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VIETNAMESE RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM AS REFLECTED IN THE NOVEL “HO QUY LY” BY NGUYEN XUAN KHANH

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Abstract. The article discusses the problem of syncretism of different religious doctrines as shown in the novel “Ho Quy Ly” by modern Vietnamese writer Nguyen Xuan Khanh. The novel has not been sufficiently investigated yet in either domestic or foreign literary criticism. The work focuses on the religious problems, viz. on Vietnamese religious syncretism, as reflected in the novel. The author has used works by leading Russian Sinologists and Vietnamists for theoretical ground. Methodology comprises historical and cultural as well as comparative approaches. The article analyses the interaction of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism in the novel. The conclusions state the connection of spiritual crisis and political decline of the Vietnamese monarchy in the late 14th century.

Keywords: Vietnam, literature, Ho Quy Ly, religious syncretism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism.

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Introduction

One of the typical features of the Vietnamese nation is the tradition of religious syncretism. Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism belong to the main traditional trends of Vietnam. There is a special concept “three religions” (“tam giáo”) for their totality.

Taoism was perceived fragmentarily, but in various periods Buddhism and Confucianism competed with each other for supremacy and the right to be part of the state ideology. Since the 10th century, after having gained the independence of the Chinese Empire, till the first half of the 14th century Buddhism occupied leading positions, and representatives of the Buddhist Sangha actively participated in political life of Vietnam. However, since the second half of the 14th century Neo-Confucianism had come to the fore, and Confucian scholars began to occupy the chief posts at the Court. The works by such domestic Vietnamists like V.V. Zaytsev, and A.V. Nikitin [Zaitsev, Nikitin 1996], E.Yu. Knorozova [Knorozova 2020] etc.; and those by Vietnamese researchers such as historian Tran Van Giao [Trần Văn Giàu 1997] or literary critic Nguyen Dang Thuc [Nguyễn Đăng Thục 1991] describe this epoch in detail.

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Fig. 1. Symbolic depiction of the three religions ("tam giáo"). *An open source photo*

Also, the history of monarchy in Vietnam witnessed the existence of such a phenomenon as imperial religion. It was meant to support the legitimacy of the ruling dynasty and was based upon the totality of folk beliefs. This concept emerged in Sinology and was analyzed in the works by A.S. Martynov [Martynov 1987] and G.A. Tkachenko [Tkachenko 1999]; A.V. Nikitin has transferred it into Vietnamese studies [Nikitin 2001]. The concept is closely connected with Chinese natural philosophy and its political components. It consists of three main elements, i.e., the cults of Heaven, imperial ancestors and fertility, expressed in divine-natural law, granted by Heaven to Vietnamese monarchs to rule their territory; the ability of the emperor (being the Heaven's son) to maintain peace and society's normal life by his good deeds etc. [Ibid.: 251–267]

The problem of interaction of different religious doctrines, particularly Buddhism and Confucianism, is one of the cross-cutting themes in the famous historical novel “Ho Quy Ly” (“*Hồ Quý Ly*”, Hanoi, 2000) by modern Vietnamese writer Nguyen Xuan Khanh, dedicated to the great Vietnamese reformer Ho Quy Ly (1336–1407) [Nguyễn Xuân Khánh 2002] (Fig. 2). The novel has not yet been thoroughly investigated either in domestic or in foreign literary criticisms. The article discusses this religious aspect of the novel.

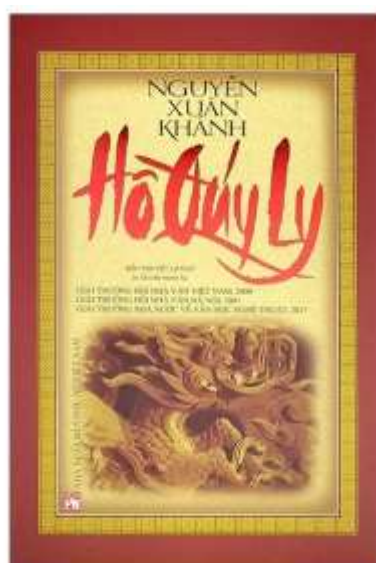


Fig. 2. Cover of Nguyen Xuan Khanh's novel “Ho Quy Ly”. *An open source photo*

Also, it is noteworthy to mention “The Tragedy of the Reformer in “Ho Quy Ly” by Nguyen Xuan Khanh”, the article by T.N. Filimonova [Filimonova 2012], analyzing the work in general and concentrating on the personality and political activity of its protagonist. In Vietnamese literary criticism such specialists like Doan Anh Duong [Đoàn Ánh Dương 2013] and Ngo Thi Tuyet Nhung have analyzed the novel in their research works [Ngô Thị Tuyết Nhung 2011]; they have not only given a general analysis of the novel, but also investigated the correlation of historical truth and literary fantasy in it.

