

THE BUDDHIST ACTIVITIES IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY

Nguyễn Ngọc Quỳnh (*)

Chủ Thị Kim Phương (**)

Abstract: *The Buddhist activities in the second half of the 19th century were divided clearly into two trends: Royal Buddhism and popular Buddhism. Nguyen court created good conditions for the Buddhist worship of royal families. The Court spent much money on sacrifice every year. Nguyen kings passed the concrete policies to express their concerns with Buddhism. As for the popular Buddhist, the Nguyen (especially, under the Tu Duc reign) had many serious rules to control. The Court allowed to maintain the Buddhist activities in popular which met the national needs on management, but these activities did not infringe upon Confucianism; limited Buddhism to take part in political activities; criticized the costly building and repairing of pagodas, and long-time worships. It was reason why Vietnam Buddhist life of this period met more difficulties than the past period. When the French colonialists invaded Vietnam, many Buddhist monks and nuns took part in the war of resistance against aggressor. Many pagodas became the meeting places of patriots and the bases of political and armed activities.*

1- THE BUDDHIST ACTIVITIES IN THE ROYAL FAMILIES

In the past, the Nguyễn dynasty had strong attachments to Buddhism. At that time Confucianism was orthodox ideology but the early kings of the Nguyễn dynasty continued to show consideration for Buddhism and the pagodas relating to the cause of the Nguyễn dynasty. Thiên Mụ pagoda (where king Gia Long lived when Gia Định citadel was building in 1790), Khải Tường pagoda (where prince Đảm was born, lately king Minh Mệnh) became National pagodas. These pagodas were grant money to restore many times by kings. The monks who helped Nguyễn lord were appointed to be royal recognized monks.

* . Ph.D., Institute of Religious Studies, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences.

** . Researcher, Institute of Religious Studies, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences.

Under the Nguyễn dynasty many pagodas in Huế, Thuận Hóa were built and repaired. Kings of the Nguyễn dynasty favored the regions that attached to the cause of the Nguyễn dynasty. Many temples and pagodas in Gia Định citadel, in Quảng Bình, in Quảng Trị, in Quảng Nam, in Bình Định provinces were restored and built on different occasions. Kings granted lands to pagodas: Thiên Mụ and Linh Hựu (in Huế), Khải Tường (in Gia Định), Tam Khai and Ứng Chân (in Quảng Nam)...

Under the period of the Nguyễn, all the Nguyễn lords and kings assigned a royal recognized monk who supervised the assembly of the monks in the national pagoda. Thiên Mụ pagoda had a royal recognized monk. Under the reigns of Minh Mệnh, Thiệu Trị, Tự Đức there were many national pagodas. At first, king who decided to choose a royal recognized monk then he ordered Ministry of Rites to grant royal decree. When many national pagodas were built, Ministry of Rites convened all royal recognized monks for recommendation of new royal recognized monks to supervise the national pagodas. Ministry of Rites would report new royal recognized monks to king. After examining, king would grant royal decree. In the pagodas of mandarin, an abbot helped royal recognized monk to supervise the assembly of the monks, the number of the monks depended on every pagoda. The abbots and royal recognized monks were exempted from taxes and they were paid good wages for their spending.

State protected two kinds of pagoda: the pagodas of king (national pagodas) and the pagodas of mandarin (pagodas were built by member of royal family or mandarins)⁽¹⁾. National pagodas were built by the court. On the occasions of rites of the court, kings and their families would come to national pagodas to make offerings to their ancestors and deities. These pagodas were granted lands and money every year. The numbers of abbot and royal recognized monk of the national pagodas were defined by the court. The pagodas of mandarin might be pagodas of village but they were built and restored by royal families and mandarins.

