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Preliminary Studies on the Buhhdism Sub-Sect of Vinh Xuong Buu Son Ky Huong in Tan Chau, An Giang

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Abstract

The Buu Son Ky Huong religious sect (BSKH – Strange Fragrance from the Precious Mountains) was originated in An Giang in 1849, then it spread to many parts of the Southwest. Since the death of Doan Minh Huyen, the founder of BSKH, the sect developed in small scale and gradually declined due to many reasons. However, in the early decades of the twentieth century, BSKH was re-established from lineage believers. The re-established BSKH later had many different names and was identified as a religious subsect derived from the BSKH founded by Doan Minh Huyen. The typical representing sect of BSKH established afterward is the one in Vinh Xuong, known as Vinh Xuong BSKH, Buddhist Vinh Xuong BSKH, or Vinh Xuong BSKH sect. In order to distinguish and compare the characteristics of BSKH to others through different stages, in this article, we temporarily use the term original BSKH to refer to the BSKH founded and handed down to the future generation by Doan Minh Huyen. As for the BSKH sub-sects formed later, we use the names identified by the follower community as that of Vinh Xuong BSKH. Regarding Vinh Xuong BSKH, there have been two studies in the past, however, they only stopped at some issues of historical summary, so we realize that further research is needed. Therefore, this article presents our study on the establishment history of sub-sects, doctrinal thoughts, characteristics of worship, annual worship ceremonies of Vinh Xuong BSKH as the fundamental basis for comparison with the original BSKH.

Keywords: *Buu son ky huong, vinh xuong, tan chau, pham thanh quang.*

Overview of Vinh Xuong Buu Son Ky Huong (Vinh Xuong BSKH)

According to the religion's documents along with the in-depth interview with elderly followers conducted in 2018 at Vinh Xuong Buu Son Ky Huong Pagoda, the founder of Vinh Xuong BSKH is Mr. Pham Thanh Quang, real name being Pham Van Sam, who was born in 1921 in a Confucian family of ten brothers, lived in Ly Nhon village, Prek Chanh commune, Kor Thum district, Candal province, Cambodia. His father, Pham Van Hanh, worked as a farmer, and was in close friendship with Trinh Dinh Kiet who belonged to a revolutionary organization. Influenced by the patriotism of his father, in his adulthood, Pham Thanh Quang made friend with Mr. Trinh Dinh Thuc (son of Mr. Trinh Dinh Kiet), Secretary of the Committee Party of Vinh Xuong commune in 1933.

In his youth time, apart from the time working as a farmer to help his family, it is not clear with whom or which sect Pham Thanh Quang studied, but only obvious that after a long time “keeping silent” (pretending to be “dumb”, talking to none but staying at home, “meditating the Dharma” and prescribing medicine to give treatment to the people in the area. By 1 April 1941 (lunar calendar), he began to disseminate religious thoughts to the sick and the people in the commune. Mr. Pham Thanh Quang set the commencement date of BSKH as April 1st, 1941.

Because he organized the monastery activities, which attracted and gathered many followers and people

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who needed medical treatment, he was suspected by the French colonists of "rallying the people to oppose the French", so in 1942, he was taken by the French to Phnom Penh (Cambodia) for interrogation. Finding no evidence, the French colonists later deported him to Vietnam. Mr. Pham Thanh Quang returned to Vinh Xuong commune (in Tan Chau district, Chau Doc province; now Tan Chau town, An Giang province), chose a plot of land on the edge of Tien River, in hamlet 1, built a small bamboo-leaf pagoda, named "Buu Son Thien Lam tu Phat Giao Vinh Xuong" for living, proselytizing and prescribing medicine to treat local people's diseases. Because he was the seventh son in his family, his followers called him (Thầy Bảy) Master Seven while the pagoda where he practiced was named by the local people and the religious followers as Chua Ong Bay (Mr. Bay Pagoda), which has existed as what it is today.

While living and evangelizing in Vinh Xuong, Mr. Pham Thanh Quang had a connection with the local revolutionary organization. Therefore, in 1943, he was arrested for the second time by the French colonists, who escorted him to Chau Doc for investigation, then sent him to Saigon and finally transferred him to Tay Ninh for imprisonment.

In 1945, when Japan couped France, he escaped prison and returned to Vinh Xuong to rebuild the pagoda, took the title of BSKH, both proselytized and actively participated in the patriotic movement. At the pagoda, Pham Thanh Quang gathered followers to practice fighting, organized the construction of a forge of weapons; attacking French garrisons on the Cambodian border to seized guns; built resistance forces in combination with local revolutionary forces to fight the French colonists, accumulated weapons and donated them to revolutionaries, ... During the General Uprising in 1945, Pham Thanh Quang's followers at the pagoda combined with revolutionary forces to descend on Tan Chau district to seize power. Thanks to close cultivation methods and revolutionary enthusiasm, people and religious believers followed Quang in large numbers. Mr. Pham Thanh Quang died of illness and "was buried" on August 15 (lunar calendar), 1947.

In 1948, French colonists at Hung Loi fort (in Cambodia) used a ship and landed to Vinh Xuong, arrested people, then set fire to the pagoda. Due to the fierce war, followers were arrested, the pagoda was burned, and the number of followers living near the temple evacuated elsewhere. When the situation was improved, the followers gradually returned to Vinh Xuong to live, practice and preserve the vestiges of Master Pham Thanh Quang.

