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## Transmission Of Buddhism Into Vietnam: Maritime And Overland Routes, And Early Interaction With Indigenous Beliefs

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**Abstract:** This study employs historical-comparative analysis to examine the transmission of Buddhism into Vietnam, tracing the dual pathways through which the Dharma reached the Vietnamese people -the maritime route connecting India and Southeast Asia across the South China Sea, and the overland route traversing Central Asia and southern China -and investigating the nature of early Buddhist interaction with indigenous Vietnamese religious beliefs and practices. Drawing upon a synthesis of archaeological evidence, epigraphy, Pāli and Sanskrit textual sources, Chinese pilgrimage accounts, and Vietnamese chronicles, the study reconstructs the multi-directional process through which Buddhism was introduced into the territory of ancient Vietnam (then known under various names including Giao Chỉ, Giao Châu, and later Đại Việt) between approximately the second century BCE and the tenth century CE. The analysis reveals that the transmission of Buddhism into Vietnam was not a single, linear event but a complex, layered process involving merchants, missionaries, monks, and political envoys from multiple civilizational sources -principally India, Central Asia, and China -each contributing distinct doctrinal emphases and cultural forms to the emerging Vietnamese Buddhist tradition. The study further demonstrates that early Vietnamese Buddhism did not displace indigenous religious beliefs but entered into a dynamic process of interaction, accommodation, and creative synthesis with pre-existing animist, spirit-worship, and agricultural ritual traditions, producing a distinctive Vietnamese Buddhist identity whose hybrid character has persisted to the present day. The findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Buddhism as a transnational civilizational phenomenon whose transmission was shaped by the specific geographical, commercial, and cultural conditions of the regions through which it traveled.

**Keywords:** *transmission of Buddhism, Vietnam, maritime route, overland route, Giao Châu, indigenous beliefs, Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Buddhist syncretism, Luy Lâu*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The transmission of Buddhism across Asia represents one of the most remarkable episodes in the history of world religion -a centuries-long process through which a spiritual and philosophical tradition born in the Gangetic plain of northeastern India diffused across the entire breadth of the Asian continent, adapting itself with extraordinary suppleness to the cultural, linguistic, and religious conditions of each new society it encountered. Among the most historically significant and underexplored chapters of this transmission story is the arrival of Buddhism in Vietnam -a process

that is at once a chapter in the broader history of Indian cultural expansion across maritime Southeast Asia and a distinctively Vietnamese story of religious encounter, creative synthesis, and cultural transformation.

Vietnam occupies a unique geographical and cultural position in the Buddhist world. Situated at the southeastern terminus of the Asian landmass, the Vietnamese territories of the Red River Delta and the central coastal plains were accessible from India both by sea -through the maritime trading networks that connected the Indian subcontinent, Sri Lanka, the Malay Peninsula, and the South China Sea littoral -and by land, through the overland routes of Central Asia and the Silk Road that connected India with China and from China southward into the northern Vietnamese territories under Chinese administration (Coedès, 1968; Wolters, 1999). This dual accessibility made ancient Vietnam a site of intersection between Indian and Chinese Buddhist civilizational influences, producing a tradition of remarkable synthetic richness.

Despite its significance, the early history of Buddhist transmission into Vietnam remains a subject of ongoing scholarly debate. Questions concerning the chronology of the first Buddhist contacts, the relative priority of maritime versus overland transmission, the doctrinal affiliations of the earliest Buddhist communities, and the nature of early Buddhist interaction with indigenous Vietnamese religious practices have been addressed from different scholarly perspectives with considerably divergent conclusions (Taylor, 1983; Nguyen, 1997; Tran Van Giau, 1993). This study seeks to synthesize the available evidence -archaeological, epigraphic, textual, and comparative -into a coherent account of the transmission process and its cultural consequences.

