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Exchange and Accuracy between Vietnamese Buddhism and Indian Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism and Local Belief Culture

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Abstract

Due to the geographical location, Vietnam locates in the middle of Indo-China, which is affected by two Eastern cultures - ancient civilizations called India and China. Although Vietnam is far from India but it connects with Indian Buddhism and culture earlier than Chinese Buddhism and culture. This study will research more about the

exchanging relationship between Vietnamese Buddhism, Indian Buddhism – Culture as well as Chinese one and traditional culture – beliefs through a specific historical era: Ly – Tran Dynasty. This is considered the peak time and the essence of the history of Buddhism in Vietnam.

Keywords: Vietnamese Buddhism, Exchanges and Acculturation, Culture - Beliefs, Indian Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism

1. Introduction

Indian Buddhism was spread to Vietnam very early, dated from 3rd BCE under Asoka great king with a missionary through the sea lane, Ne Le fort in Do Son, Hai Phong district could be the first place, then Luy Lau in Thuan Thanh, Bac Ninh province to receive Buddhism. Although it is a foreign religion, researchers agree that each nation has their own Buddha. What is a difference, the Buddhist identity of Vietnam? They all claim that Ly-Tran Buddhism was the Vietnam Buddhism's identity, the quintessence and high culture. It was Ly-Tran Buddhism making Dai Viet's culture, Dong A spirits of the time, developing in the Vietnamese's thoughts¹, bringing in the strong recovery of the nation after a millenium being colonized by China from 111 BCE to 938 CE.

Vietnam's Ly-Tran Meditation School with flexible spirits, entering into life, living in life but religiously enjoying, thereby gave birth to monks who were towards life and practiced in life. This also explained for why our country always has such monks who sacrifice for the nation, people and many temples worship a number of national heroes.

In order to explain for the difference of Vietnam's Buddhist culture, especially Ly-Tran dynasties's, we need to put it in the context of exchanges and acculturation with Indian Buddhism, Chinese's and indigenious beliefs and folklore.

2. Exchanges between Vietnamese Buddhism and Indian's

In the relation with Indian Buddhism in the early time, through history documents, we could claim that Buddhism spread to Vietnam in two ways: The first, directly the sea lane from South India; the second, the road from the north of Vietnam. By the sea lane from the south (Theravada Buddhism), Buddhism was spread to Vietnam certainly earlier than that from the North (Mahayana Buddhism). According to Nguyen Lang in *Theoretical History of Vietnamese Buddhism*, Vol 1, in the beginning CE centuries, the monks following the Indian merchant ships were the first to spread Buddhism to our country, which was Theravada Buddhism; at the beginning it was simple beliefs: Worshipping Buddha, lighting incense, mantra, curing illnesses, expelling evil spirits, holily offering things to Buddha, doing charity to the indigeneous people together with teaching five rules of Buddhism to them, there was no religious sutras or doctrines².

¹ Speech of General Secretary Le Duan: "Out nation developed in thoughts for two stages. The first stage was in the meeting Buddhism in Ly-Tran dyneasties; the second was in the meeting Marx-Lennin" (Speech of People's Edition Department, 12/1972)

² Nguyen Lang, Vietnamese Buddhism History, Vol 1, Social Science Press, 1994 Edition, p. 24

Another evidence was that the vestiges of Ne Le stupa in Do Son, Hai Phong, Vietnam was in curvy shape similar to the stupa architecture in Bodhgaya in North India which was built by Asoka (273-243 BCE) to remember the place where Sakyamuni got enlightenment. This imprint gave a hypothesis that: Is it possible that from 3rd century BCE, Theravada was spread to Vietnam by sea lane by the missionaries that great Asoka sent?³.

Later, Buddhism with a system of Mahayana canons of South India's Buddhism spread to Vietnam. This was Theravada Buddhism. Also according to Nguyen Lang and other researchers in history of Buddhism, South India was the first to use Prajna such as the Vajracchedika prajñā pāramitā Sūtra, the pagoda like an elephant, *the Perfection of wisdom Sūtra* in Eight Thousand Verses, the prajñā pāramitā Hrdaya Sūtra, Mahā Parinirvāra, etc. For example, Kim Cang was a Mahayanism belonging to Prajna popular and very important in Buddhism and Meditation School of Vietnam and China. This sutra discussed about the clinging spirits, the nature of universe. Thanks to this sutra, the Sixth patriarch Hui Neng, China and king Tran Thai Tong, Vietnam got enlightenment when reading the verse "Ung vo so tru nhi sinh ky tam" (應無所住而生其心) which Hue Nang wrote in Dharma Sūtra and Tran Thai Tong wrote in the preface of a guide book of Meditative School or Ch'an School.

