

# 'Following Uncle Hồ to save the nation': Empowerment, legitimacy, and nationalistic aspirations in a Vietnamese new religious movement

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*This article investigates new religious movements that have emerged in post-Renovation Vietnam. The formation and development of movements that worship Hồ Chí Minh will be examined through the Way of the Jade Buddha. My analysis of this indigenous movement will discuss its controversial attempts to establish communication with the spirit of Hồ Chí Minh. It is argued that the movement is a channel through which people can empower themselves, seek legitimacy, and promote nationalistic aspirations. The emergence of such movements demonstrates the ongoing millenarian dream of social transformation in the face of the challenges of international integration and the tensions caused by maritime conflicts with China.*

Renovation since 1986 in Vietnam brought changes in religious policies and a general lessening of government regulation of religious activities, providing the conditions for religious dynamism. New regulations issued in the early 1990s relaxed the government's control of religion and religious practices. Although some emerging religious groups were suppressed or closely watched by the authorities, there has been a phenomenal revival of religion throughout the nation since then. Mainstream and institutionalised religions such as Catholicism, Buddhism and Protestantism have regained their vitality in the public domain. There has been official recognition of Vietnamese religions such as Hòa Hảo Buddhism and Caodaism, while many newly-introduced Protestant denominations are now registered with local authorities. At the same time, international new religious movements have found their way into Vietnam through the missionary activities of visitors and expatriates and by Vietnamese returning after a period of living abroad. Gradually, the Vietnamese public have become aware of movements such as Soka Gakkai, Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Falun Gong, I-Kuan Tao, Transcendental Meditation, and the Way of

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the Supreme Master Ching Hai. All these phenomena have contributed to the growth and diversity of religious beliefs and practices in contemporary Vietnam.

Evidence of a religious revival can further be observed in the dynamics of popular faith-based activities. There has been a visible increase in the material resources mobilised to support these activities, such as the restoration and maintenance of sacred buildings and sites, and the restoration of rituals and festivals. At the same time, abandoned spiritual practices once deemed superstitious have resumed, as can be seen in the popularity of the worship of goddesses and national heroes; the practice of mediumship; as well as enthusiastic engagement with the world of the dead, spirits, and ancestors.<sup>1</sup> Notably, a number of practices formerly stigmatised as ‘superstitious’, even as technically ‘illegal’, are now considered by the state as ‘legitimate beliefs’ which convey cultural and moral values. These trends demonstrate an expansion in popular religion under Renovation.

Numerous new indigenous religious groups have appeared throughout the North. Prominent among them are: the Way of Maitreya (đạo Long Hoa Di Lặc); Heavenly Secrets (đạo Thiên Cơ); The Way of Immortal and Dragon (đạo Tiên-Rồng); Tô Dương’s Field of Extrasensory Perception (Trường Ngoại cảm Tô Dương); the Way of Yellow Heavenly Dragon (đạo Hoàng Thiên Long); the Way of Jade Buddha Hồ Chí Minh (đạo Ngọc Phật Hồ Chí Minh); the Way of Hà Môn (đạo Hà Môn); and the Canh Tân Đặc Sủng movement (Christian Charismatic Renewal). These groups appear to be thriving despite the cautious approach of the authorities and domestic scholars, and criticism in the media and from established religious organisations.<sup>2</sup>

My research has shown that the most popular new movement is the worship of Hồ Chí Minh as the Jade Buddha.<sup>3</sup> Religious ideas and practices surrounding the worship of Hồ Chí Minh are diverse and the scriptures (*kinh*) vary, however. In the 1990s, Madam Lang from Hải Phòng was the first to spread the idea of the advent of Hồ Chí Minh’s spirit in the form of the Jade Buddha.<sup>4</sup> That idea has since then been replayed, reworked, and changed variously among many groups.

1 See Philip Taylor, *Goddess on the rise: Pilgrimage and popular religion in Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004); Pham Quynh Phuong, *Hero and deity: Tran Hung Dao and the resurgence of popular religion in Vietnam* (Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2009); Oscar Salemink, ‘Embodying the nation: Mediumship, ritual, and the national imagination’, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3, 3 (2008): 269. On the spirit and ancestor world, see Kirsten Endres and Andrea Lauser, ‘Introduction: Multivocal arenas of modern enchantment in Southeast Asia’, in *Engaging the spirit world: Popular beliefs and practices in modern Southeast Asia*, ed. Kirsten Endres and Andrea Lauser (New York: Berghahn, 2011), p. 4; Kirsten Endres, ‘Engaging the spirits of the dead: Soul-calling rituals and the performative construction of efficacy’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, 4 (2008): 755–73.

2 Chung Hoang, ‘New religious movements in Vietnamese media discourse since 1986: A critical approach’, *Journal of Australian Religion Studies Review* 3 (2012): 293–315; Chung Van Hoang, ‘Alternative pathways to heaven: Religious reconfiguration and new religious movements in contemporary Vietnam’ (Ph.D. diss., La Trobe University, Melbourne, 2014), pp. 70–78.

3 The term ‘Ngọc Phật’ (the Jade Buddha) is not new and appeared in earlier Hòa Hảo Buddhist prophecies (*sấm giảng*). According to these prophecies, the Jade Emperor commanded that the Jade Buddha be sent down to earth to save good people and punish evil-doers. However, the ‘Jade Buddha’ has a different meaning in contemporary new religious groups where it is used to indicate Hồ Chí Minh’s spirit.

4 Pseudonyms are used for all the people that I interviewed and talked to for this article.

The popularity of new religions based on belief in the advent of the Jade Buddha calls for further enquiry into their emergence and nature as a religious trend in the post-Renovation period. In this article, I examine one of these movements, the Peace Society of Heavenly Mediums (Đoàn đồng thiên Hòa Bình) in the northern province of Hải Dương. I first explore earlier studies of new religious groups and indicate my contribution to this scholarship. The arguments and predictions provided by Shaun Kingsley Malarney in 1996 and Pham Quynh Phuong in 2005 about the deification of Hồ Chí Minh will be revisited.<sup>5</sup> This study, in a sense, extends their work. Second, I analyse the Peace Society's key religious features. Third, I will focus on identifying elements that link this movement with current and broader religious arguments and orientations in Vietnam. This article argues that the Peace Society is a channel through which people can empower themselves, seek legitimacy, and promote nationalistic aspirations. The emergence of movements based on the belief that the Jade Buddha will bring salvation to the nation demonstrates the ongoing millenarian dream of social transformation in the context of the challenges brought about by Vietnam's growing integration into the world economy, as well as recent Sino-Vietnamese tensions in Biển Đông (East Sea; South China Sea).

### 'New religious groups'

An interest in the emergence of small religious groups in post-Renovation Vietnam has been evident in studies conducted by researchers who are mainly from the Party-State's organisations and academic institutions. The early studies were carried out in the 2000s when the phenomenon of these groups first came to prominence. In general, such groups are treated by researchers as one of the novel elements of post-Renovation Vietnamese religion, hence the major concern has been to define, classify, and characterise these beliefs and practices, as well as to explain their origin and popularity.

Most researchers use terms such as '*đạo lạ*' (strange religious pathway) or '*các hiện tượng tôn giáo mới*' (new religious phenomena) to refer to these groups. Typical definitions tend to focus on what are seen as their common traits. An edited volume published by the Department for Religious Works at the Party's Central Commission for Mass Mobilisation (Ban Dân vận Trung ương) in 2007 for the exclusive use of officials defines '*đạo lạ*' as:

forms of unknown beliefs of recent origin. A number of followers gather around a person who claims to have a 'heavenly quality' (*thiên tính*) and to be chosen by spirits or deities to establish a religious pathway. Such a pathway has its own tenets, which are blended and mixed from many resources (from conventional religious doctrines and current folk-belief practices). They do not have an organisation or are only loosely organised (*tổ chức lỏng lẻo*); they have specific regulations of rituals and ways of practising the scriptures.<sup>6</sup>

5 Shaun Kingsley Malarney, 'The emerging cult of Ho Chi Minh? A report on religious innovation in contemporary northern Vietnam', *Asian Cultural Studies* 22 (1996): 121–31; Pham Quynh Phuong, 'Hero and deity: Empowerment and contestation in the veneration of Trần Hưng Đạo in contemporary Vietnam' (Ph.D diss., La Trobe University, 2005), pp. 252–63.

