



The relation between Buddhist belief and socio-economic class in Hanoi, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism has taken deep roots in Vietnamese life for more than twenty centuries. Among one of the world's major religions, 14.9 percent of Vietnamese population are Buddhists¹ (Minh Ngoc Nguyen). This is irrevocably demonstrated by the traditional practice of worshiping, pagodas, and animal sacrifice. These activities persist in present times, and have become even more active since the end of French colonial times. Nevertheless, not all Vietnamese are Buddhists. Several occasions of personal observation have led me to question what the impact of socio-economic class on Buddhist beliefs in Hanoi, Vietnam, might be and this is the question I will examine in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

Born in a devout Buddhist family, I have been exposed to various Buddhist practices from a very young age. My father belonged to Vietnam Young Entrepreneurs Association² where he held the secretary position. I have often had the opportunity to visit pagodas with government officials, those who are deemed as being part of the Vietnamese upper class. On 19th March 2022, I had the chance to go on a field trip organized for Vietnam Young Entrepreneurs' children that was guided by Man Ngoc Anh, president of the Hanaka group.³ He led us from pagoda to pagoda, exploring the cultural and traditional aspects of Bac Ninh, and carried out rituals smoothly without any help from the monks.⁴ Reflecting on the occasion, and in the attempt to find some trends, I compared Man Ngoc Anh with my acquaintances who held different positions and reached different levels of education in terms of their Buddhist faith and practice. My aunt, who is a butcher, did not believe at all in Buddhism; my uncle, who is a teacher in a rural school, to some extent subscribed to Buddhism. Based on what I observed of these different people's experiences, I reached the hypothesis that the more well-off Vietnamese

¹ The data was carried out in 2019, published by Statista
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1108165/vietnam-share-of-religions/>

² The initiative aims to accommodate the young entrepreneur movement and unite, gather, and enhance networks to promote businesses in Vietnam. The Association has covered 63/63 provinces of Vietnam with over 11000 members.

³ The head of Bac Ninh Young Entrepreneur Association, a northern branch of Vietnam Young Entrepreneur Association. Bac Ninh used to be the place where my father worked, also the supposed place of the first introduction of Buddhism in Vietnam

⁴ Usually, for ritual activities, Vietnamese people will depend on monks. People who can do rituals without any help are people who have deep bonds with Buddhism, spend time practicing and learning every practice by heart

people are, the more religious they become. This curiosity led to the desire of discovery. Thus, I spent more than three months of summer 2022 trying to determine whether or not my hypothesis was correct, the findings of which are discussed in this final paper. The paper is divided into four sections, each elaborating on different aspects and factors in order to determine whether socio-economic class affects the strength in the faith in Buddhism in Vietnam.

Section 1 provides an overview of key terms, insights, and works in relation to the paper. It explores Buddhism through a study of its background, its history, core values, and its influence both globally and in a Vietnamese context. Furthermore, section 1 tries to reach a definitive approach to define a socio-economic class in Vietnam with reference to different scholarly works.

Section 2 clarifies the historical development of Buddhism in Vietnam since its very first introduction to the country, notably through sea routes from India. In addition, it establishes the relationship between governments and Buddhism's growth, illustrating its intimate bonds with the contemporary government officials' interest and policies. In this section I show that Buddhism was, is, and continues to be, heavily intertwined with these upper class's decisions about religion.

Section 3 discusses various primary resources accumulated through the research process in order to support the thesis statement, including an account of field observation, interviews with various subjects, and pictures and practice in multiple pagodas. During my research, I conducted eight interviews with a range of people including strangers, acquaintances, and Buddhist monks. In addition, I visited three pagodas around Hanoi to observe participants' behaviors and beliefs, and lived for six-days in Thien Tue pagoda .

Section 4 summarizes the paper and includes a final conclusion after three-month research. This section also considers the limitations encountered during the process of gathering and analyzing data, and considers paths for future research.

Methodology

My research is based on an integration of historical analysis and ethnographic methods. In particular, I referenced numerous articles extracted from Google Scholars, especially in Section 2, where the history of Vietnamese Buddhism was taken into consideration. Notably, it is more

reasonable to depend on already published scholar works for reliably certified information.

Moreover, the use of such works can substantiate my analysis by cross checking my findings.

