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Buddhism in South Vietnam: Reform and Contribution

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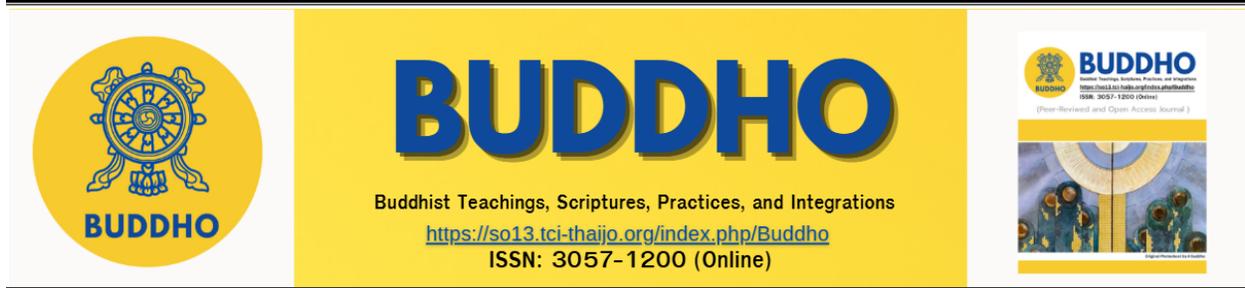
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Buddhism in South Vietnam: Reform and Contribution **Nenagh Min Gieng ***

Abstract

Buddhism has played a crucial role in the historical, cultural, and social development of South Vietnam, particularly during the 20th century. Amidst periods of political turmoil and colonial rule, Buddhist leaders initiated significant reforms to modernize monastic education, social engagement, and religious practices. These reforms were largely influenced by global Buddhist movements and local socio-political conditions. Additionally, Buddhism contributed to South Vietnamese society through education, social welfare, and resistance movements, particularly during the Vietnam War. This paper explores the key figures, institutions, and ideological shifts that shaped Buddhist reform in South Vietnam and examines its contributions to Vietnamese society. By analyzing historical records and scholarly discussions, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the dynamic relationship between Buddhism and South Vietnam's socio-political landscape.

Keywords: Buddhism, South Vietnam, Religious Reform, Buddhist Contributions, Modern Vietnamese History

Introduction

Buddhism has been deeply intertwined with Vietnamese society for centuries, shaping its religious and cultural identity (Nguyễn, 2019). In South Vietnam, Buddhism underwent significant transformations, particularly in response to colonial rule, political upheavals, and modernization efforts. During the 20th century, Buddhist leaders sought to reform monastic education, integrate Buddhist teachings with social activism, and assert religious identity in the face of external influences (Ngô, 2021). The Buddhist reform movement in South Vietnam was not merely a religious revival but also a socio-political response to French colonialism and the later establishment of the Republic of Vietnam (1955–1975) (McHale, 2004). Many Buddhist leaders advocated for national independence, social justice, and religious freedom, positioning Buddhism

as a key force in shaping the nation's ideological landscape (Zinoman, 2019). This reform movement also played a significant role in the political struggles leading up to the Vietnam War, with Buddhist activists engaging in nonviolent resistance against governmental policies perceived as oppressive (Taylor, 2013). This paper explores the key aspects of Buddhist reform in South Vietnam, focusing on its major figures, institutions, and ideological developments. Furthermore, it examines the broader contributions of Buddhism to South Vietnamese society, particularly in education, social welfare, and political engagement. By drawing upon historical records, religious texts, and academic analyses, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Buddhism's evolving role in South Vietnam.

Buddhist Reform in South Vietnam

Buddhism has played a central role in the cultural, social, and political development of Vietnam, particularly in the southern region. Throughout the 20th century, South Vietnamese Buddhism underwent significant reforms aimed at modernizing religious practices, strengthening monastic education, and increasing engagement in social and political movements. These reforms were influenced by both internal religious motivations and external socio-political pressures, including French colonialism and the Vietnam War. Furthermore, Buddhism made substantial contributions to South Vietnamese society, particularly in the fields of education, social welfare, and resistance movements (Cleary, 1991). This paper explores the major reforms in South Vietnamese Buddhism and evaluates its broader contributions through critical analysis.

