Repaying the Debts, Remaking the World:

Hoà Hảo Buddhist Charity as Vernacular Development in Vietnam's Mekong Delta

Vo Duy Thanh

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy of
The Australian National University

September 2020

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This thesis is the original work of the author except where otherwise acknowledged.

Vo Duy Thanh

19th September 2020

Department of Anthropology

School of Culture, History and Language

Australian National University

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank to the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), who awarded me the Australian Awards Scholarship to pursue my doctoral program at the Australian National University (ANU).

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Philip Taylor (Supervisor and Chair of Panel, Department of Anthropology, School of Culture, History and Language (CHL), ANU College of Asia and the Pacific), who provided me with excellent instructions from the early stages of my PhD journey. I am indebted to Philip for his intellectual inspiration and guidance throughout my candidature at the ANU. He carefully read the chapter drafts and provided many constructive comments to improve my thesis. Beyond academic support, Philip has showed me kindness, sympathy and generosity. He gave me endless emotional support, good care and encouragement in dealing with real-life circumstances. I do not have enough words to thank him. Philip is the greatest teacher I have met in my academic life.

I am also deeply thankful to Professor Andrew McWilliam, my advisor, for his insightful comments to develop the research proposal as well as my PhD thesis chapters. I would like to express my special thanks to Dr Dang Dinh Trung, my advisor, who carefully reviewed my chapter drafts and gave me invaluable suggestions that helped me sustain the progress of the research. My thanks also go to Trung and his wife, Chị Nga, for encouragement and emotional support to my family during their stay in Canberra.

I would like to extend my special gratitude to Professor David Marr, Dr Tana Li and Uncle Dien Nguyen, prominent scholars who have deep knowledge of Vietnamese history, for their constructive comments on my research proposal and some of the historical aspects of my thesis chapters. My deep appreciation to Ms Karina Pelling from the CartoGIS of the College of Asia and the Pacific for her technical support in the production of maps for my thesis. I also would like to thank Ms Sarah Jost for her assistance in editing the thesis. Finally, my special thanks go to Etsuko Mason — the HDR Administrative Officer, for her endless support during my study at the CHL, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific.

For their good friendships during my candidature, I would like to thank Dr Hua Hong Hieu, Dr Tran Anh Thong, Dr Vo Tat Thang and Dr Nguyen Van Kien for regular informal gatherings for intellectual discussions as well as daily-life experience sharing. My special thanks also go to Anh Ba Dung and Chi Quynh Dao, who kindly provided me cosy accommodation and hospitality during my first winter in Canberra. I am also grateful to my fellow anthropologist scholars at the ANU — Ha Viet Quan, Thu Le, Yen Le, Lan Thai Huynh Phuong, Holly Hieu, Tran Hong Thu, Vu Xuan Anh, Markos Bell, Julia Brown, Justine Chamber, Helen Abbot, Joanne Thurman, Visisya Pinthongvijayakul, Poonnatree Jiaviriyaboonya, Gita Nasution, Fay Styman, Jodie-Lee Trembath, Kirsty Wissing, Ian Pollock, Robert Laird, Teena Saulo, Shengjin Xie and Wen Meizhen for their friendship and support over the course of my doctoral study.

This study would not have been possible without significant support from the organisations and people in the western Mekong delta of Vietnam during my ethnography. I would like to express my thankfulness to my host institution — the Research Center for Rural Development of An Giang University (A member of Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City), who supported me to pursue my doctoral program. I especially thank Trinh Phuoc Nguyen, Le Thanh Phong, Le Phuong Viet and Truong Ngoc Thuy, who helped me through the procedures and paperwork necessary to visit the field site. I am most grateful for the helpful information provided by various local organisations and many people in the Phu Tan, Cho Moi, Chau Phu and An Phu districts of An Giang province, and the Vinh Dieu commune of Kien Giang province, whose names do not appear herein, however, helped me a lot during my ethnography in these localities.

Finally, I would like to thank my father, *Cư sĩ* Vo Van Nam, an adherent of *Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa* (The Sect of Four Debts, Filial Piety and Righteousness), who inspired me to study the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương tradition and other indigenous religions in Southern Vietnam. Special thanks are given to my brothers and sisters, especially Dr Vo Van Tuan, who always supported me while I was studying abroad. I am especially indebted to my mother and mother in-law for taking care of my children during my candidature in Australia. Finally, my endless love is given to my wife, Ho Thi Ngan, my son, Vo Minh Duc, and my daughter, Vo Ho Lam Phuong, who have always been with me and motivated me to overcome the hardships along the course of my study.

Abstract

This thesis investigates the Hoa Hao Buddhist charitable movement in the Mekong delta of Vietnam. The Hoa Hao Buddhist sect is heir to a syncretic millenarian tradition originating in the mid nineteenth century Mekong delta. Hoa Hao followers undertake charity in keeping with a prophetic injunction to repay existential debts, be meritorious and thus save their world from the apocalypse. As a seemingly parochial religious movement with a history of conflict with various outgroups, it could be assumed, in line with secularisation theses, that such a sect would not thrive in a modern Vietnam transformed by communist nation-building, modernisation and globalisation. One might reasonably predict that in such conditions the Hoa Hao would become obsolete, or at best survive as a marginal vestige. However, the powerful resurgence of Hoa Hao charitable practices throughout the Mekong delta that has occurred in the context of Vietnam's integration into the global market system confounds such expectations. This thesis investigates the beliefs that drive Hoa Hao charity and how Hoa Hao charitable practice has responded to the demands of modernity. It shows that the religious-inspired giving of the Hoa Hao sect has been remarkably adaptive to changing conditions and standards while remaining faithful to its traditional values.

The thesis draws upon a year's ethnographic research in a network of Hoa Hao localities in the Mekong delta undertaken in 2016 and 2018. I conducted participant observation with charitable practitioners in a variety of rural and urban settings, such as herbal clinics, processing facilities and farms; house, road and bridge construction sites; and charitable kitchens in state hospitals, markets and schools. I found that, informed by a distinctive belief system, Hoa Hao charity addresses a diverse and changing set of circumstances and needs. In a context of anomie, incertitude and rapid social change, Hoa Hao charitable workers have helped to build social cohesion, secure communities and overcome mistrust between antagonistic groups. Their activities have had a transformative effect on lives and localities, providing an infrastructure for individuals to build social capital and engage in self-cultivation. The findings also show how responsive and flexible Hoa Hao charity groups have been in meeting needs in diverse settings and their ability to offer large-scale, rational and effective services that are compliant with state standards. Hoa Hao charitable actors are able to co-opt local authorities in development projects, despite these actors' divergent visions, methods and rationales.

Today, Hoa Hao Buddhists are highly visible in social service provision, healthcare and rural infrastructure initiatives, where they are renowned for their high standards, efficiency and transparency. While demonstrating an adaptation to modernity and relevance in rapidly changing conditions, they still act in accordance with the values of their local religious tradition. Indeed, they have stepped up to fill various gaps in social service provision in fulfilment of a religiously-informed conception of social responsibility. The Hoa Hao charitable movement thus could be seen as an example of vernacular development. Acting in keeping with a unique indigenous worldview, the sect's practitioners have managed to adapt to and influence changes in their social environment and in doing so embody an autonomous path of development.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures

Chapter 1

Introduction

An ambulance arrived at An Giang General Hospital, one of the largest and best-appointed public hospitals in the western Mekong delta. This medically equipped vehicle was used to transport patients from rural areas of the province to this state-owned hospital for emergency medical services. Many other ambulances, each painted white, with red-cross signs prominently displayed, were parked along the street in front of the hospital. The ambulances were shiny, clean, expensive and fast. According to one ambulance driver, his organisation operated over 180 vehicles[1] that could rapidly transport paramedics and patients from any locality in An Giang province to the province's central hospital, or even to hospitals in Ho Chi Minh City. All ambulances were equipped with flashing warning lights and sirens for use while en route to the hospital. Inspecting one of these ambulances from the inside, I observed that it was carrying a variety of modern devices and medical equipment that would enable paramedics to provide life-saving interventions while the vehicle was traveling to the hospitals. These remarkable ambulances could be seen on roads all over the province and were renowned for providing highly efficient, up-to-date and modern medical services. Contradicting the commercialised ethos of modern Vietnam, the service they offer is free.

Observers might be surprised to learn that this excellent ambulance service was not operated by the Vietnamese government or a foreign aid organisation. It was run by an indigenous religious group: the Hoà Hảo Buddhists. This millenarian sect, with roots in the nineteenth century Mekong delta, is known for its apocalyptic belief system, conservative mindset and tradition of faith healing prophets. Concentrated in remote rural areas in the country's southwest, it is renowned for its history of conflict with a succession of state authorities dating back to the first years of its founding. Having been banned by the communist state after 1975, it had resumed restricted religious activities just twenty years prior to my visit. Hence, I must admit my surprise at seeing a millenarian Buddhist

[1] According to the Central Administrative Committee of the Hoà Hảo Church, there are 281 ambulances run by the Hoà Hảo religious organisation nationwide, mostly in An Giang, Can Tho, Dong Thap and Kien Giang provinces. An Giang province alone has 186 ambulances operating in 131 communes and towns across the province, more than the number of ambulances operated by the local government in these localities *(Hoà Hảo Central Administrative Committee's annual report, 2019).*

sect with such a background operating such a large and high-tech ambulance service. Equally unexpected was the smooth integration of its emergency services with those of a state-run hospital. I wondered if there had been a complete rupture between the sect's traditions and the modern operations undertaken in its name. I found myself wondering what possible connection exists between the Hoà Hảo religious tradition and these modern ambulances. What precedents for these activities may be found in Hoà Hảo prophecy and practice? I also wondered why such religious charitable activities were allowed by the state and what the Hoà Hảo Buddhists had done to make their religious charity relevant in a fast-changing society like Vietnam's.

Figure 1.1 Hoà Hảo Buddhist ambulances parked outside An Giang General Hospital.

The rapid expansion of Hoà Hảo charitable practice which has occurred despite state suppression of religion and in the context of the Mekong delta's deep integration into the global market economy, challenges the explanations and predictions of previous scholars who view the Hoà Hảo as a conflict-prone, conservative and parochial sect (Fall 1955; Woodside 1976; Marr 1981; Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983). This scholarship suggests that the intolerance and conflict-prone nature of the Hoà Hảo stems from the localist and religious mindset of its faithful who, compared with other groups such as the communists, lacked the strategic vision to overcome modern challenges. Based on such premises, one might reasonably predict that in this modern age the Hoà Hảo sect would be defeated and become obsolete, or at best survive as a marginal vestige or nostalgic memory. The need

to account for the continuing relevance of the Hoà Hảo religion in the modern world leaves a gap open for an alternative approach that sees the Hoà Hảo as an adaptive religion in Vietnam's contemporary context.

This thesis examines the significance of the Hoà Hảo charitable movement in the southwest Mekong delta in Vietnam's late-socialist context. Since Vietnam implemented the *Đổi Mới* liberal economic reforms in 1986 and opened to international relationships in the early 1990s, Vietnam's leaders began the idea of using cultural activities to foster traditional values. The secular state redefined several religious practices once considered 'wasteful, superstitious, and unsanitary' as 'folk culture' or 'mainstream' religion (Taylor 2006). In this context, the Hoà Hảo religion was finally recognised by the communist authorities in 1999. Since that time, the southwest region of Vietnam has witnessed a vital resurgence of Hoà Hảo religious activities as well as charitable activities. As a number of Hoà Hảo communities in both rural and urban areas grew wealthier, adherents of the sect chose not to rebuild grand temples or lavish statues; rather they contributed their resources to helping the needy through charitable practices across the region. This tendency of Hoà Hảo Buddhists was very different from what Yang (2000) describes in the case of Wenzhou, China, where post-socialist economic success led to an explosion of ritual activities such as building and restoration of temples, completion of new updated genealogies, and the erection of new community cultural centres.

Hoà Hảo Buddhists provide a range of services that cater to the everyday needs of the poor, sick and destitute, while also undertaking major initiatives such as bridge building and the operation of a regional ambulance service. The scale and range of services on offer indicate that Hoà Hảo Buddhists have the capacity to respond to pressing social needs and contribute significantly to alleviating a spectrum of problems in the Mekong delta. As such, the Hoà Hảo Buddhist response to these human needs is somewhat similar in scale, form and function to the social services provided by secular state. However, in making these contributions to social betterment the Hoà Hảo act autonomously of the state, in keeping with their own religious values. They chart their own path of development, which I call 'vernacular development', for it is a project of human improvement that is independent of state development initiatives and has its own religiously-inspired motivations. I hypothesise that Hoà Hảo Buddhists have positive agency that is not confined to resisting or criticising the state and/or development. Rather, they have significant capacity to coexist with Vietnam's state and provide social services that address modern needs in alignment with their own value system and cosmology.

As the Mekong delta integrated into broader economic and cultural structures of the nation, several anthropologists such as Taylor (2001a) and Bourdeaux (2003) have paid special attention to the contemporary relevance of Hoà Hảo Buddhism. Taylor (2001a) provides insights on the social and cultural context in which the Hoà Hảo evolved and notes opportunities and challenges the sect faces in the globalised era. Nonetheless, during Vietnam's post-war era and steps into globalisation over last four decades, the Hoà Hảo movement has attracted relatively little attention by native and foreign scholars. There is a notable lack of long-term ethnographic research that describes in rich detail the charitable practices and everyday experiences of Hoà Hảo Buddhists. Due to the limited data and narrow set of concerns addressed by previous scholars, our understanding of Hoà Hảo social life, cultural values, religious observances and relationship with the secular state in the contemporary context remains slight.

These knowledge gaps inspired me to undertake ethnographic research in Hoà Hảo settings in the western Mekong delta to explore the Hoà Hảo charitable movement. The year I spent doing ethnographic fieldwork allowed me to observe grassroots activities, interactions, attitudes and experiences of Hoà Hảo Buddhists that were not identified by previous scholars. By examining unique aspects of Hoà Hảo cosmology and values, the research gave me insights into the significance of the Hoà Hảo worldview as a framework for this sect's charitable activities. The thesis reveals how, through charitable action, Hoà Hảo Buddhists put their distinctive worldview into practice, responding to and influencing the trend of economic and cultural integration in the Mekong delta.

The thesis has three aims, the first of which is to examine the origins of Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity and the beliefs that motivate Hoà Hảo charitable practices. This research theme highlights the basic value orientations that guide Hòa Hảo followers in their everyday lives and have stimulated their participation in charitable acts since the foundation of the sect. The story is traced through different regimes during and after the Vietnam war, until the rehabilitation of Hòa Hảo Buddhism in Vietnam's market-socialist-integration era. It also documents Hòa Hảo activities that challenge depictions of the sect as a crisis-based, localist conflictual and oppositional creed and instead shows that the Hoà Hảo have a history of promoting social cohesion, constructive engagement and integration between different social and ethnic groups. The findings of the thesis show how a local millenarian religious tradition, distinguished for its tense relationships with different secular states, has survived and remerged with a new identity as exponent of worldly charitable activities and effective social service.

The second theme of the thesis addresses the Hoà Hảo as a socially engaged religion and shows how Hoà Hảo Buddhists are brought together by charitable practice to participate in community development and self-cultivation. Today's Mekong delta is regarded as lacking in social capital and social cohesion, which has resulted in the revival of Hoà Hảo charity as an antidote to such problems. In respond to anomie and socio-economic privation, Hoà Hảo Buddhists attempt to build communal and social infrastructure: constructing houses for the needy, roads and bridges for isolated communes, and traditional herbal medicines for poor patients in rural areas. This finding confirms scholarly interpretations of the Hoà Hảo as a faith that arose in conditions of anomie, disintegration of traditional social structure, and social conflict (Wolf 1969, Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983, Jamieson 1993). The thesis supplements that insight with new information on the motivations and meanings of Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity, and on the kinds of relationship are created through the acts of giving. It adds substantive knowledge on how charitable actions are connected to social cohesion, and on the key agents and initiators of the process of social cohesion construction. The various nodes of Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity discussed in this thesis are perceived as participatory, voluntary, accessible and experiential networks that facilitate community development through self-cultivation. Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity provides people of the western Mekong delta a form of solidarity, cohesion and social reintegration through involvement in community charitable networks.

The third theme of the thesis focuses on the question of how the Hoà Hảo religion adapts to modernity. A large body of research has assumed that localised religious groups like the Hoà Hảo are conservative, pre-modern, anti-development, or victims of development. The Hoà Hảo religion commonly is seen as the opposite of a protagonist for development, as a group that criticised, resisted, or strove to escape from the state's actions. In contrast, the communist state often is considered, for better or for worse, as the sole development agent. However, by exploring the provision of vegetarian food in urban kitchens and construction of roads and bridges in rural communities, the thesis shows that the Hoà Hảo Buddhists integrate modern urban industrial logics into their charity, adapting their religious tradition to contemporary standards and accommodating the post-war communist secular state to realise their own vision of social betterment. Little is known about the social service activities in contemporary Vietnam of religious groups like the Hoà Hảo, or about their influence as social change actors and innovative service providers

in society at large. The study sheds new light on Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity as a relevant example of vernacular development or alternative modernity in the communist context.

In the following sections, I review literature that has helped me to develop a theoretical framework for the study and highlight key debates to which this study hopes to contribute. I then describe the methodology employed in the research before presenting an outline of the arguments and findings of each of the main chapters.

1.2 Literature review

1.2.1 New Directions in Hoà Hảo Studies

Early studies of ethnic Vietnamese religion in the western Mekong delta were mostly undertaken by French and Western scholars during the past colonial period. Leopold Cadiere, a missionary and orientalist ethnographer, characterised Vietnamese religions in early 20th century as marked by 'rich diversity and plurality rather than orthodoxy, purity and order'. Despite his confirmation of a rich Vietnamese religious life, the author asserted that there were no 'real' Buddhists among the ethnic Vietnamese during the period (Cadiere 1989]1944]:1-6). Later, foreign scholars in the post-colonial period portrayed the ethnic religions in the south, such as the Hoà Hảo sect, as having a certain 'proclivity for the supernatural' and tended to emphasise new religious interpretations of what had become a rather weak and extremely tolerant Buddhism (Fall 1955:235). Other Western intellectuals supposed Hoà Hảo faith as Buddhist 'Protestantism' due to the sect's characteristics of modest in living, simplicity of ritual, a largely privatistic orientation and no priesthood (Popkin 1979:202; Wolf 1969:194). Meanwhile, native Vietnamese writers commonly expressed the Hoà Hảo sect in the context of the rising of its new prophet and his charisma leadership (see Vương Kim 1966 & 1974; Dật Sĩ and Nguyễn Văn Hầu 1972; and Nguyen Long Thanh Nam 2003).

During the post-colonial period, a number of historical and political studies on the Hoà Hảo movement, articulated in the militarised circumstances of the Vietnam wars, situated the sect in the context of 'Vietnam's clash with the west' (Taylor 2001a), and tended to portray Hoà Hảo Buddhism as a conflict-prone sect. Hue Tam Ho Tai (1983) viewed the sect as an ethnic religion that diagnosed conflict between worlds and embraced the apocalypse, the impossibility of peaceful solutions, and the futility of worldly actions. Meanwhile, Bernard B. Fall (1955) saw Hoà Hảo beliefs and personalistic charismatic leadership as key factors that bound the Hoà Hảo faith to a quasi-autonomous religious, economic, political and military kingdom. Academic scholars perceived the Hoà Hảo as

‘an agonistic greed, forged out of a clash of worlds’ (Taylor 2001a:340) while officials and journalists during the 1950s treated the Hoà Hảo sect either as either an element of instability that threatened the Sài Gòn regime or a solid barrier against the Việt Minh communists (Chapman 2013).

Scholary works during Vietnam’s post-colonial period have different notions on the Hoà Hảo movement. Foreign scholars saw the Hoà Hảo as lacking in the organisational capacity, strategic vision or pragmatic bent to pose a visible alternative to the communist movement (Marr 1971, 1981; Mus and McAlister 1971; Hue Tam Ho Tai 1992). Moreover, the Hoà Hảo faith was portrayed as backward looking and, for that reason, only partially successful in attaining power in the political sphere (Woodside 1976). Vietnamese intellectuals, however, viewed ethnic religions such as the Hoà Hảo and Cao Đài as obsolete, parochial, or a tool of aggressive elites (Phan Kế Bính 1915; Trần Huy Liệu 1927; Nguyễn An Ninh 1938; Trần Văn Giàu 1975). Hoà Hảo faith was commonly characterised by these native scholars as ‘feudalistic’ and ‘superstitious’, while the leaders of the communist regime often viewed themselves as modernists, nationalists and liberators (Taylor 2001a).

In the post-1975 period, communist writers have had negative perspectives on ethnic religions, particularly anti-communist religious movements like the Hoà Hảo sect. Hoà Hảo studies were dominated by pro-government writers who perceived the Hoà Hảo sect as a threat to the communist regime, or a hindrance to national modernisation. Trương Như Vương (2001), for instance, investigated Hoà Hảo Buddhism in the context of country’s modernisation and industrialisation, raising concerns for national security in the modern era. These mainstream writers looked at the Hoà Hảo religion as an expression of resistance to state power and the modernisation of the nation.

Recently, a new analytic trend of Vietnamese scholars provides a more positive perspective and a viable future for the Hoà Hảo faith in secular Vietnam. Phạm Bích Hợp’s *The People of the Southern Region and Indigenous Religions* (2007) demonstrates a more conciliatory attitude by the Vietnamese State towards religious groups such as Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương tradition and Hoà Hảo sect. Once designated as practicing ‘superstition’ and ‘reactionary politics’, they are now categorised as *tôn giáo bản địa* (indigenous religions). The author notes that the belief system of Hoà Hảo Buddhism focuses on individuals and personal action and the simplicity of the doctrine made widely accessible for ordinary people in the Mekong delta. She concludes that the Hoà Hảo

Buddhism perceives one of the most proactive belief systems which is less dependent on external context, thus much more freedom than other religions (Phạm Bích Hợp 2004:19). Most recently, Trần Văn Chánh and Bùi Thanh Hải (2017) observes the way of life of Hòa Hảo Buddhists, focusing on their beliefs and convictions to explore the role of the sect in today's Vietnamese society. These authors see the founder of the Hoà Hảo sect as initiator, philosopher, and utterer of the Vietnamese spirit.

This new perspective of the communist could be perceived as part of an effort to normalise relations between religions and the state. The use of the term 'indigenous religions' revises earlier state policies that had condemned Hoà Hảo and other religious groups in the south as 'superstitious' or 'heterodox' practices and allows their followers to be seen as mainstream religious believers. Native scholars today commonly talked about 'folk beliefs' (*tín ngưỡng dân gian*) that were never fully absorbed into elite or official culture, which Philip Taylor describes as 'an unofficial counterculture that reflects the priorities of groups who have been excluded from state power' (Taylor 2006:10).

Overall, the Hoà Hảo sect has been portrayed in the literature as a new religious movement founded by a charismatic prophet who encouraged in his adherents' simple living and ritual practice as a response to social and cultural insecurity. As scholars have shown, the sect's origins are founded in the context of ecological survival and cultural coping in a frontier environment; as well as political resistance and militarised conflict in colonial and post-colonial settings. A more recent scholarly focus on the Hoà Hảo movement as an enduring and relevant force in the modern Mekong delta inspired me to come up with my own research questions about how members of the Hoà Hảo Buddhist faith put their religious worldview into practice in the contemporary setting. What is missing from previous scholarly works is attention to the social concerns and charitable practices of the Hoà Hảo sect. Specifically I aim to illuminate the origins and nature of Hoà Hảo Buddhist charitable practices and focus on the contemporary Hoà Hảo charitable movement in the context of post-socialist era Vietnam.

1.2.2. Debt Repayment and Charitable Obligation

Debt repayment is built into the Vietnamese source code, in that much social activity among ordinary Vietnamese consists of gift exchanges, reciprocal obligations in life cycle rites, and a variety of forms of mutual assistance involving reciprocity (Luong 2016). The concept of debt is central in the ethical conduct of intergenerational relationships and

guides interactions with predecessors such as ancestors and founders (Jellema 2005). However, like other peasants in the frontier society of the western Mekong delta, Hoà Hảo Buddhists have experienced a deficit of social, cultural and political capital (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983). Historically, many pioneers in the delta were individuals leaving homeland, community and families behind. They were fleeing debt, lacked a stable moral code, were without kin, home or homeland and lacked protection from community, relatives or king because they were ethnic Vietnamese living at the very frontiers of the Vietnamese polity. In compensation for these deficits, a number of prophets in the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religious tradition in the nineteenth century Mekong delta articulated a new sense of spiritual personhood. Drawing on Vietnamese cultural and religious traditions, they exhorted pioneer settlers to be mindful of their multi-stranded debts to ancestors, kingdom, religious teachers and community. These prophets instilled in pioneer settlers an ethical awareness of the very sources of life in a manner that fostered respect for others, sustained morale and guided pioneers to live ethical lives in the new circumstances.

The Hoà Hảo prophet drew on this tradition to teach his followers to understand their place in society at large since the Hoà Hảo Buddhist sect's foundation in 1939. The prophet emphasised that people were born in debt and they came from *Four Debts*[2]. As such, they were required to fulfil a religious obligation by repaying these debts. The socially engaged aspect of Hoà Hảo Buddhism focuses on how to materialise the condition of indebtedness in practice and thereby creates the moral infrastructure for a secure society through generous acts of giving.

In cultural anthropology, the concepts of charity, reciprocity and gift exchange have been debated amongst scholars and schools of thought. One of the most significant contributions to the foundation of these concepts is Marcel Mauss's Essay on *The Gift*, which focuses on the way in which the exchange of objects between groups built relationships between humans in archaic societies. Mauss argues that these gifts were not simple, alienable commodities to be bought and sold, but embodied the reputation and sense of identity. The author demonstrates that a return gift is given to keep the relationship between givers alive; a failure to return a gift ends the relationship and the promise of any future gifts (Mauss 1970 [1925]).

[2] The "Four Debts" of Hoà Hảo Buddhism: Debt to the nation, debt to parents and ancestors, debt to the Three Treasures – Buddha, Buddhist teaching, and Sangha, and debt to fellow countrymen and mankind.

Gift exchange can bring different effects on constructing social solidarity, power and personal status. Mauss (ibid.) studied the gift-exchanging habits of pre-modern societies to indicate that the social ritual of gift exchange held major significance due to the formulation of respect between the giver and receiver. This respect came from the honour of giving a gift and the moral obligation to reciprocate. This obligation formed social bonds between people as the reciprocity helps to bring and tie people together. Mauss also recognized that the giving and receiving in these societies contributed to the formulation of status and power. His study of the Native American ritual known as *potlatch* saw gift exchange develop into a type of competition, with each participant competed with each other to offer a larger volume or better quality of goods. Mauss believed that this ritual behaviour exemplified the significance of the meaning of gift exchange and in fact of the power that this act had in building social structure and cultural life. Each participant was using this ritual to establish their personal status (ibid.). Mauss's analysis influenced the work of David Graeber who argues that gift exchange in many societies is key to the production of social values, relationships and hierarchies (Graeber 2001).

The meanings and motivations of human behaviour, particularly charitable action, are often contradictory. Weberian insight emphasises that charity might be motivated by a system of meaning, for instance, the Christian imperative to do good works in order to prove to God, to oneself, and to one's fellows, that one is saved (Weber 1905). The Christian notion that almsgiving had the capacity to erase sin and deliver the almsgiver from death was a central force underlying charity during the medieval period and beyond (Firey 1998). Christianity emphasises that if someone wants Christ to show them mercy, they need to show beneficence to their own needy neighbours by providing them assistance since the poor and powerless are considered as Christ's representatives on earth. Like Christian counterparts, Jews view charity as a way to atone for their sins and protect them from the judgment of hell (Galinsky 2005). Meanwhile, Buddhism focuses on the act of giving or *Dāna* as the most important means for acquiring merit. Weberian scholar M. Spiro (1982 [1970]) shed light on how Buddhist cultural ideas influence the act of giving in a predominantly Buddhist country like Myanmar. Spiro determined that one of the major motivations of the Burmese is to accumulate sufficient merit by giving in order to compensate for the demerit accumulated through violation of the precepts. This is important to the Burmese, who are deeply concerned about what is in store for them in their future existence (Spiro 1982:104).

Following the Weberian approach, this thesis aims at gaining understanding of the motivations and meanings of Hoà Hảo Buddhist generous act of giving. The thesis appreciates the comparative studies on gift giving and charity amongst Buddhists in South and Southeast Asia and draws on my own observations of the acts of giving of Hoà Hảo Buddhists in the western Mekong delta to explore the driving factors motivating Hoà Hảo charitable actions. Similar to Theravada Buddhist ethics, the Hoà Hảo Buddhist philosophy considers charity as an act to reduce personal greed which is an unwholesome mental state which hinders spiritual progress. Hoà Hảo Buddhists are taught how to live in the present and prepare for the future. It is thought that good people are reincarnated as better, stronger people and the bad people are reincarnated as undesirable beings. The main belief is that actions in one's previous life determine the quality of life in the next. Hoà Hảo Buddhists believe that all human actions and intentions have meaning. If a moral action is performed, the person who performs it will experience a positive consequence of that action. As a result, Hoà Hảo Buddhists urge to do good deeds in this life so that they will acquire merit for good karma, then will not suffer from the next life.

However, comparing Hoà Hảo charity to the act of giving of Thai and Burmese Buddhists, a distinction can be made between Hoà Hảo charitable giving and Theravada *Dāna* as acts of generosity. While Burmese and Thai Buddhists focus on practicing *Dāna* – constructing temples, giving food to the monks, offering flowers to Buddha, and so on – as the best way to yield great merit, Hoà Hảo Buddhists practice generosity by the acts of giving to others: providing a variety of social services to the needy. Hoà Hảo doctrine also indicates that human actions themselves are considered neither good nor bad, only intentions and thoughts make them so. Therefore, Hoà Hảo Buddhists give out of compassion and kindness when they realise that someone in the community is in need of help. They emphasise that one's own good fortune should be shared for the benefit and happiness of others, particularly the unfortunates.

Charitable donations also have been portrayed by sociologists as means in the quest for social status. In the classic *Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen (1899) emphasized that individual conspicuous giving to charity was considered a mean of displaying wealth and status. Veblen observed that "the flaunting of luxury possessions to convey one's 'advantage' or high status has occurred across societies and epochs" (Veblen 1899:1-5). According to Veblen, in order to maintain and to gain the esteem of men, it is not enough to merely possess wealth or power, but 'the wealth or power must be put in evidence' (Veblen 1899:36). He observed that the evidence of wealth serves 'to

impress [one's] importance on others and to keep [one's] sense of importance alive and alert' (Veblen 1899:28). The contest for status by giving wealth away uses resources in seemingly unproductive ways. However, this contest has social benefits when status is achieved by charitable acts. Hence, charitable outcomes may originate in the self-interest of the donors, whose conspicuous charitable donations serve the purpose of displaying personal wealth to others (Hillman 2009:553-559). Complementary insights have been put forward by Francie Ostrower (1995) who revealed that wealthy donors are generally more focused on their peers than those outside their class as the audience for their philanthropy. At the same time, philanthropy may well help to legitimate their own position to donors themselves, allowing them to feel more comfortable with their wealth (Ostrower 1995:13-14).

Marxists construe charitable activities as means to legitimate wealth and social power. One scholar who has illustrated this paradigm is Katherine A. Bowie (1998). In examining merit-making practices among Theravada Buddhists in Northern Thailand, Bowie shows how generous gift giving and charity entails a class element. She suggests that gift-giving to monks and temples amongst Thai Buddhists is not necessarily altruistic because it emphasises the selflessness of gifting, which earns merit and a future better life for the giver, rather than the relief of the poor or the recipient of the gift. Benefits from this form of gifting accrue predominantly to the rich, who have the resources to endow temples or sponsor the ordination of a monk. In contrast, poorer farmers are said to place much less emphasis on merit making through gifts to the monks and temples; instead, they equally validate gifting to beggars. Bowie concludes that generosity through charitable giving is central to the political dynamics of the relations between elites and subalterns in class stratified societies (ibid.).

It is somewhat difficult to apply insights from Veblen and Marx to the case of Hoà Hảo charity, given the amorphousness of Western Mekong delta society and the supressed emphasis on stratification in Vietnam's socialist culture. It is probable that the prominent financial support given to Hoà Hảo charitable projects by urban based businesspeople and other social elites responds to the sect's religious critique of greed, selfishness, exploitation and power abuse as not just immoral, but as personally and cosmically ruinous. As such, elite support for charity squares with the paradigm inspired by Veblen and Marx that views charity as a form of status enhancement and elite legitimation, potentially winning for elites a reputation as ethical and responsible social actors. However, I was struck by the broadly participatory nature of Hoà Hảo charity which, far

from being predominantly an elite concern, elicited contributions from all sectors of society – rich and poor, urban and rural, men and women – be that in funds, goods provision, project planning, voluntary labour supply or material and psychological support. The hands-on, inclusive and participatory nature of Hoà Hảo charity has led me to favour a Durkheimian and Maussian view of such charity as an 'infrastructure' (Larkin 2013) for the creation of social solidarity, cohesion and moral purpose, rather than as a mechanism for entrenching social stratification.

Drawing on insights derived from Mauss (1970) and Graeber (2011) who see charity as inspired by the obligation to reciprocate, and on Weber's emphasis on the meaning of social action, I surmise that the idea of debt and specifically the obligation to repay the Four Debts expounded by Hoà Hảo Buddhists is a driving factor motivating Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity. Being nurtured in the precarious natural and cultural milieu of the western Mekong delta led local people to feel and embody a sense of multi-stranded obligation. Through the obligation of repaying, by practicing the act of giving, Hoà Hảo Buddhists enact religiously inspired ideals of relatedness that are believed to render life secure and meaningful. Through various stages of work to provide social services to the poor, Hòa Hảo Buddhists voluntarily devote their time, labour and expertise to provide herbal medicines, roads and bridges, meals, and houses for others. The interactions and connections between charitable givers and receivers, between charitable team leaders and volunteers, and among volunteers have consolidated social networks and social cohesion within the community. They feel a sense of satisfaction, joy and healing when voluntarily engaging in these meritorious activities.

Thanks to Hoà Hảo Buddhist cultural values which cultivate a disposition of gratitude towards social others, charitable donors and recipients alike feel an obligation to repay the 'debts' by rendering service to fellows in their society. In most cases I observed, the receivers did not pay back their charitable donors and volunteers (i.e. house carpenters, bridge builders, healers or herb collectors) in any way, yet they often pay the debt forward to the community and other needy persons. As I observed, many charitable receivers join charitable groups after recovering from hardship to contribute volunteer labour to build houses for the underprivileged or become herbal collectors or staff in herbal clinics to help other patients. The act of receiving creates a generalised obligation to reciprocate, and this contributes to the creation of trust and goodwill towards social others. This explains why Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity groups are able to quickly mobilise large

numbers of volunteer labourers and material contributions for helping the needy as well as building the social infrastructure of community.

1.2.3 Hoà Hảo Buddhist Charity as Vernacular Development

The Hoà Hảo sect has been described in the scholarly literature as conservative, insular, traditional, mystical and disengaged from mainstream society and historically in opposition or conflict with the state and the market economy. Several scholars have predicted that religions such as the Hoà Hảo sect would disappear under secular states, especially communist regimes (for a review of such views, see Taylor 2001a). However, the recent flourishing of Hoà Hảo charity challenges scholarly paradigms that foretell the disenchantment of religion with the growth of modernity. The vitality of Hoà Hảo religious charity in contemporary Vietnam shows that faith remains relevant to the followers of this distinctive tradition. In fact, through their charitable practice, Hoà Hảo adepts do more than simply coexist with Vietnam's state; they participate in wider society and in doing so effect consequential social changes on terms of their own.

These realities contradict some commonplace ideas about the relationship between religion and development. During the 1980s and early 1990s, countries such as Vietnam, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia experienced rapid integration and assimilation into mainstream society (McCaskill and Kampe 1997). As the purported agent of modernity, the states of these countries commonly adopted a modernisation theory of development, with the goal of evolving from a rural agrarian society to an urban industrialised one. A number of positive benefits have stemmed from state development efforts; however, conventional development approaches have encountered limitations and biases. Many state programs and practices have brought negative consequences to local cultures and lives (Arnst 1997; Chandraprasert 1997; McCaskill 1997). Disruption to traditional religious practice has been one aspect of these changes (Leepreecha 2019). For instance, the traditional religious practices of ethnic groups such as the Hmong in Northern Vietnam and ethnic minorities of the Central Highlands were once deemed in state development programs to be incompatible with modernity or as superstitions that must be reformed or eradicated (Evans 1992; McElwee 2004; Salemink 2003, 2018; Tam 2016).

It is necessary to ask how vulnerable indigenous religions and groups could adapt to the modern world when religion is perceived as part of a pattern of attitudes and practices that compose traditional society, which is seen as clearly distinct and in opposition to

modernity. As Taylor observes, religion has been pinned to the past as temporally 'backward' behaviour destined to fade away with societal modernisation (Taylor 2003, 2004). Since the nineteenth century, evolutionary theorists have emphasised that people would move away from reliance on magic and spiritual forces as science and technology were adopted as superior modes for comprehending and controlling the world (Tylor 1871; Spencer 1876; Frazer 1890; cited in Taylor 2007:2). Later theorists also predicted that the world would become progressively secularised with the rise of increasing differentiated, atomised social relationships (Durkheim 1915) and modern bureaucratic rationalities (Weber 1976:245).

Marxist sociologists generally see religion as an obstacle to the achievement of modernisation. Marxism perceived religion as problematic because it justifies the capitalist order of things, instils into the faithful feelings of fatality, passivity and submission to fate, and attempts to bolster primitive superstition about the development of nature and society (Said 1978). Other Marxist-influenced scholars have similar notions that traditional Buddhist principles, which emphasise spiritual rather than material values and stress the importance of the afterlife or future existences, do not provide the population with incentives for material gain. Religion reinforces conservatism, tradition, superstition and ignorance, and had a direct impact on the faithful, working to weaken or destroy their ability to 'progress' and 'modernise' (Mehden 1986:38–42).

Such approaches that pit religion in opposition to modernity and development have failed to account for how and why the faithful in many countries continue to turn to religion to engage with the problems of the modern world. Recent studies on Buddhism show that followers of diverse Buddhist sects have purposively applied Buddhist teachings and practices to address the problems of contemporary society, motivated by concern for the welfare of others and as an expression of their own Buddhist values (King 2009:2). This religious movement was called 'socially engaged Buddhism' *(Phật giáo dấn thân)* by Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who emphasised that Buddhism is very much engaged with secular matters of society because it addresses human suffering (ibid.). Hòa Hảo Buddhists put into practice a similar philosophy when adepts identify social problems and provide services to humanity in keeping with their religious morality. The unique cosmology of Hoà Hảo Buddhism combines worldly aspects of Confucianism with renunciatory aspects of Buddhism, in that devotees do not need to permanently leave their family and community (*Xuất thế*) when they enter the faith, but instead practice Buddhism in their homes, as laypersons, where they support themselves and family while

also serving society (Taylor 2001). Followers of the Hoà Hảo religion in Vietnam are active in social service provision, healthcare and rural infrastructure initiatives, where they are renowned for their high standards, efficiency and transparency.

In seeking to understand the charitable practices of Hoà Hảo Buddhists, it helps to review how religious movements in the south of Vietnam became more socially engaged during the French colonial period, beginning in the 1930s. Elise A. DeVido (2009) noted that from the 1920s, Vietnamese Buddhist reformers revitalised their religion, inspired in great part by the Chinese monk Taixu's idea of constructing 'Buddhism for this world'. He emphasised that Buddhism is not secret, mystical or ghostly, but part of humanity and society in the modern world. The major work of this Buddhist revival included the unification and standardisation of the monastic system, an attempt to involve laity in Buddhist associations and compassionate social actions. Taixu's message of creating a Pure Land in the human realm, *Nhân Gian Phật Giáo* in Vietnamese, began influencing Vietnamese Buddhism in the 1930s (ibid.). The connection between Taixu's ideology and the Vietnamese Buddhism movement during this time is also briefly mentioned by Woodside (1976), Marr (1981), Thien Do (1999) and McHale (2004). The exchange with Buddhist reformers in China continued to build until the end of the colonial period in 1954 and then continued in the south, with momentous effects on the nature of Buddhist scene in contemporary Vietnam. As Taylor observed, reflecting on DeVido insights, the current Buddhist renaissance in Vietnam can only be understood in relation to its long social history of typically quiet engagements and non-conflictual transformations (Taylor 2007: 25).

The socially engaged aspects of Hoà Hảo Buddhism can be found in other new religious movements in southern Vietnam, which in the 1920s to 1950s, were similarly influenced by the Vietnamese Buddhist Revival (*Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo*) (DeVido 2009). This nationwide religious movement aimed to stem the perceived decline of Buddhism by returning to the scriptural tenets of the faith and reforming society and tradition to deal with French colonisation and, more generally, the challenges posed by modernity (Taylor 2007). Several new religious movements and indigenous lay groups such as Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo and the Tịnh Độ Cư Sĩ became prominent around this time (DeVido 2009). Caodaism was founded in 1926 as a syncretistic religion that sought to bring 'the Gods of Europe' and 'the Gods of Asia' together to heal the wounds of colonialism (Hoskin 2011) and answer the problems of the modern world (Taylor 2007). During the late colonial period, the Cao Đài exerted its influence through a vast network of social and charitable services

managed by ‘charity agencies’ (*Cơ quan Phước thiện*) established in each Caodaist temple and by each denomination in many rural villages. These charitable services created and strengthened clientelistic ties between the rural masses, largely marginalised by the colonial economy or by war, and dignitaries who could offer physical and economic protection as well as religious merit (Blagov 1999:96, cited in Jammes 2016). The welfare work of Tịnh Độ Cư Sĩ, a Buddhist sect formed in southern Vietnam during the 1930s, places great emphasis on, and has had considerable success promoting, traditional medicine, which the sect considers as equally important to the pursuit of self-perfection. Like the Hòa Hảo sect, Tịnh Độ’s existence shows that social regeneration can occur in an unexpected way. Its survival into the present also contests the proposition that modernisation means the end of supernaturalism or the necessary triumph of secularisation (Thien Do 2000).

In a similar manner, socially engaged Catholic nuns played significant roles in the making of modern Vietnam in the 1950–60s. Nguyen-Marshall (2009) pointed out that many Catholic orders founded and administered charitable institutions such as schools, hospitals and orphanages during the French colonial period. These institutions received subsidies from the French colonial government. After 1954, a number of these charitable institutions continued to operate, with some establishments in the north moving their institutions south. In post-colonial Vietnam, Catholic organisations continued to participate in humanitarian work in the south. Orphanages remained an important focus of Catholic charity work, along with refugee and emergency relief. In the 1954 mass migration, Catholic priests played leading roles in helping with resettlement logistics (ibid.).

The abundance of charitable activities in which contemporary Hòa Hảo Buddhists engage suggest that this indigenous religion has been able to do more than simply survive as a creed in the face of state-driven modernization and development. In fact, these socially engaged activities amount to an autonomous development path that is rooted in the sect’s unique religious worldview. Today, Hòa Hảo Buddhists undertake many initiatives that cater to the needs of poor people in rural and urban settings of the Mekong Delta. They have stepped up to fill various gaps in social service provision in fulfilment of a religious conception of social responsibility. Although this response to human needs is somewhat similar in type, scale and efficacy to the services offered by the state, Hòa Hảo contributions to social improvement are made independently of state development initiatives and have specifically religious motivations. As such, the sect’s charitable

practitioners have charted their own path of development, which I call 'vernacular development' (c.f. Dove and Kammen 2001), in that it demonstrates an adaptation to modernity and relevance in Vietnam's rapidly changing society, while still being in accordance with the values of their vernacular religious tradition.[3]

In this ethnography, I examine Hoà Hảo Buddhists' socially engaged religiosity, manifested in their charitable practices, as an example of 'vernacular development'. Through charitable practices, Hoà Hảo Buddhists show that they are sensitive and responsive to the radical transformations of modern society. Once they were recognised by the state as a mainstream religion in the late 1990s, Hoà Hảo Buddhists identified a set of basic human needs in the Mekong delta and began providing services to the needy in both rural and urban communities. Through such activities, including the provision of free food, shelter, clothing, herbal medicine and rural transport infrastructure, the Hoà Hảo embodied an orientation towards community service and emerged as important players in development in the western Mekong delta. These charitable activities were inspired by the sect's distinct worldview, which inclined them to interpret social problems such as hunger, homelessness and poverty as the result of deficiencies in moral awareness and self-cultivation. Exploring Hoà Hảo charity as a unique religiously-inspired form of development seems necessary, for the secular state is not the only development player in the western Mekong delta. Indeed, local rural people, particularly Hoà Hảo Buddhists, have their own ideas about development and how to achieve it.

This thesis provides an ethnographic portrait of the Hoà Hảo Buddhists, who are not deemed as "backward" and conservative, but rather as a group who have been able to adjust to various contexts, assimilate modern logics, and adapt to social change. Their charitable activities in the western Mekong delta embody an alternative path to

[3] The concept of 'development' is defined as a process of structural societal transformation (Escobar 1994) 'for the better' in the human condition (Chamber 2004), and usually encompass the idea of 'development as modernity' and 'modernity as development' (Lushaba 2009:3). Official models of development tend to be top down, ethnocentric, and technocratic, which treat people and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in charts of progress (Escobar 1992:413–4). Hence 'development' is often seen as opposed to local, traditional, 'grassroots', and customary beliefs and practices. By contrast, the term 'vernacular development' can be understood as a process by which techniques, goals and standards deemed to be of widespread or universal validity are domesticated and maintained in a distinctive way by ordinary people in specific localities in accordance with their own circumstances and understandings. The vernacular model of development was denoted by Michael Dove and Daniel Kammen as informal, norm-driven, diverse, and even conflicting practices that dominate the real versus imagined landscape of development (Dove and Kammen 2001). The specific form of vernacular development described in this thesis is a project of social betterment that has arisen independently from national development policy, in keeping with distinctive local values, and it inspires local and grassroots participation, without necessarily conflicting with, or undermining the goals of formal development.

modernity, which I describe as 'vernacular development', for in their various charity services the Hoà Hảo make a substantive contribution to societal development in their localities inspired by an indigenous worldview. In realising this development vision, Hoà Hảo Buddhists have been able to negotiate a relationship of co-existence and compromise with the state. As such, this thesis contributes to understanding religiously-inspired development under the socialist state in Vietnam. It shows how members of a millenarian religious group are involved in vernacular development as influential change actors, providing significant development services in the Mekong delta in keeping with the tenets of their faith.

1.3 Field Research: Hoà Hảo Holy Land and its Periphery in An Giang Province

I first visited *Thánh địa Hoà Hảo*, the Hoà Hảo Holy Land (formerly Hoà Hảo village) in Phú Tân district of An Giang province for a festival in mid-June 2014. It was peak pilgrimage time, commemorating Hoà Hảo Buddhism's foundation on the 18th of the fifth lunar month in 1939 (*Đại lễ 18-5*), and 2014 was the 75th anniversary. Together with *Lễ Hội Bà Chúa Xứ* (the Lady of the Realm Festival) in Châu Đốc, which takes place a month earlier, this Hoà Hảo festival was one of the biggest religious events in the western Mekong delta. Ferry boats crossing the Mekong river to the Holy Land were filled with pilgrims, visitors and vehicles. On a road leading to the main Hoà Hảo temple, *An Hoà Tự*, the crowds of motorbikes and masses of pedestrians moved slowly while most cars and buses were stuck over a kilometre away, right after the ferry station exit. In the sacred temple of *An Hoà Tự*, I witnessed masses of Hoà Hảo adepts observing religious rituals both inside the main hall and outside in the forecourt. The *Sấm Giảng*, or prophecy proclaimed by the Hoà Hảo Prophet (*Đức Giáo Chủ) Huỳnh Phú Sổ*, was being chanted via loudspeakers hung around the temple yard.

Exiting the temple and walking along the main street connecting the temple with the *Tổ Đình*, the ancestral hall to the Hoà Hảo founder, I was impressed by the rich diversity of charitable activities organised by Hoà Hảo Buddhists. There were all sorts of charitable services and goods labelled on carton signs as 'for free' (*miễn phí*), including bathroom services for pilgrims, motorbike parking, shoes and used clothes for children and the needy and many kinds of drinks and vegetarian foodstuffs. One of the most significant forms of Hoà Hảo charity which I witnessed during this trip was the large-scale operation of charitable rice kitchens. These eateries, also known as *Trại cơm từ thiện*, or 'charitable rice stations', were designed to feed the large number of pilgrims visiting the Hoà Hảo

central temple on the occasion of its major annual ceremonies. These rice kitchens could be viewed as typical case of large-scale and highly efficient Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity. For example, four rice stations at the Hoà Hảo Holy Land proved capable of feeding a hundred thousand Hoà Hảo adherents and tourists during the ceremonies. During the festival, Hoà Hảo Community Charity Boards prepared stocks of medicines, both traditional and Western, to assist the poor. It seemed to me that every Hoà Hảo individual, family, kin network and neighbour group in this Holy Land had innovatively organised a certain kind of charity offering to pilgrims and travellers. During the first visit, I also was struck by the friendly, unpretentious, sincere, gracious and humble demeanour of Hoà Hảo participants which contradicted representations of this millenarian Buddhist sect which was once considered the most significantly militarised religious movement in the Mekong delta of Vietnam.

Figure 1.2 Hoà Hảo pilgrims during the Sect's Foundation Day.

This first trip was initially inspired by one of my university colleagues, Ms. Thuỳ,[4] from Phú Tân of An Giang province, the heartland of Hoà Hảo Buddhism. She encouraged me to explore the religious rites and charitable practices of Hoà Hảo Buddhists, not only in the Holy Land, but also in its peripheral localities where different types of Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity occur. After the trip, I shared my personal experiences and thoughts

[4] The name Thuỳ is a pseudonym. Most of the names of the interlocutors in this dissertation have been also changed to protect their confidentiality.

about the significance of Hoà Hảo Buddhist philosophy and charitable practices with my university colleagues. I also had some ideas and suggestions about how the Research Centre for Rural Development of An Giang University, where I have worked as a researcher since 2004, could integrate the main features of Hoà Hảo cultural values into the future research projects on cultural-based development. Some were interested in my suggestions, however, most of my colleagues encouraged me not to carry out such research. They explained that the Hoà Hảo was 'so sensitive' and that carrying out field research in Hoà Hảo localities would be difficult. I was not completely surprised by their suggestions to avoid this topic in Hoà Hảo Buddhist settings because the Hoà Hảo sect historically had a tense relationship with the communist before 1975 and in some extents, such tension still exist in some Hoà Hảo localities. Many of my friends who work as state officials in urban area also hesitated to identify themselves as Hoà Hảo Buddhists, though they were born in Hoà Hảo families. As such, it was not strange to me that, in the midst of a Hoà Hảo Buddhist setting like An Giang province, educated people rarely discuss the Hoà Hảo topic, either in a public cafés or seminar room. As a result, ethnographic research conducted in a Hoà Hảo setting and related to the sect was almost silent at both local and national levels.

My research site was An Giang province in the western Mekong delta, where Hòa Hảo Buddhism originates and where a great number of its adherents are found today. My research took me to numerous localities both in the province and beyond. Interested in exploring the diversity of charitable services provided by the Hòa Hảo, I visited a range of localities, each renowned for the charitable activities provided by their Hoà Hảo adherents. Details of the research locations are as follows:

- Location 1: The headquarters of Hoà Hảo Buddhism in Phú Tân district, to learn Hoà Hảo philosophy, observe ritual practice at *An Hoà Tự*- the Hoà Hảo central temple, and interview key Hoà Hảo leaders at the Central Administrative Committee's office. The collected information was mainly used for Chapter 2.

- Location 2: Phú Hữu commune of An Phú district, to study the charitable house-building activity of Hoà Hảo carpenters. The information obtained from this research location has been used for the analysis in Chapter 3.

- Location 3: Bình Thuỷ commune of Châu Phú district, to observe the activity of its main herbal clinic in providing free herbal medicine for poor patients. The information

collected helped to explore the Hoà Hảo herbal medicine supply chain in the western Mekong delta, which is analysed in Chapter 4.

- Location 4: Vĩnh Điều commune of Kiên Giang province, to investigate the social cohesion building of Hoà Hảo sectarians in a newly settled frontier area of Vietnam and Cambodia, which is presented in Chapter 5.

Figure 1.3 Map showing the research locations of Hoà Hảo Holy Land and its periphery.

- Location 5: The city of Long Xuyên and its peripheral area, the Vĩnh Trạch commune, to research urban rice kitchens that provide free meals for the urban poor in the marketplace, schools and public hospitals. The findings from this research location are presented in Chapter 6.

- Location 6: Hoà Bình commune of Chợ Mới district, to explore the road and bridge construction activities of Hoà Hảo Buddhists, which was used for Chapter 7.

1.4 Methodology

As previously noted, conducting research in Hoà Hảo settings is notoriously difficult. In domestic academia, very few studies of Hoà Hảo Buddhism have been conducted in situ in Hoà Hảo localities. Hoà Hảo village settings are difficult areas for domestic and foreign

researchers to access either officially or unofficially due to considerable official restrictions, internal security and regular police checks. Foreign researchers and overseas Vietnamese scholars may not be permitted into or have limited access to Hoà Hảo villages. Therefore, the majority of scholarly works by overseas scholars such as by Hue Tam Ho Tai (1983), Nguyen Long Thanh Nam (2003), Pascal Bourdeaux (2003) and Jessica Chapman (2013), just to name a few, are obliged to either draw on Hoà Hảo doctrine books, historical documents, international research and other materials published before 1975, work with the Hoà Hảo Buddhist Church in the US or interview Hoà Hảo followers outside Vietnam. Being intensively monitored by the local security and police, Hoà Hảo adepts tend to be cautious about anyone wishing to record their lives. As such, there is a dearth of in-depth qualitative field research on the practice of Hoà Hảo Buddhism. Until now, there have been no long-term ethnographies in Hoà Hảo settings that describe in detail the daily life of Hoà Hảo Buddhists in order to understand their cultural values and the motivations driving their social actions and behaviour.

Hòa Hảo adepts usually are wary about strangers who intend to stay in Hòa Hảo settings and spend time with local people to gather information. Many times, when I met new people in a Hòa Hảo locality, I was asked about the purpose of my conversations with people. I would reply that I wanted to learn about Hòa Hảo prophecies, traditional herbal medicines and other charitable practices of the Hòa Hảo Buddhists. Sometimes, I would mention the names of several key Hòa Hảo leaders from the sect's headquarter in Phú Tân who had introduced me to people in these localities. These social referrals from well-known local Hòa Hảo leaders were a means through which my trustworthiness as an outsider could be assessed, and I believe they made the Hòa Hảo Buddhists more open to being involved in a research project implemented by a non-Hòa Hảo Buddhist outsider like me. Considering this concern, during the early stages of this ethnography, I positioned myself as a native researcher in the field of rural development from An Giang University who was eager to learn the Vietnamese culture and traditional values. I mentioned that the unique cosmology and worldview of Hoà Hảo Buddhism reflected well the social responsibility and obligations to improve the social welfare and community development in the Mekong delta.

An extended case study approach was applied in this research to explore the charitable practices of Hòa Hảo Buddhists in the western Mekong delta. Thus, the method for collecting data was to identify suitable candidates for extended case studies when selecting specific localities and allocate time to get to know people in local settings. The

aim of my ethnographic research was to understand Hòa Hảo charitable practices and notions holistically, in their full context. As such, I chose to limit the number of core case studies to five or six so as to make data collection feasible and worthwhile. I had been cautioned about the difficulties of small-scale community ethnographic research and kept in mind the following concerns:

- The importance of a flexible approach in terms of how much time I planned to use for field research in each location, and in selecting which charitable activity would be the best choice for the research in each Hòa Hảo setting. I was open to changing sites if presented with an opportunity to obtain richer or more pertinent data.
- I am by no means an expert in religious study or Hòa Hảo Buddhism, but I have a pre-existing network and knowledge of Hòa Hảo-dominated rural areas from carrying out several field research projects in Hòa Hảo villages while working at An Giang University. I was able to draw upon this existing concrete and contextual knowledge when eliciting information from Hòa Hảo interlocutors and in analysing the results.

