

DOCTORAL THESIS IN BRIEF

KHUC MANH KIEN. *Three Saints in Pagodas of Buddha in the Front and Saint in the Rear and Folk Consciousness in the Northern Delta*

Major: Folk Culture

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In the Northern delta region of Vietnam, there exists a popular style of pagodas with a special decorative structure and mode of worship, called the pagodas of Buddha in the front and Saint in the rear. The main objects of worship therein are saints and Zen masters of Vietnamese Buddhism, who have merits, virtues, and biographies imbued with Vietnamese cultural characteristics of the Northern delta. Historical books and survey data show that the most prominent saints in these pagodas include Saint Tu Dao Hanh, Saint Duong Khong Lo, Saint Nguyen Minh Khong, Saint Nguyen Giac Hai and Saint Boi (Nguyen Nhu). In particular, the three of Tu Dao Hanh, Duong Khong Lo and Nguyen Minh Khong are notable saints/Zen masters of the Ly dynasty, worshiped by Vietnamese people as saints of profession or gods of medicine.

The thesis provides a systematic explanation of the three saints from the perspective of folk consciousness, and explores the issue of Vietnamese folk consciousness about the three saints in relation to the market economy, contemporary religious policy and context.

Apart from the Introduction, Conclusion, References, the thesis is presented in 5 chapters.

Chapter 1 presents an literature review related to the thesis topic (biography, virtues, worshiping space and practices of saints), in which the majority of works describes the three saints' virtues according to official and unofficial historical documents as well as the structure and art of pagodas of Buddha in the front and Saint in the rear. Besides, chapter 1 outlines the theoretical framework on the topic as follows: Gods, saints, and common ancestors in the Vietnamese belief system; Folk consciousness; Magic and sacred biography; Culture area theory. The thesis does not aim to explain whether the three saints are real characters in history, or Duong Khong Lo and Nguyen Minh Khong are one or two characters, but pays attention to the fact that they are worshipped as holy saints, irrespective of their true virtue and character in history.

Chapter 2 clarifies the context of forming folk consciousness about the three saints in the Northern Delta - the cultural cradle of the Vietnamese people and the place of birth and home of several pagodas of Buddha in the front and Saint in the rear. Pagodas in this architectural style appear much on the right bank of Red River. Located in the wet rice cultivation culture, Vietnamese people have formed practices related to the belief in gods for the sake of receiving their blessings in difficult times. The wet rice economic system involving fishing and handicrafts offered important natural, economic and social factors that promoted the myths about the saints they worshiped, which is associated

with their socio-economic life. Besides, Vietnamese socio-political context in the 12th century included the development of dynasties, canonization, ordination, as well as the introduction of religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Tantra Buddhism was premise that formed the system of worshiping Zen masters in pagodas. The development of Buddhism in Vietnam also facilitated the establishment of pagodas of Buddha in the front and Saint in the rear such as Thay Pagoda, Keo Pagoda, Dai Bi Pagoda that are dedicated to the saints. The three saints Tu Dao Hanh, Duong Khong Lo, Nguyen Minh Khong were the human spirits who had a lot of merits and virtues towards the Ly court and the people. Sacred stories about the their biographies and virtues was fostered and worshiping space and practices dedicated to them was built and promoted respectively, throughout the social and cultural development of the nation.

Chapter 3 clarifies the virtues of the three saints. Their sacred biographies related to layers of beliefs and cultures throughout history from birth to present. Fragments of mystical biographies create “miraculous” images of common ancestors, which are formed through time in Vietnamese people’s minds. The folk consciousness of worshiping the three saints today still has many manifestations associated with their biographies, virtues and lives such as their reincarnation referring to the request the saints to gift a child, their miraculous treatment for the king’s disease related to changing destiny, the treatment of diseases related to spirits, or bringing copper from China back to Vietnam related to the holy

father of bronze casting profession. The life fragments have been passing down to create a mysterious colorful religious atmosphere around the three saints.

According to ancient records and documents, the saint Tu Dao Hanh was a noble monk who attained the dharma, had many talents and miracles. In history, he made great contributions to the construction, expansion and influence of Thien Phuc Pagoda, turning this place into a land of Buddha, a center of contemporary Buddhism. According to unofficial history, Tu Dao Hanh reincarnated as a king (King Ly Than Tong), so today Thay pagoda worships him as a king. He’s also worshiped as an father of land and water puppetries.

