Hà Tiên:

An Overlooked Conduit for Chinese Cultural Transmission into Vietnam, 1700-1870

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Abstract

The Guangji fotang in Hà Tiên was the first permanent Buddha Hall (C: *fotang* V: *phật đường*) of the Xiantiandao in Vietnam, established in 1863 by Master Zhang Dongchu from China. Hà Tiên's role as a gateway for the transmission of Xiantiandao is not entirely coincidental. During the eighteenth century, the Chinese creole Mo clan, based in the port city, ruled over the western Mekong Delta and Gulf of Siam littoral. Influenced by the Heart-Mind School prevalent during the late Ming (1368-1644), Mo Jiu (1655-1735) and his son and successor Tianci (1708-1780) espoused economic openness and religious toleration. Although Hà Tiên came under closer supervision from the Nguyễn dynasty (1801-1945) over the nineteenth century, its governance was shared with the Mo clan, Cambodia, and Siam until the French occupation in 1867.

Hà Tiên's position as a diverse, multiethnic frontier and crossroads for Chinese mercantile networks allowed it to rapidly absorb the latest social and religious trends from South China and function as a conduit for their spread. Under the patronage of the Mo, the monk Yellow Dragon (C: Huang Long V: Hoàng Long) established the dominance of the Linji Chan sect of Mahayana Buddhism in the western Mekong Delta in the early eighteenth century. In the 1790s, the first documented activities of Chinese secret societies outside China also occurred in and around Hà Tiên. Like the introduction of the Xiantiandao, these earlier trends reflected syncretism and secularization of social organizations and religious beliefs during the Qing (1644-1911).

In 1863, Zhang Dongchu (1835-1879) introduced the Xiantiandao to Vietnam by way of Saigon and Hà Tiên. His efforts had led to the first successful mass overseas transmission of a Chinese popular religion. Xiantiandao, or the "Way of the Anterior Heaven" reflected the tendency in late imperial China toward the syncretism of Confucian, Mahayana Buddhist, and Daoist beliefs and the formation of informal religious and secular networks. Zhang Dongchu, born Zhang Chengfen, was a native of Huangyan, in Taizhou Prefecture of Zhejiang Province. At the time, the Xiantiandao had already split into various, loosely affiliated and at times mutually competitive branches. Zhang received his conversion from the Guangdong branch, centered on

the Daoist stronghold of Luofu Mountain. Even while in China, he enjoyed tremendous success in spreading Xiantiandao beliefs, which believers call "reclaiming the wilderness" (*kaihuang*), in Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong, and Guangxi.[1]

But he had an ambition to take his efforts overseas, and he received authorization from his master, Jin Yimi, to proselytize in Southeast Asia. Some narratives claim that Zhang made an initial foray into Vietnam in 1863, establishing a Buddha Hall in either Cầu Kho of Saigon or Chợ Lớn. For whatever reason, he did not stay long, for he soon ended up in Siam, where he enjoyed much success. As an extension of his journeys in Siam, he visited Hà Tiên and founded the C: Guangji fotang V: Quảng Tế Phật Đường. He then went back to China. In 1868, he again embarked on a mission to Southeast Asia. In 1871, a year after he returned to China from Siam, he assumed the role of patriarch. Not long afterward, he went to Saigon. According to some accounts, it was his first visit and the occasion when he actually founded the Cầu Kho Buddha Hall.[2]

Whatever is the case, the establishment in Saigon has not survived the ravages of war and political change, but the Guangji fotang in Hà Tiên remains operational and is celebrated by believers to be the foundational Buddha Hall of Vietnam. His disciples would transmit his teachings and found new centers successively to the north of Saigon, beginning with Zhang Daoxin (1804-1898) in Bình Định.[3] I will leave it to my more qualified colleagues to comment

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[1] Zhong Yunying, "Xiantiandao zai Yuenan de chuancheng yu fazhan: Yi Mingshidao Nanyatang de wenxian wei kaocha hexin," *Minsu quyi* 217 (2022): 210-211; "Zhang Dongchu yu nian shiji Yuenan Mingshidao Dejizong de fazhan: Yi renwu wei zhongxin de tantao," *Minsu quyi* 223 (2024): 224-227.

[2] Zhong, "Xiantiandao," p. 211; "Zhang Dongchu," p. 229; Nguyễn Thanh Phong, "Đạo Minh Sư trong đời sống xã hội Nam Bộ nửa cuối thế kỷ 19 đến nửa đầu thế kỷ 20," *Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo* 8 (176) (2018): 102-103.

[3] Zhong, "Xiantiandao," pp. 211, 218-219; "Zhang Dongchu," pp. 237-238.

on the doctrines and rituals of the Xiantiandao (later known in Vietnam as Phật đường Nam tông Minh Sư Đạo or simply, Minh Sư Đạo), or the remarkable story of its spread throughout the country. I instead seek to understand the historical background for why Hà Tiên became one of the first overseas points of transmission for this Chinese popular religion.

Not only in the case of the Xiantiandao, but the port settlement had, since the eighteenth century, rapidly absorbed the latest social and religious trends from South China. By the High Qing, popular religious beliefs had inherited a long tradition of syncretism, selectively taking and mixing elements from Confucian, Buddhist, Daoist, and folk practices. At the same time, secular networks based on sworn brotherhoods and functioning as mutual aid organizations proliferated, the most famous of them being the Heaven and Earth Society (C: *Tiandihui* V: *Thiên Địa hội*). Because they often adopted a Ming loyalist stance, they went underground to prevent persecution at the hands of the authorities. The secret societies, in turn, also borrowed from popular religious practices and merged, at times, with heterodox sects.[4]

This study explores two earlier instances in which Hà Tiên played an important role in the spread of Chinese social and religious influence to Vietnam. During the early eighteenth century, it became a conduit for the successful spread of C: Linji Chan V: Lâm Tế Thiền sect of Mahayana Buddhism into the western Mekong Delta. Almost a hundred years later, what perhaps represented the first documented instance of Chinese secret society activity outside China took place in the nearby waters. Hà Tiên served as a natural meeting point for ships from China and Southeast Asia to trade. It was also home to various commercial, ethnic, and religious networks.

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[4] Qin Baoqi and Meng Chao, *Mimi jieshe yu Qing dai shehui* (Tianjin: Tianjin guji chubanshe, 2008), pp. 2-5; Cai Shaoqing, *Zhongguo mimi shehui* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1989), pp. 122-123; David Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China: The Formation of a Tradition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 126-144.

Throughout the eighteenth century, the Chinese creole C: Mo V: Mạc clan oversaw an autonomous polity from Hà Tiên that, at its height, encompassed the western Mekong Delta and Gulf of Siam littoral. C: Mo Jiu V: Mạc Cửu (1655-1735) and his son and successor, C: Mo Tianci V: Mạc Thiên Tứ (1708-1780) espoused a syncretic, decentralized form of Confucianism that bolstered Hà Tiên's role as a nexus of networks. During the nineteenth century, the city and its surrounding areas came under firmer control from a unified Vietnam under the Nguyễn dynasty (1802-1945). However, because of the tremendous distance of the western Mekong Delta from the capital at Huế, effective and consistent governance proved difficult. Although the Vietnamese state was the nominal master of the territory and could impose its will when determined to do so, it often found itself sharing authority with other states and non-state actors. These would include networks like the secret societies, Buddhists, and Christians; Cambodia; Siam; and the Mo clan, which commanded the primary loyalty of their target communities.

