwide Web," accessed June 4, 2018, <https://www.fgs.org.tw/en/Founder/Overview/>.

<sup>125</sup> Xue Yu, "Re-Creation of Rituals in Humanistic Buddhism: A Case Study of FoGuangShan," *Asian Philosophy* 23, no. 4 (November 1, 2013): 350–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09552367.2013.831609>.

<sup>126</sup> Gowans, *Buddhist Moral Philosophy*, 58.

<sup>127</sup> Martin Baumann, "How to Make Sense of Buddhism in the West," in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 60.

<sup>128</sup> Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 110.

<sup>129</sup> Martin J. Verhoeven, "Americanizing the Buddha: Paul Carus and the Transformation of Asian Thought," in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth Ken'ichi Tanaka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

the natural law of causality, and that the Buddhism doctrine of karma were based on such law as well as Darwin's evolution,<sup>130</sup> were evidence of modern Buddhism in its formative years.

## **Summary**

Rooted in the Protestant Reformation, the scientific revolution, the European Enlightenment, and Romanticism, modernity emerged as a process in which society constantly renews itself to relieve the tension between varying dynamics. With emphasis on rationality and scientific method, such process not only transformed Western medieval agricultural societies into modern industrial nations but also weakened the foundations of traditional religion, and by extension, in the supernatural, the mysterious, and the magical. Even though certain religious institutions have lost some power and influence, religion did not disappear as some leading scholars had predicted. Instead, new religious beliefs and practices were born, and both the old and the new have co-existed in modern society.

After World War II, modernity was joined by the new globalization process which intensified connections between many parts of the world through access to digital communicative technologies. The combined 'global modernity' process triggered further impact to the already deeply changed world politics in economic, political, and cultural terms caused by earlier mode of modernity. Existing policies could not cope adequately with the newer problems associated with the global modernity process. Also noted by leading scholars, as the extension of world interdependence and the rate of world

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<sup>130</sup> McMahan, "Modernity and the Early Discourse of Scientific Buddhism," 900.

consciousness increased, there appeared both transnational and cross-cultural religious movements resulting from globalization.

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, new religious movements (NRMs) were reported in the tens of thousands worldwide, some with just a handful of members and some claimed millions. These NRMs differed from one another on many issues and characteristics, some might be novel in origin and some existed as split-offs distinct from a pre-existing wider religion. Some others recombined and reinterpreted existing texts, claiming their myths, doctrines, and rituals were not new, but rather just the revival of some forgotten truths. Global modernity not only forced changes to the religious landscape in the West but did not leave Buddhism in the East alone evidenced with, as noted by contemporary scholars, the emergence of Buddhist modernism since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Co-created by educated, reform-minded Asian Buddhists and Western Orientalists, Buddhist modernism is a form of resistance to the forces of European colonization and Christian missionization in the Eastern region. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most Christian missionaries were more concerned with proving Buddhism wrong than understanding it, thus created diverse patterns of Western understanding of Buddhist thought in a tradition of misrepresentation and often contradictory, sketchy and inaccurate. In 1966, Heinz Bechert, perhaps the first to identify Buddhist modernism as a distinct 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon, laid the groundwork for thinking about Buddhist modernism by encapsulating it as a process of de-mythologization, and reinterpretation of Buddhism as ‘scientific religion’, with emphasis on equality and self-exploration. Bechert was then joined by late 20<sup>th</sup> century contemporary prominent scholars such as Donald S. Lopez, Jr. and David L. McMahan, among many others for an understanding of this global

phenomenon through the recent discourse of interpretations and developments of Buddhism associated with Western values and perspective.

Donald S. Lopez, Jr. suggests that modern Buddhism has developed, not into a universal Buddhism, but into a kind of transnational Buddhist sect with a variety of Buddhist schools in different locations. These Buddhist schools tended to emphasize ideas and values in traditional forms of Buddhism that seemed to be compatible with certain features of modernity and de-emphasized the incompatible ones. Such compatible features include ancient texts, meditation (in contrast to devotional and ceremonial actions), rationality (science), egalitarianism, and participation of women (equality) and lay persons (in contrast to focus on monasticism), while the incompatible ones consist of mythology (ritual elements, “superstition”, rebirth, karma), icons, clerical hierarchy, and traditional cosmology.

David L. McMahan and some others argue that emphasizing meditation and rejecting rituals deemed “superstition” were common features among Buddhist modernism movements. These contemporary scholars added that many of these new schools selectively referenced traditional lineage structures or canonical texts to legitimize their existence. From another perspective, Peter B. Clarke further notes that these Buddhist movements marks a move from a credo full of rituals and devotions to one that emphasizes on personal experience.

The late 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm Thiền sect seems to be an example of Buddhism Modernism movements in Vietnam. This research project deconstructed the new interpretation of movement and investigated its features in terms of the sect’s original mythos and the forces of modernity and globalization. The next chapter will review the

Trúc Lâm's original mythos established by King Monk Trần Nhân Tông in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.



## CHAPTER TWO

### The 13<sup>th</sup> Century Trúc Lâm Thiền Sect

This dissertation examines the Trúc Lâm movement established by Thích Thanh Từ that, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, has gained rapid traction not only in Vietnam but also internationally. The movement calls for restoring Thiền Buddhism to its 13<sup>th</sup> century *Golden Age* of Vietnamese Buddhism. In addressing the first research question of this project, this chapter reviews the original Trúc Lâm Thiền's teaching and practice established by King Monk Trần Nhân Tông (陳仁宗) - the core of such *Golden Age* of Vietnamese Buddhism.

The collection of Trần Nhân Tông's main Rhythmic Prose, Poems, Encounter Dialogues, Lectures, etc., will be synthesized for an understanding of the ideology and practice of Trúc Lâm's early days. The Trúc Lâm lineage will also be reviewed with emphasis on the extant literature focused around the sect's first three patriarchs before the sect faded away. First, it is necessary to survey the religious landscape of Vietnam during the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Early Religions in Vietnam

Before the country was officially declared an atheist state in 1975,<sup>131</sup> the Vietnamese people and culture had been profoundly influenced by four major religious traditions: Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and folk or popular religion, as reflected in the country's religious beliefs, behaviors and customs.<sup>132</sup> The influence of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, a trinity collectively known as 'Tam Giáo' (Three Religions:

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<sup>131</sup> Jan Dodd, Mark Lewis, and Ron Emmons, *The Rough Guide to Vietnam* (London: Rough Guides Limited, 2009).

<sup>132</sup> Naval History and Heritage Command, "Religions of Vietnam," Naval History and Heritage Command, 1968, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/r/religions-of-vietnam.html>.

Nho-Khổng-Lão) on the people was mostly a result of nearly a thousand years of Chinese occupation (111 BCE – 938 CE).<sup>133</sup> In James Sullivan’s words, “Vietnamese beliefs are a complex tangle of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, coiled about an ancient core of native dependency on spirits and goddesses.”<sup>134</sup>

These traditions, however, instead of creating conflicts in the Vietnamese religious landscape, as Sullivan further notes, “aren’t mutually exclusive but pliable and absorbent.”<sup>135</sup> Hue-Tam Ho Tai agrees with Jonathan H. X. Lee<sup>136</sup> on the argument that Vietnam had just one single religious amalgamation of all four major beliefs in one form or another, but these forms varied greatly.<sup>137</sup> In early Vietnam, according to Ho Tai, especially during the period of Chinese domination, “scholar-officials gave more weight to Confucian teachings; common people put more emphasis on Buddhism and on Taoism in its popular religious form.”<sup>138</sup> During that time, in seeking societal harmony, the Chinese put Confucian ethics with a hierarchy of deference in place; the son obeys the father, the subject obeys the King, the wife the husband, and the disciple the master.<sup>139</sup> Regarding the ‘Tam Giáo’ influence on Vietnamese society, James Sullivan suggests, Taoism played the least significant role but also the most mystical element of the trinity, with forms of divinity, fortune telling, and system of ritual performance while the balance between Confucianism and Buddhism relied mostly on the support of the royal court.<sup>140</sup> However, after Vietnam liberated itself in the tenth century and Buddhism flourished

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<sup>133</sup> Lee et al., *Asian American Religious Cultures*, 961.

<sup>134</sup> James Sullivan, *National Geographic Traveler - Vietnam, 3rd Edition* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Books, 2015), 32.

<sup>135</sup> Sullivan, 32.

<sup>136</sup> Lee et al., *Asian American Religious Cultures*, 961.

<sup>137</sup> Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “Religion in Vietnam: The Gods of the Early Vietnamese,” Asia Society, Center for Global Education, accessed August 21, 2018, <https://asiasociety.org/education/religion-vietnam>.

<sup>138</sup> Ho Tai.

<sup>139</sup> Sullivan, *National Geographic Traveler - Vietnam, 3rd Edition*, 33.

<sup>140</sup> Sullivan, 34.

during the Lý and Trần dynasties, despite Confucian belief still being in full force with the support of the royal government, according to George Dutton, “Tran’s kings blended elements of Buddhist and Confucian (the sage’s) thought, which were not seen to be in conflict with each other.”<sup>141</sup>

## Early Buddhism in Vietnam

Kenneth Ch’en in *Buddhism: The Light of Asia* suggests that Buddhism was first introduced in Giao Chỉ (*Chiao-Chih*<sup>142</sup>, 交趾: as Vietnam was known during 111 BCE – 40 CE) as early as the first century CE by the sea route.<sup>143</sup> However, the exact time of Buddhism’s arrival to Vietnam is still a debated topic. Lê Mạnh Thát in the *History of Vietnamese Buddhism (Lịch Sử Phật Giáo Việt Nam)* argues that it is almost certainly evident to say that Buddhism was present in Vietnam in some century BCE.<sup>144</sup> According to Nguyễn Lang in the *Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism (Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận)*, Indian merchants (not missionaries) brought Buddhism with them and practiced its rituals while staying in Vietnam before the arrival of Chinese rule (111 BCE).<sup>145</sup> On

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<sup>141</sup> George Dutton and Jayne Werner, John K. Witmore, *Source of Vietnamese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 53.

<sup>142</sup> Keith Weller Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 67.

<sup>143</sup> Kenneth Kuan Sh-Eng Chen and Kenneth Kuan Shêng Ch’en, *Buddhism: The Light of Asia* (New York: Barron’s Educational Series, 1968), 132.

<sup>144</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Lịch Sử Phật Giáo Việt Nam [History of Vietnamese Buddhism]* (Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City Publishing, 2003), 42: “Trong khi chờ đợi khai quật được những di vật khảo cổ học tại cửa Nam Giới và núi Tam Đảo, ta có thể có một số ý niệm khá chính xác về sự hiện diện của Phật Giáo tại nước ta vào những thế kỷ trước Dương Lịch.”

<sup>145</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 37–38: “Như ta đã biết, đạo Phật đầu tiên do các thương gia Ấn Độ đem đến. Những người này không phải là những nhà truyền giáo; họ chỉ sống đời sống tín ngưỡng của họ trong lúc lưu lại Giao Châu, và chính vì vậy mà người Giao Châu biết đến đạo Phật.” (p.37); “Khi Triệu Vũ Đế làm vua ở Lĩnh Nam, vào thế kỷ thứ hai trước Tây lịch, triều đình có dùng trâu, ngựa và dê để cúng tế trời đất, và dân chúng đã biết mua dụng cụ canh nông bằng sắt của người Hán (thư Triệu Vũ Vương gửi Hán Văn Đế năm 181 trước Tây lịch) .... ‘Dân Việt là dân cạo tóc, về mình, không thể lấy pháp độ của nước đội mũ mang đai {nước Hán} mà trị được. Từ thời Tam Đại tự trị, đất Hồ, đất Việt không theo lịch sử của Trung Quốc...’ (thư của Hoài Nam Vương dâng vua Hán, can không nên đem quân can thiệp vào cuộc gây hấn giữa Mân Việt và Nam Việt vào năm 135 trước Tây lịch). Người Giao Châu chắc đã dùng lịch Ấn Độ trong thời đó. ... Trong bối cảnh tín ngưỡng và văn hóa kia, đạo Phật đã được mang vào Việt Nam.” (p.38)”.

that topic, Jonathan H. X. Lee posits that, “Buddhist monks may have reached Van Lang (as Vietnam was known at the time) as early as the third or second century BCE.”<sup>146</sup>

### *The Formation Period*

During the period of Chinese rule in Vietnam, with the reenforcement of imported Chinese Buddhism and a philosophy that aligned with the pre-existing indigenous folk beliefs (Tín Ngưỡng Dân Gian),<sup>147</sup> Buddhism permeated Vietnamese society easily.<sup>148</sup> According to Keith Weller Taylor, Giao Chỉ turned into a center for the diffusion of Buddhism into China, where Buddhism prospered. During those 40 years (187-226),<sup>149</sup> the territory was under the helm of Chinese prefect Shih Hsieh (Sĩ Nhiếp), who did not implement new concepts of government or control the economy, but instead allowed the indigenous life to prosper.<sup>150</sup> Keith Weller Taylor further argues that there was a strong Buddhist culture during the time of Shih Hsieh’s reign; he supported Buddhist clergy and allowed the new construction of Buddhist temples despite a majority of those monks being *Hu* – the derogatory name applied to foreigners, including those from India and Central Asia.<sup>151</sup>

The introduction of Buddhism to Vietnam is associated with the founding of four temples in the environs of Luy-lau during the rule of Shih-Hsieh. These were temples dedicated to the Buddha of Clouds (Pháp Vân), the Buddha of

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<sup>146</sup> Lee et al., *Asian American Religious Cultures*, 943.

<sup>147</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 38: “Những quan niệm công đức, tam bảo, cúng dường, luân hồi, nghiệp báo... không có quan niệm nào chống đối với tín ngưỡng tại Giao Châu hồi ấy.”

<sup>148</sup> Nguyễn Lang, 38–39: “... người Giao Chỉ chưa ai trở thành những tín đồ trung kiên của Khổng Lão và trang bị bởi những ý thức hệ vững chãi, nên Phật Giáo không gặp nhiều trở ngại như khi đi vào đất Hán. Đạo Phật thấm vào văn minh Giao Châu tự nhiên dễ dàng như nước thấm vào lòng đất.”

<sup>149</sup> Ngô Sĩ Liên, Lê Văn Hưu, and Phan Phu Tiên, *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư [The Complete Chronicle of Đại Việt]*, trans. Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, PDF by Lê Bắc 2001 (Hà Nội: Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 1993), 27.

<sup>150</sup> Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, 80.

<sup>151</sup> Taylor, 80.

Rain (Pháp Vũ), the Buddha of Thunder (Pháp Lôi), and the Buddha of Lightning (Pháp Điện).<sup>152</sup>

Jonathan H. X. Lee further notes that by the end of the second century CE, a major Buddhist center was established in Bắc Ninh province (north of present-day Hà Nội, Vietnam).<sup>153</sup>

The prosperity of Buddhism in Giao Chỉ at the beginning of the first millennium was evidenced by a strong flow of arrival of new eminent Buddhist monks and scholars from the Indian subcontinent and central Asia who brought with them their knowledge through teachings and contributions of teaching and text translations. Some of those translations remain extant, but many have been lost, especially through the thousand years of Chinese domination. The most well known of those include Mouzi with *Li-hou-lun* (牟子理惑论: *Master Mu's Treatise Dispelling Doubts: Mâu Tử Lý Hoặc Luận*), Kang Senghui (康僧會: Khương Tăng Hội) with *Liu du ji jing* (*A Scripture on the Collection of the Six Perfections: Lục Độ Tập Kinh*), and Kalaruci (Chi Cương Lương Tiếp) with *Saddharmasamadhi Sutra* (*Pháp Hoa Tam Muội*).

The Buddhist text Mouzi *Li-hou-lun* (牟子理惑论: *Master Mu's Treatise Dispelling Doubts: Mâu Tử Lý Hoặc Luận*) was written in Chinese in the territory in 198 CE.<sup>154</sup> The treatise was a response to the upper-class Confucianists and Daoists (numbering about one hundred)<sup>155</sup> taking refuge in the far south Giao Chỉ to avoid the chaos of northern China, especially following the death of Han Emperor Ling (189 CE),

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<sup>152</sup> Taylor, 81.

<sup>153</sup> Lee et al., *Asian American Religious Cultures*, 943.

<sup>154</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Tổng Tập Văn Học Phật Giáo Việt Nam [Collection of Vietnamese Buddhist Literature]* (Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City Publishing, 2001), 250: “Mâu Tử với tác phẩm Lý Hoặc Luận nổi tiếng viết năm 198, ....”

<sup>155</sup> Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, 71.

who had believed Buddhist notions negated China's existing traditions.<sup>156</sup> The text was written in the question-answer conversational form, with an attempt to explain how Buddhist beliefs and practices, still strange and foreign in China, and could be understood in the familiar Confucian and Taoist languages.<sup>157</sup>

There has been a debate concerning the exact year *Lý Hoặc Luận* was written, with the participation of eminent scholars such as Lương Khải Siêu, Tokiwa Daijo, Paul Pelliot, Erik Zürcher and Henri Maspero.<sup>158</sup> According to Erik Zürcher, Japanese scholar Fukui Kōjun reexamined these various theories and suggested that the Mouzi *Li-hou-lun* text was written around the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century,<sup>159</sup> with a questionable issue related to the appearance of the story about Prince Vessantara in *Li-hou-lun*. It seemed that Lê Mạnh Thát had brought the issue to a closure, as well as further suggests that Mouzi was among the masters who helped Khương Tăng Hội after the latter's own masters passed away.

The presented new pieces of evidence made the appearance of the Prince Vessantara story in *Li-hou-lun* no longer a roadblock in determining the year of this text as well as of that of Mouzi. Mouzi as such was potentially born around 160-165 CE as Pelliot and Fukui suggested. The timeframe he wrote *Lý Hoặc Luận* is definitely not 191 CE as Chí Ban argued, also not 195 CE as Pelliot proposed. We suggest 198 CE. This makes it possible for Mouzi to be able to be alive up to 220 or 230 to enable him to educate younger generations of successors such as Khương Tăng Hội and Đạo Hành.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> John P. Keenan, *How Master Mou Removes Our Doubts: A Reader-Response Study and Translation of the Mou-Tzu Li-Huo Lun* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 12.

<sup>157</sup> Wm Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From Earliest Times to 1600* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 422.

<sup>158</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Tổng Tập Văn Học Phật Giáo Việt Nam [Collection of Vietnamese Buddhist Literature]*, 41–56.

<sup>159</sup> Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2007), 13.

<sup>160</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Tổng Tập Văn Học Phật Giáo Việt Nam [Collection of Vietnamese Buddhist Literature]*, 29–30: “Một khi khẳng định như thế, việc truyện Tu Đại Noa xuất hiện trong *Lý hoặc luận* không còn là một trở ngại cho công tác xác định niên đại của chính tác phẩm này cũng như của Mâu Tử. Mâu Tử từ đó có thể sinh khoảng những năm 160-165, như Pelliot và Fukui đã đề nghị. Thời điểm ông viết *Lý hoặc luận* dứt khoát không thể là năm 191, như Chí Ban đã đề xuất, cũng không thể năm 195, như

Kang Senghui (康僧會: Khương Tăng Hội) (?–280 CE), a renowned Buddhist monk from Giao Chỉ and a great contributor to the diffusion and translation of Buddhist sutras into the Chinese language and in the spreading of Buddhism in Giao Chỉ and China during the third century, was another piece of evidence on Buddhist prosperity in the territory.<sup>161</sup> Tăng Hội, born in Giao Chỉ to a Sogdian merchant father, and ordained there right after becoming an orphan as a teenager, was a well known, brilliant young monk and then became an eminent Buddhist scholar and writer there.<sup>162</sup> He translated *Liu du ji jing* (*A Scripture on the Collection of the Six Perfections: Lục Độ Tập Kinh*)<sup>163</sup> and *Cựu Tập Thí Dụ Kinh* into Chinese then wrote the Preface and commentary for An Shigao's *Anban shouyi jing* (*An Ban Thủ Ý Kinh*) and An Xuan and Yan Fotiao's *Fajing jing* (*Pháp Kinh Kinh*).<sup>164</sup>

Seeing Buddhism as lackluster in the Eastern Wu region, Khương Tăng Hội walked eastward and in 247 CE arrived to Kiến Nghiệp (Jianye 建業), the capital of Đông Ngô (Eastern Wu) at the time, Nanjing in the present day<sup>165</sup>, and started spreading Buddhism there.<sup>166</sup> When asked by King Tôn Quyền (Sun Quan 孫權) of Eastern Wu to

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Pelliot đã gợi ý. Chúng tôi đề nghị là năm 198. Mâu Tử có thể sống tiếp tới những năm 220 đến 230 và góp phần mình vào việc đào tạo những lớp người kế thừa mới, trong đó có Khương Tăng Hội và Đạo Hành.”

<sup>161</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 59.

<sup>162</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Lịch Sử Phật Giáo Việt Nam [History of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 313: “Khương Tăng Hội, tổ tiên người Khương Cư, mấy đời ở Thiên Trúc, cha nhân buôn bán, dời đến Giao Chỉ. Hội năm hơn 10 tuổi, song thân đều mất, khi chịu tang xong, bèn xuất gia, siêng năng hết mực. Là con người rộng rãi nhả nhận, có tâm hiểu biết, dốc chí hiểu học, rõ hiểu ba tạng, xem khắp sáu kinh, thiên văn đồ vĩ, phần lớn biết hết, giỏi việc ăn nói, lanh việc viết văn.”

<sup>163</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, 202: “Mà Lục Độ Tập Kinh theo truyền thống lại được dịch vào năm Thái Nguyên thứ nhất (251) đời Tôn Quyền thời Tam Quốc.”

<sup>164</sup> Jan Nattier, *A Guide to the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Translations: Texts from the Eastern Han “Dong Han” and Three Kingdoms “San Guo” Periods* (The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhism: Soka University, 2008), 150.

<sup>165</sup> Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization*, trans. J. R. Foster and Charles Hartman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 214.

<sup>166</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Lịch Sử Phật Giáo Việt Nam [History of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 314: “Bấy giờ đất Ngô mới nhiệm giáo pháp vĩ đại, phong hóa chưa tròn, Tăng Hội muốn khiến đạo nổi Giang Tả, dựng

produce concrete evidence of the truth of the new religion, he conjured the miraculous apparition of a Buddha-relic, after which he converted Sun Quan to Buddhism and Sun Quan subsequently built for him the first Buddhist monastery in the Southern capital, the Kiến Sơ monastery (Jianchusi 建初寺).<sup>167</sup>

There was a debate on when exactly some of Khương Tăng Hội's texts were written and recorded in Chinese biographical literature, which followed his move to Kiến Nghiệp. Based on the languages used in the extant *Lục Độ Tập Kinh* and *Cựu Tập Thí Dụ Kinh* by the same author, Lê Mạnh Thát suggests that there must have been the Vietnamese edition of the texts circulating in Giao Chỉ prior to Tăng Hội's departure for Kiến Nghiệp, as he used them for his Chinese translation, not directly from Sanskrit like most believed.<sup>168</sup> The same year the Preface of *Anban shouyi jing* was written, according to Tang Yongtong as quoted in Zürcher (2007), it must be before 229 (the year in which Sun Quan declared himself emperor of the state of Wu),<sup>169</sup> while Lê Mạnh Thát suggests that Tăng Hội was still in Giao Chỉ between the years 221-230.<sup>170</sup>

From a definitional perspective, both Erik Zürcher and Lê Mạnh Thát suggest that Khương Tăng Hội is connected to the Hinayana school founded by An Shigao in northern China.<sup>171</sup> The school advocates, in Thích Thien-An's words, "search of self-

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nên chùa nước liền chống gậy đông du, vào năm Xích Ô thứ 10 (247), mới đến Kiến Nghiệp, xây cất nhà tranh, dựng tượng hành đạo."

<sup>167</sup> Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, 80.

<sup>168</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Lịch Sử Phật Giáo Việt Nam [History of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 250–51: "Ông là người đầu tiên đã xử dụng các kinh sách Phật Giáo tiếng Việt để dịch sang tiếng Trung Quốc mà hiện nay ta còn được hai bộ. Đó là Lục Bộ Tập Kinh và Cựu Tập Thí Dụ Kinh."

<sup>169</sup> Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, 377.

<sup>170</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Tổng Tập Văn Học Phật Giáo Việt Nam [Collection of Vietnamese Buddhist Literature]*, 250–51: "Cho nên nếu Hội viết An Ban Thủ Ý Kinh chú giải vào đầu đời Ngụy thì ông phải viết nó vào khoảng những năm 221-230, tức những năm đầu của nhà Ngụy, chứ không thể sau những năm 247 hay 251 trở đi được."

<sup>171</sup> Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*; Lê Mạnh Thát, *Tổng Tập Văn Học Phật Giáo Việt Nam [Collection of Vietnamese Buddhist Literature]*, 279: "Học phong này về mặt thực tế dựa trên phương pháp tu học thiền định an ban theo kiểu An Thế Cao."



enlightenment culminating in the Arhat stage of attainment, in contradistinction to the Mahayana outlook which seeks to benefit all beings and awake in them the thought of enlightenment and the aspiration to travel the Bodhisattva path.”<sup>172</sup> Its cultivation practice, called ‘*an ban*’, according to Yijie Tang, is similar to breathing exercises espoused by Daoism:

The method of keeping one’s mind in place was known as *An ban* [anapana], in which *ana* referred to inhalation and *pana* referred to exhalation. This was similar to the *tu na* breathing exercises espoused by both the Huang-Lao school and the Immortality school of Daoism (Taoism), both of which were popular in the Han Dynasty.<sup>173</sup>

From Jan Nattier’s perspective, Tăng Hội’s corpus could best be described as reflecting both Mahayana and non-Mahayana assumptions; evidenced with the appearance of bodhisattva Manjusri in *Lục Độ Tập Kinh*, his commentary to the Mahayana sutra *Pháp Kinh Kinh*, and his Preface and commentary to the Hinayana’s traditional meditation focus *An Ban Thủ Ý Kinh*.<sup>174</sup> In line with Nattier, Zurcher also notices that Tăng Hội referred many times to Mahayana texts in his commentary to elucidate passages from the *An Ban* Hinayanistic scripture.<sup>175</sup>

There also appeared monk Kalaruci (also known as Kalyanaruci, Chi Cương Lương Tiếp, or Cương Lương Lô Chi) in Giao Chỉ during the third century. Kalaruci, a Sogdian, translated the Mahayana *Saddharmasamadhi Sutra* (*Pháp Hoa Tam Muội Kinh*) at Giao Chỉ in 255-256 CE; however, the translation was considered lost before 730

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<sup>172</sup> Thích Thiên-an, “Chapter 1: The Introduction of Buddhism and Zen into Vietnam,” in *Buddhism & Zen in Vietnam: In Relation to the Development of Buddhism in Asia* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 1992).

<sup>173</sup> Yijie Tang, *Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity and Chinese Culture* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2015), 107.

<sup>174</sup> Nattier, *A Guide to the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Translations*, 150.

<sup>175</sup> Zurcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, 54.

CE.<sup>176</sup> As Lê Mạnh Thát reports, Kalaruci translated the sutra with another monk whose name varied in different sources (Thích Đạo Thanh, Trúc Đạo Hinh, Trúc Đạo Thanh); however, there was no trace of a Vietnamese monk and scholar bearing any of those names.<sup>177</sup> In 281 CE, Kalaruci moved to China.<sup>178</sup>

The prosperity of Buddhism in Giao Chỉ continued during the first millenium with the arrival of a variety of Bodhidharma descended Mahayana *Dhyana* meditational schools of Buddhism imported from China during the colonial period.<sup>179</sup> As recorded in *Eminent Figures in the Vietnamese Thiền Community* (*Thiền Uyển Tập Anh*), the establishment and vigorous growth of Vinītaruci, Vô Ngôn Thông, and Thảo Đường sects started by Chan masters since the 6<sup>th</sup> century which carried their own generations of great patriarchs and masters bear witness to the maturity and energy of Vietnamese Buddhism.<sup>180</sup> According to Keith Weller Taylor, the doctrines of T'ien T'ai also spread quickly from China into Vietnam in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, but never as influential among the ruling class Vietnamese as the other branches of Buddhism.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận* [*Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism*], 67: “Cùng trong thế kỷ thứ ba, có một vị tăng sĩ tên Chi Cương Lương Tiếp (Kalasivi, dịch là Chính Vô Uy) đã dịch kinh Pháp Hoa Tam Muội (Saddharmasamadhi - sutra) ở Giao Châu vào năm 255 hay 256. ... Bản dịch kinh Pháp Hoa Tam Muội đã mất vào trước 730. Kinh này cũng thuộc về loại Thiền kinh đại thừa; chữ tam muội có nghĩa là định.”

<sup>177</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Lịch Sử Phật Giáo Việt Nam* [*History of Vietnamese Buddhism*], 403–4: “Cứ vào các thông tin trên, ta biết là vào năm 256 tại nước ta, Chi Cương Lương Tiếp đã cùng với Đạo Thanh hay Đạo Hinh dịch kinh Pháp Hoa tam muội... ngày nay ta hầu như không có một chi tiết cụ thể nào về nhà sư kiêm dịch giả Việt Nam đầu tiên có tên tuổi là Đạo Thanh.”

<sup>178</sup> Carsun Chang, *The Development of Neo-Confucian Thought* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1957), 81.

<sup>179</sup> William M. Johnston, *Encyclopedia of Monasticism* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1327.

<sup>180</sup> Cuong Tu Nguyen, *Zen in Medieval Vietnam: A Study and Translation of the Thiền Uyển Tập Anh* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 54: “The historical facts and evidence still do not support the traditional view on the existence and activities of the Vinītaruci, Vô Ngôn Thông, and Thảo Đường Zen schools in Vietnamese history.” However, if the existence of these sects becomes an issue, it is outside the scope of this dissertation, which has its main focus on the teaching and practice of Thích Thanh Từ in the late 20th century.

<sup>181</sup> Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, 156.

*The Vinītaruci (Tì ni đà Luru-chi) Thiền School*

The school was founded by an Indian Brahman monk named Vinītaruci (毘尼多流支: ?-594), who was transmitted the “mind-seal” directly from the third Chan patriarch Sengcan (also known as Seng-ts’an or Zeng Can: Tăng Xán) and then was advised to go south. In 580, Vinītaruci arrived in Vietnam, greeted Pháp Hiền, and resided at Pháp Vân temple (one of the four temples in Luy Lâu built during Shih Hsieh’s reign).<sup>182</sup> His translations to Chinese include the *Gayāssirsa Sūtra (Elephant Head Prayers: Kinh Tượng Đầu Tinh Xá)*, the *Sūtra on the Differentiation of Karmic Reward (Nghịệp Báo Sai Biệt)*, and the *Vaipulyadhāranī Sūtra (Kinh Đại Thừa Phương Quảng Tổng Trì)*.<sup>183</sup>

According to Nguyễn Lang, *Gayāssirsa Sūtra* is a sutra in the Prajna system (Bát Nhã) for meditation practice emphasizing on the nature of enlightenment (Bodhi).<sup>184</sup> Bodhi cannot be described in words or forms, the sutra provides a combination of what such nature is not and its analogies, instead of directly defining it. Lê Mạnh Thát illustrates in the following excerpts based on the Vietnamese translation of the sutra:

Then, Bodhi only has a name attached with no real nimitta (tượng), no sound, no rupa (sắc), no appearance, no origin, no destination, no attachment ....<sup>185</sup>

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Buddha told Manjusri: Bodhi is beyond the three realms, beyond both spoken and written words and beyond references. Specifically, Manjushri! Bodhisattva being in no place is in Bodhi, being with no thoughts is in Bodhi, being

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<sup>182</sup> Kim Sơn - Trúc Lâm, *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh [Outstanding Figures in the Vietnamese Thiền Community]*, trans. Lê Mạnh Thát, Ebook by Lê Bắc 2001 (Ho Chi Minh City: Vạn Hạnh University, 1999), 94–95.

<sup>183</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Lịch Sử Phật Giáo Việt Nam [History of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 91; Tai Thu Nguyen, *The History of Buddhism in Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008).

<sup>184</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 94: “Tượng Đầu Tinh Xá, một cuốn kinh có tính chất Thiền học và mang màu sắc của văn hệ Bát Nhã. Kinh này nói về bản chất của giác ngộ, tức là bồ đề.”

<sup>185</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Lịch Sử Phật Giáo Việt Nam [History of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 58: “Thế thì bồ đề chỉ có tên suông mà không có tướng thật, không tiếng, không sắc.”

attached to ‘nothing’ is in Bodhi, being with ‘true nature’ is in Bodhi, being with dharmas of no nimitta is in Bodhi... being like a mirror image, echoes in an empty cave, moon in the water... Manjushri! Bodhisattva being as such is in Bodhi.<sup>186</sup>

Since *Vaipulyadhāranī Sūtra* is a Tantric sutra, Tantric practice was a special feature at Vinītaruci school. Accepting folk deities worshipped by the common people Tantra made Buddhism more relatable to the general population.<sup>187</sup> In Giao Châu (another name Vietnam was then called in the 7<sup>th</sup> century), this practice correlated with traditional Vietnamese belief and customs. Many other branches of Buddhism in Vietnam started adapting Tantra around the establishment of the Vinītaruci school, which resulted in tantric rituals becoming a common practice in Vietnam, even in Thiền monasteries.<sup>188</sup>

According to William M. Johnston, the sect’s enlightenment methods employed both Prajna and Tantric practices that originated more from Indian tradition:

The Dhyana school of Vinītaruci followed in its essential Indian tradition, even though the master had received the Seal of the Heart from a Chinese master. Methods of reaching *samadhi* gradually would lead ultimately to enlightenment. Once achieved, enlightenment imparted six supernatural powers associated with Vajrayana.<sup>189</sup>

Thích Nhất Hạnh suggests that Vinītaruci may have been the first person to bring Tantric practice to Vietnam.<sup>190</sup> The Vinītaruci school flourished since its second

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<sup>186</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, 66: “Bồ-đề là vượt trên ba cõi, vượt khỏi ngôn thuyết, rồi các văn tự, không có trụ xứ. Lại nữa, này Văn-thù-sư-lợi! bồ tát ma ha tát trụ trụ chỗ không trụ là trụ bồ-đề; trụ không chấp trước là trụ bồ-đề; trụ vào pháp không là trụ bồ-đề; trụ vào pháp tín là trụ bồ-đề; trụ vào tất cả pháp không có thể tướng là trụ bồ-đề; trụ vô lượng tín là trụ bồ-đề; trụ không tăng giảm là trụ bồ-đề; trụ không niệm pháp là trụ bồ-đề; trụ như bóng gương, như tiếng dội hang trống, như trăng trong nước, như lửa lúc nóng. Này Văn-thù-sư-lợi! Trụ các pháp như vậy là trụ bồ-đề.”

<sup>187</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 102–21.

<sup>188</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, “Tương Lai Thiền Học Việt Nam [Future of Vietnamese Thiền],” 11–12.

<sup>189</sup> Johnston, *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*, 1327.

<sup>190</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, “Truyền Thống Sinh Động Thiền Tập [Traditions of Meditation Practice],” Làng Mai, accessed January 8, 2018, <https://langmai.org/tang-kinh-cac/vien-sach/giang-kinh/truyen-thong-sinh-dong-cua-thien-tap/>.

patriarch, Master Pháp Hiển, under whom 300 hundred monks and nuns enrolled.<sup>191</sup>

According to Thiền Uyển Tập Anh, the Vinītaruci School lasted until 1213 and had 19 generations of successors from Vinītaruci to Y Son. As observed by Nguyễn Lang, many monks in this school became famous for their supernatural powers, such as Sùng Phạm, Vạn Hạnh, Thiền Nham, Đạo Hạnh, who also used those powers to engage in social advocacy issues.<sup>192</sup>

### *The Vô Ngôn Thông Thiền School*

From *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh*, Chan Master Vô Ngôn Thông (無言通: Wu YanTong (759-826)), also known as Bát Ngữ Thông (Bát Ngữ Tông) based on *Chuangdeng Lu* (*Cảnh Đức Truyền Đăng Lục*), arrived in Vietnam in 820 CE, during the Tang dynasty. He then settled and practiced the wall-facing meditation at Kiến Sơ Temple in Phù Đồng Village (Vietnam).<sup>193</sup> Originally from Guangzhou (China), he was a disciple of Master Bách Trượng Hoài Hải (Baizhang HuaiHai: 百丈懷海 (720-814), also known as Pai-chang), who was known both as a dharma heir of Mazu Daoyi of Hui-neng lineage<sup>194</sup> and for establishing an early set of rules for Chan monastic discipline in the *Pure Rules of Baizhang* (*Pai chang ch'ing kuei*) containing the famous phrase, “a day without work should be a day without food.”<sup>195</sup> Later on, Vô Ngôn Thông transmitted the mind-seal to Cẩm Thành (formerly Lập Đức - the resident monk at Kiến Sơ who met Vô Ngôn Thông

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<sup>191</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 94.

<sup>192</sup> Nguyễn Lang, 108–19.

<sup>193</sup> Nguyen, *Zen in Medieval Vietnam: A Study and Translation of the Thiền Uyển Tập Anh*, 105.

<sup>194</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 122.

<sup>195</sup> Martin Collcutt, “The Early Ch’an Monastic Rule: Ch’ing Kuei and the Shaping of Ch’an Community Life,” in *Early Ch’an in China and Tibet*, ed. Whalen Lai, Lewis R. Lancaster (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1983), 167.

at his arrival) who continued Vô Ngôn Thông's line of meditational doctrine and practice, which lasted for 15 generations all the way to the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>196</sup>

The Vô Ngôn Thông School was more influenced by Chinese Buddhism than by the Vinitaruci sect. This influence is seen throughout Chan history, in the way the monasteries were organized and in the use of *gongan* (also known as *koan*) to teach enlightenment.<sup>197</sup> Nguyễn Công Lý argues that the focus of the sect's practice is on 'Sudden Enlightenment' and 'Buddha In The Mind'.<sup>198</sup> According to *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh*, the *koan* method was commonly used in the sect, verified through the *koan*-style conversations, such as ones between Ngô Ân and a monk in apprenticeship, Định Hương and disciple Cứu Chỉ, and Thiện Hội and disciple Vân Phong.

According to William M. Johnston, Vô Ngôn Thông's practice method followed the tradition of Hui-neng, which emphasized sudden enlightenment instead of the gradual method taught by Vinītaruci.<sup>199</sup> Nguyen Tai Thu argues that the fundamental idea in the Wu Yantong system is that the truth is not outside of us; it is within, inside of every sentient being themselves, and such truth can only be perceived directly and cannot be understood through spoken language or written texts.<sup>200</sup> That medium creates thoughts. However, as Hui-neng said in the *Platform Sutra*, when the mind has nothing to do with thinking (because its fundamental source is empty), we practice no-thought to turn the

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<sup>196</sup> Nguyen, *Zen in Medieval Vietnam: A Study and Translation of the Thiền Uyển Tập Anh*; Kim Sơn - Trúc Lâm, *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh [Outstanding Figures in the Vietnamese Thiền Community]*, 93.

<sup>197</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 126–28.

<sup>198</sup> Nguyễn Công Lý, "Phật Giáo Thời Lý–Trần Với Bản Sắc Dân Tộc Đại Việt [Đại Việt's Characteristics in Buddhism under Lý–Trần]," accessed August 30, 2018, [http://khoavanhoc-ngonngu.edu.vn/home/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1269:pht-giao-thi-ly-tran-vi-ban-sc-dan-toc-i-vit&catid=113:ht-vn-hc-pht-giao-vi-1000-nm-thng-long&Itemid=181](http://khoavanhoc-ngonngu.edu.vn/home/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1269:pht-giao-thi-ly-tran-vi-ban-sc-dan-toc-i-vit&catid=113:ht-vn-hc-pht-giao-vi-1000-nm-thng-long&Itemid=181).

<sup>199</sup> Johnston, *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*, 1327; Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 128.

<sup>200</sup> Nguyen, *The History of Buddhism in Vietnam*, 68.

Lotus into perceiving the Buddha mind within, instead of opening up sentient beings' own 'wisdom' to be turned by the Lotus.<sup>201</sup>

The *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* (*Yuanjue jing: Kinh Viên Giác*) and *Lotus Sutra* (*Pháp Hoa Kinh*), were among popular sutras used by eminent monks in Vô Ngôn Thông such as Viên Chiếu (998-1090), Viên Thông.<sup>202</sup> The *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*, according to Charles Muller, was an extremely popular and influential scripture within the meditation-oriented Buddhist schools of East Asia, especially in Chinese Chan.<sup>203</sup> With the emphasis of scripture, Muller further adds, the Gautama Buddha aimed his effort to rouse those whose "roots of virtue" had matured and possessed the capacity for the teaching of "sudden enlightenment" - a direct awakening to the non-duality of reality, which necessarily rules out gradualistic, "goal-oriented" practice.<sup>204</sup> As Buddha answers Samantabhadra Bodhisattva (普賢菩薩) in the sutra, when the mind can distinguish defilements, one immediately becomes enlightened: "Good sons, when you know illusion, you will immediately be free, without devising expedient means. Freedom from illusion is in itself enlightenment, and there are no stages."<sup>205</sup>

*Lotus Sutra* (*Pháp Hoa*) was also used by many of Vô Ngôn Thông school's eminent masters such as Bảo Tính (?-1034), and Minh Tâm (?-1034), according to Thiền Uyển Tập Anh. Master Thông Biện (?-1134), a National Preceptor, devoted himself to the *Lotus Sutra* and was known as "Awakened to The Lotus" (*Ngộ Pháp Hoa*). Gene

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<sup>201</sup> Philip B. Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 166.

