

New Religious Phenomena in the Southwest Region During the First Half of the 20th Century – A Case Study of Dao Tuong in an Giang

Ngo Minh Sang¹, Nguyen Van Tien²

^{1,2}Thu Dau Mot University

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the natural, historical, cultural, and religious conditions of An Giang province in the early 20th century to clarify the context and causes underlying the emergence of Dao Tuong (The Tuong Sect). Furthermore, from a historical perspective, the study elucidates the impacts of Dao Tuong on the religious and spiritual life of the local people in An Giang during the early decades of the 20th century.

KEYWORDS: Dao Tuong, religious phenomenon, Ong Dao, Southwest region, An Giang

1. INTRODUCTION

Researching the phenomenon of Ong Dao (popularly known as “Holy Men” or local religious masters) holds both theoretical and practical significance in the contemporary context of the Southwest region of Vietnam. Historically, examining the genesis and evolution of these Ong Dao enriches our understanding of the social milieu of the Southwest during the first half of the 20th century. Concurrently, it contributes to a re-evaluation of their historical contributions within the regional trajectory.

The emergence of the Ong Dao religious phenomenon underscores the distinct cultural identity of the southwestern Vietnamese peasantry within the broader matrix of Vietnamese culture during this period. This phenomenon reflects an integration of multiple historical, cultural, religious, and ecological factors unique to the Southwest. More importantly, the rise of the Ong Dao exerted multifaceted impacts on the livelihoods and mindsets of the local populace during the first half of the 20th century.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs the historical method in tandem with logical analysis, synthesis, comparison, and contrast. The primary source materials are drawn from existing research works and monographs addressing the geography of An Giang, the Ong Dao phenomenon, and Dao Tuong in Southwestern Vietnam. Additionally, archival records, oral histories, testimonies from living witnesses, and empirical field data are integrated to substantiate the arguments.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

To date, no specialized academic monograph has been dedicated exclusively to Dao Tuong in Southwestern Vietnam. Extant references are predominantly found in local chronicles, travelogues, or periodical essays documenting the general emergence of the Ong Dao. Nevertheless, these constitute valuable source materials providing preliminary insights into the historical context and regional influence of Dao Tuong.

In the monograph *Tan Chau Xua* (Ancient Tan Chau), authors Nguyen Van Kiem and Huynh Minh addressed various facets of Dao Tuong, including its origin, developmental process, and doctrinal practices. Utilizing ethnographic fieldwork, the authors gathered extensive data from adherents and living witnesses in Tan Chau, thereby partially reflecting the sect's birth and its impact on An Giang during the early 20th century. However, as their work was primarily historiographical and descriptive, deep analytical interpretations of Dao Tuong remained limited.

In *Bay Ngay Trong Dong Thap Muoi* (Seven Days in the Plain of Reeds), Nguyen Hien Le documented the eccentric appearances of various Ong Dao, such as Dao Cao, Dao Nam, Dao Ot, Dao Ran, Dao Cho, and Dao Cam. The author posited that the majority of these figures were either uneducated or mentally unstable, and their movements were typically short-lived. Nguyen Hien Le also highlighted the negative aspects of these figures, arguing that they exploited the credulity of the Southern peasantry for personal gain. However, given the travelogue nature of the text, the author failed to illuminate the systemic socio-cultural context and broader impacts of these Ong Dao on Southern culture.

Toan Anh, in *Nep Cu – Tin Nguong Viet Nam* (Ancient Customs – Vietnamese Beliefs), also noted the Ong Dao phenomenon, categorizing it as an intriguing spiritual manifestation of the Southern Vietnamese people. The book briefly outlines the origins,

New Religious Phenomena in the Southwest Region During the First Half of the 20th Century – A Case Study of Dao Tuong in an Giang

doctrines, followers, and proselytization methods of Dao Dua (The Coconut Religion), Dao Kieng, Dao Cay, and Dao Thu. Notably, Toan Anh provided an initial conceptualization of what constitutes an Ong Dao. However, the text did not delve deeply into the socio-cultural matrix or the historical impacts of these figures in the first half of the 20th century.

Following an exploratory expedition to An Giang, Nguyen Van Hau, in *Nua Thang Trong Mien That Son* (Half a Month in the Seven Mountains Region), provided rich accounts of the ecological, cultural, religious, and human landscapes of An Giang. Written in a conversational, travel-diary style, the book explains historical events profoundly, offering readers scientific arguments. Nguyen Van Hau also evaluated and highlighted the issue of Dao Tuong in this work. However, the details remained fragmented, failing to fully capture the comprehensive background and socio-cultural impact of Dao Tuong during this era.

Son Nam, in *Lich Su Dat An Giang* (The History of An Giang Land), delineated the distinct characteristics of the natural environment, people, and culture of An Giang. The author emphasized the borderland factor as a structural determinant shaping the unique historical, cultural, and social features of the region. Writing in the genre of historical monograph and fueled by a deep passion for the Southern region, Son Nam utilized fieldwork to offer a profound analysis of An Giang. His work also mentioned the birth of Dao Tuong and its ramifications on the local population. However, it only touched upon a few minor dimensions of the sect and left out the context and influence of Dao Go Moi on An Giang's cultural landscape.