The main method used in this study was participatory observation and informal conversations. In participatory observation, I followed Hòa Hảo Buddhist charitable activities in different localities (as showed in Figure 1.3). For example, I travelled place to place to collect herbal medicines with Hòa Hảo herbs collectors. I stayed for two months with Hòa Hảo charitable rice kitchens in urban areas to observe their daily activities and lend a hand. I participated as a volunteer in the main Hòa Hảo charitable activities explored in this thesis. I also regularly participated in special annual ceremonies organised by Hòa Hảo Buddhists to observe their ritual practices and charitable activities and talk with pilgrims.

The key interlocutors for informal conversations were Hòa Hảo Buddhists who engaged in various charitable activities in the selected localities. Additional informants included key Hòa Hảo leaders in the Hòa Hảo Central Administrative Committee, local charity organisers, traditional healers and herb collectors, carpenters and house constructors, road and bridge builders, chefs in the charitable rice kitchens, donors and gift receivers, volunteers and Hòa Hảo adherents in general. I tried to seek a balance in gender, age demographic, social class, occupations, and education backgrounds for informal conversations. My strategy was to get to know local people in the Hòa Hảo settings for

the first two or three weeks of the ethnography to build their trust. I then gradually built good relationships with the Hòa Hảo families I met in the field site. Some Hòa Hảo families treated me like a family member and I become an adopted son. I stayed close with them for four to six months to observe their daily activities and charitable practices. During this time, I remained in the villages and participated in daily activities. Every day, I engaged in informal conversations with fellow volunteers. Sometimes I gathered with local people in the middle of personal activity such as eating and chatting and learnt a lot from these Hòa Hảo followers. This method helped me develop rapport and build close relationship with the Hòa Hảo interlocutors. As such, they appeared to be more willing to share with me their life histories and personal experiences in their own words. During these informal conversations, people would tell about what charity they were involved in and why. I did not attempt to control the conversation, but rather engaged quite passively. Also, I did not guide them with a set of questions.

Most of the time, I employed a snowball technique for meeting informants. In one year of ethnography, I met and talked with over 300 Hòa Hảo followers and pilgrims while engaging in Hòa Hảo Buddhist charity and the sect's main festivals. I got to know about 100 Hòa Hảo Buddhists very well and formed closer relationships with nearly 50 Hòa Hảo followers who were comfortable to share comprehensive information with me. I felt this was enough to gain a good understanding of the lives of these individuals and answer my key research questions.

A cumulative data collection method was used whereby participants were interviewed several times and over an extended period in order to allow for the process of building trust and to gain a more in-depth understanding of their motivations for doing charity and their individual worldviews. This anthropological research was not very intensive in terms of labour input, though it could be demanding on a personal level. However, much of the time, my ethnography was simply chatting with people or waiting for them to turn up. This kind of anthropological fieldwork tends to entail a great deal of waiting, frustration and boredom, in addition to the fact that the author must necessarily cover the same ground several times to ensure the findings are as accurate as possible.

1.5 Structure of the thesis

Following this introductory chapter, the thesis is organised into six main chapters that each explore different aspects of Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity in contemporary Vietnam.

Chapter Two investigates the historical context in which Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity emerged. The chapter provides insight into how the Hoà Hảo Buddhist millenarian religion is today recognised for its engagement in methodical and worldly charitable activities, and how this apocalyptic traditional sect with an uneasy relationship with the secular state is thriving. The chapter highlights the unique worldview of the Hoà Hảo faith that focuses on the socially engaged practice by repaying the Four Debts to society, which could be seen as the key factor driving Hoà Hảo charity. The chapter also addresses how Hoà Hảo adepts learnt from and adapted to the adversities generated by different secular states and how they accommodated with these state authorities for charitable action. The chapter argues that the Hoà Hảo charitable practices have been determined in distinct local contexts and over a complex historical process. It suggests that adaptability, creativity and sensitivity to local social context continues to be the major characteristic of this traditionally millenarian religion.

Chapter Three explores Hoà Hảo Buddhist's charitable practices of constructing and giving houses to the destitute in the Mekong delta. The chapter uncovers how Hoà Hảo Buddhists sacrifice their time and effort to build houses for needy strangers. The chapter argues that Hoà Hảo charitable house building is perceived as a way to incorporate strangers into the community, build social cohesion and fashion youths into responsible adults. When Hoà Hảo voluntary workmen collectively build houses for poor people, they also build social capital and networks around house-building activities. The charitable workmen give time, money and personal effort in keeping with the distinctive values of the Four Debts doctrine of Hoà Hảo Buddhist teachings. When building houses for the poor, Hoà Hảo laypersons together construct a 'moral infrastructure' for rural society, providing an example of ethical action, incorporating outsiders, socialising wayward youths and building cohesion.

Chapter Four investigates aspects of the provision of traditional herbal medicine by Hòa Hảo Buddhists in the western Mekong delta. The chapter explores what it means for the people who take part in Hòa Hảo herbal medicine supply chains to grow, collect, process, dispense and consume herbal medicine. The chapter argues that contemporary Hoà Hảo herbal medicine supply chains could be perceived as a modernised form of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương traditional healing in that personal 'self-healing' and self-cultivation by ordinary people plays a key role in the herbal medicine healing process. The chapter describes the key nodes and phases of Hòa Hảo herbal supply networks, from the growing and collecting herbs, through to the processing and dispensing of herbal medicines, to the

consumption of the herbal medicine at patient's home. It suggests that Hòa Hảo herbal medicine supply chains represent a democratic and participatory framework that gives numerous individuals an opportunity to participate in self-cultivation by voluntarily contributing to the production, supply and consumption of medicinal herbs.

Chapter Five investigates how the Hoà Hảo interact with other political and ethnic groups in the frontier context. It examines relations between a Hoà Hảo healer and her patients, including ethnic Kinh, ethnic Khmers, Cambodians and a retired Vietnamese communist cadre. The chapter explores how healing in this frontier Hòa Hảo herbal clinic is inclusive and involves the participation of groups with whom the sect formerly was in conflict. The chapter finds that Hoà Hảo Buddhists continue to build social solidarity in a pluralist frontier region, but do so for a more inclusive set of relationships than previously recognised. As such, the chapter describes Hòa Hảo charity as an example of vernacular development, an indigenous grassroots contribution to promoting solidarity and unity which coexists as an autonomous alternative to top-down or formal development without necessarily conflicting with or undermining official development goals.

Chapter Six explores how Hòa Hảo Buddhists adapt to modernity and new social conditions in their charitable work in a contemporary urban context. By looking at charitable vegetarian kitchens run by Hòa Hảo urban elites in a provincial city market and peri-urban high school, the chapter highlights how Hòa Hảo Buddhists conceptualise social suffering and respond to it. It describes how key Hòa Hảo urban elites practically set about providing free food to the urban poor in response to their religiously-inspired ethics and urban realities. The layout, labour deployment and food serving processes of these vegetarian kitchens are rationally organised to meet with speed, precision and dignity the high demand of urban diners. To operate large-scale rice kitchens in these urban settings, Hòa Hảo Buddhists imitate and follow the state's criteria for health, nutrition, hygiene and food safety while also meeting donor expectations for transparency and accountability. The evidence suggests that in their charitable action, Hòa Hảo Buddhists are not parochial or conservative. In adopting modern standards, rationalities and technologies in their charitable practices and responding to both official and traditional ethical criteria, they have adapted effectively to a modern, industrial and urban context.

Chapter Seven discusses the charitable bridge and road building activities of Hoà Hảo Buddhists in a Mekong delta commune. It addresses the adaptive achievements of a

religious group involved in modern rural infrastructure development in Vietnam's late-socialist context. The findings show how a group of untrained locals from the Hoà Hảo sect were able to learn and implement cutting-edge bridge-building techniques, raise funds from a variety of sources, gain official approval for their building plans and mobilise an army of voluntary labour. It shows how Hoà Hảo bridge builders artfully negotiated with the state to gain approval and shared credit for their own charitable acts. The chapter shows how, in undertaking the ambitious and complex task of creating rural transport infrastructure, Hoà Hảo Buddhists have been able to adapt to the demands of modernity while materialising traditional values. It argues that Hoà Hảo Buddhists have positive agency that cannot be reduced to the capacity to resist or critique the state or development, but instead consists of a significant capacity to coexist with the state and participate autonomously in development.

The concluding chapter highlights the aims and argument of the thesis and summarises its main research findings and insights. It identifies the theoretical and empirical contributions of the research and discusses some implications of the study for comparative purposes.

Chapter 2

The Origins of Hoà Hảo Buddhist Charity

Early in the morning on the campus of An Giang General Hospital, masses of patients and relatives were standing in line waiting to fill hot water thermoses and pick up free food from kitchen staff. The hospital's charitable kitchen, which operates year-round, even during the Vietnamese Tết holiday, serves 1.500 free meals per day along with a thousand litres of hot water. Nearly a hundred Hoà Hảo volunteers were tirelessly engaging in the daily routine of the kitchen. The charitable kitchen functions as a coordination point for a range of charitable care services. Besides providing free food and hot water, the kitchen supports poor patients with a free ambulance service between the hospital and their homes. In many cases, the kitchen's financial assistance board also gives a sum of money to poor patients to partly cover their treatment costs. When these patients go home, the kitchen sometimes sends with them a 50 kilogram bag of white rice and some medicines, together with a sum of money for poor patients to settle back into life after hospitalisation. Furthermore, the kitchen leader follows up specific cases for ongoing assistance, for instance, sick orphans, lonely elderly patients and HIV-infected single mothers, just to name a few.

Mr Ba Lăng, the elderly but energetic Hoà Hảo man who is the manager of the hospital's charitable kitchen, explained to me how this kitchen had become a focal point for so many charitable activities:

> Thanks to the location of this charitable kitchen right in the provincial hospital campus, we can easily identify desperate cases who really need our help. Whenever patients need support, they just come to the kitchen to directly ask for assistance. We try to respond quickly to their needs based on our available resources. The majority of voluntary kitchen staff has worked in this hospital's charitable kitchen for more than a decade, since they know that numerous poor patients around the hospital campus need help. As you can see inside this storeroom, the amount of white rice and in-kind gifts donated to the kitchen is abundant. That is because the more food and other support we give away, the more charitable resources we receive from good-hearted donors.

As a Hòa Hảo urban elite who has experienced the effects, both positive and negative, of the market economy's penetration of people's lives, Ba Lăng has an acute perception of social problems. He told me that each day in the hospital, he witnessed all forms of human suffering: pain, birth pangs, sickness, neglect, loneliness, destitution, hopelessness and death. For him, the human life cycle seemed to be much shorter than in the past. Patients were sent to the hospital in the morning and the ambulance took the dead home in the afternoon. Making a living these days was so hard that the poor, in particular, could not afford to go to hospital. They only went to the hospital when they were about to die. He also witnessed many cases of young people who saw no choice but to commit suicide due to a deadlock in their life. For him, it seemed that human suffering is never ending. The manager of the hospital's charitable kitchen continued:

> The prophet taught us: when we die, we cannot bring anything with us. All we bring to other world is sin (*tội*) and merit (*phước*). Now, during the Low Era, when everything is changing for the worse, it is even more urgent to do good deeds. We should avoid acting immorally, doing anything which might cause us to accumulate more sin. Instead, we should practice giving in this life to gain merit. I believe that most Hoà Hảo followers understand this simple teaching.

Ba Lăng said he experienced suffering himself each morning when he saw patients' life crises, but he felt happy and at peace in bed at night after he had done something for the poor. He stated that his colleagues in the kitchen shared the same feelings as him. He explained how the charitable kitchen, although organised on a very modest scale at the beginning, had developed over time to become one of the largest hospital-based charities in the Mekong delta:

> Following the prophet's advice, with a 'charitable heart' (*tâm từ thiện*) we came together to form a small group to build this rice kitchen to help poor patients who came to the hospital from all over. Then, we gradually used our own social network with retired state cadres, who used to work in the provincial Fatherland Front and Red Cross Associations, to drive for change. Once the charitable kitchen had basically secured the state's recognition, we tried to attract voluntary staff from the urban periphery and rural localities to help us with the kitchen's activities.

The charitable activities described in this account are informed by moral sentiments that compel charitable donors to give in order to alleviate the suffering of the poor and needy. As can be seen from Ba Lăng's comments, such sentiments are rooted in an ethical

worldview that emphasises common humanity. The giving that occurs in keeping with these sentiments is methodical and calculated to assist the poor to recover from their illnesses in a comprehensive and precise manner. And yet, somewhat contradictorily, it also is informed by an apocalyptic worldview that sees, in the suffering of others, signs of irreversible decline in human wellbeing. In such a context, facing the end of the world itself, the only meaningful attainments are spiritual rather than worldly. The peculiar combination of compassion, apocalyptic thinking, and methodical ethical action associated with the 'four debts' doctrine visible in these charitable activities is intriguing. But what exactly is the worldview that ties together these disparate strands, what are its origins and what is the context in which it emerged?

It is remarkable that charitable acts of the scale and complexity witnessed in the hospital kitchen are even permitted under a state that traditionally has tolerated no rivals. The Vietnamese state historically has been hostile to autonomous, religiously inspired social movements, particularly those in peripheral areas of the nation where security traditionally was a challenge. In fact, in the early 1990s, when the hospital kitchen was established, the Hoà Hảo Buddhist religion was still mistrusted and subject to strict government control. However, it appears that by demonstrating humility, ingenuity and resourcefulness, Hoà Hảo adherents were able to manage their tense relationship with the state, enabling them to organise and scale up their charitable activities to an impressive degree.

Drawing on a literature review and my own ethnography in 2016 and 2018, I attempt in this chapter to tease out the twin paradoxes of how exponents of an apocalyptic religious tradition are today distinguished by their involvement in methodical and worldly charitable activities, and how a religion with a tense relationship to the secular state is flourishing under a state not known to encourage autonomous civic action. The chapter finds answers to these paradoxes in exploring socially engaged aspects of the Hoà Hảo faith that previously have received inadequate attention. I argue that the religious tradition underpinning Hoà Hảo charity has been shaped in distinct local conditions and over a complex historical process. Hoà Hảo Buddhists' deep religiosity and charitable activities are rooted in a syncretic millenarian tradition that emerged in response to crises faced by pioneer settlers in a frontier context. Although repressed under different polities, notably the Ngô Đình Diệm regime and the post-war communist state, Hoà Hảo Buddhists learned from and adapted to these adversities and negotiated a space for charitable action. Such findings show that creativity and a sensitivity to social context continue to be features of

this religious tradition. In this chapter, I isolate several of the main influences on Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity since the foundation of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương tradition in the 19th century, through the Ngô Đình Diệm and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu governments and to the post-war communist context, up to the year 1999, when the Hoà Hảo religion was finally recognised by the secular state.

2.1 The Mekong Delta Ecology of Crisis and the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương Response

The Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion (*Strange Fragrance from the Precious Mountain*), the pre-existent traditional form of Hoà Hảo Buddhism, was founded in the western Mekong delta in 1849, nine years before the French colonial conquest of Vietnam. During this period, under the Nguyễn dynasty, a large-scale migration (known in Vietnam as the 'southward advance*',* or *Nam Tiến*) of ethnic Vietnamese settlers occurred into this ecologically precarious frontier, causing the radical displacement of the formerly majority Khmer occupants by a new minority of Vietnamese settlers (Choi Byung Wook 1999; Taylor 2001). The Vietnamese settlers tended 'to pursue religious quests in order to escape or cope with mounting hardship' (Thien Do 2003:136). Subsequently, the rise of the millenarian Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương tradition (BSKH) could be viewed as a product of this migratory movement and the process of colonisation of the delta by the Vietnamese settlers during the 19th century (Nguyen Long Thanh Nam 2003). The BSKH, founded in a spiritual place where 'healers, prophets, rebels, and assorted Khmer, Chinese, and Vietnamese mystics frequently sought refuge' in sacred mountains of the *Thất Sơn* range (Biggs 2009:148), could be seen as a 'protective association for mostly illiterate farmers eager to protect themselves against the frequent violence and the outbreaks of cholera in the region' (Biggs 2003:88). The cosmology of this religion 'emerged out of a catastrophic confrontation with nature, pronounced social unrest and cultural anomie' (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983). Specifically, this religion emerged during the catastrophic cholera epidemic that swept through the Mekong delta in the late 1840s, with the apocalyptic message of the sect's founder responding to instability and privation in the frontier region (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983; Taylor 2001:342).

What we known about the emergence of the BSKH tradition and the religious life of its founder — the Buddha Master of Western Peace (Buddha Master for short) — mostly comes from studies by Vương Kim (1953), Dat Si and Nguyen Van Hau (1972), Hue Tam Ho Tai (1983) and Nguyen Long Thanh Nam (2003). Đoàn Minh Huyên (lay name of the Buddha Master) was born in Tòng Sơn village of Sa Đéc, in a better-off peasant

family, on the 15th of the 10th month in the year of *Đinh Mão* 1807 (Vương Kim 1953:8). After his father passed away, Đoàn Minh Huyên and his mother migrated out of Tòng Sơn. His life in the intervening years until he returned to Tòng Sơn in 1849 remains a mystery (Dat Si and Nguyen Van Hau 1972:62). Đoàn Minh Huyên first returned to his birthplace when he reached nearly 43 and without any attachments or connections with the home village (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983:4).

The greater part of the aforementioned scholars' work on the Buddha Master focuses on his origins and various miraculous acts of healing during the late 1840s cholera outbreak, which led to his reputation as a living Buddha. Locals today recall another miraculous act during his return visit to Tòng Sơn, before his emergence as founder of the BSKH tradition. A version of this story came from a temple custodian at Tòng Sơn temple whom I met during my ethnography in early 2016. He guided me to a large picture painted on the wall of the temple's central hall and told me a story about when Đoàn Minh Huyên returned to Tòng Sơn village:

> In early 1849 when Đoàn Minh Huyên had just arrived the village of Tòng Sơn, a storm swept through the region. A big branch of a giant banyan tree beside Tòng Sơn temple fell down and blocked the main waterway into the village. Many boats and sampans were backed up in the river and could not get through.
>
> Nearly 200 young and energetic men and women tried to pull away the huge branch to clear the waterway. They tried using many means to move the branch, however, it was hopeless. Halfway through the day, most of the villagers had left, while the remainder were too tired to continue.
>
> At that moment, a long-bearded man in a black shirt appeared and asked what the matter was. The old man asked villagers to give him a hand so that he could move the tree branch. He instructed people to tie two ropes around the fallen branch. The crowds doubted the ability of the old man; however, looking at the determined face of the stranger, several villagers jumped into the river to tie the rope around the branch. Crowds of villagers lined the banks of the river to see if the old man could remove the enormous tree branch. Đoàn Minh Huyên approached the felled branch by himself and, taking hold of the ropes, easily lifted it out of the way. His action, drawing on some miraculous power, greatly surprised the locals. Hundreds of people curiously gathered around him asking about his origins (Conversation with the custodian of Tòng Sơn temple, 5 February 2016).

Figure 2.1 The painting of Buddha Master lifting the fallen tree branch.

Đoàn Minh Huyên's act of lifting the tree branch to clear the waterway could be seen as an origin story or founding myth that features a prophetic figure whose actions set up a model for helping people that is valued within the Hoà Hảo tradition to this day. Other tales told about the man who become known as the Buddha Master of Western Peace, Phật Thầy Tây An, featured his engagement in travel, healing and assistance to the common folk in the Mekong delta's frontier society.

The same year the Buddha Master returned to Tòng Sơn, a cholera epidemic began to spread through Tòng Sơn village. Villagers' approach to taking precautions against the deadly disease was to slaughter many of their cattle for sacrifice. Đoàn Minh Huyên, however, criticised these measures, especially the killing of valuable animals like cows or buffalos. He advised sick people to find a better way of dealing with the epidemic without being harmful to other living beings. He began to perform healings and various kinds of [unspecified] miracles (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983:4). Nevertheless, Tòng Sơn village's chief did not believe his method, so he ordered Đoàn Minh Huyên to depart, giving the reason that a 'stranger' was not allowed to stay in the village. The epidemic

seriously spread through Tòng Sơn causing heavy loss of life, so villagers asked him to stay, but he decided to leave (Dật Sĩ and Nguyễn Văn Hầu 1972:62–66).

He travelled to *Trà Bư* canal, seven kilometres from Tòng Sơn village, and built a small hut to settle. His fellow villagers followed him to his place to beg him to treat the disease. He replied to the villagers that he had left a flagpole at Tòng Sơn temple with banners to the Five Lords, *Cây thẻ Năm Ông*.[5] He said that the pole of the Five Lords could make cures. Back in Tòng Sơn, villagers started to burn the flags to get the ashes, then mixed the ashes with water to drink. This method brought miraculous successes against the cholera. Eventually, the flags, together with the pole, had all been used up, yet the demand from sick people was unsated; hence villagers continued travelling to Trà Bư to meet Đoàn Minh Huyên for healing (Dật Sĩ and Nguyễn Văn Hầu 1972:66–67).

In the autumn of 1849,[6] Đoàn Minh Huyên continued travelling up the Tiền River[7] and stopped at the village of Long Kiến, where the cholera epidemic was particularly catastrophic. The small canal that led to Long Kiến was soon choked with sampans bringing in patients. Đoàn Minh Huyên provided the most treatment to children and recruited believers from patients' families.

> He burned pieces of yellow votive paper bearing inscriptions in red ink and mixed them their ashes with water. Then he held joss-sticks and offered prayers to Buddha while the sick people stood behind him. He explained to the patients and their relatives the law of karmic retribution, the need to strive for salvation and the chance of gaining better health by practicing virtue. He would exhort the listeners to have faith before finally handling out a cure (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983:4–5).

It was at that time that he claimed to be Buddha Master (*Phật Thầy*), and people spread the word that he was a living Buddha:

---

[5] According to BSKH adherents, the Five Lords are the five Buddha-Kings *(Phật Vương)* who rule over the four directions and the centre. The Five Lords were represented by five banners in different colours to protect people from harm (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983:37).

[6] '*Tháng Tám ôn dịch rất nhiều*

Thiệt năm Kỷ Dậu dương trần liêu điêu' (Vuong Kim and Dao Hung 1953).

[7] One of the two main branches of the Mekong River through Vietnam; the other branch is the Hậu River in the south.

His name became famous in the four directions. People came by tens of thousands, the mad, and those suffering from cholera or skin diseases, all seized the opportunities. Subsequently, he was venerated as Buddha Master of Western Peace (Vuong Kim and Dao Hung 1953:159).

Figure 2.2 Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương and Hoà Hảo Buddhist localities in South Vietnam.

Although the newly arrived Vietnamese inhabitants might have been a minority, during that time the Nguyễn dynasty actively assimilated groups such as the Khmer and Chinese and established Vietnamese as the dominant ethnicity in southern Vietnam (Choi Byung Wook 1999). Nevertheless, due to the lack of administrative power, the efforts of the court to spread the values of Confucianism and Vietnamese culture in the western Mekong delta were very limited. Hence, the delta remained characterised by cultural anomie through the 19th century (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983:10). At that time, the western stretches of the delta were said to exhibit critical cultural and social 'amorphousness' (Taylor 2001:343). The culturally disoriented ethnic majority settlers embraced religious beliefs from their neighbours and other sources and incorporated them into their ritual

practices (Thien Do 2003). This amalgamation brought into being somewhat mixed worship practices, so there were no clear distinctions between mainstream religion and superstitious practices in everyday life. It was in that context that the Buddha Master founded the BSKH tradition in 1849, which, according to one intellectual in the Hoà Hảo Buddhist tradition, also aimed to revitalise true Buddhist values and eliminate what its followers saw as irrational superstition (Nguyen Long Thanh Nam 2003:4-5).

The foundation of the BSKH tradition could be viewed as the Vietnamese settlers' cultural reaction to the new condition of life when the pioneers, who were colonising the Mekong delta, living under unstable social circumstances and lacking access to familiar cultural orientations, were given positive social and religious ideas. The rise of BSKH indicated for some observers that 'the potential of Vietnamese culture, although weakened by the frontier environment in the south, was nonetheless sustained and developed within the framework of the new faith' (Nguyen Long Thanh Nam 2003:4). In this setting, the BSKH was founded by men whose vocation was to 'the salvation of humanity' (*Cứu nhân độ thế*) through the application of their skills and learning to the practical problems of everyday life in the frontier area. It would appear that their followers and patients experienced this simple and frugal religion as a source of power and reassurance (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983).

When the French conquered the three remaining provinces[8] of the southwest Mekong delta in 1867, the delta underwent rapid and profound change; hence, the BSKH tradition had to adapt. After the death of the Buddha Master in 1856, several BSKH sectaries emerged in the western Mekong delta, including Nguyễn Trung Trực, Trần Văn Thành and Ngô Lợi, who were determined to carry on the struggles against the French. One of the most prominent disciples of the Buddha Master, military leader (*Tổng binh*) Trần Văn Thành, embodied a specifically sectarian current of anticolonialism. In 1867, Trần Văn Thành joined force with Nguyễn Trung Trực, who blew up a French ship on the Nhật Tảo River in 1862. Nevertheless, Trần Văn Thành soon lost his new ally since Nguyễn Trung Trực was captured by the French in 1868 (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983:47). After the defeat, Trần Văn Thành fled back to set up an agricultural settlement in the Bảy Thưa area, a desolate swamp near Châu Đốc that served as a hub of anti-French resistance (Nguyen

[8] In 1867, the colonisation of Cochinchina was complete. The three remaining provinces of the western Mekong delta - An Giang, Hà Tiên and Vĩnh Long - were seized under the French authority (Biggs 2003).

Long Thanh Nam 2003:15). He founded a new religion in this area known as *Đạo Lành,* or Religion of Good.

> Adherents believed he did not and could not have any infirmity, but he healed others. To initiate new adherents, he gave them amulets and pieces of yellow paper. One needed only to drink their ashes to be cured, whatever the diseases. The profound respect he inspired attracted many pilgrims who brought money, rice and iron (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983:47).

In March 1873, the French finally managed to break into Bảy Thưa area; most of the rebels were either killed or captured. The youngest son of the leader later committed suicide in jail. Subsequently, the Bảy Thưa community was eventually destroyed by French troops (Nguyen Long Thanh Nam 2003:15). Due to this loss, the sectaries were unable to mount another uprising until the emergence of an equally able leader, Năm Thiếp.

Năm Thiếp (1831–1890), also known as *Đức Bổn Sư* (True Eremite) Ngô Lợi, from Mỏ Cày of Bến Tre province, founded the sect of *Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa* (Four Debts, Filial Piety and Righteousness) at An Định village (later Ba Chúc town) around Núi Tượng, or the Elephant Mountain of Thất Sơn range, in 1867. Like the Buddha Master, the preferred method of gathering adherents of Ngô Lợi was healing and proselytisation. He began preaching and offering healing, giving his adherents amulets inscribed with the characters *Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương* (Strange Fragrance from the Precious Mountain) (Đinh Văn Hạnh 1999:58–67). Another epidemic of cholera, which broke out in the region in 1877, gave Ngô Lợi a chance to mobilise the Đạo Lành sectaries into a unified movement. In 1878, he convened a 'vegetarian festival' (Lễ *Trai Đàn*) in Mỹ Tho province, where 200 leaders from various parts of the Mekong delta turned up to plot the course of an uprising against the French authorities. However, the final meeting for the insurrection was reported to the French administrator by a spy. As a result, most leaders were arrested and killed, except Ngô Lợi. In 1879, he returned to the village of An Định to build several new temples. There, he claimed to be the incarnation of the Buddha Master (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983:52). In 1884, Ngô Lợi reportedly negotiated a tactical alliance in the frontier between Vietnamese and Khmer anti-French resistance fighters led by Prince Si-vatha. In 1887, the French military launched a massive assault in which they destroyed An Định Village and detained nearly all settlers (Nguyen Long Thanh Nam 2003:13). The destruction of An Định effectively put an end to Đạo Lành insurrectionism. Despite the

failed revolts, the period under the leadership of Trần Văn Thành and Ngô Lợi had been a period of growth and consolidation for the BSKH tradition.

2.2 The Unique Cosmology of Hoà Hảo Buddhism

2. 2.1 The birth of a new prophet

The opposition to French colonial rule remained an integral part of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương tradition over the next half century until the advent of the Hoà Hảo prophet - Huỳnh Phú Sổ, but cosmic insecurity, a consequence of repeated natural calamities, was gradually replaced by an increasingly clearer perception of economic oppression as the main cause of discontent. Taylor (2001:342) highlighted that the revival of religious millenarianism was a localised response to the social rifts and cultural crisis induced by French colonialism. Wolf (1969) and McAlister and Mus (1970:84) characterised Hoà Hảo Buddhism as a traditionalist response to the disintegration of Mekong delta society under French colonialism and its regime of export agriculture. French administrators had severely disrupted the pre-colonial economic system by seizing rural lands and introducing a capitalist economy that replaced the barter system with cash for trade (Chapman 2013:16). In particular, land speculation as promoted by the colonial administration and 'the need for capital gave rise to the main scourge of the small peasants: the growth of money economy that put more emphasis on capital than on human efforts' (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983:66). As one exponent of this millenarian tradition, the Yams-selling Monk (*Sư Vãi Bán Khoai*), complained around the turn of the century:

> They lend you the devil money and demon rice. They charge you ten-fold of interest. They band themselves in self-serving cliques. When you are starving, what choice have you? The will to work is there, but where the money? (Vuong Kim 1966:106, cited in Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983:66).

Most ordinary farmers lost their farmland to the French or their Vietnamese collaborators. This situation forced many small peasants into tenancy arrangements and pushed the landless into staggering debt. 'Such widespread indebtedness made it impossible for people to worship gods and ancestors, marry daughters and burry parents in a manner sufficiently ostentatious to prove their filial piety' (Fall 1955:244).

It is vital to note that the rise of Hoà Hảo religion took place in the context of French colonial domination, although the emergence of this sect in the mid-20th century was considered a direct continuation of the BSKH tradition. Similar to the ideology of Trần

Văn Thành and Ngô Lợi, resistance to the French was still the main tenet of the Hoà Hảo sect, thereby peasants became members of the sect with the cause of anticolonialism. However, the wavering of the colonial authorities, the violence of the war, which was to become increasingly intense from the end of the 1930s, and the concomitant ideological divisions all characterised this new religious movement. The challenges of independence and the building of the nation state explain the classical representations that have defined this millenarian tradition as an emotional and irrational reaction to the social and cultural anomie of the period (Brocheux and Hemery 2009; Hill 1971; Marr 1997; and Popkin 1979).

The Hoà Hảo prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ, born in 1919 in Hoà Hảo village of Châu Đốc province, grew up a sickly and somewhat apathetic man. When he fell seriously ill in 1939, his father sent him on a pilgrimage to the Thất Sơn (Seven Mountains) and Tà Lơn (Bokor Mountain in Cambodia) to seek help from reputed healers. After the pilgrimage, he returned home uncured, however soon after claimed to experience miraculous healing while praying in the middle of an intense storm outside his family home (Chapman 2013:16).

> One evening, after a period of extreme nervousness, he walked around the house, mediated in front of the family altar, apparently completely healed, and began to explain to the startled family members the teachings of Buddha as he saw them. Neighbours gathered, listened and marvelled at his recovery. A new prophet was born (Fall 1955:244).

At the beginning, Hoà Hảo Buddhism was typically described as a purely religious movement since the prophet focused mainly on healing and preaching as necessary introductory steps designed to attract potential followers. The Hoà Hảo prophet's preaching and healing practices were well in line with evangelising patterns set by the Buddha Master, Ngô Lợi, and Phật Trùm.[9] 'He performed cures with simple herbs and acupuncture, asking for no rewards' (ibid.); he offered his home as a shelter for the poor to have treatment. Healing remained an important feature of the prophet's work throughout his career. He graduated quickly to performing miracle cures, preaching and

[9] *Phật Trùm,* a Khmer man, living at *Sà Lôn* of Lương Phi village of Châu Đốc province, was claimed to be the reincarnation of Buddha Acolyte *(Phật Trùm)* (1868–75) sent into the world to warn mankind that the Low Era was ending. Since he was well known as a healer who used candle wax to make cures, he was called Candle Monk *(Đạo Đèn)*. His followers believed that *Phật Trùm* was the avatar of the Buddha Master of Western Peace (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983:41)

carrying out acts of extreme charity for the poor peasants who put themselves entirely at the service of the prophet. His additional skills of healing by herbs and acupuncture made him appear almost supernatural to his audiences. The first converts were those who witnessed his healing and heard him preach. By the end of 1939, he had already attracted tens of thousands of followers to the new Hoà Hảo Buddhism (Chapman 2013:16).

The prophet stopped practicing healing in early 1940 in order to illustrate and write prophecies, sutras and sermons specially designed for the evangelising purposes of the emerging Hoà Hảo community. Since the French considered his preaching to be anti-French and strongly political, he was exiled to Mỹ Tho and Cái Bè, where he gained many converts. The French then placed him in a mental institution in Chợ Lớn; a psychiatrist became a convert. Declared sane and released, the prophet was exiled to Bạc Liêu province, where he again converted many (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983:121–25; Vuong Kim 1974:91–114). In 1945, the Hoà Hảo sect started to organise a guerrilla resistance against the French and landlords. The Hoà Hảo Self-Defence Forces, or *Đội Bảo An,* were formed to protect Hoà Hảo communities. The Bảo An Forces became an important part of the Hoà Hảo political struggle in the south (Nguyen Long Thanh Nam 2003:60). This remarkable transition of the Hoà Hảo sect from a pure religious movement to a political movement that advocated the use of violence was not encouraged by Buddhism. But the Hoà Hảo prophet explained: 'if the country were lost, the religion would also be purged. The nation must be protected and strengthened so that the religion would be given a place to prosper' (PGHH 1965:435). He advised his followers that they had the responsibility of protecting the country from foreign invaders and making sure they did not betray their country or become lackeys of any foreign country.

The BSKH emerged out of catastrophic confrontation with nature, pronounced social unrest and cultural anomie during 19th century (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983). Nearly a hundred years later, when Huỳnh Phú Sổ founded Hoà Hảo Buddhism in 1939, it was again during a time of critical change, the traumatic dislocation of the colonial era, that this religious tradition re-emerged (Taylor 2001:342). It can be argued that Hoà Hảo Buddhism was not simply a continuation of the pre-existing BSKH millenarian movement that defined its own path to salvation. It was a form of vernacular modernity forged by the prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ who adapted the tradition to the new context —competition with and emulation of other religious ideologies and with the states of the colonial and post-colonial period. In so doing, the Hoà Hảo prophet drew directly on the BSKH tradition of resistance to French domination and sought to reform Buddhist practices in ways that

were inherently critical of the economic and social mores of the late colonial era (Chapman 2013). As several authors have noted of the so-called 'indigenous' Vietnamese religions such as Hoà Hảo and Cao Đài[10] that emerged in the early 20th century, the Hoà Hảo religion also had a reflexive element, a self-conscious reworking of a local tradition through content borrowings and frameworks modelled on other religions, such as Catholicism, and ideologies such as nationalism and socialism (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1988; Hoskins 2015; Taylor 2001). The Hoà Hảo prophet reframed the BSKH tradition in the context of fundamental changes in the Mekong delta of the late 1930s, when social and cultural relations already had been profoundly altered by the French, nationalists and communists (Brocheux 1995; Taylor 2001). The prophet shared with his adepts a new vision of the spiritual, social and cultural grounds of human existence and offered humankind a means to salvation that came through aiding others in recognition of existential debts. The ideology of the Hoà Hảo prophet was a form of vernacular modernity because he not only built on key tenets of the BSKH tradition, but also adapted it to the ideological and social context of the late colonial period.

Figure 2.3 Hoà Hảo female units in the Bảo An forces in 1948.

Source: www.gstatic.com

[10] The Cao Đài religion, was founded in South Vietnam in 1926. With its electic range of saints, teachings and rites drawn from many religious traditions and its baroque taste in architecture, Cao Đài is generally considered one of the most ambitiously syncretic religions in Vietnam (Huynh Ngoc Trang 1992).

2.2.2 The apocalyptic myth of Hoà Hảo Buddhism

Like other groups within the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương tradition, Hoà Hảo adherents believe that liberation from suffering, and salvation, can only be achieved via a certain selection process known as the Dragon Flower Assembly (*Hội Long Hoa*). It is claimed that the Buddha Master was a 'messenger from Heaven coming into the world to warn mankind of the imminence of apocalypse' (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983:28). The apocalyptic myth prophesised the appearance of the Future Buddha, *Maitreya*, also called the King of Light, or *Minh Vương,* who would be sitting on a lotus throne to convene the Dragon Flower Assembly, where only morally pure people who had survived the apocalypse would gather. The *Thất Sơn* (Seven Mountains) was the place where the Future Buddha would descend after the world had been purified after the apocalypse. By Huỳnh Phú Sổ's time, it was believed, 'the Low Era was coming to an end, and the Dragon Flower Assembly was about to be opened' (PGHH 1965:71). The Low Era, or *Hạ Ngươn*, was believed by Hoà Hảo adepts to be nearing its end and would be replaced by yet another High Era, or *Thượng Ngươn*, a Golden Age, after the predicted cataclysm. Interestingly, Hoà Hảo followers with whom I spoke further sub-divided each of Three Eras into three consecutive periods — higher, middle and lower. Many Hoà Hảo Buddhists I met pointed out that the present time falls within the Lower period of the Low Era (*Mạt Pháp*). This means the apocalypse (*Tận thế*) is very near and, according to my interlocutors, it is why the majority of Hoà Hảo adepts are urgently practicing good deeds, to accumulate enough merit to allow them to be saved during the apocalypse.

A 90-year-old Hoà Hảo man, whom I met in An Hoà Tự temple at the Holy Land, or *Thánh Địa*, the most sacred Hoà Hảo temple, during the 2016 Vesak Festival, described to me how the apocalypse would happen:

> Natural disasters would happen everywhere. The sky would suddenly get dark. Thunder would echo while fires occur everywhere. The sacred mountain in *Thất Sơn* would explode and quickly collapse. Furthermore, dangerous animals such as tigers or giant snakes would appear to kill the evil and immoral people. No one would be able to help each other, even if they were standing nearby. Masses of Hoà Hảo adherents would march to the Hoà Hảo Holy Land where they believe the Master will re-appear to save adepts from the suffering. Yet, before reaching

the Holy Land, an inter-river island, people would have to cross an angry river called *Vàm Nao*.[11]

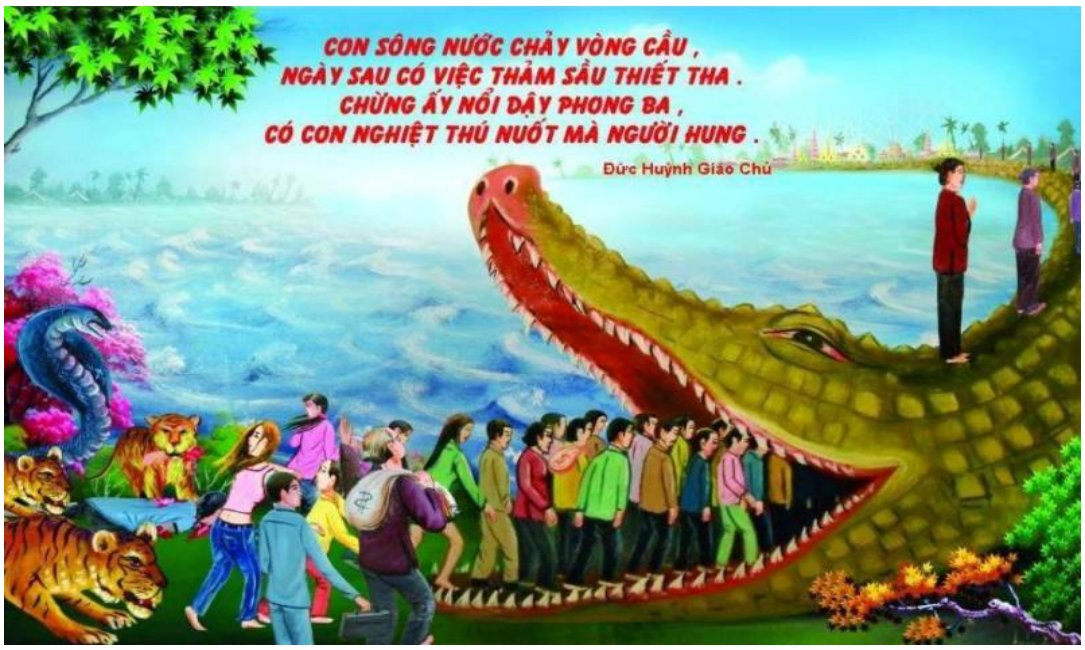

Figure 2.4 The sacred crocodile in the Vàm Nao River.

The old man continued:

> That is not the end of the story. A sacred crocodile, called *Sấu Năm Chèo,* which for centuries has hidden out at the river bottom, would appear, rising up to the river's surface. The back of the sacred crocodile is like a bridge, so people can cross the Vàm Nao river via the crocodile's back to the Hoà Hảo Holy Land. Only those who have performed good deeds in their daily lives could cross the river safely this way. By contrast, immoral people who are greedy, hateful, ignorant and selfish would instead automatically file down into the deep mouth of the huge crocodile. Hence, *Sấu Năm Chèo* prevents these evil people from salvation. The sacred crocodile is seen by many Hoà Hảo Buddhists as one of mechanisms to purify the society during the apocalypse.

[11] The river connects two big branches of the Mekong River, the Tiền and Hậu Rivers, making the current extremely strong. Due to narrowness, that current gets even stronger at the river's bottom. Hoà Hảo villagers living nearby the river state that the powerful current cuts the riverbank from below and makes it much deeper than the rest of the river's bottom. Almost no small riverboats that have gone into the deep river during the flood season have ever made it out with their occupants alive *(Conversation with Dũng, a 37-year-old Hoà Hảo adherent living near the Vàm Nao River, July 2016).*

A younger Hoà Hảo Buddhist, whom I met in an urban charitable rice kitchen, had a particularly vivid sense about the reality of the apocalypse. He anticipated the arrival of the *Mạt Pháp*, or the very end of the Lower Era, quite different from the elderly Hoà Hảo adepts:

> The world will soon come to an end, as you can see an alarming degradation of social values. Moral deterioration happens everywhere. Now, old parents are ignored or treated badly by their own sons or daughters. A spouse might kill his or her partner due to a domestic conflict. Youths easily fight each other to death because of a small issue happening on the street. Moreover, as you can experience, natural disasters, wars, and especially traffic accidents happen every day more frequently. They sometimes claim hundreds, even thousands, of lives in just a moment. The present society is notably insecure. Human life seems to be exposed to a more socially precarious and unstable environment these days. This is obviously a sign of the coming apocalypse, or even that the apocalypse has already come in our lives. Here and now, we should practise self-cultivation and accumulate merit by avoiding any immoral acts, and urgently perform good deeds by assisting the poor to overcome their misfortunes. Helping unfortunate people is something like saving ourselves.

Different from earlier adepts of the BSKH tradition, Hoà Hảo followers have a markedly socio-centric understanding of the origins of crisis and suffering and about how to overcome these conditions. Finding all around them signs of moral deterioration and social disorder, they sense that the apocalypse is imminent. They are aware that their present lives are precarious and vulnerable. However, they seek protection not through a powerful deity, being or prophet, but through their own good deeds.

The prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ himself represents something of a watershed moment between the older BSKH tradition and the modern age. Soon after his enlightenment, he travelled around dispensing miracle cures and earning the reputation of a living Buddha, very much in the mould of the prophets of the BSKH tradition who had preceded him. However, in his teachings he soon came to emphasise the need for followers themselves to take an active role in their own salvation by performing acts of charity. One of the prophet's key innovations was to emphasise that the path to salvation lay through practicing virtue, self-discipline and self-reliance. Another was to discourage the traditional religious habits of making offerings to powerful spiritual beings in order to seek patronage and protection.

These twin emphases can be seen in the doctrine he promulgated of the *Tám Điều Răn Cấm* (Eight Prohibitions). It is loosely modelled on the standard five or eight prohibitions known widely among adherents to Buddhism, but is innovative. Some of the prohibitions emphasise modesty, frugality, temperance and self-discipline, which can be taken as guides for living in an insecure, individualised, monetarised society such as the contemporary Mekong delta, with its inequalities and many social problems (such as described in Biggs 2003 and Brocheux 1995). This group of prohibitions urges followers to live their lives according to a strict moral code. The prohibitions include:

- To avoid social ills and to follow moral rules.
- To abstain from laziness and undue occupations, to practice compassion in daily life.
- To abstain from seeking money, property and fame, not to be egoistical, to lead an exemplary life.
- To abstain from being arrogant, rude and from mentioning heavens, Buddhas, and deities improperly.
- To abstain from thoughtless speech but make well-thought judgements.

The other prohibitions discourage traditional Vietnamese religion's reliance on offerings and sacrifices to the gods. In place of these, the prophet encouraged adepts to display an ethical orientation towards the other members of their society, for instance:

- To abstain from taking life, including domestic animals either as aliments or as offerings because the deities do not accept bribes to forgive sins.
- To abstain from burning golden votive paper since this is a futile waste; the money can be used to assist the poor.
- To love and to encourage one another to practice religion so as to save all living beings.

The Eight Prohibitions encourage Hoà Hảo laity to lead a religious life of appropriate morality and avoid social evils. The Eight Prohibitions outline a path of human perfection, an important element of Hoà Hảo doctrines. The message of the prophet offered a concrete solution for the moral dilemmas of everyday life. In other words, the introduction of the Eight Prohibitions, including detailed practical recommendations, provided Hoà Hảo adherents clear guidance to help them identify their place in society at

large, avoid immoral acts and practice good deeds. These moral precepts aim to transform social realities in a positive direction and reverse the perceived trend of social decline.

It was apparent that the Hoà Hảo followers I met still had deep sense of apocalyptic imminence, as evidenced in the tale of the sacred crocodile *Sấu Năm Chèo.* This tale gives voice to a feeling of fear about not being admitted to the Dragon Flower Assembly after the apocalypse. However, the followers believed they held some power over their own salvation; by doing good deeds and trying to accumulate as much merit as they could, they hoped to be able to save themselves and their ancestors in time for the coming Dragon Flower Assembly. As such, Hoà Hảo Buddhist teachings about the end of the world stimulated a great focus on merit-making. Through the act of giving during the present life, adepts can comfort themselves with a sense of earned safety and transcendence of death. According to the prophet, when people become members of the Buddhist world, they will be able to enjoy happiness in the High Era *Thượng Ngươn* and have the right conditions to continue their self-improvement for the attainment of Buddhist divine positions. It is vital, however, to see that the Hoà Hảo is a kind of religion that earns salvation through doing good deeds. Given the Eight Prohibitions, the only acceptable form of expressing their religion is through doing charity. That also explains why the Hoà Hảo adepts focus on charity far more than the ritual, sacrificial and magical practices commonly associated with traditional Vietnamese religions.

2.2.3 The obligation of repaying the Four Debts

The concept of *Tứ Ân,* or literally, *Tứ Đại Trọng Ân* (Four Debts of Gratitude), emerged as a nexus around which the ideology of Hòa Hảo Buddhist charity evolved. According to the prophet's teachings, to practice Buddhism for self-cultivation, a Hoà Hảo layperson must, first of all, do his or her best to comply with the Four Debts of Gratitude. Indeed, the concept is the continuation of the Buddhist teachings of the Buddha Master and Ngô Lợi, for whom the Four Debts of Gratitude included gratitude to ancestors, all living creatures, the Kings and the Three Jewels — Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. When establishing Hoà Hảo Buddhism, prophet Huỳnh added to these fundamentals a strong emphasis on society and people's social identities, including gratitude to parents and ancestors, gratitude to the Three Treasures, gratitude to the nation, and gratitude to fellow countrymen and mankind. The prophet illustrated that one had to adopt an attitude of being part of society, living with and rendering service to fellowmen. The Four Debts of

Gratitude became the basic philosophy and concrete direction that called on Hòa Hảo adepts to act accordingly morally (Nguyen Long Thanh Nam 2003).

According to a Hoà Hảo preacher whom I met at the Hoà Hảo central temple during the sect's Foundation Day in 2016, the strong emphases of the Hoà Hảo doctrine on humanity and humanitarian relief initially came from the response to a natural disaster that happened at the time the sect was established. He told me that in 1938 the western Mekong delta suffered an abnormally big flood that destroyed almost all rice crops in the region. People did not have enough to eat and most houses in the delta were destroyed. One year later, the year of the Cat (*Kỷ Mão*) *1939*,[12] when prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ founded Hoà Hảo Buddhism, another big flood came to the region. It swept away almost everything. Thus, the prophet, in his first preaching, called followers to share food, clothes and love with the victims. He emphasised that the act of giving could be considered a means to improve oneself, because human greed and selfishness would be quenched through charitable practices. Humanity and humanitarian relief became the core values in the prophet's teachings, which resulted in an emphasis on paying 'the debts to the fellowmen and mankind' in the Four Debts, or *Tứ Ân*, doctrine (Conversation with preacher Chí Thiện, May 2016).

In the small book *Tôn chỉ hành đạo* (The Ways of Practicing Religion in the Everyday Life of an Adherent), the prophet explained that:

> At the very moment we were born we had to depend on the people around us. When we grew up more, we had to depend more on others. We could survive thanks to the rice they planted; we were warm thanks to the clothes they gave. We were protected from winds and storms thanks to the house they built. Thus, we should share happiness as well as suffering with the people around us. We are of the same skin colour and we speak the same language. They are our fellow countrymen. We could together make up what we called our Fatherland (*Đất nước*) (PGHH 2015:19–23).

[12] *'Mắt nhìn Kỷ Mão vừa qua,*
Gẫm trong thiên hạ nhiều nhà thiếu cơm' (PGHH 1966:323)

Therefore, he advised that each person had to be grateful to the surrounding people who assisted him or her in times of misfortune, regardless of their skin colour, race and background according to the spirit of mercifulness and altruism (ibid.).

The Hoà Hảo prophet also modified a second of the four basic *Tứ Ân* injunctions, the need to repay one's debt to the King, replacing it with the idea that each person was required to repay their debt to the 'nation' (*Đất nước*) or 'homeland/country' (*Quê hương*). He stressed that each person had to be grateful to their own country since it was where they and their ancestors had been brought up and where they had learned traditional habits and customs. Each person had to contribute to the development of their country depending on their own ability. Even though Hoà Hảo Buddhists acted in accordance with Buddhist doctrine, some of their best-known activities, particularly the sect's mobilisation of armed resistance against French domination in the 1940s, can be viewed in light of the injunction to repay one's debt to the nation. According to one former Hoà Hảo leader, for most Hoà Hảo adepts, participation in the resistance was a logical act to express one's love towards the Fatherland (Nguyen Long Thanh Nam 2003:51).

The third of the *Tứ Ân* debts is that humans should be 'grateful to the Three Treasures' for their merit in enlightening mankind and saving them from suffering. The Three Treasures are the three fundamental objects of worship in Buddhism, namely, Buddha, Dharma and Sangha – in which the Sangha refers to the monastic community. The prophet taught that man was born and brought up by his parents and ancestors, but the nation makes a life for him. Thus, he owes his existence to his country. That was the physical aspect of life. In the spiritual aspect, he needed the help of Buddha, the Buddhist teachings and the Buddhist monks to enlighten his mind. Buddha is most perfect creature who is infinitely altruistic and determined to save living creatures from misfortune and suffering. The monks are Buddha's great disciples who convey Buddhist teachings to people. Thus, each person is under obligation to follow the respectable predecessors' examples for self-improvement and salvation (PGHH 1966:180–81).

The last but not least important debt is that Hoà Hảo followers are obliged to repay is the debt to parents and ancestors. This illustrates a markedly Confucian core element of the BSKH tradition's *Tứ ân* value system[13]. The Hoà Hảo prophet taught that man was born

[13] It is also true that the debt to parents and ancestors is a key part of the *Ullambana* Sutra and is celebrated during the *Vu Lan Festival* on the 15th day of the 7th month of the lunar calendar, to remember the deceased ancestors as well as living parents. This occasion is also a reminder to honour one's parents for the good

and raised by his or her parents, and their parents were born and raised by their grandparents and ancestors. Therefore, all should be thankful to the parents and ancestors. People have the responsibility of repaying their parents and ancestors. To do so, they should follow their parents' right words and take good care of them when they were sick or old. To repay the debt to ancestors, they must not act in any way that is harmful to their family's reputation. If the parents or ancestors made any mistakes that might cause their descendants to suffer, the descendants should commit themselves to act in compliance with the moral principles to restore their ancestors' honour (ibid.).

The teachings of the Hoà Hảo prophet had a significant contribution to the modernity of Buddhism. In fact, differing from former Buddhist teachers, prophet Huỳnh used simple language, easily understood by a predominantly peasant society, to inspire and encourage people to practice moral actions for future salvation. Millions of peasants could easily access his philosophy. Furthermore, he found a way to upgrade the relevant tradition to address the social disparities, moral crisis and anomie of the mid-20th century Mekong delta. Indeed, the Hoà Hảo sect might be seen as a socially engaged religion because of its highly developed and holistic vision of the multiple webs of social relations in which each person is suspended. These relations are held to give life to people and constitute them as persons, and this reality demands ethical action from each person in the form of reciprocation, or the paying of debts. The prophet paid special attention to the debts of fellowmen (*Đồng bào*) and mankind (*Nhân loại*) when the Mekong delta peasants were suffering from natural disasters in 1938 and 1939. In the 1940s when the country was very unstable under the dual French and Japanese administration (Bourdeaux 2003) and the communist challenge, he emphasised the debt to the nation (*Đất nước*). In essence, the prophet's ideology seems to find as much kinship with Confucianism, which concentrates on the debts to nation and family, as with Buddhism, whose sacred practitioners leave the community and family, or *Xuất thế,* their whole life. Hoà Hảo Buddhist doctrine combines worldly aspects of Confucianism with renunciatory aspects of Buddhism, by enjoining that all should strive to become monks for life, in service of humanity, but to do so at home while supporting themselves, rather than turning into a caste of specialists permanently dependent on the community' (Taylor 2001:346).

In summary, Hoà Hảo Buddhism could be viewed as a 'socially engaged religion' since the prophet and his followers have strongly emphasised how to materialise the unique

deeds they have performed on behalf of their children, and to remember one's responsibilities as children *(https://www.buddhistdoor.net/news/vietnamese-buddhists-honor-parents-in-vu-lan-festival).*

cosmology into practices to build a secure and moral society through acts of giving. This review has shown that the ideology of Hoà Hảo Buddhism is not limited within the framework of mainstream Buddhism, but also includes elements of Confucianism and other indigenous creeds. It also incorporates a strong sense of Vietnamese national identity and patrotism. This could explain why Hoà Hảo Buddhism underwent a successful adaptation to rural settings, particularly becoming a major spiritual force among rural peasants in the western Mekong delta, although the sect was repressed by different secular states, which I will discuss in the next sections.

2.3 Learning to cooperate with the State

Originally concerned only with religious autonomy, in 1945 the Hoà Hảo started to organise armed forces and became a significant nationalist anti-French movement. Hoà Hảo cooperated with the nationalists of the communist-led Việt Minh to fight against the French. During World War II, the Hoà Hảo sect accepted Japanese support as a means to strengthen itself to defeat the French. During this period, the Hoà Hảo strongly maintained their religion and hold over the large territory of the Mekong delta. Unfortunately, a tragedy occurred on 15th April 1947 when the Hoà Hảo prophet was reportedly assassinated by the Việt Minh, causing the struggle of Hoà Hảo sect with the communists to become a fanatical religious war. After April 1947, the Hoà Hảo joined with the French colonialists to combat the Việt Minh as they believed that the latter were trying to implement a totalitarian communist regime in southern Vietnam. It is notable that the Hoà Hảo sect's temporary alliances with past enemies like the communists and the French were formed primarily as a means of survival and to gain strength for the future. According to one Hoà Hảo scholar's perspective, the ultimate goal of the Hoà Hảo movement was always 'to control its own destiny without interference from any outside source' (Nguyen Long Thanh Nam 2003).