6 Ban Dân vận Trung ương [Central Commission for Mass Mobilisation], *Hỏi đáp một số vấn đề về đạo lạ ở nước ta hiện nay* [Q&A of some issues of strange religious pathways in our country at present] (Hanoi: Religion Publishing House, 2007), p. 17.

This definition inherits ideas from definitions previously proposed by some Institute for Religious Studies researchers. It implies that these groups lack proper organisational structures and formal scriptures, and call into question the integrity of their founders/leaders. This approach reinforces the dominant and official understanding of legal religions as organised, with a well-established code of conduct and rituals, and a complete doctrine.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, it tends to emphasise factors that make these 'strange religious pathways' based on what is often deemed '*mê tín*' (superstitious)<sup>8</sup> rather than rational thinking.<sup>9</sup>

A more neutral approach was only introduced in 2014 when the contributors to a volume on postmodernism and new religious movements began to use concepts such as '*tôn giáo mới*' (new religions) or '*phong trào tôn giáo mới*' (new religious movement, NRM), referencing relevant Western literature. Trương Văn Chung uses '*tôn giáo mới*' to refer to:

Forms of organisation, teachings, ritual and belief which are different to and independent of popular and conventional religions; they reflect great changes in terms of culture and spirit (*tinh thần*) of the contemporary society and demands in shifting spiritual practices (*nhu cầu chuyển đổi tâm linh*) in a specific socio-cultural context.<sup>10</sup>

As can be seen, unlike previous studies, the authors in this book avoid making subjective judgements on the validity of the new religious groups.

Other scholars have focused on ways to classify these groups. Phạm Văn Phóng and Nguyễn Văn Nhự classify new religious groups into four types, depending on the level of risk they are seen to pose to security and the Party-State.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, Đỗ Quang Hùng categorises 'new religious phenomena' into three types based on their origins, namely: those that detach from, but are not recognised by, mainstream religions; those that are newly and domestically founded; and those that have been recently imported from overseas.<sup>12</sup> These classifications attempt to explain the origin and formation of these groups.

Scholars of these new religions have sought common features among them. Đỗ Quang Hùng writes that the following characteristics are shared by many groups:

7 See the definition of a legal religious organisation in the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, *The Party-State's legal documents of religion and belief* (Hanoi: Religion Publishing House, 2012), p. 32.

8 For the Party's official definition of 'superstition' since 1975, see Barley Norton, 'The moon remembers Uncle Ho: The politics of music and mediumship in northern Vietnam', *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 11, 1 (2002): 75.

9 The adjective '*mê tín*' is used to refer to someone who 'excessively and unconditionally believes in supernatural symbols, imaginary beings and creations which do not conform to natural rules. This belief causes him or her the loss of rational thinking and consciousness thus causes negative effects on individuals, families, and communities in terms of health, time, money and even on life and society'. See Ban Dân vận Trung ương, *Hỏi đáp một số vấn đề*, pp. 10–11.

10 Trương Văn Chung, 'Về thuật ngữ "Tôn giáo mới"' [Regarding the concept 'new religion'], in *Postmodernism and new religious movements*, ed. Trương Văn Chung (Hồ Chí Minh City: VNU-HCM Publishing House, 2014), p. 147.

11 Phạm Văn Phóng and Nguyễn Văn Nhự, 'Nhìn nhận về 'đạo lạ' ở nước ta trong những năm gần đây' [A view of 'strange religious pathways' in our country in recent years], *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo* [Religious Studies Review] 10, 9 (2008): 49.

12 Đỗ Quang Hùng, 'Hiện tượng tôn giáo mới: Một số vấn đề lý luận và thực tiễn' [New religious phenomena: Some theoretical and practical issues], *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo* 5 (2001): 11.

‘Scriptures [...] are unsophisticated, confused, and jumbled [unlike in established religions and folk beliefs] (*bình dân, lộn xộn và pha tạp*); the method of conversion is simple (*thô sơ*); and organisation and rituals are loose and simplified (*đơn giản, lỏng lẻo và ước lệ*)’.<sup>13</sup> Võ Minh Tuấn, on the other hand, indicates that these scriptures can also be complex as some founders have tried to integrate modern scientific knowledge and findings into their teachings, as in Phật Bà ẩn tích (the Hidden Bodhisattva) and the Tổ Đường School of Extrasensory Perception, both located in Hanoi. He further suggests two features, namely that these groups ‘often introduce Doomsday prophecies’, especially ones that foretell the end of the world in the twenty-first century, and that these groups are ‘characterised by instability’<sup>14</sup> because of constant changes in membership, location, and unpredictable development.

In Vietnam, the founders and followers of these new religious groups are mainly female. In addition, they ‘belong to highly-vulnerable social groups, including retired officials, the poor who are living in urbanising areas, women who are old, living an unlucky life, having illnesses, and with a low educational background’.<sup>15</sup> These groups attract persons who have failed in the market economy and struggle to cope with the challenges of modern life which is increasingly dependent on technology.<sup>16</sup>

Their rise can be seen as the responses of part of the population to social problems brought about by the post-Renovation market economy such as corruption, bribery, family breakdowns, increasing criminality, land disputes, and a widening gap between the rich and the poor. Some suggest that religion is a cover for the leaders/founders’ real motivation, economic gain.<sup>17</sup> Recently, Nguyễn Tấn Hùng links reasons for the emergence of ‘new religions’ with changes in State policies which have given more freedom of religion, the loss of prestige of conventional religions, the increasing demand for a spiritual life, the sharing of feelings and ideas, and the need to improve health and well-being.<sup>18</sup> The efflorescence of NRMs is also linked to the cultural effects of Vietnam’s increasing economic and political international integration which has exposed its people to foreign values and orientations such as freedom of expression and individualism, including the freedom to choose one’s religion. Nguyễn Quốc Tuấn argues that the emergence and popularity of spiritual practices that are beyond mainstream religion, including extra sensory perception (soul calling, mediating between the dead and the living, and finding the remains of dead and missing war soldiers); astrology and fortune telling; as well as millenarian ideas, provide fertile ground for creativity, which leads to the establishment of new

13 Đỗ Quang Hưng, ‘Hiện tượng tôn giáo mới’: 11–12.

14 Võ Minh Tuấn, ‘Những hiện tượng tôn giáo mới ở Việt Nam’ [New religious phenomena in Vietnam], in *Tôn giáo ở Hà Nội* [Religion in Hanoi], ed. Đặng Nghiêm Vạn (Hanoi: Hà Nội Publishing House, 2001), pp. 799–801.

15 Ban Dân vận Trung ương, *Hỏi đáp một số vấn đề*, pp. 33–4.

16 Đỗ Quang Hưng, ‘Một số nhận định về ‘Hiện tượng tôn giáo mới’ ở Việt Nam hiện nay’ [Some notes on ‘new religious phenomena’ in contemporary Vietnam], in *Postmodernism and new religious movements*, p. 236.

17 Ban Dân vận Trung ương, *Hỏi đáp một số vấn đề*, p. 36.

18 Nguyễn Tấn Hùng, ‘Chủ nghĩa hậu hiện đại: Một số quan điểm triết học và triết gia tiêu biểu’ [Postmodernism: Some typical philosophies and philosophers], in *Postmodernism and new religious movements*, p. 15.

groups.<sup>19</sup> These discussions imply that greater religious options and individual freedom play a role in the popularity of such groups in Vietnam.

