

What Lies Behind the Earliest Story of Buddhism in Ancient Vietnam?

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The Vietnamese story about the arrival of Buddhism and the building of the first Buddhist temples in what is now northern Vietnam contains no distinctively Buddhist content, but rather is a tale of thaumaturgy, the worship of trees and of rocks, and rainmaking. This essay analyzes the textual history of the story, which is dated in the early third century CE. It examines the names of the two major protagonists of the story and, although the names were later absorbed into the Sinitic literary tradition, this study proposes a Tamil Hindu origin for them. One is reminded of the trade route that connected India and China along the coasts of Southeast Asia at that time; the evidence of Brahmans from India in early Southeast Asia, including northern Vietnam; and evidence of Hindu elements in Vietnamese texts.

Keywords: Amman, Hinduism in early Southeast Asia, Kaundinya, Mother Buddha, proto-Việt-Mường culture, Rain Goddesses, Rock Buddha, Shi Xie, Vietnamese Buddhism

V IETNAMESE BUDDHISM DEVELOPED WITHIN the realm of what we commonly view as Chinese Buddhism, but a story about the arrival of Buddhism that has passed through generations of Vietnamese is oriented towards a different cultural realm. Despite its Sinitic Buddhist vocabulary, this story displays plausible links to South Indian Hinduism. It is a story about how the first Buddha(s) appeared among the ancient Vietnamese (Proto-Viet-Mường) and how the first Buddhist temples came to be built around the turn of the third century CE. This was before there is any evidence of Chinese Buddhism making its presence felt here. The story itself suggests that it was not about Buddhism but that later generations placed a Buddhist gloss upon a non-Buddhist story.

This essay does not aim to debunk a narrative about the beginning of Vietnamese Buddhism—the story examined here ostensibly dates from before the time that there is any other evidence of Vietnamese Buddhism; the question of when and how Vietnamese Buddhism began is a complex topic deserving a separate study.¹ Nor is this essay a

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¹The earliest academic study of the history of Vietnamese Buddhism, by Trần Văn Giáp (1932, 216–20), used this story as evidence to date the beginning of Buddhism among the Vietnamese. Nguyễn Lang (2008), in his history of Vietnamese Buddhism originally published in Saigon in 1973, ignores the story entirely, apparently considering it to be simply a myth. Hà Văn Tấn (1993) treats the story as a legend explaining the origin of temples. Nguyen Tu Cuong (1997, 70, 332–34n10, 354n59, 391n211) cites the story as evidence of indigenous beliefs appropriated by Buddhists. In the history of Vietnamese Buddhism edited by Nguyễn Tài Thư (1988, 45–53), the story is discussed at length and given a nationalistic interpretation, observing that “although the degree of truth

textual study of the story, analyses of which I have published elsewhere (K. W. Taylor 2002, 2005). This essay takes the story as a point of entry into a time when people in northern Vietnam participated in a primarily coastal trading network leading south and west to the Indian subcontinent and beyond. This was when northern Vietnam was the primary point of access to this trading network for the Han and post-Han empires in the north, before the seventh century when ships from the south began to sail directly to the Guangdong region of southern China.

The earliest surviving version of this story is attributed to the *Báo cực truyện* 報極傳 (Records declaring the unfathomable), a non-extant text datable between the late eleventh and the early fourteenth centuries, cited in the *Cổ Châu pháp vân phật bản hạnh ngữ lục* 古珠法雲佛本行語錄, a text printed in 1752.² According to this version, in the time of the governorship of Shi Xie 士燮 (c. 190–226) in Giao Province (northern Vietnam),³ a Brahman from India named Khâu Đà La 丘陀羅 arrived in the provincial capital. He had “traveled everywhere in the four seas” and had magic superior to anyone else. He resided “in caves, under trees, among rocks.” A local man named Tu Định 修定 invited Khâu Đà La to stay at his house; Khâu Đà La sat quietly and fasted for many days at a time, which caused Tu Định to revere him. Tu Định had a twelve-year-old daughter who attended to Khâu Đà La by bringing him vegetables to eat and lighting a lamp for him at night. Her reverence, attentiveness, and good behavior impressed Khâu Đà La as “wonderfully rare,” and consequently he named her A Man 阿蠻.

Tu Định asked Khâu Đà La for incantations in order to practice magic, and Khâu Đà La agreed to do this, observing that Tu Định was in his (Khâu Đà La’s) realm of power (*dharma*) as a result of some preordained affinity in former existences. Khâu Đà La furthermore asserted that A Man had “the Way” and was his “*dharma* wife.” Khâu Đà La then predicted that there would soon be a drought, and in gratitude to Tu Định and A Man he planted his staff into the ground and water gushed out; he instructed Tu Định to dig a well in that spot. Thereupon he went into the forest, where he sat beneath trees or dwelled in caves.

must be subjected to the search for evidence by contemporary historians,” the story “at least” shows us “a strong indigenous belief with the aspect of national ethnicity” (*một tín ngưỡng bản địa đậm màu sắc dân tộc*). Later English translations of this book present variations of this language, referring to “the Vietnamese national spirit” (Nguyễn Tài Thư 1992, 37; 2008, 31). Lê Mạnh Thát (1999, 134–71) also discusses the story at length in his history of Vietnamese Buddhism, and concludes: “There is no reason for us to see this as only a legend or as a complete fabrication, but on the contrary we must see it as more or less recounting the history of Vietnamese Buddhism and having value as a historical document with a number of facts that are clear and conclusive.”

