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**Canada**

**Gender and Division of Labour in a  
Vietnamese-Canadian Buddhist Pagoda**

**Alexander Soucy**

**A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
Religion**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

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## ABSTRACT

### Gender and Division of Labour in a Vietnamese-Canadian Buddhist Pagoda

Alexander Soucy

In this thesis I will be investigating how the tasks performed by women within the organization of a Vietnamese Buddhist temple in Montréal relate to the division of labour and perceived roles of women within the traditional Vietnamese family. I will then show how the gender structuring of temple tasks and family life is often applied in the case of the roles of male and female Bodhisattvas, with emphasis being laid on Quán-Thế-Âm (Guān-yīn). This study is based on field-work at the Tam Bảo Pagoda in Montréal, a temple which has a nun as one of the two central ritual specialists.

### Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude and appreciation to all those who contributed towards this work. I would like to especially thank Dr. David Miller and Dr. Leslie Orr of Concordia University who gave me the guidance and last-minute assistance, which proved to be invaluable to the completion of this thesis. I would also like to thank the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh and the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi who gave me the permission and assistance that was required for my study, and for the novice bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs and members of the laity who put up with me poking around their Pagoda for three years, and who kindly answered all of my seemingly insubstantial questions. Finally, I would like to thank Martine Dubuc, my family, my friends, and WISS who provided me with the support that is so critical in such an undertaking.

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## Introduction

At the beginning of my undergraduate degree programme I had a Vietnamese Buddhist nun (bhikṣuṇī) in one of my classes. I knew very little about her. She was quiet, shy, and had difficulty with English. As my studies rolled along and I eventually graduated, I thought very little about this quiet little bald woman who seemed a little out of place at this large inner-city university. When it came time to start thinking about topics for my thesis, she was suggested to me as a possible way to hook up with the Vietnamese Buddhist community. I called her one evening, and after sorting out the language barrier, the person at the other end of the phone went to get her. She very kindly invited me to the Sunday service and seemed very willing to cooperate with any research that I wanted to do.

That Sunday, eagerness and trepidation saw me in front of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda on a brisk fall morning, forty-five minutes early, so I went for a walk around the neighbourhood. As I walked down the street I noticed a peculiar mixture of Vietnamese and Orthodox Jewish stores and restaurants. Passing me on the street were men in great coats with long black beards, and Asians who were quite a contrast with their shorter stature and clean-shaven

appearance. As I walked back to the Pagoda after a coffee, I thought about this mixture of people and religions, and what had brought them together here in this cold country.

The service was a whirl of incense and chanting that left me more puzzled than anything else. As I did not understand Vietnamese, I passed the time by looking at the physical structure of the pagoda and the statues within. I was aware that what I was seeing was Pure Land Buddhism, and I could identify some of the statues as images of Sakyamuni (Thích-Ca), Guān-yīn (Quán-Âm), and a figure whom I presumed was Amitābha (A-Di-Đà), but these small footholds of recognition did not seem to help very much.

I have now been doing research at this Pagoda for three years. I have become familiar with some of the members of the laity and the monastics who live here, and they have become used to seeing me. Since that initial introduction I have learned much more about the history of Vietnam's long resistance against invaders that started with the Chinese in 111 BCE. In the thousand year period that the Chinese occupied Vietnam, they were to have a deep impact on the Vietnamese people and their culture, but though much of their culture might have come from China, they have made it their own and have shaped it to suit their own temperament. Vietnamese Buddhism and its practice, as I have seen it at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, is distinct from Chinese Buddhism, just as the people are distinct from the people of China.

Laurel Kendall points out in her book Shamans,



Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits that due to the androcentric view that has historically influenced the study of religion, the dichotomy of "Church" and "cult" first delineated by Durkheim, has relegated women's ritual activity to the periphery of society, while upholding man's ritual activity as "Church" and therefore central, and more "real." She, rightly, points out the erroneous assumptions that are involved in this dichotomy and writes of her own work on shamans in Korean society:

Some of the material presented in this study suggests that in Korea ritual and trance provide the aggrieved with a supportive environment for a therapeutic venting of spleen. Are these rituals and the women who perform them also peripheral to Korean society? I shall argue the contrary position, that the gods and ghosts of the Chon family kut are integral components of Korean family and village religion. Within this religious system, women and shamans perform essential ritual tasks that complement men's ritual tasks (1985:25).

My own study, though dealing with the roles of men and women in Vietnamese ritual life, takes place in the arena of the official religion. Despite its centrality, women play a large role in the official church, both at the lay level, and at the level of the religious elite. This study is not, therefore, aimed at bringing a particular segment of ritual activity into the realm of the officialdom, which had previously been thought of as peripheral. Nor am I trying to show that women play a central part in Vietnamese religion, for their position, as

far as I am concerned, is undisputed. Women are considered to be far more religious than men are, and men are not nearly as well represented as are women in the laity. Even at the monastic level, I have been told that there have traditionally been more bhikṣuṇīs (nuns) than bhikṣus (monks) in Vietnam, and Karuna Dharma confirms this (Dharma 1988:158). Despite their greater numbers, however, and an ideology that is claimed to be essentially egalitarian, the structure of the sangha has often favoured a male-dominated hierarchy:

As I see it, one of the main obstacles for the Vietnamese bhikkhūṇīs is that Vietnamese Buddhism is quite paternalistic - the result of old Chinese customs. There is considerable Confucian influence in the Vietnamese Buddhist tradition, not in the doctrine, but in the structure. There is a rather rigid hierarchy, on the paternalistic model, which places women at the bottom. In terms of the roles they play in the community, in theory bhikkhus and bhikkhūṇīs are equal, but in actual practice such is not always the case (Dharma 1988:159).

At the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, fate has had it that the both men and women would be represented at all three levels: the laity, the sangha, and most importantly, at the level of leadership. What I shall illustrate is how, when women and men both hold prominent positions within the official cult, the cultural conceptions of femininity and masculinity are manifested in ways that are sometimes obvious and sometimes subtle. There are two forms of leadership at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. The first is the traditional form, where it is

headed by an abbot and a vice-abbot. In Vietnam the Pagodas were either for bhikṣus or for bhikṣuṇīs, but never for both. As such there was never any room for gender to be an influencing factor on power structures and division of labour. At the Tam Ba'o Pagoda circumstances have brought both bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs together under one roof and under the leadership of a male abbot and a female vice-abbot. The second form of leadership, which is a Canadian phenomenon, is leadership through a board of directors, on which both men and women hold positions. In both of these leadership institutions, division of labour and power structures are often broken up along the lines of gender as it is conceived of in the family.

I have written this work in five chapters including the conclusion. In the first chapter I will give a general background description of Vietnamese Buddhism and the events that brought the Tam Ba'o Pagoda and its community to Canada. In this chapter I will introduce you to the Tam Ba'o Pagoda and to the backgrounds of the laity and the sangha which form its core. In the second chapter I will show that, though the Chinese cultural influence played an important part in the Vietnamese views of gender, some of the Vietnamese tradition was maintained and the mixture of Vietnamese and Chinese views is often dependent on regional and economic differences. There is, however, what we could consider as a "normative" view of gender, where the male is considered the figure-head of the family, but is mainly

concerned with "external affairs" - activity outside of the home and the family, and the female is largely responsible for "internal affairs" - the running and caring for the family and the home. In the third chapter I will more specifically deal with how women and men contribute to the Pagoda and how conceptions of gender influence the division of labour, especially at the level of leadership through the abbot and vice-abbot, and through the board of directors. Finally in the fourth chapter, I will discuss how these conceptions also affect the way in which the different Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are viewed as having different roles that fall along the lines of the roles that they are expected to play in the family.

I have organised my chapters in this way for a reason. I shall start with a discussion on the Vietnamese views of gender and the family, as this serves as the fundamental model. As such, it is the basis upon which my analysis rests. I then proceed to tie this family/gender model in with the structure of the Pagoda. Finally, I discuss the celestial Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as an expression of the cosmology, for though part of the realm of the sacred, they are nonetheless conceived of along the lines of the base model that I laid down in the second chapter.

Materials on Vietnamese Buddhism were not plentiful, and articles on gender and Vietnamese Buddhism were absent. With such a lack of textual material I resorted to a number

of methods to gather information. Although there was very little on Vietnamese Buddhism, material on women in Vietnam was comparatively plentiful, as was information on the Vietnamese exodus and relocation in Canada. Therefore, the first part of my research came from textual sources. I have attended the Pagoda for about three years and spent that time observing, as well as participating in, the services and celebrations. I would sit and talk with the laity over lunch, asking questions, and responding to questions that were asked of me by people that were curious about my purposes in attending the services at the Pagoda. During the time that I spent at the Pagoda I have become familiar with the patterns of practice as well as many of the people there, both lay and monastic, and the majority of my information was attained through informal conversation with these people and by watching their activities and behaviour. They were extremely helpful to me and have shown a measure of kindness that I deeply appreciate. In addition to the informal conversation and observation, I conducted interviews with members of the laity as well as with members of the sangha, totalling 16 in all (5 bhikṣus and 4 bhikṣuṇīs, and 8 lay people). These interviews were extremely helpful and informative, and they served to not only confirm what I had already found out through my observations and informal talks with people, but also provided me with a number of insights that I would not have deduced through less formal discussions. They gave me an

idea of the geographic and economic background of the people who attend the Pagoda and an insight that can only be achieved through hearing people's personal histories. The interviews also allowed me to develop more intimate relationships and communication with the core of monastics and regular attendees of the Pagoda. I thank those who had the patience to sit and speak with me during those interviews. The final source for my information was discussions with the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh. She has been extraordinarily helpful and has gone well out of her way to help me with my research on many occasions. I would like to thank her from the bottom of my heart for the help she has given me and the welcome that she extended me into her home.

**Chapter 1:**  
**The Story of the Vietnamese**  
**at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda**

The history of Vietnam and of its children who spread out around the globe - many of them embarking on long and arduous voyages by boat to escape the Communist government of Vietnam in the 1970s and 1980s - is long and complicated. There are many aspects that went into the formation of the Vietnamese culture. Perhaps one of the biggest influences came from China which borders Vietnam to the north. During the thousand years (111 B.C.E. to 939 C.E.) that China occupied Vietnam, Vietnam's culture and people were deeply influenced, and though they were eventually able to free themselves from their powerful neighbour, the Chinese influence remained.

Traditional Vietnamese culture and society did not come up against any serious challenges until "modern" ideas of equality, and the political forces of communism and nationalism were introduced and amplified by the French colonial regime. The eventual outcome was the take over and establishment of a communist government and the giant refugee movement. By 1979, 900 000 people had fled the country, mainly by boat, and were tossed around the world

after extended stays in refugee camps in Southeast Asia.

Montréal received one of the largest of these populations in Canada. They set up their own stores, their own restaurants, and their own pagodas apart from Buddhist centres of the Chinese community which had begun arriving in Canada over a hundred years earlier. At one of these pagodas a monastic community began to grow. This Pagoda is named Tam Ba'o, meaning Three jewels which refers to the refuges of Buddhism: the Buddha, his teachings, called the Dharma, and the monastic Community that he founded, called the sangha. In this chapter I will provide some background information on the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, and the Vietnamese people who attend it.

### **Buddhism in Vietnam**

#### **Introduction of Buddhism to Vietnam**

It is often difficult to give exact dates when referring to the spread of ideas. Even the date of the transmission of the Buddha's Dharma to Sri Lanka remains obscure despite the archaeological and literary evidence. While historians generally agree that Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka by a mission sent by Ashoka's son Mahinda in c.250 BCE, there are still arguments against this thesis, and the Sinhalese tradition holds that the Buddha



himself visited the island (Gombrich 1988:134-138). More often than not the evidence of the spread of Buddhism is much more scanty than is the case of Sri Lanka. Much of the history of the spread of Buddhism has gone unrecorded as the Dharma of the Buddha slowly made its way along the trade routes of Asia. Buddhism travelled along the silk road in the north, along with the other items that were transported into China for trade. From China, Buddhism radiated out to all the regions and groups that came under the influence of the Chinese civilization. Trade also circulated in the south, through Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, and up into China through Vietnam.

The exact date of the introduction of Buddhism to Vietnam is disputed. Traditionally, it is said that Buddhism entered in 189 CE (Bechert and Vu 1976:186), but some scholars believe that Buddhism first made its entrance in the first century CE. Kenneth Ch'en writes:

As early as the first century A.D., Buddhism was introduced via the sea route. By the end of the second century there was already a flourishing Buddhist community, whose presence is attested by a Chinese convert living in the area. He wrote that the Buddhist monks shaved their heads, wore saffron-colored robes, ate once a day, and guarded the senses. (Ch'en 1968: 132)

Vietnam lay along one of the southern trade routes from India to China. Consequently, Buddhism spread from India to the Mekong Delta in the south of Vietnam. It was in the Theravāda or Hīnayāna form that Buddhism first made its

way into Vietnam. It can be identified with the Khmer empire that ruled in South Vietnam and Cambodia, which was primarily under the Indian sphere of influence. It was not the Theravāda tradition, but the Mahāyāna tradition that became dominant in Vietnam, despite its later arrival. The Mahāyāna tradition was introduced as part of the Chinese influence as a result of China's occupation of North and Central Vietnam starting in 111 B.C.E. (Bechert and Vu 1976:186). Theravāda Buddhism is still in existence in Vietnam, although it is limited primarily to the small Khmer minority population in the south of Vietnam along the Cambodian border.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, Vietnam is the only country in which the Mahāyāna and Theravāda traditions exist side by side.<sup>2</sup> This co-existence has had an impact on Vietnamese religion as a whole, and though the overwhelmingly predominant tradition is Mahāyāna, there are some traces of the Theravāda tradition that appear in the various aspects of the practice and beliefs of the Mahāyāna tradition in

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<sup>1</sup> My information on Buddhism in Vietnam almost exclusively pre-dates the Communist takeover of South-Vietnam in 1975. Since then, "the Buddhist clergy has been severely persecuted, their 'crime' being that they advocate peace, nonviolence, harmony, and tolerance" (Robinson and Johnson 1982: 195). I am uncertain how Theravāda Buddhism is faring, as it was a minority tradition previous to 1975.

<sup>2</sup> Not only have Theravāda and Mahāyāna existed side by side in Vietnam in the past, but in 1964 they joined together to form the Unified Vietnamese Buddhist Religious Association (Vietnamese. Giao-Hoi Phat-Giao Viet-Nam Thong Nhat) along with a number of other groups such as the Hoa Hao (Rambo 1982: 426, 439).

Vietnam from time to time.<sup>3</sup>

While the south of Vietnam was introduced to Theravāda Buddhism via India, the Chinese played a large role in the north by introducing Mahāyāna Buddhism. Of all the Mahāyāna traditions, it was the Thiền tradition (Chi. Ch'an) that became the most popular. It was first introduced

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, Thích Thiên-Ân writes: " Monks, nuns, and laymen and laywomen in Vietnam are ordained according to the traditions of Hīnayāna Buddhism, within which a man or woman is considered a monk or nun belonging to the Saṅgha, the established Buddhist community, after having reached the age of twenty or older and having taken the ordination vows and precepts of a Tỳ-kheo (S. bhikṣu, P. bhikkhu) or Tỳ-kheo-ni (S. bhikṣuṇī, P. bhikkhunī). For a monk these precepts amount to 250, while a nun must observe a total of 348 rules of conduct. Before taking the full ordination vows and precepts, however, serious persons intent on devoting their lives to Buddhism may prepare for this event by participating in the novice ordination ritual during which they accept the ten basic precepts of a Sa-di (S. śrāmaṇera) or Sa-di-ni (S. śrāmaṇerika).

In the case of laymen and laywomen, they must complete the required ordination ceremony, accept the three refuges (S. triśaraṇa), the Buddha, the Dharma, and Saṅgha, and observe the five precepts (S. pañcasīla) of an U'u-bā-tắc (S. upāsaka) or U'u-bā-di (S. upāsikā): no killing, no stealing, no adultery, no lying, and no drinking of alcoholic beverages. Today, however, some Buddhist organizations in Vietnam have taken a step up from the old traditional way and recognize all those who have faith in the Buddha, follow the teaching of the Dharma, and support the Saṅgha as Buddhist laymen, Buddhist believers, or Buddhists.

The degree of ordination and gradations in vows and precepts, based mainly on traditional Hīnayāna Buddhism, provide a framework from which Buddhist monks, nuns, and laymen in Vietnam may expand their vows to encompass the Bồ-tát-giáo'i, the Bodhisattva ordination and precepts of Mahāyāna Buddhism, signifying their devotion to the unending practice of saving all living beings by developing loving-kindness (S. karuṇā) and true concern for the welfare of mankind (1975:212-213).

into Vietnam in 594 CE by an Indian bhikṣu named Vinītaruci who studied Ch'an (Thiền) in China (Cleary 1991:95). Thiền Buddhism is a practice that, in its pure form, is usually reserved for the religious elite. Among the laity, the Tịnh-do, or Pure Land school is predominant. In reality, the Thiền (Chi. Ch'an) and Tịnh-do (Pure Land) traditions do not remain separate in Vietnam: "Except for the pure Thiền monasteries, pagodas today practice a particular synthesis of Thiền and Tịnh-do Buddhism which traces its teachings to the Chinese monk Van-The Hoa-Thuong (Chinese: Yun-si Ho-chang, c.1532-1612) (Bechert and Vu 1976:188). It is this union of Thiền and Tịnh-do Buddhism, called Thao-Duò'ng, that is practiced by the Tam-Ba'o Pagoda.

#### The Influence of China

The Chinese began to have a strong influence in the north by the fifth century B.C.E. In 111 B.C.E. China conquered Vietnam, and started the process of assimilation to a great degree. By the time the process had worked its course, the Vietnamese had adopted much of China's culture. The spoken language became tonal, the Chinese character system was used for written language, and the literature was based on the Chinese classics. Previous to the Chinese conquest Vietnam had probably been made up of many tribes which had a matrilocal and matrilineal kinship system, but this changed (Jayawardena 1986:197). Adopting the Chinese

model, the kinship system became patrilineal, and Confucianism's strong patriarchal system seems to have brought the status of women well below where it had been previously. Likewise, what had been a simple tribal system became "a complex and highly stratified class system, heavily bureaucratized and based upon water-control agriculture"(Rambo 1982:407). Under Chinese rule, Vietnam completely changed character:

In keeping with their traditional priorities, the Chinese made a special effort to instill their ideological concepts in the conquered Vietnamese. They systematically introduced Confucian beliefs and practices, and over time these became integral to the Vietnamese world view. Buddhism and Taoism also were introduced, although generally in a less systematic manner (Rambo 1982:407).