When Pham Thanh Quang died, the successor to the BSKH in Vinh Xuong was Mr. Tran Van Soai, a reputable and virtuous follower. Mr. Tran Van Soai, who originally came from Cambodia, was born in 1933, in Dong Phuoc village, Lédet district, Kandal province. His father, Tran Van Hu, and his mother, Duong Thi Xuan, were both followers of Pham Thanh Quang. Mr. Tran Van Soai was also the seventh child in his family, so the followers called Mr. Seven (Mr. Seven Tran Van Soai). After 1954, when the American Imperialists replaced the French colonists, he participated in local revolutionary activities. During this period, due to many reasons, the practice of BSKH believers in Vinh Xuong was dispersed. In the years 1956 - 1957, he mobilized followers to revive the practice and reactivate the BSKH religion built by Pham Thanh Quang; continued to lead the believer's production activities. The simple bamboo and leaf pagoda "Buu Son Thien Lam tu Phat Giao Vinh Xuong", which was initially built by Master Pham Thanh Quang in 1942 and re-built in 1945, off the edge of Tien River, was burned by the French colonists. On October 28, 1957, Tran Van Soai and his followers eagerly rebuilt the pagoda in its current location.

While they were building a new BSKH pagoda and rebuilding religious activities, in 1967, Mr. Tran Van Soai and his followers continued to build another pagoda in hamlet 5, about 500 meters from the original one. However, due to lack of funding and the war, the construction was not implemented until 1972. This second temple is dedicated to the Phat Ba Quan Am Nam Hai (Nam Hai Guanyin Bodhisattva). In order to develop the Vinh Xuong BSKH and rebuild the pagodas to serve the religious needs of believers, Mr. Bay Tran Van Soai disbursed the funds accumulated by him for the construction of BSKH

pagoda. Restoration work was carried out on April 1, 2007 and completed on January 15, 2009. Mr. Bay Tran Van Soai died on July 22, 2011 (on the 22nd day of June lunar month) (Managing Committee of Buu Son Pagoda, Ky Huong, Vinh Xuong, 1999).

Vinh Xuong Pagoda has great significance in the development of BSKH, and is also the site of revolutionary struggle in the two resistance wars against France and the US, ... Therefore, Vinh Xuong Pagoda was classified as a Provincial Historical Monument of Revolution by An Giang Provincial People's Committee according to Decision No. 1470/QD-UB dated 05-09-2001.

The number of followers of Vinh Xuong BSKH has fluctuated greatly over time: "In 2004: there were 3,000 people; 2007: 2,400; 2008: 2,100 people. According to previous statistics of the People's Committee of Vinh Xuong commune, religious followers used to be quite numerous, up to 10,000 people, but now they have settled in some provinces such as Vinh Long, Tra Vinh, Ben Tre, Ho Chi Minh City,... (Tran Hong Lien, 2009).

In 2018, according to some reputable followers in the Vinh Xuong Buddhist Welfare Management Board, the number of Vinh Xuong BSKH followers in the locality and some neighboring communes reach about 3,000 people.

Religious ideology and doctrine of Vinh Xuong BSKH

In terms of Vinh Xuong BSKH history and the confirmation of its followers, their religion is a continuation of the BSKH religion by Master Doan Minh Huyen, therefore, it can be said that Pham Thanh Quang has inherited the tradition of the original BSKH that was preserved for generations. Besides, he absorbed Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist ideology in the process of living and practicing before his evangelism. Therefore, in terms of doctrinal thoughts, there is an integration of Buddhist, Confucian and Taoist thoughts in Vinh Xuong BSKH. In addition to Buddhist, Confucian and Taoist thoughts, Vinh Xuong still follows the Monastic Doctrine, the Four Gratitude and Buddha Studies of the original BSKH as the main ideas to teach his followers. The teachings that follow Monastic Doctrine, Four Gratitude, and Buddhist studies by Vinh Xuong BSKH are no different from those of the original BSKH. Therefore, here, we only mention a few main contents of Buddhist, Confucian and Taoist thoughts of Vinh Xuong BSKH as a basis for comparison with the original BSKH.

Buddhist thoughts

Thoughts and Practices following "Pure Land"

Both original BSKH and the Vinh Xuong BSKH sect are greatly influenced by the thoughts - the Pure Land practice of Buddhism, which is the most basic and important practice of Buddhism. It can be said that BSKH in general is religion whose religious practice is done by following Buddhism and taking the Pure Land as the main practice.

"Pure" or "Pure Land" means the practice of reciting Buddha - the name "Nam Mo Amitabha Buddha" as the main one: "The Buddha Master revealed to his disciples the practice of the Pure Land sect, dedicated only to reciting Amitabha Buddha to pray for access to the Western realm of Ecstasy" (Vuong Kim, 1966).

Vinh Xuong follows the thoughts and practice of the Pure Land practice of the "Đạo ông bà"³ (BSKH) from ancient times as the main practice of believers in daily life. The thoughts-method of the Pure Land

³ Original BSKH followers and Vinh Xuong BSKH often refer to their religion as "Grandparent religion". That is, the religion mainly "worships grandparents", "worships parents and mothers",...

practice is taught by Pham Thanh Quang in his teaching system, which is interpreted as follows: he advised his followers to pray Buddha every day because it was believed that Pure Land practice would help human beings go beyond usual practices. The followers pray under their breath six words “Nam Mô A Di Đà Phật (Buddha Amitabha) in their everyday body movements of walking, standing, lying or sitting...” (Bui Son Ky Huong, Vinh Xuong, 1964/2010).

Being born and existing in the border area, where people's lives were difficult, and the believers "toiled and moiled" to support themselves and their families; therefore, the Dharma was easy for the followers to understand, the way of cultivation only needed to "recite the Six Temples of Maitreya" - while showing closeness, ease of practice, while attracting people to join the religion, as a spiritual support in life. This simple practice sometimes became a “strange practice” to the French colonists and other religions.

According to the elderly followers of Vinh Xuong BSKH, before 1954, at a death anniversary of Pham Thanh Quang, some French officials and even monks from the Zen sect attended and asked Mr. Tran Van Soai why it was that other religions had many scriptures and teachings, ... to teach followers, why BSKH had nothing. Mr. Tran Van Soai - a close follower of Mr. Pham Thanh Quang replied: “My Master teaches followers to do good things, be human, do daily business or labor production activities and recite Buddha. That much has not been fulfilled, let alone many scriptures, how can people learn” (Tran V. B., 63 years old).

