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TRANSFORMATIONS OF BŨU SƠN KỶ HƯƠNG RELIGION: FROM AWARENESS TO PRACTICES

***Abstract:** Based on the point of view of religious studies, the article outlines the fundamental changes of the Buu Son Ky Huong religion (Way of the Strange Fragrance from the Precious Mountain) in the South from its foundation to the present. Through the study of scriptures, previous research on this religion's history, the process of development and the current state, and field documents on the Buu Son Ky Huong in Thoi Son commune and in Tan Chau town, An Giang province (in July 2019)¹, the article analyzes some changing trends of Buu Son Ky Huong religion on the aspects such as changes in religious awareness, changes in organizational structure and ritual practices.*

***Keywords:** Transformation; Buu Son Ky Huong; awareness; organization; practice.*

Introduction

Buu Son Ky Huong is an endogenous religion founded by Mr. Doan Minh Huyen, also known as Doan Van Huyen (1807-1856) in An Giang in 1849. Research on this religion in Vietnam has been approached by researchers from many dimensions such as history, culture, ideology, belief, religion. In general, these researchers agreed that Buu Son Ky Huong is an endogenous religion, was born early, took Buddhist teachings as the basis, integrated with elements of Confucianism and indigenous beliefs, created the 'renovation' of the principles, purposes, and methods of practice. It met the need for 'spiritual security' of the people in the context of the social crisis of

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the South in the mid-19th century (civil war, foreign invasion, crop failure, diseases, etc.). Based on the system of scriptures, studies on the history, development, and current status of Buu Son Ky Huong religion in the South by previous researchers and field documents of the author in Thoi Son commune and Tan Chau town, An Giang province, This article points out some changing trends of Buu Son Ky Huong religion in various aspects such as religious awareness, organizational structure and ritual practices.

1. Transformation of religious awareness of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion's believers

The term 'religion' *Đạo* (道) originated from China and has been commonly used with many flexible meanings. Dang Nghiem Van stated that “*Đạo* is a path, a doctrine, a principle of life, a moral and ethical norm, it sometimes means philosophy, tinged with religious colors, sometimes with worldliness [...] If referring to a particular religion in Vietnam, the name of that religion must be placed after the term *Đạo*, for example, đạo Phật (Buddhism), đạo Nho (Confucianism), đạo Kitô (Christianity), đạo tổ tiên (ancestral religion)...”². For the endogenous religions in the South in general and Buu Son Ky Huong religion in particular, the word “đạo” is put before the name of the religion and associated with the image of ‘ông đạo’- the founder of the religion who has been honored by the people.

‘Ông Đạo’ is a unique concept in the South, appeared when Vietnamese people migrated there. Standing in front of the wildland, far from the institution of the court, loose structure of the community, lack of indigenous knowledge, led to the situation that the religions were no longer suitable as spiritual support. Therefore, they easily put their trust in the guidance of the ‘Ông Đạo’- “They were people who have special abilities such as magic, healing, gathering people, leading people to a doctrine. In short, someone who had the ability to do things that ordinary people can’t do and mystery”³. The ‘Ông Đạo’ were the ones who opened a new religious movement “based on the support of the gods”⁴ in the South. Doan Minh Huyen played the role

of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương founder and was the one who started the “line of Prophets in Cochinchina”⁵ in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Nguyen Quoc Tuan in his reflection on an approach to the study of religion as an “entity”⁶ emphasized that “The phenomenon called religion can only be determined through the relationship between human beings and the sacred by faith in the sacred, which is expressed by the practices engaging with that faith, forming a community who has the same faith in the sacred, a moral community...”⁷.

Accordingly, the *perception of a religious phenomenon* includes religious awareness, scientific perception of religion. *Religious awareness* is the perception of the religions themselves - the owners of religious faith, religious practices, and their communities. Religious awareness comes from sources such as Founder’s teachings (Bible); The Rules for possessing the sacred (canon Law); Explanations of the Founder’s Teaching (Theology); Symbols, documents, sacred objects⁸.

Based on the aforementioned approach to religion/ religious phenomenon, I believe that the religious awareness of the followers of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương is the religious awareness of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương belief, religion⁹. Specifically, that awareness includes the entire understanding of believers about their religion: its founder, doctrine, canon law, religious practices, ritual, and religious community through the sources of scriptures, canon law, doctrine, stories, symbols. The process of perceiving and cultivating “religious knowledge” often have a direct impact on religious faith and personal behavior in ritual and practices. This article emphasizes that the followers of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương are all those who believe, worship, and practice the teachings of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, including followers of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương establishments have been licensed to operate, believers who practice at pagodas and people who practice Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương belief at other places of worship¹⁰.

Religious awareness of believers is closely linked with the method of propagation through the history of formation and development. The religious awareness of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương’s believers is summarized in three stages:

(1) The period of Doan Minh Huyen is living. This period is associated with healing, attracting followers, propagating teachings, guiding practices and promoting the reclamation, and establishment of hamlets of Doan Minh Huyen and his disciples.

The crisis of secular life in the South in the mid-nineteenth century such as natural disaster, crop failure, pandemics, insecurity, beside the disadvantages of traditional worship practices, ‘erudite’ teachings of Buddhism, ‘faint’ education of Confucianism led to a crisis of spiritual life. Among the Vietnamese residents, most of them were farmers, “poor, ignorant, had enough practice but lacked knowledge, had enough virtue but did not know the scriptures”¹¹. They “had no dominant ideology”¹². To educate people- instead of sublime teachings, scriptures in Chinese characters that were difficult to understand- the ‘oracles’ and rhyming discourses of Doan Minh Huyen brought a new breath of life. Through the explanation of Hạ Nguon- the darkest period of mankind (famine, pandemics, death), Doan Minh Huyen associated it with the contemporary chaotic social context in order to ‘prophesy’- preaching about a bright future ‘Nhứt Nguon’ with “Hội Long Hoa”¹³.