Due to the system of prajna in the 2nd CE, Nagarjāna composed the famous mahabhūta four great elements in traditional Buddhist thought with the non-clinging, emptiness. This theory deeply influenced in meditation society in Vietnam and China. Thought of emptiness was the topic of *the Perfection of wisdom Sūtra* in Eight Thousand Verses which Khuong Tang Hoi translated in Giao Chau in the first mid of 3rd century CE. Many researchers claim that it is the sutra belonging to the earliest Prajna in Vietnam⁴.

Vietnam's Mahayana thought also appeared before that, in 2nd century with the work *Theory or Argument* of Mau Tu. There were continuous translated Buddhist works of researchers all belonging to Mahayana such as the Sūtra of the contemplation on breath-in and breath -out discussing about meditation on breath translated and annotated by Khuong Tang Hoi in the first mid of 3rd century. It was Khuong Tang Hoi who was invited by king of Dong Ngo i.e. Ton Quyen to teach Buddhism in Kien Nghiep capital in 247 CE, in where Ton Quyen built the first temple called Kien So, and the place at where Khuong's missionary stayed was called Buddha's village. Next was Fa Hua San Mei or the Lotus Sūtra on Meditation translated by Cuong Luong Lau Chi, India and Dao Thanh, Vietnam in the mid 3rd century. That much was enough to claim that in the beginning, Buddhism spread to our country was mainly Mahayanism with a tendency of meditation studies and the

Prajna appearing in South India. Upto 4th-5th century in Giao Chau, Mahayanism was developed with famous monks like Dao Thien, Hue Thang, etc. who spread Mahayanism to China before Ty Ni Đa Lư Chi came to Vietnam to teach this school in Phap Van temple in Bac Ninh.

In the cultural exchanges between India and Vietnam at the early time, the linguistic and cultural vestiges can be found in folklore through folktales, folk-songs and legends.

In Vietnamese language, But, sen, bo de, ca sa, ty kheo, sat na, xa loi (xa li), etc all were borrowed from Sanskrit. In Vietnam's folktales, especially fabulous ones, readers just encounter an image of Buddha or god appearing to help good people but unlucky and unhappy. But "But" was the word Vietnamese borrowed directly from Sanskrit 'Buddha' to mean Buddha. The Chinese pronounce "Phat da", or in short form "Phat" which was transcribed from the word "Buddha" of Sanskrit. In Vietnamese language, "But" appeared before "Buddha", meaning that our ancestors culturally exchanged with Indian culture before contacting with China, although China is a nearer neighbouring country than India.

Another example is that, the word "sen" is used to mean a pure flower living in mud but is not dirty. "Sen" according to me is a word derived from Indian language. In Sanskrit, this flower was called 'lien', Vietnamese pronounce 'sen'. In *Mahabrahata*, there is a mantra praising this pure flower: "In a pond, no flowers are as beautiful as lotus. Its leaves are green, its flowers are white, its pistil is yellow, it lives in mud but does not get dirty from it". Was our wonderful folk-song praising the beauty of lotus written in six-eight verse certainly originated from *Mahabrahata* of ancient culture and literature of India through cultural exchanges: "In pond, nothing is as beautiful as lotus, green leaves, white flowers with yellow pistil. Yellow pistil, white flowers, green leaves, living near to the mud but is not dirty.?"

In addition, it seems that in Han language, the word 'lien' 蓮 was used to mean this flower showing that the Chinese borrowed from India when phonetically transcribing the word "lien" in Sanskrit?, as in Han language there was the word 荷 to mean it.

In Vietnamese poems in Tran dynasty, there was a poem called *Hạ cảnh* (Summer scene) of king Tran Thanh Tong (1240-1290; governing from 1258-1278; being king-father from 1278 to death in 1290), in second stanza, the writer used the word 荷 to mean summer flowers: Lotus blew from the north window making a cool breeze.

The Man Nuong legend appearing in Vietnamese culture in late 2nd BCE proved the India-Vietnam cultural exchanges through marriage to give birth to Thach Quang Buddha and the four Dharma system, in which stone-worship was a belief of indigenous people of Southeast Asia with an agricultural culture. This will be discussed in details in section 3 of this article when discussing about exchanges between Buddhism and indigenous beliefs.

3. Exchanges between Vietnamese Buddhism and China's

Since shri Ty Ni Đa Lư Chi listened to his Sheng Shi Patriarch Tang Xan, he brought Meditation School to our country in the 4th century CE, forming Ty Ni Đa Lư Chi branch in Vietnam (also called Phap Van branch, Southern

³ Nguyen Cong Ly, Discussing about the time when Buddhism and Meditation School spread to Our Country, Buddhism World Journal, Institute for Vietnamese Buddhism, No.2/4-2013 (p.p. 106-116); Religious Studies, No. 8 (122)-2013 (p.p. 29-38).