Because of the closeness, simple doctrinal thoughts, it was assumed that BHKS is a “heterogeneous” practice (easy to practice) because: “reciting Buddha is impossible for anyone to practice, an official can do, a trader can also do, and a ploughman can do the same; at any time, even if one walks, stands or lies he can recite the Buddha. The practice has been so easy to sustain that the result is not difficult to achieve.” (Vuong Kim, 1953).

From this close practice, BSKH in general, Vinh Xuong BSKH in particular is considered as a religion that simply “advises people to recite Buddha”, “do good thing but avoid doing evil”, is a “religion for everyone”, a “good religion”, “folk Buddhism”,... rather than a religion that is directed by doctrines.

Zen Buddhism thoughts and practice.

Vinh Xuong BHKS was born in the context of a turmoiled society and a rather special class of monks, so the patriarch chose the appropriate thoughts-practice of Pure Land cultivation accordingly. However, it was not because of such a reason that the thoughts-practice of Zen did not have any involvements. An investigation on the system of teachings as well as practices of Vinh Xuong BHKS among the followers clearly showed that the thoughts - practice follows Zen Buddhism did exist.

Vinh Xuong BHKS was born in the context of heyday of Southern Buddhism, so it was deeply influenced by Buddhist thoughts. However, this influence was adapted to the realities of peasants' life, escaping from the scholastic ideas of Buddhism. Therefore, the Zen ideology and practice of Buddhism in BHKS also no longer had any fixed “forms”, which was integrated into the activities of secular congregational life, in the relationship between the neighborly love of farmers/believers in the daily “Zen movement” style.

Pham Thanh Quang had extensive and clear explanations about the thoughts-practice by Buddhist Zen practice – in harmony between “the physical body and the mind”. In other words, the mind and the body must go hand in hand, without separation: “The Buddha is in my thoughts, not outside my thoughts” (Bui Son, Ky Huong, Vinh Xuong, 1964/2010). Therefore: “I sat in meditation to keep my mind pure and visualize the Buddha realm. That recitation of the Buddha and prostration often reminded my heart not to be distracted during my delirium. Because I don't have autonomy over my physique.” (Bui Son, Ky Huong, Vinh Xuong, 1964/2010).

It is in another explanation that clearly shows the relationship between “tham thiền nhập định” and “Tĩnh độ niệm Phật”. Master Pham Thanh Quan told his followers to sit in meditation and practice

Zen so that the Mind would be restful, the sea would be calm and the wind would stop. If one's Mind is restful, he could become buddha at its likeliness. It was believed that someone who practiced Zen and became enlightened would become a person whose path was lit by a jade or a person who was in arrogance found wisdom (Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương Vĩnh Xương, 1964/2010).

Furthermore, in order to clearly express the thoughts-practice of Zen in the “doubt” and incomprehension of followers, Pham Thanh Quang questioned and explained himself about the clarity of the Zen practice: “Can a person do meditation and become a Buddha? Then the practice of Buddhism - studying Buddhism, participating in Zen is first and foremost. It is meditation that sets the body and mind for purity,... By participating in Zen, contemplating and understanding the noble righteous reason, we follow it, then we become a Buddha immediately” (Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương Vĩnh Xương, 1964/2010). It can be seen that the thoughts - practice of Zen by Pham Thanh Quang followed the stereotype of Zen monasticism in Tonkin Buddhism as “using physical body to maintain mind”, a “physical body-mind parallel and most regular” practice.

However, this can only be considered as the thoughts - practice that Pham Thanh Quang established for himself and for a minority of large believers who had a basis and lifelong service to the religion, while “participating in Meditation to visualize the Dharma” was of very rare practice for followers. The sect's thoughts-practice for the masses of believers was still the Pure Land; and even if there is a Zen practice, the form of Zen did not “follow the dharma”, “follow the body”, but visualize it in the “mind” as he once taught.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the thoughts-practice of Zen Buddhism in Vinh Xuong BSKH is not separate from the Pure Land Buddhism.

Confucian and Taoist thoughts

Confucian thoughts

In Vinh Xuong BHKS, Pham Thanh Quang was greatly influenced by Confucian thoughts. In the system of lectures, his teachings to followers, he used Confucian thoughts to explain Buddhist thoughts – “using Confucianism to explain Buddhism”: “He who begins to study the religion until the day he realizes the Great Righteous Enlightenment will base his study on the Nhon Dao, meaning Three Moral Bonds, the Five Constant Virtues. In five Virtues, take the Three Moral Bonds as the pillar to go up on the moral path for stability and satisfactory results.” (Buu Son, Ky Huong, Vinh Xuong, 1964/2010).

Pham Thanh Quang thoroughly explained the ideas of Confucianism in the same way as those in the masterpieces of the Four Books and the Five Classics that a Confucian once acquired: “The Three Moral Bonds include Quân-thần cang (King – civilian); Phụ tử cang (father-son); Phu thê cang (husband-wife). Five Virtues: Nhân (kindness), Nghĩa (uprightness), Lễ (decorum), Trí (wisdom), Tín (faithfulness). As for the Triple Catechumens - the Four Virtues: The Triple means that “tạì gia tòng phụ” (a woman is subordinated to her father at her home), “xuất giá tòng phu” (after her marriage she is subordinated to her husband), “phu tử tòng tử” (after her husband's death she is subordinated to, or follows, her son); Four Virtues: Công (housekeeping skills), Dung (beauty), Ngôn (appropriate speech) and Hạnh (moral conduct)” (Buu Son, Ky Huong, Vinh Xuong, 1964/2010).

These Confucian morals occupy quite a bit in Master Pham Thanh Quang's teachings and explanations. The teaching motif of mixing Confucian with Buddha has made Confucian thoughts inadvertently “belong” to Buddhist thoughts, in order to “sanctify” values that believers hear and understand but rarely practice. This purpose is nothing more than to bring faith to believers to practice the most dear and mundane ethics.