Buddhism and Confucianism in the novel

The action in the novel develops at the end of the 14th century. This is a complicated period of Vietnam’s history. It is connected with the decline of the ruling dynasty Tran due to the clumsy rule of the last emperors and economic problems. The situation was aggravated with the tense foreign policy situation. The Chinese Ming dynasty (1368–1644) rising in the North and Chams in the South under the leadership of the talented chief Che Bong Nga (ruled in 1360–1390) attempted to use the instability of the Tran dynasty. So, no wonder that numerous personages of the novel were looking for the exit of the complicated situation in religious and philosophical doctrines.

The main conflict in the novel (like also in the Vietnamese history) is the rivalry between Buddhism and Confucianism. In the novel these two doctrines often oppose each other. In the period described in the novel the Buddhists lost their political influence, but the religion did not disappear from life and culture; its successors could be found among families of prominent officials. Thus, Ho Quy Ly, one of the protagonists of the novel, a senior government official (Fig. 3), a reformer, who desired to usurp the throne to bring the country out of the crisis married a deeply pious woman, a Buddhist.



Fig. 3. Ho Quy Ly. *An open source photo*

In the novel she is shown as a weak, sensitive and compassionate woman, while Ho Quy Ly is a Confucianist, strict, tough man, ready to use every means in order to achieve his goal. Two different characters are revealed even in their appearances. The official’s senior son describes them as follows: “She was tender, but weak, unlike my father, who was a stocky, strong man, with a square face and a jet-black beard. Both my mother and Nhat Chi Mai² were gracious little women” [Там же: 334].

² Nhat Chi Mai was step-mother of Ho Quy Ly’s senior son Nguyen Trung. His mother died, when he was quite a small child.

In the novel his contemporaries describe Ho Quy Ly in this way: "...he was resolute, perspicacious, he dared to stir up the world. Some people criticized him for his severity, perfidy, cunning and extreme arrogance" [Ibid.].

Curiously, some Ho Quy Ly's close relations and associates prayed to Buddha, but the official concerned Buddhism with some contempt and fear. Thus, he forbade to build Buddhist temples and pagodas in his new capital Tay Do. One of Ho Quy Ly's reforms was the forcible return of numerous Buddhist monks to the world, which later served one of the causes of the rebellion in their midst supported with folk. The rebellions' anger was directed against the ruling class. Also, this can be seen like a confrontation between Buddhism and Confucianism. The folk mostly professed Buddhism, and the representatives of the imperial family and officials in the novel adhered to the Confucian thought.

Various personages of the work emphasize the confrontation of the doctrines. Thus, Ho Quy Ly's father-in-law, old Pham cites the old saying: "Buddhism is like a shift of light in the sky (*giếng trời*), and Confucianism and Taoism are but a cave and a canyon. Buddhism is like the sun, and Confucianism and Taoism are but torches" [Ibid.: 32]. Being a famous doctor, he also compares the doctrines with drugs: "Medicine is the root of everything. Buddhism is a drug. Confucianism and Taoism are also types of drugs... There are monarchs' drugs (*vuong y*), and there are those of vassals (*bá y*)³. The former harmonizes yin-yang in the human, restores balance. This is a long and hard way, but a safe one. The latter is like a hot-tempered and severe commander, who promises quick result with his actions, but the cause of the disease is still there" [Ibid.].

Seeking for the remedy for treating either physical or spiritual diseases, people often turn to religion or philosophy. Therefore, old Pham calls them a kind of drugs. He clearly prefers Buddhism. This doctrine, like "a monarchs' drug" is meant for peace and harmony in the world, permitting treatment of this or that disease. Confucianism and Taoism are different. Their adherents try to solve the problem radically and quickly. However, Ho Quy Ly looks for "the remedy for the people". i.e., he turns to the latter.

Another (fictitious) personage, chronicler Su Van Hoa, compared the doctrines with *yin* and *yang*: Buddhism is softness, quietness, feminine, but Confucianism is hardness, haste, regularity, masculine. It is not by chance that in the moments of despair and repentance Ho Qui Ly sought for consolation in prayers at the altar of his late wife-Buddhist [Ibid.: 540].

