

Emperor Minh Mang's policy towards Buddhism (1820-1840)

Duy Phuong Nguyen*

University of Science and Education, University of Da Nang, 459 Ton Duc Thang Street, Hoa Khanh Ward, Da Nang City, Vietnam

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Abstract:

Emperor Minh Mang was a ruler who left a significant mark on Vietnam's monarchy with many outstanding achievements in administrative reform, educational and cultural development, territorial unity, and the protection of national sovereignty. While considering Confucianism as the orthodox ideology to assert its unique position, the emperor remained friendly and open to Buddhism. During Emperor Minh Mang's reign, Buddhism experienced significant development, not only in appearance and scale but also in asserting its role in contemporary political, cultural, and social life. The article aims, through reliable sources, to more clearly reflect the state of Vietnamese Buddhism under Emperor Minh Mang's reign, contributing to a new understanding of the development of Vietnamese Buddhism during this period, and then to reassess the emperor's policy toward Buddhism. At the same time, the article will identify the unique characteristics that confirm the positive aspects of Buddhism during this period and clarify the critical role of Buddhism, not only in the past but also in the ongoing process of building and defending Vietnam today.

Keywords: Buddhism, Minh Mang, monks, pagodas, religious policy.

Classification numbers: 5.1, 8.1, 11

1. Introduction

Buddhism spread to Vietnam about two thousand years ago. Despite many ups and downs in its history, Buddhism has always accompanied the nation throughout the journey of building and defending the country, becoming a peaceful foundation in the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people. The sociable, compassionate, and intellectual spirit of this religion was soon embraced by the monarchy in its efforts to govern the country. Emperor Minh Mang, a powerful ruler who left a lasting mark in the nation's history with many outstanding achievements, particularly in administrative reform, educational and cultural development, territorial unity, and sovereignty, was a key figure in this. During his reign, Buddhism not only developed in appearance and scale but also asserted its role in contemporary political, cultural, and social life. Therefore, this period is essential when researching the history of Vietnamese Buddhism.

Research on Vietnamese Buddhism during the Nguyen dynasty in general, and during the reign of Emperor Minh Mang in particular, has been a focus for both domestic and international scholars from quite early on, achieving many significant milestones to date. Prior to 1975, notable contributions came from French authors, including works by L. Cadière, "Chua Quoc An: Ngai khai son, cac vi tru tri" (Quoc An Pagoda: founder and abbots); A. Bonhome, "Chua Thien Mu" (Thien Mu Pagoda); A. Sallet, "Nui da hoa cuong (Ngu Hanh son)" (Marble mountains (Ngu Hanh son)); J.A. Laborde, Chua Bao Quoc (Bao Quoc Pagoda); and A. Sallet and Nguyen Dinh Hoe, "Liet ke den mieu va cac noi tho tu o Hue" (List of temples and religious sites in Hue). Alongside these French scholars, Vietnamese Buddhist monks also contributed substantial works, such as "Vietnam Phat giao su luoc" (A brief history of Vietnamese Buddhism) by Thich Mat The and "Vai net ve Phat giao thoi Nguyen" (Some features of

*Email: ndphuong@ued.udn.vn

Buddhism in the Nguyen Dynasty) by Tran Hong Lien. Additionally, other vital publications have emerged, such as "Chinh sach ton giao cua nha Nguyen dau the ky XIX" (Religious policy of the Nguyen dynasty in the early 19th Century) by Nguyen Van Kiem, "Vai net ve tin nguong, ton giao Viet Nam the ky XIX" (Some features of Vietnamese beliefs and religions in the 19th Century) by Phan Dai Doan, "Chinh sach cua trieu Nguyen doi voi Phat giao va su mau thuan cua no doi voi hien thuc" (The Nguyen dynasty's policy towards Buddhism and its contradictions with reality) by Le Cung, "Ve chinh sach ton giao cua trieu Nguyen, nhung kinh nghiem lich su" (Regarding the Nguyen dynasty's religious policy: Historical lessons) by Do Bang, "Ban gioi diep thien su Dao Lich chua Hoe Nhai" (The ordination certificate of Zen Master Dao Lich from Hoe Nhai Pagoda), "Mot vai net ve hanh trang va tac pham cua Hoa thuong Phuc Dien" (1784-1862) (Some features of the life and works of Venerable Phuc Dien (1784-1862)), and "Su lieu ve Thien su Thanh Thong - Giac Ngo" (Historical records of Zen Master Thanh Thong - Giac Ngo) by Thich Dong Duong. "Bo chinh su lieu ve thien su Minh Hai Phap Bao" (Notable updates to historical records of Zen Master Minh Hai Phap Bao), "Su lieu moi ve phap su Toan Nham Quan Thong" (New historical records of Dharma Master Toan Nham Quan Thong), and "Su lieu moi ve phap su Toan Nhat Quang Dai" (New historical records of Dharma Master Toan Nhat Quang Dai) have been contributed by Thich Nhu Tinh. Research into Emperor Minh Mang's policies toward Buddhism has been an ongoing and dynamic area of study. Scholars have conducted research at various levels and achieved remarkable results. However, there is still a divergence of opinions among researchers, and no comprehensive study has yet focused exclusively on this issue as its main subject.