Most scholars and commentators who have studied the Hoà Hảo believe that the sect underwent a dark history during the repression of Ngô Đình Diệm (1954–1963), who supplanted the Hoà Hảo politico-religious organisation as the greatest enemy of the communists. In fact, during Diệm's regime, the Hoà Hảo sect was discriminated against in all areas of the Mekong delta (Nguyen Long Thanh Nam 2003:136). Diệm's government tried to draw 'dissident' leaders away from the main forces in hope of weakening politico-religious armies of the Hoà Hảo sect as a whole. By the end of the crisis, Hoà Hảo factions had split between those who rallied to the national army and

those who continued to oppose Ngô Đình Diệm's regime. General Nguyễn Giác Ngộ joined the national army in March 1955. Other Hoà Hảo leaders, including Trần Văn Soái, or *Năm Lửa (Five Fires),* and Lê Quang Vinh, or *Ba Cụt (Third Cut Finger)*, continued to stage armed resistance against Ngô Đình Diệm and the national army in southwest Vietnam. In May 1955, Ngô Đình Diệm launched the brutal *Nguyễn Huệ* operation against the remaining Hoà Hảo politico-religious armies. The most significant Hoà Hảo armed leader, *Ba Cụt*, was ordered to be beheaded by Diệm in 1956 (Chapman 2013). Furthermore, in May 1959 Diệm's government issued the notorious Decree Number 10,[14] or *Dụ số 10*, which was seen to promote inequality among religions (Nguyen Long Thanh Nam 2003:135). Therefore, by the end of the 1950s, Ngô Đình Diệm was successful in disbanding all remnants of the Hoà Hảo army and breaking up its leadership, imprisoning or executing some, forcing others into exile and neutralising the remainder (Zasloff 1962:333). Under this circumstance, the Hoà Hảo local self-government committees, or *Ban Trị Sự*, kept a low profile and their overt activities virtually came to a halt (Nguyen Long Thanh Nam 2003:135).

Since the Hoà Hảo's organisation had been decimated and the autonomy of its followers supressed, any opportunity for the Hoà Hảo charitable movement to develop under the reign of Ngô Đình Diệm was significantly restrained. Although Hoà Hảo followers were still involved in some small charitable activities such as building houses for the homeless, giving aid to the victims of natural disasters and war and funding funeral rites for the destitute, similar to the act of giving during Huỳnh Phú Sổ's time (1939–1947), these charitable activities among Hoà Hảo communities were typically spontaneous, scattered in small scale and within no organisation (Conversation with a Hoà Hảo preacher in the Holy Land, August 2016).

Owing to these factors, it is often pointed out that members of the Hoà Hảo sect had an antagonistic relationship with the post-colonial state in South Vietnam. However, it was during the Ngô Đình Diệm regime that most Hoà Hảo adherents had their first experience of public service, of working, as citizens, for and with the state rather than resisting or avoiding the state. Since late 1959, Ngô Đình Diệm had operated a large-scale rural

[14] According to the Decree, all religions in South Vietnam except Catholicism were viewed as associations and thus were allowed to operate only as such. Furthermore, *Article 7* of the Decree empowered the authorities to ban all activities of Hoà Hảo Buddhism. The government allowed to assign officials to exercise direct control over the Hoà Hảo congregation or to seize the property of the religious communities (Nguyen Long Thanh Nam 2003).

resettlement in South Vietnam through the development of agrovilles, or Khu trù mật.[15] It was expected that the newly-created centres would group the rural population beside major roads and arteries of communication along which the security forces could move more easily to provide protection and surveillance. Many Hoà Hảo Buddhists engaged in this so-called 'nation-building program' propagated by Ngô Đình Diệm. This movement could be seen as the first large-scale construction engagement of Hoà Hảo Buddhists under state supervision since the Hoà Hảo were founded in 1939.

Besides the record of Zasloff (1963) about the agroville construction at Tân Lược village of Vĩnh Long province, there are not many published works available regarding Hoà Hảo Buddhists' engagement in their construction. However, valuable information is contained in a narrative from a Hoà Hảo elder I met in Vĩnh Trạch commune (formerly Ba Bần village), Uncle Thuận, who was directly involved in the road construction as a team manager. He told me that a significant segment of Hoà Hảo adepts in Vĩnh Trạch, some hundreds of villagers, was forced to engage in digging a canal and building a road leading to Ba Thê Agroville, or Khu trù mật Ba Thê[16] in 1961. The new strategic route connected the capital of Long Xuyên to Ba Thê Agroville, passing Ba Bần village, a predominantly Hoà Hảo Buddhist area. Thus, for this the labours of local peasants, particularly Hoà Hảo Buddhists, were required along the canal and road. Uncle Thuận recalled:

> As part of the Ba Thê Agroville project, almost all villagers of working age were collectively mobilised by the state to build the village road system. Road building required numerous labourers. Several teams were organised to carry out different tasks. Digging the canal and ditch along the road, the most difficult task, was done by groups of young men. Other work teams, including middle-aged men and women, pounded the earth along the side of the canal and ditch to form the road. Each group of Hoà Hảo households was scheduled to complete a certain length of road in front of their houses and home gardens. Thus, villagers were formed into different hamlet teams or neighbourhood groups, each of which was given a quota of work to be done in the time allocated. Tasks usually required up to ten days or two weeks. The construction supervisors were state officers from Long Xuyên or

[15] Peasants in small villages or isolated areas were forced to relocate to populated areas under government control. Diem's government stated that the newly-created agrovilles, which provided electricity, schools, maternity clinics and medical and social service facilities, would provide a framework for social and economic development of the rural areas. However, it is argued that the further purpose of the agrovilles was to strengthen internal security rather than to foster social and economic development (Zasloff 1962).

[16] On 16 April 1961, Ngô Đình Diệm inaugurated a newly innovated and improved canal at the *Ba Thê* Agroville in An Giang province.

from Sài Gòn; however, most leaders of hamlet teams or sub-groups were Hoà Hảo Buddhists who were well-educated or used to work in Hoà Hảo local committees.

He continued:

That was the first time we were working together in such a big team. The amount of work was huge, so different groups had to cooperate with each other to undertake the construction. If other teams could finish their quota earlier in the day, they would come to help us. On following days, our team members would come to assist the group if they needed extra help. Sometimes, some small groups lacked young labourers because several householders in a hamlet were elderly or the majority of family members were female. In this case, young workmen from other groups or hamlets would join this group to meet the labour demand. The elderly men would carry our light jobs such as cleaning the tools or tidying up the area after working days, while the females, especially Hoà Hảo Buddhists, joined the catering and kitchen groups to serve food and drinking water to the workmen. This mutual labour exchange and labour division was well organised, so it helped the construction work finish more quickly.

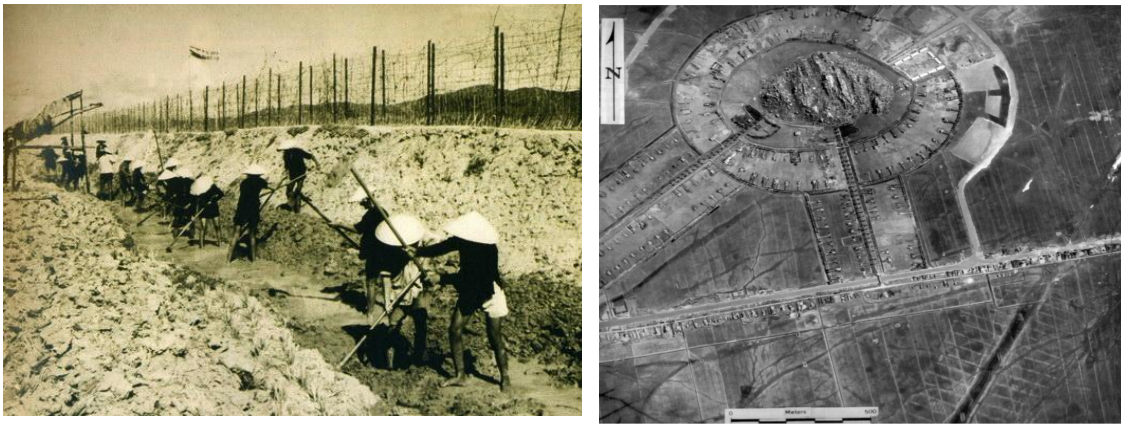

Figure 2.5 The construction of an agroville in An Giang province during 1960s.

Sources: Biggs 2009:151; www.gactholoc.com

Uncle Thuận emphasised that what he personally learned from the state supervisors was that after each working day they came along the road to check whether the work had been done by the groups. They checked the width and the height of the road. They also evaluated the concrete structure of the road surface. If the construction did not meet the standard requirement, the supervisor would raise their concern about the issue with Hoà

Hảo team leaders, so team members could fix it in the following day. But he had criticisms of the program:

> It was forced collective work. The local people had a feeling of being captured by the state and forced to dig canals and raise roads (*Bị bắt đi đào kênh, đắp đường*) while Diệm's government euphemistically referred to it as 'community development', *cộng đồng phát triển*. At the beginning, most people complained that this was not voluntary work. The peasants were not remunerated for their labours on the canals and roads that were built for the agroville. Villagers did not enthusiastically participate in the agroville scheme because they believed that the drafted labour of Hoà Hảo Buddhists on programs such as the road-building project was being used for military installation and political purposes, since the agrovilles were typically constructed in areas of great insecurity, subject to attacks by the communist-led guerrillas. Indeed, in the predominantly Hoà Hảo villages like Vĩnh Trạch where Hoà Hảo accounted for over 70 per cent of the population, Việt Minh communist activity was especially weak. Without support from Hoà Hảo adherents, it was impossible for the Việt Minh to enter the village for collecting food and taxes, gathering information or recruitment. It should be pointed out that thousands of Hoà Hảo had been mobilised in conditions of hardship in order to construct the agroville, which tired the people, lost their affection and increased their resentment. Obviously, local peasants and Hoà Hảo adherents in particular disliked the program because they were forced to do what they did not wish to do.

Despite people's disenchantment with being used as corvee labour, Thuận observed that many Hoà Hảo participants also became convinced that their involvement was positive:

> Later, we felt that Ngô Đình Diệm consistently used labourers from the Hoà Hảo population for nation-building projects such as canal digging and road building for the agroville. The program was designed to provide economic and social development through a new form of rural organisation. The villagers were convinced that we were benefitting from the nation-building process, reasoning that, although this was a strategic road leading to *Khu trù mật Ba Thê (Ba Thê Agroville*), it was also used by villagers. I still remember that the first person to drive a bicycle on the newly constructed road was Brother Tư Tuần, now the principle manager of the Hoà Hảo charitable rice kitchen of Vĩnh Trạch Village.

> Three months after the road was constructed, president Ngô Đình Diệm made his first visit to *Ba Thê* Agroville, passing this strategic road. After the trip, local authorities informed Vĩnh Trạch villagers that the president was happy with the quality of the road.

The findings emphasise that under Ngô Đình Diệm's regime, the Hoà Hảo Buddhist community did not have much freedom to undertake their charitable work in the countryside. However, through their work with the state authorities on the agroville program, Hoà Hảo Buddhists started to learn how to take part in infrastructure construction requiring a high level of cooperation. They gained the capacity to carry out complex, large and cooperative public works. They were also transformed from sectarians into national citizens. Taking part in road-building works, I would suggest, they gained the cognitive and practical capacity to interact with the government, with fellow citizens and with the mainstream culture. There, they learnt through practical immersion something of the standards, processes and techniques of a modern society. This could be seen as the first constructive engagement of Hoà Hảo Buddhists with the state. This first experience of 'being mobilised' by the state for infrastructure development during the Ngô Đình Diệm period was an important step for Hoà Hảo adherents later to be involved in an autonomous process of 'self-mobilisation', enabling them to undertake large-scale and complex charitable activities.

2.4 Self-mobilised charity under Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's government

After the collapse of Ngô Đình Diệm's regime in November 1963, the Hoà Hảo religion was immediately revitalised. "The feelings of oppression and restrictions lasting nine years under Diệm's regime suddenly disappeared. Hoà Hảo adherents prioritised a movement toward the revival of their religious life while revitalising political activities remained a second priority. At the end of 1963, the Hoà Hảo community held a preparatory congress in Hoà Hảo village to formally institute themselves as a religious association or 'church', *Giáo hội*. The revitalisation of community life commenced with the election of dignitaries to the association at the grassroots level. Subsequently, Hoà Hảo associations at the district and province levels were formed." (Conversation with a former Hoà Hảo leader in *Phú Tân*, the Holy Land, 20th July 2016).

This former Hoà Hảo leader also noted that in 1964, Hoà Hảo followers elected a Central Administrative Committee (*Ban Trị Sự Trung Ương*) and in various provinces completed the formation of a hierarchical associational structure from hamlet to provincial levels.

Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's government officially recognised the Hoà Hảo sect as a religious congregation (*Giáo hội*) in 1965. During this period, the Hoà Hảo had major concentrations of followers in the provinces of Châu Đốc, An Giang and Kiến Phong, and lesser concentrations in Kiên Giang, Vĩnh Long, Phong Dinh, Chương Thiện, Bạc Liêu, Ba Xuyên and Kiến Tường. The Hoà Hảo population formed a belt across the Mekong delta, from the Cambodian border to the East Sea, including most of the southernmost portion of South Vietnam with the exception of the extreme southern province of An Xuyên, the main base of the communist Việt Minh. Thereafter, the majority of Hoà Hảo charitable activities were organised in these predominately Hoà Hảo locales.

The demise of the Ngô Đình Diệm's regime signified a new period of Hoà Hảo charity in the Mekong delta. When the Hoà Hảo religion re-emerged, so too did its social work, along with its support for community development. An elderly Hoà Hảo leader responsible for Hoà Hảo charitable activities, whom I met at the office of the Central Administrative Committee, told me that this period was considered a golden age of Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity. In fact, most charitable activities and social works in predominantly Hoà Hảo provinces were well-organised. Each charitable activity and social work were designed to target the specific needs of ordinary people. For instance, the Hoà Hảo Construction Board (*Ban Xây Cất)* was put in charge of constructing community infrastructure and building housing for poor families. Hoà Hảo construction groups usually had an abundant workforce, so the construction was undertaken almost exclusively by volunteers. Additionally, Local Mutual Assistance Boards (*Ban Chẩn Tế*) were established to carry out other social, charitable activities, including the provision of stocks of food, medicines and clothes to assist victims of natural disasters or wartime refugees. These boards also helped poor families to perform appropriate funeral rites (ibid.).

The charitable activities of the Hoà Hảo movement during this period were highlighted by Nguyen Long Thanh Nam (2003) and in the sect's journal - *the Torch of Compassion - Tập San Đuốc Từ Bi*, published from 1964–1967. For instance, the free rice kitchens in the Hoà Hảo Central Temple, or Holy Land, in Hoà Hảo Village were organised on a large scale to feed pilgrims visiting the Holy Land on the occasion of major annual ceremonies. This pattern of social work allowed for a high level of efficiency that proved capable of feeding hundreds of thousands of visitors during these festivals (Nguyen Long Thanh Nam 2003:139). The Mutual Assistance Boards also offered relief for victims of

floods[17] and fires *(nạn nhân lũ lụt, hoả hoạn)*, veterans and wounded soldiers *(thương phế binh),* widows and orphans[18] *(cô nhi quả phụ)* and poor families[19]. According to some elderly Hoà Hảo, although the Hoà Hảo community's social activities usually lacked funding, the social work of Hoà Hảo Buddhists brought concrete results to the community.

During Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's government, the Hoà Hảo religion became more formalised, with more autonomy granted for associational life and organised social action; hence, its charitable activities also flourished. However, during this period, people were again suffering from deadly military action, particularly the 1968 Tết Offensive, which claimed many thousands of lives. Immediately after the Offensive, President Thiệu established a National Recovery Committee to oversee food distribution, resettlement and housing construction for the new refugees and victims of the war. The followers of Hoà Hảo Buddhism professed confidence to engage in the plans of the president. They showed a high capacity to self-mobilise to respond to crisis. Sixty-eight-year-old female Hoà Hảo Buddhist, Ms. Hoà, who was working at the Hoà Hảo Central Administrative Committee when I met her, told me a story about how local Hoà Hảo Mutual Assistance Boards organised charitable activities to help the victims of the *Tết Mậu Thân* Offensive in 1968.[20] She recalled:

> It was so sad; dead bodies were scattered everywhere, from the fields to the central town. People buried the bodies in collective graves. Most of the houses were burnt or destroyed. Children lost their parents while wives lost husbands to become widows. The sound of crying could be heard from a distance. At that moment, people saw this deadly tragedy like an apocalypse. After the event, we had time to look closely at the prophecy written by Master Huỳnh and so realised that he had

[17] On 14 November 1964, they organised charity to help flood victims of the central coast of Vietnam (*Miền Trung*). On 30 November 1964, the Hoà Hảo Central Administrative Committee sent a petition letter to the central government to get 10,000 children who lost their parents during the flood event in Miền Trung, in order to raise them as adopted sons and daughters (*Đuốc Từ Bi* 1964).

[18] On 16 January 1966, the Mutual Assistance Board at An Giang province gave 1,000 gifts to the veterans, widows and orphans. It was estimated there were 20,000 Hoà Hảo soldiers, together with over 10,000 wounded soldiers, widows and orphans after 20 years of fighting (*Đuốc Từ Bi* 1966).

[19] On 23 April 1967, the Mutual Assistance Board at Long An and Định Tường provinces distributed 10 tonnes of rice and 20 bags of clothes for 500 poor families (*Đuốc Từ Bi* 1967).

[20] The *Tết Mậu Thân* Offensive of 1968 was one of the largest military campaigns of the Vietnam War, launched on 30 January 1968, by the communists against the South Vietnamese regime. In the aftermath of *Tết*, more than 70,000 homes had been burned and the nation's infrastructure had been virtually destroyed. Close to 25,000 South Vietnamese civilians were killed, with an additional 24,000 wounded and almost half a million living in camps under government care (Dougan and Weiss 1983).

foreseen the tragedy of the *Tết Mậu Thân* Offensive in one of his teaching books. Since then, Hoà Hảo followers strongly believed what the Master had prophesised about the coming end of the world, so all adepts should urgently take part in the act of giving and helping the misfortunate.

She continued:

> Right after the Offensive, the Hoà Hảo Mutual Assistance Board had a meeting with different government and non-government organisations on how to mobilise 'physical and spiritual aids' to help the victims. Then, each autonomous organisation had its own plan to organise the charitable activities based on its capability of self-mobilisation. Sometimes, a single organisation could coordinate with other charitable units to facilitate the charitable activities on a larger scale. For instance, the district Education Department cooperated with the Department of Health to call for contributions among their staff and people near the areas. I joined a group of primary school teachers, followed by a group of nearly a hundred students and led by the principal, heading to the Hoà Hảo holy temple. Our group was moving along the street with bicycle-pulled wagons to collect white rice, clothes, blankets and money from donors.
>
> With a loudspeaker, the principal started reading Vietnamese poetry and chanting the Sấm Giảng prophecy, which exhorts love, compassion and humanity towards the misfortunate and victims of the war, *"When the blood is shed, the heart aches. Our fellowmen are suffering."* The voice of the principal was so emotional that it provoked the humanity of thousands of Hoà Hảo laymen standing alongside the road. Most people cried. I was not an exception, although I did not know much about the Sấm Giảng prophecy given I was only nineteen at that time.

Ms Hoà told me that villagers gave away whatever they had prepared to the charitable group, be it a bag of rice, a cupped hand of salt, a sum of money or even a blanket. They were ready to share with the misfortunates who were suffering from the war, even though they did not have much to give. On the following days, members of the Mutual Assistance Board quickly sorted out what people donated. They classified the donated in-kind gifts, packaged them, then transported them to Cao Lãnh town of Đồng Tháp (formerly Kiến Phong province, a heavily damaged area after the *Tết* Offensive) to distribute to the local victims.

In summary, during the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu government (1964–1975), Hoà Hảo charitable activities blossomed thanks to the restoration of associational freedom and the establishment of the Hoà Hảo church. With the preliminary experiences learned from the construction of agrovilles under Diệm's government, Hoà Hảo followers displayed a capacity to engage in co-ordinated charitable and community development activities, which over time were organised in a more autonomous, complex and large-scale fashion. This indicates that Hoà Hảo Buddhists had an ability to apply their religious philosophy to address new and unexpected situations and adapt it to new social and political contexts. They learned how to cooperate with an authoritarian military regime in humanitarian relief and nation-building programs. Hoà Hảo Buddhists in this period also demonstrated an ability to revive and formally establish the tradition founded by their prophet. They were able to apply and transmit their unique ethical and religious worldview, combining local tradition with modern institutions and standards. At the same time, they were able to preserve their religious identity and independence. This could explain why Hoà Hảo Buddhists continued to maintain their religious hold over the western territory of the Mekong delta although the Sài Gòn regimes of the post-colonial period were less than keen to promote the robust development of the Hoà Hảo movement.

2. 5 Learning to adapt to the communist secular state

2. 5.1 The hot-water cauldron behind the urban hospital wall

On 2 May 1975, the Vietnam People's Army took over the Hoà Hảo Holy Land and the last Hoà Hảo armed forces were captured on 6 May. Soon after, on 19 June, the Ancestral Temple, or *Tổ Đình*, issued a declaration that approved the dissolution of Hoà Hảo institutions. All properties belonging to the Hoà Hảo Buddhist Association were confiscated and deemed state property. The new regime also abolished the Hoà Hảo management structure and banned its major celebrations, including the sect's Foundation Day Festival. After 1975, Hoà Hảo Buddhists were not allowed to congregate in numbers or carry out any collective activities (Nguyen Long Thanh Nam 2003). With Hoà Hảo Buddhism thus dissolved institutionally as a religion, its religious and charitable activities also were severely curtailed. Under this hardship, Hoà Hảo adepts tried, in keeping with their religious ideology, to continue to help the poor, however, all of their charitable acts at that time were conducted individually and on a minimal scale.

Soon after unifying the nation in 1975, the socialist government tried to 'modernise' the country by stripping the traditional social order of its sacred character. The Hoà Hảo sect

was considered a superstitious, heterodox practice and blamed for wasting the resources of people who should turn their attention to nation building. The new regime ordered the dissolution of the entire Hoà Hảo Buddhist church and considered the Hoà Hảo sect in the category of 'reactionary groups with some religious trappings' (Blagov 2001), likely because they were unable to absorb the Hoà Hảo adherents into their ideology (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983). Administrative offices at all levels, temples and communal places of worship and cultural institutions connected to Hoà Hảo Buddhism were closed, thereby limiting public rites and religious festivals (Nguyen Long Thanh Nam 2003). Some Hoà Hảo elders told me that people were not allowed to chant the Sấm Giảng prophecy or practice any religious rituals at temples. They could only do so at home. Villagers usually closed the doors of their houses early in order to observe their prayers in private. It seemed that every time two Hoà Hảo Buddhists met they were observed by hamlet security. Most neighbourhood preaching halls at that time became hamlet offices. Hoà Hảo temples were used as storage houses for rice, and at least four or five general security men were posted to each. Gatherings of as few as two or three Hoà Hảo persons were banned if they involved any religious activities or social work. No autonomous collective acts of ritual, altruism or community work were permitted.

From the mid-1970s until the late 1990s, religious life in Hoà Hảo communities continued to be led along simple lines. However, that does not mean the Hoà Hảo Buddhist charitable movement was completely inactive during this period. According to an elderly Hoà Hảo who used to be involved in charitable house building in Đồng Tháp province before 1999, most Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity occurring in this period was based in rural communities that were dominated by a Hoà Hảo population. Charitable activities at that time were mostly undertaken on a small scale and were informally organised. But they were able to help the needy on a case-by-case basis. In spite of some troubles they might have had from local authorities, Hoà Hảo adepts offered relief for victims of fires and floods, the lonely elderly, and the sick and orphans. The givers did not openly name themselves as a Hoà Hảo Buddhists when giving the charitable gifts to the misfortunate. They usually explained to local authorities that they were helping their near neighbours or close relatives to overcome hardship or traumas.[21]

[21] *Conversation with Uncle Lâm at Nguyễn Trung Trực Temple in Long Kiến village of Chợ Mới, 9 June 2018.*

Vietnam's political, social and cultural landscape was significantly transformed after the promulgation of liberal economic reform in 1986 and increasing openness to the world market in the early 1990s. These developments brought many benefits to people across the whole country, including to a number of Hoà Hảo people in urban areas who gained success in the market economy of the early 1990s by engaging in trade and other occupations. A number of these Hoà Hảo urban elites could be seen as pioneers who managed to adapt themselves to and work with the state system in order to organise large-scale charity in urban settings under the strict observation of local communist state authorities. This brings us back to the scene that opened this chapter: the Hòa Hảo volunteers who operated the first charitable kitchen in An Giang province in the post-war period, in the province's main public hospital.

The charitable kitchen was opened in 1991 by a group of urban elites including ex-regime war veterans, retired businessmen, former-government cadres and retired doctors. Due to the severe restrictions imposed by the authorities, the charitable group was small and informally organised, comprising only four members, who themselves personally engaged in practical care activities on a daily basis. The group decided to launch its charitable activities at the An Giang General Hospital to benefit the hospital's patients.

Elderly people living near the hospital recalled to me how, 25 years ago, a group of old men would gather each morning, as early as 4:00am, outside the wall of the hospital grounds to light firewood to boil a large cauldron of water. 'The warm water was expected to be ready in time for the first patients, arriving as soon as the hospital security guards opened the gates at 5:00am,' a resident remembered.

Uncle Ba Lăng, now manager of the hospital's charitable rice kitchen, was a member of this group of elderly men. He explained how the group provided a direct and immediate response to the needs of patients in the urban hospital:

> The first initiative of the group was to provide hot water for poor patients. We undertook our charitable work in a small tent built behind a wall near the main gate of the hospital. We believed that only very simple social work, like giving free water to the poor, was certain to be allowed by the local authorities. To do even this basic charity, we four members pooled our resources, since people around hesitated to contribute to the kitchen due to the political circumstance at that time. In fact, to maintain the pot of boiling water, distributed to nearly 600 patients a day, we needed a large amount of wood. People around us were

> generally kind-hearted, but they hesitated to give wood to us. The urban rich people, especially merchants, wanted to contribute money to the charitable group. However, they hesitated too since they feared getting in trouble from local authorities. Members each had to collect stumps of dead bamboo in the urban periphery, one by one, then move them to the hospital by a trolley. It was a hard job. All four members were over 60 years old. No young people participated in the first days of the kitchen's establishment. I also sent a request to the director of the hospital to allow the charitable group to build a small kitchen within the hospital campus, out of the way, in the corner. This would help very much in delivering services to poor patients who might find it hard to leave the hospital grounds. Unfortunately, our request was not approved. Thus, we built a small kitchen behind the hospital wall, right on the sidewalk.

Ba Lăng recalled that after nearly one year operating the hot-water cauldron, group members experienced that the authorities did not make any challenge to the kitchen. The authorities observed the charitable activity of the kitchen, however, they seemed to ignore it, potentially because they knew efforts of the group were all about helping poor patients. Then, group members decided to add one more activity to the charitable list. That was to give each patient a bowl of vegetarian rice porridge for breakfast, serving them one after another, along with a bottle of warm water. The crowd that gathered around the porridge dispensary attracted the attention of kind donors who were traders and businessmen in the Long Xuyên market. The donors started providing white rice, mushrooms and cooking ingredients to the kitchen. Some middle-age men and women voluntarily participated in the kitchen team. Ba Lăng continued:

> The help was offered only to patients of disadvantaged background in the early days after the group's inception, but it was later extended to all people receiving medical treatment at the hospital, the relatives who tended them and even the hospital security guards and cleaning staff. Since then, the kitchen has been restructured to meet the high demand of a large number of patients every day. Businesspeople and donors became more confident to contribute resources to the kitchen. The kitchen members worked in subgroups that took turns cooking food at the infirmary after rising early in the morning to travel multiple kilometres from their homes.

Once the activities of the kitchen had expanded, more patients came to ask for food. Sometimes the number of patients per day seeking assistance went up to nearly a thousand. The kitchen decided to send another petition to the hospital director and the chair of the provincial Red Cross. They agreed the group could operate a charitable kitchen inside the hospital campus on the condition that the chairman of the Red Cross organisation be named as the head of the kitchen. Furthermore, they suggested that the kitchen be regulated under the provincial Red Cross and that Ba Lăng become the deputy manager of the charitable rice kitchen. After eight years of effort, the approval was finally signed in early 1999. The free kitchen, with its basic administrative structure, was officially considered the first Hòa Hảo charitable hospital kitchen in South Vietnam in the post-war period.

2.5.2 The return of Hoà Hảo charity in a restricted environment

Throughout the 1990s, Hoà Hảo associational life and charitable activities remained severely restricted, but there were exceptions. One of the impressive charitable activities during this time was collectively organised by Hoà Hảo Buddhists to help victims of a natural disaster in Kiên Giang province. Aunt Xuân Hoa, an elderly Hoà Hảo volunteer formerly working at a nursing home centre for old people and orphans in Long Xuyên, recalled the severe Category 5 tropical storm named Linda that hit the western Mekong delta in 1997.[22] It was the worst typhoon in southern Vietnam in over a century, claiming thousands of lives, mostly fishermen, and leaving extensive damage to the infrastructure of coastal communities. Many countries around the world sent relief aid, including medical teams, food and clothing to the damaged areas. Right after the disaster, Xuân Hoa joined a charitable group organised by a Hoà Hảo adept from the Holy Land. The group members had collected money, rice, noodles, clothes and blankets from local merchants in the city of Long Xuyên. In only one day of mobilising, a truck was filled with bags of white rice, boxes of noodle and blankets heading to Kiên Giang province. When the truck reached the affected area, Xuân Hoa saw many Hoà Hảo compatriots whose trucks had been arriving there since the early morning. Yet, they were stuck on a village road as local authorities would not allow them to deliver their goods to the victims. A commune officer told them:

[22] The worst of the typhoon's impact was over 3,000 people dead and missing. Heavy rainfall caused flooding, which destroyed almost all resident houses along the coast, leaving over 383,000 people homeless. Widespread crop and transportation damage also occurred, the latter of which impeded relief efforts. *(Source: https://reliefweb.int/report/viet-nam/vietnam-typhon-lind)*

> If you wish to distribute the food directly to the people, you must inform or register with the *Mặt Trận Xã* (the Commune's Fatherland Front Organisation) to get permission. If not, we will hold these relief items at the Commune People's Committee and distribute them to the victims later.

Recalling her disappointment, Xuân Hoa explained that the local official did not allow them to make direct contact with ordinary people since he realised they were Hoà Hảo Buddhists and from the Hoà Hảo Holy Land:

> He wanted us to leave all the goods at the Commune People's Committee. To be honest, we did not trust the man. The group wanted to hand out the food and blankets to the victims as soon as possible since people urgently needed them. However, the village officers did not leave us with any possible options aside from leaving all the goods in the front yard of the Commune People's Committee.

Xuân Hoa stated that within such a restricted environment, Hoà Hảo Buddhists concentrated on the achievement of two main objectives: to propagate Hoà Hảo doctrine among their own followers, and to come to the help of the poor if possible. Most Hoà Hảo Buddhists believed that their sacred mission was to foster and promote virtue in society, with the carrying out of charitable work serving the twin purposes of promulgating virtue and raising the living standards of people in the society. The capacity of the faithful to enact this mission was severely constrained for over a generation owing to official restrictions on autonomous charitable action. However, at the end of the 1990s, the political winds shifted, and a flourishing of Hoà Hảo Buddhist charitable activities commenced, aspects of which are described in the remainder of this thesis.

Conclusion

The socially engaged philosophy of Hoà Hảo Buddhism is deeply rooted in the unique worldview of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương millenarian tradition, which emerged as a process of adaptation of Vietnamese settlers to the ecologically precarious milieu of the western Mekong delta during the 19th century. By providing miraculous cures during a cholera epidemic, the Buddha Master appealed to poor peasants as a messianic figure. He also preached the circle of karmic retribution and advised sick people to practice virtue in order to gain better health and achieve salvation. Successive prophets within the BSKH tradition, such as Trần Văn Thành, Ngô Lợi and Sư Vãi Bán Khoai, drew on the same spiritual worldview and methods as the Buddha Master; however, these BSKH sectaries synthesised for followers an increasingly sophisticated amalgamation of religious, ethical

and patriotic values, providing them with coordinates to comprehend and adjust to the challenging circumstances of Mekong delta frontier society.

When founding the Hòa Hảo sect in the late 1930s, the prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ modified the BSKH tradition, injecting into the worldview a new emphasis on humanism, nationalism and self-regulation that not only resonated with modernist trends in Vietnamese culture, but also furnished conceptual tools for navigating the social complexity of the western Mekong delta of the late 1930s. The prophet taught adepts how to identify their place in the world at large and that the path to salvation lay through ethical behaviour rather than through the accumulation of material benefits or reliance on a spiritual protector. Via the doctrine of the Four Debts, the prophet revealed for followers a new understanding of the fundamental sources of life and provided them with concrete instructions for repaying the debts they owed for their very existence. The Four Debts became the basic value orientation that guided Hòa Hảo adepts in their daily living and stimulated their participation in charitable acts.

Focusing on aspects of Hoà Hảo relations with successive regimes until 1999 enables further insights into the origins of Hoà Hảo charity and its nature and scope. The chapter shows how the Hoà Hảo survived early repression under Ngô Đình Diệm's regime, not only maintaining their charitable actions in low-key form but also gaining experience from their participation in state infrastructure projects during that period. With the formalisation of the Hoà Hảo religion in 1964 under Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's government, Hoà Hảo charity expanded in scope and, in the context of war, members of the faith engaged in high-profile humanitarian relief efforts. Despite again experiencing very tight control under the post-war communist secular state, Hoà Hảo followers managed to negotiate with the state and adapt to the state system to provide a number of basic social services to the poor and needy. By the late 1990s when the economic status of people in the western Mekong delta had significantly improved, Hoà Hảo Buddhists actively engaged in health care provision, community development and other philanthropic activities. This brief history indicates that Hoà Hảo Buddhists had a high capacity to adapt to social change by adjusting their traditional charitable practices to a series of very different institutional contexts. The sect's members were not necessarily always in opposition with the state, but found ways to accommodate state authorities in pursuing charitable practice despite having different goals than the state. Such adaptability to social context is a characteristic of Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity and is in accordance with the Hoà Hảo prophet's injunction to his disciples to practice a socially engaged faith.

Chapter 3

Houses for Strangers:

Repaying Debts and Building Cohesion through Charitable Housing

> That man stole chickens again from my neighbour. He was also the one who chopped down mango trees at night since my neighbour did not allow him to fish in the ditches inside the fruit garden. My neighbour knew the man involved in the destruction, but he didn't dare criticise him because he believed that the man might mindlessly chop him down, like the tree. The thief is so desperate, yet he has no alternative way to escape from poverty. He might act crazy towards those who oppose him in order to make a living. Local people are scared of him; they cannot sleep well at night. Just one person like him is more than enough to make a community unsecure and disordered.[23]

I mentioned this story, told to me by a young woman in the Mekong delta, to Tư Hiền — the leader of a carpentry workshop in a Hoà Hảo locality — and he explained how the Hoà Hảo diagnose present societal problems and the cause of poverty. He stated that the destitution of a person in this life results from karmic retribution for his or her negative actions in a previous life. If he acted immorally in the past, he will suffer in this present life. Tư Hiền explained that the thief in the story was also in an unstable living situation, had no proper house and lacked access to care from his family, the neighbours and the community, so he acted negatively, sometimes harmfully, towards people in his community. Tư Hiền told me that, as the leader of a local charitable group belonging to the Hoà Hảo religious tradition, he always keeps an eye out for cases of destitution within the community. He tries to get an understanding of the personal circumstances of such cases so he could identify the real problems. Then, his carpentry team would discuss how to resolve the problem; their priority is to build charitable houses for those in need. He explained:

> The carpentry team tries to help the needy with the resources we have in the community. The most important thing is to support these people, with either

[23] This story was told by a young woman I met at a boat station in a highly populated Hoà Hảo community near Tiền River in the Mekong delta.

> physical or spiritual things, to improve their lives. In fact, the voluntary workmen focus on resolving the most urgent need, which is foremost a house, for 'one needs a place to live in order to make a living' (*an cư lạc nghiệp*). We also help them with other things if necessary. During and after the house-building time, we advise them to change their thinking and perspectives about their personal lives, their neighbourhoods and their relations with other people in the community.

As a Hoà Hảo grassroots religious leader, Tư Hiền identifies specific cases of destitute people in his rural neighbourhood in An Phú, nearby the border with Cambodia, and mobilises people in his network to come to their aid. His was one of many charitable groups I met in the Hoà Hảo areas of the western Mekong delta. His group specialises in building houses for people who lack adequate housing.

For Tư Hiền, providing houses for those in need satisfies a fundamental human requirement. However, in the Hoà Hảo philosophy, the house bears a meaning beyond a physical shelter. Within the Hoà Hảo tradition, the house has an important role as the locus of self-cultivation and worship. Hoà Hảo practices focus on self-cultivation at home (*Tu tại gia*). The house is a religious site, a centre of self-cultivation in a home-based tradition that downplays the value of monasticism as an otherworldly and wasteful form of Buddhism. In the Hoà Hảo worldview, the house is where one is born, where persons are made and where they interact and participate in exchanges with others. According to the Four Debts of Gratitude value system of the Hoà Hảo, the house is also where one acquits one's debts. The house is where offerings of gratitude are made to one's ancestors and where hospitality is offered to neighbours, visitors or travellers in reciprocation for hospitality one has obtained. The house is also a site of veneration where altars are established to acknowledge debts to the Buddha, the Buddha Master, ancestors, heaven and earth, orienting the inhabitants of the house to the most significant coordinates within which a life is lived. The house is a place where people are registered officially as citizens and thereby made legible to the state as subjects. As an infrastructure of personhood, a place of sociability, self-cultivation and veneration, the house, not the pagoda, temple or spirit shrine, is the most significant site for religious self-making in Hoà Hảo cosmology.

Hoà Hảo doctrine also offers a rationale for the act of building and giving houses to strangers in need. One of the Four Debts the Hoà Hảo prophet enjoined his followers to acknowledge and repay is the debt to compatriots and humankind (*đồng bào, nhân*

loại). On reflection, this is somewhat strange advice if viewed from the perspective of someone raised in the Vietnamese cultural tradition. It implies that one might be in debt to a person whom one may not even know or have met. Influenced by the Confucian tradition, Vietnamese people are likely to accept the proposition that they owe a debt to parents and teachers, to ancestors, and perhaps even the king or country. However, reciprocity hardly extends to those with whom one has no familial or personal relations. In a kind of revolutionary expansion of the concept of relatedness, the Hoà Hảo extend the network of relationships taken as significant in Vietnam — relationships that generate debts and require reciprocal action — to people who belong to a larger social totality, be that the nation or humanity itself. The act of giving a house to a complete stranger can be seen as consistent with this revolutionary doctrine. Indeed, my Hoà Hảo interlocutors emphasised that, according to Hoà Hảo doctrine, one is obligated to assist others (*người khác*) in repayment of one's debts. 'Others' here implies strangers or outsiders, including those who were previously unknown and not members of one's existing network.

Hoà Hảo followers contend that building 'beloved houses' (*nhà tình thương*) for the poor is a beneficial act, unlike constructing a lavish pagoda or casting a tall statue: acts which the Hoà Hảo prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ advised have no religious or moral efficacy. Their efforts go towards supporting others, not solely those to whom they are linked by personal, familial or pecuniary interests or obligations. Through their house-building activities, hundreds of Hoà Hảo volunteers work cooperatively for the benefit of people in need and contribute to strengthening community cohesion. Their work constructing houses for the poor can be perceived as an example of gift giving that embodies an ethic of reciprocity. Mauss emphasised that the exchange of gifts puts people under obligations: to give, to receive and to reciprocate. Whereas in theory such gifts are voluntary, in fact they are given and repaid under obligation. As such, in many societies, the exchange of gifts is key to the making of social relationships, identities and values (Mauss 1970). With this in mind, I wondered why Hoà Hảo Buddhists built houses for charity; who was drawn into Hoà Hảo house-building networks; and what relations, identities and values were generated in the course of such activities? Such topics have not been broached by previous scholars working on this religious tradition.

To address this knowledge gap, this chapter explores the phenomenon of Hoà Hảo Buddhists constructing houses for the poor in the Mekong delta. The chapter uncovers how Hoà Hảo Buddhists sacrifice their familial interests to care for strangers in line with

their religious worldview. The chapter argues that the houses Hoà Hảo Buddhists build for the poor are a form of moral and social 'infrastructure' (Larkin 2013) that not only helps the destitute, but enables participants to acquit their moral obligations and take part in building a better society. When Hoà Hảo voluntary workmen collectively build houses for poor people, they also build social capital and networks around house-building activities. The charitable workmen are dedicated to giving time, money and personal efforts to build houses for the destitute. They do so because they learned the distinctive values of the 'four debts' in Hoà Hảo Buddhist teachings. Hoà Hảo lay followers believe that they do good when they help other people, including those with whom they have no prior relationship. In some ways, Hoà Hảo charitable donors gain social capital when they build houses for the poor and come together in constructing rural society. By providing houses to the poor, rural society gains social cohesion.

3.1 Hoà Hảo charitable carpentry workshop and its leader

I visited Tư Hiền's charitable carpentry workshop (*trại mộc từ thiện*) in the early stages of my ethnography when I participated in a group of urban people who had come to his commune in An Phú district to assist locals whose houses were severely damaged after a tropical storm swept through the Mekong delta. While the urban group members distributed blankets, food and medicines to the needy, I realised that many local carpenters were tirelessly fixing and building houses for the victims. The majority of these Hoà Hảo volunteer workmen came from Tư Hiền's carpentry workshop. This charitable carpentry workshop was impressive to me due to its rationally organised human resources and modern facilities and infrastructure. Timbers in different sizes, types and shapes were assembled along the road leading to the carpentry workshop. The space inside the carpentry workshop, about 300 square meters in size, was almost filled with machines and timbers. In the middle of the workplace was a big chainsaw. On the right side was a new forklift truck ready to load heavy timbers onto the sawing base. On the left side was a large space for storing timbers and processed woods. The concrete floor was messy with tree bark, woodchips and sawdust, yet most machines looked to be well-functioning. Down the riverbank, just behind the carpentry house, was a large riverboat once used to transport rice throughout the waterways, now being used by the carpenters for timber transportation.

Although the carpentry workshop had been established for only seven years, its name was widely recognised throughout the entire Mekong delta due to its success in solving

housing issues for many poor families. What interested me was not only the significant number of charitable houses given to the needy, but also the way Tư Hiền and his Hoà Hảo fellows had constructed a tightly knit social relationship among charitable leaders, volunteering carpenters and house receivers who worked and lived in the same community space. By constructing houses and giving them to the poor, Tư Hiền and his fellows had contributed to rural community development, not only in terms of improving physical capital, but also through social cohesion by bringing people from different social and economic backgrounds together in a shared religiously inspired charitable project. I found myself curious to know more about the Hoà Hảo charitable leadership, how the leader could organise such a large group to assist the poor and what motives, circumstances and relationships existed among charitable workmen in the carpentery workshop.

Through my ethnography, I learned that Tư Hiền founded this charitable carpentry workshop, initially supported by his family, relatives and friends. He was born in a traditional Hòa Hảo family that nurtured his values of humaneness and compassion. His father, who was from an elite rural family, was among only a few people in his district to finish a higher school degree. Additionally, Tư Hiền was proud that his father had had a rare opportunity to meet the Hòa Hảo prophet (*Đức Thầy*) in 1945. Continuing the family's tradition, Tư Hiền had actively engaged in various religious activities organised by the Hòa Hảo community since he was young. When the Hòa Hảo religion was dissolved in 1975, Hòa Hảo Buddhists' social work and other charitable activities were no longer allowed by the new regime. Tư Hiền got married and farmed the land as an ordinary person, yet still maintained his religious ritual practices at home. During the 1990s, when the local authorities became more relaxed about Hòa Hảo community charitable works, Tư Hiền, together with his close friend Sáu Mộc, a carpenter, formed a group of five members to collect donated wood to make free coffins for the poor.

In 1999, Hòa Hảo Buddhism was officially recognised by the state and Hòa Hảo Buddhist religious activities and charity dramatically emerged. This was a transitional period for prominent Hòa Hảo Buddhists, like Tư Hiền and Sáu Mộc, who could apply their leadership and expertise to a variety of Hòa Hảo charitable practices. Thanks to his father's prestige and his family's good economic status, Tư Hiền immediately established the carpentry workshop for building houses for people in need and was successful in creating a strong social network with other Hòa Hảo leaders and 'good-hearted' businessmen from Ho Chi Minh City and other urban localities. He sometimes invited

these urban donors to visit the carpentry workshop and talk with the house receivers about their recent benefits. This helped build trust with the donors. When the demand for housing among poor people increased and the carpentry workshop needed to be scaled up to meet the urgent needs of the poor, group leaders had the ability to attract new donors outside the commune. By sharing information about donors among charitable doers, donor networks were built to connect rural and urban locations. At the community level, Tư Hiền was good at organising people and mobilising available resources for community charitable work. Local donors, who were businessmen, market traders and better-off farmers, donated money to purchase timber materials. Tư Hiền and other carpenters were the key volunteer workers, but they were also charitable donors when the carpentry workshop lacked funding on some occasions, for example, to purchase additional materials to urgently construct houses for victims of house fires. Local Hòa Hảo Buddhists also gave sums of money, which typically depended on the giver's economic status, to the carpentry workshop in the middle of each month and during Buddhist festivals. Many local Hòa Hảo Buddhists did not donate money but voluntarily gave their labour for house construction.

Although Tư Hiền was the group leader, he did not know much about carpentry skills. Instead, Sáu Mộc, an experienced carpenter, was responsible for the majority of carpentry tasks related to house construction and worked in the carpentry workshop as a vice leader. Sáu Mộc, as one of the carpentry workshop's founders and a close friend of Tư Hiền's, had participated in the house-building group since it was established. He was calm and did things quite slowly, patiently and carefully. He had started learning wood-based skills when he was 17 from his father, an expert in making fishing boats. After his father passed away, Sáu Mộc operated a private carpentry workshop, not to produce fishing boats, but to make furniture and construct wooden houses. His carpentry business was successful, and he was perceived as one of the best carpenters in the region. As part of his business, Sáu Mộc also engaged in making charitable houses for the poor. When he turned 50, he passed down the carpentry business to his eldest son, who also had good house-building skills. Then, Sáu Mộc could work full-time in Tư Hiền's charitable carpentry workshop. Whenever I visited the carpentry workshop in the morning, Sáu Mộc was always the first one there working.

Under the able leadership of Tư Hiền, who was good at fundraising and mobilising human resources for charitable house construction, and Sáu Mộc, who had expert carpentry skills and knowledge, the carpentry workshop was well known in both the commune and the

wider region. Many carpentry workshop members told me that Tư Hiền and Sáu Mộc, as prominent Hòa Hảo charitable leaders, could be compared to the main pillar of a house [cột nhà] that had the capacity to bear the weight of a whole house [society]. They played the most important part in the charitable house-building network, since they used most of their time to fundraise and build good relationships between carpenters to maintain a strong and tightly knit house-building group. They also had strong support from their kin groups, local and regional entrepreneurs and local people who gathered almost every day in the carpentry workshop as people of charity.

3.2 The collapsed house and the Hòa Hảo response

On one of my early visits to the carpentry workshop, Tư Hiền told me that improving social welfare was no easy task because the degree of poverty in the western Mekong delta was hard to imagine. With widespread indebted businesses, landless farmers, disintegrating houses, poor education and failing health, the poverty in some quarters was of a kind from which there was no chance of escaping. Religious leaders such as he also sometimes spoke of the social value degradation in contemporary rural society marked by a lack of trust, common feeling and shared values among people. Sometimes it seemed there was almost nothing but indifference or hatred: no love or understanding, and no social capital. Part of his charitable group's vision included having a community of volunteers who worked diligently, doing simple things that had the scope to change people's lives over generations. The carpenters and volunteers did whatever they could by assisting social groups and going into places that the state had seemingly forgotten. They visited the houses of the lonely, the handicapped, sick women, marginalised drunken men, orphans and the abandoned elderly to see what they could do for them, especially building them new houses or fixing shelters. They urgently addressed their needs and quickly built houses for the needy.

One day, a young man stopped his bicycle at the carpentry workshop gate. He approached Tư Hiền with a trembling voice, 'My mother is sick and our house is about to collapse. Please come to help me.' The man looked destitute with his austere face, dusty clothes and an obsolete bicycle.

'Come in and tell us more about your family,' Tư Hiền immediately replied. The young man said:

> My name is Lâm. I am living near the commune's boat station. My house might collapse anytime since it is too old. I was told the local government

> has a housing program for poor households, so I have sent a request to the Commune People's Committee for receiving a house. However, for several years I haven't received any answer from local cadres. One commune officer then asked me to come and see you for a charitable house.

Lâm shared his personal feeling that he was always struggling with the daily life. He needed a simple house to protect his family. However, he found it hard to fulfil even this fundamental need due to his modest earnings. He said that he had worked and saved money for over fifteen years. It was time to rebuild the house, yet he could not afford to do so. He wished he could have a new house to stabilise his life so that his son could go to school and, more importantly, he could take care of his sick mother in her old age.

After the short conversation, Tư Hiền and his partner, Sáu Mộc, took a motorbike and headed straight to Lâm's house. There was only a muddy pathway leading to a small group of houses where Lâm's family resided. Looking at Lâm's house, the roof was about to fall. The thatched wall was interlaced with several plastic pieces. Tư Hiền and Sáu Mộc lowered their heads to enter the shelter. Almost all of the floor was wet and muddy since it had rained heavily the previous night. Inside the house, buckets and cooking pots were placed everywhere to collect rainwater running off the roof. The only dry space inside the house was the bed where Lâm's sick mother was lying. Her bed was covered by another plastic roof. An old, torn family picture hung on the wall. An ancestral altar was set on the middle of the top of the house. It was dusty and covered with spider webs. It seemed to me that Lâm had not practiced ancestral worship for years. Potentially, it was because he was always busy making a living and his sick mother was unable to take care of the altar. A strong wind blew from the rice fields as if ready to pull the house down into the river. The rainy season had started the month before and the flood water would reach the house floor very soon, yet Lâm could not afford to fix the house, not even the roof.

Lâm was among nearly 50 impoverished locals in the commune who were landless or nearly landless, unemployed, illiterate, disabled, sick and lonely. Some of them, like Lâm, previously had lived precariously on boats on the river. Lâm told Tư Hiền that he found himself being marginalised since his family received little support from the local government. He was disappointed because his request for papers for public housing were ignored by the commune officers. He said:

> The local authorities know about my family circumstances. Yet, they are not ready to help, or they do not want to help. When we were living in a

> houseboat, my family was officially classified as a poor household as we had no land, no stable house, low income and sick family members. As a result, we got some support from local government such as medical insurance for family members, exemption from school fees for my son and some gifts during the Vietnamese Lunar New Year. However, since we moved on land and had a small house, local officers withdrew the household poverty title (*sổ hộ nghèo*). We have since then no longer received any support from the local government.

He continued:

> I am disappointed with the local government. They stated that we have escaped from poverty since we already have a new house. Hence, the support should be given for other poor families. I am not a person who relies on assistance from the government, however, my mother needs the insurance for her medication and my son needs to go to school. The agricultural hired labour jobs I do are seasonal and not stable. Most of the time nobody asks me to work on their farm. Rich farmers these days tend to use their own machines to harvest the crops. My wife and son are therefore working in the city, sending some remittance home. But daily expenses are steadily increasing while work within the commune is relatively scare. To make a living in this rural environment these days is hard. I consider that my family is still struggling for survival; our economic status has not improved as the local officials contend.

In contrast with the local authority's sluggish reaction to Lâm concerns, Hoà Hảo Buddhists responded quickly and precisely to address his needs. When they returned from Lâm's house, Tư Hiền and Sáu Mộc gathered their group members for an impromptu meeting. The group made a quick decision to urgently build a new house for Lâm since a tropical storm might hit the region in the coming week. This would be dangerous for Lâm's mother and the sons since the house was located near the river and could collapse at any time. Tư Hiền said:

> Timber is available. Some logs were sawed into small parts which are ready now for making a house. We will make the wooden frame at the carpentry station and then transport these components to the site. Sáu Mập will be responsible for organising the carpentry work. We now have enough

> workmen to make the house. It might take about one week to complete. I will contact local donors for supporting the purchase of roof tiles and other materials for the house building.

The majority of houses for the needy provided by this Hoà Hảo charitable group are built with similar decisiveness and speed. Whenever the group leader distinguished a case of poor people in need of a house, the carpenters and volunteers started the building work straight away, as if they were constructing the house for their own brothers or sisters. They understood that having a house is one of the most important things in one's life. Tư Hiền and Sáu Mộc had never ignored any cases of poor households who really needed a house.

3.3 The freshmen voluntary workmen as 'raw wood'

Many of the volunteer workmen I met in the carpentry workshop were engaging in charitable work for the first time. These new charitable workers came from different socio-economic backgrounds, including high school students, farmers, teachers, agricultural hired labourers and motorbike taxi drivers. Some of the men had received charitable houses from the carpentry workshop and wanted to 'return the debts' to the community. There were about 20 experienced carpenters and unpaid workers who worked full-time in the workshop. However, the most important labour contribution come from part-time volunteer workmen. These young men had recently begun learning the skills of carpentry work as they engaged in building houses for the needy. Their number consistently increased year by year and now came to nearly one hundred members.

Sáu Mộc used the term 'using men like using wood' (*dụng nhân như dụng mộc*) as a metaphor for these new workmen's potential to become capable adults through charitable house-building activities. Most of these new charitable workers were energetic and enthusiastic, but inexperienced and impatient since they were young and had only recently started participating in the charitable community work. Sáu Mộc told me that these freshmen were like raw timber that contains much water, sugar, oil, latex and other vital substances yet has low resistance to all types of biological attack. Therefore, to become helpful members in the community, these 'raw' youths needed to be turned into adults, like 'processed wood' for making a durable house, a good society.

According to Sáu Mộc, the quality of wood depends largely on how carpenters process the timbers and the quality of volunteer contributions relied primarily on how new

workmen were treated by group leaders and their working fellows. Raw wood needs to be immersed in water for a period, so that, under pressure, the trunk begins to lose water and other substances. This begins a slow process of eliminating sap, sugars and other organic waste materials from the wood's fibres before eventually drying, cutting and shaping the logs into usable timber.

The processing stage might take several months, varying according to the wood species. The carpenters sometimes dipped raw eucalyptus wood in the river, but most of the time they processed it in a large pond near the carpentry workshop. The pond also functioned as an underwater storehouse to stockpile and preserve timber. The longer the carpenters submerged timbers under water, the more quality wood they could get. This process helped the wood become resistant to insects, which cause house degradation during the rainy season. The prolonged immersion of wood releases its chemical substances, such as sugar and oil, which are favourite foods of insects and fungi that can rot the wood and destroy its structure. After the wood was dried in the sun, there were less chemicals in its structure, which enabled resistance to most biological attack. After lengthy processing under water, the timber was darkened due to the deposit of extractives. 'Look at those men, their skins are very black, like processed wood,' said Sáu Mộc indicating the long-term 'seasoned' members of the Hoà Hảo house-building team.

Brother Đức, 24 years old, and seven other new volunteers were standing in the pond, which was black and muddy and could be smelled from a distance. The water was up to their necks. The charitable freshmen, with bare hands and feet, were moving the long-submerged timbers to make space for processing new timbers. These young men were moving the wood piles very slowly. Most tasks were primarily carried out by hand. 'It's so muddy on the bottom. It's difficult to move. The trunks are heavy. We are sinking, Uncle. We might need more help,' Đức informed Sáu Mộc from the pond.