The study is guided by two interrelated research questions: (1) Through what geographical routes and by what human agents was Buddhism transmitted into Vietnam, and what evidence is available for reconstructing this transmission process? And (2) How did early Buddhism in Vietnam interact with pre-existing indigenous religious beliefs and practices, and what were the outcomes of these early encounters? These questions are addressed through historical-comparative analysis of primary and secondary sources from Indian, Chinese, and Vietnamese scholarly traditions.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. The Maritime Silk Road and Buddhist Transmission in Southeast Asia

The role of Indian Ocean maritime trade networks in the transmission of Buddhism across Southeast Asia has been extensively documented by scholars including Coedès (1968), Wolters (1999), and Manguin (2004). The maritime Silk Road -the network of sea routes connecting the Indian subcontinent, Sri Lanka, the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Java, Borneo, and the South China Sea littoral -was not merely a commercial highway but a vector of civilizational exchange through which Indian religious, literary, artistic, and political traditions diffused across the entire maritime world of Southeast Asia between approximately the first century BCE and the seventh century CE. Buddhist monks and merchants traveled together on these routes, with merchants providing the material support that allowed monastic communities to establish themselves in ports of trade along the way, and monks providing the ritual and moral services -blessings for safe voyages, protection from storms and pirates, the merit generated by supporting the Saṅgha -that made their presence valuable to the trading communities that hosted them (Miksic, 2013).

The most significant scholarly contributions to the understanding of this maritime transmission process include Paul Pelliot's (1903) foundational study of the earliest Chinese accounts of Buddhist communities in Funan and Giao Chi; Paul Mus's (1933) analysis of the pre-Indic religious substratum of Southeast Asian religion and its interaction with Buddhism; O. W. Wolters's (1999) account of the "localization" of Indic cultural traditions in Southeast Asia; and Kenneth Hall's (2011) study of maritime trade and state formation in early Southeast Asia. Together, these works establish the framework within which the maritime transmission of Buddhism into Vietnam must be understood.

### B. The Overland Route and Chinese Buddhist Influence

The overland transmission of Buddhism into Vietnam proceeded through a different but equally important channel: the Silk Road routes of Central Asia and northwestern China, through which Buddhism first reached China in the first century CE, and from China southward into the territories of Giao Châu (the Chinese administrative designation for the northern Vietnamese territories) through the networks of Chinese imperial administration and the movement of Chinese and Central Asian Buddhist missionaries (Zürcher, 1959; Forte, 1988). The Chinese pilgrimage tradition -represented most famously by Faxian (337–422 CE), who traveled to India by the overland route and returned by

sea through Southeast Asia, and Xuanzang (602–664 CE), who traversed Central Asia and northwestern India -generated a rich body of textual evidence about the state of Buddhism in the regions traversed, including valuable references to Buddhist communities in the Vietnamese territories.

Erik Zürcher's (1959) magisterial study of Buddhist conquest in early China remains the indispensable reference for understanding the Chinese dimension of Buddhist transmission into Vietnam, documenting in detail the mechanisms through which Buddhism was adapted to Chinese cultural and institutional conditions in ways that would profoundly shape the form in which it was subsequently transmitted southward into Vietnam. More recently, Tansen Sen (2003) has examined Buddhism, diplomacy, and trade in the exchanges between India and China between the Han and Tang dynasties, illuminating the political and commercial dimensions of Buddhist transmission across this network.

### **C. Vietnamese Scholarly Perspectives on Buddhist Origins**

Vietnamese scholarship on the origins of Buddhism in Vietnam has been dominated by two competing interpretive frameworks. The first, associated with scholars including Tran Van Giau (1993) and Le Manh That (1999), argues for the early and primary importance of the Indian maritime route in the transmission of Buddhism into Vietnam, citing the Luy Lâu center (in modern Bắc Ninh province) as evidence of a direct Indian Buddhist presence in Vietnam by the second century CE at the latest. The second, associated with scholars following the mainstream Chinese Buddhist historiographical tradition, emphasizes the overland route through China as the primary channel of Buddhist transmission and understands Vietnamese Buddhism as fundamentally a derivative of Chinese Buddhism. Cuong Tu Nguyen (1997) offers a nuanced synthesis of these positions, acknowledging both the maritime Indian and the overland Chinese dimensions of Buddhist transmission into Vietnam while arguing for the distinctive creative agency of Vietnamese Buddhist actors in shaping the resulting tradition.

