



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Vietnamese Buddhist encounters with South Asia in the 1950s

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(Received 14 April 2023; revised 10 December 2023; accepted 12 December 2023)

## Abstract

This article presents a comparison of two Vietnamese Buddhist monks who travelled to and spent time in South Asia in the 1950s. The first, Thích Tố Liên (1903–1977), travelled to Calcutta and then on to Sri Lanka in May 1950 to participate in the First General Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists. Though his encounter was relatively brief, it left a lasting impression. Tố Liên returned as an ardent advocate for the World Fellowship and for an internationalist view of Buddhism more generally. The second, Thích Minh Châu (1918–2012), had a very different encounter with Sri Lanka and India. He spent most of the 1950s studying Pali manuscripts and earning his doctoral degree from the Nalanda Institute (then a part of the University of Bihar, now Nalanda University). During this time, he became an important popularizer of contemporary Indian ideas. While in South Asia, he contributed many articles to Buddhist journals back in Vietnam. He recounted his pilgrimage to major Buddhist sites, considered the contemporary influence of Buddhism in India, and analysed the works of everyone from Tagore to the Dalai Lama. This article will compare the South Asian experiences of these two Vietnamese Buddhist monks and analyse their impact on Buddhist unification and the Vietnamese Buddhist movement in the 1960s.

**Keywords:** World Fellowship of Buddhists; engaged Buddhism; India; unification; Vietnam

## Introduction

During the middle decades of the twentieth century, Vietnamese Buddhists found themselves in the midst of dizzying cultural, political, and intellectual changes. They formed Buddhist associations that unified, fractured, and unified again. They adopted revivalist and modernist stances, seeking to present Buddhist doctrines as the answer to contemporary social problems. They famously became intertwined with the politics of the Republic of Vietnam in the 1960s. Engaged Buddhism, the Buddhist revival movement, and modernization brought cataclysmic changes to Vietnamese Buddhism in the middle part of the twentieth century. These changes, however, are typically understood as coming primarily from two sources: Chinese reformism from the likes of Taixu, whose ideas influenced the Vietnamese reformer Thích Thiện

Chiếu (1898–1974), and Western spirituality and philosophy, in various forms, from Theosophy and spiritism to phenomenology and existentialism. The assumption that Chinese and European influences were changing and even corrupting Vietnamese Buddhism is evident in Thích Nhất Hạnh's observation that the reliance on 'Chinese and Western books' was responsible for the prejudicial distortion of Buddhist ideas.<sup>1</sup>

But despite the well-known significance of South Asia in the Buddhist world, in comparison with Chinese and European influences on twentieth-century Vietnamese Buddhism, South Asia has been overlooked. Yet, the impact of South Asian developments on Buddhists in Vietnam was quite significant. From the inaugural World Buddhist Conference in Colombo in 1950 and continuing through to the influential Fourth Conference in Kathmandu in 1956, South Asia was a conduit for international ideas about Buddhism and for Buddhist modernism and engaged Buddhism. Vietnamese Buddhist monks in South Asia picked up these trends and explained them to Vietnamese audiences in Buddhist journals.

This article focuses on two case studies of the influence of South Asia on mid-century modern Vietnamese Buddhism. It will first consider the case of Thích Tố Liên (1903–1977), who travelled first to Calcutta and then to Colombo in Sri Lanka to attend the World Fellowship of Buddhists in 1950. Though Tố Liên's trip was relatively brief, it was significant as he interacted with many very notable people from South Asia and all over the world. Moreover, his trip helped set the agenda for engaged Buddhism in Vietnam throughout the 1950s and 1960s. In contrast, Thích Minh Châu's journey lasted for a decade, between the early 1950s and early 1960s, during which time he earned a PhD in Pali language and literature at Nalanda Institute (then a part of the University of Bihar, now Nalanda University). This journey was equally influential on the path of Vietnamese Buddhism, as Minh Châu acted as an intermediary between Vietnamese Buddhists and trends in Indian and global Buddhist thought, and as a correspondent for Buddhist journals. Moreover, these experiences profoundly influenced Minh Châu's views as an educational administrator and as an influential moderating voice in the Unified Buddhist Church (UBC), particularly during the tumultuous spring and summer of 1966. This article will examine the experiences of Tố Liên and Minh Châu in India and Sri Lanka to demonstrate their significance to the development of Vietnamese Buddhist thought.

These two Vietnamese monks were motivated to travel to India by four related trends, one of which was primarily domestic in nature and three of which were global. The first of these trends (which, although more domestically motivated, had implications for what was happening to Buddhism globally) was the attempt by Vietnamese monks to unify Vietnamese Buddhism under a single umbrella organization. This unification was to be not only geographical, bringing together the regional Buddhist organizations in northern, central, and southern Vietnam, but also ideological, uniting Theravada and Mahayana communities, and within Mahayana Thiền (Chan/Zen), Trúc Lâm, and other lineages.<sup>2</sup> These efforts emerged in the early 1950s, though their origins can be found in the early writings of the Buddhist revival movement in

<sup>1</sup>Thích Nhất Hạnh, 'Phật học quan yếu', *Liên Hoa Nguyệt San*, February 1961, p. 8

<sup>2</sup>Unification efforts, however, did not attempt to alter ordination lineages.

Vietnam in the 1920s and 1930s, which, despite being disunited by region and doctrine, aspired to transcend regionalism and unify Vietnamese Buddhists.<sup>3</sup> As a part of this, various regional organizations in the 1930s attempted to arrive at visions for a Buddhist organization that would transcend sects and regions, including a major effort by the Tourane (Đà Nẵng) Buddhist Association in 1937.<sup>4</sup> But it was the World Buddhist Conference, and Tổ Liên's dissatisfaction at the lack of unity among Vietnamese Buddhists, that finally led Buddhist representatives to meet on 6 May 1951 at Từ Đàm Temple in Huế. Tổ Liên's call for a unified Buddhism, which was deeply influenced by his time in India and Ceylon, was heeded by the young monk Thích Trí Quang (1923–2019), who was at the time the editor of the journal *Viên Âm*, among others. Though the new organization, the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association, did temporarily achieve its aims, its goal of true Buddhist unification was interrupted by the division of the country by the Geneva Accords in 1954. However, its aims emerged again when Buddhist monks in the South, led in part by Thích Trí Quang, formed the UBC by 1964. Thích Trí Quang was also the most significant force in the Buddhist protests of 1964–1966.<sup>5</sup>

The second impetus was a movement among Buddhists, first across Asia and then globally, to travel to South Asia to tour critical Buddhist sites and connect with the origins of Buddhism. This was related to a Buddhist revival movement within India. Though in fact such travel had occurred for millennia without stopping, in the twentieth century a discourse arose that Buddhism had been virtually wiped out in India by the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, and that there was therefore a critical need to revitalize it.<sup>6</sup> Inspired by this discourse, beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, monks from Japan, Thailand, Burma, and Tibet travelled to South Asia to seek the origins of their religious practices and to find inspiration for the revitalization on modernist terms of their doctrines at home.<sup>7</sup> They were joined by Europeans and Americans who became interested in Buddhism through Theosophy, and Indians who either followed a similar path to the Europeans or who considered Buddhism to be a desirable means of escaping what they saw as a rigidity of the Hindu caste hierarchy.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Elise De Vido, 'Buddhism for this world: The Buddhist revival in Vietnam, 1920 to 1951, and its legacy', in *Modernity and re-enchantment: Religion in post-revolutionary Vietnam*, (ed.) Philip Taylor (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), pp. 261–262.

<sup>4</sup>Hoang Ngo, 'Building a new house for the Buddha: Buddhist social engagement and revival in Vietnam, 1927–1951', PhD thesis, University of Washington, 2015, p. 267.

<sup>5</sup>Robert Topmiller, *The lotus unleashed: The Buddhist peace movement in South Vietnam, 1964–1966* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), pp. 6–7.

<sup>6</sup>Douglas Ober, *Dust on the throne: The search for Buddhism in modern India* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023), pp. 22–31; David Geary and Douglas Ober, 'Buddhist homeland(s), memory, and the politics of belonging in South Asia', *South Asian History and Culture*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2023, pp. 1–2.