Both doctrines in the chronicler's opinion are called to serve in favor of "the country's soul" (*hồn nước*). The latter concept is very broad including the state sovereignty, the population's welfare (*lit.* "safety, joy, satiety and warmth"⁴), culture, customs and traditions, everybody's independence. He supports the renovation idea (Ho Quy Ly is its defensor), but troubles that Confucianism will be the base of the transformations, and Buddhism will be discarded, i.e., *yang*, hardness, will be preferred. But "a hard heart is neither tolerable nor magnanimous. It will accompany severity. There will be but blood and tears in the human life. *Yang*'s implacability and haste will result in the decline. The country will be ruined and become a tasty morsel for foreigners. They are just waiting for an opportunity to invade the country and to crush it" [Ibid.]. Thus, Su Van Hoa believes that the promotion of one doctrine to the detriment of the other may lead the country to cataclysms and even to the loss of "the country's soul", its independence.

³ *Bá* is also part of the word "panacea" (*thuốc trị bá chứng*). Then, Confucianism and Daoism are universal remedies, and Buddhism, in old Pham's opinion, is acupressure.

⁴ Viet. *sự an vui no ấm*.

Negative consequences begun from the disbalance and moving towards Confucianism are obvious; they occur during the developments described in the novel. But Buddhism is something more complicated. However, it can be seen in meditative, peaceful and somewhat passive personages. One of these bright examples is the last emperor of the Tran dynasty Tran Thuan Tong (ruled in 1389–1398). For the first time the reader sees him at the age of 13, a tall, thin, handsome teen-ager. The author often emphasizes his meekness (he was not mixed up with the scandals at the Court), lack of ambition (several times Tran Thuan Tong asks the imperial preceptor not to bequeath the throne to him), his thirst for knowledge (he learned history at a low age, his best hobby was reading), disposition to melancholy and philosophizing (at the age of 14 he begins to think of transience of life).

His unwillingness to participate in quarrels and disappointment in his imperial status, dependent on the will of all-powerful Ho Quy Ly, made Tran Thuan Tong leave for religion and give up state affairs. In one of his meditations, he addresses Ho Quy Ly: “There are many who are thirsty for the throne... You [Ho Quy Ly] are my teacher and my father-in-law. Over twenty years you have worked hard for the throne. Yes, I know. And who does not? Ask anybody... Seemingly, the notorious throne is mine, but actually it is not. There are so many people near me, who held my hand, shut my mouth and did not let me bequeath the throne to you. They call it nonsense. You have providently developed the plan to bequeath the throne to my son who is your grandson. An is under three years old yet, he is baby walking, is beginning to speak, but he knows already what the throne is... Therefore, I have agreed to bequeath all the state affairs to you. Are you satisfied now? Why haven’t you let me go yet, haven’t given me back silence and peace... I desire to be dissolved in the night. I am thirsty for solitude” [Ibid.: 549].

The result of the monarch’s inertia, his desire to get rid of attachments and world’s passions shown in the novel while the dynasty and the country were on decline, was the Tran’s loss of power, which indirectly caused the loss of independence by Dai Viet⁵ for nearly 20 years (1407–1427).

The author opposes the two doctrines in the narration of the Tran dynasty fall. For much of the ruling period the dynasty was favorably disposed to Buddhism, but was overthrown by Confucian Ho Quy Ly. Such an opposition is seen even in the architecture of the two capitals: Thang Long, the Tran capital and Tay Do⁶, the future capital of Ho Quy Ly’s Empire. “At the gates of Tay Do, at the foot of Dun mount, Nguyen Trung⁷ entered quite a different world. Having ascended to the top of the Yen Tu mount⁸, the highest in the neighborhood, one feels that the soul is opening, rising; plenty of free and ample space; one can see farther. But when he stood at the foot of Dun mount on the long strait road of sand and stone and looked at the large stone citadel Tay Do, Nguyen Trung felt creeping into a chest, into a cliché. Everything in it consists of strait horizontal and vertical lines, everything is correct and adjusted to the east, west, south and north, from the standpoint of the ceremonial, relations between the emperor and his subjects, between father and his children” (Fig. 4).

⁵ Then Vietnam was called so.

⁶ Tay Do was located on the territory of current Thanh Hoa province. Ho Quy Ly was born there.

⁷ Ho Quy Ly’s senior son.

⁸ On Yen Tu Mount there located the chief pagoda of the Buddhist school Truc Lam founded by one of the Tran dynasty’s representatives.