The Chinese were overthrown by the Vietnamese in 939 C.E. after nearly 1000 years of occupation. Needless to say, things were not as they were before the arrival of the Chinese. This sinicization proved to be Vietnam's salvation, for just as European ideas of equality and self-government were a driving force in the struggle for independence in India, it was the cohesiveness of the Chinese social system that enabled Vietnam to resist the very power that taught it to them, and though they were invaded on other occasions, the Vietnamese retained autonomy until the coming of the French. As Woodside points out: "Chinese rule gave the Vietnamese people - through the imposition of Chinese

social, bureaucratic, and familial forms - a cohesion that guaranteed their permanence, on the eastern edge of a sub-continent where impermanent states were the rule rather than the exception. Such cohesion enabled the Vietnamese to resist future Chinese invasions of their country successfully" (1971:7-8).

The Chinese, however, never made it as far as the Mekong Delta in the south. It was not until 15th century that the Annamites from Tonkin in the north of Vietnam invaded, unifying Vietnam under the Trần Dynasty. The consequence of this is that the Chinese model of social behaviour did not have as pervasive an impact in the south as it did in the north. Therefore, the further south you travel in Vietnam, the less Chinese are the customs and social order. It would be a mistake, however, to over stress this point. Although it is true that the Chinese social structure is not as tenaciously upheld, nonetheless it is the predominant system, and it is the system that is adhered to by most people in the south in their day to day lives.

### **Vietnamese Buddhists in Canada**

Vietnamese Buddhism in Canada does not have a long-standing tradition as does Chinese or Japanese Buddhism. Furthermore, the introduction of the Vietnamese people, and consequently Vietnamese Buddhism, to Canada was under very

different circumstance. Whereas the Chinese and Japanese people have been here in many cases for well over a century and were mostly part of a voluntary migration with an economic motive, the Vietnamese population were refugees. a refugee was defined by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in 1967 as:

A person who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his [sic] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself [sic] of the protection of that country (Lavoie 1989:16)

One of the main differences between immigrants and refugees is that immigrants have chosen to leave, usually for economic reasons, and have therefore prepared themselves. They have had time to sort out their lives, and as they are not fleeing, they often are able to sort out their minds and emotions. They are able to adapt a little better to their new country as they have had an active part in choosing their destination. By contrast, refugees have not had the opportunity to prepare and have little choice in their eventual destination. Furthermore, the immigrant typically goes straight to his or her destination, whereas the refugee gets bounced around the globe like a piece of flotsam.

The Vietnamese, popularly known as the "Boat People" were not a migratory group, but a refugee movement. Although

there were a few young Vietnamese that emigrated to western countries in the 1950s and 1960s, the first major exodus came in 1975 as a result of the collapse of Saigon and the evacuation of the United State's forces, leaving Vietnam open to occupation by the Việt-Cong and the Communist government. Previous to the great exodus of April 1975, there was a great deal of internal migration as a result of the defeat of the French and the division of North and South Vietnam, under the regimes of Ho Chi Minh and President Ngô Đình Diệm respectively. Many Vietnamese from the north fled to the South to escape Communism.<sup>4</sup> In the South, harassment by the Việt-Cong led to a migration towards the major cities, increasing the urban population of South Vietnam from 2 million in 1959 to 10 million in 1975 (Lavoie 1989:9). By March 1975 Communist victory looked imminent and people vied for the few places available on American boats, planes and helicopters. After the Communist take-over in April 1975, conditions harshened, especially for the upper and middle class which formed the political and economic elite of the former regime. It was under these conditions that the majority of boat-people took flight. Most had to leave under clandestine conditions, leaving all of their possessions behind. Travelling on overcrowded boats, many

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<sup>4</sup> One example of this is a woman whom I interviewed who left Hanoi at the age of 16 with her parents. Her father was a teacher and continued his profession in Saigon. She also started teaching in Saigon and did so until she moved to Canada in 1991. She now works in a clothing factory.



fell victim to piracy, killing, starvation and thirst, dangerous climatic conditions and wreckage (Lavoie 1989:12). It is estimated that between April 1975 and April 1980, 900 000 people left Vietnam (Dorais, Pilon-Lê, and Nguyễn 1987: 76).

The majority of the people whom I interviewed at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda left Vietnam in the early 1980's. It was difficult for me to determine their exact reasons for leaving. More often than not the answer that I received was that the Communists were bad, or that communism is bad. One woman told me that her store (which was located in her home) was taken away and run by the government. As there were a number of individuals who reported to me that their families owned a store, this may explain why some left. Many others told me that their fathers were soldiers who had fought against the Communists, and a backlash against their families might explain why others had left. A few people reported imprisonments of themselves or members of their family. The majority of the members of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda appear to have been urban lower-middle class, relying on commercial enterprise.<sup>5</sup>

This brings into question whether they were

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<sup>5</sup> Wealth in Vietnam is measured primarily through land ownership, and therefore commerce is not given the status that it is in the West. Hickey writes: "In spite of the fact that commercial people have traditionally been ranked low in Vietnamese society, entrepreneurs are not regarded with disdain...(Hickey 1964:173).

refugees in the technical sense that I mentioned above or merely economic migrants. Certainly the motivation for leaving was tied in with economics for a great many people. However, this would not explain why so many went through such brutal hardships and risked such a great deal. Most were unable to take any possessions with them, and everyone that I spoke with told me that they had to leave members of their families behind. In addition to the uncertainty inherent in such a traumatic upheaval, there was a great deal of danger. If they were caught they would have been imprisoned and possibly killed. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the members of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda left purely for economic reasons. In many cases the seizure of their property took away their means of livelihood. Leaving Vietnam was an act of desperation, as a result of the threat of the Communist government. As most of my respondents left at least five years after the Communist take-over, one would have to presume that the threat that they felt was not merely perceived, as would perhaps be the case for those who fled before the Communists took over Saigon in 1975.

Most refugees found themselves in refugee camps in Southeast Asia, principally Thailand (103 413 by boat, 707 584 by land), Malaysia (238 087), Hong Kong (130 623), and Indonesia (102 330) (Lavoie 1989:11).<sup>6</sup> The average length of

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<sup>6</sup> Between 1975 and 1989. Other Countries of first asylum include Philippines (43 626), Singapore (30 743), Japan (7 840), Macau (7 114), Australia (2 246), Korea (1 155), Brunei (159), and 1 077 in other countries (Lavoie 1989: 11).

stay at these refugee camps was 8.6 months, but many stayed for longer periods of time (more than 11 months) before getting scattered around the world to their countries of permanent asylum.<sup>7</sup> In the process, many families were separated. One woman, who has since become a bhikṣuṇī at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, was captured after two days flight with her husband and her daughter. The second time, they tried to escape separately. She escaped by boat from Saigon to Palawan Island in the Philippines but her husband has never been heard from. She presumes that he was one of the many unfortunates whose ship foundered at sea.

When the Vietnamese refugees started arriving in Canada, they were greeted with a well-developed, but often insensitive, immigration policy. In 1976 Bill C-24 was adopted as the new Immigration Act. The basic principles of this act are: "non-discrimination, family reunion, humanitarian concern for refugees, and promotion of Canada's

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<sup>7</sup> Countries of permanent asylum for Vietnamese refugees between 1975 and 1986 are:

U.S.A.	(750 233)	Hong Kong	(9 680)
China	(262 853)	Switzerland	(7 925)
Canada	(103 453)	New Zealand	(6 635)
France	(102 520)	Malaysia	(4 951)
Australia	(100 781)	Italy	(3 062)
Germany	(22 732)	Austria	(1 681)
British Isles	(16 833)	Argentina	(1 282)
Scandinavia	(11 762)	Spain	(927)
Benelux	(10 299)	Israel	(366)

social, economic, demographic and cultural goals"(Lavoie 1989:19). As Lavoie points out, these principles are split up into two categories that often contradict one another; those concerning the refugee/immigrant's interests, and the other concerning the interests of Canada (Lavoie 1989:19).

The Indochinese, in many of their countries of asylum, have been the victims of dispersal policies. In the United States this policy was initiated in 1975. Upon arrival the refugees were placed in either Camp Pendleton in California, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, or Fort Indian Town Gap in Pennsylvania, where they were taught English and other courses to help them integrate with American society, while waiting for sponsorship. This sponsorship implicitly led to a dispersal of the refugees across the United States:

Government policy was to spread Vietnamese Resettlement throughout the country. The sponsorship program encouraged such a diaspora, because the financial commitment that the program required Americans to make to Vietnamese was so great that few individuals or organizations could afford to undertake sponsorship (Kelly 1980:277).

The United States served as a model for many of the resettlement countries, including Canada. Like the United States, Canada's sponsorship policy inherently led to a dispersal of the new refugees. As sponsorship could only be taken by a group of five or more, organizations such as church congregations were the most viable sponsors. Lavoie

writes:

In Canada, 38.8% of the 1979-1980 arrivals resettled in non-metropolitan areas, due to both private and public sponsorship. Sponsorship offers came from everywhere in Canada, even from places with no tradition of immigration and located far from the three Canadian economic poles (Vancouver, Toronto and Montréal) (Lavoie 1989:52).

One example that Lavoie gives is of four refugees who were resettled in Sainte-Georges-de-Beauce, a village of 11 723 residence, entirely made up of French, white Catholics. The refugees stayed in this community for between eight months and four years before finding it necessary to migrate to an urban environment with a greater Vietnamese population in which they would feel more comfortable (Lavoie 1989:63-64). This experience of isolation has led the majority of Vietnamese to migrate either to Vancouver, Toronto or Montréal. Today, Montréal has the highest concentration of Vietnamese-Canadians (88.5% in 1986) (Lavoie 1989:77).

With this immigration history, it is not surprising that the refugees gathered in groups which could provide a more familiar surroundings in an otherwise foreign and seemingly hostile environment. Within these groups, their culture and traditions, which had been taken for granted in Vietnam, increased in value for them, and many clung to these traditions more vigorously than they probably had before. The Tam Ba'o Pagoda is one place where these

traditions are kept alive, and I was told by many members of the laity that they attended the Tam Ba'o Pagoda rather than one of the others because of the strictness to which the traditional ceremony is held. I have been told that some of the other pagodas have altered the service in order to make it shorter. Another indication of how the Tam Ba'o Pagoda serves a cultural role is that there are many young and middle aged people. Many that I have talked to have said that they were not very religious before coming to Canada.

#### **The Tam Ba'o Pagoda**

On July 12, 1979, two monastics were able to escape Vietnam after numerous attempts. The Venerable Thích Thiện Nghị and his niece, the Reverend Qua'ng Oánh, after a harrowing voyage, found themselves in the Pulau Bidong Refugee Camp in Malaysia. In 1980 they were sponsored by the Liên Hoa Pagoda in Brossard, and they became the first Vietnamese monastics in Canada. The Ven. Thích Thiện Nghị found that because the Liên Hoa Pagoda was owned and run by the laity, he did not have the freedom to lead it as he thought that he should, and he and the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh left after a three month stay at the Liên Hoa Pagoda. They rented an apartment with the help of four members of the laity. There, they started to hold services for members of the Vietnamese Buddhist community. A small chapel was started at

2570 Sherbrooke East where festival services were held, including the anniversary of the Buddha, Mother's day, Tê't (New Year's festival according to the Chinese lunar calendar) (Chùa Tam Ba'o 1987:156).

This chapel was soon found to be too small, and the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi and the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh gathered the funds necessary to purchase a bigger building. In 1982 they purchased an old synagogue for \$70 000 at 4450 Van-Horne in Montréal, Québec.<sup>8</sup> In March of that year, on the 2 526th anniversary of the birth of the Buddha, the statue of Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) was installed in the newly cleaned and renovated pagoda and a sign with the name Tam Ba'o, meaning three jewels (the Buddha, the Dharma and the sangha) was hung above the door.<sup>9</sup> With this event the Vietnamese Buddhist sangha (monastic community) planted roots in Canada, signifying the transplanting of the Vietnamese Buddhist tradition itself, for it is the sangha that is the core of Buddhist thought and practice in Vietnam, as in most of the rest of the Buddhist world.

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<sup>8</sup> I was told that the building's former status of being a synagogue was beneficial, as the building therefore had already being put to sacred use. This process of adopting of sacred space, and retaining its sacredness appears to be universal. In this particular part of Montréal it is indicative of the changing composition of this historically ethnic neighborhood with a high immigrant population.

<sup>9</sup> The statue was donated and brought from Taiwan.

### Physical Description of Pagoda

The Tam Ba'o Pagoda is a square, two story structure made of brown brick, with a flat roof. On the outside it does not appear to be a pagoda with the exception of the Buddhist flag that flies alongside with the Québec, Canadian, and Vietnamese flags, and the name inscribed on the outside. It is surrounded by an iron fence, waist-high, and neatly painted a monastic yellow, as is the door. The fence clearly marks off what is considered to be sacred space. At each of the two paths, one which leads to the main entrance and one to the side entrance as well as the main entrance, there are two small gates which remain closed during the week, but which are opened on Sunday to welcome laity to the weekly service. The main entrance, on the first floor, is approached by a set of steps. This entrance leads directly into the main sanctuary and is only open on special occasions, such as during the Tê't celebration to light the firecrackers. Directly above the main door is a balcony with a yellow banister, on which are the four flags mentioned above. This balcony is approached by a door on the second floor. The working entrance is on the side of the building. There is an external bulletin-board on which information about the services are written in Vietnamese and Chinese. This entrance is usually locked during the week although, in addition to the monastics who live in the building, there are almost always one or two lay women inside who volunteer



to help cook and clean. This entrance leads directly into the basement which serves as the church-hall. This is a room where a great deal of the action takes place. During the week there is a set of tables that are arranged in a row, where the monastics eat. On Sunday these tables are arranged in an "L" shape in front of the kitchen enclave and are used to serve the meal after the Sunday service. To the left, when entering the building, there is a place to leave your shoes and hang your coat. The walls of the hall are adorned with a map of Vietnam and photographs of past events. On the wall opposite the entrance are mounted names and photographs of members of the resident sangha, which includes The Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi, the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh, an empty spot for a former disciple who is now in charge of the temple in Toronto, and the 6 novice bhikṣus (monks) and 6 novice bhikṣuṇīs (nuns). On the wall to the left of the kitchen enclave is a cabinet set into the wall which holds religious texts written in Vietnamese, and various religious accoutrements such as smaller versions of the wooden fish and bowl-gong, and talismans of different Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (mainly of Quán-Âm), which are all for sale. At the far end there is a staircase that leads up to the back right corner of the shrine room on the main floor. To the right of that staircase there is a small room which holds the washroom facilities and leads to a second staircase. This staircase leads to the center-back of the shrine room on the main floor. Upon reaching the main floor, there are a

set of double doors which are the main doors to the outside. The stairs continue from there up to the second floor.

The shrine room, which takes up the entire main floor, is the central room of the Pagoda. It is the room for which the temple exists, and around which the ritual activities of the laity and the resident sangha take place. I will describe this room from the center-back, facing the central statue of Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) and with your back to the main door. I will divide the shrine room into three sections for three reasons. The first reason is that it facilitates my description of what is a complex room. The second reason is that the physical construction of the room, with the pillars forming a square in the center of the room has pre-determined both the set-up of the shrine-room and subsequently my description of it. In fact, these pillars also forms a tic-tac-toe grid of the room which further breaks things down, but serves more as a secondary than a primary division. The third reason is much more complicated, as it has to do with the three main statues of the temple, which are Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) in the center, Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) to the left (still facing the front), and Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) on the right. These positions have been described by my informants to be fairly standard in the pagodas of Vietnam. Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) is always in the center, although the Bodhisattvas on either side sometimes

alter, especially the statue of Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha).<sup>10</sup> Di-Lặc (Maitreya) is the usual replacement. There seems to be no symbolic meaning to the placement of the statues, other than the high place held for Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) as he is considered to be the Buddha for this world, and the revelatory element by which this world has become aware of the celestial Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas past and future. Though I have been unable to uncover any deep symbolism behind their placement, the tripartite division also manifests itself in the placement of the laity who attend the service, but this will be discussed further in the fourth chapter.

The room itself is square with three pillars that would form a square in the middle if a fourth was present. The carpet is red and the walls have light coloured wood panel. Lining the perimeter of the room, at the top of the walls hang a set of pictures depicting scenes of the life of the Buddha in what is perhaps best described as Indian poster art. In the center of the room there is a sub-altar on which usually stands a set of small statues of either

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<sup>10</sup> Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) seems to be almost always present, as she is held very dear to the hearts of the Vietnamese due to her compassion manifested in her willingness to help with the travails of sentient beings. One informant related to me how she only remembers the statue of Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) in the pagodas of Vietnam as a child, as her mother, when she took her to the pagoda, would only pray in front of her statue. Further, she was instructed by her mother to pray to Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) as well as A-Di-Đà (Amitābha) before bed every night.

Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) or A-Di-Đà Phật (Amitābha Buddha). Further back from the sub-altar is the main altar upon which sits the main statue of Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni). The space between the two altars is where either the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh or the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi performs the services, always facing the main statue. To the left of Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) is the statue of Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha). The ancestor altar is closer to the back on the side of Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) and the guardian stands on the opposite side of the room peering confidently across at it.

On the back/right of the shrine room is the top of the stairs that lead down to the church hall. Beside the door there is a desk where a woman sits every Sunday to sort out donations and to record them for tax purposes. Beside the desk, and closer to the center/back stands the main bell on which is written the year that it was donated according to both the Christian and Buddhist calendars, and some Chinese characters which translate as "the wheel of the dharma is always turning". Taped on the outside of the bell are the names of sick people who are either members of the Pagoda or their relatives, and on the inside of the bell there are names of insane people who need healing. When the bell is beaten and a specific mantra is said, it is believed to have the power to drive the ghosts out of the bodies whose names are taped to it. Along the right hand wall stands the statue of the guardian who protects the temple from bad spirits and hungry ghosts. Around him stand three

small statues that represent Confucius, Lao Tse and a god that is prayed to for good luck. Behind him there is a picture of two disciples of Confucius, and to the side there is a framed set of Chinese characters which represent Tho Bia, the earth-deity associated with buildings. In front of the guardian there are two candle stick holders, a vase of flowers, an incense holder, an electric candle and a bowl of apples. To his side there is a plate of bananas. Finally, there are four inter-related items which the Rev. Qua'ng Oanh explained to me. To the back left of the statue there is a decanter that holds spring water that has been blessed and made holy. In front of the guardian there is a bowl of rice, a bowl of salt and a cup turned upside down on a tray. At four o'clock every day the cup is filled with holy water and a few grains of rice are added, and the mixture is seasoned with a little salt. The hungry ghosts to whom this is offered can only consume a few grains of rice, for though their bellies are huge, their throats are so thin that very little can pass through to ease their insatiable hunger. Consequently, they are not only hungry but fairly desperate. It is no wonder that they are shown Buddhist mercy despite the fact that they are in this position as a result of their own bad deeds in lives past, for their situation is pitiable. Beside the Guardian are two yellow donation boxes with requests for donations written in black. One box is for donations to support the monks that are living at the monastery that is being set up in the Laurentians, and the

other provides envelopes for regular monthly donations.

The drum is located along the wall in between the altar for the guardian and the altar of Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn). On the drum is written in black on square red pieces of paper, "the wheel of the dharma is always turning". The drum is beaten at the beginning and end of the main service every Sunday as the bell is sounded.