<sup>7</sup>Richard M. Jaffe, *Seeking Śākyamuni: South Asia in the formation of modern Japanese Buddhism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), pp. 1–19; Toni Huber, *The Holy Land reborn: Pilgrimage and the Tibetan reinvention of Buddhist India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>8</sup>Jairam Ramesh, *The light of Asia: The poem that defined the Buddha* (Gurugram, India: Penguin Random House, 2021), pp. 79, 149–150; John Marston and David Geary, 'Nalanda rising: Buddhism, heritage diplomacy, and the politics of revival', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2023, pp. 27–29.

The third major impetus was the movement towards Buddhist modernism. This early-to-mid-twentieth century movement is difficult to define because it involves actors from so many different places with differing political agendas. However, each of these actors had in common an interpretation of Siddhartha Gautama's message as one that was consistent with reason and science. These interpretations tended to reject practices that Buddhist modernists saw as excessively superstitious doctrinal divisions, and textual orthodoxies that they perceived as excessively narrow.<sup>9</sup> Thích Tố Liên and Thích Minh Châu were interested in Buddhist modernism because they were products of the Buddhist revival movement, which began in the 1920s and 1930s. Led by Thích Thiện Chiếu, Vietnam's Buddhist revival movement was primarily influenced by the Chinese reformist Taixu (1890–1947). It rejected 'superstitions', in particular the burning of paper offerings to the dead and the worshipping of wooden statues, and urged a return to a careful study of selected essential Buddhist texts, which they believed would reveal the essential empiricism and rationality of Buddhist doctrine.<sup>10</sup> The two Vietnamese monks discussed in this article were connected to two major figures in Buddhist modernism: Angarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) and Thích Nhất Hạnh (1926–2022). Thích Tố Liên was connected to Dharmapala through his nephew Raja Hewavitarne (1898–1959), while Thích Minh Châu sent reports from his time in India to Thích Nhất Hạnh who published them in the journal *Phật-giáo Việt-nam*, which Nhất Hạnh edited.<sup>11</sup>

The final impetus was a growing Buddhist internationalism and Pan-Asianism in which Vietnamese monks—even those with different political views—wished to take part. During the 1950s and 1960s, when Thích Tố Liên and Thích Minh Châu were travelling in South Asia, global Buddhism had taken on new political dimensions. Under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) and President Rajendra Prasad (1884–1963), in the 1950s the Indian government seized on the Buddhist revival to promote a fundamentally secular version of Buddhism as an Indian state ideology. They presented Buddhism as an 'essentially Indian religion'.<sup>12</sup> This allowed them to express a vision of Indian foreign policy, based on their non-alignment with communist or capitalist camps, to Buddhist nations in South, Southeast, and East Asia. In particular, Nehru suggested that Buddhism was an essential link between these nations, which allowed him to promote non-alignment as a 'Third Way' that was founded in Buddhist conceptions of foreign policy.<sup>13</sup> Other South Asian nations, including Ceylon (after 1972, Sri Lanka) and Tibet, along with Southeast Asian nations—especially

<sup>9</sup>David L. McMahan, *The making of Buddhist modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 7–9; Donald Lopez, *A modern Buddhist bible: Essential readings from East and West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), p. ix.

<sup>10</sup>Shawn Frederick McHale, *Print and power: Confucianism, communism, and Buddhism in the making of modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), pp. 160–162; Nguyen Tai Thu (ed.), *History of Buddhism in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008), pp. 171–173; Hoang Ngo, 'Building a new house for the Buddha', pp. 15–24.

<sup>11</sup>For example, Thích Minh Châu, 'Phong trào Phật giáo' [The Buddhist movement], *Phật-giáo Việt-nam*, vol. 7, 15 February 1957, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup>Douglas Ober, 'From Buddha bones to Bo trees: Nehruvian India, Buddhism, and the poetics of power, 1947–1956', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2019, p. 1315.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 1336; Ober, *Dust on the throne*, pp. 271–272.

Burma—were involved in both the promotion of Buddhism as a foreign policy ideology and in non-alignment.

Thích Tố Liên and Thích Minh Châu played a role in this political vision by participating in the World Fellowship of Buddhists through their conferences in Ceylon in 1950 and in Nepal in 1956. The World Fellowship of Buddhists acted as a ‘miniature Asian U.N.’ in connecting Buddhists from across the world and to foster basic agreement among Buddhists.<sup>14</sup> Not only did Thích Tố Liên and Thích Minh Châu participate in arguably the most significant of the two World Buddhist conferences—the inaugural one in 1950 and the one organized in tandem with the 2,500th Buddha Jayanti celebrations in 1956—but they also worked to standardize and propagate elements of Buddhist doctrine and to explore whether it was possible to use Buddhism to ‘solve the problems of peace and war’.<sup>15</sup>

Thích Tố Liên had praised Hồ Chí Minh and had been a member of the Việt Minh-led National Assembly in 1946, while, as rector of Vạn Hạnh University, Thích Minh Châu famously appears to have taken money from the Asia Foundation, which was used as a cover for the CIA, in exchange for severing all ties with the anti-war Thích Nhất Hạnh.<sup>16</sup> Despite these considerable political differences, both were attracted to the vision of a Buddhist modernism. More broadly, after 1954, the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the non-communist Republic of Vietnam (RVN) were attracted to Nehru’s Buddhist-infused vision of a non-aligned foreign policy. Conscious of the importance of Indochina generally and Vietnam specifically to his foreign policy, Nehru visited both Hanoi and Saigon in 1954, and emerged with a much more sympathetic view of the communists than of the government of the former Emperor Bảo Đại and his prime minister Ngô Đình Diệm.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, both countries sent delegations to the Bandung Conference, which inaugurated the non-aligned movement in 1955, and both Ngô Đình Diệm and Hồ Chí Minh visited New Delhi and met with Nehru, in 1957 and 1958 respectively.<sup>18</sup> This was not only because of their interest in non-alignment but also because of their recognition of India’s significance as chair of the International Control Commission, which was tasked with the implementation and

<sup>14</sup>Eugene Ford, *Cold War monks: Buddhism and America’s secret strategy in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 10.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 32, quoting ‘Buddhism can solve problem of peace’, *Times of Ceylon*, 570.3, Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Burma, U.S. Embassy, Classified General Records 1945–1961, box 15, RG 84, U.S. National Archives.

<sup>16</sup>On Thích Tố Liên’s statements on Hồ Chí Minh, see Minh T. Nguyen, ‘Buddhist monastic education and the national revival movement in the twentieth century’, PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin, 2007, pp. 269–271. On the use of the Asia Foundation as a CIA front, see Ford, *Cold War monks*, pp. 110–111; for specific information on Thích Minh Châu’s casting aside of Thích Nhất Hạnh, see Wynn Gadkar-Wilcox, ‘Political philology and academic freedom: A defense of Thích Minh Châu’, in *Republican Vietnam 1963–1975*, (eds) Tuong Vu and Trinh Luu (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2023), pp. 145–167.

<sup>17</sup>Jawaharlal Nehru, ‘Note on visit to China and Indo-China, November 14, 1954’, Woodrow Wilson Digital Archive, paragraphs 47–49, available at <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121651.pdf?v=d7e143cb60346614a337c648500cf3a7>, [accessed 25 January 2024].

<sup>18</sup>M. J. Desai, ‘Talks with Ngo Dinh Diem’ (Notes of meeting between Diem and Nehru, 11 November 1957), *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Second Series, Vol. 40, p. 626; ‘Prime Minister J. Nehru’s Speech at the Reception’, in *President Ho Chi Minh’s visit to the Republic of India and the Union of Burma* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Press, 1958), p. 18.

enforcement of the Geneva Accords. Thích Tố Liên and Thích Minh Châu's journeys to South Asia cannot be divorced from these larger political contexts.