1. **Modernization of Monastic Education** One of the most significant aspects of Buddhist reform in South Vietnam was the modernization of monastic education. Traditionally, Buddhist education in Vietnam followed classical methods that emphasized scriptural study and meditation. However, in the 20th century, Buddhist scholars sought to integrate Western pedagogical methods to create a more structured and systematic educational system. Institutions such as the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Saigon were established to train monks and laypeople in both traditional Buddhist doctrines and modern academic disciplines (Nguyễn, 2019). This reform allowed Buddhism to remain relevant in a rapidly modernizing society while preserving its core teachings.

2. **Engagement in Social and Political Movements** Another critical reform was the increased involvement of Buddhist organizations in social and political affairs. During the mid-20th century, Buddhist leaders in South Vietnam played a crucial role in advocating for social justice, human rights, and national independence. The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), founded in 1964, emerged as a leading force in opposing the policies of the South Vietnamese government, particularly under the rule of President Ngô Đình Diệm, a Catholic leader accused of discriminating against Buddhists (McHale, 2004). The self-immolation of Thích Quảng Đức in 1963 became a powerful symbol of Buddhist resistance and brought international attention to the plight of Buddhists in South Vietnam (Zinoman, 2019).

3. **Critical Analysis of Buddhist Reform Analysis 1: Strengths and Limitations of Educational Reform** The modernization of Buddhist education was a crucial step in ensuring that Buddhism remained relevant in contemporary Vietnamese society. By integrating Western academic

disciplines into monastic education, South Vietnamese Buddhism was able to produce a generation of monks and scholars who were both spiritually and intellectually equipped to address societal challenges (Ngô, 2021). However, some critics argue that these reforms diluted traditional Buddhist teachings by placing excessive emphasis on secular subjects. This tension between modernization and traditionalism remains a key issue in Vietnamese Buddhist education today (Taylor, 2013). Analysis 2: The Impact of Political Engagement on Buddhist Identity While Buddhist engagement in political affairs helped bring social justice issues to the forefront, it also led to internal divisions within the Buddhist community. Some Buddhist leaders believed that direct political involvement compromised the spiritual mission of Buddhism, arguing that monks should focus on religious teachings rather than political activism (McHale, 2004). Others, however, maintained that Buddhism had an ethical responsibility to confront injustice and protect the rights of its followers. This debate over the role of Buddhism in politics continues to shape Buddhist activism in Vietnam today (Zinoman, 2019).

Buddhism's Contributions to South Vietnamese Society

Buddhism has been a significant cultural, spiritual, and political force in South Vietnam, shaping various aspects of society. Its influence extends beyond religious teachings, affecting education, social welfare, and national identity. The contributions of Buddhism in South Vietnamese society have been substantial, yet they have also faced challenges and limitations. This critical analysis examines Buddhism's role in education, humanitarian efforts, and sociopolitical activism while assessing both its strengths and shortcomings.

1. Education and Intellectual Development Buddhism played a vital role in advancing education and intellectual development in South Vietnam (Tho, 2016). Buddhist schools and universities provided both religious and secular education to students, helping to bridge the gap between traditional Buddhist scholarship and modern knowledge systems. Additionally, Buddhist intellectuals contributed to the dissemination of Vietnamese culture and philosophy, promoting a distinct national identity amidst foreign influences (Nguyễn, 2019).

2. Social Welfare and Humanitarian Efforts Buddhist organizations were also heavily involved in social welfare programs, providing aid to war victims, orphans, and impoverished communities. Monasteries and Buddhist charities established hospitals, schools, and relief centers, offering essential services to those in need (Thien-An, T. (1992). These humanitarian efforts reinforced Buddhism's role as a moral and ethical guide in South Vietnamese society (Ngô, 2021).