To put it in short, the Confucian thoughts of teaching “the way of being human” in the teachings of

Vinh Xuong became an important idea in parallel with Buddhist thoughts. In other words, Buddhist and Confucian thoughts were “merged into one”, into the Four Gratitude– in the same act of religious practice. In the midst of that harmony, if there is no image of Buddha, Bodhisattva, Buddha recitation as the object of reflection and dissection, it is certain that the doctrinal thoughts of Vinh Xuong is easily mistaken as Confucian doctrine rather than Buddhism one.

Taoist thoughts

In addition to Confucian thoughts, Vinh Xuong was deeply influenced by Taoist thoughts, to the point of using Taoist thoughts to explain Buddhist contents. Use Taoist thoughts to "transform space" in the Buddhist world of belief. Without the caption in the brackets of the teacher himself - the author of the lecture and lecture, the readers would not have realized that the following teachings and lectures are Buddhist thoughts, teachings, Buddhist practices: the Eight Trigrams, Heaven and Earth, medicine of fairy, medicine refinery (Buu Son Ky Huong Vinh Xuong, 1964/2010).

In another “Buddhism-Taoism in parallel practice” explanation, which should have been given under the notion of the Buddhist learners, it is only Buddhism, but here is "Taoismized" the Buddhist worldview, not seen in Buddhist scriptures: “What is the Tam nguon? Humans have the Three nguon: Essence, Vitality, Spirit. Essence: is the wisdom, intelligence for thinking and understanding. Vitality: is the breath that absorbs the innate yin and yang that builds the body. Spirit: is the god who resides in the eye, to observe the discernment of righteousness; distinguish yin and yang” (Buu Son Ky Huong Buddhism, 1965).

The meaning of the Tam Nguon (Heaven, Earth, Water) as explained by the Master Pham Thanh Quang is similar to the meaning of the Tam Nguon in the Taoist concept. According to the commentary of Sinologist Le Anh Minh, in the work *Huynh Dinh kinh*, a transcendent and mysterious sutra of Taoism, the Tam Nguon are: (1) Heaven, Earth, Water. After everything was divided from the chaos, there was the essence of Heavens, Earth, Water that turned into human life and cultivated all things; (2) The three sources are: Essence, Vitality, Spirit (Rolf Homan, 2003).

There are many such interpretations of Buddhist teachings imbued with Taoist characteristics in the way Pham Thanh Quang taught followers. Apparently, Patriarch/teacher Pham Thanh Quang was not only influenced by Taoist thoughts through his religious studies, but also by Vietnamese, Khmer, and Chinese Buddhist monks and monks where he lived. The Vietnam - Cambodia border during this period was said to be a “good land”, proliferating the form of practicing “Taoist fairytale” of Vietnamese and Chinese Taoists exiles. Therefore, it is not strange that in the teachings by Master Pham Thanh Quang appeared Taoist thoughts due to the influence occurred in the past and the present.

It can be seen that in Vinh Xuong BSKH, the Taoism has merged with Buddhism, taking the Buddhist fulcrum to interpret Taoist thoughts, and vice versa using Taoist thoughts to explain Buddhist thoughts and worldview to clarify Buddhist philosophies. The use of Taoist scriptures, scriptures or ideas also aims at a path that is to make followers understand the essential contents of Buddhism and practice.

Worshipping characteristics of Vinh Xuong BSKH

Although originally born from the original BSKH by Master Doan Minh Huyen, the worshipping ceremonies, meanings of the worshipping symbols and worshipping objects in Vinh Xuong BSKH are different from those of the original one. Here in this article, we summarize the worshipping characteristics of Vinh Xuong BSKH through two worshipping spaces: *Pagodas* and *houses*.

Worship in pagodas

In the pagodas of Vinh Xuong BSKH, the worshipping symbols and objects are similar to the original BSKH. Vinh Xuong has two pagodas: the one worshipping Buddha, also known as Ong Pagoda (Upper

Pagoda) and the one for Ba Pagoda (Lower Pagoda). In these two pagodas, the worshipping symbols are the same but the worshipping objects are different:

- In *Ong pagoda*, the worshipping objects are quite simple:

+ In the great hall is an altar with a tall rectangular Trần Đều (*Red Cloth*) symbol, engraved with the Chinese character Buu Son Ky Huong (寶山奇香). According to the local followers' explanation, this is the altar of the *Four Religions*, or the *Four Teachings* expressing the unity of Buddhas in BSKH. *The Four Religions* are the mentioned names of the four Buddhas corresponding to the four Chinese characters Buu - Son - Ky - Huong. In specification, Buu (寶) is said to be the Buddha King; **Son** is the Master Doan Minh Huyen; **Ky** (奇) refers to Master Ngo Loi; **Huong** (香) is the Trum also called Mr. Dao Den, who is really Ta Pôn. In the *Giang ngu giao* (also known as the *Five Teachings*) by Master Ngo Loi, founder of the Four Gratitude (四恩孝義), this image of the Four Teachings is mentioned: Bửu means Phật Vương (Gyalwang Drukpa) “Sơn” refers to Master Doan Minh Huyen/ “Kỳ” refers to Ngo Loi, patriarch of Tu An Hu Nghia (Four Gratitude)/ “Hương” refers to Phật Trùm (Tà Pôn), (The Statue Mountain Master).

The communal worship of the four Buddhas demonstrates the religious belief in the relationship among the patriarchs; expressing the harmony of “inscription”, “unity” of visible and invisible Buddha objects into the unity of similar “imperceptible”, inseparable, non-symbolic body. In the names of the four Buddhas, apart from the “Buddha King” who is an incomprehensible, “invisible” body, there is still a mysterious question - which Buddha it is exactly (?), the other Buddhas such as Master Doan Minh Huyen, Master Ngo Loi, Ta Pôn, are all concrete characters. However, due to inheriting the idea of “immeasurable” worship, Vinh Xuong BSKH followers do not worship the images of individual Buddhas on the altar but a Red Cloth instead, expressing the “unification” of images and “imperceptible” thoughts as the original BSKH.

