

The Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back Pagoda: A Unique Religious Structure in Vietnam

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Abstract

Unlike China and other countries in Southeast Asia, where Buddhist pagodas house only Buddha images, in Vietnam only Theravada pagodas follow this principle. Mahayana pagodas, besides housing Buddha images, also house images of gods not related to Buddhism or unique to Vietnamese Buddhism. These figures are generically called deities whose legends or biographies are the result of multiple interweaving layers of culture. In some pagodas, there are separate spaces or large-scale structures for the non-Buddhist gods. These separate spaces have made an important contribution to the creation of a form of pagoda which is totally different from traditional Buddhist pagodas. This form of pagoda is called Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back. In Vietnam, there are about 25 pagodas of this form. Based on an empirical study of Keo pagoda (in Thai Binh province) and Tram Gian pagoda (in Hanoi city), this article presents the main features of the Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagodas in Vietnam. Special attention is given to the origins of the pagodas, their architecture and organization, ways in which images are worshipped, religious practices and festivals. The article demonstrates that the Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagoda is a unique form of pagoda which exists only in Vietnam.

Keywords: Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back, Keo pagoda, Tram Gian pagoda, Vietnamese Buddhism, Mahayana pagoda

บทคัดย่อ

เจดีย์สถานในประเทศไทยเวียดนามแตกต่างไปจากประเทศจีนและประเทศในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ที่ซึ่งเจดีย์สถานในพุทธศาสนาจะเป็นที่ประดิษฐานของพระพุทธรูปเท่านั้น แต่ในประเทศไทยเฉพาะเจดีย์สถานในพุทธศาสนาแบบเถรวาทเท่านั้น

ที่จะยึดหลักปฏิบัติเช่นนี้ เจดีย์สถานของพุทธศาสนาแบบมหายานในเวียดนามมักจะมีรูปเคารพของเทพที่ไม่เกี่ยวข้องกับพุทธศาสนาหรือพุทธศาสนาแบบเวียดนาม รูปเคารพเหล่านี้มักถูกเรียกว่าเทวรูป ซึ่งมีตำนานและประวัติอันเป็นผลมาจากวัฒนธรรมที่สอดประสานทับซ้อนกันหลากหลายชั้น เจดีย์สถานบางแห่งมีพื้นที่ต่างหากหรือมีสถานที่ก่อสร้างขนาดใหญ่สำหรับเทพที่ไม่เกี่ยวข้องกับพุทธศาสนา พื้นที่ที่แยกออกมาต่างหากนี้มีความสำคัญในการทำให้เกิดรูปแบบของเจดีย์สถานที่แตกต่างกันสิ้นเชิงกับพุทธเจดีย์สถานแบบประเพณีนิยม และมีชื่อว่าเจดีย์สถานแบบพระพุทธรูปเจ้าอยู่ด้านหน้าเทพอยู่ด้านหลัง ในประเทศเวียดนามมีเจดีย์สถานในลักษณะนี้รวม 25 แห่ง บทความนี้จะนำเสนอลักษณะสำคัญของเจดีย์สถานแบบพระพุทธรูปเจ้าอยู่ด้านหน้าเทพอยู่ด้านหลังในประเทศเวียดนาม จากการศึกษาเชิงประจักษ์เกี่ยวกับเจดีย์สถานแก้ว (ในจังหวัดไต่บิ่งห์) และเจดีย์สถานจัมซาน (ในกรุงฮานอย) โดยจะให้ความสำคัญเป็นพิเศษกับจุดกำเนิด สถาปัตยกรรมและองค์ประกอบของเจดีย์สถาน วิธีการบูชา กิจกรรมทางศาสนา และประเพณีต่าง ๆ บทความนี้เสนอว่า เจดีย์สถานแบบพระพุทธรูปเจ้าอยู่ด้านหน้าเทพอยู่ด้านหลังเป็นเจดีย์สถานที่มีลักษณะเฉพาะและปรากฏอยู่ในประเทศเวียดนามเท่านั้น

คำสำคัญ: พระพุทธรูปเจ้าอยู่ด้านหน้าเทพอยู่ด้านหลัง เจดีย์สถานแบบพุทธ พุทธศาสนาแบบเวียดนาม มหายานเจดีย์ ปรางค์

Introduction

Every religion that has deities has its own structures to house images of its founder or god(s). Buddhism is no exception. In places where Buddhism is present, these structures have been built over time. In Vietnam, they are called pagodas. Depending on the cultural and architectural characteristics of each ethnic group and the natural, economic and social conditions of each region, pagodas take different shapes and sizes, but their functions are similar: housing images of Buddhist figures and providing places for followers to practice Buddhism. In Vietnam, Theravada pagodas house only images of the Buddha and sometimes his disciples whereas most Mahayana pagodas also house images of gods who are not related to Buddhism or who are unique to Vietnamese Buddhism. This would not be note worthy if the

non-Buddhist gods¹ were placed in the same space as other Buddhist figures. However, in some pagodas, separate spaces or even large-scale structures are built for one or several non-Buddhist gods.