The Nguyễn Queens and princesses were devout Buddhist believers; they contributed much effort and money to Buddhism. They convert to Buddhism for

¹. See Thích Hải Ân and Hà Xuân Liêm, *A History of Buddhism in Huế*, Saigon Culture Publishing House, 2006, pp. 326-334.

praying for blessing and departing from this life to reach pure land. They often built pagodas in their garden. Most venerable Phúc Điền wrote that “aristocrats build small pagoda in their house”⁽²⁾. It is said that “in the past, princes and princesses made offerings in the fixed pagoda. This pagoda was in palace or next to palace”⁽³⁾. In the second half of the 19th century, many pagodas were repaired and built in Huế, Thuận Hóa. According to *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* under the Tự Đức reign in Vietnam there were 245 pagodas but Hà Nội had 15 pagodas and Huế had 36 pagodas. These pagodas were famous ones but were not village pagodas⁽⁴⁾.

At that time state carried out Confucian institution but thought highly Buddhism. The Buddhist festivals were organized annually on a large scale. Some festivals were organized in the National pagodas. The court set up altars on land and water. In 1848 king Tự Đức set up altar in Thiên Mụ pagoda for holding Queen Thuận Thiên Cao’s death anniversary on the 15th of the 7th lunar month. After Ninh Lăng festival, the court set altar on land and water and read Buddhist sutras for three weeks and two days “reading of sutras begins on the 18th August and finished on the 9 September”⁽⁵⁾. In the second year of the Tự Đức reign (1849) “the court sets a large altar on the land and water in Thiên Mụ pagoda and reads sutras for three weeks and 7 days (i.e. 21 days)”⁽⁶⁾.

Under the Tự Đức reign, the court entrusted supervision of religious ceremonies on holidays to two offices of Ministry of Rite. *Thái Thượng tự* “looks after decoration and form of the Buddhist ceremonies which are organized in nation, *Quan Loc tự* looks after offerings and banquets and feasts in the Buddhist ceremonies

². Summary record of scientific seminar, “*Studying the Religious Policy of the Nguyễn Dynasty*”, 2001, p. 193.

³. “*A Selection and Translation of Epitaphs in Huế Pagodas*”, *Study and Development Review*, N^o. 1-2, 2005, p. 213.

⁴. According to statistics of Ass. Prof. Nguyễn Duy Hinh in *A Civilization of Đại Việt*, Cultural Information Publishing House & the Institute of Culture, 2005, p. 648.

⁵. National Historiographer’s office of the Nguyễn dynasty, *Đại Nam Royal Annuals*, History Publishing House, 1963, Volume 27, p. 82.

⁶. *Đại Nam Royal Annuals*, *ibid*, volume 27, pp. 82-120.

which were organized in capital city”⁽⁷⁾ So state was interested in the organization of religious ceremonies.

Many members of royal families contributed to repairing and building pagodas. In Kim Quang pagoda (in Hương Thủy commune, Huế) there was a stele which was erected in the second year of the Duy Tân reign. It was written that “Our king revives civil administration and promotes Confucianism but pagodas are repaired [....]. In 1871 King’s grand-aunt with religious name Như Diệu builds a private pagoda and worships statues of Buddha and Quan Thánh đế quân. She devotes money to cast bell...”⁽⁸⁾

The mother of king Tự Đức was Từ Dũ (Phạm Thị Hằng) and some members of royal families offered money for repairing of pagodas in Huế. The stele in Quốc An pagodas wrote that “Because of the mobilization of monk Liễu Chơn Tứ Hiếu, two madams Từ Dũ, Trang Ý and two princess Lại Đức, Quý Đức offer money to pagoda for buying rice field and casting statues”⁽⁹⁾. In the 11th year of the Thành Thái reign (1899) in the anniversary of Từ Dũ’s birthday feast, king offered money to repair tower and erect stele for memorizing her. Madam Từ Dũ also contributed money to repaired Quốc Ân, Từ Hiếu and Thiên Hưng pagodas⁽¹⁰⁾.