Additionally, the primary data collected for this study was based on ethnographic research, the study and representation of culture whereby researchers live with and live like those who are studied. Through this type of research, the collection of information from participants of Buddhists and non-Buddhists allows for a better understanding of the lifestyle and practices of the Vietnamese community regarding Buddhist practices. My ethnographic work consists of nine informal interviews,⁵ and participation observation. I selected acquaintances like Mr. Vu Tuan Dung, Ms. Vu Dinh Luyen, and Mr Nguyen Van Hanh for interviews based on their diversity in class and experiences with Buddhism. These participants are people I have close connections with, so it was easier and more comfortable to discuss this topic where they opened up about their identity. Nevertheless, half of my interviewees were strangers I randomly encountered during field trips to various pagodas, who later agreed to assist in the research. Their responses eliminate chances of actively directing the paper to the desired answers so as to limit the possibility of researcher bias. For a more valid opinion, I interviewed two monks in Hanoi through my father's connections. Monks in Vietnam are deemed teachers of life, since they have a close relation between Buddhism and people in general. They are the mediators to lead people to religion. Therefore, their experience is broad, and their viewpoint on the relations between socio-economic class and Vietnamese Buddhism results from their diverse encounters with people.

I used primarily face-to-face calling through the Zoom platform as it was most convenient for my interviewees. The face-to-face calls allowed me to see the nuances in every answer, note the tone of their voice, facial expressions, and emotions. Because it was crucial to explain statements in order to get the intended message across, I often asked additional and follow up questions for clarification.

In addition to the interviews, I incorporated observations in three pagodas around Hanoi, Vietnam -Tran Quoc Pagoda, Van Nien Pagoda and Tao Sach pagoda,⁶ as well as conducting participant observation⁷ in a pagoda located in Hanoi. This allowed for real integration in the

⁵ For the interview questions, refer to Appendix A.

⁶ Prestigious pagodas that are located around West lake, the biggest freshwater lake in Hanoi, Vietnam

⁷ The chance when researchers go native, live and act like the studied, performing roles both as participants and observers

world of Buddhism so that I could have a more thorough and unfiltered understanding in addition to my consultation of secondary sources.

VIETNAMESE BUDDHISM: DEFINITION AND KEY TERMS

Buddhism

When it comes to the world's largest religions, Buddhism is clearly on the list with 481 million Buddhists worldwide, representing approximately 7 percent of the world population (Pew Research Center). Its origin can be traced back to Northern India in 563-483 BCE where it was founded by Siddhartha Gautama, who later became known as Lord Buddha. His life and path to nirvana have been recounted in numerous ways through a variety of sources including books,⁸ scholarly articles,⁹ and film.¹⁰ Through different life vicissitudes and years of searching for non-suffering, Buddha became a man of wisdom, having attracted many followers who seek to emulate the intelligence he demonstrated until his death.

Buddhism's influence is undeniable. Since its establishment within the first 300 years, missionaries helped rapidly spread Buddhism outside of India. First introduced to Vietnam around the 2nd century AD, Buddhism has shown a clear path of development throughout time, with close attachment to the contemporary government's growth. Despite the cult of prevailing beliefs such as Confucianism, Buddhism survived in Vietnam and has been a significant part of the spiritual fabric of Vietnamese culture until today.

HISTORY OF VIETNAMESE BUDDHISM

Given the details which will be elaborated below, I conclude that the general trend of Buddhism development heavily coincides with the political climate of Vietnam. The following verses are inscribed on big bells hung at every pagoda, which demonstrates the interconnection between Buddhism and the contemporary Vietnamese regime.

If the throne prospers,

Then the way of Buddhism will be eased

If Buddhism and King's rights are strengthened

Dharma Wheel will move naturally

⁸ Examples can be "The life of Buddha" (Edward J. Thomas, 2013), "The life of the Buddha" (Patrica M. Herbert, 1993).

⁹ Various papers have been published in many famous publishers such as Khan Academy, Britannica, and The Buddha Foundation

¹⁰ Examples can be "A journey of Samyak Buddha" (2013), "Buddha" (1961).

The verse expresses Buddhism's reliance on government's interests and policies. It distinctly demonstrates that the King (metaphor of "the throne") dictated the transition of Buddhism, whether to hamper or accommodate its growth. Also, if the King happened to be religious, then the ship of Buddhism would drift smoothly towards its destination without being forced.