The emergence of these separate spaces has made an important contribution to the creation of a form of pagoda which is totally different from traditional Buddhist pagodas and carries Vietnamese cultural identity. This form of pagoda is called Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back. According to our survey, 25 pagodas in Vietnam can be listed in this category. To explore the characteristics of this type of pagoda and confirm that Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagodas are peculiar to Vietnamese Buddhism, we studied Keo pagoda (in Thai Binh province) and Tram Gian pagoda (in Hanoi).

Keo pagoda (Than Quang pagoda)

Keo pagoda is located in Dung Nhue hamlet, Dung Nghia commune, Vu Thu district, Thai Binh province, about 15 km to the south of Thai Binh city. Legend has it that the pagoda was the place where the monk Khong Lo practiced Buddhism. Khong Lo lived during the Ly dynasty in the former land of Giao Thuy (Keo), a village sandwiched between the Red and the Thai Binh rivers. After Khong Lo passed away, local people deified him and worshipped him at the pagoda. The date when construction of the pagoda began is difficult to determine. What is certain is that it underwent a major renovation between 1630 and 1632.

¹ According to *Thien Uyen tap anh* (Collection of Outstanding Figures of the Zen Garden) and *Linh Nam chich quai* (Selection of Strange Tales in Linh Nam), the biography of Khong Lo can be summarized as follows: Khong Lo's family was engaged in fishing for several generations. He quit fishing and became a monk at Nghiem Quang pagoda (modern Keo Pagoda) in Hai Thanh district. Khong Lo usually read Dharani. At about the time of King Ly Than Tong, he and Zen monk Giac Hai went to Ha Trach and devoted themselves to Buddhism. After having practiced different magical tricks, he could fly, walk on ice, tame tigers and capture dragons. What incredible skills! Later, he moved to live in a pagoda in his district. He passed away on the third day of the sixth month of the Year of Ky Hoi or the 10th year of Hoi Tuong Dai Khanh (1119); his body was buried at the entrance of the pagoda. The king ordered the expansion of the pagoda and donated 20 altar sets. See: *Giao hoi Phat giao Viet Nam* (1990); Vu Quynh-Kieu Phu (1960).

A stele carved in 1632 and now kept at the pagoda says, “There are 21 rows [of buildings] in total, consisting of 154 rooms.” Since then, despite several repairs, traces of the 17th-century renovation have remained.

The pagoda faces the southeast, both the divine direction according to traditional belief and the direction which receives cool summer breezes from the ocean and avoids cold winds in the winter, therefore the most suitable direction for the monsoon tropical climate of northern Vietnam. The pagoda occupies an area of 108,000 square meters. It is composed of several independently standing structures of various heights. Between the Red river dyke and the pagoda is a large yard with a platform for a flag pole. At the end of the yard is a structure locally called *dinh* (meaning stop), because on festival days, the divine palanquin stops here so people can carry out rituals. Beyond that structure is a large semicircular pond leading to a paved path to the three-entrance gate built in the 1660s-70s.

After the three-entrance gate and a relatively large grassy area is the structure dedicated to the Buddha. Designed to look like the Chinese character 工, the structure consists of the front, middle and back shrines. The architectural details of the Buddha-worshipping area such as columns, bars and lines are large and are mainly smoothly planed and tightly fitted. Decorative patterns are present only on small bars. These patterns resemble stylized unicorns with curved backs and clouds on their bodies. Decorative patterns also appear on two corner lines on the outer verandah: the one on the right has a carving of a dragon’s head, and the one on the left has a carving of a fish transmutating into a dragon on the inside and a turtle spouting out water on the outside. These carvings have the artistic style of the 18th-19th centuries.

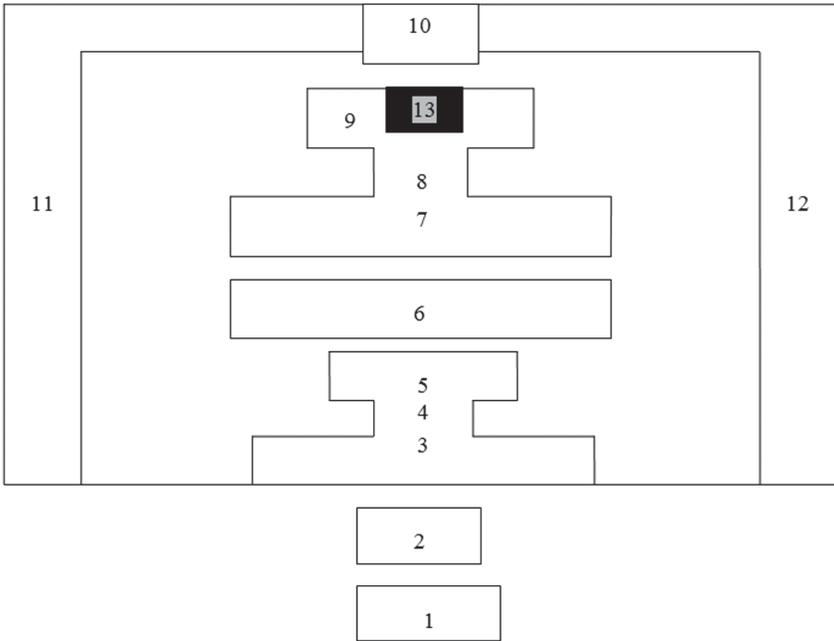


Figure 1 The structure of the Keo pagoda (Thai Binh province)