+ Opposite the *Four Religion* altar is the altar for the Hộ pháp (Lokapalas). The worshipping symbol on the altar for the Lokapalas at Vinh Xuong BSKH Pagoda is a *Red Cloth*. The altar is simply decorated: a vase of flowers, lamps, incense burners. The Giant spirits or Dragon Deity – Lokapalas are the two bodhisattvas in Tonkin Buddhism, whose statues are usually set up on two sides pagoda’s entrance or on two sides of the altars of Shakyamuni Buddha.

+ In the posterior, the middle hall is the altars of *the Hundred Former Gods*. According to Vinh Xuong BSKH followers, the *Hundred Former Gods* are deceased officials through different dynasties and served the country, homeland, and villages,... upon death is “deified” and worshipped. These are very vague “human gods”, not specific to any objects, sometimes understood as the altar of the Fatherland. The worshipping symbol on the Altar for the *Hundred Former Gods* is also a *Red Cloth*.

+ In front of the pagoda is a one-storey *Thong Thien* (Heaven) Connection altar, which is influenced by the folk beliefs of worshipping the Jade Emperor by Vietnamese people in the Southwest.

- *At the pagoda to worship Ba (Lower Pagoda)*: Believers call *the pagoda of Nam Hai* Guanyin Bodhisattva *Buu Son Ky Huong, Vinh Xuong*. The belief and consciousness of *worshipping the Lady* Buddha and *worshipping the Landlord* Buddha show the equality, the “yin – yang” in folk perception. Vinh Xuong commune is positioned in a river area, in which water rises in the annual season, affecting human life. It is the impact of living environment circumstances and spiritual needs that the image of Lady Buddha is established for followers to practice their religion, meeting their spiritual needs.

As the name suggests, the Nam Hai Guanyin Bodhisattva is dedicated to the center of the main hall. The Nam Hai Guanyin Bodhisattva is represented by the vast *Red Cloth* symbol painted on the walls, not the image as common as in Tonkin Buddhist pagodas. The altar is decorated with incense sticks, lamps, bells, muzzles, incense burners, vases of flowers. Around the altar decorated with umbrellas, veils embroidered with dragons, phoenixes flowers, leaves,... Around the altar in quadrangle direction are

pillars carved in the shapes of interwinding dragons and phoenixes.

+ In the back, in the middle is the altar of the Nine Legends of the Seven Ancestors (九玄七租).

+ On both sides of the altar of the *Nine Legends of the Seven Ancestors* are two altars of the *Ten Thousand male and female People*, with the male being on the right and female being on the left. Followers believe that among “*ten thousand male and female people*” in thousands of births and deaths reincarnation, are those who used to be their grandparents and parents, so they must worship them daily.

The form of decoration of the altars for the *Nine Legends of the Seven Ancestors* and the *Ten Thousand People* is very simple: a square table of about 0.5 meters with incense burners, three of pots water and the symbol of *Red Cloth* painted on the wall. It looks as if it were for worshipping the “tree table”.

+ In front of the pagoda is a one-storey *Thong Thien* altar, which by the folk beliefs is for worshipping the Jade Emperor as Vietnamese people in the Southwest have done.

+ It is noticeable that in the right side of the pagoda, the *God of Agriculture* is respectfully worshipped in a fairly large temple. *God of Agriculture* is worshipped by the *symbol of Red Cloth* with the Chinese character (神農) being inserted in. *God of Agriculture* is a god in folk legends in China, spreading influence to Vietnam. “*God of Agriculture is believed to have the function of blessing the peasants to enjoy favorable weather conditions so as to reap a bumper crop.*” (Huynh, Ngoc Trang & Truong Ngoc Tuong & Ho Tuong, 1993). Every year, *the worship ceremony of God of Agriculture* at the temple is solemnly held, which is the main worship ceremony according to the regulations of the religion.

In short, the worshipping symbols and objects in the pagodas of Vinh Xuong BSKH are simpler than those of original BSKH. Despite its simplicity, it clearly shows the fusion of the worshipping objects in the folk beliefs and Northern Buddhism in this time.

Worship at home

In the households belonging to Vinh Xuong BSKH, there are three worshipping objects, namely in the top middle of the house being the altar for Red Cloth; below being the altars of the *Nine Legends of the Seven Ancestors*, all inside the house; in front of the yard being a one-storey *Thong Thien* altar for worshipping the Jade Emperor as Vietnamese people in the Southwest practice.

Worship at home by religious believers is highly variable, and the process of integrating objects of worship is more “flexible” than at pagodas due to many factors, including psychology, spiritual needs, inter-religion correlation,... Therefore, many households belonging to Vinh Xuong BSKH worship statues or images of Shakyamuni Buddha, Guanyin Bodhisattva,... simultaneously with the altar of worshipping Red Cloth in the middle of the house, sometimes the portrait of Huynh Phu So (Master of Hoa Hao Buddhism),... This fusion and transformation is quite easy to understand, and is expressed through two important reasons. *First*, with regard to the issue of worshipping Buddha images/statues, Vinh Xuong followers believe that their religion comes from Buddhism, therefore, it’s normal to worship the Buddha images/statues, just because of the believers’ spiritual needs. *Second*, for worshipping the image of Huynh Phu So, Vinh Xuong followers said that BSKH and Hoa Hao Buddhism are of one root, like “a tree with many branches”. This reason also comes from the “myth” of the relationship - the “regeneration” of Master Doan Minh Huyen through the “image” of Master Huynh Phu So.

