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Millenarianism
and Peasant Politics
in Vietnam

Hue-Tam Ho Tai

MILLENARIANISM AND PEASANT POLITICS IN VIETNAM

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To the memory of my father,
Ho Huu Tuong (1910–1980)
and to my mother,
Nguyen Hue Minh (1913–)

PREFACE

THIS BOOK IS about a millenarian tradition known in the Mekong delta of Vietnam as Buu Son Ky Huong and about its evolution into the Hoa Hao sect. Although the Buu Son Ky Huong tradition is scarcely known outside Vietnam, the Hoa Hao sect is already familiar to Western students of twentieth century Vietnam. Founded in 1939 by a sickly twenty-year-old named Huynh Phu So, who preached a message of apocalypse and collective salvation, the Hoa Hao sect gathered followers by the thousands. After Huynh Phu So was assassinated by the Viet Minh in 1947, his adepts pursued fiercely anti-Communist policies, for which they became well known during the Vietnam War.

Hoa Hao adepts were easily recognized by the amulets they wore, which bore the inscription "Buu Son Ky Huong." These amulets had first been distributed in the nineteenth century by a mystic called the Buddha Master of Western Peace. Huynh Phu So founded his career on claiming to be the reincarnation of the Buddha Master and on exploiting the millenarian tradition that these amulets symbolized. The Hoa Hao sect, far from being a historical aberration in an age of secular politics, was the modern embodiment of a long-standing if at times obscure tradition.

The millennial myth has a variable potency, which is sometimes strong and other times weak, but the vitality of the Buu Son Ky Huong tradition was due to more than the myth. The tradition had a communitarian dimension which kept it alive every time the dreams of the millennium faded with a failed outburst of eschatological fervor. Whereas the millennial dream provided believers with a comforting vision of future prosperity and happiness in a perfect world, the communitarian ideal shaped their lives in the imperfect here and now. Millenarian ideologies are not, however, necessarily religions of protest. While they tend to arise out of the perception that the world is imperfect, this world is both the physical and the social environment in which individuals find themselves. As in the case of the Buu Son Ky Huong

religion, such ideologies can be responses to specific challenges or circumstances which the received orthodoxies do not successfully address.

Whatever the context in which an ideology is formed, once it is formulated, it takes on a life of its own. It becomes a screen through which reality is filtered and interpreted, limiting choices and dictating the kinds of responses that can be made to the perceived reality; it provides both the questions and the answers. Thus, to view an ideology merely as a sociological end-product is to ignore the extent to which it can shape history by shaping both perceptions of and responses to the world. Buu Son Ky Huong millenarianism was a total, holistic solution to cosmic problems, in which devotional piety and collective violence were seen as two ends of the same salvationist spectrum of responses. Quietism and revolt combined to form an ideological ecology of unrest, which could be explained only partially by objective conditions such as deprivation, disenfranchisement, or rising expectations. Sectaries were ideologically conditioned to expect and welcome violent change and to take an active part in it. The experience of participating in outbursts of millenarian fervor had a cumulative effect: far from persuading the adepts of the fallacy of the millennial myth, such an experience made it easier for them to contemplate revolt as an acceptable mechanism for dealing with overpowering misery, whatever its causes. This ecology of unrest throws light on certain aspects of Vietnamese history. Southern Vietnam underwent rapid and profound change in the colonial period. The Buu Son Ky Huong tradition had to adapt to change or else become obsolete. Out of this process of adaptation was born the Hoa Hao sect.