Notes: 1. Main entrance; 2. Three-entrance gate; 3. Front shrine; 4. Incense burner; 5. Upper Shrine; 6. *Gia roi* shrine; 7. Pre-worshipping area; 8. Connecting hall; 9. Back shrine; 10. Bell tower; 11, 12. Corridor; 13. Khong Lo statue

Let's move on to the deity-worshipping area, which begins with the *gia roi* shrine. This is a special structure in terms of its name and function. To date, no one has been able to explain the meaning of this name. The shrine is the place where deity-worship rituals are carried out. It consists of five rooms. The front and back sides of the shrine are without walls, allowing greater ventilation. Beyond the shrine are the pre-worshipping area, the connecting hall and the back shrine, which together create a layout resembling the Chinese character 工. As a sacred area with multiple doors separating different units and hidden behind the *gia roi* shrine, it lacks natural light. The bell tower and back hall are two major structures located at the end of the central axis.

Alongside the pagoda, beginning from the front to the back shrines (with the bell tower in between) are two rows of corridors, each consisting of 33 rooms surrounding the two main structures of the pagoda and creating the outer edges of the Chinese character 國. Thus, the architecture of Keo pagoda takes the form of “(double) 工 inside and 國 outside.”

As in Mahayana pagodas in general and Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagodas in particular, the upper shrine of KeoPagoda is home to images of Buddhas, including those of the past (Amitabha), present (Gautama) and future (Maitreya); bodhisattvas, including Avalokitesvara, Mahakasyapa and Ananda; dharma palas, and the ten kings in charge of hell.

The image of Khong Lo is located in a wooden cupboard at the back hall of the deity-worshipping area. This is a special image made with Vietnamese techniques. Only its face is relatively completely sculpted, whereas its arms, legs, body, and especially its feet, do not have clear forms and are basically a log.² The image is dressed in a red silk robe and green trousers.

Along with the images, Keo pagoda contains a large number of valuable items, such as steles, incense burners, bronze bells, and which are only found in Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back temples and pagodas. These items are altars, palanquins, ritual weapons, and especially a wooden boat, which is a model of the boat closely connected to Khong Lo's life, according to legend. In addition, the pagoda owns seven royal edicts³ promoting Khong Lo as a deity.

The main festival of Keo pagoda is held from the 13th to the 15th days of the ninth lunar month.⁴ According to local people, Khong Lo passed away on the third day of the sixth lunar month, and the 13th day of the ninth lunar month marks the 100th day after his death.⁵

² Local people explain this phenomenon as thus: After the death of Khong Lo, his body turned into a piece of wood, which villagers used to make an image of him. However, when they had only finished the face, the night was over and the next morning the wood had become so hard that it could not be worked. Villagers had to take that “image” and worship it.

³ These edicts were used to promote aristocrats and mandarins, award people with distinguished service and list deities to be worshipped at communal houses, temples and shrines.

⁴ At religious sites such as communal houses, pagodas, temples and shrines, the Vietnamese usually use the lunar calendar for their activities. Therefore, we use this calendar in this article.

⁵ According to Vietnamese belief, within 100 days (from the death), the soul is still around the house.

Every year on these days, local people and people from other areas flock to this place to remember Khong Lo's service. Main activities of the festival include carrying the incense burner, royal palanquin and small palanquin, a "reading and literature" contest at the *gia roi* shrine,⁶ a rowing competition on the Red River, carrying the deity's palanquin, and a ritual paying tribute to the deity. In addition to the main festival in the ninth lunar month, Keo pagoda hosts the spring festival on the fourth day of the first lunar month. The three main activities of this festival are duck-catching, fire cracker-throwing, and rice-cooking contests with fire cracker-throwing being the most remarkable.⁷

Tram Gian pagoda (Quang Nghiem pagoda)

Tram Gian pagoda, located in Tien Lu hamlet, Tien Phuong commune, Chuong My district, Hanoi, houses the deity Nguyen Nhu⁸ as does Boi Khe pagoda, about 15 km away. The pagoda itself is situated on mount So (or mount Ma), a not-too-high earthen mountain. Surrounding the pagoda are earthen mounds called Long (or Thanh Long), Mount So (or Ho or Bach Ho), and other mounds called Moc and Hoa.

Therefore, at the 100th day, the family of the deceased must perform a ritual to say goodbye to the soul so it can go to its eternal resting place and free itself from worldly trouble. After that ritual, the family will no longer cry for the deceased. This is why this ritual is also known as *tot khoc* (stop crying).

⁶ This is a unique contest rarely seen in other pagodas. Participants are shamans with good reading and writing skills from the lower portion of the Red River Delta. They create one or more ritual speeches on six themes: incense, flowers, lights, tea, fruit and food. The speeches are therefore called six offerings. They must be satirical writings, so people must have a sense of humor in order to read them out loud successfully. The winning speech is the one which is humorous and receives great appreciation from audiences. People's extremely skillful combination can be seen in this contest: the folklore and the simple nature of everyday lives which are not ritualistic at all (they are even vulgar) are still appreciated in a deeply sacred environment and space. This clearly shows the characters of the Vietnamese: adaptable, flexible and sociable.