In *Van Hoa Dan Gian Nam Bo Nhung Phac Thao* (Sketches of Southern Vietnamese Folklore, 1997), Nguyen Phuong Thao addressed the Ong Dao phenomenon in the opening chapter (The Southern Vietnamese Village and Folklore), introducing the intriguing concept of “heterodox/eccentric religions” (tôn giáo dị biệt). Within less than three pages, the author initially explained the Ong Dao phenomenon from the perspective of folk psychology within the framework of Southern Vietnamese villages. The author argued that due to the precarious nature of making a living combined with landlessness, Southern peasants experienced a sense of existential deprivation, prompting them to seek new systems of belief. While these arguments provided an initial analytical framework, the work did not elaborate on the specific socio-historical context or the long-term impacts of these figures.

Pham Bich Hop's *Nguoi Nam Bo Va Ton Giao Ban Dia* (The Southern People and Indigenous Religions: Buu Son Ky Huong - Cao Dai - Hoa Hao) also touched upon the Ong Dao phenomenon. Approaching the topic through the lens of psychological anthropology focusing on national, regional, and religious psychology, the author decoded the faith systems and intrinsic values that indigenous religions offered to satisfy the spiritual needs of Southern peasants. The author provided an initial definition of Ong Dao, highlighting their extraordinary perceived abilities such as faith healing, mass mobilization, mystical prowess, and ideological leadership. However, because this research focused primarily on religiosity and the correlation between the Southern Vietnamese psyche and indigenous religions, it omitted the specific historical background and impacts of the Ong Dao during the first half of the 20th century.

In the articles *The Influence of Certain Religions Among Peasants in the Mekong Delta* (Social Sciences Review, No. 9, 1991) and *Religious Sects in the South* (Giac Ngo Monthly, Nos. 30-32, 9/1998), Phan Lac Tien offered preliminary explanations for the rise of indigenous religions and the Ong Dao phenomenon. The author asserted that the specific political climate and social landscape of the South gave rise to these religious sects and the manifestations of the Ong Dao's theocratic authority. Although the articles outlined the preliminary influences of these sects on the Mekong Delta peasantry, they lacked a deep analysis of their birth context and cultural impacts.

In the Proceedings of the 2008 Southern Social Sciences Research Conference, Phan An presented a paper titled *The Southern Vietnamese People (From a Religious Perspective)*, which provided a profound analysis of the concept of Ong Dao and explained the causal factors behind their emergence. From a religious and belief-oriented perspective, the paper offered intriguing insights, suggesting that indigenous religions and the Ong Dao stemmed from the psychology of the Vietnamese people during their historical southern migration and land reclamation process (mở đất). However, the paper did not sufficiently incorporate geopolitical and socio-cultural dimensions to explain the distinct specificities of the Ong Dao's emergence and impact.

In synthesis, prior scholarship has established several foundational points: Dao Tuong was not an institutionalized, classical indigenous religion of the South, but rather a localized religious phenomenon that emerged during a specific historical juncture. The constitutive elements of Dao Tuong represented a syncretic patchwork of various cultural and religious traditions found in the frontier zone of An Giang. The colonial exploitation policies of the French, coupled with shifts in economic, cultural, and religious life in An Giang during the first half of the 20th century, were critical drivers. The highly complex and volatile nature of the borderland frontier served as the primary catalyst for the genesis of Dao Tuong. The emergence of Dao Tuong primarily impacted the political landscape, cultural expressions, and religious practices of the An Giang peasantry during the first half of the 20th century.

New Religious Phenomena in the Southwest Region During the First Half of the 20th Century – A Case Study of Dao Tuong in an Giang

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. The Historical Context and Root Causes of the Rise of Dao Tuong

4.1.1. French Colonial Exploitation Policies in An Giang

The colonial policy of land reclamation and plantation establishment, which had been implemented across the provinces of Cochinchina (Nam Kỳ) since 1890, was officially extended to An Giang in 1900. The French colonial administration imported various machinery and equipment into Cochinchina and An Giang to facilitate large-scale canal dredging. In 1902, the French authorities completed the renovation of the Long Xuyen Canal, which ran from the Bassac River to Rach Gia, widening its total width to 50 meters. This was followed by the successful dredging of the Ong Chuong canal in 1905 and the Thot Not canal in 1908. Furthermore, the colonial state excavated new canals to irrigate the arid, uncultivated lands of An Giang province, including the Lap Vo canal (1905), the Rach Soi – Bassac canal (1922), the Mac Can Dung canal, and the clearing of the Vinh Te and Vinh An canals.

In tandem with dredging and canal excavation, the French administration aggressively expanded agricultural land reclamation. However, unlike other Cochinchinese provinces where the colonial government directly managed or leased land out to capitalist syndicates, in An Giang, the French state did not directly undertake reclamation as the Nguyen Dynasty had previously done. Instead, they incentivized local landlords (điền chủ) to autonomously clear waste lands, requiring them only to pay land taxes. This policy generated profound social consequences: landlord holdings expanded exponentially, while the stratum of landless tenant farmers (tá điền) grew rapidly in An Giang.