Buddhism was assisted by the court because imperial concubines of Nguyễn kings were devoted to Buddhism. They had great contributions to restoring and repairing the pagodas both in capital city and in their villages. The numbers of imperial concubines were large. According to Daniel Grandclément, Tự Đức had 103 wives and 300 maidens “After a long time living in palace, maidens are dismissed because of ill or old. They often enter religion and lead a religious life in pagodas”⁽¹¹⁾.

2- THE BUDDHIST ACTIVITIES OF MANDARINS

⁷. *Đại Nam Royal Annals*, ibid, Volume 27, pp. 196-197.

⁸. Đỗ Bang (Chief Editor), *The Organization of State under the Nguyễn Dynasty in 1802-1884*. Thuận Hóa Publishing House, Huế, 1997, pp. 90-91.

⁹. “*The Selection and Translation of Epitaphs in Huế*”, *Study and Development Review*, p. 38.

¹⁰. “*The Selection and Translation of Stele Inscriptions in Huế Pagodas*”, *Study and Development Review*, p. 66.

¹¹. Daniel Grandclément, *Bảo Đại or the Last Days of An Nam Kingdom*, Phu Nu Publishing House (Translated and Publishing), 2006, pp. 62-63.

After reading epitaphs we find that many people of royal families as well as mandarins of the Nguyễn dynasty in general and of the Tự Đức reign in particular were devoted to Buddhism and they had many contributions to restoring and building pagodas.

One of important mandarins of the Nguyễn dynasty was Minister Nguyễn Đình Tân. In the second year of the Minh Mạng reign (1821) Nguyễn Đình Tân passed the prefectural examination and became Minister of Ministry of War. During his term of office he offered Trường Xuân pagoda two steles.

The next important mandarin was Đặng Lễ Trai. He was Minister of Ministry of Justice. In 1850 he offered 40 taels of silver to pagodas in Thanh Lương village, Hương Xuân commune, Hương Trà province where he lived.

The Minister of Ministry of Justice Đặng Lễ Trai also offered money to repair Bác Vọng Tây pagoda in Quảng Phú commune, Quảng Điền province where his mother's village was. In the 6th year of the Tự Đức reign (1853) he devoted money to put up the statues of Dvarapala and the Trinity of Buddhas of three epochs and cast a great bell. He contributed 100 coins (Vietnamese money) to building temple and pagoda”⁽¹²⁾.

In 1848 the viceroy of Ninh Thái, Trương Văn Uyển donated a bell to the pagoda in Phú Lễ village, Quảng Phú commune, Quảng Điền province. Crow prince Hiệp biện Đại học sĩ Đặng tướng công and his wife restored his village pagoda in the 4th year of the Tự Đức reign (1851)⁽¹³⁾.

Từ Hiếu pagoda was a special pagoda which was built in the Thiệu Trị reign and king Tự Đức gave a name to it. “Từ Hiếu pagoda combined two elements Buddhism and Confucianism because the abbot of these pagodas thought highly Confucius spirit. The builder of this pagoda was the monk Nhất Định; he was a native of Quảng Trị. At first, these pagodas were small, so it was called An Dưỡng small pagoda in Hương Thủy district, Thừa Thiên province (now Huế). In 1847 monk Nhất Định died and his disciple, Hải Thiệu Cương Kỳ, continued to look after this pagoda. In 1848

¹². Trần Đại Vinh, *Vietnamese Stele Inscriptions and Bell Inscriptions in Chinese in Thua Thien-Hue*, Thuận Hóa Publishing House, Huế, 2006, pp. 100-101.

¹³. Trần Đại Vinh, *Vietnamese Stele Inscriptions and...*, *ibid*, Huế, 2006, pp. 129-130.

three eunuchs asked the court's support to rebuild this pagoda. King Tự Đức admired the morality of monk Nhất Định so he named this pagoda Từ Hiếu. Because of some rebellions of monks, the Nguyễn dynasty limited Buddhist activities but king Tự Đức allowed people to restore Từ Hiếu pagoda. Now Từ Hiếu pagoda still has some steles which were erected in 1848, 1849, and 1855. On these steles were written "good behavior of monks and the names of contributors".