'Be patient. Try the other side. The log is slipery. Tighten the rope at the ends of the trunk. Hold the ropes, then move it slowly. Be careful with your hands and your head,' Sáu Mộc instructed.

Processing raw timbers under water was a heavy and dirty job. Young new workmen primarily carried out this task. According to Sáu Mộc, this was the first challenge and lesson to test whether these young men were ready to engage in charitable work. It was unpaid work and harder than any kind of work they had ever done. The men took off their shirts and jumped into the black water without hesitation. Their bodies were wet up to

their faces and heads. Sometimes, black water came into their eyes and mouths. These young men submerged their bodies under such black water twice a month, like the raw wood.

Đức shared his feelings:

> It is itchy after getting out from the pond. When I get home, it is hard to sleep. Skin allergies are common among the new workmen who engage in the wood processing stage. You can see several red and dark spots on my neck and some scars on my legs. It's a difficult job and I find hard to explain why I engage in this. Yet, I never refused such kind of work. The first day I joined the group was a hectic day; I felt exhausted at the end, but happy. Constructing a new house for an underprivileged family is significant and we could understand the value of our charitable work.

Several timber trunks were taken out of the pond for the next processing stage. At the bank of the pond, Sáu Mộc and group members were taking off the trunks' bark. These timber trunks then needed to be dried under the sun for several days so the wood would lose all its water before being sawed. Then, reclaimed hardwood piles awaited sorting, machining and grading. Conversion of this wood is achieved predominantly by sawing logs into regular sizes and shapes.

Figure 3.1 Sáu Mộc and Hai Hùm grading and sorting processed wood.

Inside the sawmill, the noise from the machines overwhelmed the noise from motorboats running on the river. Workmen said nothing to each other due to the noise. Sáu Mộc did not directly engage in the sawing process but instructed Đức and other young men on how to use the machine and properly saw a wood pile. Occasionally, Sáu Mộc stopped the machine to give a piece of advice to Đức and the team:

> This is a particularly dangerous task. Always stand on this side to operate the machine. We should be very careful when using the band saw since the saw bit is very sharp. You should concentrate on the work, at all times.

After that, Sáu Mộc classified the processed wood according to its quality and purpose:

> These are mature timbers. The quality is good enough to make the house frame. The biggest trunks — the strongest material — should be used for the principle pillars (*Cột cái*). Those smaller ones could be good for making small columns (*Cột con*). The smallest would be ultilised for the side beams (*Xà nách*). Don't throw away any pieces of wood. Everything can be ultilised for a purpose based on its shape and strength.

Like using woods, Sáu Mộc knew how to mobilise young workmen by appreciating their strengths and the things that make them unique. He said that an experienced carpenter should know how to make use of any kind of wood, whether it was straight or bent. It would depend on the purposes and on how he processed and used the woods. Similarly, good leaders should know how to transform a less useful person to become a more helpful man for the community construction. In this carpentry workshop, he had many young volunteers who were very different in personalities and characteristics. However, as the group leader, he tried to empathise and understand them well by talking with them whenever he had time. He had created a friendly environment so that these young people could share experiences, work together as a team and love each other like family members. In the carpentry workshop, the workmen could also share their emotions about the role of men in families, their social responsibility in the community and their concerns of contemporary society. Although they were focused on different tasks, they all attempted to assist the poor to fulfil their basic needs with a charitable house.

Sáu Mộc told me:

> We make use all of men and wood materials donated from the community for house building and give the charitable house back to the community. The

> warped and bent wood could be used for house balcony. The huge by-products from the workshop such as tree branches, woodchips, bark, etc. are used as firewood for the charitable rice kitchens across the entire region.

The new workmen had become involved in charitable house building for various reasons. Some, like 24 year-old Đức had actively decided to join the carpentry group to help poor people, having witnessed cases of the destitute who did not even have a shelter; others were 'volunteered' by their family members to keep them out of trouble and learn something useful; some came to accompany peers. To start, these freshmen all first had to engage in the dirty and dangerous work associated with wood processing and sawing so that their bodies and minds were tested for doing community work. These young men were mentored by key charitable leaders, experienced carpenters, just like raw wood is turned into useful timber. The more they engaged in house-building activity, the more they understood the importance of providing houses for the poor. They gradually learnt the values associated with Hòa Hảo Buddhist humanitarianism, as well as the responsibilities of working in a team. After working for several months in the carpentry workshop, these workmen had a sense of purpose and group identification as well as an appreciation for the plight of the poor. Some of the workmen used to be drunk, aggressive or agnostic, however when they began working together in this charitable carpentry enterprise, they were transformed into gentler, more graceful, sincere and generous people. By engaging with the house-building group, Đức believed himself to be a beneficiary of the charitable activity of building houses as well as a person who had learnt to contribute to this activity in a meaningful way.

3.4 Protecting 'the most tattered leaves'

In the carpentry workshop, a group of experienced carpenters was operating cutting tools, wood drills, brush-sanding machines and other carpentry facilities. They started making the frame for Lâm's house. The wood was cut to exact size according to the house-frame structure designed by Sáu Mộc. These men knew well the specifications of a standard wooden house since they had built many houses of the same size and type. Brother Hai Hùm was expert in using a circular saw to cut timbers to certain widths and lengths to create the house's pillars and side beams. His colleagues were operating a band saw to cut a large trunk into planks that would be used to make the floor of Lâm's house. After several years working in the carpentry workshop and having rich experiences with Sáu Mộc, the workmen had learned a range of different skills, from how to process raw wood

and make and assemble a house frame, to co-operating in a team and working to deadlines. Their charitable work equipped these volunteer workmen with valuable knowledge they could use in their own careers. For instance, thanks to master skills learned from Sáu Mộc and his colleagues, Hai Hùm had recently opened a small carpentry workshop to earn some extra money in addition to doing the charitable work.

Hai Hùm had been involved in the charitable group for nearly seven years and knew how to use his time to do extra work. For instance, he usually got up earlier in the morning to perform his farm work. He would go to the field around 6:00am to see if there was any pest damage. Then he went back home to send his children to school. He helped his wife prepare her grocery shop. After that he went straight to the carpentry workshop to join with his co-workers. Hai Hùm explained his impulse to help the less fortunate, in spite of his own modest circumstances, using a metaphor about mutual assistance that drew on house roofing methods:

> The common proverb in Vietnamese culture is *lá lành đùm lá rách* (whole leaves protect tattered ones). But as Hòa Hảo Buddhists, we do more than that: *lá rách đùm lá rách hơn* (the tattered protect the even more tattered). That means, in our culture, not only can the rich assist the poor; even the poor can help the poorer. If they do not have money, they could sacrifice their time and labour to help those in greater need.

I kept asking why he sacrificed time from his own family for other families, and what motivated him to protect the other 'tattered' families. He replied:

> The most important thing is how to balance time for your family and for the charitable work. Of course, everyone has 24 hours a day for doing things. You must trade off the time between your family and the community. When I decided to participate in the house-building group, my wife advised me to think about my family economic status. We are not rich, and our children are small and need to be in school. Living costs are borne on my shoulders. If I am away from home and give too much time for the community, we might not have enough to raise the children. I told my wife that the prophet taught we should thank Heaven and Buddha (*Trời phật*) for having a shelter to avoid rain while others are wet; for having a blanket to keep ourselves warm while others are cold; for having friends and neighbours while others are lonely

and neglected. We now have all of that. Hence, we should share these things for others more destitute and unfortunate than us.

The charitable group members also helped each other to get by. Besides helping the poor, the workmen also became sensitive to their fellow workers' needs and concerns. When Hai Hùm was about to harvest his sweet corn crop, he did not know any middlemen who could buy the corn at a reasonable price. He was also concerned about the shortage of hired labourers since the majority of young men and women had migrated out seeking jobs. A fellow carpenter replied, 'I just harvested my corn yesterday. I know a lady who could buy the corn at a good price. Her boat is still moored opposite to my house. Here is her phone number.' He continued, 'More rains might come next days. But don't worry much about the labourers. Like last time, we ourselves can organise a small group to help you harvest the corn tomorrow.' When working as a team in the charitable group, these kinds of interactions were common among the carpenters and workmen. They shared information about the markets to sell agricultural products and facilitated mutual labour exchange among workmen during peak harvest time.

Their close working relationships provided opportunities for group members to share common values and concerns, increasing the intimacy among group members. They frequently would discuss Hòa Hảo cosmology and thoughts about the world where they were born and live. Working in the house-building group, charitable workmen like Hai Hùm acquired not only practical knowledge of carpentry from experienced carpenters like Sáu Mộc, but also values of compassion and social responsibility from religious intellectuals like Tư Hiền. Whenever the group members had a tea break, Tư Hiền shared his understanding of Hòa Hảo doctrines that encourage people to contribute to constructing a good society. He explained the practical meanings of the debts to one's fellows and mankind: 'to help by all means the misfortunate and poor around us', which inspired Hai Hùm and his fellow workers to uphold their community work. Hòa Hảo Buddhists believe that since they were born, they found themselves depending on people, and as they grew up, their responsibility was to reciprocate. Tư Hiền emphasised that people are of the same root (*gốc*), help each other in distress and have the same task of building a bright future for the nation (*đất nước*). They must therefore do their best to help people in need to show in some way their gratitude for the assistance these workmen have received from others.

Hòa Hảo Buddhist values and the good relationship between Tư Hiền, Sáu Mộc and their fellow workers positively impact their focus and productivity in their work to help the poor. The group leaders created good social relationships among the workmen, which provided them the necessary guidance and support to achieve community development. The charitable workmen shared community values, tried to reduce disparities in social wealth and generally had a sense that they were engaged in community work, and that they were members of the same society.

3.5 The 'unexpected' volunteers in charitable house building

The carpentry group completed the house frame for Lâm in four working days. The truck carrying the wooden house frame slowed down and stopped in front of Lâm's house. Carpenters and workmen would connect different parts of the wooden frame and complete the house today. In Lâm's front yard, a group of men had already assembled. They were smoking, drinking coffee and looking towards the road. They were waiting for the volunteer carpenters and the truck. An old man was talking about factory life in Bình Dương province. A teenager was talking about his girlfriend whom he met in the workplace. Several men in this group had returned home after several months working in urban factories. They were then unemployed and usually spent almost their whole day at a small coffee shop nearby Lâm's house.

Once the truck arrived, these men stood up and approached it. Sáu Mộc and his team were surprised by the presence of this group. Their faces and bodies looked black and dirty from the dust from the decayed roof. These men had come to Lâm's house early in the morning to clear the collapsed house. Broken wooden pillars, sticks and decaying thatched walls were put neatly near the riverbank. Two men were assisting Lâm to move the beds, chairs, tables and other personal belongings to Aunt Năm Quê's house, a neighbour.

Năm Quê, Lâm's closest neighbour, was making coffee and drinks for the group. She had helped Lâm bring his mother to rest in her house the previous night. She told Lâm that although they had known each other for over 10 years, they had not had a chance to help each other when they encountered hardship. She told him that many builders would come to construct his house the next day, so he might need someone to cook for the crowd. Lâm's mother was sick and his wife was away. She said she knew several ladies in the local market who sold vegetables and fish for a reasonable price. She suggested that Lâm should not worry about the money. She would be happy if he let her cook for the group.

Năm Quê had a small coffee shop where young men usually gathered for coffee or noodles in the early morning. When she saw Tư Hiền and Sáu Mộc come to see Lâm's house the other day, she told her young customers Lâm's story:

> Lâm seems to be a quiet man. He does not interact much with people around. Yet, he is a good man. He is pious with his mother and behaves well towards his wife and sons. Look at his house which will collapse at any time. He cannot afford to fix the house. The charitable carpenters will come to build the house. They might need our help. If you are available tomorrow, please come and give them a hand. I will prepare some dishes to treat you all. No need to pay. You can also order any kind of drinks, whatever coffee or tea. It is all free.

The land was now cleared for the charitable group to start the house-building activity. Sáu Mộc and the carpenters were happy with what the 'unexpected volunteers' had done to prepare the base for building the house:

> When we came to the house some days ago, we were concerned about how to climb up to clear the roof since it was almost collapsed. All the house pillars were decaying, and every part of the house was torn. It might take time for our staff to take off everything from the old house before building a new house on the plot. Thanks to your assistance, everything is now ready for constructing the new house. I believe we can complete the house today.

Sáu Mộc was leading the group to quickly embark on the house construction. The carpenters were responsible for more complicated tasks such as combining different parts of the house frame, balancing between the pillars and the frame and making the roof, while the volunteers would handle simpler things such as making the floor or moving wood for the carpenters. Sáu Mộc and three carpenters started putting different parts of the house frame together while Hai Hùm was instructing 'amateur' workmen to make the house floor. Lively sounds from hammers hitting nails and wooden boards sounded out to every corner of the neighbourhood. Brother Quang, 17 years old, was using a wood-chopping tool, instead of a nail hammer, to affix timber boards to the floor base. He had never learnt how to use a hammer properly. Quang and Lâm lived in the same commune, however, they had not liked each other since Lâm was once hit by Quang when he was speeding on his motorbike on the commune's road. They almost fought each other right after the accident happened. Fortunately, Năm Quê came in time to resolve the problem.

Năm Quê suggested that Quang could be a reflection of youth troubles in today's rural society. He dropped out of school before he even finished secondary school. The previous year, he had migrated to Bình Dương, but could not find a job since he was under 18. He remained in the city with his friends for several months, then went back to his home village with dyed hair. He did not want to do anything, neither his own farm work nor agricultural hired labour. Every day, he gathered with other young people, mostly unemployed, for cockfight gambling (*đá gà ăn tiền*). Năm Quê continued:

> To make money in this rural setting is hard. I haven't seen these young men do any kind of jobs. I wonder where the money these young men spend comes from. The noise from the cockfighting can be clearly heard from a distance. The crowd quarrels, swears and screams during the cockfighting. After the bouts, they slaughter the cocks and gather for drinking until midnight. They talk loudly and angrily and then fight each other after that. Commune police regularly come to take away these young men. Then, two or three days later, maximum one week, the arguing and fighting happens again.

Figure 3.2 Quang (middle-left) and his friends engaging in Lâm's house construction.

Năm Quê contended that rural youth like Quang were disruptive to the society. Every day, these young men preferred cockfighting to taking care of their parents or themselves.

They regularly engaged in this kind of societal trouble instead of charitable work. Năm Quê said:

> Honestly, I do not see any bright pictures about these men. But today, Quang and his counterparts are joining in Lâm's house building as real workmen. He helps Lâm as if the story of the motorbike accident had never happened. You see, he is very engaged and focussed on the house construction.

Sáu Mộc was standing in the forecourt to look over the house frame structure. The carpenters had completed the frame structure and the wall while the lads from the neighbourhood were about to finish the floor. These young men seemed hungry as the work was lasting longer than they thought. 'It's time for lunch,' Năm Quê loudly informed the crowd.

The food was already arranged on her house balcony for serving the group. Quang and his friends approached the food quickly. Sáu Mộc and the carpenters joined the group but had their own vegetarian food that had been prepared by Tư Hiền's wife early that morning. People were getting to know each other. The old and new, experienced and inexperienced workmen were eating and sharing about the house-building work.

On the balcony, Lâm was serving food and drinks to the impromptu team members. 'More rice or fish sauce, brothers?' Lâm asked Quang and the man sitting next to Quang. He used the names of people whom previously he would never even look in the face. While working together since the morning, despite a bit of hesitation at the beginning, they had been conversing and getting to know more about each other. Now, they were sitting around the balcony, talking about what they had just done together on the house. The ice had been broken. Lâm, Quang and other young men knew the names of Sáu Mộc and all the carpenters who engaged in the house building. Two young men sitting close to Sáu Mộc wanted to know more about the carpentry workshop and its working schedule as they might join the charitable group as part-time volunteers. Quang asked Sáu Mộc, 'Uncle, can the carpentry workshop accept an under 18-year-old part-time volunteer?' Sáu Mộc was surprised by his question:

> You want to join the carpentry group? Yes, you can do simple tasks in the carpenter's. But, it's not an easy job. You should think it over and ask some advice from your parents. Let's help your parents in their farm first. Then, come to the carpenter's whenever you have free time.

Aunt Năm Quê seemed excited going back and forth to serve more food to the crowd. It had been years since her little café had been as busy and lively as this day. Neighbours sometimes had the chance to drink coffee and talk in her shop, but this was the first time they had worked together as a community, in a team. They were communicative, confident, caring and patient. Năm Quê said:

> I believe that such social charitable engagement will foster an integrated and secure community. I do not expect these men could transform their behaviours right after participating in this house building, yet I think this is a good start for them to become more gentle and helpful to the community. I hope I will no longer hear the barking noise from Quang's motorbike at night. No more gambling and fighting. We like to be safe in our neighbourhood. If these trouble-making men really do get involved in charitable work, I believe they will never do wrong things to harm the society.

Figure 3.3 Workmen having lunch together.

Although these spontaneous group members did not contribute as much to Lâm's house building as the expert carpenters, as Năm Quê said, they had started to create a new sense of neighbourhood and community that she had never before experienced. She shared with me that although she was not sure how long these men could maintain this good

relationship, she believed this day had been a good beginning and had the potential to inspire the men to turn around their lives for the better.

3.6 Beyond a physical house

Hòa Hảo Buddhists emphasise the importance of houses as places that make it possible to settle down to make a living. This phrase implies that only when one has a house, does one have the means to build a good career or earn a good living. A wooden house with waterproof roof tiles was truly unaffordable for Lâm's family. Unstable earnings, a sick mother and number of family dependents meant his family was increasingly vulnerable to underprivilege and homelessness. He spent the most on food, medicine and school fees as a percentage of his daily earnings. As a result, he could not afford to build a new house. The cost of building a wooden house was relatively high and so it was fortunate that the community had rallied to help his family. Most of house-building materials were donated by generous farmers and entrepreneurs, while manual labour was done via community volunteering efforts. Lâm's family could now access a safe and secure house, which would help maintain the livelihoods, good education and health of the family.

However, the charitable house was not just a physical structure for Lâm to take shelter, make a living, and keep his mother and son dry. The new house opened a new chapter in Lâm's life. With a fresh start, he could take care of his mother and raise his family. His youngest son could go to school next year. Now Lâm had a stable home, he could think beyond where his family members were to live from day to day and begin to look ahead to what he could do to improve their economic status. Home was now the base from which everything could begin for his family.

Lâm used to experience social isolation, as he had almost no close friends, neighbours or relatives to call upon whenever he encountered difficulties. He said:

> Once my mother got sick, I asked the neighbours for some money to send my mother to hospital. Yet it was hard to borrow even a small sum from them because they are also poor. The better-off don't want to lend me money since I have nothing valuable in the house to serve as collateral. I usually borrow money in advance from the landowners for whom I do hired farm work. If they agree to give a loan, they lend just a small amount because they are afraid of losing the money. This locality is very isolated; not many outsiders, like charitable donors, know this place to help us.

Furthermore, Lâm once felt excluded from the community as he had little chance to engage in its social life. He stated that:

> When you always struggle with daily survival, you don't have time to think about anything else, even for yourself. For years I have seldom visited my relatives, even though their houses are just on the other side of this river. I felt ashamed to invite friends and relatives to my place as the house was so torn. I work from early morning to evening. I haven't attended any festivals or community events for years.

Due to his destitute circumstance, Lâm emphasised that he tended to struggle with his own family and personal life rather than take part in community activities in the local area. As a result, the community appeared not to recognise him as a member.

In the following days, Tư Hiền and Sáu Mộc visited the house to see whether it had any structural problems. Sáu Mộc carefully checked the roof and the connections between the pillars and side beams. He had taught Lâm some necessary skills to best maintain the house. With respect, Tư Hiền offered Lâm's mother some parting comments and gifts:

> Now, the house is yours. I hope you will have a happy life with all family's members. Take care yourself and pray to Buddha. Whenever you need help, just tell Lâm to come to see me and Sáu Mộc. We will help you. And, here is a gift, which came from a charitable group in the Holy Land, including an electric fan for your comfort and a bicycle for your grandson to go to school. And a wheelchair for you, so you can move around the house and visit the neighbours.

Tư Hiền, Sáu Mộc and their house-building group had helped Lâm build his self-confidence. The charitable leaders gave Lâm's mother a house with respect and appreciation. They believed their efforts would impact these poor people's lives for the long term. The charitable group hoped the receivers would feel comfortable and confident because this was their own house.

In addition, the house building helped Lâm overcome the sense of isolation and detachment from the community that has become apparent in many rural societies these days. Lâm used to suffer shame from his own poverty, as well as marginalisation, isolation and social exclusion. Now, he felt himself to be part of the community. The volunteer workmen had made him aware of social issues that affected all people. Through

the house-building activity, neighbours were put in contact with each other and better able to call on others for mutual help and survival. Lâm found himself drawn by circumstances into new connections, and in that moment a new social intimacy and identity were born. The new house transformed his family's opportunities. They now had a home from which to generate an income, educate and nurture their children and feel secure.

Lâm said:

> I used to dream of a house with a waterproof roof and intact walls that would simply keep my children and mum out of the cold, the rain and the mud. It would have a door to lock so my sons could have a sound sleep at night. Being in an insecure house was traumatic to me. When it rained, I could not stand when my mother and sons got wet.

In addition, Lâm asserted that a man without a house meant losing the origins *(nguồn gốc*). For him, 'house' referred to the homeland (*quê cha mẹ*) where he was born and grew up with a childhood full of memories. The new house would create rituals and domestic care for others among family members. Home was place for his mother to worship, so they could maintain their ancestral roots (*gốc ông bà*). The house would be also a safe space where his wife and son would return one day. They could share food, clothes and happiness in the same house. They could live in that shelter and take care of his mother.

Lâm was applying finish to the house's wooden frame so the family could occupy the house for many years. With some basic knowledge learned from Sáu Mộc, he used carpentry oils to treat the pillars, side beams, doors and wooden floor. By doing so, the house could avoid termites and worms that might damage its frame. Lâm said that the natural durability of a wooden house relied heavily on how well the owner took care of and maintained it. If the house was abandoned, even for only several months, it would degrade very quickly. The average life of a eucalyptus-wood house was about 15 years. Yet, if the house owner maintained the house in good condition, the house could be used up to 20 years. Therefore, he treated the wooden frame with care to strengthen the structure against biological attacks.

Inside the house, Lâm's wife was arranging chairs and tables and decorating the house. The eldest son was having fun painting the windows and the doorframe. They both had

come back home to visit from the city the previous night. The Vietnamese *Tết* holiday was coming and this was the first time they had experienced the excitement of decorating their own house in preparation for it. The altar was decorated with a new flower vase and colourful light bulbs brought from the city. Lâm's mother had lived in a broken house for nearly 10 years. She told Lâm that she wanted him to rearrange the altar to continue ancestral worship. It touched him to hear that. In a typical Hòa Hảo Buddhist's house, there are three altars inside and outside the house. One is dedicated to the ancestors, another serves to worship Buddha and the third is set up in the house's forecourt to communicate with Heaven. Due to the limitation of space, however, there was no altar in the forecourt of Lâm's house. The only altar was placed in the central space of the house and was dedicated to the ancestors, Buddha and the Prophet. Lâm's mother wanted to connect to the ancestors as she believed that ancestral spirits were always present in the house to witness happenings in the family.

One week later, Lâm decided to become a member of the house-building group as a way of repaying debts on behalf of his mother. He followed his mother's advice so that she would get a reward after she passed away. He was going to be 'processed' by Sáu Mộc, like other members of the carpentry workshop. Lâm said that the previous night his mother had asked him to go see Tư Hiền about participating in the charitable group. Lâm stated that his family's economic condition was not good enough for him to contribute money to the carpentry workshop; instead he would join the group of volunteers to build houses for other destitute people. This was important for his self-respect, for it showed he could give charity, even if it was just a little. In broader terms, it also demonstrated the subtle power of the gift to motivate reciprocal action and thereby contribute to the building of social bonds.

Figure 3.4 Lâm joining into the charitable group.

Conclusion

This chapter explores how and why Hòa Hảo Buddhists take part in charitable house building in a rural community. The project of building houses for destitute people, many of whom are strangers, fulfils a doctrinal enjoinder to repay one's existential debts to others, which includes debts to people one might not even know. The gift of a house is meaningful, given the significance the house in Hòa Hảo religious practices, for Hòa Hảo Buddhist laypersons consider the house as 'infrastructure' for self-cultivation (c.f. Larkin 2013). The chapter shows that some Hòa Hảo community leaders have the capacity to mobilise resources for building houses for others. They teach the young how to build houses and take part in charity in the community. In the process of house building, the young, even unemployed migrants, who are considered 'raw wood', take part, which helps build social solidarity and neighbourhood cohesion. The case study in this chapter shows how Hòa Hảo charitable housebuilders can provide not just a house, but moral infrastructure for self-cultivation and community strengthening.

The findings show that the charitable project of constructing houses for the poor had widespread social effects. With regards to social capital, it fostered a positive relationship between neighbours, between the poor and volunteer workers, and among the volunteers

themselves. By spending time in the carpentry workshop, volunteers learned valuable life skills and earned an identity as socially mature and responsible people. Volunteers, carpenters and group leaders were engaged, productive and satisfied in their roles within the house-building group, believing that their efforts helped the poor become self-sufficient and created a more secure community. The key to these positive outcomes was the lead taken by Hòa Hảo Buddhists mentors to create a work environment that supported volunteers to share their energies in charitable work. Charitable house building drew social outcastes into a community and fostered connections among, charitable builders, neighbours and troubled youth. For the house receivers, the gift of a house offered them a base to improve their livelihoods and improve their social profile. It enabled them to provide for their children's future and acquit their filial debts. When the children grow up, they will be known in their community and, in turn, know their roots. The connections forged in the construction of a house created a new sense of self, home and belonging.

Chapter 4

Herbal Medicine Supply Chain:

Participatory Healing and the Work of Self-Cultivation

A crowd of patients swelled around the door of the traditional herbal clinic when a clinical assistant announced it was time to see the herbal healer. The healer's office, used for diagnosing, was neatly arranged with a long wooden table in the middle and two rows of wooden chairs. On the wall was an image of Lê Hữu Trác, considered the ancestral founder of Vietnamese herbal medicine, and pictures of the President Hồ Chí Minh and the Hoà Hảo prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ. On either side of these pictures hung several certificates of merit signed by the local government and the Hòa Hảo Central Committee, awarded to the herbal clinic in recognition of its significant contribution to the community healthcare services. Around 7:00 am, the traditional doctor entered the clinical office in a short-sleeved white shirt. At the age of 65, his short hair was pure white. The doctor was wearing glasses. His eyes were very focused. He looked sophisticated with his rosy face and precise gestures. Just outside his office, over a thousand of patients were patiently waiting to see the herbal doctor.

The crowds flocking to this Hòa Hảo traditional herbal clinic were huge. The number of patients would rival those turning up each day at the outpatient wards of large urban public hospitals. It brought to mind the large crowds going on pilgrimage or attending Buddhist festivals in the Mekong delta. Just as intriguing to me was the capacity of this clinic to meet the demand of more than a thousand patients a day. According to my observations, and as confirmed by the clinic manager, the herbal clinic served about 1,200 patients per day and I learned that sometimes the number could go up to 1,500 patients during the weekend. According to the manager's calculations, that meant the clinic dispensed on average 35,000 - 45,000 dried herbal packages each day, equivalent to about 35 to 45 metric tonnes of fresh herbs a day. I wondered how this herbal clinic could get reliable access to such a large quantity of medicinal herbs and arrange for its continuous production and supply. I wondered who collected and processed these herbs and what motives lay behind their charitable actions. For me one of the most remarkable aspects of

this herbal clinic is that all of the herbal medicines it dispensed each day were entirely free of charge.

This chapter investigates aspects of the herbal medicine treatment offered by the Hòa Hảo Buddhists in the western Mekong delta. The chapter aims to explore how herbal medicine works and also what it means for the people who take part in the collection, production, dispensing and consumption of herbal medicine. Hoà Hảo herbal medicine has roots in 'southern medicine' *(thuốc nam)* — the herbal health tradition prevalent in pre-colonial Vietnam (Marr 1979; Thompson 2015). In the 19th and 20th centuries, prophetic leaders in the western Mekong delta used herbal medicines along with other reputedly magical cures in an attempt to cure serious diseases such as cholera at a time when disease and environmental crises were prevalent, social inequality was growing and public health services and education were of poor quality. Apparent proficiency in such cures was key to the charisma of leaders such as Hòa Hảo prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ and to the following they attracted (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983; Thien Do 2003). The Hòa Hảo herbal clinic featured in this chapter would seem to exemplify this tradition with a charismatic master deploying mysterious techniques and prescribing herbs with reputedly miraculous properties gathered from sacred mountains. The many hundreds of clients per day flocking for this miracle cure could be read as an ominous sign of the inadequacy of modern health services, the ignorance of patients or the trickery or fanaticism of religious providers. Might it signify the utter failure of over a century and a half of modernisation efforts by various states to break the hold of traditional mindsets in the Mekong delta? Or does it suggest a resurgence of magic, superstition and faith healing in response to the anxiety, desperation or moral exhaustion experienced by people struggling with the insecurity and dislocations provoked by Vietnam's assertive neoliberal market reforms (Salemink 2011; Taylor 2004)?

Countering these plausible but superficial conclusions, the chapter suggests that to understand the efficacy of Hòa Hảo herbal treatment, one needs to go beyond explanations that focus on the charismatic healer or the beliefs at play in the clinical encounter to explore the role played by personal self-healing for the people involved in the supply and consumption of herbal medicine. The chapter examines in detail the remarkable scope of the herbal medicine supply network, which involves thousands of people in cultivation, collection, transport, processing, packaging and distribution. This network is a logistical marvel in its own right, but the point of explicating it in such detail is to show how herbal medicine supply creates a framework for numerous ordinary people

to collectively participate in a meritorious activity, partake in meaningful purposive effort and engage in self-cultivation. The chapter describes in detail the experiences and perceptions of the people involved in key nodes and phases of this herbal supply network - from the growing and collecting of herbs through to the processing and dispensing of herbal medicines and the consumption of the herbal medicine at the patients' homes. It searches for a theory of how the traditional herbal remedies work – as well as what drives them and what it means – that combines insights from observing the supply and consumption of medicinal herbs.

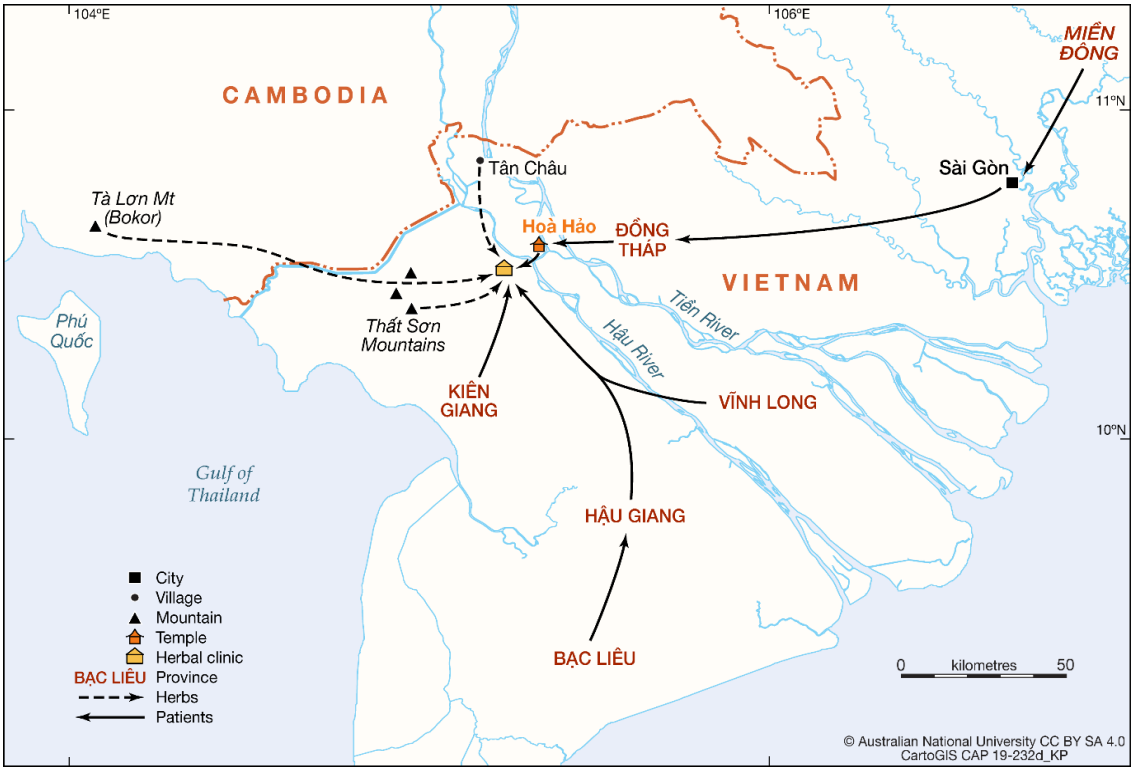

Figure 4.1 Hòa Hảo Buddhist's traditional herbal medicine supply chain.

These activities were observed during the course of my ethnographic research in an herbal medicine clinic in the Hòa Hảo Buddhist heartland of An Giang province in 2016 and 2017. There, I met and interviewed dozens of people involved in collecting and growing herbs, processing and dispensing herbal medicine, and using herbal medicines at home. The interviews and observations gave me insights into the motives and beliefs of herbalists, volunteer workers and patients. In addition to interviews, I participated in various trips for collecting herbs in Thất Sơn mountainous area; harvesting medicinal plants in the plains of Tân Châu and transporting these herbs to the central clinic; and sorting, chopping and packaging herbal medicines inside the clinic. This research, the first to my knowledge that has investigated the scope of Hòa Hảo Buddhist medical

charity, offers a sense of the vast scale and intricate complexity of the network coordinated by Hòa Hảo Buddhist groups in the herbal medicine supply chain.

4.1 'Miraculous' diagnosis and medicine dispensation

Considering the five to six hundred patients waiting outside the diagnosis room on a single morning, I wondered how a sole healer could manage to diagnose and dispense medicines to them all. I did not need to wait long for the answer. Via a loudspeaker, a clinical assistant started to read the name of the first group of 50 patients in numerical order. These patients came to stand in line in front of the office door, ready to see the healer. Another clinical assistant was sitting close to the doctor and quickly passed him each patient's registration paper with their name, age and birthplace. Then, the first five patients came to sit on a long chair facing the doctor. Each patient put both of their hands on top of a small pillow so that the doctor could easily touch on their pulses. Master Tư used two fingers from each hand to gently touch the veins of the patient's hands. His eyes quickly looked at the patient's face. This technique happened rapidly, lasting just two or three seconds. Then the doctor wrote down the herbal remedy on the registration paper. At the same time, his left hand took a few packages of herbal medicine pellets and passed them to the patient. The patient raised their cupped hands to receive the packages of medicine pellets and quickly moved on to give up their seat to the next patient.

The whole process of diagnosing, writing down a prescription and giving basic herbal medicines to a patient took less than 30 seconds. During the diagnosis, the patients did not need to tell their health problems to the healer and the healer also said nothing to the patients. He just quickly passed the small medicine packages to the patients who took them wordlessly and left. As I observed, the process of medical examination and herbal medicine dispensation went on as quickly as products running off a factory's conveyor belt. By using a fast and remarkable technique in an instant process, the herbal doctor could diagnose and dispense herbal medicines to a large number of sick people every day.

Conversing with patients and their relatives, I learned that many of them came to see the herbal doctor because they believed he was endowed with a supernatural and extraordinary ability to heal the sickness. An elderly female patient told me that Master Tư had a talent to see what was wrong inside a human body with only a gentle touch of patient's hands. He could also read the patients' mind with just a quick look at their face. It was miraculous. This patient also explained that the healer's eyes become brighter when he was diagnosing. He looked smart while doing the acts of medical giving. She believed

that Heaven and Gods assisted him at that moment. As a measure of respect for the healer's abilities, the majority of them called him Virtuous Master Tư (*Thầy Tư),* instead of Doctor Tư like in a public hospital.

Grandpa Lương — the oldest member of the clinical assistant staff — told me about how Master Tư had become a famous traditional healer. He said Master Tư came from the Hòa Hảo heartland of Phú Tân, around ten kilometres from the herbal clinic. No-one in his family or circle of relatives was good at traditional healing or had any special knowledge of herbal medicines. Grandpa Lương said:

> One night, Master Tư fell asleep with a strange dream. In the dream, he saw a long-bearded man with a long wooden stick on his shoulder. To the end of the stick was attached a big bag made of grass, filled with herbs. The old man told Master Tư that he would transfer his spiritual ability to Master Tư to heal chronic diseases which he predicted would spread widely in the region in coming years. The old man handed Master Tư a herbal remedy, then disappeared. Master Tư awoke at midnight and quickly wrote down the remedy. He knew most of the herbs in the remedy as these herbs were very common with ordinary people in the Mekong delta, yet he wished to ask the old man which disease this herbal remedy was intended to heal. Unfortunately, on the following nights, he never saw the old man again.

Grandpa Lương continued:

> Over the next days, Master Tư came to ask some experienced herbalists in the region who gave him some advice that it was heaven's will for Master Tư to become a good traditional doctor to save people's lives. These healers also suggested that the herbal remedy given by the old man was to cure liver disease since all herbs listed in the remedy were famed for liver disease treatment. Since that day, Master Tư started his career as an herbalist and his reputation soon spread far and wide, and patients from many parts of the country flocked to this herbal clinic. The patients sought after cures for their sickness and showed their admiration in person to this amazing herbal doctor.

The incredible transformation of Master Tư throughout this story is quite similar to what the Hoà Hảo prophet underwent to become a miraculous healer. After his visits to the sacred mountains of Bokor and Thất Sơn in the late 1930s, the prophet's agitated illness

was suddenly healed. He achieved a great enlightenment after these trips. He had amazing divine powers to treat diseases that he did not have before. The prophet's healing practice focused on using pure water, common medicinal plants and acupuncture to treat all kinds of diseases (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983). He won over thousands of followers by offering them free consultations and performing miracle cures with simple herbs and methods (Fall 1955:151–52). It was said that his methods amazed healers, modern doctors and others in the medical field in that time (Dat Si and Nguyen Van Hau 1972).

Figure 4.2 The traditional herbal healer.

There was some evidence from talking with patients that they saw the herbal treatment as a miracle cure, the herbs as possessing magical properties and the healer as endowed with supernatural charisma. They were particularly awestruck at the healer's powerful ability to know so much about each patient in such a short time with seemingly so little effort. One possible explanation for this quick diagnosis was that the cause of the illness was already known or assumed. Although Master Tư did not communicate this diagnosis to his patients, I found out from speaking with Grandpa Lương that liver disease was the most common disease diagnosis in the herbal clinic. Based on my enquiries, I estimated that around eight out of ten patients came to the clinic to obtain treatment for liver complaints. The majority were males from 35-50 whose eyes were often yellowed, and

their skin of their faces were typically dark. As Grandpa Lương contended, these were classic signs of liver problems. As such, I deduced that by coming to this clinic, patients themselves may already have been diagnosed with liver disease since that is what this herbal clinic is famed for. If so, that may explain why so many people who came here get a liver-related diagnosis and why the healer's diagnoses were so quick and wordless.

Another possible explanation for the swiftness and apparent confidence with which the doctor assessed the individual ailments of his patients could be his rich experience with healing. I learned from Grandpa Lương that Master Tư had been working in this herbal clinic as a traditional healer for more than 30 years. According to Grandpa Lương, the Master had gained competency from this experience, accounting for why, with just the naked eye and a quick touch on the patient's pulse, Master Tư could correctly recognise a disease and immediately prescribe a remedy. However, this is not to say that all patients were treated alike. When completing the prescriptions for every single patient, Master Tư also passed the herbal remedy to another clinical assistant beside him who would get supplemental herbs for this patient. These supplemental herbal medicines were to be boiled and used by the patients over the course of a month at their home. An elderly male patient explained to me that, the number of ground medicine packages received from the herbalist indicated the severity of a patient's sickness. The process of quick and precise herbal medicine dispensation reflected the discriminating nature of the doctor's disease diagnosis. If a patient suffered from a serious sickness, he or she might receive more herbal pellet packages than others.

The methodical treatment performed by Master Tu, including high-speed diagnosis and medicine dispensation performed by Master Tư seemed miraculous to many. However, also important to the confidence patients espoused in the treatments offered by Master Tư was the reputed efficacy of the herbs he prescribed. An elderly patient who had travelled with his wife from Bạc Liêu province told me that he came to this herbal clinic because he had a strong belief that this herbal medicine doctor could provide not only an exact diagnosis, but also an effective herbal remedy to heal his sickness. It was not so much the diagnosis that was exceptional but the remedy. The patient was not able to tell me how the herbs worked to combat his illness. For him, the secret to the treatment on offer was the power contained in the herbs. He explained that the herbs in Master Tư's clinic were very powerful, since most of them had been collected from the sacred mountains of Thất Sơn and Bokor which were believed to be sources of known reliability and purity. Patients had faith in the curative properties of the medicine dispensed by the herbal clinic. As a

result, the efficacy of the traditional herbal treatment offered by the Hoà Hảo healer was widely attested to by many people and in the western Mekong delta (*Miền Tây)* and Southeast Region (*Miền Đông)*.

4.2 Processing herbs, producing merit

The calm efficiency of the herbal doctor as he diagnosed and dispensed treatments to hundreds of patients was an impressive sight to behold. Given his phenomenal workload, it is not difficult to understand why many have attributed the master's abilities to supernatural powers. Yet behind the charismatic front man was an army of Hòa Hảo voluntary staff who were working hard to supply the clinic with its herbs. The supply chain for traditional herbal medicine is large and complex and the people working in each of its links make contributions of religiously inspired significance.

This was immediately apparent in the workshop and warehouse just behind the doctor's diagnosing area, where a hundreds of volunteers were working on processing and packaging of dried herbal medicines. The workshop was more than half a hectare wide and almost filled with herbal packages. As observed, the processes of herbal medicine production were well-coordinated, each aspect with different functions. It took just 30 seconds for a patient to sit at the doctor's desk, receive a diagnosis and take delivery of a small package of herbal medicine. Behind these 30 seconds were dozens of hours of volunteers working on different processes to produce this one herbal package. There were various groups touching hands in the herbal medicine production that included voluntary staff around the clinic, herb collectors far up in the mountains, herb growers down in the delta, and herbs transporters along the Mekong River. There were about a hundred voluntary staff working permanently in the clinic, and the same number of staffs who came here to do herbal medicines on a part-time basis. The organisational system of this free clinic was complex, meeting the constant needs of a massive number of patients every day.

An herbal processing man said:

> These herbs are harvested from Uncle Bảy's farm in Tân Châu district. All sorts of fresh herbs have been stockpiled there, on the riverbank in front of the clinic. Perhaps there is no sunshine today at all. Hence these herbs need to be dried straight away in the drying machine; otherwise the herbs will be going mouldy, resulting in reduced quality.

Traditionally, clinical staff would dry fresh herbs in the sunshine since this was a good way to ensure the herbs maintain their pharmaceutical value. It might take several days to complete this phase of processing. However, this method had many disadvantages, especially in the rainy season, which caused regular shortages of dried herbs and wasted a lot of fresh herbs that could not properly dry in time. Laying out the herbs to dry outdoors and keeping them raked, even and protected also consumed a great deal of labour and it took up a lot of space. Fortunately, the problem was recently solved when a donor donated money to install two drying systems that could process of fresh herbs a day.

The herbal clinic had about thirty to forty voluntary staff who were responsible for transporting, sorting, chopping and drying herbs in the processing area. The majority were middle-aged men who could work full time in the clinic. Younger staff worked part-time in different shifts according to seasonal work demands on their own farms. These volunteers were usually local residents, so they could go home after finishing their tasks. At least three of them used to study mechanical engineering so they knew how to operate the machines and how to dry different kinds of herbs in a proper way. These mechanical experienced staff were usually the leaders of processing groups. They coordinated the team members and could mobilise more staff very quickly, if necessary.

Figure 4.3 Processing men working in the drying area.

It was hot, dusty and noisy in the processing area. The drying and chopping machines seemed to be working at maximum performance. Almost all processing staff were sweating profusely. They said very little to each other due to the loud noise from the operating machines. After the fresh herbs had been dried, they would be transported to the packaging area for another group of staff to complete the next steps. Brother Minh, the team leader of the processing component of production, explained to me:

> Processing staff always attempt to respond on time to the high demand for dried herbs from the herbalist. Although the clinic always needs huge amount of herbal medicines per day, the herbal supply system is very stable since we try to manage the source of dried herbs efficiently to use for a month. Some processes need to be specialised to increase productivity of work such as drying herbs. These activities need some certain knowledge to produce a good product, for instance, how many kilograms per drying cycle and how long to dry the leaves, flowers and branches respectively. But no specialisation is required for simple things like chopping and packaging because it is easy for everyone.

The team leader shared with me that he had worked full time in the processing component for nearly five years. He admitted that working in herb processing was very hard. The staff processed dozens of tonnes of herbs per day. They kept loading and loading every day. Therefore, it required the staff to have good physical health and strong mind so that they could work continuously throughout the day. Brother Minh said:

> There are so many patients on the other side of this door who urgently need herbs. We are young and healthy, so we can contribute our time to help those people who cannot afford to go to the public hospital. In spite of working hard, I feel myself full, happy, peaceful and contented after a working day. My wife and my children always support me to do this charitable work. I occasionally bring my son to the clinic to see how his father does voluntary works. I want my son to learn about humane values so that when he grow up, he can do somethings good for the society.

I then moved to the packaging area, where nine women and four men were sitting nearby a ‘mountain’ of processed herbal medicines. They had been in the clinic since early morning and were constantly putting these dried herbs into small packages. In contrast to the chopping and drying area, the conversational atmosphere in the packing area was lively. These ladies were chatting about their families, crops, pilgrimage plans and

personal emotions. Most of them were elderly and had retired from their farming and now worked full-time in the herbal clinic. An image of the prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ was placed on a wooden altar. Close to the prophet's image, a cassette deck was playing Hòa Hảo Buddhist teachings at a low volume.

Figure 4.4 Male and female volunteers working in the packaging area.

A woman in her mid-fifties told me her story about why she worked in this herbal clinic:

> I was very sick when I reached 50 years old. I lost my mind, so I wandered around many localities, sometimes outside my home district. I did not know who I was. My niece was so tired to look for me every day. One day I incidentally got lost near this herbal clinic. I came to the clinic kitchen for a free noodle. I talked with people and started working with them. Some colleagues told me about the Hòa Hảo prophet and his teachings. I am illiterate, so I learned about prophecy (*Sấm Giảng)* by listening to other Hòa Hảo Buddhists and the recording from that cassette. Amazingly, I felt better since that day.

As I observed, the processing of herbal medicine was industrial in nature, mostly unskilled, highly repetitive, and produced large quantities of identical items in a continuous, mechanical fashion. In the darkened back halls of the clinic, the anonymous

volunteer army squats, dries, chops, sorts, packs and stores, servicing thousands of people they have never met each day. Their work was done under difficult conditions and over long hours, which required great physical stamina, mental and emotional discipline. Nevertheless, unlike many routine factory jobs, the work was not experienced as dehumanising, mechanical and soul-less. Approach it with a spirit of sacrifice, offering their bodies and their labour freely as a gift to the needy. Theirs was a gift which in turn rewards those who made it. In the harsh conditions of the factory and its unvarying routines, these volunteers found honour, purpose and healing.

4.3 Making merit, sacrificing profits

One of the most important sources of ingredients for the herbal clinic are the medicinal herbs grown by Hòa Hảo Buddhists along the Mekong River's banks. Only two decades ago, most herbs utilised for herbal medicine grew wild in the mountains and islands of Vietnam and Cambodia and were gathered by groups of volunteer collectors. However, with the enclosure of mountain land for private plots and use of the slopes for commercial agriculture, tourism and mining, there has been a marked decrease in the availability of wild herbs. Planted herbs have recently played a significant role as an alternative source for medicinal herbs and now contribute nearly two thirds of the total amount of herbs supplied to this central clinic. The cultivation of herbs for medicine could be seen as another link in the herbal medicine supply chain where volunteers have stepped in to make merit by contributing time and resources. This practice was exemplified in the case of Uncle Tư Hương, a better-off farmer, who had a strong will to sacrifice agricultural profit to charity by contributing a large farmland area to grow medicinal plants to supply the herbal clinic.

At a local temple in Tân Châu, Tư Hương had a conversation with Hai Xuân — leader of the commune's herbal collecting team — about the plan to harvest herbs from his farmland the next week. These herbal plants had been planted three months previous since the rain started. The herbal plants were flowering, and the first leaves had begun to fall. Hai Xuân said that the herbs were mature and good enough to be harvested. He suggested:

> The weather in this rainy season is unfavourable for the processing team to dry fresh herbs in keeping its good pharmaceutical quality unless we should organise everything very well to harvest and transport these herbs to the central clinic within one or two days. The clinic has always needed a large amount of this specific kind of herbs for healing liver disease. Like last year, we were very

> responsive to the clinic's urgent need. This year should be the same. It is time bound. The harvesting process requires from 50 to 60 people for collecting herbs and another 10 people for loading and transporting them to the herbal clinic.

Tư Hương was worried about how Hai Xuân could mobilise enough man labours to harvest nearly a hectare of herbs in such a short time. Tư Hương was one of the richest farmers in the village. He owned nearly four hectares of farmland in the commune and a similar amount of land in other localities. Like many rich farmers, aside from farming he also had an agribusiness to provide tractors, combine harvesters and water pump services to local farmers. Looking at the way this man, at the age of 60, spoke to other people, very loudly, frankly and realistically, one would think he was a nominal Hòa Hảo Buddhist and a businessman rather than a key charitable donor who had enthusiastically engaged in various charitable activities in the region. He usually contributed money to organise the commune's Hòa Hảo Buddhist festivals. He also provided financial support to build houses for poor people. More recently, one of the charitable activities that interested him most was supporting the charitable herbal clinic. Over the last five years, Tư Hương had dedicated nearly one hectare of his farmland to grow herbs. He explained his motivation to do so:

> Sickness is a human suffering. I would like to help sick people, yet I am not affordable to support many of them by giving money. Hence, I have chosen another way to provide free herbs to the herbal clinic. As a result, I could assist thousands of patients. I reckon that it is an easy and feasible way to help poor patients on a mass-scale.

Tư Hương usually donated money for the village's herb collecting team to collect natural herbal medicines in the mountains of Thất Sơn. However, as emphasised by these collecting volunteers, the quantity of wild herbs in mountainous areas had recently significantly decreased. They were too worried about a deficit of herbal supply in the near future. Some herb collecting members suggested that some certain herbs could be cultivated in the islet's fertile soil (*đất cồn)* as other crops. The large amount of herbs harvested each crop would help sustain the herbal supply for the central clinic. Tư Hương discussed the issue with his wife and sons. They all agreed to give one hectares of land to grow herbs. The field was nearby the Mekong River *(Sông Hậu)* and where Tư Hương used to cultivate watermelon or onion which usually yielded high profits. He admitted that his family's members were too busy with agribusiness and agricultural production,

so they were unable to actively participate in community charitable activities. Instead of contributing family labours to these charitable activities, he decided to give part of his land to the commune's herbal clinic as a kind of contribution to the community charitable work. Tư Hương admitted that although his name was still listed on the land-use title, he had almost permanently given this land to the commune's herbal charitable group to cultivate herbal plants. 'They can use that area of land for herbs planting as long as they need it,' said Tư Hương.

He recalled:

> After trying several kinds of herb on this farm, Hai Xuân and I have realised that *Mần Ri* plant (*Cleome chelidonii*) can develop very well in this soil. In other places, this plant usually grows up only to the knees; however, it can reach to our heads when growing in this alluvial soil. This herbal plant can serve as a medicine that enhances liver function. I heard that Master Tư often uses *Mần Ri* to treat liver related diseases. All of the stem, leaves, flowers, and roots can be used as medicine. The herbal doctor evaluated that the quality of these plating herbs is as good as those herbs collected in the wild. We can collect about 50 tonnes of this medicinal plant in each three-month crop. It is very productive if comparing to collect them in the nature. The herbal field is also located nearby the riverbank; hence it is easy for boats to transport herbs to the clinic. Since then, we are confident to specialise planting this kind of herb.

When was asked about the cost of planting the herbs, Tư Hương smiled and told me:

> This herb is easy to cultivate since it requires very little labour and no production cost. Usually, we do not need to plough up the land. I only use tractor to quickly clear weeds before seeding herbs. Neither fertilisers nor pesticides were applied in the herbal field. The plant grows up very quickly as in the nature. In the harvest time, we would reserve a corner of the herbal field to get seeds for next crop. The only investment thing is labours for seedling, harvesting and transporting to the clinic. All of these laborers are voluntary. Hai Xuân would be responsible for mobilising voluntary labours, planning and managing the herbal crops. I am responsible for supplying tractor (if necessary) and boat to transport herbs to the clinic. We do not need to pay any other coast for the herbal crop.

Figure 4.5 Harvesting and transporting herbs in Tân Châu.

In the early morning, Hai Xuân had already gathered more than 50 people who were ready to harvest the herbs. Another group of 25 volunteers from neighbouring communes had just arrived to join. Compared to collecting herbs from mountainous areas, which required the herbal collectors to have knowledge of different kinds of herbs, harvesting herbs in the delta was much easier. Everyone, whether male or female, young or old, could participate. An old lady wearing a conical hat said, 'This is simple work. Just pull out the whole bunch of herbs and bundle it into bigger bunches.' In the field, people were talking and laughing while harvesting herbs as though they were at a Hòa Hảo Buddhist festival. One elderly female was looking happy since the herbal harvest at Tư Hương's farm was a good chance for her and her neighbours to earn merit. She said, 'This is the third time I join in this group to harvest herbs. My younger sister has also come. I would never miss this event.' This elderly volunteer's motivation could explain why Hai Xuân could quickly and easily mobilise such a large number of volunteers to harvest herbs.

By dedicating quality land to herbal plantation, Tư Hương made himself visible as a person concerned with charitable practice. He did not use his prime land as a means of accumulating more profits. Instead, he used those fields to grow medicinal herbs for charity. People in his district frequently would mention 'Uncle Tư Hương's herbal medicine field' (*Ruộng thuốc nam của chú Tư Hương*). In this sense, he was looked upon as a good person who was willing to give up production for profit for the sake of charity. People like Tư Hương sacrificed themselves for the religion and were known for doing the right thing. Planting herbs in the field provided a new opportunity for Tư Hương, Hai Xuân and other villagers to actively engage in herbal charitable practice. By sacrifying

personal agricultural profit for herbal medicince planting, Tư Hương was considered a key person who provided a new vehicle for ordinary people in the plain to generate merit.

4.4 Collecting wild herbs on sacred mountains

With suppliers such as Tư Hương's herb farm increasingly coming to the fore, Hòa Hảo herbal healers rely less and less on the mountains as a source of ingredients for their herbal medicine. Yet groups of Hòa Hảo continue to undertake trips to the mountains to collect wild herbs. Their voyages trace the footsteps of the founders of their religion, the holy figures who found enlightenment in the mountains and there commenced their careers as prophets and healers. To this day, these trips are experienced by Hòa Hảo elders as sacred, re-energising and an opportunity to pass on their heritage. For the young they are opportunities to learn from their elders how to better themselves, experience self-cultivation, and connect with their cultural tradition.

Uncle Bé Năm was calling up members of the herbal collecting, saying:

> Our group will travel to the Bảy Núi Mountains (Seven Mountains) tomorrow. I got a request from Master Tư's herbal clinic that some kinds of herbs are running out. I am estimating the amount of herbs needed so that we can make a good plan for the forthcoming collecting trip.

He paused and explained to me:

> On this trip, we plan to collect three tonnes of fresh herbs, focusing on seven kinds of specific herbs as listed on this paper. Here, the first three herbs are common on Tô Mountain. The other three are abundant on Núi Dài (Long Mountain). The last herb is very rare at the moment; however, we might find it on top of Núi Cấm (Forbidden Mountain).