In Vietnam, the revival of millenarianism through the Hoa Hao sect coincided with the rise of revolutionary Communism. Despite their shared advocacy of violence in the pursuit of change, the relationship between millenarian and revolutionary politics was a tense one, culminating in open conflict between the Hoa Hao sect and the Viet Minh. The articulation of this theme in this book was influenced by the history of my own family. My paternal grandfather was a small landowning peasant of the Mekong delta who, in the 1910s, was converted to the Buu Son Ky Huong religion; his brother, from all accounts something of a ne'er-do-well, chose to join the Heaven and Earth Society, a secret society that had come to Vietnam from China. In 1926 my father was dismissed from school for taking part in student strikes, but he was fortunate enough to secure a scholarship in France and obtain money from relatives for his boat fare. So at the age of sixteen, this son of peasants who had grown up among Buu Son Ky Huong faithfuls left Vietnam to study mathematics. In France, where he came into contact with Vietnamese from other parts of the country and from different back-

grounds, he became radicalized. After his return to Vietnam in 1931, he joined with other youths who had studied in France to found the Trotskyist Party. He gradually became disillusioned with Communism and disavowed it in 1939, although he remained active in revolutionary politics. By the late 1960s, he had come full circle and reverted to his childhood religion.

My father was not the only person who found it easy to cross not once, but several times, the dividing line between millenarian and revolutionary politics. But if the history of people like him shows how tenuous this dividing line was, the history of the conflict between the Hoa Hao sect and the Viet Minh also shows how difficult it can be for a revolutionary movement to absorb a millenarian sect when the sect is at the height of its power. The millennial myth and the revolutionary ideal are both about violent, total, and lasting change. The Hoa Hao-Viet Minh conflict was thus the playing out of two competing ideologies of change. The players were peasants who wanted to remake the world, and they vacillated between the Marxist and the millenarian vision of history and society. In the wings were preachers of the apocalypse and Communist cadres.

The purpose of this book is to follow the fortunes of the Buu Son Ky Huong religion from the beginning through its fragmentation into local sect-organizations, attempts to update the tradition and unite its adherents into a single movement capable of playing a vital role in the modern world, and the fading of the millennial dream and the transformation of the Hoa Hao sect into a force dedicated to the pursuit of purely communal interests. The period covered extends from the appearance of the Buddha Master in 1849 to the Communist takeover of the South in 1975.

Any historian who investigates the lives of peasants faces problems of historiography, chiefly of sources. Like their Chinese counterparts, Vietnamese historians have traditionally come from educated, upper-class backgrounds, and they have brought to their work their own class prejudices. The doings of the peasants were chronicled only when they impinged on upper-class consciousness, that is, mostly when they rebelled. This emphasis on unrest gave accounts of sectarian activities an episodic flavor which belied the continuity of the tradition and masked the essentially peaceful banality of everyday life in religious communities, even those that owed their very existence to the millennial myth. Because Confucian historiography was burdened with the moralistic requirement to serve as a "mirror" for posterity, the everyday actions of dissidents and heretics were alluded to as little as possible lest the mirror reflect the wrong image, and their beliefs were either dismissively treated or seriously distorted. The task of tracing the

antecedents of the Buu Son Ky Huong ideology is therefore an arduous one, all the more so as there does not exist in Vietnam the abundant fund of unofficial source-materials available to Chinese historians.

Fortunately, the French compiled numerous reports on the activities of dissenting groups. These reports, however, are colored by their authors' dislike of "superstition" and charlatanism" and by their unwillingness to accept the legitimacy of peasants' aspirations for a better life and for independence. Even more than the Confucian mandarins whom they replaced, the French were wedded to the idea of a sharp distinction between the temporal and the spiritual, and they had little tolerance for those who did not share this view. As far as the colonial authorities were concerned, religious sects that did not confine their activities to passive contemplation in a purely monastic setting were composed of trouble-makers who tried to take advantage of the religious liberty guaranteed under French law to plot the overthrow of the colonial government. As a rule, therefore, the reports are hostile and derogatory; they also show a considerable amount of misinformation about the sect's history and ideology, such as sometimes confusing it with other groups. But these reports are not, after all, pieces of historical research. Their value lies in their detailed description of uprisings and their references to the socioeconomic disruption which accompanied sectarian unrest.