The above content shows that many mandarins and people of royal families were devoted to Buddhism when Confucianism developed and prospered. Many researchers remark that kings and mandarins of the Nguyễn dynasty "give prominence to Confucianism but admire Buddhism". This remark is not wrong. The Buddhist activities were favored by the court, especially in Huế because they supported the court. After reading words which were carved on the bell in Từ Quang pagoda in Văn Xá village, Hương Trà district, we find that both Buddhas and kings won praise ⁽¹⁴⁾.

During the 19th century Vietnamese Buddhism had many famous monks. They influenced people's ideology and Buddhist activities. They were Thanh Đàm, Thanh Nguyên, An Thiên, Nhất Định, Diệu Giác, Tịch Truyền, Chiêu Khoan, Phúc Điền, Phổ Tịnh, Mật Hoảng, Thông Vinh, Liễu Thông, Viên Quang ⁽¹⁵⁾. Some of them had collected and annotated Buddhist sutras.

3- THE BUDDHIST ACTIVITIES IN PEOPLE

Different from Buddhism in the capital city and in imperial palace, Buddhism in people was not favored by the court. The Buddhist activities in people were not allowed to enlarge on organization and material facilities. But Buddhist activities in village connected with the life of people and so they developed strongly. Buddhism was great inspiration to many poems; for example, *Kiều* by Nguyễn Du, *Quan Âm Thị Kính*, *Vịnh Phật* by Nguyễn Công Trứ and some poems written by Cao Bá

¹⁴. Trần Đại Vinh, *Vietnamese Stele Inscriptions and...*, ibid, Huế, 2006, pp. 137-138.

¹⁵. See Nguyễn Lang, *A Short History of Vietnamese Buddhism*, Literature Publishing House, Hanoi, 2000, pp. 682-709.

Quát...⁽¹⁶⁾. Buddhism was moral support of people when they met difficulties. When new lands in the South were developed, people built pagodas there to worship their ancestors.

On architecturally, in the second half of the 19th century the architecture of Buddhism manifested the harmony of three religions so in the pagodas there were many statues of worship. On the Buddhist sanctuary of some pagodas there were statues of Taoist gods. The worship of statues and Hậu steles happened in many pagodas. The architecture of pagodas in the North was the Đình (J) shape⁽¹⁷⁾. In the South the Buddhist sanctuaries had more statues (the statues of Trinity of Buddha of three epochs, king of heave, Avalokitesvara, little angels, new born Sakyamuni⁽¹⁸⁾)... The court forbad to carve the dragon designs in the pagodas. Pagodas were allowed to carve the four supernatural creatures (Dragon, Unicorn, Tortoise and Phoenix) the word of Phúc and flowers...

Under the Nguyễn dynasty and the Tự Đức period country met many difficulties, the Buddhist activities were upheld by people. People contributed effort and wealth to repair pagodas; for example, Dâu, Bút Tháp, Phật Tích, Vĩnh Nghiêm, Keo, Sài Sơn, Tây Phương pagodas... In Hanoi, Lý Quốc Sư and Quán Sứ pagodas were repaired in the 8th year of the Tự Đức reign (12855). Dục Khánh pagoda and Huy Văn shrine were repaired in the 17th year of the Tự Đức reign (1864). Thanks to the contributions of monks and Buddhist followers, Liên Phái pagoda was repaired⁽¹⁹⁾.