Buddhism's entry to Vietnam

(1st to 10th century A.D)

Vietnam's central location facilitated the spread of Buddhism to the country. Situated on the Indochinese Peninsula, Vietnam is a geographical dot between China and India. In order to reach China by sea routes, the passengers had to pass Northern Vietnam (Asian Map, World Atlas). As a result, there has been conflict among scholars concerning the initial introduction of Buddhism to Vietnam, whether it was from China or the Indian subcontinent. In either case, researchers came to the consensus that by the 2nd century AD, Buddhism had clearly established itself in Vietnam, centering its activity in Luy Lau, Bac Ninh Province. Buddhism was inactive during this time, for the most part due to the lack of encouragement from the authorities to spread its spirits.

Indian traders set out in their boats, taking advantage of the Southwestern monsoon, sailing towards Southern Asia to Vietnam. When coming back, they had to wait for the Northeastern monsoon the following year. During a year's stay, they had enough time to trade and gradually, deeply influence the host's production, culture, daily life and religion... Indian merchants often traveled in the company of Buddhist monks, who would pray for peace, a smooth passage on the seas, and good trade. (T. T. Nguyen and Hoàng, 10).



World Atlas

Buddhism Ngo to Tran Dynasty

(10th to 14th century AD)

Buddhism in Vietnam experienced a growth spurt between 940-1570 (Kiernan, 17). After gaining independence from Chinese feudal domination with the victorious Bach Dang battle in 938, “the door was left open for the encroachment of Buddhism orthodoxy in Vietnam” (T. T. Nguyen and Hoàng, 75). Three important factors accounted for this situation: the need to build and manage the country on an ideological basis, the incomplete development of Confucianism, and the active participation of Buddhist monks in enhancing national liberation. Though not declared as Vietnam’s official religion, Buddhism was understood to be its foremost organized religion (Xuan Thanh Nguyen, 21) and many sources have clearly documented the creation of Buddhist centers, namely Dai La, Hoa Lu and Luy Lau.

Since Buddhism gradually penetrated into the society, the royal court supported it through different means. After becoming king, Dinh Tien Hoang standardized the different grades for monkhood in 971, which was regarded as broad support for Buddhism in the eyes of the general public. The Ly Dynasty followed similar policies, as many monks became advisors to Dinh and Ly Kings with tremendous influence on politics. While it did not fully flourish until later times, empirical historical evidence implied the noticeable development with the existence of numerous pagodas during the tenth century as well as people’s initial respect and practice towards the religion.

The Ly Dynasty marked the progressive stability of Vietnam due to a consolidated state apparatus, various encouraging programs, and the introduction of the first written law. Although Confucianism gradually spread among the lives of Vietnamese, Buddhism “rose to unprecedented levels” (T. T. Nguyen and Hoàng, 89). Sutras were widely printed, pagodas were built across the country and Buddhist followers increased remarkably. Pagodas were built across the country. Monks were esteemed and held great prestige in society. The Lý dynasty was “the first Vietnamese ruling power to make a religious declaration for the Vietnamese nation state regarding Buddhism as its official religion.” (Jason Moris, 28).

All the Ly Kings venerated Buddhism... When a king follows Buddhist practice, it is natural that the whole royal bureaucratic strata do the same...Its influence spreads in every region of the country. In 1010, after the transfer of the capital to Thang Long, Ly Thai To ordered the buildings of a series of pagodas and promulgated a decree encouraging citizens to become monks. (T. T. Nguyen and Hoàng, 90-91)

This deep commitment persisted during the next ruling family, the Tran Dynasty, after Tran Canh was overthrown in 1226. If the Ly Dynasty was representative of a growing period, the Tran Dynasty reached the perfect peak in every aspect (national spirits heightened after victories over Monglo invaders, industry and trade scored new progress, regular examinations guaranteed the quality of public functionaries). As stated in *Dai Viet su ki toan thu*,¹¹ the administrative apparatus was perfected from the center to the villages. At the same time when Confucianism ideology increased in its social status, Buddhism conserved its prosperity until the 14th century under connection with Confucianism.

Buddhism from the Later Le to Tay Son Dynasty

(15th to 18th century AD)

The event of Le Loi pacifying the country against Ming Chinese invaders and proclaiming himself emperor reflected an era of changing attitudes. The local hero, Le Loi, had shifted the country’s focus towards Confucianism, which left Buddhism unprotected. Hong Duc code included no mention of Buddhism.¹² “Buddhism had clearly been forced to yield its place to

¹¹ “*Complete Annals of Đại Việt*” The official national chronicle of the Vietnamese state

¹² National Court of Criminal Law or Le Dynasty of Criminal Law, is the official code of Dai Viet state in the early Le Dynasty.

