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Project Abstract

This research project is a two-part study of Buddhism in contemporary Viet Nam. Part A is a theological study of Vietnamese Buddhism and appraising the religion as an indigenous, localised branch of Buddhism to Viet Nam. Part B will engage with secondary literature and primary sources to understand the relationship between state and faith in contemporary Viet Nam, before studying the development of Buddhism in Vietnamese society.

Research Objectives

My research will introduce a new paradigm into the fractured discourse on Buddhism in Vietnam by illustrating its indigenous nature, rather than relying on the studying of sects such as Zen Buddhism, the prevalent conversation in academic literature on Vietnamese Buddhism. The primary methodology employed by this project is case study, with the use of primary and secondary source documents.

Project Introduction

Viet Nam is one of the fastest developing countries in the world, steeped in two thousand years of Buddhist tradition that has permeated its culture. Today, Viet Nam is a one-party socialist state under the Communist Party of Viet Nam (CPV). While the Communist state and the CPV does not have an official religion, it fully acknowledges and embraces Buddhism as an important aspect of national identity and a force for nationalism.

The study of Vietnamese Buddhism has been largely guided by lived experiences and oral history accounts, rather than texts. Scholarship from the West has given privilege to Zen Buddhism in its study of Vietnamese Buddhism, due to a legacy of many established institutions of Buddhist academia on Zen, neglecting the Buddhism practised by the vast majority of the Vietnamese population. This project seeks to divert the scholarly focus on Zen by highlighting the indigeneity of Vietnamese Buddhism. Then, the situating of Buddhism in Vietnamese society will be studied.