The Enigma of Yellow Dragon

After acquiring Hà Tiên from the Cambodian king in the 1710s, Mo Jiu decided to give his new polity an additional layer of security by paying tribute to the Nguyễn lords of Cochinchina. In exchange, the lord in Huế honored him with ranks and titles. Cochinchina proved its value to Jiu as a protector when its forces helped him fight off a subsequent invasion from Siam, the patron of the Cambodian king. Afterward, Jiu was able to rule in relative security and stability until his death in 1735.[5] His style of governance was heavily influenced by his

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[5] Vũ Thế Dinh, *Hà Tiên trấn Hiệp trấn Mạc thị gia phả* (Hanoi: Thế Giới, 2006), pp. 98-100; Nguyễn Dynasty Historiographical Institute, *Đại Nam thực lục* (Veritable Records of the Great South) (Tokyo: The Oriental Institute, Keiō University, 1961), vol. 1, pp. 111, 131-132, 273-274; Trịnh Hoài Đức, *Gia Định thành thông chí* (Hanoi: Giáo dục, 1998), pp. 184-187, 304-305.

patronage of the Linji sect. On the one hand, it allowed Jiu to strengthen ties with the Nguyễn lord, who himself relied upon a combination of Mahayana Buddhism, Daoist beliefs, and folk rituals in governing his diverse population.[6]

Moreover, the leading Linji figure in Cochinchina was a Chinese monk, Yuanshao (1648-1728), who enjoyed great favor with the lord. Through master-to-disciple transmissions and trips to China, he was able to cultivate an extensive network of temples extending across maritime East Asia, forming linkages between the different coastal Chinese communities. At the same time, the temples functioned as repositories of a Chinese identity outside China based upon loyalty to the defunct, ethnically Han Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), which had been replaced by the Manchu Qing on the mainland. Mo Jiu shared this political stance, as he himself had left his hometown on the Leizhou Peninsula of western Guangdong to escape the Manchu invasion. It is unclear whether he had met Yuanshao or at least knew of the monk. However, communications must have occurred regularly between Hà Tiên and Quy Nhơn, where Yuanshao had first set foot after going abroad. In 1677, he had established the Temple of Ten Stupas (C: *Shita Mituo* V: *Thập Tháp Di Đà*), so named after the ruins of Cham towers on its grounds.[7]

Yuanshao was connected in some way to the monk Yellow Dragon (C: Huang Long V: Hoàng Long), who played a leading role in the transmission of the Linji sect, and Mahayana Buddhism in general, to the western Mekong Delta. A gazetteer of the southern frontier compiled by the early Nguyễn dynasty official Trịnh Hoài Đức (1765-1825) describes Yellow Dragon as "a

[6] Charles J. Wheeler, "1683: An Offshore Perspective on Vietnamese Zen," in Eric Tagliacozzo, Helen F. Siu, and Peter C. Perdue (eds.), *Asia Inside Out: Changing Times* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 147.

[7] Wheeler, "1683," pp. 139–140.

man of the Shakya clan from Quy Nhơn prefecture."[8] The Hà Tiên-based scholar Trương Minh Đạt interprets the passage to mean that the monk was Vietnamese and a native of the central coastal city. He further claims that Yellow Dragon came to Hà Tiên to join the poetry club of Mo Jiu's son and successor, Mo Tianci, after his accession to power in 1735.[9]

However, there is convincing evidence to establish that the monk was already present during Jiu's time and enjoyed his patronage. Soon after Jiu obtained recognition as a vassal of Cochinchina, he ordered the construction of the Temple of Three Treasures (C: Sanbao V: Tam Bảo) on behalf of his mother, Madame Cai. Although over eighty years of age at the time, she decided to brave the dangers of the sea and sail all the way from Leizhou to join her son, whom she dearly missed. A devout Buddhist, she resided and worshipped in the temple.[10]

The nun Như Hải (1974-2015), a former abbot, added further details, perhaps through consultation with records kept at the temple. It was none other than Yellow Dragon who took charge of the Temple of Three Treasures and looked after the spiritual needs of Madame Cai. According to the narrative, his arrival was foreshadowed in a dream that the old lady had one night. She saw a yellow dragon wrapped around the mast of a boat sailing from the north. The creature was sucking on a lotus branch. Not long afterward, a monk appeared before Mo Jiu. In responding to Jiu's inquiry, he claimed to be a former general in the Ming army who had tired of worldly affairs and decided to take on the Buddhist vows. His dharma name was C: Yincheng V:

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[8] Trịnh, *Thông chí*, p. 307.

[9] Trương Minh Đạt, "Từ bản đồ Hà Tiên năm 1869 viết lại lịch sử chùa Tam Bảo," *Văn Hóa Phật Giáo* 327 (2019): 26.

[10] Trịnh, *Thông chí*, p. 536, Nguyễn Dynasty, *Thực lục*, vol. 1, pp. 273-274; Vũ, *Gia phả*, pp. 100-101.

Ấn Trừng and his monastic title, Yellow Dragon. Madame Cai readily associated her dream with his arrival and warmly welcomed him to the temple.[11]

Như Hải, writing in modern Vietnamese, renders the monk's monastic title as Huỳnh Long rather than Hoàng Long. In fact, both Huỳnh and Hoàng share the same Chinese character of 黃. Huỳnh is an alternate spelling common to southern Vietnam because of naming taboos, Hoàng being a homophone of the personal name of a Nguyễn lord. Thích Minh Nghĩa believes that the two were undoubtedly the same person.[12] Trương Minh Đạt, on the other hand, disagrees. The story of Master Yincheng's arrival at Hà Tiên would mean that he was Chinese. But Yellow Dragon, according to the historical records, was a Vietnamese from Quy Nhơn. Moreover, these sources document his activities as occurring later than Mo Jiu's time and having no relation to the Temple of Three Treasures.[13] Although Trương Minh Đạt gives solid reasons, I tend to agree with Thích Minh Nghĩa in equating Yincheng and Yellow Dragon. I also believe that there is a way to reconcile the seemingly contradictory information from Như Hải and the more conventional historical accounts.

Yincheng's personal name and background in China remain unclear. Certainly, his claims of being a Ming loyalist general should be taken with a grain of salt, since it probably served to enhance his credentials overseas. Whatever his original identity, he formed part of a mass exodus of merchants, soldiers, and scholars who refused to submit to Manchu rule. Just as with Yuanshao, Quy Nhơn would have served as an ideal first point of disembarkation for him. As the former Cham capital of Vijaya, the Quy Nhơn area had, since ancient times, been a center for

[11] Thích Nữ Như Hải, "Huyền thoại về Hòa Thượng Khai Sơn Sắc Tứ Tam Bảo Từ," Hà Tiên: descriptive plaque.

[12] Thích Minh Nghĩa, "Phật giáo Hà Tiên dưới thời Mạc Cửu," Phật Học Từ Quang 26 (2018): 154-156.

[13] Trương Minh Đạt, "Từ bản đồ Hà Tiên," pp. 25-26.

trade connecting southern China with the Malay Peninsula and present-day Indonesia. It had witnessed much early Chinese migration, especially from Fujian. After the fall of Vijaya to Vietnamese forces in 1471, what became Quy Nhơn (Submission to Benevolent Rule) declined in importance but continued to serve as an important transit point for the exchange of highland resources and overseas products. Until the early eighteenth century, with the development of the Mekong Delta, its ports of CM: Cri Boneithilibi Nai V: Thị Nại and Nước Mặn (Salty Water) were the southernmost nodes in a regional commercial network centered upon Hội An.[14]

Quy Nhơn certainly proved to be an attractive choice for Yellow Dragon on account of its economic opportunities, which would allow him to live quite comfortably. If he tried of being involved in trade and other mundane affairs of the world, then Yuanshao's Temple of Ten Stupas would become a perfect spiritual haven. Nguyễn Hiền Đức believes that Mo Jiu probably requested the temple to dispatch Yellow Dragon to Hà Tiên. This, in turn, shows that Jiu may have maintained direct contact with Yuanshao, a thirty-third generation Chan patriarch, or his disciple, Minh Giác Kỳ Phương (1682-1744) from the thirty-fourth generation. Yellow Dragon's tomb tower in the garden of the Temple of Three Treasures identifies him as a thirty-fifth generation patriarch.

And Nguyễn Hiền Đức's claim is not mere speculation. In fact, Jiu's son and successor Tianci later donated to the temple a copy of the Jiaxing Tripitaka (*Jiaxing zang*), a private, elite-sponsored Ming-period compilation of the Buddhist canon from the Jiangnan region. He had

[14] Pierre Poivre, "Mémoire divers sur la Cochinchine," in Henri Cordier (ed.), *Revue de l'Extrême-Orient*, vol. 2 (Paris: E. Leroux, 1884), p. 335; Nguyễn Văn Kim and Trần Văn Mạnh, "Cù Lao Chàm trong không gian biển Chămpa thế kỷ XI-XV" *Khoa học xã hội Việt Nam* 1 (2020): 62; Li Tana, *A Maritime Vietnam: From Earliest Times to the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), pp. 176-193, 245-246.

imported it from China and entrusted it to the third abbot of the temple, Thiệt Kiến Liễu Triệt (1702-1764).[15] A gift of such expense and magnitude, besides a demonstration of Hà Tiên's immense prosperity, also highlights the existence of a longstanding special relationship with the temple. Tianci was likely exhibiting gratitude for some tremendous contribution to his port settlement, and Yellow Dragon and his deeds certainly fit the profile.