Confucianism” as various Le kings subscribed to the pragmatism of this particular set of beliefs (T. T. Nguyen and Hoàng, 165-66).

The prolonged civil war between the Trinh and Nguyen families “constituted a good factor conducive to the people’s sympathy for the ideas and sentiments of Buddhism” (T. T. Nguyen and Hoàng, 177), leading it to grow at the grassroots level. From north to south, the cultural and spiritual worldview of people was deeply formed by the Buddhist premises of suffering, *karma* and the afterlife. However, Buddhism remained largely unsupported by national rulers and continued its decline for the next decades.

Buddhism under the Nguyen Dynasty

(19th century)

Unlike previous dynasties, the Nguyen dynasty laid its foundation by seeking help from an outside expansionist without achieving national liberation against foreign invasion. Therefore, its power had become “unrelated to and isolated from people right at its birth” (T. T. Nguyen and Hoàng, 223). Incapable of attaining steadfast unity, it adopted centralized arbitrariness to retain its certain influence, even in the field of religion. One prime example was that the Nguyen Dynasty sought to make Confucianism the sole national official belief at the cost of Buddhism.

By and large, the Nguyen tried to limit Buddhism growth by further managing Buddhists monks and nuns, forcing them to join social work, minimizing pagoda-building.... Together with the promulgation of policies to control Buddhism, the Nguyen Dynasty involved all the court officials and many Confucianism scholars in criticizing Buddhism with a view to toppling this religion with regards to religious doctrine, ... claiming it to be useless and unrealisable. (T. T. Nguyen and Hoàng , 225).

Nevertheless, Buddhism did not perish, but stayed steady. In fact, Buddhism doctrine still penetrated the lives of people where Confucianism did not reach, even in places where Confucianism was widespread.

Buddhism under French colonial times

(Second half of 19th century to first half of 20th century)

The inception of the world's first notions of capitalism, modernisation, and imperialism paralleled the reformation in Buddhism’s beliefs, especially in Vietnam “where it rehabilitated itself and regained a place in history” (T. T. Nguyen and Hoàng, 260). To adapt to a

rapidly-changing world, Buddhism “needed to be reformed into a force that would both inspire and improve society” (Buswell and Lopez, 2567). Given the colonization of France during the late 19th century, Vietnamese lost its land, freedom, and ultimate independence. And Vietnamese Buddhists, given that they were after all Vietnamese, shared the same agony and ideology of pain and compassion.

Taking into account these factors, this revival of Buddhism was special. Pagodas carried out dual functions as both spiritual centers and secret meeting places for the planning of uprisings, rendering them famous for the first time. Buddhist monks were also “formidable patriotic fighters” (T. T. Nguyen and Hoàng 263). After the colonial phase when Vietnam began the process of modernisation, Buddhist movements centralized from rural, mountainous areas to modern, urban areas, which ensured broader impacts and facilitated easier communication.

Since Vietnam’s independence in 1975, the country has developed under communist rule, which sustained the steady development and influence of Buddhism. Notably, in order to unify Buddhists “in a manner compatible with the one-party government that had reunified Vietnam” (Moris, 32), Buddhism’s major branches started to operate under a unified institutional voice throughout the country, and this has lasted until today.

FIRST-HAND OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS

Class

Class, or social stratification, in Vietnam is a subject that has been treated by various scholars. Given the changes that occurred after the Vietnam War, the socialist-oriented market economy has fundamentally improved Vietnamese lives. However, at the same time, it generated problems in creating a concrete definition for different socioeconomic classes, and an accurate measurement of wealth and income differences is not easily attainable. Multiple researchers¹³ have attempted to resolve such differences by depending on economic status (property, income), political status (power), or social status (such as prestige). Some examine the spending level of each citizen. However, this paper will tackle the issue by examining income ranges in Vietnam and how they may relate to Buddhism. The main reason was due to its transparency, attainability, and convenience compared to other approaches.