<sup>202</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 137.

<sup>203</sup> A. Charles Muller and Kihwa, *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment: Korean Buddhism's Guide to Meditation (with Commentary by the Son Monk Kihwa)* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>204</sup> Muller and Kihwa, 41.

<sup>205</sup> Muller and Kihwa, 95.

Reeves argues, the core teaching of *Lotus Sutra* explains the universal Buddha-Nature through emphasis on stories, which can also be said to be a doctrine of universal liberation or salvation, that all sentient beings have the Buddha-Nature, and being a bodhisattva is what eventually leads to being a Buddha.<sup>206</sup> According to Yoshiro Tamura, “the eternal life of the Buddha is shown through infinite, never-ending bodhisattva practice. The everlasting or eternal life is realized by endlessly doing bodhisattva practice in this actual world.”<sup>207</sup> Thus, as Gene Reeves further argues, “Because the Buddha and his Dharma are alive in such bodhisattvas, he himself continues to be alive. The fantastically long life of the Buddha, in other words, is at least partly a function of and dependent on his being embodied in others.”<sup>208</sup>

Even though Tantrism existed and was popular in the Vinītaruci community, and the Vô Ngôn Thông school tried to avoid its influence at first, the practice penetrated the school some time along its lineage, most notably with masters Không Lộ, Giác Hải, and Nguyên Học.<sup>209</sup> As William M. Johnston confirms, “At first, the doctrine of Vô Ngôn Thông had no esoteric element, but later such element emerged in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> generations.”<sup>210</sup> According to *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh*, as translated to English by Cuong Tu Nguyen, Không Lộ traveled to India together with Giác Hải and Đạo Hạnh, and the three attained the six supernatural powers.<sup>211</sup> Later after returning home, Không Lộ became a National Preceptor after mystically treating King Lý Thần Tông’s strange sickness. Giác Hải was well known for the power of making a lizard fall from a high ceiling in Lý Nhân

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<sup>206</sup> Gene Reeves, *The Stories of the Lotus Sutra* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 5.

<sup>207</sup> Yoshiro Tamura, *Introduction to the Lotus Sutra*, ed. Gene Reeves, trans. Michio Shinozaki (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 7.

<sup>208</sup> Reeves, *The Stories of the Lotus Sutra*, 5.

<sup>209</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 145.

<sup>210</sup> Johnston, *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*, 1327.

<sup>211</sup> Nguyen, *Zen in Medieval Vietnam: A Study and Translation of the Thiền Uyển Tập Anh*, 136.



Tông's imperial palace, by fixing his gaze at it; he also had the magical skills of jumping fifty or sixty feet in to the air and remaining there in the area a while. Nguyễn Học was famous for praying for rain and curing illnesses, just by reciting *dharani*.<sup>212</sup>

### **Buddhism in Vietnam After Reclaiming Independence from China in 938 CE**

After defeating the Chinese in 938 CE, the new leadership of Vietnam relied heavily on Buddhism to build the country as an independent state. According to Cuong Tu Nguyen, "During the four centuries after Vietnam established its independence from China, the Vietnamese ruling dynasties constantly enlisted eminent monks to assist them in religious, political, and literary affairs,"<sup>213</sup> as the independent state needed an ideological basis on which to build the country. Among the reasons, first of all, was that during most of the thousand years of Chinese domination, Buddhist monks lived entrenched in the communities and therefore fully understood the people's desires and needs.<sup>214</sup> As a direct consequence, Buddhism became an integral part of the cultural landscape.<sup>215</sup> Secondly, according to Pham Duy Nghia, Buddhist monks constituted the largest group of literati at the time,<sup>216</sup> many of whom were well-educated not only in Buddhism, but also in Confucianism, as recorded in *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh*. Thirdly, the scholars of Confucianism were exiled from political life as the new administration

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<sup>212</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 144–45.

<sup>213</sup> Nguyen, *Zen in Medieval Vietnam: A Study and Translation of the Thiền Uyển Tập Anh*, 9.

<sup>214</sup> Đặng Thái Mai, foreword to *Thơ Văn Lý-Trần [Literature Under Lý-Trần Reigns]*, trans. Nguyễn Huệ Chi, vol. 1 (Hà Nội: Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 1977), 38: "Các vị thầy chùa hồi này [colonial period] là những người sống rất gần gũi với nhân dân. Họ biết quần chúng muốn gì, yêu chuộng gì, và có thể hiểu và nên hiểu những gì trong giáo chỉ của Thiền."

<sup>215</sup> Damien Keown, *A Dictionary of Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 327.

<sup>216</sup> Pham Duy Nghia, "Confucianism and the Conception of the Law in Vietnam," in *Asian Socialism & Legal Change: The Dynamics of Vietnamese and Chinese Reform*, ed. John Stanley Gillespie, Pip Nicholson, and Penelope Nicholson (Canberra: Australian National University E Press, 2005), 81.

suspected those with Chinese education had questionable loyalty.<sup>217</sup> Fourthly, as Nguyễn Lang argues, a king could fully trust Buddhist monks since they no longer had the desires for power and social status in their mind, therefore had no intention of taking the throne for themselves.<sup>218</sup> Furthermore, based on a US Navy 1967 report, the pagodas were almost the sole repositories of culture in both writings and personality.<sup>219</sup>

Under the Đinh dynasty (968–980) and Early-Lê dynasty (980-1009), Buddhism was recognized as the state religion reflecting the high esteem of Buddhist faith held by these Vietnamese monarchs,<sup>220</sup> as well as erudite Buddhist monks' involvement in the court affairs.<sup>221</sup> Đinh Tiên Hoàng Đế (968-979), the founder of the dynasty, appointed Buddhist monks to roles in the national administration, “serving the ruler as advisers, rallying the people in times of crisis, and attending to the spiritual needs of the masses.”<sup>222</sup> The King granted Master Ngô Chân Lưu of the Vô Ngôn Thông sect the sobriquet Khuông Việt Thái Sư (Great Master Who Brings Order to Việt), and honored him with the rank of Tăng Thống (General Supervisor of Monks).<sup>223</sup> This was the first mention of the rank of Tăng Thống in Vietnam, and the role continued to exist under the

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<sup>217</sup> US Navy, *The Religions of South Vietnam in Faith and Fact* (Chaplain Division: Bureau of Navy Personnel, 1967).

<sup>218</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 154.

<sup>219</sup> US Navy, *The Religions of South Vietnam in Faith and Fact*.

<sup>220</sup> Nguyen, *The History of Buddhism in Vietnam*, 77.

<sup>221</sup> Trần Văn Giáp, foreword to *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Brief History of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, by Thích Mật Thể (Hà Nội: Tôn Giáo, 2009): “Biết đâu bắt đầu từ Đinh, Việt Nam ta đã nhận Phật giáo làm Quốc giáo, đặt Tăng quan trong triều, thì chắc hẳn Phật giáo hồi đó đã tới một trình độ thịnh đạt lắm rồi.”

<sup>222</sup> Keown, *A Dictionary of Buddhism*, 327.

<sup>223</sup> Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Donald S. Lopez Jr., *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 435.

subsequent Lê and Trần dynasties.<sup>224</sup> Various ranks and positions were also granted to eminent monks serving the court by the Đinh dynasty's founding king.<sup>225</sup>

In the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, according to Nguyễn Lang, Tantra and Thiền were the two most flourishing Buddhist systems.<sup>226</sup> Many eminent monks, especially ones from Vinītaruci, possessed supernatural powers through Tantric practice. Recent discoveries of multiple three-meter-high octagonal stone columns in Hoa Lư (Hà Nam Ninh province, North Vietnam), which was then the imperial city of the Đinh dynasty, were engraved by Đinh Khuông Liễn (the eldest son of the founder king Đinh Tiên Hoàng) with Tantric script *Usnisa Vijaya Dharani (Phật Đảnh Tôn Thắng Đà La Ni)*.<sup>227</sup> This find was new material evidence of the strength of Tantra during the period.<sup>228</sup>

Great Master Khuông Việt not only served in the Đinh dynasty, he also contributed to the Early-Lê dynasty (980-1009) in all military, administrative, and diplomatic affairs.<sup>229</sup> Masters Vạn Hạnh (?-1025) and Pháp Thuận (?-990) of the Vinītaruci sect were also visible in the Early-Lê dynasty. When the Đinh dynasty ended, Pháp Thuận supported Lê Hoàn (also known as Lê Đại Hành) to be a King to start the Early-Lê dynasty.<sup>230</sup> After the dynasty was established, Pháp Thuận was often invited to

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<sup>224</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Lịch Sử Phật Giáo Việt Nam [History of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 415: “Ta chỉ biết năm khoảng năm 969, Đinh Tiên Hoàng đã phong cho Khuông Việt làm Tăng Thống. Đây là lần đầu tiên chức Tăng Thống được nói đến trong lịch sử nước ta.”

<sup>225</sup> Thích Mật Thể, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Brief History of Vietnamese Buddhism]* (Hà Nội: Tôn Giáo, 2009), 50.

<sup>226</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 153: “Thế kỷ thứ mười ... Mật Giáo và Thiền là hai hệ thống Phật giáo hưng thịnh nhất của thời đại. Chính trong thế kỷ này mà những trụ đá về Mật Tông được tạo dựng ở Hoa Lư.”

<sup>227</sup> Hà Văn Tấn, “Inscriptions from the Tenth to Fourteenth Centuries Recently Discovered in Việt Nam,” in *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, ed. Keith Weller Taylor (New York: SEAP Publications, 1995), 51–53.

<sup>228</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Lịch Sử Phật Giáo Việt Nam [History of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 431.

<sup>229</sup> Buswell Jr. and Lopez Jr., *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, 435.

<sup>230</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Lịch Sử Phật Giáo Việt Nam [History of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 461.

attend political and diplomatic discussions of the court,<sup>231</sup> as his words were considered prophetic by the administration.<sup>232</sup> According to George Dutton, the relationship between the King and Pháp Thuận “became an essential component of Vietnamese models of governance, manifested both in the ritual of presenting memorials to the throne and in the less formal, spoken advice offered by close confidants.”<sup>233</sup>

Vạn Hạnh, who focused his practice on the *Dhàrani-samàdhi* (*Tổng Trì Tam Ma Địa*) script after his master passed away,<sup>234</sup> was well known for his strong supernatural powers.<sup>235</sup> Every word he uttered was considered prophetic by the people, and very much revered by King Lê Đại Hành, especially after seeing his predicted events come true on multiple occasions.<sup>236</sup> Though regarded in the political landscape, Vạn Hạnh was also highly respected by the courts for his firm religious lifestyle, distancing himself far away from the mundane by always retreating to the temple whenever he could.<sup>237</sup>

During the 11<sup>th</sup> century, with the establishment of the new Thiền school of Thảo Đường, the three Thiền sects existed side by side in an open religious market, easily causing Mahāyāna to intermix. This is proven in the case of Trì Bát (1049-1117) of Vinītaruci, who was known as a master of Dhyana and was greatly influenced by Tantrism as recorded in Thiền Uyển Tập Anh. The prayer to Amitabha Buddha inscription, found on the pedestal of a stone statue recently discovered in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>231</sup> Thích Mật Thể, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận* [Brief History of Vietnamese Buddhism], 54.

<sup>232</sup> Kim Sơn - Trúc Lâm, *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh* [Outstanding Figures in the Vietnamese Thiền Community], 105.

<sup>233</sup> Dutton and Jayne Werner, John K. Witmore, *Source of Vietnamese Tradition*, 60.

<sup>234</sup> Kim Sơn - Trúc Lâm, *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh* [Outstanding Figures in the Vietnamese Thiền Community], 110.

<sup>235</sup> Johnston, *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*, 1327.

<sup>236</sup> Nguyen, *Zen in Medieval Vietnam: A Study and Translation of the Thiền Uyển Tập Anh*, 175.

<sup>237</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận* [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism], 157: “Nhưng những thiền sư có tham dự chính sự như Vạn Hạnh trong khi làm việc vẫn giữ thái độ xuất thế của mình, không muốn hòa mình trong vòng danh lợi, xong việc thì rút lui về chùa.”

at Hoàng Kim temple in Hoàng Ngô village (Hà Sơn Bình province), made known that Trì Bát was also a devout propagator of Amidism who had set up the statue in 1099.<sup>238</sup> The advocacy of Tịnh Lực (1112-1175) of Vô Ngôn Thông sect on prayer recitation with both one's heart and mouth, as recorded in *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh*, is another example of the Pure Land penetration into Vietnam during the period.<sup>239</sup> The inscription on the stele of the Viên Quang pagoda (also known as Diên Phúc, constructed by Master Giác Hải in 1122, but changed to Viên Quang by Lý Anh Tông) reads that the statue of Amitabha was positioned in the main hall and those of six patriarchs in the back hall.<sup>240</sup> Also, according to Nguyễn Lang, King Trần Anh Tông carved the statue of Amitabha among other Buddhas on the day he became Senior Emperor.<sup>241</sup>

### *The Thảo Đường Thiền School*

Chan Master Thảo Đường, a disciple of Master Hsueh-t'ou Ming-Shueh (also known as Trùng Hiên or Tuyết Đậu Minh Giác) in China, was captured from Champa as a prisoner of war and brought to Đại Việt (Việt Nam).<sup>242</sup> According to Nguyễn Lang in the *Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism*, when he was discovered as a Chan master, King Lý Thánh Tông (r. 1054- 1072) promoted him in 1069 to National Preceptor. Master Thảo Đường settled at Khai Quốc temple right in the capital Thăng Long, then created a

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<sup>238</sup> Hà Văn Tấn, "Inscriptions from the Tenth to Fourteenth Centuries Recently Discovered in Việt Nam," 51–53.

<sup>239</sup> Nguyen, *Zen in Medieval Vietnam: A Study and Translation of the Thiền Uyển Tập Anh*, 145.

<sup>240</sup> Đinh Đạt, "Văn Bìa Chùa Viên Quang [Inscription on Stele at Viên Quang Temple]," in *Thơ Văn Lý-Trần [Literature Under Lý-Trần Reigns]*, trans. Nguyễn Huệ Chi, vol. 1 (Hà Nội: Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 1977), 453–57.

<sup>241</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 358: "Vua Anh Tông, nhân ngày lên là Thái thượng hoàng, cho đúc tượng A Di Đà, Thích Ca và Di Lặc, mỗi tượng cao 17 thước ta."

<sup>242</sup> Nguyễn Lang, 149–50.

Buddhist sect under his name and transmitted the “mind-seal” to King Lý Thánh Tông, subsequently forming the next generation of the sect after Master Thảo Đường.<sup>243</sup>

Unfortunately, all of the literature on the Thảo Đường sect has been lost. The only information left was in the *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh*.<sup>244</sup> Advocating the unified practice of Thiền and Pure Land methods for attaining enlightenment,<sup>245</sup> and lasting six generations with 19 members from 1069 to 1210, with some generations having more lay members than monks, this Thiền school was confined to the circle of the royal and dignitary circles under the Lý dynasty, with three kings and three high mandarins, including King Lý Thánh Tông, King Lý Anh Tông, and King Lý Cao Tông. This was the only Thiền sect significantly led by lay Buddhists, especially the monarchs and the court officials.<sup>246</sup> According to Nguyen Tai Thu, the sect perished after the collapse of the Lý dynasty.<sup>247</sup>

Influenced from Tuyết Đậu, a special feature of the Thảo Đường sect is that it preached harmony between Buddhism and Confucianism, instead of attempting to bring Confucians closer to Buddhism by becoming Buddhist themselves.<sup>248</sup> According to Cuong Tu Nguyen, since the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Vietnamese Buddhism was almost identical with Thiền, which proved to attract intellectuals including some of the

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<sup>243</sup> Nguyễn Lang, 149.

<sup>244</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông [All About Trần Nhân Tông]* (Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City Publishing, 1999), 73.

<sup>245</sup> Thích Thiên-an, *Buddhism & Zen in Vietnam: In Relation to the Development of Buddhism in Asia* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 1992).

<sup>246</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 149–52.

<sup>247</sup> Nguyen, *The History of Buddhism in Vietnam*.

<sup>248</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 150: “Một đặc điểm của phái Tuyết Đậu là chủ trương sự dung hợp giữa Phật giáo và Nho giáo; đặc điểm này đã ảnh hưởng nhiều tới Phật giáo và Nho giáo; đặc điểm này đã làm ảnh hưởng nhiều tới Phật giáo đời Trần ở Việt Nam, như ta sẽ thấy. Văn Môn và Tuyết Đậu đều là những thiền sư bác học và có khuynh hướng văn học: cả hai người đều nhằm tới hoàng dương Thiền học trong giới trí thức, đưa nho gia đến gần đạo Phật và trở nên Phật tử.”

most eminent Confucians.<sup>249</sup> The school's use of poetry and poetic images to illustrate Buddhist themes by the school for the main purpose of spreading Buddhism among the mandarins and literati in the court circle also greatly influenced some members of the other Thiền schools during this period,<sup>250</sup> most notably Minh Trí of Vô Ngôn Thông and Chân Không of Vinītaruci.<sup>251</sup>

### *The Yên Tử Thiền School*

Toward the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism in Vietnam clearly declined in both number and character. The Buddhist monastic establishment's demise started due to corruption, and monastics breaking the Precepts.<sup>252</sup> As recorded in *Đại Việt Sử Lược*, high official Đàm Dĩ Mông reported the following to King Lý Cao Tông in 1198:

Monks are now as many as laborers. They formed gangs, named their leaders, and committed many filthy acts. Some deliberately ate meat and drank alcohol in sacred spaces and monasteries or committed sexual indulgence in meditation and residence halls. They disappeared in the day and emerged at night like foxes and rats. Those acts of corrupting traditions and depraving religious codes will gradually become commonplace; therefore are in need of our attention, otherwise the problem will definitely grow worse in the long run.<sup>253</sup>

Furthermore, the differentiation in teaching and practice between the three sects grew increasingly blurry during the period. According to *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh*, Thường Chiếu of Vô Ngôn Thông moved into and conducted meditation teaching at Lục Tổ temple, one

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<sup>249</sup> Cuong Tu Nguyen, "Rethinking Vietnamese Buddhist History: Is the Thiền Uyển Tập Anh a 'Transmission of the Lamp' Text?," in *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, ed. Keith Weller Taylor and John K. Whitmore (Ithaca, NY: SEAP Publications, 1995), 113.

<sup>250</sup> Johnston, *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*, 1327.

<sup>251</sup> Johnston, 1327.

<sup>252</sup> Nguyen, *The History of Buddhism in Vietnam*, 3.

<sup>253</sup> Nguyễn Gia Tường, trans., *Đại Việt Sử Lược [A Brief Chronicle of Đại Việt]*, PDF by Lê Bắc 2001 (Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City Publishing, 1993), 85: "Đàm Dĩ Mông tâu với vua rằng: 'Nay tăng đồ và phu dịch số lượng chẳng kém gì nhau. Bọn tăng đồ tự kết làm bè đảng, lập càn người lên làm chủ, tụ họp thành từng nhóm làm nhiều việc dơ bẩn. Hoặc ở giới trường, tịnh xá thì công khai ăn thịt, uống rượu. Hoặc nơi thiền phòng, tịnh viện thì kín đáo tự gian dâm với nhau. Ban ngày thì ả núp, ban đêm thì làm như chồn như chuột. Những hành vi làm bại hoại mỹ tục, làm thương tổn danh giáo dần dần sẽ thành thói quen, như thế mà không cấm thì lâu ngày tất sẽ càng thêm lên hơn nữa.' Based on Đàm Dĩ Mông's life records as reported by others, I'm not sure on the level of credibility of this report.

of Vinītaruci's main patriarch halls. Hiện Quang, a disciple of Thường Chiếu of Vô Ngôn Thông, attained enlightenment with Trí Thông of Thánh Quả temple after his master passed away. Later he received ordination from Pháp Giới of Mount Uyên Trừng (Nghệ An), both of unknown lineage. Không Lộ and Giác Hải belonged to both Vô Ngôn Thông and Thảo Đường lineages. Thảo Đường did not have a base outside of the royal court with its own monastic facilities like the other two sects, but, according to Nguyễn Lang, their *Tuyệt Đâu Ngũ Lục* script was a popular text in both Vinītaruci and Vô Ngôn Thông.<sup>254</sup>

An effort to fuse all of these meditation sects together to cover each other's weaknesses, beginning with Thường Chiếu and ending with Trần Thái Tông,<sup>255</sup> resulted in a new Thiền sect named Yên Tử with Hiện Quang, a disciple of Thường Chiếu, as its founding patriarch. Masters Đạo Viên, Đại Đăng, Tiêu Dao and Huệ Tuệ succeeded their predecessors as patriarchs of Yên Tử Thiền sect before Trần Nhân Tông. The sect lineage ended with its name being changed to Trúc Lâm Yên Tử (Trúc Lâm, for short) by its sixth patriarch who started a new chapter of Thiền Buddhism.

### **The 13<sup>th</sup> Century Trúc Lâm Thiền sect**

According to Keith Taylor, the Lý dynasty (1010-1225) left no Buddhist literature and most of the content written by Buddhist monks focused on abstract religious belief.<sup>256</sup> *Literature Under Lý-Trần Reigns (Thơ Văn Lý-Trần)* confirms this by saying that even devout Buddhist kings Lý Thánh Tông (the 1<sup>st</sup> patriarch of Thảo Đường sect) and Lý

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<sup>254</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 151.

<sup>255</sup> Johnston, *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*, 1327.

<sup>256</sup> Keith Weller Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 119.



Nhân Tông left only two small writings each.<sup>257</sup> While the Lý emperors were devout Buddhists, the influence of Chinese Confucianism was on the rise, as seen in the establishment of Temple of Literature (Văn Miếu) in 1070, in which the statues of Confucius and his four best disciples were displayed and commemorated all year round.<sup>258</sup>

Buddhism during the Trần (1225-1400) dynasty was more remarkable. In Keith Taylor's words, "The Trần kings and princes were exceptionally well educated, and not only in Confucian classics. They were also trained in Buddhism, and they were great builders of temples and stupas."<sup>259</sup> Cuong Tu Nguyen argues that under Trần rulers, Thiền learning also became more established, and as compared to Confucianism and Taoism, "Buddhism represented the most profound soteriological aspect of the Three Religions."<sup>260</sup> Among evidence is King Trần Nhân Tông's establishment of a Vietnamese-born Buddhist branch called Trúc Lâm Thiền sect carrying a lineage that left a significant mark on Vietnamese history. The sect was considered a mixture of the teachings from three existing, foreign-imported, early Thiền schools: Vinītaruci from India, Vô Ngôn Thông from Guangzhou, China, and Thảo Đường (Tsao T'ang) from Champa.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Lê Quý Đôn, foreword to *Thơ Văn Lý-Trần [Literature Under Lý-Trần Reigns]*, trans. Nguyễn Huệ Chi, vol. 1 (Hà Nội: Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 1977).

<sup>258</sup> Ngô Sĩ Liên, Lê Văn Hưu, and Phan Phu Tiên, *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư [The Complete Chronicle of Đại Việt]*, 108, 111: "Mùa thu, tháng 8, làm Văn Miếu, đắp tượng Khổng Tử, Chu Công và Tứ phối, vẽ tượng Thất thập nhị hiền, bốn mùa cúng tế." (p.108). "Chọn quan viên văn chức, người nào biết chữ cho vào Quốc Tử Giám." (p. 111).

<sup>259</sup> Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 117.

<sup>260</sup> Nguyen, *Zen in Medieval Vietnam: A Study and Translation of the Thiền Uyển Tập Anh*, 20.

<sup>261</sup> Michael A Di Giovine, "Patrimonial Ethics and the Field of Heritage Production," in *Ethics and Archaeological Praxis*, ed. Cristóbal Gnecco and Dorothy Lippert (New York: Springer, 2014), 201.

*Trần Nhân Tông's Biography (1258-1308)*

According to the *The Complete Chronicle of Đại Việt [Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư]*, Trần Nhân Tông (陳仁宗) was born on November 11, 1258, of the lunar calendar (December 7, 1258) and was the third emperor of the Trần dynasty. His given name was Trần Khâm (陳吟), the first child of Emperor Trần Thánh Tông and Empress Nguyên Thánh Thiên Cảm Trần Thị Thiệu of Trần Liễu clan.<sup>262</sup> Prince Trần Khâm was first named Crown Prince of the Trần dynasty in December 1274, but he refused it three times, wanting to yield to his brother but ultimately was not allowed to give it up.<sup>263</sup> As recorded in *The Complete Chronicle of Đại Việt (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư)*, to ensure a proper education for Trần Khâm, Trần Thánh Tông, besides assigning Lê Phụ Trần, a prominent mandarin and general to the professor for the Crown Prince alongside two famous scholars Nguyễn Sĩ Cố and Nguyễn Thánh Huân, the Emperor in 1274 himself composed poems and a literary work named *Di hậu lục* to enhance the effort.<sup>264</sup> Prince Trần Khâm, at 20 years old, finally accepted the throne on October 22, 1278. During his reign over Đại Việt from 1278 to 1293, King Trần Nhân Tông faced two Mongol invasions of Kublai Khan (忽必烈: Hốt Tất Liệt) in 1285 and 1287. Vietnam's battle victory on the Bạch Đằng River in 1288, in which the Mongol naval fleet was completely

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<sup>262</sup> Ngô Sĩ Liên, Lê Văn Hưu, and Phan Phu Tiên, *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư [The Complete Chronicle of Đại Việt]*, 27.

<sup>263</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thánh Đẳng Lục Giảng Giải [Essay of Awakening Records]* (Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City Publishing, 1999), 56.

<sup>264</sup> Ngô Sĩ Liên, Lê Văn Hưu, and Phan Phu Tiên, *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư [The Complete Chronicle of Đại Việt]*, 182: “Lấy Lê Phụ Trần làm Thiếu sư, kiêm Trừ cung giáo thụ, lấy bọn Nguyễn Thánh Huân, Nguyễn Sĩ Cố sung Nội thị nội thị học sĩ (Phụ Trần người Ái Châu). Vua tự làm thơ để dạy hoàng tử và viết Di hậu lục 2 quyển.”

destroyed under Trần Nhân Tông's forces, ended the second invasion and historically marked a long period of peace and prosperity over the country.<sup>265</sup>

According to Nguyễn Lang, Trần Nhân Tông ceded the throne to his son Trần Anh Tông on the third day of the third month in 1293 (Lunar year) and took the role of Senior Emperor (Thái Thượng Hoàng). In 1299, he went to Mount Yên Tử and dedicated himself to the ascetic practice of the 12 ascetical dharma virtues, calling himself Hương Vân Đầu Đà, and was recognized as the official sixth patriarch of the Yên Tử sect, succeeding the fifth patriarch Huệ Tuệ. From then on, the Yên Tử sect became more popular and quickly spread among members of the court as well as the people.<sup>266</sup> Trần Nhân Tông then changed the sect's name to Trúc Lâm Yên Tử (Trúc Lâm, for short) with the King as the founding patriarch of the new sect, to start a new era of Vietnamese Buddhism. The Trần dynasty can be called "One Buddhist sect era," or the era of a single Buddhist sect.<sup>267</sup>

### *Trần Nhân Tông's Mythos*

According to Thích Thiên Ân, the three Mongolian invasions (1257, 1285 and 1287) left the Vietnamese with a lingering threat of foreign domination, which created nationalist tendencies afterward, acting as a catalyst for a reassessment of national character, inner conviction, and ethnic aim.<sup>268</sup> As a king, Trần Nhân Tông faced two problems: how to rebuild the war-shattered country and at the same time protect it from

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<sup>265</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông [All About Trần Nhân Tông]*, 42–45.

<sup>266</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 232: "Vua được nhận là người truyền thừa chính thức của phái Yên Tử, thế hệ thứ sáu, tiếp nối vị tổ thứ năm là thiền sư Huệ Tuệ. Từ đó trở đi, phái Yên Tử trở thành nổi tiếng, thế lực lan rộng trong triều đình và giữa nhân gian."

<sup>267</sup> Nguyễn Lang, 171: "Đời Trần có thể được gọi là thời đại Phật Giáo Nhất Tông, tức là thời đại của một phái Phật Giáo Duy Nhất."

<sup>268</sup> Thích Thiên-an, *Buddhism & Zen in Vietnam: In Relation to the Development of Buddhism in Asia*.

future invasions. The co-mingling of nationalism and Buddhism was a part of the Trần dynasty's movement in response to the rise of nationalist tendencies.<sup>269</sup>

Vietnamizing the written language to promote sovereignty by mandating the use of 'Chữ Nôm' in royal court correspondence along with traditional Chinese was another part of the Vietnamization effort by Trần Nhân Tông.<sup>270</sup> The royal court was ready to lead such transitional change, as K. W. Taylor suggests: "Some, if not all, Tran family members were bilingual in the thirteenth century."<sup>271</sup> As for Trần Nhân Tông, to set himself as an example of such language mandate, the King composed *The Joy of Đạo Anywhere on Earth (Cư Trần Lạc Đạo)* and *The Joy of Enlightenment in the Wilderness (Đắc Thú Lâm Tuyền Thành Đạo)* in 'Chữ Nôm', the two oldest Vietnamese writings in 'Chữ Nôm' in the country's literary history.<sup>272</sup> Even though Trần Nhân Tông expressed his ideology throughout his many writings and lectures, according to Nguyễn Duy Hinh, these two verses describe best the philosophical aspect of the King's belief.<sup>273</sup> Trần Nhân Tông's main ideological features include Nationalistic Buddhism (or Engagement in the World while Embracing the Dharma, or 'Hòa Quang Đồng Trần' in Vietnamese), Buddha-Nature inside Everyone, and Non-duality of Reality.

As Nguyễn Duy Hinh argues, the formation of the King's philosophy was greatly influenced by Trần Thái Tông and Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ, his grandfather and his master,

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<sup>269</sup> Thích Thien-an.

<sup>270</sup> Quang Minh Thích, "Vietnamese Buddhism in America" (Ph. D. Dissertation, Florida State University, 2007), 80.

<sup>271</sup> Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 120.

<sup>272</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông [All About Trần Nhân Tông]*, 46.

<sup>273</sup> Nguyễn Duy Hinh, *Triết Học Phật Giáo Việt Nam [Vietnamese Buddhist Philosophy]* (Hà Nội: Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 2006), 188, [www.hocthucphuongdong.vn](http://www.hocthucphuongdong.vn): "Ngài còn để lại một số câu vấn đáp, bài phú Cư trần lạc đạo, Đắc thú lâm tuyền thành đạo ca là những tư liệu đậm chất triết học nhất."

respectively.<sup>274</sup> On the influence from Trần Thái Tông, K. W. Taylor in *A History of the Vietnamese* confirms that “His grandson, Trần Khâm, followed his deep engagement with Buddhist thought and practice.”<sup>275</sup> The influence from Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ (慧中上士 (1230 – 1291)) is easily seen throughout the King’s writings, especially in *The Analects of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ (Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ Ngữ Lục)* that he wrote to dedicate to the master who had transmitted the mind-seal to him.<sup>276</sup> The following verse from the King clearly shows his admiration toward Thượng Sĩ:

The more you look up, the higher it becomes  
The more you drill, the more solid it turns  
Having just seen it in the back  
You suddenly find it in the front  
That’s Thiên of Thượng sĩ!<sup>277</sup>

### *Vietnamization of Buddhism*

Nguyễn Duy Hinh argues, as quoted by Nguyễn Công Lý in *Đại Việt’s characteristics in Buddhism under Lý-Trần (Phật giáo thời Lý-Trần với bản sắc dân tộc Đại Việt)*, that a purpose of the establishment of the new Vietnamese-born Trúc Lâm Thiên sect was to have a fresh start of a movement to make Vietnam autonomous in all

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<sup>274</sup> Nguyễn Duy Hinh, 188: “Thực tế tư tưởng sơn môn Yên Tử phải kể từ Trần Thái Tông, Tuệ Trung thượng sĩ, hai tiền bối của Trần Nhân Tông. Cho nên nghiên cứu tư tưởng triết học sơn môn Yên Tử không thể không đề cập đến hai vị tiền bối đó.”

<sup>275</sup> Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 117.

<sup>276</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông [All About Trần Nhân Tông]*, 46: “Tại buổi giảng vào ngày mồng 9 tháng giêng nhuận năm Bính Ngọ (1306) vua Trần Nhân Tông đã cảm ơn Vô Nhị Thượng Nhân và Tuệ Trung đại sĩ, là ‘ơn mưa pháp đã thấm tới cho cháu con được tắm gội’ Vô Nhị Thượng Nhân không ai khác hơn là vua Trần Thánh Tông như Thánh đăng ngữ lục cho ta biết. Còn Tuệ Trung đại sĩ thì chính là Tuệ Trung Trần Quốc Tung, người đã ấn chứng cho vua Trần Nhân Tông trong sự giác ngộ thiên, như chính vua đã ghi lại trong Thượng sĩ hành trạng.”

<sup>277</sup> Pháp Loa Đồng Kiên Cương, *Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ Ngữ Lục [The Analects of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ]*, trans. Lý Việt Dũng (Cà Mau, Vietnam: Mũi Cà Mau Publisher, 2010), 534: “Càng nhắm càng cao, Càng dui càng cứng, Bỗng nhiên vừa phía hậu, Nhìn lại đã mặt tiền, Ôi đó mới thật là, Thiên của Thượng sĩ!”

aspects,<sup>278</sup> including a nationalistic Buddhism with unique Vietnamese characteristics to serve the Vietnamese people instead of being just a branch of Chinese Buddhism.<sup>279</sup> Nguyễn Duy Hinh further argues that Vietnamese Buddhism at the time had already trained a class of nationalist intellectuals who were ready to contribute to the independent Đại Việt.<sup>280</sup> As claimed by Đinh Quang Mỹ, as the founder and supporters of Trúc Lâm were all responsible for the survival of the country, the Trúc Lâm Thiền sect transformed Vietnamese Buddhism to be significantly different from Chan Buddhism.<sup>281</sup>

According to Nguyễn Lang, during Trần dynasty Buddhism became a psychological factor uniting the entire population under the purpose of defending and building the nation.<sup>282</sup> Consequently, eminent Buddhist monks during this period made no differentiation between soteriology (personal perfection) and communal religion (solidarity).<sup>283</sup> As Cuong Tu Nguyen argues, they found in Buddhism the resources not only for their own spiritual cultivation but also for engagement in the common historical, social, and cultural aims of the Vietnamese people by being self-conscious and

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<sup>278</sup> Nguyễn Công Lý, “Phật Giáo Thời Lý–Trần Với Bản Sắc Dân Tộc Đại Việt [Đại Việt’s Characteristics in Buddhism under Lý–Trần].”

<sup>279</sup> Nguyễn Duy Hinh, *Triết Học Phật Giáo Việt Nam [Vietnamese Buddhist Philosophy]*, 212: “Thiền tri thức Việt Nam không bị nền Phật giáo Trung Quốc cực kỳ phong phú uyên bác khổng lồ chế biến thành một chi nhánh của Phật giáo Trung Quốc.”

<sup>280</sup> Nguyễn Duy Hinh, 212: “Phật giáo Việt Nam đã đào tạo nên một tầng lớp trí thức dân tộc đóng góp vào sự hình thành nước Đại Việt độc lập.”

<sup>281</sup> Đinh Quang Mỹ, “Thiền Trúc Lâm,” *Religion, Buddhism Today*, 2011, <http://www.daophatngaynay.com/vn/phap-mon/thien-dinh/to-su/9474-Thien-Truc-Lam.html>: “Thế thì Thiền Trúc Lâm mang một sắc chủ nghĩa quốc gia khá rõ. Và đây không phải là sự kiện khó hiểu, khi chúng ta biết rằng, tất cả những vị khai sáng ra nó đều là những người có trách nhiệm trực tiếp với sự tồn vong của quốc gia dân tộc. ... Trúc lâm phải được coi là một phái Thiền đứng ngoài Thiền tông Trung Hoa.”

<sup>282</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 232: “Đạo Phật trở thành yếu tố tâm lý liên kết toàn dân lại trong mục đích xây dựng và bảo vệ quốc gia.”

<sup>283</sup> Nguyen, “Rethinking Vietnamese Buddhist History: Is the Thiền Uyển Tập Anh a ‘Transmission of the Lamp’ Text?,” 114.

responsible cultural witnesses who were always ready to respond to the call of their country.<sup>284</sup>

As a king, Trần Nhân Tông saw himself as a model of the ideological element of “Engagement in the world While Embracing the Dharma”, a co-mingling of Buddhism and nationalism, to serve both the needs of the country as a citizen and as a king, as well as his own personal perfection as a Buddhist. In assessing the Trần dynasty’s Buddhism, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) documented in 1966:

During the Tran Dynasty (1225-1400), several kings were either monks before they assumed power or retired to monasteries at the end of their rule. The most revered, Tran Nhan Ton (1278-1293), is reputed to have moved back and forth between the monkhood and the throne, depending on whether the country needed his services to bring it peace.<sup>285</sup>

Such a co-mingling ideological element promoted a new approach for all Buddhists. As characterized in his *The Joy of Đạo Anywhere on Earth*, a Trúc Lâm Buddhist was not only a respectable Bodhisattva in the religious realm, but also a virtuous person respected in the secular world.<sup>286</sup>

(section 6)

No thoughts and no forms attached to the mind,  
Then one becomes a respectable Bodhisattva.  
Being loyal to his lord and filial pious to his father,  
Then a socially virtuous person one also becomes.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> Nguyen, 114.

<sup>285</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “Buddhist Action in Vietnam: A Special Assessment of the Situation in the Light of Events in March and April 1966,” May 4, 1998, [https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0000196603.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000196603.pdf).

<sup>286</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông [All About Trần Nhân Tông]*, 78: “Mẫu người Phật tử Việt Nam thời Trần, như thế, là một mẫu người Bồ Tát trang nghiêm, là một mẫu người trượng phu trung hiếu. Bồ Tát dĩ nhiên là một phạm trù tư tưởng lớn của Phật giáo, còn trượng phu là một phạm trù của tư tưởng Nho giáo.”

<sup>287</sup> Trần Nhân Tông, “Cư Trần Lạc Đạo [The Joy of Đạo Anywhere on Earth],” in *Thơ Văn Lý-Trần [Literature Under Lý-Trần Reigns]*, trans. Nguyễn Huệ Chi, vol. 2 (Hà Nội: Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 1988), 507: “Sạch giới lòng, dồi giới tướng; Nội ngoại nên Bồ Tát trang nghiêm; Ngay thờ chúa, thảo thờ cha; Đi đố mới trượng phu trung hiếu.”

Monastics were already invested in Trúc Lâm Buddhism at that time. According to Thích Nhất Hạnh, during the Trần dynasty, despite being the most learned and greatly influential persons in the country's political and social landscape, monastics used such knowledge and skills not for personal gain, but for serving others and country while pursuing their religious practice in a simple lifestyle in humble monastic facilities.<sup>288</sup> Taking the story from King Trần Thái Tông's *Thiền Tông Chỉ Nam Tự* [Preface of 'The Principles of Thiền Buddhism'] about the National Preceptor and monk Đạo Viên<sup>289</sup> at Hoa Yên Temple in his response to the King's quest to give up the throne and be ordained as an example. To convince the King to return to the throne, the monk gave the King a Buddhist cultivation teaching: "There is no Buddha in the mountains, it's only in your own mind. When nothing is attached to your mind, Buddha will appear,"<sup>290</sup> and a socially engaging advice: "being a king, basically, means taking the people's will to be one's own will and taking people's mind to be one's own mind."<sup>291</sup> On the secular side, besides Trần Nhân Tông, enlightened secular and war heroes like Trần Thái Tông and

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<sup>288</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Đạo Phật Đi Vào Cuộc Đời* [Engaged Buddhism] (Sài Gòn: Lá Bối, 1964), 91: "Sử chép rằng ở triều Lý giới trí thức bác học nhất trong nước là các nhà Phật học và các thiền sư. Cái học của Phật học lúc đó là cái học để hiểu và để xây dựng, nó không đem lại tước vị cho ai cả. Các thiền sư thường được vua vời vào cung giảng đạo, luận bàn việc văn hóa, kinh tế, xã hội và cả chính trị nữa. Có thiền sư đã được mời đứng ra để tiếp sứ ngoại quốc. Thế nhưng họ vẫn sống đạm bạc nâu sòng trong các tự viện, và chỉ vào cung khi có chỉ triệu mời."; Elise Anne DeVido, "Buddhism for This World': The Buddhist Revival in Vietnam, 1920 to 1951 and Its Lagacy," in *Modernity and Re-Enchantment: Religion in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam*, ed. Philip Taylor (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), 423.