²The *Cổ Châu pháp vân phật bản hạnh ngữ lục* (Record of what has been said about the origin and deeds of the Cloud Dharma Buddha at Cổ Châu) is designated A.818 in the Viện Nghiên Cứu Hán Nôm (Institute for Hán-Nôm Research) in Hanoi; there is also a photographic reproduction of a second surviving copy of this printing in Nguyễn Quang Hồng (1997, 2–43). *Báo cực truyện* is cited by an early fourteenth-century work, *Việt điện u linh tập* 越南幽靈集, as the source for several stories, the chronologically last of which is dated in the mid-eleventh century (K. W. Taylor 1986a, 156–62; 1986b, 36–41).

³Northern Vietnam was at this time part of the Han Empire. Shi Xie was governor of the region during the collapse of the empire and the dawn of the Three Kingdoms era.

For many years, Tu Định brought fruit and vegetables to Khâu Đà La, sometimes sending A Man to do this in his place. When A Man became pregnant, Tu Định confronted Khâu Đà La. Khâu Đà La replied that there should be no blame because by forbearing this situation all the bad *karma* accumulated in Tu Định's family would be removed. Tu Định accepted this and thereafter disappears from the story.

A Man gave birth to a daughter. She carried the baby into the forest and announced: "This is the child of Khâu Đà La." Khâu Đà La took the child and called out to the trees, saying that if any tree would take care of the child it would become a heavenly being. A big tree responded by splitting open; Khâu Đà La placed the baby girl into the tree and it closed up again. After chanting a hymn, Khâu Đà La disappeared into the forest and A Man returned to her home.

Drought came and there was no water except for the well in A Man's garden, which provided for all the people. King Sĩ, as Shi Xie is called in the text—Sĩ Nhiếp being the Vietnamese pronunciation of Shi Xie—heard of this and summoned A Man for an explanation. She reported everything about Khâu Đà La, and King Sĩ sent messengers into the forest to find him and beg for his help to end the drought. When the messengers failed to find him, King Sĩ sent A Man, who found Khâu Đà La sitting under the big tree; she explained why she had been sent. Khâu Đà La thereupon stood up on one leg, and immediately a great rain came down, ending the drought. King Sĩ led all the people to bring gifts in gratitude to Khâu Đà La, but Khâu Đà La "did not even slightly turn his head to look" but remained beneath his tree chanting day and night.

Later, during the northeast monsoon, a great wind uprooted Khâu Đà La's tree and it floated in the flood into the river and stopped by the wharf on the riverbank of the capital city. People saw bright light shining from the tree, smelled the sweet fragrance of incense coming from the tree, and heard music coming from inside of the tree. King Sĩ was puzzled by this and ordered soldiers to pull it up out of the water. In a dream he learned that the tree was a supernatural being and wanted to be worshipped as a divine image. He inquired by throwing ritual objects and learned that the tree was to be made into Buddha statues.

The tree was cut into four sections and carved into four Buddha images. Workmen found a round rock inside the first section; when they took it to the river to wash it they fumbled it and it fell down to the bottom of the river at a place that became known as the Buddha abyss.

Four temples were built for the four Buddhas, and when the images had been carved from the tree but not yet installed into the temples there was a drought. Prayers were addressed to the images and a big rain came down. Consequently, King Sĩ named the four statues as Cloud Dharma, Rain Dharma, Thunder Dharma, and Lightning Dharma.

The statues were carried into the temples, except for the Cloud Dharma Buddha, which refused to budge. King Sĩ inquired and was told about the rock. Believing that the loss of the rock was the cause of the statue's refusal to move, he ordered divers to search in the abyss. The rock emitted a dazzling light that frightened the divers, but eventually it was raised from the river and returned to the statue; the statue with the rock was then easily carried into its temple. Then King Sĩ understood that the tree had cared for the daughter of Khâu Đà La and A Man.

King Sĩ sent messengers to bring gifts of gratitude to Khâu Đà La; at the place where the tree had been they found a farewell hymn in which Khâu Đà La indicated that he had

departed to return to the place from which he had come. As for A Man, when she died she was buried in a mound raised in front of the Cloud Dharma Buddha's temple and worshipped as the Mother Buddha (Phật Mẫu 佛母).⁴

This earliest version of the story, in *Cổ Châu pháp vân Phật bản nữ lục*, reflects a devotional attitude of venerating what became known as the four female "rain maiden" Buddhas (the first Buddhas to appear among the Vietnamese), the rock/baby that later became known as the Rock Buddha, and the Mother Buddha. It is a complex story with elements of worshipping trees and rocks, pregnancy out of wedlock, female spiritual potency, and the magic of making rain in time of drought. Although it is ostensibly about the beginning of Buddhism and the building of the first Buddhist temples among the Vietnamese, there is nothing distinctively Buddhist about the story. For example, the detail of Khâu Đà La planting his staff into the ground and causing water to gush out might plausibly be a phallic reference to a Saivite linga cult.