⁴ qv: Nguyen Lang, *ibid*, Nguyen Tai Thu Editor, History of Vietnamese Buddhism, Institute for Philosophy, Hanoi, 1988; Le Manh That, History of Vietnamese Buddhism, Vol.1, Van Hanh Bookshelf, 1976; Thuan Hoa Press, Hue, 1999.

branch⁵), our Buddhism was in another cultural exchange with Meditation school from India to China and then to Vietnam with a system of Mahayana canons belonging to Prajna emphasizing on non-attachment and emptiness. Although Tỳ Ni Đa Lưu Chi got enlightenment with the third Sheng Shi Patriarch Tang Xan of Bodhi Dharma in China, he was less influenced by South India's Buddhism. At this time, Tanjít of India's Buddhism and Tibet's strongly developed.

According to Nguyen Lang, Tanjít Buddhism was the third stage of development of India's mahayanism (the first stage was Prajñā, the second stage was Vijñānavāda). Tanjít doctrines are similar to Maditation school's for instance they all emphasize on meditation, spiritual intuition, using secret language to open mind, using mantra, etc. to support meditation. Hence, Tanjít Buddhism covered all folklore beliefs in India as well as in Giao Chau at the time. In Vietnam, this was suitable to the belief worshipping gods, goddess, totem and so on, and suitable to Vietnamese customs; hence, it became quite important in Meditation school's practices and activities⁶.

In the 9th century CE, Vietnamese Buddhism had another exchange-acculturation with Chinese Meditative School of Speechless Meditation. This school bore the China's Meditation studies nature with non-winning thought, Buddha in heart, meaning Buddhist nature was in our heart, we need not to find anywhere else. With that truth man can train to get enlightenment directly, need not to perceive through language, texts. Vo Ngon Thong Meditation school emphasized on non-texts, focusing on heart, becoming Buddha, which was Don Ngo the Sixth patriarch Hui Neng proposed before. Later, Bach Truong claimed that: If the mind is clear, the wisdom will come.

In summary, Vietnamese Buddhism in Ly-Tran times inherited and developed on the three exchange-acculturation knots due to three imported sources:

- Mahayanism with Meditation studies from South India directly spread by sealand in the late 1st BCE with Prajna;
- Maditation school from India to China then to Vietnam with a role of Tỳ Ni Đa Lưu Chi in the 6th century with the thought of non-attachment, transcendence, emptiness;
- Chinese Meditative school spread to Vietnam by Vo Ngon Thong in the 9th CE with Don Ngo teaching and the thought of Buddha at heart.

4. Exchanges between Buddhism and Indigenous beliefs in Vietnam

Before Buddhism came to Vietnam, our nation had had the belief of worshipping goddess. In those days, Vietnamese worshipped three goddesses creating the universe: Thuong Thien goddess, Thuong Ngan goddess, and Thoai goddess. In the mind of ancient Vietnamese, these goddesses were the creator of the three complete areas of the country: Sky, earth

including forest and mountains, sea including rivers and lakes.

In addition to worshipping these goddesses, our nation worshipped farm god, nature gods, etc all worship was simple materialist sense. It was not strange that in the treasure of Vietnamese folktales, we often encountered images of mothers: Mother Au Co with a nylon of hundred eggs – symbolizing a creation of the nation; mother Au Co taught us how to grow rice field, plant sericulture – symbolizing for culture; Thanh Giong's mother – symbolizing for giving birth to a giant hero in fighting for protecting the country; Man Nuong mother with a lighting stone (Thach Quang Buddha) at the holy Dung Thu tree. In Vietnamese's mind, Man Nuong mother was considered female Buddha and her children were Cloud god, Rain, Thunder god together with a system of four temple (Phap Van, Pháp Lôi, Pháp Điện, Pháp Vũ or so called Dâu goddess temple, Đậu goddess temple, Đàn goddess temple, Tướng goddess temple). As we mentioned in section 1, the practice of worshipping stone and nature goddesses was cultural manifestations, which was close to the people's life of wet rice agriculture in the south. Those mothers' images reflected a long path of history of the nation closely related to the process of establishing and protecting the country, making sure that Vietnamese could overcome from their enemies and natural disasters. The story happening in the 2nd CE around 168-189 representing the cultural exchanges between India and Vietnam, a cultural mixture through a marriage between Vietnamese honest mother Man Nuong and Indian supernatural father Khâu Đà La. Also from this culture, in the shrine of Vietnamese temples, besides worshipping Buddha, there is worshipping Goddess. That is a manifestation of humane tradition of Vietnamese people. It is based on this primitive belief that later religions including Buddhism have enough conditions to import and root quickly, influencing deeply in the Vietnamese's spiritual life. On the other hand, being a self sustained nation with brave tradition and flexible mind of wet rice inhabitants, our forefather at those days knew how to partly receive and partly choose the exotic culture, including importing the quintessence of the partner; meanwhile partly object to those strange things if they were not suitable to us.