The legal frameworks governing land transfers were significantly relaxed by the French in An Giang. The colonial government delegated land reclamation and property transfer rights directly to local oligarchs. Wealthy individuals invested capital to clear land and subsequently transferred these plantations to others for substantial profits. This speculative behavior was actively encouraged by the French authorities, as every land transaction generated substantial registration taxes for the colonial treasury. As a direct consequence of this policy, disenfranchised peasants in An Giang were forced to submit rents to secure tenant status. While this status theoretically granted them cultivation rights over the plots they cleared, the practical impacts of these colonial land policies rendered the peasants' livelihoods extremely precarious, as their reclaimed plots were easily usurped by wealthy landlords.

To facilitate the mono-cropping of rice for export purposes, the French administration focused exclusively on expanding rice acreage. In Long Xuyen, rice cultivation land skyrocketed from 1899 to 1929, reaching 193,499 hectares; in Chau Doc, it increased to 114,920 hectares between 1888 and 1930. The number of colonial capitalists seeking concessions to establish rice concessions also grew dramatically; between 1912 and 1916 alone, there were 12,563 applications for plantation land grants in Chau Doc. This strict mono-cropping of rice inextricably shackled the An Giang peasantry to the global rice market, making them entirely dependent on local landlords and French capitalists. Consequently, the land owned by self-sufficient peasants shrank, and the number of landless tenant farmers swelled, severely destabilizing the livelihoods of the local population whenever natural disasters struck (Vo Thi Hong, 1997, p. 61).

Regarding the development of the sericulture (silk) industry: due to the metropolitan demand for raw silk in France, the colonial government turned its attention toward expanding mulberry cultivation and silkworm rearing immediately upon establishing its direct administrative apparatus in Cochinchina. Initial survey missions in Vĩnh Long, Sóc Trăng, and Cần Thơ yielded subpar results. Following the decree of March 17, 1907, the Governor of Cochinchina delegated survey authorities to Bui Quang Chieu, focusing primarily on areas populated by the ethnic Khmer. These surveys proved unsuccessful in Cần Thơ, Vĩnh Long, and Tiền Giang, until Bui Quang Chieu arrived in Long Xuyên and Châu Đốc. Here, his delegation rigorously analyzed the ecological conditions, social fabrics, and traditional silk-weaving crafts of the locals.

In August 1907, Bui Quang Chieu recommended that the French administration establish a Sericulture Institute (Viện tằm tơ) in Tan Chau, tasked with disseminating modern techniques and cultivating new mulberry varieties to stimulate the local silk industry. The immediate objective was to expand mulberry cultivation, which concentrated primarily in the communes of Long Phu, Long Thuan, Long Khanh, and Thuong Thoi (Tan Chau). Additionally, model silkworm rearing houses were constructed in Tan Chau between 1910 and 1914, alongside the organization of silkworm breed selection competitions.

The silk trade historically played a vital role in the commercial networks linking An Giang with Cambodia. The institutionalization of the Sericulture Institute in Tan Chau directly intervened in the traditional weaving crafts of the Khmer populace (Vo Thi Hong, 1997, p.89). The French authorities resorted to coercive measures to force local artisans to work within the state institute. This provoked deep resentment among the local population, who covertly resisted this heavy-handed colonial intervention into their natural, self-sustaining mode of production. Furthermore, the French administration placed unrealistic ambitions on expanding mulberry acreage and maximizing silk yields, creating structural vulnerabilities within the industry, which ultimately culminated in the bankruptcy of the Tan Chau Sericulture Institute in 1929.

Concurrently, the colonial state overhauled the transportation system. While the defining characteristic of the transport network in Cochinchina was maritime and riverine, the concurrent expansion of agricultural plantations generated an acute demand for the

New Religious Phenomena in the Southwest Region During the First Half of the 20th Century – A Case Study of Dao Tuong in an Giang

overland transit of agricultural and local commodities. Consequently, the French administration commenced the rehabilitation and construction of inter-provincial and inter-district road networks. In 1903, the highway connecting Long Xuyen to Thot Not was reconstructed, restoring various severed segments. By 1905, Long Xuyen province possessed 54.5 kilometers of overland roads, of which 6.6 kilometers were paved with stone, while the remainder consisted of dirt roads running along canal dikes. Crucially, the government initiated the construction of two vital inter-provincial routes: Long Xuyen - Can Tho and Long Xuyen – Chau Doc, both of which were highly significant for socio-economic integration in An Giang. However, this expansion of overland infrastructure directly burdened the local population through increased taxation and forced labor (*lao dịch*).

At the core of the colonial fiscal economy lay taxation. The colonial tax apparatus encompassed capitation (head) taxes, land taxes, market levies, and ferry tolls. In An Giang, the primary taxes levied by the French targeted communal lands (*công điền công thổ*), local marketplaces, and ferry crossings. Furthermore, the colonial state routinely escalated the capitation tax rate to fund public works projects within the province. This multi-layered fiscal policy severely impacted the local populace, particularly tenant farmers. Already unable to afford land rents, the compounding weight of these various taxes plunged them into deep pauperization, leaving them with no viable socioeconomic escape.