### Thích Tố Liên: A biography

Tố Liên was born in 1903 as Nguyễn Thanh Lai in Quỳnh Lôi village in Kim Liên district in what is now the Hai Bà Trưng district of Hanoi, to a family of scholars. At the age of 13, he received his ordination at the famed Perfume Pagoda (*Chùa Hương Tích*) under the tutelage of the Venerable Thích Thanh Tích (1881–1964), the Thiền (Zen Buddhist) who later became the long-time abbot there.<sup>19</sup> Though he was offered a leadership position at the Perfume Pagoda, he aspired to visit and learn from monks at all the great Buddhist academies in Tonkin. During his young adulthood, he also became the abbot of Côn Sơn and Thanh Mai Temples in Hải Dương.<sup>20</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s, Tố Liên became a major figure in the Buddhist revival movement that was well underway in Vietnam. This movement was deeply influenced by Chinese reformers such as Taixu and came to fruition in the late 1920s. It was first and foremost an attempt to make Buddhism relevant to the problems of the modern world. Led by Thích Thiện Chiếu, the revivalists argued that the Vietnamese practice of Buddhism was too steeped in fatalism and superstition and insufficiently based on Buddhism's fundamental principles. Buddhists first needed to reform practices, ensure that Buddhist concepts and practices were clearly understood by all practitioners, and that those who were ordained had expertise in basic texts.<sup>21</sup>

As part of the revival movement, Tố Liên became an enthusiastic participant in advocating for reforms in monastic education. In 1935, he was invited to the famed Quán Sứ Temple in Hanoi to direct Buddhist affairs there. During that time, he wrote frequent articles for the journal *Đức Tuệ* advocating for improved monastic education in Tonkin. He particularly admired monastic education in Huế, which followed more closely the structured, formal education of the Franco-Annamite schools rather than the loose and unstructured summer programmes to train Buddhist monks that were common in Tonkin. He embarked on a trip to Huế in 1936, where he met important Buddhist leaders and toured all the schools at the temples.<sup>22</sup> He was particularly impressed by the rigorous writing and public speaking required of the students there.<sup>23</sup> He brought this information back to Quán Sứ Temple, where he implemented the modern educational techniques of the Buddhist revival in Buddhist education in Hanoi.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Hòa thượng Thích Thanh Tích', *Chùa Phật Học Xã Lợi*, available at <http://chuxaloi.vn/thong-tin/hoa-thuong-thich-thanh-tich-1881-1964/2272.html>, [accessed 25 January 2024].

<sup>20</sup>Thích Đồng Bổn (ed.), 'Hòa thượng Thích Tô Liên', *Tiểu sử Danh Tăng Việt Nam* (Ho Chi Minh City: Thành hội Phật giáo TP. HCM, 1995), vol. 1.

<sup>21</sup>McHale, *Print and power*, pp. 160–162; Nguyen Tai Thu (ed.), *History of Buddhism in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008), pp. 171–173; Hoang Ngo, 'Building a new house for the Buddha', pp. 15–24.

<sup>22</sup>Tố Liên, 'Đi thăm cứu trường Phật học ở Huế', *Đức Tuệ*, vol. 45, 20 October 1936, pp. 5–6.

<sup>23</sup>Hoang Ngo, 'Building a new house for the Buddha', p. 240.

<sup>24</sup>Thích Đồng Bổn (ed.), 'Hòa thượng Thích Tô Liên'.

After the August revolution, in the autumn of 1945, Tố Liên was elected vice-chairman of the Ủy Ban Chấp hành Tăng già Phật Giáo Việt Nam (Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha Executive Committee), a northern organization that worked closely with the Việt Minh with a goal of propagating the Dharma and serving the country by helping the suffering. As an extension of those activities, he was elected to the National Assembly in January 1946. He worked in apparent coordination with the Việt Minh by running a literacy campaign through the Northern Buddhist Association that paralleled the government's own efforts. In 1949, he became editor-in-chief of the journal *Phương Tiện* (Upaya). It was focused on the Buddhist revival, and published translations of Taixu's work, but also reflected an emphasis on making Buddhism a useful force for nationalism and modernization.<sup>25</sup> In it, Tố Liên argued that Buddhists should educate themselves and participate in social services to develop the 'national spirit' and 'democratic spirit' in Vietnam. To do this, he advocated for a modern Buddhist organization that would be produced by unifying not only the sangha in Tonkin, but throughout the country.<sup>26</sup> This was the context in which Thích Tô Liên departed from Hanoi for Saigon, and then on to Calcutta, in May 1950 en route to the conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists.

### The context of Tố Liên's trip

The impetus for the World Fellowship of Buddhists came from the All-Ceylon Buddhist Congress of December 1947. Ceylon was on the cusp of becoming an independent country in the British commonwealth—an independence agreement having been reached in the previous month—and nationalist fervour was in the air. At India's independence, British authorities had pledged the return of relics of the great patriarchs Sāriputta and Moggallāna to India, and these relics were displayed in Sri Lanka on their way to India, evoking emotional reactions among Buddhist practitioners. Buddhist organizations were excitedly planning for a grand celebration of the Jayanti on the 2,500th anniversary of the Buddha's entry into final *nirvana*, in May 1956. According to some Buddhist traditions, at that time, the power of Śākyamuni's message would be magnified by being the midpoint of its 5,000-year lifespan.<sup>27</sup> To plan for this event, to unite and 'bring closer together' the worldwide Buddhist community, and to encourage Buddhists around the world to make a contribution to 'peace and happiness', the Congress decided to make plans for an all-Buddhist conference in Ceylon in 1950.<sup>28</sup>

Two lay Sinhalese were chosen to lead this process: the linguist, Professor G. P. Malalasekera (1899–1973), and the surgeon, Dr W. E. A. Fonseca. Malalasekera, a professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of Ceylon, was a well-known expert on

<sup>25</sup>Thích Giác Toàn, 'Lược sử báo chí Phật giáo Việt Nam từ năm 1951 đến năm 1975', *Thư viện Hoa Sen*, 1 August 2014, available at <https://thuvienhoasen.org/a21838/luoc-su-bao-chi-phat-giao-viet-nam-tu-nam-1951-den-nam-1975>, [accessed 25 January 2024].

<sup>26</sup>Minh T. Nguyen, 'Buddhist monastic education', p. 271.

<sup>27</sup>George Doherty Bond, *The Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka: Religious tradition, reinterpretation, and response* (Delhi: Motilal, 1992), p. 75.

<sup>28</sup>*Record of Proceedings of the WFB First General Conference held at Colombo, Sri Lanka, 25 May–6 June 2493 (1950)* (Colombo: World Fellowship of Buddhists, 1950), p. 1.



Pali manuscripts and an energetic organizer.<sup>29</sup> Together, they began a mass letter-writing campaign to Buddhist organizations and governments around the world. In addition, Malalasekera also attended the East-West Philosopher's Conference at the University of Hawai'i in 1949, which featured a number of prominent academics, including Dartmouth University Professor Wing-tsit Chan and the famed popularizer of Zen Buddhism, D. T. Suzuki.<sup>30</sup> Malalasekera, who presented a paper on Theravadin views of interdependent origination as a basis for reality, was also highly successful at raising awareness about the World Fellowship of Buddhists during his time in Honolulu and on his stops in Europe and the mainland United States en route to the conference.<sup>31</sup>

In the Vietnamese case, word of the conference was sent to Bảo Đại's government and was received by the governor of Tonkin, Nguyễn Hữu Trí (1903–1954). On 23 March 1950, the governor sent a letter to the Buddhist Association requesting that a 'worthy, educated monk' be named as a representative to attend the conference in Colombo in May, specifying that he must be ready to depart for Saigon by April.<sup>32</sup> Tố Liên reported that he was recovering from an illness and was overworked in an attempt to decline the invitation. However, he was told by other influential monks in the Association that his absence would make them look bad, so he reluctantly agreed to attend as the leader of the Vietnamese delegation only.<sup>33</sup> He did so despite his concerns that 'Buddhism should never get involved in politics', and that representing Vietnam at the request of Bảo Đại's government might appear to be taking political sides. At this time, the Buddhist revival movement was entering a critical stage, and had merged with sentiments of Vietnamese nationalism. Momentum was building to bring the variety of regional and doctrinal practices of Vietnamese Buddhists under one unified umbrella, and a Vietnamese national delegation at the Colombo Conference would help solidify the legitimacy of the Vietnamese sangha's aspirations to be unified and recognized on the world stage.

<sup>29</sup>Bandō Shōjun, 'G. P. Malalasekera 1899–1973', *The Eastern Buddhist*, n.s., vol. 6, no. 2, October 1973, pp. 166–168.