The ‘cause - effect’ practice is judged! The way to ‘deliverance’ is “Cultivating- Studying the teachings of Buddha”. It was easily understood, touched the hearts of farmers with the explanation of Doan Minh Huyen.

In addition, Doan Minh Huyen emphasized the most basic Four Graces that each person is grateful and reciprocate as follows:

(1) Gratitude to ancestors, parents: Parents gave each person a shape, nurtured each person to grow up. Gratitude to parents, gratitude to ancestors is an important human quality.

(2) Gratitude to the country: homeland, the country is a shelter for each person to live and to maintain the race. And the country is also the place where descendants continue their future journey.

(3) Gratitude to the Three Jewels: the Three Jewels are the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. In terms of spirituality, the

Three Jewels help each person open their minds, be wise, perfect their hearts and morals; save people from the suffering of the Samsara (cycle of reincarnation), reach enlightenment.

(4) *Gratitude to compatriots and humanity*: people do not only live for themselves with their families but they also have interaction with people around them. Those are people of the same race, the same homeland, the same country who always help them (compatriots); regardless of race because all of them are human beings.

During the process of cultivation and propagation, Doan Minh Huyen propagated the teachings of Buddhism, he stated that it does not need statues, it only needs to worship ‘Trần điều’; put the Buddha in the heart, offer incense respectfully; no chanting, no offering of sticky rice, no shaved head to be ordained. To study Buddhism is to make oneself wise, to reach mindfulness to be at peace, to love, the achievement will come. Self-cultivation (Tu Nhân) is taking care of daily actions, changing the view of life and worldview to behave toward human beings and the world. Pham Bich Hop emphasized that Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương was born “to help people who live at home, take care of the secular life, they also could learn and practice spiritual life, therefore, the organizations, as well as rituals, were simple and suitable to the actual circumstances of the believers at that time”¹⁴.

In addition, Doan Minh Huyen used his special ability to cure diseases to save people: “with just a piece of yellow paper, a little water or a piece of paper to wrap the incense, the Buddha master (Phật Thầy) does not only cures the seasonal diseases, but he also treats cough, asthma, leprosy, madness. His fame spread far and wide, causing people to come to see him like a rising tide”¹⁵.

It can be said that during the period when Doan Minh Huyen was alive, the religious perception of believers was mainly based on direct contact, listening to lectures, witnessing the Buddha Doan Minh Huyen’s behavior, words, and spiritual practices. The first perception of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương was the awareness of Doan Minh Huyen’s special abilities such as prophecy, healing, preaching a new method of practice in accordance with people’s thoughts. The practical direction

of action of the “leader”: organizing a religion with familiar doctrines, ritual activities in accordance with the Vietnamese consciousness in the South, and establishing the “communal” institution where everyone has rights and benefits. It is “the initiatory idea for a new form of religious organization in the South to affirm the autonomy and independence of the Vietnamese in the new land”¹⁶.

This is the initial stage associated with the process of building and developing the religious founder. Simultaneously, this period was also the period when the disciples and close friends of Doan Minh Huyen received the teachings and practice motto of the Buddha, creating a premise for the later process of Buu Son Ky Huong religion.

(2) The period after Doan Minh Huyen’s death, the great disciples spread religion.

The name of Buu Son Ky Huong religion means the strange fragrance from the treasure mountain (That Son mountain range). It expressed Doan Minh Huyen’s aspiration for “a religious innovation”: spread a new religious spirit through the most sacred and pure essence of That Son land in order to build a new life. As explained by Nguyen Van Sam “Buu Son Ky Huong means the Treasure Mountain, it will brighten up the country, and the strange fragrance will spread throughout the world to announce to everyone that the era of salvation has come and human life is not long. You have to cultivate, take care of your mind to be saved”¹⁷.

On the other hand, the fact that followers venerated the founder as the Buddha, the master Tây An, showed the awareness of the people who considered Doan Minh Huyen as “a Buddha who came enlight and renewal of the will of the Buddha. They considered him as a Buddha who inaugurated a new school of Buddhism” in Tây An. According to followers, Doan Minh Huyen was the person who had the wisdom and morality of the enlightened one - practicing to “become a Buddha”.

After the death of Doan Minh Huyen, the great disciples- who were the closest, had ability and wisdom- received both the “magic” and “dharma” of the founder to develop the religion. The propagation of

the Buddha founder only lasted less than 10 years, so we can see the role of great disciples in the development of the religion. The most prominent was the Twelve ông đạo (12 great disciples).

They were the new “leaders” of the religion. They took care of the religion such as directly gathered believers, propagated the teachings, and focused on cultivating and developing worship facilities. They also took care of secular life such as reclaiming, establishing hamlets, expanding farm fields, developing agriculture throughout That Son region. For examples, Buu Huong Cac field farm (Lang Linh area) led by Trần Văn Thành, Can Lo field farm (Dong Thap Muoi) headed by ông Đạo Ngoạn, Elephant mountain farm (núi Voi) established by Phật Trùm, Hung Thoi and Xuan Son fields were built by Bui Van Than and Bui Van Tay (Đình Tây)¹⁸. Moreover, the spirit of “engaged the world” of the Buu Son Ky Huong religion was also developed by the disciples into a “patriotic spirit” in the context of the country facing foreign invasion, for example, Bảy Thưa uprising led by Tran Van Thanh (1867-1873); many disciples and followers of Buu Son Ky Huong religion directly participated in the resistance war; many places of worship became revolutionary bases (Thoi Son, Tay An temples).

During this period, the religion of Buu Son Ky Huong developed according to the reclaimed branches of the great disciples, formed religious branches. Depending on the capacity and reception of each disciple, the followers of these religious branches had different perceptions. In addition to spreading and developing the teachings that the Buddha master (Phật thầy), these disciples (ông đạo) also repaired the temples to be more spacious worship facilities. The recording of the Buddha master’s oracle was also paid attention.