In summary, the French colonial exploitation policies induced profound transformations across economic, cultural, and social domains, directly altering the material realities of the An Giang peasantry during the opening decades of the 20th century.

4.1.2. The Political, Cultural, and Religious Realities of An Giang

During the early 20th century, the shifting political, economic, and social dynamics in An Giang heavily impacted the populace and served as structural catalysts for the rise of Dao Tuong.

Anti-French Patriotic Movements: During this period, numerous anti-French patriotic movements emerged in An Giang under various ideological banners. The dominant trend involved appropriating religious doctrines to mobilize local forces. Concurrently, new patriotic movements emerged under the influence of progressive proletarian ideologies.

Secret Societies: The Southern Secret Societies (*Hội kín Nam Kỳ*), which adopted organizational colors from the Chinese Heaven and Earth Society (*Thiên địa hội*), flourished in the 1920s. The land of An Giang served as a fertile breeding ground for these underground organizations, including those led by Phan Phat Sanh and Nguyen Huu Tri. Within the An Giang secret society movement, Cao Van Long emerged as a prominent figure at the Phat Lon (Big Buddha) Pagoda on Cam Mountain. Regarded as the soul of the Chau Doc Secret Society, locals revered him as the “Master of Cam Mountain” (*Ông Thầy núi Cẩm*). He traveled extensively to mobilize the populace and recruit members, including within ethnic Khmer communities.

Millenarian Eschatology: The dissemination of apocalyptic and millenarian doctrines remained highly active, exemplified by figures like Sur Văn Bán Khoai (The Potato-Selling Monk). Similarly, the cryptic prophetic verses (*sấm văn*) composed by Ông Ba Thới in 1926 within the text *Kim Cổ Kỳ Quan* (The Wonders of the Past and Present) aimed at expelling the French colonialists. These writings prophesied that prior to the fast-approaching apocalypse, cataclysmic events would unfold, moral orders would dissolve, and a Righteous Monarch (*Minh vương*) would manifest to restore cosmic justice.

Proletarian Communist Movements: An Giang was one of the earliest birthplaces of Vietnamese communist organizations in Cochinchina. Inheriting the regional patriotic tradition, under the leadership of the Communist Party, the peasantry of An Giang actively participated in agrarian uprisings across Cho Moi and Tan Chau during the revolutionary waves of 1930–1931 and 1936–1939. Striking examples include agrarian struggles demanding land rights in the villages of Thanh Quoi, Ba The, and Binh Thanh, which demonstrated the powerful resonance of proletarian movements among the An Giang populace in the first half of the 20th century.

Socio-Cultural Transformations: This era witnessed the widespread translation and distribution of vernacular newspapers, modern literature, and Chinese classical vernacular novels (*truyện Tàu*) in An Giang. The profound cultural impact of these Chinese novels was noted by the writer Binh Nguyen Loc in his essay *The Golden Age of the Publishing Industry in Saigon*, published in *Tan Van Monthly*:

The populace of the six southern provinces (*dân Nam kỳ Lục tỉnh*) became so enamored with Chinese novels that they were deeply imbued with a Chinese worldview. Even simple boatmen or bandits aspired to emulate the righteous demeanors of Shan Xiongxin (*Đon Hùng Tín*) or Guan Yu (*Quan Công*), whereas in Tonkin (*Bắc Kỳ*), this influence was strictly confined to the Confucian literati class.

Simultaneously, structural overhauls of the educational system and the introduction of modern occupations reshaped the cultural demands and lifestyles of the local population.

Religious Milieu: The proliferation of diverse religious phenomena significantly transformed the spiritual landscape of An Giang during this era (Tran Thi Bich Ngoc, 1997). Certain religious traditions that failed to adapt to the local realities modified themselves to fit the psychology of the An Giang people. A prime example was Taoism (*Lão giáo*), which hybridized into the localized philosophy of “Practicing Buddhism in Phu Yen, Cultivating Daoism in the Seven Mountains” (*tu Phật Phú Yên, tu tiên Bảy Núi*), characterized by the establishment of hermitages, ascetic fasting, and the pursuit of immortality through magical arts. Alongside

New Religious Phenomena in the Southwest Region During the First Half of the 20th Century – A Case Study of Dao Tuong in an Giang

this, new religious phenomena emerged centered around charismatic Ong Dao, who utilized traditional herbal medicine, faith healing, and the recitation of prophetic verses to attract massive followings. A multitude of belief and religious elements—both positive and negative—intertwined, as various figures sought to establish their own sects to deliver the masses from their bleak and miserable existence.

4.1.3. The Structural Characteristics of the An Giang Borderland

The idiosyncratic nature of the An Giang frontier was a decisive factor influencing the birth of Dao Tuong. This borderland possessed unique characteristics compared to other frontiers in Vietnam. Geographically, it was shaped by the Tien and Hau rivers flowing down from Laos and Cambodia. On the Tan Chau side, along the Vinh Te canal, the border consisted of flat, porous plains that allowed for easy crossing. Historically, this was a zone of economic and cultural exchange connecting Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand.