A later version of this story appears in the *Lĩnh nam chích quái* 嶺南摭怪, a collection of tales with two prefaces dated in the late fifteenth century, after the ascendancy of Confucianism among elite Vietnamese. This collection has survived in several manuscripts, most of which appear to have been most recently copied in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁵ The various manuscripts report the story in an abbreviated form and do not differ significantly from each other. Shi Xie/King Sī plays no part in this version. Tu Định is absent. Names are changed: Khâu Đà La is called Già La Xà Lê 伽羅闍梨; A Man is called Man Nương 蠻娘.

In this version of the story, Man Nương was a poverty-stricken temple orphan. Being a stutterer, she could not recite the sutras, so she worked in the kitchen to feed the monks and their disciples. One night the monks and disciples recited until late and did not come for their food. Man Nương fell asleep in the doorway. She became pregnant when Già La Xà Lê stepped over her to pass through the door. Both Man Nương and Già La Xà Lê were embarrassed; she left to dwell in a different temple. When her daughter was born, she brought the child to Già La Xà Lê, who committed the infant to a tree and gave Man Nương a staff with which to obtain water in time of drought. When Già La Xà Lê was over ninety years old, the tree fell over and floated down the river to the

⁴If read with Chinese syntax it would be "Buddha Mother."

⁵This is the *Lĩnh nam chích quái*; a preface by Vũ Quỳnh (1453–97) is dated 1492 and a preface by Kiều Phú (1447–?) is dated 1493. Lê Hữu Mục (1960, 5) mentions eight manuscripts; four of them (A.33, A.750, A.1200, and A.1300) are currently available in the Viện Nghiên Cứu Hán-Nôm, while four of them (A.749, A.1897, A.1920, and "the Phạm Quỳnh text") are no longer known to me. He appears to rely upon Gaspardone (1934, 128–30), who mentions A.749, A.1897, and A.1920 in addition to A.33, A.750, A.1200, and A.1300. Đinh Gia Khanh (1960, 127–37) mentions eight manuscripts (A.33, A.750, A.1200, A.1300, A.2107, A.2914, and VHv.1473), all of which are currently available in the Viện Nghiên Cứu Hán-Nôm. Trần Văn Giáp (1990, 2:186–87) mentions five manuscripts, four of which are in the Viện Nghiên Cứu Hán-Nôm (A.33, A.1200, A.1300, and A.2107), and one (Hv.486) that is held in the library of the Institute of History in Hanoi. Trần Nghĩa (1993, 2:206–7) lists nine manuscripts, all of which are in the Institute for Hán-Nôm Research (A.33, A.1200, A.1300, A.1752, A.2107, A.2914, VHv.1266, and VHv.1473) except for A.1516, which is held at the Société Asiatique in Paris. A.750 is not a manuscript of the text itself but rather a *khảo chính* dated 1911 that compares divergences between A.33 and A.1200. For this paper, I have consulted A.33, A.1200, A.1300, A.1752, A.2107, A.2914, VHv.1266, and VHv.1473. For more on the *Lĩnh nam chích quái*, see Engelbert (2011) and Kelley (2015).

temple. No one could move it until Man Nương lifted it out of the water and placed it on dry land. When craftsmen carved four Buddha images from the tree, they found the rock and threw it into the river; it flashed light and all the craftsmen died. Man Nương prayed; divers retrieved the rock and gave it back to the statue from where it had come. Già La Xà Lê named the four Buddha images Cloud Dharma, Rain Dharma, Thunder Dharma, and Lightning Dharma. Man Nương was called the Mother Buddha, and the day of her death was celebrated as the birthday of the Buddha.

This *Lĩnh nam chích quải* version differs from the *Cổ Châu pháp vân phật bản ngữ lục* version in many respects, but here I will mention only two. First, the virgin birth is apparently a way to sanitize the story for the taste of literate people increasingly influenced by Confucian family morality. The idea of pregnancy outside of wedlock had become unpalatable, while the idea of miraculous supernatural intervention in human affairs was still conceivable.

Secondly, the names of the two protagonists in the story have been changed. Già La Xà Lê can be translated as “fragrant herb Buddhist priest.” Già La is sometimes an abbreviation for Đa Già La 達伽羅, the common transcription for tagara or valeriana, a fragrant woody herb used medicinally for its soothing qualities. Xà Lê is the common transcription for *acharya*, meaning a Buddhist priest. Khâu Đà La may have dropped out of this text because it was a name thought to have no apparent meaning. In 1932, Trần Văn Giáp offered a conjecture that Khâu Đà La could be read as Ksudra (Trần Văn Giáp 1932, 218); this is phonetically plausible, but a serious impediment is that *ksudra* means something small and insignificant or a low-class servant, which makes no sense in the story as the name of someone identified as a Brahman having godlike powers. As for Già La Xà Lê, Trần Văn Giáp suggests reading Già La as Kala, meaning “black,” designating this person as the “black sage” (220); one modern writer suggests this as an indication of Dravidian origin (Nguyễn Tài Thư 1992, 32). This reading is moot in the absence of any indication of how Khâu Đà La in the earliest text became Già La Xà Lê in later texts unless it is simply an editorial effort to replace a mystery with something plausible. I will return to the problem of the name Khâu Đà La near the end of this essay.