¹³ Notable examples can be Bui The Cuong, Heinz-Herbert Noll (1997), Tran Huu Quang, Le Minh Ngoc, Do Thai Dong

This definition depends largely on the work “Social class based on income, 1998-2008” by Bui The Cuong and Truong Si Anh. After investigating living standards data published by the General Statistics Office in three years 1998, 2008, and 2018, the two researchers proposed a comprehensive classification by using k-means clustering, whereby the monthly income of investigated people was divided into distinct six groups of upper, upper middle, middle middle, lower middle, upper lower, lower lower class. The average income falls approximately into the average of the given data. Using a similar fashion to analyze statistics updated in 2021, I have finalized the following table.

TT	Social class	Urban	In general
		Average income*	Average income*
1	upper	24,209	26,044
2	upper middle	9838,4	9780,1
3	middle middle	5469,2	5316,3
4	lower middle	3089,9	2972,2
5	upper lower	1571,9	1505,9
6	lower lower	747, 349	712,176
General		6.203,3	4.249,8

**Measured in 1,000 Vietnamese Dong*

Given the interview reasons and definition of class explained above,¹⁴ I selected seven interviewees for further information and sharing about beliefs, practice, and opinions between socio-economic class and Buddhism beliefs in Vietnam. The table below provides an overview about the background of interviewees for comfortable backing when needed.

¹⁴ For reasons, refer to Methodology in the Introduction. For definition of class in Vietnam, refer to Class in Vietnamese Buddhism: Definition and Key terms

Interviewee	Age	Education/ Job	Monthly Income **	Class
Vu Tuan Dung	40-50	PhD in Economics	~ 80,000, 000 VND	Upper class
Luong Thuy Ngan	20-30	Master	~ 24,000,000 VND	Upper class
Vu Dinh Luyen	60-75	Doctorate	~ 20,000,000 VND	Upper middle class
Nguyen Van Hanh	50-60	7/10 *	~ 6,000, 000 VND	Middle middle
Nguyen Chi Binh	20-30	Bachelor	~ 3,000,000 VND	Lower middle
Nguyen Dinh Phuong	60-75	Doctorate	~ 44,000,000 VND	Upper class
Monk Thich Minh Tam	30-40	Doctorate	N/A	N/A
Monk Thich Nhat Hanh	20-30	Doctorate	N/A	N/A

* The outdated education during the Vietnam War was only having 10 grades instead of 12 grades like modern times due to the difficulties of education. The class of 1-7 was the standard level for the general public.

** Monthly income was self-reported by interviewees.

Given the historical background elaborated in the previous section, it is reasonable to assume the great popularity of Buddhism in Vietnam. Mr Vu Dinh Luyen, 58 years old, has a doctorate in Mechanical Construction and has clearly expressed a belief in Buddhism. Yet, he differentiated between conformity and belief. While the former stems from long-standing traditions, the latter is strengthened based on different factors. Generally it is the breadwinner's religion and level of literacy that determine the situation, according to him. When asked to elaborate on this argument, he revealed that the breadwinner has a significant role as the "captain" on the family "ship" towards any destination he directs. As for the level of literacy, Mr

Luyen has the same mindset as Mr Phuong, an electrical engineer; they believed the level of literacy can impact choices of religions. Mr Phuong provided a more detailed answer by giving examples of Japanese people: “You can see, Japan - the most educated country in this world, has lots of pagodas and places of worship.”

Beliefs

Falling into the category of “middle class”, Mr. Luyen demonstrated a certain belief in Buddhism. In particular, he subscribes to the notion of “The Three Universal Truths”, “The Four Noble Truths”, and “The Noble Eightfold Path”,¹⁵ but strongly dislikes the excessive practice of Buddhism in present times. Mr. Luyen rated his faith in the law of cause and effect - one of the core values of Buddhism - as “9”, but selected “4” to rate his belief in Samsara, spirits, and the afterlife, since he had “observed no such cases”. His faith in the law of cause and effect exists because of his prior exposure to different religious books during his time in Russia as an undergraduate in architecture twenty years ago. Mr. Luyen did not acknowledge the existence of such belief until he was forced to confine himself in a room due to sickness. During that time he explored different notions of Buddhism and Taoism, and Catholicism which he found relatable. In particular, it is the ultimate end of being a complete person who fulfilled a life of great dignity. Nevertheless, when it comes to a daily practice of Buddhism in this day and age, he deems it unnecessary at the cost of daily labor, time, and resources. The act of building pagodas, according to him, may cause people to indulge in impractical activities that could even lead them to forget their families, jobs, and communities.

