

# BUDDHIST CONTRIBUTION TO GOOD GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT IN VIETNAM

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Buddhism was introduced into Vietnam quite early around the second half of the third century before C.E.<sup>1</sup> It is about this time that the Vietnamese coming to contact with the Chinese civilization, and this contact become increasingly repeated, when the Chinese Emperor by the name Han Wu Ti (Hán Vũ đế) decided to attack three Vietnamese States along the Chinese Southern coast i.e., the Viet state of the East (Đông Việt), (present day Zhejiang -Chiết Giang), the Viet state of Fuchian (Mân Việt), (present day Fuchian - Phúc Kiến), and the Viet state of the South (Nam Việt), (present day GuangTung and Guangxi – Quảng Đông Quảng Tây) in the year 111 B.C.E. During this war of conquest, the Viet state of the West (Tây Âu Lạc Việt), present day Northern Vietnam and Northern part central of Vietnam has dispatched their own troop to help these three Viet states. But according to the Chinese first history book *Shichi (Sử ký)* by Su Ma Tien (Tu Mã Thiên), one of the commanding generals of this expedition army by the name Tả Hoàng Đồng has betrayed his superior, killed the Prince of Tây Âu and surrendered to the Chinese.<sup>2</sup> So the conquer of three Việt states of South Yangci (Dương Tử) river was carried out successfully. From now on, the Vietnamese has to face the imminent threat of

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1. Lê Mạnh Thát, *Lịch sử Phật giáo Việt Nam 1*, Tp. Hồ Chí Minh: NXB. Tp. Hồ Chí Minh, 2006, pp.15-78.

2. Lê Mạnh Thát, *Lục độ tập kinh và lịch sử khởi nguyên dân tộc ta*, Tp. Hồ Chí Minh: NXB. Tp. Hồ Chí Minh, 2006, p.328, 330.

attack by the Chinese. And we are not waiting for too long to see the Sino-Vietnamese war to occur between the years 39-43 C.E. The Vietnamese lost the war after a valiant and heroic fighting.

It is at this junction of history that the Vietnamese Buddhist put down their own thoughts about how to govern a state and how to protect that state to keep independence for their own people. First of all, they defined the role of Buddhism in Vietnamese life. In the work *Righting the Wrong*, Mậu Tử (160?-230?) has specified in the following words: “*The Buddhist way, when applied to the family, is for serving the parents; when applied to the nation, is for helping the people; when applied to one’s own life, is for perfection of oneself*” (道之為物 居家可以事親 宰國可以治民 獨立可以治身 Đạo chi vi vật, cư gia khả dĩ sự thân, tể quốc khả dĩ trị dân, độc lập khả dĩ trị thân).<sup>3</sup> This specification of Buddhism reflects the demand of the Vietnamese people in the first and second century of C.E. when they were struggling to recover the independence of Vietnam. Actually, when Mậu Tử was writing *Righting the Wrong*, Vietnam at that time was an independent country under the leadership of Sĩ Tiếp which Vietnamese called King Sĩ (Sĩ Vương) (137-226). In his work, Mậu Tử also criticized the concept of Middle Kingdom (Trung Quốc) dearly upheld by the Chinese who considered their country as the center of Heaven and Earth (*Hán địa vị tất vi thiên trung dã*).<sup>4</sup> From this, he determined that China is a land on the North of Vietnam. This determination of North and South put the Vietnamese on the equal footstep with the Chinese and later on, throughout Vietnamese history, became the fundamental concept of the Vietnamese nation in their territorial and sovereign dispute with the Middle Kingdom. Middle Kingdom is a country in the North and Vietnam is a country in the South. Three hundred years after Mau Tu, when Ly Bon (503-548) proclaimed himself to be Emperor in the year 544, he declared himself to be Emperor of the South (Nam Đế). This reminds us of the famous poem written by Pháp Thuận (914-990) during the Sino-Vietnamese war of 981 C.E.