<sup>289</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông* [All About Trần Nhân Tông], 110–11: The name of this National Preceptor was recorded differently, such as Đạo Viên, Viên Chứng, Phù Vân, from various sources.

<sup>290</sup> Trần Thái Tông, "Thiền Tông Chỉ Nam Tự [Preface to 'The Principles of Thiền Buddhism']," in *Thơ Văn Lý-Trần* [Literature Under Lý-Trần Reigns], trans. Nguyễn Đức Vân, vol. 2 (Hà Nội: Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 1988), 28: "Trong núi vốn không có Phật, Phật chỉ ở trong tâm. Tâm lặng mà biết gọi là Chân Phật."

<sup>291</sup> Trần Thái Tông, 29: "Phàm đã là bậc nhân quân tất phải lấy ý muốn của thiên hạ làm ý muốn của mình; lấy tâm lòng của thiên hạ làm tâm lòng của mình."



Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ served as clear evidence of Trúc Lâm's model in practice during the Trần dynasty.

Through the following excerpts from *The Joy of Đạo Anywhere on Earth*, Trần Nhân Tông insists that everyone, monks and laypeople, with the right level of practice, can reach enlightenment regardless of where they dwell, in the city (secular style), or in the mountain (ordained style); it is just their mind.<sup>292</sup>

(section 3)

Secular but enlightened is a great blessing,  
Ordained but not enlightened is a waste of effort misfortune.<sup>293</sup>

(section 1)

The body in the city, The mind in the mountain,  
The past all quiet and self-nature at rest, Already half a day in full  
transquility.<sup>294</sup>

Trần Nhân Tông did not completely deny the helpfulness of the wilderness in calming his mind. Many times, he had to hide himself in mountainous places like Yên Tử and Vũ Lâm to find some peaceful moments from his busy secular life as a King. Those short joyful periods were described in his writing *The Joy of Enlightenment in the Wilderness* through an excerpt below:

Seeking self-suffice and a place to cultivate the mind,  
Hiding in high mountain, staying among the wild,  
Having monkeys to talk to, and to befriend with,  
In this serenity, joy and emptiness fill the body and mind.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông [All About Trần Nhân Tông]*, 77: “Điểm quan trọng không phải là sống ở rừng núi hay thị thành. Vấn đề là làm sao giác ngộ được sự thật. Đây là mấu chốt của vấn đề. Ta đã thấy sự giác ngộ có thể tìm thấy ở bất cứ nơi đâu, đặc biệt là chính giữa cuộc đời trần tục đầy những hệ lụy thế sự.”

<sup>293</sup> Trần Nhân Tông, “Cư Trần Lạc Đạo [The Joy of Đạo Anywhere on Earth],” 506: “Trần tục mà nên, phúc ấy càng yêu hết tấc; Sơn lâm chẳng cóc, họa kia thực cả uổng công.”

<sup>294</sup> Trần Nhân Tông, 505: “Minh ngồi thành thị, Nết dùng sơn lâm, Muôn nghiệp lặng, an nhàn thể tính, Nửa ngày rồi tự tại thân tâm.”

<sup>295</sup> Trần Nhân Tông, “Đắc Thú Lâm Tuyền Thành Đạo [The Joy of Enlightenment in the Wilderness],” in *Thơ Văn Lý-Trần [Literature Under Lý-Trần Reigns]*, trans. Nguyễn Huệ Chi, vol. 2 (Hà

According to Trần Nhân Tông, living in city or in the mountain is not that important. The importance is the realization that everything, form or formless, is illusory, as a precursor for seeking enlightenment. He shares this in another excerpt from *The Joy of Enlightenment in the Wilderness*:

Our body is vain like a floating cloud;  
Everything comes and goes away like bubbles on the sea surface.<sup>296</sup>

That realization is fundamental in being a Buddhist. According to Bodhidharma's treatise, illusions obscure one's view of the Buddha-Nature and distinguish one so utterly from the ranks of the enlightened.<sup>297</sup>

### *Self-Exploration (Phản Quang Tự Kỳ)*

The association of the Buddha with the mind is a characteristic of Chan, and therefore it is sometimes called Mind Buddhism.<sup>298</sup> According to Charles Luk, "it is said that he who realizes his self-mind can perceive his self-nature and attain enlightenment."<sup>299</sup> Following the path of Bodhidharma stated in *Treatise on the Two Entrances and Four Practices* on the existence of the Buddha-Nature or potential for enlightenment within all sentient beings,<sup>300</sup> Trần Nhân Tông expressed the ideology in *The Joy of Đạo Anywhere on Earth*.

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Nội: Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 1988), 533: "Yên bề phận khó, Kiếm chốn dưỡng thân; Khuất tịch non cao, Nấu mình sơn dã. Vượn mừng hủ hỷ, Làm bạn cùng ta; Vắng vẻ ngàn kia, Thân lòng hỷ xả."

<sup>296</sup> Trần Nhân Tông, 534: "Cốc hay thân huyền, Chẳng khác phù vân; Vạn sự giai không, Tựa đường bọt bể."

<sup>297</sup> John R. McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch'an Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 111.

<sup>298</sup> Nguyễn Duy Hình, *Triết Học Phật Giáo Việt Nam [Vietnamese Buddhist Philosophy]*, 187: "Đồng nhất Phật với Tâm là đặc điểm Thiền Tông, chính vì vậy tông này còn gọi là Tâm Tông."

<sup>299</sup> Charles Luk, *The Secrets of Chinese Meditation: Self-Cultivation by Mind Control as Taught in the Ch'an, Mahayana and Taoist Schools in China* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1972), 44.

<sup>300</sup> John R. McRae, *Seeing Through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 17.

(section 5)

And then we know!

Buddha is in the house, no need to search afar;

Being ignorant, we keep looking for Buddha,

Until awakening, then we realize that Buddha has been in ourselves.<sup>301</sup>

On how to perceive one's own self-nature, Trần Nhân Tông advises in the following excerpt from *The Joy of Enlightenment in the Wilderness*. It's the matter of being unattached to anything to perceive self-nature and stop the three poisons in order to harvest the joy of being in Bodhi.

(Section 2)

No longer attached to the illusory self, the diamond True Nature emerges,

No longer with greed, delusion and hatred, harvesting the joy of Perfect Enlightenment.<sup>302</sup>

According to Nguyễn Lang, upon reaching the total freedom of unattachment, the mind becomes really in peace, is no longer moved with greed, delusion and hatred, and the diamond True Nature starts to emerge.<sup>303</sup>

Trần Nhân Tông admits in *The Analects of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ* that he learned the “Buddha-Nature inside Everyone” concept from Tuệ Trung. In an encounter during the mourning period for Senior Empress Nguyên Thánh, doubtful about Tuệ Trung's religious accomplishment based on his secular display, the King tried him with a question about karma from consuming alcohol and non-vegetarian food. Tuệ Trung taught him that karma emerged when the mind still clung to things; therefore, such emergence would stop when the mind became empty:

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<sup>301</sup> Trần Nhân Tông, “Cư Trần Lạc Đạo [The Joy of Đạo Anywhere on Earth]:” “Vây mới hay! Bụt ở cong nhà, Chẳng phải tìm xa, Nhân khuấy bốn nên ta tìm bụt, Đến cốc hay chín bụt là ta.”

<sup>302</sup> Trần Nhân Tông: “Dứt trừ nhân ngã thì ra tướng thực kim cương, Dừng hết tham sân mới làu lòng màu viên giác.”

<sup>303</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 253: “Bí quyết của Trúc Lâm là làm cho tâm hồn không vương bận. Lòng không vương bận nghĩa là không bị ràng buộc bởi thành bại đắc thất và bởi sự dòn chứa kiến thức. Đạt tới được tâm trạng tự do ấy là đạt tới sự an ổn thật sự; nhân ngã và tham sân không còn lay chuyển được tự thân, và thực tính Kim Cương bắt đầu hiển lộ.”

Things constantly change by nature,  
When the mind clings to things, karmas germinate.  
If nothing is attached to the mind,  
Nothing germinate.<sup>304</sup>

On another day, according to *The Analects of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ*, in response to Trần Nhân Tông's question about the essence of Thiên, he said, "Explore within, not without."<sup>305</sup> Suddenly awakened by Tuệ Trung's answer, the King respectfully asked Thượng Sĩ to be his master.

### *Non-Duality of Reality*

On the practice to perceive Buddha-Nature, Trần Nhân Tông emphasized Non-duality, connecting the false appearance of all phenomena to our deluded mind.<sup>306</sup> The endless variety of forms is due to the mind. The non-duality concept was revealed in an excerpt from his lecture at Kỳ Lân temple on January 9, 1306, in which he argues that clinging to illusory separation between dual views such as right-wrong, kind-evil, or sin-merit blinds one from perceiving his/her Buddha-Nature.

Bodhi is void and vast, not attached to anything. Its nature is innocent and neither kind nor evil. Duality makes life perplexed, choices and distinctions lead life to many ways, sometimes to the extremes. Ordinary people and Sages all have Buddha-Nature, which does not have right and wrong separation and the likes. Sins and merits are originally the same, cause and effect are not real. Everyone has the Buddha-Nature in full, just the matter of being in Bodhi.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> Pháp Loa Đồng Kiên Cương, *Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ Ngữ Lục [The Analects of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ]*, 508–9: "Vô thường các pháp hành, Tâm động tội liên sanh, Xưa nay không một vật, Chẳng giống cũng chẳng nanh."

<sup>305</sup> Pháp Loa Đồng Kiên Cương, 505: "Phản quan tự kỷ bỏ phân sự, bắt từng tha đắc."

<sup>306</sup> Nguyễn Duy Hinh, *Triết Học Phật Giáo Việt Nam [Vietnamese Buddhist Philosophy]*, 187: "Chủ yếu là tư tưởng Bất Nhị, đưa ra lý luận về Vọng tưởng để giải thích vạn hữu."

<sup>307</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông [All About Trần Nhân Tông]*, 139: "Này xem, đạo lớn trống rỗng, đầu buộc đầu ràng, bản tính sáng trong, chẳng lành chẳng dữ. Bởi do chọn lựa, lăm ngả sinh ngang, một nháy thoáng mờ, dễ thành trời vực. Thánh phàm cùng chung một lối, phải trái há được phân ranh. Nên biết tội phước vốn không, nhân quả rốt ráo chẳng thật. Người người vốn đủ, ai nấy tròn đầy."

The feature is also in the King's poem *To Be and Not to Be (Hữu Cú Vô Cú)*, in which he reminds people that being stuck in duality is similar to looking around the finger instead of the moon to find Buddha, and as ridiculous as 'being drowned on plain ground,' as evidenced in an excerpt below:

To be and not to be  
From the past until now  
If the focus is on the finger instead of the moon  
Like being drowned in the plain ground.<sup>308</sup>

Non-duality is a prominent feature in Tuệ Trung's poems and a characteristic of Trần's thought in general.<sup>309</sup> Tuệ Trung pointed out it was the discrimination between the two opposite views, such as self and enlightenment, samsara and nirvana, right and wrong, etc., that keeps people in the circle of samsara.<sup>310</sup> Tuệ Trung's concept of Non-duality is evidenced in *Illusion and Enlightenment are No Different (Mê Ngộ Bất Di)*' verse, in which he argues that duality only occurs in illusory minds as expressed in the excerpt:

Illusions separate form and emptiness  
Enlightenment comes with neither form nor emptiness  
Form and emptiness, illusion and enlightenment may sound different  
All have been principally the same.<sup>311</sup>

or in *Ordinary Person and Sage are No Different (Phàm Thánh Bất Di)* verse:

Our mind is from nothingness  
Illusion of separation causes false views of phenomena

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<sup>308</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, 102: "Câu có câu không, Từ nay từ xưa, Quên trắng giữ ngón, Chết đuối trên bờ."

<sup>309</sup> Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 117.

<sup>310</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 226–29.

<sup>311</sup> Pháp Loa Đồng Kiên Cương, *Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ Ngữ Lục [The Analects of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ]*, 326: "Khi mê sinh không sắc, Lúc ngộ chẳng sắc không, Sắc không mê ngộ ấy, Một lẽ xưa nay đồng."

We are all as transient as dew and frost  
Ordinary persons and sages as thunder and lighting.<sup>312</sup>

Tuệ Trung's view of the non-duality concept is consistent with Hui-neng's teaching in *Platform Sutra*, "If within and without you are not deluded then you are apart from duality. If on the outside you are deluded you cling to form; if on the inside you are deluded you cling to emptiness."<sup>313</sup> From George Dutton's perspective, "Tuệ Trung stresses one's inner Buddhahood and integration of time, past, present, and future. He believed that controlling the Two Wrong Views and establishing the Dharmadhatu were necessary for achieving this total oneness in time and space for the realm."<sup>314</sup> Based on Thái Tông's and Tuệ Trung's attitude toward the practice, Nguyen Tai Thu interprets the concept as, "When we penetrate into the equality of 'right' and 'wrong', then there is no difference between the Devil and Buddha, everywhere is Buddha's country and the Devil palace will also become Buddha's country."<sup>315</sup>

### *De-mythologization of Thiền Buddhism*

Thiền cultivation using a combination of meditation, *koan*, and scripture learning was a specific feature of Trần Nhân Tông's reign. In the past, meditating and *koan* were associated with Thiền, and sutra-learning was belittled. Bodhidharma's and Wu YanTong's wall-contemplation and secretive *koan* dialogues between masters and disciples, which make Thiền Buddhism perceived as full of mysterious practices, were examples of such past tradition. According to Nguyễn Lang, Trần Nhân Tông demythologized Thiền Buddhism by adding scripture learning into Trúc Lâm practice:

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<sup>312</sup> Lý Việt Dũng, 318: "Thân từ vô tướng xưa nay không, Huyền hóa phân chia thành nhị kiến, Ta, người như móc cũng như sương, Phạm, Thánh như sấm cũng như chớp."

<sup>313</sup> Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, 166.

<sup>314</sup> Dutton and Jayne Werner, John K. Witmore, *Source of Vietnamese Tradition*, 54.

<sup>315</sup> Nguyen, *The History of Buddhism in Vietnam*, 157.

After Trần Nhân Tông entered the monkhood, Buddhism became a popular movement. This period experienced a rise in the importance of learning from scripts, which include not only the Diamond Sutra but also some other sutras and quotes from Patriarchs or Great Masters, in the form of critical analysis and commentary. This was a new phenomenon in Thiền Buddhism pushed by the so called ‘Meditation and Script Synchronization’ tendency, adding scripture learning into Thiền practice.<sup>316</sup>

The basic nature of Thiền is one’s own personal experience, not the knowledge from scripts and lectures from masters, since Buddha Nature could not be described using languages.<sup>317</sup> However, as the King argues in his January 1306 lecture at Kỳ Lân temple that since the transcendental truth (not saying any thing) might not be helpful to the masses, he would try the conventional truth instead (rationalizing scriptures):

Venerables, based on the transcendental truth, we would go wrong when forming thoughts in our minds and false when opening our mouths. In such a case, how would we grasp the truth? How would we master meditation? Today, let’s use the conventional truth then.<sup>318</sup>

According to *The Analects of Three Patriarchs (Tam Tổ Thực Lục)*, Trần Nhân Tông tried rationalizing scripts through lectures a few times during his lifetime. In 1306, while serving as an abbot at Bảo Ân Temple, Siêu Loại, Trần Nhân Tông appointed Pháp Loa as lecturer.<sup>319</sup> The King himself lectured *Chuándēng-lù* (傳燈錄: *Truyền Đăng Lục*) in April 1308, and asked National Preceptors Đạo Nhất to lecture *Lotus Sutra (Pháp Hoa*

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<sup>316</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 319: “Sau khi Trần Nhân Tông xuất gia, phong trào Phật học được phát khởi và đại chúng hóa. Thiền ngày xưa chú trọng đến thiền tọa và tham cứu những thoại đầu, có tính cách đồ kỹ cái học chương cú, bắt đầu lấy sự học hỏi kinh điển làm trọng. Không những thiền sinh học kinh Kim Cương và các bộ ngữ lục, họ còn học nhiều kinh khác, và học theo kiểu phân tích, chú giải và bình luận. Điều này là một hiện tượng mới trong thiền môn, và được thúc đẩy bởi một khuynh hướng tổng hợp giữa giáo tông và thiền tông, gọi là khuynh hướng ‘thiền giáo nhất trí.’”

<sup>317</sup> Nguyễn Lang, 292: “Bản chất của Phật Giáo là sự thực chứng mà không phải là kiến thức thu thập được từ giáo điển và thầy tổ.”

<sup>318</sup> Thích Phước Sơn, trans., *Tam Tổ Thực Lục [The Analects of Three Patriarchs]* (Hà Nội: Research Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1995), 61: “Nếu đại chúng hướng về đệ nhất nghĩa đế mà nói thì động niệm là sai, mở miệng là lầm, thế thì phải lãnh hội thế nào? Quán sát thế nào? Hôm nay hãy nhắm vào đầu mỗi thứ hai mà nói, há chẳng được sao?”

<sup>319</sup> Thích Phước Sơn, 39: “Năm Bính Ngọ, niên hiệu Hưng Long thứ 14 (1306), Điều Ngự đang trụ trì chùa Báo Ân tại Siêu Loại, cử Sư làm chủ giảng.”

*Kinh*) in Vĩnh Nghiêm Pagoda.<sup>320</sup> On the day Pháp Loa succeeded Trần Nhân Tông as the patriarch of Trúc Lâm in January 1308 at Siêu Loại temple, the King sat on the side listening to Pháp Loa's preaching.<sup>321</sup>

Tantric supernatural and ritual practices, according to Nguyễn Lang, which had been as popular as Thiền under the Lý dynasty, disappeared in the 13<sup>th</sup> century due to the influence from Viên Chứng, Ứng Thuận, Thái Tông, Đại Đăng and Tuệ Trung.<sup>322</sup> However, according to Nguyễn Lang, Buddha chanting, a Pure Land practice, continued on even though it was not as popular as Thiền practice.<sup>323</sup> As recorded in *The Analects of Three Patriarchs (Tam Tổ Thực Lục)*, Trúc Lâm's monastics still practiced Buddha chanting in groups under Trần Nhân Tông reign.<sup>324</sup>

Besides promoting social engagement of Buddhism, Trần Nhân Tông is also well known for his combative and bold *koan* teaching practice, in which shouts and sticks were sometimes used.<sup>325</sup> *The Analects of Three Patriarchs* recorded some of those *koan* sessions from the King, which were somewhat similar to Lâm Tế (Linji). However, according to Nguyễn Duy Hình, the clues used by the King to stimulate awakening in

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<sup>320</sup> Thích Phước Sơn, 29: “Tháng 4, Điều Ngự đến kiết hạ tại chùa Vĩnh Nghiêm ở Lạng Giang, giảng Truyền Đăng Lục, ..., bảo Quốc sư Đạo Nhất giảng kinh Pháp Hoa cho đại chúng.”

<sup>321</sup> Thích Phước Sơn, 39: “...Điều Ngự bèn bước sang một bên, ngồi trên giường khúc lục, nghe Sư thuyết pháp.”

<sup>322</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 316: “Yếu tố Mật Giáo đã được thanh lọc ra khỏi Thiền học qua những nhà Phật tử như Viên Chứng, Ứng Thuận, Thái Tông, Đại Đăng và Tuệ Trung. Trong những tác phẩm của Thái Tông và Tuệ Trung, Mật Giáo đời Lý không còn lưu lại dấu vết nào. Tuy vậy, khuynh hướng niệm Phật vẫn được tiếp nối.”

<sup>323</sup> Nguyễn Lang, 316: “Tuy nhiên ảnh hưởng của Diên Thọ nơi Phật Giáo đời Trần, nhất là trong thể kỷ thứ mười ba không nặng nề đến nỗi Tịnh Độ có thể lấn áp Thiền học.”

<sup>324</sup> Thích Phước Sơn, *Tam Tổ Thực Lục [The Analects of Three Patriarchs]*, 64: “Một hôm Sư nghe đệ tử tụng kinh, bèn hỏi: Tăng chúng làm gì đó? Có vị Tăng bước ra thưa: Tăng chúng đang niệm tâm Phật.”

<sup>325</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 316: “Phương pháp dùng tiếng hét và gây đánh cũng thỉnh thoảng được áp dụng.”



those responses were based on Buddhist scripts, therefore were not as secretive as the ones from Chinese Chan masters.<sup>326</sup>

### *13<sup>th</sup> Century Trúc Lâm's Lineage*

Emperor Trần Nhân Tông (1258-1308) established the first native Buddhist branch called Trúc Lâm, on the Mount Yên Tử (located in the Đông Triều district, Quảng Ninh Province, North Vietnam), along the Red River Delta, the main Buddhist center of Đại Việt in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Trúc Lâm sect was created from the Yên Tử sect, which had been founded by Hiện Quang (?-1221), a disciple of Master Thường Chiếu of Lục Tổ pagoda, by combining the existing three Thiền sects during the Lý dynasty.<sup>327</sup> King Trần Nhân Tông was the 6<sup>th</sup> patriarch of Yên Tử but was the first patriarch of Trúc Lâm sect to have a fresh start of a new Vietnamese Buddhism era.<sup>328</sup>

As shown in *Guiding Diagram of Thiền Schools (Lược Dẫn Thiền Phái Đồ)* (Figure 1)<sup>329</sup> extracted from *The Analects of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ (Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ Ngữ Lục)*, Pháp Loa and Huyền Quang succeeded the King as the second and third patriarch of Trúc Lâm, respectively. According to Lý Việt Dũng, among the sections added into the book after its original edition published by Trần Nhân Tông and Pháp Loa, the diagram apparently must have been written and added to its 1362 edition at the latest,

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<sup>326</sup> Nguyễn Duy Hinh, *Triết Học Phật Giáo Việt Nam [Vietnamese Buddhist Philosophy]*, 190: “Tuy nhiên tông Trúc Lâm không thuần Lâm Tế đánh hết mà chủ yếu lại là Giáo tông giải thích các câu hỏi theo kinh kệ Phật giáo dù rằng ngôn từ chịu ảnh hưởng Thiền Tông nhưng không quá bí ẩn như các thiền sư Trung Hoa.”

<sup>327</sup> Johnston, *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*, 176.

<sup>328</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 171: “Đời Trần có thể được gọi là thời đại Phật Giáo Nhất Tông, tức là thời đại của một phái Phật Giáo Duy Nhất.”

<sup>329</sup> Lý Việt Dũng, *Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ Ngữ Lục [The Analects of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ]*, 80.

not the editions published by Master Tuệ (Huệ) Nguyên of Long Động Temple on Mount Yên Tử in 17<sup>th</sup> century or later as many thought of.<sup>330</sup>

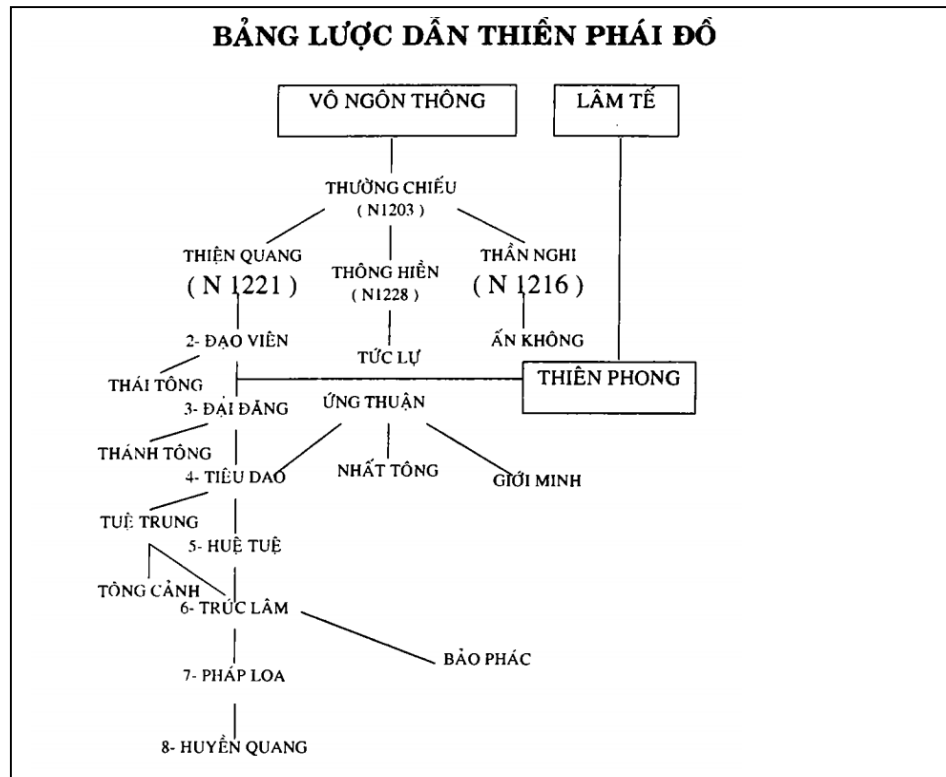


Figure 1: Guiding Diagram of Thiền Schools [Lược Dẫn Thiền Phái Đồ]

Due to limited (almost zero) literature found on the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử lineage after Huyền Quang,<sup>331</sup> this research project mainly focuses on teachings and practices under its first three patriarchs.

### *Pháp Loa (1284 -1330): The Second Patriarch*

According to Nguyễn Lang, in 1304, upon arrival at Nam Sách hamlet, Trần Nhân Tông met the 21-year-old Đồng Kiên Cương, who wanted to become a monk. Seeing the

<sup>330</sup> Lý Việt Dũng, 21: “Vậy ta có thể xác định chắc chắn rằng “Lược Dẫn Thiền Phái Đồ gồm cả lời tựa” một khi đã được quyển Tam Tổ Thực Lục đề cập thì nhất định nó phải được viết trước hay viết một lược với quyển 1 chép tiểu sử Điều Ngự Giác Hoàng Trần Nhân Tông trong tập “Tam Tổ Thực Lục” tức từ năm Nhâm Dần niên hiệu Đại Trị Nhà Trần (1362) trở về trước...”

<sup>331</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 277: “Lịch sử Phật Giáo Trúc Lâm sau Huyền Quang đã không còn lại những ghi chép nào đáng kể ....”

young man's extraordinary figure, Trần Nhân Tông said to himself, "This young man has the 'dharma-eye' (dharma-cakṣus), then must be a potential Dharma-vessel," ordained him, named him Thiện Lai, and sent him to Master Tính Giác to study.<sup>332</sup> In 1305, Thiện Lai was allowed to take Bhikkhu and Bodhisattva precepts with the dharma name of Pháp Loa, and then became the preacher at Siêu Loại temple in 1306.<sup>333</sup>

As Nguyễn Lang argues, Trần Nhân Tông knew that he could not live for many more years, so he carefully prepared Pháp Loa for the second patriarch takeover.<sup>334</sup> According to Lê Mạnh Thát, in May 1307, Nhân Tông asked Pháp Loa to come to Ngọa Vân hut located on Mount Kỳ Đặc and transmitted the Dharma-gāthā as well as handed down the robe and begging bowl to him, telling him to preserve them carefully. Seven months later, the official dharma transmission ceremony was formally held at Siêu Loại temple with many people attending, including King Trần Anh Tông and the court dignitaries as eyewitnesses.<sup>335</sup> Only three years since being ordained, Pháp Loa became the second patriarch of Trúc Lâm (1308).

During Pháp Loa's term, according to Nguyen Tai Thu, due to strong support from royal and noble circles, the number of pagodas and monasteries rose substantially.

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<sup>332</sup> Nguyễn Lang, 238: "Đến năm 1304 đến thôn Nam Sách, Trúc Lâm gặp một người trai trẻ, tuổi hai mươi một, muốn xuất gia, tên là Đồng Kiên Cương. Thấy dung mạo khác thường, Trúc Lâm tự bảo: 'Người trai trẻ này có đạo nhân, sau này chắc sẽ trở thành pháp khí'. Vui vì sự gặp gỡ này, Trúc Lâm đặt tên cho chàng là Thiện Lai, cho thọ giới Sa Di, và gửi đi tham học với Tính Giác Hòa thượng."

<sup>333</sup> Nguyễn Lang, 238: "Pháp Loa chỉ làm sa di được trên một năm; sang năm 1305, thì Trúc Lâm đã cho ông thọ giới Tỳ Khưu và Bồ tát. Sang năm 1306 thì ông đã được lập làm giảng sư ở chùa Siêu Loại."

<sup>334</sup> Nguyễn Lang, 238: "Ta cũng hiểu rằng Trúc Lâm tự biết không còn sống được nhiều năm nữa nên đã chuẩn bị kỹ lưỡng như vậy, như đã chuẩn bị kỹ lưỡng cho việc xuất gia của mình."

<sup>335</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông [All About Trần Nhân Tông]*, 97: "Thứ nhất, vào tháng 5 năm Hưng Long thứ 15 (1307), Pháp Loa đã được gọi lên am Ngọa Vân ở núi Kỳ Đặc để được trao y bát và tâm kệ. Ngày mồng một tháng giêng năm Mậu Thân Hưng Long thứ 16 (1308), sư vâng lệnh làm trụ trì nối dòng pháp ở Cam Lộ đường chùa Siêu Loại. Để khai đường và làm lễ trao truyền, vua cho đặt bài vị của liệt tổ, tấu Đại nhạc, đốt hương thơm. Điều Ngự dẫn sư lên lễ tổ đường xong... Bấy giờ Anh Tông xa giá đến chùa. Sau khi đặt ngôi chủ khách xong, vua Anh Tông vì là đại thí chủ của Phật pháp đứng vào ngôi khách ở pháp đường, thượng tể đem bá quan đứng ở dưới sân."

Buddhism-learning from scripts and lectures became an important emphasis in Thiền practice, more than a thousand statues were made, and the number of ordained and lay Buddhists also quickly increased including some from the dignitary circle.<sup>336</sup> As Nguyen Tai Thu further claims, Pháp Loa also wrote and printed around ten books, but they were all lost. However, as Nguyễn Lang argues, among his accomplishments, the printing of *The Tripitaka* was his most significant contribution to Buddhism.<sup>337</sup>

Non-duality and Buddha-Nature within are still the base of Pháp Loa's teaching and practice. As recorded in *The Analects of Three Patriarchs (Tam Tổ Thực Lục)*, he preached, "Then, when we can perceive what cannot be seen then the Buddha mind emerges."<sup>338</sup> On calming the mind, he preached meditation with fundamental questions such as where our body is from, where our mind is from, if the mind doesn't exist then how could our body exist, if mind and body do not exist then how could everything exist?<sup>339</sup>

A significant difference of Buddhism in Pháp Loa epoch as compared to his predecessor is the rise of Tantric influence, partly due to strong support from Pháp Loa and King Trần Anh Tông. According to Nguyen Tai Thu,

One of the Tantrism rites, the *abhiseka* ceremony, i.e., the holy-water sprinkling, was undertaken in a generalized manner. In 1318, carrying the King's decree, Pháp Loa went to search for the Indian monk named Pandita Sasri to translate the Tantrist prayers "*Mahasitatapatradharani*." Pháp Loa himself wrote and published *Kim Cương Trường Đà La Ni Kinh Khoa Chú*, the explicatory text for the Tantrist prayer, "*Vajramanda dharani*." Even

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<sup>336</sup> Nguyen, *The History of Buddhism in Vietnam*, 153–54.

<sup>337</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 262: "Nhưng Phật sự đáng kể nhất trong đời Pháp Loa là sự ấn hành Đại Tạng Kinh."

<sup>338</sup> Thích Phước Sơn, *Tam Tổ Thực Lục [The Analects of Three Patriarchs]*, 67: "Cho nên, thấy được cái thấy không thể thấy, thì chân tính sẽ hiện ra."

<sup>339</sup> Thích Phước Sơn, 67: "yếu chỉ của Thiền định là trước phải định tâm, thường tự suy nghĩ: thân này từ đâu tới? Tâm này từ đâu có? Tâm không thể có thì do đâu có thân? Thân tâm đều không, thì pháp từ đâu có?"

the book *Thiền Đạo Yếu Học* mentioned Buddha Vairocana, who was the highest-ranking Buddha in Tantrism.<sup>340</sup>

*The Analects of Three Patriarchs (Tam Tổ Thực Lục)* provides evidence of Tantric rituals being practiced during the Pháp Loa reign.<sup>341</sup> Pháp Loa himself consistently recited Dharani during his daily routines. Carrying the King's decrees in dealing with droughts in 1319, 1325, and 1326, Pháp Loa assigned monks for the rituals of praying for rain; all three times provided satisfactory results. According to Nguyễn Lang, Pháp Loa performed Tantric rites of Abhiṣeka (或: Murdhabhisikta: Quán đĩnh) for Senior King Anh Tông, Văn Huệ Vương, Uy Huệ Vương, and some others.<sup>342</sup>

*Huyền Quang (1254-1334): The Third Patriarch*<sup>343</sup>

Based on *The Analects of Three Patriarchs (Tam Tổ Thực Lục)*, Huyền Quang was born in the Vạn Tải hamlet along the lower part of Bắc Giang river,<sup>344</sup> with the birthname of Lý Đạo Tái.<sup>345</sup> He passed the Hội exam, the highest level in the Vietnamese imperial examination system, with the highest grade and was appointed to serve in the Imperial House Institute of the court. At the age of 51 (1305), he resigned from the court,

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<sup>340</sup> Nguyen, *The History of Buddhism in Vietnam*, 155–56.

<sup>341</sup> Thích Phước Sơn, *Tam Tổ Thực Lục [The Analects of Three Patriarchs]*, 42–52: “Sư [Pháp Loa] thường ngày đêm lễ Phật, trì chú không lúc nào thiếu sót, ...” (p.42) “Năm này [1319] trời hạn, có chiếu sai Sư cầu mưa, Sư khiến Sa-môn Thu Tử cầu, được ứng nghiệm.” (p. 47). “Tháng này [1325] trời hạn có chiếu thỉnh Sư cầu mưa, Sư sai một vị Tăng cầu được ứng nghiệm.” (p. 52) “Tháng tư [1326] đại hạn, Sư phụng chiếu cầu mưa, bèn sai Thu Tử cầu được ứng nghiệm lập tức.” (p. 52).”

<sup>342</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 321: “Thượng hoàng Anh Tông, Văn Huệ Vương, Uy Huệ Vương và nhiều người khác đã được thiền sư Pháp Loa làm lễ quán đĩnh, một nghi lễ Mật Giáo.”

<sup>343</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, in *All About Trần Nhân Tông [Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông]*, raises an issue if Trúc Lâm's third patriarch was actually Kim Sơn based on a verse written by King Trần Minh Tông (1300-1357), instead of Huyền Quang as reported in *The Analects of Three Patriarchs [Tam Tổ Thực Lục]*.

<sup>344</sup> Thích Phước Sơn, *Tam Tổ Thực Lục [The Analects of Three Patriarchs]*, 76–80.

<sup>345</sup> Based on Trúc Lâm's official website:

<http://thuongchieu.net/index.php/chuyende/thiensuvn/790-thin-s-huyn-quang>, accessed August 28, 2018. However, Lê Mạnh Thát in *All About Trần Nhân Tông [Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông]* called him ‘Huyền Quang Lý Tải Đạo’ (p. 79).

was ordained, and became a disciple of Bảo Phác<sup>346</sup> of Vũ Ninh temple, a disciple of Trần Nhân Tông. Afterwards, he followed Trần Nhân Tông for a couple years at the request of the King to help him to edit books such as the *Chư Phẩm Kinh*, *Công Văn Tập*, *Thích Khoa Giáo*. After Nhân Tông's death, he followed Pháp Loa and became the nearest disciple of a master 30 years his junior.<sup>347</sup>

Huyền Quang had a different lifestyle as compared to his two predecessors.

Nguyễn Lang summarizes such lifestyle as:

While not as socially active as Trần Nhân Tông and Pháp Loa, Huyền Quang was a talented writer and poet, as well as an excellent instructor of Buddhism. He lectured preferably at monasteries to monks and rarely to the public. He built temples and stupas such as Vân Yên, Ninh Phúc, Thanh Mai and Côn Sơn, but not in the hundreds like Pháp Loa. He preferred to spend his time teaching Buddhist doctrine, editing scripts, and write poems. He rarely was in contact with people in the court.<sup>348</sup>

According to Nguyen Tai Thu, upon accepting the position of the third patriarch of the Trúc Lâm sect in 1330, instead of residing on Mount Yên Tử and ready to lead the clergy, the 77-year-old Huyền Quang returned to Mount Côn Sơn and continued to live as a secluded monk until his death in 1334.<sup>349</sup> As an explanation for such a strange behavior, Huyền Quang left a note at Cứu Lan pagoda (*Nhân Sự Đề Cứu Lan Tự*):

Not so virtuous, ashamed of holding the Dharma lamp  
Not wanting to make Hàn Sơn and Thập Đắc angry

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<sup>346</sup> Thích Phước Sơn, *Tam Tổ Thực Lục [The Analects of Three Patriarchs]*, 79: Thích Phước Sơn noted that there was a definite typo in the saying that Huyền Quang was ordained by Pháp Loa. Based on Pháp Loa's biography, Huyền Quang was a disciple of Bảo Phác of Vũ Ninh temple. "... khi được phép vua, Tổ liền thị giáo với Thiền sư Pháp Loa, được pháp hiệu là Huyền Quang. ... Theo bản tiêu sử của Pháp Loa thì Huyền Quang là đệ tử của Bảo Phác ở chùa Vũ Ninh."

<sup>347</sup> Nguyen, *The History of Buddhism in Vietnam*, 156.

<sup>348</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 286: "Ông không phải là một mẫu người thuộc hành động như Trúc Lâm và Pháp Loa. Ông là một nhà văn, một thi sĩ có tài và cũng là một giáo sư Phật học giỏi. Ông ít đi giảng diễn trong quần chúng mà chỉ dạy trong các tu viện cho giới tăng sĩ. Ông có mở mang các chùa Vân Yên, Ninh Phúc, Thanh Mai và Côn Sơn, nhưng ông không xây dựng hàng trăm chùa tháp như Pháp Loa. Ông để thời giờ dạy giáo lý, biên tập kinh điển và làm thơ. Ông ít giao du với những người trong triều, ...."

<sup>349</sup> Nguyen, *The History of Buddhism in Vietnam*, 156–57.

It's best for me to follow friends going back to the wilderness  
Where life can be hidden behind thousands of mountains<sup>350</sup>

Nguyễn Lang argues that the rise of Confucianism in the court, coupled with Huyền Quang's poor relations with members of the dignitary circles, greatly contributed to Trúc Lâm's sudden loss of royal court's support and the consequent decline of the sect.<sup>351</sup> Neither Huyền Quang's own verse nor Nguyễn Lang's argument, however, provides the reasoning behind Huyền Quang's acceptance of the role of Trúc Lâm's third patriarch in the first place.

In regard to Buddhist practice, Huyền Quang's ideology was based on Non-Duality and Buddha-Nature Within. Unlike Tuệ Trung with strong assertion of 'emptiness,' Huyền Quang's emphasis was on "no separation between things," because "hell" is as good as nirvana.<sup>352</sup> In order to get the mind to achieve the state of Non-Duality, he followed the path of Tuệ Trung by freeing self from materialistic lifestyle and recognizing "no separation between phenomena" as they are all parts of nature including the separation of life and death.<sup>353</sup> Huyền Quang's verse below further describes such a peaceful lifestyle:

An innocent mind unharmed to others,  
An old man with a cane,

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<sup>350</sup> Huyền Quang Lý Đạo Tái, "Nhân Sự Đề Cứu Lan Tự [Passing by Cứu Lan Pogoda]," in *Thơ Văn Lý-Trần [Literature Under Lý-Trần Reigns]*, trans. Nguyễn Huệ Chi, vol. 2 (Hà Nội: Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 1988), 688: "Đức mông then mình đèn tổ nối; Luống cho Hán, Thập nổi hờn cãm; Chi bằng theo bạn về non quách; Núi dựng non che vạn vạn tầng."

<sup>351</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 294: "Một điều ta có thể ghi nhận là Huyền Quang nhận trách vụ lãnh đạo giáo hội lúc ông đã 77 tuổi. Ông đã chán việc ngoài đời, không ưa giao du liên lạc với vua quan trong triều nữa."

<sup>352</sup> Nguyễn Duy Hình, *Triết Học Phật Giáo Việt Nam [Vietnamese Buddhist Philosophy]*, 200: "Thị phi bình đẳng tướng, Ma cung Phật quốc hảo sinh quan."