In this frontier environment, Daoist mystics (đạo sĩ) from Ta Lon Mountain easily interacted with Siamese sorcerers (thầy Bùa Xiêm). Conversely, the fishing and resource-extraction industries of the Tonle Sap (Biển Hồ) required substantial Vietnamese labor, and populations from the Tonle Sap frequently moved toward the Siamese border for trade or settlement. Historically, Thailand was a powerful feudal state that consistently projected power toward Laos, Cambodia, An Giang, and Ha Tien to expand its sphere of influence (Son Nam, 2003).

Consequently, the An Giang borderland historically functioned as a refuge for exiled political prisoners, outlaws, and righteous individuals alike, a melting pot of marginalized elements and a repository for heterodox religious practices. During the period under study, the French colonial administration enforced a policy of isolating border zones, which temporarily restricted overt external communication. As a result, An Giang had to rely on economic self-sufficiency, turning inward and becoming a self-contained world dominated by oral literature. Diverse myths and ancient animistic superstitions of Southeast Asia converged here, locking individuals into a worldview dominated by theocracy, Chinese novels, prophetic texts, and magical amulets.

During the initial stages of anti-French resistance, almost every local sect introduced anti-colonial slogans to attract adherents. The An Giang frontier essentially became a reservoir for the socio-political and cultural contradictions of the French colonial era. The colonial policy of border isolation directly contradicted the inherently fluid, open nature of this frontier terrain, thereby fueling local volatility. Compounding this were the remote topography and distance from the central seat of government; imperial and colonial laws were loosened, allowing individuals the autonomy to operate according to their own designs. The integration of these diverse political, economic, cultural, and religious variables directly facilitated the emergence of Dao Tuong (Son Nam, 2003, p. 323).

4.2. The Genesis, Practice, and Activities of Dao Tuong

4.2.1. The Genesis of the Sect

According to the historical chronicles of Nguyen Van Kiem and Huynh Minh, the founder of Dao Tuong was named Lam Van Quoc (alias Ba Quoc), a native of Cai Cung, Long Dien commune, Bac Lieu province. The text Tan Chau Xua described Lam Van Quoc as follows: “He possessed a well-proportioned and robust physique, a broad chest, a large back with muscular shoulders, a square face, piercing eyes, and sinewy limbs. He walked with a majestic stride and spoke with a resonant, booming voice. These extraordinary physical traits combined to give him the appearance of a military general, exuding an aura of indomitable and unyielding defiance” (Nguyen Van Kiem and Huynh Minh, 2003, p. 164).

Following the demise of his father, Lam Van Quoc traveled through Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand to study esoteric sorcery and occult amulets (bùa ngải). By 1925, he arrived in Tan Chau and gained employment as a household and estate manager for the local notable Nguyen Chanh Sat, overseeing domestic affairs and agricultural fields. During his tenure here, Lam Van Quoc began exhibiting peculiar psychological behaviors, frequently falling into states of deep trance and bewilderment: “Suddenly, he felt a sense of profound restlessness and exhaustion within his body; he became averse to speaking or laughing, and began walking in a hesitant, dazed manner as if possessed, his eyes constantly bloodshot” (Nguyen Van Kiem and Huynh Minh, 2003, p. 164).

These bizarre mannerisms piqued the curiosity of the Tan Chau locals, who began referring to him as the Mountain General (Trưởng Núi) or the Lao Master (Ông Lèo). In 1928, Lam Van Quoc erected a modest bamboo hermitage (am) on a plot of land owned by Nguyen Chanh Sat in Long Phu commune (Tan Chau). Within this hermitage, he dedicated himself to spiritual self-cultivation, attracted local followers, and formally founded Dao Tuong. The local populace subsequently referred to the path leading to his hermitage as the “Pagoda Road” (Đường Chùa).

Between 1925 and 1939, the adherent base of Dao Tuong expanded rapidly, mobilizing over 10,000 followers across various locales in Tan Chau, including the Than Nong canal, Giong Tra Den, Long Thuan, Long Son, Phu Lim, and Thuong Phuoc. The expanding regional influence of Dao Tuong eventually came to be perceived as a direct threat to French colonial security. Lam Van Quoc's sermons gradually shifted from purely ethical teachings to explicit critiques of the colonial state and its atrocities. He proclaimed that the nation required a sovereign leader to expel the French, and asserted that he himself was that destined leader. Self-styling his

New Religious Phenomena in the Southwest Region During the First Half of the 20th Century – A Case Study of Dao Tuong in an Giang

title as Minh Hoang Quoc (The Enlightened Emperor of the Nation), he organized his followers for an armed insurrection against French colonial rule in Tan Chau in 1939.

Regarding the nomenclature of Dao Tuong, Nguyen Van Hau explained that because the master frequently sat in deep reverie, daydreaming of distant realms, he was dubbed Dao Tuong (The Religion of Reverie/Imagination) (Nguyen Van Hau, 2006, p.59). Nguyen Van Kiem and Huynh Minh also initially explained the name through his practice of falling into deep “reverie” (trầm tưởng) to diagnose and cure his followers' ailments. However, considering his subsequent anti-French military actions and oral testimonies from surviving adherents, the two authors expanded the meaning of Tuong. They argued that his deep meditation was not intended for faith healing, but rather represented a deep pining or romanticizing for the sovereign motherland (mơ tưởng về giang sơn tổ quốc). These mystical rituals were structurally designed to assemble a loyal base to resist French rule. In our assessment, the nomenclature aligns more accurately with the first interpretation (the method of utilizing trances and visualization for ritual practice); only later, due to its intersection with political resistance, did contemporaries re-interpret Tuong as a patriotic yearning for national sovereignty.