It should be noted, however, that many state-linked Vietnamese researchers have also seen their task as reporting to the authorities on the validity of these groups and suggesting how the state should respond. Contributors to the *Ban Dân vận Trung ương* volume promote the removal of 'malignant' (*dữ*) new religious groups from society. Đỗ Quang Hùng, meanwhile, expresses his concern about groups that criticise present society through their worship of Hồ Chí Minh.<sup>20</sup> Some researchers have proposed anti-cult solutions in order to close such groups, reduce their scope of activity, or put them under strict surveillance.

There has not yet been a substantial study of a post-Renovation NRM in Vietnam by international scholars. Most studies of Vietnamese new religions are of pre-1975 groups, such as Caodaism, Hòa Hảo Buddhism, and many other religious streams founded and led by *ông Đạo* (male religious masters).<sup>21</sup> There are, of course, many studies which explore religious changes since Renovation. Notably, many studies are accounts of the vitality and innovativeness of the traditional model of deification of great contributors to the nation. In his study of popular religion in southern Vietnam, Philip Taylor indicates an emerging trend of embedding more identities into familiar deities, historical figures and personages.<sup>22</sup> Benoît de Tréglodé points out that the deification of Hồ Chí Minh began decades before 1986.<sup>23</sup> Looking at cult-like activities surrounding national heroes such as Trần Hưng Đạo and Hồ Chí Minh through an anthropological lens, Malarney and later Pham Quynh Phuong have also uncovered the continuous deification of these figures in northern Vietnam.

In his ethnographic study in northern Vietnam after 1986, Malarney identifies the emergence of local ideas and practices in the assertion of Hồ Chí Minh's divinity. He describes a process of deification of this communist leader and foresees that the cult of Hồ Chí Minh will 'continue to be constructed' and 'transform' because individuals and localities continue to seek 'supernatural benefit or protection' from the spirit of Hồ Chí Minh. He argues that 'the future core' of this cult would be based on similar expressions of gratitude by worshippers towards their ancestors.<sup>24</sup> Later, Pham Quynh Phuong observes that Hồ Chí Minh's deification along with the already deified older national hero Trần Hưng Đạo is a part of 'the ongoing creation of a

19 Nguyễn Quốc Tuấn, 'Về Hiện tượng Tôn giáo mới' [Regarding new religious phenomena], *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo* 1 (2012): 11–15.

20 Đỗ Quang Hùng, 'New religious phenomena': 12.

21 See, for example, Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and peasant politics in Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); Tạ Chí Đại Trưỡng, *Thần, Người và đất Việt* [Spirits, human beings, and the Viet land] (Westminster, CA: Van Nghe, 1989); Sergei Blagov, *Caodaism: Vietnamese traditionalism and its leap into modernity* (New York: Nova Science, 2001); Pascal Bourdeaux, 'Những ghi chép từ một tài liệu đầu tiên bằng tiếng Pháp thuật lại sự ra đời của một giáo phái ở làng Hòa Hảo (15–3–1940)' [Notes from the first French text relating to the birth of a cult in Hòa Hảo village (15 Mar. 1940)], *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo* 6 (2005): 36–42. Literally, 'ông' means 'an old man' and 'đạo' means 'a religious pathway'. These men would speak to any person they met about their own ethical and religious ideas.

22 Taylor, *Goddess on the rise*, pp. 23–56.

23 Benoît de Tréglodé, *Heroes and revolution in Vietnam: 1948–1964*, trans. Claire Duiker (Singapore: NUS Press in association with IRASEC, 2012), p. 307.

24 Malarney, 'The emerging cult of Ho Chi Minh?': 129–30.



national pantheon and tradition'.<sup>25</sup> In a joint study, Pham Quynh Phuong and Chris Eipper affirm that Hồ Chí Minh is being popularly worshipped as a deity.<sup>26</sup>

There are both State and popular dimensions to the deification of Hồ Chí Minh. The former refers to the Party-State's political use and promotion of Hồ Chí Minh's posthumous image. Tréglodé convincingly analyses the Party's attempts to encourage and direct the commemoration of Uncle Hồ's contributions to the nation and in order to transform the 'new hero' from 'a propaganda tool into the tutelary spirit of the nation'.<sup>27</sup> Hue-Tam Ho Tai argues that Hồ Chí Minh's death gave the State 'a new opportunity to raise him to semi-mythical status and to use him to present a unified version of both Vietnam's revolutionary past and of its glorious future'.<sup>28</sup> In the same vein, Malarney points out that the Party intended to 'create a personality cult around Hồ Chí Minh'<sup>29</sup> and this can be observed in its agenda of constructing his image to emphasise his 'saint-like qualities'.<sup>30</sup> Pham Quynh Phuong, meanwhile, demonstrates that the Party-state seeks to promote the veneration of Hồ Chí Minh among people in a modern way which is 'less religious' and thus 'less superstitious'. Such veneration of Hồ Chí Minh was seen as following the traditional model of ancestor worship.<sup>31</sup>

The Party-State's political agenda has had some unexpected outcomes on the popular veneration of Hồ Chí Minh, as described by Malarney:

People did respond to the image of Hồ, but for reasons sometimes different from those articulated by the Party. In Hồ they saw a leader who epitomised local ideas about the modest, sympathetic, incorruptible, and effective leader who brought benefits to his community. In Hồ they also saw a standard by which political leaders and Party members could be legitimately judged.<sup>32</sup>

This contradiction is thus a challenge to the Party-State's political agenda in promoting the veneration of Hồ Chí Minh. On the other hand, as indicated by Pham Quynh Phuong, people are widely and publicly venerating him in public and private spaces in much the same way as they worship indigenous spirits and deities and this is also hard for the Party-State to control.<sup>33</sup> The Party-State's endorsement of the veneration of Uncle Hồ and the people's preference for his deification are not aligned.

In short, three main points arise from a review of studies of Vietnamese NRMs and of the veneration of Hồ Chí Minh in particular. First, Vietnamese studies seem to be sceptical about the religious validity of these groups because many have proposed

25 Pham Quynh Phuong, *Hero and deity*, p. 163.

26 Pham Quynh Phuong and Chris Eipper, 'Mothering and fathering the Vietnamese: Religion, gender, and national identity', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4, 1 (2009): 73.

27 Ken Maclean, 'Book review: Benoît de Tréglodé, Heroes and revolution in Vietnam', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 45, 2 (2014): 308.

28 Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 'Monumental ambiguity: The state commemoration of Ho Chi Minh', in *Essays into Vietnamese pasts*, ed. Keith W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1995), p. 278.

29 Shaun Kingsley Malarney, 'Culture, virtue, and political transformation in contemporary Northern Viet Nam', *Journal of Asian Studies* 56, 4 (1997): 918.

30 Malarney, 'The emerging cult': 128.

31 Pham Quynh Phuong, *Hero and deity*, p. 166.

32 Malarney, 'Culture, virtue, and political transformation': 918.

33 Pham Quynh Phuong, 'Hero and deity: Empowerment and contestation', p. 261.

that the authorities suppress or at least limit their influence on society. Second, two different simultaneous processes can be observed in the veneration of the former national leader: the top-down effort to make him an icon worthy of national veneration and the bottom-up movement to turn him into some kind of guardian spirit, deity or Buddha. For the latter process, previous scholars have analysed the first stage whereby Hồ Chí Minh has been elevated to the status of an ancestral spirit or a tutelary god who is recipient of prayers and offerings. My article will demonstrate the second stage of this process by which he is being shifted to a higher spiritual plane as an entity who delivers messages and is apparently expected to intervene more actively in human affairs. Third, studies of the deification of Hồ Chí Minh by international scholars often concern cultic activities which conform to the pre-revolutionary model of the deification of national heroes found in Vietnamese popular religion. Yet the connections between such deification and the formation of a new religion have not been investigated. My research will highlight the significance of the formation and development of a distinctive religious belief and community, going beyond domestic criticism and suspicion of new religions and seeing their foundation as a sign of creativity, not a lack of rationality. This article focuses on examining and understanding this creative impulse and the agenda articulated by the Peace Society's founder and followers.