⁷ About the festivals of Keo pagoda, see: Le Trung Dung and Le Hong Ly, 2005.

⁸ The legend of Nguyen Nhu is recorded on the Boi Dong stele presently kept at Boi Khe pagoda, Hanoi, and in myths in Boi Hong and Tien Lu. He comes from Boi Khe (Thanh Oai, Hanoi). He is also known as Binh An and Duc Minh. His father was Nguyen Huong, and his mother Tran Thi Hoa. He was born in the early period of the Tran dynasty. He was able, clear-sighted and kind-hearted by nature, and loved setting free live animals. At 15 years of age, while travelling, he met an 80-year-old man in mountainous Tien Lu (Chuong My, Hanoi), who, according to legend, is called Pham Coc or Hong Nhan. Nguyen Nhu asked him to be his follower. After 10 years of hard work, he knew all the magic and became well-versed in his religion. Once he visited Huong Tich cave and met Long Vuong, who gave him rain-invoking sacred texts. His reputation spread to the king. He was invited to the court to invoke rain. He built an altar and prayed for three days. He managed to invoke heavy showers providing enough water for farming. The king gave him the title, Duc Minh, the religious man. When his master passed away, he stopped the prayers and went home to mourn him. He was in charge of the building of Tien Lu or Tram Gian pagoda.

Several documents say that Tram Gian pagoda was built during the Ly dynasty, but in fact no traces from that period can be found. The oldest artifact is a pair of once-headless dragons (now heads have been mounted on them) on the sides of the steps to the front shrine. They are dated to the Tran period (1343). Over time, the pagoda has been enlarged and renovated multiple times. According to the Quang Nghiem stele built in the year of Hoang Dinh (1603), the upper shrine, incense burners, front hall and left and right corridors of the pagoda were renovated in the year of Dinh Suu (1577). Thus, by the late 16th century, the pagoda had been enlarged. The fact that a type of pagoda (tram gian, meaning hundreds of rooms) became the name of a particular pagoda partly demonstrates the size and value of this pagoda in previous periods.

Tram Gian is a large pagoda consisting of many structures located in an area stretching from the bottom of mount Ma to its peak. The main pagoda is situated on the top of the mountain. Right outside the main entrance is a busy village market which meets every morning. After the entrance, which is composed of only four simple columns, is a large brick yard. On the two sides of the yard are two rows of houses where visitors rest and prepare their offerings. The entrance does not lead directly to the main pagoda but to the stele hall. To get to the main pagoda, visitors must take a Z-shaped path. To get to the bell tower, they must turn left from there. From the bell tower, visitors will see another structure called *gia ngu*, the place where the divine palanquins are kept during festive days. Keo pagoda is similar. From the bell tower, visitors walking upwards and through a yard and steps will reach the main structures of the pagoda, which are designed to look like “工 inside 國.” The structures include the front hall, middle hall, bridge hall, upper shrine (the divine shrine is at the upper shrine), musical instrument tower, back hall, and left and right corridors. The pagoda used to be surrounded by four shrines housing the deities guarding the four directions, east, west, north and south, but only three remain, and two of them have been separated from the pagoda because of civilian residences.

Tram Gian pagoda has quite a lot of images, including its own and those originally owned by some other pagodas and transferred here

because they are broken. Many of the latter are untraceable and their display in the upper shrine is somewhat confusing. Despite their sheer number, most of the images were made quite recently.⁹ Nevertheless, what deserves attention is that we can clearly see the stages of craftsmanship evolution in different periods at the Buddha shrine of the pagoda. While the images of Amitabha and the thousand-armed, thousand-eyed Avalokitesvara reflect much of folklore culture, especially in their portrait like faces, the others are more realistic, and most importantly, each of them seems to have its own air conveyed by the artist's emotions, thoughts and desires. Most of the images have plump faces, straight noses, small slightly-closed mouths, downward-looking eyes and double chins which suggest wealth and nobility.

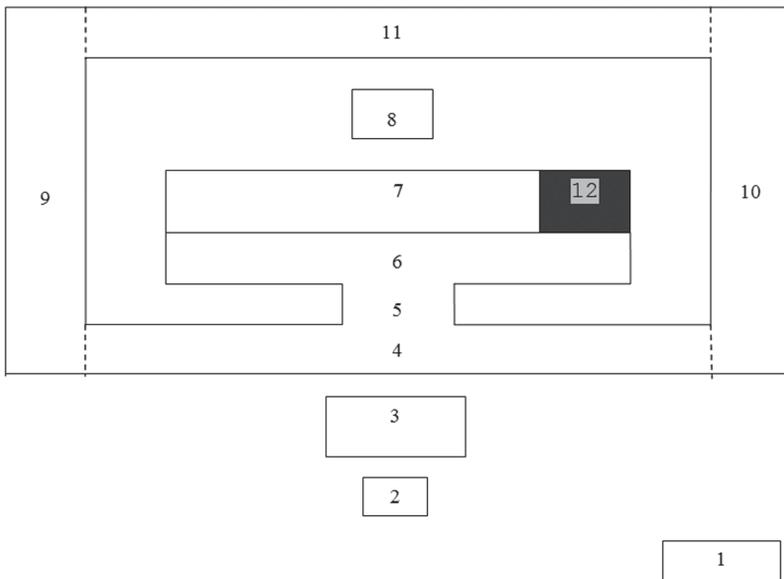


Figure 2 The structure of Tram Gian pagoda

Notes: 1. Main entrance; 2. Gia ngu house; 3. Bell tower; 4. Front hall; 5. Incense burner; 6. Middle Shrine; 7. Upper Shrine; 8. Drum tower; 9, 10. Corridor; 11. back hall; 12. Deity temple.