<sup>30</sup>East-West Philosophers' Conference, Department of Philosophy, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, available at <https://hawaii.edu/phil/journals/east-west-philosophers-conference/>, [accessed 25 January 2024]. The conference was partially responsible not only for the inauguration of the journal *Philosophy East and West*, but also for the discussions that led to the founding of the East-West Center at the University of Hawai'i.

<sup>31</sup>Charles A. Moore (ed.), 'The Second East-West Philosophers' Conference: A preliminary report', University of Hawai'i Occasional Paper 52. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1949), pp. 22–24; *Record of Proceedings of the WFB First Annual Conference*, pp. 1–2. This connection to Hawai'i may explain why the World Fellowship of Buddhists acknowledged the Hawai'i delegation as separate from that of the United States. The World Buddhist Conference in Colombo effectively treated Hawai'i as a separate country.

<sup>32</sup>Tố Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan: Cuộc Hội nghị Phật giáo Thế giới tại Colombo từ ngày 25-5 Đến 8-6-1950* (Hà-Nội: Duốc-Tuệ, 1950), p. 9.

<sup>33</sup>Tố Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo*, pp. 10–11. See also Hoang Ngo, 'Building a new house for the Buddha', p. 282. One wonders whether this was not a reflection of Tố Liên's political loyalties to the Việt Minh. Tố Liên had been a national assembly member in 1946, had written approvingly that 'Chairman Hồ said: "When a nation is liberated then its religion is liberated", Indeed, [he] must be a great revolutionist of Vietnam [who] has deep understanding of history and belief for Vietnamese people which gave such a profound calling'. Quoted in Minh T. Nguyen, 'Buddhist monastic education', p. 269. He also decided to remain in the north after 1954. Given this, representing the Bảo Đại government at Colombo may have put Tố Liên in an awkward position.



The other element of controversy was the make-up of the Vietnamese delegation. Tô Liên was accompanied by two others: Thạch Bích and Phạm Chử. Phạm Chử, an English translator with Bảo Đại's foreign ministry and a Buddhist himself, presented no issues for Tô Liên, but he was concerned with the choice of Thạch Bích, who was from Cambodia. An ardent nationalist, Tô Liên had argued for separate Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodian Buddhist delegations rather than a single Indochinese organization, and was adamant that at the Colombo Conference, the delegations of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam should be seated separately. He needed to be reassured that Thạch Bích was in fact an ethnic Vietnamese, and was a Vietnamese citizen, to be placated. It was only after these assurances that Tô Liên agreed to depart from Saigon.

Once on the plane, however, Thạch Bích and Tô Liên became fast friends. They marvelled at the experience of flying high in the air, viewing the rice paddies below. They were exhilarated both by the sense of the exoticism of the trip and by the universality of certain things, such as the way that the countryside above Cambodia and Thailand looked the same as in the Mekong Delta. At the same time, they fancied themselves as modern-day versions of the monk Xuanzang (602–664), who travelled to the great universities in India in the mid-seventh century, and compared their own experiences to those described in the great Chinese novel *Journey to the West*.<sup>34</sup>

### Tô Liên's experiences in India

Their first stop was Calcutta, where the Vietnamese delegation was to be hosted by the Mahabodhi Society, which had been co-founded in 1891 by the Sri Lankan reformer and globetrotter Anagarika Dharmapala while he was on a pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya.<sup>35</sup> The society had strong links with the Sri Lankan Buddhists who were organizing the conference. After being greeted by a representative from the French Consul General in Calcutta, they were whisked to the Society, where they were greeted by the Venerable Neluve Jinaratana, a branch head and important member of the society. While others in the group went into the city to thank the French consulate, Tô Liên spent his time marvelling at the grandeur of the Mahabodhi temple, including the famed life of the Buddha in 12 paintings by Atasi Barua (1921–2016), Rabindranath Tagore's great-grandniece, and enjoying the picturesque grounds that were near to the massive College Square swimming pool.

The group spent from 6–23 May in Calcutta, which was sufficient time to develop a meaningful relationship with those affiliated with the Mahabodhi Society. Tô Liên engaged with Arabindra Barua of the Bengal Buddhist Association, a scholar who is perhaps best known as Atasi Barua's husband. Two of the most prominent conversations they had were about the nature of Vietnamese Buddhism and the status of the Franco-Vietnamese War. Regarding Vietnamese Buddhism, the question Barua posed was whether Vietnam was in essence a Southern or an Eastern Buddhist country. Interestingly, and perhaps diplomatically, Tô Liên emphasized the South Asian roots of Vietnamese Buddhism. He did not discuss the Chinese lineages often emphasized

<sup>34</sup>Tô Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, pp. 20–22.

<sup>35</sup>The co-founders of the society were the American, Colonel Henry Steel Oclott, who was also the first president of the Theosophical Society, and Hikkaduve Sumangala. See Sarath Amunugama, *The lion's roar: Anagarika Dharmapala and the making of modern Buddhism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 31.

by Vietnamese monks. Rather, he noted that the first documented transmission of Buddhism in Vietnam came from Kang Senghui, a Sogdian merchant who had introduced Buddhism to the Red River Delta via India. He also emphasized that this transmission was responsible for the organization of the sangha in Vietnam and was therefore more significant than transmissions from China. Though there may have been a political reason for these answers, one gets the impression that Tố Liên was genuine.<sup>36</sup>

After two weeks of touring Buddhist pilgrimage sites at Benares and Sanchi, visiting relics, including the relics of the great patriarchs Sāriputta and Moggallāna, one of the last acts of the group from Vietnam was to travel to New Delhi for an audience with the president of India, Rajendra Prasad, at the Presidential Palace on 17 May 1950. Prasad related to them his pride in being from Bihar, the location of Bodh Gaya and the birthplace of Buddhism. He touted the Indian government's efforts to receive back Buddhist relics from Britain and to preserve Buddhist sites. He also expressed a desire to see closer relations between India and Vietnam, including those based on a shared Buddhist and cultural heritage. He then asked the Vietnamese delegation for their impressions of India. This desire was consistent with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's strategy of using Buddhism as a pan-Asian diplomatic tool, linked to his advocacy of the recognizably Buddhist *panchsheel*, or five virtues, to promote his vision of non-alignment with communist and capitalist camps in the Cold War.<sup>37</sup>

Speaking for the group, Tố Liên embarked upon a thinly veiled critique of Hinduism. He asserted that India had three major religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam—and that Muslims had been relocated to Pakistan, leaving only Buddhism and Hinduism. He argued that a revival of Buddhism was necessary to improve the situation of 'religious persecution' based on caste that left 18 million Indians as 'slaves'. Despite this critique, Tố Liên went on to identify some areas in which India's culture and politics were superior to Vietnam's. His observations in Calcutta and New Delhi led him to understand Hinduism as promoting less harmful superstition than Buddhist practice, because 'the sick use medicine, rather than making offerings to ghosts or burning votive papers' and the dead were cremated simply, without elaborate ceremonies that wasted money and time. The weddings of the common people in India were comparatively simple, and the economy was based on principles of self-reliance. India had obtained its independence from Great Britain without 'losing a drop of blood' (though he did not mention it, the contrast between that decolonization and Vietnam's was notable), and Westerners, fed up with 'material civilization', were flocking to study India as an alternative to Western culture.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup>Tố Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, pp. 49–52.

<sup>37</sup>Ober, *Dust on the throne*, pp. 278–279, and Ober, 'From Buddha bones to Bo trees', pp. 1338–1339; see also 'Panchsheel: A model code for bilateral relations', Joint statement issued after the talks between Nehru and Zhou Enlai, 29 June 1954, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Second Series, Vol. 26, p. 411. On the implications for Nehru's foreign policy regarding Vietnam, see D. R. Sardesai, *Indian foreign policy in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, 1947–1964* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 53–54, and Baljit Singh, 'India's policy and the Vietnam conflict', *World Affairs*, vol. 129, no. 4, January 1967, p. 251.

<sup>38</sup>Tố Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, pp. 123–125.