## **III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is guided by two complementary theoretical frameworks. The first is Wolters's (1999) concept of "localization"-the process through which Indic cultural and religious traditions were not simply adopted wholesale by Southeast Asian societies but selectively appropriated, adapted, and transformed by local political and religious actors in accordance with their own cultural priorities and social structures. Localization is distinguished from both passive reception, which underestimates the creative agency of local actors, and syncretic dilution, which assumes that the encounter of Buddhism with indigenous traditions necessarily produced a weakened or incoherent hybrid. Rather, localization produces something genuinely new: a local form of Buddhism that is simultaneously recognizably Buddhist in its doctrinal core and distinctively Vietnamese in its cultural expression.

The second theoretical framework is Tambiah's (1976) analysis of the relationship between Buddhism and local spirit religion in Southeast Asian societies. Tambiah demonstrates that across Southeast Asia, the encounter between Buddhism and pre-existing animist and spirit-worship traditions typically produced not the displacement of the latter by the former but a hierarchical integration in which Buddhism claimed a higher cosmological and soteriological status while accommodating spirit worship within a Buddhistically ordered universe. This integration -the "encompassment" of local religion by Buddhism -is a structural feature of Southeast Asian Buddhist cultures and provides the analytical framework for understanding early Buddhist interaction with indigenous Vietnamese religious beliefs.

## **IV. METHODOLOGY**

### **A. Research Design**

This study employs historical-comparative analysis, integrating evidence from multiple categories of primary sources with secondary scholarly literature to reconstruct the process of Buddhist transmission into Vietnam and its cultural consequences. The historical-comparative method is appropriate to this research because the transmission of Buddhism into Vietnam was a multi-site, multi-century process involving actors from several distinct civilizational traditions -Indian, Central Asian, Chinese, and indigenous Vietnamese -whose contributions must be assessed comparatively in order to produce an adequate account of the whole.

## B. Primary Sources

Primary sources analyzed include four categories. First, archaeological and epigraphic evidence: the archaeological findings from the Luy Lâu site complex in Bắc Ninh province, including Buddhist sculptural remains and inscriptions of Indian and Cham stylistic affiliation; the Võ Cảnh inscription in Sanskrit from central Vietnam (third century CE), one of the earliest Buddhist inscriptions in Southeast Asia; and archaeological findings from the port sites of Óc Eo in the Mekong Delta, which document the commercial and religious networks connecting the Vietnamese territories with the Indian Ocean world.

Second, Chinese textual sources: the Mouzi Lihuo Lun (Lý Hoặc Luận), composed by the Chinese scholar Mou Bo (Mâu Tử) in the Vietnamese territory of Giao Châu around 200 CE, which is the earliest Buddhist text composed in Vietnam and documents the presence of a sophisticated Buddhist community in the region; the Gaoseng Zhuan (Biographies of Eminent Monks) compiled by Huijiao (497–554 CE), which contains accounts of Indian and Central Asian monks who traveled through the Vietnamese territories; and the pilgrimage accounts of Faxian and Yijing (635–713 CE), who both passed through Southeast Asian ports and recorded observations about the Buddhist communities they encountered. Third, Vietnamese chronicles and Buddhist historical literature, including the Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư and the Thiền Uyển Tập Anh, which preserve traditions concerning the early history of Vietnamese Buddhism. Fourth, Sanskrit and Pāli textual sources pertaining to the Indian Ocean trade networks and Buddhist missionary activities of the Aśokan and post-Aśokan periods.