Studies of Vuong Kim, Nguyen Van Hau, Nguyen Van Sam, Pham Bich Hop, and the presentations in the workshop Historical figure Doan Minh Huyen (1807-1856) organized by the Historical Association of An Giang (2013) showed that the information of Doan Minh Huyen’s biography before his foundation of religion was faint and inconsistent. The ambiguity of historical data, which was covered

with mystery stories and legends about the healing, reclamation, and foundation of religion made Buu Son Ky Huong religion to be more “sacred”. All stories and legends showed supernatural powers and virtues of the Buddha master.

The ambiguity of the myth and legend about Doan Minh Huyen strengthened the faith of the masses. Along with the faith in the teachings and the ‘human’ religious practices according to the doctrine of the Buddha master, Buu Son Ky Huong was interwoven with new nuances: trust and worship towards the founder of the religion, believe in the sacred, the transcendent, the protection of the Buddha master.

Later, the transmission of the religious branches, and the expansion of the living area of followers led to the formation of new branches in the early twentieth century. The new branches, in addition to Doan Minh Huyen’s principles, also integrated many personal characteristics of the founders of the branches such as the influence of Nguyen Tan Dac with Buu Son Ky Huong in Thuong Lac, Dong Thap; the influence of Pham Thanh Quang and Tran Van Soai in Tan Chau, An Giang; the influence of Su Hai (Nguyen Van Hai) in Chau Duc, Ba Ria - Vung Tau... It also led to changes in religious awareness of believers in each locality.

Studying from the beginning period to this stage, it can be said that the Buddha master and his disciples enlightened and developed the religion, and the descendants continued to expand and develop the religion, forming the religious branches. For believers, awareness of the religion is a combination of the achievements of Cultivation - studying Buddhism, practicing the Four Graces.

In terms of spirituality: the establishment and development of a religion “filled up” the shortage in spiritual life. On the basis of the basic doctrine of “self-cultivation - study Buddhism” to change and shape people’s daily behavior, “perseverance to do good things or avoid evil; love and harmony to respond to the four great graces in order to achieve benevolence- filial piety- righteousness (nhân- hiếu- nghĩa), they are important human qualities. Do not waste time

chanting verses, do not take the monastic life as the main thing, it needs to self-cultivate (worshipping the symbol of ‘trần điều’).

In terms of health: this religion deeply interested in people’s health, organized medical treatment to save lives by special methods, it was not only treating cholera (yang disease) but was also psychological and mental diseases (yin disease).

In terms of material life: this religion interested in people’s material life. It did not waste money on building temples but it made fields. They were places of labor and production and places where people practiced their religion (self-cultivation). This religion encouraged followers to actively reclaim, gathered people to establish new villages and hamlets, and worked hard in agricultural production to ensure their livelihood.

In terms of socio-political life: The Buddha master, his disciples, and his descendants took the spirit of serving people, interested in politics and society to respond to the Nguyen Dynasty’s reclamation policy. They promoted patriotism: ‘help the country save the people’. The Buddha master and his disciples and descendants were ‘leaders’-managing the farms, preaching, and leading religion, while perfecting their self-cultivation.

It should be noted that the teachings of the Buddha master Doan Minh Huyen as well as the doctrine of Buu Son Ky Huong had a direct influence on some endogenous religions in the South. At that time, the founders of Tu An Hieu Nghia religion and Hoa Hao Buddhism were considered as ‘reincarnation’ of Doan Minh Huyen, reincarnated to help people and brighten up the spirit of the religion. Therefore, Tu An Hieu Nghia religion was founded in 1867 by Ngo Loi (1831 - 1890) in Cu Lao Ba (An Phu district, An Giang province) and then concentrated mainly in Ba Chuc (Tri Tôn district, An Giang)¹⁹ and it was considered as a denomination²⁰ of Buu Son Ky Huong religion.

Currently, ‘lòng phái’- the ‘certificate of entry into the religion’ issued to followers of the Tu An Hieu Nghia religion records four Chinese characters 寶山奇香 (Buu Son Ky Huong), or transcribing

Chinese scriptures of this religion to popularize to believers is annotated as Buu Son Ky Huong Buddhism- Tu An Hieu Nghia at Tuong Mountain²¹. In addition, Hoa Hao Buddhism founded by Huynh Phu So in 1939 in Hoa Hao village, Tan Chau district, Chau Doc province (Phu My, Tan Phu district, An Giang province today), although it has had many ‘renovations’ in terms of the symbol (Trần Đà), in doctrine and dominated among endogenous religions in the South, its believers clearly aware of the origin from Buu Son Ky Huong.

The two aforementioned religions preach about ‘Hạ Nguơn’, take the “self-cultivation - study Buddhism”, “Four graces” as the basis, supplemented and completed the system of scriptures, canons laws fill ‘lack of philosophical basis’²², continue to guide and enlighten the believers’ thoughts; to build a system of worship facilities, to unify churches from the central to local levels in order to carry out internal and external relations, widely spread the doctrine to attract followers.

(3) The current period

This was the period when Buu Son Ky Huong had formed branches in the provinces. Worship facilities, rituals, and scriptures were relatively stable. In fact, through listening to lectures, reading scriptures, media, and daily practices, the followers of Buu Son Ky Huong have gained a fairly complete awareness of the Buddha master, ‘ông đạo’, teachings, methods of cultivation, and rituals.