### Tố Liên's experiences in Sri Lanka

On the morning of 23 May 1950, the group left Calcutta and proceeded to Colombo. Upon arrival they were greeted by Ceylon's Minister of Commerce and Angarika Dharmapala's nephew, Raja Hewavitarne (1898–1959), who announced that they would stay in his residence (they could not stay at the temple as the third member of their delegation, Mr Phạm Chử, was not a monk). Over the course of half a month, the entire delegation became quite close to Hewavitarne's family, and marvelled at their Buddhist devotion and their relatively frugal life, despite their prodigious wealth.

On 25 May, the conference started with a ceremonial swearing-in during which the 26 delegations formally became the World Buddhist Conference. To add to the solemnity of the affair, it was held at the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy. Upon arriving back in Colombo on the 26th, every delegation was invited to deliver a short message.<sup>39</sup> Tố Liên's message emphasized the importance of Buddhist unity in a time of war and political violence. Not only is 'humanity [...] the embodiment of all Buddhas', but even beyond the human, 'mountains, rivers, trees and grass' are also Dharma beings. That means that 'leaves rustling, flowers falling, birds singing, and the wind blowing are all the sounds of the Dharma teachings'. These insights required a global unity that Buddhism could produce, to 'build the foundation of the human world', and 'only then can we proceed to the universal realm' of true peace and happiness.<sup>40</sup>

In addition, each delegation, including Vietnam, submitted a report on the state of Buddhism in their country. Vietnam's report emphasized the fragmented nature of Buddhist organizations owing to the 'political structure in the past' which accounted for the fact that there were separate organizations in northern, central, and southern Vietnam, with the Central Sangha being further split between two organizations. Nevertheless, 'the present Head of the Vietnam Government, Bao Dai, is a great supporter of all Buddhist activities'. The statement again emphasized that Vietnamese Buddhism had originated in India and was quickly adopted in Vietnam because of its suitability to Vietnamese customs and culture.<sup>41</sup>

At the end of the conference, Tố Liên was pleased with the results. However, he was not without constructive criticism. He believed that the Vietnamese delegation, with only three members, suffered from being far too small and that his inability to speak a word of English was a major hindrance to the role of the Vietnamese in the proceedings. Phạm Chử from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had to double up his responsibilities, translating for Tố Liên and participating in the conference. This had proved difficult for the young and inexperienced diplomat, even if Tố Liên regarded him as having done well under the circumstances. Throughout the conference, Tố Liên had to deal with the frustration of Vietnam not always being treated as a fully independent country and being listed in the Indochinese Federation.

Nevertheless, the Charter and resolutions of the conference, Tố Liên believed, 'laid a solid foundation for the establishment' of the World Buddhist Association, and he felt that the Vietnamese delegation had played an important role in that establishment and that the resolutions arrived at had been positive.<sup>42</sup> These included several of

<sup>39</sup> *Record of Proceedings of the WFB First Annual Conference*, p. 5.

<sup>40</sup> Tố Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, pp. 158–159.

<sup>41</sup> *Record of Proceedings of the WFB First Annual Conference*, p. 82.

<sup>42</sup> Tố Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, pp. 232–234.

note for Vietnamese Buddhism in the future: that the six-coloured Buddhist flag, then mostly in use only in Ceylon, would be adopted as the official International Buddhist flag, that Vesak (the day of Śākyamuni Buddha's birth) would be celebrated on the first full moon of May, and that such a day should be recognized as a holiday by all Buddhist countries.<sup>43</sup>

### Thích Minh Châu: A brief biography

Thích Minh Châu and Thích Tố Liên seem initially to have much in common. Both were from scholar-official families; both were fundamentally committed to the idea of improving Buddhist education; both were firm believers in the Buddhist revival and were delegates to the World Buddhist Conference (Tố Liên to the first, and Minh Châu to the fourth); and both believed that India was the origin of Vietnamese Buddhist practice. From there, however, their biographies and views diverged. Thích Tố Liên was from Hanoi; Thích Minh Châu was a southerner, born in a village in Quảng Nam province about 20 kilometres north of Hội An. And while Tố Liên's experience in India and Ceylon was brief, lasting less than two months, Minh Châu's was extensive, lasting from 1952 (some sources say 1951) to 1964. While most of Minh Châu's first five years were spent in Colombo and Rangoon, he spent the rest of his time completing a PhD in Pali and Buddhist studies at the Nalanda Institute (then part of the University of Bihar, now Nalanda University) comparing the Pali and Chinese versions of the *Madhyama Agama*. And though they both returned from their trip to India committed to reform and the unification of Buddhists in Vietnam, Tố Liên pursued these aims from northern Vietnam, setting up an office for the World Fellowship of Buddhists at Quán Sứ temple after his return from Ceylon and then stayed in Hanoi after 1954, despite increasing restrictions on Buddhist Association members, who were removed from Quán Sứ temple. These restrictions prevented Tố Liên from making substantial contributions from 1954 until his death in 1977. The younger Minh Châu, on the other hand, was able to implement the lessons he learnt through his role as the rector of Vạn Hạnh University from 1964 until 1975, though he too was silenced by the shuttering of that university by communist authorities after 1975.

### Thích Minh Châu as a Vietnamese Buddhist travel writer and tour guide

Thích Minh Châu's dispatches from India were mostly published in the influential central Vietnamese publication *Liên Hoa Văn Tập* (Lotus Series). *Liên Hoa* was originally created in 1955 by the central Vietnamese sangha in Huế to make Buddhism more accessible to a lay audience.<sup>44</sup> By the lunar new year in 1956, it had been expanded into a fully fledged journal, with the aspiration to 'take people from their lives into the faith and to put the faith into their lives'. In other words, the journal aimed to take

<sup>43</sup>Record of Proceedings of the WFB First Annual Conference, pp. 83–84.

<sup>44</sup>Thích Giác Toàn, 'Lược sử báo chí phật giáo Việt Nam từ năm 1951 đến năm 1975' (The history of Buddhist journals in Vietnam from 1951 to 1975', *Thư Viện Hoa Sen* (Lotus Library), available at <https://thuvienhoasen.org/a21838/luoc-su-bao-chi-phat-giao-viet-nam-tu-nam-1951-den-nam-1975>, [accessed 25 January 2024].

Buddhist ideas and make them practically useful, along with answering the questions of lay Buddhists.<sup>45</sup>

Almost immediately, Thích Minh Châu, a monk from central Vietnam, who was also an expatriate in India, became a frequent contributor. His early pieces were in the genre of Buddhist travel writing, the first of which appeared in the third lunar month issue of 1956. It gave an account of Minh Châu's travels from Nalanda to tour Vulture Peak, *Gr̥dhrakūṭa*, where Śākyamuni Buddha was said to have given the sermons included in the *Heart Sutra* and the *Lotus Sutra*, among others. Overwhelmed by the moment, Minh Châu recalled that Vulture Peak was the location of the conversation that led to the conversion of King Bimbisara (circa 558–circa 491 BCE) to Buddhism, and that the monastery of the great philosopher Vasubandhu (fl. fourth and fifth centuries CE) of the Yogacara school was also not far away. Much of the rest of the piece waxed poetic on the profundity of seeing this craggy peak where the Buddha taught in the fading light of sunset.<sup>46</sup>

Along these same lines, in a long 1956–1957 essay published in excerpts, beginning with the very first volume in *Liên Hoa Văn Tập*'s new series, Minh Châu took his Vietnamese readers on a tour of the repositories of the Buddha's relics in India. The memoir of this pilgrimage starts at the beginning of Minh Châu's initial foray to India after he had spent considerable time in Ceylon. A prefatory note explains how Minh Châu was explicitly sent to India by the Central Vietnamese sangha not only to study but also to visit and report back on the sites of the Buddha's relics. It then tells the story of Minh Châu's journey, starting in Burma, then on to Calcutta, and the Bodh Gaya and the major Buddhist sites. His partner on this journey was the famed northern-born monk Thích Quảng Độ (1928–2020), the patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam from 2008 until his death. On the trip they began an association that would continue throughout the 1960s and 1970s, when they were colleagues at Vạn Hạnh University.<sup>47</sup> This serialized essay took up a significant part of nearly every volume of the journal, which enjoyed a wide circulation across the Republic of Vietnam, from its inception until the end of 1957. This essay served to solidify the connection that Vietnamese Buddhists had to the Indian origins of their practice.