## V. FINDINGS I: ROUTES OF TRANSMISSION -MARITIME AND OVERLAND

### A. The Maritime Route: India, the South China Sea, and the Luy Lâu Center

The most compelling evidence for the early maritime transmission of Buddhism into Vietnam is the existence of the Luy Lâu Buddhist center in the Red River Delta -identifiable with the modern Luy Lâu site in Bắc Ninh province, approximately thirty kilometers east of Hanoi -which appears in both Chinese and Vietnamese sources as the most important early center of Buddhist activity in the Vietnamese territories. According to the account preserved in the Lý Hoặc Luận of Mâu Tử (approximately 200 CE) and corroborated by later Vietnamese Buddhist historiography, the Luy Lâu center already possessed over twenty Buddhist temples, a community of more than five hundred monks, and a substantial collection of translated texts by the end of the second century CE (Le Manh That, 1999). If these figures are even approximately accurate, they suggest that Buddhism had been established in the Red River Delta for a considerable period before the composition of Mâu Tử's text -a period that scholars have estimated as beginning no later than the first century CE and possibly as early as the third or second century BCE.

The maritime character of this early Buddhist presence is suggested by several strands of evidence. The Luy Lâu center was located at or near the main port of entry for maritime trade in the Red River Delta -a position consistent with the well-documented pattern across Southeast Asia in which Buddhist communities first established themselves in ports of trade, sustained by the commercial networks through which Indian merchants, monks, and missionaries traveled (Miksic, 2013). The sculptural remains from the Luy Lâu site include images that display stylistic features consistent with the Buddhist artistic traditions of the Indian subcontinent and Sri Lanka, suggesting direct artistic and religious contact with the Indian world rather than transmission through a Chinese intermediary.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For detailed analysis of the sculptural evidence from Luy Lâu, see Nguyen Tien Dong (2010), whose study of the Buddhist remains from the site identifies artistic parallels with the Amarāvātī and Mathurā schools of Indian Buddhist sculpture.

The most important piece of epigraphic evidence for the maritime route is the Võ Cảnh inscription from central Vietnam, dated by scholars to the late second or early third century CE, which is composed in Sanskrit and records a royal dedication in a formula that closely parallels the Aśokan dedicatory inscriptions of the Indian mainland. The presence of a Sanskrit Buddhist inscription in central Vietnam at this early date -in a region that was not under Chinese administration but was part of the Kingdom of Champa, a deeply Indianized polity -demonstrates that the maritime transmission of Indian Buddhist culture into the Vietnamese coastal zone was already well advanced by the early centuries of the Common Era (Coedès, 1968).

The broader maritime network through which this early Buddhist transmission occurred is documented by the archaeological remains from the Óc Eo site in the Mekong Delta -identified by scholars with the ancient port city of Vyadhapura in the kingdom of Funan -which has yielded a

remarkable assemblage of Indian, Roman, Persian, and Chinese artifacts documenting the extraordinary cosmopolitan character of the South China Sea trading world in the early centuries of the Common Era. Among these remains are Buddhist votive objects, images, and inscriptions that testify to the presence of Buddhist merchants and missionaries within the trading networks that connected the Indian subcontinent with the Vietnamese coastal territories (Manguin, 2004).

### **B. The Overland Route: Central Asia, China, and the Sinicization of Vietnamese Buddhism**

Alongside the maritime route, the overland transmission of Buddhism into Vietnam through China played an equally important role in shaping the Vietnamese Buddhist tradition, particularly from the early centuries of the Common Era onward. The overland Silk Road -connecting northwestern India through Bactria, Sogdia, the Tarim Basin, and northwestern China -was the primary channel through which Buddhism reached China by the first century CE, and it was through the networks of Chinese Buddhist translation bureaus, monastic institutions, and imperial patronage that a second, doctrinally distinct current of Buddhist transmission flowed southward into the Vietnamese territories of Giao Châu.