<sup>353</sup> Nguyễn Duy Hình, 204: "Thuận theo tự nhiên, giải thoát trần thế công danh lợi lộc an nhàn giữa thiên nhiên, không luận bàn sinh tử."

In the bamboo grove with so many birds  
More than half of them have been his friends.<sup>354</sup>

Nguyễn Lang quotes the following verse from Huyền Quang as evidence of his belief in a life of tranquility after one has perceived Bodhi:<sup>355</sup>

Once the Bodhi within is perceived,  
Life is no longer with obstacles and far reaching dreams.<sup>356</sup>

There were signs of Tantric and Pure Land features in Huyền Quang's practice.

According to *The Analects of Three Patriarchs (Tam Tổ Thực Lục)*, he constructed a Cửu Phẩm Liên Hoa tower at Côn Sơn pagoda,<sup>357</sup> a nine-grade structure depicting the nine levels of rebirth mentioned in the Pure Land sutras. As recorded also in *The Analects of Three Patriarchs (Tam Tổ Thực Lục)*, in his visit to the capital in 1313, Huyền Quang lectured *Shurangama Mantra (Thủ Lăng Nghiêm)* a Tantric script, at Bảo Ân temple.<sup>358</sup>

#### *Trúc Lâm sect after the First Three Patriarchs*

According to Lê Mạnh Thát in *All About Trần Nhân Tông (Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông)*, the Trúc Lâm sect, instead of being extinct as many thought, continued to exist at least up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, evidenced by some Thiền masters who made great

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<sup>354</sup> Huyền Quang Lý Đạo Tái, “Ở Am Núi Yên Tử [The Hut in Yên Tử Mount],” in *Thơ Văn Lý-Trần [Literature Under Lý-Trần Reigns]*, trans. Nguyễn Huệ Chi, vol. 2 (Hà Nội: Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 1988), 684: “Vụng dại mưu nào có, Già nua gây một cây, Rừng tre chim chóc lăm, Quá nửa bạn cùng thầy.”

<sup>355</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 294: “Ông muốn nói: nếu ý thức được tự tính giác ngộ sẵn có nơi mình thì sẽ không còn thấy con đường tu trước mắt xa thăm nữa.”

<sup>356</sup> Huyền Quang Lý Đạo Tái, “Phú Vịnh Chùa Vân Yên [Verse on Vân Yên Temple],” in *Thơ Văn Lý-Trần [Literature Under Lý-Trần Reigns]*, trans. Nguyễn Huệ Chi, vol. 2 (Hà Nội: Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 1988), 712: “Cốc được tỉnh ta nên bụt thật, Ngại chi non nước cảnh đường xa.”

<sup>357</sup> Thích Phước Sơn, *Tam Tổ Thực Lục [The Analects of Three Patriarchs]*, 89: “Sư cư trú núi Thanh Mai sáu năm, rồi về trụ trì Côn Sơn đọc tụng kinh điển, và lập ra đài Cửu phẩm liên hoa, để lại cho kẻ hậu học.”

<sup>358</sup> Thích Phước Sơn, 80: “Ngày rằm tháng giêng năm Quý sửu ([1]) (1313), Sư về kinh thăm vua, rồi đến chùa Bảo Ân giảng kinh Thủ Lăng Nghiêm.”



contributions to the society and introduced themselves as descendents of the sect.<sup>359</sup> Master Chân Nguyên (1646-1726) as an example, in 1722 was named the National Preceptor by King Lê Dụ Tông.<sup>360</sup> Master Hương Hải (1628-1715) as another example, explained many Buddhist scripts using ‘Chữ Nôm’ in his 20 writings.<sup>361</sup> However, a total lack of documentation on Trúc Lâm lineage after Huyền Quang is a significant issue, with little trace on who the 4<sup>th</sup> patriarch of the sect was.<sup>362</sup>

According to Nguyễn Lang, Thích Thanh Từ, and Lê Mạnh Thát, there exists a list of 23 masters who succeeded one another as abbots of Yên Tử temple, where Yên Tử sect was founded, from Hiện Quang of 13<sup>th</sup> century up to Vô Phiền of 17<sup>th</sup> century:

Hiện Quang  
Viên Chứng  
Đại Đăng  
Tiêu Dao  
Huệ Tuệ  
Nhân Tông  
Pháp Loa  
Huyền Quang  
An Tâm  
Phù Vân (aka Tĩnh Lự)  
Vô Trước  
Quốc Nhất  
Viên Minh  
Đạo Huệ  
Viên Ngộ  
Tông Trì  
Khuê Thám  
Sơn Đăng

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<sup>359</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông [All About Trần Nhân Tông]*, 110: “Thiền phái Trúc Lâm, sau khi Huyền Quang mất vào năm 1334, như thế, vẫn được liên tục kế thừa với những khuôn mặt anh tài có những đóng góp to lớn và nhiều mặt cho dân tộc, chứ không phải là ‘thời hưng thịnh chấm dứt’, như trước đây nhiều người đã lầm tưởng.”

<sup>360</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 405–6: “Năm 1722, hồi 76 tuổi, ông được vua Lê Dụ Tông phong chức tăng thống và ban hiệu Chính Giác Hòa Thượng.”

<sup>361</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông [All About Trần Nhân Tông]*, 110: “Minh Châu Hương Hải (1628 -1715) giải thích kinh điển bằng tiếng Việt quốc âm qua hơn 20 đầu sách.”

<sup>362</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 277: “Lịch sử Phật Giáo Trúc Lâm sau Huyền Quang đã không còn lại những ghi chép nào đáng kể ....”

Hương Sơn  
Trí Dung  
Tuệ Quang  
Chân Trú  
Vô Phiền<sup>363</sup>

According to Lê Mạnh Thát, the list was published in *Đại Nam Thiền Uyển Kế Đăng Lục* written by An Thiền and printed around 1858.<sup>364</sup> Recent discoveries, however, reveal that the list was engraved by Master Tuệ Nhân on the stele at Giao Quang tower built in memory of Master Tính Đường and located on the right side of the gate of Kỳ Lâm Temple on Mount Yên Tử starting with the Preface:

Mount Yên Tử, from the Grandmaster Hiện Quang to Trúc Lâm Viên Chứng, then the three Grandmasters under the Trần dynasty, one succeeded another, hard to record all the names. ...<sup>365</sup>

Besides the first three patriarchs of Yên Tử sect and the first three patriarchs of Trúc Lâm sect (Trần Nhân Tông, Pháp Loa and Huyền Quang), the list named the succeeding abbots of the Yên Tử Temple after Huyền Quang without biography or information.

## Summary

In addressing the first research question of this project, this chapter, through primary sources in existing literature, reviews the original 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm Thiền's teaching and practice established by King Monk Trần Nhân Tông (陳仁宗) - the core of

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<sup>363</sup> Nguyễn Lang, 311: “Sau đây là danh hiệu hai mươi ba vị Tổ truyền thừa chùa Yên Tử từ Hiện Quang Tổ Sư đến Vô Phiền Đại Sư, thấy trong sách Đại Nam Thiền Uyển Truyền Đăng Lục quyển hai của Phúc Điền Hòa Thượng đính bản: Hiện Quang Tổ Sư, Viên Chứng Quốc Sư, Đại Đăng Quốc Sư, Tiêu Dao Tổ Sư, Huệ Tuệ Tổ Sư, Nhân Tông Tổ Sư, Pháp Loa Tổ Sư, Huyền Quang Tổ Sư, An Tâm Quốc Sư, Phù Vân (hiệu Tĩnh Lự) Quốc Sư, Vô Trước Quốc Sư, Quốc Nhất Quốc Sư, Viên Minh Tổ Sư, Đạo Huệ Tổ Sư, Viên Ngộ Tổ Sư, Tổng Trì Tổ Sư, Khuê Thám Quốc Sư, Sơn Đăng Quốc Sư, Hương Sơn Đại Sư, Trí Dung Quốc Sư, Tuệ Quang Tổ Sư, Chân Trú Tổ Sư, Vô Phiền Đại Sư.”; Lê Mạnh Thát, *Lịch Sử Phật Giáo Việt Nam [History of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 110.

<sup>364</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Lịch Sử Phật Giáo Việt Nam [History of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 110.

<sup>365</sup> Thích Thông Phương, *Vua Trần Nhân Tông Với Thiền Phái Trúc Lâm* (Hà Nội: Religion, 2006), 9: “Danh sách này được Thiền sư Tuệ Nhân lược dẫn trong phần đầu của bia ký tháp Giao Quang thờ Thiền sư Tính Đường hiệu Tuệ Cự ngay bên phải cổng Chùa Lâm-Thiền Viện Trúc Lâm Yên Tử: “Núi Yên Tử từ Sơ Tổ Hiện Quang đến Trúc Lâm Viên Chứng trải qua tới Trần triều Tam Tổ, lần lượt tiếp nối nhau, danh chép truyền đăng phần nhiều khó nêu ra hết....”

the *Golden Age* of Vietnamese Buddhism. The chapter also explores the lineage of the original sect. The historical landscape of Buddhism in Vietnam up to the 13<sup>th</sup> century helps in facilitating a full understanding of the presentations.

Contemporary scholars suggest that Buddhism was brought to Vietnam (known as Giao Chi at the time) through the Maritime Silk Road before the arrival of Chinese occupation (111 BCE – 938 CE). The religion began to prosper when Giao Chi turned into a diffusion center of Buddhism into China. Buddhism in Vietnam appeared to prosper with the circulation of Mouzi's *Li-huo-lun* and Kang Sanghui's *Liu du ji jing* translation around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and experienced vigorous growth since the 6<sup>th</sup> century with the establishment of Vinītaruci, Vô Ngôn Thông, and Thảo Đường Thiền sects. These early Thiền sects gradually turned Vietnamese Buddhism into the most learned group in the country and carried their own generations of great patriarchs and masters.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, after defeating the Mongol of Kublai Khan (忽必烈: Hốt Tất Liệt) in their last two out of three consecutive invasions, the well-educated and enlightened secular Buddhist King Trần Nhân Tông co-mingled Buddhism with nationalism and started the use of Sino-Vietnamese language (Chữ Nôm) in his process of rebuilding the war-shattered country independent of Chinese occupation. That co-mingling provided Buddhism with even greater influence in Vietnam's royal court. After ceding the throne to his son and taking the Senior Emperor role supervising the young King for six years, Trần Nhân Tông left the royal circle and committed himself to the monastic life as well as the spread of Buddhism at the age of 41. Later he founded the Vietnamese-branded Trúc Lâm from the union of the three existing Thiền sects and

became the new sect's founding patriarch, marking a new era of Vietnamese Buddhism significantly different from Chinese Chan Buddhism.

Trúc Lâm followed the path of Bodhidharma on fundamental elements such as Buddha-Nature inside Everyone and Non-duality of Reality in its meditation practice. Furthermore, the Dharma transmission method through the mysterious koan technique, a traditionally prominent Chan and Thiền feature, was still popular in the 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm. However, the new three ideological features established by Trúc Lâm during Trần Nhân Tông's reign that distinguished the sect from the previously established Thiền sects are Vietnamization of Buddhism, Scripture learning, and the disappearance of Tantric practice.

While sutra-learning was traditionally belittled, Trần Nhân Tông added the feature to the Trúc Lâm Thiền tradition of cultivation. Vietnamizing Buddhism in the country was another special feature promoted by Trần Nhân Tông, where Sino-Vietnamese (Chữ Nôm) was mandated along with Chinese that had been the territory's traditional language. Furthermore, greatly influenced by Trần Thái Tông and Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ, his grandfather and his master, respectively, Trần Nhân Tông further Vietnamized Buddhism by promoting the concept of 'Engagement in the world while Embracing the Dharma' in Buddhism, in which a Buddhist was not only a respectable Bodhisattva in the religious realm, but also a virtuous person respected in the secular world. Tantra's supernatural and ritual practice, very popular in the previous dynasty, seemed to disappear during Trần Nhân Tông's time.

Pháp Loa and Huyền Quang succeeded the King as the second and third patriarch of Trúc Lâm, respectively. During Pháp Loa's term, with strong help from royal and

noble circles, the number of pagodas and monasteries rose substantially. A significant difference of Buddhism in post-Trần Nhân Tông is the rise of Tantric influence, which had strong support from these two latter patriarchs and the royal dignitaries including King Trần Anh Tông. The Trúc Lâm Thiền sect under its first three patriarchs, named by Thích Minh Châu as “Trinity of Truc Lam Patriarchs, the symbol of the Buddhist *Golden Age*,”<sup>366</sup> left a significant mark on Vietnamese history as the peak of the *Golden Age* of Buddhism. The significance is due to not only for its high number of monastics, lay Buddhists, and pagodas, but also for the knowledge pool of its members as well as their simple lifestyle and their level of contribution to the country’s development.

After Huyền Quang, however, a total lack of documentation on Trúc Lâm lineage creates a historical gap, with little trace on who the fourth patriarch of the sect was.<sup>367</sup> Recent discoveries, however, reveal that the sect continued to exist at least up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, evidenced by some Thiền masters who made great contributions to the society and introduced themselves as descendents of the sect.<sup>368</sup> Also found in the discoveries is a list of 23 masters who succeeded one another as abbots of Yên Tử temple where the Trúc Lâm sect was founded, but without biographies attached to each of those names.

Thích Thanh Từ’s late 20<sup>th</sup> century movement attempted to restore Thiền Buddhism to its 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm origin appears to experience tremendous success. The doctrine and practice of the movement is the focus of discussion in the next chapter.

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<sup>366</sup> Thích Minh Châu, “A Brief History of Vietnamese Buddhism,” Religion, Buddhism Today, September 5, 1994, <http://www.buddhismtoday.com/english/vietnam/country/003-buddhism%20in%20VN.htm>.

<sup>367</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 277: “Lịch sử Phật Giáo Trúc Lâm sau Huyền Quang đã không còn lại những ghi chép nào đáng kể ....”

<sup>368</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông [All About Trần Nhân Tông]*, 110: “Thiền phái Trúc Lâm, sau khi Huyền Quang mất vào năm 1334, như thế, vẫn được liên tục kế thừa với những khuôn mặt anh tài có những đóng góp to lớn và nhiều mặt cho dân tộc, chứ không phải là ‘thời hưng thịnh chấm dứt’, như trước đây nhiều người đã lầm tưởng.”

## CHAPTER THREE

### Trúc Lâm Movement in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century

This dissertation investigates the mythos of the Trúc Lâm movement established by Thích Thanh Từ, which has experienced robust growth in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. This “new” Trúc Lâm Thiền sect became visible throughout Vietnam, establishing monasteries and nunneries filled with disciples, and eventually becoming a renowned Vietnamese Buddhist school. The strong growth of the sect during the period requires investigation and the construction of its mythos is the main focus of this project.

This chapter examines the mythos of the current Trúc Lâm doctrine and practice through primary sources in existing literature. However, it is first essential to explore Thích Thanh Từ’s biography and original lineage, as well as the context of Vietnamese Buddhism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to the establishment of the newly revitalized Trúc Lâm Thiền sect.

### 20<sup>th</sup> Century Buddhism in Vietnam

Since Buddhism arrived in Vietnam, the religion has been deeply rooted in the heart of the Vietnamese people. Buddhism’s development is often associated with the destiny of the country through many historical periods.<sup>369</sup> As such, Cuong Tu Nguyen suggests, “Buddhism played a significant role in the political and cultural life of Vietnam from the early centuries C.E. up to the period of independence (tenth century) and throughout the Lý (1009-1225) and Trần (1225-1400) dynasties.”<sup>370</sup> Toward the end of

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<sup>369</sup> Thích Trí Quảng, “Phát Biểu Chào Mừng Hội Thảo [Welcome Speech],” in *Nhìn Lại Phong Trào Phật Giáo Miền Nam Năm 1963 [Reviewing the Buddhist Movement in the South in 1963]*, ed. Trương Văn Chung, Nguyễn Công Lý, Thích Nhật Từ (Ho Chi Minh City: Phương Đông, 2013), 17.

<sup>370</sup> Nguyen, “Rethinking Vietnamese Buddhist History: Is the Thiền Uyển Tập Anh a ‘Transmission of the Lamp’ Text?”

the Trần dynasty, Buddhism entered a period of decline because Confucianism and Taoism received support by the country's rulers and later the impact of Catholicism introduced by French's colonists.<sup>371</sup> Some scholars have suggested that the destruction and confiscation of pagodas and Buddhist sacred writings in Vietnam during the 15<sup>th</sup> century Chinese occupation period contributed to the decline of Buddhism.<sup>372</sup> Nguyễn Lang argues that the downswing began before that, when Buddhism lost its royal support and consequently was no longer the leading influence in the country's direction of social and political development.<sup>373</sup> Another event that greatly contributed to the decline, according the Nguyen Tai Thu, is the Hồ Quý Ly's order in 1396 to discharge apprentice monks and compel monks under 40 years of age to give up their tonsure, which ended the 13th century Buddhism's period of brilliance.<sup>374</sup>

#### *Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Vietnamese Buddhism*

Thiên Đô suggests that the decline resulted in a lack of Buddhist scriptural knowledge and understanding, even among the monastic community.<sup>375</sup> Thich Thien-An describes Vietnamese Buddhism common practice in *Buddhism and Zen in Vietnam* that most Buddhists in Vietnam, monks and laymen, traditionally obey Theravada disciplines,

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<sup>371</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "Buddhist Action in Vietnam: A Special Assessment of the Situation in the Light of Events in March and April 1966."

<sup>372</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 360–61: "Tướng nhà Minh là Trương Phụ cho thu lượm hết các trước tác cũ mới của Đại Việt chở về Kim Lăng. Sợ những sách này còn sót lại, năm 1418 lại cho hai nhà trí thức nhà Minh là Hạ Thanh và Hạ Thì sang Đại Việt để thu lượm cho kỳ hết những tác phẩm Đại Việt. Đại Tạng Kinh thực hiện và ấn loát nhiều lần dưới triều Trần, mỗi lần in hàng ngàn cuốn, vậy mà ngày nay sách Thiên Tông Chi Nam, Bình Đăng Sám Hối Khoa Văn của Trần Thái Tông, Thạch Thất Mỵ Ngữ, Thiên Lâm Thiết Chùy Ngữ Lục, Đại Hương Hải Ấn Thi Tập, Trúc Lâm Hậu Lục và Tăng Già Toái Sự của Trúc Lâm Điều Ngự và tám tác phẩm của Pháp Loa không tác phẩm nào còn lại."

<sup>373</sup> Nguyễn Lang, 356: "Thực vậy, trong suốt một thời gian hơn hai trăm năm, từ khi nhà Trần bắt đầu suy đồi, đạo Phật không còn chỉ đạo được đường hướng văn hóa và chính trị nữa."

<sup>374</sup> Nguyen, *The History of Buddhism in Vietnam*, 158.

<sup>375</sup> Thiên Đô, "The Quest for Enlightenment and Cultural Identity: Buddhism in Contemporary Vietnam," in *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth Century Asia*, ed. Ian Harris (London: A&C Black, 2001), 261.

recite mantra, learn mudra, practice meditation and chant the Buddha's name without any conflict between these practices.<sup>376</sup> According to Jonathan H. X. Lee, the activities in most pagodas in Vietnam depicted as the morning rituals include recitations of the Shurangama Mantra, The Great Compassion Mantra, and The Heart Sūtra; and in the evening includes recitations of Amitābha Sūtra, all passages associated with Tantra (Mật Tông) Chan (Thiền) and Pure Land (Tịnh Độ).<sup>377</sup>

In describing that reality, Đoàn Trung Còn (also known as Reverend Thích Hồng Tại) suggests, since the learned were few, it was rare to find monks who understood the meaning of the scriptures they were reciting or ones who refused invitations to paid ceremonial services.<sup>378</sup> Agreeing with Nguyễn Lang who argues that contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism had more shamans than monks,<sup>379</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh depicts the image of Vietnamese Buddhism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in his writing *Engaged Buddhism* (*Đạo Phật Đi Vào Cuộc Đời*) as:

For nearly a hundred years, the image of Buddhism in the eyes of Vietnamese intellectuals has been associated with gloomy temples housing mixed displays of worship, or monks known for income-generating sutra chanting and funeral services.<sup>380</sup>

Based on a 1966 report issued by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), “By the twentieth century, Buddhism seemed sterile and moribund in comparison with the *Golden*

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<sup>376</sup> Thích Thiên-an, “Chapter 1: The Introduction of Buddhism and Zen into Vietnam.”

<sup>377</sup> Lee et al., *Asian American Religious Cultures*, 948.

<sup>378</sup> Đoàn Trung Còn, *Đạo Lý Nhà Phật [Principles of Buddhism]* (Ho Chi Minh City: Tôn Giáo, 2010), 107–8: “Nhà sư càng ngày càng kém đức. Nhiều vị tụng kinh mà không hiểu nghĩa; còn thấu đáo tường tận văn chương nhà Phật thì không mấy người. .... Ngày xưa, tăng sĩ không phải là người đi làm đám, đọc kinh mướn cho người. Ngày nay, bất cần là cuộc tế lễ gì, thiện tín có cậi đến thì không mấy vị chối từ.”

<sup>379</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 356: “Trong lúc Phật Giáo suy đồi, thầy cúng nhiều hơn thầy tu, ....”

<sup>380</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Đạo Phật Đi Vào Cuộc Đời [Engaged Buddhism]*, 89: “... mỗi khi nói đến đạo Phật, một số trong chúng ta thường liên tưởng tới những ngôi chùa tối tăm với lối thờ phụng phức tạp và tới những ông thầy quanh năm gõ mõ tụng kinh và đi làm đám ma đám chay trong làng trong xóm. Từ gần một trăm năm nay hình bóng của đạo Phật là như thế đối với người trí thức Việt Nam.”



Age.”<sup>381</sup> Looking at contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism from a different perspective, Thích Mật Thể voices concern, saying,

Is this the time the Vietnamese Buddhism spirit vanishes for good?  
Way of life in temples throughout the country looks more like a typical household, possessing no sign of association with a religious organization. Monks live there but choose to be ignorant and forgetful, purposefully shielding themselves of their genuine obligation as Buddhist ordained monastics.<sup>382</sup>

Even worse, according to Thích Thanh Từ, many Thiền monastics rejected meditation practice.<sup>383</sup>

To some scholars, blaming just the outsiders, such as the rise in popularity of Confucianism and Taoism and policies during the periods of Chinese and French colonization, for the dramatic decline of Vietnamese Buddhism as seen in the 20<sup>th</sup> century might not be fair. Thích Nhất Hạnh questions whether the inability of Vietnamese Buddhism to adapt to social and technological advancement, introduced by the West for its own advancement further contributed to such decline.<sup>384</sup> Evidence supporting Thích Nhất Hạnh’s notion includes, while Latin-Vietnamese (also known as Quốc Ngữ or Việt Ngữ) had been taught and used before 1906 at more than ten schools in and around Hà

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<sup>381</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “Buddhist Action in Vietnam: A Special Assessment of the Situation in the Light of Events in March and April 1966.”

<sup>382</sup> Thích Mật Thể, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Lược [Brief History of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 87–88: “Ôi! Tinh thần Phật giáo đến đây hầu đã tuyệt diệt? ... các cảnh chùa trong nước đã thành những cảnh gia đình riêng, không còn gì là tính cách đoàn thể của một tôn giáo nữa. Họ sống trong Phật giáo hầu hết chỉ còn dốt và quên! Quên đi khỏi phải biết đến bốn phần - bốn phần chơn chánh của một Tăng đồ!”

<sup>383</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 6: “Thế mà hiện nay nghe ai nói tu thiền, đa số Tăng Ni cực lực phản đối.”

<sup>384</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Đạo Phật Đi Vào Cuộc Đời [Engaged Buddhism]*, 89: “Khi người Tây phương mang qua nước ta nền văn minh và cái học của họ, đáng lẽ đạo Phật có thể lấy kỹ thuật mới để phát huy nền đạo học đã bị mai một và chen lấn bởi cái học khoa cử.”

Nội area as reported by David G. Marr,<sup>385</sup> Thích Mật Thể observes that young monks in Buddhist monasteries were still forced to learn only Chinese.<sup>386</sup>

### *Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Buddhist Restoration Movement*

After centuries of dramatic decline, shame of the corrupt image of their religion led to a desire for a rebirth of Lý Trần Buddhism's *Golden Age*, when Buddhists and monks were the most learned and greatly influential persons in Vietnam's political and social landscape.<sup>387</sup> Contemporary Buddhist leaders spoke of restoring Buddhism to its "rightful place in society."<sup>388</sup> Inspired in great part by the popularity of the Buddhist Revival Movement established by monk Taixu (太虛:Thái Hư) in China,<sup>389</sup> the 1920s-1950s Buddhism Restoration Movement arose in Vietnam attempting to rebuild a generation of learned monks to recapture the glory of Buddhism's *Golden Age* in Vietnam.<sup>390</sup> Thiên Dô describes this initiative in more detail, saying, "A few scholarly monks, aided by modern print technology, were dedicated to the dissemination of explicatory texts on Buddhist philosophy and the translation of Buddhist scriptures while

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<sup>385</sup> David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 163; Nguyễn Đình-Hoà, "Vietnamese," in *The World's Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 691.

<sup>386</sup> Thích Mật Thể, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Brief History of Vietnamese Buddhism]*.

<sup>387</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Đạo Phật Đi Vào Cuộc Đời [Engaged Buddhism]*, 91: "Sử chép rằng ở triều Lý giới trí thức bác học nhất trong nước là các nhà Phật học và các thiền sư. Cái học của Phật học lúc đó là cái học để hiểu và để xây dựng, nó không đem lại tước vị cho ai cả. Các thiền sư thường được vua vời vào cung giảng đạo, luận bàn việc văn hóa, kinh tế, xã hội và cả chính trị nữa. Có thiền sư đã được mời đứng ra để tiếp sứ ngoại quốc. Thế nhưng họ vẫn sống đạm bạc nâu sồng trong các tự viện, và chỉ vào cung khi có chỉ triệu mời."

<sup>388</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "Buddhist Action in Vietnam: A Special Assessment of the Situation in the Light of Events in March and April 1966."

<sup>389</sup> DeVido, "'Buddhism for This World': The Buddhist Revival in Vietnam, 1920 to 1951 and Its Lagacy," 252; Dô, "The Quest for Enlightenment and Cultural Identity: Buddhism in Contemporary Vietnam," 260; Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 559.

<sup>390</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "Buddhist Action in Vietnam: A Special Assessment of the Situation in the Light of Events in March and April 1966."

calling for a nationwide reform of the sangha in terms of education and training.”<sup>391</sup> In Elise A. DeVido’s words, its purpose was to “modernise and systemise Sangha education and temple administration.”<sup>392</sup> The movement was initiated by a widely respected monk Khánh Hòa (1877-1947) of Bến Tre province, who together with monk Khánh Anh and a few other respected monks in the Mekong delta, founded Lục Hòa Alliance (Lục Hòa Liên Hiệp) in 1923 at Long Hoa temple in Trà Vinh, South Vietnam.<sup>393</sup>

After four years of extensive travelling across the country looking for like-minded monks to promote ideas of reviving Buddhism, the alliance accomplished nothing toward its first objective of forming a nationwide association.<sup>394</sup> In 1927, monk Thiện Chiếu, who had become acquainted with Khánh Hòa around 1926 and already renowned as being a young, talented and energetic monk, who was familiar with Taixu’s progress in China, was dispatched to Hà Nội to connect with North Vietnam’s interested parties in 1927, but the trip was unsuccessful.<sup>395</sup> The old mode of thinking seemed to still dominate the air. Trí Hải, a young northern monk began to explore ways of implementing Taixu’s ideas then, but was met with resistance from sangha seniors, and temporarily kept the seed of reform within his Quán Sứ temple in Hanoi.<sup>396</sup> Shaun Frederick McHale argues

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<sup>391</sup> Dô, “The Quest for Enlightenment and Cultural Identity: Buddhism in Contemporary Vietnam,” 261.

<sup>392</sup> DeVido, ““Buddhism for This World’: The Buddhist Revival in Vietnam, 1920 to 1951 and Its Legacy,” 252.

<sup>393</sup> Elise Anne DeVido, “The Influence of Chinese Master Taixu on Buddhism in Vietnam,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 10 (2009): 559.

<sup>394</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 579–80.

<sup>395</sup> Nguyễn Lang, 598.

<sup>396</sup> Thích Trí Hải, *Hồi Ký Thành Lập Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam [Memoir of the Establishment of the Tonkin Buddhist Association]* (Hà Nội: Tôn Giáo, 1965), 13: “Khi lên Hà Nội, vào thăm các chùa danh tiếng như Bà Đá, Hòe Nhai, Liên Phái v.v... chúng tôi đều trình bày việc chấn hưng Phật giáo. Nhưng bấy giờ chúng tôi còn nhò lại vào các chùa lớn nói những việc mới lạ nên có nhiều vị tỏ ý khinh rẻ, cho là viễn vông. Các vị ấy nói: Phật giáo vẫn hưng thịnh, chùa vẫn làm, tượng vẫn tô, chuông vẫn đúc, khách thập phương vẫn đi lại đông đúc, tập nập vui vẻ, có gì sứt mẻ đâu mà phải chấn hưng?”; DeVido, “The Influence of Chinese Master Taixu on Buddhism in Vietnam,” 424–25: “senior monks in his northern province of Ha Nam as well as Hanoi dismissed him as a mere child, saying there is nothing wrong with Buddhism, we are

that “most Vietnamese expressed far more interest in gaining access to ‘traditional’ Buddhist writings than in becoming acquainted with modern reformers like Taixu or Thiện Chiếu.”<sup>397</sup>

Not giving up the revival effort, but realizing that their scope of work needed narrowing, Khánh Hòa and supporters, both ordained and lay notables, established Saigon-based Cochinchina Association for Buddhist Studies (Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu Phật Học) in 1930, which established the periodical *The Voice of Compassion* (Từ Bi Âm) and published its first issue in January 1932 in Quốc Ngữ.<sup>398</sup> Seeing the progress in the South, respected monks and lay notables in the other two regions rapidly established their regional Buddhist associations. In the central region, monk Giác Tiên and supporters formed Huế-based An Nam Association for Buddhist Studies (Hội An Nam Phật Học) in 1932; in the North, monk Trí Hải and local notables started Hà Nội-based Tonkin Buddhist Association (Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ) in 1934.<sup>399</sup> In the South, monk Khánh Hòa established in 1934 Lưỡng Xuyên Association for Buddhist Studies (Hội Lưỡng Xuyên Phật Học) when Cochinchina could not progress under the administrative lead of lay notable Trần Nguyên Chấn.<sup>400</sup>

Gaining momentum from its success in the 1930s, this 1920s movement continued to improve decades-old image of Buddhism for another decade or so. As documented by CIA, though varied across regions, there were programs generally aimed at tightening discipline in the monasteries, expanding educational facilities for monks,

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building and restoring temples, repainting statues, recasting bells, visitors are flocking to the pagodas, why the need to revive or rebuild Buddhism?”

<sup>397</sup> Shawn Frederick McHale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 170.

<sup>398</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 560.

<sup>399</sup> Nguyễn Lang, 560.

<sup>400</sup> Nguyễn Lang, 585.

and increasing social service activities, as well as spreading Buddhism in the Vietnamese language rather than through the medium of Chinese characters which only monks and a few scholars were able to read.<sup>401</sup> Various periodicals and books on Buddhism began to appear in Quốc Ngữ.

Each region established its own Quốc Ngữ periodicals such as Viên Âm (central, 1933), Đuốc Tuệ (north, 1935) and Duy Tâm (south, 1935),<sup>402</sup> in addition to Từ Bi Âm (south, 1932). Besides learned monastics, these publications attracted a few learned lay people including university professors and students to contribute to the study of or to begin to their study of Buddhism.<sup>403</sup> Those non-monastic contributors included the following notables: Trần Trọng Kim, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, Trần Văn Giáp, Lê Dư, Nguyễn Hữu Tiến, Nguyễn Can Mộng, Dương Bá Trạc, Bùi Kỷ, Nguyễn Trọng Thuật, Nguyễn Văn Ngọc, Nguyễn Quang Oánh, Nguyễn Văn Tố, Lê Toại, Nguyễn Đỗ Mục, Trần Lê Nhân, Vũ Như Trác, Lê Đình Thám and Nguyễn Huy Xương.<sup>404</sup> A few Buddhist sutras and documents translated from Chinese or some new Buddhist books being written in Quốc Ngữ during this period include, Ưu Bà Tắc Giới, Quán Vô Lượng Thọ Phật, Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh, Khóa Hư Lục, Kinh Di Giáo, Kinh Di Đà, Kinh Tứ Thập Nhị Chương, Hán Việt Tự Điển, and Phật Học Giáo Khoa.<sup>405</sup>

New institutions for Buddhist Studies such as Tây Thiên, Kim Sơn, Báo Quốc, Lương Xuyên, and Liên Hải were established across all three regions, with faculty of widely respected monastics to facilitate learning opportunities to younger generations of

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<sup>401</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “Buddhist Action in Vietnam: A Special Assessment of the Situation in the Light of Events in March and April 1966.”

<sup>402</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 585.

<sup>403</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “Buddhist Action in Vietnam: A Special Assessment of the Situation in the Light of Events in March and April 1966.”

<sup>404</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 652.

<sup>405</sup> Nguyễn Lang, 585–663.

monks and nuns.<sup>406</sup> Even though these institutions contributed a good number of graduates during the period, around 500 with a tenth of those considered excellent, the number barely made a dent in the overpopulated Vietnamese ordained population.<sup>407</sup> However, as Nguyễn Lang further notes, it was this small group of excellent graduates that had a significant influence on the country's 1945-1975 social and political landscape.

### *1963 Buddhist Upheaval*

A major Buddhist upheaval began in May 1963 in South Vietnam under Ngô Đình Diệm's regime. A nationwide demonstration erupted when there was news that Vietnamese security forces had killed eight young people in Huế marching in response to Diệm's ban of the Buddhist flag in recognition of Buddha's Birthday.<sup>408</sup> The demonstrations culminated on June 11, 1963, with Thích Quảng Đức setting himself on fire in the middle of a busy street in Saigon. The monk's self-immolation photo, photographed by Malcolm Browne, earned him a Pulitzer Prize as it circulated widely around the world.<sup>409</sup> A few other subsequent monastic's self-immolations only further intensified the movement. The upheaval played a critical role socially and politically not

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<sup>406</sup> Thích Mật Thể, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Brief History of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 115: "Ba miền đều có mở đạo trường cả, ở Bắc có trường Tăng ở chùa Quán Sứ, trọng Ni ở chùa Bồ-đề do Bắc kỳ Phật giáo hội tổ chức; ở Trung có Phật học viện ở chùa Tây Thiên, đầu tiên do các thầy Đại đức và một nhóm thanh niên trong Sơn môn tổ chức, hiện nay đã giao lại cho toàn thể Sơn môn quản cố; lại có Phật học viện ở chùa Báo Quốc do Phật học hội tổ chức, duyên khởi thành lập đầu tiên là thầy Giảng sư Mật Khế, và trường Ni ở chùa Diệu Đức do một nhóm nữ cư sĩ tổ chức; trong Nam thì có Phật học viện do hội Lương Xuyên Phật học Trà Vinh tổ chức."

<sup>407</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 572.

<sup>408</sup> Robert J. Topmiller, *Lotus Unleash: The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam, 1964-1966* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 1; Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 793-819.

<sup>409</sup> Patrick Witty, "Malcolm Browne: The Story Behind the Burning Monk," Time, August 28, 2012, <http://time.com/3791176/malcolm-browne-the-story-behind-the-burning-monk/>.

only in South Vietnam but internationally and ultimately led to the demise of Diem power and influence.<sup>410</sup>

Another major Buddhist movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the Trúc Lâm movement in the later part of the century led by Thích Thanh Từ, which is the subject and focus of the following sections.

### Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century Buddhist Restoration Movement



**Figure 2:**  
**Thích Thanh Từ in the 1960s**  
(Source: <thuongchieu.net>,  
Mar 12, 2019)

At first, Thích Thanh Từ's effort was to restore Thiền Buddhism in Vietnam after decades of decline and being misunderstood by the general public. Upon experiencing success with the initial effort, Thích Thanh Từ merged his organization into Trúc Lâm lineage and turned his effort and focus towards reviving the sect.

#### *Thích Thanh Từ's Biography*

According to his official biography, Thích Thanh Từ was born Trần Hữu Phước (also known as Trần Thanh Từ) on July 24, 1924, in Cần Thơ province (located in modern day Vĩnh Long province, South Vietnam). Even though his family's religion was Cao Đài, an indigenous religion founded in 20<sup>th</sup> century Vietnam, he was described as having a natural predisposition for monasticism.<sup>411</sup> At 9 years old, during a visit with his father to Sân Tiên temple on Ba Thê mountain (Long Xuyên), upon hearing the bell in

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<sup>410</sup> Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 268–96.

<sup>411</sup> “Đôi Nét về HT Ân Sư [Biography of Master Thích Thanh Từ],” Religion, Thường Chiếu Monastery, May 20, 2007, <http://thuongchieu.net/index.php/doinethtansu>: “Có thể nói rằng chí xuất trần của Hòa thượng nổi dậy kể từ đây.”

the midst of silence, he felt his heart melted with the sound, then spontaneously authored the following poem,

Oh! How joyful the serenity of the mountain  
A peaceful place for everyone  
Awakened by the sound from wooden fish  
Heard the woe of life echoed in the bell tone<sup>412</sup>

On another occasion, when seeing tremendous suffering others endured through the many ups and downs of his early years, especially in the chaos of war, he uttered the wish: “If I cannot be a magic pill that saves all beings, at least I can be a tonic to lessen the suffering of people.”<sup>413</sup>

His predisposition for monasticism began to surface at age 25, when he was ordained by Master Thích Thiện Hoa, a well respected Pure Land monk who headed the Institute for the Propagation of the Dharma (Viện Trường Viện Hóa Đạo), and where he was given the ordained name of Thích Thanh Từ.<sup>414</sup> Per official record, after learning and practicing Pure Land for 13 years, he served as one of the key administrators and lecturers in the Vietnamese Buddhist education system while his cultivation process came to a state of deadlock. After repeatedly seeking advice from his teachers, Master Thích Thiện Hoa and Great Master Thích Khánh Anh, he sought to find the answer for

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<sup>412</sup> “Đôi Nét về HT Ân Sư [Biography of Master Thích Thanh Từ]”: “Khoảng năm 9 tuổi, nhân theo Cụ ông lên Mốp Vắn, Long Xuyên thọ tang người Bác thứ ba, Hòa thượng được đến chùa Sân Tiên trên núi Ba Thê cúng cầu siêu cho Bác. Duyên xưa gặp lại, nghe tiếng chuông chùa ngân dài giữa khoảng thình không cô tịch, Hòa thượng rung động như có một nỗi niềm giao cảm tự bao giờ. Bất thần Người xuất khẩu thành thơ: Non đánh là nơi thú lắm ai, Đó cảnh nhàn du của khách tài. Tiếng mõ công phu người tỉnh giấc, Chuông hồi vắng vắng quá bi ai!”

<sup>413</sup> “Đôi Nét về HT Ân Sư [Biography of Master Thích Thanh Từ]”: “Sớm chìm nổi theo dòng đời và nhất là sống trong thời loạn lạc, Hòa thượng càng thâm thía, càng đau xót nỗi thống khổ của con người. Chỉ xuất trần của Hòa thượng vì thế càng trở nên mãnh liệt hơn và Người luôn ôm ấp một tâm niệm: ‘Nếu tôi không thể làm một viên linh đơn cứu tất cả bệnh của chúng sanh, ít ra cũng là một viên thuốc bổ giúp cho người bớt khổ.’”

<sup>414</sup> “Đôi Nét về HT Ân Sư [Biography of Master Thích Thanh Từ]”: “Ngày 15 tháng 07 năm Kỷ Sửu 1949, sau ba tháng công quả tại chùa Phật Quang, Hòa thượng được Tổ Thiện Hoa chánh thức cho xuất gia với pháp danh là Thanh Từ.”



himself.<sup>415</sup> Thích Thanh Từ began his own investigation, questioning even the sources of knowledge he had spent a lifetime learning from.