The new religious groups mentioned in this article can be seen as NRMs in the sense that they are animated by ideas concerning the ultimate meaning of life and alternative philosophies on contemporary Vietnam. To assist with the selection of this case study, I drew up a list of further criteria, namely, Vietnamese NRMs are those that: emerged in the country after 1986 and are not one of the 34 officially recognised religious organisations; exist in small and loosely organised communities founded and led by a charismatic leader who attracts a permanent group of followers; are seen as primarily Vietnamese and indigenous; promulgate new worldviews, unprecedented prophecies and alternative pathways to salvation; introduce alternative ways of worshipping existing or new supernatural objects; and attempt to change existing popular religious beliefs.

### **'The Jade Buddha' and his Heavenly Mediums**

Madam Xoan founded Đạo Ngọc Phật Hồ Chí Minh (the Way of Hồ Chí Minh as the Jade Buddha) also known as Đạo Bác Hồ (the Way of Uncle Hồ) at the đền Hòa Bình (the Peace Temple) on 1 January 2001. Since the year 2001, hundreds of spirit texts have been released by Madam Xoan. Here, I will selectively quote from texts in the Peace Society's *Lời Tâm linh: Hồn Trời-Hồn nước. Quyển 2* (Words of spirits: Heavenly soul and soul of the nation. Collection no. 2), self-published in Hanoi in May 2010.<sup>34</sup> According to *Collection no. 2*, the year 2000 marked the beginning of a new era in which spirituality rises and a new world will be formed on the

34 'Spirit texts' here refer to messages that a person claims to have received from 'spiritual beings' through dreams, their subconscious, or mediumistic practices. They are similar to texts received through 'giáng bút' (spirit writing) practices found in the South, especially in Cao daism and Hòa Hảo Buddhism, in the first half of the twentieth century. Such messages are also found in Chinese shamanic movements in Malaysia and China.



basis of a perfect and dual combination of this-worldly and other-worldly elements.<sup>35</sup> A Jade Buddha appears as the main invisible actor in this transformation and is actually the spirit of Hồ Chí Minh. To complete his mission, he chose a number of human assistants and Madam Xoan was the first.

Born in 1948, in the countryside of Nam Định province in the North, Madam Xoan had an unfortunate and hard childhood. Her parents were poor and her father was often away from home. When she was 14, her mother died of an illness. Soon after, her father remarried a woman who treated Xoan and her younger sister badly. She sometimes fought back and the relationship only got worse. She had to move out of the house and live at a cousin's place. To feed herself and her sister, she left school and when she was 15 years old she began working. In despair, she attempted suicide several times. At 16, she left her village to become a factory worker (*đi công nhân*) far from home, in Hải Dương province. At the age of 19 she married a co-worker and they had four children.

Things changed when she began experiencing health problems in her mid-20s. She fell unconscious on numerous occasions. She even had intense pain in one finger, which she asked to have amputated. None of the many doctors consulted could explain what kind of disease she had. One day, while waiting for treatment at a hospital in Hanoi, she heard a strange voice, not very clear at first, coming out of thin air. The voice said that she did not have a disease and that what she had endured were challenges because she had been chosen to undertake duties assigned by spirits (*hầu việc thánh*). Upon being told that she had a 'spirit root' (*căn*), she decided to retire early and became a small trader at the local market and earned a good income by selling votive papers and other objects essential for religious rituals. Five years later, guided by the voice that she could hear clearly by then, Madam Xoan gave up trading to study the benediction of spirits (*học phép thánh*) at home.

In 1989, to her surprise, the voice told her that she had been chosen by the Heavenly Palace (*Tòa Thiên*) to perform duties to save the nation. She began building a small 10-square-metre shrine named the Peace Shrine (*điện Hòa Bình*) on her own land and started receiving donations from devotees. Over the next ten years, Madam Xoan devoted all her time to taking different courses at home with the Jade Buddha at ever more advanced levels. In 2000, the Peace Shrine was upgraded to the Peace Temple (*đền Hòa Bình*) on the same site. This time, after fifteen years of training, she could directly communicate with the Jade Buddha whenever she wanted. She was also required to recruit mediums to work with her and she established the Peace Society of Heavenly Mediums in the same year. She remembered that:

Often at night, as the Jade Buddha began calling I could do nothing but sit down with a pen held ready on a blank sheet of paper. The pen then started moving, out of my control [...], I could only read and understand the texts the next morning. [...] In 2000, it was revealed to me that Uncle [Hồ] had become the leader of the Heavenly Palace and *Bác* (our Uncle) had been ordained with the title Jade Buddha. The reason was that he was a person of great merit when alive. Soon after his death, he entered the Heaven

35 All of the translations are mine. It should be noted that Madam Xoan does not have official permission for these desktop-published booklets, hence they are technically illegal.

Palace. [...] ‘Jade’ means the most precious thing on earth while ‘Buddha’ refers to his great care for the people. [Our] Uncle now ranks number one in the Heavenly realm.

The texts were either in modern Vietnamese script or in the ‘Heavenly script’ (*chữ Thiên*).<sup>36</sup> At that time, she was the only one who could translate the Heavenly scripts. She told me that the Jade Buddha revealed to her that he wanted to remake the whole world, beginning his quest in Vietnam first with some chosen helpers.

But Madam Xoan was very nervous about being the first to be chosen for these duties. She recalled how shocked she was when the Jade Buddha ordered her to promulgate a new religion for the Vietnamese. But He assured her that she would be safe. Since 2001, Madam Xoan has worked ceaselessly to boost the activities of the Way of the Jade Buddha. Besides organising training sessions for selected mediums and conducting sessions required by the Jade Buddha, she has managed the Peace Temple and all its activities. She has organised key ceremonies, received guests and researchers who are interested in communicating with Hồ Chí Minh’s spirit, and provided services for followers and clients. The scriptures of the Jade Buddha (*kinh*) are still being revealed in the form of spirit-texts through Madam Xoan, and there are over sixty notebooks of verses.<sup>37</sup> The first spirit poems were typed and compiled in a collection in 2001 and many additional collections have been released since then, such as *Kinh theo đạo Bác từ đây cứu đời* (Following the Uncle’s Way to save the nation from now on) in 2001 and *Luật đạo đất trời Việt Nam muôn thuở* (Eternal heavenly laws for Vietnam) in 2011.

Madam Xoan sees herself as a medium, but distances and differentiates herself from ‘traditional mediums’ in other temples: she neither loses consciousness while engaging with the Jade Buddha nor organises rituals to entertain spirits. She explains this difference as characteristic of ‘a heavenly medium’ (*đồng thiên*) not a ‘saint’s medium’ (*đồng thánh*) as seen in the Four Palaces belief.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, she asserts her differences from ordinary spiritual masters (*thầy mo*). During our conversations, she sometimes spoke in plain language like an ordinary person and at other times in verse, for hours. Yet, she would respond normally in prose to my questions. This also occurred when she conducted ceremonies before a thousand followers. She said she was regularly possessed by the Jade Buddha to transmit his messages, but could still fully control the ceremony. In these ways Madam Xoan’s mediumship differed from more common forms of spirit possession in Vietnam that use music (*chầu văn*) and costumes.

This ability adds greatly to the respect for, and confidence in, Madam Xoan. I often witnessed followers solemnly addressing her as ‘my Uncle’ (*thưa Bác*) or ‘my Jade Buddha’ (*thưa Đức Ngọc Phật*) rather than by name. ‘We did not know whether it is actually her or the Jade Buddha [who is] speaking. We’d better accept her authority (*uy*) and orders though she is not right all the time’, one of her followers told me.