He evidently took good care of Tianci's mother, Madame Cai, until the old lady passed away peacefully one day while sitting in meditation.[16] The Siamese invasion of 1717 subsequently laid waste to the Temple of Three Treasures. Although the complex was later rebuilt, Trương Minh Đạt notes that it apparently became a center for popular worship and was constructed in a makeshift manner without receiving any patronage from the Mo clan. Yellow Dragon seemed to have no further involvement in its affairs. In fact, the conventional historical sources do not mention him in connection with the temple at all, a major reason for Trương Minh Đạt's doubts about whether Yellow Dragon and Yincheng were the same person.[17] However, it is entirely conceivable that the monk went on to do something entirely different after weathering or fleeing the Siamese invasion. After all, he had helped the Mo fulfill their mission of looking after the clan matriarch, and the temple as he had known it no longer existed.

According to the historical gazetteers, Yellow Dragon became a mendicant, wandering around the hinterlands of Hà Tiên, especially in the sparsely populated hills some six kilometers north of the city center, next to the present-day Cambodia border. During his journeys, he may

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[15] Thích Không Nhiên, Thích Pháp Hạnh, and Lê Thọ Quốc, "Về bộ Gia Hưng Đại tạng kinh," *Liễu Quán* 5 (2021): 110–113.

[16] Trịnh, *Thông chí*, p. 536, Nguyễn Dynasty Historiographical Institute, *Đại Nam thực lục*, pp. 273-274; Vũ, *Gia phả*, pp. 100-101.

[17] Trương, "Từ bản đồ Hà Tiên," pp. 25-26.

have come into contact with Khmer recluses (*ta eisey*) who resided and practiced meditation in its forests. Since the Khmer believed that elevated places contained the abode of deities and spirits, these hermits wanted to get closer to the source of the spiritual power.[18] Trịnh Hoài Đức's gazetteer describes Yellow Dragon's wanderings in similar terms, using the four characters of *yunyou feixi* 雲遊飛錫.[19] The phrase could serve as a broad metaphor for travel without any particular aim or it could be taken at its literal value as "floating among the clouds and flying into the air with a metal-tipped walking cane." The source seems to be implying some magical or supernatural connection during his time spent in the forested hills.

The extraordinary description of his subsequent death confirms the attribution of mystical qualities to the monk. In 1737, knowing that his days were numbered, Yellow Dragon ordered his disciples to erect a seven-storied stupa, known as the White Pagoda, to house his cremated bones and ashes. After his passing, at the dawn of every fifteenth day of the first, seventh, and tenth months of the lunar year and on Buddha's birthday, a crane and a green monkey would dutifully appear before the stupa. They would offer fruits and then stay around, wandering back and forth, as if meditating and listening to the dharma being preached.[20] The mysticism of Yellow Dragon and the spiritual significance of the hills on the present-day Vietnam-Cambodia border seems to serve as a direct antecedent for the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương sect during the nineteenth century. Adherents would view the Seven Mountains, about eighty kilometers to the east of the White

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[18] Philip Taylor, *The Khmer Lands of Vietnam: Environment, Cosmology and Sovereignty* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2014), pp. 167-168.

[19] Trịnh, *Thông chí*, p. 169.

[20] Trịnh, *Thông chí*, p. 169.

Pagoda, as a sacred abode. They would also pay visits to their temples on the fifteenth day of the first, seventh, and tenth months, an influence more of Daoism than Buddhism.[21]

Trương Minh Đạt points to the presence of the stupa in the hilly northern hinterland of Hà Tiên as yet another, and the most important, argument for Yellow Dragon being a different individual from Master Yincheng, who had his own tomb tower in the garden of the Temple of Three Treasures.[22] Yet, it is not unusual for monks to have their remains stored in more than one location. Moreover, if Yellow Dragon had merely been an isolated mendicant monk and had not made any meaningful contribution to the Mo clan, such as caring for Madame Cai, his presence would not have justified the close connections between Hà Tiên and Quy Nhơn. In fact, from the account of the construction of his stupa, Yellow Dragon, whom I believe to be the same person as Yincheng, had taken on a substantial number of disciples. Although a student of Linji Chan, he also reached out to commoners by appealing to the Pure Land sect. Trịnh Hoài Đức's gazetteer compares the White Pagoda to Jetavana, one of the most famous Buddhist monasteries in India. The pagoda stood at ease, basking underneath the sun as if in the Pure Land.[23]

I also discovered an additional piece of evidence: a bronze bell sitting at the entrance to the Thonburi Palace in Bangkok. According to the inscription on its surface, the object originally belonged to the Temple of Three Treasures and includes a date at the end: the fifteenth year of Gia Long (1816). It is unclear how the bell ended up in Siam. It may have been plundered from its original location during the several Siamese armed confrontations with Vietnam during the

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[21] Hue Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 27-37.

[22] Trương, "Từ bản đồ Hà Tiên," pp. 25-26.

[23] Trịnh, *Thông chí*, p. 169.

first half of the nineteenth century. The main content of the bell consists of a quote from the founder of the temple, Yincheng, from a century earlier. The exact words were:

> Master Yincheng of the Temple of Three Treasures in Hà Tiên Garrison attests that in front of me, the sins of all of you, men and women devotees of Buddha, are extinguished and your fortunes are increased. When your time has reached its limit, you will all be reborn in the Pure Land.

This passage shows that during his residence at the Temple of Three Treasures, Yincheng carried his message to common believers.

Even after supposedly becoming a recluse and retiring to the hills on the extreme edge of Hà Tiên, Yincheng or Yellow Dragon did not fully isolate himself. As it turned out, the monk participated in a poetry society established by Mo Tianci a year after the death of his father. This literary circle involved primarily lower level elites from China and Vietnam. Exchanges took place both long-distance through poetic pieces being brought back and forth on trading vessels, and at Hà Tiên, whether local residents or guests who were invited and lodged at Tianci's expense. Unfortunately, none of Yellow Dragon's poetry has been located to date.[24] But undoubtedly, the monk was a pioneering figure in the introduction and transmission of Mahayana Buddhism, in particular Linji Chan and Pure Land, to the western Mekong Delta, appealing to elites and commoners alike. He also appeared to have combined the two into a syncretic belief system that was infused with mysticism. It presaged the appearance of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương movement a century later.[25]

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[24] Trịnh, *Thông chí*, p. 307.

[25] Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics*, p. 25.

Yellow Dragon's success owed much to the climate of openness and tolerance that Mo Jiu and Mo Tianci fostered and promoted as a means of attracting more business to their shores. Unlike Jiu, who was a devout Buddhist, his son espoused Confucianism as the guiding ideology of the realm. Tianci had a shrine to Confucius built in the center of town and actively courted literati from China and Vietnam through his poetry club.[26] However, he did not walk away from his father's patronage of Buddhism. As we have seen, he made a generous donation of the *Jiaxing Tripitaka* to the Temple of Ten Stupas in Quy Nhơn.[27]

Moreover, according to the Unified Gazetteer of the Great South (*Đại Nam nhất thống chí*), an official compilation published by the Nguyễn Historiographical Institute (*Quốc sử quán*) in 1861, he sponsored the construction of Hibiscus Temple (C: Furong V: Phù Dung). Initially situated at the foot of Hibiscus Mountain southwest of the city center, the structure was destroyed during a Siamese invasion in 1833. A temple bearing the same name was reconstructed on the grounds of Mo Tianci's old poetry pavilion in 1846 through funds supplied by local residents. All that remains at the original site is the remains of a multi-storied brick pagoda that had already been grown over by a huge banyan tree. A stone tablet in front of it bears the simple inscription: Tomb of the old monk C: Yintan V: Ấn Đàm, Linji thirty-sixth generation. His precise identity, and even his dates of birth and death or when he was active, remains unknown. Could he have been a disciple of Yincheng, or Yellow Dragon, a thirty-fifth generation patriarch? After all, they shared the same first character in their dharma names.