In contrast, Mr. Nguyen Van Hanh, a 62 year-old school guard from the middle class, displayed no depth of knowledge of Buddhism. He professed himself “half religion, half life” as his mother practiced Catholicism and his father was an atheist. Mr. Hanh simply believed in the construction of good people of all religions, having heard Buddhist terms and ideology, but unable to express in length. “By myself I acknowledge this, but it is hard to say it out loud”. This situation can be reasonably explained by the deep-rooted impacts of Buddhism in the Vietnamese mindset, and “the bread-winner decisions and level of literacy” according to what Mr. Luyen had previously indicated.

¹⁵ These are the The Basic Teachings of Buddha which are core to Buddhism extracted from The Buddhist core values and perspectives for protection challenges: Faith and protection

Mr. Vu Tuan Dung - the director of Viettel Binh Phuoc, the southern branch of Viettel telecommunications group - earns around 80,000,000 VND (approximately 3,397 USD) on a monthly basis. He holds two master's degrees, and this puts him in the "upper class" classification.

However, his answers were far different from what I expected from someone in this class, as he revealed having experienced "the spirits" in his real life. He committed to Buddhism in all aspects, which was reflected in his passion in talking about various ideologies in Buddhism. During our talk, he showed profound knowledge about the Three Universal Truth, The Four Noble Truths, and The Eightfold Path¹⁶, all of which are the core values of Buddhism.

Practice

On the one hand, Mr. Hanh and Mr. Luyen both keep their visits to the pagoda to a minimum. Mr. Luyen often visits pagodas when there are special occasions in Vietnam, such as Tet holiday, Mid-Autumn Festival, etc. On occasions when Mr. Luyen wants to find peace and recollection, pagodas are the places he chooses to go to. Yet, he insisted his adversity towards excessive worship by stating that: "a stick of incense is sufficient, just to show your sincerity." Even during important occasions, he turned to his family elders instead of inviting monks to conduct ceremonies as is commonly done. Mr. Hanh visited pagodas during the Tet holiday, and when the head of his village demanded. Both claimed to have never been vegetarian, which is one of the core practices of Buddhism.

On the other hand, those I interviewed from the upper class displayed a much deeper bond to such practices. As Mr. Dung chants every day and visits pagodas on a weekly basis. Mr. Phuong however, carries out worship by himself instead of referring to monks. The frequency of pagoda visits and worship differed greatly from the general norm. Moreover, Mr. Phuong and Mr. Dong follows a vegetarian diet for 7 days per a month, specifically the 5th, 7th, 15th, 17th, 21st, 23rd, 27th which are known to be days of penitence for your past sins in Buddhism.

On one of my weekly trips to the pagodas around Hanoi, I met a woman who demonstrated decent knowledge of Buddhism evident by her observed actions at Thien Tue pagoda. After some time of explaining and negotiating, Ms Luong Thuy Ngan, 28 year-old, agreed to an interview. Despite her young age, she was privileged due to her family's good financial foundation, who owned an organic foods business. She stated that she visits pagodas every

¹⁶ The Buddhist core values and perspectives (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee, December 2012)

week to listen to the Dharma, to read Sutra, and, in her own words, “to find inner peace, and freedom in your mind.”.



Tran Quoc Pagoda, location of interview with Mr.Ngan (Photographed by: The author)

Opinions on the relation between socio-economic class and Buddhism

With some personal connections, I received the opportunity to interview Monk Thich Minh Nhat, the head of Non nuoc Pagoda in Soc Son.¹⁷ During his six years of monkhood, he has met different types of people of all classes. With this in mind, he confirmed that there is a relation between socio-economic class and Buddhism. What is more remarkable is the way he accounted for this situation:



Non Nuoc Pagoda (Photographed by: The author)

“With reference to your question about the relationship between socio-economic class and faith in Buddhism, I might say Buddhism beliefs may be strong among affluent people.

¹⁷ A district on the outskirts of Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam

Nevertheless, you have to know that there are two approaches to their religions: negative and positive. What I mean by negative is that rich people become more religious as they want to increase their wealth and position in society. After a while of worshipping, they feel that Buddha is helping them because of their sincerity. As a result, they spend more money for ¹⁸towards worshipping Buddha in fear of losing what they have. However, keeping in mind that mental life is heavily intertwined with physical life. When people have enough, they demand profound happiness other than physical material goods. Therefore, they turn to Buddhism as a way to rescue their mind, free their body and release their jealousy”

When asked why lower people would not choose Buddhism instead of the affluent, Monk Thich Minh Nhat gave a convincing answer. “In Vietnam, we put much emphasis on the outside value, which appears unaffordable to many people. Maybe these poor people acknowledge the existence of Buddhism, they may well believe a little, but they lack the resources to dive into this world. Their current situations consume all their available time and money to pay attention to other religious worlds. Some people keep their faith down until they have enough financial conditions to go to pagodas, to spare time listening to monks to become more religious.”