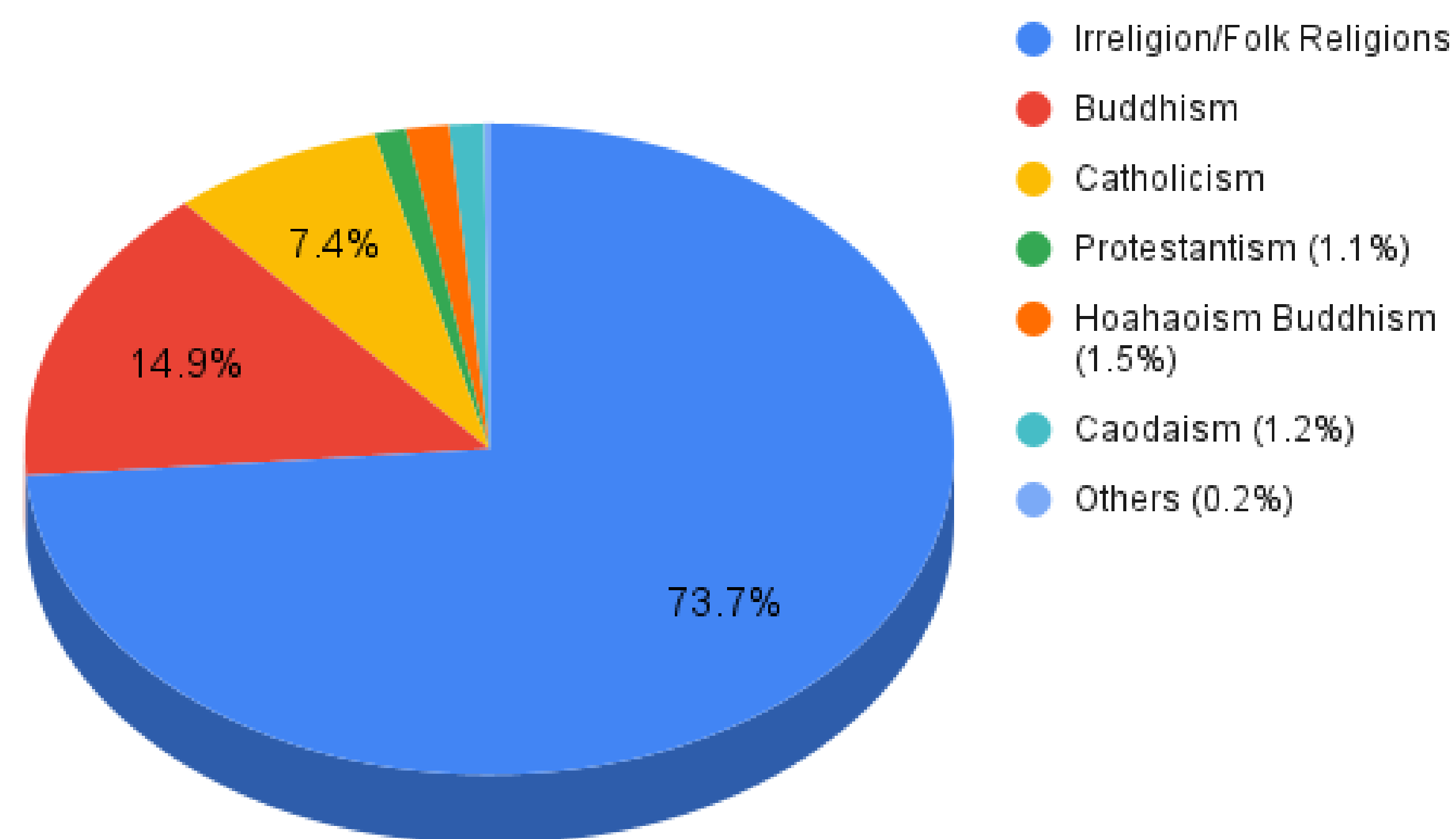
Research Questions

- 1) To what extent does Vietnamese Buddhism exist as an indigenous branch of Buddhism?**
- 2) How does the Communist Party of Viet Nam, and by extension the government, engage with Buddhism?**
- 3) To what extent does Vietnamese Buddhism influence Vietnamese society?**

Literature Review

Existing literature on Vietnamese Buddhism from Alexander Soucy (2012, 2022) in his books *Zen Conquests* and *The Buddha Side* established a connection between the development of contemporary Vietnamese society and specifically Zen Buddhism. In *Zen in Medieval Vietnam*, Cuong Tu Nguyen (1997) showed that Buddhism, mainly Zen, has a long history in Vietnam, prior to its emergence as a nation-state. This perspective is shared by DeVido (2009, 2012), and Anh (2018). However, these perspectives, by focusing on Zen Buddhism, missed Mahayana Buddhism, the primary Vietnamese Buddhist sect. Furthermore, research on Vietnamese Buddhism mainly focuses on the globalisation of Buddhism by the Vietnamese diaspora, led by Thich Nhat Hanh (Hoskins and Thien-Huong, 2017) (Soucy, 2017).

Demographics of Religion in Viet Nam (2022)



Pie chart showing the 2022 demographics of religions in Viet Nam. Buddhism is currently the country's second-largest religion. Source: General Statistics Office of Viet Nam

Pie Chart Analysis

The pie chart shows the breakdown of religions in Viet Nam. As of 2022, Buddhism surpassed Catholicism as the country's second-largest religion. A point of note is the annual survey of the population is unreliable when categorising religions. The survey relies on individuals 'registering' their faith with government offices, usually when applying for a national ID card. Many individuals 'unofficially' practice faiths. For civil servants, being non-religious is a requirement. Nevertheless, folk religions are practiced in the majority of households.

Research Conclusions

This research was of qualitative nature, relying on existing data and literature to synthesise its findings and conclusions. The lack of transparency and access to official government data and insufficient record keeping prevented the project from undertaking quantitative studies, such as tracking the development of Buddhism through the number of Buddhists or growth of Buddhist pagodas around Viet Nam. However, this project has demonstrated, through examining literature on the topic, the influence of Buddhism on Vietnamese culture and society, while also illustrating how the atheistic Communist government of Viet Nam interacts with the most prevalent faith in the country. The findings demonstrates the co-existence of state and faith in Communist countries.

Methodology Part A

Using the Georgetown University library and public libraries of local universities in Viet Nam, secondary literature on the main beliefs of Vietnamese Buddhism was selected. Then, a closed reading and analysis was performed to synthesise a complete picture on the basis of faith in Vietnamese Buddhism, the history of its development, and relevant syncretisms to other integrated faiths in Vietnamese culture. The combination of sources in Viet Nam with outside literature helped appraise Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhism as being indigenous to Viet Nam.

Methodology Part B

The two units of analysis for this section is the relationship between the state and Buddhism in Viet Nam; and the impact of Buddhism on Vietnamese culture and contemporary identity. The project utilises restricted-access state archives to access important government documents such as ministerial decrees and acts of parliament to understand how the Vietnamese state has interacted with Buddhism, which is backed up by a close reading of state-run newspapers through keyword-directed Google searches. Lastly, the Georgetown University library was used to access a variety of online articles. The time frame set was post-reformation Viet Nam (1986-present), defined as contemporary Viet Nam, when the state began tolerating religious practices. The study mainly observed the role of Buddhism on the media and cultural practices, selecting the relevant secondary texts that analysed those aspects in modern Viet Nam.