4.2.2. Ritual Practices and Modes of Worship

Altar Arrangements: Dao Tuong did not venerate a unique institutionalized icon. Within his hermitage, Lam Van Quoc arranged a highly elaborate system of altars. Moving inward from the main pillars, the central elevated altar was dedicated to Quan De Thanh Quan (Guan Yu), designated as the Altar of the Ancestral Masters (Bàn thờ Tổ) or the Altar of the Teacher (Bàn thờ Thầy). Flanking this central altar were two distinct stations: the altar of local deities on the left (thờ thần bên tả) and the altar of saints on the right (thờ thánh bên hữu). Directly facing the Guan Yu altar was a large tabernacle dedicated to the Chư Vị Năm Ông (The Five Holy Masters). Above this structure, a concealed loft was constructed to serve as his private chamber for quietude, meditation, and prayer, alongside an elevated outdoor platform (thiền đài) designed to receive individuals engaged in absolute ascetic fasting. Within the interior of the hermitage, a specific room was designated for the Mountain Deity (Sơn Thần) to facilitate faith healing. In the center of the front courtyard, he erected a Bàn Thông Thiên (Open-Air Altar) to worship the Heavens, adhering to traditional Southern Vietnamese folk customs. This syncretic setup demonstrates the convergence of multiple religious traditions (Buddhism, Taoism) and indigenous folk beliefs, reflecting the hybrid cultural landscape of the An Giang frontier.

Ritual Procedures: According to Nguyen Van Kiem and Huynh Minh, Dao Tuong originally possessed its own liturgical texts and prayers, though his disciples failed to memorize them over time. Because he brought these scriptures down from the Seven Mountains region, his disciples viewed his lineage as a branch of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương tradition. The offering rituals of Dao Tuong were remarkably simple, requiring only fresh water, flowers, and incense, while strictly prohibiting the burning of joss paper or spirit money. Ritual services were performed thrice daily: at midnight, noon, and twilight, accompanied by scriptural chanting and the striking of wooden fish bells (gõ mõ), reminiscent of Buddhist liturgy. The prostration sequence followed a rigid hierarchy: beginning at the Altar of the Teacher, moving to the Altar of the Saints, the Altar of the Deities, and concluding at the Altar of the Five Holy Masters with each station receiving 12 prostrations, totaling 48. Following this, the master would proceed to the open-air altar to perform 12 prostrations toward each of the cardinal directions: East, West, South, and North.

Attire and Diet: Adopting Buddhist monastic aesthetics, Ba Quoc shaved his head and wore yellow robes. His disciples and lay followers were not required to shave their heads but were mandated to wear yellow attire. Regarding dietary restrictions, Dao Tuong did not impose permanent vegetarianism on his adherents; followers observed fasts ranging from a maximum of half a month to a minimum of two days per month. The standard daily diet of Dao Tuong consisted simply of lemongrass, chili, fruits, and sweet potatoes.

Initiation and Proselytization: Adherents joined the sect out of deep reverence for the master's moral virtue. Upon formal initiation, the neophyte performed a solemn rite before the Altar of the Teacher, reciting the foundational oath: “I, your disciple, solemnly vow never to betray my Teacher, nor to betray the Path”. The primary mechanics of proselytization relied on the master's charismatic virtue and practical talents, manifested through traditional medical healing and oratorical eloquence.

4.2.3. Anti-French Insurrectionist Activities

Following years of proselytization, the adherent base of Dao Tuong grew substantially, spreading across An Giang province. His public sermons increasingly focused on the atrocities of the French regime and outlined a new utopian state model over which he would rule as king, during which he openly referred to himself as Minh Hoàng Quốc. Adherents rallied around him, regularly congregating at the hermitage to listen to his declarations.

Lam Van Quoc systematically combined political preaching with martial arts training for his followers. He instructed his disciples in various martial arts forms he had mastered during his youth, such as Shaolin kung fu (Thiếu Lâm Tự) and esoteric invulnerability rituals (phép sinh tà). He established a formal military-administrative hierarchy under his direct command, creating titles such as Military Strategist (Quân sư), Pacification Prince (Định Phan vương), Admiral (Đô đốc), Vanguard Commander (Tiên phuông), Imperial Brother (Ngự đệ), and Grand Marshal (Nguyên soái). Among his leadership cadre, Imperial Brother Ut (Ngự đệ Út) and

New Religious Phenomena in the Southwest Region During the First Half of the 20th Century – A Case Study of Dao Tuong in an Giang

Grand Marshal Nam (Nguyên soái Năm) became his most trusted lieutenants. Both were highly proficient in martial arts; legend holds that Marshal Nam wielded a ceremonial iron baton (cây gươm) engineered to “strike down corrupt monarchs in the vanguard, and execute rebel officials in the rear”. Furthermore, Ba Quoc successfully co-opted various local notables and village gentry in Tan Chau into his fold, including the village constable Hương tuần Hiếm, the village administrator Huynh Cong Minh, Mai Van Du, anh Mai Van Lang) (Hương tuần Huỳnh Công Minh, Mai Văn Du, và Mai Văn Lang). He also forged alliances with underground anti-French resistance networks operating within the Seven Mountains region.