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[26] Zhang Tingyu, *Qingchao wenxian tongkao* (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1936), p. 7463; Nguyễn Dynasty, *Nhất thống chí*, vol. 3, p. 280; Trịnh, *Thông chí*, pp. 307, 532–533.

[27] Thích Không Nhiên, Thích Pháp Hạnh, and Lê, "Về bộ Gia Hưng Đại tạng kinh," pp. 110–113.

Trương Minh Đạt has cast doubt upon whether Tianci had a role in the construction of Hibiscus Temple. One of his key claims is that, as a Confucian, Tianci would have no interest in sponsoring Buddhist places of worship. Instead, Trương Minh Đạt believes, the gazetteer was referring to the poetry pavilion on whose grounds the new temple was built in 1846.[28] However, if we are to believe the words inscribed on a plaque at the temple, relics from the original site had made their way to the new edifice, including a bronze idol of the Shakyamuni Buddha, the prime deity situated in the Main Hall. According to the description, Mo Tianci had procured it from China in 1758. Although the evidence is inconclusive, the idol points to some involvement on his part in the temple's construction.

In addition, Mo Tianci patronized Daoism. Not far away from the current Hibiscus Temple, several flights of steps up the slope of a hill, lies a shrine to the Jade Emperor and his two attendants, personifications of the northern and southern pole stars. Artisans in China had cast the idols of the three deities, applying the highest quality of craftsmanship. Tianci had them brought over in 1752. Besides Yellow Dragon, a Daoist priest named Su Yin took part in his poetry society. Nothing else is known of him, and no specimens of his work have yet been found.[29] Perhaps he was involved with the shrine to the Jade Emperor?

Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ and Nguyễn Thanh Phong convincingly argue that Mo Tianci's Confucian ideology received greater influence from the Heart-Mind school of Wang Yangming (1472-1529) prevalent in the late Ming. Unlike the neo-Confucian orthodoxy of Zhu Xi (1130-1200), with its emphasis on objective reality and the maintenance of a hierarchical imperial

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[28] Nguyễn Dynasty, *Nhất thống chí*, vol. 3, p. 280; Trương Minh Đạt, *Nghiên cứu Hà Tiên*, vol. 2: Họ Mạc với Hà Tiên (Ho Chi Minh City: Nhà xuất bản Tổng hợp Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2017), pp. 150-156.

[29] Trịnh, *Thông chí*, p. 307.

order, it viewed subjectivity and emotions as the basis for social action. Translated into the realm of governance, the Heart-Mind school adopted a welcoming attitude toward commerce and merchants and accommodated different religious beliefs. In fact, its emphasis on inner reflection was directly borrowed from Chan Buddhism.[30]

The Heart-Mind school also proved perfectly suited for ruling over a decentralized environment like the western Mekong Delta and Gulf of Siam littoral, consisting of multiple horizontally organized networks. These could based upon shared ethnicity, religion, trade, or literary pursuits, such as Tianci's poetry society. Almost all of them had linkages outside the region, such as southern China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Siam, island Southeast Asia, or the Catholic Church. In other words, none of them could be entirely confined within the western Mekong Delta and Gulf of Siam littoral or within a bounded state in the modern sense.[31] The Heart-Mind school gave room for Mo Tianci to be pragmatic in his administration. He largely allowed each group to govern itself according to its own regulations and under its own leaders. Moreover, he submitted as a vassal to some states, such as Cochinchina, Siam, and Cambodia, while maintaining semi-formal foreign relations with others, including the Qing and the Dutch East India Company.[32]

The Heaven and Earth Society

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[30] Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ and Nguyễn Thanh Phong, "Philosophical Transmission and Contestation: The Impact of Qing Confucianism in Southern Vietnam," *Asian Studies* 8(24).2 (2020): 89-90; Wu Jiang, *Enlightenment in Dispute: The Reinvention of Chan Buddhism in Seventeenth-Century China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 49-50.

[31] Keith Weller Taylor, "Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region," *Journal of Asian Studies* 57.4 (1998): 967-969

[32] Hang Xing, *The Port: Hà Tiên and the Mo Clan in Early Modern Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

During the late eighteenth century, Hà Tiên became among the very first, if not the very first, documented areas of activity for the Heaven and Earth Society outside of China. Since the early twentieth century, scholars have engaged in a debate over the origins of this enigmatic organization. Much of it surrounds a semi-legendary account about its establishment found in manuals circulating internally among members. They vary in certain details but the basic storyline remains consistent.

A group of barbarian tribes from the west were attacking China, and the Manchu banner forces were unable to stop them. The Qing emperor issued a plea for heroes across the empire to come to his aid. A group of monks at the Shaolin Temple in Fujian responded to the call and handily defeated the western barbarians. As a reward, the emperor gave them an imperially bestowed seal. But greedy and corrupt officials at the court coveted the seal. They accused the monks of plotting to subvert the throne. The emperor believed their slander and ordered his troops to set fire to the Shaolin Temple. A total of 108 monks were burned to death. Another eighteen were hunted down and killed. Only five survived and took refuge at the Gaoxi Shrine in Yunxiao, Fujian, close to the Guangdong border. A few others joined them, including a descendant of the last Ming emperor, a general named Chen Jinnan, and the monk Wan Yunlong. Under Wan Yunlong's coordination and supervision, they forged a pact of brotherhood and adopted the platform of "resisting the Qing and restoring the Ming" (*fan Qing fu Ming*).[33]

In interpreting this narrative, scholars have divided into two broad camps. Those who tend to trust the manuals or utilize them to study secret society rituals see the Heaven and Earth Society as a relatively cohesive organization tied together by Ming loyalist beliefs. They also

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[33] Dian H. Murray in collaboration with Qin Baoqi, *The Origins of the Tiandihui: The Chinese Triads in Legend and History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 197-228.

came to consensus about its emergence to the seventeenth century and a specific founder: the monk Wan Five. He was abbot of the Changlin Temple, not far away from the Gaoxi Shrine in Yunxiao. He and a group of sworn brothers all took on the surname of Wan (Ten Thousand) to demonstrate their resolute unity. Many of them went on to serve in the coastal-based resistance movement led by Zheng Chenggong (1624-1662) against the Qing after 1651.[34]

Scholars in the opposing camp, relying primarily on Qing archival documents from Beijing and Taipei, see the Heaven and Earth Society as a group of loosely affiliated cells calling themselves by different names and acting in their own interests. They functioned as mutual aid organizations that helped landless and destitute people on the fringes of society to collectively seek better conditions and treatment. If there was a specific founder, then he would be the monk Wan Ti Xi of the Gaoxi Shrine, who lived during the late eighteenth century. His identity was revealed through depositions by Qing officials of the main leaders of the Lin Shuangwen Rebellion on Taiwan in 1787, an uprising organized and led by Heaven and Earth Society cells on the island. Scholars of this persuasion tend to emphasize class relations and discount the role played by Ming loyalism or any ideology. They argue that the "oppose the Qing and restore the Ming" slogan only became introduced, along with other rituals, as time went on to give the societies greater coherence and legitimacy among their followers.[35]

I believe there is a way to reconcile these different camps if we move beyond a singular focus on the Heaven and Earth Society to examine secret societies as a general phenomenon in late imperial China. As David Ownby convincingly points out, the use of elaborate rituals, coded language, and symbolism, along with the blood covenant sealing the oath of brotherhood, all had

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[34] He Zhiqing, *Tiandihui qiyuan yanjiu* (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 1996), pp. 141-293.