While Sutras (Kinh) and Abhidharma sàstras (Luận) told me that Prince Siddhartha reached enlightenment through meditation, why did my Great Master and Master teach me Pure Land? This issue made me think really hard.<sup>416</sup>

His thorough investigation into Sutras and Abhidharma sastras resulted in revealing the solution to his cultivation stagnation. Based on his findings, the Gautama Buddha spent 49 days under the Bodhi tree for the last states of meditation to reach enlightenment. The holy monks were then awakened through meditation, and all patriarchs, from Indian Mahākāśyapa to Chinese Hui-neng, as well as Vietnamese patriarchs from the seventh to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries Chinese Hui-neng, all meditated to become awakened and vigorously promoted meditation to become patriarchs.<sup>417</sup> Thích Thanh Từ was convinced and decided to follow the path of Gautama Buddha, the holy monks, and the Indian, Chinese, and Vietnamese patriarchs who chose meditation as his cultivation and propagation practice, knowing that his decision would disappoint his

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<sup>415</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, *Kỷ Yếu 50 Năm Thiền Viện Chơn Không 1966-2016 [Yearbook for the 50th Anniversary of Chơn Không Monastery (1966-2016)]* (Ho Chi Minh City: Tôn Giáo, 2016), 157: “Thầy đã nói về Thầy. Thầy nói lại quãng đời tìm tu của mình. Từ sự cầu học với Hòa thượng Pháp chủ Cụ Tổ Thích Khánh Anh rồi đến Hòa thượng Thích Thiện Hoa. Trải bao lần thừa thĩnh, qua bao năm tháng, mà sự tu vẫn trong bế tắc. Thế rồi, không thể trông cậy vào ai nữa, tự Thầy nỗ lực suy tìm.”

<sup>416</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Ba Vấn Đề Trọng Đại Trong Đời Tu Của Tôi [Three Critical Matters in My Monkhhood Life]*, 11: “Sau khi xuất gia tôi được học sử Phật và Kinh, Luận thấy rõ Thái Tử Tất Đạt Đa (Siddhattha) xuất gia tu thiền được giác ngộ thành Phật, các Kinh, Luận hầu hết đều dạy tu thiền, tại sao Sư Ông và Thầy tôi dạy tu Tịnh Độ? Đây là một nghi vấn khiến tôi phải suy nghĩ nhiều. Lần lượt học thêm Kinh, Luận tôi hiểu rõ hơn lời Phật, Tổ dạy, pháp tu thiền đã đủ sức thuyết phục tôi. Tăng sĩ Việt Nam đại đa số tu Tịnh độ, tại sao riêng tôi chọn pháp tu thiền? Hẳn phải có lý do thôi thúc tôi.”

<sup>417</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 11–12: “Cuối cùng Ngài đến dưới cội Bồ Đề (Bodhi) ngồi thiền định bốn chín ngày đêm, đến đêm bốn mươi chín được giác ngộ thành Phật ... Đệ tử Phật cũng do tu thiền được thành Thánh quả ... Từ Tổ Ca Diếp đến Tổ Huệ Năng cả thầy ba mươi ba vị Tổ Ấn Độ, Trung Hoa rõ ràng các Ngài do tu thiền ngộ đạo và truyền bá thiền nên thành Tổ. Cho đến ở Việt Nam chúng ta từ thế kỷ thứ bảy đến thế kỷ thứ mười tám, chư vị Tổ sư Bắc, Trung, Nam đều tu thiền, truyền thiền nên kế thừa làm Tổ.”

lineage and that the path of meditation would be a solitary one in contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism.<sup>418</sup>

As recorded in his official biography, in 1966, upon obtaining the consent from his master to move out to find his “true self,” Thích Thanh Từ resigned from all the positions he was serving, seeking a different life and leaving behind his original lineage.<sup>419</sup> He then started his new life as a ‘mountain monk’ by building himself a hut, naming it Pháp Lạc, on Tương Kỳ Mountain in Vũng Tàu province, and dedicated himself to the understanding of meditation and its cultivation.<sup>420</sup> On the full moon of April 1968, being resolute in his belief in meditation, he entered a closed retreat (also referred to as ‘hut entering’ or ‘Nhập Thất,’ seclusion for mind-cultivation) declaring that he would come out only when he became awakened.<sup>421</sup>

Upon having found his Way in July 1968, Thích Thanh Từ came out of the retreat a month later,<sup>422</sup> and started a new chapter of Thiền Buddhism in Vietnam. This marks the beginning of the revival of Thiền Buddhism, which had been misunderstood, mispracticed or forgotten for centuries, even by the Vietnamese monastic community.<sup>423</sup>

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<sup>418</sup> “Đôi Nét về HT Ân Sư [Biography of Master Thích Thanh Từ]”: “Tôi quyết tâm tu thiền là noi gương đức Phật, các bậc Thánh Tăng, chư Tổ Ấn độ, Trung Hoa, Việt Nam với lòng cung kính trung thành của mình. .... Song sự tu thiền và truyền thiền trên đất nước Việt Nam hiện nay, tôi thật cô đơn. Tuy vậy, tôi vẫn hy vọng sẽ có những người sau thông cảm, tiếp tục việc làm dở dang của tôi.”

<sup>419</sup> “Đôi Nét về HT Ân Sư [Biography of Master Thích Thanh Từ]”: “Hòa thượng liền xin phép với Tổ Thiện Hoa được lui về núi ẩn tu. Chí đã quyết, Hòa thượng dẫn lòng dứt áo ra đi, âm thầm một mình một bóng lên chốn non thâm.”

<sup>420</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, *Kỷ Yếu 50 Năm Thiền Viện Chơn Không 1966-2016 [Yearbook for the 50th Anniversary of Chơn Không Monastery (1966-2016)]*, 12.

<sup>421</sup> “Đôi Nét về HT Ân Sư [Biography of Master Thích Thanh Từ]”: “Đến rằm tháng tư năm Mậu Thân, Hòa thượng tuyên bố nhập thất vô hạn định với lời kiên quyết: ‘Nếu đạo không sáng, thế không ra thất.’ Thế là cửa sài đôi cánh khép.”

<sup>422</sup> “Đôi Nét về HT Ân Sư [Biography of Master Thích Thanh Từ].”

<sup>423</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 6–7: “Thế mà hiện nay nghe ai nói tu thiền, đa số Tăng Ni cực lực phản đối ... Có lắm người Phật tử hâm mộ tu Thiền, song sự có mặt của nhiều lối tu Thiền ở Việt Nam làm họ không biết đầu tà đầu chánh.”

## *The Revival of Thiền Buddhism*

As reported in the *Yearbook for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Chơn Không Monastery (1966-2016)* (*Kỷ Yếu 50 năm Thiền Viện Chơn Không*), on the very mountain where Pháp Lạc hut was, the new Chơn Không monastery was established in 1971 as the first brick of Thích Thanh Từ's Thiền Restoration foundation.<sup>424</sup> Based on the *Yearbook*, the facility in 1971 housed 10 students of his first Thiền session, which was a 3-year program, and marked the beginning of a new era of Thiền Buddhism with emphasis on self-exploring meditation practice, in a land, as characterized by Cuong Tu Nguyen, predominated by Pure Land and Tantric traditions full of rituals and devotions relying on supernatural powers.<sup>425</sup> Upon the opening of the first Thiền session on April 8, 1971, Thích Thanh Từ declared the three-fold purpose of the monastery:

First, to eradicate superstitions and the practice of Buddhism as purely theory learning: Chơn Không monastery is a place of practice with much less theory learning. Second, to provide a clear path of spiritual practice: The monastery is for dedicated spiritual practitioners, who will experience a sublime spiritual practice. Third, to restore the Vietnamese Thiền's meditation practice to its genuine tradition.<sup>426</sup>

To accomplish such difficult objectives which first involved the hard task of eradicating practitioners' old habits of cultivation, Thích Thanh Từ at times had to put tough disciplines on the learners to help them in affirming their conviction.<sup>427</sup> An example, as

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<sup>424</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, *Kỷ Yếu 50 Năm Thiền Viện Chơn Không 1966-2016 [Yearbook for the 50th Anniversary of Chơn Không Monastery (1966-2016)]*, 45.

<sup>425</sup> Nguyen and A.W. Barber, "Vietnamese Buddhism in North America: Tradition and Acculturation."

<sup>426</sup> "Thiền Viện Chơn Không," Religion, Thường Chiếu Monastery, March 11, 2018, <http://thuongchieu.net/index.php/component/content/article?id=391>: "Trong dịp khai mạc khóa I vào ngày 8 tháng 4 năm Tân Hợi (1971), Hòa Thượng ân sư đã nói về mục đích thành lập thiền viện như sau: (1) Trừ dẹp mê tín và lý thuyết suông: Tu viện Chơn Không là chỗ học ít tu nhiều; (2) Khai thông đường lối tu hành: Tu viện là nơi chuyên tu, khiến tăng sĩ thấy rõ đường lối tu hành của mình là cao siêu thanh thoát; (3) Gầy dựng lại đường lối tu thiền đúng là Thiền tông Phật Giáo Việt Nam."

<sup>427</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, *Kỷ Yếu 50 Năm Thiền Viện Chơn Không 1966-2016 [Yearbook for the 50th Anniversary of Chơn Không Monastery (1966-2016)]*, 126: "Trong lúc này cần phải xác định chí

recalled by a disciple, when Thích Thanh Từ learned that a Pure Land book had been brought in and circulated among learners, he requested the book be burned in front of the group. His explanation to the group was that he was not burning a Pure Land book, but burning a book coming from outside to allow them to fully focus on his teaching.<sup>428</sup>

To the surprise of many, Thích Thanh Từ's program at Chơn Không drew a great deal of interest from the public, especially considering the tough economic and social landscape of Vietnam at the time. In response to the tremendous demand for such teaching, Bát Nhã and Linh Quang monasteries were built in expectation of the second session, which began in 1974 with the accommodations to board 20 students in each of the three monasteries.<sup>429</sup> However, the final headcount of those who showed up at the beginning of the session exceeded the boarding capacity of the facility:

Chơn Không had 28 monks, the oldest being 45 years old and the youngest at 19 years old ... Linh Quang had 18 monks ranging in age from 20-30 ... Bát Nhã had 35 nuns, the oldest being 58 years old and youngest being 15 years old ... There were also 21 monks/nuns who lived in their own huts around the area ...

Many more came just for the lectures, including some from the Mendicant Buddhist branch and a Catholic priest with the name of Father Thống, who was the Head of Catholic Convent Đan Viện from Phước Sơn, Thủ Đức.<sup>430</sup>

In the ceremonial speech on opening day of the second session,<sup>431</sup> Thích Thanh Từ stated that although the students from the first session had to move out to make room for the new students, meditation needed time and practice; consequently, those first session students were encouraged to stay for an additional three years to cultivate or do whatever

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hướng. Phải biết rõ hướng đi của mình 'lập chí hành đạo' nhất định phải được đặt ra, phải được xác định rõ ràng không được lằng lẩn."

<sup>428</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, 126: "Thầy đã nói việc đốt sách này không phải là đốt sách Tịnh độ, mà đốt một quyển sách ngoài đường hướng của Tu viện, nhằm xác định rõ ràng hướng đi của Thiền sinh."

<sup>429</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, 82–85.

<sup>430</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, 82–85.

<sup>431</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, 86–90.

deemed suitable. He reported in the speech that the second session was more crowded than expected and that it was better to have quality over quantity, though he would deny no one since this session was to be his last.<sup>432</sup> He also promised in the speech to build more monasteries to provide enough boarding for students to continue their meditation practice.

Unfortunately, the second session was cut short due to the Fall of Saigon (otherwise referred to as the reunification of Vietnam's north and south regions after a decades-long civil war) on April 30, 1975. Up to 1981, Thích Thanh Từ continued to have a difficult time growing his meditation line. According to various memoirs shared in *Yearbook for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Chơn Không Monastery*, under the new government's regulations, the communities at Chơn Không, Bát Nhã and Linh Quang monasteries needed to be disbanded. Only some limited number of community members, including Thích Thanh Từ, were allowed in the newly established Thường Chiếu and Viên Chiếu monasteries on a large farm lot in Long Thành, Đồng Nai. At the new location, monastics spent more time on the 'meditation farms' with hoes, shovels and wheelbarrows making a living and building huts than in the meditation halls.<sup>433</sup> When the living conditions of the remaining students were considered relatively stable, the second session resumed at the new location, but was again abruptly and completely stopped in the summer 1976.<sup>434</sup> Thích Thanh Từ started another three-year session at Long Thành, but again was forced to stop after a year and a half.<sup>435</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, 88–89.

<sup>433</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, 279: “Thiền sinh xuống núi rồi Thiền đường để đến Nông thiền làm rẫy làm ruộng sinh nhai. Tu trên Nông thiền nhiều hơn Thiền đường, suốt ngày hai buổi cấy cày, chỉ ngồi thiền buổi tối và buổi khuya. Buổi chiều học 2 giờ rồi tiếp tục lao động.”

<sup>434</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, 189: “Với các Thiền viện, Thiền viện Thường Chiếu và Viên Chiếu, xem như là hóa thân của Chơn Không, Linh Quang và Bát Nhã. Các Thiền sinh này đã học dở dang việc

According to a memoir featured in the *Yearbook for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Chon Không Monastery*, Thích Thanh Từ was not allowed to open any more Thiền sessions, but he kept on preaching periodically on the days of repentance, and twice a month to the public at Long Thành facility, which attracted a crowd each time and more new people every day.<sup>436</sup> The memoir also reports that his teaching was also conducted, according to demand, to groups of people of various sizes, or even in casual encounters with his disciples and neighbors, which occurred more often during the summer retreats. Directing his teaching of Buddhism toward helping people resolve their own issues in the face of conflicting challenges during this period of social unrest and change, Thích Thanh Từ was quite successful in calming people down, and bringing back confidence, peace and meaning of life to many.<sup>437</sup>

In 1979, according to a memoir in the *Yearbook for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Chon Không Monastery*, Thích Thanh Từ's popularity rose to a new high during his visiting lecture series at Xá Lợi Temple in Saigon, the headquarters of the Association of Buddhist Studies (Hội Phật Học), per invitations from the association.<sup>438</sup> These half-a-

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học, chương trình lại đứt đoạn. Khi việc ăn ở đã tạm ổn, Viện chủ bắt đầu giảng dạy tiếp tục chương trình còn lại. Nhưng rất tiếc lại bị trục trặc và đình chỉ ... Một số chúng Thường Chiếu, gốc từ Chon Không, Linh Quang, đã rời Thường Chiếu, chỉ còn 5, 7 vị, và như vậy chương trình học xem như bị đổ vỡ hoàn toàn, để tiếp nối chương trình không còn được đặt ra nữa. Khóa II việc học, chúng xem như tan rã từ đó. Đó là thời gian sau chừng một năm của mùa hạ 1975.”

<sup>435</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, 475: “Sau đó, Thầy mở khóa dạy ở Thường Chiếu cũng 3 năm, nhưng chỉ một năm rưỡi thôi lại phải nghỉ.”

<sup>436</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, 188–89: “Thầy Viện Chủ vẫn thuyết pháp định kỳ theo ngày sám hối, mỗi tháng 2 lần. Số thính chúng đi nghe pháp khá đông. Những người mới càng ngày càng nhiều ... Ngoài những buổi thuyết pháp định kỳ, Thầy Viện chủ còn có những thời pháp tùy sự thỉnh cầu cho ít người hay cho từng nhóm, những buổi học dành riêng cho Tăng ni Tu viện và Ni chúng quanh vùng, những lớp này cụ thể rõ ràng vào những mùa An Cư Kiết Hạ.”

<sup>437</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, 189.

<sup>438</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, 190: “Và sau đó, Viện chủ được thỉnh giảng bộ kinh Diệu Pháp Liên Hoa, mỗi tháng một buổi vào thời điểm 1981. Pháp hội nghe kinh rất đông. Giảng đường Xá Lợi không đủ chỗ chứa người. Người phải lên lầu, ra sân, lan ra lề đường và cả đường lộ. Số thính chúng có mấy ngàn người. Với số người đi xe gởi có số phiếu là 3.000 phiếu. Đây là pháp hội đông nhất trong các pháp hội ở thời điểm này. Người đến nghe pháp không phải chỉ dân TP. Hồ Chí Minh thôi mà cả từ các tỉnh xa xôi. Từ các tỉnh miền tây cho đến các tỉnh miền trung, Huế, Đà Lạt v.v... người muốn được nghe phải đi trước

day lectures, held monthly during 1981 attracted a few thousand people, some of whom from far-away provinces and most of whom had to physically reserve their spaces the night before. They filled up the Xá Lợi's main lecture hall and overflowed to the facility's upper level as well as in to its yards and streets. The memoir further noted that accepting donations was a hard task for Thích Thanh Từ at the end of each lecture. The lecturing invitation, however, disruptedly terminated in 1981 when the lecturer was half way through the Lotus Sutra.

On March 18, 1986 (according to the lunar calendar), the government's "clearance order" of Tương Kỳ Mountain was finally fully enforced, and consequently the Thích Thanh Từ's movement to revive Thiền Buddhism had switched its headquarters from the mountainous Chơn Không to the flat farm of "Chiếu" to continue its efforts.<sup>439</sup> After almost a quarter of a century of continuous effort since leaving the mountainous Chơn Không, Thích Thanh Từ gradually and tirelessly built and shaped the "Chiếu" monasteries in the Long Thành farm land to their more stable condition day-by-day the same way he shaped his disciples.<sup>440</sup> Besides Thường Chiếu and Viên Chiếu establishment in 1975, the growing number of "Chiếu" includes Huệ Chiếu, Linh Chiếu and Phổ Chiếu nunneries were built during the 1979-1982 period, which housed around

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nhiều ngày, và phải đến từ khuya để giành chỗ ngồi ... Sau thời pháp, Viện chủ phải đón nhận cúng lễ cũng khá nhọc nhằn. Viện chủ bị đặt vào thế "chăng đặng đưng" không còn đường để thoái lui. Giảng dạy được nửa bộ kinh, thì duyên hết. Viện chủ không còn giảng dạy nữa, hàng thánh chúng thấy đều nuôi tiếc."

<sup>439</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, 194–96: "Đầu năm 1986 thì lệnh di chuyển Tu viện Chơn Không chính thức được thực thi ... Ngày 6/3/1986 (AL) việc tháo dỡ chuyển dời được bắt đầu. Thiền sinh các Thiền viện từ Long Thành đến Bà Rịa và Phật tử các nơi cùng về Chơn Không chi lo công việc, y theo lời Hòa thượng chỉ dạy. Mọi vật liệu tháo dỡ đều được thu nhặt, gìn giữ cẩn thận, để chuyển về Thường Chiếu dựng lập cơ sở mới ... Sáng 18/3/1986 (AL), Tăng ni, Phật tử tụ hội về mảnh đất Chơn Không đón Hòa thượng hạ sơn ... Hòa thượng cười vui, lên xe thẳng về Thường Chiếu, vùng trời diệu hữu phía trước đang chờ."

<sup>440</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, 194–96: "Từ già Chơn Không đưa đàn con xuống núi và bắt tay làm lại từ đầu, phải mất hơn một phần tư thế kỷ miệt mài xây dựng với cả tâm huyết và mồ hôi, các Thiền viện dựng lập trên miền đất mới đã trụ vững và những đứa con non yếu ngày nào đã từng bước trưởng thành."

20 monastics each at the time of establishment.<sup>441</sup> Liễu Đức, Chơn Chiêu, and Tịch Chiêu nunneries were also added to Thích Thanh Từ's monastic community in Long Thành during 1986-1987 to accommodate the growing demand for his teaching and practice among women.<sup>442</sup> The addition of Tuệ Thông, Hương Hải and many other Buddhist temples into the movement further strengthened Thích Thanh Từ's Thiền restoration effort.

Aiming his Buddhism revival movement at restoring Vietnamese Buddhism to its Lý-Trần *Golden Age* period, Thích Thanh Từ chose Trần Nhân Tông's Trúc Lâm Thiền sect to revive.<sup>443</sup>

#### *The Rivival of Trúc Lâm Lineage*

After naming the new monastery in Đà Lạt "Trúc Lâm" in 1993,<sup>444</sup> Thích Thanh Từ began the process of recreating the Trúc Lâm spirit in Thiền Buddhism.<sup>445</sup> His argument for the decision was that in order for Vietnamese Buddhism to grow in to a strong, sublime, and precious entity, Buddhists, monastics and non-monastics need to be developed to first see such values in Buddhism best demonstrated with Vietnam's 13<sup>th</sup> century Buddhism.<sup>446</sup> In his view, it would be worthwhile to learn and seek guidance

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<sup>441</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, 187.

<sup>442</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, 197.

<sup>443</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, "Đường Lối Tu Trúc Lâm [Trúc Lâm's Principles of Practice]," Religion, Thiền Tông Việt Nam, 7, accessed January 8, 2018, <http://thientongvietnam.net/kinhsach-thike/dirs/duongloituTrucLam/DuongLoiTuTrucLam.pdf>: "Cho nên tôi mới cố tình khôi phục Phật giáo đời Lý đời Trần, mà nhất là đời Trần."

<sup>444</sup> "Thiền Viện Trúc Lâm Phụng Hoàng," Religion, Thường Chiếu Monastery, March 27, 2008, <http://thuongchieu.net/index.php/component/content/article?id=454>.

<sup>445</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Trọn Một Đời Tôi [My Entire Life]* (Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City Publishing, 2000), 33: "Chúng ta dùng hình ảnh Thiền tông đời Trần là một hình ảnh rất tốt đẹp. Nên khi đặt tên Thiền viện rồi, tôi đã có chủ trương khôi phục Thiền tông đời Trần."

<sup>446</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, "Đường Lối Tu Trúc Lâm [Trúc Lâm's Principles of Practice]," 6: "... nếu muốn cho Phật giáo Việt Nam có một sức sống mạnh mẽ hơn, cao siêu hơn, quý báu hơn thì chúng ta phải làm sao gây dựng cho người tu sĩ cũng như người cư sĩ thấy được cái giá trị Phật giáo là cao siêu, là quý báu."



from that historical period not only on how to cultivate and spread Buddhism, but also on how to contribute properly to contemporary Vietnam and its people.<sup>447</sup>

Some of the traditional Trúc Lâm effort and values that Thích Thanh Từ admires and therefore attempted to revitalize include: monastics being associated with the most notable and socially worthy life; Buddhists, including monastics, besides exploring within to perceive their own Buddha-Nature and spreading Buddhism as Buddhists, also actively looking outward engaging themselves in the country's affairs as citizens of the territory; and Vietnamese Buddhism uniquely reflecting Vietnamese culture and way of life.<sup>448</sup> Regarding the social image of monastics during the *Golden Age* period, as Thích Nhất Hạnh describes it, despite being the most learned and greatly influential persons in the country's political and social landscape, monastics used their knowledge and skills not for personal gain, but for serving others and country while pursuing their religious practice in a simple lifestyle in humble monastic facilities.<sup>449</sup> Trần Nhân Tông's monastic lifestyle was so simple, which was captured in equally basic images, such as 'eggplants and black bean sauce' or 'no horse carriage, just walk for life.' According to Lê Mạnh Thát, no one could have ever imagined such a lifestyle for a hero of the recent victorious war and a talented king.<sup>450</sup> Thích Thanh Từ argues that there must be something notable in that monastic lifestyle which made it more worthy to live than that of a prince or a king with the utmost power, fame, and material richness; otherwise why did Trần Nhân Tông decide to leave the latter for the former?

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<sup>447</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Trọn Một Đời Tôi [My Entire Life]*, 31: "... Khi chọn lựa, tôi chăm ngay cái điểm Phật giáo đời Trần. Tôi cho đó là một điểm son. Đó là thời gian xứng đáng để cho chúng ta nương theo mà tu, nương theo mà truyền bá và cũng nương theo mà thể hiện được tinh thần lợi dân ích nước."

<sup>448</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 32: "Hiện nay chúng ta phải làm sao để cho đạo Phật được tốt. Mà muốn đạo Phật tốt thì chúng ta phải tạo cái duyên cho đời được đẹp. Chớ không thể nào đạo tốt mà đời dễ mặc thế nào cũng được. Chúng ta phải làm sao cho đạo với đời đều tốt đẹp với nhau."

<sup>449</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Đạo Phật Đi Vào Cuộc Đời [Engaged Buddhism]*, 91.

<sup>450</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông [All About Trần Nhân Tông]*, 60.

Trúc Lâm Buddhists engaged themselves in the development of the country and in the defense of its independence. Thích Thanh Từ argues that, even though all three 13<sup>th</sup> century Trần dynasty kings were deeply instilled with Buddhist values, practicing to free themselves from a prolonged lifecycle, at the same time they managed to put those personal tenets aside to fulfill their citizenship and leadership obligations to defend the independence and integrity of Vietnam.<sup>451</sup> As an example, although they believed in their hearts the Buddhist precept of not causing harm to others, these kings never shied away from engaging themselves in battlefields to defend their homeland from foreign invasions. In all three Mongol invasions that century, they vigorously engaged in defense neither as a Buddhist nor in the name of Buddhism, but as citizens and country leaders obligated to act for the independence of their borders and people.<sup>452</sup>

King Trần Nhân Tông started to Vietnamize the language used in the land by promoting the Sino-Vietnamese ‘*Chữ Nôm*’<sup>453</sup> as the official language of the court, along with the Chinese that had been officially used since ancient time.<sup>454</sup> Trần Nhân Tông published ‘*Cư Trần Lạc Đạo*’ and ‘*Đắc Thủ Lâm Tuyền Thành Đạo Ca*’ using ‘*Chữ Nôm*’ language to set an example for the initiative.<sup>455</sup> According to Thích Thanh Từ, the King’s defensive war efforts and governmental ‘*Chữ Nôm*’ policy establishment indicates

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<sup>451</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Trọn Một Đời Tôi [My Entire Life]*, 32–33: “Các vua từ vua Trần Thái Tông cho đến Trần Nhân Tông, rồi sau này Anh Tông v.v... đều là những ông vua thấm nhuần đạo Phật. Mà chưa bao giờ nhân danh đạo Phật để làm chuyện sát hại quần sanh, chỉ khi rồi, khi nhân hạ thì các Ngài cố gắng đem đạo Phật ứng dụng tu hành và truyền bá cho quần chúng. Còn khi loạn lạc thì các Ngài nhân danh là một người có trách nhiệm với đất nước, đứng ra lãnh đạo chống ngoại xâm, chứ không có bóng dáng đạo Phật ở trong đó.”

<sup>452</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 32: “Mà đạo Phật chỉ có ở trong tâm của các Ngài. Còn hành động chống ngoại xâm, là trách nhiệm của một công dân, của người lãnh đạo đất nước. Chớ không đem đạo Phật vào việc chiến tranh để làm hoen ố đạo. Đó là điều rất hay.”

<sup>453</sup> Thích, “Vietnamese Buddhism in America,” 90.

<sup>454</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông [All About Trần Nhân Tông]*, 83–84.

<sup>455</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, 83–84.

that Trần Nhân Tông wanted Vietnam to be independent from China not only politically and militarily, but also culturally.<sup>456</sup>

Thích Thanh Từ's lifetime aspiration is to see not only a Vietnam independent and stable, but also to see Vietnamese Buddhism bearing unique Vietnamese characteristics, not just another imitation of Chinese Buddhism.<sup>457</sup> Seeing that contemporary Buddhism in Vietnam was pitifully Chinese-dependent, evidenced with Chinese in daily chanting practice<sup>458</sup> and Buddhist texts were still in Chinese,<sup>459</sup> and being impressed with Trần Nhân Tông's effort of Vietnamizing Buddhism,<sup>460</sup> Thích Thanh Từ directed his Thiền restoration movement towards the Vietnamese-branded Trúc Lâm.

Among all Thiền sects in Vietnam, Trúc Lâm is the only Thiền sect founded by a Vietnamese person who happened to also be a king. The Vietnamese founding patriarch understood best Vietnamese customs, habits, and aspirations, thus was the best to understand the needs of Vietnamese Buddhists and effectively help them.<sup>461</sup>

Naming the new monastery in Đà Lạt as Trúc Lâm to officialize his choice, Thích Thanh Từ changed his existing monastic regulations to force use of Latin-Vietnamese (*Quốc*

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<sup>456</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Trọn Một Đời Tôi [My Entire Life]*, 32: “Như vậy thì không phải chỉ độc lập bằng quân sự, bằng chính trị thôi mà Ngài muốn độc lập luôn cả về văn hóa, không lệ thuộc Trung Quốc. Đó là điều tôi thấy rất là đáng nể, đáng kính.”

<sup>457</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 38–39.

<sup>458</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 41–42: “Chúng ta phải có một nền Phật giáo Việt Nam thực sự. Nếu không thì chúng ta lệ thuộc một cách đáng thương. .... Việt Nam chúng ta cũng có ngôn ngữ văn tự Việt Nam, mà chúng ta cứ rờn rặc đọc theo Trung Hoa thì có lệ thuộc không?”

<sup>459</sup> Thích Mật Thể, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Lược [Brief History of Vietnamese Buddhism]*.

<sup>460</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Trọn Một Đời Tôi [My Entire Life]*, 42: “Nguyện vọng của tôi là muốn làm sao cho đất nước Việt Nam được độc lập, vững bền, lâu dài. Và muốn làm sao cho Phật giáo Việt Nam cũng có những nét độc lập của Phật giáo Việt Nam.”

<sup>461</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Ba Vấn Đề Trọng Đại Trong Đời Tu Của Tôi [Three Critical Matters in My Monkhhood Life]*, 30: “Chỉ có phái thiền Trúc Lâm Yên Tử, ông Tổ đầu là Trúc Lâm Đại Đầu Đà chính thực là người Việt Nam. Ông Tổ Việt Nam mới thông cảm tâm tư nguyện vọng phong tục tập quán của người Việt Nam, giáo hóa mới thích ứng nhu cầu người Phật tử Việt Nam.”

*Ngũ*) in all rituals at his monasteries,<sup>462</sup> and revitalized some 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm temples while continuing his text translation efforts to *Quốc Ngữ*.<sup>463</sup>

In 2002, Thích Thanh Từ rebuilt Lâm (or Kỳ Lâm) pagoda, which is also called Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Monastery in Quảng Ninh province in northern Vietnam<sup>464</sup> and was originally built in 1293 by King Trần Nhân Tông. Lâm Pagoda was one of the most important and largest temples in the system of Trúc Lâm Thiền where its first three patriarchs Trần Nhân Tông, Pháp Loa, and Huyền Quang often came to give sermons. During French colonization, the temple was almost completely destroyed, except the tomb towers, among the largest of which belonged to monk Chân Nguyên (1647-1726), a master in the Trúc Lâm lineage. The Trúc Lâm Yên Tử monastery, after being renovated on approximately 5 hectares (12 acres) area, was officially opened on November 11, 2002. The decor inside the temple was simple, with all horizontally lacquered boards (Hoành Phi) and couplets (Câu Đối) inscribed in Latin-Vietnamese (*Quốc Ngữ*).<sup>465</sup>

In 2004, Thích Thanh Từ rebuilt Sùng Phúc monastery in Hà Nội, the current capital of Vietnam. Sùng Phúc is one of the oldest temples in the nation, built during the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries. For 20 years, the monastery had no resident monk. In 1998, Thích Thanh Từ appointed one of his disciples to be a resident there. It was then rebuilt on February 16, 2004, on an area of around 4,000 m<sup>2</sup> (43,000 ft<sup>2</sup>), as a two-story building

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<sup>462</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Trọn Một Đời Tôi [My Entire Life]*, 38: “Ở đây, Thiền viện Trúc Lâm ra đời, quý vị thấy chúng ta có cải đổi không? Tất cả những nghi thức đều chuyển thành tiếng Việt.”

<sup>463</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Kinh Pháp Bảo Đàn [Platform Sutra]* (Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City Publishing, 1992), 5: Bao nhiêu năm rồi, chúng tôi ao ước những tư liệu Phật giáo Việt Nam còn sót lại được dịch ra chữ quốc ngữ để cho người sau có phương tiện tham khảo học tập.”

<sup>464</sup> “Đặc Sắc Chùa Lâm - Thiền Viện Trúc Lâm Yên Tử - Đất và Người Quảng Ninh - Báo Quảng Ninh Điện Tử,” Province Newsletter, Quảng Ninh, February 1, 2010, <http://www.baoquangninh.com.vn/van-hoa/dan-va-nguoi-qn/201002/dac-sac-chua-Lan-Thien-vien-Truc-lam-yen-Tu-2123618/>.

<sup>465</sup> “Đặc Sắc Chùa Lâm - Thiền Viện Trúc Lâm Yên Tử - Đất và Người Quảng Ninh - Báo Quảng Ninh Điện Tử.”

with a 460 m<sup>2</sup> (5,000 ft<sup>2</sup>), a meditation hall that could accommodate 600 Buddhists from Hà Nội and its neighboring areas. In 2005, Thích Thanh Từ was present for the opening ceremony and delivered the first Dharma talk of the year with around 1,500 Buddhists in attendance.<sup>466</sup>

In 2005, Tây Thiên Trúc Lâm Monastery was built on Tam Đảo Mountain, about 300m (984 ft) above sea level. The total area of the land was 50 hectares (123 acres) on which the buildings occupied 4.5 hectares (around 11 acres).<sup>467</sup> Tây Thiên Trúc Lâm was built on the foundation of one of the three oldest temples named Thiên Ân Thiền Tự. The main hall constructed is 675 m<sup>2</sup> (7,250 ft<sup>2</sup>) that could accommodate 600 meditators. At the beginning of 2010, the monastery planned for six meditation sessions each summer, with approximately 250 students each, ranging from 14-18 years of age, males and females in separate learning groups.<sup>468</sup>

Tây Thiên Trúc Lâm monastery, Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Quảng Ninh pagoda, and Trúc Lâm Đà Lạt monastery are three of the largest facilities in the Trúc Lâm system.<sup>469</sup> Currently, the eight “Chiếu” in Long Thành each house an average of 100 monastics, according to the record posted in the movement’s official website. Trúc Lâm monasteries and temples are also present across many provinces in Vietnam, such as Chân Nguyên in Vũng Tàu, Thanh Nguyên in Bình Dương, Chánh Giác in Tiền Giang, and Sơn Thắng and Giác Thiên in Vĩnh Long, just to name a few. In addition, Trúc Lâm has built a

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<sup>466</sup> “Thiền Viện Sùng Phúc,” Religion, Thường Chiếu Monastery, April 5, 2008, <http://thuongchieu.net/index.php/component/content/article?id=476>.

<sup>467</sup> Vũ Tất Tiến, “Thiền Viện Trúc Lâm Tây Thiên,” Chùa Việt Nam (Vietnamese Temples), Vietnam Buddhist Church, 2014, <http://phatgiai.org.vn/chua-viet/201409/Thien-vien-Truc-Lam-Tay-Thien-15873/>.

<sup>468</sup> Vũ Tất Tiến.

<sup>469</sup> Vũ Tất Tiến.

number of monasteries and temples in foreign countries such as the United States, Canada, France, Germany, and Australia to spread its teaching and practice.<sup>470</sup>

As reported in the *Yearbook for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Chon Không Monastery (1966-2016)*, there are 59 facilities for monks and 29 facilities for nuns around the world that belong to the Trúc Lâm system.<sup>471</sup> As noted by Alexander Soucy, Trúc Lâm wasn't much of a global influence in its earlier years but has been on top of Buddhist movements on the global level in recent history.<sup>472</sup> The fact that this new Trúc Lâm Thiền sect was made visible throughout the country and internationally, surfacing with monasteries filled with disciples, and becoming a large and well-known Vietnamese Buddhist sect deserves some attention. The principal features embedded in the movement's teaching and practices are the focus of the next section.

### **Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century Trúc Lâm Mythos**

The mythos for Thích Thanh Từ's Trúc Lâm movement is mainly featured in his first book on Thiền, *Vietnamese Zen in The Late Twentieth Century* (Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20), with some of those features further elaborated upon in his other writings and lectures. They include Vietnamization of Buddhism, Buddha-Nature Inside Everyone, Non-Duality of Reality, and De-mythologization of Thiền Buddhism.

#### *Vietnamization of Buddhism*

As stated in his *Trọn Một Đời Tôi (My Entire Life)* lecture, Thích Thanh Từ's dreamt of seeing an independent and stable Vietnam as well as a Vietnamese Buddhism

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<sup>470</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, *Kỷ Yếu 50 Năm Thiền Viện Chon Không 1966-2016 [Yearbook for the 50th Anniversary of Chon Không Monastery (1966-2016)]*, 201–7.

<sup>471</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, 201–7.

<sup>472</sup> Soucy, “Nationalism, Globalism and the Re-Establishment of the Trúc Lâm Thiền Buddhist Sect in Northern Vietnam,” 353.

bearing unique Vietnamese characteristics, not just another imitation of Chinese Buddhism.<sup>473</sup> To him, a country is considered as fully autonomous when it is independent not just in politics, military, and economics, but also in traditions.<sup>474</sup> As he happened to be in the field of Buddhism, all he could do was to shape Vietnamese Buddhism into contributing its best to the country and the people.<sup>475</sup>

The issue, caused by the absence of scriptural knowledge in the monastic community raised by Thiên Đô,<sup>476</sup> as well as the monks lack of understanding of their recitations raised by Đoàn Trung Còn,<sup>477</sup> contributed to the awkward situation where, as Thích Mật Thể observes, Buddhist texts in Vietnam were still mostly in Chinese<sup>478</sup> while Latin-Vietnamese (Quốc Ngữ) was the everyday language of the population. The traditional Buddhist education system in Vietnam forced future monks to learn Chinese in monasteries. Thích Thanh Từ questioned that tradition:

Vietnam has its own Vietnamese spoken and written language. If we are still persistent in reading and reciting Buddhist scripts in Chinese, then aren't we still dependent in our behavior and practice?<sup>479</sup>

Vietnamizing Buddhism is at the core of Thích Thanh Từ's movement, as he puts it, "We must have a real Vietnamese Buddhism; otherwise, we are still pitifully dependent."<sup>480</sup>

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<sup>473</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Trọn Một Đời Tôi [My Entire Life]*, 38–39.

<sup>474</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 30: "Một đất nước thực sự độc lập đòi hỏi phải độc lập về chính trị, độc lập về quân sự, độc lập về văn hóa, độc lập về kinh tế."

<sup>475</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 30–31: "Cho nên ở trên đất nước Việt Nam, mà tôi chỉ có mặt trong lãnh vực Phật giáo, chứ tôi không có mặt trong những lãnh vực khác. Vì thế ở trong lãnh vực Phật giáo, tôi phải làm thế nào cho Phật giáo Việt Nam đóng góp một phần lớn cho dân tộc, cho đất nước."

<sup>476</sup> Đô, "The Quest for Enlightenment and Cultural Identity: Buddhism in Contemporary Vietnam," 261.

<sup>477</sup> Đoàn Trung Còn, *Đạo Lý Nhà Phật [Principles of Buddhism]*, 107–8: "Nhà sư càng ngày càng kém đức. Nhiều vị tụng kinh mà không hiểu nghĩa; còn thấu đáo tường tận văn chương nhà Phật thì không mấy người. .... Ngày xưa, tăng sĩ không phải là người đi làm đám, đọc kinh mướn cho người. Ngày nay, bất cần là cuộc tế lễ gì, thiện tín có cậy đến thì không mấy vị chối từ."

<sup>478</sup> Thích Mật Thể, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Lược [Brief History of Vietnamese Buddhism]*.

<sup>479</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Trọn Một Đời Tôi [My Entire Life]*, 39: "Việt Nam chúng ta cũng có ngôn ngữ văn tự Việt Nam, mà chúng ta cứ rờn rặc đọc theo Trung Hoa thì có lệ thuộc không?"

In fulfilling his dream of making Buddhist texts available in Quốc Ngữ and de-mythologizing Thiền Buddhism's doctrine and practice for the sake of his movement and future Vietnamese generations, he relentlessly translated and commented on many sutras and shastras, as well as authored his own texts, totaling a few dozen contributions to Buddhist literature in Vietnamese. Sutras such as Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh (Heart Sutra), Lăng Già (Lankavatara Sutra), Thắng Man (Śrīmālādevī Siṃhanāda), and Kim Cang (Diamond Sutra), just to name a few, are among his translations. He also provided Vietnamese commentary on Buddhist shastras, such as Hui-neng's Pháp Bảo Đàn (Platform Sutra), Bích Nham Lục (Blue Rock Collection), and Hsu Yun's Tham Thiền Yếu Chỉ (Essence of Meditation). Most of his lectures were recorded and published as books and in digital format for free distribution on the internet.

Foreign language dependency of Buddhism in Vietnam existed not only in the foreign texts being used, but also in the routine practices of Buddhists. After naming the new monastery in Đà Lạt "Trúc Lâm" to mark the beginning of his course for the movement, Thích Thanh Từ changed existing monastic regulations to force the use of Vietnamese (Quốc Ngữ) in all rituals at all of his monasteries.<sup>481</sup> To rid it of foreign dependency, changes were also applied to even ritual phrases that still reflected Chinese culture. As an example, the traditional Gautama Buddha recitation of "Nam Mô Bổn Sư Thích Ca Mâu Ni Phật" was changed to "Nam Mô Phật Bổn Sư Thích Ca Mâu Ni" since the former reflects Chinese grammar instead of Vietnamese, like the latter.<sup>482</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 41: "Chúng ta phải có một nền Phật giáo Việt Nam thực sự. Nếu không thì chúng ta lệ thuộc một cách đáng thương."