For the above two reasons, Vinh Xuong followers’ acceptance to worship the image or statue of Shakyamuni Buddha, Guanyin Bodhisattva, and the image of Huynh Phu So,... at home. In the case of receiving more worshipping objects, the arrangement of the home altar of Vinh Xuong followers is also different from that of pure believers who keep the “traditional practice”. In the middle of the house, at the highest position is the altar for Shakyamuni Buddha with his portrait or statue. Under it is the altar worshipping Red Cloth; at the bottom is the altar for *Nine Legends of the Seven Ancestors*. To the left or right (above) is the altar for the , Guanyin Bodhisattva with her image otherwise the portrait of Huynh Phu So. These altars are large or small depending on the space of the house, the household’s economic

conditions, the household owners' spiritual needs.

It can be said that the psychological transformation of believers due to the impact of other beliefs and religions, social changes and other causes has led to the current situation of Vinh Xuong followers who receive more different objects of worship at home. This problem of fusion and transformation no longer lies in the individual family but gradually spreads into the worship concept of the believer community. This somehow alters the characteristics of the religion.

Typical annual worshipping ceremony of Vinh Xuong BSKH

The Vinh Xuong BSKH religious community holds many worshipping ceremonies every year. Followers believe that these traditional ceremonies have been held since the Master Pham Thanh Quang settled and preached here; or established from the successor of the religious relationship, Master Tran Van Soai, after the death of Master Pham Thanh Quang. The big annual worshipping ceremonies of Vinh Xuong BSKH both bear religious meanings and show the characteristics of deep folk beliefs.

The following are the main and outstanding annual worshipping ceremonies of Vinh Xuong BSKH:

Three full moon days: worshipping ceremony in accordance with Tonkin Buddhism

The founder of Vinh Xuong BHKS confirmed his religious belief in "following Buddhism". In many verses of his teachings, interpretations of his teachings are clearly Buddhist; even the name of the religion he coined shows it: "Buu Son Ky Huong Vinh Xuong Buddhism". Profoundly influenced by Buddhism in many ways, Buddhist rituals of the full moon worshipping ceremonies were received and practiced by the Master in the entire community of believers. The worshipping ceremonies of Tam Nguyen (three full moon days), including Thuong Nguyen (lunar January 15th), the largest ones, *Trung Nguyen (lunar July 15th)* and *Ha Nguyen (October 15th)*. Here, we give a brief description of how the rituals are organized, practiced, and what it means to worship at Thuong Nguyen day.

According to Vinh Xuong BSKH followers, the worshipping ceremony of Thuong Nguyen, also known as *Sao hoi*, takes place on lunar January 14-15th. Followers and people in Vinh Xuong religious villages and many other nearby places, even believers in the Cambodian region where Pham Thanh Quang started his religion in the past, altogether come to Vinh Xuong Buddhist pagodas and participate in the worshipping ceremony. The pagoda's ceremony organization team, local people and followers line up neatly to practice the ritual steps, first at the altar for Red Cloth - Four Religions in the main hall, then at other altars in the pagoda. During the worshipping ceremony, in front of the altars, the believers or normal people, with incense sticks in their hands, recite Buddha, recite their names and ages,... the full names, ages,... of family members and also those of the deceased, praying to the Four Religions, the Jade Emperor, Buddha,... to give them and their families a new year of peace, health, favorable business, and pray for the deceased to go beyond usual practices." (Doan V. D., 70 years old).

Sao hoi worshipping ceremony means offering all the "stars of the same categories" – "good stars", "bad stars" of the year in the relationship between the natural universe affecting the social-human time, and the "stars of destiny" of each human age to "converge" to resolve "conflicts", "harmony", "bad stars",... wishing for better life in the village (favorable weather conditions, bumper crops,...), and for the followers, their families to be peaceful, healthy and prosperous,... This is also considered a form of pray for peace, but the ritual practice of worship at Vinh Xuong BHKS pagoda is very different from the ritual process of worship at Tonkin Buddhist ones. In the pray for peace, or rituals for freeing "bad stars",... the names of the involved (living persons – for peace) and the name, date of birth of the deceased for salvation) are usually written on a sheet of paper so that the monks could chant them at times of worshipping phases. As for Vinh Xuong followers, it is simple that believers stand with incense sticks in hands and bow in front of the altar for the Red Cloth - Four Religions, or the altar set up outside the pagoda's yard, praying Buddha and Jade Emperor,... to bless themselves (name, age), family members

(name, age), the deceased (name, age, year of death,...) to be healthy and go beyond usual practices are freed in accordance with the repeated bell sounds. Believers do not perform rituals of praying for peace, for freeing from “bad stars”,... as in Tonkin Buddhist pagodas.

The brief description about the meaning of Thuong Nguyen worshipping ceremony in combination *Star worship* - a form of Buddhist religious worship that has been “folked”, combined with folk beliefs imbued with Taoists’ characteristics,... show that Vinh Xuong followers have received the meanings of Buddhist worship and incorporated it into folk worshipping ceremonies to form a religious worship, distinctive from the others.

Worshipping Ceremony for the God of Agriculture

Living in the land of agriculture with manual productive labor activities as a means of living while always being affected by the natural habitat, the people in Southern Vietnam have worshiped the God of Agriculture so that this deity will safeguard the farming life of the community, due partly to the legend, deeply existing in folk spiritual beliefs as having it that the god is associated with agricultural life.

In the southwest of Vietnam, apart from a very few separate worships for the God of Agriculture in temples, the common worship for the God is done in the village’s temple for the God of Terrain, and is organized annually along with the worships for the God of Terrain is Thuong Dien Festival (after transplanting rice seedlings) or Ha Dien Festival (going to the field),... Therefore, the worship of the God of Agriculture annually organized in a temple with required worship ceremonies can be considered as exceptional. It seems that in the southwest of Vietnam no religion regulates the worship of God of Agriculture as the main worship ceremony of the religion, except for the worship ceremony done according to folk beliefs at a certain temple with the participation of religious followers.