In front of the Quán-Âm altar is a small wooden donation box with the donation request written on it. People usually put donations in this box when they perform xin xam (a divination ritual) in order for the divination to be correct. On top of the box stands three small bearded Chinese men made of porcelain representing longevity, wealth, and good fortune, called Phuo'c Loc Tho. These figurines are consciously acknowledged being of non-Buddhist, Chinese origin. Most people that I spoke to were not entirely sure what they represented. Also on the box sits the container of xin xam sticks and the two halved liver-shaped pieces of wood when they are not being used to divine a response to questions about the family or business. When services are not in progress and the Pagoda is open to the laity, they are almost always in use. I will discuss xin xam in the fourth chapter.

On the altar itself, Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) sits with a compassionate half-smile, one hand raised to confer blessings and compassion on her children. In back of her head shines a neon halo which indicates her holiness, as

does the lotus she sits upon. On the altar in front of her there are two marble candlestick holders, a few vases with flowers donated by the laity, a large marble incense holder, an electric candle, a lotus shaped bowl for rice offerings, and a small bowl-shaped gong. The fruits that are laid out in front of her are apples, oranges and mandarins. These fruits are used because they reflect the colours of the Buddha and because their round shape shows the completion of action. On her lap, and sitting on the lotus, is a smaller porcelain statue of Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) that is owned by the pagoda, and a number of smaller statues of Quán-Âm of different styles, that have been placed there by devotees who will later take them back to put on their altars at home. In this way, the statues' "spiritual batteries" are charged up. To the left of the main Quán-Âm statue there is a stem of bamboo in a glass water-filled vase that shows that the Buddha is always present. Behind the statue of Quán-Âm there is a board with numbered pieces of paper corresponding to the numbers on the xin xam sticks, which give the answers to the questions that are asked Quán-Âm. On either side of the statue of Quán-Âm there are red banners on which are written the name of Quán-Âm and the day that they were donated, in Chinese characters.

The left side of the sanctuary is dominated by the ancestor altar in the back, and the altar of Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) in the front. The ancestor altar is a long wooden counter. On it there are offerings of apples, oranges

and mandarins (which are supplemented on Sundays by rice, tea, and vegetarian dishes), two candle sticks, flowers, an incense holder, an electric candle and a bamboo shoot held in a glass vase of water. There are often ancestor tablets of the recent dead on the altar, which are moved up onto the wall behind the altar after seven weeks. The paper tablets of the dead are placed on the wall behind the altar. This wall is only for lay people. Tablets or photographs of monastics are never placed here. Therefore, on the ancestor altar, there are tablets of the parents of the Venerable Thích Thiện Nghi and the Reverend Qua'ng Oánh, but not for the Venerable's master, who in many respects is considered a father.<sup>10</sup> There are photographs of dead monastics on the altar of Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha). Above the tablets on the ancestor altar is a small wooden statue of A-Di-Đà (Amitābha) that recently replaced a framed colour picture of this Buddha. The tablets are placed above the altar free of charge, but for a fee of \$2000.00 the ashes of the dead are placed up at the Great Pine Forest Monastery, where they are prayed for every year, and their names are recorded on a piece of yellow bristol-board to the right of the ancestor altar. To the right of the ancestor altar, in the middle of the wall there is a bodhi tree which I have been told was taken from the original bodhi tree under which Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) gained enlightenment.

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10. The Reverend referred to her uncle's master as her grandfather.



The altar of Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) holds the usual paraphernalia that is seen on the other altars: candles, and incense holders, a small gong and mallet, fruit offerings, a lotus shaped bowl for rice offerings, and an electric candle. Beside him there is a shoot of bamboo. Also as in the case of the statue of Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn), there are red banners on either side on which are written the name of Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha), the name of three disciples of Địa-Tạng, the name of the donor and the date that they were donated. There are a number of differences between the altar of Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) and the altar of Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn). Rather than having an array of different small statues belonging to the laity, placed on the lap of Địa-Tạng as they are for Quán-Âm, there are two medium-sized, matching gold statues on the altar. On the ledge of the lotus, on which the statue sits, there are photographs of dead monastics. In a glass panel in the front there are photographs of five important monks. From left to right they are: 1) Thích Thiện Tuong who was the leader of a big temple in Vietnam and the teacher of monks and nuns before 1975; 2) Thích Thiện Minh (1921-1978) who was the leader of young Buddhist monks and nuns in Vietnam; 3) Thích Phuoc Ho; 4) Thích Thiện Hoa; and 5) Thích Bao Thanh who was the master of the Venerable Thích Thiện Nghi (the abbot of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda). To the left of the glass panel there is a picture of a Cambodian monk who was the master of one of the novice nuns and was put on the altar at her request. To the right

of the panel is a picture of Thiện Duong, whose daughter attends the Tam Bao Pagoda, so his photograph is placed on this altar so that she may pay reverence to it, as monastics cannot be put on the ancestor altar. In Vietnam there was usually a separate altar especially for monastics. However, lack of space has put certain constraints on the Pagoda, so the pictures were placed on the altar of Dia-tang (Kṣitigarbha) as he is associated with the dead.

Another outstanding feature of the altar of Dia-Tang (Kṣitigarbha) is the sceptre (called Tich Truong) that he holds in his hand, and the matching scepter that stands beside him. The sceptre is used to knock at the gates of hell. When the doors open, light from the body of Dia-Tang pours in, and extracts the unfortunate souls. The sceptre is a symbol of power. From it hang twelve rings that symbolize the chain of dependent origination (Sanskrit. pratītya samutpāda.)

Finally, I will describe the main altar which consists of the sub-altar, the "stage", the altar, and the statue of Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni). The sub-altar is flanked by two pillars on which are written gold Chinese characters on a red background, which roughly translate as "It took many lifetimes for the Buddha to become valuable", and "The three bodies of the Buddha depend on the needs of the people". In front of the sub-altar there is a brown donation box with a request for donations written in yellow, and a square piece of red paper conferring blessings on those who donate. On

the sub-altar itself there is an incense burner, two candle sticks, and fruit offerings. There used to be statues of A-Di-Bà (Amitābha) of varying numbers (two to three) belonging to the laity, which were taken back to be put on altars in their homes, but they have recently been replaced by four gold statues of Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni), each in a different position. These gold statues are examples of statues that can be donated to the Great Pine Forest Monastery, which is trying to get a collection of one thousand of these statues. For \$500 the donor can purchase one of these and have his or her name engraved on the back of the statue and it will be installed at the monastery.

The stage is the space between the sub-altar and the main altar. It is raised above the rest of the floor by about four inches and is carpeted in beige rather than red like the rest of the floor. It is the area where the leader of the service sits. There is a pillow for the leader to sit on, facing the statue of Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni). A low table in front of the pillow holds a few books, prayer beads, and a picture of Thích-Ca propped up against the main altar. To the left is a wooden fish which is hit by a novice bhikṣu (monk) or bhikṣuṇī (nun) who stands off the stage, and to the right a large bowl-gong which is likewise hit by a bhikṣu or bhikṣuṇī who stands off stage.

The main altar is cluttered with several small statues put there by members of the laity, and the usual assortment of religious paraphernalia: vases of flowers, fruit

offerings, candles, and a bamboo shoot.<sup>11</sup> There is also a large metal brazier that creates an eye-numbing amount of smoke on special celebrations (Tê't - New Years for instance), and two decanters of holy water. On the lotus platform and lap of the statue of Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) there are a number of other small statues belonging to the laity, and a small gold and glass pagoda.<sup>12</sup> In this pagoda, I was surprised to find out that there was a relic of the Buddha. These small round white pieces of bone were obtained from India and are said to be marrow from the spine of the Buddha. I was told that they had another relic which was obtained from Thailand, and is kept up at the Great Pine Forest Monastery.

The main statue of Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) is a large gold representation of the Buddha in meditation, with his hands folded on his lap, his eyes half closed, and his lips slightly up-turned in a half smile. Behind his head there is a mirror that is set in a halo-like backing that is rimmed by small electric bulbs that give off a warm yellow glow. On the backing there is a carving of a dragon which protects the Buddha while he meditates. Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) is

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<sup>11</sup> When I recorded this, there were one gold and one yellow statue of A-Di-Đà (Amitābha) and one of Di-Lặc (Maitreya), the fat, laughing Buddha.

<sup>12</sup> At the time of recording, there was a red, a gold, and a white statue of A-Di-Đà (Amitābha), two statues of Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni), and another statue of Di-Lặc (Maitreya), this time covered with children clambering on top of him.

uniformly described as the most important Buddha, as he was the one who taught the truth. His prominence is amply displayed in the centrality and grandeur in this Pagoda.

The third level of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda is where the quarters for the bhiksus and bhikṣuṇīs are, and there is a small library which houses a collection of the sutras in Chinese. The third level also acts as the office and headquarters for the Chánh Pháp Buddhist Society, and the Union of Vietnamese Buddhist Churches in Canada (UVBCC).

#### Activities of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda

The Tam Ba'o Pagoda is very active and acts as a focal point for many Vietnamese lay people. It is a place where things are familiar, which is an immense relief for people who have found themselves alone in such a foreign and different country. Perhaps this is one of the greatest roles of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. Although it is not possible to provide services every day for the laity to attend, as pagodas in Vietnam have traditionally done, there are regular services every Sunday, and the Pagoda is open for visits on Saturdays. I have been told by a number of people that they prefer to go to the Tam Ba'o Pagoda because of its strict adherence to the traditional Vietnamese service. It also celebrates all the major traditional Vietnamese Buddhist celebrations, such as the anniversary of the birth of Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni), the Vu Lan feast for filial piety,

the spring celebration, Tê't (New Years), and Mother's Day. Finally, it fills a very important role by performing the rites for the dead and having an altar for ancestors which becomes very important for those who do not have room for an altar in their apartment.

The Rev. Qua'ng Oánh and the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi have gone to great lengths to transplant Vietnamese Buddhism in Canada. They have assisted in the opening of other Vietnamese pagodas all across Canada and have founded the headquarters of the United Vietnamese Buddhist Churches of Canada (UVBCC) as a body to bring together these separate communities. A monastery is presently being built in the Laurentians to the north-west of Montréal called The Great Pine Forest Monastery, which will serve as the main Canadian monastery for the budding Vietnamese Buddhist sangha in Canada. It will also house the Institute of Buddhist Teaching "Tam Ba'o Sôh", a large library, a retreat center, and statues depicting the life of Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) installed along the side of a mountain.

Perhaps one of the most vivid illustration of how Vietnamese Buddhism is being transplanted in Canada is the growing sangha. As the sangha is the central organism for Buddhism, its health and growth signifies that Vietnamese Buddhism is thriving in Canada. The number of monastics does not compare with the sangha in Vietnam, but this number is growing. Perhaps, more important is the fact that the sangha is growing in Canada, not by the immigration of bhiksus

(monks) and bhikṣuṇīs (nuns) from Vietnam, but by the entrance of novices. There are currently twelve novice bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. Although some of them were religious before coming to Canada and always knew that they would join the sangha, many have turned back to tradition and started practicing Buddhism in earnest since their arrival in Canada. They are enthusiastic and helpful and are eager to learn and become leaders in the growth of Buddhism in Canada, a goal which has been impressed upon them by the vision of the Ven. Thích Thiện Ngộ and the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh.

In addition to striving to maintain traditional Vietnamese values and practices, the Tam Ba'o Pagoda actively fights against isolationism. The Rev. Qua'ng Oánh has attended Dawson College and received a bachelor's and master's degree in Religion from Concordia University. While the novices are currently studying only at the Pagoda (their curriculum includes English and French), they will be attending college and then university in a few years.

Efforts are made by the Tam Ba'o Pagoda to make themselves known to the greater community of Montréal. When they publish such books as their two anniversary books, and the Regulations of "The Great Pines Forest" Monastery and Disciplines of Tam Ba'o Sơn Monastic Buddhist Institute, both English and French are included, as well as Vietnamese and Chinese. During special celebrations, such as Tết, and the installation of statues at the Great Pine Forest Monastery

Western special guests are often invited, including representatives from the community, representatives from the police, Catholic priests and Franciscan monks, and representatives from the press. In addition, the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh often visits universities and colleges as a guest lecturer to speak about Vietnamese Buddhism in Canada, and schools and groups are often invited to visit the Pagoda.

The Tam Ba'o Pagoda is a vibrant addition to the community, and while the Vietnamese community at the Pagoda wish to preserve their distinct culture, language, and practices, they also wish to contribute to the community as a whole by teaching the Vietnamese children who have been born in Canada about Vietnam and Vietnamese Buddhism. The struggle of the Vietnamese has been long and arduous, but they have survived, and they are making themselves at home in Canada...despite the cold and the snow!!!



## Chapter 2

### Family, Women, and the Division of Labour

#### **Introduction**

When I entered into my thesis research at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda I held some preconceptions about the situation of Asian women, which were based on my knowledge of the position of women in other Asian countries, especially India, China and Japan, and the position of women in Theravāda Buddhism. I expected to see a large number of males dominating the rituals of the temple. I was surprised, therefore, to see that there was a far stronger representation of females than males at the Pagoda. Further, there did not seem to be any noticeable inequalities, and in fact the women seemed to be far more active in the service, as well as in the running of the Pagoda. For instance, when I first started visiting the Pagoda, Vietnamese women were always the ones who directed me to where I ought to be sitting, or to which page the congregation was chanting from. The women were the ones who cooked the food and served it after the service. I have repeatedly seen older women guide men to a place to sit in the sanctuary. More importantly, The Rev. Qua'ng Oánh holds a real position of

authority in the Pagoda, second only to her uncle, the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi. She does not rely on his authority for her power, but holds it on her own. She is well regarded, highly respected, and listened to by men as well as women.

These observations piqued my curiosity, and that curiosity soon turned into interest and then into fascination. I became interested not only in the roles of women, for that seemed to be a narrow way of looking at it, but in the relative roles of gender as a holistic system. I will start off this chapter by examining the position of men and women in the family and in Vietnamese society. I will then examine more closely how women and men behave as religious beings.

### **Gender in Vietnamese Society**

One cannot speak of the Vietnamese views concerning gender and the family as homogenous. The same values are not universally held. The primary differences arise from economic differences. Equality is much more apparent in the lower and middle classes. In the upper class, the Confucian ideals are much more strongly upheld, and the position of women can be much less egalitarian. This is illustrated by the story of Le Kwang Kim who grew up in the 1940's in an upper class Vietnamese family in Saigon, where her position as a daughter was to obey her parents:

Now on that May evening, while I was struggling with my essay, I heard my father coming upstairs. Good heavens, what could I have done to displease him? Whenever he came up to my room it was to scold or lecture me - reminding me of a young girls duties to her parents and her family. This might go on for hours for my father, like every self-respecting, well-educated man, was never in a hurry. In these circumstances there could be no thought of my essay; as usual I should have to listen, sitting motionless with downcast eyes, looking as docile as possible. In Viet-Nam, filial piety is the first and fundamental principle engraved on our hearts. My father came in and sat down on the large couch of polished wood, without mattress or pillows on which we used to sleep, our heads resting on those oblong, wicker-work blocks which, though very pretty with their brightly coloured covers, were very hard and most uncomfortable. He looked at me over his spectacles and quietly said: 'Tomorrow you will take your books back to the librarian at the college and give this letter to the vice-principal before giving up your studies. Your mother and I, with the approval of your grandparents, have arranged a marriage for you with the sixteenth son of Madam H. The young man is one of the most eligible partis in the country. They are Catholics and have asked that you should become one, and therefore you will do so. It is of no importance since, as a girl, you would not have to be responsible for the cult of the ancestors. Your brother will undertake this honourable duty. That day after tomorrow you will attend instruction at the Cathedral of Saigon (Lê 1965:463-464).

### Confucian Tradition in Vietnam

It is impossible to talk about Vietnamese culture, society and views on gender without talking about the

influence of China. It was due to the influence of Chinese culture, steeped in Confucian patriarchy, that events such as those described above took place in upper-class Vietnamese families. The Chinese entered Northern Vietnam in 111 BCE and remained there for one thousand years (until 981 CE), at which time they were successfully driven out. Their ideals and their culture had a great influence on Vietnam, and in that sense China was in Vietnam to stay. The result of this is that when speaking of Vietnamese religion, culture, society, and family structure one is very much talking about a Chinese-based system with few twists. Rambo writes:

The Chinese character system was adopted, and a written literature based on the Chinese classics appeared. The kinship system became patrilineal, and the sociopolitical system changed from a relatively simple and egalitarian tribal system to a complex and highly stratified class system, heavily bureaucratized and based upon water-control agriculture (1982:407).

All aspects of Vietnamese life relied heavily on the Chinese model, specifically the Confucian system, which is primarily an ethical code that stresses social virtue and outlines a system of proper action for social and political relations:

In ordinary life, according to Confucius, the individual existed only in and for society, which minutely prescribed his obligations of form and substance, as well as his privileges, according to rank in the community. Included were the signs of

respect he owed to his superiors and expected of his inferiors, and even the rites he had to perform to maintain social harmony at the level of the family and village (Hammer 1966:41-42).

As Confucianism is an intensely patriarchal system, proper social action for women was dictated as submission to their husbands. A passage from a Confucian marriage manual amply illustrates the extent to which women were expected to submit: "Even though you sleep intimately on the same bed and use the same cover with him, you must treat your husband as if he were your king or your father" (Bergman 1975:21). Another passage from the Analects of Confucius shows how women were considered very low on the social scale: "The Master said women and people of low birth are very hard to deal with. If you are friendly with them, they get out of hand, and if you keep your distance, they resent it" (XVII:xxv, Waley 1938:216-217).<sup>1</sup> Vietnamese culture took on this patriarchal attitude, as can be seen by this Vietnamese proverb: "An officer is one who commands

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<sup>1</sup> There is some discrepancy between translators as to how "nu zi" (女子) ought to be translated in this case. James Legge translates the first part of this passage as meaning: "The Master said, 'Of all people, girls and servants are the most difficult to behave to', footnoting that in this case nu zi (女子)" does not mean women generally, but girls, i.e., concubines" (Legge 1966:271). Soothill, on the other hand, translates the passage as "Of all people, maids and servants are hardest to keep in your house" (Soothill 1910:855). I find that the translation into "women" is probably the best, as girl would be better translated as "nu er" (女兒) or "nu hai" (女孩). The translation into maid is a little more problematic, and probably reflects the time of the translation.

soldiers; A husband is one who commands wives"(Bergman 1975:21).