Man Nương is apparently a Sinitic rendering of a demotic understanding of A Man as ả Man, with ả being an archaic word for young women in vernacular Vietnamese while *nuong* means the same in Sino-Vietnamese. In Vietnamese, modifiers follow the nouns they modify, while it is the opposite in Sino-Vietnamese. The character used to represent Man means “southern barbarian.” Chinese characters carry implicit semantic clues so that even when they are ostensibly used purely for their phonetic value they nevertheless bring moot meanings into the transposed usage. Consequently, translators have rendered the name as “barbarian lady” (K. W. Taylor 1983, 81) or “savage maiden” (Kelley, n.d.) from the Sinitic meaning of *man*. However, this is implausible considering that in the story this person is portrayed as a civilized girl who is a respected resident of the regional urban center. I will return to the problem of the name A Man near the end of this essay. Meanwhile, I want to point out that Già La Xà Lê and Man Nương represent Sinitic recifications of names.

In 1752, two texts containing the story were printed with woodblocks.⁶ One text, the *Cổ Châu pháp vân phật bản hạnh ngữ lục*,⁷ has the earliest version of the story in Hán 漢 (literary Chinese) prose with a phrase-by-phrase translation into Nôm 喃 (demotic Vietnamese); the forms of Nôm used suggest that the translation was completed in the

seventeenth century. Elsewhere I have analyzed this text in terms of seven editorial episodes over a period of several centuries (K. W. Taylor 2002). And elsewhere I have also analyzed the translation process in this text in terms of four kinds of divergences between the Hán and Nôm: intentional shifts of meaning, interpretive additions, explanatory additions, and errors (K. W. Taylor 2005).

The other text, the *Cổ Châu phật bản hạnh* 古珠佛本行, is a 496-line poem written in six-eight (*lục-bát*) vernacular prosody (Nguyễn Quang Hồng 1997, 46–87); it follows the earliest version of the story with some significant revisions, including the virgin birth. The name Khâu Đà La is retained, although this person is sometimes called Xà Lê for rhyming purposes. The name Man Nương is used, except for a few places where A Man is used for the rhyme.

In 1919, a versified version of the story was published in Vietnamese that appears to be based on this text, but it adds a detail contained in no other versions, apparently inspired by the character for *man*, meaning barbarian, which in recent times became part of the Vietnamese term for Cambodia: Cao Man (Cao meaning “high” and Man meaning “barbarian”). This text, *Cổ Châu tứ pháp phá lục* 古珠四法譜錄 (Genealogical record of the four dharmas at Cổ Châu), says that Tu Định was from Cambodia and had settled among the Vietnamese; he was a simple and decent man but his behavior violated all conventional rules, and he took, or was given, the surname Man, apparently indicating his origin as an immigrant from Cao Man (Nguyen Tu Cuong 1997, 391n211; Trần Nghiã 1993, 1:327; Trần Văn Giáp 1932, 219). This perhaps inspired the authors of a book about Vietnamese Buddhism published in 1992 to conflate this detail with mention of Man Nương being a stutterer in the fifteenth-century version to say that she “spoke in a non-standard accent,” suggesting that she was a foreigner (Nguyễn Tài Thư 1992, 32). From this we see that the Sinitic gloss of “barbarian” in the transcribed syllable *man* has hardened through time, despite it being contradicted in the 1752 six-eight poetic version in which Man Nương was the child of proper parents (Tu Định and his wife “a harmonious pair”) and that she “was talented in writing and poetry” (Nguyễn Quang Hồng 1997, 35–36, lines 19 and 29).

A geography compiled in the early twentieth century, *Đại nam nhất thống chí*, includes an abbreviated version of the story in a section on temples in Bắc Ninh Province (Nguyen Tu Cuong 1997, 365n35). The names Khâu Đà La and A Man are used and are explicitly identified as the progenitors of the baby girl left in the care of the tree.

Ostensibly, the story is an account of how Buddhism began among the Vietnamese. That there does not appear to be anything Buddhist about it aside from certain aspects of vocabulary may appear to be consonant with Nguyễn Tìr Cương’s analysis of early Buddhism in Vietnam as “a mixture of elements from India and China and beliefs and practices characteristic of the indigenous people’s religious sensibilities and popular cults ... magic, ritual, and thaumaturgy” (Nguyen Tu Cuong 1997, 7, 42, 52, 62).

We may assume a preexisting environment of local popular religion and of non-Sinitic “elements” that were increasingly overwhelmed by “elements” from China as

⁶Elsewhere I have published a comparative analysis of the two texts, *Cổ Châu pháp vân phật bản hạnh ngữ lục* and *Cổ Châu phật bản hạnh*, in terms of five thematic divergences (K. W. Taylor 2002, 358–60).

⁷See note 1 above.

time went on. For example, Trần Quốc Vương (1995) has interpreted another story from the *Lĩnh nam chích quái* in a way that resonates with the rainmaking theme that we find in the Khâu Đà La and A Man story. According to him, the ancient boy hero known as Ông Dống who defeats invaders from the north should be understood as a storm god bringing the monsoon rains. In this case, a local water-bringing deity was recycled into the Sino-Vietnamese relationship by later scholars to legitimize a sense of separation.

A well-known passage in the biography of Shi Xie (*San Guo Zhi* 三國志, 49), asserts that, whenever he traveled, “chariots and outriders filled the road while men of Hu by the dozen, with incense smoldering, marched close beside the wheels of his carriage” (O’Harrow 1986, 261). The term *hu* indicates people from India and Central Asia; it has been universally assumed by modern scholars that these people were Buddhist monks from India (Nguyen Tu Cuong 1997, 10–11, 332n7; O’Harrow 1986, 253; Trần Văn Giáp 1932, 206). However, this can be no more than a conjecture; there is nothing in the text to suggest that they were Buddhists.