However, the concept of the sacred “outstanding” and the merits of founding a village of the Buddha master Tây An gradually became a strong belief, ‘ông đạo’ (disciples) became ‘new sacred objects’ worshiped by believers at the temples. Religious ceremonies for these figures became important annual ceremonies. A follower of Buu Son Ky Huong affirmed that “if the Buddha master was sham and a liar, he would be exposed, the Buddha was talented so he was respected as a Buddha. The inhabitants of this land venerated him the Buddha of Tay An”. [An in-depth interview with a male, 60 years old, Management Board of Thoi Son Pagoda, Tinh Bien, An Giang].

In the early period, the ‘leaders’ of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion attracted followers through healing and reclamation. Currently, religious awareness of followers has been comprehensive and complete through the following aspects.

Worship facilities related to the Buddha master and Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion were built, restored, and expanded in the South as a basis for believers to have a place of religious activities, to receive teachings and practices. The system of symbols (sacred objects) of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion has been collected, displayed, and worshiped (the bun of the Buddha master’s hair, ‘trần điều’, three hooks, a grain of rice, etc.). They affect the religious consciousness and sentiments of believers.

The scriptures and documents are printed in large quantities, freely given to believers²³; preaching is regularly held contribute to strengthening the teachings and motivating the followers to practice. Besides, the electronic propagation (radio, television, internet) such as the news of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương in Ba Rịa - Vũng Tàu province; the news of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương of Thuồng Lác denomination²⁴ strengthen ‘religious knowledge’ for believers, as well as widely spread Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion.

Representatives of the worship facilities of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion carry out domestic and foreign affairs, participate in local socio-political work; organize many social activities, encourage charity (nourishing the homeless, providing free vegetarian meal (Thoi Sơn pagoda); building free houses (Thoi Sơn); helping people in difficulty; car to pick up patients (Bau Muop, Thoi Sơn temples); encouraging education and training (Tây An temple).

The highlight in the perception of followers of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương is still the spirit of ‘engaging the world’, ‘cultivating at home’, bringing the principle of self-cultivation- Study Buddhism, practicing the Four Graces to ‘do good things and avoid evil’, worshiping the symbol of ‘trần điều’, worshiping Buddha master and ‘ông đạo’.

2. Transformation of organizational structure of Buu Son Ky Huong religion

According to research by Nguyen Van Sam, Buu Son Ky Huong religion is an ‘organization with all levels and is divided into 3 levels as follows:

(1) *The first level (the highest) is the founder and the incarnations (the Buddha master Tây An, his disciples, the incarnations of the Buddha master);*

(2) *The second level is laymen;*

The third level is believers - this is the majority and includes ‘all classes’²⁵.

The hierarchical organization of the religion led to harmony in religious activities, did not create a big gap between the founder, his disciples, laymen, and followers. The development of religion with inheritance was an advantage in the early period. However, the motto of developing religion by forming branches or independent organizations (temples) did not lead to religious cohesion. Nguyen Thi Minh Ngoc with an assessment of Buu Son Ky Huong's organization in the work Basic issues of some religions in the South emphasized that “it was impossible to form a unified organizational system at all levels”. It is the biggest limitation affecting the development of Buu Son Ky Huong religion²⁶.

According to the Directory of Religious Organizations in Vietnam (on June 2020), there were 16 recognized religions in the country including Buu Son Ky Huong religion (2007). The recognized religious establishments of Buu Son Ky Huong include “a number of temples in provinces and cities that have been authorized by the State for religious activities”²⁷. On the other hand, Article 2, Chapter 1 of the Law on Belief and Religion (2016) stipulates that: dignitaries - those who hold dignity in religious organizations and assistants - those who hold service in religious organizations²⁸, according to this Article, Buu Son Ky Huong religion (in many localities) does not have a team of dignitaries and assistants to be recognized. The statistic of

the Committee for Religious Affairs (2009) showed 15,000 followers of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion distributed mainly in the provinces of An Giang, Đồng Tháp, Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu, Long An, Sóc Trăng, Vĩnh Long, Tiền Giang, and Bến Tre with a total of 18 temples²⁹. The temple is a worship facility for believers, and also is an independent organization managed by the Representative Board, Management Board, Board for administrative and religious activities.

Study the perspective of state management of religion showed that the organizational structure of some worship establishments of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion is recognized by the State as a religious organization or registered religious activities.

In 2007, the organization of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương in Nghĩa Thành, Châu Thành district, Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu province located at Tay An pagoda was granted a certificate of registration for religious activities³⁰. The 3rd Laymen Congress (2018 - 2023) continued to supplement and complete the Charter of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, elected 15 members (15 dignitaries), led by Mr. Lê Lon as Head of the Executive Board in charge of a total of 2,500 followers and laypeople in the area. In terms of organizational structure, the Executive Board consists of Head and Deputy Heads, members, and heads of committees. There are seven committees as Doctrinal Committee; Ceremonial Committee; Laymen and Believers Committee; Finance- Property Committee; Reception - Foreign affairs Committee; Culture - Society - Charity Committee; Security Committee. The Executive Board has a seal, performs management, administration, guidance, inspection, and supervision of all internal and external activities of the religion.

In 2008, the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương Thuong Lạc branch was recognized as a legal entity, operating at the commune level, forming the Executive Board of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương Thuong Lạc. This religious branch has 6 temples, followers are mainly in three provinces as Đồng Tháp, Bến Tre, and Long An³¹.

In addition, the majority of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương temples have not been recognized as a legal entity, so they have separate religious activities. And some temples mainly worship the Buddha master Doan

Minh Huyen such as Thoi Son, Phuoc Dien (Tinh Bien, An Giang). These temples have been recognized as cultural, historical, and architectural relics of the province. According to an official in charge of religion and culture in the locality, “Belief activities are not recognized as religious activities, however, a Buddhist temple can be recognized (belief activities of Buu Son Ky Huong). People celebrate the death anniversary of Mr. Doan Van Huyen. The Buddha master is called by local inhabitants. The pagoda organizes the death anniversary of Doan Van Huyen on August 12 according to the lunisolar calendar” [A depth interview with a male, official, Tinh Bien district, An Giang]. According to a representative of the Management Board, “People do not call ‘believers of Buu Son Ky Huong’ there. They follow a belief, they are not believers of religion”. [A depth interview with male, Management Board of Thoi Son temple, Tinh Bien district, An Giang].