Similarly, the rivalry between the Hoa Hao sect and the Viet Minh is well documented from the Communist side in a collection of province-by-province reports on the efforts of local Communist organizations to prepare for the Viet Minh takeover of August 1945. The Viet Minh was a united front whose adherents were drawn from all segments of the population but whose leadership was unmistakably Communist. As far as the leadership of the Hoa Hao sect was concerned, the terms "Viet Minh" and "Communist" could be used interchangeably. The Communist reports, written by cadres, do little to dispel this impression. They blur the distinction between Viet Minh and Communists, portraying the Hoa Hao-Viet Minh conflict as one between two sets of leadership for allegiance of the same peasant masses. Although uniformly hostile to the Hoa Hao sect, the Communist reports nevertheless give a fair notion of its activities and its size in the Mekong delta in 1944 and 1945.

Sectarian sources are lamentably few. The majority of the Buu Son Ky Huong adherents were illiterate. Although the Buddha Master of Western Peace reportedly received some education, he never wrote anything down, leaving that task to his disciples. Of his attributed works, only a few poems have survived. Important though these are, they offer little clue to his practical teachings or to the Buu Son Ky

Huong brand of eschatology. That eschatology was described in long poems written by disciples after the Buddha Master's death. A compendium of the works of past Buu Son Ky Huong leaders was published in Vietnam in 1971 but seems not to be available outside Vietnam, so what is known of these writings is fragmentary. Huynh Phu So's own copious output has been readily available since the 1940s.

Because of the scarcity of primary sectarian sources, secondary works assume greater importance. However, sectarian authors wrote with a view less to converting the general public or even explaining their faith to nonbelievers than to strengthening the faith of existing adepts. The result of their efforts was not so much history as hagiography. Millenarianism is a peculiarly ahistorical world-view, and this aspect of the Buu Son Ky Huong tradition is compounded by the reminiscences of aged and often illiterate sectaries. These sources have obvious pitfalls: sectaries' accounts of their own uprisings are much less accurate than French reports. Yet they help correct certain errors of fact and interpretation contained in the French reports, and they provide a precious insider's perspective. Most important, they allow the nonbeliever to have a glimpse of the sectarian world. One of the most prolific, and certainly the most accessible, of these sectarian writers is Nguyen van Hau. His writings make clear that the sectarian world was also a pioneer world. Thus, to study the Buu Son Ky Huong tradition and its modern fate is also to study how the South was colonized and developed.

In precolonial times, the South was called variously Gia Dinh (not to be confused with the province of Gia Dinh near Saigon) or Luc Tinh (the Six Provinces). In colonial times, the area was called Cochinchina by the French and Nam Ky by the Vietnamese. Since this book spans such a long period of time, none of these names fulfills the criterion of historical accuracy. This book therefore follows modern usage: the South is referred to as Nam Bo, the Center as Trung Bo, and the North as Bac Bo.

This book first saw light as a doctoral dissertation. I wish to thank the Harvard-Yenching Institute and the Ford Foundation for giving me the wherewithal to complete my dissertation, and the Committee on the Kenneth T. Young Professorship in Sino-Vietnamese History of Harvard University for providing funds needed in the revision of the manuscript.

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My husband designed the maps and provided all the calligraphy. Above all, he gave me tireless support and encouragement in my career. The addition of our son Andrew to our family in the last stages of the manuscript revision occasioned many chores which he willingly assumed in order to allow me to meet publishing deadlines.