<sup>481</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 38: "Ở đây, Thiền viện Trúc Lâm ra đời, quý vị thấy chúng ta có cái đổi không? Tất cả những nghi thức đều chuyển thành tiếng Việt."

<sup>482</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 39: "Như Nam Mô Bổn Sư Thích Ca Mâu Ni Phật, Bổn Sư Thích Ca Mâu Ni là danh từ riêng, Phật là danh từ chung. Danh từ chung đặt sau, danh từ riêng đặt trước. Đó là lỗi văn phạm của Trung Quốc."



*Self-Exploration (Phản Quang Tự Kỳ)*

In contrast to Pure Land and Tantric practices seeking assistance from outside supernatural powers through devotions or rituals to attain enlightenment, Chan practice allows one to achieve that goal through self-examination to perceive Buddha Nature within, which is, as described by Hui-neng, “originally clear and pure,”<sup>483</sup> but already “obscured by human illusion, discriminative thinking, and emotional activity.”<sup>484</sup> Thích Thanh Từ rephrased that core of Chan/Thiền practice in perceiving Buddha Nature (Bodhi) inside everyone in his first book, *Vietnamese Zen in The Late Twentieth Century* (Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20),

The essence of Thiền is to allow the emergence of the unlearned wisdom possessed by everyone. Such emergence enables one to perceive his own Buddha-Nature, and when such wisdom is at its perfection level (*prajna*) the ultimate enlightenment (Buddha) comes.<sup>485</sup>

Following the teaching in the Lankavatara sutra, which states that “Your mind is nirvana,”<sup>486</sup> he further elaborates the relationship between one’s mind and wisdom,

The mind that comes from nowhere and has neither birth nor destruction but with the embedded knowledge is called unlearned wisdom. Since being possessed by everyone and coming from nowhere, such wisdom is also called birthless mind.<sup>487</sup>

Thích Thanh Từ reminds Buddhists of the impermanence of things and the ultimate truth of Buddha Nature inside everyone in his lecture titled *Tết Inside the Thiền Gate (Xuân Trong Cửa Thiền)*:

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<sup>483</sup> Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, 132.

<sup>484</sup> McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch’an Buddhism*, 106.

<sup>485</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 45: “Chủ yếu của Thiền tông là khơi dậy trí vô sư sẵn có nơi mọi người. Nhận ra được trí này là kiến tánh, đạt được viên mãn trí này là giác ngộ giải thoát.”

<sup>486</sup> Bodhidharma, *The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma*, trans. Red Pine (New York: Macmillan, 1989).

<sup>487</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 26: “Chính cái tâm không sanh không diệt mà hằng giác hằng tri ấy là tuệ. Cái tuệ này là tính giác sẵn có muôn đời của mình, không phải từ đâu đến, nên gọi là trí vô sanh.”

We need to have courage to look into the reality of our body and things around us to realize that they are all temporary and impermanent, formed by conditional combinations. Being constantly changed, they are all illusory indeed. Our own original mind (Buddha Nature) is the the only thing permanent, without birth and without death, but we have all forgotten about it.<sup>488</sup>

Thích Thanh Từ affirms in his *Unlearned Wisdom (Vô Sư Trí Vi Tôn)* sermon that each individual, since possessing their own Buddha-Nature, is in charge of their own cultivation destiny. The difference in human gender (male and female) or religious affiliation (ordained and lay) has nothing to do with the capacity of attaining Unlearned Wisdom:

The female might have shapes or forms different from the male, but they all have the capacity of attaining Unlearned Wisdom – the essential element of Thiền Buddhism. Every sentient being has the potential to become Buddha. Monastics, lay male or female Buddhists, even sentient beings without any knowledge of Buddhism, all possess their own precious diamond (Bodhi mind); therefore no one is poor, only the ones who forget such possession are poor.<sup>489</sup>

On the answer to the ultimate question of how one can change oneself so to become able to perceive the Buddha Nature within, according to the Bodhidharma's treatise as understood by McRae, there is no need to make a personality change to reach enlightenment:

What was needed was not some form of personal transformation that would destroy or render ineffective the illusions obscuring one's view of the Buddha Nature and distinguishing one so utterly from the ranks of the enlightened.

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<sup>488</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Xuân Trong Cửa Thiền 1, 2, 3 [Tết Messages to Thiền Monastics]* (Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City Publishing, 2005), 4: “Chúng ta phải gan dạ nhìn thẳng vào lẽ thật của bản thân của ngoại cảnh, mới thấy chúng là tướng trạng tạm bợ vô thường, là giả hình bởi nhân duyên chung hợp. Quả thật là huyền hóa không có một tí gì chắc thật. Chỉ chân tâm của chính mình, mới là cái chân thật bất sanh bất diệt, mà lâu nay chúng ta đã lờn quên.”

<sup>489</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, “Vô Sư Trí Vi Tôn [Unlearned Wisdom],” in *Hoa Vô Ưu [Saraca Asoca Flowers]*, vol. 1 (Ho Chi Minh City: Tôn Giáo, 2000): “Người nữ đứng về mặt nghiệp tướng thì khác, nhưng về mặt Vô Sư Trí thì bình đẳng với người nam. Vì vậy Thiền tông luôn khai thác Trí Vô Sư đó. Dưới con mắt nhà Thiền thấy nam nữ bình đẳng như nhau, ai cũng có khả năng thành Phật. Tăng Ni, Phật tử nam hay Phật tử nữ, cho đến cả người thế gian chưa từng biết đạo cũng có hòn ngọc quý, cho nên không ai là kẻ bần cùng, chỉ người quên mới bần cùng thôi.”

Rather, what was needed was the realization that no such transformation was required. By recognizing the unreal quality of one's illusions and rejecting the temptation to tamper with them for the purpose of some preconceived notion of spiritual progress, one attained a state of perfect enlightenment. This attainment may in fact constitute a very important type of transformation, but it would not require the replacement of one's own mundane personality with the transcendent identity of a Buddha or celestial Bodhisattva.<sup>490</sup>

As for Thích Thanh Từ, the Lankavatara sutra provides the relationship between the intuitive wisdom and the recognition of illusions to attain a state of ultimate enlightenment (bodhi),

At the Dharma Gate of the Lankavatara sutra, the unlearned wisdom allows one to recognize that all things are of unreal quality, and then the sutra guides one's practice to perceive the original mind.<sup>491</sup>

In his lecture *Unlearned Wisdom (Vô Sư Trí Vi Tôn)*, Thích Thanh Từ preaches that practitioners should never attempt to look for Buddha Nature outside of their body, but instead to put effort in releasing all attachments and calming all thoughts inside to allow the birthless mind to emerge.<sup>492</sup>

On reaching the birthless mind, Thích Thanh Từ suggests in his book *Vietnamese Zen in The Late Twentieth Century* that following the two methods of cultivation 'ignoring thoughts, as they are all illusory' and 'treating externals with no-mind, as they are conditioned appearances and therefore impermanent in nature,' would be among the basis for meditation practice at his monasteries.<sup>493</sup> He claims that the first is based on the second Chan patriarch's 'pacification of the mind' awakening approach, meaning not

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<sup>490</sup> McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch'an Buddhism*, 111.

<sup>491</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 137: "Cửa vào của kinh Lăng-già là trí tuệ Bát-nhã thấy các pháp như huyễn, cứu kính của kinh là nhận ra bản tâm chân thật."

<sup>492</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, "Vô Sư Trí Vi Tôn [Unlearned Wisdom]:" "người học đạo không nên có tâm tìm kiếm bên ngoài mà chỉ dồn hết sức mình phá dẹp phiền não, dừng lặng dòng tư tưởng lăng xăng. Những thứ đó tan rồi, lặng rồi thì ông Phật hiện tiền."

<sup>493</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 60: "Biết vọng không theo, vì vọng tưởng là những tâm niệm hư ảo, Đối cảnh không tâm, vì nó là tướng duyên hợp giả dối tạm bợ."

letting the mind be led and controlled by thoughts since they are all illusory by nature.<sup>494</sup>

In this approach, Thích Thanh Từ argues, however, that being able to ignore thoughts is not easy, since as soon as one instant of a thought is gone, another arises, and the process continues.<sup>495</sup> On the latter approach, Thích Thanh Từ argues that “without correlation of the senses and objects, we experience no-thought, non-form, and non-abiding,”<sup>496</sup> and claims that it is based on the sixth Chan patriarch’s awakening method, “Don’t rest in objective things and the subjective mind. .... If someone speaks of ‘viewing the mind,’ [then I would say] that the ‘mind’ is of itself delusion, and as delusions are just like fantasies, there is nothing to be seen.”<sup>497</sup>

### *Non-Duality of Reality*

Thích Thanh Từ started his 1984 New Year lecture on the doctrine of Non-Duality with a well-known quote from the Heart Sutra: ‘*form is emptiness and emptiness is form.*’ He argues since all phenomena are formed not by themselves but by many ingredients conditionally combined and therefore returned to emptiness when those conditions are no longer there, they are illusory.<sup>498</sup> From this Buddha teaching of form and emptiness, Thích Thanh Từ lectures on the *Non-Duality Doctrine*, that the separation

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<sup>494</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 57–60.

<sup>495</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 57: “Nơi Nhị Tổ chúng tôi ứng dụng pháp an tâm. Nghĩa là biết rõ tâm suy tưởng lâu nay là hư ảo, không để nó đánh lừa, lôi dẫn chúng ta chạy theo trần cảnh, nên nói ‘Vọng tưởng không theo’.”

<sup>496</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 32: “Với Lục Tổ, chúng tôi ứng dụng sáu căn không dính mắc sáu trần làm hướng tiến tu. - Căn, cảnh không dính mắc nhau là Vô Niệm, Vô Tướng, Vô Trụ, đó là chủ trương của Lục Tổ.”

<sup>497</sup> Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, 17–18.

<sup>498</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, “Pháp Môn Không Hai [Non-Duality Doctrine],” Religion, Thường Chiếu Monastery, October 8, 2008, <http://www.thuongchieu.net/index.php/phapthoai/suong/979-phap-mon-khong-hai>: “Nếu nói cái không của bản tánh, thì sắc chất có là do duyên hợp mà có. Bởi duyên hợp mà có, nên nó có mà không phải tự có, do nhiều yếu tố, nhiều nguyên nhân hợp lại thành. Do nhiều thứ hợp thành, nên nó không có cái thể cố định của nó. Không có thể cố định của nó mà tùy duyên. Đủ duyên thì hợp, hợp gọi là có, thiếu duyên thì tan, tan gọi là không. Vậy thì cái hiện có của nó là cái hiện có của duyên, chứ không có cái tự tánh, bởi không có tự tánh nên nói là không. Tuy mắt thấy nó hiện có mà tự tánh nó là không.”

of phenomena into dualities such as wholesome and unwholesome, right and wrong, existing and non-existing is illusory, not absolute truth.

The lesson of form and emptiness from the Heart Sutra clearly shows us that the duality separation is for temporary use to deal with our daily life phenomena. In this world, all dharmas are categorized as either right or wrong, wholesome or unwholesome, right or wrong. All dualities, however, are temporary, not permanent, not reflecting the True Reality.<sup>499</sup>

In his *Platform Sutra Translation and Commentary*, Thích Thanh Từ expounded the doctrine of non-duality of Buddha Nature by quoting Hui-neng's conversation<sup>500</sup> with Yinzong (627-713)<sup>501</sup> in their first meeting. The following excerpt from such conversation was quoted,

There are two types of good roots. One is permanent and the other is impermanent. The buddha-nature is not permanent and not impermanent. Therefore, not to eradicate is said to be nondual. One type [of roots] is said to be the good, and the other is the nongood. The buddha-nature is not the good and not the nongood. This is called nondual. The *skandhas* and sensory realms are seen as two by ordinary people, but the wise comprehend their natures to be nondual. The nondual nature is none other than the buddha-nature.<sup>502</sup>

In practice, Thích Thanh Từ in his *Vietnamese Zen in The Late Twentieth Century* argues that it would be a joyful moment when we can see things with a calm and quiet mind free of dualities,

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<sup>499</sup> Thích Thanh Từ: “Cho nên lý sắc không của Bát-nhã cho chúng ta thấy rõ tất cả sự vật ở thế gian này, trên phương diện ngôn ngữ thì tạm đặt, hoặc là có hoặc là không, hoặc là thiện, hoặc là ác, hoặc là phải, hoặc là quấy. Tạm đặt để dùng thôi, không phải là cứu kính, không phải là chân lý.”

<sup>500</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Kinh Pháp Bảo Đàn [Platform Sutra]*, 11: “Thiện căn có hai, một là thường, hai là vô thường, Phật tánh chẳng phải thường, chẳng phải vô thường, thế nên chẳng đoạn, gọi là chẳng hai; một là thiện, hai là chẳng thiện, Phật tánh chẳng phải thiện, chẳng phải chẳng thiện, ấy là chẳng hai; uân cùng với giới, phạm phu thấy hai, người trí rõ thấu tánh nó không hai, tánh không hai tức là Phật tánh.”

<sup>501</sup> John M. Thompson, “Huineng (Hui-Neng) (638-713),” in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed November 15, 2018, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/>.

<sup>502</sup> Robert A. F. Thurman, trans., *Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sutra* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 1976).

How joyful when we can see phenomena exactly as they are by nature. In such moments, without the interference of dualities such as real and unreal, beautiful and ugly, hard and easy ..., we have nothing else to say.<sup>503</sup>

We “have nothing else to say” indeed, as Thích Thanh Từ said to further describe the non-duality world, similar to the way Manjusri said to Licchavi Vimalakirti as reported in the *Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sutra*, that the entrance to non-duality has no use for syllables, sounds, or ideas.<sup>504</sup> Trying his best to differentiate between duality and non-duality, however, the bodhisattva Pramati declared,

'Eye' and 'form' are dualistic. To understand the eye correctly, and not to have attachment, aversion, or confusion with regard to form - that is called 'peace.' Similarly, 'ear' and 'sound,' 'nose' and 'smell,' 'tongue' and taste, 'body' and touch, 'and 'mind' and 'phenomena' - all are dualistic. But to know the mind, and to be neither attached, averse, nor confused with regard to phenomena - that is called 'peace.' To live in such peace is to enter into nonduality.<sup>505</sup>

On ‘confusion with regard to form’ as stated by the bodhisattva Pramati, the sixth Chan patriarch argues, “All forms everywhere are unreal and false,”<sup>506</sup> and “if you exclude delusions then the original nature reveals its purity.”<sup>507</sup> When delusions are cast aside, then one becomes self-enlightened and achieves the Buddha Way.<sup>508</sup>

### *De-mythologization of Thiền Buddhism*

Many factors make Buddhism mysterious. According to Thích Thanh Từ, since Mahayana scripture seems unintelligible and Buddhist masters are typically associated

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<sup>503</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 23: “Đẹp để thay, nếu chúng ta thấy sự vật đúng với bản chất của nó. Nhìn sự vật với tâm lặng lẽ thanh tịnh, mọi phàm tình không có chỗ chen vào, còn gì là thật giả, đẹp xấu, khó dễ..., đến đây không còn gì để nói.”

<sup>504</sup> Thurman, *Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sutra*.

<sup>505</sup> Thurman.

<sup>506</sup> Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, 9.

<sup>507</sup> Yampolsky, 18.

<sup>508</sup> Yampolsky, 23.

with magic, the Dharma becomes confusing and incomprehensible.<sup>509</sup> The cultivation approach relying on supernatural powers like Pure Land's Amitabha Buddha recitation or Vajrayana's mantras and mudras also greatly contribute to the myth of Buddhism.<sup>510</sup>

The use of *koan* is another mysterious element of Thiền Buddhism. Agreeing with Carl Jung, that *koan* is a powerful approach aiming at a complete destruction of the rational intellect,<sup>511</sup> but Thích Thanh Từ also agrees with Barry Stephenson in his claim, that *koan* teaching is outside of scripture,<sup>512</sup> and therefore in need of close supervision from experienced *koan* masters.<sup>513</sup> Additionally, as Carl Jung argues, "the descriptions of the final result are so obscure that in no single case can one discover any rational connection between the *koan* and the experience of enlightenment."<sup>514</sup>

With a strong determination to de-mythologize Thiền Buddhism, Thích Thanh Từ stresses more emphasis on the 'Meditation and Script Synchronization' process by replacing the traditional Thiền *koan* method with the self-explanatory Four-Path meditation approach, rationalizing all necessary scriptures, and de-emphasizing supernaturalized rituals.

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<sup>509</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 8: "Kinh Đại Thừa nói bằng cách diễn giảng trên trời dưới đất đâu đâu, còn Thiền sư dùng thuật xuất quỷ nhập thần khiến người ta mờ mịt không hiểu."

<sup>510</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 108: "Tịnh độ thì dùng câu niệm Phật làm pháp tu, Mật tông thì dùng câu thần chú làm pháp tu .... Chỉ riêng Thiền tông không mượn một pháp nào cả."

<sup>511</sup> Jung C. G., "Foreword to Suzuki's 'Introduction to Zen Buddhism,'" in *Collected Works of C.G. Jung: Psychology and Religion: West and East*, vol. 11 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 539.

<sup>512</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 112: "Tu thoại đầu có sức mạnh, song phải buông hết mọi học tập, mọi suy luận."; Barry Stephenson, "The Kōan as Ritual Performance," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 2 (June 1, 2005): 475–96, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfi044>.

<sup>513</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 112: "Tu thoại đầu phải có bậc thầy đặt đạo trong pháp tu này dẫn dắt, mới đến nơi đến chốn."

<sup>514</sup> C. G., "Foreword to Suzuki's 'Introduction to Zen Buddhism,'" 539.

## *Rationalization of Scriptures*

In further intensifying the scripture-based learning approach, he provides numerous writings to Vietnamize and rationalize all the necessary scriptures, including legendary *koan dialogues*, not only to his disciples but also making them widely available to the public,

By rationalizing Thiền Buddhism, we broke the secretive door of the Dharma. Doing so might well be an insult to individuals with superior capacity, but definitely is beneficial to those with inferior capacity like us. In this scientific era with emphasis on rationality and facts, blurry languages and mystical acts would not be acceptable to the public.<sup>515</sup>

According to Thích Thanh Từ, even though such scripture elaboration effort is not an easy task, he felt that he owed that obligation to Buddhism and the public regardless of its consequences,

The effort of making Thiền Buddhism no longer mysterious is an extremely difficult task. Firstly, using the means and language in the duality world to explain the non-duality realm is almost impossible. Furthermore, we might accidentally lead practitioners deeper into the world of duality and reasoning. However, such scripture elaboration needs to be done, especially in this era of rationality and facts; otherwise things will definitely stay the way they have been forever.<sup>516</sup>

### *Emphasis on Four-Path Meditation Practice in place of Mysterious Koan*

Thích Thanh Từ argues in his book *Vietnamese Zen in The Late Twentieth Century* that a Thiền practitioner is either enlightened (perceiving Bodhi) or still illusory

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<sup>515</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 8–9: “Vạch trần bộ mặt thật của Thiền tông cho độc giả thấy, chúng tôi đã phá vỡ cánh cửa bí mật của nhà thiền. Việc làm này là có tội với những bậc căn cơ bén nhạy, nhưng có công với những kẻ căn cơ tầm thường như chúng tôi. Thời đại của chúng ta là thời đại khoa học, nặng về lý trí và chân thật, nếu dùng những ngôn từ huyền ảo, những hành động quái dị thì không bao giờ dân chúng chấp nhận.”

<sup>516</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 70: “Nay giải thích về Yếu Chỉ Thiền Tông thật là một điều khó khăn vô kể, vì chỗ không được giải thích mà đem ra giải thích. Nếu chúng tôi không giải thích toạc ra thì độc giả cũng thấy khó khăn như các quyển sách thiền xưa. Bằng giải thích trắng ra, chúng tôi mắc phải cái lỗi ‘tự ngữ’, đã cột độc giả vào chỗ ý tứ so lường. Song với thời đại lý giải này, không cho phép chúng tôi làm theo người xưa, mà buộc lòng phải giải thích.”



(sentient being), and nothing else is important in between.<sup>517</sup> This is different from Theravada Buddhism for example, where practitioners are ranked from First Jhana, Second Jhana up to Sotapanna and finally Arhat (perceiving Bodhi) based on their level of attainment in practice and concentration.<sup>518</sup> Focusing on the mind, the practice of Thiền is to first discover unlearned wisdom (perceiving Bodhi), then gradually perfect Bodhi to become a Buddha.<sup>519</sup>

Focused on the goal of perceiving one's own Buddha Nature (Bodhi), the meditation practice at the contemporary Trúc Lâm is based on the teaching from Thiền Trúc Lâm's founding patriarch Trần Nhân Tông in conjunction with those from two Chan patriarchs: Huìkě (慧可 - Huệ Khả) being the second and Hui-neng (慧能 - Huệ Năng) being the sixth. As shown in the following excerpt, however, Thích Thanh Từ's intent was not to imitate historical Buddhism practices in their entirety, but only to incorporate the elements that best fit the contemporary context of Vietnam for his movement,

Taking the good old day experiences and applying them as appropriate in the contemporary situations is helpful. Making people strictly follow a traditional practice is going backward. We selected and presented the good experiences from Trần era's Buddhism to today's Buddhist community to allow people to make their own choices of practice that fit them most to follow, not taking the entire Trần era's Buddhism and forcing them to rigidly adhere to it.<sup>520</sup>

The common meditation approach at the 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm includes four methods, which are the paths practitioners could choose to follow in their own meditation journey.

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<sup>517</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 43: “Mê là chúng sanh, ngộ là Phật, không có bậc nào trong khoảng giữa đó.”

<sup>518</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 43: “Khác với giáo lý Nhị thiên, do huân tu quán chiếu có sâu cạn, nên chứng quả có cao thấp. Đi từ cấp bậc Sơ thiên, Nhị thiên... cho đến Tu-đà-hoàn, cuối cùng là A-la-hán.”

<sup>519</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 45: “Chủ yếu của Thiền tông là khơi dậy trí vô sư sẵn có nơi mọi người. Nhận ra được trí này là kiến tánh, đạt được viên mãn trí này là giác ngộ giải thoát.”

<sup>520</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Ba Vấn Đề Trọng Đại Trong Đời Tu Của Tôi [Three Critical Matters in My Monkhood Life]*, 45: “Lấy những kinh nghiệm hay của người xưa ứng dụng trong hoàn cảnh hiện nay thì hữu ích. Bắt người nay rập khuôn theo người xưa là nệ cổ lạc hậu. Chúng tôi chắt lọc những cái hay của Phật giáo đời Trần trình bày cho Tăng, Ni, Phật tử hiện nay xem thấy điều nào thích hợp áp dụng được thì áp dụng, không phải đem cái khuôn của Phật giáo đời Trần bắt buộc người thời nay rập theo.”

The first method, ‘*No Abiding to Thoughts (Biết Vọng Không Theo)*’, according to Thích Thanh Từ, is based on the second Chan patriarch’s ‘pacification of the mind’ awakening approach, meaning not letting our mind be led or controlled by thoughts since they are all illusory by nature.<sup>521</sup> About the illusory nature of thoughts, Huikē completely agrees with layman Hsiang in his analogies, “[People] arbitrarily posit names where there are no names, and these names lead to the generation of [distinctions between] ‘this’ and ‘not this’.”<sup>522</sup> According to Thích Thanh Từ, however, being able to ignore thoughts is not easy, since as soon as one instant of thought is gone another arises and such process continues.<sup>523</sup> Thích Thanh Từ suggests this meditation path instead of *koan* to his beginners, arguing that an individual’s accumulation of learned wisdom through scripts will eventually detach the practitioner’s mind to thoughts in order to allow unlearned wisdom to emerge:

Using the “No Abiding to Thoughts” method, practitioners see a clear direction in practice, as listening to scripts may create opportunities for their mind to gradually perceive Bodhi. Therefore, we advocate for this method in our teaching of meditation to young monastics and Buddhists, while lecturing scripts along the way create opportunities for their mind to open, for less attachment and eventually a breakthrough to the unlearned wisdom realm.<sup>524</sup>

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<sup>521</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 57–60.

<sup>522</sup> McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch’an Buddhism*, 111.

<sup>523</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 57: “Nơi Nhị Tổ chúng tôi ứng dụng pháp an tâm. Nghĩa là biết rõ tâm suy tưởng lâu nay là hư ảo, không để nó đánh lừa, lời dẫn chúng ta chạy theo trần cảnh, nên nói ‘Vọng tưởng không theo’.”

<sup>524</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 60–61: “Tu biết vọng nương nơi kinh, chúng ta thấy rõ đường lối tu, có khi nhân nghe kinh liền được kiến tánh. Bởi những lý do trên, chủ trương chúng tôi dạy Tăng Ni và Phật tử sơ cơ tu thiền bằng lối ‘biết vọng’, đồng thời giảng Kinh, Luận cho họ nghe, mong họ nhận ra bản tánh, để tiến lên ‘kiến tánh khởi tu’ ở trên. Giả sử thiền giả chưa được kiến tánh, cứ như thế mà tu vẫn dũa mòn ngã chấp, trí tuệ Bát nhã từ từ phát hiện.”

According to Thích Thanh Từ, the second method is ‘No Mind for the Externals,’<sup>525</sup> which refers to no wandering mind running after the externals, not turning the mind into an insentient thing like wood or stone.<sup>526</sup> About the externals through senses and the mind, Hui-neng teaches that, “Don't rest in objective things and the subjective mind. .... If someone speaks of 'viewing the mind,' [then I would say] that the 'mind' is of itself delusion, and as delusions are just like fantasies, there is nothing to be seen.”<sup>527</sup> On this approach, Thích Thanh Từ argues that “without correlation of the senses and objects, we experience no-thought, non-form, and non-abiding,”<sup>528</sup> as explained in the sixth patriarch’s Three-Noes teaching as a way to cultivate to find one’s self-nature:

... from ancient times up to the present, all have set up no-thought as the main doctrine, non-form as the substance, and non-abiding as the basis. Non-form is to be separated from form even when associated with form. No-thought is not to think even when involved in thought. Non-biding is the original nature of man.<sup>529</sup>

Thích Thanh Từ further added that the ultimate goal of meditation is to perceive not the mind of subjective thinking running after impermanent objects, but the original one of no birth and no dead.<sup>530</sup>

As for the third method, ‘Non-Duality,’ Thích Thanh Từ argues that comparison between conditioned appearances is not real.<sup>531</sup> Thích Thanh Từ cites Trần Nhân Tông’s

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<sup>525</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 60: “Đối cảnh không tâm, vì nó là tướng duyên hợp giả dối tạm bợ.”

<sup>526</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 32: “Không tâm là không tâm vọng tưởng chạy đuổi theo ngoại trần, chứ chẳng phải không tâm là vô tri vô giác như cây gỗ.”

<sup>527</sup> Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, 17–18.

<sup>528</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 32: “Với Lục Tổ, chúng tôi ứng dụng sáu căn không dính mắc sáu trần làm hướng tiến tu. - Căn, cảnh không dính mắc nhau là Vô Niệm, Vô Tướng, Vô Trụ, đó là chủ trương của Lục Tổ.”

<sup>529</sup> Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, 16–17.

<sup>530</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 32: “Không tâm hư ảo sanh diệt mà vẫn có tâm hằng giác hằng tri, bất sanh bất diệt. Đây là chỗ giải thoát sanh tử của người tu Phật.”

verse of ‘On Duality [Hữu Cú Vô Cú]’ and comments that contrasting pairs such as yes-no, bad-good, win-lose, and the like, the duality thinking is the cause of not perceiving the original mind to be free from the cycle of samsara. Bhikkhu Bodhi’s teaching further clarifies the notion of duality claimed by the Mahayana schools, as well as, how it is related to Buddha Nature:

The Mahayana schools, despite their great differences, concur in upholding a thesis that, from the Theravada point of view, borders on the outrageous. They claim that there is no ultimate difference between samsara and Nirvana, defilement and purity, ignorance and enlightenment. For the Mahayana, the enlightenment which, the Buddhist path is designed to awaken consists precisely in the realization of this non-dualistic perspective. The validity of conventional dualities is denied because the ultimate nature of all phenomena is emptiness, the lack of any substantial or intrinsic reality, and hence in their emptiness all the diverse, apparently opposed phenomena posited by mainstream Buddhist doctrine finally coincide: “All dharmas have one nature, which is no-nature.”<sup>532</sup>

The sixth Chan patriarch provides another duality example, form and emptiness, “If within form you are apart from form and within emptiness you are separated from emptiness, then within and without you are not deluded.”<sup>533</sup>

In the fourth method, ‘Non-Form,’ as, according to Thích Thanh Từ, the false of forms will lead to the long course of samsara.<sup>534</sup> According to the sixth Chan patriarch’s teaching, “All forms everywhere are unreal and false,”<sup>535</sup> and “if you exclude delusions

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<sup>531</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, “Đường Lối Tu Trúc Lâm [Trúc Lâm’s Principles of Practice],” 54–60: “Không kẹt hai bên, vì đối đãi là không thật.”

<sup>532</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, “Dhamma & Non-Duality (Part I),” *BPS Newsletter*, no. 2 (1994), <http://enlight.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-AN/an140804.pdf>.

<sup>533</sup> Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, 166.

<sup>534</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 60: “Hằng sống với cái thật, không theo cái giả, vì giả là luân hồi, thật là giải thoát.”

<sup>535</sup> Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, 9.

then the original nature reveals its purity.”<sup>536</sup> When delusions are cast aside, then one becomes self-enlightened and achieves the Buddha Way.<sup>537</sup>

As an important note from Thích Thanh Từ to his followers, depending on an individual’s karma and level of spiritual insight, different practitioners may experience varying results in their practice.<sup>538</sup> Concerning such difference in experience, he argues in his lecture, *Principles of Trúc Lâm Practice* [Đường Lối Tu Trúc Lâm], that a slow and gradual path of cultivation is common, and the sudden ones as in the case of Hui-neng who suddenly awakened the first time listening to the *Lankavatara Sutra* are the exceptions.<sup>539</sup> As taught by Hui-neng in his *Platform Sutra*, even though people are different, some keen and others dull in their path of perceiving their own original nature, one thing is universal: “those who are not enlightened will for long kalpas be caught in the cycle of transmigration.”<sup>540</sup>

### *De-Emphasis of Supernaturalized Rituals*

Thích Thanh Từ de-emphasized ‘superstitious’ rituals in his monasteries. While he admitted that superstition was still widespread in contemporary Buddhism in Vietnam, he condemned those superstitious elements in his lecture *Superstition and Rational Faith* (*Mê Tín, Chánh Tín*),

Superstition is an irrational faith that could lead its believers to insanity. Practitioners of superstition make the world messy and revert society back to ancient time. A true religion or a civilized nation should not allow superstition

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<sup>536</sup> Yampolsky, 18.

<sup>537</sup> Yampolsky, 23.

<sup>538</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20* [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century], 60–61.

<sup>539</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, “Đường Lối Tu Trúc Lâm [Trúc Lâm’s Principles of Practice],” 62: “Như bây giờ mình nghe thiên hạ tụng Kim Cang chừng bao nhiêu lần? Có ai ngộ không? Còn Ngài mới nghe tụng Kinh Kim Cang, Ngài liền tỉnh ngộ đi tu.”

<sup>540</sup> Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, 137.

to penetrate its society; yet superstition is still widespread in Vietnamese Buddhist community.<sup>541</sup>

He referred to those superstitious practices as social evils and asked all Buddhists to reject those practices and eradicate them from Buddhism:

Buddhism advocates rational faith and never accepts superstition. Some Buddhists who did not have enough Buddhist knowledge preached some indigenous practices as elements of Buddhism, which perpetuated some misunderstandings about the religion. The true Buddhists should bravely reject those wrong practices, courageously and decisively crushing all those social evils that diminish the value of Buddhism.<sup>542</sup>

Thích Thanh Từ quotes the set of improper acts established by Gautama Buddha in *The Bequeathed Teachings Sutra* to start off the list of specific practices he considers to be “superstitious”, which includes prophesizing good and evil, studying the stars’ positions, casting horoscopes by the waxing and waning of the moon, nor reckoning days of good fortune.<sup>543</sup> In *Rational Faith and Superstition*, he added mediumship, fortune telling, ghost money burning, and the like on to the superstitious list.<sup>544</sup> Furthermore, in his *Tết Messages to Thiền Monastics (Xuân Trong Cửa Thiền)*, Thích Thanh Từ specifically forbid his monastics from accepting invitations to attend funerals and

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<sup>541</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, “Mê Tín, Chánh Tín [Superstition and Rational Faith],” Religion, Thường Chiếu Monastery, December 17, 2009, [http://thuongchieu.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2090:chanhtinmetin&catid=58:pcanban&Itemid=330](http://thuongchieu.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2090:chanhtinmetin&catid=58:pcanban&Itemid=330): “Mê tín là lỗi tin mù quáng khiến con người mất hết trí thông minh. Những kẻ chủ trương mê tín là người làm hoặc loạn thể gian, đưa dân tộc lùi lại bán khai. Một tôn giáo chân chánh, một dân tộc văn minh, không cho phép mê tín len lỏi trong tín đồ mình, trong dân tộc mình. Thế mà, đồng bào chúng ta, trong Phật giáo chúng ta, tệ đoan mê tín vẫn còn nhiều.”

<sup>542</sup> Thích Thanh Từ: “Đạo Phật chủ trương chánh tín, không bao giờ chấp nhận mê tín. Do vì người truyền đạo không thông lý đạo, nên ghép những tập tục thể gian vào trong đạo, khiến người ta hiểu lầm đạo Phật mê tín... Người học Phật chân chánh phải gan dạ loại bỏ những tập tục sai lầm ấy, can đảm dứt khoát đập tan mọi tệ đoan làm suy giảm giá trị Phật pháp.”

<sup>543</sup> Thích Thanh Từ: “Chính trong kinh Di Giáo Phật dạy, Xem tướng lành dữ, trông xem sao hạn, xem xét thanh suy, coi ngày đoán số đều không được làm.”

<sup>544</sup> Thích Thanh Từ.

ceremonies organized at private residences,<sup>545</sup> arguing in his *Three Critical Matters in My Monkhoo Life (Ba Vấn Đề Trọng Đại Trong Đời Tu Của Tôi)* that praying for peace or the dead is not a part of Buddhism whose purpose is to serve the living.<sup>546</sup>

## Summary

The Lý Trần period is highly regarded as the *Golden Age* of Vietnamese Buddhism in which Buddhist monastics were the most learned and influential class in the country's development, especially during the Trần dynasty. During that time, nationalism and Buddhism were co-mingled in response to the rise of nationalist tendencies. Toward the end of the Trần dynasty, however, Buddhism entered a period of decline due to Confucianism and Taoism receiving support by the royal courts. This was compounded with the Chinese destruction of Buddhist temples and sacred writings during their 15<sup>th</sup> century period of Chinese colonization, and later the impact of imported Catholicism, encouraged by the French colonial rules in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yearning for a rebirth of the *Golden Age* of Vietnamese Buddhism, the 1920s-1950s Buddhism Restoration Movement followed by the 1963 Buddhist Upheaval gained some ground in revitalizing the religion. These efforts, however, did not gain traction neither inside nor outside the Vietnamese Buddhist monastic community.

In 1971, Thích Thanh Từ established his first monastery and a 3-year Thiền session with a declaration to restore the Vietnamese Thiền's meditation practice to its

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<sup>545</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Xuân Trong Của Thiền 1, 2, 3 [Tết Messages to Thiền Monastics]*, 1: "Tôi chủ trương rằng từ ngày tôi lập Thiền viện là tôi dứt khoát không cho Tăng Ni đi đưa đám ma và không đi dự những buổi cúng kính của Phật tử tổ chức ở nhà."

<sup>546</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Ba Vấn Đề Trọng Đại Trong Đời Tu Của Tôi [Three Critical Matters in My Monkhoo Life]*, 44: "Tu sĩ Phật giáo mà chỉ lấy tụng cúng cầu nguyện làm Phật sự, là vô tình đã đưa Phật giáo lên lơ lửng trên hư không và tạo cho Phật giáo đáng vẻ mờ mờ ảo ảo không thể giải thích được. Tôi dám khẳng định rằng Phật giáo không phải thế, mà thực tế hữu hiệu trong cuộc sống hiện tại của con người."

genuine tradition. The session with its promise of a sublime spiritual practice to replace the tradition of theory learning and ‘superstitious’ rituals quickly became a magnet attracting a good population of supporters and followers. Unfortunately, the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975 cut short his effort. His second 3-year Thiền session crowd needed to be dispersed and all three of his monasteries needed to be vacated by regulations from the new government. Not easily giving up his dream, Thích Thanh Từ moved to a farm in Long Thành where he could continue to lecture to his remaining followers who had to spend more time in the ‘meditation farms’ to make a self-sufficient living than in the meditation halls. His persistence in spreading the sublime spiritual practice by any means during this hard time resulted in additional newer monasteries popping up in the meditation farms to accommodate the increasing flow of followers. In 1994, Thích Thanh Từ officially merged his organization with the Trúc Lâm lineage and turned his initial effort into reviving the sect. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the new Trúc Lâm became a large international Buddhist sect with more than a couple dozen new monasteries crowded with hundreds of monks and nuns.

The set of all the variables that triggered Thích Thanh Từ’s movement to gain fast track of growth is worth some attention, but it is outside the scope of this research project. The focus of this research study is the movement’s mythos. Specifically, this investigation is about how Thích Thanh Từ incorporated, referenced, and reinterpreted the sect’s original mythos to make it attractive to the contemporary audience. This chapter addresses the elements of mythos constructed by Thích Thanh Từ in the new Trúc Lâm as reported and documents in existing literature.



The new Trúc Lâm has four main features: Vietnamizing Thiền Buddhism, Self-Exploration Meditation, Non-Duality of Reality Practice, and De-mythologization of Thiền Buddhism. Trúc Lâm followed the path of Bodhidharma on fundamental elements such as Buddha-Nature inside Everyone and Non-duality of Reality in its meditation practice. However, Vietnamizing Buddhism is also at the center of Thích Thanh Từ's movement. Besides relentlessly translating Buddhist texts which is still mostly in Chinese to Latin-Vietnamese (Quốc Ngữ) and recording his lectures for free distribution on the internet, Thích Thanh Từ made regulations to force the use of Latin-Vietnamese (Quốc Ngữ) in all rituals at Trúc Lâm monasteries. Such Vietnamization effort helps Buddhist scripts more comprehensible, hence making Buddhism less mysterious to the public.

To further de-mythologize Thiền Buddhism, arguing that blurry languages and mystical acts would not be acceptable to the public in this scientific era with emphasis on rationality and facts, Thích Thanh Từ also puts a strong emphasis on rationalizing scriptures and koan stories. Replacing the secretive koan practice with a self-explanatory Four-Path meditation method designed after Huìkě's and Hui-neng's teaching is another Thích Thanh Từ's footstep toward his Buddhism de-mythologization effort. Thích Thanh Từ also declares 'superstition' as an irrational faith and therefore forbids his monastics from accepting invitations to attend funerals and ceremonies organized at private residences. The monk also asks his followers to eradicate prophesizing, fortune telling, ghost money burning, and the like as well as other indigenous practices he considers 'superstitious'.

Data collected on how the movement's insiders understand the origins of their sect and Trúc Lâm's current views on meditation gathered through interviews with its monastic and lay members will be examined in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Views of Contemporary Trúc Lâm Followers**

This dissertation examines how 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm adapted its traditional roots to make its movement attractive to a contemporary audience. Trúc Lâm's traditional and revised mythos, as recorded in existing literature, were reviewed in Chapters Two and Three, respectively. To further gauge the revitalized Trúc Lâm's mythos, especially in the areas posed in the third research question, I conducted interviews with the sect's monastics and lay followers. In particular, I examine and present the "insider perspective" on their current views on meditation, the origins of their sect, and the contemporary form of Trúc Lâm through site observation and face-to-face interviews in Vietnam, and in the United States of America. The goal of this chapter is to share and present the data gathered during my 2017-2018 fieldwork in light of the demographic characteristics of participants in the study and the analysis of the data.

#### **Situation Assessment**

This section first recaptures the doctrine and practice of the revived Trúc Lâm sect based on Thích Thanh Từ's writings and lectures as well as existing research. This information may or may not be consistent with the understanding of the sect's monastics and lay followers who were interviewed for this study. That doctrine and practice will then be discussed with regard of the sect's characteristics from the participants in this study as well as my observation during my visits to a few Trúc Lâm facilities.