One of the most significant observations was in relation to the types of people who would go to these pagodas. At 7:30 pm every day, the monks would carry out chanting for the general public. They chose various notable Sutras, namely the Medicine Sutra¹⁹, and Repentance ritual of the emperor of Liang²⁰. Each day one chapter would be read with participation from over 20 local people. They are called into two categories, mostly the elderly and the well-off with good positions in society. A head of a village, an engineer or sometimes a doctor would come to Thien Tue pagoda in the evening to chant.

¹⁸ Worshiing is considered one of Buddhism practice, to demonstrate sincerity from Buddhists. In fact, monks do not

¹⁹ The sutra emphasizes faith in the assistance of the **Medicine**

²⁰ The highest book for repentance purposes in Buddhism



The inauguration of the pagoda two years ago with the head of nun speaking, Phatgiao.org.vn



Some pictures of Thien Tue pagoda I took myself



Images of Buddha and daily practice at the pagoda (Facebook: Chua Thien Tue)

**Due to privacy concerns, I was not allowed to take pictures of practice during my time.*

Therefore, I have asked permission to use images from social media instead, which pretty much convey the spirit of such practice.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Summary

From the given answers, it can be concluded that the beliefs to some extent vary due to class, as class may lead to life disparities that effects the viability to practice and participate. These factors might in turn strengthen their faith over the course of time, given the above-mentioned demonstration.

Limitations

Due to the intimacy inherent in interviews, it was difficult to gather people from all different social strata in order to ensure a diverse and comprehensive quality in answers. Given also the sensitive character of dividing people into class and income level , the rejection to interviews was inevitable by members of the community. Hanoi's population is around 8.33 million people according to Hanoi Government 2022 data. Therefore, the small scale of this research prevents it from establishing a firm connection of the impacts of social economic class on Buddhism beliefs , but instead confirms a correlation.

In addition, other factors which can also be considered when it comes to Buddhist belief are not fully taken into account in this study such as: Family traditions, breadwinner's decisions and age. These factors are acknowledged, but not completely understood, through the research as there were no consistent findings on the scale of this research. While, these factors might complement and cooperate together to form a person's religious path, Therefore, assuming class as the driving force in terms of belief in Buddhism in Vietnam means ignoring other elements.

Surveys might facilitate presenting data in a quantitative approach, but it can lead to incorrect assumptions and conclusions given these uncertainties as to (1) decide and gather the right ratio of the poor: the average: the privileged; (2) the inclusiveness and responsiveness inherent in the questions; (3) the validity of data due to the general mental barriers to hold back

information; (4) the scale of population in order not to overgeneralize the results. Therefore, I did not include a survey for a start. However, in the course of this research experience, surveys might assist in telling stories that cannot be expressed in words, but in numbers.

Future considerations

Given the limitations described, there are some considerations for future work. Firstly, the implementation of quantitative approach by using survey. Although this method means numerous shortcomings, it can help present data in objective visual graphs elucidated from the responses. Moreover, surveys can help gather a great number of responses. Surveys are convenient through the platform of Google Forms, which reduces the margin of error gathered from a small population through personal interviews.

Moreover, to really understand the relationship between class and Buddhism in Vietnam is to understand its two-way impact. In other words, belief in Buddhism holds the possibility of strengthening Vietnamese people's position in society. This paper simply explores only a one-dimensional correlation.

Last but not least, there was not enough room for respondents to answer in depth about their connection with Buddhism through factors other than class. This shadows a comprehensive view on the relationship between class and Buddhism, since class is not always the case. In future works, it is desirable to redesign the process of gathering data and allow for other accounts.

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Appendix A.

Interview questions:

1. List of questions for people

Basic information: (background)

- What is your name?
- How old are you?
 - + <6
 - + 6-18
 - + 18-25
 - + 25-55
 - + >55
- What level of education have you achieved?
 - + High school
 - + University/ College
 - + Masters
 - + Doctorate
- What is your job?
- Range of income:
 - + <150 USD/ month
 - + 150-600 USD/ month
 - + 600-2000 USD/ month
 - + > 2000 USD/ month

Question about faith:

- Do you have faith in Buddhism?
 - **Yes: Why**
 - + Is there anyone in your family who has faith?