Women were expected to be submissive, wholesome, and chaste, and rules for their behaviour towards their husbands were laid down in detail, as were the rules of all social relationships, by the Confucian system.. Confucianism lays down the "three submissions" (Vietnamese, tam tong) that divide the life of women into three sections relating to which master they must obey: in childhood it is the father; in marriage, the husband; and in widowhood, the eldest son.<sup>2</sup> Confucianism also lays down the "four virtues" ( Vietnamese, tu duc): 1) labour (cong) which means mastering cooking, sewing and embroidery, but not reading and writing; 2) physical appearance (dung) which consists of being attractive to one's husband but not enticing others; 3) appropriate speech (ngon), which enjoins being self-demeaning and rigidly polite rather than assertive or imaginative; and 4) proper behaviour (hanh), which is being

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<sup>2</sup> I have been unable to find the origin of this belief, though I have encountered it a number of times. My best guess is that it comes from a book called the Nu Erh Ching attributed to Lady Tsao(?) which I found translated in Isaac Taylor Headland's Home Life in China (1914:69-80) He writes: "

"Girls have three on whom dependent,  
All their lives they must expect,-  
While at home to follow father, who a husband  
will select,  
With her husband live in concord from the day  
that she is wed,  
And her son's directions follow if her husband  
should be dead."(1914:74)

honest to one's superiors (Marr 1976:372).<sup>3</sup> As can be seen, this value system does not leave much room for women to be

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<sup>3</sup> Like the Three Submissions, I am unable to find the original source of the four virtues. The best I can do is supply the passage from the Nu Erh Ching mentioned above:

There are four important virtues  
 which a maiden should possess.  
 I will one by one rehearse them that your minds  
 they may impress.  
 First, like Lady T'sao be perfect, and your  
 happiness secure,  
 Who in virtue, and deportment, and in words and  
 work was pure

First of all a woman's virtues  
 Is a chaste and honest heart,  
 Of which modesty and goodness and decorum form a  
 part.  
 If in motion, or if resting, a becoming way is  
 chief;  
 You should guard against an error as you guard  
 against a thief.

In your personal appearance  
 You should ever take delight.  
 Ne'er depend upon cosmetics, whether they be red  
 or white;  
 Comb and bathe at proper seasons; all the dirt  
 remove with care;  
 In the washing of your clothing no exertions  
 should you spare.

Of the virtues of a woman,  
 Conversation is the third.  
 By your friends 'tis often better to be seen than  
 to be heard,  
 But to speak at proper seasons will incur no  
 one's disdain,  
 And one fit word o'er a thousand will the victory  
 often gain.

Fourth, the duties of a woman,  
 You should never dare to shirk.  
 Know that drawing and embroidering is not all of  
 woman's work,  
 You should labour at your spinning all the time  
 you have to spare,  
 And the flavourings for cooking you should  
 constantly prepare (Headland 1914: ).

equal. This, however, was not the only value system in Vietnam, for Confucianism had competition in the form of the indigenous pre-Chinese ideals.

### Contra-Confucian Tradition

Before the Chinese had invaded Vietnam, it is quite probable that women enjoyed greater equality. "Anthropologists and historians report that up to the last century before the Christian era, Vietnamese practiced slash-and burn rice agriculture and had a matriarchal or bilateral kinship system"(Hoskins 1976:129). One can imagine the tremendous conflict that the indigenous tradition would have had with the fundamentally different patrilocal, patrilineal and patriarchal Chinese tradition that was imposed upon them. To some extent the Chinese policy of systematic sinicization was very successful. On the surface there is very little difference between Chinese and Vietnamese society. Under the "official" surface, the story is quite different however. Confucian values are widely held but they remain tempered by an older tradition that stubbornly refuses to be driven out completely. In the parts of society where the Confucian influence played a greater role, such as in the upper classes, and in the north, the contra-Confucian tradition is less evident, or not evident at all, but at the social level of the farmer and the village, especially in the South, the other tradition is



much more apparent.

This indigenous tradition was much more egalitarian than the tradition that was imported from China. Women in the indigenous tradition held power, and despite the efforts of first the Chinese, then of the Vietnamese dynasties, and finally French imperialism (which continued the draw upon Confucian ideals as a means of control), the Confucian ideals were never completely accepted; thus, the position of women in Vietnam has remained considerably stronger than in China. In a sense, the Confucian patriarchal values were officially upheld as a "great tradition," but at the same time, a "little tradition" of women as independent and empowered was maintained. During different periods, when the Chinese influence was less strong, we can see that there were reversions to pre-Chinese values. According to Jayawardena:

Despite the adoption of Confucianist ideology, a perusal of Vietnamese history shows that the position of women there tended to be better than in China. During the Lê dynasty, which spanned from the 15th to 18th centuries, women had equal inheritance rights, could own property and, if there was no son, could keep the extra land allocated by law for ancestor worship. These rights were enumerated in the Hong Duc Code which was promulgated in 1483 and remained in force till the end of the 18th century. The Code also contained provisions that sought to secure the personal rights of women, who were protected from abuse, abduction or sale by members or servants of powerful families. Women were also given the right to divorce for neglect or abandonment by husband. The basis for granting such rights to women has to be attributed to an attempt by the Vietnamese leaders, after the

defeat of the Chinese, 'to separate its identity from China's by incorporating traditional laws and customary practices in their legal and political framework' (1986:197-198).

Throughout Vietnamese history this strong tradition of women lurked below the surface and came out wherever Confucianism had a weaker hold. As I mentioned earlier, in the peasant classes, Confucianist Chinese ideals did not hold as much sway. Marr writes:

It would be wrong to assume...that Confucian moralists succeeded entirely in propagandizing Vietnamese women into submission. Among the plain people in particular there remained a frankness of expression and diversity of life experience that defied regimentation... Generally, the poorer the family the more likely husband and wife were to rely heavily on one another, to share tasks, and thus to take superior-inferior strictures with a grain of salt. On the other hand, wealthier families had perhaps three generations and various collateral elements under one roof, with all the role differentiation and vertical organization implied by that structure (1976:374-375).

Another place where this "little tradition" has come out is during times of rebellion. Women often, as Jayawardena points out, held positions of leadership in these grass-root rebellions. The most famous are the Trung Sisters who led an army of 80,000 against the Chinese in 40 CE and who succeeded in driving them out for a short period. The story tells us that one of the sisters was a brilliant strategist and the other was a fierce warrior. They issued a call for all people to join in the rebellion and picked 36

women (including their mother) to be the generals. They succeeded in liberating 65 fortresses, and the governor, To Dinh, fled the country in disguise. The Chinese eventually defeated them in 43 CE, and the Trung Sisters committed suicide rather than accepting defeat (Bergman 1975:30-31).

We can see, then, that as popular folk heroes they provide a positive role model of women in power that not only reflects the "little tradition," but also must have served to cushion the impact of Confucian values. Even in Communist North Vietnam Two Trung Sisters' Day was still being celebrated in the 1960's (Keim 1967:49). No doubt the Communist government draws on this legend for propaganda value, but the fact that it is used at all indicates that the Trung sisters do hold a prominent place as folk heroes. Although the Trung sisters are the most renowned, they are not the only example of women holding power. In 248 CE Trieu Thi Trinh led a rebellion against the Chinese, which again failed, although the legend lives on. Of the five major uprisings against the Chinese, two were led by women (Bergman 1975:32).

Vietnam spent much of its long history in resisting its dominant neighbour to the north. This resistance was in part martial, but there were other means by which the Vietnamese attempted to resist not only the Chinese as a ruler, but also as a cultural antagonist seeking to smother the identity of Vietnam. Although the Chinese system of government served as a model for the Vietnamese, and

although the Vietnamese codes of law were largely a copy of the Chinese codes, there are instances where the Vietnamese systems diverge, if only slightly. Ta Van Tai in his comparative study on the position of women in the Vietnamese Code of the Lê Dynasty and the Chinese codes of the T'ang, Ming and the Ch'ing dynasties, writes:

But law is rooted in culture. Vietnamese custom with its idiosyncracies compelled the drafter of the Lê Code to incorporate original Vietnamese provisions, unknown in the T'ang Code-its model-and other Chinese codes, to give special protection and equal property rights to Vietnamese women (1981:100).

Ta Van Tai shows that although the position of women was essentially Confucian, dictating the inferiority of women to men, there were some quite significant divergences. Women were given some protective measures in the family against such things as forced marriage and rape (Ta Van Tai 1981:111-113). Furthermore, punishment for offenses were often less severe for women under the Lê code (Ta Van Tai 1981:117). More significantly, women were given equal property rights, inheritance rights, and a higher position for the succession of ancestor worship property (Ta Van Tai 1981:115-135). Ta Van Tai concludes that:

Thus, ever since the Lê dynasty emperor's assumption of the role of defenders of the Vietnamese customs against the zealous propagation of Chinese civilization, the Vietnamese folk culture's dedication to women's equal rights has prevailed over Confucian ethics, despite attempts, as during the Nguyễn dynasty, to impose an

alien legal system on the people (1981:141).

The last example that I shall give of this non-Chinese tradition of women having strength and holding power is found in the folk-literature. Somehow, folk poetry and songs have often been overlooked by rulers. They seem to slip under the carpet and go unnoticed by the people in political control (including foreign powers) who are trying to impose their own set of values and systems on the population. We are fortunate to have these poems and songs in our effort to understand cultures, religion, history, etc., for they show us an alternative set of values and a different set of interpretations, from the formal, official doctrine of those who are holding the power.

There is always more than one story. By looking at these songs and poems, we can see that the official story is often only part of the story. So, Confucianism imposed and set on a pedestal the value of chastity saying: "Chastity is worth one thousand gold coins"(Bergman 1975:22), and Vietnamese women have responded with folk songs such as:

Chastity is truly worth a thousand gold coins:  
Counting from my ex-husband to you: I have had five men.  
As for lovers that I have had in secret,  
A hundred of them have gathered on my belly as they  
would in a market (Bergman 1975:33).

In response to forcing adult women to marry young boys so that the boys' families may get cheap labour, this verse was sung:

Bump! Bump! I took a walk with my husband on my  
back.  
Crossing a shallow spot, I dropped him by mistake.  
Hey fellow sisters! lend me a scoop,  
I'll scoop the water and get my husband out!  
(Bergman 1975:33)

There are many examples of such folk songs, addressing various hardships that were imposed on women in Vietnam. What these folk songs point out to us is that though Vietnamese women were faced with these hardships, it was under protest, and not as totally indoctrinated automatons. The "little tradition" remained barely below the surface, under a thin veneer of Confucian and Chinese values and norms. To summarize, we have seen that: 1) the Confucianist tradition is weaker in the South; 2) Confucianism is weaker at the lower economic levels; 3) women have found a place as folk-heroes and have acquired more rights under the Lê code of law showing a resistance against Chinese domination and influence; and finally 4) there is a tradition of folk-songs and poetry that take the Confucian ideals to task. All of these factors indicate that, though the Chinese influence was strong, it was by no means total, and the older tradition is most apparent when and where the Confucian influence has been weakest. It is not surprising, therefore, that with the move to Canada many Vietnamese have discarded the Confucian patriarchal tradition like ill fitting clothes.

### "Modernity": The Great Equalizer

When I first started to interview the laity who attend the Tam Ba'o Pagoda I asked questions on gender which often confused the person whom I was questioning. If I asked about employment possibilities for women, I would be told that they are the same as for men. If I asked about who was higher in position, my respondents would again indicate equality. It did not take me long to realise that if I wanted to know about traditional values, I had to indicate specifically whether I was interested in traditional or modern values. Otherwise, the answer would quite naturally come from their present experience. The Vietnamese with whom I have spoken unanimously uphold the value of inherent equality between gender, but say that traditionally, women were expected to stay home to raise children and take care of the house. Furthermore, they were often not given the educational opportunity that was open to boys. This has changed, in Vietnam to begin with, and now in Canada. Girls are educated, and women now seek employment outside of the home. When I question about what sorts of jobs are suitable for women, I am told that women can do the same things as men.

The people with whom I have talked have been acutely aware of the changes that have been brought about in the last century. One of the fundamental changes that has been expressed to me concerns the family and gender. At times it

seems as though my respondents have gone out of their way to be politically correct in terms of gender issues, and this has at times made my research a little more complicated. I was made constantly aware of the changes in the views of gender as I did my research. Often the dichotomy between the old and the new that has been expressed to me has been characterised as "modernity". "Modernization" is largely the abandonment of one set of values for another. Although it is often seen as progress, from an objective point of view, this view of change as progressive evolution, with all of its hierarchical assumptions, is groundless. As such, I use the term "modernity" in contrast to "traditional" without implying any judgement of value, and I do so principally regarding views on gender.

"Modernity" has had a profound effect on the position of Vietnamese women, especially in North America, but I believe that it would be simplistic to think of modernity as the sole cause of change toward gender equality.<sup>4</sup> To a large extent the value of equality has been so fervently embraced because of certain preconditions that have allowed the Vietnamese to accept equality as an ideal. There has historically been friction between the Chinese

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<sup>4</sup> Many would object to me speaking of equality in the West as if it had been fully achieved and universally held. However, the Vietnamese whom I have spoken with seem to conceive of Canada as having an equal attitude towards men and women. I am therefore not making a judgement about the truth of this belief, but am portraying their own views on Canada.



organisation of gender roles and the non-Chinese tradition that tended to place women and men on more equal footing. There seems to be a pre-disposition to accept the notion of equality, which I would say stems from a fundamental disagreement with the Confucian ideals of female submission. By coming to Canada, the ties with Confucianism were further severed, allowing my respondents to freely accept and be moved by "modernity" and its notion of equality.

The Vietnamese emigration to the West was not their first encounter with "modernity," although its influence was greatly accelerated by the shift of milieu. Despite the attempts of the French colonial regime to uphold the oppressive doctrines of Confucianism as a matter of convenience, they could not isolate Vietnam from the tides of change.

A new generation of Vietnamese literati emerged in the first decade of the twentieth century determined to work for national independence and to modernize Vietnamese society. Women were recognized as part of the national polity, at least in theory. Concrete proposals were made for expanding their educational opportunities. At the short-lived but highly influential Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc (Eastern Capital Non-Tuition School), women were encouraged to attend public lectures on history, culture and politics-at the time a radical innovation. Larger, less scholarly gatherings were organized outside, including dramatic presentations recounting legends surrounding the heroic Trung sisters (Marr 1976:375).

As is hinted at above, the older tradition of equality was often drawn upon by the advocates of feminism.

Although the French were undergoing a process of change in their own country concerning the status of women and women were starting to achieve small measures of equality, the French continued to support the Confucian system in its Indo-chinese colonies. It is not surprising, therefore, that Feminism became identified with the anti-colonial struggle. In 1932 a well known Vietnamese lawyer named Nguyễn Mạnh Tu'ông wrote:

Surely one sees that at the present time, leavened by dangerous Western thoughts, dishevelled little females are enlisting at random under the banner of feminism and proclaiming at the instigation of their 'Western sisters,' their right to a free and full life...These little fools do not know that this very doctrine of feminism, which they adduce and go so far abroad to look for, is a product of the national soil, capable of being exported; that the genuine feminism must be searched for, not elsewhere but in their own country, by returning to the admirable and reasonable traditions of their race (Ta Van Tai 1981: 97-98).

By the time that the Vietnamese arrived in Canada they were already familiar with ideas of equality. Most of the women with whom I spoke had attended school in Vietnam. Two women were teachers, one of French, and one of history. All of the young and middle aged women have jobs or are pursuing an education. Only the older women do not seem to be actively working, but this is more a matter of age than of views on gender, for most have held jobs in the past.

Perhaps the biggest change in terms of the family, that is a direct result of coming to Canada is the divorce

rate. Vietnamese women are now less likely to put up with abusive or oppressive situations within the home. One 71 year old woman has recently joined the sangha at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda for this very reason. I was told that she had wanted to join for at least the last ten years, but her husband had not let her. In 1992 she broke her leg and was consequently thrown out of her house by her husband who regarded her as having no use because of her injury. Rather than going to live with her daughter, who is also a member of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, or with a friend, she took the opportunity to join the order. She was accepted and has remained a novice nun despite the pleadings and the protests of the husband. Although he was at one time a vice-president, he left the Pagoda in anger on account of its having accepted his wife into the sangha. Western ideas of equality have influenced Vietnamese women, or at the very least, have provided a chance for the pre-Chinese tradition to once again break through. I have been told that instances of divorce have increased dramatically since coming to Canada. In Vietnam divorce has not been traditionally allowed, or was frowned upon, and was not a viable option for most women.

Another possible source for the views on equality is the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh, who is a vocal proponent of equality. As a woman who has achieved a status within Vietnamese Buddhism that is only shared by five other Vietnamese nuns world wide, I am sure she has had to endure a number of

difficulties. She attributes her position to the liberal attitude of her uncle and master, but nonetheless she is a charismatic figure in her own right. I suspect that both her position and her attitude regarding the equality of women and men have had an impact on the attitudes of the people who attend the Tam Ba'o Pagoda.

### **Views of Men and Women within the Context of the Family**

As I have outlined above, the views on gender in Vietnamese society, and more particularly, at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, are due to an intricate blend of two very different cultures. The resulting views are likewise intricate, sometimes contradictory and always confusing. When discussing these views with the members of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, I very often ran across such questions and phrases as: "now or traditionally?", "you know, this came from China" and, "It is not like that anymore". However, traditions die hard and the people at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda still display attitudes and actions that indicate that, as in the West, equality is upheld as an ideal while not always being fully carried out to the letter.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty in achieving an understanding of their views on gender is that almost all of the people with whom I spoke tried to steer me away from generalisations by prefacing all of their responses

concerning views on gender by: "It depends on the person", at which point I would have to prompt them on with such phrases as: "but generally speaking..." I was surprised to find such a reluctance to generalise, but I respect the intent behind it. However, it is difficult to understand things such as cultural views on an individualistic level, and therefore I felt compelled to find out what they believed "most people's" views and actions were. They are quite correct in pointing out to me that their culture and society is far from homogenous. Therefore, while I am making broad generalisations in order to illustrate patterns, it is important to keep in mind that these are not views that are held by everybody, but rather, my understanding of the cultural patterns. Views on gender are always very complex, and each individual holds a different set of values that are not ever universally held. Each individual is different, with a different set of views and values that are never identical to the next person's. I have tried to represent the full range of views, but in the end, I have been forced to generalise in a way that is not representative of each person. For those who do hold the beliefs that I have written, I apologize.

Broadly stated, I have found that officially, men are the heads of the family. They are acknowledged as the authoritarian figure both within the family and especially outside of the family. They are also viewed as the primary

bread winners.<sup>5</sup> In corporate terms, the men seem to be in charge of external affairs. Their main concern within the family is making money for its support, and in this regard men are regarded as being very busy, with little spare time for other activities, such as taking care of the household directly. This lack of spare time was one of the most frequent responses to my queries about why so few men attend the Pagoda. One well thought out response to this question was:

Men have to keep in mind the needs of the family, so men are always forced to work. They seldom have time to think of themselves. Women have the time to think of themselves and their problems and therefore they are more religious and attend the Pagoda more frequently (Female member of the laity at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda).