Due to the influence of folk beliefs and the spiritual needs of believers associated with agricultural life, the patriarch/teacher Pham Thanh Quang and followers of Vinh Xuong established the God of Agriculture as an important object of worship, and therefore held annual worship ceremonies since their returning dates to Vinh Xuong to settle down and do farming work. It obviously shows that the spiritual need arising from the reality of life of Vinh Xuong followers has created the reception of folk beliefs into religious life as an inevitable occurrence.

The annual worshipping ceremony of the God of Agriculture held by devotees of Vinh Xuong BSKH takes place on April 19 (lunar calendar). Because this is a ceremony prescribed in the series of annual religious worship ceremonies, a large number of followers and people in the religious villages come to attend.

The special thing about this religious worship imbued with the color of folk beliefs is reflected in the practice of rituals and offerings. In other annual worshipping ceremonies, the offerings are fruit of many kinds while in this ceremony, the offerings are non-vegetarian items, with the pig – offered “every three years.” That is, a whole pig is offered at the first year and will be done again at the third year; in other years only the “head” of the pig or “head” and “tail” are offered. According to the believers, the pigs offered to the God of Agriculture” must be one-colored pigs, pure *black* or *pure white*, not “bicolor” (two-colored). The pig after being slaughtered, or the head of the pig - raw meat (left whole or headed), is placed on a large tray, offered to the altar of the God of Agriculture. After that, the devotees “descend” the meat, process it into dishes, continues to make offerings on the God of Agriculture altar and other altars set up below the God of Agriculture altar, called the altar for the Terrain. In addition to the offering trays that the Pagoda’s management board itself offers, there are offering trays that devotees and local people offer to pay homage to the God of Agriculture during the course of their business vows, such as: roasted pork, sweet soups, sticky rice, grilled snakehead, chicken, duck, fruit, etc ...

According to author Tran Hong Lien's research: “The ritual of worshipping the God of Agriculture will be conducted at 3 a.m. on lunar April 19th. This is the time when all the villages in Tan Chau that worship the Bon Canh Terrain Good hold worshipping ceremonies. When conducting the ceremony, a

specialized ceremony performer was invited for the worshipping ceremony. Usually there are 6 ceremony performers, but in the ceremony of the re-occurring years of worship, when the ceremony is much bigger, there are 8 ceremony performers, but they organize worshipping rituals only, not (Hát Bội) Vietnamese classic opera " (As cited by Ton Viet Thao, 2011).

The ritual of worshipping the God of Agriculture is conducted in accordance with the ritual of worship and temples in the southwest of Vietnam. All ceremony performers wear "aodai and turbans"; there is a set of ceremonial music: trumpets, drums, đàn cò (two-string bowl shaped chordophone), đàn gáo (one-string bowl shaped chordophone),... The Board of Trustees and his ceremony performers stood in two rows in front of the God of Agriculture altar, practicing rituals: offering incense, praying; offering tea, offering cake, offering wine, offering meat and performing one footstep - one prostration. Unlike the worshipping ceremony of God of Agriculture in many localities in the South, the priest reads the sacrificial passage, then burns it. However, for the worshipping ceremony of Agriculture God of Vinh Xuong BSKH, the elderly and prestigious believer - also the chief priest reads the prayers, which is summarized like: *this year, the villagers of Vinh Xuong commune offered all offerings to the God (Nong), praying to the God to bless the Quoc Thai people to enjoy Favorable weather conditions, Bumper crops, Peaceful homes, Prosperous business,...* When the Board of Trustees completes the rituals, the devotees and general people come to the altar of Agriculture God and pray for a peaceful family life, favorable business and production activities, bumper harvests,...

Through the process of practicing rituals and offerings in the worshipping ceremony of Agriculture God by Vinh Xuong followers, it shows the great influence of folk beliefs on the spiritual life of the community of believers here since the establishment of religion until now. This influence is not merely the spiritual need of the believers but also expresses the founder's concept of association, reception of polytheism and transmission in the spiritual life of believers.

Worshipping ceremony of Nam Hai Guanyin Buddha

Nam Hai Guanyin Buddha is also known as Lady Guanyin Buddha, Guanyin Bodhisattva or Nam Hai Mother. This is a Buddha who has a great influence on the spiritual life of Vietnamese people in general, and of Southern people in particular.

The image of the Lady Guanyin Buddha is mentioned in many poems, penances, and sutras, of Vinh Xuong BSKH. In the followers' belief, Guanyin Buddha is considered the "Mother Buddha" who helps people in times of difficulty and tribulation in daily life.

In addition to the altar being placed at the central position, the process of organizing the astral worship ceremony of Nam Hai Guanyin Bodhisattva is an expression of the role of this Buddha in the spiritual life of Vinh Xuong followers.

The organization of the astral worship ceremony of Lady Guanyin Buddha by Vinh Xuong followers corresponds to the time of the worship ceremony in the Tonkin Buddhist pagodas. At the Tonkin Buddhist pagodas, the worship of Lady Guanyin Buddha is divided into 3 times: February 19, June 19 and September 19 (Thich Nu Tam Tu, 2012).

The date for astral worship ceremony of Nam Hai Guanyin Bodhisattva takes place on June 19 (lunar calendar). This is the day of the Yin Avalanche.

Worshipping offerings and ritual practices on the astral day of Nam Hai Guanyin Bodhisattva are the same as in other religious rituals (except for the worship of God of Agriculture).

Regarding the ritual: elderly and prestigious believers in the Board of Trustees and followers, people stand in line according to the rule of "male on the left - female on the right" in front of the altar of the Nam Hai Guanyin Bodhisattva (manifested by a Red Cloth), put incense sticks on their foreheads, hold incense sticks and kneel along with the sound of bells with each prostration. Believers do not perform rituals of chanting, tapping muzzles, as such ceremony that take place in Tonkin Buddhist pagodas.