In carrying out this study, the author updated the most recent research findings and incorporated newly available sources, particularly the Chau ban trieu Nguyen (Imperial records of the Nguyen dynasty). At the same time, the study employed two principal methods of historical science - the historical method

and the logical method combined with other supporting approaches such as systemic analysis, summarisation, and comparison. The historical method was applied to reconstruct the historical context and to analyse the events, policies, and practices related to Buddhism in accordance with their emergence and development during Emperor Minh Mang's reign. Consultation of primary sources, including the Chau ban trieu Nguyen, the Dai Nam thuc luc, administrative regulations, royal decrees, and court records, enabled an accurate reflection of the state of Buddhism as well as the emperor's decisions in each period. On that basis, the logical method was used to systematise the collected data, examine the relationships between Minh Mang's policies and the evolution of Buddhism, and thereby clarifying the nature, objectives, and outcomes of these policies. The combination of these two methods not only ensured the reliability of the sources but also contributed to drawing general conclusions, further illuminating the argument on the renaissance of Buddhism under Emperor Minh Mang's reign and its role in the political and cultural life of the period. It is a new contribution because the majority of researchers in the history of Vietnamese Buddhism have supposed that, from the 19th century to the beginning of the reconstruction movement of Buddhism in the early 20th century, Vietnamese Buddhism declined and fell into crisis; then it has contributed to reassess the policies of the Nguyen dynasty in general and of the Emperor Minh Mang in particular towards Buddhism. At the same time, the article also points out particular characteristics confirming the positive aspects of Buddhism in the reign of Emperor Minh Mang; contributing to clarify the important role of Buddhism not only in the past but also in the cause of building and defending the country today.

2. Pagoda construction and renovation

Emperor Minh Mang was the second emperor of the Nguyen dynasty and the fourth son of Emperor Gia Long, the founder of the Nguyen dynasty in the early 19th century (1802). Assessing Emperor Minh Mang, author Nguyen Minh Tuong stated, "Minh Mang was very aware of his national responsibility. The

highlight of Minh Mang's personality is his intelligence, deep understanding of politics, and assertiveness. Nineteenth-century historians considered him as "King Le Thanh Tong" of the Nguyen dynasty" [1]. Y.X. Dong (2008) [2] also remarked, "Minh Mang was an elegant, profound, and talented emperor". These remarks are entirely valid, as Vietnam was one of the most powerful countries in Southeast Asia under his reign.

As for Buddhism, Emperor Minh Mang once made his perspective clear: "The Buddha uses God to teach life, while Confucius teaches morality as a daily necessity; both of them teach people to do good deeds. People born in heaven and earth should do good and avoid evil. As for Buddhism, it teaches people through the doctrine of karma, and that people should not be superstitious. The Buddha advises us to do good, because even if a saint is reborn, it cannot be changed" [3]. With this positive view, Minh Mang paid much attention to Buddhism during his reign. While Emperor Gia Long restricted and controlled the construction and renovation of Buddhist pagodas with strict regulations, such as: "All temples, pagodas, and institutes, except those already built, are not allowed to be renovated or rebuilt. Anyone who goes against this law shall be punished with 100 sticks..." [4], his successor, Emperor Minh Mang, was very proactive in developing Buddhist facilities. During his more than 20 years of reign, Emperor Minh Mang built and repaired dozens of ancient pagodas and provided financial support to localities to repair pagodas throughout the country. For the ancient pagodas with imprints from previous emperors or those built by the royal Nguyen dynasty, Minh Mang himself restored and embellished them, because, as he stated: "As for famous landscapes, we are not allowed to let them ruin but must preserve all traces for future generations. Most of the landscapes here were created by our ancestors for the Royal court and for the people. The creation is aimed at encouraging people to cultivate the mind of goodness and to create merit" [5]. With this in mind, he restored Thien Ton Pagoda (Quang Tri), Ngu Hanh Son Mountains (Da Nang), built Long Phuoc Pagoda (Quang Tri), Thanh Duyen Pagoda (Hue), Giac Hoang

Pagoda (Hue), Vinh An Pagoda (Quang Nam), and Khai Tuong Pagoda (Gia Dinh).