This exchange-acculturation was in nature. Our forefather only received what was benefits for us, suitable to our cultural identity. Hence, despite any religions coming to Vietnam, they all were changed to become ours, representing our identity. Buddhism was the same. It is the meaning of of statement: "Each nation has their own Buddha". Buddhism was a system of philosophical thoughts, later became a religion with open, humane and democracy nature. This open democracy was suitable to openness, flexibility of wet rice inhabitant. That was a reason why Buddhism when coming to our country quickly rooted in the people's mind. It was this spirit manifested clearly in the Ly-Tran times' people. This age gave birth to people with good nature: Duong Van Nga queen readily gave the throne of her prince to the best official when the country was invaded; Ly Thanh Tong did not kill Champa king Che Cu; he was also a king loving his subjects as his children; Ly Nhan Tong did not kill Le Van Thinh when the latter turned to a tiger to harm the former; Ly Thuong Kiet was ready to give up his high-rank status to lead the soldiers to protect the boundary in the South of the country; Tran Thai Tong gave up his throne as a worn shoe; Tran Nhan Tong gave his

⁵ In addition to calling the name of the founder, this meditation branch is called Phap va, or Southern branch, because Tỳ Ni Đa Lưu Chi listened to his master Tang Xan to go southward to spread religion, and the first place he came was Phap van temple (Dau temple).

⁶ Nguyen Lang, bid, p. 138-139

crown to his prince to go around and convert his subjects, advice them to do good deeds, give up superstition and became Buddha of Great Viet; Tran Hung Dao preferred loyal to the country to his own hatred, etc. then people like An Tu princess, Tran Binh Trong, Nguyen Dai Phap, and so on all represented the spirit of the time. At that time, there were many monks, Confucian researchers sacrificed and devoted themselves to the country, good life and religion, and at many temples nationwide worship national heroes and mother goddesses. This is a mixture of Viet-Indian-Chinese culture and the concept of Buddhism-Confucianism-Daoism has the same root, one home and one form.

5. Exchanges between Buddhism and Indigenous Religion

In Vietnam, temples are not only worshipping places, where religious rituals take place, but they also are where the nation's traditional spiritual culture is preserved with many festivals, customary practices.

In here, Buddhism and folklore culture have close relation with each other, which was written in books like *Việt điện u linh*, *Lĩnh Nam chích quái*. It was Thanh Giong meaning Phu Dong Thien Vuong or Dong Thien Vuong in *Việt điện u linh*; Man Nuong, Chu Dong Tu, Tu Dao Hanh, Nguyen Minh Khong in *Lĩnh Nam chích quái*. The stories about these people were evidence for Buddhism-folklore exchanges and acculturation. The system of four Dharma in Man Nuong story was considered a lucky god to help the people pray for rain, good crops. Chu Dong Tu one of the forever living men of Vietnamese, together with Tien Dung trained themselves to support Trieu Quang Phuc to fight against enemies. The annual festival of washing Buddha on 8th April according to Lunar calendar in Man Nuong story was the occasion on which people gather together to play and dance. The anniversary day of Man Nuong goddess is the same day of Sakyamuni's birthday. This was recored in *Sùng Thiện Diên Linh tháp bi inscription* of Nguyễn Công Bật in Ly time, great Viet's history encyclopedia in Le time, *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục* in Nguyen time. great Viet's history encyclopedia wrote that: Dinh, Le, Ly, Tran dynasties did not have royal music as later dynasties. At that time, when having parties, after party, king and officials used to dance folklorelly. They stood in a circle hand put on shoulder, foot stepped on foot to sing⁷. Having such open, equality, democracy could be due to the exchange-acculturation between the wet rice people and Buddhism. These exchanges also were mirrored activities in life such as praying for rain, praying for peaceful life, praying for strength to fight enemies, etc.

6. Conclusion

Thus, it can be said that Vietnamese Buddhism from the beginning was directly influenced by Indian Buddhism, which is the Southern Buddhist tradition transmitted through the sea. Later, in more than a thousand years of Northern domination, Vietnamese Buddhism was also influenced by Chinese Buddhism through the law of cultivating and acculturation. Besides, Vietnamese Buddhism also has an exchange relationship - to continue with indigenous folk beliefs and culture. It was the above-mentioned exchange

relations and acculturation that made up a Vietnamese Buddhism in general, most notably, the Ly-Tran Buddhism, expressing the national identity.

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