[35] Qin, *Mimi jieshe*, pp. 75-81, 111-112.

antecedents in ancient social practices and religions, especially Daoism. Horizontal bonds were also nothing new. By the late Ming, there were numerous surname associations, merchant guilds, temple societies, and organizations that pooled money for burials.[36]

However, secret societies combined these elements, especially through the secularization of religious practices. What gave them their underground character, which meant facing the danger of official persecution, was not just Ming loyalist ideology. It also lies in their potential to organize and mobilize large numbers of impoverished commoners outside of the imperially sanctioned hierarchy.[37] In fact, the first documented instances of secret societies came from the late Ming, when commercialization and the silver economy stimulated mobility and created substantial disparities in wealth. The monk Wan Five actually formed his brotherhood, which may or may not have been the Heaven and Earth Society, in response to gentry abuse and exploitation.[38]

The networked character of secret societies, however, ensured that they remained open systems and could never become fully class-based organizations. As a result of the Ming-Qing transition, ethnic animosity often cut across class lines, causing many gentry and merchants to join the ranks of secret societies. They appeared prominently in the membership lists found on Taiwan in the aftermath of the Lin Shuangwen Rebellion.[39] The Heaven and Earth Society, then, can be seen as a mature secret society that combined economic assistance and ideological agenda. In theory, elites can put up the funds, while poorer members supplied manpower to

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[36] Ownby, *Brotherhoods*, pp. 29-54.

[37] Ownby, *Brotherhoods*, pp. 13-16.

[38] He, *Tiandihui qiyuan*, pp. 265-267.

[39] Zhuang Jifa, *Qing dai Taiwan huidang shi yanjiu* (Taipei: Nantian, 1999), pp. 147-153.

advance the Ming cause. An elaborate set of rituals and beliefs served to cement their fictive kinship. Of course, the reality was always messier, but this flexibility gave secret societies tremendous subversive potential.

The Heaven and Earth Society expanded from its original home in Fujian to Taiwan, Guangdong, Guangxi, and southwestern China. In the process, its cells acquired different names, such as the Three Unities Society or Triads (*Sanhehui*) and the Hong League (*Hongmen*). Although the Heaven and Earth Society and its offshoots certainly enjoyed the most success, others witnessed similar growth. Eventually, some elements might split off to become formally separate organizations. In other cases, there would be amalgamation or alliance between different societies. Especially in frontier areas or overseas, where supervision from the imperial court was either thin or completely nonexistent, the flexibility of secret societies allowed them to take on a variety of functions. They became integrated with other, more traditional anti-state elements on the margins, such as the pirates of the South China coast and the White Lotus sect. In parts of Southeast Asia, they could even operate completely in the open and become equivalent to a governing authority.[40]

The Hà Tiên area proved to be an ideal location for the initial expansion of the Heaven and Earth Society outside of China. In the 1770s, the Tây Sơn rebellion erupted in Quy Nhơn, eventually bringing about the downfall of both Cochinchina and the northern regime of Tonkin. The Nguyễn rulers and many of their relatives and court officials fled from Huế to take refuge in Saigon. The city became a hotly contested place, changing hands several times. One Tây Sơn

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[40] Murray and Qin, *Origins*, pp. 33-83; Ownby, *Brotherhoods*, 105-144; Mary Somers Heidhues, "Chinese Organizations in West Borneo and Bangka: Kongsis and *Hui*," in David Ownby and Mary Somers Heidhues (eds.), *Secret Societies Reconsidered: Perspectives on the Social History of Modern South China and Southeast Asia* (Armonk: M. E Sharpe, 1993), pp. 80-82.

offensive in 1777 forced Mo Tianci to abandon his possessions in the western Mekong Delta and Gulf of Siam littoral. He, his sons, officials, and many residents fled to Siam. The half-Chinese King Taksin (1734-1782, r. 1767-1782) settled them on the site of present-day Bangkok.[41]

However, Taksin soon suspected them of plotting to subvert his rule and take over the throne. In 1780, he forced Mo Tianci to commit suicide and proceeded to massacre his sons and key officials, and exiling others to the remote frontiers. A Khmer official at the Siamese court took pity on his three sons and grandsons, who were still young, and took them under his protection, allowing them to survive the carnage. Taksin himself was overthrown in 1782 in a coup led by two of his generals. One of them, Thongduang, became Rama I (1737-1809, r. 1782-1809), founder of the Chakri Dynasty, the current ruling house of Thailand, while the other, his younger brother, became the vice-king (*upparat*).[42]

Until 1787, when Nguyễn Anh (1762-1820), a royal relative of the last Cochinchinese rulers who died at the hands of the Tây Sơn in 1777, seized Saigon for the final time and forged a durable base in the far south, multiple parties fought to occupy Hà Tiên. They included Anh and his direct subordinates; the Đông Sơn (Eastern Mountain) and the Harmonious and Righteous (C: Heyi V: Hòa Nghĩa) Armies, commanded by warlords loosely allied with Anh; the Tây Sơn; the Siamese; and Mo descendants. However, none of them proved able to hold it for long. The Vietnamese records describe the once-thriving port as "a remote, destitute corner" during this

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[41] Hang, *The Port*.

[42] Trịnh, *Thông chí*, pp. 330-333, 341-342, Nguyễn Dynasty, *Thực lục*, vol. 1, p. 278; vol. 2, p. 315 (25); Vũ, *Gia phả*, pp. 143-145, 157-158.

period.[43] Most of the population had left, either forming part of the exodus of Mo Tianci and his retinue to Bangkok or fleeing from disorder.

However, the sources seem to only tell part of the story. There is good reason to believe that Hà Tiên became an important center for Chinese pirates from Guangdong. The Tây Sơn had enlisted them as privateers, according them ranks and titles and providing them with bases and markets in exchange for their military support and goods acquired from plundering the Qing coastline. Undoubtedly, as Dian Murray and Stefan Amirell show, this sponsorship helped them develop into powerful, consolidated organizations that dominated and terrorized the area from the South China Sea to the Gulf of Tonkin and the Pearl River Delta.[44] Some pirate groups escaped Tây Sơn influence altogether to operate autonomously farther south in the waters around the Mekong Delta and Gulf of Siam.

If we are to take how they operated in Guangdong as a model, they worked together with merchants to fence booty and acquire supplies. The pirates also formed alliances with secret societies like the Heaven and Earth Society, whose decentralized cells usually operated illicit enterprises, such as gambling joints and brothels, with part of the benefits accruing to the pirates. Brotherhood members also bribed officials and served as spies or scouts. However, secret societies did not just provide profitable criminal channels on land. Their ideological orientation heavily influenced the pirate groups. Zhang Bao (1783-1822), leader of the largest and most famous pirate confederation, often told others that his ultimate aim was to expel the Manchus

[43] Trịnh, *Thông chí*, pp. 333-350; Vũ, *Gia phả*, pp. 149-183.

[44] Dian Murray, *Pirates of the South China Coast, 1790-1810* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 32-56; Stefan Eklöf Amirell, *Pirates of Empire: Colonisation and Maritime Violence in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 161-163.

and restore Chinese rule.[45] Whether he was sincere or not, this rhetoric seemed to have been taken verbatim from the Ming loyalist message of the Heaven and Earth Society. Some of the pirate leaders were themselves members of the brotherhood.

A similar situation appeared to have prevailed in Hà Tiên. After losing Saigon for the second time in 1783, Nguyễn Anh spent most of his time fleeing the Tây Sơn among the islands in the Gulf of Siam. At one point, while on the island of Phú Quốc, he was so short on provisions his troops were reduced to eating grass and taro.[46] He quickly learned that if he were to have any success in obtaining a foothold on land in the western Mekong Delta, a necessary first step for retaking Saigon, he needed the support of the Chinese pirates who controlled the waters and coastline. And Anh proved perfect for the task, as he possessed the talent for cultivating personal relationships, recruiting talented individuals, and using the various horizontal networks in the region to his advantage.[47]

The wife of a merchant based in Hà Tiên soon sent along a junk filled with rice to Phú Quốc. This timely aid allowed him and his men to regroup and withdraw to Siam, where they would spend the next few years in exile.[48] The presence of the merchant and his wife challenges the claims in Vietnamese records of Hà Tiên as a desolate wasteland. It continued to serve as a viable center for trade, at least in the export of rice cultivated in the hinterlands of the delta. However, given the overall state of flux in the area, merchants based there needed a stable source of protection that none of the political actors could provide. Accordingly, they most likely

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[45] Murray, *Pirates*, pp. 75, 89-90.

[46] Nguyễn Dynasty, *Thực lục*, vol. 2, p. 323 (33).