In term of offerings: devotees often make offerings on the altar of Lady Guanyin Buddha and other altars: tea, cakes, flowers, fruit, incense sticks,...

Worshipping ceremony of Dieu Tri Kim Mau (Golden Mother of the Nacre Lake) (14th month of the 8th lunar calendar)

Dieu Tri Kim Mau is said to be the Mother Buddha who gave birth to all living beings (Huynh Ngoc Thu, 2017) in the lower world (Yin), second only to the Heaven (Yang). Dieu Tri Kim Mau was a goddess who existed in Taoist thoughts and divinity, then the Taoist character was blurred and transformed into folk beliefs.

According to Cao Dai's dictionary, in Caodaism: "Dieu Tri Kim Mau is the one who holds half of the power of the Divine Spirit, created by the Divine Spirit to master the Yin and create the Ten Thousand Spirits in the invisible Divine Realm, and then, let the first Ten Thousand Spirits descend on the Earths to form the Universe, i.e. living beings" (Huynh Ngoc Thu, 2017).

The figure of Dieu Tri Kim Mau is commonly worshipped in the Cao Dai Divine Hall (Mother Buddha Shrine), worshipped in some pagodas of Tonkin Buddhism and shrines in folk beliefs.

The fact that Vinh Xuong BSKH devotees organize the annual worshipping ceremony of Dieu Tri Kim Mau shows that the Buddha herself has an influence and role in the spiritual life of the believer community. Based on many aspects, one hypothesis is that the religious influence and formation of the worship of Dieu Tri Kim Mau in Vinh Xuong BSKH was originated from the Caodaism during the period when this religion developed widely throughout the Southern region and some places in An Giang's borders to Cambodia; Caodaism was present in several provinces in Cambodia adjacent to Vietnam by mid-1927 (Le Huong, 1971). The localities where Caodaism existed at this stage are in the space where Master Pham Thanh Quang and his followers lived and proselytized.

The worshipping ceremony of Dieu Tri Kim Mau is annually held by Vinh Xuong BHKS followers at the sect's pagodas in the afternoon and late at night on August 14.

The process of practicing ritual worship is quite simple, just like daily worship and other rituals (except for God of Agriculture worship). At the time of the ceremony, Board of Trustees and followers stand in line of "men on the left and women on the right" to practice rituals: hold incense sticks and kneel along with the sound of bells with each prostration in harmony with ringing of bells. Devotees do not practice the chanting-tapping ritual or the procession of the Dieu Tri, the procession and dance of the mascot as those such at the same time in Caodaism, called the Dieu Tri Palace Bird's Nest Night.

The worshipping ceremony of Dieu Tri Kim Mau of Vinh Xuong BSKH, devotees are divided into two worship periods: the afternoon *worship period of 6 o'clock* (August 14) and *the late night of 12 o'clock* through August 15. At these two times, devotees practice sequential rituals in front of all the altars of the two pagodas. Offerings on the altar are usually: flowers, fruits, tea, cake, incense sticks, ... A noticeable thing is that, although the annual worship ceremony of Dieu Tri Kim Mau is held, in the temple of Vinh Xuong BSKH there is no main worship or worship of the image of Dieu Tri Kim Mau as in the Cao Dai Holy Family or the Tonkin Buddhist pagodas. The main ritual practice of the ceremony takes place at the altar for Red Cloth - the symbol of the Nam Hai Guanyin Buddha. Therefore, it can be said that the **image** of Dieu Tri Kim Mau (spiritual concept) at the center of **the ceremony** (the expression) has been "nullified" by the symbol of the Red Cloth - the symbol of "fusion of all gods".

In addition to the large worshipping ceremonies, clearly demonstrating the process of receiving worship of folk beliefs and other religions into the worship ceremony of Vinh Xuong BSKH, there are other worship ceremonies prescribed in the annual ceremony such as: the astral worship ceremony of Master Doan Minh Huyen (August 12th lunar calendar), the ceremony of worshipping the Initiation Day (the 1st day of the 4th month of the lunar calendar), the commemoration ceremony of the Master Pham Thanh Quang (the 15th day of the 8th month of the lunar calendar).

In summary, by choosing to organize the typical annual worshipping ceremonies of Vinh Xuong BSKH,

it shows the process of receiving and transforming Vinh Xuong BSKH compared to the original BSKH. The founder of BSKH Vinh Xuong and the community of followers established their own religious belief system through ritual activities, by receiving the worshipping ceremonies from Buddhism, other indigenous religions, and folk beliefs.

Conclusions

Vinh Xuong BSKH was born as a continuation of the redevelopment of the original BSKH after a long time of being faded due to the impact of the society's history. The re-establishment of Vinh Xuong BSKH shows that this religion plays an important role in the spiritual and material life of Vietnamese farmers in the Southwest.

Vinh Xuong BSKH makes an important contribution to the transmission and existence of BSKH religion/sect. However, due to its later birth, influenced by many different cultural streams, Vinh Xuong BSKH on the one hand still preserves the tradition of the original BSKH, on the other hand, has received many new cultural elements.

Vinh Xuong BSKH is a branch and as one of origins – continuation of the original BSKH, the ideology of Vinh Xuong BSKH mainly revolves around the philosophy of Four Gratitude, Self-improvements and Buddha studies of the original BSKH. In addition, Vinh Xuong is influenced by Buddhist, Confucian and Taoist thoughts in term of worshipping ceremony, rituals, somehow the continuation of the tradition of the original BSKH on the one hand, while influencing the objects of worship of folk beliefs and worship rituals of Tonkin Buddhism,... This transformation process makes BSKH in general have certain differences to those of the same BSKH name. As the time goes by, the reception of the changes will inevitably take place, so at some point, the BSKH in general and in each its separate sect in particular will not retain the “tradition” of the religion. Therefore, the question is how to have unity in the religious community in one locality to preserve the traditional values of religions and religious sects.

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