- + When did you first have faith in religion? (Is it a family tradition or is it a moment of realization) → do not go straight into the bracket
- + Rate from 1-10 your belief in the afterlife, the law of cause and effect, the souls that live on?

No: Why Not?

- + Is there anyone in your family who has faith?
- + When did you first have faith in religion? (Is it a family tradition or is it a moment of realization) → do not go straight into the bracket
- + Rate from 1-10 your belief in the afterlife, the law of cause and effect, the souls that live on?

- Do you visit a pagoda?

- **Yes: Why**

- + An influential pagoda experience you have?
- + How many times (yes)

- **No: why**

- What are the core values of Buddhism according to you?

- + **Positive:**

How do you practice these values (chant, etc)

- + **Negative:**

Why do you think so

- What do you think about the act of presenting goods, building pagodas, and contributing to the Buddhist community?

- + Is it necessary or is it a waste? Why
- + Do you directly do this?

Question about a particular action:

- Do you believe in the souls living among us? Have you ever experienced a visit to the soul? (How would you react in that situation?)
- Have you ever experience a situation where you felt someone come to visit you
- If there was a big black butterfly flying and dogs are barking at you, how would you interpret the situation?

- If you sense a dangerous situation, what would you do to feel safer? (that line of chant - use)

2. List of questions for the monks:

Basic information: (background)

- What is your name?
- How old are you?
 - + 6-18
 - + 18-25
 - + 25-55
 - + >55
- What level of education have you achieved?
 - + High school
 - + University/ College
 - + Masters
 - + Doctorate
- How long have you decided to leave the real world and become a monk?
 - + <2 years
 - + 2-5 years
 - + 5-8 years
 - + >8 years

Question about knowledge:

- What are the core values of Buddhism according to you?

Question about Vietnamese community

- What is a religious/faithful person? (particular action, faith and so forth)
- Do you think that class and socio-economic status affects the belief in Buddhism?
 - + Yes:
Explain :why do you think so? How? (Your frequency of meeting high-class people, your particular occurrence)
 - + No:
Explain why you think so? How?

Appendix B.

Participant's Consent form

Study Title: <i>The relation between Buddhist belief and socio-economic class in Hanoi, Vietnam.</i>
Researcher: Anh Thu Vu
Version Date: July 15th 2022

Participation is voluntary

It is your choice whether or not to participate in this research. If you choose to participate, you may change your mind and leave the study at any time. Refusal to participate or stopping your participation will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of this research is to verify and understand the existence of the class distinction in terms of belief in Buddhism in Vietnam.

How long will I take part in this research?

Your participation will involve one interview with the possibility of 1-2 more follow-up interviews. I will also be attending pagodas where I will observe, participate and take notes.

What can I expect if I take part in this research?

As a participant, you will take part in interviews and be present at places where I conduct my observations.

What are the risks and possible discomforts?

If you choose to participate, I foresee there not being any risks or discomforts.

Are there any benefits from being in this research study?

We do not expect any direct benefits to you from your taking part in this research.

Will I be compensated for participating in this research?

You will not be compensated for participating in this research.

If I take part in this research, how will my privacy be protected? What happens to the information you collect?

The data we collect will be used purely for the purpose of research with no further utilization.

The information with your name on it will be analyzed by the researcher and may be reviewed by a Polygence mentor checking to see that the research is done properly.

If I have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research study, who can I talk to?

The researcher for this study is Vu Anh Thu who can be reached at camelliavu.work@gmail.com. The Polygence mentor is Dr. Lulie El-Ashry, Harvard University who can be reached at lulie@polygence.org if you have questions, concerns, or complaints:

- If you would like to talk to the research mentor,
- If you think the research has harmed you,
- If you wish to withdraw from the study,
- If your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team,
- If you cannot reach the research team,
- If you want to talk to someone besides the research team, or
- If you have questions about your rights as a research participant.

I have read the information in this consent form. All my questions about the research have been answered to my satisfaction.

SIGNATURE

Your signature below indicates your permission to take part in this research. You will be provided with a copy of this consent form.

Printed name of participant

Signature of participant

Date