Fig. 4. Buddha statue at Lord of the Mountain Pagoda in prov. Binh Dinh in Vietnam. *An open source photo*

“Ho Quy Ly is a Confucian scholar. Thang Long, the capital which existed throughout the rule of the Ly and Tran dynasties, professing Buddhism, experienced the influence... of that religion in its architecture. There is a lot of pagodas and lakes in the city... Ho Quy Ly sent Nguyen Trung to draw a map of Tay Do during its construction. He said: There must not be the least sign of pagodas. Pagodas easily mollify humans’ hearts. The new capital must convey a strong sense of grandeur, veneration, canonicity (*phép tắc*)» [Ibid.: 771–772]. The novel emphasizes that even imperial palaces of the two cities differ. In Thang Long the palace is a wooden light building, while in Tay Do the palace is a copy of the former, but more luxurious one, constructed of stone with the predominance of black color in the main halls.

Speaking of the religious complementarity shown in the novel, it is possible to return to the character of emperor Tran Thuan Tong. On the one hand, he is directly connected with imperial religion, being one of its chief priests and symbols, and consequently, through it, including the idea of filial obedience (such parallels as father – son, emperor – folk) also with Confucianism.

On the other hand, Tran Thuan Tong constantly comes into contact with Taoism. Thus, in the process of learning he got acquainted with the work of Ruan Ji (Viet. *Nguyễn Tịch*), a Chinese poet and philosopher who lived in Three Kingdoms period of Chinese history (220–280) and grew very fond of the poet. By the way, Ruan Ji was a representative of Taoist philosophical doctrine of *Xuanxue* (Mystic Learning) disseminated in China in the 3d – 4th centuries. It had several points of contact with Buddhism, and therefore contributed to its penetration into China. This trend was due to the political crisis of the ruling Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD); it was an attempt to reassess Orthodox Confucianism presenting it as a kind of its alternative [Kobzev 2006: 405–407].

Tran Thuan Tong got carried away with the idea to create a new Taoist school in the hope to revive the past grandeur of his dynasty and the whole country and quickly comprehended main subtleties of the doctrine. That attempt (by the way, a futile one) to resolve the crisis contrasts with more traditional ways. For instance, there was a recruitment of talented people to the state apparatus through state examinations, by that time already Confucian in their essence, which Ho Quy Ly had resorted to.

For about a half of the novel Tran Thuan Tong is accompanied with a white monkey, a pet of a Taoist monk. Once it even helped to bring the young emperor back to life when during the meditation his soul was near to leave his body forever. The vision of a lonely tiny monkey trying to warm its master mollified the latter's heart and made him think and then return into his bodily form.

Explaining his return into the world, Tran Thuan Tong addressed Buddhist karma: "Suddenly he felt pity for himself, for everybody. He could not leave yet. He was to remain and undergo everything what the Tran karma had prepared for him. The glorious Tran dynasty had rendered great services for the country. But his ancestors had already used the results of their labors, having left him in karma legacy nothing but the tragedy. In the end, the life of the last representatives of the ruling dynasty used to be like that. In the past the ancestors of the Tran dynasty prepared tragic fate for Ly Hue Tong and Ly Chieu Hoang⁹, didn't they? These thoughts made his soul sigh. Thuan Tong returned into his body to taste the fruit, having prepared for him by karma, however bitter they might be" [Ibid.: 706–707].

We can see that elements of various religious and philosophical doctrines have entangled together even in the life of one person, the emperor. Such personages in the novel are numerous enough, though Tran Thuan Tong is one of the most expressive examples.

In the work a lot of personages address the concept of "karma". Most of them are Buddhists, but still, they adhere to a certain syncretism, supporting not only Buddhist canons, but also elements of other philosophical and religious doctrines. So does Vo Chu, a Buddhist monk. Once he gave refuge and educated Pham Su On, the would-be leader of the Buddhist rebellion mentioned above, and later sheltered his son. In one of his conversations with the latter Vo Chu thinks on the individual and collective karma: "From times immemorial a country like a human being has its own karma. This collective karma of all people... preserve seeds... good wishes, elements of culture, which the people had sowed. They become desires, the soul of mountains and rivers. Then, from one life to another these desires are incarnated in sages, great and famous persons and even in kind hearts of simple inhabitants, to lead the people along the way of Dao" [Ibid.: 760]. In its turn, Dao is a Taoist concept.

Confucian scholar, chronicler Su Van Hoa, trying to guess his fate after he had criticized "*Minh Dao*" ("Thoroughfare"), one of the main works by Ho Quy Ly, also mentions karma saying that it is impossible to avoid what it had prepared. The confession he adhered to is not directly named in the novel. However, in his youth Su Van Hoa was educated by a monk who acquainted his novice not only with Buddhism, but also with Confucianism and Taoism. Then the would-be chronicler continued his education in the capital concentrating on Confucianism, to pass the examinations and get a degree.