[47] Choi Byung Wook, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mang (1820–1841): Central Policies and Local Response* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, 2004), pp. 28-30.

[48] Nguyễn Dynasty, *Thực lục*, vol. 2, pp. 323 (33), 325-236 (35-36).

opened the port to pirates and helped fence their goods in exchange for security. This means that Nguyễn Anh himself, at some earlier point, had also cooperated with the pirates or, at the very least, traded with them.

Subsequent events bear out this conjecture. In early 1787, Nguyễn Anh returned from Siam to the Gulf of Siam islands. This time, he secured the submission of a powerful pirate leader, He Xiwen (or Qiwen in the Qing sources), who provided him with crucial naval support and coastal bases, facilitating Anh's recapture of Saigon from the Tây Sơn later in the year. The Vietnamese records describe him as a native of Sichuan, in southwestern China, and a follower of the heterodox White Lotus sect. He led a group of members into the sea and proclaimed himself king of the Heaven and Earth Society. Xiwen commanded a fleet of Cantonese black junks, the largest and sturdiest vessels in China and frequently used for warfare. He and his followers plundered along the coastline of Guangdong and Fujian, and the provincial authorities proved unable to stop them.[49]

The narratives found in these Vietnamese sources appear to be the first ever mention of Chinese secret society activity overseas, appearing in the same year as the Lin Shuangwen rebellion in Taiwan, when Qing officials became aware of these brotherhoods. Of course, the historical records themselves were published in the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, Trịnh Hoài Đức's gazetteer, the earliest of them to use the term "Heaven and Earth Society," dates from around 1820, or less than 50 years after the events recorded.[50] It still precedes much of the other documentation about secret society activities abroad. Moreover, the Vietnamese sources have

[49] Nguyễn Dynasty, *Thực lục*, vol. 2, pp. 333 (43); Trịnh, *Thông chí*, p. 347; Vũ, *Gia phả*, p. 180.

[50] Trịnh, *Thông chí*, p. 347.

captured much of the initial confusion about the exact nature and identity of secret societies and their relationship to popular religious movements and pirates.

In China during this period, the Heaven and Earth society's activities expanded northward, while the White Lotus spread southward from its original stronghold in the northwest. Sichuan, where He Xiwen supposedly came from, became a meeting ground for the two. The amalgamation and integration of their ideas and practices later formed the basis for the Elder Brothers Society (*Gelaohui*), which would play an important role in the anti-Qing revolutions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, Murray and Ownby show that this integration occurred earlier, already in the late eighteenth century in places like western Fujian and Jiangxi. The Vietnamese sources provide further substantiation of the mixture of popular religion and sworn brotherhoods in both Fujian and Guangdong, as well as their collusion with pirates. In many ways, it reflects the trend toward the secularization of heterodox sects through the incorporation and promotion of Confucian values, which also underlay the secret societies.[51]

Whatever his background, He Xiwen appeared to have emerged as the dominant authority in the Gulf of Siam region in the 1780s. Hà Tiên, a crossroads for trade between China and Southeast Asia during the days of Mo Tianci, proved ideal as a piratical lair, and Xiwen probably controlled the mercantile groups there. His fleets also patrolled the waters from Pulau Kundur, where the Gulf of Siam met the South China Sea, to Ko Kut off the coast of eastern Siam. In large part, Nguyễn Anh could take refuge in this area, maintain regular communications with Siam, and obtain supplies and recruit men for his war effort on account of Xiwen's protection.

[51] Cai, *Zhongguo mimi shehui*, p. 50; Murray, *Origins*, pp. 56-60; Ownby, p. 139; Wang Wensheng, *White Lotus Rebels and South China Pirates: Crisis and Reform in the Qing Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 43-44.

When Anh returned from Siam in 1787 and was poised to strike Saigon, the pirate, along with his subordinates, Zhu Yuanquan, Liang Wenying, Zhang Baguan, and others, a total of eighteen, rallied behind the young ruler and became commanders in his reconstituted military.[52] Xiwen's submission may have been motivated by a need to seek a reliable source of legitimacy to whitewash his band. He may have also seen great promise in Anh and was moved by the young man's charisma.

However, we might, in addition, take into account the role played by the Mo clan as a possible patron and intermediary. In 1784, Siamese forces had joined forces with Anh in invading and briefly taking control over the Mekong Delta before the Tây Sơn drove them away a year later. Anh and the Siamese had agreed to allow Tianci's third son, C: Mo Sheng V: Mạc Tử Sinh, to rule over the occupied territory. This choice, in many ways, represented a continuation of the established arrangement whereby the Mo clan had been the master of this area while paying tribute to both states. Moreover, as the legitimate heir of Mo Tianci's legacy, he possessed the clout to command the loyalty of the complex demography and its ethnic, religious, economic, and social networks. Sheng left with the Siamese after their military collapsed, but when Anh returned in 1787, he brought Sheng back to inherit the role of his deceased father as the commander of Hà Tiên Garrison.[53]

This successor to the Mo enterprise appeared to have facilitated the submission of He Xiwen and other remnant forces in the area left over from the years of warfare with the Tây Sơn and the Siamese debacle. In preparation for the impending attack on Saigon, Sheng had been able to acquire three hundred items of weaponry, including catapults, harquebuses, and cannons,

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[52] Nguyễn Dynasty, *Thực lục*, vol. 2, p. 333 (43); Trịnh, *Thông chí*, pp. 347-349; Vũ, *Gia phả*, pp. 180-181.

[53] Trịnh, *Thông chí*, pp. 342-348; Vũ, *Gia phả*, pp. 156-181.

on behalf of Anh. Siam was certainly an important source. However, he may have also purchased them from the pirates under He Xiwen. The influx of armaments greatly bolstered the hard power of Nguyễn Anh and, along with his credentials as a royal relative, allowed him to successfully rally the various armed groups around him. His reconstituted military recaptured Saigon from the Tây Sơn in 1788, this time on a permanent basis.[54]

He Xiwen, Wheeler shows, would go on to form the backbone of the Nguyễn navy. In 1790, using Pulau Kundur as a base, his fleets successfully projected power into the Gulf of Tonkin, the traditional hotbed of the largest Guangdong pirate groups, and eliminated them or drove them away. The addition of Xiwen's maritime prowess was one important factor that helped the Nguyễn to finally operate beyond their bases in the far south and take the offensive against the Tây Sơn. He participated in the campaigns on land and sea that led to the capture of the Tây Sơn stronghold of Quy Nhơn and capital at Huế. In 1801, just as the Nguyễn forces were poised to strike the final blow to their enemies, He Xiwen passed away. After the unification of Vietnam under the Nguyễn Dynasty, Anh, who assumed the reign name of Gia Long (r. 1802-1820), bestowed honors and rewards upon the deceased and his family. The ruler placed Xiwen's former subordinates in charge of coastal defense. He also appointed the former pirate's son, C: He Xiyang V: Hà Dương as the official in charge of Chinese shipping.[55]

Localization of the Secret Societies and Xiantiandao

[54] Nguyễn Dynasty, *Thực lục*, vol. 2, p. 333 (43); Trịnh, *Thông chí*, pp. 347-349; Vũ, *Gia phả*, pp. 180-181.

[55] Charles J. Wheeler, "Placing the 'Chinese Pirate' of the Gulf of Tongking at the End of the Eighteenth Century," in Eric Tagliacozzo, Helen F. Siu, and Peter C. Perdue (eds.), *Asia Inside Out: Connected Places* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), vol. 2, pp. 50-53.