3. Critical Analysis of Buddhism's Contributions to South Vietnamese Society Analysis 1: Educational Contributions Buddhism played a crucial role in the development of educational institutions in South Vietnam. Buddhist schools and universities provided both religious and secular education, fostering intellectual growth and national consciousness. The establishment of the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Saigon is a prime example of efforts to modernize Buddhist education and integrate it with contemporary academic disciplines (Nguyễn, 2019). These institutions produced scholars and leaders who contributed to Vietnamese society's intellectual and cultural development. While Buddhist educational institutions provided valuable knowledge

and promoted ethical values, they faced criticism for limited accessibility and exclusivity. Many of these schools primarily catered to monastic communities, leaving laypeople with fewer educational opportunities (Taylor, 2013). Additionally, the emphasis on Buddhist philosophy sometimes overshadowed scientific and technological education, limiting their contribution to Vietnam's economic modernization.

Analysis 2: Humanitarian and Social Welfare Contributions Buddhist organizations have historically been at the forefront of social welfare efforts in South Vietnam. Monasteries and Buddhist charities established hospitals, orphanages, and relief centers, providing aid to war victims and impoverished communities. These efforts helped alleviate suffering and reinforced Buddhism's role as a moral and ethical guide (Ngô, 2021). Despite their extensive social contributions, Buddhist humanitarian efforts sometimes lacked coordination and faced resource limitations. The reliance on donations and voluntary support meant that these initiatives were often inconsistent and unable to meet the full demands of society (McHale, 2004). Additionally, some critics argue that these welfare efforts were sometimes used to promote Buddhist religious influence rather than purely addressing social needs (Zinoman, 2019).

Analysis 3: Sociopolitical Activism and Resistance Movements Buddhist leaders and organizations played a crucial role in South Vietnam's political landscape, particularly during the Vietnam War. The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) emerged as a leading force advocating for social justice and human rights. The self-immolation of Thích Quảng Đức in 1963 became an international symbol of Buddhist resistance against governmental oppression (Zinoman, 2019). This activism contributed to policy changes and increased awareness of religious discrimination. While Buddhist political activism brought international attention to social injustices, it also led to divisions within the Buddhist community. Some monks and scholars believed that political involvement distracted from Buddhism's spiritual mission, arguing that religious institutions should remain apolitical (McHale, 2004). Furthermore, political engagement sometimes resulted in government crackdowns on Buddhist organizations, limiting their effectiveness and autonomy (Ngô, 2021).

Conclusion

Buddhism in South Vietnam underwent profound reforms during the 20th century, particularly in the realms of education and political activism. While these reforms helped modernize Buddhism and increase its social influence, they also sparked debates over the balance between tradition and modernization, as well as the ethical implications of political engagement. Despite these challenges, Buddhism made substantial contributions to South Vietnamese society, particularly in education, social welfare, and human rights advocacy. Understanding these historical reforms and contributions provides valuable insight into the enduring role of Buddhism in Vietnam's cultural and political landscape.

Buddhism's contributions to South Vietnamese society are multifaceted, encompassing education, social welfare, and political activism. While these contributions have been invaluable in shaping Vietnamese culture and society, they have not been without challenges. Issues such as accessibility in education, resource limitations in social welfare, and the controversial role of political engagement highlight the complexities of Buddhism's influence. A balanced approach

that integrates Buddhist ethical teachings with modern societal needs can further enhance Buddhism's role in Vietnam's future.

Suggestion

To further develop the understanding of Buddhist reform and contributions in South Vietnam, future research should explore the long-term effects of modernization on contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism. Additionally, comparative studies between South Vietnamese Buddhism and other Buddhist movements in Southeast Asia could provide deeper insights into regional religious transformations. Further examination of the role of lay Buddhist organizations in shaping Vietnamese society would also be beneficial. Policymakers and religious leaders should continue to balance modernization efforts with the preservation of traditional Buddhist teachings to ensure Buddhism remains a vital force in Vietnamese culture and society.

Body of Knowledge

The study of Buddhism in South Vietnam provides valuable insights into the interplay between religion, culture, and politics. The reforms and contributions of Buddhism in this region illustrate the adaptability of religious traditions in response to modern challenges. Scholars continue to analyze the impact of Buddhist modernization efforts on contemporary Vietnamese society, particularly in education and political engagement. Furthermore, the study of South Vietnamese Buddhism offers comparative perspectives on Buddhist movements in other Southeast Asian countries, enhancing the broader understanding of Buddhism's role in socio-political contexts.

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