

Mekong Routes and Its Role to Vietnamese Buddhism

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1. Introduction

Plato, Greek philosopher, in his influential "theory of Forms", holds that the objects that are seen are not real but literally mimic the real Forms. Accordingly, the outward "form" of a thing which we can see by our senses is not what it really is. In order to realize a thing of itself, we need to have a nearer look at the inward "form" of that thing. This is a case for Vietnamese Buddhism.

With a glance on the outward "form" of Vietnamese Buddhism, it is seen to be totally different from other countries such as Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia in Mekong region, very often stated in the three following aspects:

Buddhism in these countries is of Theravada tradition, Buddhism in Vietnam, Mahayana.

Buddhist Sangha of these countries might always exert a powerful influence on their governing elite toward the country's policies and constitutions, while Vietnam Buddhist Sangha might not, though majority of Vietnamese people are Buddhists.

Buddhist culture of these countries looks to have a lot in common with India, where this religion was born, while Vietnamese Buddhist culture is somehow just a photo-copy of Chinese culture. [Martin Stuart-Fox, 2006]

What are seen as above, in the writer's opinion and in that of many Vietnamese scholars as well, are true for the outward "form" of Vietnamese Buddhism, but not true for its real "form". Firstly, Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhism is not like what it is in China and other countries in East Asia. That is to say, it is closer to traditional Buddhism in nature. Secondly, when speaking majority of Vietnamese people are Buddhists, this means Vietnam Buddhist Sangha always has a voice of a certain weight for its ruling government, and it has been ever proved in history. Lastly, Vietnamese

Buddhism is not a photocopy of Chinese Buddhism at all. It is different from the latter in nature and in many aspects. Why it is so it is due to there are three reasons as follows:

Vietnam does not only border with China but also with other countries of Mekong region.

In the bottom of Vietnamese people's heart, they have always been aware of the Chinese's control.

Vietnamese Buddhism has its solid grounds of orthodox Buddhist culture directly acquired from India and indirectly from other adjacent Buddhist countries of Mekong region through a variety of routes, viz., the Sea routes and the land routes along Mekong river.

Thus, two things that make Vietnamese Buddhism somewhat different from Chinese Buddhism and not so much a far cry from Buddhism in the countries of Mekong region are the Vietnamese's historically experienced consciousness of Chinese control and the routes through which Buddhism came to Vietnam from India. Of which the latter did play an important role in shaping a solid base for Vietnamese Buddhism before the land of Vietnam was forced to accept the Buddhist forms from China.

2. Routes through which Buddhism came to Vietnam from India

The beginning of Vietnamese Buddhism is a long story and somehow shrouded in controversies among scholars. Some held that Buddhism was indirectly introduced into Vietnam around the second or the third century AD from China. This point of view is held by such scholars as Trần Văn Giáp (1902-1973), Thích Mật Thế (1913-1961) .., who mainly took their grounds for their works on the Chinese literary materials, which often contain a high percentage of counterfeit for some political reasons. Ironically, these scholars' works were pioneers, then became influential ones, with regard to this domain. The others are of the standpoint that Buddhism was directly propagated to Vietnam from India, latest in the beginning of the Christian Era, and earliest in the third century B.C., during Asoka's time, when Indian Buddhism developed at its zenith, spread all over India and beyond. This viewpoint is held by most Vietnamese contemporary scholars such as Nguyễn Lang", Nguyễn Tài Thư, and especially Lê Mạnh

That. who has contributed his whole life to research on history of Vietnam and that of Vietnamese Buddhism

¹Trần Văn Giáp is the author of an influential French work known as "Le Bouddhisme en Annam des origines au XIII^e siècle 1932.

² Thích Mật Thể is the author of "A Short History of Buddhism in Vietnam", first printed in 1942, Ha Noi.

³ Nguyễn Lang, who wrote "Việt Nam Phật giáo Sử luận" - A historical essay on Vietnamese Buddhism- is another name of Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh.

⁴Nguyễn Tài Thư is editor of "History of Buddhism in Vietnam".

as well. According to these authoritative scholars, orthodox Buddhism was definitely brought to Vietnam directly from India through two passageways long before this land was under control by the Chinese. These are known as maritime or sea route and overland route.