Some of the pagodas in the villages under the patronage of the Royal family fell into disrepair. The Royal court allowed local people to undertake repairs themselves, with contributions from Buddhists and other supporters in the village. The emperor also provided some financial support. For example, when renovating Kinh Thien Pagoda in Quang Binh, which was originally built by Emperor Gia Long¹, "people asked the soldiers in the village to join forces to repair, the emperor approved and gave 100 ounces of silver" [3]; or Phuc Hai Pagoda in Hai Chau commune, Hoa Vang district (now in Da Nang city), last year it was restored, in 1825 the emperor offered 100 money to repair it and gave it a Royal marking "Phuc Hai Pagoda awarded by Monarch's Decree" [6]. The restoration and construction of ancient pagodas were directly overseen by agencies of the Royal court, primarily the Ministry of Rites and the Ministry of Public Works. Records of the restoration efforts at the ancient pagodas on Ngu Hanh Son (Marble Mountains), Long Phuoc Pagoda (Quang Tri), and Thien Mu Pagoda show that the ministries had to submit detailed plans - including the workforce, materials, construction costs, and ceremonial arrangements - to the emperor for review and approval. This process is clearly documented in original records related to the restoration at Ngu Hanh Son Mountains (Quang Nam), including the pagodas of Tam Thai, Ung Chan, and Tu Lam. "Tam Thai Mountain in Quang Nam has many famous landscapes, after the war, the mountain has been greatly damaged, it is necessary to renovate its pagodas in order to spread the good work. Now, assign the Senior Assistant of Ministry of Public Works Nguyen Cong Lieu and Bureau Director of Imperial Work Manufacturing Department Vuong Hung Van to take care of the renovation and donate three thousand quan from Quang Nam Treasury along with the amount of three hundred taels of silver granted by the Queen for the restoration" [7].

¹That is Lord Nguyen Hoang.

By personally sponsoring the monastic restoration activities, he paved the way for the Royal family, mandarins, and the public to participate in these restoration efforts. As a result, during the reign of Minh Mang, pagodas grew rapidly, with many ancient pagodas of cultural and historical value being restored and preserved, thus avoiding the risk of disappearance due to the adverse effects of time, climate, and human activity. Many pagodas, built by the Royal court on a grand and spacious scale, have become beautiful landmarks that enhance the scenic beauty of Vietnam's rivers.

By Emperor Minh Mang's reign, the southward expansion had largely been completed, yet risks of regional and ethnic divisions remained. The regions had been unified territorially but not yet culturally, especially in newly annexed areas such as the South Central and Southern regions of Vietnam. To strengthen central authority in distant areas like the Southern Central region and to assimilate ethnic minorities such as the Cham and Khmer, Emperor Minh Mang rigorously pursued assimilation policies through various measures. Building on the Nguyen Lords' policy of "living by Confucianism while admiring Buddhism", Emperor Minh Mang continued to use Mahayana Buddhism as a means to harmonise the indigenous religions and beliefs of the Cham and Khmer people. As noted by scholar Li Tana, "Mahayana Buddhism provided a solution that met the needs of the Nguyen. On the one hand, it bolstered Vietnamese national identity; on the other hand, it eased the anxieties of settlers without challenging the legitimacy of the rulers. Mahayana Buddhism, with its numerous deities, was thus not unfamiliar to the Cham people" [8]. During his reign, Emperor Minh Mang ordered the construction and renovation of numerous pagodas in the Southern region. Notably, in 1836, he instructed officials in Gia Dinh province to rebuild the Khai Tuong Pagoda [3], and by 1839, a large-scale Buddhist ceremony was held there. During this period, the Cham and Khmer were the predominant ethnic groups in the Southern region, both deeply devoted to Buddhism. However, unlike the Vietnamese, they followed Theravada Buddhism, which Indian Buddhism directly influenced.