A group of eighteen men and two women gathered nearby Bé Năm's house. Bé Năm wore black pyjamas and a wide hat. He had never cut his hair since his first herbs collecting trip in the Bảy Núi mountainous area 10 years ago. Bé Năm was instructing his group to be ready for the trip and he briefly outlined the trip plan for group members. The distance to the mountains was about 70 kilometres and everyone would travel by motorbikes. The team would stay for five to seven days in a Buddhist temple nearby the collecting area.

Everyone looked excited, as it was the first herbal collecting trip of the year. Brother Nhựt, 20 years old, was carrying a pack filled of clothes and personal items. He was the newest and youngest member of the team. This was the first herbal collecting trip of his life. He turned to me and said:

> This motorbike looks very outdated, but still works very well. I upgraded the engine last week, so it can climb up the mountain along the small strait. It helps to save your time and your legs.

He said that he prepared for the trip several days ago as he was so curious to explore the Sacred Mountains about which he had heard many mysterious stories from his uncle when he was a child. Nhựt told me a short story, which he might have just heard from his uncle the previous night:

> You know, every single mountain in Bảy Núi area, whether large or small, contains gods and powers, and the strength of those divinities is directly proportional to the size of the mountain. My uncle has emphasised that to enter the mountain without the proper preparations is to be certain of anxiety and harm. In some cases, the travellers fall ill, are wounded or become stricken with fear. Someone who uttered wrong words about divine ensembles and deities in the mountain will lose his mind like a madman. In other cases, they see shadows and blue lights nearby big trees, or they hear strange sounds in the caves. Lack of preparation may also cause you to meet with poisonous insects and animals that might harm you.

Brother Nhựt was the youngest son in a Hòa Hảo family. He admitted that he did not know much about the Hòa Hảo prophetic sutras, the *Sấm Giảng,* but he was taught by his parents how to become a good man. To him, the lesson was very simple:

> Do good deeds and avoid doing evil. Whenever I went to the herbal clinic, I saw many sick people. I am not so busy at this time since my maize crop is just started, so I wanted to participate in collecting herbs in the mountains. My uncle also encouraged me to join the collecting group. My parents told my uncle that they want me to participate in charitable activities in order that I could stay away from bad teenagers in the commune. That is why Uncle has tried to attract me by telling many interesting myths about the Seven Mountains. This morning, when my mother prepared food and money for me for the trip, she saw that I was very

excited to join people in the group. She was very pleased. She told me that now you are about to become an herb collector, like your uncle.

Nhựt turned his head to me and said, 'That elderly man, Bé Năm, is my uncle.' Nhựt and I were travelling to Bảy Núi on his motorbike. The group arrived at a temple in a central town in the heart of the Bảy Núi mountainous area. There was nothing much in the temple's courtyard except some herbs remaining from the last collecting trip. Bé Năm disappeared inside. The temple's custodian welcomed the leader and the team since they had known each other for a long time. This temple usually provided free shelters for various herbal collecting groups. We peered inside the dimly lit room. There was a long wooden table where Bé Năm was sat talking to the custodian, who wore a black shirt and black pants. Then, the team leader announced to the team, 'We are not going up to the mountains today. The whole group will freely take a rest during the afternoon. We will start tomorrow. It should be a hard day.'

The two women of the group were responsible for preparing foods and drinks for all members during the trip. In the temple kitchen, Aunt Hai was busy preparing vegetarian foods for lunch. Nhựt and two men gave her a hand cleaning vegetable which were brought from his farm. Aunt Hai had worked as a chief for several charitable rice kitchens in the Hòa Hảo heartland. When she did not travel to the Bảy Núi area with the herb collecting group, she would cook in these kitchens, set up for its poor people. I asked Aunt Hai whether all herbs collectors were vegetarians. She replied that some eat fish, but most of them were *ăn chay trường* (permanent vegetarians). I was too curious, asking, 'If they eat only vegetables, will they have enough energy to climb up to the mountain top?' Aunt Hai smiled at me: 'Let's see these men tomorrow.'

On the floor in the middle of the temple's worship hall, the leader had a quick meeting with his group. He had divided its 18 members into three small groups. Each small group also had a subgroup leader who would assign volunteers to different mountains to collect determined kinds of herbs. At the end of the day, all groups would reassemble in the temple.

After having dinner, the group members rested freely. They were lying on the temple floor. Nhựt was surfing Facebook and chatting with his friends, maybe talking about the trip. Some members were listening to recorded recitations of the prophecy *Sấm Giảng*, others were talking about the mountains, the herbs, the local herb collectors and the forestry officers. They would probably encounter all these things tomorrow.

Bé Năm got up early in the morning. He washed and dressed himself in a long brown tunic, then did his offering of incense and prostrations in front of the indoor altar. He was kneeling in front of the Buddha altar in the middle of the temple. He was praying to Buddha, the Hòa Hảo prophet and the mountain gods for the peace and safety of all members during the trip. Nhựt was concentrated on observing his uncle doing these rituals. This was the first time he had seen his uncle practicing rituals in a non-Hòa Hảo temple. Nhựt said, 'My uncle never missed a trip to the Seven Mountains, except if he was unwell or had an ancestral ceremony at home.'

Early morning, after breakfast, everyone was ready to head up the mountains. The two women stayed in the temple to prepare foods for the next day. I joined Bé Năm's group travelling to the Long Mountain with Nhựt. It took about an hour from the temple to the path providing access to the mountain's slopes. Nhựt's motorbike seemed to work well on the hilly terrain. The group then stopped their motorbikes halfway up the mountain as it was too dangerous to continue by vehicle. We all walked farther up to reach the collecting area by about 9:00 am. I was impressed with how well Bé Năm knew the mountain. He seemed to be familiar with every corner of the forest. He knew the caves and streams where people could get fresh water during the dry season. He could identify a rare herb on a high cliff from a distance. He could remember the exact location of the young herbal creepers that he had left last year in order to harvest this year.

Figure 4.6 Thất Sơn mountains, known for rare and powerful herbal medicines.

On the mountain, Bé Năm began to teach Nhựt how to properly harvest a creeper, saying:

> You should cut this creeper about 0.5 metres from the ground so that it can regenerate in the following years. For the medicinal tubers, harvest only the old

> plants, don't pick the young ones. By doing so, we could preserve the wild herbal medicines for next generations.

Listening to his uncle, Nhựt was awed by his knowledge. Everything on this mountain seemed to be very new to him. He asked, 'Uncle, people say that even a piece of wild grass on the Sacred Mountain could be a powerful medicine'. 'That is true', his uncle replied. 'All plants on this top of the mountain can cure human diseases. The important thing is how we collect and use these herbs properly.'

Collecting herbs on top of the mountain is a strenuous exercise that requires both physical and spiritual effort. According to Bé Năm, collecting members have to take a long trip to the mountainous region, then have to walk up to the mountain top, sometimes barefoot during the rainy season since it is very slippery. I could easily see many scars on the herbs collectors' legs. Bé Năm, collecting herbs was also very hard and dangerous. The collectors used a lot of energy since they had to move a lot in complex and difficult terrains. They would climb a cliff just to collect a small rare herb. They would jump over a ravine to pick up a medical plant because there was no other way to get there. They dared to go into the untouched jungle or a dark cave to get big old creepers. Only those who were brave could do such a thing. Moreover, collectors had to protect themselves from dangerous animals, for instance poisonous snakes. The herbal collectors had to do whatever they could to get pure, good quality herbs. Patients at the clinic might not know how much effort the herb collectors had put in the mountain to collect these medicines.

'How can I collect the herbs on that cliff, Uncle?' Nhựt asked. Bé Năm replied:

> You should go from this side. Don't rush. Take off your sandals while climbing since the rock is too wet. Be careful with the moss. Last year, one young Hòa Hảo fellow was fallen [to dead] in an attempt to collect a herb from a cliff. When you climb up to the cliff, you should pray *Nam mô A di Đà Phật* (the six-word prayer of *Amitabha*) repeatedly; the Buddha will assist you to avoid any danger.

Bé Năm shared with me that in order to collect good herbs, each volunteer used their own experiences, techniques and knowledge. There was an abundance of herbs in the wet season; however, it was not easy to collect the good ones if you did not have much experience recognising them. The collectors could easily identify the herbs based on their leaves and flowers. In contrast, in the hot season, the Seven Mountains were very dry and almost all the leaves had fallen off the trees. Thus, it took more time and skills for the

collectors to pick up the right herbs. However, the herbs collected in the dry season were usually higher pharmaceutical quality than those collected in the wet season.

One thing that usually happened during the trip was that the herbs collectors usually interacted with local farmers who farmed in the mountains. After the Vietnam War ended in 1975, the majority of the Seven Mountain forest land was cleared and transformed into privately owned land. What had once been mostly primary forest was converted into fruit orchards and vegetables patches. This process has been happening even faster in recent years. As a result, the mountain sources of natural herbs have steadily declined. Bé Năm recalled:

> Five years ago, each member could collect 50 kilograms of herbs per day; yet at the present each collector can only pick up from 20–30 kilograms herbs. Most farmers are friendly since they know we are collecting medicines to help the poor. Therefore, they do not mind when we collect herbs on their land, as long as we do not damage their crops. Just simply ask their permission to enter the garden.

Bé Năm emphasised that the Hòa Hảo collectors did not have any problems with the local farmers, but sometimes they had to contend with local herbal collectors who collected herbs for sell. He continued:

> The local commercial collectors arrive on the mountaintop in the very early morning. They collect herbs daily since this is their livelihood. These local collectors usually only collect rare medicinal herbs since they could be sold for more money. They may not know how to preserve the herbs for later harvesting. On some occasions, if we do not collect enough herbs as we expected, we have to buy herbs from these local herbal collectors.

We stopped for lunch on a flat rock where we could have a look down to the plain. The delta below the mountain was all green. The views from the peaks were immense. In the far distance was the Vietnam–Cambodia border and the Bokor, one of the most sacred mountains, nearby the Thất Sơn mountainous area. Everyone was sweaty. The winds blowing up the mountain from the plain made the collectors more comfortable. The group was submerged inside a forest with many layers of sounds, emotions and feelings. A cooler, fresh, and fragrant air enveloped the collecting group. For Nhựt, this was the most invaluable experience of his life as the youngest herbal collector on this sacred mountain.

4.5 The work of self-cultivation

This was the first time Nhựt had such an experience on top of a mountain. He did not mind about his hands, dirty with mud and herb sap. He did not care about his sweaty shirt and broken sandals. He looked happy and satisfied since he had explored many new things in a sacred mountainous place that he had known about only from his parents' narratives. On the mountain, he was in touch with that place and learned many things, from how to collect good medicines using proper methods to how to reserve the young herbs, how to distinguish the common and private properties and protect himself from dangers. This was a knowledge transfer process from an uncle, an old Hòa Hảo Buddhist, to his nephew, a potential new-generation collector, who might continue his mission as an herbs collector. However, Nhựt was learning something else as well.

Bé Năm directed his finger toward Cambodia and explained:

> In the far distance is *Tà Lơn* (Bokor Mountain of the Elephant Chain) which once used to be a Daoist training ground of considerable reputation. The Hòa Hảo prophet set foot on that mountain just one month before he attained enlightenment and founded Hòa Hảo Buddhism in 1939. Like the Seven Mountains, more than being a repository of special wild herbs and powerful medicinal plants, animals and other products, it was home to magicians, or men of knowledge. And, where we are standing now, these seven mountains, offer reclusive shelters to healers and meditators for ascetic living and training. In other words, the ultimate environment for self-cultivation. Have a look in this cave. A Daoist used to stay here to practice self-cultivation.

Nhựt did not want to go into the cave as he saw it was quite dark. Instead, he jumped onto a big stone near the cave to look at the landscape. He looked across to the top of Forbidden Mountain on the other side of the valley. Bé Năm pointed out an outcrop on the slopes of the neighbouring mountain:

> That is *điện Bồ hông* (cave), the highest point of *Núi Cấm* (Forbidden Mountain). It is not unusual to hear rumors about the coming great explosion in this mountain marking the end of the Low Era. A hidden golden flagpole, its base under the mountain, will appear at that point from which a future leader will emerge.

Taking a rest, Bé Năm told me that on this mountain 10 years ago, his life course was completely transformed.

My parents were Hòa Hảo Buddhists and they were keen on doing charity. In contrast, I used to be a bad child. When I grew up, I had many drinking peers who had dropped out of school at an early age. I did not follow my parents' advice and that made them very displeased. They sent me to a temple to learn the *Sấm Giảng* prophecy to become more mature. But they failed since I did not want to stay in the temple for long. I got drunk and went out overnight with friends very often. Sometimes I was fighting against young men from neighbouring villages. My parents were not happy with my behaviour. One day they decided to get a wife for me, hoping I could become a good man after I got married. However, I kept drinking and ignored my wife since I was addicted to alcohol and I wanted to be free. My parents felt hopeless.

One day, *Ông Đạo* (a Daoist) from the Seven Mountains came to visit my father. He knew my story. He asked me whether I would like to do something new by joining an herb collecting group who would travel to the Seven Mountain the following day. I agreed, but really was not sure what I would learn from the trip. But I wanted to explore something new in the mountains and the forest. I remember that was a long trip, lasting nearly a month. I had never stayed away from my family for so long. But I found it was very valuable. During the trip, *Ông Đạo* told me many legends about the Seven Mountain area. More important, he taught me how to behave well to others, particularly to those in the collecting group. I was exhausted so I got sick right after the trip. Yet I recovered very quickly. I stopped drinking after that day. I also gave up smoking after the second trip. I told my wife and my parents that I would like to permanently join the group as an herb collector. They all were very happy about my decision. I was not a permanent vegetarian and only took meatless meals four days a month: the first, 15th, 16th and 30th days of the lunar month. Now I have become a permanent vegetarian. I feel fortunate to have met that Daoist. He enlightened my mind. He was my teacher.

When I asked him what personal benefit, he got from this voluntary but hard work, Bé Năm replied that he had climbed up the mountains for almost 10 years. It had been like doing exercise every day. He had hardly ever been sick since he participated in this herb collecting. Also, he was fond of the smell of herbs. He said he liked this work. He shared with me that after each trip, he felt happy and he could sleep well. On the top of a mountain, his mind was peaceful. Those were the direct benefits. He pointed out that he

would keep doing this activity as long as he was still healthy. Bé Năm turned to remind Nhựt to move carefully to preserve the trees and vegetables of local farmers.

The herbs collecting group came back to resume work in the afternoon. I went back to the temple on Bé Năm's motorbike. On the way, he shared with me a story about Nhựt. He confessed that he could see his nephew as a reflection of his own rebellious childhood. Therefore, he wanted to help him to become a good and helpful person in this society by taking him herb collecting in the Seven Mountains. Nhựt was not really such a bad boy, but he had dropped out of secondary school because he had spent more time in the Internet games studio than in the classroom. He had been addicted to video games. This was dangerous at his age since he seemed to lose consciousness of time. He sometimes played games all day without eating. He went to the Internet shop whenever he had money. Bé Năm emphasised that what determines the possibility of improving one's life is known as *Duyen* (karmic connection), or predestined affinity: 'It links one's life with those once lived and with lives yet to come. It is thus by *Duyen* that one meets one's teacher, as I met the Daoist.'

I replied, 'Now you have become your nephew's teacher.' He agreed. He said he wanted to pass the responsibility of collecting herbs to him although it was too early to say. Over time, Nhựt could master the experiences and skills required and acquire enough knowledge to be able to help many people. Bé Năm told me many things about the person he would like his nephew to become in the future. Therefore, what the uncle expected of his nephew was not just the gaining of experience and knowledge about collecting herbs. Also, through the many legends and religious stories Bé Năm had provided the nephew on top of the sacred mountain, he also wanted his nephew to be capable of self-correcting (*Tự sửa*) and self-regulating (*Tự chủ*) in his mind and actions.

4.6 Medicinal consumption as self-cultivation

Perhaps the most vital set of links in the entire Hoà Hảo herbal medicine supply chain is found in countless homes in the Mekong delta and elsewhere, where herbal medicines are consumed by patients over a prescribed course of healing. Herbal medicine (*thuốc nam)* has long been a traditional remedy and medical mainstay in rural Vietnam, and the Mekong delta is no exception (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983; Thien Do 2003; Thompson 2015; Wahlberg 2006). David Craig (2000) discovered that Vietnamese traditional medicine has many effective uses to heal patients' sicknesses and is 'linked with concepts of identity, familiarity and compatibility, whereas Western medicine is widely perceived to

be harmful and hot, needing to be restricted' (Craig 2000:703–711). Owen (1998) argues that, in contrast with much of orthodox medicine, spiritualist healing is predicated on the successful interaction between healer and recipient and a commitment to the key factor of holistic care. The spiritualist healing exchange usually involved a 'top-down' flow of vital energy or power from the herbal doctor directed toward the sick person (Owen 1989:108). Similarly, common perceptions of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương *thuốc nam* healing tradition concern the transmission of remedies from powerful healers or prophets to receptive patients or followers. For instance, the Buddha Master and True Eremite Ngô Lợi usually performed spiritualist healing practices, including hydropathy, or the water-cure, and the distribution of amulets for patients to gain miraculous defence against the cholera outbreaks of 1849 and 1867 (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983). The Hoà Hảo prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ also applied freshwater and simple herbs to cure many diseases.

However, the modern version of Hoà Hảo herbal medicine does not just rely on the healer; it is also very much about patients' self-healing. What I observed in this Hoà Hảo herbal clinic shows that contemporary herbal medicine represents a model of participatory healing, as patients themselves actively engage in the healing process. I learned this by talking with patients and herbalists about what patients expected from the herbal remedy and how the herbal medicine was supposed to work. A commonly mentioned example of self-treatment in these discussions concerned alcohol-related diseases.

Speaking with patients and others who came to Master Tư's herbal clinic, I heard that many people these days have come down with liver problems. It is widely reported that Vietnam is now ranked first in Southeast Asia and third in Asia for consumption of beer and alcohol.[24] Liver complaints can be seen as a 'lifestyle disease' as the number of people inflicted has increased. Liver disease is usually associated with bad habits such as drinking, smoking, eating disorders and the socialising lifestyle of men. Nowadays, people tend to drink at any time and in any place to promote social cohesion. Businessmen are frequently enjoined to drink when making business deals. Civil servants sometimes abuse alcohol in response to social environments. Farmers usually drink during the sowing and harvesting times. Drinking at birthday, wedding parties and death anniversaries has been penetrating every corner of the western Mekong delta. In such

[24] In 2013, beer consumption in Vietnam was 32 liters per head, ranking first in Southeast Asia and the third biggest beer consumer in Asia, behind China and Japan *(Vietnamnet 2014)*.

cases people frequently drink to excess. It is this lifestyle that has led to the increase in people suffering from liver problems.

This research finds that one of the most distinctive aspects of Hoà Hảo herbal medicine is the expectation of 'self-healing'. In fact, the real efficacy of herbal remedies comes from the self-healing of the individual patient to overcome the phenomena of suffering, ignorance, and misguidedness. Before coming to the herbal clinic, patients might be thoughtless, mindless or lacking in self-discipline. They might drink alcohol and consume food carelessly. They might be easily swayed by peers and follow social norms and pressures. When they get sick, they come to see the herbal doctor for a diagnosis and to receive herbal medicines. Yet, the cure begins when the patients return home, as they cook and use the herbs for 30 or more days. In the first instance, the herbal remedy prescribed to patients at the clinic requires a period of enforced abstinence. When the patients take the packages of herbs, they received an instruction from the healer: 'Avoid eating too much fat. And definitely stop drinking alcohol', which reminds them that they need to adjust their daily practices if they want to heal the disease. Therefore, if there is to be a cure it happens at home, where the patients started cooking and using the herbs.

Patients' consumption of herbal medicines is perceived as a form of self-cultivation since it demands that the patients participate in a process of self-regulation and self-control. People who attended the clinic were frequently told the story of a local young man who died the previous year due to a liver complaint. He had lived near the herbal clinic. Almost all the villagers knew him as an alcoholic who frequently insulted his wife and scolded his mother when he got drunk. No one, even elderly men or hamlet police, could advise him to stop drinking and behaving badly to his family members and the neighbours. Gradually, his tummy got bigger and the skin became black as he was in the last stage of liver disease. His wife and mother repeatedly insisted he see Master Tư to heal liver disease, yet he opposed the master's treatment, even though it took only 10 minutes to walk from his house to the herbal clinic. Then, modern doctors in the district hospital refused to heal his liver disease because they thought it was incurable in the late stage of disease. Once he seemed to be hopeless, he agreed to visit the herbal clinic with his wife. The clinical staff and villagers were very surprised since they knew that he had never believed anything. However, while waiting outside the clinical office for a diagnosis, he read some religious beliefs associated with sickness and herbal medicines[25] on the clinic

25 Rủi ốm đau bởi tại căn tiền, (Previous karma resulted in present sickness,

office's door. He also heard the people around him talking about the herbalist's instructions forbidding patients from drinking alcohol during the course of using herbal medicine. He doubted the efficacy of the doctor's advice, as he thought the doctor's message was to illustrate a religious lesson rather than curing a disease. He refused the herbal treatment, so went home straightaway without saying anything to his wife or the clinical staff. He kept drinking as usual. One month later, he died at home when he was 30 years old.

Uncle Ba Nguyên, a clinical assistant who had worked in the clinic for 10 years and had basic knowledge of herbal medicines, explained to me why patients and villagers kept talking about this man's story. They wanted to emphasise his case as a lesson for those who get a serious disease but are too conservative, aggressive and full of hatred to use the traditional herbal remedies. This man died because of his own karma. No one could save his life, not even the master. The healer emphasised that to cure the disease, patients should first avoid social ills (e.g. drinking) and follow the moral rules, then take the doctor's remedies. To do this, they should be self-controlled and correct their own actions before talking about the efficacy of any kinds of medicine.

In addition to receiving instructions to abstain from alcohol, the patients received 30 packets of herbs that they must boil and drink over the course of 30 days. The herbs armed them with a material substitute for alcohol, a substance to be consumed each day and thus, in an important sense, served as a replacement for alcohol. They also came with a structured regime, which required that patients prepare and drink the herbal remedy three times each day, giving them a framework of action that might allow them to exercise control. The course of herbs also provides a structure of hope, something to aim for during the course of their abstinence.

I was unable to get a precise explanation from anyone at the clinic about how the herbs worked: the essential properties of the herbs or the material effects that they have on a patient's body. Herbal healers explained the curative nature of herbal medicine as something that treats the root cause of the disease, not its symptoms. As Tư Hiền explained, herbs are very complex and cannot be patented in their whole form. A single herb is made up of hundreds and thousands of known constituents. Compounding herbs makes the effects of that particular mixture very different from the action of the individual

Vì tiền kiếp làm điều bạo ác… This bad karma is due to the evil and immoral acts in previous lives)

herbs. Taking some certain kinds of herb with water over a long period helps the human body gradually detoxify. Herbal medicines might not heal disease or kill the pain immediately the same way as modern medicines do. Instead, they are a long-term treatment that may take several months to a year, or even several years, to take effect. Therefore, the patients must continue using the remedy of the same doctor until the sickness is completely cured. Tư Hiền mentioned about the psychological and moral effects of using herbal medicine on sick people. Unlike Western medicine, herbal remedies needed to be taken over a long period of time and require lengthy preparation and many applications. Using medicine like this requires patience.

These points can be illustrated by one case of home-based treatment I observed that was undertaken by a patient I first met at Master Tư's herbal clinic. Aunt Năm had come from the Định Yên Commune in Đồng Tháp province with her nephew, Huy, who had recently been diagnosed with liver disease. This was the second time she had visited the herbal clinic. Aunt Năm and Huy brought me to visit their house in Định Yên and explained to me how the herbal remedy worked.

Inside the house in Định Yên, Huy was cooking the herbs from Master Tư's clinic. He would try these herbs for 30 days before returning to see the healer for further advice. The cooking process might take three hours per day. Huy carefully checked the kettle several times to make sure it did not run out of water and caused the herbs to burn. He waited patiently near the wooden stove. When the water in the kettle condensed from three cups to nearly one cup, Huy stopped the fire and poured the hot liquid into a cup. Aunt Năm had just come from her house, which was next door to Huy's. She advised Huy that he should put incense batons or chopsticks over the cup of herbs while waiting for it to cool down. This would help retain the quality of the herbs inside the cup. Furthermore, incense or chopsticks could prevent 'child spirits' from drinking the herbs or making the medicine dirty. She reminded Huy that just before drinking the herbs, he should silently pray to the ancestors of herbal medicine and to his own ancestors to heal the disease. Huy looked at me and smiled. He was reluctant to practice that ritual since he had never done it before, especially when using Western medicines, yet he followed Aunt Năm's instructions. 'The herbs are so bitter. It's so hard to drink the lot'. Huy frowned when taking the medicine.

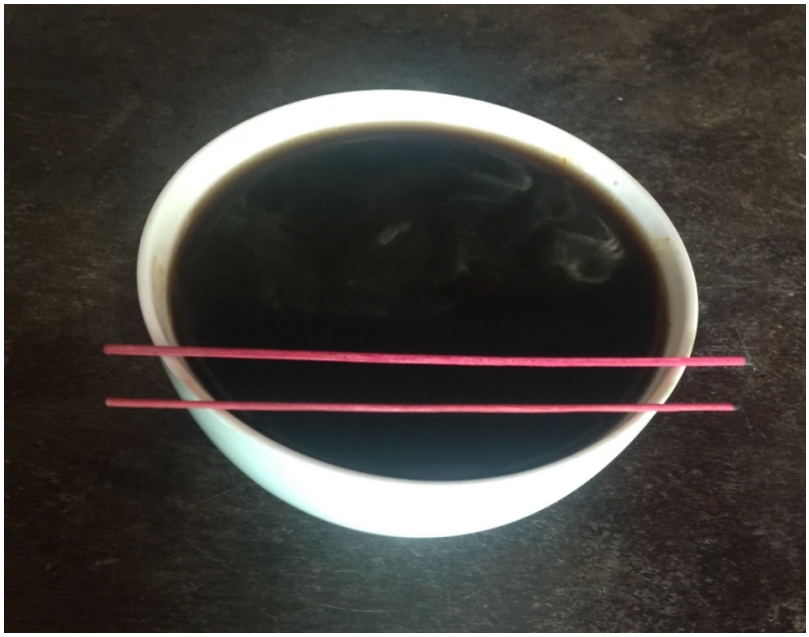

Figure 4.7 Cooked herbal medicine.

According to Aunt Năm, Huy's course of using herbs entailed a process of personal transformation. She said he had travelled a long distance from Đông Tháp to the herbal clinic in An Giang for a diagnosis and to get medicines. He asked her how to clean, cook and consume the herbs the proper way. He promised himself not to gather with friends anymore, or at least minimise joining his peer group for drinks while using the herbs. He made a plan with a specific time of the day to take the herbal remedy continuously for a month. He might take another month or more of the treatment until his liver disease is completely cured.

In this way, the herbal remedy helps cure the disease, but it is not in itself the cure. The medical treatment is just part of a curing process. The process of self-treatment is the actual cure because, for the herbs to work, the patient must learn how to be disciplined and plan methodically. They must stop drinking alcohol when using the herbal medicines. They have to prepare and drink the herbs every day. The patients must learn to control themselves and avoid harmful social pressures and habits. In other words, neither the doctor nor the herbs healed the patient, rather healing requires that patients be thoughtful, self-controlled and persistent. It requires the patient to be more self-regulated. Therefore, the result of the curing process is not just a healthy physical body, but rather the production of self-cultivating individuals.

As such, herbal remedies are also a moral cure. As Tư Hiền emphasised, a long course of taking herbal medicines not only helps a person recover from sickness, but also helps

them to become more calm, gentle, patient and forgiving. Indeed, this aspect of the healing process begins in the clinic, where patients can see various circumstances of those who were suffering from similar ailments of sickness, poverty and hopelessness. No matter if you are rich or poor, on visiting the harbal clinic, you could not avoid witnessing the suffering of people struck down by illness. Patients can learn how to sympathise and share their emotions with those who have the same circumstance. They could also see how industriously voluntary people worked in the clinic to supply medicines that are good but completely free. Emulating their example and practicing the disciplines of mindfulness and self-control restructures the *selfhood* of a patient.

Conclusion

This chapter explores how the Hòa Hảo Buddhists provide charitable herbal medicines to people in need via a large-scale, complex and coordinated supply chain. To meet the needs of a substantial number of poor patients, groups of Hòa Hảo Buddhists work every day in a variety of locations to grow, gather and produce a large quantity of herbal medicine. The work required for herbal medicine production includes collecting wild herbs in mountainous areas, growing medicinal plants in the plain and processing herbs and dispensing herbal medicines at the clinic. There are all voluntary activities that demands commitment, emotional discipline and physical and mental effort. However, the Hòa Hảo herbal medicine supply chain is more than a means of producing and dispensing herbal medicine. With its multiple nodes and intensive demands on contributors' time and labour, the supply chain provides many opportunities for Hòa Hảo Buddhists to practice self-cultivation and earn merit. Through the various stages of processing and dispensing herbal medicine in the herbal clinic, clinical assistants and processing staff collectively participate in the herbal medicine supply chain with purpose of helping the society. They voluntarily devote their time, labour and expertise to provide free medicines for the sick.

In performance of dedicating fertile land for herb cultivation, a rich Hòa Hảo farmer felt meaningful since he sacrifices individual production profit, which against the natural logic of profit making, for societal wellbeing and beyond, sacrifice himself to the religion, and therefore to the righteousness. This farmer's personal performance also provides a good opportunity for his fellow Hòa Hảo to earn and accumulate merit. On the mountain, the work of herbal collecting involves physical and spiritual effort, care, selectivity, skill and knowledge. As volunteers search for herbs on the sacred mountain, a new generation

of Hòa Hảo youths are inducted into the setting, stories and practices at the heart of their tradition of self-cultivation. The herb collecting leader saw his role as moral guides and transmitters of the tradition to the next generations. Many Hòa Hảo Buddhists structured their whole life around herbal medicines *Thuốc nam* and supplying the herbal clinic also give them an opportunity to make merit and practice self-cultivation.

This chapter also uncovers that the consumption of herbal medicine can be distinguished as a form of self-healing since consuming herbs requires patients to get involved in a process of self-regulation and self-control. To treat the sick body by consuming herbs is only part of the herbal remedy. Also inherent to the remedy is the patients' self-treatment. For the herbal remedy to work, patients must learn control, discipline and mindfulness to avoid social ills. The process of consuming herbal medicine is therefore a process of self-cultivation. Patients who consume Hòa Hảo herbal medicine participate in a vast herbal medicine supply chain that restructures the selfhood of all who engage in it.

Chapter 5

The Great Unity:

Hoà Hảo Charity and Social Solidarity in the Frontier

Uncle Hưng, a 55-year-old Kinh emigrant, told me about the precarious natural and social environment of Vĩnh Điều, a frontier commune on the Vietnam–Cambodia border. He explained how Hòa Hảo Buddhists have recently brought new social values into this formerly wild and violent frontier milieu:

> Since the early 2000s, a number of Hòa Hảo farmers from the Hòa Hảo heartland have come to Vĩnh Điều to purchase farmland for rice production. These advanced farmers from An Giang province, the centre of rice production in the Mekong delta, typically had rich experience in growing high-yield rice varieties. These farmers also had the knowledge and technologies to deal with high acidification for rice production, which the Khmers and local Kinh farmers failed to manage for many years. Thanks to their rich experiences, financial capital and efficient machines, these Hòa Hảo farmers were confident to accumulate large areas of farmland in Vĩnh Điều. Thanks to these Hòa Hảo farmers, mechanised ploughs, tractors, water pumps, motorboats, small trucks and combine harvesters have become prevalent in the area. The village's agricultural landscape dramatically changed as most rice fields, abandoned by the Khmers and local farmers during the 1990s due to acidification and saline intrusion, are again coloured green by the high-yield rice varieties.

Uncle Hưng went on to emphasise that one member of these Hòa Hảo families had recently constructed a Buddhist temple at the edge of the village that also functioned as a charitable hub, providing medical care and charitable assistance for the underprivileged Khmer families in the frontier. The Khmer landless poor families frequently receive material and spiritual support on special Buddhist occasions when they visit the Hòa Hảo temple. Also, children from these families have better opportunities to go to school thanks

to the support available from the temple. Furthermore, a thousand of Khmer patients, on both sides of the border, have benefited from the Hòa Hảo herbal clinic.

Uncle Hưng told me that he initially saw this Kinh lady's acts of generosity towards the Khmers as strange, owing to the hostile relationship that existed between the two ethnic groups in the past. He recalled the brutal 1978 attacks of the Khmer Rouge troops into many Vietnamese villages along the border, during which almost all residences along the border had been burnt down. The Khmer Rouge killed thousands of innocent people, particularly the Kinh residents in the nearby town of Ba Chúc. He called the Khmers on both sides of the border the same term, *Miên*, meaning 'Cambodians', and implied that they were lazy, backward and underdeveloped as a people. He shared with me that local Kinh people especially hated the Khmers because they believed the Khmers had supported the Khmer Rouge during the war to kill Kinh people and destroy Kinh villages. Such bad memories amongst Kinh people have made the relationship between Kinh and Khmer ethnic groups uneasy, even though the war was over 40 years ago. Like Hưng's point of view, Lan (2015) highlights that negative stereotypes about the Khmer and Kinh ethnic groups — rooted in the border war between Cambodia and Vietnam in the late 1970s — are still strong in the frontier areas. The memories of historical tensions have led to the development of pejorative stereotypical judgments towards each other's ethnic groups, which further widens the distance between them. While documenting the occurrence of Khmer–Kinh interethnic marriage, Lan also emphasises that many Kinh people see Khmer–Kinh interethnic marriage as abnormal and impossible because of the significant socioeconomic gap between the two ethnic groups.

Hưng was a retired communist cadre who left his home village of An Biên — a communist base area during the Vietnam War — for Vĩnh Điều in the late 2000s to seek out a new opportunity in rice production. He came to Vĩnh Điều to assist his brother-in-law, also from An Biên and now a key leader of Vĩnh Điều, who had accumulated a large area of farmland due to his powerful influence in the commune. It was commonly commented by local people that the benefits to these local governments came at the expense of the local Khmers and small-holding Kinh farmers who had failed in operating their farms, causing them to abandon the land and flee to their home village. Similar stories were told by Khmer villagers that described the social disparity between large-scale land holders and the landless, and between current local cadres and ordinary Kinh and Khmer people in the area. The economy of the frontier seemed to be developing, however, its social problems were acute. In this socially divided, amorphous and marginal

frontier context, the Hòa Hảo brought a new value of solidarity by providing care and other charitable support for poor and landless Kinh and Khmer farmers, regardless of ethnicity, helping rich and poor alike, and even extending charity to sick, retired cadres.

Hoà Hảo is a millenarian Buddhist sect that emerged in the Mekong delta on the eve of the Second World War. Scholars of Vietnam describe the Hòa Hảo as a sect that emerged in the Mekong delta during a time of socio-cultural crisis to provide solidarity to residents experiencing anomie and the disintegration of traditional community, familial and political bonds (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983; Jamieson 1993; McAllister and Mus 1970; Wolf 1969). The Mekong delta is a frontier area that was incorporated into Vietnam in the 18th and 19th centuries. It is a multi-ethnic region that became a major destination for migrants from elsewhere in Vietnam as well as from other countries. Colonised by France, it grew wealthy as a rice export-producing colony; however, in the early 20th century it experienced booms and busts, social inequality and severe social dislocation. Faiths such as the Hòa Hảo, founded by a prophetic figure in 1939, sprang up in a context of social amorphousness and extreme social inequality. The Hòa Hảo religion provided inhabitants of the delta — landless itinerant workers, migrants from other regions and people from different families, localities and classes — with a spiritual community and a new sense of belonging, protection and purpose.

It is therefore not out of character with this tradition to see the Hòa Hảo sect today offering social cohesion to strangers in the contemporary frontier context of Vĩnh Điều. However, many studies on the Hòa Hảo have also drawn attention to sectarians' tense relationships with other political and religious groups in their locality (Chapman 2013; Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983; Marr 1971, 1981; Taylor 2001, 2013; Woodside 1976). The Hòa Hảo tend to pursue their own frequently exclusivist visions of a post-colonial order (Fall 1955). Several studies chart the conflictual relations between ethnic Kinh and Khmer groups since the settlement of Kinh people in the Mekong delta in the 18th century. As Lan (2015:4), notes, such studies provide in-depth analysis ranging from segregation and preferential avoidance between these two groups to inter-group enmity and overt conflict (Biggs 2010; Brocheux 1995; McHale 2013; Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong 1992; Taylor 2014a, 2014b; Thach 2004; Choi Byung Wook 2004).

Historically, one group that the Hòa Hảo strongly fought against were the ethnic Khmers whom they displaced from their homes along the freshwater rivers of the Mekong delta (Taylor 2013). Based on oral histories gathered in Ô Môn of Cần Thơ province, Philip

Taylor described the relationship between the local Khmers and the Hòa Hảo during the 1940s anti-French resistance war as highly conflictual. The Khmers saw the Hòa Hảo as a great danger, even more than the French, during the war when many Khmer villages and wats were attacked by the Hòa Hảo armed forces. According to elderly Khmers interviewed by Taylor, during the fierce fighting between local Hòa Hảo and Khmers, many people died, and many houses were burnt. The Hòa Hảo picked off Khmer family members one by one while they were out fishing, taking rice to the market or staying at home. Eventually, the Khmers, who were outnumbered in Ô Môn, abandoned their houses and fields and fled to the marketplace. When the war was over, the Khmers came back to their home villages and wats, however, they were entirely surrounded by Vietnamese families. These Khmers tried to eject the Vietnamese who had occupied their land but were unsuccessful (Taylor 2013:500-41).

The Hòa Hảo religion was also described by previous scholars as a localist and parochial faith (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983; Marr 1971; Woodside 1976). After the disappearance of the prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ, the Hòa Hảo sect was split as key Hòa Hảo leaders formed different private armies and ruled over their own autonomous localities in the western Mekong delta, collecting taxes and operating protection rackets with armed bands. They formed the Bảo An units (Self-defence Force) to guarantee the internal security of 'Hòa Hảo villages'. From 1947 to 1954, no Việt Minh were able to operate their armed forces in the areas under the Hòa Hảo's control. In particular, An Giang province, the centre of the Hòa Hảo zone of control, became famous as the most secure province in the south of Vietnam during the war. The Hòa Hảo also made the localised boundary between them and others to provide care supports for people inside their controlled territory (Nguyen Long Thanh Nam 2003).

It is fair to conclude that earlier scholarship has depicted the Hòa Hảo as 'a conflict-prone sect', unable to cooperate with other social groups. The sect has been portrayed as a worldly religion, yet one that was localised, exclusivist and prone to violence. However, this information about the Hòa Hảo mostly relates to the activities of some sectarians during wartime and requires updating, given that Vietnam has been at peace in excess of four decades. Also, scarcely any ethnographic work has been done with Hòa Hảo communities. Therefore, the existing literature, which stresses conflict and enmity between groups, may not provide a balanced portrait of Hòa Hảo dealings with other groups on an everyday basis and in times of peace. Indeed, the revelatory testimonies by the communist retired cadre, the Khmers and the Hòa Hảo sectarians of Vĩnh Điều offer

new insights into Hòa Hảo interactions with other political and ethnic groups, and the faith's capacity to integrate and assimilate a variety of peoples in a socially amorphous, newly settled area along the Vietnam–Cambodia frontier. The findings of this thesis contradict the notions of previous scholars by highlighting peaceful and charitable intercultural practices of Hòa Hảo Buddhists in the modern time.

This chapter examines relations between a Hoà Hảo healer and her patients, including ethnic Kinh, ethnic Khmers, Cambodians and retired Vietnamese communist cadres. The chapter explores how healing in the Hòa Hảo herbal clinic is inclusive and involves the participation of groups with whom the sect was formerly in conflict. This ethnography finds that the Hoà Hảo continue to build social solidarity in a pluralist frontier region, but do so for a more inclusive set of relationships than was previously recognised. As such, the chapter describes Hòa Hảo charity as an example of vernacular development, a grassroots indigenous and informal alternative to top-down or formal development.

The herbal clinic is a means by which this socially engaged faith demonstrates a capability to integrate disparate social groups and engage them in a united social network, construed in Hòa Hảo philosophy as *Thế giới Đại đồng,* or The Great Unity. The concept of the Great Unity is rooted in the Hòa Hảo worldview as the main tenet of 'repaying debts to fellow men and mankind'. The prophet emphasised that:

> People should treat their fellow countrymen well because they are of the same race, tradition and culture, history and language. They must be graceful to surrounding people and assist those in misfortune since they are of the same root in the same country (Sấm Giảng Thi Văn Toàn Bộ 1966:183–84).

Furthermore, the Hòa Hảo prophet extended the harmony of building solidarity to people beyond the national boundary, observing:

> Besides our fellow men, there are other peoples in the world who are working hard to supply us with necessities. They are the human race, those who live with us on the earth. Hence, we must be graceful to them. We must think of them as we do of ourselves and of our own compatriots. There must be no discrimination of race. We should take responsibility to help them in case of distress regardless of their skin colour, race and social status according to the spirit of mercifulness and altruism (ibid.).

This chapter explores the acts of charitable giving of Hòa Hảo Buddhists in a herbal clinic in Vĩnh Điều, a frontier commune along the Vĩnh Tế canal, beside the Vietnam–Cambodia border (Figure 5.1). The research draws upon three months of ethnographic observations and oral conversations with local ethnic Kinh and Khmer farmers, Cambodian nationals and retired communist cadres who visited the herbal clinic during the course of healing sickness. The study relies on the oral life histories of key informants such as Uncle Hưng — a communist retired cadre — and interviews and observations with Kinh and Khmer patients and a Hòa Hảo female healer to examine the disparities and interactions between social groups in the frontier context and the role played by Hòa Hảo charity as an integrating and healing practice.

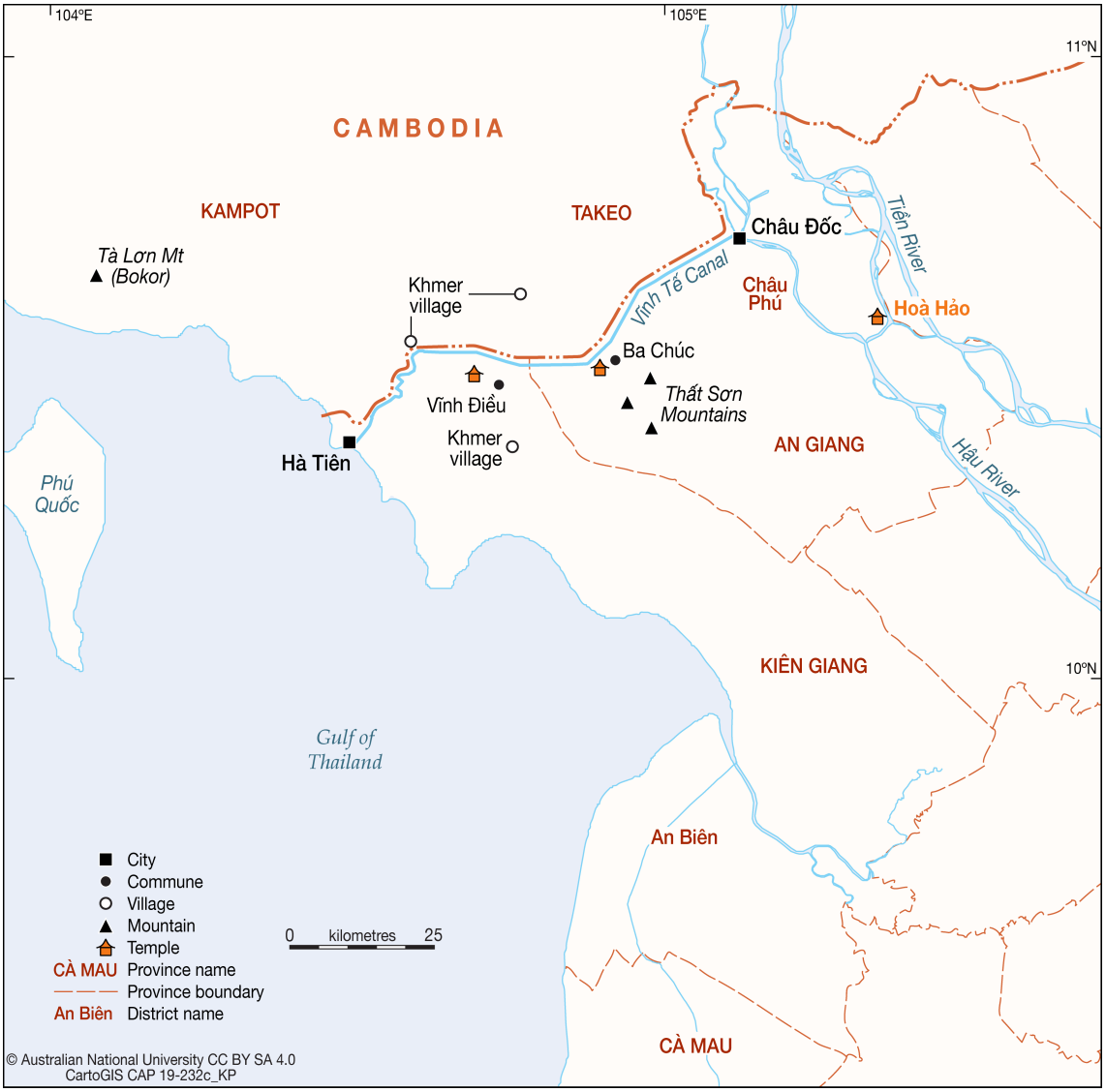

Figure 5.1 The frontier setting and Hòa Hảo temple in the Vĩnh Điều commune.

5.1 The precarious frontier milieu

Vĩnh Điều is among the most ecologically, socially and culturally precarious milieus of the frontier area. Local people explained to me that the soil has a high acid-sulphate content, which makes it marginal for agricultural production. Freshwater is critically scarce in the dry season due to low water flow and acidification. The roads between settlements within the commune are all muddy in the wet season. The scattered pattern of settlement along a dense canal network creates isolation between different groups of villagers. According to an elderly villager, the history of this frontier settlement is related to the migration movements of different social groups. Before 1975, the population of this swampy forested area was around one thousand Vietnamese Kinh and Khmers. Although the Khmers were perceived as local residents, the Kinhs comprised the majority of the population. The majority of Kinhs, originally from Ba Chúc, migrated to this area during the decolonial period. They built houses on stilts and grew floating rice along the Vĩnh Tế canal. The Khmers were concentrated in Phum Lò Bom (*Tra Péang Touk* in Khmer), about 10 kilometres from Vĩnh Tế canal towards Kiên Lương. These Khmers had been settled in the region for a long time and had close connections to the Khmers in Cambodia. Due to the cultural differentiation, the connection between the Khmer and Kinh people was, however, relatively weak. The Khmers called the Vietnamese Kinhs *Việt*, while the Vietnamese called them *Miên.* Some others called the Khmers Cambodians. The Kinhs usually saw the *Miên* as backwards, lazy and unreliable. Meanwhile, the Khmers perceived the immigrant Vietnamese as exploiters who had destroyed the forest and took their livelihoods during the period of land reclamation.

After 1975, intensive agricultural production had been promoted in the entire region in the form of new economic zones (*Vùng kinh tế mới*) and agricultural collectives (*tập đoàn sản xuất*). Particularly, after the deadly border war with the Khmer Rouge in 1978, Vĩnh Điều had been almost destroyed, so most Kinh and Khmers moved away to escape from the war. After the war, the communists called local people back home. The government also encouraged the landless from different regions to come to Vĩnh Điều to establish new resettlements in order to launch frontier economic development and maintain national security. In the second half of the 1980s, the frontier area witnessed a significant change in its landscape as a series of canals were excavated to drain acid sulphate and supply freshwater for agricultural production. The first inward migrators were the Northerners who came to establish a cashew farm in Vĩnh Điều. These newcomers were called *Bắc Kì* (Northerners) by local Kinhs and Khmers. These Northerners were

negatively portrayed by local people as stinginess, boast, garrulous and selfish. One local farmer said:

> They used tractors to quickly destroy the forest to reclaim large areas of land, even outside the cashew farm. They didn't care about whether it had any negative effects to local Kinhs and Khmers. They were highly collectivistic within their group, entirely Northerners. They only came to visit you when they needed helps. Yet whenever you asked *Bắc Kì* to give you a hand, no doubt, they never came.

Figure 5.2 The frontier landscape.

During the 1990s, the village experienced mass immigration. The population of Vĩnh Điều almost tripled. The next migrant group was from the An Biên, Giồng Riêng and Gò Quao districts of Kiên Giang. These migrants came from poor households who were collected from their home district by the local government and sent to the Vĩnh Điều commune in groups. They were classified as the landless poor by the state and given a plot of land for rice cultivation. The third migration movement was families from Cà Mau and Hậu Giang provinces who 'contributed to the communist revolution' during the war, some from An Biên of Kiên Giang, like Uncle Hưng. The householders usually brought all family members and belongings to Vùng kinh tế mới Vĩnh Điều. Each household from these migratory movements was allocated one *Lô* of three hectares of rice land. These new settlers constructed houses along new canals and started cultivating a high-yield

variety of rice *(Lúa Thần Nông)*. Large areas of the village and forest were earmarked for resettlement and agricultural conversion. Modern rice was dominant in Vĩnh Điều.

In the early 2000s, the canal excavation was completed. A portion of Vĩnh Điều has been bisected by a network of excavated canals, therefore it has some brackish water characteristics during the dry season, although we could grow rice in the rain season. This has doubled the risk to rice farmers, as they already suffered from acidification. The village experienced its first outward migration during 2001 and 2002. Over half of the farmers who migrated to Vĩnh Điều during the canal excavation have lost their land due to crop failures. The majority went back to Cà Mau and Hậu Giang. Hundreds of thatch houses along the canals were abandoned. Many farmers sold their land to repay the debts.

Despite many unsuccessful experiences of emigrants, people from different locales continued moving to this frontier setting to make new lives. Those who have suffered from social and economic crises such as indebtedness, broken love affairs, theft, murder, sickness and other socially problematic issues in their home villages wished to hide their personal lives or clear their historical records in a completely new frontier place. By 2000, almost all farmland had been allocated to the landless households who migrated to Vĩnh Điều during 1990s, so the very recent migrants were certainly landless poor. Family livelihoods relied mainly on natural exploitations and agricultural wage labour. The new migration movements have brought the village the burden of more social problems. The number of people who are so busy with daily subsistence has dramatically increased. Unemployment increased because many farmers abandoned their land. The sense of community and connection between people was weak. People did not care about their neighbours. Alcoholism, especially among the young and teenagers, could be seen everywhere in the village. The poor worked hard all year round, however when they got sick, they usually had no money to go to hospital. Vĩnh Điều was an ecologically precarious community, then became socially precarious as well.

5.2 The Hòa Hảo young lady and the herbal clinic

The failures of local inhabitants and emigrants in rice production created new opportunities for large-scale farmers from An Giang who wished to use their expertise in modern rice production to get rich in this frontier. Út Thu's father was one such farmer. In 2003, her father decided to leave Châu Phú, a district near the Hòa Hảo Holy Land of Phú Tân, to bring his family members to Vĩnh Điều when Út Thu was only 16 years old. After selling all of their rice land in Châu Phú, her father purchased 10 hectares of

farmland from farmers who sold their land due to the crop failures. Her father, together with her brothers-in-law — one of them was an engineer — started using agricultural machines to launch the farm. Surprisingly, they were successful right from the first crop. Her father continued to get good harvests with the next crops. After four years, he had enough money to purchase another 10 hectares. By 2008, he owned nearly 40 hectares of farmland in Vĩnh Điều, one of the biggest farms in the frontier.

When Út Thu was 23 years old, she inherited five hectares of land from her father. Instead of trying to accumulate more wealth like her father, she decided to dedicate one hectare of farmland to build a Hòa Hảo worship place in the frontier. Út Thu recalled the first month when she was in the new frontier resettlement:

> Life was completely changed in this new place since everything looked strange to me. Different from the prosperity of my former hometown, there were so many poor people in the village; the Khmers were even poorer. You could see young couples stayed home during the morning since they did not have any jobs to do in the field. In the afternoon, I went along the road near my new house where I could see one or two groups of elderly drinking alcohol. The drunk men sometimes fought each other at night-time. On the first and 15th days of each month, we came to the Tà Êm local market but could not buy any fresh flower offerings for the Buddha. It was also hard to find any vegetarian soya cakes in this market. I thought to myself that there might be no vegetarians and no religious worshiping activities in this strange village.

Figure 5.3 The female healer.

Considering the disparity among people in the frontier, Út Thu had a feeling that most people in this place had the same sufferings. She wondered why they were born in this precarious place, where local people describe themselves as of the same circumstance and defined the unsecure and unstable frontier area as *vùng đất bạc phước,* or 'demerit land'. In this place she could experience the chaos of the typical borderscape with many kinds of societal problems, such as unemployment, thieves, drinking and fighting, cultural deprivations, acidification, water-borne diseases, at-risk agriculture and big gaps between the rich and the poor, the locals and the emigrants, *người Việt* (Southerners) and *Bắc Kì* (Northerners) and the Kinh and Khmer people. Even though they might have different family backgrounds, life histories and causes of migration, they all suffered from the same thing; the frontier's natural and social problems tied them all together. She emphasised that large-scale farmers in Vĩnh Điều were very different from the farmers in the Hòa Hảo Holy Land, who were generally generous, did a lot of charity and maintained a sense of community. The better-off people in this place, however, tried to make more profit day by day. They seemed more materialistic, and thus they paid less attention to community development than the Hòa Hảo in An Giang. The charitable activity in the village was relatively weak due to a lack of coordination and contributions from these new, but very rich, inhabitants. The social cohesion of the village was also weak due to a lack of interactions between the different social groups in the village. She continued:

> In 2009, a group of voluntary nurses and doctors from Hồ Chí Minh City came to the frontier to provide free diagnoses and medicines for poor people. You could not imagine how many people stood in a long line waiting their turns to see the doctors. It was sad because only those villagers who came early could get the medicines. At that moment, I asked myself why there were so many sick people in this village. It was the fact that the village was so poor while its people were so sick. The public frontier clinic was underdeveloped, and people could not access an adequate treatment. The poor, especially the landless Khmer, were dying from their sicknesses due to desperation.

Seeing the crowd of patients waiting to receive the medicines, she thought she should establish a free herbal clinic in this region to help the poor. In the same year, she decided to build a herbal clinic, just near the worship place. After constructing the herbal clinic, she invited herbal doctors from the Hòa Hảo heartland to come help the poor. However, due to the isolation, hardships and loneliness of the frontier, these healers left the clinic after only three to six months in Vĩnh Điều. This motivated Út Thu to study herbal

medicine herself so that she could operate the herbal clinic on her own in the long run. Her father supported her decision:

> My father used to be a *Bác sĩ quân y,* a doctor who treated wounded soldiers in the forests during the war, so he could recognise various kinds of herbs. He knew well how to use different parts of the plants for medicine. He could distinguish special plants that had curing properties only by looking at these plants. My father always said that the herbs that grow wild on *Tà Lơn* (Bokor) Mountain in Kampot province have the best curing properties. These rare herbal medicines were hard to find elsewhere, even in the Bảy Núi mountainous area of An Giang.

Út Thu's father encouraged his daughter to follow his career to save people's lives as a traditional herbal doctor. Út Thu entered the herbal medicine college in Cần Thơ City when was 24. She received a degree after two years of studying:

> It was my father who inspired me a lot to construct my life around this herbal clinic. He is always a good assistant in the clinic. Every two or three weeks, he drives a small truck, crossing the border, heading about a hundred kilometres to the herb collecting site. As he travels many times, he knows exactly what kind of herbs need to be collected and where they are in the forest.