Maritime or sea routes through which Buddhism was directly brought to Vietnam are as follows: setting out from some Indian Southern coasts Indian traders⁵ See, Nguyen Tai Thu (Chief editor), History of Buddhism in Vietnam, Institute of Philosophy, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, Hanoi, 1992, pp. 11. of old time could, taking advantage of the Southwestern monsoon, sailed their boats toward Southeast Asia, to Malaysia, to the Indonesian group of islands, crossing the Malacca Strait into the East Sea, and to Giao Chi, Vietnam. Or instead of sailing through the Strait of Malacca, far away to the South, the Indian traders could also cross through the Isthmus of Kra on the Malayasian Peninsula, then go along an easy land passageway to cross from this sea to the other with hours. The argument that holds Buddhism was directly introduced from India is based on the hard and clear evidences of this sea route.



(Source: Copied from Wikipedia)

Other significant evidences that also support to this argument are those of overland routes which could be said as Mekong delta or Mekong routes. This passageway could be shortly stated as follows: setting off from Central India it was possible to take a land route crossing the Three Pagodas Pass, then boat along Kamburi river to the Gulf of Thailand and reach Vietnam. Or, it was also possible to take a land route connecting Moulmein with Tak Rahaeng, a town on the branch of the Mae Nam Wang, Thailand, and at last reach the Central Vietnam. There was also another route linking Mae Nam with Mekong River, crossing Khorat plateau and the Mun River valleys leading directly to the Bassak region in the midstream of the Mekong River in the Cambodian kingdom. This route could lead to Laos, then crossing Trường Sơn ranges to Thanh Hóa and Nghệ an provinces, Central Vietnam.

As compared to the sea routes, the overland Mekong passageways appeared to be more difficult but safer. In addition, these routes are not just to have been the ones through which Buddhism was propagated to Vietnam, but it played more roles in the foundation and development of its own in the land. (6 see, *ibid*, pp.12-13)

3. Roles of Mekong routes for Viet- names Buddhism

Two phrases "Buddhism in Vietnam" and "Vietnamese Buddhism" are sometimes used alternately. But, they are different from each other in meaning. The former leans toward its social status of development and performance, while the latter mainly points to the inward and inherent attributes of its own. The components that make the inherent attributes of Vietnamese Buddhism are Vietnamese culture (Vcul), Chinese Buddhism (ChiBud), Indian orthodox Buddhism (IBud), Mekong region Buddhism (MBud) and Champa Buddhism (CBud). These could be presented in a short formula as follows:

$$VBud = IBud + ChiBud + Vcul + MBud + CBud$$

Of which, Vietnamese culture plays as a central role in assimilating and integrating the rest factors to found what Vietnamese Buddhism is. The fact that Chinese Buddhism impacts on Vietnamese Buddhism is apparent when the country was under the control of China for over 1000 years. The rest three lie behind the roles of the routes through which Buddhism was either directly or indirectly introduced into the land of Vietnamese people.

The land of Vietnamese people in old time is known as Giao Chi, which means the intersection point of commercial and cultural convergences, it was on this land that Indian merchants, who were so much active for centuries before Christian Era, came through sea or land passageways and stopped by on their way to China or some other lands for goods exchange.

With regard to the introduction of Buddhism into Giao Chi, it is said that among those Indian merchants, some might be Buddhist followers, and that during the time they stopped and stayed here, they might perform some kinds of Buddhist practice. In so doing, they unintentionally left their Buddhist cultural imprints on this land. In addition to this, it is also said that

Indian Buddhist monks might be invited to go with the merchants for the purpose of safe prayer, and that these monks sowed the land with Dharma seeds.

In the early years of Christian Era, when the land was totally under Chinese control, the Dharma seeds sown by those Indian monks and Buddhist merchants did already grow up with a Buddhist center of a considerable level. That is Luy Lâu Center (at Bắc Ninh Province of today). Accordingly, before Vietnam acquired Buddhism from China, Buddhism in the land had stood on their sound foundations. Owing Ibid, pp.13 . to Buddhist monks and Buddhist laity from India and from Buddhist states of Mekong region.