36 The script is written in ballpoint pen on ordinary notebook paper and is similar in form to Sino-Vietnamese characters (*Nôm*). Yet only Madam Xoan can read or write this script.

37 Most of the Society’s spirit poems are written in *thơ lục bát*, a popular and much used Vietnamese verse form.

38 This is the indigenous Vietnamese belief in the spirits who reside in four different palaces: Heaven, Earth, Water, and Forest, which typically involves spirit possession.

One aspect of this respect lies in their expectations of the potential benefits to be obtained from Uncle Hồ through Madam Xoan. I was told a story about one of her clients: the man had become very rich after he had consulted the Jade Buddha about his construction business. Out of gratitude, he contributed around VND 200 million (about US\$10,000) to the planned upgrade of the temple, saying that his contribution was given with sincerity (*lòng thành*) to thank Uncle Hồ. Madam Xoan is rewarded for being a 'heavenly medium' not only with respect, but also materially. In other words, she has been empowered through establishing a special relationship with the Jade Buddha.

### A 'spiritual revolution' to remake the world

The Way of the Jade Buddha at the Peace Temple is most widely known through its 2001 self-published booklet *Following Uncle's Way to save the nation from now on*, which reveals the advent of the spirit of Hồ Chí Minh and his plan for a 'spiritual revolution' (*cách mạng tâm linh*) to save the nation from all past and present 'foreign enemies' (*giặc tà*). Ten years later, in 2010, Madam Xoan compiled *Collection no. 2*. This 'spiritual revolution' meant a major change in religious practices ushered in by the new millennium and appeared repeatedly in spirit texts. The revolution is also designed to perfect relationships among 'residents' of different but interrelated realms, a process said to have already begun in Vietnam and which will eventually be achieved worldwide.

First, the 'revolution' was to be accompanied by a new order that would free people and the nation from dependency on foreign ideological, religious, and political influences. The following is an extract from a long spirit poem printed in *Collection no. 2*:

*Một cuộc cách mạng thiên đàng tâm linh.  
Thay cũ đổi mới thực tình,  
cho dân, nước hết cảnh mình làm tôi.  
Từ nay có thứ có ngôi,  
theo lệnh luật trời, theo lệnh tổ tông.*

A spiritual revolution was initiated from Heaven.  
Old things will be replaced by new things.  
The nation and the people will no longer be servants.  
From now on a new order has been established  
according to the Heavenly laws  
and the commands of the great ancestors.

A new order is needed because of a crisis that affects all the realms of heaven and earth. According to Madam Xoan and members of the Peace Society, the Way of the Jade Buddha affirms the existence of parallel worlds that influence human affairs. There is the world of human beings and the world of spirit entities (*cõi Tâm linh*). In the world of spirit entities, the heavenly realm (*cõi Thiên*) covers and governs Buddha's realm (*cõi Phật*), the Yin realm (*cõi Âm*), and the earthly realm (*cõi Trần*).

But there has been a crisis in the Yin realm because of people's inappropriate attitudes and behaviour in the earthly realm. The crisis has been caused by residents of

the earthly realm destroying the living environment. Besides, people have become too materialistic and forgetful of their true ancestors. Specifically, spirit texts emphasise the following eight 'problems': a mistaken understanding of the origins of the Vietnamese people and an inadequate recognition of the primary ancestors; the over-use of votive paper and objects; incorrect performance of traditional rituals to the Mother Goddess; a mistake in dating the death anniversary of Hồ Chí Minh; the invalidity of rituals of spirit possession; the pervasive worship of foreign spirits and gods (such as Sakyamuni of Indian Buddhism, Jesus, or Chinese religious figures); inappropriate behaviour towards heroic soldiers who died in war; and the wrong diagnosis and treatment of illnesses caused by spirit entities. Because of these entrenched problems, the spirits, ancestors and heroic soldiers became angry and began to cause personal and social problems as punishments. The current situation has become unacceptable and something has to be changed. Indeed, the presentation of these 'problems' and their solutions represent the framework of ideas underlying the Society's creation, development, and challenges.

Second, the spirit texts of the Peace Society indicate that the earthly realm is in chaos, requiring total transformation to regain balance and harmony with the world of spiritual entities. Because of his great success in self-perfection after his physical death, Hồ Chí Minh's spirit was elected by the Heavenly Palace as the leader who would bring about a 'revolution' in the earthly realm. Ultimately, the revolution was to impose the Way of the Jade Buddha. The Jade Buddha would indicate clearly which spiritual objects (Vietnamese Buddhas, saints, immortals, national heroes, and deities) the Vietnamese must worship, and how to do this correctly.

Third, to implement such a 'revolution', the Jade Buddha needed human assistants, thus the Peace Society of Heavenly Mediums was established. Headed by Madam Xoan, many other mediums were also chosen by the Jade Buddha to perform duties. It sees itself as an organised society within the broader community of worshippers of the Jade Buddha, one that works closely with the leadership of Madam Xoan and under His command. Once a member joins the Society, he or she must commit time and labour as required by the Jade Buddha. This is to be performed on a voluntary basis, as no member can expect income from working for the Society.

Throughout the spirit texts, the Jade Buddha reveals himself as an alternative form of the Jade Emperor. He is now imagined as an entity with heavenly power to transform the whole world. Yet the transformation may not necessarily be painful since he also has the qualities of a Buddha — love, tolerance, compassion, and care.

### Followers of the Jade Buddha

The idea of the advent of the Jade Buddha linked to Hồ Chí Minh's spirit is appealing to various audiences. In 2007, it was estimated that around 11,000 people worshipped the Jade Buddha throughout the North.<sup>39</sup> According to a recent study, by May 2014, the Peace Society alone reported around 24,000 followers.<sup>40</sup> I witnessed gatherings of over 1,300 people at the Peace Society's ceremonies. Followers can be

39 Ban Dân vận Trung ương, *Hỏi đáp một số vấn đề*, p. 46.

40 Nguyễn Ngọc Phương, 'Hiện tượng thờ cúng Hồ Chí Minh: Quá trình hình thành, đặc điểm thờ cúng và bản chất tôn giáo' [The cult of Hồ Chí Minh: Formation, features and religious nature] (M.A. diss., College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi National University, 2014), p. 59.

categorised into three groups. The first are core members, including 19 ‘heavenly mediums’, both men and women, of the Society who regularly work at the Temple and strongly support its leader. The second — also the majority — are regular members who carry out rituals at home, practise the scriptures, and attend major ceremonies at the Temple. The third are those who have no strong commitment to the Way of the Jade Buddha or those who come for services at the Temple only when in need. People in all three groups come from various walks of life: they include university lecturers, students, school teachers, doctors, policewomen, small traders, businessmen, military veterans, retired cadres, and farmers.

These core members of the Society constitute the main force performing its ‘public services’ (*việc công*). ‘Public services’ are explained as all works that benefit the Vietnamese and the nation as a whole. The three main kinds of public works are: to perform annual rituals for the ancestors, Hồ Chí Minh, and dead soldiers; to strengthen the nation’s power through installing amulets underground (*trấn yểm và hàn long mạch*) and through performing rituals to deport evil spirits (*giải tà*); and to report to the Jade Buddha issues faced by the nation (*viết sớ*). In fact, the Society dedicates most of its work and time to these activities. To its followers, the Society emphasises that the most important activity is the ritual to deport evil spirits, which features some aspects of exorcism.