This formidable force, composed primarily of robust and daring young peasants willing to sacrifice their lives for the cause, eventually aroused the suspicions of the French colonial authorities. Sensing the encroaching surveillance, Ba Quoc formally petitioned the colonial state to dispatch 36 of his elite disciples to the European front to fight against Nazi Germany. This petition served a dual strategic purpose: it was intended to overtly signal loyalty to the French administration while positioning his disciples as an internal fifth column for his planned domestic uprising. The French district chief in Tan Chau summarily rejected the proposal, dismissing Dao Tuong as delusional for claiming his disciples possessed magical invulnerability against modern firearms.

Subsequently, Dao Tuong suspected that the village constable, Hương tuần Hiếm, had acted as an informant, leaking his strategic designs to the French intelligence apparatus. Believing his entire plan had been compromised, a wave of panic gripped the leadership, prompting Dao Tuong to launch the armed insurrection ahead of schedule.

According to the revised plan, prior to the hour of mobilization, Dao Tuong gathered his adherents at the hermitage for a final sermon to galvanize their martial spirit. Breaking away from doctrines of Buddhist compassion, Ba Quoc openly declared: “O compatriots! Our nation has suffered under the humiliating rule of the French for nearly a century! Now, their karmic destiny is spent. Let us unite solidly behind this path to crush the invaders and restore happiness to all citizens.” He proclaimed himself Chính Vĩ Vương (The Righteous Sovereign King), asserting he possessed cosmic sorcery that would cause French bullets to miss their targets. This mass gathering alarmed local informants, who urgently alerted the French military command in Tan Chau.

Following the sermon, Dao Tuong initiated a flag-consecration ritual (lễ tế cờ), which required a living sacrifice for a blood-oath covenant. He immediately targeted the constable Hương tuần Hiếm, branding him a traitor to the Master and the Path who deserved to be sacrificed. The insurrection erupted on the night of February 26, 1939. Dao Tuong and his inner circle executed constable Hiếm and his wife, using their blood to consecrate the revolutionary banner, accompanied by thunderous cheers from the armed converts that echoed across the area.

Dressed in monastic robes and followed by 60 disciples with shaven heads, Dao Tuong marched directly toward the Tan Chau district headquarters. Along the banks of the Vinh An canal and the Tan Chau market waterfront, fleets of boats manned by sympathetic merchants and hidden followers stood ready to supply provisions. Recognizing the gravity of the uprising, the native district magistrate Nguyen Van Le, accompanied by a platoon of colonial forces led by the French gendarme Cò Laffont, advanced toward Long Phu commune to suppress the rebellion.

Colonial forces successfully surrounded the hermitage along the banks of the Vinh An canal. Magistrate Nguyen Van Le ordered Ba Quoc and his followers to lay down their weapons and dispatch a representative to Tan Chau for negotiations. These demands only heightened the religious fanaticism of the rebels. With soaring morale, Dao Tuong and his forces ignored calls for surrender and charged directly at the French lines. Magistrate Le ordered his troops to fire warning shots into the air and at the ground. However, this action inadvertently convinced the fanatical adherents that the master's invulnerability magic was working. The rebels rushed the French lines along the canal. Facing an imminent breach, the French forces opened direct fire into the charging ranks. The charging adherents were mowed down by modern French rifles. The clash ended when Ba Quoc was shot dead by Cò Laffont. Seeing their master fall despite his promises of invulnerability, the remaining followers panicked and fled.

The French authorities arrested nearly 30 individuals, including the grand marshal Năm and the military strategist Hương. The detainees were transferred to the Tan Chau district bureau for interrogation before being forwarded to the colonial tribunal in Can Tho. The French court sentenced all participants in the Dao Tuong uprising to hard labor (khô sai).

4.3. The Impacts of Dao Tuong on the Local Population

The rise and fall of Dao Tuong significantly impacted the political, cultural, and religious life of An Giang in the first half of the 20th century. While the insurrection was deeply wrapped in theocratic and mystical tones evident in its organization, weapons, and rhetoric, the movement's core objective was highly progressive: explicitly identifying French colonialism as the primary enemy. This invites a structural comparison between the Dao Tuong uprising and broader anti-French movements in An Giang during this era.

To date, outside of Tan Chau Xua by Huynh Minh and Nguyen Van Kiem, and Lich Su Dat An Giang by Son Nam, few secondary sources detail this uprising. In 1954, Nguyen Van Kiem returned to his native Tan Chau to teach. To develop a localized curriculum on regional history and geography, Kiem and Huynh Minh conducted extensive oral history collections and field research, publishing a local gazetteer in 1964. Given their heavy reliance on empirical fieldwork, their records carry a high degree of historiographical reliability.