In his attempt to find the exit out of the crisis a number of personages, Tran Thuan Tong among them, address the experience of emperor Tran Nhan Tong (ruled in 1278–1293) who founded his Buddhist school Truc Lam ("The Bamboo Grove"). The time of Tran Nhan Tong's rule is connected with the victory of Dai Viet over the Mongol/Mongol-Chinese troops in the 13th century, the increase of the regional prestige of the Empire, the work at the country's welfare as a whole. Therefore, the school's foundation is also linked in the personages' consciousness with success and prosperity. Curiously, the Truc Lam school, being a Buddhist one, absorbed elements of Confucianism, Taoism and autochthonous beliefs of the population [Torchinov 1993: 89].

⁹ *Lý Huệ Tông* (ruled in 1210–1224) and his daughter *Lý Chiêu Hoàng* (ruled in 1224–1225) were the last rulers of the Ly dynasty. *Trần Thủ Độ* (1194–1264), the Tran dynasty's general and leader, married his nephew to Lý Chiêu Hoàng, then forced Lý Huệ Tông to transfer the throne to his infant daughter; after that the throne was transferred to her husband. Thus, the Ly dynasty was overthrown. In 1226 Trần Thủ Độ, fearing possible discontent of the population and Ly's attempts to get back the power, forced the former emperor to commit suicide.

Another problem connected with religious syncretism of the Vietnamese has been raised in the novel: a certain crisis of the Confucian doctrine itself. Ho Quy Ly was one of the chief critics of Confucianism form existed at that time. He exposed his ideas in his work “Minh Dao”. This was a real work, which, unfortunately, have not survived to our time. There is a meagre information on it in some historical sources¹⁰. Particularly, the reformer spoke against the thoughtless application of the theories created in China for Chinese realities, as well as against collecting and copying ancients’ wisdom for self-reproduction of the officials’ system but not for the practical application of knowledges to improve the state’s life.

Criticizing Confucianism Ho Quy Ly was supported by a narrow circle of people such as imperial preceptor Tran Nghe Tong, Ho Quy Ly’s younger son and Nguyen Can, one of his associates. However, most officials and the Tran dynasty representatives, adherents of Orthodox Confucianism, opposed the critic and Ho Quy Ly, though he contributed to the making of the scholars’ power, having strictly regulated the state examinations for a degree and having made them purely Confucian.

Some Russian Vietnamists (A.V. Nikitin, E.Yu. Knorozova) [Nikitin 2001; Knorozova 2020: 72–88] support the idea that in traditional Vietnam studies despite the just separation of the two stages of Vietnamese thought, i.e., Buddhist and Confucian ones, mentioned above, in reality the core of ideology always was imperial religion, but other religious systems were auxiliary. Consequently, there always existed a base not coinciding with the dominant doctrine [Knorozova 2020: 75].

When transferring this point of view to the novel, it is possible to explain Ho Quy Ly’s behavior concerning Buddhism and Confucianism through the prism of imperial religion. The Vietnamese reformer was guided by how they could help to strengthen and preserve the power. Thus, his measures concerning Buddhism can be interpreted not only with his Confucian antagonism. For instance, the return of numerous Buddhist monks into the world was to increase the taxed population and to solve the state financial problem existed then. The absence of Buddhist pagodas in the new capital was the desire to support the Tran wading dynasty (mostly Buddhist one) and at the same time to prevent a new rebellion of the adherents of this religion in the city. The same causes explain why despite the above-mentioned measures, as if directed against Buddhists Ho Quy Ly permits to celebrate Buddhist feasts before the oath of allegiance to his grandson, who was destined to the would-be rulers of the country; why he does not forbade his close relations and associates to pray to Buddha etc.

From the same standpoints it is possible to explain why Ho Quy Ly, being a Confucian, criticized that doctrine, opposing the elder officials of higher ranks.

In reality he rejected neither of those doctrines, but, on the contrary, he tried to influence the situation in order that all the religious trends, in their symbiosis, could support the imperial religion, legitimating its new regime.

¹⁰ For instance, its content is briefly exposed in the chronicle “Complete Annals of Dai Viet” [Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư 1993: 467].

Conclusion

Thus, the novel presents a complicated religious situation, which once again demonstrates syncretism of Vietnamese philosophy. The novel describes the period when Buddhism took the second place, obvious then to few people, but nothing had been suggested in return. The imperial religion could not find support either in the doctrines needed to be changed, or in the ruling dynasty being in decline. Spiritual vacuum and search for the ways and means to overcome it, reflect the general crisis experienced by Dai Viet.

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