3. Lê Mạnh Thát, *Nghiên cứu về Mậu Tử*, Nhà xuất bản Tổng hợp Tp. Hồ Chí Minh, 2006, p.414.

4. Lê Mạnh Thát, *Nghiên cứu về Mậu Tử*, Nhà xuất bản Tổng hợp Tp. Hồ Chí Minh, 2006, p.486.

when he affirmed that: “The mountains and rivers of the Southern country are reigned by the Emperor of the South.”<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, the people of Mau Tu’s time or a few years before that also put their own thoughts about the nation and their own people into what later becoming Buddhist sutras. Here, we are talking about the *Compendium of Six paramitas* (Satparamitasangrahasutra) which later on was translated into Chinese and still extant in the Taisho edition of Chinese Tripitaka under the name *Liu du ci qing* (*Lục độ tập kinh*).<sup>6</sup> In the sutra, we for the first time found out the story of the birth of Vietnamese people.<sup>7</sup> They also put out their own thoughts about how to govern the nation successfully by using ten good dharma (kusaladharma) as law of the land. From this, they reason how a nation could get lost by not applying these ten good dharma for governing. They also emphasized that if we lose our nation, that is the nation is conquered and administered by another nation, then we should not lose our culture. If we keep our culture, then we still have hope to regain our territory and sovereignty. They also appealed to the Buddhists to follow the Bodhisattva way in order to carry out the struggle with the tyrannical government to rescue people out of misery. The King as a leader should be human and practice five Buddhist precepts and ten good dharma.

So from the beginning, Buddhism in Vietnam claimed itself to be a political philosophy in responses to the need of the Vietnamese of early times. After Ly Bon proclaimed himself to be Emperor of the South, Dinh Khong (?-808) clearly speaks out the need to set up this new kind of government. The Buddhists then fervently form themselves into different kinds of organizations to struggle for a completely independent Vietnam. Interestingly enough, the earliest bell usually called Thanh

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5. Lê Mạnh Thát, *Lịch sử Phật giáo Việt Nam 2*, Tp. Hồ Chí Minh: NXB. Tp. Hồ Chí Minh, 2001, pp.473-486. The whole poem read as follows:

“*Nam quốc sơn hà nam đế cư  
Tiệt nhiên dĩ định tại thiên thu  
Như hà nghịch lỗ lai xâm phạm  
Nhữ đẳng hành khan thủ bại hư*”.

6. Lê Mạnh Thát, *Tổng tập văn học Phật giáo Việt Nam 1*, Tp. Hồ Chí Minh: NXB. Tp. Hồ Chí Minh, 2001, pp.215-833.

7. Lê Mạnh Thát, *Lục độ tập kinh và lịch sử khởi nguyên dân tộc ta*, Tp. Hồ Chí Minh: NXB. Tp. Hồ Chí Minh, 2006, p.18-72.

Mai bell was cast in the year 798 C.E. by a number of people under the leadership of King Phung Hung (761-802), among whom the most prominent is General Do Anh Han, the man who surrounded the Dai La citadel and killed the Chinese commanding official Cao Chính Bình in the year 791 C.E.

Thus, step by step, the Vietnamese set up an independent state of their own so the need for a theory of state in Buddhist view must be put forward for the leadership of the nation to govern and develop the country according to the Buddhist ideal of good governance and development. And here, we propose to present five case studies.

### Pháp Thuận's theory

The first case is the theory of good state governance and development proposed by Zen Master Pháp Thuận (915-990). In a poem entitled Quốc tộ (National destiny 國祚), in response to the question by Emperor Lê Đại Hành (reigned 980-1005) about the destiny of the Vietnamese nation, recorded in Thiên uyển tập anh (*Collection of Outstanding Figures in Zen Garden 禪苑集英*), Pháp Thuận said:[\[2\]](#)

“Quốc tộ như đẵng lạc	國祚如藤絡
Nam thiên lý thái bình	南天裏太平
Vô vi cư điện các	無為居殿閣
Xứ xứ tức đao binh”	處處息息刀兵
Nation's destiny is just like a bunch of intertwined rattan	
Peace reigns over the southern sky	
No-action stays in the palace	
War will be stopped everywhere	