According to a summary written by Trần Dinh, a member of the Peace Society, evil spirits are the source of social problems, misbehaviour and bad health. These evil spirits are the souls of dead foreign soldiers or demons created by foreign invaders a long time ago. They remained in Vietnam and never gave up their plans to destroy the nation and its people’s well-being. Therefore, exorcising evil spirits through rituals is not only a matter of individual health but also of national security. These verses, for example, implicitly refer to the Chinese army, during its historical invasions of Vietnam:

*Đừng nghe họ, đấy tà tinh,  
xưa giặc yểm lại lừa mình hại ta.  
Chúng yểm hồn giặc yêu tà,  
khi sang định cướp nước ta lần đầu.*

Do not listen to them — those true devils that  
foreign invaders hid to deceive and harm us,  
when they first intended to seize our nation.

To eliminate these forces, the Society organises working sessions, which are not open to the public or ordinary followers, when the 19 ‘heavenly mediums’, as possessed by relevant heavenly mandarins, will expel great numbers of evil spirits (*truy quét giặc tà*). The Society, however, does allow an audience during other kinds of services during which it often reports what it considers urgent national issues to the Jade Buddha. On 19 May 2014, for instance, the Society celebrated Hồ Chí Minh’s birthday and the whole event was filmed and made into a VCD. Madam Xoan read the Society’s report to the Jade Buddha before an audience of 400 followers, in which she stressed the request to get rid of China’s *Haiyang Shiyu* 891 oil rig and stop Chinese activities in Biển Đông:

*Cầu cha là Bác đồ trần nước an.  
[...] chủ quyền biển đảo ngoài khơi,  
đã bị xâm chiếm đất trời Việt Nam.*

We are asking you, our Uncle,  
to come down to secure the nation [...]  
Vietnam's sovereignty on the sea has just been violated.

Although these verses look traditional, ‘*chủ quyền biển đảo*’ (sovereignty at sea) is a very modern term. It has been only used in popular discourse since the Vietnam–China conflicts at sea became heated in 2010. According to Madam Xoan, what the Society’s public services focus on rests mainly on the idea that its members are fulfilling what is neglected by the State: taking care of the spiritual dimension of the nation (*lo liệu phần tâm linh của nước nhà*). For years, these public services have attracted followers to the Way of the Jade Buddha.

The followers of the Jade Buddha are those who act according to his teachings through reading tenets and maintaining a close relationship with the Society. They are encouraged to attend important events. Such attendance is considered not only to be proof of their loyal affiliation to the Way, but also as a chance to be blessed by the Jade Buddha. Followers also come to the Temple to obtain free booklets on self-improvement and how to organise home rituals. The intensity of a follower’s relationship to the Peace Society can be measured by how often she or he visits the Temple, either to give a donation, partake in services, or buy the latest spirit texts.

Devotees of the Jade Buddha are advised to worship Hồ Chí Minh at home. They are instructed to set up an altar with a national flag placed above a picture of Hồ Chí Minh and an incense burner. These objects should be placed on a higher shelf than that for the ancestors. On important days people should prepare offerings to heaven and earth, to the national Buddha, immortals, saints, deities, the earth god and to their own ancestors. Everyday offerings of fresh flowers, cakes or fruit should be prepared for the home earth god and ancestors. There are no special dietary requirements; however, the burning of votive paper is prohibited.

The revolutionary changes that the Jade Buddha seeks to bring about needs the strong support of his followers. The spirit texts can be seen as an appeal to followers to act in the interests of the future of the nation. Followers appear to be much inspired by the ideal that they could, together with their Uncle Hồ, do something meaningful for the country. Most followers relate to the idea of the return of Hồ Chí Minh as a spirit of a familiar person they once believed in, and still respect. Mr Danh, 72, from Gia Lâm, Hanoi, described how he responded to Uncle Hồ’s appeal when he was young, joined the army and took up a gun to liberate the homeland: ‘Now because I am told that He is back, I must follow Him to save the nation once again from falling into evil hands.’<sup>41</sup> People like Mr Danh who were faithful to Hồ Chí Minh in the past see themselves as acting responsibly by responding to his spirit’s appeal for the country at present.

41 Interview with Mr Danh from Hanoi, 26 July 2010, Hải Dương.



### Millenarian expectations

The messages conveying prophecies from the Society and its annual rituals since the year 2000 also reflect its expectation of a millenarian transformation. As discussed, the prophecy is of a total transformation which will take place as result of a 'revolution' brought about by the Jade Buddha. The revolution will give birth to a new world order in which Vietnam will hold a leading position. This can be seen as the continuation of the millenarian dream of an ideal society and the anxieties over the fate of the nation now fuelled by border conflicts with China.

In East and Southeast Asia, there exists a millenarian hope in world transformation by the Maitreya (Phật Di Lặc). The Maitreya is seen as the future Buddha who will bring about a new world without suffering, as seen in many indigenous religious movements in Korea, China, and Vietnam.<sup>42</sup> New religious movements with millenarian expectations emerged in early-twentieth-century Vietnam. Hòa Hảo Buddhism, for example, began as a peasant movement in the South with a belief in the advent of Maitreya at the end of the 'age of decline' (*thời mạt pháp*). Hue-Tam Ho Tai and later Sang Taek Lee discussed how Hòa Hảo Buddhism, during the 1950s, even sought violent solutions to foster change.<sup>43</sup> The Peace Society has furthered its ambition to win over its peers and attract a wider audience by introducing a new world brought by the Jade Buddha and by sending out prophecies of the nation since the year 2000. The prophecies stress the nation's opportunity to be blessed by the Jade Buddha, spirits and ancestors. At the same time, the prophecies reveal threats of mass destruction if messages demanding change and correction to popular religious practices are not heeded. Nationalism is evoked from a religious perspective and national salvation is seen to be responsive to both the spirits' will and followers' efforts. Common concerns here are Vietnam's position in the world, the self-representation of the Vietnamese, and the changes and sacrifices needed for the nation's prosperity.

The Peace Society's scriptures feature these themes, and promote a somewhat radical form of nationalism. The scriptures contain narratives of national origins, justifications for the current situation, and an imagined future for the nation. The Society's narratives have titles such as *Sử Trời và sử nước* (History of heaven and of the nation) to reaffirm, with minor changes, popular legends stating that the primary ancestors of the Vietnamese were Lạc Long Quân (the Dragon) and Âu Cơ (the Immortal). For Vietnam in the twenty-first century, the Society declares that '*Thê kỷ Hai một thay phiên. Có Phật nước Việt đầu tiên ra đời*' (For the first time there will be a Vietnamese Buddha). The notion of a specific Buddha for the Vietnamese to worship is developed in the Jade Buddha's teachings that further emphasise the exclusion of all foreign religions:

*Không thờ Phật chúa ngoại bang.  
Mà thờ Phật Thánh rõ ràng nước ta'.*

Let's not worship foreign Buddhas or gods.  
Let's worship our own true Buddhas and saints.

42 Sang Taek Lee, *Religion and social formation in Korea: Minjung and millenarianism* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter 1996), pp. 94–8.

43 Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and peasant politics in Vietnam*, p. 107; Sang Taek Lee, *Religion and social formation*, p. 23.

Here, the Way of the Jade Buddha reveals its intention to impose one religion for all the Vietnamese. The Jade Buddha's teachings repeatedly stress the privileged position of Vietnam and its people among all nations in the new world, as seen in this spirit poem in *Collection no. 2*:

*Việt Nam con cả thiên vương.  
Trời sinh ra trước ở dương thế trần.*

The Vietnamese are the first children of the Heavenly Emperor.  
They were born on the earthly realm before all other races.

Followers believe that a unique 'heavenly soul' always comes down to Vietnam in the form of a real person, a messiah, whenever the country faces a challenge. The first incarnation of this soul was Lạc Long Quân as the first father of the Viet, followed by the Hùng kings, Trần Hưng Đạo, and most recently Hồ Chí Minh. To join the Way of Uncle Hồ is to join a great family, sharing not only a common ancestor, but also one history and a bright future as the first chosen nation and people.