The most important Central Asian dimension of this transmission is documented by the biographies of the Buddhist monks who traveled through the Vietnamese territories during the Han and Six Dynasties periods. The monk Kang Senghui (康僧會; died 280 CE), one of the most significant early Buddhist figures in the Vietnamese territories, was of Sogdian (Central Asian) ancestry -his family had originally come from Sogdia, the region of modern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan -and had been resident in the Vietnamese territories for at least one generation before his birth. Kang Senghui's career as a translator and missionary in Giao Châu and subsequently in the kingdom of Wu (in the lower Yangtze Delta) embodies the multi-directional character of early Buddhist transmission: a Central Asian Buddhist trained in the Vietnamese territories who subsequently transmitted Buddhism northward to China (Zürcher, 1959).

The Indian monk Mahājīvaka (Chinese: Moujing; second century CE), who is recorded in Chinese sources as having lived and taught in Giao Châu, and the Parthian monk An Shigao, who translated Buddhist texts in China after passing through Central Asian and possibly Southeast Asian territories, are further documented examples of the diverse geographical origins of the missionary monks who traveled through the Vietnamese territories in this early period. The presence of such figures -Indian, Central Asian, and Chinese -in the same geographical space within a relatively short historical period illuminates the remarkable cosmopolitan character of the early Vietnamese Buddhist world.

The Chinese dimension of the overland transmission became increasingly dominant from the third century CE onward, as the Vietnamese territories were more thoroughly integrated into the Chinese imperial administrative system and as the networks of Chinese Buddhist translation, institutional development, and patronage increasingly shaped the Buddhist landscape of Giao Châu. The Zen (Chinese: Chan) school that would eventually become the dominant institutional form of Vietnamese Buddhism was transmitted from China into Vietnam through the lineages documented in the Thiền Uyển Tập Anh, which traces the Vietnamese Zen tradition back to Chinese patriarchal lineages originating in the teaching of Bodhidharma and his successors (Nguyen, 1997).

### **C. The Relative Priority of Maritime and Overland Transmission**

The question of which transmission route was historically prior -and therefore which civilizational source was more formative for Vietnamese Buddhism -has been a matter of sustained scholarly debate. The Vietnamese scholars Le Manh That (1999) and Tran Van Giau (1993) argue strongly for the priority of the maritime Indian route, citing the Luy Lâu evidence and the Sanskrit-language inscriptions as demonstrating a direct Indian Buddhist presence in Vietnam before the Chinese Buddhist tradition had sufficiently developed to serve as a significant transmission vector. Against this view, the mainstream Chinese Buddhist historiographical tradition, represented in Vietnamese scholarship by figures such as Nguyen Lang (2000), has tended to emphasize the overland Chinese route as the primary channel of Buddhist transmission on the grounds that the institutional, doctrinal, and literary forms of Vietnamese Buddhism are predominantly Chinese in character.

The most defensible position, supported by the available evidence, is that both routes were significant and that their relative importance varied across different periods and different parts of the Vietnamese territorial complex. The earliest Buddhist presence in the Red River Delta and the central coastal zone was primarily the product of maritime Indian and Indianized Southeast Asian contacts, as the Luy Lâu evidence and the Võ Cảnh inscription suggest. The subsequent development of Vietnamese Buddhist institutions, however -their doctrinal orientation, their literary culture, their

relationship to the state, and their organizational structures -was shaped more decisively by the Chinese Buddhist tradition transmitted through the overland route. What emerged from this dual transmission was not a simple synthesis of Indian and Chinese Buddhism but a distinctively Vietnamese Buddhist tradition that selectively appropriated elements from both sources in accordance with its own cultural and religious priorities.