Based on late 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm literature as presented in the previous chapter, Thích Thanh Từ de-emphasizes some mythological elements of the existing Vietnamese Buddhist tradition and promotes features that were championed by 13<sup>th</sup>

century Trúc Lâm mythos but perhaps with a revised interpretation. Thích Thanh Từ argues that Buddha-Nature is possessed by all sentient beings and emphasizes that a sublime meditation practice allows everyone to perceive such nature within instead of relying on outside mythical sources. These are examples of the *Golden Age* Buddhism features that the movement claims to restore in contemporary Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism. It is expected that the followers of the renewed Trúc Lâm sect understood not only the reinterpretation of the sect's doctrine and practice features but also its roots.

This study employs the views of modern-day followers, monastic and lay, of the revitalized Trúc Lâm sect to further the understanding of the sect's doctrine and practice. Conducting field research was expected to be difficult because, as David Saperstein, U.S. ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom suggests, the environment in Vietnam is politically sensitive on issues related to religion, given that the Vietnamese government still “maintains a tight grip over religious practices.”<sup>547</sup> Therefore, only general characteristics of the participants' identities and temple associations are reported in this project to protect their anonymity.

Thirteen Trúc Lâm followers participated in face-to-face interviews, including eight monastics (four men and four women) and five lay people (four men and one woman). The monastic participants included five senior administrators who joined the movement in the 1970s and three lecturers. All lay participants followed the sect's practice after 1975. All the participants in Vietnam were recommended by the Trúc Lâm's Executive Board at the sect's headquarters, and those in the United States were suggested by local monastic senior administrators.

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<sup>547</sup> Luke Hunt, “Vietnam's Religious Law: Testing the Faithful,” *The Diplomat*, January 12, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/vietnams-religious-law-testing-the-faithful/>.

## **Key Factors**

Two key factors involved in this exploration deserve special attention. One is the process of building relationships and communicating with the sect in the study. The other factor is the language used between the participants and me. All communication with Trúc Lâm Thiền sect's personnel as well as participants throughout the data collection process was conducted in Vietnamese.

First, I contacted Trúc Lâm Thiền sect's headquarters for permission to conduct research on the sect and for building the sample pool. A verbal research brief and explanation of research procedures were provided to the contact in the initial conversation. After receiving verbal permission and a general visit appointment from the sect, I planned the first visit trip accordingly. Upon arrival at Thường Chiếu monastery, the sect's headquarters in Long Thành, Vietnam, where Thích Thanh Từ lives, the bilingual research documentation package (English and Vietnamese) was submitted to Trúc Lâm's Executive Board for formal review and consideration. The package consisted of the research brief, the survey questionnaire, and the letter of informed consent form (Appendix C). While waiting for formal approval, I arranged to stay in the guest quarters of Linh Chiếu nunnery nearby. Upon receipt of the list of recommended participants, I built the research sample by contacting each and requesting a one-on-one, face-to-face meeting.

All the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese at each participant's monastery, using the IRB-pre-approved (Appendix A) set of bilingual questions (English and Vietnamese, Appendix B), strictly adhering to the IRB guidelines. The questions focused on elements of practice which the participants believed were part of the Trúc Lâm Thiền.

To establish consistency of the responses to increase the reliability of the instrument, considerable effort was placed in the design of the questions for cross-checking. The responses for some of the questions were expected to overlap each other. Each interview session was audio recorded with simultaneous hand-written notes.

The participants involved in this research were affiliated with the Trúc Lâm Thiền sect as either monastic or lay followers, which would be referred to throughout the report as Venerable and Layperson, respectively. In this report, each participant is referred to by his/her pseudonym (e.g., Venerable Minh Nhát, Layperson Công). All participants made key contributions to the success of this research.

## **Events**

The research was conducted using multiple data collection techniques. Most of the data were collected through a fact-to-face interview with each of the 13 followers conducted at their monasteries. Site observations during the face-to-face interviews at the participants' monasteries contributed more information to the data pool. Other sources of data came from informal short unrecorded conversations with other Trúc Lâm followers. These sources were outside the original design and information collected was intended mainly for the purpose of clarification.

Each interview started with an introduction in an informal tone to put the participant at ease. I introduced the reason for my presence, the purpose of the study, and the protection of confidentiality of all data provided by the participant. The questionnaire was then handed to the interviewee to preview the questions for clarity. The participant was also clearly reminded upfront that the interview was a survey and would be audio recorded, his/her participation was completely voluntary, and his/her name would not be

disclosed to anyone in any way. After the participant felt comfortable with the conversation, I obtained the participant's consent in writing (see consent form in Appendix C). Written notes were also taken during each interview and used as a source of data for analysis.

## Findings

Data from participants' understanding on the historical and contemporary Trúc Lâm Thiền sect collected from the interviews would be presented in this section. Artifacts from observations would be also presented. During the process of analyzing the set of insiders' perspectives along with data from direct observations, conflicting data, if any, would be identified for future research. Except for observed data, no interpretation was interjected into the findings reported in this section.

## Interviews

#	Pseudonym	Gender	Age Range	Years with Trúc Lâm	Country Interview Held
1	Venerable Minh Nhất	Male	51-60	40 years+	Vietnam
2	Venerable Bất Nhị	Male	71-80	40 years+	Vietnam
3	Venerable Tâm Tâm	Female	51-60	35 years+	USA
4	Venerable Phổ Tứ	Female	71-80	40 years+	Vietnam
5	Venerable Phổ Niên	Female	71-80	40 years+	Vietnam
6	Venerable Tuệ Luật	Male	31-40	25 years+	Vietnam
7	Venerable Tuệ Thất	Male	51-60	35 years+	USA
8	Venerable Tâm Nhã	Female	41-50	20 years+	USA
9	Layperson An	Female	61-70	20 years+	Vietnam
10	Layperson Bình	Male	61-70	20 years+	Vietnam
11	Layperson Công	Male	41-50	20 years+	Vietnam
12	Layperson Định	Male	61-70	15 years+	USA
13	Layperson Phát	Male	61-70	15 years+	USA

**Table 1: Key Participants Interviewed during Field Work**

The participants' interview responses as related to their understandings of the historical and contemporary Trúc Lâm Thiền sect were gathered through the interviews and are described below, together with a sample of participants' comments, wherever applicable. Table 1 (using pseudonyms) details the demographics of the pool of participants.

### *View of Contemporary Trúc Lâm Followers on Meditation*

On their reasoning for joining Thích Thanh Từ's movement, the participants could be categorized into three groups. Some had a pre-existing direct or indirect relationship with Thích Thanh Từ, some found him in their search for a reputable meditation master, while still others became convinced of the sublimeness of his meditation method. These groups are not mutually exclusive, meaning some participants could belong to more than one group. The first group (23%) consisted of either former disciples of Thích Thanh Từ during his time in the Pure Land lineage or pre-existing disciples of his disciples.

The second group (69%) set their mind on self-exploration meditation as the best practice for awakening, instead of looking outward for help toward awakening, and were in search of the best master and place for a deeper understanding and practice. These individuals argue that such personal self-exploration allows each practitioner to have total control of his/her own cultivation journey to reach their lifetime destiny. Venerable Minh Nhất notes that in the early 1970s, Vietnamese literature written about meditation was rare. Venerable Tâm Tâm, Venerable Phổ Tứ, and Venerable Phổ Niên comment that meditation practice was even rarer in the far southern region of Vietnam. Layperson Công adds that Liễu Quán was another Thiền sect in Vietnam during that period, but it



barely existed – mainly in central Vietnam. Furthermore, according to Venerable Phổ Niên and Venerable Tuệ Luật, the practice of contemporary Lâm Tế Thiền likened it to Pure Land.

The third group (61%) joined Thích Thanh Từ's movement due to his easy-to-understand explanation of Buddhist scripts and best practices through a simple but practical self-exploring cultivation method. According to Layperson Định, listening to the revered monk's lectures clarified Buddhism's mystery and complexity. Venerable Tâm Tâm and Layperson Phát found the master's cultivation method intriguing in that cultivation should be a self-exploratory and self-repairing process, not begging outside spiritual powers for personal emancipation. Ordained since childhood and both struggling with manifest destiny, Venerable Minh Nhất and Venerable Tâm Tâm share that when they listened to Thích Thanh Từ's lectures, Buddhism seemed less mysterious and that they could eventually see light at the end of the tunnel.

### *Mythos at Contemporary Trúc Lâm*

This section describes the main elements of the mythos practiced in the contemporary Trúc Lâm Thiền sect, from the understanding and perspective of the sect's followers participating in the research.

#### Self-Exploration (Phản Quang Tự Kỷ)

The belief that Buddha Nature is within everyone is the fundamental element of the contemporary Trúc Lâm's mythos (100%). As Venerable Phổ Tú puts it, perceiving one's own Buddha Nature is the ultimate goal of one's lifetime cultivation effort to be free from the eternal cycle of rebirth. To reach that goal, according to Venerable Minh Nhất, one needs to stop relying on outside supernatural powers for help and dualistic

thinking, such as right-wrong and hate-love. Instead, one returns to self and examines within.

Then, how to examine within becomes the question.

### Cultivation through Script and Meditation Synchronization

Thích Thanh Từ's process of self-exploration involved script and meditation (100%). Venerable Minh Nhất and Venerable Bất Nhị described that process best. Venerable Bất Nhị argues that the script provides practitioners with the Learned Wisdom for an understanding of every step of their cultivation process, which, over time, would allow the Unlearned Wisdom to emerge. However, since script alone would not trivially transcend the former Wisdom to the latter, meditation must serve as another critical element of the process to make transcendence possible.

According to Venerable Minh Nhất, script and meditation assist each other in that meditation typically makes practitioners less and less deluded, which in turn helps them have a clearer and deeper understanding of the script. As Layperson Phát noted, the practice of meditation allows for a better understanding and recognition of the concept and reality of illusions taught in script. Venerable Minh Nhất further adds that possessing Unlearned Wisdom allows one to perceive his/her own Buddha Nature. He noted that the use of script as a main source in the cultivation process is different from traditional Chan, which belittles script in Dharma transmission.

The question raised then is how Thích Thanh Từ's followers meditate.

### No-abiding Meditation Method

All participants (100%) follow the No-abiding (Biết Vọng Không Theo) meditation approach, in which 15% seem to use multiple approaches. Layperson Phát

argues that the mind is typically overwhelmed with thoughts of the past, the present, and the future, but has little control over them. According to Venerable Phổ Niên and Venerable Tâm Nhã, the practitioner should not let any thoughts attach to the mind since they are all illusory. Venerable Tâm Nhã asserts, knowing that the birthless mind is permanent and all things are impermanent, that we do not let the impermanent control or lead the permanent. In Venerable Tuệ Luật and Layperson Định's experience, the mind with fewer illusions attached to it becomes more relaxed and therefore calmer.

#### De-emphasis of Supernatural Powers and Devotions

According to some of the participants who were originally from Pure Land Buddhist traditions (30%), among numerous sets of prayers, mantras, and mudras commonly practiced in contemporary Vietnamese Buddhist temples, only a few are conducted at Trúc Lâm monasteries. As Venerable Minh Nhất argues, these few are not for devotions and rituals seeking outside powers for help on reaching awakening, but to either help practitioners in reaffirming themselves to a religious focus or to symbolically dedicate compassion to the lives and spirits surrounding.

Most participants (85%) state that the two rituals *Praying for Peace* (Cầu An) and *Praying for the Dead* (Cầu Siêu) are still conducted, but short and limited within the compound of Trúc Lâm monasteries. Venerable Minh Nhất and Venerable Tuệ Thất argues that these two rituals are offered after the repentance session not as a part of Trúc Lâm belief, but to return favor and to show compassion to the sect's followers and supporters.

The rituals of *Bestowing Food on Hungry Ghosts* (Cúng Thí Thực) in the evening and *Food Offering to Gold Wing Bird* (Cúng Đại Bàng Cánh Vàng) at lunchtime are also

conducted at Trúc Lâm facilities (69%). Each of these two food offering rituals involves some combination of prayer chanting in Vietnamese, mantra reciting, and mudra positioning. Venerable Bất Nhị further adds that the symbolic food offer needs to be re-enforced by appropriate prayers, mantras, and mutras as well as the ritual monk's merit in order to see fruition. Venerable Tâm Tâm argues that the Gautama Buddha, according to legend, symbolically conducted these rituals out of compassion toward the spirits and lives around him.

### *Trúc Lâm Contemporary Followers' View of Their Roots*

Based on the interviews, participants articulated multiple reasons that led Thích Thanh Từ to redirect his Thiền restoration effort towards revitalizing the Trúc Lâm Thiền sect. During Thích Thanh Từ's period of Thiền research and 'hut-entering,' he found that the 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm practice closely reflected the teaching of the Gautama Buddha, and the great Thiền patriarchs' method and teaching are practical and doable. Venerable Bất Nhị, Venerable Phổ Niên, and Venerable Tuệ Thất mention evidence of a good number of well-known monastics and non-monastics awakened during that period, such as the King himself, Tuệ Trung, and Pháp Loa. On the other hand, Layperson Công states that literature on the other Thiền sects was either rare or not detailed enough for practitioners to fully understand.

Venerable Bất Nhị supports the idea that the 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm teaching was among the critical factors that helped Thích Thanh Từ find the Way. Venerable Bất Nhị and Venerable Phổ Niên share the same idea that at the time of his first Thiền session at Chơn Không monastery, Thích Thanh Từ had the simple intention of only restoring Thiền Buddhism to its genuine and sublime tradition without any knowledge of how the

public would respond, let alone the grand idea of revitalizing the Trúc Lâm sect. Most early members who joined the movement in 1970s and early 1980s did not hear about Trúc Lâm from Thích Thanh Từ at the time they joined the movement.

According to Venerable Bất Nhị and Venerable Tâm Nhã, while persistently growing the Thiền restoration movement and continuing the effort of Vietnamizing Thiền Buddhism, Thích Thanh Từ considered a thorough understanding of the traditional Thiền Buddhism as a part of the movement. The most notable of his findings during this period is that Trúc Lâm's founder Trần Nhân Tông stood out as quite an admirable success, not only as a talented king serving his people, but also as a devoted Buddhist serving Vietnamese Buddhism (Venerable Minh Nhất, Venerable Tuệ Luật, Venerable Phổ Tứ, Layperson Phát, and Layperson Định). As a king, Trần Nhân Tông, even though he had already attained awakening while still on the throne, served his people well by leading the country not only in fighting off multiple foreign invasions but also in post-war development (Venerable Tâm Tâm). As a devoted Buddhist, Trần Nhân Tông left his royal life after ceding the throne to his son for a simple lifestyle to serve his religious conviction, leading to the founding of Trúc Lâm sect which left a remarkable mythos and accomplished record in the history of Thiền Buddhism (Layperson Công).

According to Venerable Tâm Tâm, admiring Trần Nhân Tông for his accomplishment for the Vietnamese people and Thiền Buddhism, as well as for the King's philosophy and practice as reported in existing literature, Thích Thanh Từ longed for the opportunity to visit Trúc Lâm sites located in north Vietnam to obtain empirical data on the sect. When opportunities surfaced in the 1980s as social conditions allowed, Thích Thanh Từ made visits to the Trúc Lâm facilities built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century located on

the northern side of Vietnam (Venerable Minh Nhất, Venerable Bất Nhị). According to Venerable Bất Nhị, the results of the visits further confirmed Thích Thanh Từ's initial understanding of the traditional Trúc Lâm, of which there exist a great deal of similarities in philosophy and practice between his movement and Trần Nhân Tông's 13<sup>th</sup> century sect. These incorporated elements include Vietnamizing Buddhism to reflect Vietnamese ideology, championing the '*Script and Meditation Synchronization*' method, and '*Engagement in the world While Embracing the Dharma (Hòa Quang Đồng Trần)*' philosophy.

As some participants recall (23%), Thích Thanh Từ decided in the 1990s to direct his Thiền restoration effort toward revitalizing the sect. He marked the day of that decision by officially naming his new monastery in Đà Lạt Trúc Lâm. According to Venerable Minh Nhất, as part of the reason for his choice, Thích Thanh Từ wanted to remind the Vietnamese that they historically had an extraordinary King and a great indigenous Thiền sect that many had forgotten.

#### *Major Mythos Reformulated from the Old Trúc Lâm*

According to 85% of the participants, the two mythoi are fundamentally identical in features since Thích Thanh Từ had no intention of making fundamental changes to the sect's origins. However, some features are carried out a little differently in the new Trúc Lâm, to fit contemporary society and audience. As an example, Venerable Tâm Tâm argues that the '*Engagement in the world While Embracing the Dharma (Hòa Quang Đồng Trần)*' philosophy is promoted by both the old and the new Trúc Lâm, but its contemporary application is limited to some extent due to different national and local laws and regulations.

The use of *gongan* (also known as *koan*) method in meditation practice is another difference. 54% of the participants argue that while *koan* was very popular in traditional Trúc Lâm, it is not promoted in the new Trúc Lâm. The widespread rumor, even among revered Vietnamese monastics, which claimed *koan* easily made practitioners crazy, discouraged Thích Thanh Từ from suggesting the method to his followers (Venerable Tuệ Thất). Venerable Tuệ Thất further argues that the *koan* is more applicable for the ‘no-thought’ meditation approach where practitioners need close mentoring from experienced *koan* masters for best results.

### *Observations*

During the fieldwork period from late 2017 to October 2018, I visited nine Trúc Lâm facilities to seek face-to-face interviews with Trúc Lâm insiders.<sup>548</sup> While there, some information from site observation was also collected. These visits typically lasted a few hours each during the day time, with couple exceptions where I stayed overnight to observe site activities in the evening. Some of these observations would be accompanied with information gathered through informal conversations I had with Trúc Lâm followers in the vicinity of the events for clarification purpose. Site observations collected will be categorized as general characteristics, worshipped figures, texts, and supernatural rituals, and reported in this section as such.

### *General Characteristics*

#### Thường Chiếu monastery and Linh Chiếu nunnery

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<sup>548</sup> All the photos in this observation section were taken by the researcher during field work 2017-2018, otherwise the source of the photo will be cited.

Located in Long Thành (Đồng Nai, Vietnam), about 60 kilometers from Ho Chi Minh city (also known as Saigon), Thường Chiếu monastery was Trúc Lâm headquarters and housing around 200 monks<sup>549</sup> at the time of my visit. Sitting next to it in a walking distance was Linh Chiếu nunnery housing around 150 nuns.<sup>550</sup>



**Figure 3: Thường Chiếu Monastery**



**Figure 4: Linh Chiếu Nunnery**

Lay followers come to these monasteries just for retreats and stay in the guest quarters. I was allowed to stay in Linh Chiếu's guest quarters during my overnight visit to the Trúc Lâm headquarters. Monastics at Thường Chiếu and Linh Chiếu followed the same daily routine from 3:30 am to 9:30 pm, which included a few meditation sessions throughout the day and a repentance session in the evening, with chores and study periods in between.

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<sup>549</sup> Per an informal conversation with a follower in the vicinity of the event.

<sup>550</sup> Per an informal conversation with a follower in the vicinity of the event.



Fortunately, I met Thích Thanh Từ in Vietnam during my first visit to Thường Chiếu monastery in 2017 and took a photo with him.



**Figure 5: Thích Thanh Từ and the Researcher in 2017**

According to his caregiving assistants who prepared him for the photo, he had not appeared in public since experiencing a stroke, but still uttered a few words occasionally, especially upon hearing one of his favorite verses.

These two monasteries provided me the opportunities to conduct the interviews with Venerable Bất Nhị and Laypeople An, Bình, and Công in 2018, as well as to observe lunch rituals and participate in an evening repentance session.



**Figure 6: Lunch Ritual at Linh Chiếu**



**Figure 7: Evening Repentance at Thường Chiếu**

### Chơn Không Monastery

Located on a side of Tương Kỳ mountain in Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu, Chơn Không monastery - the first brick of Thích Thanh Từ's Thiền Restoration foundation<sup>551</sup> - was divided into two sections: one for nuns and one for monks, each housing around 30.<sup>552</sup>

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<sup>551</sup> Thường Chiếu Monastery, *Kỷ Yếu 50 Năm Thiền Viện Chơn Không 1966-2016 [Yearbook for the 50th Anniversary of Chơn Không Monastery (1966-2016)]*, 45.

<sup>552</sup> Per an informal conversation with a follower in the vicinity of the event.

Close to the top of the mountain was the historical Thích Thanh Từ's Pháp Lạc hut<sup>553</sup> where Thích Thanh Từ first awakened. The hut was connected to the monastery by a stone stairway called Thạch Đầu about 200-ft long on a 45-degree grade.



**Figure 8: Chân Không Monastery**



**Figure 9: Pháp Lạc Hut (1966)**  
(Source: <thuongchieu.net>, Feb 12, 2019)



**Figure 10: Thạch Đầu Stairway**

A large statue of a hand holding up a lotus flower as appeared in the Flower Sermon (*Niêm Hoa Vi Tiểu*) - a pillar story of Chan/Thiền Buddhism which focuses on direct experience rather than dogma or intellectual analysis – standing on top of the mountain is a special feature at Chơn Không monastery. The story goes, according to Nyogen Senzaki:

When Buddha was in Grdhrakuta Mountain he twirled a flower in his fingers and held it before the assembly. Everyone was silent. Only Mahakashyapa smiled at this revelation, although he tried to control the expression on his face.

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<sup>553</sup> Per an informal conversation with a follower in the vicinity of the event, the 1966 Pháp Lạc hut was substantially damaged after Chơn Không was vacated in 1980s and was rebuilt in 2014.

Buddha said: “I have the eye of the true teaching, the heart of Nirvana, the true aspect of non-form, and the ineffable gate of Dharma. It is not expressed in words, but is transmitted beyond the teachings. This teaching I give to Mahakashyapa.”<sup>554</sup>



**Figure 11: Statue of a Hand Holding up a Lotus Flower at Chơn Không**



**Figure 12: Nunnery Section at Chơn Không**

During the visit, I was given a hardcopy of the *Yearbook for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Chơn Không Monastery (1966-2016)* (*Kỷ Yếu 50 năm Thiền Viện Chơn Không*), which, according to the head of the nun section, had just been published. The Yearbook became a great contribution to the understanding of Thích Thanh Từ's 20<sup>th</sup> century movement presented in Chapter Three.

### Viên Chiếu nunnery

Located in Long Thành (Đồng Nai, Vietnam), about 15 km from Linh Chiếu, Viên Chiếu nunnery housed around 150 nuns.<sup>555</sup> Passing by a classroom with about 30-40

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<sup>554</sup> Nyogen Senzaki, *Eloquent Silence: Nyogen Senzaki's Gateless Gate and Other Previously Unpublished Teachings and Letters* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008), 60.

<sup>555</sup> Per an informal conversation with a follower in the vicinity of the event.

monastics inside, the head of the nunnery explained that most monastics studied in-house within the Trúc Lâm system using in-house lecturers.



**Figure 13: Viên Chiếu Nunnery**



**Figure 14: A Classroom at Viên Chiếu**

The nunnery not only functioned as a learning center in the system, but also was responsible for providing lecturers to many Trúc Lâm learning centers in the surrounding area and two other centers in California, United States: Diệu Nhân monastery, established in 2002 in the Sacramento area, and Vô Ưu monastery, established in 2002 in the San Jose area.

The interviews with Venerables Phổ Tứ and Phổ Niên were conducted at this nunnery.

#### Tuệ Quang monastery

Originally, a Pure Land temple in Thủ Đức located on the perimeter of Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), the facility was donated by its lay owners to Thích Thanh Từ's Thiền Restoration Movement in the 1990s and then eventually converted to a monastery. The facility housed about 20 monks and still had an altar dedicated to Pure



Land Great Masters Thích Khánh Anh<sup>556</sup> and Thích Thiện Hoa, from whom Thích Thanh Từ first learned Buddhism.

A crowd of a few hundred Buddhist followers visited the monastery that weekend to practice meditation which made it appear more as a meditation center than a monastery.



**Figure 15: Tuệ Quang Monastery**



**Figure 16: Trúc Lâm's First Three Patriarchs**



**Figure 17: Great Masters of Pure Land at Tuệ Quang**

I interviewed Venerable Tuệ Luật at this monastery.

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<sup>556</sup> Thích Khánh Anh was one of the Buddhist monks spearheading the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist Restoration Movement as presented in Chapter 3.

### Chánh Giác monastery

Standing on a 75-acre lot in Tiền Giang (Vietnam) and shaped after the Indian four sacred places: Lumbini, Bodh-Gaya, Sarnath (where the Gautama Buddha delivered his first sermon), and Kusinagar, the monastery housed about 40 monks.<sup>557</sup>



**Figure 18: Chánh Giác Monastery**



**Figure 19: LUMBINI at Chánh Giác**



**Figure 20: SARNATH at Chánh Giác**

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<sup>557</sup> Per an informal conversation with the Chánh Giác's abbot.



**Figure 21: BODH GAYA at Chánh Giác**



**Figure 22: KUSHINAGAR at Chánh Giác**



**Figure 23: Statue of Hui-neng,  
the 6th Chan Patriarch at Chánh Giác**



**Figure 24: Statue of Trần Nhân Tông  
in the Buddha-King Hall at Chánh Giác**

This 2018 newly built monastery had two features that distinguish it from the other Trúc Lâm facilities I visited during this research project. One is the introduction of the large Buddha-King hall in place of the ancestor hall commonly seen in other

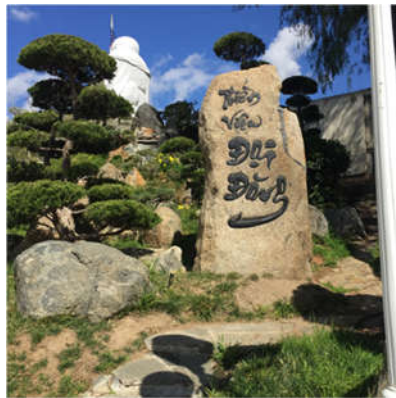


monasteries, and the other is the existence of the Hui-neng shrine facing the Buddha-King hall.

The interview with Venerable Minh Nhất took place at this monastery.

#### Đại Đăng monastery

Though many sections were still under construction on its hilly 9-acre lot in Bonsall (California), the monastery served as the headquarters of Trúc Lâm in the United States. There were trailer homes around the main building for monks. I noticed a small altar on the outside wall of the dining room, which, according to the posted instruction next to it and a follower passing by, is for the Bestowing Food to Hungry Ghosts (Cúng Thí Thực) lunch ritual. There was also an existing beautiful house sitting in the same lot but on another hill, for nuns and where I stayed overnight during my three-day visit.



**Figure 25: Front Sign at Đại Đăng**



**Figure 26: Lunch Ritual at Đại Đăng**

During my stay, I had the opportunity to join in a 50-people group retreat, to observe the Food Offering to Gold Wing Bird ritual, as well as to conduct interviews with Venerable Tâm Tâm, Venerable Tuệ Thất, and Layperson Định. Consisting of 10 men,



35 women, and 5 monastics, the retreat daily activities ran from 5am to 10pm with a mixture of meditation sessions, lectures, and repentance recitations.

### Chánh Tâm monastery

Located in Anaheim (California), the monastery was originally a residential house being converted. With a few rooms for monks and a large meditation hall in the back that could hold around 30-40 people, the monastery looked more like a meditation center or a temple than a monastery. It was a Sunday, and therefore Buddhists gathered to listen to lectures, meditate, and have lunch.

During the visit to this monastery, I had the opportunity to join the resident monastics and other followers for lunch. At the beginning of lunch, while the monastics were performing short and simple lunch rituals, worshipping Buddhists sat quietly, joining palms. Together, everyone chanted the Heart Sutra to end their lunch.



**Figure 27: Statues of Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra to the sides of the Gautama Buddha at Chánh Tâm**



**Figure 28: Altar for the Food Offering to Gold Wing Bird Ritual at Chánh Tâm**

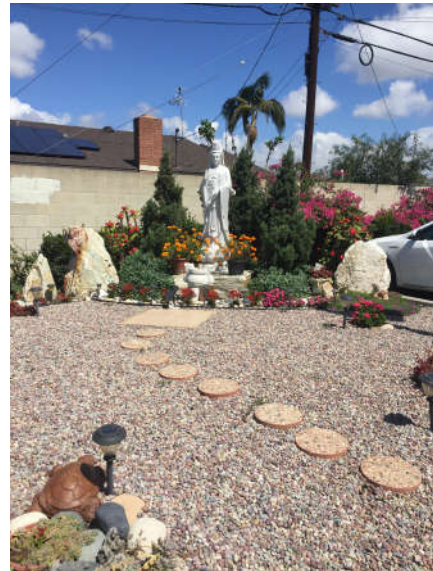
The monastery also allowed the interview with Layperson Phát to be conducted at this facility.

### Chân Giác nunnery

Located in Garden Grove (California), Chân Giác was a nunnery housing up to ten nuns. I visited this facility twice, the first time to seek information for contacting Trúc Lâm headquarters to start the fieldwork, and the second time to interview Venerable Tâm Nhã. Both times, I participated in their lunch rituals. A big white statue of Gautama Buddha in the backyard is a special feature of this monastery, where I noticed most visitors stopped by to burn incense sticks and bow to him.



**Figure 29: Chân Giác Nunnery**



**Figure 30: Statue of Avalokitesvara  
in Front Yard at Chân Giác**

### *Worshipped Figures*

Inside the visited monasteries, the altar in the main hall was dedicated almost solely to the Gautama Buddha with a large golden statue in the center holding up a lotus flower. Bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī (Văn Thù Sư Lợi) and Samantabhadra (Phổ Hiền Bồ Tát) were to the sides of the Buddha. The altar in the ancestor hall was commonly dedicated to Bodhidharma (Bồ Đề Đạt Ma) who brought Chan Buddhism to China from India, and the

first three patriarchs of the Trúc Lâm sect: Emperor Trần Nhân Tông (also known as Trúc Lâm Đầu Đà), Pháp Loa and Huyền Quang.

At Chánh Giác, a newly built monastery in 2018, the ancestor hall was replaced with a large hall dedicated to Trần Nhân Tông with the verse “Cư Trần Lạc Đạo” on his sides, called Buddha-King hall, and a shrine facing the hall dedicated the sixth Chan patriarch Hui-neng. Thích Thanh Từ’s portraits of various sizes featured a few interior walls in each monastery.



**Figure 31: Statue of Gautama Buddha with a Hand Holding up a Lotus Flower, a Special Feature of Thiền Chosen by the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Trúc Lâm**

On the outside, the statues of Maitreya Buddha (Đi Lặc Phật) and bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara were seen on the front yard of a few Trúc Lâm monasteries I visited.



**Figure 32: Statue of Maitreya Buddha at Đại Đăng**



**Figure 33: Statue of Bodhidharma at Đại Đăng**

Maitreya Buddha (Di Lặc Phật) was observed at Đại Đăng and Chánh Tâm, and bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara at Tuệ Quang, Đại Đăng, Chánh Tâm, and Chân Giác.



**Figure 34: Trần Nhân Tông Hall at Chánh Giác**



**Figure 35: Trần Nhân Tông's “Cư Trần Lạc Đạo” Verse at Chánh Giác**

With the exception of Tuệ Quang (Vietnam), all these monasteries were in the United States. A white statue of the Gautama Buddha in the backyard is a special feature at Chân Giác.

### *Vietnamization of Buddhism*

Thích Thanh Từ's effort in making Thiền Buddhism that traditionally was heavily Chinese influence to reflect Vietnamese cultural characteristics instead could be seen through the sect's daily activities, which include not only making Buddhist scriptures in Vietnamese available and distributing them free to the public but also forcing Vietnamese to be used in the sect's daily chanting and practice. Besides being made available in digital format on the sect's official website, Trúc Lâm texts such as books, translations, and lectures, all in Latin-based Vietnamese, were printed in hardcopies and distributed free-of-charge to the public at various Trúc Lâm monasteries. The library at Thường Chiếu stored thousands of those hardcopies and, according to a monastic working at the facility; their distributions were based on requests from Trúc Lâm branches.

All prayers and script recitations were chanted in Vietnamese at participating Trúc Lâm monasteries, with the exceptions of some ritual mantras still in a foreign language. The change was seen to be deep to the grammatical style level. As an example, being used to chanting the traditional Gautama Buddha recitation as “Nam Mô Bổn Sư Thích Ca Mâu Ni Phật”, which reflected Chinese grammar, I sometimes had trouble switching to the Vietnamese version “Nam Mô Phật Bổn Sư Thích Ca Mâu Ni” chanted in the Trúc Lâm system.

### *Rituals*

During visits to the Thường Chiếu, Linh Chiếu, Đại Đăng, and Chánh Tâm monasteries, I had opportunities to observe some short rituals being conducted at lunches and in evening repentance sessions. Those rituals are Praying for Peace (Cầu An) and

Praying for the Dead (Cầu Siêu), and Food Offering to Gold Wing Bird (Cúng Đại Bàng Cánh Vàng).

Praying for Peace (Cầu An) and Praying for the Dead (Cầu Siêu)

At the end of a repentance session at Thường Chiếu monastery that I participated in, two short prayers were conducted, one was the prayer for peace and the other the prayer for the dead with a long list of names attached. Afterwards, in response to my curiosity about these prayers, a bystander monastic answered, “To return favor to followers and supporters and to show compassion, we are willing to accept requests to either pray for peace or for the dead at the monastery after the recitation of the Heart Sutra at 7pm.”

Food Offering to Gold Wing Bird (Cúng Đại Bàng Cánh Vàng)

This ritual was conducted before the monastics started their lunch. The ritual master started with a set of short prayer, mantras, and mudras while extracting and placing seven seeds of rice in a small cup of water with his compassionate heart. The ritual supporter took the cup outside and recited the Food Offering to Gold Wing Bird to complete the offering.

**Summary**

Data collected through the face-to-face interviews, site observation and participation presented in this chapter reveal that the doctrines and practices of the new and the old Trúc Lâm were fundamentally identical, with some revisions only at the implementation level to fit contemporary Vietnamese society, domestically and transnationally. To many Trúc Lâm insiders, it was the traditional Chan meditation



approach of perceiving one's own Buddha Nature through self-examination advocated by the 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm as well as the Thích Thanh Từ's movement, which allowed everyone to have total control of their own cultivation journey, that attracted them to the movement. This personal experience approach starkly differed between Thích Thanh Từ's movement and the contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism, where looking outward was the common practice, which relies on supernatural powers from outside through rituals and devotions for help on achieving personal awakening. Script and meditation teaching and learning method, championed by the 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm which continues to be advocated at contemporary Trúc Lâm monasteries, is another significant feature of the sect. According to these followers, the method tremendously boosted their understanding of not only Buddhism but also every step of their cultivation journey.

Contemporary Trúc Lâm followers consider the 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm mythos as the genuine tradition of Thiền Buddhism guiding them toward awakening. That consideration is not totally from Thích Thanh Từ's teaching, but partly due to their own admiration of Trần Nhân Tông for his personal contribution to the Vietnamese people and Thiền Buddhism. The record of well-known awakened 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm followers, monastic and lay, also plays a large part in strengthening the contemporary followers' belief on the sublime and doable Thiền approach.

A few rituals are still conducted at Trúc Lâm monasteries. They, however, are not for devotions and rituals seeking outside powers for help on reaching awakening, but to either help practitioners in reaffirming themselves to a religious vow or to symbolically dedicate compassion to the lives and spirits surrounding. The next chapter will synthesize and analyze Trúc Lâm mythos from data provided in this chapter and Chapters Two and

Three for differences and how these differences are related to elements of Vietnamese Buddhist modernism.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### Data Synthesis and Analysis

This dissertation examines how the late 20th century Trúc Lâm Thiền movement used its 13<sup>th</sup> century original Trúc Lâm mythos to attract a contemporary audience. This process of reformulating its origins resulted in changes that reflect transformation of Buddhist faith traditions that Buddhist Studies scholars refer to as Buddhist modernism. In addressing the second research question, this chapter will synthesize and analyze Trúc Lâm's mythos from data provided in Chapters Two, Three, and Four for elements that Thích Thanh Từ incorporated, referenced, and reinterpreted from the sect's original mythos. The chapter also addresses which of his elements are novel to his presentation of the new Trúc Lâm and the extent to which each of the reinterpreted elements was influenced by the forces of modernity and globalization presented in Chapter One.

### 13<sup>th</sup> Century Trúc Lâm Lineage

Based on existing literature, the 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm Thiền sect established by King Trần Nhân Tông left a significant mark on Vietnamese history as Buddhism's *Golden Age* in Vietnam, not only for the number of followers and pagodas, but also for the knowledge pool of the group as the most learned in the territory as well as their simple lifestyle and their level of influence on the country's development. Pháp Loa and Huyền Quang succeeded the King as the second and third patriarchs of Trúc Lâm, respectively. However, little trace of documentation has been found on Trúc Lâm lineage following Huyền Quang.<sup>558</sup> Recent discoveries reveal that the sect continued to exist until at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as evidenced by some Thiền masters who made great

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<sup>558</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 277: "Lịch sử Phật Giáo Trúc Lâm sau Huyền Quang đã không còn lại những ghi chép nào đáng kể ...."

contributions to society and introduced themselves as descendents of the sect<sup>559</sup> as well as a list of 23 masters who succeeded one another as abbots of Yên Tử temple where Trúc Lâm sect was founded but without biographies of any of those individuals.

Data from the interviews and site observation reveals that Thích Thanh Từ's followers are aware of their root and its traditional mythos. However, they appear to follow 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm more because of Thích Thanh Từ and his de-mythologized self-exploratory Thiền meditation approach than any other reasons.

### **13<sup>th</sup> Century Trúc Lâm Elements Thích Thanh Từ Incorporated and Referenced**

Thích Thanh Từ declared his intention to restore the 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm's mythic values to contemporary Thiền Buddhism.<sup>560</sup> Thích Thanh Từ argues that Trúc Lâm was the first Thiền sect founded by a Vietnamese who was not only a talented and accomplished King but also a devout and awakened Buddhist monastic. Thích Thanh Từ further argues in his writings, as mentioned in Chapter Three, that a founding patriarch of Vietnamese descent understood best Vietnamese customs, habits, and aspirations, and thus is the best to understand the needs of Vietnamese Buddhists.<sup>561</sup>

Using data from existing literature presented in Chapters Two and Four, triangulated with data collected from face-to-face interviews with Trúc Lâm's insiders as well as my observation during the visits, this section addresses the mythic elements Thích

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<sup>559</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông [All About Trần Nhân Tông]*, 110: “Thiền phái Trúc Lâm, sau khi Huyền Quang mất vào năm 1334, như thế, vẫn được liên tục kế thừa với những khuôn mặt anh tài có những đóng góp to lớn và nhiều mặt cho dân tộc, chứ không phải là ‘thời hưng thịnh chấm dứt’, như trước đây nhiều người đã lầm tưởng.”

<sup>560</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Trọn Một Đời Tôi [My Entire Life]*, 33: “Chúng ta dùng hình ảnh Thiền tông đời Trần là một hình ảnh rất tốt đẹp. Nên khi đặt tên Thiền viện rồi, tôi đã có chủ trương khôi phục Thiền tông đời Trần.”

<sup>561</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Ba Vấn Đề Trọng Đại Trong Đời Tu Của Tôi [Three Critical Matters in My Monkhood Life]*, 30: “Chỉ có phái thiền Trúc Lâm Yên Tử, ông Tổ đầu là Trúc Lâm Đại Đầu Đà chính thực là người Việt Nam. Ông Tổ Việt Nam mới thông cảm tâm tư nguyện vọng phong tục tập quán của người Việt Nam, giáo hóa mới thích ứng nhu cầu người Phật tử Việt Nam.”

Thanh Từ incorporated from the 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm that are novel to his presentation of his 20<sup>th</sup> Thiền restoration movement and how he referenced them.

*Self-Exploration (Phản Quang Tự Kỳ)*

The belief that there exists a Buddha-Nature within every sentient being and the practice of self-exploration to perceive it, is the fundamental mythic element of Chan/Thiền as stated by Bodhidharma in his *Treatise on the Two Entrances and Four Practices*.<sup>562</sup> Among evidence reported in Chapter 2, Trần Nhân Tông embraced the ideology in the following excerpt from his verse *The Joy of Đạo Anywhere on Earth*.

(section 5)

And then we know!

Buddha is in the house, no need to search afar;

Being ignorant, we keep looking for Buddha,

Until awakening, then we realize that Buddha has been in ourselves.<sup>563</sup>

Extant literature indicates that Thích Thanh Từ incorporated and referenced the core ideology of Self-Exploration in Chan/Thiền in the new Trúc Lâm, evidenced by the following excerpt from his first book, *Vietnamese Zen in The Late Twentieth Century* (*Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20*), among other evidence reported in Chapter Three.

The essence of Thiền is to allow the emergence of the unlearned wisdom possessed by everyone. Such emergence enables one to perceive his own Buddha-Nature, and when such wisdom is at its perfection level (*prajna*) the ultimate enlightenment (Buddha) comes.<sup>564</sup>

Data from the interviews presented in Chapter 4 also suggests that through his teaching and mentoring, his followers fully recognized that the self-exploration ideology

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<sup>562</sup> McRae, *Seeing Through Zen*, 17.