Religious activities at this place of worship are managed by the Management Board (in charge of internal, external, ceremonial affairs). Members of the Management Board include Head of the Board, Deputy Heads (in charge of ceremonies, finance), Commissioners. The principle of the Management Board selection of the relic: “the temple chooses and gives the list to the commune government to make decisions. People who are selected with criteria of righteousness, virtues, a good family. Then, they will be elected by inhabitants.” [A depth interview with a male, 60 years old, Thoi Son temple, Tinh Bien, An Giang].

It is noteworthy that the descendants of the former ‘ông đạo’ still play an important role in ritual practices and the development of Buu Son Ky Huong religion in the locality. At Phuoc Dien temple (Tinh Bien), the person in charge of the ritual is the 4th generation of Mr. đạo Sang (who established the temple); at Mr. Dinh Tay’s grave, the person who supervises the tomb is the 5th generation of Mr. Dinh Tay. They are knowledgeable about the local history and culture; religious history, and oracles of Buu Son Ky Huong (doctrine, principles) and focus on ritual practices.

3. Transformation of ritual practices of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion

According to Nguyen Van Hau, the religious structure in the early period was called the Farming field (Trại ruộng) by the Buddha master Doan Minh Huyen and “all followers are laymen, both working for a living and practicing diligently. The farms were considered as temples and his great disciples were called ‘Ông Đạo’ to do things like propagation of monks”³². In particular, the practice of the ritual was not bound, it just needed a ‘Trần điều’- “a red cloth, about 7 ‘tấc’, more than 1 meter long, hang on the altar of the Three Jewels”. Instead of worshipping statues and pictures, the Buddha master “advocated to worship ‘Wu wei’ (vô vi), do not to create a form, worship only a ‘Trần điều’. Whether at home or at a temple, he taught us to worship just like that”³³. It showed that the ritual of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion was extremely simple in the early stages.

At present, the ritual of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương believers is mainly practiced at home and at the temple. In the following section, we summarize the ritual practice at some religious/belief establishments of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion.

(1) Practicing rituals of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương’s followers in Thoi Son

Practice at home: Currently, there is usually an altar to worship the ancestors in each family in Thoi Son. A few families with a deep religious tradition have a ‘trần điều’ on the top of the altar, worshipping according to the mind without any time constraints. The most important ritual is ancestral worship.

Practice at the temple: everyone can go to the temple to do meritorious deeds, offer incense, and worship Buddha, depending on time conditions and spiritual needs, there are no mandatory regulations.

In addition to the monthly rituals on the 14th and 29th (lunisolar calendar), the major ceremonies at Thoi Son pagoda include the first full moon, the seventh full moon, the eighth full moon, and the tenth

full moon; Guan Yin ceremony on February 19, on June 19, September 19 (lunisolar calendar); the ceremony of offering rice to Mr. Tu Sau on July 20 (lunisolar calendar); the ceremony of offering rice to Mr. Tu Lao on the 2nd of November (lunisolar calendar). In which, the biggest is the Buddha master Doan Minh Huyen's ceremony on August 12 (lunisolar calendar) with the participation of the government (district, commune). There is a specific assignment: the government takes care of the festival (opening, closing, security), the local religious community represented by the Management Board directly takes care of rituals and worship (offering offerings, incense, and praying).

In general, the worship and offerings at Thoi Son have been regulated and implemented by the Management Board for a long time. Accordingly, the monthly main rituals have been arranged such as day and hour of worship, type of offerings (salty, sweet), quantity (how many trays), altar (each sacred object is corresponding to each kind of offerings). The monthly rituals take place at 3 am; the noon worshipping is at 11 am; the afternoon worship is around 5 pm. Offerings are arranged in 18 altars (1. The main altar, 2. Guan Yin, 3. Buddha master, etc..)³⁴.

The ritual at Thoi Son pagoda is quite simple, the person in charge of the ritual wears a long robe (áo tràng dài), offers water, offerings, and incense, rings bells, and performs rituals.

Besides, believers who come to the Thoi Son pagoda still have the habit of drinking sacred water at the altar of the Buddha master-praying for healing, good health, and eradication of calamities. This phenomenon is the imprint of the Buddha master's method of healing with water and yellow paper. Moreover, demand for the card is still maintained. According to legend, the Thoi Son pagoda was established by Buddha master Doan Minh Huyen, so it is extremely sacred, the 'prophecy of the card has been trusted. The spiritual healing experiences of some believers at Thoi Son pagoda also shows their deep faith in this 'sacred space'. For example, "When I went to the temple, I felt very happy and healthy. When I stayed at home, I

was sick. Then, I went to the temple to recover from it. So I stay there, I always dedicate myself to Buddha. I sweep garbage for the temple. That's all. I have been there for 25 years" [A depth interview with a female believer, 50 years old, Thoi Son pagoda, Tinh Bien, An Giang]; "I'll tell you the truth, I hadn't slept any hour for 5 years, then, I came here... I've been there for 3 years" [A depth interview with a male, 60 years old, a member of Management Board of Thoi Son Pagoda, Tinh Bien, An Giang].

(2) Practicing rituals of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương's followers in Tan Chau, An Giang

Practice at home: Families in Tan Chau all worship the 'trần điều' in the middle of the house, below it is the altar to worship the ancestors. In addition, there is the altar to Heaven in the external. Every day believers burn incense two times (morning and afternoon), can recite prayers (optional). Fasting (usually 6 days/month), doing good deeds are encouraged but they are not required.