In this poem, Pháp Thuận discusses war and peace and the method for stopping war, enabling peace to be maintained – forever in Vietnam. This is the ideal that the Vietnamese people of Pháp Thuận's time aspired towards and fervently desired to be present in their country after the successful resistance war for national independence in 939 A.D., and during the war between the warlords from 944 to 968. The key issue here is how to stop war and

bring peace to the people and the Nation's destiny depends upon the answer to that question. In Pháp Thuận's views, for the war to be stopped, the first and foremost requirement is to have "no-action staying in the palace". What does the word no-action in this context mean? In Buddhist terminology, the Chinese word no-action (wu wei 無為) is used to translate the Sanskrit *asamkr̥ta* which means "the absolute" in Buddhist epistemology and ontology and has nothing to do with the term no-action in that poem.

In the *Collection of the Sūtras on Six Paramitās*, there is a definition of no-action which has some social and ethical bearing, which reads as follows: "Careful but not haughty is the character of a learned man, to give away the ideas of dirty love and not to be contaminated with the dust of six sentiments, not to let those dirty loves even small as a strand of hair to be camouflaged in our hearts, then every thought will become extinct, that is no-action".<sup>[3]</sup> But then, this definition is not fit quite well in the context of the above poem.

We have to look another place for the meaning of no-action. In the Chinese literature, this term appears quite frequently, especially in the works of Lao Tzu (老子) and Confucius. In the *Book of the Way*, Lao Tzu is believed to have said: "The sages manage affairs with no-action, carry out teaching without speech... Act by no-action, then, nothing is not in order".<sup>[4]</sup> But, what the term no-action means, Lao Tzu does not state clearly. Therefore, it is very difficult to specify the content of that concept, and there are different explanations of it in the history of Chinese thought.

On the contrary, in the *Book of Sayings*, Confucius is said to have the following statement: "Governance with no-action, only Emperor Shun did it. How could that be done? It needs only to be serious about himself in order to face southwards"<sup>[5]</sup> (子曰無為而治者其舜也歟夫何為哉恭己正南面而已矣 *Tử viết: Vô vi nhi trị giả, kỳ Thuấn giả dư? Phù hà vi tai? Cung kỹ chính nam diện nhi dĩ hĩ*). Although the concept of no-action here is used to define the governance and is said to be the way of the governance of Emperor Shun, but the content is not clearly specified, except the property of being serious about himself (恭己). Such a specification evidently is not sufficient to define

the way of governance of Emperor Shun. Fortunately, there are two other places where Confucius is reported to describe Emperor Shun's way of governance.

The first place is a statement in the section 31 entitled The Middle (中庸) of the *Book of Rites* (禮記): “Is Emperor Shun a great wise man? Emperor Shun likes to inquire and discuss in order to speak, hide people's bad sides and show their goodness, maintain two extremes, but use the Middle for the good of people. Is it because of this that he became Emperor Shun?” (子曰舜其大智者歟? 舜好問而好察以言, 隱惡而揚善執其兩端, 用其中於民, 其斯以為舜乎).[6] The other place is also in the Book of the Middle: “Is Emperor Shun a man of great filial piety? He is morally good to be a saint, to be honored as a Son of the Heaven, with wealth spreading to four seas, ancestors honored in the Palace, and children to continue on. Therefore, if the virtue is great, he will get the place, will have the enumeration, will enjoy the fame and will have longevity. So, the Heaven gives birth to all things and treats them depending upon their case. In consequence, if they are good, Heaven will strengthen them and if they are not, It will throw away... That is why man of great virtue will receive the mandate from Heaven.” (子曰舜其大孝者與德為聖人尊為天子富有四海之內宗廟饗之子孫保之故大德必得其名必得其壽故天之生物必因其材而篤焉故栽者培之傾者覆之詩曰嘉樂君子憲憲栽令德宜民宜人受祿于天保佑命之自天申之故大德者受命).[7]

Through these two statements by Confucius about Emperor Shun and how he got the mandate from Heaven to be leader during his lifetime, we know now that his way of governance by no-action requires that the leader should have two necessary qualities in carrying out his mission of leading the people, that is, the wisdom and the virtue. Shun possesses these two qualities, so he becomes the Emperor of China at his time. From this, we presently could understand what the term no-action in the above poem by Pháp Thuận means. It means that if the Vietnamese of his time have a leader who possesses the wisdom and virtue, then the country will have a peaceful life.