<sup>563</sup> Trần Nhân Tông, “Cư Trần Lạc Đạo [The Joy of Đạo Anywhere on Earth]:” “Vầy mới hay! Bụt ở cong nhà, Chẳng phải tìm xa, Nhân khuấy bốn nên ta tìm bụt, Đến cốc hay chín bụt là ta.”

<sup>564</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 45: “Chủ yếu của Thiền tông là khơi dậy trí vô sư sẵn có nơi mọi người. Nhận ra được trí này là kiến tánh, đạt được viên mãn trí này là giác ngộ giải thoát.”

is a fundamental element of the contemporary Trúc Lâm's mythos and of their daily practice.

### *Non-Duality of Reality*

Among evidence documented in Chapter Two, Trần Nhân Tông embraced the fundamental Chan/Thiền ideology of Non-Duality in the following excerpt from his sermon at Kỳ Lân temple on January 9, 1306.

Bodhi is void and vast, not attached to anything. Its nature is innocent and neither kind nor evil. Duality makes life perplexed, choices and distinctions lead life to many ways, sometimes to the extremes. Ordinary people and Sages all have Buddha-Nature, which does not have right and wrong separation and the likes. Sins and merits are originally the same, cause and effect are not real. Everyone has the Buddha-Nature in full, just the matter of being in Bodhi.<sup>565</sup>

Existing literature suggests that Thích Thanh Từ incorporated and referenced the core ideology of Non-Duality in Chan/Thiền in the new Trúc Lâm, evidenced by the following excerpt from his first book, *Vietnamese Zen in The Late Twentieth Century* (*Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20*), among other evidence reported in Chapter 3.

How joyful when we can see phenomena exactly as they are by nature. In such moments, without the interference of dualities such as real and unreal, beautiful and ugly, hard and easy ..., we have nothing else to say.<sup>566</sup>

Data from the interviews presented in Chapter Four also suggests that through his teaching and mentoring, his followers fully recognized that the ideology of Non-Duality is a fundamental element of the contemporary Trúc Lâm's mythos and of their daily practice.

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<sup>565</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông [All About Trần Nhân Tông]*, 139: “Này xem, đạo lớn trống rỗng, đầu buộc đầu ràng, bản tính sáng trong, chẳng lành chẳng dữ. Bởi do chọn lựa, lầm ngã sinh ngang, một nháy thoáng mờ, dễ thành trời vực. Thánh phàm cùng chung một lối, phải trái há được phân ranh. Nên biết tội phước vốn không, nhân quả rốt ráo chẳng thật. Người người vốn đủ, ai nấy tròn đầy.”

<sup>566</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 23: “Đẹp để thay, nếu chúng ta thấy sự vật đúng với bản chất của nó. Nhìn sự vật với tâm lặng lẽ thanh tịnh, mọi phàm tình không có chỗ chen vào, còn gì là thật giả, đẹp xấu, khó dễ..., đến đây không còn gì để nói.”

*Engagement in the World while Embracing the Dharma (Hòa Quang Đồng Trần)*

As presented in Chapter Two, Trần Nhân Tông's ideology of life and Dharma co-mingling is suggested in his *The Joy of Đạo Anywhere on Earth*, in which he advocates that a Trúc Lâm Buddhist should be not only a respectable Bodhisattva in the religious realm, but simultaneously also a virtuous person serving well his/her obligations in the secular world.<sup>567</sup>

(section 6)

No thoughts and no forms attached to the mind,  
Then one becomes a respectable Bodhisattva.  
Being loyal to his lord and filial pious to his father,  
Then a socially virtuous person one also becomes.<sup>568</sup>

Existing literature suggests that Thích Thanh Từ incorporated and referenced the life and Dharma co-mingling feature into the revitalized Trúc Lâm. In his book *My Entire Life (Trọn Một Đời Tôi)* he expresses his admiration of the ideology and argues that all three Trần dynasty kings in the 13<sup>th</sup> century were deeply imbued with Buddhist values, practicing to free themselves from this suffering lifecycle, while managing to put such personal dearness aside to fulfill their citizenship and leadership obligations to defend the independence and integrity of Vietnam.<sup>569</sup> Thích Thanh Từ explains the reasons of

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<sup>567</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông [All About Trần Nhân Tông]*, 78: “Mẫu người Phật tử Việt Nam thời Trần, như thế, là một mẫu người Bồ Tát trang nghiêm, là một mẫu người trượng phu trung hiếu. Bồ Tát dĩ nhiên là một phạm trù tư tưởng lớn của Phật giáo, còn trượng phu là một phạm trù của tư tưởng Nho giáo.”

<sup>568</sup> Trần Nhân Tông, “Cư Trần Lạc Đạo [The Joy of Đạo Anywhere on Earth]:” “Sạch giới lòng, dòi giới tướng; Nội ngoại nên Bồ Tát trang nghiêm; Ngay thờ chúa, thảo thờ cha; Đi đỗ mới trượng phu trung hiếu.”

<sup>569</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Trọn Một Đời Tôi [My Entire Life]*, 33: “Các vua từ vua Trần Thái Tông cho đến Trần Nhân Tông, rồi sau này Anh Tông v.v... đều là những ông vua thấm nhuần đạo Phật. Mà chưa bao giờ nhân danh đạo Phật để làm chuyện sát hại quần sanh, chỉ khi rồi, khi nhân hạ thì các Ngài cố gắng đem đạo Phật ứng dụng tu hành và truyền bá cho quần chúng. Còn khi loạn lạc thì các Ngài nhân danh là một người có trách nhiệm với đất nước, đứng ra lãnh đạo chống ngoại xâm, chứ không có bóng dáng đạo Phật ở trong đó.”

meeting the obligation for simultaneously serving both Buddhism and society in the following excerpt:

We need to do our best to make Buddhism better. To achieve that, however, we need to create opportunities for the society to advance along. There is no such thing as a better Buddhism in a society in standstill. The advancement of Buddhism and society need to be in sync.<sup>570</sup>

Data in the interviews suggests that through his teaching and mentoring, his followers fully recognized that the ‘*Engagement in the world While Embracing the Dharma (Hòa Quang Đồng Tràn)*’ ideology is a fundamental element of the contemporary Trúc Lâm’s mythos and of their daily practice. This element is promoted by both the old and the new Trúc Lâm and differentiates Trúc Lâm from other Thiền sects in Vietnam. However, data also suggests that its application in 20<sup>th</sup> century Vietnam was limited to the extent allowed by contemporary social environment where, as reported by the U.S. Department of State, the Vietnamese government continues to restrict the activities of religious groups in education and health,<sup>571</sup>

#### *Vietnamization of Buddhism*

Admiring Trần Nhân Tông for his effort in Vietnamizing Buddhism by promoting Chữ Nôm (the Vietnamese language in the 13<sup>th</sup> century) and establishing the first indigenous Trúc Lâm sect, Thích Thanh Từ translated and commented all Buddhist sutras, shastras, and even prayers into Latin-Vietnamese (the Vietnamese language in the 20<sup>th</sup> century), a need by his followers to facilitate their learning. According to Thích Thanh Từ in his memoir *My Entire Life (Trọn Một Đời Tôi)*, Vietnamizing Buddhism

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<sup>570</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 32: “Hiện nay chúng ta phải làm sao để cho đạo Phật được tốt. Mà muốn đạo Phật tốt thì chúng ta phải tạo cái duyên cho đời được đẹp. Chớ không thể nào đạo tốt mà đời dễ mặc thế nào cũng được. Chúng ta phải làm sao cho đạo với đời đều tốt đẹp với nhau.”

<sup>571</sup> Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor U.S. Department of State, “International Religious Freedom Report for 2016 - Vietnam.”

was at the core of his movement, as he puts it, “We must have a real Vietnamese Buddhism; otherwise, we are still pitifully dependent.”<sup>572</sup> He further argues in the book that his aspiration is to see not only a Vietnam independent and stable, but also a Vietnamese Buddhism bearing unique Vietnamese characteristics, not just another imitation of Chinese Buddhism.<sup>573</sup>

*Script and Meditation Synchronization (Thiền Giáo Song Hành)*

According to Nguyễn Lang as mentioned in Chapter Two, Trần Nhân Tông added learning scripts to Thiền Buddhism in Trúc Lâm:

After Trần Nhân Tông entered the monkhood, Buddhism became a popular movement. This period experienced a rise in the importance of learning from scripts, which include not only the Diamond Sutra but also some other sutras and quotes from Patriarchs or Great Masters, in the form of critical analysis and commentary. This was a new phenomenon in Thiền Buddhism pushed by the so called ‘Thiền & Scripts Synchronization’ tendency, adding learning scripts into Thiền practice.”<sup>574</sup>

Existing literature implies that Thích Thanh Từ incorporated and referenced such 13<sup>th</sup> century feature into the revitalized Trúc Lâm. His argument in *Vietnamese Zen in The Late Twentieth Century (Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20)*, is that practitioners first need to obtain knowledge from outside (learned wisdom) for an understanding of what they are doing during meditation:

New practitioners need to accumulate knowledge from outside not only to guide them in their cultivation, but also to serve as a source of motivation in

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<sup>572</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Trọn Một Đời Tôi [My Entire Life]*, 41: “Chúng ta phải có một nền Phật giáo Việt Nam thực sự. Nếu không thì chúng ta lệ thuộc một cách đáng thương.”

<sup>573</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 38–39.

<sup>574</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 319: “Sau khi Trần Nhân Tông xuất gia, phong trào Phật học được phát khởi và đại chúng hóa. Thiền ngày xưa chú trọng đến thiền tọa và tham cứu những thoại đầu, có tính cách đồ kỵ cái học chương cú, bắt đầu lấy sự học hỏi kinh điển làm trọng. Không những thiền sinh học kinh Kim Cương và các bộ ngữ lục, họ còn học nhiều kinh khác, và học theo kiểu phân tích, chú giải và bình luận. Điều này là một hiện tượng mới trong thiền môn, và được thúc đẩy bởi một khuynh hướng tổng hợp giữa giáo tông và thiền tông, gọi là khuynh hướng ‘thiền giáo nhất trí.’”

the meditation process. However, since such outside knowledge (learned wisdom) still belongs to the realm of samsara, practitioners need a breakthrough beyond such realm at some point to finally reach the birthless teacherless knowledge (unlearned wisdom) instead.<sup>575</sup>

Data from the interviews presented in Chapter Four also suggests that through his teaching and mentoring, his followers fully recognized that ‘Script and Meditation Synchronization (Thiền Giáo Song Hành)’ is a fundamental element of the contemporary Trúc Lâm’s mythos and of their daily practice.

### **13<sup>th</sup> Century Trúc Lâm Elements Thích Thanh Từ Reconstructed**

Evidenced in the following excerpt reported in Chapter Two, Thích Thanh Từ’s intent was not to imitate historical Buddhist practices in their entirety, but to only incorporate the elements that best fit the contemporary context of Vietnam for his movement,

Taking the good old day experiences and applying them as appropriate in the contemporary situations is helpful. Making people strictly follow a traditional practice is going backward. We selected and presented the good experiences from Trần era’s Buddhism to today’s Buddhist community to allow people to make their own choices of practice that fit them most to follow, not taking the entire Trần era’s Buddhism and forcing them to rigidly adhere to it.<sup>576</sup>

Data collected through my site observation and interviews with Trúc Lâm insiders also suggests that some 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm mythic elements have been reinterpreted in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm. This section addresses the mythic elements of the 13<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>575</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 60: “Buổi đầu đến với đạo chúng ta phải nhờ trí hữu sư, như kinh dạy ‘Văn Tư Tu’ là ba tuệ học. Trí hữu sư hướng dẫn chúng ta biết lối đi và làm cho chúng ta phấn khởi trên đường tu học. Song nó thuộc kiến thức sanh diệt, cuối cùng phải vượt qua nó mới đến trí vô sanh.”

<sup>576</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Ba Vấn Đề Trọng Đại Trong Đời Tu Của Tôi [Three Critical Matters in My Monkhood Life]*, 45: “Lấy những kinh nghiệm hay của người xưa ứng dụng trong hoàn cảnh hiện nay thì hữu ích. Bắt người nay rập khuôn theo người xưa là nệ cổ lạc hậu. Chúng tôi chắt lọc những cái hay của Phật giáo đời Trần trình bày cho Tăng, Ni, Phật tử hiện nay xem thấy điều nào thích hợp áp dụng được thì áp dụng, không phải đem cái khuôn của Phật giáo đời Trần bắt buộc người thời nay rập theo.”



century Trúc Lâm that Thích Thanh Từ reconstructed, which are novel to his presentation of his 20<sup>th</sup> century Thiền restoration movement and how he reformulated them.

### *Emphasis on Gender Equality*

Even though championing the Chan/Thiền ideology that everyone possesses Buddha Nature inside, there is no documentation in extant literature which suggests that the 13<sup>th</sup> Trúc Lâm specifically promotes gender equality in its preaching and practice.

As reported in Chapter Three, Thích Thanh Từ specifically affirms gender equality in his *Unlearned Wisdom (Vô Sư Trí Vi Tôn)* sermon, stressing women's equal capacity of attaining Unlearned Wisdom:

The female might have shapes or forms different from the male, but they all have the capacity of attaining Unlearned Wisdom – the essential element of Thiền Buddhism.<sup>577</sup>

Based on the information provided on the Trúc Lâm official website and data collected during the site observation reported in Chapter Four, the 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm recorded more than 20 nunneries with around a thousand nuns in residence.

### *De-mythologization of Thiền Buddhism*

According to Thích Thanh Từ, Mahayana scripture seems unintelligible, therefore confusing and incomprehensible to many.<sup>578</sup> Relying on supernatural powers, Pure Land's Amitabha Buddha recitation and Tantric's *mantras* and *mudras* add more myths to Buddhism.<sup>579</sup> *Koan* practice in Thiền Buddhism is outside of scripture<sup>580</sup> and is therefore considered another myth of the religion.

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<sup>577</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, “Vô Sư Trí Vi Tôn [Unlearned Wisdom].”

<sup>578</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 8: “Kinh Đại Thừa nói bằng cách diễn giảng trên trời dưới đất đâu đâu, còn Thiền sư dùng thuật xuất quỷ nhập thần khiến người ta mờ mịt không hiểu.”

<sup>579</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, 108: “Tịnh độ thì dùng câu niệm Phật làm pháp tu, Mật tông thì dùng câu thần chú làm pháp tu .... Chỉ riêng Thiền tông không mượn một pháp nào cả.”

<sup>580</sup> Stephenson, “The Kōan as Ritual Performance.”

As reported in Chapter Two, the 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm de-mythologized Thiền Buddhism to some extent through verses and lectures from Trần Nhân Tông, Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ, and Trần Thái Tông, as well as the disappearance of Tantric supernatural and ritual practices which used to be popular under the Lý Dynasty. However, since Tantric features rose again under Trúc Lâm's second and third patriarchs who still kept using *koans* for Dharma transmission to disciples, the sect's overall mythos was still full of myths.

As reported in Chapter Three, Thích Thanh Từ de-mythologized Thiền Buddhism much more vigorously. He de-emphasizes Tantric and Pure Land's mythological ritual and devotional features, while promoting the self-exploratory and self-repairing process of cultivation. Additionally, he replaces the mysterious *koan* method with scripture-based meditation approaches such as '*No Abiding to Thoughts (Biết Vọng Không Theo)*' and other meditation methods based on Hui-neng, Huike and Trần Nhân Tông's awakening experience for meditation advancement. Furthermore, he rationalizes scriptures and *koans* through books, translations, and sermons to make them as comprehensible as possible.

Data collected during the interviews and site observation reported in Chapter Four suggests that Thích Thanh Từ succeeded in de-mythologizing Thiền Buddhism. To his followers, Thích Thanh Từ took Thiền Buddhism from being full of mystery and complexity to a comprehensible meditation doctrine and practice.

### **Buddhist Modernism's Influence on the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Trúc Lâm Mythos**

According to Thích Thanh Từ, abstract languages and mystical acts in traditional Vietnamese Buddhism would be unacceptable to the public in this scientific era that

emphasizes rationality and facts.<sup>581</sup> His efforts of rationalizing Buddhist scriptures to make the texts more comprehensible and replacing the traditional Chan/Thiền's secretive and outside-of-scripture koan practice with the self-explanatory Four-Path meditation method to make Buddhism no longer mysterious and full of mystical acts suggest the influence of modernity, in which, according to David McMahan, rationality is a driving force.<sup>582</sup> As argued by Norris and Inglehart, the rationality and scientific feature of modernity weakens the supernatural, the mysterious, and the magical elements of the traditional religion.<sup>583</sup>

De-emphasizing ritual and devotional tradition of contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism,<sup>584</sup> and simultaneously promoting the scripture-based Dharma transmission methods in place of outside-of-scripture *koan* used by the sect in the 13<sup>th</sup> century suggests further influence of the rationality and scientific feature of modernity on the 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm. The new Trúc Lâm's 'rationality and facts' ideology also appear to be in line with Agnes Heller's argument on modernity, that "everything is open to query and to testing; everything is subject to rational scrutiny and refuted by argument."<sup>585</sup> Such proclamation from Thích Thanh Từ also suggests that the revitalized Trúc Lâm mythos is aligned with a Heinz Bechert's argument which claims that, according to Russell Webb, Buddhist modernism reinterprets Buddhism as a scientific religion.<sup>586</sup>

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<sup>581</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 8–9: "Thời đại của chúng ta là thời đại khoa học, nặng về lý trí và chân thật, nếu dùng những ngôn từ huyền ảo, những hành động quái dị thì không bao giờ dân chúng chấp nhận."

<sup>582</sup> McMahan, "Buddhist Modernism."

<sup>583</sup> Norris and Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular*, 3.

<sup>584</sup> Nguyen and A.W. Barber, "Vietnamese Buddhism in North America: Tradition and Acculturation," 129–46.

<sup>585</sup> Heller, *A Theory of History*, 41.

<sup>586</sup> Webb, "Obituary: Heins Bechert," 213.

Thích Thanh Từ's promotion of scripture-based self-exploratory meditation practice to replace the contemporary Vietnam mythological ritual and devotional tradition suggests the influence of the aspect of Buddhist modernism claimed by Peter B. Clarke<sup>587</sup> as a move from the credo full of rituals and devotions to a personal-experience-based spirituality. This concept and practice in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm, going against the predominant Vietnamese Buddhist tradition, also suggests the sect's mythos is aligned with a Heinz Bechert's argument which claims that, according to Russell Webb, Buddhist modernism puts emphasis on self-exploration.<sup>588</sup>

Additionally, as observed by Heinz Bechert, the rise of females in monasticism is another characteristic of Buddhist modernism.<sup>589</sup> Thích Thanh Từ's stress of this element in the 20<sup>th</sup> century mythos through his "Gender Equality" feature, and the surprising number of nuns and nunneries in the Trúc Lâm system suggest that Thích Thanh Từ is influenced by this aspect of Buddhist modernism as well.

Furthermore, from Christopher W. Gowans's perspective, de-emphasis of mythology is a characteristic of Buddhist modernism.<sup>590</sup> J. J. Clarke<sup>591</sup> and David L. McMahan<sup>592</sup> are more specific in that rejecting rituals deemed "superstition" is a common feature among the new Buddhist movements. Eradicating 'supersititious' rituals<sup>593</sup> from its daily practice suggests that the 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm's mythos is aligned with this Buddhist modernism's de-mythologization feature.

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<sup>587</sup> Clarke, *New Religions in Global Perspective*, 305–6.

<sup>588</sup> Webb, "Obituary: Heins Bechert," 213.

<sup>589</sup> Webb, 213.

<sup>590</sup> Gowans, *Buddhist Moral Philosophy*.

<sup>591</sup> Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 100–104; McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*.

<sup>592</sup> McMahan, "Buddhist Modernism."

<sup>593</sup> "Thiền Viện Chơn Không:" "Trong dịp khai mạc khóa I vào ngày 8 tháng 4 năm Tân Hợi (1971), Hòa Thượng ân sư đã nói về mục đích thành lập thiền viện như sau: (1) Trừ dẹp mê tín và lý thuyết suông: Tu viện Chơn Không là chỗ học ít tu nhiều; (2) Khai thông đường lối tu hành: Tu viện là nơi chuyên

## Summary

This study examined the 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm's features in terms of its 13<sup>th</sup> century origin and Buddhist modernism. The 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm Thiền sect established by Trần Nhân Tông left a significant mark on Vietnamese history as the peak of Buddhism's *Golden Age*. The growth of the sect continued its momentum under Pháp Loa and Huyền Quang as its second and third patriarch, respectively, but faded away afterwards without much of a trace due to the loss of support from the royal court. The only information known is from a few Thiền masters who introduced themselves as descendents of the sect<sup>594</sup> and a list of 23 masters who served as abbots of Yên Tử temple where Trúc Lâm sect was founded, though without further information attached to each of the names.

As suggested by the data collected from existing literature and from the perspective of Trúc Lâm followers, the new Trúc Lâm referenced all fundamental elements of its original 13<sup>th</sup> century mythos: Vietnamization of Buddhism, Self-Exploration Meditation, Non-Duality of Reality, Engagement in the World while Embracing the Dharma, and De-mythologization of Thiền Buddhism. However, the revitalized sect reinterpreted a few of the sect's original features, mostly in the category of De-mythologization of Thiền Buddhism such as the replacement of the *Koan* method with the intensification of both the Scripture-based Dharma Transmission Approach and the Rationalization of Scriptures effort. His emphasis on 'Gender Equality' feature

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tu, khiến tăng sĩ thấy rõ đường lối tu hành của mình là cao siêu thanh thoát; (3) Gầy dựng lại đường lối tu thiền đúng là Thiền tông Phật Giáo Việt Nam.”

<sup>594</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông [All About Trần Nhân Tông]*, 110: “Thiền phái Trúc Lâm, sau khi Huyền Quang mất vào năm 1334, như thế, vẫn được liên tục kế thừa với những khuôn mặt anh tài có những đóng góp to lớn và nhiều mặt cho dân tộc, chứ không phải là ‘thời hưng thịnh chấm dứt’, như trước đây nhiều người đã lầm tưởng.”

embedded in the ‘Buddha Nature Inside Everyone’ fundamental Chan/Thiền element is another reformulation Thích Thanh Từ made to his 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm. This set of referenced and reconstructed features in the findings suggests the influence of Buddhist modernism in a few aspects, which include a move from a credo full of rituals and devotions to a personal-experience-based spirituality, rationality, the rise of female in monasticism, de-emphasis of ‘superstition’, and the persistence of some traditional features not conformed to Western modalities.

The next section will present the conclusions from this data analysis and recommendations for future research.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This dissertation examines how the late 20th century Trúc Lâm Thiền movement used its 13th century original Trúc Lâm mythos to attract a contemporary audience. This process of reformulating its origins resulted in changes that reflects transformation of Buddhist faith traditions that Buddhist Studies scholars refer to as Buddhist modernism. Data collected through primary sources in existing literature, from both interviewing the sect's followers for insiders' perspective and from site observation were synthesized and triangulated for the research findings presented in Chapter Five. This chapter presents the conclusions made in light of the findings of this research and makes recommendations for future research.

### Conclusions

Data from existing literature and face-to-face interviews with the 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm followers suggest that the mythos of the revitalized sect is fundamentally rooted in its original version established by King Monk Trần Nhân Tông in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the original features, however, were negotiated to fit a contemporary audience in the Buddhist modernism era. This research project presented an understanding of the construction of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm mythos in reference to its 13<sup>th</sup> century root and Buddhist modernism features in the context of contemporary Buddhism in Vietnam.

Interfusing the three existing, foreign-imported, early Thiền schools: Vinītaruci from India, Vô Ngôn Thông from Guangzhou, China, and Thảo Đường (Tsao T'ang) from Champa;<sup>595</sup> Trần Nhân Tông established the first Vietnam indigenous Trúc Lâm

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<sup>595</sup> Di Giovine, "Patrimonial Ethics and the Field of Heritage Production," 201.

Thiền sect. Trúc Lâm followed the path of Bodhidharma on fundamental elements such as ‘Buddha-Nature inside Everyone’ and ‘Non-duality of Reality’ as its meditation practice. On Dharma transmission, while sutra-learning was belittled in the past, a ‘Script, Meditation and Koan Synchronization’ approach, however, was a specific feature of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm. Another feature specific to the original Trúc Lâm is the ideology of ‘Engagement in the world while Embracing the Dharma’, in which a Buddhist was not only a respectable Bodhisattva in the religious realm, but also a virtuous person respected in the secular world. Also attempting to rebuild the post-Chinese-occupation of war-torn Vietnam with specific Vietnamese characteristics, Trần Nhân Tông Vietnamized the country’s written language by mandating the use of ‘Chữ Nôm’ as the official language of the royal court, along with the Chinese that had been officially used since ancient time. To start the process, he set himself up as an example for the mandate by composing two verses using the language - the two oldest Vietnamese writings in Chữ Nôm in the country's literary history. Another aspect of Trúc Lâm under Trần Nhân Tông worth mentioning during Trần Nhân Tông’s reign is the disappearance of Tantra’s supernatural and ritual practices which used to be popular during the previous dynasty.

Trúc Lâm continued to flourish under Pháp Loa and Huyền Quang who succeeded the King as the second and third patriarch of Trúc Lâm, respectively. Trúc Lâm Thiền sect under its first three patriarchs left a significant mark on Vietnam history as the peak of Buddhism’s *Golden Age* not only for its high number of monastics, accomplished lay Buddhists, and pagodas, but also for the knowledge pool of its members as the most learned, while carrying a humble lifestyle in contrast to their level of contribution to the



country's development.<sup>596</sup> Toward the end of the Trần Dynasty, Trúc Lâm entered a period of decline, partly due to the rise of Confucianism and Taoism in the royal court, the rise of Tantric supernatural and ritual practice after the King's death, and later, the impact of imported Catholicism, encouraged by the French colonial laws of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The destruction and confiscation of pagodas and Buddhist sacred writings in Vietnam during the 15<sup>th</sup> century Chinese colonization period further contributed to the decline of Thiền Buddhism and played a significant role in a total lack of documentation of Trúc Lâm lineage. The little pieces of information about the existence of the sect up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century is through a few Thiền masters who introduced themselves as the sect's descendents, and a list of 23 masters who succeeded one another as abbots of Yên Tử temple where Yên Tử sect was founded, though without further information attached to each of the names.

By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the common practice in most pagodas in Vietnam were full of rituals and passages associated with Tantra (Mật Tông) and Pure Land (Tịnh Độ),<sup>597</sup> mostly relying on supernatural powers for a spiritually transcendental breakthrough.<sup>598</sup> Leading scholars observe that it was not just Thiền Buddhism, but as a whole Vietnam Buddhism was in decline. The contemporary image of Vietnam Buddhism in the eyes of Vietnamese intellectuals, according to Thích Nhất Hạnh, was “associated with gloomy temples housing mixed displays of worship, or monks known for income-generating sutra chanting and funeral services.”<sup>599</sup> Other descriptions of the religion include, “more

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<sup>596</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Đạo Phật Đi Vào Cuộc Đời [Engaged Buddhism]*, 91.

<sup>597</sup> Thích Thiên-an, “Chapter 1: The Introduction of Buddhism and Zen into Vietnam.”

<sup>598</sup> Nguyen and A.W. Barber, “Vietnamese Buddhism in North America: Tradition and Acculturation.”

<sup>599</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Đạo Phật Đi Vào Cuộc Đời [Engaged Buddhism]*, 89.

shamans than monks,”<sup>600</sup> “a loss of Buddhist scriptural knowledge and understanding,”<sup>601</sup> and “many Thiền monastics rejecting the practice of meditation,”<sup>602</sup> just to name a few, reflecting an image of “a sterile and moribund Buddhism in comparison with the *Golden Age*.”<sup>603</sup>

In 1971, Thích Thanh Từ, who had previously left Pure Land and attained enlightenment himself through Thiền scriptures and practice, established his first monastery and a three-year Thiền program with a declaration to restore the Vietnamese Thiền’s meditation practice to its genuine tradition. The movement quickly turned into a magnet attracting a crowd of followers who found the revered monk’s teaching that made Buddhist scriptures coherent and cultivation practice a controllable process. Even though the restoration effort was almost at a complete halt after the April 1975 event due to the new governmental laws and regulations, Thích Thanh Từ’s determination to spread his transcendent truth and his followers’ strong ambition to teach not only survived the movement through hardships but also flourished over time.

By the mid 1990s, instead of choosing to become a legend as the founder and first patriarch of a new Thiền sect with his flourished Thiền Buddhism restoration movement he personally created and persistently nurtured rain or shine, Thích Thanh Từ officially referenced the *Golden Age*’s 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm lineage structure to continue his Thiền restoration effort. That reference appears to be in alignment with many other New

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<sup>600</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism]*, 356.

<sup>601</sup> Đỗ, “The Quest for Enlightenment and Cultural Identity: Buddhism in Contemporary Vietnam,” 261.

<sup>602</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Thiền Tông Việt Nam Cuối Thế Kỷ 20 [Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism in the Late Twentieth Century]*, 6: “Thế mà hiện nay nghe ai nói tu thiền, đa số Tăng Ni cực lực phản đối.”

<sup>603</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “Buddhist Action in Vietnam: A Special Assessment of the Situation in the Light of Events in March and April 1966.”

Religious Movements (NRMs) that, according to David McMahan, selectively referenced traditional lineage structures or canonical texts to legitimize their existence.<sup>604</sup>

The elements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm's mythos, however, are an imprecise reflection of the sect's origins. According to existing literature and confirmed by Trúc Lâm's followers, the fundamental ideologies of the original Trúc Lâm were all incorporated in the revitalized sect. These fundamental ideologies include Self-Exploration Meditation, Non-Duality of Reality, Engagement in the World while Embracing the Dharma, and De-mythologization of Thiền Buddhism.

To many Trúc Lâm insiders, the traditional Chan approach of Self-Exploration Meditation, advocated by Thích Thanh Từ's movement which allowed everyone autonomy over their own cultivation journey, first attracted them to the movement. This personal experience approach starkly differs between Thích Thanh Từ's movement and the contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism, where the common practice is looking outward and relying on supernatural powers for help on achieving personal awakening. The data suggest the influence of the Buddhist modernism feature characterized by Peter B. Clarke as a move from the credo full of rituals and devotions to a personal-experience-based spirituality.<sup>605</sup> Also according to Heinz Bechert, emphasis on self-exploration is a characteristic of modern Buddhism.<sup>606</sup>

According to Heins Bechert, the rise of females in monasticism is another characteristic of Buddhist modernism.<sup>607</sup> Thích Thanh Từ's stress on 'Gender Equality' hidden in the traditional Thiền fundamental element 'Buddha-Nature Inside Everyone' in

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<sup>604</sup> McMahan, "Buddhist Modernism."

<sup>605</sup> Clarke, *New Religions in Global Perspective*, 305–6.

<sup>606</sup> Webb, "Obituary: Heins Bechert," 213.

<sup>607</sup> Webb, 213.

the revitalized Trúc Lâm which resulted in about 20 nunneries crowded with a thousand nuns suggests the influence of such Buddhist modernism characteristic on the construction of the sect's mythos.

Furthermore, collected data also suggest that the revitalized sect negotiates a few of the sect's original features in the 'De-mythologization of Thiền Buddhism' fundamental ideology. These features include the de-emphasis of Tantric and Pure Land's mythological rituals and devotions, the replacement of the mysterious *koan* method with the scripture-based meditation approaches, the de-emphasis of 'superstitious' rituals, and the rationalization of scripture effort. The traditional versions of these features seem incompatible with contemporary societies, but their reinterpretations are only to the extent that does not radically change the original fundamental ideologies. As confirmed by Trúc Lâm's followers, These reinterpretations suggest an influence from modernity, in which, according to David McMahan, rationality is a driving force<sup>608</sup> characterized by Agnes Heller, "everything is open to query and to testing; everything is subject to rational scrutiny and refuted by argument."<sup>609</sup> Heinz Bechert further adds that, due to this modernity force, Buddhism is reinterpreted as a scientific religion.<sup>610</sup> An effect of the rationality and scientific feature of modernity on modern societies, as Norris and Inglehart argues, is that it weakens the supernatural, the mysterious, and the magical elements of the traditional religion.<sup>611</sup>

It also appears that the transition from Thích Thanh Từ's initial Thiền restoration movement to the 13<sup>th</sup> Trúc Lâm sect revitalization effort went well. In regard to the third

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<sup>608</sup> McMahan, "Buddhist Modernism."

<sup>609</sup> Heller, *A Theory of History*, 41.

<sup>610</sup> Webb, "Obituary: Heins Bechert," 213.

<sup>611</sup> Norris and Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular*, 3.

research question concerning how followers of the new Trúc Lâm movement view their root, all participants, including the ones who joined the movement prior to the merge, refer to the 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm as the origin of their sect. They dearly embrace all of Trúc Lâm's fundamental values in their daily cultivation practice and their way of spreading Thiền Buddhism. The worshipped figures of Trúc Lâm's first three patriarchs typically dedicated in the ancestor hall of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm monasteries further suggest the success of the merge.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The findings from this exploratory study suggest that Thích Thanh Từ's 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm revitalized the 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm tradition by incorporating all the original fundamental mythic elements but negotiated a few features to fit a contemporary audience influenced by Buddhist modernism. Data from the interviews with Trúc Lâm insiders and site observation validate the literature on the relationship between the features in the old and new Trúc Lâm. The following recommendations are based upon insight discovered by this study.

#### *Replication of This Study*

Future researchers in this area should avoid the shortcomings that I encountered. One drawback in this study was allocation of time for each interview. While an hour was set aside for each interview, a few interviews took almost twice as long. Some participants needed the additional time to become comfortable with me before actually sharing their thoughts in depth. Furthermore, a larger sample size might improve the validity of research results.

Another shortcoming is the lack of documentation on Trúc Lâm lineage after Huyền Quang, the third patriarch of the sect. This missing link makes the lineage disconnect on subsequent patriarchs and activities from that time on. Future discoveries in this area might reveal more interesting information on the evolution of the old Trúc Lâm's mythos.

#### *Factors Leading to the Rapid Growth of Thích Thanh Từ's Initial Movement*

This research focused on the mythos of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm as compared to that of the 13<sup>th</sup> century sect and the values advocated by Buddhist modernism. Data from the sect's insiders suggest that its mythic elements, especially the Self-Exploration meditation approach and Thích Thanh Từ's effort of rationalizing Buddhism scriptures to make them comprehensible, were keys in attracting them to join the movement in the contemporary context where Buddhism was associated with mysterious practices on top of its incomprehensible scripture. A question that might deserve attention is if any other factors, besides Thích Thanh Từ's initial movement's mythos, contributed to the rapid growth of the movement. Knowing those factors might provide more insight for a better understanding of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm.

#### *Factors Leading to Thích Thanh Từ's Decision to Revitalize Trúc Lâm*

Literature and Trúc Lâm followers suggest that Thích Thanh Từ tremendously admired Trần Nhân Tông's accomplishments in serving the Vietnamese and Thiền Buddhism. After creating and growing the Thiền restoration movement for over 20 years, instead of choosing to become a legend as the founder and first patriarch of a new Thiền sect, Thích Thanh Từ decided to dedicate his effort to revitalize the 13<sup>th</sup> century Trúc Lâm. As reported by some of his senior followers, that decision came after his visits to

the old sect's facilities located in the north side of Vietnam. A question that might deserve attention is what all the crucial factors are that led Thích Thanh Từ to make that choice. Knowing those factors will provide a fuller history of 20th century Trúc Lâm.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) Approval**



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University of the West  
1409 Walnut Grove Ave.,  
Rosemead, CA 91770

Date: April 11, 2018

Approval Number: # 01801

Principal Investigator: Laura - Loan Thuy Nguyen

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Jane Iwamura

Project Title: New Buddhist Movements and the Construction of Mythos: The Truc Lam Thien Sect in late 20th Century Vietnam

The University of the West Human Participants Protection Committee has reviewed the proposed use of human participants on the project identified above and has determined that the rights and welfare of human participants are adequately protected. The informed consent of participants will be obtained through a written or online consent form to be signed, either electronically or physically, by the subject (*unless otherwise noted below*).

☐ Written Consent Waived

☐ Secondary Analysis of Pre-collected Data

Consent to be obtained by:

☒ Introductory Letter

☒ Oral Statement

If modifications are made in the approved project, it is the investigator's responsibility to notify the Human Participants Protection Committee.

**HPPC Approval Expires:** 5/20/2019. If this research study continues beyond the approval period, you must request re-approval of this study prior to the expiration date.

*Hiroshi M. Sasaki, Ph.D.*

*Ashley Coleman, Psy.D.*

*Jitsuyo T. Gauthier, Ph.D.*

University of the West Human Participants Protection Committee

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Questions

#### Interview Questions

##### **New Buddhist Movements and the Construction of Mythos:**

##### **The Trúc Lâm Thiền Sect in late 20th Century Vietnam**

(Cấu Trúc của Phương Pháp Tu trong Những Phong Trào Phật Giáo Cận Đại:  
Trường Hợp của Phái Thiền Trúc Lâm vào Cuối Thế Kỷ thứ 20)

1. How long have you practiced or been affiliated with Trúc Lâm and with this particular temple?  
(Ông/Bà tu theo phái Trúc Lâm này được bao lâu rồi? và Ông/Bà tu ở chùa này bao lâu rồi?)
2. Could you tell me about your religious background (including how you were introduced to Trúc Lâm)?  
(Trước khi tới Trúc Lâm Ông/Bà tu ở đâu? Và sao Ông/Bà biết Trúc Lâm mà tới?)
3. (*For laypeople*) Why did you choose to become a practitioner of Trúc Lâm?  
(*For monks*) How did you decide to become a monastic at Trúc Lâm?  
(Tại sao Ông/Bà chọn dòng thiền Trúc Lâm để tu?)
4. What is the main teaching of Trúc Lâm?  
(Điều gì Ông/Bà cho là chính yếu nhất trong cách tu ở Trúc Lâm?)
5. Can you tell me the story of Trúc Lâm—its origins and development? How did you learn about this history?  
(Ông/Bà hiểu thế nào về nguồn gốc và sự hình thành ban đầu của dòng thiền Trúc Lâm? Sự hiểu biết này Ông/Bà học được từ đâu?)
6. Trúc Lâm was a Buddhist sect that began in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by King-Monk Trần Nhân Tông. After the first 3 patriarchs, the sect was fairly dormant until Master Thích Thanh Từ chose to revitalize the movement. Do you know the reason(s) why Master Thích Thanh Từ chose the Trúc Lâm lineage to revitalize?  
(Như Ông/Bà đã biết, Vua Trần Nhân Tông lập nên phái Thiền Trúc Lâm vào thế kỷ thứ 13, và sau 3 đời Tam Tổ thì hầu như ít người biết đến. Ông/Bà có nghe Sư phụ Thanh Từ nói lý do tại sao lại chọn dòng Thiền Trúc Lâm để phục hồi không?)
7. *If the subject knows of the origins and longer history:* Is Trúc Lâm's doctrine and practice now different/similar from/to Trúc Lâm in the 13<sup>th</sup> century? How?  
(Nếu người này biết rõ về nguồn gốc của Trúc Lâm - Theo Ông/Bà, phương pháp tu tập của Trúc Lâm bây giờ có khác Trúc Lâm thời Trần Nhân Tông không? Nếu có, khác và giống nhau chỗ nào?)
8. Can you tell me about your practice?  
(Ông/Bà có thể cho biết về phương pháp tu của ông/bà được không?)

## APPENDIX C

### Informed Consent Form

#### **Informed Consent (Giấy Đồng Ý Tham Dự)**

New Buddhist Movements and the Construction of Mythos:  
The Trúc Lâm Thiền Sect in late 20th century Vietnam  
(Cấu Trúc của Pháp Tu trong Những Phong Trào Phật Giáo Cận Đại:  
Trường Hợp của Phái Thiền Trúc Lâm vào Cuối Thế Kỷ thứ 20)

Interview Date: (Ngày)

Interview Location: (Địa điểm)

---

Name: (Tên)

Monk or Layperson: (Xuất Gia hay Cư Sĩ)

Age: (Tuổi)

Gender: (Giới Tính)                      Male (Ông)      Female (Bà)

Temple/Monastery: (Chùa/Thiền Viện)

Education: (Trình độ văn hóa)    College (Đại Học)                      High School (Trung Học)    Others  
(Khác)

Occupation: (Nghề nghiệp)

Primary Language: (Ngôn ngữ chính)    Vietnamese (Tiếng Việt)    English (Tiếng Anh/Mỹ)

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I understand the content of this audio recorded interview, and voluntarily participate in the study.

(Tôi hiểu nội dung của buổi phỏng vấn có thu âm này, và tự nguyện tham dự.)

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Participant's Signature (Chữ ký của người đồng ý tham dự)