Under the Nguyễn dynasty, the court paid attention to collect and printed Buddhist sutras. Some pagodas were in charge of printing and preservation of printing wood-blocks; for example, Bồ Đà, Từ Quang, Liên Tông pagodas in the North and Đại Giác (Biên Hòa), Giác Lâm, Giác Viên (Gia Định), Vạn An (Đồng Tháp)... in the South. Many Buddhist sutras and commandments were printed; for example, *Avatamsaka sutra* (Flower ornament sutra), *Suddharma-Pundarika sutra*

¹⁶. Summary record of scientific seminar, *A Problem on Socio-Culture of the Nguyễn Dynasty*. Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 1992, p. 186.

¹⁷. Summary record of scientific seminar, *A Problem on the Socio-...*, *ibid*, pp. 78-85.

¹⁸. Summary record of scientific seminar, *A Problem on the Socio-...*, *ibid*, p. 188.

¹⁹. *A Heritage of the Stele Inscriptions in Chinese in Thăng Long-Hanoi*, Đỗ Thị Hào translated, pp. 84, 88, 137, 189.

(The Lotus sutra), *Bhaisaya guru sutra* (Medicine Buddha sutra) *Ksitigarbhapranidhana sutra* (the Erath store sutra)...⁽²⁰⁾.

When French colonialists invaded our country, many pagodas were destroyed. From 1861 to 1865 French colonialists occupied and destroyed Khải Tường, Kiểng Phước, Cây Mai pagodas in Gia Định⁽²¹⁾. In 1863 Kim Tiên and Pháp Võ pagodas were taken down; Phước Hưng pagoda was destroyed in 1864; Phật Lớn pagoda was taken down in 1865... According to the statistics of J. Ch Balencie, Gia Định had 305 pagodas, 82 monks, 49 nuns and 211.057 believers in 1899⁽²²⁾.

4- BUDDHISM WITH VIETNAM CONDITION

When the French colonialists invaded Vietnam, many Buddhist monks and nuns took part in the war of resistance against aggressor. Many pagodas became the meeting places of patriots and the bases of political and armed activities. Under the leadership of three brothers “giặc chày vôi” uprising (i.e. the weapons of all those who took part in this uprising were lime pestles) broke out on the 16th August, 1866. Many monks took part in this uprising as monk Nguyễn Văn Quý of Thiên Phước pagoda⁽²³⁾, monk Nguyễn Văn Ly of Pháp Vân pagoda⁽²⁴⁾. Pháp Vân pagoda (i.e. Khoai pagoda) in the suburb of Huế was the headquarters of uprising. Monk Nguyễn Văn Quý was appointed to be adviser; he gathered many Buddhist monks, nuns and believers to take part in uprising. This uprising was defeated because imperial guards defended citadel from the attack. After this event many monks were compelled to return the secular life. At that time in the capital city there were only 24 monks and 24 pagodas⁽²⁵⁾.

²⁰. Summary record of scientific seminar, *Nguyễn Lords and the Nguyễn Dynasty in Vietnamese History from the 16th Century to the 19th Century*.

²¹. Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation, *Buddhist Annals of Sài Gòn-Gia Định-Hồ Chí Minh City*, Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, 2001, pp. 56-57.

²². Trần Hồng Liên, *Buddhism in Vietnamese Community from the 17th Century to 1975*, Social Sciences Publishing House, 2000, p. 140.

²³. Thích Hà Ân and Hà Xuân Liêm, *A History of Buddhism in Huế*, Saigon Culture Publishing House, 2006.

²⁴. Thích Hà Ân and Hà Xuân Liêm, *A History of Buddhism in Huế*, *ibid*, p. 285.

²⁵. Yoshiarru Tsuboi, *Vietnam Opposed France and China (1847-1885)*, Association of Vietnamese History, Hanoi, 1993, pp. 268-270.

In the South the uprisings which broke out in 1873, 1875, 1885, 1913, 1916 were led by Ông Đạo (men of Tao). Their beliefs consisted of Buddhism, Taoism and magic. The uprising of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương broke up in 1873; the uprising of Đạo Lành broke up in 1875- 1885. In 1895 -1898, Núi Cấm pagoda in An Giang was base of Phan Xích Long uprising; this uprising broke out in 1913- 1916.