⁹ The earliest are the images of Amitabha and thousand-armed, thousand-eyed Avalokitesvara, which date from the late 17th century. A majority of images date from the 18th century and later.

In addition to images and reliefs, the pagoda has a large number of other artifacts, such as bronze bells, stone steles, wooden palanquins, ritual objects, wooden altar cupboards, processional parasols, and a terracotta altar dating back to the 16th or early 17th century. The pagoda does not keep royal promotion edicts. Nguyen Nhu's royal promotion edicts are all kept at Boi Khe pagoda perhaps because Boi Khe is his homeland.

The pagoda's main festival occurs from the fourth to the sixth days of the first lunar month. However, preparations begin in the twelfth lunar month of the previous year when people from the hamlets of Thuong (or So Nui), Noi (or So Dong), Phuong Tuyen and Tho Ngoa, Tien Lu commune, meet and elect the organizing board, the chair of which is always a person from Thuong because it is regarded as the big brother hamlet.¹⁰ Main ritual activities include praying to deities, carrying deities' palanquins, performing puppetry,¹¹ and paying tribute to deities. During these three days, the pagoda also hosts a number of contests including wrestling, cock fighting, human chess, and a fireworks show like the one at Boi Khe pagoda. These contests take place on a wooden stage erected in the middle of the semicircular pond in front of the royal palanquin hall so that the deities can watch them.

¹⁰ Around the late 19th century, Tram Gian pagoda began to be managed by Buddhist monks instead of lay people.

¹¹ Legend has it that after Minh invaders destroyed the pagoda and burned its images, they suffered a blood shower which caused them to become sick. Many of them died and so they had to retreat. A group of seriously ill troops remained in Dong Mai village (modern Mai Linh village) and settled down there. From then, on the festive days of the pagoda, they would have to be present at the pagoda and confess their crimes to the deities; otherwise fires would regularly occur in the village. According to village elders, every year a family named Doan in Mai Linh perform puppetry at the festival on behalf of their greater clan. They have been doing this on a voluntary basis from generation to generation without asking for compensation. On the third night of the first lunar month, four or five people from the family arrive at the pagoda to make preparations. The next morning, before carrying a palanquin to the divine inn, they pray in front of the deity's palace. Then they put up a cloth screen and perform puppetry. Performers stand behind the screen and hold up puppets one by one, from the mother to the children. As they hold up the puppets, they introduce them: full names, familial origins, crimes committed against the deities, and finally they ask the deities for forgiveness. In the afternoon, these people stand waiting at the bottom of the mountain with their puppets for the procession of deity palanquins to return. After some rituals, they pray one more time and then put the puppets away so they can use them next year.

Vietnamese Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagodas

From these case studies, we can make some remarks about the names, characteristics and origin of the Vietnamese Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagodas. These pagodas house images of both the Buddha and deities, hence their name. Deity-worshipping areas, regardless of their size and their location inside pagodas, are independent structures which are sacred yet not so high-profile as Buddha-worshipping areas. Deities housed in these pagodas are not common ones like Tran Hung Dao, Mother Lieu Hanh, Giong, or Tan Vien; instead, they are Buddhist monks who have been deified.¹²

A Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagoda normally has the following characteristics. It was originally built as a place to house and worship the Buddha. Later, it also housed images of deities (or Buddhist monks). In the early days, there were no areas specifically designed for the worship of deities, but over time, these areas were created and called deity shrines. The shrines are decorated solemnly and host the image or wooden tablet of only a certain deity. Rarely are the images of other deities placed in the shrines. The ones that are worshipped do not include images of mothers like in most Mahayana pagodas in modern-day Vietnam. There are no Buddhist monks managing the pagodas. Lay people who live in the pagodas take care of them.

The appearance of Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagodas is closely connected to the social setting of the 17th-century

¹² Normally, Buddhist monks who are deified belong to two groups. 1) They were real people such as Tu Dao Hanh or Thanh Tu (1072-1116), Nguyen Minh Khong or Thanh Nguyen (1065-1141), Nguyen Giac Hai (the tenth generation of the Wu Yantong order). The Wu Yantong order is the Zen order established in Vietnam in 820 by a Chinese Zen monk called Wu Yantong, and Nguyen Binh An or Thanh Boi (about the late 13th century-late 14th century). 2) They were not real people but products of the imagination, for example Duong Khong Lo, who was created by people combining some details of the biography of monk Nguyen Minh Khong with the name of monk Duong Khong Lo (?-1119), the ninth generation of the Wu Yantong order. Of these four figures, Tu Dao Hanh and Duong Khong Lo are more popular among the pagodas. Another remarkable point is that people tend to equate Duong Khong Lo with Nguyen Minh Khong.