The two stubbornly difficult elements of the story are the names of the main protagonists, Khâu Đà La and A Man. By the fifteenth century, they had been changed to names that could be normalized according to Sinitic tradition. But the names as rendered in the earliest extant text have resisted any such normalization.

Chinese texts mention three propagators of Buddhism from Central and South Asia who dwelled in or traveled through northern Vietnam in the third century. Kang Senghui (d. 280), whose father was a seaborne merchant originally from Sogdiana in Central Asia who had settled in northern Vietnam, reportedly traveled north to preach Buddhism in southern China and by 247 CE was established in Nanjing (Nguyen Tu Cuong 1997, 332n8; Trần Văn Giáp 1932, 212–13; Zürcher 1972, 51–55). A person identified as coming from Central Asia and with a name that some scholars have read as Kalyanaruci is recorded as having translated a Buddhist text in northern Vietnam in the year 265 (Nguyen Tu Cuong 1997, 334n11; Trần Văn Giáp 1932, 213–14; Zürcher 1972, 77, chap. 2n258). Finally, a peripatetic Buddhist thaumaturge named Jivaka is recorded as having come from the south and passed through northern Vietnam on his way to Luoyang, where he arrived at the turn of the fourth century (Nguyen Tu Cuong 1997, 332n8; Trần Văn Giáp 1932, 211–12; Zürcher 1972, 67, 141).

None of these three are associated with the time of Shi Xie, who died in 226.⁸ One Buddhist figure that supposedly resided in northern Vietnam during the time of Shi Xie is Mou Bo 牟博, but there are many problems with this information and with the text attributed to this name; there are strong arguments to say that Mou Bo, also known as Mouzi 牟子, is an imaginary person and that the work ascribed to him, the *Li huo lun* 理惑論, cannot have been written before “the fourth or early fifth century” (Zürcher 1972, 13–17). Consequently, there is no firm evidence in Chinese sources of there being Buddhists in

⁸*Cổ Châu pháp vân phật bản hạnh ngữ lục* mentions a Jivaka who arrived in northern Vietnam from the south with Khâu Đà La and, instead of staying with Khâu Đà La, continued northward. I suspect that this Jivaka, who plays no role of significance in the story, was a later interpolation, perhaps to strengthen the textual legitimacy of Khâu Đà La with the Jivaka who was attested in Chinese texts at Luoyang at the beginning of the fourth century. If these Jivakas were the same person, then he lived to be very old, which may not be plausible considering that after his sojourn in Luoyang he is reported to have returned to India (Trần Văn Giáp 1932, 212).

northern Vietnam during Shi Xie's rule. What we have for Buddhism in that place and time is the story of Khâu Đà La and A Man preserved in Vietnamese sources. Is there any way of reading these names other than within the Sinitic tradition? And is there any way of understanding the scores of people from India bearing incense other than as Buddhists?

We need to place our evidence in the context of maritime contact among the peoples living on the coasts of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. There is abundant evidence of trade between Southeast Asian ports and India as early as the third century BCE (Bellwood 1997, 275–77; Hall 1985, 26–38; 2011, 1–5, 29–32; Higham 1989, 242–45; Ray 2003, 120–25; K. W. Taylor 1976; Wheatley 1961, 8–36). In the time of Shi Xie, northern Vietnam received influence not only from the north via land and coastal routes but also from India via a long-established maritime route.

In 166 CE, people claiming to be envoys from Rome arrived in northern Vietnam by sea on their way to the Han court (Hirth 1885, 42, 47). In 226 CE, a Roman merchant arrived in northern Vietnam by sea (48). There is abundant archaeological evidence for a maritime trade route during this time that connected southern India with the Vietnamese coast via the Isthmus of Kra and the Oc Eo sites of the Mekong Delta. There can be no doubt about there being significant contact in the second century CE between the ancient port of Arikamedu in southeast India, near Pondicherry, which was a center of trade with the Mediterranean, and the ancient port of Oc Eo in the Mekong Delta. Roman artifacts from the second century and Sanskrit seals with an Indic script used in the second century have been found at Oc Eo (Coedès 1947).⁹ The trade in glass beads at this time spread from Arikamedu to Oc Eo; both sites became places of glass bead production (Francis 2002, 27–35). Five thousand glass beads of the type associated with Arikamedu and Oc Eo were excavated from the Han tomb at Ngoc Am in Thanh Hoá Province in northern Vietnam (Janse 1951, 1:pl. 75.1, 2:160–63).