New Religious Phenomena in the Southwest Region During the First Half of the 20th Century – A Case Study of Dao Tuong in an Giang

Analyzing the textual records reveals a logical correlation between Dao Tuong's rhetoric and the broader anti-colonial movements in An Giang. The most striking detail is Dao Tuong's proclamation on the eve of the insurrection on February 26, 1939, utilizing highly specific terms such as compatriots (đồng bào), nation (dân tộc), solidarity (đoàn kết), and collective happiness (hạnh phúc cho toàn dân). This terminology closely mirrors the anti-colonial rhetoric popularized after the rise of the Vietnamese Communist Party. While the overarching political vision of Dao Tuong remained rooted in monarchical restorationism (evident in his self-proclaimed titles of Minh Hoàng Quốc and Chính Vì Vương), the inclusion of these progressive concepts indicates that anti-colonial ideas driven by proletarian frameworks had subtly permeated local peasant consciousness and intersected with his movement.

Politically, Dao Tuong secured a distinct place in An Giang's history by mobilizing a marginalized peasant base into active resistance. His slogans shaped anti-French sentiments across Tan Chau, and his envisioned state provided a source of hope for both his followers and a broader segment of the local population. Ultimately, the failure of Dao Tuong's mystical resistance forced the An Giang peasantry to look past theocratic solutions and seek secular, revolutionary pathways toward national liberation.

Culturally and socially, Dao Tuong's operations were deeply practical and grounded in an empathetic understanding of peasant suffering. His proselytization relied on a dual-purpose strategy: dispensing traditional herbal medicine to heal the sick while lecturing on morality. Dao Tuong acted not only as a spiritual anchor but also as an economic coordinator, engaging in collective labor to support his followers. During this volatile era, joining a local religious sect became a vital social coping mechanism across the frontier zone, protecting poor peasants from social isolation and economic precarity. To successfully operate, an Ong Dao had to possess a specific combination of bravery, martial prowess, healing skills, and oratorical eloquence. These attributes offered tangible security to poor peasants, who willingly rallied around Dao Tuong to secure a baseline of economic, cultural, and spiritual stability.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the evidence presented, Dao Tuong was not an institutionalized, classical indigenous religion of the Southwest, but rather a localized religious phenomenon bound to a specific historical timeframe. Its constituent elements represented a syncretic patchwork of political, economic, cultural, and religious variables unique to the An Giang borderland. The root causes of its emergence stemmed directly from French colonial exploitation, shifting socio-religious dynamics, and the geopolitical complexities of the frontier zone. Ultimately, the rise and fall of Dao Tuong left an enduring imprint on the political landscape and popular culture of the An Giang peasantry during the first half of the 20th century.

REFERENCES

- 1) Toan, A. (1968). *Nep cu – Tin nguong Viet Nam (Quyen ha)* [Ancient customs – Vietnamese beliefs (Vol. 2)]. Nam Chi Tung Thu Publishing House.
- 2) Phan, A. (2008). *Nguoi Viet Nam Bo (tu goc nhin ton giao)* [The Southern Vietnamese people (From a religious perspective)]. In *Proceedings of the Southern Social Sciences Research Conference (December 2008)*. Institute for Sustainable Development of the.
- 3) Southern Region & University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City.
- 4) Nguyen, V. H. (2006). *Nua thang trong mien That Son* [Half a month in the Seven Mountains region]. Tre Publishing House.
- 5) Pham, B. H. (2007). *Nguoi Nam bo va ton giao ban dia* [The Southern people and indigenous religions]. Religion Publishing House.
- 6) Vo, T. H. (1997). *Tinh hình kinh tế An Giang thời Pháp thuộc, 1867 – 1929* [The economic situation of An Giang during the French colonial period, 1867 – 1929] (Doctoral dissertation). Institute of Social Sciences in the Southern Region.
- 7) Nguyen, V. K., & Huynh, M. (2003). *Tan Chau xua* [Ancient Tan Chau]. Thanh Nien Publishing House.
- 8) Nguyen, H. L. (2002). *Bay ngay trong Dong Thap Muoi* [Seven days in the Plain of Reeds]. Van Hoa Thong Tin Publishing House.
- 9) Son, N. (2003). *Tim hieu dat Hau Giang va Lich su dat An Giang* [Understanding the Hau Giang land and The history of An Giang land]. Tre Publishing House.
- 10) Tran, T. B. N. (1997). *Buu Son Ky Huong mot vien tuong xa hoi tích cực (Tay An – co tu o An Giang)* [Buu Son Ky Huong: A positive social vision (Tay An ancient pagoda in An Giang)]. *Xua & Nay Magazine*, 12/1997, p. 11.
- 11) Tran, T. B. N. (2008). *Su hoc hien dai va lich su xa hoi* [Modern historiography and social history]. *Journal of Social Sciences*, (10).
- 12) Phan, L. T. (1991). *Anh huong cua mot so Dao giao trong nong dan dong bang Song Cuu Long* [The influence of certain religious sects among peasants in the Mekong Delta]. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 9 (III).