## **VI. FINDINGS II: EARLY INTERACTION BETWEEN BUDDHISM AND INDIGENOUS VIETNAMESE BELIEFS**

### **A. The Indigenous Religious Landscape Before Buddhism**

In order to understand the nature of early Buddhist interaction with indigenous Vietnamese beliefs, it is necessary first to characterize the pre-Buddhist religious landscape of the Vietnamese territories. The indigenous religious traditions of ancient Vietnam -documented through a combination of archaeological evidence, Chinese historical accounts, and the preserved traces of pre-Buddhist religious practice that persist within later Vietnamese Buddhism and popular religion -were characterized by several distinctive features.

The most fundamental was an animist worldview in which the natural world -mountains, rivers, trees, rocks, and agricultural fields -was understood as inhabited by a vast population of spirits (Việt: thần, ma) whose benevolence or malevolence determined the success or failure of agricultural production, the health or illness of human communities, and the prosperity or decline of political communities. Spirit worship (tín ngưỡng thờ thần) was not a marginal practice but the central religious activity of ancient Vietnamese society, organized around a complex calendar of agricultural rituals, spirit propitiation ceremonies, and communal festivals that structured the relationship between human communities and the spirit world (Nguyen Tu Chi, 1993).

Alongside spirit worship, the ancient Vietnamese religious tradition included a rich complex of ancestor veneration practices -the belief that the spirits of deceased ancestors maintained an active presence in the affairs of their living descendants and required regular ritual attention in the form of offerings, prayers, and memorial ceremonies. This ancestor cult, which has persisted as one of the most robust features of Vietnamese religious life to the present day, was grounded in a conception of the relationship between the living and the dead as one of continuous mutual obligation and exchange, rather than a clean separation between the world of the living and the world of the dead (Phan Ke Binh, 2012).

A third important feature of the pre-Buddhist Vietnamese religious landscape was the prominence of female religious figures -both divine and human. The Trung Sisters (Hải Bà Trưng), whose revolt against Chinese rule in 40–43 CE became one of the foundational narratives of Vietnamese national identity, were understood in religious as well as political terms as powerful female spirits whose intercession could protect their people from external threats. The prominence of female deities in the Vietnamese spirit pantheon -including the Mother Goddess tradition (Mẫu) that remains one of the most vital currents of Vietnamese popular religion -reflects a pre-Buddhist religious culture in which feminine spiritual power was accorded high cosmological significance (Endres & Lauser, 2011).

### **B. Mechanisms of Early Buddhist-Indigenous Encounter**

The encounter between Buddhism and this indigenous religious landscape was not a confrontation between two fully formed and internally consistent religious systems but a gradual, locally variable, and multi-directional process of contact, negotiation, and creative recombination. Several mechanisms of interaction can be identified from the available evidence.

The first and most historically significant mechanism was what scholars have called “encompassment”-the strategy through which Buddhist missionaries and practitioners acknowledged the existence and power of local spirits while situating them within a hierarchically ordered Buddhist cosmological framework (Tambiah, 1976). Rather than denying the reality of the spirit world or seeking to eliminate spirit worship, early Vietnamese Buddhism assigned the spirits a recognized but subordinate position within the Buddhist cosmological order: the spirits (thần) were understood as powerful beings dwelling in lower cosmological realms who, like all sentient beings, were subject to the law of karma, capable of generating merit, and potentially on a path toward eventual liberation. The great earth spirits and mountain spirits of the Vietnamese landscape were reinterpreted as Buddhist devas and nāgas -protective supernatural beings who had taken refuge in the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, Saṅgha) and who now served as guardians of the Dharma in their local territories.

This strategy of encompassment is documented most vividly in the legendary accounts of the monk Man Nương (third century CE), one of the most celebrated figures of early Vietnamese Buddhist tradition. According to the legend preserved in the *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh* and in later Vietnamese religious literature, Man Nương was a Vietnamese woman who became pregnant through a miraculous encounter with the Indian monk Khâu Đà La (Sanskrit: Kṣudra), gave birth to a daughter who transformed into a spirit, and subsequently became associated with a sacred tree from which Buddhist images were carved. The legend is a complex narrative of Buddhist-indigenous encounter in which the Indian monk, the Vietnamese woman, the local spirit, and the sacred tree -all elements of the pre-Buddhist indigenous religious landscape -are woven together into a distinctively Vietnamese Buddhist sacred narrative (Nguyen, 1997).