The Peace Society spreads information of the nation's promising future once the 'revolution' is completed peacefully. Its prophecies tell of a future when 'each nation has its own ancestors, deities, Buddhas, and spirits' and there will be no antagonisms among nations because 'each nation will take care of its own internal affairs'. In the imagined new order, there will be no more invasions, wars, and conflicts among nations in the world and people will enjoy harmonious relationships with spiritual forces.

This millenarian transformation comes with threats of punishments by the Heaven Palace on actors that hinder the process. The spirit texts state that the world is in an alarming situation because major problems have not been solved. Saving the world means saving nations and peoples from 'spirits' punishments' (*hình phạt tâm linh*) and the burden of 'debts to spirits' (*nợ tâm linh*). The main reasons for the 'spirits' punishment' are the bad karma that nations and peoples have accrued in the past and at the same time their refusal to act according to the Jade Buddha's new 'heavenly laws'. Basically, these laws emphasise the nation's sovereignty in both Yang and Yin dimensions; the termination of the activities of foreign religions and beliefs in Vietnam; and the recognition of Hồ Chí Minh as the ultimate object of worship. The Society through its texts insists that the Party-State has a crucial role in fostering changes according to these laws. Recently, the Society has sought to speed up the progress of the Jade Buddha's 'revolution' through promulgating warnings of heavier 'punishments'. One follower, Mr Phạm Khiêm, asserted that 'these punishments continue to happen at global, national and personal levels in the form of epidemics and natural catastrophes, social disorder, wars and conflicts, crime, and illnesses'.<sup>44</sup> Further, these 'punishments' are strongly connected with the Jade Buddha's message of a 'filtering process' (*lọc sàng*), after which only a small percentage of human beings, mainly those who follow the Way of the Jade Buddha, will survive. The promised rewards for followers are clear: the chance to be free from 'punishments', to be among the chosen ones, and to enjoy salvation.

44 Interview with Mr Phạm Khiêm, 1 Sept. 2010, Hanoi.

The Peace Society's scriptures implicitly suggest the continuity of nationalistic discourses which developed in Vietnam in the early twentieth century among some new religions (mostly in the South) and Buddhist revival movements. Despite variations in names, teachings, practices, and size, many new and indigenous religious groups shared a common feature during this period: they originated as patriotic anti-French movements. The founders and followers of these movements used magic to treat illnesses, to protect the physical body from the enemy's bullets, or to harm the foreign invaders.<sup>45</sup> Founders/leaders such as Đoàn Minh Huyền, Ngô Lợi and Trần Văn Thành encouraged their followers to stand up and fight for national independence.<sup>46</sup> These movements mobilised great numbers of supporters by harnessing sentiments of patriotism and love of the nation. They were able to put together complete doctrines and organised themselves into churches or associations. Some scholars speak of a cultural perspective in the ideology of movements that sought to fight foreign conquest. They tend to view these movements' religious ideologies, particularly Hòa Hảo Buddhism and Caodaism, as part of the Vietnamese response to Western cultural imposition and dominance at the time.<sup>47</sup> These studies suggest the groups' antipathy to the imposition of foreign cultures, while at the same time inspiring their followers to think and act nationalistically.

In modernising Southeast Asia, nationalism has often taken on a religious dimension as nations integrate with the capitalist world.<sup>48</sup> In the context of Renovation in Vietnam, nationalist discourses created and promoted by the Party-State have both developmental and cultural perspectives.<sup>49</sup> The Way of the Jade Buddha relies on these nationalistic discourses to inspire and mobilise its supporters. It seeks to reaffirm Vietnamese origins and identity and at the same time to appeal for action and even sacrifice to protect national sovereignty. Specifically, it promulgates a directly anti-Chinese ideology. What the movement brings to these nationalistic discourses is the promotion of a religious perspective. Interestingly, this orientation is in tandem with the rise of ethnic and religious nationalism outside Vietnam.<sup>50</sup>

However, the Peace Society's agenda in fostering a single, new religion for the whole nation, radically excluding foreign elements and emphasising nationalism, reflects the tensions and challenges within Vietnamese society and the changing religious-cultural environment. Clearly, it also represents anti-Chinese and xenophobic views amongst some of the population.

45 Tạ Chí Đại Trùng, *Spirits, human beings, and the Viet land*, p. 292.

46 Đỗ Quang Hưng, 'Suy nghĩ về Tôn giáo ở Nam Bộ thời cận đại' [Thinking about religion in the South in the near modern times], *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo* 1 (2000): 15.

47 Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and peasant politics in Vietnam*, pp. 156–7; Blagov, *Caodaism*, pp. xi–xii.

48 Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann, 'Introduction', in *Nation and religion: perspectives on Europe and Asia*, ed. Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 7.

49 Hy Van Luong, 'The restructuring of Vietnamese Nationalism, 1954–2006', *Pacific Affairs* 80, 3 (2007): 445–7.

50 Willfried Spohn, 'Multiple modernity, nationalism and religion: A global perspective', *Current Sociology* 51, 3–4 (2003): 265.

### Legitimizing the belief in Hồ Chí Minh’s spirit

The Peace Society has an open agenda to legitimise the belief in the Jade Buddha. The pairing of the notions of ‘spiritual revolution’ with ‘heavenly laws’ reflects the Way of the Jade Buddha’s efforts to legitimise itself through fundamentally transforming society. There have been efforts to mobilise support from followers and to obtain official recognition. Madam Xoan wants her beliefs to be widely heard not only by ordinary people, but also by the central and local authorities.

In this regard, Madam Xoan has approached the local authorities and sought to register the Peace Society many times over the years without success. The answer she usually receives from the local authorities is that they cannot make a decision but have to ‘wait for instructions from the government’ (*chờ Nhà nước quyết định*). In the meantime, she has sought to raise the profile of the Peace Society. Madam Xoan continuously seeks acceptance and recognition from higher-level authorities. She looks for support from state officials and from followers whom she believes can speak to people in power. In 2011, she established a club of well-connected people who were interested in Hồ Chí Minh’s spirit. About thirty people were invited to join, including scientists, state officials, and intellectuals whom she knew supported the legitimization of the faith in his spirit. Some active members of the Society hold important positions in ministries and government departments. By encouraging such connections, the Society has sought to mobilise support from intellectuals who are better placed and able to influence the State’s regulation of this new belief. Further, in May 2011, Madam Xoan published two major collections of spirit-writing after ten years, in the form of a desktop-published booklet. The booklet was sent directly to the highest leaders of the Communist Party, and relevant ministries, as well as local authorities. It directly asked the government to immediately recognise the Way of the Jade Buddha. Madam Xoan’s persistent requests for acceptance exhibit no fear of being suppressed by the authorities.<sup>51</sup> During a visit in August 2015, I was told that she and the local authorities had just come to a verbal and unofficial agreement. The local authorities promised to respect and not interfere in her cultic affairs. In return, she was asked not to directly address ‘Hồ Chí Minh’ at any public ritual or print his name in the Society’s pamphlets. Such negotiations reflect that the Society has obtained a certain unofficial legitimacy.

At the same time, the Peace Society stresses its contributions to the nation in its investment of time, labour, and resources — claims that further mobilise its followers’ enthusiastic participation and support. On 27 July 2010, I was invited to an event held by the Society to celebrate the National Day for Heroic War-Invalids and War-Dead Soldiers (*ngày Thương binh Liệt sĩ*), one of the many ceremonies that the Society organises annually. By the time I arrived at 9.30 a.m., many private cars and buses were parked outside and a crowd of participants occupied all the alleys leading to the temple. All six neighbouring premises were mobilised for the event. In the front yard of the temple, hundreds of people were watching a large screen that showed previous rituals. Centre-stage before the Peace Temple, Madam Xoan was surrounded by all

51 During the 1990s, some emerging religious groups were heavily suppressed or closely watched by the local authorities and negatively reported by the media. For more details, see Chung Hoang, ‘New religious movements’: 298.

members of the Society. Beside the screen, there was a large altar beneath the portrait of Hồ Chí Minh in the pose of greeting his people with his right hand raised. Above the altar hung two large red banners: 'Towards the National Anniversary of Heroic War-Dead Soldiers'; 'We Forever Show Gratitude to Vietnamese Heroic War-dead Soldiers'. The anniversary celebrations began with simultaneous loud drumming and the ringing of a bell. The crowd of over 1,300 people fell silent. Madam Xoan, sitting in the Temple chamber, dressed in a bright yellow costume, read a votive report and then the Jade Buddha's teachings in the form of poems. A cameraman captured her actions and voice and everything was transmitted to the screen outside so that the crowd could clearly see and hear the proceedings.