To further integrate the spiritual life of the Southern ethnic communities into Vietnamese culture, Emperor Minh Mang facilitated the spread of Mahayana Buddhism and Vietnamese-style pagodas into the region. This approach often involved building Vietnamese pagodas on the former grounds of Cham or Khmer temples. Such practices were common during the Nguyen Lords' era: "In establishing pagodas, the Vietnamese selected sites they deemed suitable, often incorporating geomancy and feng shui principles. And, in that choice, the Vietnamese adopted many places that were originally Cham worship places to build pagodas" [9]. Historian Le Ba Vuong also stated: "None of the Nguyen Lords forced indigenous people to convert. Dozens of Cham and Khmer towers and temples remained as revered worship sites. In some places, new Vietnamese pagodas were erected on the foundations of native towers" [10]. Although we have not found many cases from Minh Mang's time that follow this pattern, Choi Byung Wood's account of the disappearance of a Khmer village and its Ba Ket Pagoda, replaced by a Vietnamese pagoda at the same site, indicates that this practice of constructing Vietnamese pagodas on Khmer temple grounds persisted. Vietnamese monks also gradually replaced Khmer monks in these areas [11].

3. Organising Buddhism rituals

Organising Buddhist rituals was a regular practice in monasteries. For village pagodas, Buddhist ceremonies were organised by monks and monasteries in their own ways. However, for national pagoda, the Royal court provided adequate funding, ceremonial items, and necessities for organising rituals. The Nguyen dynasty kept very detailed records of the amounts, weights, and types of gifts and necessities provided to the pagodas. For some national pagodas located far from the capital, the Royal court allocated part of the village's public land for pagoda worship, exempted it from taxes, and granted it to the pagoda or local villagers for management. In the fifth year of Minh Mang's reign (1824), Phuc Long Pagoda in Quang Tri province - an important pagoda dedicated to Emperor Gia Long - was supported by the three wards of An Dinh, An Huong and Phuong Xuan.

At the local level, the pagoda was renovated, and 67 hectares of public land from these three wards were allocated, exempted from taxes, and designated for the cost of incense. This land was handed over to these three wards for the perpetual service of worship. "In the 18th year, the emperor approved the proposal: 20 mǎu (unit of measurement) of public land at Khai Tuong Pagoda is exempt from the tax and granted the abbot of that pagoda as Nguyen Chinh Truc to plow, collect the yields and expenses of the rituals" [4].

The national pagoda served as a national centre for the spread of Buddhism. Therefore, under Emperor Minh Mang's reign, support for these pagodas reflected both the recognition of and commitment to Buddhism's role in the religious life of the nation. Moreover, most national pagodas were located in the imperial capital of Hue, where a large number of people were devoted to Buddhism. Supporting the national pagoda was thus also a way to care for the spiritual well-being of the people. This allowed the Royal court to win the people's hearts, build their trust and support, and contribute to the country's stability.

In addition to providing attentive support for daily rituals at public pagodas, the Royal court directly organised several major Buddhist ceremonies, including large-scale gatherings and sacrificial ceremonies². During his reign, Emperor Minh Mang organised sacrifice ceremonies at the pagodas more than ten times. With this ritual, Emperor Minh Mang desired to "pray for the souls of the officials and soldiers who died for the country" [3]; "pray for the souls of the deceased near and far bodies"; "pray for healthy people, prosperous things, peaceful river waves and good rice to satisfy my wish for the blessing of the

²Trai Dan chan te is a practical offering ceremony for the dead without anyone worshiping and praying for those who died unjustly (such as deaths from wars, accidents, natural disasters ...) to be freed. The workshop is practiced on the basis of a work called "Thi Chu Nga Quy Am Thuc Cap Thuy Phap" (Giving Food and Water to Hungry Ghosts), which is translated in the 8th Century. Dai Viet su ky toan thu (Complete Annals of Dai Viet) states that Trai Dan chan te began to be prevalent in Dai Viet in 1302 by a Northern Taoist named Xu Zong Dao. From here on, almost every dynasty has organised Trai Dan chan te.

people" [3], or just to show mercy to the emperor's officials, "set a vegetarian worship for the souls of the underworld, it's just to show that the emperor respect his officials" [3].