In just a short period of time after inheriting the land from her parents, Út Thu gave away an enormous amount of money to build the Hòa Hảo worship place and free herbal clinic. She also performed a variety of charitable practices. The Hòa Hảo temple became a charitable hub to provide care for the Khmers and other sick people in the frontier that local people had never seen. What is notable about this generosity is that one part of her original intention appears to be to repay debts to fellowmen and mankind *(trả ơn cho đồng bào nhân loại)* as a typical Hòa Hảo Buddhist. Like other Hòa Hảo followers, the practice of the Four Debts was the critical factor that brought Út Thu to carry out many charities for the marginalised in Vĩnh Điều. According to her, repaying debts to fellowmen is a rite, an act of filial devotion, at once expected and demanded, forced and desired. Following the teachings of the Hòa Hảo prophet, Út Thu initially intended her sacrifice to fulfil her obligations to the community. She simply wanted to build a united community of different ordinary people in the village. In this sense, she wanted to share her prosperity with the marginalised people and meet her familial obligations. By

sacrificing personal property, land and money for a herbal clinic to help the Khmers to mitigate their hardship, she wanted to emphasise that the Hòa Hảo had no discrimination or narrow thinking about different ethnic groups. She shared with me that she wished to construct a society with a sense of intimacy between Kinhs and Khmers by recruiting Khmer patients into a social network of friendship.

The fact is that Út Thu had found the best way to live with poor people. By being involved in the practice of giving free herbal medicines to the poor, she wanted to help harmonise social relationships in the village. She said people should love each other more and do more to help people outside their own families. Út Thu herself felt happy with the initial effects of the temple, the herbal clinic and her charitable works on community development. She confidently shared with me the latest achievements:

> People now can work together to fix the road and bridge in the rainy season. They also help each other build new houses. One group of men who drank alcohol as I mentioned has given up the bad habits. These men engage in religious activities during the Buddhist festivals. Sometimes, they come to help me in the herbal clinic when they have free time. The Khmers regularly visited the worship place during the Buddhist Days. The temple's yard and the clinic have become a playground for local children during the full moon festival. The worship place also functioned as a community house during the Vietnamese *Tết* holiday.

Furthermore, throughout the giving practices, the temple and the herbal clinic could be seen as a religious school where Kinh and Khmer beneficiaries who had recently received free medicines from the herbal clinic could spiritually and psychologically transform the course of their religious lives. To illustrate this aspect, Út Thu wanted me to take opportunity to know Uncle Hưng, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, who went through a transformative health problem and life crisis that led him to change course and dedicate himself to a religiously charitable life.

5.3 The retired communist cadre: Spiritual and psychological transformation

This section examines the personal benefits and transformations experienced by a retired communist cadre who is involved in charitable practices in the Hòa Hảo herbal clinic. It looks closely at the transformation of identities, roles and ways of interacting between the communist cadre and the Hòa Hảo healer in the clinic.

I met Uncle Hưng in front of the Hòa Hảo Buddhist worship place during the *Vu-Lan* festival *(Ullambana)*, which honours the ancestors and parents, and provides offerings to the wandering ghosts who lack means of propitiation. At the first sight of his uniform, I thought he was a member of the hamlet police, who are usually invited to visit the worship temple during the Buddhist festival. However, he admitted to me that he was a real Hòa Hảo Buddhist. Moreover, he was now a key member of the Hòa Hảo administrative committee to organise the Buddhist Day events of the year. Uncle Hưng was quite busy welcoming special guests from the commune's people's committee and Hòa Hảo leaders from the Holy Land. He actively engaged with the organising team to ensure a successful festival that year. The way he communicated with the local communist cadres and villagers seemed to be not strict or secretive and was much easier going than their typical interaction with a Hòa Hảo Buddhist.

The afternoon of the festival day, I had chance to talk with Uncle Hưng in front of the worship place. He told me that he was now part-time assistant staff at the herbal clinic. He was also the secretary of the Vĩnh Điều Commune's Hòa Hảo administrative committee. He shared with me his family background and life story which, as he emphasised, included hardships and suffering. This man used to have a good family with a son and a daughter, yet he migrated nearly 150 kilometres from his home village of An Biên District to the frontier in 2008 alone due to his family crisis.

He had completed a high school degree, which was rare in his farming village at that time. Uncle Hưng had a river fishing boat that sustained his family income all year round. His wife was a fish-seller in the local market. The family's economic status was fairly stable compared to their neighbours.

Uncle Hưng used to be the headman of the hamlet police in An Biên in the late 1970s and 1980s. During the war from 1960–1975, An Biên, near U Minh Thượng, was a guerrilla area heavily controlled by the Việt Cộng communist forces. There were no Hòa Hảo followers in the area. Uncle Hưng stated that during the war he did not know much about the Hòa Hảo sect, however he hated and had no sympathy with the Hòa Hảo due to the continuous negative propaganda about the Hòa Hảo by the authorities. He summarised the message:

> The Hòa Hảo are superstitious and so violent. People were very scared of being killed by the Hòa Hảo. They killed people, took their livers out and ate their flesh. During the war, the Hòa Hảo betrayed the liberationists as they

> cooperated with Nguyễn Văn Thiệu to fight against the communist revolution. Any Hòa Hảo present in 'the liberation area' were certainly reported by local residents.

Uncle Hưng shared a humbled story of when he first interacted with a real Hòa Hảo at An Biên in 1983. One night, he had been assigned by the village's police headman to arrest a Hòa Hảo who had just entered the village that afternoon. With an AK in hands, he went with two other hamlet policemen to check the house in question. He got into the dark house to take the man, but soon realised that the Hòa Hảo man was his uncle-in-law from the Hòa Hảo Holy Land of An Giang. He recalled that he apologised for the event, but he had no choice to send the man straight to the village office. Uncle Hưng did not dare to reveal his relationship with the man. Early the next morning, he went to the village police station to meet his uncle. He quietly asked the man in a low tone, 'Are you fine, uncle? Did they [the village policemen] beat you hard?' Half smiling, half crying, the uncle responded, 'No beats, no kicks. But being educated and insulted, the whole night.'

'And … where is your long hair then?' he asked the uncle. 'You look like an "alienated man" with the long hair. Ordinary people should have the same short hair.' 'The police headman gave such a short comment. Then another guy came to cut my hair', replied the uncle.

The village police agreed to free the Hòa Hảo man since they knew he was Hưng's uncle-in-law. Before leaving, Hưng joked with his uncle, 'You look more handsome with your short hair', as he believed his uncle would never come to visit An Biên again.

As the head of the hamlet police, Uncle Hưng used to hold much power in the village. He told me that local communist authorities had a great deal power in rural areas during that time. They regularly used their power to control people, and as a result were feared by the neighbours, villagers and even relatives. Uncle Hưng admitted that he was the kind of person who *ăn thịt chó không từ* (never said no to dog meat) during the time he worked as a hamlet policeman. His colleagues frequently came to his house on the weekend for drinking. Their favourite food was dog meat. He recalled:

> My friends told me that I was the most professional in beating dog-head. In fact, I slaughtered dogs almost every week. They came and saw me whenever they wanted me to slaughter a dog. We ate dog meat and drank almost every week. I was definitely addicted dog meat at that time.

Uncle Hưng told me he never thought that one day he would become a Hòa Hảo Buddhist, who must avoid killing animals, especially dogs, buffalos and cows, for the sake of killing. He had had no idea about reincarnation, samsara or punishment in Hell if he did unethical acts in this life. He emphasised that the communist cadres were not superstitious. Although he was not a butcher, he could not remember how many dogs, calves and chickens had to be killed for food to treat these communist cadres.

Uncle Hưng continued:

> Many life crises happened when I reached 45 years old. I encountered a health problem so serious that I could not continue to work. I was always struggling with terrible headaches that made me unable to sleep. Even the district doctor did not know exactly what was happening in my head. I then resigned my title as headman of the hamlet police. After nearly two years of treatment, my wife had sold almost everything in the house; yet still my headache never left me. She then left our house with an unknown man to an unknown place. My son and daughter dropped out of school before they had even completed high school. One year later, both migrated to cities seeking jobs. My dog meat-eating peers never dropped by my house again after I resigned from my job. No one cared about me. I stayed alone in the village; I struggled with the sickness and continued suffering from my family crisis. I started to think about my life. I regretted my misbehaviour with my Hòa Hảo uncle and the fellow villagers when I worked as head of the hamlet police. I felt sorry about killing many dogs and for my drinking. I thought a lot at night. I had lost almost everything, I believed, because I did so many bad and immoral things in this life.

In 2008, Uncle Hưng came to Vĩnh Điều to help his brother-in-law on his farm. He told me that he also wanted to hide his disastrous life in An Biên and sought social and spiritual tranquillity in a new land. A small house had been built for him near the rice field to manage the farm. In Vĩnh Điều, he frequently joined with his brother-in-law, who had just become the commune's vice president, to organise drinking parties, and the favourite food was again the dog meat. He found it hard to avoid dog meat, although he did not slaughter dogs anymore. He smiled and continued:

> I wished to be a good man with a good life, but "old habits die hard" (*ngựa quen đường cũ*). I found it was hard to do so due to negative influences from bad guys in this immoral setting.

He made a quick decision migrate to the frontier. However, he soon realised that the frontier was more complicated and chaotic than he thought. He found himself drawn by circumstances into new connections and in that moment new identities were born. With the quiet environment of the isolated area, he got bored in his new life not long after settling. He made friends with those who were stubborn and undesirable newcomers (*thành phần bất hảo*) from different locations. He admitted that the sum of money earned after harvesting rice crops was not enough for him to spend with these new friends.

He was addicted to alcohol. His health had gotten even worse. He visited a western doctor several times, but the pain relievers had not helped much. One day, he met a fortune teller, who was also a shaman, to resolve the headache:

> The shaman gave me a burning amulet with water to drink. He said that my sickness was unable to be cured because of my bad karma (*căn nghiệp đã tới, nên quay đầu là bờ*). I must give up my bad habits, particularly alcohol and dog meat. He demonstrated that I have a heavy debt to pay because I beat the dog heads for food. Now I have to suffer from pain in my head.

Uncle Hưng had no doubt this was the problem. He believed his chronic pain stemmed from his wrong actions in this present life and now his karma had come to an end. If he did not turn his head to do good deeds, the ancestors would take his life. One night, his nephew told him a tale about the black pyjama lady, a Hòa Hảo Buddhist, who was good at using herbal medicines to cure many diseases. Uncle Hưng did not believe that there was a herbal medicine doctor who provided free medicines in such an isolated and chaotic frontier:

> People in this frontier were struggling for food (*miếng ăn*), both the poor and the rich. They are selfish and don't care about others. I had never heard about any charitable doctors in this region.

His nephew replied, 'It is a very new clinic run by a young lady. You should come to see her because even the shaman and western doctors could not cure your sickness.'

The next morning, Uncle Hưng decided to give it a try. He met Út Thu, the Hòa Hảo healer, at the herbal clinic. The doctor diagnosed his health problem by touching his hands. She looked him over, then asked, 'What is your occupation?' 'I used to be a hamlet policeman in An Bien', he replied. Uncle Hưng told the healer what he thought about his karma due to the unethical acts he did in the past. He promised he would stay in the temple

and do the temple's charitable work (*làm công quả*) if his sickness would be cured. The sickness reminded him of all the wrongs he had committed in this life and others. He told the healer that he had never been guided by the folktale about the weighty presence of karma in his life. The herbal doctor carefully listened his story. After that, Út Thu instructed Uncle Hưng to wear a long, brown dress that was the traditional Hòa Hảo costume:

> With the diagnosis established, the next step was to visit the worship place, where Út Thu instructed me to take refuge under the Buddha. I was then led toward the main altar in the middle of the worship place and instructed to sit before the Buddhist brown cloth. Út Thu knelt beside me after giving me a mini Hòa Hảo book that was an instruction book for a beginning Hòa Hảo follower.

Út Thu explained to Uncle Hưng about the worship place. There was no Buddha statue on the highest altar, but a piece of brown cloth. Under the Buddha's altar was the ancestral altar for the cult of ancestors (*Cửu huyền thất tổ*). In front of the worship house was a heaven's altar to enable communication between the earth and the sky. Only pure water, flowers and incense sticks were needed to worship Buddha. She explained that fresh water represents cleanliness and flowers purity, while incense is used to refresh the air. Hòa Hảo adherents worship Buddha at least twice a day: in the early morning from 4:00–6:00 and in the evening from 5:00–7:00. On the first and 15th of each lunar month and Buddha's holy days, the followers usually go to Hòa Hảo temples or community worship places to pray and listen to sermons.

She guided him to kneel in front of the ancestral altar. Behind him was an image of the Hòa Hảo prophet in the middle of the worship place, looking toward heaven's altar. Following her instructions, Uncle Hưng held incense sticks in his hands, kowtowed three times, then knelt down in front of the ancestor's altar and the image of the prophet. He then prayed with hands joined and touched to the forehead:

> I respectfully present the incense to my revered ancestors,
>
> And request them to witness my faithfulness,
>
> I awaken now and take refuge under Buddha,
>
> And pledge to improve myself and allow myself to enjoy bliss.
>
> (*Cúi kính dưng hương trước Cửu huyền,*

Cầu trên Thất tổ chứng lòng thiềng,

Nay con tỉnh ngộ qui y Phật,

Chí dốc tu hiền tạo phước duyên)

He planted the incense sticks in the incense holder, then standing straight, praying with hands joined at the chest, continued the prayer:

I respectfully bow to my ancestors,

And offer my gratitude for your nurturing and raising me through so many hardships,

From now on, I will keep my religion,

And pray that my ancestors have their souls released from suffering and that they may reach the Buddhist paradise,

I pledge to be honourable for my ancestors,

Pray that my ancestors escape the ocean of suffering to reach the heart of the lotus

I pray the Almighty

To bless me so that I may continue on resolutely, my religious faith.

(*Cúi đầu lạy tạ Tổ tông,*

Báo ơn sanh dưỡng dày công nhọc nhằn,

Rày con xin giữ đạo hằng,

Tu cầu Tông tổ siêu thăng Phật đài,

Nguyện làm cho đẹp mặt mày,

Thoát nơi khổ ải - Liên đài được lên,

Mong nhờ đức cả bề trên,

Độ con yên ổn vững bền cội tu).

Finally, she guided Uncle Hưng to kowtow four times to end the prayers. She said, 'Staying still and be silent.' He closed his eyes, smelt burning incense and listened the preaching of Út Thu.' After two hours, the ritual practice had fully transformed Uncle Hưng, a communist retired cadre, into a true Hòa Hảo Buddhist. At this moment, the religious worship place and the herbal clinic had become the spiritual and psychological

school to transform his life from anomie to religion. He then voluntarily led a religious life.

From that day, Uncle Hưng stayed in the herbal clinic using herbs and assisting. He helped Út Thu dry fresh herbs during daytime. He learned about Hòa Hảo ritual practices when Út Thu prayed in the early morning and at night. He was keen to read Hòa Hảo sutras and prophecies whenever he had free time. 'The words in Hòa Hảo books are simplified so that I could easily understand. I would ask Út Thu whenever I had any queries about Hòa Hảo doctrine and she was eager to explain', said Uncle Hưng. In the following days, he started having vegetarian food twice a week and gave up eating dog meat. After taking herbal medicine for a month, he felt that his headache had gradually reduced. The overcoming of his chronic headache, despite the short treatment time, was perceived by him as miracle:

> I got better, so I could participate actively in the daily activities of the clinic and ritual practices. After worshiping Buddha in early morning, I came to help Út Thu sort out different kinds of herbs and made the clinic neatly. I chopped herbal medicines that were collected by Út Thu's father and patients. Sometimes, the clinic lacked certain kinds of medicine and I would go around the village to collect them. In the clinic, I had good chances to chat with Kinh and Khmer patients who might have similar life stories as mine. I have no need to keep my previous life and suffering hidden. Everything seems to be more relaxing to me. I could share with them my personal emotions and personal life and hear about their stories.

Observing the enthusiastic participation of Uncle Hưng in the charitable activities of the herbal clinic, Út Thu decided to include this retired communist cadre in the current charitable network. One year after healing his sickness, Uncle Hưng was selected to be the secretary of the Hòa Hảo administrative committee of Vĩnh Điều and he could formally contribute to the charitable activities of the temple and herbal clinic. As a retired communist cadre, he had a close relationship with his brother-in-law and other local authorities in Vĩnh Điều who could support the religious activities of Hòa Hảo Buddhists at the temple during the Buddhist festivals. Uncle Hưng particularly maintained a good connection with the commune's Father Front Organisation in order to coordinate with them the delivery of charitable support to poor families in the commune. As a rice farmer,

Uncle Hưng also had many chances to communicate with other large-scale rice farmers to convince them to participate in the Hòa Hảo charitable network:

> Large-scale famers came to this frontier to make wealth. Like the other new emigrants in this area, those better-off did not care much about the people around. They only concentrate on accumulating more land to get rich. Many of them own up to 20 hectares of rice land. You could not imagine how much rice they produce every year. However, only a few of them contribute white rice to help the poor. I invite them to come to the worship place during the Buddhist festivals so that they can see our charitable activities to help the poor. By doing so, we hope to attract more rich farmers to be involved in our charitable activities in the future.

Uncle Hưng then changed his voice:

> With my deepest gratitude, I have been indebted to Út Thu who saved my life from physical pains and enlighten my mind. Thanks to the course of healing sick, I have started to learn about the Four Debts of Gratitude, the Three Karmas and the Noble Eightfold Path. I found myself to be committed with all principles of the three karmas (physical karma, verbal karma and mental karma), such as not killing living creatures (dogs, cats or buffalo) for food. With animals, I had been even more cruel: I killed them for the sake of killing. I had taken advantage of the saying that animals are born to feed man to kill them [dogs] abusively. I gradually understand that the reason for my misfortune was a result of my actions from this life (karma) when I did not repent or accomplish good deeds. Therefore, I have taken a more positive approach to my destiny, which tells me that by avoiding evil and doing good I can enrich my soul for an eternity.

During my ethnography in the frontier, I also had the chance to talk with local government officers who knew about Út Thu's act of herbal medicine giving as well as the other charitable activities of the Hòa Hảo temple. Unlike Uncle Hưng's spiritual benefit, the local authorities tended to emphasise the practical benefits of the Hòa Hảo charitable activities. Local officers particularly commented on the educational benefits to a number of poor students who have recently received physical support from Út Thu to maintain their schooling. They also highlighted the significant contribution of the charitable herbal clinic towards improving the community's health care services, which were very poor compared to communes in other regions. These local cadres, however, tended to report that these community benefits came from good-hearted donors. They rarely mention the

critical contributions of the specific Hòa Hảo Buddhists who are the key charitable doers in this frontier commune.

5.4 The Khmers in the Hòa Hảo herbal clinic: healing the sick or healing the disparity?

According to the herbal doctor, the village had recently witnessed a notable increase in the number of young Khmers who were suffering from chronic health problems, particularly stomach aches, joint pain and disorders of the spine. As stated by the healer, these disorders were previously commonly seen only among old-age Khmers. These health problems have resulted in the young being unable to work, either temporarily or permanently, to generate money, which adversely affects their family life and socio-economic status. The healer emphasised:

> This is a sick and marginalised village. People a far distance away may know the name of Vĩnh Điều, yet not many know about one group of nearly a thousand desperate Khmer living in the village. The Khmers were either struggling day by day to make a living or suffering from physical pain. People should eat enough if they are engaging in hard work. Unfortunately, the Khmers are so weak as they no longer have well-balanced meals due to their underprivilege. They live in the middle of the rice basket of the Mekong delta, but do not have enough rice to eat. Sickness is one of main reasons that hinders the Khmers from making a living. In this frontier, the life is just so much harder for the marginalised.

In the herbal clinic, I was rather surprised by the dominant number of Khmer patients who were from different Khmer villages near the Vĩnh Điều Commune. About a quarter of patients on that day came from neighbouring villages in Cambodia. There were 35 total Khmers, but only three Vietnamese patients in the clinic. Most of them were repeat patients, so they knew each other quite well. Only three Cambodians from Kampot were new patients. I had never seen such a large number of Khmer patients in a single Hòa Hảo herbal clinic as in the Holy Land of An Giang province. Some Khmer patients sat on chairs in front of the clinic while others sat on the floor of the temple. They were chatting to each other in Khmer language. These Khmer patients usually come to the clinic in groups of four to six people, including husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, relatives and neighbours. The majority were poor. They were small-scale rice farmers or landless agricultural wage-labourers. I met Chau Um, a 50-year-old Khmer patient, who was

visiting the Hoà Hảo herbal clinic due to his back pain. Chau Um told me about his sickness as well as the social and economic disparity recently generated between the Vietnamese farmers and Khmers in the amorphous frontier.

Figure 5.4 Khmer patients gathering inside the Hoà Hảo Buddhist temple.

Unlike the ethnic Kinh large-scale farmers, the common experience for local ethnic Khmers was of landlessness and struggling to make enough for subsistence. The Khmers were mostly employed by the Kinh large landowners; they did not have alternative livelihoods since the local Khmers no longer had access to forest-based livelihoods. According to an elderly Khmer who visited the clinic, 30 years ago this area was covered by a permanent swamp, seasonal inundated grassland and melaleuca forest. People inhabited only the dry places along the banks of canals (Taylor 2014). The Khmers harvested lepironia in the swampy plain between the Vĩnh Tế canal and Kiên Lương as they had been doing in the past and sold it to Vietnamese from Ba Chúc Town to produce handicraft mats. During that time, Khmer people could also make a good living from other forest exploitations such as melaleuca wood, honey and fishing, which were abundant in the inundated forested swamp. Since the additional canals dredged during the 1980s helped to drain the swamps and channel in fresh water, most of the swampy land was converted into commercial rice land, which allowed the cultivation of up to two crops of rice each year under local government's sponsorship. Due to unsuccessful modern rice

production, most Khmer families remained poor. They were perhaps the poorest inhabitants in the frontier area.

Khmers who lived in unfavourable natural conditions like Vĩnh Điều had no better options for their livelihoods. Recently, the concern has been that agricultural machines, especially combine harvesters, have become so dominant in rice production in the frontier that it is having severe effects on the way of life of landless Khmer. In the rice fields, almost all human labour has been replaced by machinery, which threatens the subsistence of local Khmers, especially the landless poor, elderly and disabled. Chau Um explained that most landless Khmers in Vĩnh Điều often do not earn enough for daily subsistence. If machinery continues to dominate the agricultural activities around the village, in the near future the Khmers will potentially have nothing to eat, even during the harvest time. He further explained that some Vietnamese farmers own a dozen hectares of farmland, but that does not mean there are plenty of jobs available for hired landless labourers. Large farmers are usually equipped with various kinds of machines to operate the farm, from tractors for land preparation, machines for seeding and combined harvesters to harvest rice, to small trucks or river boats to transport rice to their home. Chau Um was concerned about the scarcity of available work in the frontier and its negative effects on Khmer people:

> The large landholders have efficient machinery to work their own farms rather than hire in more labourers from other households. The only 'hard and dangerous' tasks that still require the employment of labourers are spaying pesticides and loading and transporting rice to the landowners' homes. I have engaged in the later job since I got married at 20 years old. I must use my shoulder to carry rice bags, 50 kilograms each, to move up and down the steep riverbanks. In the peak of the harvest time, I could carry 50 rice bags per day, approximately 2.5 tonnes of loading. In reward, I earn more money than other with agricultural jobs, however, as the herbal healers said, my back pain and disorder of the spine might be a result of this heavy job. I have almost had no savings after nearly 30 years of working but now suffer from permanent back pains.

Chau Um also raised the issue of recent unfavourable natural conditions that had caused insecure land tenure amongst Khmer small-scale farmers. Most Khmer small landowners who had below one hectare frequently experience lost rice crops because they did not

usually own water pumps to deal with strong acidification and saline intrusion during the dry season. Chau Um used to have one hectare of rice land, yet he got little from farming. Owing to the lack of fresh water for irrigation due to the serious saline intrusion in 2016, Chau Um lost all his rice crops. As a result, he was unable to pay off the debt to the agricultural businessman. His land title had currently been held by a local creditor so he could not operate the farm anymore. Many Khmer families had the same problem, which resulted in young members fleeing the village for urban cities to seek new opportunities. The only ones remaining in the village were children, the elderly and sick people.

Inside the Hòa Hảo herbal clinic, Chau Um was lying down on a wooden bed. He has had a spine disorder and back pain since the previous year. To feed his family of five, he ignored his health problem and continued to work until he could no longer stand the serious pain in his back. One of his friends advised that he should see a district hospital doctor for a diagnosis. With the modest income earned from seasonally hired labour, which only met his family's survival needs, he thought to himself that even if the doctor could correctly identify his health problem, he would not be able to afford to have long-term treatment in a public hospital. Since the previous month, this middle-aged Khmer man had been unable to go to the fields to work anymore. That was the harvest time when Vietnamese landowners urgently needed a large number of manual labourers like him to load bags of paddy rice from the rice field to river boats and from the boats to the riverbanks. Chau Um was encountering a deadlock since he was the main labourer of his family. Now, the survival of his family relied mainly on the earnings of his son who was also engaging in agricultural hired labour in the village.

The chronic pain caused Chau Um to be unable to sleep at night. In the midst of his desperate situation, he heard from his Khmer neighbours that a Vietnamese 'black pyjama lady' in a new temple could heal many kinds of diseases. She was particularly good at healing bone-related problems. The neighbour added that the female practitioner had cured several Khmer patients. Chau Um said to me that, at the beginning, he was doubtful about a Vietnamese stranger who would help poor Khmers. He stated that the main purpose of these Vietnamese people was to exploit the new land to generate more wealth through their large-scale rice production. The Vietnamese farmers intended to pay more attention to how to gain more material accumulations than to come and share the difficulties and sufferings of Khmer people in this precarious place. However, considering the new opportunity to cure his disease, Chau Um tried seeing the herbal doctor. He visited to the herbal clinic together with his son, 22-year-old Chau Sóc Phát,

who had recently suffered from a stomach-ache. Chau Sóc Phát wanted to migrate out of the village to the city to seek a job like his Khmer friends. However, due to his health problem, he decided to remain home to work as agricultural hired labour. The father and son visited the herbal clinic three days a week.

Figure 5.5 Chau Um and his son, Chau Sóc Phát, in the herbal clinic.

The herbal healer used multiple techniques to treat Chau Um's back pain. Before using electrical acupuncture, she first used a stethoscope to check his heartbeat. Then, she used her fingers to seek the pain points in his back before inserting needles into a field of indicated pain. When the healer darted the needle into Chau Um's flesh, other female Khmers turned their heads to the other side. These Khmers could see what the treatment would look like. It took about 30 minutes to use electrical acupuncture on each person. After that, Út Thu picked up several small bags of herbal medicines and gave them to Chau Um so he could use the herbs at home. The healer usually asked patients to return to seven days later. However, patients who needed electrical acupuncture like Chau Um were required to have treatment in the clinic in three days continuously, then come back to the clinic four days later. Regarding the effectiveness of the treatment, Chau um commented:

> In the first three days of the treatment when the healer inserted the needles into my flesh, it seemed that the act generated additional pain in my spine.

> However, in following days I felt the pain caused by the needles disappeared while my back pain gradually reduced. The back pain was almost cured after only one month although the healer commented that I should continue using herbal medicines for the next three months to assure that my health would completely recover. She asked nothing for rewards from the patients. Now I know what Khmer people in the village told me about the 'black pyjama healer' is true. She is a miraculous healer and generous woman.

The Hoà Hảo healer paid special attention to provide good care for the patients, no matter whether they were Kinh, Khmer or Cambodian. They would all be treated the same. She had recently installed some hammocks for the patients to rest while waiting their turn. These hammocks were hanging between mango trees around the temple yard and were usually allocated for elderly patients. The healer suggested that old patients, particular Khmers who travelled a long way from the Takeo and Kampot provinces of Cambodia to reach the clinic, needed to have a rest before undergoing any treatment. The herbal clinic had only two single beds so could treat three patients at any one time. Patients could also take a short nap to wait until the early afternoon if the clinic was busy in the morning. The road infrastructure had been improved, so border crossing of patients from the Takeo and Kampot provinces of Cambodia to Vĩnh Điều was more common recently. These Khmers were usually unable to speak Vietnamese. The Hoà Hảo healer also spoke limited Khmer. If she wanted to talk with a Cambodian Khmer patient, she usually asked assistance from a local Khmer who could speak both Vietnamese and Khmer. The female healer sometimes made jokes with the Khmers so that they could enjoy their time in the clinic. She shared with me that she wished the Khmer patients could be more relaxed because that was also an important part of her treatment method.

Most Khmer patients were satisfied with the treatment of the female healer. The majority tended to follow up the treatment until the current situation was improved. As observed, the Khmer patients, particularly those from Cambodia, put a sum of money into a charity box after their sickness was healed. Before leaving the clinic at the end of the day, they also joined hands and prayed, touching their foreheads toward the ancestral altar of the temple. They felt much better, so they would be able to go back to work. They said to me, in half Vietnamese and half Khmer language, that they did not know how to repay the debt to the herbal healer, except through respectfulness and a small amount of money donated to the herbal clinic. Chau Um had another way of returning what he said he was indebted to the herbal clinic. Whenever he came to the clinic, he usually carried a big bag

of herbs that he collected around his place. These herbs were carefully dried in the sun before he brought them to the clinic. He demonstrated that he could experience the hardship of the healer's father, who had alone collected a huge amount of herbal medicines from Bokor Mountain and brought them back to the clinic in order to treat a large number of sick Khmers.

Chau Um respectfully mentioned the voluntary work of the healer's father, a retired large-scale Vietnamese farmer who once came to exploit this frontier land for profit accumulation but now sacrificed his time, energy and resources to heal the sick and the disparity between the Vietnamese and Khmers. He called him Uncle Năm, who frequently travelled a long way to collect herbal medicines in Bokor:

> For this frontier herbal clinic, I and my father think that we get the rare and valuable herbal medicines from Bokor, then we use these herbs for healing Khmer sickness. I propose that this is a good way to repay to the Khmer people.

Giving herbal medicines and healing the sick Khmer people were not the only charitable activities of the frontier clinic to help the Khmers. The healer occasionally distributed rice and other gifts to the Khmers. She shared her feeling that when she was confronted with poor patients, particularly those had serious health problems and were unable to make a living, she felt she should give something to the Khmers, a bag 10 kilogram bag of rice and a box of noodles, or more depending on the patients' circumstances. She responded compassionately by personally offering them further charitable gifts, sometimes an amount of money, to assist them until they overcome their hardship. Furthermore, the healer cared for the children of these Khmer patients. She said the money from the charity box would be used to buy school stationary for Khmer students when they started the school year. The previous year, she was invited to become an honorary member of the commune's educational promotion association (*Hội khuyến học*). The healer continued to contribute to the education fund for assisting poor students. She had recently called for more charitable resources from people outside the community. She had contacted several charitable donors from Rạch Giá and Hồ Chí Minh Cities to contribute money to purchase some bicycles so that the poor Khmer students could go to school during the rainy season.

Figure 5.6 The charitable gifts for the Khmers during the Sangha Buddhist Day.

The majority of Khmer patients and Khmers who had previously received charitable gifts from the herbal clinic came to the Hoà Hảo temple during Buddhist festivals. On one occasion when I took part in one of these festivals, the Khmers walked inside the temple to explore the worship place. They curiously stopped at a series of pictures hanging on the temple wall, just behind the herbal clinic. Although many Khmers that day were unable to read Vietnamese well, they could partially understand what people called *Vòng Luân hồi* (Saṃsāra) through these pictures. Saṃsāra is perceived as the suffering-laden cycle of life, death and rebirth, without beginning or end. These Khmers might not know the Buddhist cosmology of this endless cycle of birth, re-birth and re-death, they simply know that if people do good deeds or perform ethical actions in this life, they will be reborn into human beings and enjoy a happier life afterwards. One Khmer told me it was the fourth time she had attended a Buddhist festival in this Hoà Hảo temple. They also visit this temple during the healing of the sick. She said:

> The healer hasn't talked about the Buddhist teachings during her diagnosis and giving medicines. However, if we have any questions about these pictures, she will carefully explain for us to understand about the basic cosmology of Hoà Hảo Buddhism. Although we are unable to read, by looking these pictures, we could learn something new to do good deeds. If you do evils, you will be punished in hell, like the pictures show. The Hoà Hảo teachings are quite

similar to Khmer Buddhist teachings, even more simple than what I learned in the Khmer temple when I was young. The only Khmer temple in the village was abandoned since the Khmer Rouge attacked the frontier area in 1978. We had not heard the Buddhist sutras for a long time since there was no Khmer abbot in the temple. Now we regularly come to the Hoà Hảo temple on the occasions of Buddhist festivals. During the Full Moon Festival, children in this commune are excited to play in the temple's yard where they will receive colourful lanterns, together with a small gift. These things, in this frontier area, never happened before the black pyjama lady appeared.

Figure 5.7 The Khmers in Hòa Hảo traditional costume during the *Ulambana* Festival.

This great unity came from the love and compassion of the Hòa Hảo healer, who particularly felt suffering if she did not share with the poor or get along with the Khmers. The efficacy of healing the sick and the generous gift-giving of the Kinh lady became a popular topic of discussion among the Khmers during the Buddhist festivals. The Hòa Hảo Buddhists, who were previously depicted as intolerant towards other ethnic groups, are now accepted by the Khmers. The honour that the Khmers reserve for the herbal healer encourages her to maintain the charitable practices and nurture new ideas for the future, especially for the young Khmer students as she had plans to build a charitable rice kitchen near the school to assist poor students. When I asked a Khmer local what she thought about the herbal doctor, she said to me in half Vietnamese and half Khmer:

The female doctor is a fairy. She helps me to heal the chronic pain in my knees and my back. I can now go back to work for a living. She gave me rice when I got sick. She is a real *Bồ tát* (Bodhisattva-hearted lady). She has shown to the Khmers that charity comes from the enlightenment of the heart. She does not mention much about her family and the act of giving, but is humble about what she had done for the marginalised Khmer in the frontier area since this Hòa Hảo temple was constructed.

Figure 5.8 Young students offering incense in front of the ancestral altar.[26]

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how the Hòa Hảo faith has been deployed to build solidarity in an amorphous frontier milieu that was once seen as a chaotic, violent, poor, precarious and marginalised. The vast social, political and ethnic disparities among different groups in this frontier context once hindered people from developing intimate relationships with neighbours drawn from a range of social others. This situation provided an opportunity

[26]According to Hòa Hảo Buddhism, this is the collective ancestral altar. The altar is not worshiping the prophet's ancestor, the temple's founder or any private family, but is dedicated to 'a hundred lineages'. The collective ancestral altar in this Hòa Hảo temple is particularly important for the immigrants in the frontier context. When the emigrants kneel in front of this collective ancestral altar, they preserve the honour to their ancestor of their lineage. In this regard, the Hòa Hảo temple is considered a window for these immigrants who are able to worship their ancestors far from their home. The Hòa Hảo temple in the context of migration is very open and inclusive. It bears a meaning of solidarity for many generations as people from different social, political and ethnic backgrounds together come to the same temple and kneel at the same ancestral altar.

for local members of the Hòa Hảo sect to intervene and undertake community development activities — specifically, providing a herbal clinic offering traditional medical remedies to frontier dwellers — in the name of building a 'great unity'. The effort to build solidarity in the frontier was rooted in Hòa Hảo religious doctrine, which emphasises the debts that all people have to their compatriots, and to all of humankind, regardless of lineage, ethnicity or place. Since they came to this region and began offering medical charity to all, regardless of their backgrounds, the Hòa Hảo created a new sense of intimacy between people who previously had been strangers in the socially amorphous frontier. Their patients included newcomers and locals, the poor and the rich, communist cadres and ordinary civilians, ethnic Kinh and Khmers and Vietnamese and Cambodian citizens. The differences that had existed between these strangers were overcome and set aside in the process of giving and receiving medical charity. The generous acts of giving by the Hòa Hảo were accepted by the Khmers and Kinh alike, effacing mistrust and rifts between the groups that had endured since the wars of the 1970s. Additionally, Khmers and retired communist cadres were recruited into a social network of friends facilitated by the Hòa Hảo.

By focusing on people and activities in a frontier clinic, this chapter shows that the Hòa Hảo Buddhists have been able to unify social, political and ethnic groups that previously had been divided by enmity and avoidance. Their ability to build social solidarity in an once conflict-plagued site along the Vietnam–Cambodia border is an accomplishment of considerable social and political significance. However, despite resonating with the state's own goals and efforts to build unity, it was achieved by putting into practice tenets of their own indigenous religious cosmology, rather than the ideology of the secular state. Different from the state's top-down approach to unity building, which is promulgated through a battery of rules, guidelines, lessons, seminars, subsidies, affirmative action policies and educative, surveillance and discipline practices, the findings from Vĩnh Điều demonstrate a practical and decentralised approach to unity building. Key to this was the display of generosity by a Hòa Hảo healer in offering treatments to strangers, which brought together people from different backgrounds in ways that not only treated physical ailments but also repaired fractured social relations. This form of vernacular development also signifies that the Hòa Hảo have a wider societal vision than has often been credited, for they were able to offer inclusive, multifaceted treatments to a variety of social others, including people from groups with whom the Hòa Hảo themselves previously had been in conflict. This aspect of Hòa Hảo religion has been neglected by previous scholarship.

Chapter 6

Meritorious Efficacy:

Charitable Rationality in Hòa Hảo Urban Vegetarian Kitchens

Concentrating on the tray, Mr. Giàu – a migrant worker – consumed the food very quickly, as if he had not eaten anything since early morning. Giàu occasionally raised his head to look toward the large image of the Hòa Hảo prophet that hung on the wall opposite to the food serving area. 'Uncle, please give me some more food. The *canh chua* (sour soup) today is especially delicious. I am a bit hungry, so I want to eat more'. Giàu asked Uncle Năm Thọ, who was serving the food and also was the manager of the rice kitchen, to put extra food onto his food tray.

Sitting next to Giàu was a one-legged beggar, together with a lottery ticket boy. In front of his table were three university students who had just arrived at the charitable rice kitchen (*Bếp cơm từ thiện)* after finishing a lecture and took a food tray each. Just behind him, a blind man and his wife were sitting next to a motorbike taxi driver and a porter. Outside the kitchen, at the main entrance, dozens of poor people, including the disabled, elderly men and women, orphans, street boys and girls were queuing for their turn to pick up a food tray. The dining area was filled with diners who could not afford a decent meal in the city centre of Long Xuyên in An Giang province, one of the busiest marketplaces in the Mekong delta. Most rural people had migrated to this city to pursue higher education, access better healthcare services or seek better job opportunities. Giàu was among thousands of poor migrants who had come to Long Xuyên to seek better treatment for his mother, who had a chronic disease. He described his hard life in the city:

> My mother is suffering from kidney disease, so she needs a long-term treatment which costs a lot of money. I sold all our farmland in my home village and came to this city for the treatment. I am facing a financial exhaustion since everything needs money. There are extra costs associated with the new life such as housing rent, water and electricity, and medicines. I have worked as a brick-builder's assistant (*phụ hồ)*. I do have neither friends nor relatives in this city who could help me in emergency like in my home

village. I could definitely not escape from this urban marketplace, at least until my mother passes away.

The case of Giàu is an example of the hardship and suffering of migrants in urban areas. Giàu felt himself stuck in a dilemma: although his mother needed better treatment, he could not afford the long-term care for her. He told me that he had no other options but to remain in Long Xuyên to work — with no friends, away from neighbours and family, and with no home or land. He stated that for the majority of people, VND20,000 (about one US dollar) a meal is affordable. But if he, a poor migrant, spent that amount of money on these three meals a day, there would be no money left for his mother's treatment. Hence, he decided to visit the Hòa Hảo charitable rice kitchen every day for free meals.

This charitable rice kitchen has been in operation for over five years, with an elderly man working from morning to night to pass food trays to diners, one after another. His name is Năm Thọ and he is the founder of the charitable kitchen. He explained that people found it hard to imagine that such a large number of poor people exist in a prosperous marketplace like Long Xuyên. He highlighted that migrant workers, poor students, rural out-patients and permanent urban poor were the most vulnerable people in the city. These poor people were facing big challenges, such as high living costs, a poor quality of life, especially in terms of health and nutrition, and limited access to other services. He asserted that deficits in the provision of basic services for immigrants widened the social gap between migrants and urban residents. Furthermore, migrants lacked a sense of community, since urban people tended to look upon them as "non-urban" citizens or as strangers, and so did not care much about them. To respond to this urban phenomenon, the Hòa Hảo charitable rice kitchen was built to supply free meals and offered hospitality for thousands of people in need in the city of Long Xuyên.

This expansion of this Hòa Hảo Buddhist charity in an urban setting seemingly contradicts the findings of previous scholars who described Hòa Hảo Buddhism as primarily a localist, rural-based religion catering mainly to peasants (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983; Fall 1955; Nguyen Long Thanh Nam 2003; Woodside 1976). Indeed, most religious and charitable activities of the sect's adherents once took place within 'Hòa Hảo villages' in remote areas of the Mekong delta. What remains puzzling, therefore, is how such a religion could extend its operations and influence into the contemporary urban context. By looking at the charitable rice kitchens run by Hòa Hảo urban elites in two different locations — an urban marketplace and a peri-urban school — this chapter explores how Hòa Hảo urban elites assess the social problems that exist in the

contemporary urban context and how these urban Hòa Hảo practically respond and resolve these problems. It shows how Hòa Hảo donors provide charitable food for the urban poor in keeping with their sense of religious obligation, and do so precisely and effectively on a large-scale, demonstrating their capacity to adapt their charity to modern urban circumstances. This chapter argues that Hòa Hảo Buddhists are not local and conservative; rather, they have transformed very quickly to adapt to the modern urban context and the public health standards imposed by the state. The act of giving vegetarian food to the needy responds to the religious impulse to make merit as well as the social obligation to fill the gap in social welfare provision in urban areas. This is a meaningful response of the Hòa Hảo Buddhists to the problems of the poor and is compatible with modernising and industrialising trends in the urban context.

6.1 Rice kitchen origins: sympathy for the urban poor

To save one unfortunate person could make even more merit than to build ten temples.

Năm Thọ, founder of the rice kitchen

The Hòa Hảo prophet advised his followers against making any costly food offerings to the gods and the dead because the gods and the dead could not consume them. Moreover, according to Hòa Hảo prophecy, aid to the less fortunate is favoured over temple construction or any expensive rituals or religious ceremonies as a means to make merit. Hòa Hảo laypersons should reserve money to help the miserable and incapacitated to overcome their hardship (PGHH 2013:223–25). Năm Thọ explained that the way for a Hòa Hảo layperson to make merit is not by building lavish Buddhist temples or making costly offerings to gods, but by helping poor people in society. In order to do this effectively, charitabale partitioners must first try to identify who is most in need. He stated that urban poverty is the worst issue that needs to be resolved in the western Mekong delta. He explained that because poor families in rural areas were eligible for many poverty reduction programs, the rural poor get various social welfare benefits from the government. Moreover, the rural poor families could more easily make a living in rural settings because the natural environment was more favourable and to some extent the poor could more or less get necessary support from relatives, neighbours and their community. In contrast, the urban poor, including registered residents and migrants, rarely received necessary support from the community or local government. They often encountered big challenges to stabilising their lives because of the high cost of living,

lack of secure occupations and limited access to public services in the urban setting. Năm Thọ told me that he could sympathise with the stressful lives of the poor people in urban areas, for not everyone had the privilege of enjoying three meals a day. He stated that most people can see the affluence of Long Xuyên City, however, many urban poor are desperate as their daily income often is not enough to feed themselves or support their children going to school.

Năm Thọ went further to emphasise the social problems resulting from urban poverty:

> There is a causal relationship between the material deprivation and social deterioration in urban areas. The poverty might stem from immoral behaviour like theft, violence and falsehood. The problem happens when social welfare is neglected, and the urban poor are not provided a basic means for their survival. I believed that the first and foremost solution for poverty-induced crime in any society is to help the poor to fulfil their basic needs, then to guide them to become good people in the society. The free food supply might help the destitute alleviate hunger and improve their health for work. Morality obligates the Hòa Hảo rice kitchen to provide sufficient food for as many the needy in this city as we can. We expect that any poor people who visit the kitchen will be full and happy after having vegetarian foods. We try to organise the kitchen in the best way to improve the kitchen's services so that the poor, especially poor migrants, could feel this charitable kitchen as their home.

Năm Thọ stated that the problem is not that the urban society does not have enough resources to support the basic needs of everyone, but that it lacks collective compassion to help the poor. Hòa Hảo Buddhists recognised this gap and tried to respond to this contemporary urban phenomenon, acting on the religious belief of repaying the debts to society by setting up a charitable rice kitchen to assist the poor. When the Hòa Hảo charitable rice kitchen Long Xuyên was built, all kitchen members believed that they were doing the right thing in the right place to fill this social gap, provide necessary support to the people in most need. Their quick response to the fundamental needs of the urban poor people was seen by kitchen members as pure compassion at the time when the rice kitchen was established. A kitchen chef added her comments regarding religious motivation, emphasising that no matter how much the charitable rice kitchen could give to the poor and unfortunate in this particular context, what counted was the mind and

intention *(tâm và ý)* of Hòa Hảo Buddhists to help these most desperate people in society, and this intension was responsible for making a great deal of merit (*tạo được công đức lớn)* for the charitable donors.

The founder of the kitchen stressed that there were so many poor people in the city who could not afford the increasing food price and the high cost of living in urban areas. He provided me the specific context wherein the idea of running a charitable rice kitchen to support these poor people emerged. His business shop was nearby the market's boat station, where he usually saw poor porters loading and transporting goods from boats to the market from early morning until late afternoon. These porters worked hard starting at 3:00am each day, but they seemed to eat very little. There were about a hundred men working around the boat station who were very poor, and their daily income was insufficient to support their families. Năm Thọ felt pity on these people. He discussed this with his friends who shared the same emotion, thus they made a decision to build the free rice kitchen to feed these people. He told me:

> We built the charitable rice kitchen adjacent to Long Xuyên market in 2012. With the unanimity of the initial group's members, I found it not too difficult to mobilise basic elements such as voluntary staff, rice, vegetables and other cooking materials for running the rice kitchen. However, given that land prices in the urban centre were significantly increasing, to have an available plot of land for constructing a 'non-profit' kitchen nearby the market centre was really a big challenge. Fortunately, an urban Hòa Hảo Buddhist — a jewellery shop owner — supported the kitchen project, so she gave us a plot of land on a busy street nearby Long Xuyên central market to build the rice kitchen. She had a spoken contract with me to use the land for charity for as long as poor people still need free food. The charitable rice kitchen opened to serve the urban poor after only three months of construction. On these first days, we cooked vegetarian foods at the kitchen, then brought the food in packets to the boat station to distribute to the porters.

Năm Thọ related that the charitable group initially targeted the poor porters for the provision of free meals. However, group members soon realised that many other poor people such as beggars, sick people, the disabled, street boys, lottery ticket sellers, and small traders around the marketplace also needed charitable food. Năm Thọ observed that the need for such assistance was only increasing, partly as a result of the increasing

number of migrants from rural areas. Most of these people were living on a very marginal income. He noticed that there were more poor people who needed to be fed than the kitchen could afford to help at that time, so he asked for more assistance from local businessmen and traders around the market. Fortunately, the rice kitchen accumulated a substantial list of key donors and could afford to cook for more of the needy. The kitchen staff had since installed more chairs and tables so that the kitchen could provide better access for more people. Then they could come and eat at the kitchen. The kitchen manager increased the number of free meals to up to 500 per day. More people came to the tables than the kitchen staff had expected, and aspiring diners stood in a long queue in front of the kitchen. This huge response showed how timely and widely appreciated was the Hòa Hảo initiative to make free food available for needy people in the Long Xuyên marketplace was.

The kitchen manager shared with me that he personally had never known the feeling of hunger, since he was born into a better-off family, but after seeing the poor struggling for a living, promised himself to help these desperate people. He tried to follow the teachings of the Hòa Hảo prophet about the obligation to humanity which encourages Hòa Hảo adherents to positively engage in social work to help the less fortunate. Năm Thọ believed that the success of his business in Long Xuyên resulted from previous good merit accumulated by his parents because his father had been keen to help the less fortunate during his lifetime. Therefore, Năm Thọ wanted to extend his parent's meritorious deeds by cooperating with other Hòa Hảo urban elites, but his idea was to provide such aid in a new way, to do more to help poor people in the urban area. In the line waiting for charitable food, one could find all sorts of disadvantaged urban residents, including students, patients, beggars, homeless people, unemployed, lottery ticket sellers (*người bán vé số),* motorbike taxi drivers (*xe ôm),* porters (*bốc vác),* construction workers, and street vendors (*bán hàng rong)* who were making a living in the vicinity of the marketplace. Năm Thọ highlighted that from the charitable rice kitchen the urban needy gain was not only the money saved on food costs, but also the love, care and compassion of the Hòa Hảo Buddhist voluntary staff who work inside the rice kitchen every day.

6.2 Rationally organising charitable rice kitchens for large-scale merit

The key members of the Long Xuyên kitchen team tried to increase the effectiveness of food giving by logically designing the kitchen's infrastructure and its facilities, together with its human resources, to provide free food for the urban needy at a large scale. Hòa

Hảo urban elites and businesspeople around the marketplace were the primary donors who provided financial capital to build the rice kitchen's infrastructure. It is a two-level building whose second floor is dedicated to religious preaching, storing cooking oil and rice, and providing a resting place for the kitchen members. All of the ground floor is used for cooking and serving food. The width of the kitchen floor is only about 100 square metres; however, it is filled with tables, chairs and kitchen facilities. The kitchen designer had utilised all available space on the ground floor to set up benches for seating and tables. The tables were specially designed to fit four to five people on each side, with the width of the table just enough fit one row of food trays. The width of the benches is also just enough to accommodate the diners. The rows of benches and tables are straight and neatly arranged. The special design of the chairs and tables help to maximise the number of people in the kitchen for each round of food serving. As Năm Thọ explained, this is a populous city, so the size of the kitchen is hardly large. The kitchen is only big enough for 21 tables and benches; however, the kitchen staff could serve nearly a hundred people in each batch due to the good design and arrangement of seats and tables in the dining area. He stated that the kitchen looks crowded all the time, but everything is very orderly and neat.

The second significant feature of the Hòa Hảo urban rice kitchen is that its facilities were gradually modernised to meet the demand of the high number of the urban poor. Recently, the kitchen manager had discussed upgrading to more modern cooking equipment with key donors in order to serve the poor at a larger scale. The steam rice cooker that used wood and charcoal was swapped for an electric rice cooker that can steam up to 100 kilograms of white rice at a time, enough to serve nearly 500 people. Instead of using wood in cooking, the kitchen staff began using gas and electricity in this activity. This helped the kitchen minimise the risk of fire in the context of densely populated marketplace. The new cooking equipment also helped the kitchen to save labour by making cooking a more convenient and less tiresome for the kitchen staff. The small refrigerator was replaced with a large one that can store more vegetables and keep these cooking materials in good condition. The kitchen also needed necessary pieces of equipment for cooking activities such as pots and pans, food trays, storage cupboards, bins for vegetables and a sink. Responding to the needs of the kitchen, the key donors readily equipped it with these modern facilities to help to improve its services.

Another important factor that influenced the success of this urban charitable rice kitchen was that the kitchen manager had organised its human resource like a business in order

to increase the productivity and serve a large number of diners every day. Kitchen labour was separated into spacialised tasks of which volunteers were assigned different components. This division of labour in the kitchen was associated with the ability to feed an increasing number of people. This number has increased over 10 times since the kitchen was established in 2012, from only about 100 meals to 800 - 1,200 meals per day in 2017. The kitchen's human resource was mobilised by voluntary Hòa Hảo Buddhists from urban peripheral areas and highly populated localities by Hòa Hảo Buddhist in the Mekong delta, such as An Giang, Đồng Tháp, Cần Thơ and Kiên Giang provinces.

Figure 6.1 Sorting vegetables before storing and cooking.

The kitchen's volunteers include ten groups who are usually relatives, friends and neighbours from the same locality that registered to work in the kitchen once a year on a one-week rotating basis. At the end of every week, each group moves to cook in another urban rice kitchen or go home to rest, and another group come to take the shift. Each group comprises 10 to 15 members, mostly retired farmers; some are also retired teachers, traders and businessmen. As Năm Thọ mentioned, besides the members of the kitchen managing board, who are local residents, the majority of voluntary staff are from different hometowns. However, they come to the charitable kitchen with the same motivation and compassion to help the poor. They have worked together since the kitchen was established. They loved each other and the diners as members of the same family. This is

the collective intentions of all Hòa Hảo voluntary kitchen staff and therefore reflects Hòa Hảo Buddhist values.

As I observed, there were about 25 voluntary staff working in the kitchen every day, of which a staff or sub-group of staff were assigned a specialised task in order to increase the efficiency. Generally, there were four types of daily activities that made up the kitchen work: (1) collecting, sorting and storing vegetables, fruits and other cooking materials; (2) preparing, cleaning and cooking vegetarian foods; (3) serving foods; and (4) cleaning up. The male kitchen staff were responsible for physically taxing tasks such as collecting, transporting and storing kitchen materials, including rice, vegetables, fruits and cooking oils. The kitchen men collected the donated vegetables and fruits from local traders who tended to give surplus products to the charitable kitchen at the end of their trading day. These vegetables and fruits were classified according to their freshness, then all of them were put in storeroom or refrigerator. For the rice and cooking oils, urban donors usually transported them to the kitchen door on a monthly basis, mostly midway through the lunar month. The female Hòa Hảo Buddhists were in charge of cooking activities. Vegetables were peeled and washed in the evening to make sure that they were ready for cooking early in the next morning. The kitchen manager usually oversaw the task of passing the food trays to the diners. Young volunteers, mostly female students, were responsible for serving food and drinks, while the male students looked after diners' vehicles and cleaned the dishes and kitchen floor at the end of the day.

The most intriguing thing about the urban charitable kitchen was that the urban Hòa Hảo Buddhists had organised and managed its food supply activities very quickly and timely to adapt to the industrial working styles of urban people on a large scale. The kitchen staff started cooking at 2:00am so that hot meals were ready for delivering to the poor porters at 4:00am. After finishing the first round of feeding breakfast, the kitchen staff immediately started cooking foods for lunch, the main feeding of the day. At around 9:00am, a group of voluntary students cleaned and arranged chairs and tables in the food serving area. Other students assisted the kitchen staff to fill white rice and vegetarian foods into different food trays. The students hurried up in putting foods into the trays while Năm Thọ filed them into a shelf one by one. The forehead of the kitchen manager was sweaty, and the shirts of students were all wet. All kitchen staff were super busy at this moment. They tried to prepare everything to be ready when the first diner arrived. Lunch was served at the kitchen from 10:00am to 13:00pm every day.

Inside the serving area, 21 long tables and chairs were arranged straight and neatly. Five people could sit together at one table. From the main entrance, the diners entered the kitchen, took a food tray and sat at a table. The diners would finish eating the foods very quickly, vacating the seat for another person after just about 20 minutes of eating. After the diners finished their foods, the voluntary students cleaned the table to welcome the next diners. Everything happened very quickly. The voluntary staff worked continuously to refill the rice and food dishes for the food trays, which needed to be available at all times. This required the kitchen staff to manage their time very well. As I observed, the rice kitchen, despite its limited space, could feed 300 people in just one hour. Therefore, during the three and a half hours of the lunch time, the kitchen could serve up to 1,000 people. The kitchen staff tried their best to do their specialised tasks, as they knew that a delay in any process might affect the food supply of the whole kitchen.

After finishing a workday, Năm Thọ shared with me that serving 1,000 free meals to the poor every day was not easy in the context of current economic hardship. He estimated that the kitchen spent nearly VND20 million (equivalent to about 1,000 US dollars) per day; hence, the annual spending amount was certainly huge. However, the kitchen rarely encountered financial problems in providing free meals for the urban poor because it had a reliable list of strategic urban donors who provided sufficient money and cooking materials to the kitchen every month. In particular, the supply of vegetables was very stable. Năm Thọ said that the more the vegetable traders knew about the kitchen's charitable activities, the happier they were to give their surplus produce to the kitchen.