The kingdom based in the Oc Eo region was sufficiently important to attract a visit by envoys from the southern Chinese kingdom of Wu in the 240s (Coedès 1968, 37). Information gathered by these envoys, Kang Tai and Zhu Ying, entered various Chinese dynastic histories and other texts, sometimes as citations from a book attributed to Kang Tai known as “Record of Fu Nan” (*Fu Nan ji* 扶南記), which no longer exists (Pelliot 1903). Fu Nan was the name by which the Chinese knew the polity in the region of Oc Eo. Dynastic histories compiled in the sixth and seventh centuries, the *Nan qi shu* 南齊書, the *Jin shu* 晉書, and the *Liang shu* 梁書, record a story about a devout Brahmin in India named Kaundinya who received a magic bow and was instructed by his god to go overseas on a merchant boat; arriving at a royal city, he shot an arrow from his magic bow to subdue the reigning queen, whom he married and thereby founded the kingdom of Funan.¹⁰

⁹The so-called Roman coins have recently been reinterpreted as seals made in India modeled on Mediterranean-style coins (Pierre-Yves Manguin, personal communication with the author, Seattle, April 2016). The study of connections between ancient India and Southeast Asia has not advanced much since the end of colonialism, being unfashionable amidst efforts to enshrine national histories.

¹⁰The texts with this story are dynastic histories: the *Nan qi shu*, compiled in the early sixth century; and the *Jin shu* and the *Liang shu*, both compiled in the early seventh century (Briggs 1951, 17–18).

A Sanskrit inscription at the Cham site of Mi Son in Quảng Nam Province, central Vietnam, dated 658, tells of a Kaundinya described as “the bull of the Brahmins” who founded the city of Bhavapura by planting a javelin he had received from “the eminent Brahmin Acvatthaman, son of Drona”; the inscription further relates that Kaundinya married a Naga princess in order to perform rites and was an ancestor of Bhavavarman, a sixth-century Khmer king (Finot 1904, 923). Bhavapura was the royal city of this king, located north of Cambodia’s great lake, Tonle Sap (Coedès 1968, 67). Drona and Acvatthaman are prominent in the genealogy of the Pallava dynasty, which ruled in southern India from the sixth to the ninth centuries (Coedès 1909, 478). According to a tenth-century Khmer inscription, the reigning king is identified as being in the lineage of Kaundinya (476). A ninth-century Chōla inscription contains a story about dynastic origins with a Brahmin marrying a Naga princess and founding a kingdom with a magic bow (Coedès 1911, 391–93). There are in fact many stories from antiquity that contain this theme of a dynastic union between a spiritually potent South Indian and a local woman in Southeast Asia (Przyluski 1925).

But returning to the name Kaundinya, it is the name of a prominent and influential Brahmin lineage that appears in South Indian inscriptions and texts dated from the second to the eleventh centuries as providing eminent poets, statesmen, politicians, colonizers, and Shaivite spiritual leaders (Chatterjee 1939, 139; Jayaswal 1933, 169–70; Sastri 1961). The Kaundinya lineage was closely allied with some dynastic houses of South India, including the Pallavas, which, according to the Chinese texts, had a great cultural and religious influence on Funan in the fifth century when a “second Kaundinya” came from India to rule over the kingdom (Briggs 1951, 24–25).

A book with the same title as Kang Tai’s “Record of Fu Nan” (*Fu Nan ji*) but attributed to a man of the Liu Song dynasty (420–79) named Zhu Zhi, about whom no information seems to have survived, describes a dependency of Funan named Tun Sun that scholars locate on the Isthmus of Kra, where trade between the Bay of Bengal and the Gulf of Thailand was shifted before an all-sea route between India and East Asia was developed after the third century. This “Record of Fu Nan,” like the book with the same title attributed to Kang Tai, is believed to contain information gathered in the mid-third century by Kang Tai. According to citations of this book in later texts, there were five hundred *hu* families residing in Tun Sun; furthermore, there were more than one thousand Brahmins who practiced Hinduism, read Brahmanic scriptures, made offerings to their deities, and married local women (Coedès 1968, 38–39; Noonsuk 2012; Pelliot 1903, 279–80; Wheatley 1956; Wolters 1967, 37–48). As I have shown, echoes of these themes can be found as far north as ancient northern Vietnam.

The maritime link between the coasts of South India and of Vietnam circulated not only merchants but also people who accompanied Shi Xie’s carriage with incense, and, according to our story, a holy man named Khâu Đà La. That this link was more than a matter of trade is indicated by two stories in *Lĩnh nam chích quái*, the fifteenth-century collection of tales I have mentioned above, which also includes the Man Nương story.

One story entitled “One Night Swamp”¹¹ is anachronistically dated in the time of the Hùng kings prior to the third century BCE. A princess left the palace, married a poor

¹¹See *Lĩnh nam chích quái*, manuscripts A.33, A.1200, A.1752, A.2914, VHv.1266, and VHv.1473.

man named Chủ Đổng Tử, and opened a market that attracted merchants from other kingdoms to trade. One wealthy merchant advised: “If a person of high position takes one weight of gold and this year goes out to sea to trade in goods, next year that person can return with ten weights of gold.” Consequently, Chủ Đổng Tử took gold and accompanied the merchant “to trade beyond the sea.” At a place where they landed for fresh water, Chủ Đổng Tử encountered a little monk at a small Buddhist temple; he entrusted his gold to the merchant to trade for him and remained there to study with the monk. The merchant stopped for Chủ Đổng Tử on his return, and at the time of departure the monk gave Chủ Đổng Tử a magic hat and staff. After rejoining the princess, these magic objects turned into “a city with towers of jade, halls of gems, temples, palaces, treasure houses, shrines to earth-gods, gold, silver, pearls, precious stones, beds with blankets and curtains, beautiful boys and girls to serve, officers and soldiers to guard, all in great abundance.” When news of this reached the ears of the king, he sent an army against the upstarts. On the night before the army was scheduled to attack, the city with all of its inhabitants ascended into heaven, leaving nothing but a vast swamp in its place.