Upon boarding a boat from Rangoon to Calcutta, Minh Châu and Quảng Độ spent two weeks at the same place as Tổ Liên's group some time before: the Mahabodhi Society in Calcutta. During those two weeks, they arranged tickets for their tour as well as their papers, books, and effects. Of particular concern was arranging their meals ahead of time, not because they were vegetarian (which was not much of an impediment in India), but because they were worried that the 'unfamiliar' Indian food would ruin their constitutions and negatively impact on their health.

After arrangements had been made, they travelled to Bodh Gaya. Minh Châu gave his Vietnamese readers a tour of the site. He explained the significance of the Bodhi tree as the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, and described it, the Vajrasana (the stone slab thought to be placed in front of the Bodhi tree along with relics by Emperor

<sup>45</sup>Liên Hoa, 'Lá thư chung' (A letter to the public), *Liên Hoa Văn Tập*, vol. 1, March 1956, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup>Thích Minh Châu, 'Mặt Đêm Trăng trên núi Linh Thứu (Gr̥dhrakuta)' (A moonlit night on Vulture Peak), *Liên Hoa Văn Tập*, *Bộ Mới*, vol. 3, 1956, p. 16.

<sup>47</sup>Thích Minh Châu, 'Chiêm bái Phật tích tại Ấn Độ' (Venerating Buddha's relics in India), *Liên Hoa Văn Tập*, series 2, no. 1, 1956, p. 38.

Ashoka), the tower, Buddha's seat, the Jewel House (a site of the Buddha's meditation), the Rajayatana and Ajapala Nigroda trees, and the *naga* (snake-protector) Mucalinda in flowery detail.<sup>48</sup> Moving on from the immediate area of the Bodh Gaya complex, he described the river where Śākyamuni Buddha crossed to reach the Bodhi tree, and the stupa dedicated to the milkmaid Sujata, who gave the Buddha a bowl of kheer to end his six years of extreme asceticism and provided him with the basis of the principle of the middle path. He then toured the forest of Uruvela, where the Buddha strengthened his path to enlightenment through a series of trials; the 'Chinese Temple' constructed near Bodh Gaya by itinerant Chinese monks; and the 'Tibetan Temple' which served the same purpose for Tibetan monks.<sup>49</sup>

Several sections of the essay were then dedicated to the history of the site, the British archaeological work that was led by retired British Army engineer Sir Alexander Cunningham, and the preservation and restoration of the site by Angarika Dharmapala. Following that discussion, he moved on to a description of the Rajagriha, where King Bimbisara reigned and where the conference that decided on doctrine after the Buddha's death was held. From there, he described his party's trip through Rajgir to Nalanda Mahavihara, the great Buddhist university of medieval times. It is here that Minh Châu found his calling and his voice as a leader of Buddhist education in Vietnam. He described in detail the stupa at Nalanda, the educational mission of the university, and the modern museum on the site. Upon his arrival there, he was immediately struck by the immensity of Nalanda's Mahavihara, with its many lecture halls, the historic weight of the kings, such as Kumaragupta (413–455) and Devapala (ninth century) who constructed them, and the ways in which, then as now, they attracted monks and students from places throughout South, Southeast, and East Asia.

These experiences would inspire him in building the Buddhist Vạn Hạnh University later in the 1960s.<sup>50</sup> They reflected his belief in what John Marston and David Geary have called the 'productive nostalgia' in relation to those involved in loosely basing the Nava Nalanda Mahavihara on the model of the ancient Nalanda. Minh Châu was especially on board with the vision of a modern university (and also a modern Buddhist practice) outlined by Nava Nalanda's founder Jagdish Kashyap, who believed that this new university could look to Hindu and Christian institutions as a model to create an institution organized around the three pillars of Buddhism.<sup>51</sup>

### Minh Châu's views on Indian and Buddhist politics

In addition to introducing Vietnamese monks and lay Buddhists to the foundations of their practice at Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Nalanda, Thích Minh Châu also commented on the state of Buddhism in Indian politics. He was present in India for the 1956 Buddha Jayanti, the celebration of the 2,500th anniversary of Gautama Buddha's birth. Promoted by many Buddhist organizations in India, including the Mahabodhi Society, these celebrations were one of many events that spotlighted India's role in the genesis of Buddhism and in Buddhist modernization.

<sup>48</sup>Thích Minh Châu, 'Chiêm bái Phật tích tại Ấn Độ', *Liên Hoa Văn Tập*, series 2, no. 5, 1956, pp. 32–33.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, series 2, no. 7, 1956, pp. 37–39.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. 3, no. 9, 1957, p. 36.

<sup>51</sup>Marston and Geary, 'Nalanda rising', pp. 26–28.

Several other events that took place in 1956 were also the focus of Minh Châu's excitement about what he termed 'the Buddhist Movement in India'. One was the success of the Fourth World Buddhist Conference which was held in Kathmandu in November 1956. By this time, the World Fellowship of Buddhists had expanded greatly, and the Fourth Conference included delegates from Latvia, Estonia, Russia, Mongolia, and many other far-flung places. The Vietnamese delegation had also expanded significantly and, as a reflection of the political reality, had split into two groups, from the North and South. Minh Châu joined the president of the Buddhist Federation Thích Tịnh Khiết (1891–1973) and Thích Huệ Quang (1927–2009) as part of the southern delegation, along with a Buddhist scholar and several laypeople.

From the outset, Minh Châu observed that the Buddhist movement was expanding rapidly, not only in East Asia but also in Europe and America. In Asia, he attributed this expansion to decolonization, since in many nations, Buddhism was elevated to the status of a national religion after independence was declared. Even when it was not the state religion, it was often acknowledged as the religion with the most followers as well as the religion of the common people. In Vietnam in particular, even though—Minh Châu admitted—many people did not clearly understand the intricacies of Buddhist doctrine, they still recognized that Buddhism 'is the religion that is the most loved and respected, because it is the religion of the people, the religion of their ancestors, and the religion of the nation'. In India, by contrast, the number of Buddhists was still relatively small, but was 'increasing by the day, because the government actively encourages the spread of Buddhism'.<sup>52</sup>

Minh Châu emphasized that the conference focused on Buddhism as a means to global peace. It took place amid the Suez Crisis, and the prospect of the Cold War becoming hot was on everyone's minds.<sup>53</sup> In that context, a global return to 'the religion of peace' was desirable. Minh Châu argued that Buddhism was the antidote to ideological clashes and global conflagrations because it was 'a religion that does not indoctrinate its believers, a religion that emphasizes enlightenment through reason, a religion that does not involve politics, because Buddhism only focuses on individual liberation, a religion does not support only one class to dominate other classes, because Buddhism is an egalitarian religion'. These features, which were not only noted by Minh Châu but also emphasized by World Buddhist Conference leader Dr Malalasekera, were the reasons why Buddhism was spreading throughout the world.<sup>54</sup> These views situate Minh Châu squarely in the middle of the individualistic and rationalistic emphasis in the discourse of Buddhist modernism generally.<sup>55</sup>

To further that expansion of Buddhism, the conference emphasized two points common to modern Buddhist revival and reform: an emphasis on the basic points of doctrinal agreement rather than on differences between sects, and the importance of developing Buddhist education. On the former point, the World Buddhist Conference worked slowly towards the unification of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists, banning the use of the term 'Hinayana' to refer to Theravada Buddhists at the 1950 Conference.

<sup>52</sup>Thích Minh Châu, 'Phong-trào phật giáo ở Ấn Độ' [The Buddhist movement in India], *Liên Hoa Văn Tập*, vol. 3 no. 1, 1957, pp. 13–14.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

<sup>55</sup>McMahan, *The making of Buddhist modernism*, p. 8; Lopez, *Modern Buddhist bible*, p. ix.