The submission of He Xiwen appeared to have uprooted, for the time being, the Heaven and Earth Society and Chinese pirates from Hà Tiên and the western Mekong Delta and Gulf of Siam littoral. However, because of volatile conditions resulting from the increasingly intense competition between Siam and the newly unified Vietnam for influence and control over Cambodia, these groups soon returned to plague the coastline. Scholars, such as Choi and Taylor, broadly agree that the Gia Long court ruled the country with a relatively light touch. The capital at Huế served as a fulcrum that balanced the interests of the main population centers of the north and south. However, its location in an isolated strip of coast surrounded by mountains and lacking a proper port made governance over both ends, located at distances of over 500 kilometers away, hugely difficult.[56]

Accordingly, Gia Long placed his old trusted associates in positions of responsibility. In particular, they assumed control over the semi-autonomous vice-royalties (*thành*) established at Hanoi and Saigon to ensure more effective governance suited to the specific conditions of each region. Of the two, the southern vice-royalty of Gia Định enjoyed the greatest degree of independence. It had its own bureaucracy and system of recruitment. A military governor-general administered five garrisons (*trấn*), each led by a commander who primarily reported to him. Ethnic Chinese officials provided much of the supporting roles, including, most prominently, Trịnh Hoài Đức, who served as vice-governor-general. The vice-royalty also took charge of Cambodian affairs, acting as a protector of the kingdom while trying to squeeze out Siamese influence. In terms of daily administration, it carried out Gia Long's will of letting the different ethnic and religious groups govern themselves and not encroaching on the land and interests of

[56] Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 398-400; Choi, *Southern Vietnam*, p. 45.

others.[57] This also often meant that, while Vietnam controlled the territory, the people living on it could maintain loyalties to other states or networks, such as the Khmer and Siamese courts, commercial and ancestral corridors to southern China, and the Roman Catholic Church.

Situated on the frontlines of Vietnam's conflict with Siam over Cambodia, Hà Tiên served as an extreme example of this ambiguity. In fact, its jurisdiction was often in flux. Initially, before the unification, the Nguyễn were actually at a disadvantage, yielding control over the entire western Mekong Delta to the Siamese-approved Mo Sheng in 1784. After the Siamese were routed in 1785 and Anh recaptured Saigon in 1788, Sheng's role became more circumscribed to Hà Tiên garrison. Its area encompassed present-day coastal Cambodia, Kiên Giang, and the K: Tuk Khmau V: Cà Mau peninsula.[58] An arrangement of dual allegiance was worked out whereby the Vietnamese would appoint the Mo descendants. However, since they lived in Siam, they depended upon its rulers to send them to assume office, a mark of confirmation from its court.

Nguyễn Anh was determined to alter this practice and wrest control of Hà Tiên away from the Mo and their Siamese patrons. Although tolerance, caution, and non-interference characterized much of his reign, Taylor notes that the ruler picked his battles carefully, acting decisively and with force when deemed necessary to assert his authority. And Hà Tiên was one arena where he put this principle into practice. Many of the centralization policies commonly associated with his successor, Minh Mạng (1791-1841, r. 1820-1841), were first implemented in Hà Tiên under his direction.[59]

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[57] Taylor, *History of the Vietnamese*, pp. 418-419; Choi, *Southern Vietnam*, pp. 48-53, 135-136.

[58] Trịnh, *Thông chí*, pp. 342-349; Vũ, *Gia phả*, pp. 180-181.

[59] Taylor, *History of the Vietnamese*, pp. 399-400, 412-413, 415-416.

After Sheng passed away from illness in 1789, the Siamese dispatched the eldest son of Mo Tianci's eldest son, C: Mao Gongbing V: Mạc Công Bính (d. 1792), as successor. Claiming that Hà Tiên had been devastated by warfare, and the people needed time to regroup and regain their livelihoods, Nguyễn Anh refused to place him in the city. Instead, Bính was instructed to govern from Cà Mau, assisted by several Vietnamese subordinates. This move evidently aimed at removing him from his power base and placing him more directly under Nguyễn control. The Siamese protested the move, and, under heavy pressure, Anh allowed him to return to Hà Tiên. After Bính died in 1792, the position of garrison commander again went unfilled. Apparently, the two sides could not agree upon the succession. In 1799, a compromise seemed to have been reached. The Siamese dispatched Tianci's youngest son, C: Mo Tian V: Mạc Tử Thiêm (d. 1809), whom Anh instated in Hà Tiên the following year. However, the taxes and rents from Kiên Giang and Cà Mau, while still a part of the garrison's jurisdiction, would be paid to neighboring Vĩnh Thanh (present-day Vĩnh Long).[60]

The situation remained stable until 1809, when Mo Tian passed away. At this point, acting on the pretext that the grandsons of Mo Tianci were still too young, Nguyễn Văn Nhơn (1753-1822), the military governor-general of the vice-royalty of Gia Định, and his assistant, Trịnh Hoài Đức, went to Hà Tiên to directly take control of its affairs. After revamping the local administration, they appointed Nguyễn Văn Thiện as garrison commander, Nguyễn Đức Hội as vice-garrison commander, and Dương Văn Châu as staff assistant. They were all bureaucrats from neighboring Vĩnh Thanh. However, Thiện died of illness before he could assume the position. Hội and Châu proved unable to provide effective governance. According to Trịnh Hoài Đức's gazetteer, the two men constantly competed with each other. It often got to the point that

[60] Nguyễn Dynasty, *Thực lục*, vol. 2, pp. 348 (58), 375 (85); Trịnh, *Thông chí*, pp. 350-351; Vũ, *Gia phả*, p. 183.

they would “lead crowds into rowdy brawls, greatly disturbing the peace in the area.”[61] Besides personality differences, the two men also appeared to have appealed to opposing constituencies or networks within the city. In fact, the passage reads like a typical description of rivalry between secret societies for control over turf and lines of business. Around this time, pirates returned to plague the waters of the Gulf of Siam, additionally validating the presence of these brotherhoods.

The problems of administration evidently proved serious enough for the vice-royalty to devote ever more resources to Hà Tiên. Twenty officials drawn from the four other garrisons were sent to staff the local bureaucracy. Moreover, two hundred troops and six ships drawn from the garrisons would be stationed at Hà Tiên and rotated every six months. An admiral in charge of piracy suppression imposed military control over the area for a year until 1811, when Trương Phúc Giáo assumed duty as the new garrison commander. He enjoyed greater success in bringing order, mostly achieved by walking back on the more interventionist measures of his predecessors. He allowed the different ethnic communities of Chinese, Viet, Khmer, and Austronesians to manage their own affairs. In other words, he relinquished much of the local administration to horizontally organized networks, which would probably include the secret societies and pirates. As a further stabilization measure, the vice-royalty again turned to the Mo clan. In 1816, C: Mao Gongyu V: Mạc Công Du, another grandson of Tianci, arrived from Siam to serve as the vice-garrison commander.[62]

Since Giáo essentially adopted the same approach as the Mo clan and came to collaborate closely with its members, there was no longer a sound justification for a heavy state presence in Hà Tiên. Accordingly, after his retirement in 1818, Du became the garrison commander, serving

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[61] Trịnh, *Thông chí*, pp. 351-353.

[62] Trịnh, *Thông chí*, pp. 353-354.

for a lengthy tenure of eleven years. Gia Long balanced out this appointment with the construction of the Vĩnh Tế Canal. The project, initiated in 1820, mobilized thousands of Viet and Khmer laborers and soldiers with the aim of connecting Hà Tiên more firmly to the garrisons under the vice-royalty's direct control.[63]

The Mo descendants faced a new challenge after the ascension of Minh Mạng in 1820. The new ruler sought to homogenize and place all of Vietnam under firm centralized control. To this effect, he abolished the Gia Định vice-royalty in 1832 and converted the garrisons into regular provinces, including Hà Tiên. His actions alienated much of the population in the vice-royalty, leading to a massive revolt led by Lê Văn Khôi from 1833 to 1835. Mạc Công Du and his sons took the side of the rebels. But Du soon passed away from illness. Nguyễn troops captured the sons and carried them off to Huế. After quelling the revolt, Minh Mạng proceeded to invade and occupy Cambodia, prompting a protracted war with Siam.[64]

After the ruler's death, his successor, Thiệu Trị (1807-1847, r. 1841-1847), walked back on his father's aggressive expansionist policies. He eventually reached a deal with Siam whereby both sides would withdraw troops from Cambodia, which would then maintain a double vassalage to the two countries. In reality, Thiệu Trị, faced with threats from French and other European warships on his shores, essentially yielded Vietnamese influence over the Cambodian court to Siam. His successor, Tự Đức (1839-1883, r. 1847-1883), had no ability to gain back the lost ground. Weak in character and having come to power through court intrigue, he was confronted with a fundamental challenge of legitimacy in addition to dealing with the ever-more

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[63] Trịnh, *Thông chí*, pp. 354-355; Taylor, *Vietnamese*, pp. 413-414; Choi, *Southern Vietnam*, pp. 84-87.