In this story, the monk teaches Chủ Đổng Tử the Buddhist *dharma*. After he rejoins the princess, Chủ Đổng Tử preaches “the Way” and the princess is enlightened. The Buddhist gloss on this story is similar to the tale of Khâu Đà La and A Man, covering a story having no essential Buddhist content with Buddhist vocabulary. The story highlights a connection between maritime trade, wealthy merchants, and the spread of religious ideas. Furthermore, the detail of departing one year and returning one year later indicates the pattern of maritime travel between Vietnam and India following the seasonal monsoon winds.

The other story is called the tale of King Dạ Thoa.¹² This is an extremely abbreviated summary of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. King Dạ Thoa covets the beautiful wife of the crown prince of a neighboring kingdom and kidnaps her. The crown prince obtains the assistance of an army of monkeys who take down a mountain and fill up the sea “to make a level road” so as to attack and kill King Dạ Thoa and retrieve the wife. The story ends by identifying the kingdom of the crown prince as Champa, the southern neighbor of the ancient Vietnamese.

These stories are apparently cultural debris from contact with India. Perhaps the story of Khâu Đà La and A Man is as well? The story itself has nothing distinctively Indian about it; it probably reflects local religious ideas and practices. But do the names of the main protagonists provide any clues? We have noted efforts to reform or replace the names Khâu Đà La and A Man. These names have not been digested into the tradition of Sino-Vietnamese letters.

As I have shown, the idea of transcribing Khâu Đà La as Ksudra, meaning something or someone small, petty, worthless, cruel, avaricious, wicked, beggarly, and mean-hearted, although phonetically plausible, will not do as the name of a Brahmin with great knowledge of the world and of supernatural matters. Culla, the Pali pronunciation of Ksudra, could be imagined as a respectable name with the sense of “second rank,” but this is also inappropriate for someone specifically described as a Brahmin with

¹²See *Lĩnh nam chính quái*, manuscripts A.1200, A.1300, A.2914, and VHv.1266.

supernatural powers greater than anyone else. Khâu is the second syllable of the Vietnamese transcription for Sanskrit Bikkshu, Bi Khâu 比丘, meaning a Buddhist monk, but abbreviating this term with its second syllable is very unlikely;¹³ furthermore, it does not accord with seeing Buddhist terms as later additions to a non-Buddhist story. Khâu also happens to be the personal name of Confucius, now pronounced Qiu in Chinese, although this is surely coincidental.

As for Đà La, it can be read as a transcription of the Hindu god Dhara, the earth god among the eight *vasus* or deities of universal elements in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. In other Hindu texts, the goddess Prithvi stands in place of Dhara (Danielou 1985, 86–87). The literal meaning of *dhara* in Sanskrit is “flowing water,” which is appropriate for someone who can make rain fall down from the sky or make water flow out of the earth. But this leaves the syllable Khâu unexplained.

That the name Khâu Đà La remained current among educated Vietnamese in the seventeenth century is attested in the Hán-Nôm dictionary *Chi nam ngọc âm giải nghĩa* 指南玉音解義, where it is used to explain the term “Rock Buddha” (*Thạch Phật*) as “the Rock Buddha in the lineage of Đà La” (*bụt đá giống thầy Đà La*).¹⁴ This dictionary is written in “six-eight” (*lục bát*) prosody, which explains why the initial syllable of the name—Khâu—was left off to accommodate the rhyme and meter.

The transposition of Khâu Đà La into Già La Xà Lê (Kalacarya, “Black Sage”) in later texts, while seeming to offer a superficially acceptable solution, has no phonological logic, and reading Khâu Đà La as a transcription of Ksudra/Culla is utterly dissonant with this character’s role in the story, according to which he came from India, was a Brahmin, and had supernatural powers. However, Khâu Đà La can be read as a plausible transcription of Kaundinya.

Two separate transcriptions of Kaundinya appear in Chinese texts. In stories about the “first Kaundinya” who married the local queen to found the kingdom of Fu-nan, the characters used to transcribe the name are today pronounced Hùn-tián 混填 in Chinese. French Sinologists in the early twentieth century were certain that this was an exact transcription of Kaundinya.¹⁵ In references to the “second Kaundinya” of the fifth century, the characters used to transcribe the name are now pronounced Qiáo-chén-rú 僑陳如 in Chinese (Pelliot 1903, 257, 269).

Since, even within the Chinese historiographical tradition, two different transcriptions for Kaundinya appeared, a third transcription is not implausible, particularly if arising from within a Sino-Vietnamese textual tradition, as in the case of Khâu Đà La (*Qiu-tuó-luó* in modern Chinese). Reading Khâu Đà La as a transcription of Kaundinya requires marking the syllables as Kau(n)-di-nya instead of Kau(n)-din-(ya), which is plausible because of a tendency in some Chinese dialects to confuse “n” and “l.” It is a reasonable conjecture that, in the case of Khâu Đà La, “nya” was transposed into “la.” It is instructive to bear in mind that during the first millennium CE a regional dialect of

¹³I am indebted to Daniel Boucher for this information; personal communication with the author, Ithaca, New York, February 2016.