Therefore, as a whole, Pháp Thuận's poem clearly states his Buddhist view on good governance and development in Vietnam of 10th century. At this junction of history, when Vietnam is facing an imminent war from the rising Sung Dynasty in China, the question of the national existence comes into forefront. So, the answer to that question is that in order to keep peace, the Vietnamese should be in great solidarity, just like a bunch of intertwined rattan, and in order to stop the war, they should have a leader who possesses wisdom and virtue. So, quite early in the history of Buddhism in Vietnam, the Vietnamese Buddhists, through the case of Zen Master Pháp Thuận, have known how to exploit the Buddhist theory of good governance and development to apply to the Vietnamese political and social reality.

### Viên Thông's theory

Nearly one century after Pháp Thuận passing away, Zen Master Viên Thông (1080-1151) was born and he became our second case study of Buddhist theory of good governance and development in Vietnam. He grew up in a peaceful Vietnam and the country already became a Great Việt (大越). The leadership of the nation started to show signs of separating from the people and the mass began to ask for their rights. In this circumstance, Viên Thông, as a royal adviser, has proposed a new theory of good governance and development. Again, in this theory, the question of how to keep peace and stop the war is dealt with, but there already appears a shift in the emphasis from war to peace. In a conversation with Emperor Lý Thần Tông in the year 1130 A.D., which Thiển uyển tập anh recorded, in response to Lý Thần Tông's question about the principles of political order and upheaval, of prosperity and decline in the world, Viên Thông said: "The people is like an instrument. Put them in a safe place, they are safe; put them in a perilous place, they are peril. It all depends on how the leader of the people behaves himself. If his benevolence is in harmony with the hearts and minds of the people, then they will love him as a parent and look up to him like the sun and the moon. This is putting people in a safe place." (天下猶器也置諸安則安置諸危則危願在人主所行何如耳好生之德合于民心故民愛之如父母仰之如日月是置天下得之安者也).<sup>[8]</sup>

Through this answer, a shift clearly appears in the theory of good governance and development from war to peace. And here, the question of the behavior of the leader becomes a hot spot which must be analyzed to find out what such a behavior should be composed of. Of course, a good leader must possess wisdom and virtue, but how these qualities are put into practice should be inquired. So, Viên Thông went on to say: “Order or chaos rests with the officials. If they can win the people over, then there is political order; if they lose the people’s support, then there is upheaval. I have observed Emperors and Kings of former time, no one succeeded without employing true gentlemen, or failed unless he employed petty men. When we trace how these things come about, it does not happen overnight, but develops gradually. Just as heaven and earth cannot abruptly produce cold and hot weather, but must change gradually through the seasons like spring and autumn, etc., Kings cannot suddenly bring about prosperity or decline, but rather it is a gradual process depending on their good or bad activities. The wise Kings of old knew this principle, so they molded themselves on Earth and never ceased to rely on virtue to cultivate themselves; they molded themselves on Earth and never ceased to rely on virtue to pacify the people. To cultivate oneself means to be cautious within, as cautious as if one were walking on thin ice. To pacify people means to respect those who are below, to be as respectful as one riding a horse holding worn-out-reins. If one can be like that, one cannot but succeed; if otherwise, one cannot but fail. The gradual process of prosperity or decline depends on this.”<sup>[9]</sup>

Here, Viên Thông expounds a new theory of good governance and development by emphasizing upon what we with our modern science of business management call the question of personnel, the question of employing appropriate men for appropriate works. The leader is now not reserved only for the king or the Emperor, or the head of a state but also for the officials in the governing bureaucracy of a country. In other words, if the working of a state machinery runs smoothly with good officials, then, the country will be in great peace. Otherwise, it will fall into chaotic state. Thus, there is an expansion of the notion of leadership from one man to a group of people who are responsible for the working of a state

machinery. This is a new contribution of Viên Thông's theory of good governance and development.