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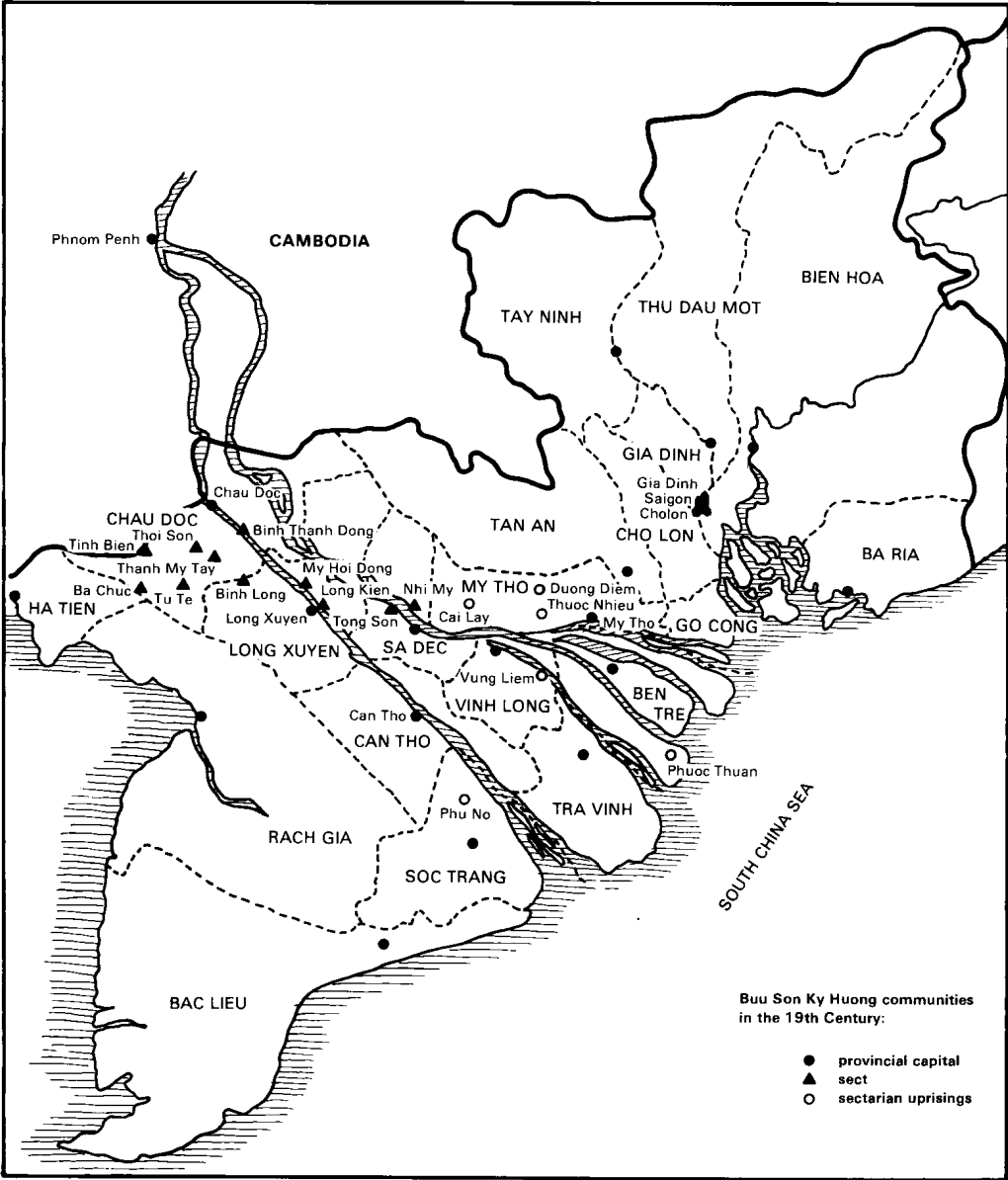
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PART I

TRADITION



1

PIONEERS AND PROPHETS

THE PHRASE “Buu Son Ky Huong” is a neologism coined by writers belonging to the Hoa Hao sect to refer to the collectivity of people in the South, or Nam Bo, for whom amulets bearing the characters *Buu Son Ky Huong* (Strange Fragrance from the Precious Mountain) and the poem beginning with these four words held a special and mystical significance. Because of their sacred connotation, the words were seldom spoken out loud, and the poem, which could be read both horizontally and vertically, has never been satisfactorily explained. Although the meaning of the words remained abstruse even to the millions of believers since the mid-nineteenth century, they represented a millenarian world-view and a communitarian way of life that were immediately identifiable. They also symbolized a shared veneration of the founder of the Buu Son Ky Huong tradition, a mystic commonly known as the Buddha Master of Western Peace (*Phat Thay Tay An*), who was reputedly the author of the poem.