Dai Viet, especially given the re-emergence of Buddhism.¹³ However, for these pagodas to arise, an important reason often cited concerns the ideological features of the Vietnamese and the way they treat gods and deities. To the Vietnamese, the supreme forces of all religions act as omnipotent gods who can bring good fortune or cause disasters. Therefore, when a particular religion is introduced into the country, the people tend to folklorize it in the way that it suits them. Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Mothers, even Confucius, Lao Tse, the Trung sisters, Lady Trieu, Ngo Quyen, and Phung Hung all became deities in Vietnamese shrines. Therefore, in many cases, the deities of a religion appear in the shrines of another religion. Some folk deities of the Vietnamese are included in Buddhist shrines. People deify some special Buddhist monks and worship them together with Buddha images. In this case, they are “Buddhist monks and Taoist hermits,” especially those who follow Esoteric Buddhism and are influenced by Vietnamese folk beliefs and Taoism. They can perform tricks and cure illnesses. They are also magicians who can drive away evil spirits and invoke wind and rain.

For the people, particularly those who live near Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagodas, these deities play a crucial role in their spiritual lives and their influence surpasses that of Buddhas. Therefore, many once regular, small-sized pagodas which did not differentiate

¹³ Buddhism is the earliest religion in Vietnam. It was first introduced into the country in the beginning of the first millennium CE and thrived during the Ly dynasty (1010-1225) and the Tran dynasty (1225-1400). However, in the mid-14th century, Buddhism began to decline for various reasons. Tran aristocrats, who were strong supporters of Buddhism, gradually lost their political and economic power as Confucianism and feudal examinations for selection of talents were becoming prevalent and the system of aristocratic farmland ownership was breaking down; Confucian mandarins were taking important positions in the state apparatus. Also, at the time, the number of Buddhist monks was very large, and negative practices occurred in pagodas, causing considerable effects on society and the image of Buddhism. Therefore, in 1396, when Ho Quy Ly ordered a dismissal of Buddhist monks and forced those under 50 years old to return to secular lives, Buddhism effectively ceased playing a dominant role in politics. However, in the 16th century, after the Mac dynasty overthrew the Le dynasty and wars broke out, people's lives became difficult, the authorities weakened, and Confucian mandarins declined. As a result, the trust in Confucianism by politicians and intellectuals deteriorated, which allowed Buddhism to re-emerge. Prolonged warfare, separation and suffering caused people to turn to the ideas and sentiments of Buddhism. In the mid-17th century, some venerable Chinese monks went to Dai Viet to practice Buddhism, which had been absent for a long time and this was the reason for re-emergence of Buddhism in 17th century. See: Nguyen Lang, 1990.

between Buddha-and deity-worshipping areas and which even “housed deities in small temples,” (Tran Lam Bien, 1996 :32) were expanded in the 17th century thanks to the sponsorship of kings, lords, mandarins and physical and financial contributions of ordinary people. At that time, areas housing deities became separate, major structures of pagodas, thus creating the present-day form of Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagodas.

It must be noted that pagodas in some regional countries also have separate areas housing non-Buddhist figures like *Phi* or *Phi* in Laos, Thailand and Cambodia or *Nat* in and Myanmar.¹⁴ In Thai temples, there is a place called *In tha khin*-where *Phi muong* is worshipped. If there is drought or flood or warfare, people will go there to pray to *Phi muong*; other than that they pray for peace only once a year. *In tha khin* is a tiny structure compared to others in a temple and is usually located to the left of the gate. It is built completely from wood. Inside this structure is a wooden throne where *Phi muong* is seated (Nguyen Le Thi, 2002 : 44-65). What is remarkable is that this structure is only a subordinate part of a temple whereas the area housing deities in a Vietnamese pagoda receives even more attention than the one housing the Buddha. In China, according to cultural researcher Kieu Thu Hoach, the Buddha and Lao Tse are worshipped, along with some venerable monks, who upon their death, were not cremated but covered in paint before they were worshipped. Their painted bodies were placed in altar cupboards and are called images of ancestral monks. This is a quite common practice in China. However, their biographies are clearly and accurately recorded in books and archives. They are hardly the products of popular imagination as they are in Vietnam (Kieu Thu Hoach, 2005). Thus, it is affirmable that the Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagoda is a uniquely Vietnamese Buddhist structure and that it is not influenced by structures and functions in China, India or Southeast Asian countries.

¹⁴ *Phi* and *Nat* are similar to Vietnamese natural deities such as mountain and river deities, so they resemble, to a certain extent, Vietnamese cloud, rain, thunder and lightning deities. However, *Phi* and *Nat* are not deities which are worshipped in Vietnamese pagodas (Nguyen Le Thi, 2002).

While they serve as Buddhist structures, Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagodas also house folk deities,¹⁵ which are shown in the fact that they have not only familiar Buddhist architectural units but also structures commonly found in divine temples such as secondary gates, pre-prayer areas, and back halls. It is especially noteworthy that in some pagodas, the left and right corridors have become the left and right residences, which is evident of the predominance of the deities housed in the pagodas.