In 1956, they went further and formally abolished the division altogether, advising delegates not to refer to a 'Theravada Bhikkhu' or a 'Mahayana Bhikkhu' but just a bhikkhu.<sup>56</sup> On the second point, the conference focused a great deal of its energy on prodding the Buddhist associations to open more Buddhist schools around the world, to allow children to be raised and taught 'in accordance to the true spirit of Buddhism', as had been the priority in Vietnam since the beginning of the Buddhist revival.<sup>57</sup>

After a trip by all the delegates to the Lumbini Gardens (Śākyamuni Buddha's birthplace), the delegation continued to New Delhi for festivities marking the 2,500th Buddha Jayanti. This affair, which was more scholarly in character, invited experts on Buddhist art, literature, and philosophy to an enormous conference and discussion. These included a presentation of Sir Edwin Arnold's 1879 Orientalist book *The Light of Asia*, a performance of Rabindranath Tagore's play *Nati Puja*, along with screenings of other films about the history of Buddhism.<sup>58</sup> These left Minh Châu with a mixed reaction: he appreciated the technical and artistic prowess of these contributions, but he also thought that 'the spirit of Buddhism' was not expressed as thoroughly as the Buddhist audience would like, because the essence of Buddhism was so difficult for 'amateurs' to understand.<sup>59</sup>

Minh Châu also believed that the high-profile visits of the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama were creating considerable excitement about Buddhism in India and around the world. In addition to creating quite a stir at the conference and the Buddha Jayanti, both Lamas (but the Dalai Lama in particular) invoked awe and reverence wherever they went. There were even rumours that as the Dalai Lama toured each site of Buddhist relics, from Sanchi to Sarnath to Bodh Gaya, he brought the weather with him: though it never rained in Bihar in winter, each time the Dalai Lama visited a Buddhist site, the heavens would open as if just for him, evoking an astonished reaction from the assembled audience.<sup>60</sup>

The aspect of the conference and the Buddha Jayanti celebrations that seemed to excite Minh Châu the most was that they coincided with the mass conversions of Dalits in India. Minh Châu mentions the conversions of over 300,000 Buddhists 'in one day', which occurred in Nagpur in October 1956, and a total conversion of over 500,000 over the course of the last several months of 1956. Minh Châu explains, accurately, that Dalits are 'often bullied and oppressed by other classes', and so they were attracted to Buddhism as 'the religion of equality, which completely eliminates classes, and is the only hope for such people to have an equal status with other classes'.<sup>61</sup>

Curiously, however, Minh Châu leaves out a crucial detail of the story: what prompted the mass Dalit conversions in the first place. This was the result of the personal conversion to Buddhism of the father of India's Constitution, the former Indian

<sup>56</sup>Thích Minh Châu, 'Phong-trào phật giáo ở Ấn Độ', p. 15.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>On the continued post-colonial appeal of *The Light of Asia*, as well as the Buddha Jayanti and the use of *Light of Asia* in the context of Ambedkar's conversions and other events in 1956, see Ramesh, *Light of Asia*, pp. 321–329.

<sup>59</sup>Thích Minh Châu, 'Phong-trào phật giáo ở Ấn Độ', p. 16.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., pp. 18–19. On the politics of the Dalai Lama's tour and presence at the Buddha Jayanti, see Huber, *The Holy Land reborn*, pp. 343–346.

<sup>61</sup>Thích Minh Châu, 'Phong-trào phật giáo ở Ấn Độ', p. 17.

Minister of Law, and member of parliament B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), a Dalit whose conversion was witnessed and then shared by hundreds of thousands of other Dalits that day in Nagpur. Why did Minh Châu, nor, for that matter, Thích Tố Liên, mention Ambedkar? Ambedkar played a critical role in both the First and Fourth World Buddhist conferences and was present at both. At the 1950 Conference, even though he was only an interested observer, and not a delegate, he was asked on at least two occasions to make substantial comments, when he said that ‘the time had come to make an effort to revive Buddhism in India’. He implored the delegates to present Buddhism as a living religion, rather than a cultural relic, to potential converts.<sup>62</sup> At the conference in Kathmandu, his presence was difficult to avoid. At the closing session, just before the delegations were to depart for Lumbini, a gravely ill Ambedkar emerged from convalescence to give a speech whose topic was supposed to be ‘Ahimsa in Buddhism’. Instead (according to Ambedkar, by popular request), he presented a fiery speech on Buddhism and Marxism. In it, he discussed his theory that Buddhism should be understood as a much more desirable alternative to communism, since the Buddha had preached similar ideas to Karl Marx in regard to the exploitation and suffering of the poor and the need to give up private property and possessions, but Buddhism offered a path to these desirable ends that would not force people to give up political and civil rights and would not resort to violence.<sup>63</sup>

This anti-communism may be one reason for the silence of both Tố Liên and Minh Châu (even though one might argue that Ambedkar’s anti-communism was less pronounced in 1950 than it was in 1956). A former member of the Việt Minh’s National Assembly who had praised Hồ Chí Minh, Tố Liên would probably have disagreed with Ambedkar’s anti-communist politics. While Minh Châu, on the other hand, was not necessarily sympathetic to communist rhetoric, he was insistent on the apolitical nature of Buddhism being one of the religion’s main attractions. Even in his account of the World Buddhist Conference, he was quick to emphasize that Buddhism was focused on personal enlightenment and therefore was not political. Having to interact with a DRV delegation is likely to have meant that Ambedkar’s critiques of communism would have put Minh Châu in an awkward position.<sup>64</sup>

Moreover, despite both Tố Liên (in his discussions with Rajendra Prasad) and Minh Châu discussing the existence of Dalits as a problem within Hinduism that Buddhism could solve, the Vietnamese delegations in general and both of these monks in particular held a view of Buddhist reform and renovation that was much closer to those of Dr Malalasekera, Raja Hewavitarne, and the leaders of the Mahabodhi Society, as well as to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, than to that of Ambedkar. One can say that the World Buddhist Conference’s vision in these years was fundamentally in line with Nehru’s: Buddhism could serve as a politically neutral force to argue for non-violence and the peaceful resolution of conflicts worldwide. This coincided with Nehru’s vision for India’s foreign policy as a keystone of neutralism in the Cold War, and Nehru found

<sup>62</sup> *Record of Proceedings of the WFB First General Conference*, pp. 102–103.

<sup>63</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, ‘Dr. Ambedkar’s speech at the World Fellowship of Buddhists, Nepal’, *Velivada*, 16 May 2015, available at <https://velivada.com/2017/05/16/dr-ambedkars-speech-world-fellowship-buddhists-nepal/>, [accessed 25 January 2024]. See also B. R. Ambedkar, *Buddha or Karl Marx* (Delhi: Siddharth Books, 2009).

<sup>64</sup> On Ambedkar, communism, and Buddhism, see Ober, *Dust on the throne*, pp. 185–251.

it convenient to promote a secularized vision of Buddhism, and present India as the birthplace of Buddhism, for this purpose.<sup>65</sup>

But this vision of a neutralist, pacifist, frontist Buddhism clashed with Ambedkar's view of Buddhism. Ambedkar sought to highlight the inability of Nehru's government to resolve the issue of caste (most importantly through Nehru's unwillingness to pass sweeping reforms through the Hindu Code Bill in 1951, which led to Ambedkar's resignation from Nehru's cabinet). Ambedkar claimed that Buddhism implied a rejection of Marxism, which could not be fully reconciled with a neutralist position.<sup>66</sup> There is, moreover, no evidence that the Vietnamese delegations had any substantial contact with Ambedkar, but they were close to Dr Malalasekera and Raja Hewavitarne. Both scholars encouraged Tố Liên's aspirations to build a unified Buddhist Association for all of Vietnam; during the conference in Huế in May 1951, to inaugurate the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association, they both gave speeches of congratulation on behalf of the Ceylonese sangha and from the World Buddhist Association.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, Minh Châu was a great admirer of Nehru, who was a central figure at the Buddha Jayanti ceremonies in New Delhi. For example, he translated Nehru's comments on 'Buddha and the Atomic Bomb', which suggested that by using the example of Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism after the Battle of Kalinga it was possible to govern a state using principles of non-violence and non-aggression, and that the Buddha's path showed the way. Since Nehru and Ambedkar were practically at loggerheads by 1956, this might suggest that the lack of consideration of Ambedkar was out of deference to Nehru.<sup>68</sup>

## Epilogue and conclusion

On 8 May 1963, Buddhists celebrating Vesak, the Buddha's birthday, in Huế prominently displayed the brilliant red, blue, and saffron-striped Buddhist flag at their celebration. The display of the flag was in contravention of a recent decree promulgated by the president of the Republic of Việt Nam, Ngô Đình Diệm, which banned the flying of any flag other than that of the Republic unless the official flag of the Republic was displayed more prominently at the same time. When the Republic of Việt Nam's flag was not displayed, the Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN) tore down the Buddhist flags. That led to a mass protest by Buddhists in Huế, the takeover of a radio station, and to further demonstrations and an ARVN response that involved firing live rounds, killing eight people. This was followed by the Buddhist crisis of 1963, which,

<sup>65</sup>Ober, 'From Buddha bones to Bo trees', p. 1315; Ober, *Dust on the throne*, pp. 186–188.