While men are mainly concerned with things outside of the home, with the family's survival in the world, by providing an income in order to maintain the home and feed the family, the main concern of women is within the boundaries of the home. I will label the sphere of activity for women as internal affairs. As such, they are responsible for the raising of the children and with their education, although men do take a more active role in taking care of the children when they are not working. Women are usually

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<sup>5</sup> Although women seem to work outside the home as much as men today, they do not seem to be considered the primary source of the family income. Their pay seems to be more often regarded as a necessary addition to the man's pay.

regarded as the ones who do most of the upbringing and disciplining of the children in the day-to-day affairs, although people indicate that this is mostly because women tend to be present in the home more than men.<sup>6</sup> Some have indicated to me that it is not usually expected for men to take care of children, but there does not seem to be any prohibition against men doing this job, and I have seen men take care of children in many instances. Men usually assume the role of disciplinarian for more serious instances of misconduct and are said to punish much more severely. My findings are confirmed by Richard Coughlin who writes about the situation in Vietnam today: "It is no exaggeration to say that the family authority over the children belongs to both parents; while the mother constantly controls and softens the father's authority"(Coughlin 1954:141). Most (but not all) of my respondents indicated to me that women are in charge of the general maintenance of the house, including minor repairs and renovations. Interestingly, women also take care of the finances of the home and are considered to be more thrifty than men. Because of this

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<sup>6</sup> There is a contradiction here that I am unable to explain. On the one hand, I am told and I have seen, that women usually work outside the home (and are considered subsidiary wage earners), but when questioning about who takes care of the children I am told that women do it. I am then usually presented with the apologetic explanation that it is because men are busy working, in order to address any seeming gender inequities. I would speculate that the normative view of women as being the principal caregivers of children overrides the image of women as wage-earners.

presumed innate quality in women, one occupation that they often fulfill is as small merchants. A number of my respondents identified their mother's occupation as a merchant, usually saying: "She sold things" and later identifying those things as groceries. Many of these people said that she actually owned the store, or that the family owned the store and the mother ran it. More often than not, these stores operated out of the home. Coughlin's information is similar to mine, and he reports:

One of the most important of women's activities is shopkeeping, which men have traditionally considered debasing for themselves. Perhaps this is why observers have noted that women have a better business sense than their husbands and are considered more economical and thrifty. Despite the traditional ideal of woman as the soul and the vigilant guardian of the home, in Vietnam today one invariably finds women in charge of the shops and the stalls in the markets, selling everything from vegetables to shoes, and providing a curious contrast to the adjacent Chinese shops, where the proprietors are invariably male (1954:137).

I have been told by almost all of my informants that the general practice is for the husband to hand over his pay to the wife who budgets everything and gives him an allowance which he can go and spend on his entertainment. Some others have told me that men are independent and are in charge of their own spending money. However, this does not seem to be the rule, but rather, the exception. By and large, women are regarded as the accountants of the family.

I would now like to turn my attention to who has the



decision making power in the family structure. This is an area that was extremely hard to get information on. My conclusions are that for the smaller decisions, it depended upon whose sphere of influence the decision rested with. So, in affairs having to do with the home the woman made the decision, and in the case of affairs outside the home, the man made the decision. Most of my respondents have told me, almost without hesitation, that larger decisions were discussed and the responsibility was shared. Both the husband and wife within the family unit had a say in decisions that would affect the family as a whole. Therefore, opening a business or moving would be a decision that both the husband and the wife shared.

I must add that the division of labour is largely dependent on what class the family belongs to. The most rigid system is only upheld by those who can afford it. Gerald Hickey, who has produced one of the best ethnographic studies of village life in the Mekong Delta in his work, Village in Vietnam, writes:

Division of labor in the family depends on economic level, season, and household composition. Taking the nuclear family as the model, families of laborers, landowners with very small holdings, and tenant farmers tend to divide labor in much the same way. They are closer to the subsistence level than other families, so all able-bodied members are expected to contribute to the sustenance of the group...(Hickey 1964:114-115).

At the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, the majority of the people

who attend are not wealthy, and therefore most of the women have jobs outside of the home. I have been told that it is also necessary for more women to work outside of the home because of the cost of living in Canada which makes it very difficult to get by on only one income. However, it has been indicated to me that career opportunities have increased greatly in Canada. Whereas in Vietnam women were usually restricted to agricultural work and small commerce (Hickey 1964:115), I have been told that in Canada women can do the same as men.

Kingsley Davis writes in his book Human Society:

One of the outstanding peculiarities given to human society by symbolic communication...is what we may call legitimacy, or the normative. In every human situation there are two elements - the facts and the attitude or sentiment towards the facts. The latter are conveyed as a part of the cultural heritage, so that they are there in advance of the actual situation (1949:47).

In the study of religion, this duality is often described as "great tradition" and "little tradition". My findings during my research at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda have often been a source of confusion because of these different levels, which are not as dichotomic as distinctions may lead me to believe. I would label the reality of religion and society in practice as multi-leveled, but this seems to imply, aside from the fallacy of hierarchy, that different people are at different levels. My findings seem to show me that, more often than not, an individual holds beliefs from

many different levels, and no one seems to be consistent enough to label as an ideal type. Belief resembles a plate of spaghetti, much more than a pile of boards.

For the sake of clarity and understanding making distinctions is unavoidable, and therefore, in the interest of comprehension, I shall attempt to force reality into pigeon-holes, which I hope will be helpful in explanatory terms, at the price of twisting reality a little. I will categorise, views on gender as being either "normative" or "factual." The "normative" tradition finds its roots in Confucianism but has been adapted to better suit the temperament of the Vietnamese. In this tradition can be seen the dichotomy between the female's sphere of activity which is located in the home, and men's sphere of activity, which is located outside the home. These spheres have been labeled as domestic (private) and public, by people studying other cultures, and there has been much debate over whether such a division provides an accurate description, or whether it is a result of certain expectations due to the cultural and historical background of the analyst. I believe that the distinction between public and private is applicable in this case as the distinction was made by my respondents, and was furthermore identified (in one way or another) to be part of the "normative" tradition.<sup>7</sup> Another important qualifier

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<sup>7</sup> The distinction was usually made to me by indicating that men go to work, whereas women stay home. This distinction was also made when I was told that one reason for women being more religious, and attending services more often than men, is that men have to work while women stay at home all day and do not have to

about the "normative" tradition, that was given by many of my respondents, was that it is part of the older tradition and is no longer relevant or practiced today.<sup>8</sup>

Let me briefly summarize what the "normative" (traditional) view of the family is. The Vietnamese family has the husband/father as the head who is responsible for making the important family decisions, although the wife/mother is expected to share in the decision making process as an advisor, and in a "good" family, her input will be highly valued and often acted upon. The father is further expected to bring home the money that will support the family. The mother is expected to stay home, take care of the family and the home, as it is the center of the family. As such her duties include, the cleaning, cooking,

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worry about feeding the family, and that men can go to discotheques, whereas women cannot, and therefore, they go to pagodas.

The distinction of normative and factual was usually identified to me by indicating a time reference (eg. "it used to be like that; traditionally...") or a geographical reference (eg. "in Canada women have to work because everything is so expensive"), or by giving economic explanation (eg. "only the rich can do this, poor women have to work as well to support the family"), or just by indicating a hesitation to generalize (eg. "it depends on the family").<sup>8</sup> Although most of the men and women with whom I spoke work, the answer to my question "what roles do women play in the family", more often than not, was "they stay at home, cook, clean, and take care of the children," even though the mothers of many of those who responded in this way actually worked.

Another indication of the normative view still being in existence is that one girl in her late teens was appearing in a school fashion show, but was keeping the event hidden from her parent's knowledge, as she would not be permitted to do such a thing.

and general maintenance of the house. The woman is responsible for hiring the contractor to do repairs. She is responsible for having children, and for bringing them up. This includes their early teaching in the case of boys and training girls to be good wives. When the children do something wrong, she will discipline them if the fault is minor. If the fault is greater, the father/husband will handle the problem with great severity, which will be tempered by the wife/mother. As the keeper of the family, the wife/mother is also expected to take care of the finances. The husband/father will give her his pay, and she will determine how much of an allowance the family can afford to give him. As the supreme head of the family, the husband/father can always demand more. Finally, a wife is supposed to be reserved and polite. She is supposed to serve her husband, as well as respect and obey him.

The reality, or factual system of the Vietnamese family is usually quite different than the normative system. To begin with, one must be rich for some semblance of the normative system to be possible. As the laity of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda are generally lower to middle class, the normative system is not practical and probably never truly existed in their families' histories. As women and men of lower and middle class families had to work together, they were much more dependent on one another, and therefore the normative system was often considerably modified. It served as a guideline which was often not applicable or possible to

follow. Furthermore, modernity is at odds with the values expressed by the normative family system. As such, although the values expressed by that system are still acted upon in many instances, "modern" notions of equality are often the values that are expounded as most valid in the lives of my respondents. That the values of equality are usually expounded to me at the same time as I am told that the normative position for women is in the home, indicates the incorporation of conflicting values and practices. The factual practice is really a combination of the "normative" (traditional) view and the "modern" view.

The factual order of relationships and division of labour within the families of the laity who attend the Tam Ba'o Pagoda is said to be one of equality. Both men and women work, because I have been told that it is necessary in order to get by in Canada. Decision making responsibilities are shared, and the responsibilities of bringing up the children are shared as well. I have seen men at the Pagoda taking care of small children and babies. Women still have control over money and taking care of the home, but in what is called "a good family", men will help clean and cook. By and large, all of the job descriptions for the normative family are contradicted by views of the "modern" family, but neither "normative" nor "modern" are abandoned altogether. While most Vietnamese women in Canada work or go to school, they are still said to be doing the cooking, the cleaning, and most of the caring for children. I have been told that

men consider women to be their equals, but this does not explain why more women are leaving their husbands in Canada "because Vietnamese women in Canada are not putting up with bad husbands" (member of Tam Ba'o Pagoda).<sup>9</sup>

### The Religious Character of Men and Women in Vietnamese Society

Although my intention in this chapter is to describe gender and the family, I am going to conclude with a discussion of how men and women are viewed in terms of religion. The first reason for concluding this aspect here is that religiosity, or lack thereof, is linked with the overall view of men and women in Vietnamese society. Another reason to discuss religion in this context is because I believe that women, to some extent, act as the family representative at the Pagoda, and their religious activity are therefore an extension of family duties as well as an expression of religiosity.

To begin discussing the view that one gender is more religious than the other, I like to quote a passage in a book on Vietnam that I came across a few years ago. It says:

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<sup>9</sup> I was told by one women that it is good for Vietnamese women to marry Western men because Western men respect their wives and consider them equal. In return, a Vietnamese wife is good because she pays so much attention to her husband, and is very attentive to his needs as long as he treats her well.

Despite this multiplicity of religious practices, the average Vietnamese is not an especially religious man (Hammer 1966:40).

This passage indicates pre-conceived ideas held by scholars as to which gender should be more religious, for though Vietnamese men, unlike the men of Burma, are not particularly religious, this does not hold true for the entire Vietnamese population. I can only presume from this quote that, due to Hammer's ideas of religion and gender, she made the mistake that has marred the study of religion since its beginning: she has discounted women as being a significant part of the population and has not bothered to suppose that they could be more religious than men. Although in the Christian tradition it is believed that women can be religious, they are regarded as "the moral inferior of the male: willful, lacking self-control of her passions and appetites, a temptress to the male, and therefore needing to be kept under control, both for her own good and to prevent her from subverting the higher capacities of male rationality and virtue" (Ruether 1987:209). In Vietnam women are believed to be, by nature, much more religious than men, and take part in the official cult. Crawford writes:

To the casual onlooker, Buddhism appears to be most appealing to the women of the country, and the young people and men do not seem to take as much interest in the religion as their counterparts in other Asian countries (Crawford 1966:77).

This trend is clearly seen at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda,



and was confirmed by the people whom I interviewed. The majority group within the laity who attend regularly (I would estimate at least 50%) are late middle-aged to elderly women, and in total, I would estimate that more than three quarters of the congregation at the weekly service are women. On the average Sunday, there are usually about sixty to seventy people present, and of those, only ten to twenty are male. This figure would be even less if it was not for many males temporarily attending the service because they are in mourning. This fluctuating body of people accounts for the sizable inconsistency in the number of male attendants.

Upon asking why so few males attend the services regularly, I received a number of different answers. Rev. Qua'ng Oanh told me that men believe that, since they have been born men, they do not have much bad karma and are therefore already quite close to reaching nirvana. Therefore there is little reason for them to attend services at the Pagoda, whereas women have much more bad karma to work off. Although the Rev. Qua'ng Oanh said this was men's belief, such an idea was not mentioned by anyone else with whom I spoke. The second reason that she gave me, which was corroborated by other people, is that women in Vietnam, by nature of the role they play in society, had more time to go to the temple, whereas men work all day and have no time, or are too tired by the time they return from work.

By far the most common explanation that I received

from both male and female monastics and members of the laity is that it is women's nature to be more religious than men, and women are more caring and have more of a religious temperament. According to this view, it is easy for women to believe without understanding. Men, by contrast, need to understand something thoroughly before they are willing to believe.

This advantage of being able to believe, and therefore be more religious, has its drawbacks as well as advantages. While women are believed to have more faith by nature, it is believed that men are generally better able to understand. As such, once men have taken the step and become regular attendees, I have been told by both men and women that they will progress much faster. I went to great lengths to clarify the beliefs in this area, and therefore I usually followed up these responses by asking if, all things being equal (ability to believe and ability to understand), do men and women have an equal shot at realisation? The answer was invariably that men and women were equal. No one held the belief that a woman must first be reborn as a man before gaining enlightenment. Furthermore, when I asked which one was more karmically evolved, they indicated to me that one gender was not higher than the other spiritually despite the glaring advantages and disadvantages.<sup>10</sup> Despite what I

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<sup>10</sup> I tried to work through the possible logical steps with my respondents, such as: "If it is easier for women to believe than for men, and therefore they attend the Pagoda more frequently and pray more fervently, don't they have an advantage over men? Does this not indicate that it is better to be born a

perceived as a logical problem, it was firmly held that: a. It is easier for women to believe; b. it is easier for men to understand; c. men and woman are spiritually equal.

This cultural assumption that women have a certain temperament that men lack is one of the fundamental explanations for the prominence of women at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. The Reverend Qua'ng Oánh answered my questions as to whether it was possible for women to gain enlightenment without first becoming men (which is the assumption of many Buddhist traditions, particularly Theravāda), she told me that it is possible, but that many people believe it is not. She says that this view arises out of misinterpretation and is due to lack of understanding, or ignorance. I suspect that as one of the leaders of the Pagoda, her views have considerable influence, and she is one reason why people at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda hold the view of equality, despite the fact that it appears at odds with other gender related beliefs that they might have. I also suspect that her uncle, the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi has an influence, as he is the one who taught the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh.

The second point that I would like to make about the religious character of women and men, is that attending the Pagoda constitutes a part of a woman's duty as a member of the family, and as such, may be considered as an action relating to "internal affairs" (domestic sphere of activity)

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woman, and that they have better karma from their last life?" They didn't go for it.

rather than "external affairs" (public/male) under the normative system. In other words, attending the Pagoda is considered a female thing to do (but not to the exclusion of males). To a certain extent, I believe that women are acting in behalf of the family by attending the Pagoda.

Evidence of this mostly springs from the xin xam ritual in which Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) is questioned about whether certain decisions are right. The divining is done by shaking a jar of sticks until one falls out. In order to varify whether the answer is correct, two halves of a liver shaped piece of red-stained wood are thrown on the ground and the way that they fall indicates whether the stick is the correct one. If it is not, than another stick is shaken out.<sup>11</sup> The number on the stick is then matched up with a numbered slip of paper that is kept behind the statue of Quán-Âm. I have learnt through observation as well as through my informants that xin xam is always performed in front of statues of Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn), and that it is usually done by women.<sup>12</sup> It has been reported to me that the

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<sup>11</sup> If both woodblocks land flat-side up the stick is wrong. If both land flat side down, the answer is unclear, so try again. If one lands up and one down then the stick is correct.

<sup>12</sup> Hickey reports that in the village he studied xin xam was performed in front of the altar of the great Chinese warrior Quan Cong by a man named Ong Rau who was a cu si ("Buddhist laymen who observe five of the ten monastic inter-dictions [against killing, drinking alcohol, smoking, sexual pleasures, and stealing]") (Hickey 1964:64-65).

This is the only report that I have run across that contradicts my findings. My respondents are unanimous in saying that xin xam is always performed in front of Quán-Âm. The fact that it is performed by a man for people also runs against my own findings. At the Tam Ba'o Pagoda it is performed by the person who wants the answers, who is usually a woman. Once the stick is picked, it is just a matter of finding the

kinds of questions that are asked almost always concern the proper route for the family to follow. The questions always concern worldly things and are never related to salvation. I was greeted with mild shock and amusement when I asked a monastic at the Pagoda whether people would perform xin xam in order to help in the decision to join the sangha. Questions that are asked usually involve work, finance, study, the future, how to solve problems, help with decisions, how to deal with problems in the family, and whether a business should be opened.

It would be misleading if I were to say that the principle aim of the Pagoda is to help people in this world. The aim of the Pagoda is very clearly to help people achieve salvation. There is a worldly element in it, however, and of the five altars in the sanctuary room of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, are related to worldly concerns: 1. The Guardian's principal role is to keep away evil spirits that lurk around this world; 2. Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) serves mainly to help her followers with their worldly problems; 3. Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) has vowed to take people out of hell. Although this last point is not worldly in the common meaning of the word, it is what Melford Spiro would call a Kammatic goal rather than Nibbanic goal, meaning that the concern is with

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right piece of paper. On New Years Eve (Tê't) xin xam is particularly popular and there is usually someone standing by ready to help with interpretation or to answer any question that the person might have. Two years ago a novice bhikṣu filled this role, and this year it was an elder lay-woman.

a better rebirth rather than salvation. The fact that Dia-Tang's (Kṣitigarbha) altar acts as the ancestor altar for monastics further stresses Dia-Tang's (Kṣitigarbha) involvement with the life process rather than the enlightenment process;<sup>13</sup> and 4. the ancestor altar, like the altar of Dia-Tang (Kṣitigarbha), is concerned not with salvation, but with rebirth. As in Chinese Buddhism the sangha has assumed the role of performing funerals and taking care of ancestors, by promising the possibility of improved rebirth.

A further indication of the dual roles of the Pagoda as relevant both to salvation and to improvement for the family in this world, is that many of the celebrations are directly concerned with this world. Tê't (New Years) is one of the biggest celebrations, and many people show up for the ceremony, as well as for the ceremony for Di Lặc (Maitreya) which is performed the next day in order to bring good luck to the new year. Another important celebration is Mother's day. I have been told that these are the two most important celebrations. Two more special days are the service for the dead and the service for living. In the first the ancestors are blessed, and in the second the names of everyone in the families of the laity who attend the Tam Ba'o Pagoda are

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<sup>13</sup> Dia-Tang (Kṣitigarbha) would probably more easily be characterised as having a role that is regarded as transcendent rather than immanent. Although he is involved with the ancestor cult, his sphere of influence would not be said to be this world, as is Quán-Âm's Guān-yīn). I will deal with this problem more in the fourth chapter.

read and blessings are conferred upon them.