### Trần Thái Tông's theory

Hundred years after Viên Thông's death, Vietnam underwent many changes. Even with his advice, the leadership of the Lý dynasty could not reverse the course of history and the country fell into a chaotic state. Warring factions fought each other and finally appeared a new dynasty whose leader was a new young man under the name Trần Cảnh (1218-1278), later on, widely known under the title Trần Thái Tông. In the year 1236 A.D., due to the coercion by Trần Thủ Độ, the imperial head of government, to accept his brother's wife, Trần Cảnh fled to Yên Tử mountain from the capital Thăng Long. There, he met Zen Master Phù Vân and of course, Trần Thủ Độ got after him, asking him to be back to the capital. After many requests and not receiving the acquiescence from Trần Cảnh, Trần Thủ Độ decided to make the mountain into a new capital. Phù Vân intervened, saying to Trần Cảnh: "To be the leader of the people, one should take the wish of the people to be his wish, the heart of the people to be his heart, now, that the people wish to welcome Your Majesty back to the capital, then how can Your Majesty not come back?" (凡為人君者以天下之欲為欲以天下之心為心今天下欲迎陛下歸之則陛下安得不歸哉).<sup>[10]</sup>

With this statement, Phù Vân again gives us a new look on the theory of good governance and development in Vietnam of 13th Century when the Vietnamese began to deal with the rising power of the Mongolian empire in the north under the leadership of Genghis Khan (1162-1227). Actually, this new theory for the first time discusses about the desire and the will of people in relation to the governance and development of the state in its clearest term and content. The governance and development of a state totally depends upon the desire and the will of people and reflects this desire and will. Thus, a new and most important element is introduced into the theory of state governance and development, which Pháp Thuận's and Viên Thông's theories do not explicitly state or marginally deal with, that is, the desire and the will of people. The leader of the nation will act according to that desire and will.

We can say this is a new contribution of the Vietnamese Buddhist theory of state governance and development of the 13th century which still has a great bearing upon our time. This is because this theory emphasizes the role of the people in the running of a country and demands that any state policy should reflect faithfully their desire and will. This explains why the Vietnamese of the 13th century successfully defended their country against three military invasions of Genghis Khan's successor, Kublai Khan (1215-1294) in the years 1258, 1285 and 1287.

### Trần Nhân Tông's theory

Tran Nhan Tong (1258-1308) came to power in 1278 when Kublai Khan completely destroyed the Han Dynasty of Sung and set up the new Mongolian dynasty Yuan. Kublai wished to expand his imperial territory southward into Southeast Asian countries. But Vietnam stands as an obstacle on his way to realize that ambition. So he had to conquer Vietnam. The wars of 1285 and 1287 occurred. The Vietnamese under the leadership of Tran Nhan Tong had successfully destroyed these two expedition army of almost one million men and totally crushed Kublai Khan's dream. After his victory over the Mongolians, he put out his theory of Buddhist life. Through this theory, he appealed to the Buddhists to live a worldly life (cư trần) but behave as a Buddhist (lạc đạo). He gives priority to worldly activities and through these worldly activities, we realize the Buddhist ideal. The first sentence of his prose poem *Cư trần lạc đạo* says: "We sit in the city but our behaviors are like in forest" (*Minh ngồi thành thị, nét dụng sơn lâm*). This means that we work for the benefit and welfare of the people but we are not attached to it. We built bridges and roads before constructing temples and stupas. We take care of our parents and our master at the same time we take care of our fellow men. Trần Nhân Tông defeated the Mongolian army in the name of a Bodhisattva way, because he considered that army as a tyranny to his people, as his diplomatic letters to Kublai Khan's envoy show. He wished to work tirelessly as a leader so that his people to have something to eat when hungry and some places to lay down to rest when they are tired. So, at his time, people looked at him as a Buddha-Emperor (Phật Hoàng) or Buddha-King (Giác Vương). If we talk about the dharmaraja in Vietnamese history, Trần Nhân Tông is probably one

of the best representatives. Because of this title, to maintain Buddhism for him is a duty of the king and the mandarin (*duy trì Phật pháp thị quốc vương, đại thần*). Therefore, to build the prosperity and create the wealth for the society is the main responsibility of the Buddhists. He set a good example for the leaders to come in good governance and development in Vietnam, which we will find in the next case study.