A second mechanism of interaction was the adoption and reinterpretation of indigenous ritual practices within a Buddhist framework. The agricultural festival cycle of ancient Vietnam -organized around the planting, growing, and harvesting of wet rice and marked by communal ceremonies of spirit propitiation and ancestor veneration -was not abolished by the arrival of Buddhism but gradually reinterpreted in Buddhist terms. Buddhist monks began to perform rituals at the seasonal festivals, Buddhist prayers and merit-making ceremonies were incorporated into the agricultural ritual calendar, and the Buddhist concept of karma was used to explain the differential fortunes of agricultural communities in ways that reinforced rather than replaced the indigenous understanding of the relationship between human moral conduct and agricultural prosperity (Tran Ngoc Them, 1997).

### **C. The Synthesis of Buddhism and the Mother Goddess Tradition**

Among the most significant and enduring outcomes of early Buddhist interaction with indigenous Vietnamese religious beliefs is the synthesis of Buddhist and indigenous feminine religious traditions that produced the distinctive Vietnamese Mẫu (Mother Goddess) tradition. The Mẫu tradition -a system of mediumistic spirit possession rituals organized around the veneration of a pantheon of female deities (the *Tứ Phủ*, or Four Palaces) who embody different aspects of the natural world -represents one of the most vital currents of Vietnamese popular religion and one of the most complex examples of Buddhist-indigenous religious synthesis in the Vietnamese cultural tradition.

The Mẫu tradition draws simultaneously on indigenous Vietnamese spirit worship traditions, Taoist cosmological frameworks, and Buddhist devotional practices, producing a ceremonial complex that cannot be adequately understood as belonging exclusively to any of these contributing traditions (Endres & Lauser, 2011). The fact that Mẫu temples frequently contain Buddhist shrines, that Buddhist monks sometimes perform rituals at Mẫu festivals, and that the boundaries between Buddhist and Mẫu devotional practice are often porous in the lived religious experience of Vietnamese communities, testifies to the depth and durability of the syncretic encounter that began with the earliest Buddhist contacts in the first centuries of the Common Era.

### **D. The Mouzi Lihuo Lun as Evidence of Early Buddhist-Indigenous Dialogue**

The *Mouzi Lihuo Lun* (Lý Hoặc Luận) composed by Mâu Tử in Giao Châu around 200 CE is an invaluable primary source for understanding the nature of early Buddhist interaction with indigenous Vietnamese beliefs and with the Confucian and Taoist traditions that had arrived in Vietnam through Chinese administration. The text takes the form of a dialogue in which a Buddhist interlocutor (Mouzi himself) responds to the objections of critics who challenge the compatibility of Buddhism with indigenous Vietnamese and Chinese cultural values. Among the most revealing of these objections are those that concern Buddhist attitudes toward ancestor veneration -a core indigenous Vietnamese religious practice.

Mâu Tử's response to the charge that Buddhism, by encouraging monastic celibacy and the renunciation of family life, undermines the ancestral duties that are central to both Vietnamese indigenous religion and Confucian ethics, is philosophically sophisticated and culturally sensitive. He argues that the Buddhist monk who cultivates virtue and generates merit creates a store of spiritual benefit that accrues to his ancestors and descendants more powerfully than any conventional ancestral ritual, and that the Buddhist path of liberation is itself the highest form of filial piety -the greatest gift a child can offer his ancestors (Zürcher, 1959). This argument represents an early and remarkably lucid example of the strategy through which Buddhism negotiated its relationship with the indigenous Vietnamese religious landscape: not by displacing indigenous values but by reinterpreting them within a Buddhist framework that claimed to fulfill their deepest intentions more effectively than their conventional forms.