To maximise the efficacy of the food giving to meet higher quantity of the urban needy, the kitchen had a plan to extend its activities around the city so that more poor people could access the free meals. Members of the charitable kitchen were going to organise hot foods to be delivered to the university dormitory so that more poor students could have free foods throughout their semesters. Furthermore, at the time, the kitchen only provided breakfast and lunch for needy, but was trying to attract more donors to contribute to the kitchen. The kitchen manager believed that the kitchen would successfully mobilise more resources in the near future and be could provide free diners for people.

Năm Thọ explained that the establishment of the charitable rice kitchen was not a spur-of-the-moment decision or ad hoc action by the Hòa Hảo Buddhists. He stressed that Hòa Hảo laypeople in Long Xuyên had tried to identify the most urgent need of the poor in

their city and come up with a solution to help them. These people concluded that the best thing they could do was to supply charitable foods to the needy. He stated that the rice kitchen was well-organised and coordinated to adapt to the urban context. The work of the Hòa Hảo charitable rice kitchen in the marketplace was to mobilise financial supports from good-hearted businessmen and utilise surplus vegetables and other resources from local traders to produce vegetarian foods. Then brought these cooked foods back onto the tables near the marketplace where it was most needed.

6.3 Producing high quality food as secular compliance with public health standards

As observed, the Long Xuyên kitchen's founder and staff had made great efforts in their food supply service so that it could bring the real benefits, but not any harmful effects, to the diners. The founder of the kitchen told me that, in order to serve food for people in an industrial, large-scale fashion, the rice kitchen must follow the state's regulations associated with the health required standards for nutritious, hygienic and safe food. This showed that secular considerations and interests – including self-interests – also shaped this Hòa Hảo charitable practice. It could be understood that Hòa Hảo Buddhists tried to create a system-sustaining contribution to labour market maintenance, coming from the main beneficiaries of the low-cost labour market, who received help from a sustainable supply of healthy bodies. On the other hand, these Hòa Hảo charitable donors also want to avoid being punished for mass-poisoning.

One of the most meaningful benefits brought by the Hòa Hảo food supply service is that it helps the urban labour market function more effectively and increases labour efficacy. The kitchen manager told me that most of the urban poor, especially poor migrants, engage in manual labour jobs. Hence, they need to have a balanced diet to keep their bodies strong for work. The chefs and all of the kitchen staff in this Hòa Hảo rice kitchen were highly aware of that, so always found ways to improve the quality of the food to ensure that all people who came to the charitable kitchen could experience the best service.

According to Dì Tám – the kitchen's main chef – having a nutritious diet is the most important part of maintaining good physical health. Based on the available resources of vegetables donated during the day, the chef and key staff would together design a specific food menu for the following day. Basically, they would cook white rice, combined with two or three 'salty dishes' and one vegetable soup. Dì Tám explained that the main chefs were usually the kitchen team leaders who were well known in Hòa Hảo localities for

cooking various vegetarian cuisines. They often combined different kinds of vegetables to cook the dishes that were believed to provide higher intakes of various important nutrients to help people maintain healthy physical bodies. She highlighted:

> If the diners eat a wide variety of foods in the right proportions, it can help them to achieve and maintain a healthy body. We have rich experiences in combining different kinds of vegetables to produce a delicious and nutritious food menu. Moreover, we were eager to learn and share best cooking practices among kitchen members to improve the quality of meals. Recently, the kitchen chefs have gained understanding that a vegetarian diet is associated with a higher consumption of vegetables that results in vegetarians having lower cholesterol, having lower blood pressure, and therefore reduced risk of heart attack and other chronic disease. This updated knowledge was attained during several training sessions organised by the provincial Department of Health during the year. The kitchen's key members, including the kitchen manager, chefs and cooking group leaders, must attend these training sessions to know how to produce healthy food to help people with a healthy diet.

Figure 6.2 Vegetarian foods prepared in the stainless-steel food tray.

According to Dì Tám, many people argued that vegetarian foods might not provide enough energy for a daily diet, especially for those who did heavy labour like porters or construction workers. In fact, kitchen members understand that the poor also had the desire to eat delicious and nutritious foods which was necessary for their physical body

in search of a balanced diet. However, when coming to the charitable rice kitchen, the needy did not have a choice of the favourite foods they liked like when they ate in a restaurant, so they relied on the available foods cooked by the kitchen chef. Being aware of this issue, the kitchen chefs always attempted to design different food menus for different days to provide a varied selection for the diners. When the food was ready on the table and the diners started eating, the kitchen chef would observe the eating habits of the diners. If a certain kind of food tasted good, the diners usually asked the serving staff for a refill. Sometimes shortly after having lunch, the chef would ask some diners about their favourite dishes. Then, the kitchen chef would keep these favourite recipes in regular rotation. Dì Tám told me that she knew almost every Hòa Hảo kitchen chef who was well-known for cooking vegetarian food in the western Mekong delta. She was keen to learn how to cook new, healthily vegetarian recipes and continued to share these recipes among kitchen chefs so that the diners could enjoy them more. She stressed that all kitchen staff wanted to produce delicious meals so that the needy would be happy and consume more food to meet their body's daily energy requirement.

Furthermore, according to Dì Tám, kitchen staff compulsorily participated in training sessions on food hygiene and safety organised by the provincial Department of Health. The provincial government wanted to ensure that Hòa Hảo charitable rice kitchens complied with the industrial standard of food hygiene regulations. The main chef would learn basic knowledge regarding how to properly process, cook and store foods in a proper way. She would share this knowledge with all kitchen staff. Their understanding of food hygiene and safety would minimise the chance of food contamination or food poisoning, protecting both the diners and the reputation of Hòa Hảo charitable rice kitchen. According to Năm Thọ, the kitchen manager:

> It is a rule that the rice kitchen must keep a small sample of the food served each day. This is stored in a box in the freezer for three to four days. In emergency cases if the diners have food poisoning or encounter any health problems regarding their consumption of these foods, the provincial Department of Health would test this food sample and send the affected person to hospital for suitable treatment. Fortunately, we confidently can say that, after five years of serving dozens of thousands of meals, there have been no food poisoning cases in the Hòa Hảo charitable rice kitchen (July 2018).

Dì Tám also stated that kitchen staff attempted to keep everything in the cooking area clean, since good hygiene practices were an important step in developing a food safety culture in the Hòa Hảo rice kitchen. Traditionally, the kitchen used plastic trays to serve meals. However, the kitchen staff found it hard to clean and sanitise these food trays, especially when they had been used for oily foods. The staff then learnt from the training sessions that hot foods might cause residues in reusable plastic food containers to leach into the foods, which was harmful for people's health. The kitchen manager raised the issue and a key donor in the marketplace agreed to donate 1,000 stainless steel food trays for the charitable kitchen. She also provided money to upgrade all kitchen utensils to meet the state's standards on hygiene and safety in public kitchens. Moreover, the donor purchased a big modern refrigerator so the rice kitchen could keep the vegetables fresh and safely store some dishes for the next days. After collecting donated materials from the marketplace, all cooking materials were carefully checked before they entered the cooking process. The kitchen manager managed the food supply chain very carefully, from the input materials, such as vegetables and ingredients, to the cooked foods on the trays, ready to serve the needy.

6.4 Vegetarian food charity as 'evil avoidance'

> Providing charitable food for the urban poor is meaningful to Hòa Hảo Buddhists. However, if many animals are killed to get meat for the needy to consume, we ourselves might generate new sins and this act might add new bad karma to the poor diners.
>
> *Dì Tám — the rice kitchen chef, August 2018.*

This comment from Dì Tám highlights that the food supply of Hòa Hảo Buddhists, which fulfilled official public health requirements, was essential to improving the social welfare provision in urban settings. However, their response to this secular need also had to comply with Hòa Hảo Buddhists' religious ethic of avoiding taking the lives of other sentient beings. To be effective, the Hòa Hảo Buddhists' charitable act of food giving should avoid harmful, unethical activity. In this regard, producing and serving all-vegetarian food was perceived as a suitable method to meet the requirements of their faith.

Dì Tám figured that merit making through providing vegetarian meals for the most desperate people in the city, like a reward, would bring good fortune to charitable donors

and volunteers in the next life. Further than that, vegetarian food giving would also help the urban poor to purify themselves, so even they could make good karma when they consumed vegetarian foods. Hòa Hảo Buddhists conceptualised the poverty of one's current life as a consequence of the bad karma generated from immoral actions in the past or in past lives. The Hòa Hảo prophecy taught the laity that 'those who do good deeds would earn merit, those who do evil would suffer'. If the poor believed in the circle of cause and effect (*nhân quả)* and karma (*nghiệp báo),* they could escape from poverty and suffering in the next life by avoiding immoral and evil actions and creating good karma in this very life. However, not all people appreciated this. Most of the Hòa Hảo kitchen elderly with whom I conversed in the rice kitchen believed that the poor were destined to suffer ceaselessly owing to this consequence, for they did not have the basic material requirements to live a decent life. They had neither the capability to improve their present material circumstances nor the vision to lead a morally elevated life since the poor always struggle for a living. Therefore, the Hòa Hảo Buddhists needed to give the poor a hand for salvation. Dì Tám said the Hòa Hảo prophet taught that followers should find suitable means of self-liberation, and then help other people overcome their suffering, to achieve joys and happiness in this present life. As such, food giving to the needy was the first criterion everyone should practice.

Năm Thọ entered the conversation to highlight that Hòa Hảo followers understand that karma is active in the act of food giving. Suppose that the charitable rice kitchen offered impure food to unfortunates who suffered from bad karma from previous lives? That would benefit no one. Hòa Hảo Buddhists should help these people to eat pure food in order to reduce the impact of the bad karma from their previous lives. Meanwhile, Hòa Hảo charitable practitioners themselves are not allowed to do harm to other sentient beings when making food and giving it to the needy as a way of earning merit. The intention of Hòa Hảo Buddhists was to observe the five precepts of Buddhist teachings, most importantly the rule of refraining from taking the life of sentient beings. Năm Thọ calculated that:

> The charitable rice kitchen provides nearly 1,000 meals per day. Taking an example, if we kill a chicken enough for ten diners, we have to slaughter almost a hundred of chickens a day to serve foods for the poor. Saying, the rice kitchen works 26 days per month. If we did not offer vegetarian foods but meat for the needy, the kitchen staff would take the life of nearly 3,000 chickens per month. That is a mass killing and we see this as an immoral act that would definitely, not

make more merit, but generate new sins and bad karma. Hence, giving vegetarian foods was perceived as the most effective way of avoiding mass killing, so making merit for both charitable givers and food receivers.

Năm Thọ further explained that the Hòa Hảo prophet conceptualised vegetarianism as a way to develop humane compassion, to love other people and all living things and to respect the life of other sentient beings as one's own life.[27] Hòa Hảo followers attached special importance to the practice of 'heart vegetarianism' (*chay tâm),* which combined fasting with the correction of body, mind and speech. There was a degree of efficacy for making merit that Hòa Hảo Buddhists combined by giving vegetarian food to the poor and teaching them how to act morally. Encouraging the poor 'to do good deeds and avoid evil (*làm lành, lánh dữ)* would help them nurture human compassion and avoid killings. This method would be more efficacious for the charitable rice kitchen. Năm Thọ noted that if someone practiced vegetarianism but did not know how to do good things, especially respect the life of others, the vegetarianism became meaningless.

According to Năm Thọ, charitable practice, especially food almsgiving, is one of the most important components of Hòa Hảo Buddhism. Food giving is humane and loving because it nurtures the compassion of both givers and receivers. It is important to balance the body and mind in order to get rid of all the causes that generated suffering. For this reason, the charitable rice kitchen usually organised preaching in the middle of each month, to help the poor know that when people did immoral things in this life, they would reap bad consequences in the present or next life. Hòa Hảo Buddhists believe they should help the needy to become conscious of the cause of their suffering, to awaken, guide, and take them on the path of the light of morality. Năm Thọ contended that practicing charity through giving vegetarian food to assist the urban poor with heart, sincerity, joy and spontaneity would achieve immeasurable meritorious value.

In the urban context, giving vegetarian food went beyond feeding and this was also seen as an instrument to connect the Hòa Hảo urban elites and kitchen members to the urban poor community, and connect the migrants and urban 'stranger' neighbours. Every lunchtime, the needy came to the rice kitchen to have vegetarian food cooked by Hòa Hảo Buddhists. After the lunch, some of them went home with a lunch box to share the meal

[27] Hòa Hảo adherents are encouraged to practice permanent vegetarianism. Alternatively, laypeople can eat vegetarian food at least four times a month: on the first, the 14th and 15th, and the last days of each month; and on the important anniversary days of Hòa Hảo Buddhism. The Hòa Hảo followers abstain from eating the meat of dogs, cows and buffalos because these animals are useful and close to human (Sấm Giảng Giáo Lý PGHH 2013:185).

with single parent caring for small children, single elderly, disabled people, orphans, HIV infected person, or chronic sick neighbours who were unable to visit the rice kitchen for the meals. Every day, the kitchen staff packed vegetarian foods in many lunch boxes so that when the diners came home, they could take the foods for these people. According to Năm Thọ, the action of these people also generated merit for themselves because they helped the kitchen distribute the foods so that more poor people could access the vegetarian foods. Năm Thọ estimated that eight in ten diners in this charitable kitchen were regular customers who had been consuming the vegetarian foods at the kitchen for several years. Some people might not 'look poor', but they came to take a food tray for a disabled or abandoned neighbour. The vegetarian foods were not just for the poor and destitute. They were also for those with big families struggling to cope or anyone else who needed it.

Giving food to the needy with respect was the other aspect of the Hòa Hảo charitable rice kitchen. The kitchen manager explained that once the vegetarian meals were well prepared, the food should be presented to the people in need in a respectful way. As I observed, the kitchen staff carefully prepared the food and got ready before the serving time. Once the first diner came in, he stopped in front of Năm Thọ, the kitchen manager, who carefully placed a food tray into the diner's hands, then guided him to sit on a chair. The kitchen manager did this for one diner after another, respectively. The other serving staff were frequently moving around the dining area to gently ask whether the diners needed extra food.

The diners received the food trays respectfully and politely, too. They took off their hats while the eating vegetarian food as a way of respecting the donated food and the kitchen members who cooked and offered the food to them. All diners kept a low voice while eating. Sometimes one just heard the sound of spoons and chopsticks hitting against the stainless-steel food trays. This was very different to what happened in the 'non-charitable' rice kitchen next door, where customers were loudly ordering meals while the kitchen owner frequently shouted at the staff when they brought the wrong dishes to customers. Năm Thọ stated that all people visiting the kitchen were treated alike. They were all welcome in the rice kitchen regardless of their religious backgrounds, hometown, occupations or social class. Members of the rice kitchen liked to see that all diners felt full after having vegetarian food. These voluntary kitchen staff were happy when diners asked for more food because they knew that the needy also felt happy consumingwhat the charitable kitchen had cooked. Năm Thọ told me that although these urban poor often

changed their accommodations and jobs, they still visited the rice kitchen almost every day.

6.5 Moral money for healthy charity: the expansion of charity in the urban outskirts

In previous sections, I highlighted how Hòa Hảo Buddhists identified the urban need and responded to the need by establishing a charitable rice kitchen to assist the poor. By producing a high-quality food provision service, which was well complied with, either the secular public health standards, or the strict moral code of the sect about abstaining from taking life of animals, the charitable donors of the sect had already made a lot of merit. They were trying to manage the merit they had produced by gradually improving the food quality giving for urban poor people. In addition, by producing and giving vegetarian food for the needy, the Hòa Hảo Buddhists had made an effort to protect the merit they earned by refraining from contractor actions and avoiding counterproductive outcomes. They avoided secular infractions that would damage their store of merit and avoided damaging their merit by any wrongful religious actions.

I frequently wondered how these Hòa Hảo urban elites could expand the charitable food supply on a larger scale to make more merit, and what might be behind this remarkable expansion of their food giving activity and how Hòa Hảo Buddhists could sustain a supply of donations for a successful food supply service to maintain the merit they produced. With an introduction from Năm Thọ, I visited another significant rice kitchen organised by Hòa Hảo Buddhists in a peripheral region of the city of Long Xuyên. This charitable rice kitchen in the urban outskirts was established in 2012, aimed at helping poor high-school students in Vĩnh Trạch commune - one of the most densely populated Hòa Hảo Buddhist areas. I met Uncle Tư Tuần – the founder of the kitchen – who shared with me an interesting story of how members of a small group of better-off Hòa Hảo established the charitable rice kitchen in this commune:

> Students from impoverished families of Vĩnh Trạch and its neighbouring communes find it hard to access the school. There is only one high school for all students from eight surrounding communes, so students have to travel a long distance by bicycle to reach the school. Most students remain at school after the morning session, having lunch and waiting for the afternoon session. Besides these students, many others ride their bicycles nearly 10 kilometres to reach home, just for a lunch, then took another 10 kilometres back to school for the afternoon class. These students come from poor families so they could not afford

to have lunch around the school. Most times, they arrived at school late with tiredness, and as a result found it hard to concentrate on the lessons.

Tư Tuần noticed that many of these poor students usually dropped out at the high school level, so they could not pursue their university dreams. He shared with me that he felt sad when he saw these students riding bicycles a total of nearly 40 kilometres a day, in the rain, on slippery roads, uniforms all wet; they looked cold while their stomachs seemed to be empty. He said he could not imagine why in this rich delta with a vast area of rice fields, these students still struggled for such a lunch every day to go to school. This reminded him of his childhood, when he also struggled with the hardship of attaining the schooling. He could not stand for that, so he discussed the idea of helping these students with his close friends Tư Lâm and Hai Thuấn, also key members of the commune Hòa Hảo Committee. These three members decided to build a charitable rice kitchen nearby the high school to support these students.

Figure 6.3 In-need students during the lunch time.

Hai Thuấn shared with me the reason why Hòa Hảo Buddhists do not hesitate to contribute money accumulated during their lifetime for charity. He explained that, over generations, Hòa Hảo laymen were taught by the prophet that money was the source of evil, both for those people who had not enough and for those who had too much. He explained that since Hòa Hảo adherents practiced Buddhism at home, not in a monastery, they had to earn money for their living. Many engaged in farming activities; some participated in small business while others performed various occupations. Though their lives depended on these livelihoods, such dependency differed from that of the dishonest, and the sect's followers were not allowed to carry out deceptive undertakings. The laymen

were also prohibited from undertaking any malicious professions that do harm to other people (PGHH 2013:214). The Hòa Hảo prophet encouraged adherents that when they engaged in any kind of work, they should work diligently to make money morally.

Furthermore, spending money in a moral way is perceived as doing a right action. Hòa Hảo Buddhists liked to lead a simple life, so they spend money just for necessary things such as food, clothes, medicines and education. Hai Thuấn gave me an example that he had earned great success in his rice mill business while Tư Tuần and Tư Lâm had been quite successful operating a large rice farm over the last 30 years. He asserted that when Hòa Hảo Buddhists think they have already accumulated enough wealth for their families, they do not use that money as a mean for further accumulating of wealth or purchasing luxurious materials for entertaining themselves. Instead, they tended to allocate a certain amount of money to assisting people in need, as well as contribute to voluntary labours to various charitable activities. Hai Thuấn described the engagement of his family in the kitchen's activities:

> I decided to donate 2,000 m^2 of land to build the charitable kitchen without much thinking. I also contributed funding to build the kitchen and to purchase kitchen utensils. My family earn money via our own business and accumulated the money for many years. We earned the clean money and I believed it was time to use this money to repay the debts to the society. Furthermore, I encouraged my sons, relatives and friends to engage in the kitchen's daily activities. My eldest son is now the group leader responsible for preparing woods, collecting rice, vegetables and other resources from the donors. My wife and my daughter-in-law also participate in the cooking group.

He added:

> If the kitchen gives foods with something morally unclean, we see ourselves as immoral charitable donors. It would be a mischievous way of doing charity. By using moral money for providing vegetarian foods for poor students, we wished to pass the merit and good luck to all of them.

Tư Tuần said that when the group intended to build the charitable rice kitchen, no external donors knew about the group's charitable activities. The group members tried to mobilise available resources from their families, relatives and friends. Tư Tuần recalled that in the first month of operating the kitchen, he contributed 70 kilograms of rice and provided

vegetables from his farm to the kitchen. Tư Lâm gave a sum of money to buy ingredients and other cooking materials, while Hai Thuấn made a contribution for kitchen gadgets. All of the voluntary kitchen staff were members of these three families. The group used the office of the commune's Hòa Hảo Administrative Committee (*Văn phòng Ban trị sự PGHH*) as the charitable rice kitchen. Though the rice kitchen was quite modest in scale in its first year, it functioned well, with the number of poor high-school students who came to the kitchen for a free lunch reaching fifty.

6.6 Transparency for a sustainable supply of donations

As the number of poor students registered for free meals significantly increased, the rice kitchen needed to mobilise more resources from external donors, mainly from urban elites from the city of Long Xuyên. The founder of the charitable kitchen noticed that the kitchen needed to be organised on a larger scale to meet the increasing demand of impoverished students in the entire urban periphery. Given the recent increasing numbers of scandals related to some charitable activities nationwide, Tư Tuần and the kitchen members were aware that public trust played an important role in attracting generous donors to contribute to charitable activities. These Hòa Hảo Buddhists believed that transparency was essential for the rice kitchen to win the trust of donors.

With official permission from the local authority, the kitchen manager started to organise a fundraising event to increase the scale of the rice kitchen. Tư Tuần signed his name on a stack of invitation letters that would be sent to honoured guests including representatives of the commune people's committee, local business owners, potential charitable donors from Long Xuyên, principals of local schools, and the parents of students. Furthermore, Tư Tuần had invited some journalists from Long Xuyên City to come to the event to observe and write reports about the 'beloved rice kitchen' for poor students. This special event was organised on the opening day of the students' school year. The beloved kitchen was then covered on a special report on the provincial television channel. It highlighted the meaningful contributions of the charitable rice kitchen to help young students access higher education. This kitchen was perceived by journalists as the first charitable kitchen focused on resolving the issue of education in the western Mekong delta.

The result of this media campaign exceeded the kitchen manager's expectations. Some days later, many entrepreneur owners from Long Xuyên came to visit the kitchen. Mrs. Phượng, a gold-shop owner from Long Xuyên, was conversing with a high-school student. Phượng, a Hòa Hảo Buddhist, was a well-known donor for various charitable

activities in the entire western Mekong delta. Her donated contributions varied from providing houses for the needy to giving free ambulances to deliver poor patients to hospitals to providing scholarships for university students. However, it was the first time she had visited and donated money to a charitable rice kitchen. Phương consulted with Tư Tuần about the kitchen's future plan. She supported the kitchen's plan to scale up its food giving services for all hard-off students in the area, not just high-school students. She committed to be a long-term donor of the kitchen. Mrs. Thảo, her daughter, made a video tape recording the conversation between her mother and Tư Tuần. She also recorded the kitchen's accounting table indicating clearly the names of every single donor. She said that she would share the video with her relatives in France to introduce them to the 'beloved kitchen' so that these overseas Vietnamese could give financial support to the rice kitchen. In the following months, many donors from Cần Thơ and Hồ Chí Minh City visited the kitchen. Other donors from the U.S., France and Australia also sent money to support the rice kitchen. Furthermore, the kitchen developed a network of local donors to mobilise more resources within the village that included businessmen, small traders, teachers, retired cadres, and better-off farmers. These local donors committed to contribute money to the kitchen on a monthly basis.

Hai Thuấn wrote down donors' names and the amount of their contributions in neat handwriting on a big blackboard nearby the dining area. It clearly indicated a long list of donors who had recently contributed money, rice, cooking oil, tofu and other materials to the rice kitchen. Another smaller accounting table summarised the total donation funds and total spending for the month. Both tables were well designed so that donors who came to visit the kitchen could easily read their names and their contributions from the tables. A businessman who visited the kitchen told me that, by looking at these accounting tables, he could know the current financial status of the kitchen and identify which resources were limited so that he could focus more on contributing those resources.

According to Hai Thuấn, trust was key in developing a good relationship between the rice kitchen, its donors and its beneficiaries. Thus, they made sure everything was transparent. Generally, charity givers usually do not know exactly what happens to their donations, how much was used for overhead costs and where the money was actually spent. For Hai Thuấn, that lack of transparency was dangerous because a single media report of poor performance or misallocation of charitable funds might easily bring disrepute, not only to this rice kitchen, but also to the entire set of charitable activities offered by Hòa Hảo Buddhists. As such, he was highly aware of how to properly manage and use funds.

Figure 6.4 The list of key donors at the urban outskirt charitable rice kitchen.

Hai Thuấn told me that the introduction of the accounting statement nearby the dining area was an effective instrument for ensuring the public's trust with donors. Furthermore, the kitchen manager occasionally invited key donors to visit the kitchen so that they could see the effects of their donations on the beneficiaries. Hai Thuấn suggested:

> Vegetarian food is pure. Hence, the use of donors' money should be pure like the food. We could not waste or take these resources, even a cent, from donors. Clean food helps students' bodies be healthy for a good study, while clean money spent helps to operate the kitchen healthily too. We feel good and the donors feel good. Therefore, the transparency of how money was spent strengthens the trustworthiness from the donors. This helps the kitchen stabilise the donated resources.

Mrs. Phượng highlighted that Hòa Hảo charitable organisations stand out as more trustworthy to the public than other organisations. The Hòa Hảo charitable kitchen was considered as a mediator for a businesswoman like her to do charity. She did not have any critique about the transparency of state-led organisations. Yet, she assured me that when she gave money to this Hòa Hảo charitable kitchen, she did not worry much about the corruption or how the money would be spent. This explained why she had been

confident to give money to many Hòa Hảo Buddhist charitable groups to help thousands of poor people since the last ten years.

The Hòa Hảo kitchen manager's efforts to signal their trustworthiness to the public successfully attracted more donors to assist the kitchen. The kitchen house was widened while the kitchen floor was heightened and lined with ceramic tiles. The preaching hall was renovated to become a resting place for students to take a nap. The kitchen experienced that higher degree of trust about the kitchen was associated with a greater willingness to become a donor and to give greater sums. Occasionally, new donors visited and contributed to the kitchen fund. Former donors stayed with the kitchen. Some of them even contributed more money towards renovating the kitchen. With these supports, the kitchen was successfully upgraded, enabling it to serve a large number of students at the same time. Moreover, the number of voluntary staff almost tripled compared to that of last year. Many female teachers from local schools also took part in the cooking group. Tư Tuần said that he wanted to express gratitude and indebtedness to all people who had sacrificed their time, labour and money for the success of the beloved kitchen which now could operate to serve over 300 students per day.

Conclusion

This chapter reveals how Hòa Hảo urban elites identify and respond to the social problems that exist in the contemporary urban context. The findings show that the charitable food supply run by the Hòa Hảo urban elites is responsive, precise and effective in a remarkable fashion that meets the modern urban standards and fulfils the contemporary urban identified needs. The charitable rice kitchens feed the urban poor, fellow human beings, with nutritious, hygienic and safe vegetarian foods, and offering them hospitality to overcome remoteness and inaccessibility to social service provision in urban areas. This is a meaningful response of the Hòa Hảo Buddhists to the mass need of the urban poor, yet also significant about the response is the speed, scale, professionalism and effectiveness of the charitable kitchen that the Hòa Hảo Buddhists had rationally created. The industrial-scale food charity they developed is able to meet the high demand of the poor and it is compatible with high level modern standards and public health requirements in the urban context. The charitable giving of vegetarian food, which is purposefully prepared for the needy to be nutritious, hygienic and safe, also meets the sect's faithful requirement of avoiding the wrongful religious actions of taking lives of animals, which might destroy the store of merit they had made and accumulated during the course of their

charitable life. Their merit is maintained by doing something regarded as functional in secular terms, avoiding harm to the health of the beneficiaries, and complying with the state regulations. The findings from the chapter also highlighted that Hòa Hảo Buddhists are able to maintain incoming contributions and donations by rendering the transparency, building prestige and trust with donors in ensuring the collecting resources' sustainability. As such, the Hòa Hảo charitable rice kitchens were responsive to the demands of the modern urban setting while remaining its religious values and beliefs that motivated the charitable donors to act. Findings from this chapter confirm that Hòa Hảo Buddhists are highly capable, responsive, sensitive and adaptive to the radical transform of the contemporary society and modern context.

Chapter 7

Building Bridges with the State

> This steel, cable-stayed bridge, built entirely by local people, is now open to the public after only three months of construction. Following this modern bridge, more bridges and roads will be constructed as indicated in the commune's five-year strategic plan for rural infrastructure development. The bridge will bring collective benefit to all people. Farmers have more chances to access the market as middlemen and traders could easily travel to the locality to buy agricultural products. More important, thanks to the good infrastructure system, patients are quickly sent to hospital in emergency cases, and children can easily get to school, particularly during flood seasons. This newest achievement stems from various efforts of the whole political system, particularly the political will of key leaders of the Commune People's Committee.

Interspersed with the speech of the commune chairman above was applause from honoured guests: government cadres from neighbouring communes and districts who had been invited to attend the bridge-opening ceremony. In his speech, the chairman underlined his success in mobilising the grassroot people to take part in the national program for rural development (*Chương trình xây dựng nông thôn mới*). The chairman seemed proud when another commune chief mentioned that he wanted to learn how he could convince so many voluntary workers to engage in such a big construction. The modern bridge and the chairman's tone made the bridge-opening ceremony reminiscent of the inauguration of a state development project. This impression was strengthened when the chairman stressed the principle role of the state and political system in improving rural infrastructure. Surprisingly, however, this modern bridge was not built by the state. It was constructed, in its entirety, by people belonging to the Hoà Hảo religion, a millenarian Buddhist group in the western Mekong delta.

According to an elderly Hoà Hảo Buddhist I met at the construction site, one of the main features of the sect is its response to natural disasters, particularly floods. In 1939, the year Hoà Hảo Buddhism was founded, the Mekong delta experienced a historic flood. The whole delta was submerged under water and many rural communities were completely isolated. Confronting such conditions, Hoà Hảo Buddhists frequently engaged

in community work such as building embarkments to prevent flood water from destroying rice crops, fixing washed-out village roads after the flood season, or constructing wooden bridges to cross small ditches and canals. These community infrastructure developments tended to be spontaneous and were primarily conducted on a small scale by groups of Hoà Hảo adepts comprising just a few local people.

In contrast, present-day Hoà Hảo Buddhist bridge and road construction projects have been implemented on a large scale with the engagement of hundreds of voluntary workers and meet modern construction standards compatible with the state's criteria. For instance, the steel, cable-stayed bridge mentioned in the commune head's opening speech has two spans, each 25 metres-long, supported by a 25-metre-high H-shaped central tower. A thick metal roof covers the top of the bridge tower. This was described by the construction team as an innovative technique to protect the tower and cables against corrosion from rainwater. According to the bridge designer, this would help increase the longevity of the bridge up to 50 years, double the lifespan of a wooden bridge.

Figure 7.1 A steel, cable-stayed bridge built by Hoà Hảo Buddhists.

Walking around the commune and seeing a number of similar bridges constructed by Hoà Hảo Buddhists, I found myself wondering how the Hoà Hảo sect, which has been portrayed by previous scholars as traditionalist, otherworldly and disengaged from mainstream society, could construct such modern pieces of infrastructure. Moreover, the Hoà Hảo religious movement has been understood by scholars as an oppositional sect

(Chapman 2013; Fall 1955; Haseman 1976; Hill 1971; Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983; Wolf 1969; Woodside 1976). Given that the sect has historically been in conflict with the state, I also wondered why the government allowed the Hoà Hảo such leeway in its construction projects. It is true that Hoà Hảo Buddhists' charitable activities are not necessarily in conflict with the mission of the secular state, since their activities, such as constructing good transport infrastructure in the Mekong delta, are in line with official development goals and cater to the needs of ordinary people. Yet it is striking that thousands of Hoà Hảo lay followers have autonomously engaged in infrastructure development schemes, an arena was completely dominated by the state. Due to the engagement of a large number of Hoà Hảo voluntary workers and donors, Hoà Hảo charitable projects have grown in scale and have had a significant impact on the modern development of the Mekong delta.

Given prior understandings of the Hoà Hảo, such an outcome seems scarcely possible, as the communist state in Vietnam is known for being suspicious of religion (Taylor 2007). Conversely, the Hoà Hảo are also suspicious of the state and have a long history of conflict with various perceived outsiders. However, by looking at the different stages of a Hoà Hảo bridge building project, the findings highlight that the Hoà Hảo have a high capacity to work effectively with the state in modernising rural infrastructure. For example, Hoà Hảo bridge builders were able to secure support for their project from both grassroots religious backers and state officials because of the syncretic way they legitimised the bridge. They did so by stressing its conformity to the sect's cosmology of debt, local experiences of coping with floods and state development discourses, with which key Hoà Hảo bridge builders were familiar. In addition, the Hoà Hảo showed themselves to be highly cooperative with the state in fundraising and mobilising local resources, as well as had an effective strategy to attract external donors' contributions for the bridge projects. They were humble about their contribution to the community, so they did not compete with the state for credit for the bridges they built. Whenever the Hoà Hảo builders built a bridge, they were serious about meeting exacting modern standards. Importantly, the Hoà Hảo earned respect from local people since they wasted none of the resources mobilised from the community to build their bridges.

In this chapter, I explore how Hoà Hảo charitable bridge builders accommodate the state by examining various aspects of the bridge-building process. I show that this accommodation of the state occurs from beginning to end, starting with the inspiration for bridge building and continuing in subsequent steps such as fundraising, meeting construction standards, public relations and the prestige of the Hoà Hảo builders. The

chapter describes the capacity, attitude and tactics that have enabled the Hoà Hảo to accommodate the state in rural infrastructure projects that they undertake in line with their religiously informed charitable tradition. In so doing, this chapter contributes to the argument of the thesis by situating Hoà Hảo bridge building as an example of vernacular development.

7.1 The inspiration to build modern bridges

> Our lives are not meant to be detached from other people and the society. If we are unable to do great things for compatriots (*Đồng bào*) or the country (*Đất nước*) during the course of our life, we can do other modest things which partially contribute to enrich our nation. Debt to the nation is the most important of the existential debts we are obliged to repay. Life consists of repaying debts until we die (*Đời là trả nợ, đến khi nào chết thì thôi*).

This comment from Tư Hiệp — the leader of a Hoà Hảo bridge construction team — gives insight into the motivation for Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity, emphasising the Hoà Hảo philosophy of debt repayment. According to this philosophy, people are born into debt. They come from 'four debts' — to their parents and ancestors, Buddha, nation, and humanity — and are obliged to reciprocate the gift of life. Charitable practice, or serving society, is one means of repaying these existential debts. Intriguingly, as in the case of bridge building, Hoà Hảo Buddhists do not limit their debt repayments to parents and ancestors, according to the restrictive ethic of filial piety (*báo hiếu*) that is pervasive in Vietnamese rural society. Theirs is a more generalised form of reciprocity (Sahlins 1972) that conceives of and pays debts 'outward' to strangers they perhaps never will meet and 'forward' to members of the next generation. Bridge building is seen as a way of paying one's debt to others, and to the country. As Tư Hiệp told me, by helping people improve life in local villages and communities, the Hoà Hảo repay their debt to the nation. In his view, the contribution made to each village and community, no matter how small, is a contribution to the entire country.

The inspiration of Tư Hiệp and other Hoà Hảo Buddhists in bridge building comes not only from Hoà Hảo cosmology, but also the local experiences of coping with floods. According to Tư Hiệp, the Hoà Hảo initially built roads and bridges for children to access school safely during the flood season. As a grassroots Hoà Hảo leader, Tư Hiệp first formed an infrastructure construction group to respond to community needs. He explained to me that his commune near the Hậu River was subjected to annual flooding

from mid-August to the end of November. The peak of flood season in September occurred at the same time children began the school year. He recalled that the floods in 2000 and 2001 submerged the land everywhere. It was particularly dangerous for the children going to school unaccompanied by their parents. The children usually had to walk through strong currents to reach the school. The distance to the school was about just one kilometre, yet the children took over an hour to reach it. The majority of students came to class late, and the textbooks they carried were usually wet and their uniforms muddy. Furthermore, the children also had to cross a river via small boats. The water current was strong enough to claim the life of anyone who fell into the river when the boats capsised. This tragedy once happened in a neighbouring commune. In this regard, the bridge building could be seen as 'the gift of life', because the Hoà Hảo built the bridge for the sake of society's next generation, enabling children to survive and learn. This socially engaged characteristic of the Hoà Hảo religion could be perceived as the obligation of reciprocity in Mauss's gift economy (Mauss 1970).

Tư Hiệp's ideology about modernising rural infrastructure was also shaped by his experience as a low-level cadre in the local administration. Before taking his position as the Hoà Hảo construction team leader, Tư Hiệp was a key member of the commune's dispute resolution team, which was established by the Commune People's Committee. He became a prominent mediator on the team due to his prestige in the community, his knowledge and his deep understanding of the state laws and their enforcement documents, which he had learned from his nephew, a commune cadre. As a result of his work with the local administration, he well knew the national priorities for rural development. He was also aware of the state's cosmology of connectivity, which deemed that by modernising road and bridge systems across the region, the economy would grow, and people could more easily access schools, hospitals and markets. According to the official state perspective, a lack of good transport infrastructure would prevent the development of the Mekong delta. People's quality of life in these localities would only improve if they were able to access the market economy. Through his frequent interactions with commune and district officials, Tư Hiệp was exposed to these discourses and sensitised to the importance of bridge building in state rural development ideology.

Tư Hiệp shared with me that around the time of the large floods in 2000 and 2001, the local government responded quite slowly to community demands for better living conditions, and local people, particularly children, struggled with the dangerous floodwaters. Tư Hiệp attempted to respond to the potential risks proactively, before any

more harm could come to the children during the flood season. His construction team was formed in that context and in a short space of time built many wooden bridges. According to Tư Hiệp, building a wooden bridge was a relatively easy task that required no more than two or three weeks and some local materials. These bridges were usually constructed at a low cost, required little maintenance and had an average lifespan of 15 to 25 years. Because they were small structures and mostly situated on backroads, the state did not require any specific construction standards.

A transition in Hoà Hảo Buddhist infrastructure development ideology happened, however, in 2015, when Tư Hiệp and his fellow workers came to discuss plans for a new wooden bridge with the commune chairman. Tư Hiệp was informed that the central government had recently promoted the national program for building new countryside and the chairman expressed his hope that the commune would become one of the most successful cases in this development movement. He suggested that Tư Hiệp and the Hoà Hảo construction team build modern bridges instead of simple wooden bridges. The chairman declared that future infrastructure projects must comply with the national standards on infrastructure quality.[28]

After that meeting, Tư Hiệp realised his wooden bridges might no longer meet the demands of modern society. He learned that the climate resistance of a concrete bridge was better than that of a wooden one. A reinforced concrete bridge was more durable than any other building system and the maintenance cost was relatively low. As a result, the group members decided to change from constructing traditional wooden bridges to modern concrete structures. Tư Hiệp believed that the construction team should accumulate advanced knowledge of modern bridge building techniques to adapt to the new standards for transport infrastructure systems.

Tư Hiệp recalled that at that time, specialised skills and knowledge about concrete, cable-stayed bridge building was almost non-existent in his group. The Hoà Hảo group members started seeking new knowledge about how to build modern bridges. Some days later, Tư Hiệp was informed by a fellow Hoà Hảo Buddhist about an old farmer who had successfully built the first steel cable-stayed bridge across a wide canal. The old man had

[28] The new standard for all road and bridge construction in rural areas is that commune roads should be permanently cemented, and bridges should be constructed in a steel or concrete modern style to at least level four on the national standard scale. That is, modern bridges should be at least 4.5 meters in width, enabling a car to cross.

also successfully built a dozen concrete bridges using the same model. The old man was called *Vua Cầu Treo* (the King of cable-stayed bridges) by the delta's inhabitants.

Early the next morning, Tư Hiệp and other group members decided to go see 'the King'. They encountered an old man in black pyjamas with long, uncut hair practicing ancestral worship in his home. Tư Hiệp saw an image of the prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ in the house of the old man, so that way he knew the old man was also a Hoà Hảo Buddhist. His name was Sáu Quý. He was a farmer who had never attended any engineering course related to modern bridge building. The old man said he used to take a motorbike to Bến Tre province to observe engineers building the Rạch Miễu Bridge (nearly three kilometres in length), once considered the longest modern cable-stayed bridge in the Mekong delta. He thought that model of cable-stayed bridge could be applied to constructing future bridges crossing rivers wider than 30 metres.

Sáu Quý took Tư Hiệp and the group members to see one of his cable-stayed bridges. The modern structure was extraordinary to the group. The bridge had a total length of 40 metres and provided two traffic lanes for motorbikes and pedestrians. With a navigational clearance height of 15 metres, the bridge could facilitate river boats passing underneath. Especially, the bridge had a central span of 25 metres and was supported by a 20-metre-high tower founded on a bored pile five metres below river level. The foundation could sustain impact loading from vessels up to five deadweight tonnes. This was considered the first and longest steel, cable-stayed bridge designed and built by Hoà Hảo Buddhists in the rural areas of the Mekong delta. Tư Hiệp and his group stayed with Sáu Quý to learn new knowledge and skills in the construction field for nearly a month. After the trip, Tư Hiệp and the group members had acquired invaluable knowledge. The group went back the commune and started to design their first steel, cable-stayed bridge in the same style as the first bridge of 'the king', but a bit longer.

7.2 Cooperation with the state in fundraising

The new modern bridge was incredibly long and wide; the total funding needed for their construction was also higher than for the old-style wooden bridges. To push the project, Tư Hiệp actively communicated with the commune chairman about the funding and official permission to construct the modern bridge. Several meetings between the Hoà Hảo construction team and local officers were organised at the office of the Commune People's Committee. Tư Hiệp presented the detailed design and construction plans, as well as the total estimated budget, to the chairman and his cadres. The team leader was

not very worried about the facilities and human resources required since he had organised similar projects over the previous years. However, he was concerned about how to mobilise efficient funding for this 'mega' project as the cost might be over one billion Vietnamese *đồng* (equivalent to 50,000 USD). This would be the biggest bridge project the Hoà Hảo construction team had ever built. Before attending these meetings, Tư Hiệp had successfully fundraised nearly one third of the total construction cost. These funding contributions came from Vietnamese overseas in Australia and Europe as well as donors in Ho Chi Minh City with whom he had close connections from his initial construction projects. Tư Hiệp suggested he could fundraise the other one third of the construction expenses from Hoà Hảo Buddhists and other locals.

The commune chairman came to agree with the action plan designed by the Hoà Hảo construction team. It seemed to be an achievable project since the local government would contribute one third of the construction cost. The amount of the state's financial contribution was indicated in the national policy about state–people joint projects in rural infrastructure development (*Nhà nước và Nhân dân cùng làm*). The chairman decided to establish a project management board led by himself as a representative of the local government, the chairman of the Commune's Fatherland Front as a representative of the commune's mass organisations and Tư Hiệp as representative of the Hoà Hảo construction group. The chairman emphasised that the Hoà Hảo Buddhists would be primarily responsible for constructing the bridge. The local government provided supplementary support, such as completing official documents and contributing up to 30 per cent of the construction cost. However, the chairman wanted the Commune People's Committee to be the main organiser of the bridge-building project.

To mobilise funding for the project, the chairman assigned Tư On, the chairman of the Commune's Fatherland Front, to cooperate with Tư Hiệp. The fundraising group was formed with four members: two members of the Commune's Fatherland Front, Tư Hiệp and Hai Long — a construction team member. Led by the chairman of the Fatherland Front, the fundraising group visited people's homes to ask for contributions towards the bridge project. Regrettably, a communication breakdown occurred between the chairman and a man who wanted to avoid contributing money. The man was upset because he felt he had been imposed on by the chairman about a fixed amount of money he must contribute. He emphasised that the amount of voluntary contributions depended on each household's economic circumstance and willingness to give. He said the local

government should not impose on people to contribute a fixed amount. 'I could give more, yet please don't enforce the people in such an authoritarian manner,' he said angrily.

The group left the house without any contribution. The face of the chairman was flushed. He looked angry with the man and embarrassed in front of Tư Hiệp and Hai Long, though he tried to keep silent on the way back to the hamlet's office. This was the third day of fundraising led by the chairman; unfortunately, the group had not collected much money from the local people. The chairman failed to communicate well with people, as he usually displayed his power over local people whenever he come to collect their contributions, either compulsory fees (*khoản phí bắt buộc*) or voluntary contributions (*khoản đóng góp tự nguyện*). Similarly, he was not successful this time, such as with the 'aggressive reaction guy', as he called the angry man. It was hard to explain. The difficulty might have stemmed from his 'top-down' manner in attempting to levy a voluntary contribution. It might have also been that the instant contributions requested by the local government for the new rural development program were beyond the capacity of the local people to afford.

That evening, Tư Hiệp went to see Tư On at his house. Tư On looked sad about what had happened that day. He said he wanted to be like Tư Hiệp, a religiously charitable man who was trusted and respected by the people, rather than a state representative who was hated and mistrusted. Tư Hiệp told the chairman:

> It happens sometimes. It is always hard to ask for money from people. We should try another way. Otherwise, the bridge construction might delay again due to the constrain in mobilising the funding. Can I lead the fundraising group tomorrow? I will come and talk with householders. You continue accompanying with us as the state's representative. You do not need to say anything. I will try to convince the people.

The next day went smoothly and the amount of money collected went beyond what the group expected. The group continued the fundraising in the following days; unfortunately, the chairman no longer joined the fundraising group. Within two weeks, Tư Hiệp had collected almost one third of the total estimated funds for the construction.

Tư Hiệp and the Hoà Hảo Buddhist group were successful in fundraising for infrastructure development for two main reasons. Firstly, Tư Hiệp had his own strategy to convince people to contribute to the community works. He did not visit every single

house in the commune. Instead, he just visited those families who were good in economic positions and eager to donate to community works. He rarely went to poor households to ask for contributions. Furthermore, Tư Hiệp never asked people for a fixed amount of money. The local people were ready to give because they knew Tư Hiệp enthusiastically engaged in various charitable activities in the commune. He regularly visited residents' houses asking for donations. However, he also visited poor families to give them donated gifts, such as a bag of rice, a Lunar New Year gift, a bicycle or even a wheelchair. People knew him as a good, charitable mediator who connected 'good-hearted donors' to poor people in the commune. For about 10 years, Tư Hiệp and his group had built a dozen wooden bridges and improved kilometres of commune roads that the local government had ignored for many years. Therefore, the people believed in Tư Hiệp and the Hoà Hảo Buddhists to carry out the infrastructure construction works.

The second reason their fundraising was successful was that Tư Hiệp had an effective approach to attracting funding from big donors outside the commune. Unlike the local government, which tried to mine the capacity of local people (*khoan sức dân*) for rural infrastructure development, Tư Hiệp paid more attention to external resources. He was aware that modernising rural infrastructure required an enormous amount of resources, especially financial capital. He found that local resources were not enough to modernise rural communities. As a result, he created good connections with key donors in urban cities, as well as from overseas, to contribute to the local development.

Tư Hiệp shared with me that the commune cadres usually hesitate to engage in community work because it is unpaid. They particularly refused to participate in the fundraising group as they might get trouble rather than benefit from such hard work. Before undertaking the role of a fundraiser, the leader needed to know about people and understand what they expected. Sometimes, Tư Hiệp used Buddhist teachings regarding love and humaneness to get people together, encourage them to 'do good', then convince them to participate in mutual help in community infrastructure development.

7.3 Meeting the State's construction standards

To start the bridge project, Tư Hiệp and his deputy Hai Long, a fellow Hoà Hảo Buddhist who played the key roles of project manager and technical leader, had to sit down at the commune office to discuss in detail the state's required bridge-building standards. This was a new and ambitious engineering project, perhaps the biggest and most modern bridge to be built in the commune. However, on the local government side, besides the

commune chairman and the representative of the Commune's Fatherland Front, there were no official staff who were professional bridge builders or had any technical knowledge about infrastructure construction. Hai Long presented the design of the bridge, which would be made of steel in a modern style and expressed confidence in the material's performance and durability. According to the design, the bridge's total width would be 4.5 metres, wide enough for a car lane and two small lanes for pedestrians. The bridge's loading capacity was ten tonnes. According to Hai Long, the planned bridge was ideally suited for exposure to aggressive environmental conditions and the needs of the small trucks that transported the agricultural products of the Mekong delta's dwellers. The bridge could achieve a service life of 50 years or more, depending on how local people took care of it. Compared to the previously built wooden bridges, the modern bridge was like a state infrastructure project in that it needed careful pre-planning, detailed design complying with national infrastructure construction standards and the use of appropriate modern materials and technologies.

Tư Hiệp and Hai Long made their action plans, from the first phase of building on, to fulfil the modernising criteria of the state. They tried to engage the local government in their working plans so that the Hoà Hảo could cooperate with the local government throughout the implementation of the project. This accommodation of the state shows part of the Hoà Hảo's adaptation process to meet the general goals of both developer regimes in rural infrastructure development. This seemed to be a joint action in the development process, yet usually occurred at the beginning phase of the project when the Hoà Hảo Buddhists were negotiating with the local government about funding and the official permission to start the construction. They needed this official paper to show that the local government supported the Hoà Hảo and that the action plans related to these infrastructure projects were officially recognised by the local government. Tư Hiệp and Hai Long also discussed the design and standards of the modern bridge with the commune chairman and asked for feedback. The Hoà Hảo leaders convinced the commune chairman that the Hoà Hảo construction team had the capacity to build such a modern bridge. However, the participation of the local government in the construction process was relatively weak. According to Tư Hiệp, neither the chairman nor any local cadres gave any feedback about the bridge design. Based on my observations, they also did not come to observe, supervise or otherwise engage in the bridge-building process, and main tasks at the construction site were done by Hoà Hảo Buddhists.

On the first day of the bridge construction, a large billboard that named the commune and the infrastructure construction group was placed along the road leading to the bridge construction site alongside flags of the nation and Buddhism, as well as other colourful decorations. There was a small excavator, two small cement mixers, some wheelbarrows and a river boat with a small crane on top parked near the construction site. Nearly one hundred local people, both men and women, young and old, in their farm clothes and wide hats, were congregating around the construction site. The construction team started working early in the morning. A group of elderly men were using hoes, spades, saws and knives to clear trees and weeds along the road and around the construction site. On the other side of the river, an excavator was dealing with a big bundle of banana trees. Down the riverside, a group of young men were transporting sand, cement, steel and other building materials from a river boat to a residence's house, where a group of elderly women were busy cooking vegetarian food for the workmen.

Tư Hiệp was in western-style trousers and a worn T-shirt, wearing a pair of old sandals and holding a folded paper with the bridge design. A small notebook with a pen was placed in his pocket. Under the shadow of a tree, he was showing the bridge design to key members of the construction team. As the construction manager, Tư Hiệp was involved in planning, monitoring, documenting and managing the entire project to ensure that the bridge construction was cost efficient, timely and to a high standard of quality. He was entitled to build the bridge at the lowest possible cost as long as the required bridge specifications were fulfilled. At the beginning of each workday, he always had a quick conversation with his team members about the construction speed, material quantities, facilities and human resources required at the construction site that day. He directly supervised various operations from supplying input materials, arranging labour divisions, mobilising facility operators and monitoring construction activities. Tư Hiệp said:

> All complicated tasks requiring technical skills will primarily be operated by these 10 key members. Supporting tasks such as clearing and levelling the riverbank, carrying input materials and producing and delivering cement mixers to the building area were carried out by young volunteers. Particularly, building a bridge requires moving soil, levelling the riverbank and digging trenches for constructing foundations. These tasks fall to those who already knew how to operate the excavator and crane.

The following days of the construction involved several technical operations. The construction team was in a running river and needed to drive piles and pile footings deep into the mud below the bottom of the river. They started building the foundations of the bridge. According to Tư Hiệp, this was the most challenging task. They could not stop the flow of the river, so the team used a river boat to make an area that was safe to work in. Once the flow of water behind the boat was calm, another boat with a crane on top accessed the area in which they needed to work. The crane started to drive the first pile, 12 metres in length, deep into the ground. Hai Long was standing on the boat to instruct the group members operating the pile while two workmen dove under the water to check whether it was going into the right place. The crane lifted another pile into place as set by the group of 11 men. The driver then slowly pounded the pile into the ground to a predetermined depth. Groups of pilings were then tied together at the top, forming a basement. In the middle of the river, a total of 64 piles were driven into the riverbed so that four foundations, 16 piles each, could be created. At both ends of the proposed bridge, close to the riverbanks, an excavator was digging four square areas to create four more foundations. A group of young men then de-watered those small areas to accept the structure. They then continued to excavate where necessary to prepare for driving other piles.

Tư Hiệp and Hai Long were monitoring the activities, particularly this main part of the bridge construction, to make sure the bridge was entirely built to high-quality standards. They were also in charge of managing individual construction members in various roles appropriate to the bridge project. Before every workday, the plan and design were carefully discussed among construction team members to see if any problems had arisen that were not in accordance with the state's standards. They inspected the various details and operations of the construction. In order to do so, both of them was at the construction site at all times while critical operations such as excavation, piling, or pouring concrete were in progress.

The construction team leader was responsible for constructing the bridge not only in full accordance with the plan and specifications, but also in safe conditions. Every morning, Tư Hiệp carefully checked the equipment and machines to be used as well as the methods for handling input materials. He stated:

> As a team leader, you should carry out inspection of the construction in ethical manner. Hence, I am at the construction site at all possible times. We

were highly aware that careless or neglect might lead to faulty and possibly even dangerous construction. For instance, driving the piles, more than two tonnes each, into the deep riverbed is possibly the most difficult and dangerous task. Unlike the state's project with good facilities and larger machines, majority of the task were done by our manual labours. The crane is slowly depressing the pile into the ground while a group of men, some standing on the boat, some swimming in the water are holding the pile. We only have one boat with a small crane which was recently innovated by our team for building the bridge foundations in deep water. Also, we don't have any insurance, so we are very care about the safety to protect ourselves. If an accident happens in the construction site, the local authorities will come to stop the construction and the commune chairman may not give any permission for our bridge building projects.

It took two weeks to complete eight foundations of the proposed bridge. The team continued casting concrete bars at the construction site, then placed them on top of the pile foundations. They then connected the bars to the columns of the foundations. The whole process of creating the bridge foundations and connecting them to the concrete bars took nearly a month.

Figure 7.2 Hoà Hảo Buddhists working at the construction site.

The bridge building project entered the strategic stage when the workmen completed the steel deck form and started distributing wet concrete mix onto the deck. Producing the wet concrete and pouring it onto the deck required a lot of labour, which is usually done with a concrete pump. Unfortunately, the construction team did not have any concrete pumping machines to speed up the bridge surface construction. Instead, volunteers formed a long line to carry buckets of wet concrete mix, one after the other, handing them to the next person until they reached the necessary area. In this peak of labour need, there were nearly one hundred volunteers working at the construction site. Three concrete mixer machines had maximised their performance. A group of 20 workmen were carrying cement, sand, stones and water to put into the mixer machines. The majority were in bare feet, running in line to the machines with a bag of cement or stones on their shoulders. Their heads and bodies were all sweaty and covered by the dust of sand and cement. A hundred people were working together at the building site, however, at that moment I just heard the noise of the concrete mixers and the sound of the workmen's steps hitting the ground. After 30 minutes, the first group took a short break and the second group came to perform the task. I had never seen such a large number of volunteers engaging in a rural infrastructure construction project.

Two young men, white t-shirts tucked into their trousers, were standing on the riverbank opposite the crane. These engineers from the provincial infrastructure department had come to the construction site to inspect the process of piling and building the foundations, which was crucial to the quality of the whole construction. The state inspectors wanted to ensure the bridge was constructed by Hoà Hảo Buddhists in compliance with the state's specifications. Tư Hiệp confirmed that the consultant's state representatives came to check the quantity and quality of the piles, concrete bars and reinforcing steels. They also documented the dimensions and elevations of the piles and the foundations. Tư Hiệp guessed as to why they were there:

> This is the first modern bridge built by our team who have never attended any technical or professional training in relation to road and bridge construction. Therefore, the provincial state may have doubted our capability to build such a modern bridge. So, they sent staff to observe the principle stages of the constructing process.