Although it was a Buddhist ritual, the Trai Dan was organised by the Royal court, so during this ceremony, most of the Royal family, mandarins, and the emperor attended and performed the ceremony. On the occasion of the 16th lunar year celebration of Emperor Minh Mang (1835), the emperor directly participated in the ceremony: "When it was the time to set up the vegetarian altar, (Emperor Minh Mang) ordered the Ministry of Administration and Ministry of Military Affairs to assign the mission. Civil mandarins included Overseer and Official Clerk, while military mandarins included Lieutenant. A total of several dozen people took turns to the vegetarian altar and perform the ceremony. The emperor came to Thien Mu Pagoda to worship the generals, he poured wine himself and granted to the guards to perform the ceremony ..." [3].

Although it was still conducted in the pagoda in accordance with Buddhist rituals, all the preparation, arrangement, and organisation of these rituals were directly performed by the imperial agencies. The original documents of "Chau ban Trieu Nguyen" recorded the Trai Dan ceremony, clearly indicating the roles and tasks of each agency in organising this ceremony. In the 16th year of Minh Mang's reign (1835), to organise the Trai Dan ceremony at Thien Mu Pagoda on the Mid-Autumn Festival day, Emperor Minh Mang ordered the tasks of each ministry to be assigned very closely. The history recorded that "on the Mid-Autumn Festival, a vegetarian altar was placed at Thien Mu Pagoda ... Field Marshal Bui Cong Huyen and Judge of Ministry of Public Works Nguyen Duc Trinh were dispatched to take charge of such mission. Also, a round-collar imperial guard and a steward of imperial guardsmen were dispatched to military group, while bureau directors and deputy bureau directors of all 6 ministries were dispatched to civil group, with one official for each ministry, taking turns to work together" [4].

Although the Trai Dan ceremonies organised by Emperor Minh Mang were intended to pray for all sentient beings and for the souls of the unclaimed and unremembered, the primary focus was on the emperor's own audience. For Emperor Minh Mang, this ritual was dedicated to the generals and soldiers of the imperial army who had died fighting for the country and for the inheritance of the Nguyen family. It was Minh Mang himself who, for many years, organised the Trai Dan ceremony to express his gratitude to these individuals. For example, during the Trai Dan in 1830, the emperor made it clear that the purpose was to worship "the dead soldiers and all the unknown ghosts" [3]; the Trai Dan ceremony in 1835 was prayed for "our army who died because of the country" [3]. The Trai Dan ceremony was a way of showing mercy and expressing gratitude for the sacrifices of military officials and soldiers, while also helping to alleviate the pain and suffering of the living. Thereby, the ceremony partly demonstrated the heart for the people and the country of Emperor Minh Mang, as well as the humanity in his way of ruling the country.

4. Management of monks

Monks played a vital role in the spread and development of Buddhism. Therefore, in addition to offering hospitality, Emperor Minh Mang paid close attention to managing the monastic community by providing guidance and conducting examinations for monks and nuns at pagodas, as well as by promoting ethical standards and a disciplined lifestyle.

As in previous periods, during Emperor Minh Mang's reign, licensing remained the primary tool used by the state to manage the monastic community. "Hoang Viet luat le" (Hoang Viet Law) stipulated that "If a monk is not granted the imperial ordination certificate but shaves his hair by himself, he shall be punished with 100 sticks. If he commits such act due to a patriarch, the patriarch must be punished. If he is instructed to commit such act by an abbot of pagoda or his private teacher, they will be punished with the same crime, forced to return to secular life, and recorded in the book of current offenders" [12]. However, during this time, the Royal court did not organise official tests

for monks. Under Emperor Minh Mang's reign, the previous laws continued to be enforced. Monks and nuns who wanted to receive a license had to travel to the capital, where they were tested and recognised by the Ministry of Rites as true monks, upholding the precepts and knowledge of Buddhism. They were also exempt from taxes and labour. However, if a monk failed to maintain his precepts, the government would confiscate his license and force him to return to secular life. The license issued by the Ministry of Rites to Toan Duc - Hoang Tong (1779-1843) clearly stated: "Considering Quang Nam province, Dien Ban prefecture, Dien Phuoc district, Thanh Ha commune, Van Duc Pagoda, the monk Doan Van Thu write Buddha theories very well, the precepts are carefully and considerately preserved, all things are complete. The license was given. In accordance with the old order, he will go back to the abbot of the pagoda ... and exempted from all tax and army duty. If the recipient who received the license did not escape from the secular life, or he did evils and went against morality, or he was unruly with the local law, he would be punished and return back to the secular life, and the license would be delivered to be destroyed" [13].