Practice at home: At Bửu Sơn Thiên Lâm Pagoda - Vinh Xuong Buddhism, on weekdays, the full moon day, and the beginning of the month, believers usually come to the temple, burn incense and worship Buddha. On the main holidays such as the death anniversary of the Buddha master Tay An on August 12 (lunisolar calendar), the death anniversary of Patriarch Pham Thanh Quang on August 18 (lunisolar calendar), Shennong (Divine Farmer) shrine ceremony on April 19 (lunisolar calendar), the death anniversary of Mr. Tran Van Soai on June 22 (lunisolar calendar), people- believers wear traditional costumes of the religion (black and brown color)- men wear black ao dai; women wear brown/black ao dai), participate in large numbers³⁵.

On the other hand, the ritual activities of Bửu Sơn Thiên Lâm Pagoda - Vinh Xuong Buddhism are related to Tan Chau communal temple, the followers of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương are also followers who attend the ceremony of this communal temple.

(3) Practicing rituals of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương's followers in Nghĩa Thành commune, Châu Đức district, Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu province

Practice at home: For the followers of Buu Son Ky Huong, every day they perform the ritual four times, including morning (the hour of the Rabbit)- noon (hour of the Horse)- afternoon (hour of the Rooster)- at night (hour of the Rat). According to Mr. Pham Viet Thanh³⁶, the religious ceremonies at home are fully performed by believers in the Chau Duc district.

Practice at home: in the Tay An pagoda, there are altars for worshipping such as Buddha, Buddha master, Twelve great disciples, ancestors. On weekdays, the ritual committee offers incense and worship. Believers can go to the temple to perform the ceremony. On the main festivals: the Buddha's birthday on April 15 (lunisolar calendar), the Yulanpen Festival for filial piety on July 15 (lunisolar calendar), the Buddha master's birthday on October 15 (lunisolar calendar), the death anniversary of the Buddha master on August 12 (lunisolar calendar), the Executive Board performs the ritual to offer incense, lights, fruits, water. In addition, in the temple, there are ceremonies to pray for peace. The costumes are a long robe, a Quan Am hat, or a black scarf. On these occasions, believers come to the temple and offer incense and worship³⁷.

In general, the ritual activities of Buu Son Ky Huong's followers in Tan Chau (An Giang), Nghia Thanh (Ba Ria - Vung Tau) have been clearly specified from the rituals at home to the rituals at temples. The costumes for believers and the person in charge of the ritual have been regulated.

In summary, during the process of development, in addition to the ceremonies related to the Buddha (Quan Am), the Buddha master Doan Minh Huyen, believers added rituals for the founders of religious branches at these monuments with the appearance of new altars. The religious rites of Buu Son Ky Huong religion are quite simple, closely linked with the religious rituals of the family such as ancestor worship, and other rituals of the community such as the festival of communal temples (Thoi Son, Tan Chau communal temples); Shen Nong ritual, Nam Hai festival (located in the relic complex in Tan Chau). It shows the 'tolerance' in the ritual practice of Buu Son Ky Huong.

Conclusion

Buu Son Ky Huong is an ‘engaged’ religion that has had an influence on politics, culture and ideology, and especially beliefs in the Southern region. On the basis of Buddhism and Confucianism, Doan Minh Huyen localized the doctrine (Self-cultivation - Studying Buddhism) and practiced the Four Graces, ‘Wu wei’ in order to meet the people’s consciousness and spiritual needs in the context of Southern society in the mid-19th century. Over time, Buu Son Ky Huong has gone beyond the teachings and doctrine of a religion, become a community lifestyle”³⁸.

The religious awareness of Buu Son Ky Huong followers has been associated with the process of religious development. First, they followed the doctrine, worshiped the symbol of ‘trần điều’. Then, they changed to worship the founder and later leaders. The method of religious propagation has important implications for the religious perception of believers, the survival of religion. Since its establishment, Buu Son Ky Huong has gone through various methods of propagation such as oral tradition, handwritten scriptures, printed scriptures, electronic media³⁹ to strengthen the awareness of followers of Buu Son Ky Huong in particular and the mass in general. However, this spread was not the same among the establishments of Buu Son Ky Huong, so the effectiveness of religious awareness of believers in each place and the facility is also different: or more profound in the teachings, canon law, or fading, lost.

Currently, Buu Son Ky Huong has not been able to perfect its organizational structure and has not unified the administrative organization throughout the country. Separation and fragmentation in ritual activities and propagation of teachings of the religious branches/temples led to the difficulty of attracting followers and development of religion. In particular, a part of followers tended to convert to the religious activities of Hoa Hao Buddhism⁴⁰. Therefore, the statistics of believers and religious management also face many difficulties in the localities./.

Notes:

- 1 The article uses field data of the project: *Tôn giáo nội sinh ở Nam Bộ (Nghiên cứu trường hợp Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Phật Giáo Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn)/ Endogenous religions in the South (A case study of Buu Son Ky Huong, Tu An Hieu Nghia, Hieu Nghia Ta Lon Buddhism)*. Nguyễn Ngọc Mai (Institute for Religious Studies) was in charge. The study was conducted in An Giang in July 2019.
- 2 Đặng Nghiêm Vạn (2005), *Lý luận về tôn giáo và tình hình tôn giáo ở Việt Nam/ Theories about religion and religious situation in Vietnam*, Nxb. Chính trị Quốc gia, Hà Nội, p. 33.
- 3 Phạm Bích Hợp (2007), *Người Nam Bộ và tôn giáo bản địa (Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo)/ Inhabitants of the South and the indigenous religions (Buu Son Ky Huong, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao)*, Nxb. Tôn giáo, Hà Nội, pp.84-85.
- 4 Đỗ Quang Hưng (2000), “Vài suy nghĩ về vấn đề tôn giáo ở Nam Bộ thời cận đại”/ Some thoughts on religious issues in the South in the modern period, *Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo*, No. 1, p.15.
- 5 Tạ Chí Đại Trùng (2014), *Thần, người và đất Việt/ Deities, Inhabitants and land of Vietnam*, Nxb. Tri Thức, Hà Nội, p.316
- 6 Nguyễn Quốc Tuấn (2014), “Tiếp cận hệ thống về thực thể tôn giáo – một cách nhìn khác về tôn giáo”/ Research on the system of religious entity - a different view on religion, *Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo*, No. 3 (129), pp. 3-15.
- 7 Nguyễn Quốc Tuấn (2014), “Triển khai lý thuyết thực thể tôn giáo”/ Deployment of religious entity theory, *Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo*, No. 10 (136), p. 17.
- 8 Nguyễn Quốc Tuấn (2015), *Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo là gì?/ What is Religious Studies? Tài liệu thuyết trình khoa học tại Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo/ Documents presented at the Institute of Religious Studies*.
- 9 Buu Son Ky Huong Belief and Buu Son Ky Huong Religion are the classifications of administrators.
- 10 In the early days, everyone who joined was given a *lòng phái* by the Buddha master, the four Chinese characters were written on it 寶山奇香 - *Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương* to carry for a lifetime. Today, granting *lòng phái* to the followers of Buu Son Ky Huong is only common in some temples such as An Giang, Bà Rịa- Vũng Tàu. This is no longer for the followers of the Buu Son Ky Huong belief in Thoi Son - Tinh Bien. Over time, the followers' consciousness of *lòng phái* has faded, it is only conjectures: “The Buddha master gave *lòng phái*- Today, believers have to be memorized *lòng phái*” [A depth interview with a male, 63 years old, Phuoc Dien pagoda, Tinh Bien district, An Giang province] ; “At first,

when taking refuge, believers demanded a *lòng phái* and memorized the poems on it. After that, it was not all believers who memorized those poems, so they took it on the body. At present, our children and grandchildren only take refuge in the Buddha Dharma Sangha. It can be said that it is over 100 years ago” [A depth interview with a female, 69 years old, Thoi Son, Tinh Bien, An Giang].

- 11 Trần Văn Giàu (Chủ biên, 1987), *Địa chí văn hóa Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh/ Cultural geography of Ho Chi Minh City*, Nxb. Tp. Hồ Chí Minh, pp. 134-135.
- 12 Ngô Văn Lê (2011), *Các tôn giáo bản địa và ảnh hưởng của nó đến đời sống văn hóa của người Việt Nam Bộ/ Indigenous religions and their influence on the cultural life of the Vietnamese in the South*. Tài liệu online:
http://www.hids.hochiminhcity.gov.vn/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=dd2fce0f-4bda-4049-a28d-7ba21b093638&groupId=13025. Accessed on 1 July 2020.
- 13 Nguyễn Văn Hầu biên khảo, phiên âm, chú thích (1973), *Tác phẩm Nôm cổ Sám truyền Đức Phật thầy Tây An/ Work of Ancient Nom oracle of the Buddha master of Tay An*, Tông Sơn, p. 89.
- 14 Phạm Bích Hợp (2007), Sđd, tr. 67.
- 15 Nguyễn Văn Hầu biên khảo, phiên âm, chú thích (1973), *ibid*, p. 29.
- 16 Phạm Bích Hợp (2007), *ibid*, p. 42.
- 17 Nguyễn Văn Sâm (curriculum school year 1974 - 1975), *Tin ngưỡng Việt Nam cận đại và hiện đại/ Vietnamese beliefs in the early modern and modern period (Giảng khóa chứng chỉ Văn minh Việt Nam)*, Đại học Văn khoa Sài Gòn, p. 53.
- 18 The spirit of reclamation and establishment hamlets was promoted by Ngo Loi- the founder of Tu An Hieu Nghia religion. In the process of propagation in the area of Tuong mountain (belonging to That Son range), Ngo Loi and his followers reclaimed land, established 4 villages such as An Định, An Hòa, An Thành, An Lập (Ba Chúc, Tri Tôn, An Giang). Other religions such as Hoa Hao Buddhism, Caodaism also had a process of expanding the influence of the religion through expanding the area of residence, taking care of production, and developing the material life of believers.
- 19 Có một số giả thuyết về địa điểm Đức BỔn Sư Ngô Lợi sáng lập đạo Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa: một là không rõ địa điểm lập Đạo; hai là lập Đạo tại Núi Tượng (Ba Chúc, Tri Tôn, An Giang), ba là lập Đạo tại Cù Lao Ba (An Phú, An Giang). Trong bài viết này, chúng tôi căn cứ vào nội dung của *Văn kiện Đại hội đại biểu đạo Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa lần thứ 2, nhiệm kỳ 2015 – 2020*.