Concern for the family, seems to be a major motivation for attending the Pagoda. As such, attending the temple may be viewed as an extension of the wife's duties as the protector of the family. This explanation would certainly go a long way towards explaining why Vietnamese women are more religious than men, and why they attend pagoda services with much more regularity.

### Chapter 3:

#### Pagoda Structure and Division of Labour

The view of gender in Vietnamese culture has always been more egalitarian than in China. Although the Confucian ideology was passed on to the Vietnamese during China's one thousand year occupation, it does not seem to have had as much of an impact on gender views as it did in China. Perhaps part of the reason was that Vietnam was evidently comprised of societies in which women held positions of power before the Chinese invaded. Confucian ideology did not permeate all levels of Vietnamese society, or all of the geographical region of Vietnam. As a result, the Confucian pattern is much more strictly adhered to in the upper classes of Vietnamese society, and in Northern Vietnam, where Vietnam directly borders China. Confucian values were further weakened by the advent of what we call "modernity" and, for many Vietnamese, by their forced relocation in a Western society.

For the members of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, who come mainly from the South, in the vicinity of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), and who are mainly from the middle and lower economic and social levels, this means that the Confucian attitude towards men and women in the family has never been



totally adopted and may have been further abandoned in recent times. This abandonment has not been total, however, and the "normative" tradition still affects the Vietnamese views of how men and women should behave. While equality of gender is today upheld as the "modern" ideal, "normative" assumptions about the roles of men and women have not been abandoned. Views of women in relation to the family have changed considerably. Whereas now Vietnamese women receive an education and join the work-force, becoming providers for their families, older ideals of women as being tied to the home and family, while men operate at a more public level, are still apparent. In this chapter, I will look at how these "normative" (traditional) views have influenced the way in which the Tam Ba'o Pagoda is organized and run. The two most striking examples of this are: 1. the formation of a board of directors in which both male and female members of the laity directly contribute to the running of the Pagoda, leading to a gender-based division of labour; and 2. the division of leadership at the monastic level between the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi (abbot) and the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh (vice-abbot) which has led to the assumption of roles that reflect traditional views of the position of men and women in the family.

### **The Laity at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda**

The laity at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda and in Buddhism as a whole, play a very important part. The Buddhist sangha in South-East Asia is not engaged in economic activity to the same extent as their counterparts in China before the Communist Revolution, and therefore its members are dependent on the laity for donations in order to sustain itself. In Thailand you can see the monks go on their daily begging rounds. In Vietnam the Mahāyāna Buddhists do not go out daily to beg for food; however they are equally dependent upon the laity for their food and their clothing. When I have been invited to speak with the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda during times when it is closed to the laity as a whole, there is often an elderly woman who is cooking food for the bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs and helping them take care of the upkeep of the Pagoda. The bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs are not allowed to work for material gain, or to deal with money as part of their monastic vows, but maintenance of the Pagoda and its grounds have long been a part of the lives of the Vietnamese sangha.<sup>1</sup>

Although the lay people are needed for donations and for labour at the Pagoda, they would not seem to be as

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<sup>1</sup> Although it is against the Rule to handle money, life in North America has necessitated a certain amount of flexibility. Although cash is not handled, the Reverend Qua'ng Oánh has access to a credit card that is under the Pagoda's name.

essential to the Pagoda as they are to the Christian Church. The purpose of the Pagoda is not to minister to the laity, and a pagoda could retain its total identity, if not its economic survival, even if there were no members of the laity to attend. Buddhism has always been a religion that has centered on monasticism. The sangha, as one of the Three Refuges, is essential to the identity of Buddhism. The primary role of the laity is to support the sangha through donations, both of money and of labour. This is not to say that there are no benefits for the laity and that the laity play a part in the identity in the Pagoda, for the relationship is reciprocal. In return for their donations, they are sowing the seeds for a better rebirth, and better existence for their family. By attending services at the Pagoda, they are further able improve the fortunes for themselves and their families. In addition, the Pagoda and the Buddhist sangha have long been an essential part of the funeral rituals and the ancestor cult in Vietnam. The sangha and the Pagoda also play a role in religious education and counselling. Classes are given both to adults as well as to children, for which there is the Tịnh Khiết Young Buddhists which serves as a Vietnamese Buddhist version of the Boy Scouts, and classes are given in Vietnamese, primarily to pass on the language and tradition to the children who are growing up in Canada, separated from their tradition. Furthermore, the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh and the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghị will counsel lay people who are having problems.

A Note on Ancestor Worship and Funeral Rights at Tam Ba'o

When speaking of the family in Asia, and particularly in Vietnam, one does not necessarily mean the nuclear family, but is speaking of the extended family, which includes parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, cousins, nephews, nieces, aunts and uncles. More confusing for the Westerner, is that the family does not necessarily mean only the living, for the dead, especially ancestors, are considered to be as important as the living.<sup>2</sup> As a general rule, there does not seem to be the same preoccupation with lineage (toc) at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda as there is in countries such as Korea and China. Most of the people with whom I have spoken do not have an ancestor altar in their home. Some people keep ancestral tablets above the ancestor altar at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, but this is not done by everyone. I have not spoken to anyone who has any tablets going back farther than one or two generations. Furthermore, all the people whom I have interviewed have told me that if they had an ancestor altar in their home when they were a child, it usually only accommodated pictures of their grandparents. It has been noted by Kendall that only the very rich in Korea had these great lineages. The poor were

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<sup>2</sup> As the theory of ancestor worship seems not to vary from China to Vietnam, and as there has been a great deal of work done on Chinese ancestor worship, I will not explain its philosophy or rituals here.

not able to maintain such an elaborate and complicated set of ancestors. Hickey writes of patrilineages in the Vietnamese village he studied: "Only a few patrilineages in Khanh Hau have the corporate character noted above and since, with the exception of the Duc family, most patrilineages have been established in the village only three or four generations, they are small and young compared to those described by Hu and Freedman for China"(Hickey 1964:281). He goes on to write:

Most families in Khanh Hau are without land, their homes do not endure long enough to become ancestral houses, and their graves are earthen mounds. There is a tendency for patrilineages comprised of such families to fission. Economic necessity forces members to quit the village, and eventually they lose contact. Although there is an effort to observe the rituals associated with the Cult of the Ancestors, the group that gathers is small, usually composed of those within walking distance. Segments that fail to come together for rituals honoring common ancestors usually designate their own truong toc, and consequently there is apt to be duplication of rituals honoring the common ancestors. In fissioned patrilineages, cohesiveness is found in lineage segments (Hickey 1964:281-282).

If the complexity of the ancestor cult is determined by wealth, then the economic position of the laity who attend the Tam Ba'o may be a partial explanation for its seeming lack of importance. I have been told by two members of the laity who characterise their background as "wealthy", that their families did maintain a more elaborate ancestor

cult, which would support this idea.<sup>3</sup> Leopold Cadière's report of ancestor worship in Vietnam reflects a much wealthier, and therefore elaborate situation:

Dans certaines de ces réunions cultuelles, on n'a qu'une branche de la famille, du moins du côté des vivants. Mais dans l'autre, lorsque la cérémonie a lieu dans le temple ancestral commun, la famille entière est représentée. Et quelle assemblée imposante! Au fond, sur les autels, dans les laques et les ors, au milieu des volutes de l'encense, tous les Ancêtres, depuis le dernier mort de l'année, dont on porte encore le deuil, jusqu'aux générations les plus reculées, celles dont le deuil n'est plus obligatoire, mais dont le culte ne s'éteint pas (Cadière 1958:38).

As I mentioned previously, the economic level of most of the laity at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda is from low to middle class and has not changed substantially since coming to Canada. The move to Canada may be one cause for not maintaining the toc (lineage) past one generation. Gerald Hickey explains that the toc (lineage) is tied in with concepts of patrimony (huong hoa) and ancestral land, and moving tends to disrupt the system which presumes a fixed location that serves as the focal point for the extended family. He writes:

Cohesiveness or corporateness, such as may be found among the wealthy, are not characteristic of most patrilineages in the

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<sup>3</sup> In addition, one of them came from Hanoi, and fled to Saigon during the partition. As the North tends to have had a much stronger Chinese influence, it would explain why the ancestor cult seems to have been more strictly maintained in her family.

village. Many, if not most, of them have fissioned, particularly as members move from the locale, and only segments of the patrilineage gather for the cult celebrations. The term truong toc tends to be loosely used - most often referring to the eldest of the patrilineage group living in the same part of the hamlet - and without any proper functions there is no need for serious council to decide on the new truong toc. Because of the fissioning, several members are likely to be designated truong toc for different segments which are not in contact. Consequently there is apt to be duplication of rituals venerating the common ancestor (duplication of ritual causes villagers no concern, but omission does) (1964:90-91).

In contrast to the rural people that Hickey studied, omission does not seem to be a cause for concern among those who attend the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, but Hickey's findings does seem to indicate that relocation does cause a disruption in the ancestral cult. Most of the laity at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda seem to come from an urban environment (Saigon), whereas Hickey was doing research on Vietnamese Village life. Perhaps the urbanisation of the families that moved to Saigon over two generations before the immigration to Canada, caused some break with tradition and with toc. This would explain why most of the people that I have asked have recalled that on their parents' ancestor altar, when they were children, there were only pictures of their grandparents. The move to Canada would further destroy the lineage ties. Consequently, only parents are revered on the altars in their homes and at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda.

Another likely reason for their relative lack of

concern for ancestors is a waning of belief as a result of the challenge of "modernity". I have been told by one middle-aged woman that these old fashioned superstitions are not believed by the younger people any longer. This, again, may be due to their urban background and the influence of the French who were centered in Saigon, for though the French largely supported the Confucian ethical code, Catholic missionaries made attempts to convert the Vietnamese to Christianity. Likewise, the immigration to Canada will not have helped in the maintenance of tradition.

As opposed to the Chinese and the Koreans, the Vietnamese with whom I have spoken are not especially concerned with who gives the offerings to ancestors. As I mentioned above, it is usually only the tablets (or pictures) of parents that are kept on the ancestor altar in their homes or at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. In contrast to Hickey's reports of patrilineage in the village in South-Vietnam where he did his ethnographic research, the people whom I have interviewed indicated to me that it wasn't necessarily only the husband's parents who are found on the ancestor altar. Rather, I have been told by a number of individuals that if the couple respected each other, then they would have the pictures of both the husband's and the wife's parents on the altar. Furthermore, I have been told that reverence and the giving of offerings to the ancestors does not necessarily have to be done by the husband, or the wife exclusively, but should, in a happy and respectful



family be done by both the husband and the wife together for both sets of parents.<sup>4</sup>

There is some precedent for women having a higher position in terms of ancestor worship than was the case in China. Whereas under the Chinese Ming and Ch'ing law codes and the Vietnamese Nguyễn code, which was essentially a translation of the Ch'ing code, women were relegated to the last position for inheritance rights of ancestor worship property, after all sons and adoptive sons, under the Lê code women were given second priority after all sons (Ta Van Tai 1981:125). Although still an inferior position, it is a marked improvement over the Chinese civil codes, and indicates that in Vietnam it was not as taboo for women to perform the rituals of ancestor worship. This, however, is a far cry from responses that I have received at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. It also does not explain the discrepancy with Hickey's findings, which reported a strong patrilineage, and seems to show that the women abandoned their own families' ancestor cult after marriage. Although I have no answer, I would speculate that perhaps it is due to the urban background of many of the people with whom I spoke. As there seems to be a connection between patrilineage and property,

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<sup>4</sup> I have only received this information verbally, and has been expressed as the ideal. It is difficult to observe, for though I see men paying reverence at the ancestor altar, I have been unable to determine who they were paying reverence to. Likewise, men often come to the services during the period of mourning, but I have been unable to determine whether husbands go if it is the wives' parents who have died.

the informality with which ancestor worship is practiced by the people at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda may be a result of a separation with the ancestral land that came about due to urbanisation. This urbanisation would also have introduced them to "modern" ideas which served to further break down the tradition of ancestor worship.

### Attendance

I have mentioned previously that far more women come to the Pagoda than do men. I would estimate that approximately 75% of the laity who attend services regularly (every week) are women.<sup>5</sup> Generally speaking, women show up earlier and spend more time praying at the different altars. I usually show up for services fifteen minutes early, and at this time there are a few of the older women sitting at the left side of the sanctuary room, in the back, close to the ancestor altar. Slowly, the room starts to fill with mostly women, who spread to the right side of the room, sitting in front of Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn). The center of the room usually has more men, however; this is because it is reserved for mourners, who do not necessarily attend regularly. The older men tend to sit up front on the left in front of Bia-Tạng,

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<sup>5</sup> Regulars are usually fairly easy to spot, for when they become confirmed Buddhists who are a part of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda's congregation, they wear a grey robe during the services. To supplement this method picking out who attends regularly, I have become familiar with many of the members at a personal level and many more on the basis of visual recognition.

and they generally show up at the last minute. There are not many in this category, but they are regular in their attendance and fairly consistent in their seating preference. I might add at this point that the regulars tend to keep their seating positions. At the start of the service there are usually very few males in attendance, but there are more crowded into the back by the time that the service ends. Their number never seems to reach more than 25% however. There are exceptions in this attendance record, the primary one being special holidays. At special holidays (especially the eve of Tê't, or New Years Eve) the number of men equal to that of women. This record of attendance is not an anomaly of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. It has been agreed upon by everyone to whom I have spoken that in Vietnam women attended with far more frequency than did men. Furthermore, when I asked individuals about their own families, it was indicated to me that usually the mothers attended services at the pagodas with regularity, whereas fathers generally did not attend, with the exception of holidays and festivals. Furthermore, it was usually mothers and not fathers who prayed before altars within the homes.

#### Donations and Participation

There are a number of things that the Buddhist laity hopes to achieve by giving donations to the Pagoda and by praying to the various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. These

expectations can be divided up in two different ways. The first division is between personal and family needs. People pray so that they may achieve a better life, wealth, children, longevity, or other goals for themselves as well as their families (both alive and dead). The second division is linked to goals in this life or in the next. People will pray (for themselves or their families) for salvation, a better rebirth, birth in the Pure Land (Cực-lạc), for either themselves or their families, or deliverance from hell if they feel that may be the fate of a person.

In the previous chapter I dealt with the religious character of Vietnamese women and how religious participation was, to a certain degree, an extension of their responsibilities as the guardian of the family. There are numerous ways in which the lay person can participate and contribute to the Pagoda. The easiest is by simply attending services regularly. By participating in the services, by praying and chanting the names of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, one can accumulate merit. The Rev. Qua'ng Oánh writes about the service at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda:

Next they kneel down to chant the Prajna Paramita (Heart Sutra), a great transference of merit and take refuge in the Three Jewels. The fulfillment of wishes is to be achieved through transfer of the merit arising from (sic) recitation of the liturgy. The true worship belongs properly to the great superhuman buddhas and bodhisattvas, whose merit, insight and power for good are unlimited. According to Amitabhas teaching, a single act of devotion, a single thought of the Buddha even for a single moment can procure

salvation (1989:9).<sup>6</sup>

Instruction is also given at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, which in itself is a source of merit. Other important aspects of participation include donations (which are tax deductible) and volunteer work. I will deal with donations first.

Donations to the Pagoda are usually made by women. That is not to say that men do not contribute. I have been told that the husband has a say as to how income is spent, but the actual handling of accounts is done by the wife. Giving donations to the Pagoda is an extension of this duty, and therefore the donations that are given by women benefit the household. The women represent the family in this respect. This is not unlike the women of Korea, who are reported by Kendall to be concerned with, and responsible for, the well-being of the family at the spiritual level. There are many different types of donations that can be given to the Pagoda. Donations can be placed in the donation boxes that are in front of the Guardian and in front of the main altar. There is also a donation box in front of Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn). These donations go directly towards securing

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<sup>6</sup> I have not corrected any grammatical mistakes, as I feel that it would detract from the Reverend's intended meaning. Although her English is not perfect, she has put a great deal of energy into learning English for the benefit of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. She has made considerable progress, and I applaud her diligence, and her achievements that have been a result thereof.

compassion and aid for the person donating. Bigger donations are requested in order to build the Pagoda and the Buddhist center in the Laurentians. As I mentioned in the first chapter, small brass statues of the Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) are currently available for purchase.

### Volunteers

The laity at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda have two different ways of donating. The first is monetary and is done frequently and according to means. The benefit of these donations go towards the welfare of the entire family. There is another type of donation which is much more personal. This type of donation is the giving of time and physical labour for the benefit of the Pagoda and the monastics who are associated with it and form its core. There are many sorts of labour that are donated to the Pagoda. They include assisting in minor repairs, cooking, cleaning, secretary work, and serving on the board (which I will discuss separately). It is usually women who volunteer for the majority of these tasks. They seem to be occupied with the general maintenance and support of the Pagoda. On Sundays, lunch is always prepared and served by women, and it is the women who clean up afterwards. Although men do help in some of the smaller tasks, it is generally in major enterprises, such as during construction of the Monastery in the Laurentians, or in the installation of a statue, and it is

in the higher positions of the board of directors for the Chánh Pháp Buddhist Society that men are prominent as volunteers. In volunteering, as in the giving of donations, men and women largely follow traditional gender based division of labour.

### Corporate Structure

In Vietnam the organizational structure of the Pagodas consisted of an abbot, a vice-abbot, and the bhikṣus or bhikṣuṇīs who are resident at the Pagoda. As monasteries were either for bhikṣus or for bhikṣuṇīs (but never both), there was no reason for jobs to be split up along gender lines. Furthermore, pagodas were run totally by monastics; laity had no part in the organization. Since coming to Canada, this structure has changed, primarily because of federal laws concerning societies and organizations. Revenue Canada, Taxation outlines under information circular 80-10R entitled Registered Charities: Operating a Registered Charity:

A "charitable organization" must have an independent board of directors or trustees, in that more than 50% of the directors or trustees, officers or similar officials of such an organization must deal with each other and with each of the other directors, trustees, officers or similar officials at "arm's length". (Note: if 50% or more of its officers or directors are related to each other, it cannot be qualified under this category. It may, however, qualify as a "private foundation" as described in paragraph 15). In addition, not more than

50% of the capital contributed (total contributions from all sources during the lifetime of the charity) may have been contributed by a person or group of persons not dealing with each other at "arm's length". Such a person or group would not include a government, municipality, another "registered charity" that is not a "private foundation", or a "non-profit organization" as described in paragraph 149(1)(1) of the Act (Revenue Canada 1985:4).