Surprisingly little is known of the life of the Buddha Master of Western Peace before his emergence as prophet and sect leader in 1849. Despite the large number of people who venerated his memory for more than a hundred years and the recent efforts of Hoa Hao historians to trace his antecedents, he remains a shadowy, elusive figure. It is now accepted that his real name is the one that appears on his funeral tablet, which is placed outside the pagoda of Western Peace (*Tay An tu*) in Sam Mountain:

Born in the year Dinh Mao [1807] on the 15th day of the 12th month at noon.

Belonged to the orthodox Lam Te sect in the 38th generation.

Secular name: Doan; given name: Minh Huyen; dharma name: Giac Linh.

Died in the year Binh Thin [1856] on the 12th day of the 8th month at noon.¹

Doan Minh Huyen was born in the village of Tong Son in Sa Dec province in a family of fairly well-to-do peasants. The father had risen to the position of canton chief but died while his son was still young, whereupon his widow and child were hounded out of the village by an

envious relative and lived in poverty. Doan Minh Huyen did not return to Tong Son until 1849. He was then forty-two and without any visible attachments or connections. His life in the intervening years remains a mystery. Supposedly he confided to a cousin that he had spent some time as a religious man, without specifying which religion he trained in and whether he was in a monastery or not. By 1849, however, he knew various kinds of magic, could cure people and domesticate wild animals, and could read and write Chinese characters. He was also versed in Buddhism.²

Not long after his return to Tong Son, a cholera epidemic swept through the country. The estimated national toll reached over half a million.³ A foreign missionary left a vivid description of its ravages: "In 1849, cholera decimated the Annamese in the whole kingdom . . . All that could be seen were funeral processions following one another. Very soon, there were no coffins left, so people threw the corpses into hastily dug pits; finally, there were not enough living people to bury the dead, and the corpses were thrown into rice-fields, on the roads, everywhere people could throw them away."⁴

In Tong Son, the peasants began taking the usual precautions against disease, which consisted of holding ceremonies to drive out the wind (*tong gio*) and killing much of the cattle in sacrifice. Doan Minh Huyen objected to these measures, especially to the slaughter of valuable animals. Pressed by the irritated villagers to show them a better way of dealing with the epidemic, he performed healing and various kinds of unspecified miracles. The villagers were duly impressed and begged him to stay, but having made his point, he decided to spread his message elsewhere. Before leaving, he gave the villagers a flag-pole with five banners (*cay the Nam Ong*, or literally, "pole of the Five Lords") to give them protection against harm. The banners were soon torn to shreds to make cures, and even the pole itself disappeared.⁵

After further traveling, Doan Minh Huyen stopped in the village of Long Kien in the neighboring province of Long Xuyen where the ravages of the epidemic were particularly catastrophic. One day he was found sitting on the altar of the village gods in the communal house, declaring, "I am the Buddha Master sent into this world to rescue mankind."⁶ When the local notables expressed outrage at his irreverent use of the communal altar, he built a small hut nearby in which he held cure sessions and preached his doctrine. He would burn pieces of yellow votive paper bearing inscriptions in red ink and mix their ashes with water. Then he lit joss-sticks and offered prayers to Buddha while the patient was made to stand behind him. Turning around, he explained to the afflicted and to the rest of the waiting patients and their

relatives the law of karmic retribution, the need to strive for salvation, and the possibility of earning better health by practicing virtue. He would then expound on the proper way of worshiping and invoking Buddha (*niem Phat*) and exhort his listeners to have faith before finally handing out the cure. This technique was reputedly effective against all but the most incurable of diseases and was particularly successful against madness. The "Ancient Ode of the Buddha Master" (*Giang Xua ve Phat Thay*) thus describes the scenes in the Long Kien hut:

His name became famous in the four directions.
Asthmatic, consumptive, ascitic, people came by the tens of thousands.
People who were mad, and people who suffered from skin diseases,
Or cholera, or typhus, all seized the opportunity.⁷

The canal which led into Long Kien was soon choked with sampans bringing in patients. Doan Minh Huyen gave treatment mostly to children and recruited adepts from among their families.⁸ He told them that the root of disease is accumulated sinfulness; if the sin is too great, nothing can cure the disease. His claim to be a Buddha Master gained credence, and word spread that he was a living Buddha.