[64] Taylor, *History of the Vietnamese*, pp. 425-429; Choi, *Southern Vietnam*, pp. 95-99, 129-159; Trương Minh Đạt, *Nghiên cứu Hà Tiên*, vol. 1 (Ho Chi Minh City: Nhà xuất bản Trẻ, 2008), pp. 413-424.

pressing demands from European powers.[65] Along with the weakness of the court after the death of Minh Mạng, Chinese piracy and secret society activity experienced another surge in the wake of China's defeat at the hands of Great Britain in the Opium Wars and domestic disorders, such as the Taiping Rebellion. Munitions and armaments were also readily available at the British-controlled free trade ports of Singapore and Hong Kong.[66]

Under these circumstances, the Mo, whose actual power was a mere shadow of their heyday in the eighteenth century, still appeared to be the only ones with the local reputation and authority to ensure peace and order. In 1845, Thiệu Trị issued a pardon to the clan. The following year, he ordered the erection of a shrine on the slopes of Screen Mountain to commemorate the three generations of Mo leaders. Finally, in 1848, the newly enthroned ruler Tự Đức restored Mạc Hầu Phong, the youngest son of Mạc Công Du, to Hà Tiên, this time as governor-general (*tổng đốc*). A Mo clan member remained in this position until the French occupied the western Mekong Delta in the late 1860s.[67]

The end result was that Hà Tiên retained a significant degree of autonomy. According to the settlement of 1847 ending the war with Siam, the western part of its traditional jurisdiction, from around present-day Kep to Kampong Som (Sihanoukville), was ceded to Cambodia. Siamese influence then extended into the core area of Hà Tiên and, just as before, balanced out Vietnam's territorial rights. To return to the Xiantiandao master Zhang Dongchu, when he

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[65] Taylor, *History of the Vietnamese*, pp. 429-445.

[66] Amirell, *Pirates of Empire*, pp. 162-163.

[67] Trương Minh Đạt, *Nghiên cứu Hà Tiên*, pp. 413-424; Nicolas Sellers, *The Princes of Hà-Tiên (1682–1867): The Last of the Philosopher-Princes and the Prelude to the French Conquest of Indochina: A Study of the Independent Rule of the Mạc Dynasty in the Principality of Hà-Tiên, and the Establishment of the Empire of Việtnam* (Brussels: Editions Thanh-Long, 1983), pp. 133-134.

established his Guangji fotang in 1863, he had arrived from Bangkok. This shows that Hà Tiên was more readily accessible from Siam than Vietnam. Moreover, Hà Tiên maintained extensive ties with Singapore, exporting its natural resources in exchange for opium. The trade was legal, although trafficking the drug, under normal circumstances, would have incurred capital punishment according to Vietnamese law. Besides a lack of administrative resources, this tolerant attitude toward foreign trade points to the continued active presence of pirates and secret societies in the area.[68]

Hà Tiên thus became an ideal location for the spread of Xiantiandao. The sect soon integrated with the Heaven and Earth Society and the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, themselves the products of religious and ethical syncretism in China and Vietnam. In fact, their mutual cross-fertilization resulted in the Vietnamese becoming the majority of the membership of each organization by the 1870s. Along with their localization, they became increasingly intertwined with the anti-French resistance in the Mekong Delta. In a process similar to China, local gentry and the court in Huế tapped into the revolutionary potential of sects and secret societies. But because these organizations possessed their own interests, especially the expansion of their own horizontal networks, the state and elites found it difficult to effectively harness their energies. Eventually, the French came to impose firmer control over the western delta.[69]

However, one of the more significant legacies of the sects and secret societies was to give rise to the new religious movement of Cao Đài, which was another round of comprehensive synthesis of these previous rounds of syncretism. Once again, Hà Tiên became a crucial site for its formation. Ngô Văn Chiêu (1878-1932), the first disciple of Cao Đài, received his second

[68] Sellers, *Princes of Hà-Tiên*, pp. 134-135; Amirell, *Pirates of Empire*, pp. 162-163.

[69] Ho Tai, *Millenarianism*, pp. 73-75.

revelation in 1920, during a seance at the home of the local notable Lâm Tấn Đức (1866-1938). Đức was the uncle of Lâm Tấn Phác (1906-1969), who would become a famous poet writing under the pen name of Đông Hồ.[70]

Moreover, the area around the city provided Chiêu with places to meditate and acquire significant inspiration. He often ascended the Stone Grotto (C: *Shidong* V: *Thạch Động*) to invoke spirits. A subject of poetry for Mo Tianci and his literary club, this craggy limestone rock formation, complete with a subterranean cave network, was located not far away from where the monk Yellow Dragon wandered about and constructed his stupa. It is not clear whether Chiêu ever visited the Guangji fotang, but he traveled to the island of Phú Quốc and held seances at a Xiantiandao Buddha Hall in the main town of Dương Đông. Later on, many members of the Heaven and Earth Society would also join Cao Đài after the failure of an anti-French rebellion.[71] It appears that the local gentry Lâm Tấn Đức played an important role in assisting Ngô Văn Chiêu in all these endeavors. But Đức's exact connections to the Xiantiandao and the Guangji fotang, as well as the Heaven and Earth Society, and why Chiêu would hold seances at his home remain unclear. It is certainly a topic worthy of further exploration and research.

Conclusion

It was not by coincidence that Hà Tiên served as one of the founding sites for Xiantiandao in Vietnam. Since the late seventeenth century, long before Zhang Dongchu's establishment of the Guangji fotang in 1863, Hà Tiên stood at the forefront of the major rounds of religious and cultural transmission from China. Yellow Dragon, the thirty-fifth patriarch of

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[70] Huệ Khải, *Ngô Văn Chiêu: Người môn đệ Cao Đài đầu tiên* (Ho Chi Minh City: Nhà xuất bản Tôn giáo, 2012), pp. 19-20.

[71] Huệ Khải, *Ngô Văn Chiêu*, pp. 20-21.

Linji Chan, probably introduced Mahayana Buddhism to the western Mekong Delta and Gulf of Siam littoral. Besides his own school, he reached out to commoners by promoting Pure Land beliefs. Through his ascetic lifestyle as a mendicant wandering in the remote hills, he cultivated an aura of mysticism and magic that would foreshadow the later practices of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương and other popular religious sects based in the Seven Mountains. Starting from the end of the eighteenth century, secret societies and pirates made Hà Tiên their base. In fact, one of the earliest references to the activities of the famous Heaven and Earth Society occurred in the port and its surrounding waters.

Sects and secret societies could acquire a stable foothold in Hà Tiên on account of its unique status as an autonomous enclave run by Chinese creoles. As a crossroads of trade between China and mainland and island Southeast Asia, it became home to a diverse, multiethnic population and a site for multiple native place, commercial, and religious networks. Most of them maintained translocal connections outside of the western Mekong Delta and Gulf of Siam littoral. Mo Jiu and Mo Tianci promoted these linkages through a decentralized variant of Confucianism that deemphasized the creation of vertical hierarchies and orthodoxy. Although the power and influence of the Mo declined during the late eighteenth century, Hà Tiên became a focal point in the geopolitical contest between Vietnam and Siam. Because neither side could fully overcome the other, the clan became a compromise choice acceptable to both and thereby continued to play an important role in governance over the area, first as garrison commanders and later as governor-generals.

The ambiguous political and jurisdictional status of Hà Tiên, as well as its Chinese heritage and multiethnic and multiconfessional communities, made it an ideal point of entry for sects and secret societies from China. These organizations, too, were the outcomes of centuries

of integration between the three teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. By the Ming and Qing, this syncretism had resulted in the secularization of religious practices and the growing centrality of Confucianism. Hà Tiên also provided an ideal environment for the further elaboration and development of these organizations. The entry of the Xiantiandao, in many ways, led to another round of syncretism and integration and facilitated localization, with membership eventually becoming majority Vietnamese over the 1870s. The Cao Đài religion represented a synthesis and culmination of all of these previous trends. Again, Hà Tiên was a crucial place where one of its key figures, Ngô Văn Chiêu, acquired much of the inspiration for his teachings.