During his 20-year reign, Emperor Minh Mang held only three monks' examinations, in 1830, 1835, and 1840. As a result, the number of monks who received official recognition was relatively modest compared to the actual number of monks. This indicated that the rules of renunciation and the licensing system under the Hoang Viet luat le (Hoang Viet Law) were not fully implemented. The Ministry of Rites conducted the monks' examinations in a Confucian literary style, meaning only those who could express themselves in a scholarly manner were recognised as true spiritual practitioners. Others, no matter how devout, would not be acknowledged if they could not express themselves in this manner. Religious beliefs and knowledge of Buddhism in literary and formal language were also not recognised. Nonetheless, this system demonstrated Minh Mang's efforts to manage the monastic community. The examination of knowledge allowed for the identification of talented monks who could effectively practice their religion, while simultaneously

eliminating uneducated or ill-prepared practitioners from the pagodas. This was a necessary measure that brought many positive effects to Buddhist activities during that time.

According to Vietnamese Buddhist tradition, decisions regarding monks at pagodas were mostly made by the monks themselves or the abbot. However, under the reign of Emperor Minh Mang, the Royal court directly carried out the rotation and appointment of monks at several large pagodas. Many monks from pagodas in the South were invited by the Royal court to become monks or abbots of the ancient pagodas in Hue³. Usually, the head of the pagoda is the abbot, but since the time of Emperor Minh Mang, in some cases, the new Superintendent Monk became the highest dignitary⁴. The Superintendent Monk was essentially a form of Royal court recognition to honour a number of reputable and virtuous monks, thereby setting good examples and encouraging other monks to motivate the process of their practice. The following example only partly reflects this: "Again there a directive: the abbot of Long Quang Pagoda is Nguyen Van Thuong, ordained from a young age whose precepts were kept well, are prepared for the granting of a religious certificate" [14]. The Superintendent Monk was responsible for managing the monks, organising Buddhist activities, performing ceremonies, and preaching to the emperor and the royal family. In all national pagodas, decisions were made by the government. However, the Superintendent Monk as well as other monks, no matter how talented they were, were not indispensable in the Royal court. Their talent was limited to the pagoda, with the main task being to take care of spiritual life for believers. For a monarchy, a centralised bureaucratic state based on Confucian ideology like the Minh Mang dynasty, the withdrawal of monks from politics was understandable.

³Master Monk Te Chanh - Bon Giac, the abbot of Tu An Pagoda (Ho Chi Minh city), was summoned by Emperor Minh Mang to the Imperial Capital (Hue) to become Superintendent Monk of Thien Mu Pagoda; Tien Giac - Hai Tinh - a monk from Tu An Pagoda (Ho Chi Minh city) was appointed to be the abbot of Thien Mu Pagoda in place of Mr. Mat Hoang.

⁴Monk Tien Giac - Hai Tinh (Thien Mu Pagoda, Hue), Te Chanh - Bon Giac (Thien Mu Pagoda, Hue), Tanh Thien - Nhat Dinh (Linh Huu Quan, Giac Hoang Pagoda, Hue), and Giac Ngo - Tanh Thong (Bat Nha Pagoda, Phu Yen) ... was appointed by Emperor Minh Mang as the Superintendent Monk of the national pagoda.

Not only concerned about the personnel issues of the monasteries, Emperor Minh Mang also paid great attention to the ethics and lifestyle of Buddhist monks. The Nguyen dynasty's laws stipulated that "only use rough silk and cloth, silk was used as smooth, beautiful, embroidered flowers. Whoever violated the order would be fine of 50 lashes, forced to remove the Buddhism and return to the secular life. Buddhist cassock - the religious costume was not in this law" [12]; "The monk who got married would be punished of 80 lashes and returned to the secular life ..." [12]; "Whoever monk who violated the law of prostitution, would be punished hundred cadets and returned to the secular life ..." [12]. These regulations clearly showed the requirements of the Nguyen dynasty in general and Emperor Minh Mang's dynasty in particular for monks. Not only must they understand Buddhism, but they must also be virtuous people, leading a pure lifestyle in a simple way and willing to give up worldly desires to set an example for people, thereby inspiring them to embrace religion and spiritual life.