Millenarian sectarianism in Vietnam was largely confined to the South. Not that the myth of the millennium did not exist elsewhere, or that sects did not make their appearance in the North and the Center, called respectively Bac Bo and Trung Bo. Deviations from prevailing orthodoxies can occur anywhere. But for such deviations to prosper beyond the strict boundaries of time and space, they must find favorable conditions for growth. The millenarian impulse is a volatile one, easily summoned, but also easily dispersed. It tends to be found in culturally and politically unstable environments which lack the ability to absorb rapid change or frequent traumas such as natural disaster, war, and conquest.

It would be erroneous to regard Vietnamese millenarianism merely as a consequence of colonial conquest in a still undeveloped pioneer area. French conquest did indeed affect the adherents of the Buu Son Ky Huong religion, steering them in new directions and bringing attention to their existence, which might otherwise have passed largely unnoticed. But the emergence of the doctrine of the Buddha Master of Western Peace was caused by another and earlier conquest, that of western Nam Bo by the Vietnamese. The context in which it occurred made the experience as traumatic for the colonizers as for the colonized. By the time the French arrived on the scene, entire villages in the region were already peopled by adepts of the Buu Son Ky Huong religion.

Western Nam Bo in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

The settling by the Vietnamese of what eventually became the Six Provinces and later Cochinchina was a process which began in the mid-seventeenth century. By the middle of the following century, most of the South had already passed under the control of the Nguyen overlords (*chua*). But the saline westernmost region would not be brought under cultivation until the colonial period. The whole area along the present border with Cambodia was also a wilderness except for the port of Ha Tien, which had been developed by immigrants from South China in the late seventeenth century and was ruled by their descendants as a quasi-satrapy for the next hundred years. As the Vietnamese presence grew, so did the strategic importance of this western region, but not until Vietnam was unified under Nguyen rule could the task of reclaiming it begin.

The first step in that direction was taken in 1817 with the building of the Vinh Te canal, which was designed to link the fort of Chau Doc, built only the year before, to the prosperous port of Ha Tien. The canal was not completed until 1822, but long before then peasants were encouraged to settle along its finished portions. In order to assist them, the court instituted a series of measures ranging from tax relief for a period of three years to easy procedures for requesting land titles. The only restrictions were token warnings that the new settlers must not trespass on land already tilled by Cambodians. By 1830, the area around Chau Doc fort boasted forty-one new communities with a combined population of eight hundred registered taxpayers.⁹ These promising results suffered a grave setback in 1833 when the Le van Khoi rebellion broke out. From its starting point in Gia Dinh, the rebellion spread to the border area, and Cambodia became embroiled. When the rebellion was quashed a year later, the Hue court moved to bring Cambodia under direct rule and appointed a Vietnamese Resident to implement a vigorous policy of assimilation.

A system of military settlements (*don dien*) was established to stabilize the region that had been wrecked by the rebellion. Military settlements were chiefly means of bringing land under cultivation through the labor of farmer-soldiers. These farmer-soldiers were organized under military discipline into brigades and companies; their chief duties were agricultural, but they could be called upon for military duty in case of war and rebellion. As they were described in a popular saying, "in time of peace they are peasants, in time of unrest they are soldiers" (*thì vi nông, đông vi binh*). Recruited from among those branded by the court as criminals and vagrants from the South and Center, they led a harsh life on the settlements and faced severe punishment if they tried