Classics in East Asian Buddhism (Thiền uyển tập anh) - one of the available oldest documents about the history of Vietnamese Buddhism shows that Saint Duong Khong Lo, a Buddhist, specialized in practicing Dharani and meditation. After attaining the Dharma, he had many miracles: “His mind, eyes and ears become more and more clear, he can fly in the air, walk under water, tame dragons and tigers. He has thousands of unpredictable miracles. He can master and tame wild beasts, pray for the rain and make it stop, do irrigation management and disease treatment, etc. No works fail”.

History books also show that Saint Nguyen Minh Khong is both a real figure in history and a personified one with miraculous powers. One of Nguyen Minh Khong’s talents recorded in history books and books on mystical stories, myths and widely spread as a monk had cured the king’s illness, which made Saint Nguyen Minh Khong

come into folk consciousness as a god of medicine.

Saints have charisma and magic power thanks to their innate, outstanding and prominent background. It is their sacredness, charisma and power that make up a system of religious expressions and practices dedicated to the three saints.

Chapter 4 analyzes the manifestations of the folk consciousness about the three saints. The diverse expression of the folk consciousness about the three saints is revealed through a system of worship space (architecture), festival (performance), folk narrative (words), letter of request (text), and prayer (utterance). To the people, saints in general and the three saints Tu Dao Hanh, Duong Khong Lo, Nguyen Minh Khong in particular are the powerful saints, always present in the invisible world. They could give blessings by direct requests or through the rituals performed by a mediator such as a shaman or a male/female spirit mediums. Survey results and interviews about people's experiences show that their main concern is to ask for holy treatment of disease, to gift them a child, to ask for blessings in studying and exams and blessings of Father of profession.

Folk consciousness of the three saints is merged in the flow and the system of god/saint worship in Vietnam. The French researcher Cadière wrote, Vietnamese beliefs are intertwined, so that it is difficult to distinguish between types of beliefs and to determine what is folk Buddhism, what is Taoism, and what is Vietnamese belief. Vietnamese people keeps the habit of praying for gods in cases of important

issues related to individuals, families, or collectives, agencies or villages. The religious belief is appeal to people due to it responds to their desires and satisfies their expectations.

Chapter 5 discusses some traditional and contemporary issues in saint worship in the Northern Delta. According to the author, worshiping practice in the Northern Delta region is a system combining religion and beliefs, a mixture of religious customs, practices, and behaviors of Taoism, Tantra Buddhism and folk beliefs. The formation of a system of worshiping Zen masters who are both a saint and a Buddha shows the polytheistic beliefs of Vietnamese people and the tendency to sanctify real characters in history as well. The worship of saints in general and the three saints in particular expresses the folk consciousness of the Vietnamese people, reflecting the relationship between the natural world and the supernatural world, and Vietnamese people's desire for a prosperous and happy life.

Currently, the market economy, the changing religious and beliefs policies and the diverse and active religious market have resulted in changing people's consciousness about the image of saints. Based on the principles of 'supply' and "demand", services and forms of religious and belief practices have been growing, constantly being renovated and providing new and attractive religious products and services to encourage religious needs, including the worship of saints. Compared with the "outbreak" of the practices of spirit mediumship, worshiping Mother Goddess of Four Realms, Saint Tran Hung Dao, Lady of Treasury (Bà

Chúa Kho), Buddhist pilgrimage, etc., the worship of the three saints is somewhat more 'peaceful'. However, their charisma and power over the years remained in the mind of their worshipers regardless of the varied devotion in different regions. Some places where people's consciousness of saints remains strong, some places where the consciousness of saints is just faded away into the traditional feeling of a cultural fossil. Despite of strong and weak devotion, people's consciousness about the three saints, in the prevailing context of

religious integration in Vietnam as well as in the stream of consciousness about saint worship in general, is governed by market rules, State policies and the specific needs of the people.

The thesis was successfully defended before the Academy-level Thesis Assessment Council, meeting at the Graduate Academy of Social Sciences (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences) in May 2020.

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Regarding the issue of land use rights of private economic entities, the presentations clarified the current regulations, bases, procedures, forms of land allocation, land lease for private economic entities; thereby offering solutions to perfect the law to ensure private economic entities

have access to land use rights. In terms of commercial exploitation of intellectual property rights of small and mediums enterprises, it clearly showed the role and significance of intellectual property rights and also offered solutions to commercially exploit intellectual property rights of this group of enterprises.

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