Canada, unlike Vietnam, does not take Buddhist institutions into account when writing tax law. Buddhist institutions must therefore disregard how pagodas were run in Vietnam and adapt to Canadian ways. On the surface, the organizational structure has altered greatly with the formation of a board of directors made up of both monastics and laity. The Rev. Qua'ng Oánh writes:

To adapt to the new life in Canada, after Pagoda Tam Ba'o was established, the Congregation in this temple was established in 1982 under the name "Societe Bouddhique Chánh Pháp". The Board of Directors included the president, two vice-presidents, one secretary and one chairperson and one treasurer (1989:7).

As all positions are held by the laity, with the exception of the president and the secretary, one might think that the institution is no longer monastic in character. This is not so, however, for, "the special rule of this community is that the president must be a Buddhist monk. So the president of this congregation is the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi who is the first Vietnamese Buddhist monk to come to Canada" (Qua'ng Oánh 1989:7). The president has



the final decision. Under his authority the board of directors works to keep the organization running. As such,

The Board of Directors takes responsibility for certain aspects of the temple such as income tax, expenses, and organizing celebrations. Normally the final decisions concerning every celebration and the schedule of the regular services belongs to the monk who is the president.

All the people on the Board of Directors work voluntarily. They help by arranging meetings, planning trips for the members and organizing social services. The secretary and the treasurer are the two people who sign checks to pay the telephone, electricity and water taxes, and they also deposit money into the temple bank account. Every month the directors have a meeting to go over the temple finances (Qua'ng Oánh 1989:7-8).

At the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, the president, who is also the abbot, holds ultimate power and his position may be considered permanent. Theoretically, he can be voted out, however in practice this is highly unlikely as his position is in reality abbot, not "president". As such he is a highly regarded religious leader and holds his power through his achievements and charisma as much as through official titles. The Rev. Qua'ng Oánh writes:

The period of office for this congregation is one year, so another meeting is held each year to vote in new directors. However, for many years the members of our community have never wanted to vote another president. They believe in the monk who has automatically the right to teach, to preach and to decide on all matters related to the temple. Moreover, he also is a founder of the temple and all members see him as their spiritual father (1989:8).

Under him there are two vice-presidents; one in charge of internal affairs, and one in charge of external affairs. Currently, the vice-president in charge of internal affairs (which involves replacing the president in his absence, making sure people are seated properly, inviting important people to the special functions, and organizing the cooking) is a woman, and holds equal power with the vice-president in charge of external affairs, who is male, and whose job is to attend meetings with other congregations. There is no rule as to what gender should assume each position, but I was told that women tend to assume the role of vice-president in charge of internal affairs while men tend to be in charge of external affairs. The evidence I have does not necessarily agree with this. I have been able to attain membership lists for the board of directors for five different years (1982, 1985, 1987, 1990 and 1992). During these five years the V.P. External was female twice and male three times, and the V.P. Internal was also three times male and twice female.<sup>7</sup> The total would therefore come to six men and four women holding a position as vice-president.

Next, in the organisational, though not the power structure, we have the secretary, who is the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh, the niece of the abbot, and a fully ordained nun. The

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<sup>7</sup> 1982: V.P. External, male; V.P. Internal, male.  
 1985: V.P. External, female; V.P. Internal, Male.  
 1987: V.P. External, female; V.P. Internal, male.  
 1990: V.P. External, male; V. P. Internal, female.  
 1992: V.P. External, male; V.P. Internal, female.

vice-secretary (who is, at present, the sister of the vice-president of internal affairs,) aids the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh with the office work that is required. The Rev. Qua'ng Oánh, has remained in the position of secretary since the Chánh Pháp Buddhist Association was formed. She, along with the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi, makes up the monastic representation on the board. The role of vice-secretary has always been filled by a woman.

The treasurer and vice-treasurer are always women. This reflects the Vietnamese assumption that women are better at handling money than men. There are also a few positions that are not officially part of the board, but which are important roles in the running of the temple. There is a president in charge of construction, who is at present male, and there is someone who is in charge of greeting visitors, especially Westerners. The woman who was given the position of greeting visitors holds this position by virtue of being in Canada for 23 years (since 1971) and her ability to speak both English and French. She is very active in the Pagoda although she has only been a member for a few years. She is always present whenever there is an official function to which dignitaries are invited.

In Vietnam, these functions were filled completely by monastics, and since monasteries for bhiksus and bhiksunis were located in separate places and each had their own hierarchy, the structure is not comparable. The structure is therefore fabricated especially for the change

in environment, and in the new organisational structure, women are well represented, are very active, and have the potential of holding power equal to the men up to the level of vice-president. Although there is no clear division of labour along the lines of gender for the positions of vice-president, it is interesting to note that the official head, as in the family, is held by a man, and he is the final authority. It is also interesting to note that the positions of both V.P. Internal and External are more often held by men. By and large, these are all managerial and representational roles. Those doing the "housekeeping" so to speak, as secretaries and treasurers are always women, and overall, most of the positions are held by women. Furthermore, the woman who is in charge of greeting people is not the only one that I have spoken with who could speak both English and French. What distinguishes her from many others is her willingness to work. I have been told that the main reason for there being more women than men on the Board is that women, in general, are more eager to volunteer and to work for the Pagoda. Indeed, this involvement with the Pagoda is in line with the Vietnamese view that women have a stronger belief. It also may be an extension of the idea that, by volunteering to help the Pagoda, women are in some way representing the family.

The last thing that I would like to note is that men are usually only represented at the level of president and vice-president. One may draw the conclusion, that, in many

regards, division of labour in the Chánh Pháp Buddhist Association often mimics that of the Vietnamese conception of the family. It does not seem to me that this is a conscious decision, and the variation in the sex of vice-presidents indicates this. However, when confronted with a situation where there are set of positions that need to be filled, and a certain number of men and women to fill them, they are often divided by gender. Men and women are expected to act in certain ways and to do certain jobs. The family would seem to serve as a model for this division of labour.

### Monastics

Buddhism is centered around monasticism. In most forms of Buddhism it is thought that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to progress spiritually as a lay person. Although, in the case of the Pure Land Buddhism of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, this harsh pronouncement is somewhat tempered by the promise of the Pure Land (Cụ'c-lạc) that can be gained by the repetition of the name of A-Di-Đà Phật (Amitābha Buddha), salvation is still by no means easy to achieve. The monastics at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda stress the need to join the sangha. Their view is that the people in the outside world are far too busy to be able to practice Buddhism in a way that is really effective. The promise of the Pure Land is there, but in order to be reborn there, one

must recite the name of A-Di-Đà Phật (Amitābha) with a pure mind. This is very difficult to do if participating in the world, where it is almost impossible to escape doing impure things.

In 1980 The Venerable Thích Thiện Nghi and the Reverend Qua'ng Oánh arrived in Canada as the first Vietnamese bhikṣu and bhikṣuṇī. They were sponsored by the Lien Hoa Pagoda in Brossard, which had been set up by Vietnamese Buddhist lay people, and lacked a member of the sangha to perform the ceremonies. The Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi and his niece, the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh left a few months after due to a disagreement over who should have decision making powers.<sup>8</sup> After leaving, they rented an apartment with the help of some lay people, and in 1982 the Tam Ba'o Pagoda and the Chánh Pháp Buddhist Society was founded.

Since this time, the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi has assisted in the founding of pagodas in Toronto, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Vancouver, Edmonton, London, Victoria and Regina, and The Union of Vietnamese Buddhist Churches in Canada

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<sup>8</sup> I have only heard one side of the story, but as I understand it, the lay members (owners) of the Lien Hoa Pagoda wished to retain the decision making powers for the Pagoda and dictate how the services should be run. The Ven. Thich Thiên Nghi believed that, even though the Pagoda was set up by members of the lay community, the lay community must not be able to control the sangha. This is a position that has been held by Buddhism since its inception and can be traced back to Indian views on the separation of religion and state. These views were a source of contention in China where religion, previous to the advent of Buddhism, had been an arm of the state.

(UVBCC) was formed as the body that serves to unite the various communities. In addition a monastery has been formed in the Laurentians, north-west of Montréal:

To keep develop Buddhism on in the future and to preserve the Vietnamese culture; in September 1988, the Ven TT Nghi bought a 337 acres piece of land in the region of Harrington, Québec. On this land, he would like to recreate the 4 holy places relating to the Buddha's life, to build a Great Temple, a library with over 50 000 books on Buddhism, to finalize the routes to the "gaya", place for worship and the Tam Ba'o Sơn, Buddhist Institute. This project are spread out in 10 years with an estimated cost of 10 millions (sic) (Chùa Tam Ba'o 1993:25).

As the heart of Buddhism is the sangha, perhaps the greatest indication of the health of Vietnamese Buddhism in Canada is the growth of the sangha. In 1980 a bhikṣu and a bhikṣuṇī got off a plane at Mirabel Airport. They had no money and their possessions were limited to one item of clothing. At the Tam Ba'o Pagoda today, there are 12 novice bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs (6 bhikṣus and 6 bhikṣuṇīs,) the majority of who, joined the sangha in 1991. Although three of them are older women, the majority of novice bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs are around twenty-three to thirty-one. Most of them were not dedicated practitioners before arriving in Canada. This growing monastic core, which consists of twelve novice bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs, as well as the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi and the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh, seems to indicate that Vietnamese Buddhism is being successfully transplanted.

The Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi and the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh

are strong proponents of gender equality in the sangha, which is a significant departure from Buddhism in many other countries. There are a number of aspects in Buddhism that have kept the bhikṣuṇī sangha subordinate to the bhikṣu sangha, not the least of which are the Eight Chief Rules (garudhammā). These rules were, according to tradition, handed down to the bhikṣuṇī sangha by the Buddha as a precondition to the founding of a bhikṣuṇī sangha by his aunt and step-mother Mahāpajāpatī. These rules ensure the subordination of the bhikṣuṇī sangha to the bhikṣu sangha by making them reliant on the bhikṣus for their most fundamental monastic requirements.<sup>9</sup> The affects of these

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<sup>9</sup> The Eight Chief Rules are:

- I. An almswoman, even if of a hundred years standing, shall make Salutation to, shall rise up in the presence of, shall bow down before, and shall perform all proper duties towards an almsman, if only just initiated. This is a rule to be revered and revered, honoured and observed, and her life long never to be transgressed.
- II. An almswoman is not to spend the rainy season (of Vassa) in a district in which there is no almsman. This is a rule . . . never to be transgressed.
- III. Every half-month an almswoman is to await from the Chapter of Almsmen two things, the asking as to (the date of) the Uposatha ceremony, and the (time when the almsman) will come to give the exhortation. This is a rule . . . never to be transgressed.
- IV. After keeping the rainy season (of Vassa), the almswoman is to hold Pavāraṇā (to enquire whether any fault can be laid to her charge) before both Sanghas—as well that of the Almsmen as that of the Almswomen—with respect to three matters, namely what has been seen, and what has been suspected. This is a rule . . . never to be transgressed.
- V. An almswoman who has been guilty of a serious offence is to undergo the Manatta discipline towards both the Sanghas (Almsmen and Almswomen). This is a rule . . . never to be transgressed.
- VI. When an almswoman, as a novice, has been trained for two years in the Six Rules, she is to ask leave for



rules on the bhikṣuṇī sangha are much debated. To a large extent the fact that a bhikṣuṇī sangha came into existence at all shows that the Buddha was far more liberal than his contemporaries. In this light, the Eight Chief Rules can be seen as a necessary evil in order to make the bhikṣuṇī sangha acceptable to the Buddhist laity and the society in which they exist. This acceptance was all the more important because the sangha, both bhikṣu and bhikṣuṇī, depended upon donations from the laity (especially in the form of royal patronage,) for their existence. On the other hand the nature of the Eight Chief Rules remains uncompromisingly biased towards the bhikṣu sangha, and holds within it a structure that subordinated bhikṣuṇīs to bhikṣus. Nancy Falk writes:

The damage inflicted by the special rules was of a subtler and worldier nature. The discriminatory provisions meant that women would never be leaders in the life of the whole community or have any decisive voice in shaping its direction. They meant that the men would never be beholden to any of the nuns, in the way that students are beholden to the teachers whose efforts have helped them find meaning and direction. These negative effects became more pronounced in the days of the great

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the Upasampadā initiation from both Sanghas (as well that of the Almsmen as that of the Almswomen). This is a rule . . . never to be transgressed.  
 VII. An almswoman is on no pretext to revile or abuse an almsman. This is a rule . . . never to be transgressed.  
 VIII. From henceforth official admonition by almswomen of almsmen is forbidden, whereas the official admonition of almswomen by almsmen is not forbidden. This is a rule . . . never to be transgressed (Horner 1990:119-120).

universities and the royal patrons who built their own fame though (sic.) these foundations. They communicated a damaging image to the greater world that picked up the tab, because they affirmed that the monks were the more significant and worthier part of such a community (Falk 1989:160).

The inherent lower status of the bhiksuni sangha led to its extinction in not only the country of its origin, but of all countries where the Theravāda tradition of Buddhism is practiced. Currently, there is no official bhikṣuṇī sangha in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, or Cambodia, although there are various lay orders that have for women that serve the same function. These organisations generally wear special clothing and live in nunneries, though they follow a lesser amount of precepts than the sangha. They are not considered to be the equivalent of the sangha and receive very little recognition for their efforts, and consequently, they receive very little in the way of donations.

By comparison, the situation for female monastics has been much better in countries where Mahāyāna Buddhism is practiced. In China the bhikṣuṇī sangha has remained in existence since it was brought over from India. In China, the the bhikṣuṇī sangha seems to have enjoyed more respect than in the countries that upheld the Theravāda tradition:

Many Chinese nuns became great teachers who lectured to other nuns and to large congregations of laypeople on the sutras, thereby becoming highly respected and extremely influential. Like monks, they often had many friends at court and lectured to and acted as spiritual guides to emperors and other members of princely families. Some

nuns publicly debated famous monks and defeated them (Barnes 1987:124).

In Vietnam the situation has been much the same. There has been a strong bhikṣuṇī sangha that has often been larger than the bhikṣu sangha. However, The Rev. Qua'ng Oánh has told me that despite their greater numbers, the bhikṣuṇī sangha has not been equal to the bhikṣu sangha. One of the greatest differences is that very few bhikṣuṇīs are qualified to perform the Pure Land services for the laity. She explained to me that the problem is education, which is essential in order to be allowed to perform the services. In Vietnam women have traditionally been brought up to be shy and reserved. Not only was education believed to be wasted on women, but even if the opportunity arose, many would not take it out of shyness. Dharma writes "A second obstacle is that the Vietnamese bhikkhunis themselves tend to be too shy and retiring." (Dharma 1988:159) This has been a barrier to the bhikṣuṇī sangha in Vietnam, and the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh and the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi intend to change the situation. The Tam Ba'o Pagoda upholds the ideal of equality and educates the bhikṣus and the bhikṣuṇīs together. Furthermore, the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh acts as one of their teachers, explaining the inequalities of the past as misinterpretations.

The Venerable Thích Thiện Nghi

The Venerable Thích Thiện Nghi is an important and well respected individual. He is the founder and abbot of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, as well as the president of the Chánh Pháp Buddhist Society which acts as the governing body of the Pagoda, and he serves as the president of the Union of Vietnamese Buddhist Churches in Canada (UVBCC). As such, the Venerable is an extremely busy man.

By virtue of being the abbot of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi automatically holds the position of president of the Chánh Pháp Buddhist Society. In this capacity, he has ultimate control of the activities of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, and has the final say on any decision that concerns the Pagoda. It is through this position of authority that the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi participates in the structure of the Pagoda. Although he is in a position of authority, his presence is not particularly felt. He does not seem to be active in the day-to-day workings of the Pagoda. As many have explained to me, he is very busy taking care of the Unified Vietnamese Buddhist Churches of Canada (UVBCC) and working in the main office and therefore does not really take part in the general management of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. That is left to the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh.

Another of the principal forms of contact that the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi has with the Tam Ba'o Pagoda is as a

teacher of the novices. It is my impression, however, that it is the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh rather than the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi who does the majority of the instruction for the novice bhiksus and bhiksunis. One indication of this is that if the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi were the principle instructor, their education would be very sporadic, for he is often travelling in order to fulfill his role as president of the UVBCC (Union of Vietnamese Buddhist Churches in Canada). Another indicator is that I have been told by most of the bhiksus and bhiksunis that if they have problems they will usually go to see the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh if the problem is small, because she is closer to them in their daily activity. This sentiment seems to be agreed upon by most of the laity as well, who have a deep admiration and respect for the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi, but would rather deal with the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh for most problems.

His ritual role at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda has greatly decreased over the last few years. Although he is the abbot of the Pagoda, he seldom performs any of the services. Three years ago, when I first started attending services at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi performed the services at least every second Sunday. Later, when he started to perform the services less, he was always central for the important holidays and festivals. This year he has been absent from the bigger festivals as well. As I will discuss later, the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh performed the Tết (New Years) service this year (1994).

The Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi holds a position that is very typical of the father or husband in the "normative" (traditional) Vietnamese family. He is honoured and regarded as a great person, but he has very little contact with, as he is usually occupied with things that are external to the Pagoda. He is concerned with the well-being of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, as well as the Vietnamese Buddhist community in Canada and the United States and serves the Tam Ba'o Pagoda mainly through his external dealings. When he is functioning at the Pagoda, it is in the position of president of the Chánh Pháp Buddhist Society, or as the abbot of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. Both of these roles are largely representational. He acts as a figure-head. To be sure, he plays a central role in decision making, but not for the smaller decisions; these are left to the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh.

#### The Reverend Qua'ng Oanh

Although the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi is the head of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, he is rarely seen. Often, he is visiting one of the many Vietnamese Pagodas that he has helped to found across Canada. As a result, the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh is usually left to do the service and to take care of the Pagoda. In this capacity she excels. She is an animated leader who is well liked and respected.

The Rev. Qua'ng Oánh's official capacity is as the secretary of the Chánh Pháp Buddhist Society and the UVBCC

(Union of Vietnamese Buddhist Churches in Canada). One would be misled to believe that her responsibility and authority ends here. The Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi is frequently absent from the Pagoda, having to spend a great deal of his time dealing with the affairs of the other pagodas that are members of the Union of Vietnamese Buddhist Churches in Canada. During these times, it is the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh who acts as his second in command, taking charge of the Pagoda and ensuring its survival. In addition, he is often engaged in dialogue with other Vietnamese communities in exile. In 1984 he spent a year in isolation praying for the success of Vietnamese Buddhism in Canada, and during this period the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh and the Rev. Thích Qua'ng Lu'ong (who is now the abbot of the Hoa Nghiem Pagoda in Toronto) took over leadership of the Pagoda. I have been told that in this coming year (1995) the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi intends to spend another year in isolation. During this period the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh will be managing things on her own.

Although the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi is the abbot of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, it is usually the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh who performs the services on Sunday. As I mentioned earlier, when I first started visiting the Pagoda three years ago her uncle and she seemed to alternate. One week it would be the Reverend and one week the Venerable. On the days that the Reverend would perform the service, the Venerable would come down from his chamber on the second floor to deliver the sermon, which occurs after the service. Over the past few

years the Reverend has been performing the services more and more frequently. It is now rare that the Venerable Thích Thiện Nghi performs the service or delivers the sermon. One reason for this is that the Venerable is getting older, and another that I am often given is that he is too busy taking care of the affairs of the UVBCC. It is apparent to me however, that the main reason is that the Reverend Qua'ng Oánh is being prepared to take over the leadership of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda.