- 20 Hà Tân Dân (1971), *Phật giáo Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương – Hệ phái Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa*, Tủ sách sưu khảo sử liệu.
- 21 *Phật giáo Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương – Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa của Đức Bốn Sư tại Núi Tượng, Linh Sơn Hội Thượng Kinh*, do Ban Tu thư và sưu tập kinh điển của Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa ấn hành. Đây là bản phiên âm từ chữ Hán kinh *Linh Sơn Hội Thượng Kinh* của các cư sỹ của đạo Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa tại Ba Chúc (Tri Tôn, An Giang).
- 22 Nguyễn Văn Sâm (curriculum school year 1974 - 1975), p. 61.
- 23 Tây An temple (Nghĩa Thanh Commune, Chau Duc District, An Giang Province) has its own system of sutras: *Kinh Thiên Nguyên “Tâm kinh”*; *Kinh Mạc Kiếp “Bảo phụ mẫu ơn Kinh”*; *Kinh Huỳnh Đình “Kinh Mật Tông trợ duyên”*, *kinh Thí thực (Chấn tế)*. Bửu Sơn Thiền Lâm Tự - Buddhism Vĩnh Xương (Tân Châu, An Giang) has: *How to practice meditation of the master Phạm Thanh Quang*; *The oracle of the master Phạm Thanh Quang*; *Chơn lý: summary and commentary of the master Phạm Thanh Quang*; *Poetry collection of the master Phạm Thanh Quang* ... Thới Sơn temple (Tịnh Biên, An Giang) also has popular documents like *The oracle of the Buddha master Tây An*, *Tích ông Đình Tây*, *Biography of the Buddha master Tây An Đoàn Minh Huyền* and some scriptures of Hoa Hao Buddhism as *The oracle of Hoa Hao Buddhism’s teachings of the master Huỳnh*, *Phật giáo Hòa Hảo...*
- 24 Website: <http://bskhnguyenthuy.blogspot.com/>;
<http://www.buusonkyhuong.vn/>
- 25 Nguyễn Văn Sâm (curriculum school year 1974 - 1975), p. 59.
- 26 “The religious organization” of Buu Son Ky Huong religion according to Nguyen Van Sam’s division is basically reasonable. However, *the classification of lay people into Gánh and Trò các Trò need to be reconsidered*. Because, according to our research, the classification of Ông Gánh and Ông Trò belongs to Tu An Hieu Nghia religion. This name appeared when the government implemented the management of the lay people of Tu An Hieu Nghia after 1945. Currently, according to the Charter of the Second Congress of Tu Tan Hieu Nghia, the religious organization includes: dignitaries – dignitaries’assistants- thân bằng (ông Trò - ông Gánh – thân bằng). [An in-depth interview with a male, dignitaries, Phi Lai Pagoda, Ba Chuc Town, Tri Ton district, An Giang]
- 27 Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc (chủ nhiệm, 2010), *Những vấn đề cơ bản của một số tôn giáo ở Nam bộ/ The basics of some religions in the South*, Đề tài Nghiên cứu khoa học cấp Bộ năm 2009 - 2010 do Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo chủ trì.
- 28 List of religious organizations in Vietnam (June 2020). Website:

- 29 http://btgcp.gov.vn/Plus.aspx/vi/News/38/0/264/0/16963/Danh_sach_cac_to_chuc_duoc_cong_nhan_la_to_chuc_ton_giao_cac_to_chuc_duoc_ca_p_dang_ky_hoat_dong_ton. Truy cập ngày 20/7/2020.
- 30 Dignitaries and dignitaries' assistants are explained in Article 2, Chapter 1 of the Law on Belief and Religion (2016).
- 31 Data from the Department of Religious Affairs, at website:
- 32 http://btgcp.gov.vn/Plus.aspx/vi/News/38/0/162/0/1185/Gioi_thieu_khai_quat_ve_dao_Buu_son_ky_huong. Truy cập ngày 20/7/2020
- 33 Buu Son Ky Huong religion, Nghia Thanh commune, has been granted registration of religious activities No 01/GCN-TGDT 05/09/2007.
- 34 Nguyễn Trung Hiếu & Mai Thị Minh Thy (2019), “Bước đầu tìm hiểu về chi phái Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương Thường Lạc ở Tây Nam Bộ”/ Initial research on the Buu Son Ky Huong Thuong Lac in the Southwest region, *Khoa học xã hội*, No. 1 (245), p. 54.
- 35 Nguyễn Văn Hầu biên khảo, phiên âm, chú thích (1973), *ibid*, p. 33.
- 36 Nguyễn Văn Hầu biên khảo, phiên âm, chú thích (1973), *ibid*, p. 63.
- 37 Survey materials at Thoi Son pagoda, July 2019.
- 38 Trần Hồng Liên (2009), “Đạo Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương ở Nam Bộ (Trường hợp xã Vĩnh Xương, huyện Tân Châu, Tỉnh An Giang)”/ Buu Son Ky Huong religion in the South (The case of Vinh Xuong commune, Tan Chau district, An Giang province), *Khoa học xã hội*, No. 4 (128), pp. 84 - 90.
- 39 Phạm Viết Thanh is the Chairman of the Board of Executive of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion, Bà Rịa – Vũng Tàu. See: Phạm Viết Thanh (2013), *Đạo Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương tỉnh Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu: Quá trình xây dựng và phát triển*/ Buu Son Ky Huong religion, Ba Ria - Vung Tau province: The process of construction and development in *Kỷ yếu hội thảo khoa học: Nhân vật lịch sử Đoàn Minh Huyền (1807 - 1856)/ Proceedings of the conference: Historical figure Doan Minh Huyen (1807 - 1856)*, do Hội Khoa học Lịch sử tỉnh An Giang và Huyện ủy Tịnh Biên, tỉnh An Giang tổ chức tại Tịnh Biên ngày 28 tháng 9 năm 2013, pp. 234 - 235.
- 40 Phạm Viết Thanh (2013), pp. 234 - 235.
- 41 Vĩnh Thông (2017), “Tầm nhìn về Thất Sơn: một mô hình hai tác dụng”/ Vision of That Son: a model with two effects, *Nghiên cứu và Phát triển*, No. 6 (140), pp. 49 - 56.
- 42 Đới Thần Kinh (bản dịch, 2006), “Khuyh hướng cá nhân hóa của tín ngưỡng tôn giáo”/ The personalization tendency of religious beliefs, *Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo*, No. 2, p. 12.
- 43 Trần Hồng Liên (2009), p. 89.

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7. Trần Hồng Liên (2009), “Đạo Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương ở Nam Bộ (Trường hợp xã Vĩnh Xương, huyện Tân Châu, Tỉnh An Giang)”/ *Buu Son Ky Huong religion in the South (The case of Vinh Xuong commune, Tan Chau district, An Giang province)*, *Khoa học xã hội*, số 4 (128).
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