### Nguyễn Phúc Chu's theory

Through out history of Vietnam, the demand for good leadership for national governance and development is increasingly acute, as the Vietnamese moved Southward and expand their territory. Interestingly enough, Pháp Thuận's theory of good governance and development is again proclaimed and put into practice. Nguyễn Phúc Chu (1675-1725) is a lord who governs the South apart of an unified Vietnam, establishes the city of Sài Gòn (now Hồ Chí Minh City) in 1698 and cooperates the Mekong delta into the Vietnamese map. He belongs to a class of those few political leaders who explicitly declare themselves to be Buddhists of some Zen schools and receive some Buddhist precepts. In this case, he receives the Bodhisattva vow in the year 1695. Due to this event, the history of the Southward expansion of the Vietnamese nation is mainly carried out by a Buddha (ie., Trần Nhân Tông) and a Bodhisattva (ie., Nguyễn Phúc Chu). In reality, this process of Vietnamization occurred not by military conquest, but to peaceful means mainly through intermarriage. If Trần Nhân Tông gives away his daughter Huyền Trân for acquiring the Ô Lý land (now Southern Quảng Trị Province, Thừa Thiên Province, Đà Nẵng and Hội An City), the Granfather of Nguyễn Phúc Chu, Nguyễn Phúc Tần (1620-1687), did the same, but for obtaining not the land, but the right for the Vietnamese to work in the area which is now the Vietnamese call Nam Bộ (the South of Vietnam). It takes almost half a century for that part becoming Vietnamese territory. By the way, we should notice the interesting significance of these two personalities, ie., Trần Nhân Tông and Nguyễn Phúc Chu in the annexation of the land which later become the Capital of the Unified Vietnam (Huế) and apart of Vietnam (Sài Gòn). In the inscriptions written by Nguyễn Phúc Chu in the year 1715, after finishing the building of Thiên Mụ Temple (Celestial Lady Temple), Nguyễn Phúc Chu put

down for the first time his theory of state. And also the first time we see the appearance of the word “*vô vi*”. This shows that in the history of Vietnam, there is a logical inheritance of the theory of state which each generation of Vietnamese political leaders have to devise to suit their own needs and national requirement. Nguyễn Phúc Chu writes: “*The stability and security of the nation, peace in four directions (depend upon) the exercise of ‘vô vi’ where Confucianism and Buddhism are in the same service.*” This echo of Pháp Thuận’s theory of state reflects not only Pháp Thuận and the Vietnamese theory of state itself, but also the unity of the Vietnamese theory of state power. At the time of Nguyễn Phúc Chu, the globalization is occurred at the world scale with the emergence and participation of the new elements which are the Western states and nations. So, in using the theory of “*vô vi*,” Nguyễn Phúc Chu enlarges his search for wise and good men not only in his country in Vietnam but also abroad which in this case, the China and Euro. In a circle of those who serve him, we found not only Vietnamese, but also Chinese and Europeans, not only Buddhist clergy men but also Catholic priests. This hunting for talented people had helped Nguyễn Phúc Chu to have those great achievements which history has recorded.

### SOME OBSERVATION

We hope, in the discussion of these case studies of Buddhists contribution to the theory of state governance and development in Vietnam, we will realize how from a general Buddhist theory, four Vietnamese Buddhist statesmen exploit and develop into new theories of state governance and development of their own which has enduring historical values and are still applicable to Vietnam today in spite that many concepts in them still open for discussion. These Buddhists were all active political leaders and personally took part in the political advisers and leaders of the country. Therefore, what they were discussing was the policy they were trying to apply, so that the people’s welfare could benefit from their realizations. The people here are all those whom the modern science of human resource management would call: “stakeholders” with a small difference in that these stakeholders are not limited to the members of a corporation, but belonging to the whole society and their welfare should be taken care of, or managed, by good leadership.