## VII. DISCUSSION

The findings of this historical-comparative study reveal the transmission of Buddhism into Vietnam as a multi-layered, multi-directional process whose complexity has not always been adequately appreciated in the existing scholarship. The dominant narrative in both Chinese Buddhist historiography and in much Western scholarship on Vietnamese religion has tended to present Vietnamese Buddhism as fundamentally derivative -either a branch of Indian Buddhism transmitted through the maritime route or a branch of Chinese Buddhism transmitted through the overland route. The evidence examined in this study suggests a more complex and more interesting picture: Vietnamese Buddhism is simultaneously indebted to both Indian and Chinese sources and irreducibly original in the synthesis it produced from these multiple influences.

The mechanism of localization, as theorized by Wolters (1999), is powerfully illustrated by the Vietnamese case. The Buddhist missionaries who arrived in Vietnam -whether by sea from India and Sri Lanka or by land from Central Asia and China -did not encounter a religious vacuum but a richly textured indigenous religious landscape of spirit worship, ancestor veneration, and agricultural ritual. The success of Buddhism in Vietnam was not the result of the displacement of these indigenous traditions but of its capacity to engage with them on their own terms -to acknowledge the reality and power of the spirit world while situating it within a more comprehensive cosmological framework, to honor the values of filial piety and ancestral obligation while reinterpreting them in Buddhist terms, and to incorporate indigenous ritual forms into a Buddhist ceremonial framework that enriched rather than impoverished them.

The gender dimension of this encounter -particularly the integration of the powerful indigenous tradition of female religious authority into the emerging Vietnamese Buddhist synthesis -deserves particular scholarly attention. The prominence of female figures in early Vietnamese Buddhist legend, including Man Nuong and the various female spirit manifestations that became part of the Vietnamese Buddhist sacred landscape, suggests that the process of Buddhist-indigenous encounter in Vietnam was not simply a patriarchal Indian or Chinese religious tradition imposing itself upon an indigenous tradition but a more dialogical process in which indigenous Vietnamese cultural values -including the high valuation of feminine spiritual power -actively shaped the form that Buddhism took in the Vietnamese context.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the transmission of Buddhism into Vietnam through two principal routes -the maritime route connecting India, Sri Lanka, and the South China Sea trading world with the Vietnamese coastal territories, and the overland route connecting Central Asia and China with the northern Vietnamese territories under Chinese administration -and has investigated the nature of early Buddhist interaction with indigenous Vietnamese religious beliefs and practices. The findings demonstrate that the transmission of Buddhism into Vietnam was not a single, linear event but a complex, multi-century process involving multiple civilizational sources, multiple transmission routes, and multiple categories of human agents.

The early history of Buddhism in Vietnam is, above all, a history of encounter and synthesis -the encounter between a great world religion of Indian origin and the indigenous religious traditions of an ancient Southeast Asian civilization, and the creative synthesis that emerged from this encounter. The Buddhism that took root in Vietnam was not simply Indian Buddhism or Chinese Buddhism transplanted to a new soil but a genuinely Vietnamese Buddhism: one that drew upon Indian and Chinese doctrinal and institutional resources while rooting itself in the specific cultural soil of Vietnamese civilization, producing a tradition of remarkable vitality whose distinctive hybrid character -its synthesis of Buddhist doctrine with indigenous spirit worship, ancestor veneration, and feminine religious symbolism -has persisted across more than two millennia of Vietnamese religious history.

Future research should continue to integrate archaeological, epigraphic, textual, and ethnographic evidence in order to illuminate the specific local mechanisms of Buddhist-indigenous encounter at particular sites and in particular periods, and to extend the comparative analysis to the broader Southeast Asian context in order to situate the Vietnamese transmission story within the full panorama of Buddhism's extraordinary civilizational journey across Asia.

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