¹⁴*Chi nam ngọc âm giải nghĩa*, 49b (text AB.372 in the *Viện Nghiên Cứu Hán-Nôm*, Hà Nội; Trần Xuân Ngọc Lan 1985, 185).

¹⁵Pelliot (1903, 245n4) wrote that the transcription of Kaundinya into Hun-tian was “certain”; Finot (1911, 207) wrote that the transcription was “very exact.”

Chinese developed in what is now northern Vietnam, which after the tenth century contributed to the formation of the language we know today as Vietnamese (Phan 2013). It would not be unexpected that local forms of transcribing foreign words developed on a frontier jurisdiction such as this and survived in Sino-Vietnamese usage of later centuries.

As for A Man, I am aware of but one mention of this name in a Chinese text.¹⁶ A Tang dynasty text reports that in the middle of the eighth century a female musician who was very good at singing and dancing named Xie A Man 謝阿蠻 was presented to the imperial court from a place called Xinfeng 新豐 (Zhang 1974–83, 9:1077). The location of Xinfeng in Tang times was in the vicinity of modern Kunming in Yunnan (Tan 1992, 5:80–81). We know that Tang officials at that time were active in Yunnan establishing a route of communication and transport between Sichuan and northern Vietnam; this was a region inhabited by non-Tang peoples that the Tang government was at that time endeavoring to mobilize under its imperial supervision (Luce 1961). So far as I can tell, there is no plausible connection between this person and the A Man of our story.

According to the story, the name was given to the girl at the age of twelve by Khâu Đà La as a mark of her rare qualities. Khâu Đà La saw that she was reverent, attentive, chaste, and well behaved to an unusual degree; considering this to be uncanny, he named her A Man.¹⁷ He later asserted that her spiritual nature indicated that she was at the level of “a great *dharma* vessel.”¹⁸ And at a later time, he summoned her, put his hand on her head, and said to her, “You have become my *dharma* wife.”¹⁹ Rather than being a name that can be explained in terms of Chinese characters used to transcribe it, A Man is a name that apparently had a definite religious meaning for the holy man from India. What did he mean by giving her this name?

As it turns out, Amman is the Tamil name of a popular Mother Goddess whose main function is to send rain. She is identified with Devi Mata (“mother goddess”), the main goddess of North Indian Hinduism. Amman was and is a popular Mother Deity and Rain Goddess among the Tamils of southern India; she has many forms and names (Balfour 1885, 1:92–93; Bhattacharyya 1999, 177–78; Bunce 2000, 26, 28, 29; Ferro-Luzzi 2002, 76; Knappert 1991, 34, 310–11; Srivastara 1978, 54, 63, 108; Whitehead 1921, 23; Younger 1980).²⁰ The idea that the name of A Man in our story has a connection with Amman, the South Indian rain-making Mother Goddess, may explain why, as our story has it, a Brahmin religious master from India used the name to designate a person whom he considered to have divine qualities. The scores of people from India bearing incense that appear in the biography of Shi Xie may have been more inclined to venerate a goddess named Amman than to venerate the Buddha.²¹

¹⁶Cao Cao (155–220), the famous leader during the period of the Three Kingdoms, had the infant name of A Man 阿瞞, but the character for Man is not the same as in our story.

¹⁷A.818:2b.

¹⁸A.818:3a.

¹⁹A.818:3b.

²⁰Tamil merchants built temples devoted to Mariamman, a manifestation of Amman, in Bangkok and Singapore in the 1820s and in Saigon later in the century.

²¹Revire (2016, 394) suggests “that the use of such cultural labels as ‘Buddhist,’ ‘Hindu,’ and ‘Brahmanical’ must be qualified and a new way of looking at original sources in early Southeast Asia must be sought.”

As anthropologists and scholars of popular religion have shown, stories about deities and supernatural events associated with ritual practice proliferate, assume various forms, and are in a constant state of revision from generation to generation (Adriano 2002; Dean 1993, 1998; Dror 2007; P. Taylor 2004). The search for authenticity is a vain endeavor. What attracts attention in the tale of Khâu Đà La and A Man is that these names have failed to be successfully incorporated into Sino-Vietnamese philology. This has led us to look beyond the Sinosphere to a time when the countenance of Asia reflected a maritime realm encompassing what we today know as South and Southeast Asia. At that time, people living in what is now northern Vietnam participated in that realm even as they were on the edge of an imperial world that would eventually shape all aspects of their culture, from language, literature, and religion to philosophy, government, and politics.

Vietnamese historiography and literary scholarship has developed from within the Sinitic tradition. In the case of our story, this may obfuscate as much as it makes clear. Southeast Asian studies developed in the 1950s and 1960s with a strong awareness of what was then called “the Indianization of Southeast Asia” in ancient times (Coedès 1968). Since then, there has been a strong reaction against this perspective to emphasize the local genius of societies in Southeast Asia to “localize” external “influence” and “drain” away its Indian content, filling it with local meanings (Wolters 1999). Our story may indeed be an example of just such localization. But it is also a reminder that an excessive reliance upon the Sinitic tradition may make it difficult for us to imagine the pre-Sinitic past of the ancestors of the Vietnamese. Maybe the rain-making Buddha Mother was previously the rain-making Hindu Mother Goddess Amman; and maybe Amman was previously a rain-making local mother goddess whose name has long been forgotten.

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