<sup>66</sup>Ober, 'From Buddha bones to Bo trees', p. 1348.

<sup>67</sup>'Hai Diển Từ: Một ý niệm', *Viên-Âm*, vol. 118, August 1951, p. 12. For more information on the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association, see Minh T. Nguyen, 'Buddhist monastic education', p. 283, and Hoang Ngo, 'Building a new house for the Buddha', pp. 264–265. This version of a unified sangha failed to last past 1954; after that, monastic education and reform efforts were curtailed by the DRV authorities.

<sup>68</sup>Thích Minh Châu, 'Đạo Phật với Bom Khinh Khí', *Liên Hoa Văn Tập*, vol. 2, no. 7, 1957, pp. 14–15. Though there is no evidence Minh Châu and Nehru ever spoke, they were on the dais together, as the Vietnamese delegation was not invited to the Jayanti conference due to an oversight which the Indian government resolved by allowing the Vietnamese delegates to sit with Nehru and Vice-President Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan for the event.

after the immolation of Thích Quảng Đức and Nhất Linh, eventually led to the coup that deposed Diệm.

Many of the events that led to the Buddhist crisis of 1963 would never have happened without the First World Buddhist Conference of 1950. That conference established the official celebration and the official date of Vesak; the Buddhists in Huế would not have been celebrating Vesak but for that decision. At that conference, delegates adopted the World Buddhist flag; the Huế Buddhists would not have been flying that flag but for the conference. As one delegation of only 26, the Việt Nam delegation led by Tố Liên played an important role in the discussions that led to the adoption of the Vesak date and the flag.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, the galvanizing of Buddhists, both monks and laypeople, into organized political protest in the summer of 1963, and the formation of the Unified Buddhist Church (UBC) that emerged from it, was only possible because of the galvanizing effect that the early conferences of the UBC had on Buddhism as a force for nationalism in the newly decolonized nation. The UBC itself certainly was only possible because of the groundwork for Buddhist unification across doctrines and sects that was laid out at the World Buddhist Conference and first inaugurated, with the explicit help of Malalasekera and Hewavitarne, with the short-lived All-Vietnam Buddhist Association in 1951.

In 1964, Thích Minh Châu became the rector of Vạn Hạnh University in Saigon. In his 11 years in that position, he oversaw the expansion of this university as a cornerstone of Buddhist education in the Republic of Vietnam. His idea was to build a truly Buddhist university based on the Nalanda Mahavihara. It was foolish, he opined, to build a Western-style university when Western forms of knowledge and learning were in deep crisis. Instead, a model of a university based on meditation, the study of Buddhist doctrine, rigorous Buddhist scholarly debate, along with the greatest traditions in Western literature and philosophy, was what was needed. This would not only provide Vietnamese with an excellent education, but would cultivate an attitude of peace and nonviolence that would ultimately be the only way for them to emerge from either the Second Indochina War or the Cold War.<sup>70</sup> His vision of such an education, which was quasi-secular in the sense that Vạn Hạnh encouraged students and staff from all religions and traditions, was consistent with the views expressed at the Fourth World Buddhist Conference and at the Buddha Jayanti. At both events, delegates had rejected sectarianism and offered a pared-down and almost secular view of Buddhist values.

It seems clear that these views were formed during Minh Châu's many years in India. His admiration for Nalanda was doubtless forged on his original trip in 1956, in which he was able to see the university that so impressed Xuanzang (about whom Minh Châu wrote a book in English while still in Bihar).<sup>71</sup> His commitment to expanding Buddhist education was forged during his role as a delegate to the Fourth World

<sup>69</sup>For the delegation's role in negotiations (about which Tố Liên is regrettably not very specific), see Tố Liên, *Ký Sự Phái Đoàn Phật Giáo Việt Nam Đi Ấn Độ và Tích Lan*, pp. 223–234.

<sup>70</sup>Thích Minh Châu, 'Chân lý, tự do, và nhân tính' [Truth, freedom, and humanity], *Tư Tưởng*, vol. 2–3, 1968, p. 25; Venerable Thích Minh Châu, 'The role of the university', *Vạn Hạnh Newsletter*, vol. 10, June and July 1968, p. 1.

<sup>71</sup>Bhikṣu Thích Minh Châu, *Hsuan Tsang: The pilgrim and scholar* (Nha Trang: Viet Nam Buddhist Institute, 1963).

Buddhist Conference in Kathmandu, when creating educational institutions based on Buddhist values was one of the important resolutions passed. And his continued admiration for Indian culture was evident in his translations and engagement not only with Buddhist texts but with Nehru, Krishnamurti, and Tagore.

In reading English-language studies of the Buddhist movement of the 1960s, one can still get the impression that Vietnamese Buddhist leaders were insular and mysterious; their tactics, such as self-immolation, were part of an inexplicable, strange, and primordial practice. They were, in other words, objects of ethnographic curiosity. Reflecting on the events of May 1963, Frances Fitzgerald opined that ‘until the May incident the few hundred bonzes who inhabited the city pagodas had never appeared upon American horizons. Few of them spoke Western languages, and with one or two exceptions they seemed naïve about the outside world.’<sup>72</sup> This supposed strangeness fitted well into the conceit that the United States, in John Kerry’s words, ‘lost the war in Vietnam because our soldiers were trapped in a distant country we did not understand’.<sup>73</sup>

The political significance of India for Vietnamese politics had decreased by the early 1960s because of a wide variety of factors, including the emergence of direct combat between the DRV and the RVN in 1959, the Sino-Indian War of 1962, disputes over the neutralization of Laos (a political event in which Nehru was intimately involved), and ultimately Nehru’s death in 1964. Yet the significance of South Asian influence, Buddhist modernism, and Buddhist pilgrimages to South Asia was still apparent through to the end of the Second Indochina War in 1975. This was evident in the structure of the UBC’s protests against United States policies in Vietnam, but also in cultural areas such as the continuing influence of South Asian writers and intellectuals such as Mohandas Gandhi and Jiddu Krishnamurti.<sup>74</sup>

In fact, the Buddhist movement that coalesced in 1963 was the result of four decades of global Buddhist modernization. Its leaders and rank and file were very familiar with global intellectual trends. It was, from the start, a modern and internationalist movement, based on interactions with many foreign Buddhists and scholars of Buddhism, including those from the United States and Europe. In the 1950s and 1960s, Vietnamese Buddhists travelled to Europe, the United States, Australia, and India to seek knowledge and inspiration to shape Buddhist reforms at home. As this article has shown, the interactions of two very different northern and southern monks—Thích Tô Liên and Thích Minh Châu—in South Asia may be among the most significant.

**Competing interests.** The author declares none.

<sup>72</sup>Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), pp. 100–101.

<sup>73</sup>Quoted in Arthur Herman, ‘Who owns the Vietnam War?’, *Commentary*, December 2007, available at <https://www.commentary.org/articles/arthur-herman/who-owns-the-vietnam-war/>, [accessed 25 January 2024].

<sup>74</sup>Nguyễn Ngọc Lan, ‘Martin Luther King, người con đã đen của Thánh Gandhi’, *Bách khoa*, no. 271, 15 April 1968, pp. 65–72; J. Krishnamurti, *Đường vào hiện sinh* (Commentaries on Living) (Saigon: An Tiem, 1969).

**Cite this article:** Gadkar-Wilcox, Wynn. 2024. ‘Vietnamese Buddhist encounters with South Asia in the 1950s’. *Modern Asian Studies* 58(2), pp. 611–630. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X23000549>