Tư Hiệp said he believed his group had met the state's building standards:

> I am in no doubt that if there had been a problem, these state inspectors would have come back to stop the bridge construction. However, after the inspection they left the construction site without any suggestions. We did not see them on following days. I suppose they must have determined that the bridge met the required standards. We have the obligation to conform to the standards set by the state, however, as long as these standards are being met, the Hoà Hảo construction team are reasonably free to choose our own methods for doing so.

7.4 Who takes the public credit

The following day, a group of about 50 men and women in green uniforms from the commune and province branches of the Youth Union joined in the bridge construction. These young people were led by Mrs Thu Hồng, the chairperson of the Commune Youth Union. Thu Hồng lived in the hamlet where the bridge was being built. She was predicted to be on the short list of candidates for the position of commune deputy chairperson to be elected at the following congress. By bringing new, young volunteers to the construction site, she hoped she could earn more spiritual support from the local people working there. She was keen to talk with Tư Hiệp about how Youth Union members could straight away engage in bridge-building activity. She also approached Hai Tâm, the kitchen team leader, to introduce a small group of girls whom she wanted to join the Hoà Hảo catering group for the day.

An hour later, a couple on their motorbike arrived at the construction site. The woman was holding a digital camera while the man was carrying a heavy bag of professional media equipment. They were there to film a short documentary about the contribution of the Youth Union to rural infrastructure development, which was intended to be shown on the provincial television channel that night. The man and woman were filming the scene of the real construction site with a background of young males and females from the Youth Union handing buckets of wet concrete and walking, one by one, toward the bridge-building area. The characters were all smiling and looked energised. The lady was interviewing the main actor, Thu Hồng — one of the potential commune leaders, about the contribution of the commune's mass organisations, particularly the Youth Union, to the community infrastructure development. Next, two members of the Youth Union, one male and one female, were asked about their motivations for voluntary participation in this bridge construction site. The cameraman told me they wanted to document some

aspects of the reality of the youth engaging with local people in building rural roads and bridges, primarily for education purpose. Finally, Tư Hiệp was also asked about his feelings about the contribution of the youths.

At first, the local people and construction workers were excited when the new group of young volunteers came to help them during the peak of labour need. The kitchen team leader was also happy with the new girls' performance helping people in the kitchen. However, when the couple from the local television channel came, they soon realised that the youths had come to engage in bridge-constructing activities for their own purposes. By making the film, the state might have wanted to propagandise that the local government and its members in mass organisations, particularly the Youth Union, were actively engaging in improving rural infrastructure. Yet, the reality greatly differed from what they said and performed for the cameras. Hai Long gave a straight comment:

> So far, the bridge building is almost finished, we rarely seen either the commune cadres or any members of the Youth Union to visit the construction site. Surprisingly, the youths seem to be available in the Commune People's Committee, but they have never come to help us. Yet, today they come here with the camera man. After short working hours, they left the construction site after placing a large board entitled 'The Construction of the Youth Union (*Công trình Thanh niên*) in front of the bridge. The youths in the Youth Union should be encouraged to engage more in community works. Their voluntary actions should come from their hearts, rather than driven by the specially arranged working day for such the documentary film.

Figure 7.3 Tư Hiệp and 'the Construction of the Youth Union'.

In contrast, Tư Hiệp humbly shared his moderate emotion after the youths had left the construction site. He emphasised that any contributions to the commune infrastructure development, either in kind or in cash, were recorded. The Hoà Hảo were eager to cooperate with the local government to complete the building of the modern bridge. Hence, the labour contribution of the Youth Union should be welcomed. He wished that in the future the youths could work more regularly with people on the construction activities.

The bridge-building project went into its final stage when the construction team finalised the bridge and embarked on building the road system. The process of finalising the bridge and building a cement road system connecting to both sides of the bridge required a large amount of input materials. However, after the documentary film, the local government had so far not allocated the third of the construction costs for the Hoà Hảo construction team like the chairman committed. The expense of the bridge building was managed well by the team leader throughout the process to ensure that the project would be completed on time and within the allocated budget. However, the available funds were running out. Without the state's financial support, the team could not complete the road system as planned.

Tư Hiệp and Tư Long were looking at the notebook in which all input expenditures for the bridge building were carefully recorded. The notebook also indicated how the

available funds would be allocated. Tư Hiệp contacted the accountant in the Commune People's Committee to ask about the state's financial contribution. The official accountant replied:

> You should be advised that there are many processes and procedures in order to allocate that funding. It may take a lot of time to process. The Commune People's Committee has many activities at the end of the year. I suppose we do not have available money to refund for the road construction at the moment. I hope the construction team can get the money in the next three or six months.

The local government had committed to contribute 30 per cent to the modern bridge construction because it was a 'state–people joint project in rural infrastructure development'. The Commune People's Committee was the main organiser, as highlighted by the chairman, and so would take credit when the modern bridge was completed. However, the Hoà Hảo construction team were experiencing a financial shortage as they struggled to find money to purchase input materials. The Hoà Hảo usually embarked on construction right after getting permission from the local government, though they might not yet have collected enough funding for the project. According to Tư Hiệp, big projects naturally bring in more funding from charitable donors and the state; they also come with greater investments and risks, like in this situation. As such, Tư Hiệp regularly took notes about all the jobs during the bridge construction, which allowed for budgeting and access to the required building materials. Sometimes, he made adjustments for dealing with unexpected issues like increases in the prices of input materials.

The construction expenditure was exceeding the initial estimation, so the group leader was trying to think of ways the construction team could work through and overcome the cash shortage. Tư Hiệp explained that when building wooden bridges, the team could easily estimate the total construction cost. The cost of the modern concrete structures, however, was much more complicated to accurately estimate. Unlike the state's projects, the Hoà Hảo never hide when they were going through a financial shortage. They had a list of donors with the amounts they had contributed. Everything spent on the bridge construction was completely transparent. The Hoà Hảo believed that charitable donors were keen to help them, so they were open and honest about the problem and tried to find a solution.

When I visited the locality during my second fieldwork in 2018, Tư Hiệp said he was proud of the construction team as they had overcome many obstacles and finally completed the concrete bridge. He also shared with me that the local government had finally allocated the money to the Hoà Hảo construction team to recover their debts. However, the local cadres had their own calculation showing nearly double the total amount they had actually allocated for the construction project. They deducted many items from the payment amount, such as the cost of the architectural design of the road and bridge and the cost for their staff to monitor and manage the project, though in reality they were not involve in these activities. As a result, the total amount received from the state was only half of the committed funding. The amount received was just enough to repay the loan from the bank. Tư Hiệp said:

> We do not have any fund left to repay the money borrowed from the key members. So, we had a short meeting among key members and have decided that we will not get back the money. This is like an extra gift from us for this first modern concrete construction built for the community.

Although the Hoà Hảo knew the local government would not share the difficulty with them during the financial shortage, despite the local cadres taking credit for the bridge project, the Hoà Hảo construction team did not criticise the local government. They did, however, try different solutions, including buying materials in credits, borrowing money from themselves, getting loans from local banks and mobilising more money from donors to deal with the shortfall of funding for the infrastructure construction.

7.5 Earning prestige by building moral bridges

During the course of my ethnography, many informants shared with me that, at the beginning of the modern bridge construction, local people were confused because they were in the crossroads of two development regimes: the local government and a religious charitable group, the Hoà Hảo. Later, however, these informants confirmed that it was not too hard for them to choose which developer they should follow. During the construction, a young man near the bridge construction site contended that the corruption of some local cadres had seriously affected the quality of the roads and bridges in the commune. Some people were even upset about the poor quality and performance of the state's recent projects to improve the commune road system. The young man complained that one commune road project took nearly a year to complete. The construction workers hired by the local government performed very slowly. Local people suffered a lot from

the mess of the construction. In fact, those with shops along the road could not conduct their businesses due to the terrible dust coming from the construction. Moreover, the road had been completed only two years previous, yet there were already many signs of degradation. Some elderly people raised the issue in the commune meetings, but no one cared about their concerns.

Hoà Hảo philosophy encourages its adherents to perform good deeds through the process of repaying the Four Debts to serve society. Hoà Hảo are also taught to 'be good' in their daily lives to create good predestined affinities and purify their hearts and minds so as to reach the Buddha Pure Land in the next life. They strictly follow the prophet's teachings to avoid telling lies and stealing money from others. They sacrifice their time and money to build modern infrastructure that meets the state's criteria, but have their own ways to maintain their traditional values of morality. In the case of this bridge-building project, the Hoà Hảo construction team always found their own ways to mobilise and morally use the funding to build modern infrastructure. Firstly, in order to reduce the construction cost, Tư Hiệp managed to buy cheaper input materials. The construction team then started to build the cement road system, which required a large amount of materials, especially crushed stone, which was relatively expensive if purchased from local stores. To minimise the cost, Tư Hiệp organised large river boats to purchase the material from a rock mining site in the Seven Mountains area. By so doing, the construction team reduced the cost of the stone by a third, saving the project a total of 50 million Vietnamese *đồng*. One construction workman estimated that for each river boat the group got an extra 20 m^3 of rock, which could be used to build an extra 20 metres of road. The surplus savings from this buying method did not go to any personal pocket but were used to purchase extra materials to help increase the quality of the road.

Secondly, to purchase other materials such as cement, sand and steel, Tư Hiệp negotiated with different suppliers for the best prices. He also convinced local vendors to deliver the orders before expecting full payment. He said:

> We negotiate better payment terms with suppliers for delaying payment. The local suppliers are usually happy to deliver everything we need to complete the work on time. They also agree to receive money at the end or close to the end of the construction project. To fulfil our commitment to the material suppliers, we usually make a half of total payment when they started to supply the first round of material order. But most of the time, the vendors

> agree us to make the payment for materials closer when we complete the bridge construction. Interestingly, since the local suppliers know our charitable work, they do not charge any interest for the credit. After we made a full payment, they often gave back a sum of money as a charitable gift to the bridge building.

Moreover, in order to build their reputation and fulfil their commitments to the material suppliers, if the construction team was unable to access more funding from mobilising donors and needed the funds right away, they would borrow from themselves. This was their simplest and most used strategy for accessing temporary funds. To offer flexibility, Tư Hiệp and four other key members would use their own money to pay the material suppliers in advance. They thought their money would be refunded after they received the funds from the state in the next six months.

The total amount of money borrowed from the key members, however, comprised only half the remaining construction cost. The construction project needed more money, so the team members were thinking about getting a loan from a local bank. A bit worried, Hai Long said:

> Our land title will be used as collateral for a short-term loan from the banks. I believe that no one, except us, dares to do so. It is very risky if you could not mobilise enough money to return the loan after the bridge project has completed. Furthermore, you must pay the interest by yourselves. Getting a loan from the banks was just invented for the situation we do not have any better solution as we do not have close relationship with the banks. We want to set up access to cash so we can purchase the materials we need for the road building. We could mobilise more funding from the donors, even after the bridge had been finished, but expect it might take longer and the construction might delay.

Figure 7.4 Vegetarian food serving at the construction site.

Many local people acknowledged the high quality of the infrastructures built by Hoà Hảo builders. Local people had also engaged in the building process and observed its various stages, from fundraising money to mobilising voluntary labourers, buying input materials, constructing and completing the road and bridge. To them, everything was transparent. They could observe what was being done from the beginning to the end of the project. Charitable donors could also see their names and the amounts of their contributions on the list of contributors.

One retired cadre who engaged in the bridge building told me that the local government officers were usually interested in big projects because they could earn something from them. The bigger the project, the more money they could get. The local authorities emphasised that big infrastructure projects would push the commune's socio-economic development, however, this retired cadre wondered how many roads and bridges had been built by the local government Those structures built by the local government had quickly degraded. He continued:

> Those people involved in state projects, from local cadres, project managers and inspectors, and even construction workers, 'eat' too much. They get

> benefit from the construction whenever they have the chance. They increased the real prices of input materials. They delayed the project, then asked for extra construction cost. They sucked the budget like vampires suck human blood. These people are even more dangerous than vampires since a vampire does its bloodsucking at night; they, however, corruptly ate from the budget even in the daytime.

Different from the state, the Hoà Hảo construction team had allocated the available resources to building small and medium-sized roads and bridges. They had attempted to build as high-quality single lane roads and bridges as possible. This was a quick response to the real needs of the community, and they thought it would bring more benefits to the people. The retired cadre said:

> We are the constructors and we are direct beneficiaries of the infrastructure which has been built by us. Our actions generate our benefits. We have used a hundred per cent of the money collected from the people. And we can hundred per cent guarantee the quality of the road and bridge. We have completed the road and bridge system on time, to a high quality (*đảm bảo chất lượng*) and at the lowest construction cost (*tiết kiệm tối đa chi phí*).

According to the local people, it was easier to trust the Hoà Hảo builders because if they got one *đồng* from the people, they spent one *đồng* on the road and bridge development. Sometimes, they spent more than what they got. They gave their time and labour for the road and bridge for free. They worked hard but earned no salary. They did not gain material things, but rather a trustworthiness and reputation with the people. Everyone in the western Mekong delta knew about the Hoà Hảo Buddhist's values: they were not corrupt and strongly opposed corruption. They perceived it to be a means of stealing. According to Hoà Hảo Buddhist teachings, it was evil and a sin. They tried to do good deeds by helping people and the community.

Tư Hiệp confirmed that:

> For us, every inch of steel, bag of cement, bucket of stone and sand come from people, whatever they are poor or rich. They have contributed money to the construction. We have dedicated the time and efforts on modernising the community infrastructure. To corrupt money from good-hearted donors is an evil. It is unhuman. We, as religious charitable doers, avoid such kind

of sins. For the state, high standard might mean higher construction cost due to its higher amount of material and labour inputs. But, for Hoà Hảo Buddhists, high quality means not only more physical inputs, but also more humane and morality inputs. The local people, particularly Hoà Hảo Buddhists, viewed these bridges as the sons and daughters because these structures were born, raised and cared by all locals.

Figure 7.5 A concrete bridge constructed by Hoà Hảo builders.

After successfully constructing the first modern concrete bridge in the commune, the team had expanded its expertise in infrastructure development outside the Hoà Hảo locality. The construction team had been invited to build another modern cement bridge in the hometown of the first president of Vietnam, the chairman Tôn Đức Thắng. During the construction, a large panel showing the name of the construction group, together with some images of typical modern bridges built by the team, was placed opposite the construction site. By doing so, the collective symbolic action of Hoà Hảo Buddhists in infrastructure development could be widely recognised by the state officials and others. The construction team wanted to build its reputation beyond the boundaries of their home village. They wished their expertise would be used to improve the infrastructure in many communities. People could easily recognise the Hoà Hảo construction workers by the typical clothes they wore, the daily language they used and the common manner in which they behaved with each other. They had built quality road and bridge systems with their personal morality and efforts, not only for the good of their own community, but because

they were following what they had learned from the Hoà Hảo Buddhist teachings about doing good deeds and avoiding stealing.

Since this new bridge was located near the monument of the first president, many provincial leaders went across it before reaching the monument on some occasions of national events. These leaders were attracted by the modern style and the quality of the bridge. They also admitted that the roads and bridges built by Hoà Hảo Buddhists were of trustworthy quality. One provincial cadre told me during a bridge's open ceremony:

> I can't believe this modern bridge was built by a group of low-educated peasants like the Hoà Hảo. Its scale and quality seem to be the same as any modern construction projects built by the state. It is extraordinary, with such modest funding, how the Hoà Hảo could construct such a modern structure.

Whenever the Hoà Hảo construction team completed any road or bridge system, they usually chose a special day to open the bridge to the public. The opening ceremony usually fell into the main festivals of Hoà Hảo Buddhism, such as the anniversary of Hoà Hảo Buddhism's Inauguration Day (18 May), the Anniversary of the prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ's Birthday (25 November) or a special Mid-lunar month (January, July, and October). The Hoà Hảo Buddhists considered the roads and bridges not only good physical structures given to the children and the community, but also moral gifts offered to the Buddha and the Hoà Hảo prophet. The Hoà Hảo Buddhists attempted to integrate people from different socio-economic backgrounds into the rural infrastructure development. The bridges were, therefore, not simply physical structures, but moral infrastructures that built the prestige of Hoà Hảo builders and united people together.

Conclusion

This chapter shows that the Hoà Hảo religion has been able to do three remarkable things for society: they have contributed to rural infrastructure development; they acquired new knowledge, adapted and met state standards regarding road and bridge building; and they have been able to accommodate the state in modernising community infrastructure. The Hoà Hảo Buddhists have made these contributions motivated by their unique philosophy, which enjoins them to do good deeds and avoid evil, and also to repay their debts to the nation. Adherents of the sect have a broad and inclusive vision that places them in existential debt to society in order to reciprocate the gift of life. As they are alive thanks to the generosity of preceding generations, they feel obligated to pay that debt forward to

the next generation. They know how to gain support from donors and charitable doers by building trust with them. Their method of gaining funding from donors for construction is very modern, but also based on the Hoà Hảo traditional value of spending money morally to build moral infrastructure. These findings show the power and relevance of traditional Hoà Hảo morality. They also contradict the notion of previous scholars that the Hoà Hảo traditional worldview is obsolete and outdated, meaning that the sect is liable to lose its relevance in modern conditions. However, this chapter finds that the sect still survives, adapts and meets the demands of modernity and the state in modern infrastructure development while maintaining their traditional moral values.

The chapter also finds that the Hoà Hảo are not disparaging or dismissive towards the state, but instead are able to accommodate the state and bring it into their rural infrastructure development. They are not in conflict with the state, nor do they pay attention to how much the state might take credit for their charitable road and bridge building. They can cooperate and accommodate the local authorities because, owing to experience, they understand the state's system, but also because their moral values overlap substantially with those of the state. This chapter highlights that this rural millenarian religious group has been able to respond to the demands of modernity and accommodate the state in performing infrastructure development while remaining faithful to its own traditional values. The findings suggest that the role of religious faiths like Hoà Hảo Buddhism in modernising the Mekong delta's infrastructure must not be overlooked. In fact, the Hoà Hảo are presently a major provider of services and physical infrastructure in many rural areas of the Mekong delta. This chapter contributes to understanding the state's intersections with non-state religious actors and profiles a significant case of religiously inspired vernacular development in the late-socialist context.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

This thesis investigates the Hoà Hảo Buddhist charitable movement in Vietnam's late-socialist period. The Hoà Hảo are a religious sect based in the western Mekong delta with roots that trace back to the mid-19th century. Contemporary Hoà Hảo Buddhists offer a range of charitable services that address fundamental social problems arising in the context of market-based integration. Acting on a religious worldview that fuses millenarian Buddhism, Confucianism, humanism and patriotism, Hoà Hảo individuals respond to social problems through ethical actions. They believe that by repaying the 'Four Debts' to society, one can purify one's own moral condition and achieve salvation for oneself and others. Hoà Hảo Buddhists pursue these religiously-defined ends by providing a variety of social services to help the poor. These charitable activities extend to the provision of herbal medicines, vegetarian meals, houses for the needy and rural infrastructure development. As such, they address pressing social needs and fill gaps in official socio-economic development, thus providing a vernacular form of development that is inspired by an indigenous cosmology.

This thesis explores how the Hoà Hảo sect has been able to survive, adapt and meet the demands of modern times, while remaining faithful to its own values. The study asks how a purportedly parochial rural religious movement such as the Hoà Hảo Buddhists has maintained relevance in a broadly secular modern context. It finds that traditional Hoà Hảo cultural values and religious ideology shape practitioners' conception of social responsibility, however, the services offered are remarkably up-to-date and adapted to contemporary standards and circumstances. Various chapters of the thesis explore how charitable donors from a sect with origins rooted in the experiences of the Việt or Kinh ethnic group today interact with social others in a multi-ethnic setting; how members of a formerly rural-based group are able to meet the specific care needs of an urban population; how a religion with agrarian roots offers highly efficient industrial-style social services; and how a group once at odds with the state is able to act co-operatively in development projects with state authorities. The study of the contemporary Hoà Hảo charitable movement shows that an indigenous millenarian sect like the Hoà Hảo has the capacity not only to survive but also to shape modern society and secular governance.

Hoà Hảo charity is thus shown to be a form of alternative modernity or vernacular development.

This thesis draws upon on a year of ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in 2016 and 2018 in a network of Hoà Hảo villages in the western Mekong delta of Vietnam. I intensively interacted with over a hundred Hoà Hảo adherents from different socio-economic backgrounds in a study that examined their life histories, motivations for doing charity, social networks and experiences engaging in a diversity of charitable practices. I did not formally interview these people, but had numerous unstructured conversations with them. Mostly, I gained an understanding of their rationales for charity through my own involvement in and observation of their charity practices. Participant observation with charitable actors was conducted in the movement's Hoà Hảo heartland and its periphery, from frontier rural areas such as charitable herbal clinics, community road and bridge construction sites to urban centres including state hospitals and charitable rice kitchens. I was struck by the distinctive belief system that informs Hoà Hảo charitable giving; the significant transformative effect of the charity on lives and localities; the large-scale, responsive, flexible, inclusive, rationally organised, and modernist aspects of Hoà Hảo charity; and the complex relationship Hoà Hảo charitable actors have with secular state welfare provisions and development programs.

This thesis argues that the charitable activities of the Hoà Hảo sect are inspired by unique notions of social obligation associated with a syncretic religious cosmology that emerged in the western Mekong delta. These charitable activities are diverse and large in scale and fill significant gaps in the secular state's social welfare provision. Somewhat surprisingly, the sect's charitable activities flexibly, rationally and effectively respond to a diversity of contemporary needs and circumstances, proving adaptive to changing local conditions and modernity. I contend that the charitable practices of Hoà Hảo followers plausibly can be viewed as a form of 'vernacular development' (c.f. Dove and Kammen 2001). By elucidating the rationales, modes and effects of Hoà Hảo charitable actions, this study attempts to uncover how the Hoà Hảo sect's contributions to modern society and its charitable practices embody an autonomous approach to modernity and development rooted in the religious culture of the western Mekong delta.

In what follows, I highlight the key findings and the theoretical and empirical contributions of the research.

Key elements of Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity

A number of distinctive doctrinal and practical features underlie the significance of charity in the Hoà Hảo religious movement. It is broadly a Buddhist sect whose cosmology includes belief in rebirth and karmic causation, thus equipping charitable actors with a sense of the transcendent, extra-mundane moral significance of their actions. As a millenarian Buddhist belief, it also ties moral action such as charity to the preservation of the world and avoidance of the apocalypse, the imminence of which is believed to stem from human immorality. Yet it is, at the same time, a form of socially-engaged Buddhism, influenced by the ethical imperatives of secular humanism and modernism to steer away from magic and monasticism and focus on this-worldly self-cultivation and socially beneficial action. The centrepiece of morality for Hoà Hảo Buddhists is the doctrine of the Four Debts: recognition of the debts owed by individuals to ancestors, the nation, Buddha and to humanity. In this we can see an ideological debt to Confucianism – both its ethical and political dimensions – and perhaps also to nationalism and Marxism, ideologies that were very much in ascendency in the Mekong delta of the late 1930s when the Hoà Hảo religion was founded.

One of the most significant elements of Hoà Hảo charitable practice is the voluntary nature of the act of giving. The attitude is inspired by Buddhism. Findings highlight that since the early days of the sect's foundation, the Hoà Hảo prophet taught the faithful that giving which comes from human compassion and love generates great merit. The merit thus earned does not merely benefit individuals or their relatives but has world-saving qualities. The Hoà Hảo Buddhists believe that by together performing moral acts they replenish merit in their localities and in the wider world and thus avert the onset of the apocalypse. This impending event is sometimes imagined as a flood and/or fire that will destroy everyone and everything on earth save for the people who have lived good lives. Thus, their acts of giving have the potential to avert that terrifying scenario and bring comprehensive security to individuals, their communities, the environment and the wider society. The Hoà Hảo Buddhists also propagate morality by giving away something that is of value to them: be it their time, food, expertise, herbal medicine, money or materials. Such generosity displays the 'heart' of givers, reveals their pure intent. To sacrifice something of personal or familial importance for the needy is to test oneself and show one's generosity. For someone to destroy themselves by giving demonstrates that they lack selfishness. Through giving, Hoà Hảo Buddhists embody the moral teachings of their

prophet and, as 'influencers', transform morality through their practical acts as moral exponents.

At the same time, for the Hoà Hảo, charity is informed by a sense of personhood defined by obligation. Hoà Hảo Buddhists are taught that giving defines what it means to be a good person, act correctly, have good relations with others, show respect. Giving makes oneself recognisable, not strange to other people. Above all to give is to manifest gratitude (*biết ơn*): the self-awareness that one's life owes to the generosity of others. Thus, charity is experienced as a voluntary act, yet it is subtly compelled by social norms. Such norms can be summed up as the obligation, defined by Marcel Mauss, to reciprocate 'the gift' (Mauss 1925). That explains why thousands of Hoà Hảo charitable donors sacrifice money, time and labour for charity, yet do not expect any kind of return from the receivers. They act according to certain standards, out of a sense of responsibility, in reciprocation of the multi-stranded relations of debts in which they are entangled.

To Hoà Hảo Buddhists, the provision of care to needy strangers is a religious obligation. It is a departure from the tenets of Confucianism, historically widespread in Vietnamese society, which prioritises the obligations that an individual owes to his or her family members over those one may have to social others (Rydstrøm 2003; McHale 2004). The findings in Chapter 3 highlight how Hoà Hảo Buddhists sacrifice their familial interests to care for strangers in line with a religious worldview that recognises debts owed to unrelated others. This too is at odds with the custom in Vietnam for most substantive social interactions to take place between people already linked by personal, familial or pecuniary relations, or obligations such as gift exchanges (Luong 2016). Hoà Hảo carpenters build houses to help others – including outsiders, drifters and outcastes – not solely those with whom they already have mutual relations, nor those with whom they aspire to have pecuniary relationships. This flows from the teaching of the Hoà Hảo prophet that debts to compatriots and to humankind are among the most important that a person must acknowledge and repay. Hoà Hảo Buddhists believe that all people are related to each other, and thereby, like kin, ought to live in relations of 'mutuality' with others (Sahlins 2011). If, in practice, rarely are such relationships as substantive as kin relations, at the very least followers are enjoined to treat each-other with love and humanity, and should act towards others as expected by Buddha. Therefore, to become a good person, one should do more than just take care of oneself or one's family, but extend care to one's fellows, including people in the community and even those whom one may not know. Hoà Hảo charitable carpenters I met constantly gave up something of

themselves to unknown others. They built houses for strangers, sacrificing time and energy they might otherwise have used to care for their own family. Building shelters for poor, homeless, isolated and lonely individuals, Hoà Hảo Buddhists built a network around these individuals that served as a substitute family and gave them means to make or repair a family of their own.

The doctrinal emphasis on the four debts that make up the person and the obligation to reciprocate them was first articulated by a predecessor of the Hoà Hảo, the Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa (Four Debts, Filial Piety and Righteousness) sect, which emerged in the Mekong delta in the 19th century. The enjoinder to disciples of Ngô Lợi, the Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa founder, to acknowledge debts to non-kin and strangers was a novel conception of relatedness. Arguably, like the role of Islam for the socially composite Cham communities of the Mekong delta (Taylor 2007), this creed stimulated the building of social capital in this socially unstable and amorphous frontier setting and helped pioneer settlers found communities comprised of people with no prior relationship to each-other. The findings of this thesis shed light on how contemporary Hoà Hảo Buddhists continue in this tradition by constructing infrastructure such as houses, bridges and roads for social outcasts and people they do not know. They do so for religious self-cultivation and, in consequence, build strong and secure communities. By constructing houses for strangers and giving the houses to the poor, Hoà Hảo voluntary carpenters created the infrastructure for social solidarity, building social capital and networks via house-building activities. In the charitable carpentry workshop, volunteers also learn valuable life skills and earn an identity as socially mature and responsible people.

The findings confirm that the charitable houses for the poor and bridges built by Hoà Hảo Buddhists to connect remote rural communities are forms of moral 'infrastructure' (Larkin 2013) that not only materially help the needy, but enable charitable participants to acquit their moral obligations and take part in building a better society. Therefore, the act of giving, conceived of as repaying the debts, is very much an integrative and generative force. The obligation to repay debts is a positive idea with a high cultural value. The Hoà Hảo 'ideology of debt' (Graeber 2012) stimulates people to build social infrastructure and stabilise life and identity in the context of ongoing change, inequality, insecurity and destitution in the western Mekong delta.

Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity is an activity of self-cultivation (Thien Do 2001). The Hoà Hảo prophet, Huỳnh Phú Sổ, taught that one gains nothing from making offerings to spirits, becoming a monastic recluse or seeking supernatural assistance from sorcerers or

magicians. Instead, each person should endeavour to practice self-cultivation at home. By doing good and avoiding evil in the course of their everyday lives, Hoà Hảo adepts learn to improve their own lot and that of humanity. The findings in Chapter 4 reveal that the Hoà Hảo are active in the collection, processing and distribution of herbal medicines that not only heal the sick but also bring moral benefits to both the herbal providers and the herbal consumers. The Hoà Hảo herbal medicine supply chain is a vast network that provides a wealth of opportunities for individual adepts to participate in self-cultivation and merit-production at the same time as it produces efficacious medicine for diseased bodies. What herbalists, clinical assistants, herb processing staff, herb collectors and patients produce and consume, is a meritorious community, and a collaborative network for self-healing and self-cultivation. The efficacy of the traditional herbal medicines supplied by the Hòa Hảo Buddhists is based on a belief in the healing potency of traditional herbs. Yet the supply chain itself is religiously efficacious, for it is participatory and accessible and allows for hundreds if not thousands of herbal medicine collectors, growers, producers, dispensers and medicinal consumers to engage in self-cultivation and self-healing.

For many individuals, participation in Hoà Hảo charity is a morally transformative experience. In a contemporary social environment characterised by amoral materialism, anomie and disorientation (Salemink 2010; Taylor 2004), personal involvement in Hoà Hảo charity gives people a framework within which to engage in purposeful acts motivated by gratitude and humility, thus experiencing healing and reintegration. The thesis findings include evidence that the collection and consumption of herbal medicines provides a therapeutic alternative to young people who were addicted to alcohol, games, or social media. An example is given in one chapter of a former state official whose chronic sickness was healed and behaviour utterly transformed by his involvement in charity provision with the Hoà Hảo, a group he formerly had ridiculed and opposed. Charity offered at a herbal clinic on the Vietnam-Cambodia border overcame tensions, misunderstandings, and long-held suspicion between ethnic Khmers and ethnic Kinh, both of whom joined in the provision and receipt of healing services. In a newly-settled frontier milieu characterised by high migration flows, mistrust between neighbours, and precarious livelihoods, the charitable services offered by Hòa Hảo sectarians provide an opportunity for strangers and former adversaries to meet and get to know each-other. The findings confirm what previous scholars have observed, that the Hòa Hảo faith has been able to provide social cohesion in a Mekong delta context marked by anomie, inequality and the disintegration of social bonds (Wolf 1969; Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983; Brocheux

1995). The intercultural charitable practices of Hòa Hảo Buddhists in the contemporary context also reveal the Hòa Hảo to be open to and welcomed by former enemies and socio-cultural 'others', thus showing this once conflict-prone faith to be more inclusive and unifying than previous generations perhaps may have expected.

Responsiveness to the contemporary context

One of the main findings of this thesis is the discovery that Hoà Hảo Buddhists are sensitive and responsive to even radical social and cultural change. Discussing new evidence on the origins of Hoà Hảo charity, Chapter 2 enhances empirical knowledge of the historical context in which the Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity emerged. The findings highlight that the religious tradition underpinning Hoà Hảo charity has been shaped in distinct local conditions and over a complex historical process. Hoà Hảo Buddhists' deep religiosity and charitable activities are rooted in a syncretic millenarian tradition that emerged in response to crises faced by pioneer settlers in a frontier context (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983; Thien Do 2001). Though repressed under different polities, notably the Ngô Đình Diệm regime, Hoà Hảo Buddhists learned from and adapted to these adversities and negotiated a space for charitable action. Later, despite again experiencing very tight control under the post-war communist secular state after 1975, Hoà Hảo followers managed to negotiate with the state and adapt to the state system to provide a number of basic social services to the needy. Upon being recognised by the state as a mainstream religion in 1999, Hoà Hảo Buddhists immediately ramped up their charitable activities in the Mekong delta, responding to a range of pressing human needs. Many Hoà Hảo individuals and localities plunged into offering a spectrum of social services to needy rural communities such as free herbal medicine, traditional health clinics, ambulance services, charitable houses for the poor, charitable meals for market porters, students and hospital patients, and rural transport infrastructure development. These significant findings about the contextual responsiveness of Hoà Hảo charitable practices are highlighted in detail in several chapters of this thesis. Such findings show that creativity and sensitivity to changes in social context continue to be the main features of this religious tradition in the modern era which challenges commonplace ideas about religious groups like the Hoà Hảo as conservative, incapable of change, obsolescent, or destined to disappear.

One might reasonably have expected that, being a localised millenarian sect, popular among illiterate peasants, and confined to the rural backwaters of the western Mekong delta, the Hoà Hảo sect eventually would have faded away when confronted by powerful

trends in the modern context such as secularism, mass education, urbanisation and industrialisation. However, the pronounced flourishing of the charitable practices of the contemporary Hoà Hảo highlighted in this research presents a challenge to Marxist and Weberian social science paradigms that foretell the disenchantment of sects such as the Hoà Hảo with the growth of modernity. Like other religious traditions in contemporary Vietnam (for examples, see Taylor 2007; Pham 2009; Endres 2011; Hoskins 2015) the Hoà Hảo have survived and adapted in the new context of modernisation and integration to the global market economy across the Mekong delta.

The findings in Chapter 6 illustrate this by showing how Hoà Hảo Buddhists provide charitable food responsively and effectively in ways that meet modern state standards and contemporary urban needs. A religiously-inspired sense of social obligation motivated Hòa Hảo urban elites to practically set about providing free food to the urban poor, which they did precisely and effectively, in response to identified gaps in social service provision. Their charitable rice kitchens were organised in a rational manner to offer nutritious, healthy and hygienic food to the urban poor quickly, and on a large scale, thereby adapting the charitable impulse to the modern urban context. Founders of the charitable kitchens maximised the efficacy of the food supply by logically designing the kitchen's infrastructure, facilities and human resources so that the rice kitchens were able to facilitate the food supply chain to the urban needy on a large scale. Hygiene protocols were strictly observed to ensure the charity was compatible with official public health requirements. The food charity they developed was designed to meet the spiritual needs of both the donors and the recipients by offering healthy and exclusively vegetarian meals to the poor, thus enabling all involved to avoid accumulating sin in the process of surviving and making merit. In addition, the process of collecting donations was rendered transparent, thus building prestige with donors and ensuring sustainability of the charitable kitchens. As such, the charitable kitchens were responsive to the demands of its modern, urban setting while being faithful to the religious beliefs that motivated the donors to act.

Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity responds to the sect's unique religious ideas about the obligations of indebted personhood and thus illustrates Max Weber's insight that religious worldviews meaningfully shape social action (Weber 1976). The significant contributions made by urban elites to Hoà Hảo charity also can be seen as a means for the rich and powerful in western Mekong delta society to gain an ethical reputation as 'responsible' or 'good' persons, thus legitimating their social status, as observed by

Veblen (1899). However, rather than being a mechanism for widening social stratification in society (c.f. Bowie [1989] for Thailand), the active participation in Hoà Hảo charity of people from the entire spectrum of western delta socioeconomic, geographical and political backgrounds, supports the Maussian and Durkheimian insights that charity in the Hoà Hảo case is, most centrally, key to the conceptualisation, construction and reproduction of social solidarity and cohesion in an otherwise amorphous social context.

The final feature I seek to draw out in this conclusion is the Hoà Hảo sect's accommodation with the state in rural development. In this study, I assumed that the Hoà Hảo Buddhist's charity is not necessarily in conflict with the state since the sect's charitable activities are in line with the state's official development goals and cater to the needs of ordinary people. By investigating the stages of the Hoà Hảo charitable road and bridge building in a rural area, the findings in Chapter 7 show that the Hoà Hảo builders are not in conflict with the local government in rural infrastructure development; rather, they have been able to work effectively with the local government to deliver transport infrastructure of remarkable design quality, safety and utility. A cooperative attitude and clever tactics, along with proven technical capability and the ability to mobilise funds and a large voluntary labour force have enabled the Hoà Hảo builders gain the state's approval for the construction projects that they undertake in line with their religiously informed charitable tradition. The evidence of this accommodation is pronounced across different stages of the road and bridge-building process, beginning with the motivation for the bridge and road construction and continuing throughout different steps, including organising effective fundraising, meeting the state's required standards, and acknowledging of contributions and allocating prestige for the construction work.

The Hoà Hảo Buddhists have been able to cooperate with the local government in rural infrastructure development because contemporary Hoà Hảo Buddhists understand the state's system owing to experience, but also because their moral values overlap substantially with those of the state. As a result, they have been able to negotiate and flexibly handle the relationship with the local government. The findings from Chapter 7 confirm that members of this rural millenarian religious group have been able to accommodate the state in providing rural infrastructure development while remaining faithful to their own traditional values. The Hoà Hảo Buddhists' successful coexistence with the state in rural infrastructure development leads us to revisit the arguments of previous scholars who portrayed the Hoà Hảo as an oppositional sect (Fall 1955; Hill 1971; Wolf 1969; Woodside 1976; Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983), or historically in conflict with

different successive states (Chapman 2013; Haseman 1976). This study contributes to understanding the state's intersections with non-state religious actors in contemporary Vietnam and profiles a significant case of religiously-inspired vernacular development in the late-socialist context.

Research limitations and further research

This study does not address Hoà Hảo Buddhist charitable activities in the entire Mekong delta (let alone elsewhere in Vietnam or overseas), but is limited to highly populated Hoà Hảo Buddhist areas in An Giang and its peripheries, where four main types of charity - herbal medicine, houses for the needy, urban charitable food supply, and rural infrastructure construction - were identified and analysed. This qualitative research was based on ethnographic case studies of social practices in unbounded spatial and temporal scales. A number of official primary sources and Vietnamese research studies were utilised, however, the qualitative data was obtained primarily from field observations and conversations with people in different research locations where the aforementioned charitable activities are based. Moreover, compared to the high number of Hoà Hảo Buddhists engaging in a variety of charity acts, only a small sample of participants was intensively investigated in this research. Consequently, the study may not comprehensively elucidate the diversity of rationales, modes and effects of Hoà Hảo charitable actions across the range of social, political and ecological landscapes of the Mekong delta, and it may not reflect the perspectives of all engaged actors. Hence, this limits the ability of the study to make generalisations about the patterns and trends of the Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity in the Mekong delta at large. Additional research may be needed to explore such matters.

This thesis seeks to understand Hoà Hảo Buddhist charity in light of practitioners' perceptions of religious doctrine and social responsibility, and thereby to understand the motives and nature of contemporary Hoà Hảo followers' charitable actions. It does not address the views of non-Hoà Hảo actors, particularly those like state officials, traders, neighbours and other religious communities who may engage with them. Further research is required to investigate whether the Hoà Hảo cultural values, ideology and practices described in this thesis have influenced or contributed to shaping the moral behaviours or conceptions of social responsibility of non-Hoà Hảo Buddhists in the western Mekong delta. More research is needed to answer such questions.

Bibliography

Arnst, R. 1997. Indigenous Peoples. In D. McCaskill and K. Kampe (eds). *Development or Domestication? Indigenous Peoples of Southeast Asia.* Chiangmai, Thailand: Silkworm Books.

Biggs, D. 2003. Problematic Progress: Reading Environmental and Social Change in the Mekong Delta. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 34(1):77-96.

Biggs, D. 2009. Americans in An Giang: Nation-Building and the Particularities of Place in the Mekong Delta, 1966–1973. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4(3):139-72. University of California Press.

Biggs, D. 2010. *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.

Blagov, S. 2001. *Caodaism: Vietnamese Traditionalism and Its Leap into Modernity*. Huntington: Nova Science Publishers.

Bourdeaux, P. 2003. Emergence and Settling of the Hoa Hao Buddhism Community. Doctoral dissertation. École Pratique des Hauters Études.

Bowie, K. 1998. The Alchemy of Charity: Of Class and Buddhism in Northern Thailand. *American Anthropologist*, 100(2), 469-481. Retrieved September 22, 2020, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/683125.

Brocheux, P. 1995. *The Mekong Delta: Ecology, Economy, and Revolution, 1860–1960.* Madison: University of Wisconsin.

Brocheux, P. and D. Hemery 2009. *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954.* Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

Cadiere, L. 1989[1944]. Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Vietnamese. (Trans. by Ian Mabbett). *Working Paper 60.* Clayton: The Centre for Southeast Asian Studies. Melbourne: Monash University.

Chambers, R. 2004. *Ideas for Development.* IDS Working Paper 238. Sussex: IDS.

Chandraprasert, E. 1997. The Impact of Development on the Hilltribes of Thailand. In D. McCaskill, D. and K. Kampe (eds.) *Development or Domestication? Indigenous Peoples of Southeast Asia.* Chiangmai, Thailand: Silkworm Books.

Chapman, J. M. 2013. *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950's Southern Vietnam.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Choi Byung Wook 1999. Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mang (1820-1841): Central Policies and Local Response. PhD thesis, Australian National University.

Choi Byung Wook 2004. *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mang (1820-1841): Central Policies and Local Response.* Ithaca: Cornell University Asia Program.

Craig, D. 2000. Practical Logics: The Shapes and Lessons of Popular Medical Knowledge and Practice - Examples from Vietnam and Indigenous Australia. *Social Science & Medicine,* 51(5):703-11.

Dật Sĩ and Nguyễn Văn Hầu 1972. *Thất Sơn Mầu Nhiệm.* Nhà Xuất Bản Từ-Tâm.

DeVido, E. A. 2009. The Influence of Chinese Master Taixu on Buddhism in Vietnam. *Journal of Global Buddhism* 10:413-58. Retrieved from https://search-proquest-com.virtual.anu.edu.au/docview/521756264?accountid=8330.

Đinh Văn Hạnh 1999. *Đạo Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa của Người Việt Nam Bộ.* Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ.

Dougan, C. and S. Weiss 1983. *The Vietnam Experience: Nineteen Sixty-eight*. Boston: Addison Wesley Publishing Company, 161.

Dove, M. R. and D. M Kammen 2001. Vernacular Models of Development: An Analysis of Indonesia under the "New Order." *World Development* 29(4):619-639.

Durkheim, E. 1915. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life.* London, New York: G. Allen & Unwin, Macmillan.

Endres, K.W. 2011. *Performing the Divine: Mediums, markets and modernity in urban Vietnam*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.

Escobar, A. 1992. Reflections on 'Development': Grassroots Approaches and Alternative Politics in the Third World. *Futures* 24(5): 411-436.

Escobar, A. 1994. Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Evans, G. 1992. Internal Colonialism in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia,7*(2), 274-304.

Fall, B. 1955. The Political-Religious Sects of Viet-Nam. *Pacific Affairs* 28(3):235-53.

Galinsky, J. D. 2005. Jewish Charitable Bequests and the Hekdesh Trust in Thirteenth-Century Spain. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35(3), Poverty and Charity: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Winter, 2005), pp. 423-440.

Graeber, D. 2001. *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The Talse Coin of Our Own Dreams.* New York: Palgrave.

Graeber, D. 2011. *Debt: The First 5000 Years*. London: Penguin.

Haseman, J.B. 1976. The Hoa Hao: A Half-Century of Conflict. *Asian Affairs* 3(6):373-83. Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Hefner, R. 1998. Multiple Modernities: Christianity, Islam and Hinduism in a Globalising Age. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27:83-104.

Hill, F. R. 1971. Millenarian Machines in South Vietnam, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 13(3):325-50.

Hillman, A.L. 2009. Public Finance and Public Policy: Responsibilities and Limitations of Government. Second edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Holston, J. 1999. "Alternative Modernities: Statecraft and Religious Imagination in the Valley of the Dawn", *American Ethnologist* 26, no. 3 (Aug., 1999), pp. 605-631.

Hoskins, J. 2015. *The Divine Eye and the Diaspora: Vietnamese Syncretism Becomes Transpacific Caodaism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Hue Tam Ho Tai 1983. *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Hue Tam Ho Tai 1988. *Maitreya, the Future Buddha*. In A. Sponberg and H. Hardacre (Ed.). Princeton University Press, p. 167.

Hue Tam Ho Tai 1992. Radicalism and the origins of the Vietnamese revolution. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Huynh Ngoc Trang 1992. Tổng quan về văn hoá Nam Bộ *(A synopsis of Nam Bo culture)*. *Social Sciences Review* 1159-70.

King, S.B. 2009. *Socially Engaged Buddhism.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Jamieson, N. 1993. *Understanding Vietnam.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Jammes, J. 2016. Caodaism in Times of War: Spirits of Struggle and Struggle of Spirits. *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 31:247–94.

Jellama, K. 2005. "Making Good on Debt: The Remoralisation of Wealth in Post-revolution Vietnam". *The Asia-Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 6, no. 3, pp: 231-248.

Rydstrøm, H. 2003. *Embodying Morality: Growing up in Rural Northern Vietnam*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Sahlins, M. 1972. *Stone Age Economics.* Chicago: Aldine-Atherton.

Sahlins, M. 2011. What Kinship Is (Part One). *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, *17*(1):2-19.

Said, E. W. 1978. *Orientalism.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Salemink, O. H. J. M. 2003. *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders: A Historical Contextualization, 1850-1990.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Salemink, O. H. J. M. 2010. Ritual Efficacy, Spiritual Security and Human Security: Spirit Mediumship in Contemporary Vietnam. In T. Hylland Eriksen, E. Bal and O. Salemink (eds). *A World of Insecurity: Anthropological Perspectives on Human Security*. London: Pluto Books, 262–89.

Salemink, O. H. J. M. 2011. Embodying the Nation: Mediumship, Ritual, and the National Imagination. In P. Taylor (ed.), *Minorities at Large: New Approaches to Minority Ethnicities in Vietnam*. Singapore: ISEAS Press, 216-90.

Salemink, O. H. J. M. 2018. The Regional Centrality of Vietnam's Central Highlands. in Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.113.

Spiro, M.E. 1982. *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Larkin, B. 2013. The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42:327-43.

Lan, T.H.P. 2015. Making Families across the Ethnic Divide: Khmer-Kinh Intermarriage in Vietnam. PhD thesis, Australian National University.

Leepreecha, P. 2019. Becoming Indigenous Peoples in Thailand. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 50(1):32–50.

Luong, H. V. 2016. Social Relations, Regional Variation, and Economic Inequality in Contemporary Vietnam: A View from Two Vietnamese Rural Communities. In P. Taylor (ed.) *Connected and Disconnected in Viet Nam: R*emaking *Social Relations in a Post-socialist Nation.* Canberra: ANU Press, 41.

Lushaba, L.S. 2009. Development as Modernity, Modernity as Development. Codesria; Illustrated Edition (November 1, 2009).

Marr, D.G. 1971. *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Marr, D.G. 1981. *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Marr, D.G. 1997. "Vietnamese Youth in the 1990s." *The Vietnam Review 2*. pp. 289-374.

Marty, M. and R.S Appleby (eds) 1991. *Fundamentalisms Observed (eds).* Chicago: Universiy of Chicago Press.

Marty, M. and R.S. Appleby (eds) 1995. *Fundamentalisms Comprehended.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mauss, M. 1970 [1925]. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies.* London: Cohen & West.

McAlister, J. and P. Mus 1970. *The Vietnamese and their Revolution.* New York: Harper.

McCaskill 1997. Indigenous Peoples of Southeast Asia. In D. McCaskill, D. and K. Kampe (eds.) *Development or Domestication? Indigenous Peoples of Southeast Asia.* Chiangmai, Thailand: Silkworm Books.

McCaskill, D. and K. Kampe (eds) 1997. *Development or Domestication? Indigenous Peoples of Southeast Asia (eds.).* Chiangmai, Thailand: Silkworm Books.

McElwee, P. 2004 You Say Illegal, I Say Legal. *Journal of Sustainable Forestry*, 19:1-3,97-135, doi: 10.1300/J091v19n01_06.

McHale, S.F. 2004. *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

McHale, S. 2013. Ethnicity, Violence, and Khmer-Vietnamese Relations: The Significance of the Lower Mekong Delta, 1757–1954. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 72(2):367-90.

Mehden, F. R. V. D. 1986. *Religion and Modernization in Southeast Asia*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Morris, R. C. 2000. *In a Place of Origins: Modernity and Its Mediums in Northern Thailand.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Nguyễn An Ninh 1938. Phê Bình Phật Giáo *(Critique of Buddhism).* Mỹ Tho: Đông Phương Thư Xã.

Nguyen Long Thanh Nam 2003. *Hoà Hảo Buddhism in the Course of Vietnam's History*. New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc.

Nguyen-Marshall, V. 2009. Tools of Empire? Vietnamese Catholics in South Vietnam. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada* 20(2): 138–159. https://doi.org/10.7202/044402ar.

Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong 1992. *Khmer-Viet Relations and the Third Indochina Conflict*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company.

Ong, A. 1998. "The Production of Possession: Spirits and the Multinational Corporation in Malaysia", *American Ethnologist* 15(1):28-42.

Ostrower, F. 1995. Why the Wealthy Give: The Culture of Elite Philanthropy. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Owen, A. 1989. *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

PGHH 1965. Sấm Giảng Thi Thơ Toàn Bộ *(The Complete Works of Prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ).* Giáo Hội Phật Giáo Hoà Hảo, 1965. Santa Fe Spring, CA: Văn Phòng Phật Giáo Hoà Hảo Hải Ngoại.

PGHH 1966. Sấm Giảng Thi Văn Toàn Bộ của Đức Huỳnh Giáo Chủ *(The Complete Works of Prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ).* Ấn Hành: Ban Phổ Thông Giáo Lý Trung Ương.

PGHH 1967. Tin Tức (News). *Đuốc Từ Bi* (The Torch of Compassion: A Journal of Hoa Hao Buddhism), Special No. 26&27. Phổ thông Giáo lý PGHH. Kiểm duyệt số: 22/UBKD/ CD / KD ngày 21-6-1967.

PGHH 2013. Sấm Giảng Giáo Lý Phật Giáo Hoà Hảo của Đức Huỳnh Giáo Chủ *(The Prophecies of Prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ).* Ban Trị Sự Trung Ương Phật Giáo Hoà Hảo. Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Tôn Giáo.

PGHH 2015. Thi Văn Giáo Lý Phật Giáo Hoà Hảo của Đức Huỳnh Giáo Chủ *(The Prophecies and Sutras of Prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ)*. Ban Trị Sự Trung Ương Phật Giáo Hoà Hảo. Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Tôn Giáo.

Phạm Bích Hợp 2007. Người Nam Bộ và tôn Giáo Bản Địa *(The People of the Southern Region and Indigenous Religions).* Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Tôn Giáo.

Phan Kế Bính 1915. Việt Nam Phong Tục *(Vietnamese Customs).* Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh.

Popkin, S. 1979. *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Spiro, M. 1982 [1970]. *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Tam, T.T.N 2016. *The New Way: Protestantism and the Hmong in Vietnam Religious Practices*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.

Tam Tê 1966. Lễ Phát Quà Cho Thương Phế Binh và Cô-Nhi Quã-Phụ do Ban Xã Hội Trung-Ương GH PGHH tổ chức tại Tỉnh lỵ An Giang *(Gifts for Veterans, Widows and Orphans in An Giang Province)*. *Đuốc Từ Bi* (The Torch of Compassion: A Journal of Hoa Hao Buddhism) 13:58-60.

Taylor, P. 2001a. Hoa Hao Apocalypse now? Hao Hao Buddhism emerging from the Shadows of War. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 12(3):339–54.

Taylor, P. 2001b. *Fragments of the present: Searching for modernity in Vietnam's South*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Taylor, P. 2003. The Goddess, the Ethnologist, the Folklorist and the Cadre: Situating Exegesis of Vietnams Folk Religion in Time and Place, *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 14 (3):383-401.

Taylor, P. 2004. *Goddess on the rise: pilgrimage and popular religion in Vietnam*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.

Taylor, P. 2006, Economy in Motion: Cham Muslim Traders in the Mekong Delta, *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 7(3):237-50.

Taylor, P. 2007. *Modernity and Re-enchantment: Region in post-revolutionary Vietnam.* Vietnam Update series. Singapore: Institution of Southeast Asia Studies.

Taylor, P. 2014a. Coercive Localization in Southwest Vietnam: Khmer Land Disputes and the Containment of Dissent. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies, 9*(3), 55-90.

Taylor, P. 2014b. *The Khmer Lands of Vietnam: Environment, Cosmology, and Sovereignty*. Singapore: NUS Press.

Thach, C. 2004. *Khmer Kampuchea Krom Dilemma: An Analysis of the Struggles Experienced by Khmer People in South Vietnam and a Case Study in the United State.* EdD thesis, University of St. Thomas.

Thien Do 1999. Charity and Charisma, the Dual Path of the Tinh Do Cu Si, a Popular Buddhist Group in Southern Vietnam. *ISEAS Working Papers, Social and Cultural Issues* No. 2 (98).

Thien Do 2000. Charity and Charisma: The Dual Path of the Tinh Dô Cu Si, a Popular Buddhist Group in Southern Vietnam. In John Kleinen (ed.) *Vietnamese Society in Transition*. Amsterdam: IIAS/Her Spinhuis, 159-82.

Thien Do 2003. *Vietnamese Supernaturalism: Views from the southern region.* London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon.

Thompson, M. 2015. *Vietnamese Traditional Medicine: A Social History.* Singapore: NUS Press, pp: 179.

Trần Huy Liệu 1927. *Một Bầu Tâm Sự* (A Bag Full of Confidences). Saigon: Nam Đông Thư Xã.

Trần Văn Chánh and Bùi Thanh Hải 2017. Phật Giáo Hoà Hảo: Một tôn giáo cận nhân tình trong lòng dân tộc *Hoà Hảo Buddhism: A Human-Centred Religion at the Heart of the People.* TP. Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Tổng hợp, pp. 471.

Trần Văn Giàu 1975. Sự Phát Triển của Tư Tưởng Việt Nam từ thế kỷ XIX đến Cách Mạng Tháng Tám *(The Evolution of Thought in Vietnam from the 19th Century to the 1945 August Revolution),* Vol. II. Hanoi: Social Sciences Publish House.

Trương Như Vương 2001. *Đạo Hoà Hảo và những vấn đề đặt ra cho công tác an ninh trật tự xã hội hiện nay*. Đề tài cấp Bộ. Viện Khoa học Bộ Công An. Hà Nội.

Veblen, T. 1899. The Theory of the Leisure Class. New York: Macmillan.

Vuong Kim and Dao Hung 1953. Đức Phật Thầy Tây An *(The Buddha Master of Western Peace)*. Sài Gòn: Nhà Xuất Bản Long Hoa.

Vương Kim 1953. Tận Thế Hội Long Hoa *(The Dragon Flower Assembly)*. Sài Gòn: Nhà Xuất Bản Long Hoa.

Vương Kim 1966. *Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương.* Sài Gòn: Nhà Xuất Bản Long Hoa.

Vuong Kim 1974. Đức Huỳnh Giáo Chủ *(The prophet Huỳnh).* Sài Gòn: Nhà Xuất Bản Long Hoa.

Wahlberg, A. 2006. Modernisation and Its Side Effects: An Inquiry into the Revival and Renaissance of Herbal Medicine in Vietnam and Britain. PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Weber, M. 1930 [1905]. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (trans. T. Parsons). London: Allen & Unwin.

Weber, M. 1976. Towards a Sociology of the Press. *Journal of Communication* 26,(3): 96-101.

Werbner P. and B. Helene 1998. *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality and the Performance of Emotion in Sufi Cults.* London: Routledge.

Wolf, E. 1969. *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century.* New York: Harper and Row.

Woodside, A. 1976. *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Yang, M.M.H. 2000. Putting Global Capitalism in Its Place: Economic Hybridity, Bataille, and Ritual Expenditure. *Current Anthropology* 41(4):477-509.

Zasloff, J. J. 1962. Rural Resettlement in South Viet Nam: The Agroville Program. *Pacific Affairs* 35(4):327-40.