When the French colonialists ruled Vietnam together with the whole people the Buddhist believers rose up against the French colonialists. In 1888 Kỳ Đồng recruited young people to rise up against the French colonialists in Nam Định. In 1888 monk Thọ led the uprising against French colonialists in Thái Bình and Nam Định. Monk Thọ was abbot of the pagodas in Lãng Đông village, Trục Nam district. Monk Vương Quốc Chính of Ngọc Long Động pagoda also took part in this uprising. The uprising of Trần Cao Vân (1897) had the contributions of Buddhist monks and believers. In late years of the 19th century many pagodas in Bình Định, Phú Yên were bases of many uprisings ⁽²⁶⁾.

Because Confucianism did not occupy an important position in society, Vietnamese patriotic based on Buddhism, Taoism and mystery to fight against the French colonialists. Many patriotic movements bearing the religious color connected with the political activities at that time. Many the leaders of uprising were monks, their action guidelines were the ideology of Buddhism and Taoism. However, their uprisings were defeated. The historian Trần Văn Giàu remarked that “Confucianism could not encroach on Buddhism and Taoism, on the contrary Buddhism and Taoism developed. The mysteries of Taoism and Buddhism connected friendly with the patriotic movements in the end of the 19th century” ⁽²⁷⁾.

As we know, the Buddhist activities in the second half of the 19th century were divided into two clear directions: the Buddhist activities in imperial palace and the Buddhist activities in people. On the Buddhist activities in imperial palace: the worship of Buddha was granted money by the court. Nguyễn kings, especially king Tự Đức was interested Buddhism. He depended on Buddhism to rule the country. Under the Tự Đức reign, Buddhist activities were organized regularly. On the

²⁶. Trần Văn Giàu, *The Developing of Vietnamese Ideology from the 19th Century to the August Revolution*, Volume 1, National Politics Publishing House, 1996, pp. 500-513.

²⁷. Trần Văn Giàu, *The Developing of Vietnamese Ideology...*, *ibid*, p. 547.

occasion of national ceremonies the court set up altars in Thiên Mụ. The court defined the number of Buddhist monks and nuns in the national pagodas. The court examined the monks' catechism standard and granted articles to monks... The court gradually ruled Buddhism and Buddhism gradually enhanced the court. So the Nguyễn policy for Buddhism achieved the memorable achievements.

On the Buddhist activities in people: The court promulgated severe regulations to control and regulate the Buddhist activities in people. The court maintained the policy on solidarity of three religions within limit. All Buddhist activities which met the national needs on management were favored by the court. The court criticized over-activities of Buddhist believers as spending much money on building and repairing pagodas or long time ceremonies. The Nguyễn kings, especially king Tự Đức thought that if people venerated Buddhism overmuch they would not respect the Taoist dogmas so he did not allow building new pagodas. At that time only collapsed pagodas could be reconstructed. These measures helped the court to manage the Buddhist activities and affirm royalty which means royalty was used in religious right.

On the one hand, king Tự Đức venerated Confucianism. On the other hand many uprisings were led by monks so the court made important changes to Buddhism. The court promulgated many severe regulations to control the Buddhist activities in people. The court forbade enlarging organization and material facilities of pagodas outside capital city. That was the reason why Vietnamese Buddhism met many difficulties at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

The court allowed maintaining the Buddhist activities in people but these activities were in moderate level so that they did not encroach Confucian activities. The court limited monks to take part in the political activities. That is why many people think that the Nguyễn kings, especially king Tự Đức was not fond of Buddhism even they repressed Buddhism. If we only survey exterior manifestations of policies not to explain the reason why the Nguyễn kings should bring out these policies we caused people to have untoward remarks on the policies of the Nguyễn dynasty in general and king Tự Đức in particular on Buddhism. /.