In the middle of the ritual, Madam Xoan's voice suddenly changed. It now sounded similar to the voice of Uncle Hồ, with its familiar accent and rhythm. 'Here comes Uncle Hồ' (*Bác về đây*), whispered someone joyfully. Everyone bowed deeply at the end of each couplet spoken through Madam Xoan, and the crowd chanted loudly, 'Please let me follow the Jade Buddha.' Uncle Hồ's main message was to praise the soldiers' sacrifices for the nation's independence. When the ceremony finished, I asked some attendants why it was important. A woman told me that heroic Vietnamese soldiers who died in war deserved more than what the Party-State had done for them. Thus, she agreed with Madam Xoan that their spirits had to be worshipped with devotion, just as the Society was doing.

From a broader context, what we can see in the Peace Society's agenda of legitimisation is a popular attempt to influence the Party-State's political use of Hồ Chí Minh, as seen in annual nationwide government programs of commemoration and campaigns to perpetuate his memory as a great leader. He is also commemorated in the arts, literature, education and music.<sup>52</sup> However, the Party-State has no intention of institutionalising religious groups that worship Hồ Chí Minh as a spirit, deity, or Buddha.

The Party-State still runs many campaigns, strongly supported by the mass media, to maintain Hồ Chí Minh as a powerful symbol of national solidarity and of morality — a perfect example of personal sacrifice for national interests. His thoughts and morality are said to be still valuable and relevant in contemporary Vietnam. There have been numerous initiatives called 'social movements' encouraging cadres and ordinary people to learn from his example. In 2007, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam issued Directive No. 06-CT/TW to launch a nationwide campaign for 'Learning and following Hồ Chí Minh's moral example'. Throughout the country, contests were organised to support the campaign, attracting millions of participants.

Although the Party-State seeks to take the lead in the social commemoration of the former national leader, people also choose to memorialise him in their own ways. They have made home altars, home museums, built village shrines, and integrated him into the altars of indigenous spirits at Buddhist temples. It has become popular to bring images of Uncle Hồ into places for the worship of the Mother Goddesses and national heroes in Buddhist temples or village communal houses.

52 See Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 'Monumental ambiguity'; Norton, 'The moon remembers Uncle Ho'; Pham Quynh Phuong, *Hero and deity*.

Strong criticism of state officials and Party members who fail to fulfil their duties often has a parallel image in the absolute idealisation of Hồ Chí Minh's personality and achievements. Many new religious groups seek to develop the religious aspect of this idealisation. The Peace Society proclaims that Uncle Hồ was a heaven-sent hero, not an ordinary person. This can be seen as a catalyst for new religious groups to reinvent and develop his deification. Indeed, they have actively sought to further embed religious aspects into the State-led veneration of Uncle Hồ.

For NRMs that worship Hồ Chí Minh, it could be said that seeking legitimacy is not impossible. There are two reasons for this. First, the Party-State faces a dilemma in regard to its promotion of the national veneration of Hồ Chí Minh. There is a fine line between the forms of veneration that are likely to be endorsed by the Party-State and those which will be suppressed because they are considered to be 'superstitious'. While it is permissible for people to worship Hồ Chí Minh at home or at State-designated public spaces, setting up groups or communities to worship him as a spirit is still not officially allowed and thus subject to suppression. Yet, as we have seen in this study of the Peace Society, enforcement is actually uneven, revealing local authorities' inconsistency and confusion, which create spaces for NRMs to continue to strengthen their claims and gain greater social acceptance. Second, NRMs may find a way to obtain recognition from the Party-State as its policies evolve. Claire Trần Thị Liên has discussed the Party-State's strategy to promote two forms of legitimacy, internal and international. The former refers to its assertion of authority through legal means to control religion and the latter has resulted in changes in religious policy for the purpose of Vietnam's integration into the international economy.<sup>53</sup> This situation enables Vietnamese NRMs to request a legal and permanent place in the religious sphere.

### Conclusion

This article has provided an updated account of Hồ Chí Minh worship in Vietnam. While the State continues its political agenda associated with the national commemoration of Hồ Chí Minh, as discussed by Hue-Tam Ho Tai, Malarney, Pham Quynh Phuong and Tréglodé, the people are taking his deification to a different level. Hồ Chí Minh remains a powerful symbol in the politics of Vietnamese nation-building. Yet his deification and veneration as has been demonstrated in these new religious groups reflect how he has become a similarly powerful symbol in the religious sphere. As I have demonstrated in this study, Madam Xoan and her Peace Society have transformed the cult of Hồ Chí Minh into a post-1986 new religious movement. Its growth is taken to be a vindication of its chosen path and methods. The Peace Society's success in creatively developing the idea of the advent of the Jade Buddha has contributed to the expansion of religious notions and practices associated with national heroes and ancestors.

The founding and popularity of the Way of the Jade Buddha have a number of attributes and implications. First, the emergence of movements that believe that the Jade Buddha will bring salvation to the nation demonstrates the ongoing millenarian

53 Claire Trần Thị Liên, 'Communist state and religious policy in Vietnam: A historical perspective', *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 5, 2 (2013): 242.



dream of social transformation in the context of the challenges of international integration and tensions with China. Second, the propagation of nationalism from a religious perspective and an ambitious agenda to foster the idea of ‘one religion for the Vietnamese’ are integral to the strategy of empowerment and seeking legitimacy. It is a form of religious development that advocates indigenous values and radically excludes foreign elements. Third, a corollary is the criticism of key cultural-religious agendas and policies, and strong demands for the Party-State’s to change its regulations on minority religions. The followers of such religions have sought to advance their alternative worldview over that of the atheism once imposed upon them, and to pursue not only autonomy, power, but also spiritual solace and to secure the nation’s future in their own way.

The State’s responses to minority religious groups that worship Hồ Chí Minh as the Jade Buddha have been ambiguous and inconsistent. First, it remains silent in the face of these groups’ requests and applications to register their activities — the initial step for any religious group seeking official recognition in Vietnam, according to the 2004 Ordinance on Religion and Belief. Second, in the meantime suppression and strict control are applied unevenly to different groups, depending on what kind of trouble each group causes locally and how the local authorities interpret them. Third, however, groups that worship Hồ Chí Minh enjoy more freedom than those who worship other subjects or have foreign origins. In a sense, showing gratitude and respect to Hồ Chí Minh also means supporting the Party-State. In contrast, groups that challenge the Party-State’s legitimacy directly or indirectly, such as the Way of Supreme Master Ching Hai and Falun Gong, are suppressed and controlled.<sup>54</sup>

The popularity of the Way of Hồ Chí Minh as the Jade Buddha and other emerging groups represents some trends in grassroots religion in contemporary Vietnam: the vitality of spirit worship and its adaptation to nationalistic discourses; the continuity of millenarian themes in new beliefs; the quest for mystical experiences of the unseen world; and the religious factor in effecting improvements in an individual’s authority, social status, voice, and material interests. These trends reflect attempts that the Vietnamese have made to reconnect themselves to their ancestors, indigenous spirits, and deities, and to embed religious dynamics into their lives in the context of regional and global integration.

54 Chung Hoang, ‘New religious movements’.