From the above works, it is clear that Emperor Minh Mang's desire was to control Buddhism through the management of the monks. This was not only implemented during Minh Mang's reign, but almost all ruling classes wanted to control religion, especially Buddhism. The difference was that Minh Mang's method was more flexible and effective. There was no strict ban, but by mastering the monks - the soul of Buddhism - he fully managed and governed the religion in a way that benefited the rule of the country without encountering opposition or protest. The monks and nuns who received the royal mandate, enjoyed the royal court's graces and ordination certificates, certainly not only served the dharma but also became government officials, serving effectively for the benefit of the royalty. Many people thought that the strict management of monks and the control of Buddhism was a measure to limit the development of this religion. But in our opinion, this practice did not restrain Buddhism; on the contrary, it strengthened it. It was the administration of the royal court that helped restore an organised team of monks, raise the level of

Buddhism and virtue, and restrict those who escaped from the hard labour and took advantage of the meditation door as a place to oppose the Royal court, contributing to bringing Buddhist activities into order. It was a useful practice for Buddhism that helped the religion grow stronger.

5. Conclusions

For Vietnam, Buddhism is not only a religion but also an important element of traditional Vietnamese culture. Along with the history of the nation, this religion has also greatly contributed to the cause of national defence and construction. Therefore, for Minh Mang, Buddhist development was a good measure for building and consolidating the emperorship, a form of winning people's hearts. It not only contributed to satisfying the religious beliefs of the masses in a way that benefited the monarchical government, but before the introduction and expansion of Western culture and religion, it was also a way to arm the people with "spiritual weapons" to protect against the risk of external cultural invasion.

In consolidating sovereignty and unifying newly annexed southern territories, Buddhists supported the Vietnamese court's efforts to assimilate the spiritual life of the Cham and Khmer communities in the southern region. Through these efforts, the central government strengthened its oversight of local religious practices, promoting social stability. Furthermore, Buddhism facilitated cultural cohesion and harmony among Vietnamese, Cham, and Khmer people. Through these efforts, the aim was to achieve cultural unity in line with the broader national unification of the time. Despite providing many favourable conditions for development, Emperor Minh Mang did not allow Buddhism to fully operate or develop spontaneously. Instead, he always tried to manage, regulate, and sometimes strongly intervene with tough measures. Although Emperor Minh Mang showed sympathy toward Buddhism, he was still a sincere Confucian scholar, whose mission was to protect the unique position of Confucianism. He could not allow Buddhism to develop freely, as

excessive development threatened the status of Confucianism. Moreover, in the context of the country, having recently emerged from war, Buddhism itself had been weakened and degraded by years of turmoil and division. Therefore, the government had to strengthen its management to stabilise social order and help Buddhist activities become more orderly, thereby contributing to the creation of a healthy religious environment.

Although he advocated the exclusiveness of Confucianism, Emperor Minh Mang did not strictly prohibit Buddhism and even facilitated its development. This showed that the emperor did not wish to maintain the same three religions as the Ly - Tran dynasties in Vietnam, nor did he want to restrict Buddhism like the Le dynasty. Instead, he chose to follow the direction of the Nguyen Lords, which combined the ideas of Confucianism and Buddhism in governing the country, in the manner of "living by Confucianism while admiring Buddhism". He skilfully attracted Buddhism to Confucianism, viewing it as a complementary thought to Confucianism and for "royalising". In the process of expanding, unifying, and consolidating sovereignty over the southern territories, Buddhism primarily served as a catalyst - a tool to initially stabilise society, unify public sentiment, and harmonise the cultures of different ethnic communities. However, it was not regarded as a fundamental ideological tool like Confucianism, which the Nguyen dynasty had established as the official ideology of the nation. This demonstrated the inheritance and creativity in Minh Mang's approach to Buddhism. Despite the differences, Buddhism during Minh Mang's reign continued to inherit and demonstrate its role in the political and cultural life of the 19th century. It became an important factor in helping the Royal court win the people's hearts, harmonise social conflicts, consolidate the monarchy, stabilise the country, and foster good qualities. It also satisfied the spiritual beliefs of the people, created special cultural values, and contributed to the development of contemporary culture and art.

Studying Emperor Minh Mang's policies towards Buddhism provides valuable lessons that can be applied to contemporary religious life and management. These include: 1) strengthening state oversight in the activities and organisation of this religion, 2) focusing on the development of Buddhist teachings and enhancing Buddhist studies for monks and followers, and 3) preserving and restoring Buddhist cultural heritage.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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