Time rolled by and Buddhism of the land enjoyed its mergence into aboriginal culture and then became as Vietnamese Buddhism. The link of Buddhist culture between Vietnam and India through the sea route might still continue for some time more until Buddhism came into decline on its very native land in the 13th century AD. Meanwhile, the interrelation of Buddhism between Vietnam and the countries belonging to Mekong region became more and more strengthened. And, when the country was expanded toward the south up to Mekong delta (Cuu Long delta), where Theravada Buddhism of Khmer people was present and prevailing, such a Buddhist cultural ties was lifted up at a new level of height.

Khmer people's Theravada Buddhism is almost the same with the Buddhist form prevailing in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. It is known to have been propagated to Mekong delta in rather early times, viz., the 3rd or the 4th century AD, from India and Srilanka through overland and Mekong river routes. Besides, the contact with the Buddhist countries of Mekong region also gave birth to Kinh people's Theravada Buddhism (Phật giáo Nam Tông Kinh) in the first decades of the 20th century. Both Khmer and Kinh

Theravada are now inseparable parts of Vietnam Buddhist Sangha. Thus, the interaction between Vietnam and the countries of Mekong region led to the foundation of Vietnamese Theravada. It is this Buddhist form that takes a part in building the inward characteristics for what Vietnamese Buddhism is.

4. The characteristics of Vietnam-ese Buddhism contributed from Mekong routes

As far as Vietnamese culture concerns, its foremost feature is often recognized to be the amalgamation and harmonization towards other cultures imported into Vietnam. It first absorbs foreign cultures then assimilates them and at last turns them into Vietnamese. Vietnamese Buddhism, a reality of Vietnamese culture, too act on this just in the same way, It first adopts all other Buddhism's and then makes them the characteristics of its own.

Above all things is the characteristics of "one Buddhism". Vietnamese Buddhism appears as Mahayana Buddhism but it is not divided into different independent Mahay- anic schools and sects as seen in China or Japan. In fact, though both Pure land School and Tantric School have been present in Vietnam since long, they have never enjoyed as independent ones. They are none other than supporting parts of Vietnamese Thiến Buddhism (i.e., Cha'n or Zen Buddhism), In addition, there have also existed in Vietnam some Chinese Cha'n schools, but they have all been assimilated and unified into two Vietnamese Thiến Sects, viz., Trúcc Lâm Thiến Sect in the North and Liễu Quán Thiến Sect in the Central Vietnam.

Another feature that is easy to identify is a respectful attitude towards Buddhist texts and teachings. Vietnamese Buddhism is found as Thiên Buddhism which was originally absorbed from Chinese Buddhism. Nevertheless, it is not like what this kind of Buddhism is seen in China or Japan. For Instance, it never refutes the important roles of sutras as encouraged by Chinese Lin-Chi Cha'n Sect. Such practices that bear the color of Chinese Cha'n as Kung - an (quiz problem) or Only Sitting in Meditation, etc., have not become main or popular ones in Vietnamese monasteries and temples.

One thing more that is characterized for Vietnamese Buddhism is that it always puts a stress on such traditional Buddhist practices as mindfulness meditation, vipassana or satipatthana. Not only are these practices popularly applied in Vietnam today but they have been encouraged by Vietnamese Trúcc Lâm Thiến Sect and Lieu Quán Thiến Sect since long.

5. Conclusion

In sum, there may be some other features, but as far as the writer's knowledge can reach, the above mentioned points could be easy to be realized and recognized by many. It is safe to say they are wonderful results that Vietnamese Buddhism has got from the interaction between Vietnam with the countries of Theravada Buddhism in Mekong region through the Mekong routes.

May be, there still exist some certain historical and cultural constraints on the development of Mekong region in terms of Buddhism. However, there must be nothing to prevent Buddhist Sangha's as well as Buddhist communities of these countries moving toward a good future of understanding cooperation for propagating the Buddha's message of compassion and wisdom to all.

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