Surveys at Keo and Tram Gian pagodas and others show that most Buddhist structures, Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagodas are designed in such a way that they look like “工inside 國.” The architectural units of these pagodas are laid out in a clear order. They can be divided into two types. Type 1 consists of secondary gate–three-gate entrance (and bell tower)-Buddha and deity worshipping areas-back hall-two vertical rows of houses (or corridors). A typical example of this type is Tram Gian pagoda. Type 2 consists of secondary gate-three-gate entrance-Buddha and deity worshipping areas (back shrine)-bell tower-back hall-two vertical rows of houses (or corridors). Keo pagoda belongs to this type.

Some of these units, for example the secondary gate, deity shrine, back shrine, and left and right residences, do not appear in regular pagodas. These units are unique to Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagodas, but they are also found in sites related to folk beliefs such as communal houses, temples and shrines.

It is argued by many researchers that sculptures at 16th- and 17th-century village communal houses are usually preoccupied with realistic, diverse, lively daily lives, which clearly express desires for well-being and prosperity, whereas those at pagodas are normally sacred and solemn (Ha Van Tan and Nguyen Van Ku, 1993). However, this argument does not seem to be applicable to Buddha-at-the-front,

¹⁵ As far as traditional Vietnamese architecture is concerned, there are clear distinctions in the nomenclature of the worshipping structure of a particular belief or religion. A structure housing the Buddha is called a pagoda. In Christianity it is called a church. Places which house village gods are called village communal houses, those which house deities of deity-worshipping beliefs are temples or shrines, and those which worship Mothers and other figures of the mother-worshipping religion are palaces or shrines.

Deity-at-the-back pagodas. At Tram Gian pagoda, in addition to lotuses-a motif commonly found in other pagodas, there are folk reliefs reflecting peasants' aspirations and themes typical of the "reproduction" belief-a quite common folk belief of Vietnamese culture. On *con*¹⁶ are dragon motifs, but they are stylized and express clearly human emotions such as happiness, sadness, anger and jealousy. These themes are never seen in other types of pagodas. Additionally, the columns, bars and lines¹⁷ of Tram Gian pagoda are painted crimson and decorated with dragons-a decorative style alien to Vietnamese pagodas but familiar to temples.

Artifacts at Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagodas are also different from those at other types of pagodas. Apart from Buddha statues and familiar pagoda artifacts such as bronze bells and stone steles, objects associated with deities commonly found in communal houses, temples and shrines, such as altar palanquins, altar cupboards, eight treasures, weapons, thrones, elephants, horses, and parasols are all present at Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagodas. Most remarkable are royal edicts, which promote deities who are worshipped in these pagodas. This shows that, to people and even court mandarins, these deities are not only monks but also gods similar to those of Vietnamese folk beliefs. In this capacity, they are even more highly regarded than when they serve as Buddhist followers or monks.

A common feature among deities housed in Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagodas is that they all possess magic and can invoke rain and wind, and tame dragons and tigers. They are all the products of multiple layers of religions interwoven over time. First of all, it must be confirmed that Buddhism plays an important role in the "creation" of legends of these figures. According to *Thien Uyen tap anh*, the deities are all monks living in different periods.¹⁸ Besides Buddhism, other religions and beliefs are present in these legends.

¹⁶ These are wooden triangle-shaped architectural details placed on wooden bars. *Con* do not provide support for a house but mainly create surfaces for decorative motifs or themes.

¹⁷ These are basic wooden parts constituting the frame of a traditional Vietnamese house.

¹⁸ Duong Khong Lo belongs to the ninth generation of the Wu Yantong order, and Nguyen Nhu is a monk living in the times of the Tran dynasty. See: *Giao hoi Phat giao Viet Nam* (1990).

Festivals of Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagodas are a unique product of Vietnamese Buddhism. Situated in Southeast Asia, Vietnam shares a common cultural foundation with other countries in the region. However, due to its location at the juncture of diverse cultures, the country, particularly its northern region, enjoys favorable conditions for cultural exchanges but it is also influenced by different cultures, especially Chinese. This influence has given Vietnamese culture various Chinese elements on the surface, but Southeast Asian culture underlies it. Yet this is not the salient feature because Vietnamese culture is not simply a sum of the two above-mentioned cultures but it has been changed and supplemented to suit the needs and characteristics of the Vietnamese people. This can be clearly seen in festivals held annually in Vietnam, especially those organized at Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagodas.

A similarity between temples housing Buddha images in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and China is that only rituals or festivals related to the Buddha and Buddhist figures are held at pagodas, for example the Thai *Songkran*, the Cambodian *Chol Chnam Thmay* and the Lao *Bun Pi May Hot Nam*, which are all New Year festivals, are the most important ones in each country. These festivals occur on April 13-15, and the birthday of Gautama Buddha is on the 15th day of the fourth lunar month. These festivities are held not only in temples but also in houses and public places. In China, the Laba Porridge Festival is held annually at Yonghegong Lama Temple in Beijing on the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month. However, this festival originated in India, particularly legends about Gautama Buddha on his way to becoming a monk, and the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month is celebrated as the day when Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment. Thus, the above-mentioned festivals happen at pagodas because they are related to Buddhism.