Case Study Conclusions

PART A: APPRAISING THE STATUS OF VIETNAMESE BUDDHISM

The predominant Buddhist sect in Viet Nam is Pure Land, an important component of the classic Mahayana Buddhist tradition found in East Asia and the Sinosphere. The chief characteristic of Pure Land is rebirth in the "pure land," a celestial realm in Buddha's field of influence. Vietnamese Buddhism, however, is a diverse syncretism of peripheral faiths to Buddhism, such as Confucianism, Taoism, and other folk beliefs such as ancestor-worshipping. The appellation of Pure Land or Mahayana Buddhism to Viet Nam is not certain due to this characteristic. Practices such as burning money, asking deities for material favours, and the use of shamans are all non-canonical in classic Buddhist traditions. As such, in the early 20th century, the Buddhist Revival Movement has emerged in Viet Nam, which sought to rid Vietnamese Buddhism of these non-canonical elements, regarded as "impure" and "incorrect" practices. Nevertheless, these practices continue to this day. In most Buddhist countries, these syncretic practices are not found, and in countries of the Sinosphere folk religions are separated, with their own dedicated temples. Vietnamese Buddhism is ethnic and indigenous to the population of Viet Nam, who 'localised' Buddhism by integrating local faiths. It is also worth noting that Mahayana Buddhism tends to enlarge the definition of the Buddhist upaya (Buddhist guidance paths) by integrating elements of local cultures. In the development of Mahayana Buddhism in China, Buddhist scholars speak of a 'Sinification' of Buddhism, where the moral and spiritual outlooks of Chinese civilisation (Confucianism and Daoism) had an influence on the doctrine of emptiness, an important tenet of belief in Buddhism.

PART B: SITUATING BUDDHISM IN CONTEMPORARY VIET NAM

Buddhism is regarded as an ally of the Vietnamese government, and the Vietnamese state uses Buddhism to galvanize nationalism, while the country's Buddhist legacy is marketed to outsiders as authentic Vietnamese culture. The state sees Buddhism as an indispensable part of shaping of Vietnamese identity, which involves integrating Socialist/Communist principles such as civic duty and nationalism with Buddhist values such as harmony and love, which the state regards as an essential mechanism in building a 'peaceful, tolerant society.' The Constitution and legal code of Viet Nam defines the authorities in charge of 'governing' Buddhism. The Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, the only officially recognised body representing Vietnamese Buddhists, has a constitution that closely models the language of the Vietnamese Constitution, laying the duties of its followers and principles of the Sangha, which integrates the above-mentioned Socialist/Communist principles, such as the patriotic duty of its followers. Through the freedoms granted to the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, the Communist state demonstrates to the world its commitment to religious freedom. Members of the Sangha are socially privileged. The indigenous form of Vietnamese Buddhism is manifested in everyday life and practices of the population. The most prevalent aspect is asking favours from deities and money-burning, which is done before important events to obtain good fortunes by families. Buddhist pagodas also house other deities in local folk religions, Confucianism, and Taoism, in addition to the Buddha. In popular media, Buddhist practices are depicted in movies as an integral part of stories or characters. Non-canonical practices that nevertheless make up Vietnamese Buddhism are accurately shown, with its significance well-developed.

Significance of Research

The research project contributes to a larger understanding of how religion binds together the social fabric of countries. The research project has also establishes a broad portrait and lays the groundwork for substantial future academic studies on the impact of Buddhism on contemporary culture, identity, and society in Viet Nam, a topic largely neglected in literature. The case study also shows how a Communist government can engage with religion as an ally of the state, being deployed to reinforce an imagined community. In Viet Nam, the state participates in 'Vietnamized' Buddhist practices by performing rituals during visits made by government officials. It also integrates and welcomes Buddhism as the culture and religion of the Vietnamese people, marketing it as such to outsiders. The conclusions of this study should inform how social scientists understand the relationship between Communist states and the country's predominant faith. In recent years, China's oppression of its Muslim population has come to light, warranting conversations on the relationship of state and faith in Communist countries. The findings from this research will present a more nuanced angle and challenge the monolithic portrayal of all Communist countries as violent oppressors of religion. However, it remains uncertain if the case study of Viet Nam's successful integration of religion into the state apparatus can successfully challenge academic and popular discourse on the relationship between Communism and religion.

Acknowledgements

I express deep gratitude to my mentor, Professor Patrick Laude of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, for his thoughtful guidance and dedication. I am grateful to the Center for Research and Fellowships for enabling me to participate in the Laidlaw Programme, and the Laidlaw Foundation for their generous funding of the project.

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