In Vietnam there is a clear differentiation between types of pagodas and the types of festivals they hold. Pagodas that house only Buddha images celebrate the birthday of the Buddha (the 15th day of the fourth lunar month), the day when he left home to become a monk

(the eighth day of the second lunar month), and the day he attained enlightenment (the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month) with simple rituals: monks read prayers. Only on the birthday of the Buddha do the pagodas carry out the ritual of bathing the images.¹⁹ By contrast, Buddha-at-the-front, Mother-at-the-back pagodas organize “festive” days to remember the deities of mother-worship beliefs. Deity-at-the-front, Buddha-at-the-back pagodas hold festivals related to the cloud, rain, thunder and lightning deities with the main purpose of invoking rain.²⁰ However, for Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagodas this festival either invokes rain or asks for it to stop, depending on the time of the festival, which is normally explained to be the day when the deities worshipped there were born or passed away; this means that the festival has nothing to do with Buddhism.

Another remarkable difference is that these festivals are influenced by Confucianism in that they historicize and legendize the figures which are worshipped. Not only do they add color to legends; most rituals of these festivals include a replica of a court prayer platform. During these rituals, the host performs a ceremony as if he were a subordinate praying to his lord. The ceremony proceeds slowly to the verbal commands of two men. The speech is written in Chinese. Costumes are similar to those worn by feudal mandarins. The atmosphere is as solemn as a court meeting.

Apart from the above differences, the basic meaning of this festival is similar to that of festivals in the above-mentioned countries: invoking rain. Festivals of Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagodas in the highlands usually serve this purpose and are normally held in the first lunar month, i.e. after the Lunar New Year of the

¹⁹ The image-bathing ceremony is carried out on the early morning of the 15th day of the fourth lunar month. Before that, people prepare a large bowl of water with flower petals in it. They put an image of baby Gautama Buddha inside the bowl (to reenact the moment when he was born. The image is a standing boy with his left arm pointing to the sky and his right hand pointing to the ground). Buddhist monks and followers take turns to pass the bowl and pour water over the image with a dipper. Vietnamese cultural researchers believe that this ceremony has the same meaning as the rain-invoking festival of Southeast Asian countries mentioned above.

²⁰ Major pagoda festivals honoring the cloud, rain, thunder and lightning deities occur mainly in April, when rice plants are in dire need of water. *Dai Viet su ky toan thu (Complete Annals of Viet Nam)*, contains passages about kings sponsoring rain-invoking festivals in these pagodas.

Vietnamese. In the North of Vietnam, this is the driest month because of lack of rain in the three preceding winter months and dry north eastern monsoons blow in from China absorbing moisture precious for agriculture. Moreover, this is the time when plants are beginning to grow and develop, so water plays an even more important role. Under these conditions Vietnamese farmers look forward to rain and predict it through the sound of thunder which signals bumper harvests. Therefore, during a drought, people create thunder-like sounds to invoke rain. This is illustrated in the practice of setting off firecrackers at festivals at Boi Khe, Tram Gian and Keo pagodas. We also see this practice in Laos at the rocket festival (*Bun Bang Fai*) in the sixth month of the Lao calendar or May of the solar calendar (Vien Nghien cuu Dong Nam A, 1998), when Lao people need water for the new rice crop.

The colors of deity temples and images also concern water. At Keo pagoda, the deity temple is a separate structure surrounded by wooden planks painted in a dark color-the color of deep water. At Tram Gian pagoda, although the deity temple is located inside the upper shrine, it is separated with crimson wood. The columns and ceilings have a similar color and are all decorated with dragons-the sacred animal associated with water sources.

Conclusion

It can be confirmed that in the 17th century the Vietnamese developed a special form of Buddhist architecture-the Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagoda. The most unique trait of this type of pagoda is that it is a place of worship for different religions and beliefs, which shows that the Vietnamese receive them easily and are willing to adapt them to their benefits. At Buddha-at-the-front, Deity-at-the-back pagodas, Buddhism is practiced along with the worship of other deities, so these structures play the double role of being both a pagoda and a temple. The deities include those whose legends or biographies result from multiple interweaving layers of culture. By using myths as origin stories, the Vietnamese include Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism and local religious beliefs about real historical figures to create legendary

beings with clear thinking about, and expectations for, the objective world. Therefore, at annual festivals where deities are honored and remembered, these underlying cultural traits are expressed in rituals, offerings, customs and contests. The meanings of these rituals and contests show similarities with and differences between Vietnamese culture and those of other countries in Southeast Asia as well as in China.

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Appendix



Figure 1 Bell Tower, Keo Pagoda (Thai Binh province)

Photo taken by Pham Thi Thu Huong, October 15, 2015



Figure 2 Worship place of Khong Lo Deity, Keo pagoda (Thai Binh province)

Photo taken by Pham Thi Thu Huong, October 15, 2015



Figure 3 Front Hall, Tram Gian pagoda (Hanoi)
Photo taken by Pham Thi Thu Huong, May 12, 2015



Figure 4 Image of Nguyen Nhu Deity, Tram Gian pagoda (Hanoi)
Photo taken by Pham Thi Thu Huong, May 12, 2015