The power structure at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda and the Vietnamese conception of the family have become remarkably similar as a result of factors that would not have been present in the pagodas of Vietnam. The Venerable Thích Thiện Nghi, though he is the head of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, is concerned with things external to the actual Pagoda. He is involved with Pagodas in other parts of Canada, with the UVBCC and with the Buddhist community in the United States as "the advisor of the Vietnamese in the United States under the presidency of the Ven Thích Duc Niem" (Chùa Tam Bảo 1992:19). He spends much time travelling throughout the world, visiting communities in Europe and in Asia (especially Taiwan where he received much of his education) (Chùa Tam Bao 1987:161). His main project is to set up a Buddhist center in the Laurentians (Tam Ba'o Sơn), which will benefit the Vietnamese in all of Canada. The Tam Ba'o Pagoda is the headquarters for the UVBCC and serves as the training center for the Vietnamese sangha in Canada. This



role will be taken over by the Monastery in the Laurentians (Tam Ba'o Són) eventually. The Rev. Qua'ng Oánh's main concern is the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. She writes in her curriculum vitae:

A Montréal, La Société se base à la Pagode Tam Bao dont l'Abbe est le Vén TTN. Depuis un certain temps, à cause de ses multiples activités pan-canadiennes, l'Abbé lui délègue la responsabilité de gestion de la Pagoda et maintient son rôle de conseiller. La Révérende Quang Oánh est donc la directrice opérationnelle de toutes les activités de la Pagoda. Elle préside ou seconde l'Abbé pour les cérémonies religieuses, organise des fêtes traditionnelles, propage l'Enseignement de Bouddha aux adeptes et aux jeunes fervents, soutient moralement toutes les malheureuses personnes qui viennent à elle.

In past years, at the Tê't (New Year's) ceremony the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi performed a service to which many special guests were invited. These guests were largely Westerners (white English or French Canadians.) They were definitely outsiders: a Montreal Gazette Reporter, representatives from the local police department, a Catholic priest from a local church, two Franciscan monks, and a number of others. They were received on the third floor by the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh and the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi, with the help of the woman who is in charge of greeting guests. Before the service they were served Vietnamese sweets and tea. They were given chairs off to one side while everyone else sat on the floor as is the custom. After the service there were some speeches given, some in Vietnamese and a few

by the special guests. After the service, their names were called one-by-one, and they were asked to take a tangerine off the tree. Each of the tangerines had a fortune attached. After they had finished, everyone else was allowed to pick a tangerine, and the service concluded in mayhem as usual. The dignitaries then left, and the celebrations went on through the night. This has happened for a number of years, but it did not happen this year. The Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi was not present, and the service was performed by the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh. Although there were just as many Vietnamese present, not one Westerner or special guest was to be seen. As the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi speaks very little English or French, his presence as the abbot is very much symbolic but required. Without him, as with the husband in a traditional Vietnamese family, guests are not received.

One of the main responsibilities of the Rev. Qua'ng Oanh is as the instructor of the novice bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs:

The Ven. TT Nghi leads the 10 novice monks and nuns who follow Buddhist program composed with internal specialized courses (as the ones given in Vietnam), and English and French courses taught by the Rev Quang Oánh. The Rev Quang Oánh is the first nun graduated with Master in Religious Philosophy program in a North America university. Also, the Rev. gives some internal courses. She is an aggregate professor of the institute (Chùa Tam Ba'o 1993: 26).

She is much more than their instructor. She is their daily guide. One of the questions that I asked the bhikṣus

and bhikṣuṇīs was whether they (or the laity) went to the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi or the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh when they had problems. The answers that I received confirmed what I had observed in the many months that I have attended the services at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. The Reverend is more frequently approached by both the laity and the novice bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs. People do go to the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi, who is a very approachable individual, and some people told me that which one they go to depends largely on the preference of the individual. However, the majority of people told me that usually he is only approached for big problems. Most people would go to the Reverend to discuss family problems, problems at work. I was told that of the laity, it is mostly women that go to her. Men do not usually discuss their problems with anyone, but if they did, some say they prefer to go to the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi. The novice bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs say that they normally go to the Reverend for smaller problems and for problems with study. The reasons for this vary, but essentially I have been told that they talk to her because she is the principal of the school, and she is closer to them in the daily activities. She is considered by some to be easier to talk to, and one bhikṣu told me that she is "like a mother: easy to talk to".

It becomes apparent that she is the manager of the Pagoda. In the day-to-day activities she is always present and is taking care of things. As the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi

acts as the figure head of the Pagoda, while the majority of his activity is focused outside the Pagoda, the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh is mainly concerned with the safe-guarding of the Pagoda and in ensuring its smooth running. While the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh organizes and directs the laity and the novice monastics, the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi remains upstairs and receives people who wish to pay their respects to him.

The parallels that emerge between the power structure and division of labour within the Tam Ba'o Pagoda and that of the traditional Vietnamese family are very strong. As a mother/wife in her home wields most of the power, if not the authority, so does the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh run the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. She is a charismatic woman who is an effective leader, and I have been told by some that they prefer services done by her, though they were unable to describe the difference between her and her uncle's performance of the services. Perhaps it is her wonderful voice that hauntingly chants the sutras, urging the laity to confidently chant along with her. People at the Pagoda obey her authority and follow her orders. She is always at the center of activity. An image of her comes to mind of a few months ago when she was in the corner of the sanctuary room, surrounded by women discussing donations, or another instance when she was teaching a young boy to prostrate three times in front of her. She seems always to be present and always in charge. Her sermons are always attentively listened to, and though I cannot understand what she is

saying, her speaking and teaching abilities are proclaimed by the intent looks and the laughter that rumble from the laity at frequent intervals.

The last thing I would like to add is that Rev. Qua'ng Oánh has acted as a positive female role model for the women of her Pagoda. Through her, they see the example of a woman who is actively religious and who is in a position of power. At the Tam Ba'o Pagoda she has taught that men and women are equal and that it is nonsense to believe otherwise. She teaches that if men were so much more spiritually advanced than women and, by virtue of being men, are very close to becoming Buddhas, there wouldn't be so many unenlightened men in the world, for they would have become Buddhas. Further, she says Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) said that no one will become a Buddha until the time of Di-Lặc (Maitreya Buddha). Therefore, it is ridiculous to believe that men are already very pure and are farther ahead spiritually than women.

For Rev. Qua'ng Oánh, authority is not a matter of gender, but a matter of education. With education comes equality. She refuses to believe that a man is higher than she by virtue of being male. This triggered questions in me, for I thought of rules that were set down by the Buddha, such as the prohibition against nuns, regardless of rank, rebuking any monk. I also thought of a picture I once saw of nuns bowing to the passing monks who walked by without acknowledgement. She explained to me that nuns bow to monks

out of politeness, and that act has nothing to do with inequality or subservience. Because nuns are often uneducated, they do not understand the real meaning, and it is misinterpreted to mean that nuns of any level must bow to even the most junior monk. I believe, therefore, that Rev. Qua'ng Oánh, with her education serves as a role model within the Pagoda.

Rev. Qua'ng Oánh also has an influence in another sense, in shaping the ideas of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, for she serves as a filter. As she is the one who performs many of the services, and because of the egalitarian ideas that she teaches, people who strongly hold onto patriarchal assumptions of men being superior would leave the Tam Ba'o Pagoda in favour of an institution which reflects their own gender values, such as the other Vietnamese temple in Montréal. The people who do attend the Tam Ba'o Pagoda are, therefore, the ones on whom the Confucian ideals did not have a firm grip in the first place, which again ties us back to the fact that the people who attend the Tam Ba'o Pagoda are predominantly from South Vietnam and from a lower economic level than the members of the Brossard temple. Rev. Qua'ng Oánh has told me there have been cases of men who have come to the Pagoda and have found that they could not stomach the fact that a nun was performing the service and was firmly established in a position of authority.

### The Novice Monastics

One of the most outstanding aspects that makes the Tam Ba'o Pagoda significant is its growing monastic community. This growth has been achieved through the renunciation of twelve Vietnamese, who are now novices at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, where they are receiving their monastic education. There are, at present, twelve novice monastics, six of who are bhikṣus and six who are bhikṣuṇīs. Of these novices, the majority are in their late twenties and early thirties; three are older women in their seventies; the youngest is a bhikṣu age sixteen; and there are no older bhikṣus. The older women are not as evident at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda as they tend to spend most of their time at the monastery in the Laurentains. One of the bhikṣus has also recently left to go help the Rev. Thích Qua'ng Lu'ong in Toronto. Therefore, there are usually around eight novices at the Pagoda. It is with these whom I was able to get interviews with.

All of the novices with whom I spoke were animated and committed to their chosen paths. Of all the people that I interviewed, it was they who stressed the value of equality the most, and it was they who were the most reluctant to attribute any significance to the gender appearance of the different Buddhas and Bodhisattvas at the Pagoda (which I will talk about in the following chapter).

In every way, it appeared as though there was complete equality between the bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. There was no gender-based rule to guide their positions during rituals. Nor did there seem to be any rule about who rang the bells, gongs, or the drum during rituals. When I questioned them about the division of labour at the Pagoda, they told me that all of the jobs were shared. Both bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs helped to cook and to clean. There were, however, two monastics who indicated that they had special functions. One bhikṣu told me that he had to take care of the Reverend and the Venerable, and their chambers more than the other novices. However, he indicated that this was due to his being the youngest and that it was not in any way a gender-based division of labour. The other was a bhikṣuṇī who told me that she helps with finances, which is a job traditionally handled by women in Vietnam. This particular job seems to indicate that gender may play a very small part in the division of labour, but it may also be attributed to her greater age (born in 1949) and greater experience (she was married and owned a store for a number of years in Vietnam). These variances, on their own, do not seem to be particularly relevant. Even the two exceptions indicated that for the most part all chores were shared, and neither thought that these variances had anything to do with gender-based division of labour within the sangha. Equality within the sangha, especially at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda was universally upheld.



The biggest difference that I saw between the novice bhikṣuṇīs and bhikṣus was that the bhikṣuṇīs tended to be much more shy. I would often speak informally with the bhikṣus before services, however, it was very rare that I spoke with a bhikṣuṇī, and the only significant conversation I had with any of them was during my interviews. The bhikṣuṇīs tended to interact to a greater extent with the Vietnamese at the Pagoda, therefore, I would have concluded that a large part of their shyness had to do with me, and I would have dismissed it as being irrelevant if it were not for the bhikṣuṇī's presence being less pronounced overall. Although equal, the novice bhikṣus tended to be much more active in a public sense, while the bhikṣuṇīs tended to be active in a more subdued way, as if they wished to avoid taking on a public role, which confirms Dharma's criticism of Vietnamese bhikṣuṇīs propensity towards avoiding public roles:

A second obstacle is that the Vietnamese bhikkhūṇīs themselves tend to be too shy and retiring. They need to learn to put themselves forward more. A very interesting process of change is occurring as a result of the meeting of cultures, but the Vietnamese nuns are still not as confident and outspoken as their American counterparts (Dharma 1988:159).

### Conclusions

Views and attitudes that have been long ingrained into a society's way of perceiving and behaving cannot be

discarded instantly, despite conscious efforts to do so. The phrase "like father, like son" does not only have implications on the individual level, but also indicates how difficult it is for a society to throw out long held attitudes. Such is the case with the Vietnamese views on gender. While equality as a principle is universally upheld by the members of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, ingrained views about gender die hard. Women and men are perceived as having particular roles, and these roles are often modeled on the patterns that are played out every day in the family.

Historical circumstance has brought about some interesting developments at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda that would not have occurred in Vietnam. The laity have traditionally volunteered their labour for the benefit of pagodas and Buddhism in Vietnam. In Canada this role as volunteer has become more important as there are fewer bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs to do the labour. As in Vietnam, women prepare meals at the Pagoda for the sangha and for the people who attend the services, and men volunteer on occasion to do manual labour for the Pagoda, although it is no longer rice cultivation. There are types of participation for laity that have no precedent in Vietnam. One of these is participation on a board of directors, becoming directly involved in the running of the Pagoda and its programmes, which is due more to requirements of Canadian law than it is due to a desire to change the organisational structure of the Pagoda. This created a situation where men and women were given different

tasks in order to help with the running of the Pagoda. The result of this is that certain jobs tended to be filled according to the traditional gender roles of the family.

In Vietnam, bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs were always at separate pagodas, and therefor men, or women, filled all of the roles in their respective pagodas. The recent immigration to Canada has not given the sangha the opportunity to have separate dwellings and institutions for bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs. Both are gathered together under the same roof at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. The leadership of the new Vietnamese-Canadian sangha and the Tam Ba'o Pagoda has been assumed by two individuals. The Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi and his niece, the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh. The result is that the Ven. Thich Thiên Nghi has fallen into a role that has many similarities with the father/husband of the "normative" Vietnamese family: he is occupied primarily with things external to the Pagoda; he is respected and highly regarded; but retains an aloofness in accordance with his position of symbolic head of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. The Rev. Qua'ng Oánh has largely taken on roles that parallel those of a mother, or a wife. She is engaged in the day-to-day running of the Pagoda, and while she is not regarded as the symbolic head of the Pagoda, she is regarded and acts as the functional head of the Pagoda, as a mother/wife does in the traditional Vietnamese family.

There are two distinct types of factors that have shaped the organisational structure of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda.

The first are the formational forces that are largely due to circumstance. Because of Canadian law, a board of directors was formed, and the roles were filled by men and women. Leadership of the Pagoda may also be attributed to circumstance. If the Ven. Thich Thiên Nghi had a nephew rather than a niece, the situation concerning gender would not be the same. Both the roles of abbot and vice-abbot would be filled by men. These circumstantial forces explain why a board of directors was formed, and why the Ven. Thich Thiên Nghi and the Rev. Qua'ng Danh both assume leadership roles at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. They do little, however, to explain the gender/labour distinctions that have emerged. The historical circumstances have provided a forum for these divisions of labour to be made and roles to be filled. The Rev. Qua'ng Danh would not be regarded as a mother figure by some if she had been male. The organisational structure at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda can, therefore, be attributed to well established gender patterns that have come into play because of circumstance.

**Chapter 4**  
**Gender and Division of Labour in the Conception**  
**of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas**

Different Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have different roles and different personalities that are reflected in their different forms. This is the belief of most of the lay people at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. These differences were perhaps best summed up to me by a novice bhikṣu during a New Years Eve (Tê't) celebration. The room was filled with such an enormous amount of smoke from the incense bowl and firecrackers that it was difficult to breath without choking by reflex. He looked at me when I asked him why people approach different Bodhisattvas for different reasons, and replied as if to a child, "You don't go to a leg doctor if you have problems with your eyes."

It occurred to me at this time that if the differences between the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are so apparent, then every aspect and every detail must be highly symbolic, meaningful, and filled with purpose. It became very clear to me that if this were so, and it certainly seemed to be by the explanation that I was given by this particular bhikṣu, then gender would also be significant to the conception of the roles that the various Bodhisattvas

fulfill. Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn), Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni), Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha), and A-Di-Đà (Amitābha) were not depicted and conceived of as male or female in a happenstance manner, but for a reason. Furthermore, the gender conception must be linked with roles that they are supposed to fulfill.

This notion was met with mixed reviews from the bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs with whom I spoke. They said that in reality all the Buddhas are the same, although it never became clear whether they were saying that all Buddhas were emanations from the same Buddha, or whether they were identical once attaining Buddha or Bodhisattva-hood. Two monastics told me that on the outside, in appearance, the Buddhas are different, but on the inside they are the same. Many said that Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have no gender. One bhikṣu admonished me at length saying: "Why do you cling to form? They are all the same and form means nothing." I was slightly dumfounded, for I had received answers from other bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs that acknowledged the differences: "Different forms appeal to different people, so the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas appear in different forms so the people can feel close to them. A little girl doesn't want to play with a toy gun, and a little boy wouldn't want to play with dolls" (bhikṣu at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda). This opinion was expressed to me over and over again: the different forms were to appeal to different people; people pray to whichever one they are most comfortable with; the Buddhas assume different roles for different people; form is empty.

Form is not empty to all, however, and while on the one hand I was being told that form was empty by many of the bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs, I was witnessing something entirely different in the case of the lay people. People, especially women, who were drawn to Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) associated words like "compassion", "approachable" and "Mother" with her. Replies I received when I re-phrased my questions brought this to light. I would ask not about the form, but about what people would approach her for as opposed to the other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Clearly, each Buddha and Bodhisattva was conceived of as having a role, and each Buddha and Bodhisattva were approached with a different purpose in mind and a different feeling towards each. While Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) was approached as "mother," Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) was approached as a hero or founder. The attitudes towards these two, as well as towards A-Di-Đà (Amitābha) and Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) were completely different. I found that, like members of a family, or like the two monastic leaders at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, each one had a task to perform. Furthermore, these tasks seemed to reflect their idea of gender as it works in the Vietnamese family.

In this chapter I will discuss how the four main Buddha and Bodhisattva figures are conceived at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. These figures are Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn), Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni), Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) and A-Di-Đà (Amitābha). I will discuss them in that order, with Quán-Âm at the

beginning because Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) is the only figure that was described to me along the lines of gender, and therefore much of my argument rests on my informants' perceptions of her. She is the basic reference point for my comparison of the four Buddha and Bodhisattva figures enshrined in the Tam Ba'o Pagoda.

**Quán-Âm**  
(Guān-yīn)

The Bodhisattva Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) in the form of a woman is not a phenomenon isolated to Vietnam, nor is it in Vietnam that Quán-Âm came to be portrayed as a woman. David Kinsley writes:

Although disagreement exists among scholars concerning different religious strands and traditions that might have blended to form the figure of Kuan-yin in medieval Chinese religions, most agree on the fact that, in nature and function, Kuan-yin is the Chinese Buddhist form of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, who dominates much of Indian Sanskrit Buddhist literature. What is remarkable about this fact is that Avalokitesvara is a male, while Kuan-yin (at least after the eleventh century) is usually a female (Kinsley 1989:26).

As Kinsley points out, the female form of Guān-yīn is an amalgam of many different sources:

Around the tenth or eleventh century, Kuan-yin begins to be shown and described primarily as a female. Three factors



probably combined to bring about this final sexual transformation: (1) the association of Kuan-yin with the Tibetan Buddhist goddess Tara; (2) the association of Kuan-yin with the indigenous goddesses the Holy Mother (Sheng mu) and the goddess of the sea, Matsu; and (3) the association of Kuan-yin with the heroine Miao Shan (Kinsley 1989:27).

I cannot add to the body of literature that describes the origins or conceptions of the Bodhisattva Guān-yīn. I wish, rather, to describe how members of the Vietnamese Buddhist laity at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda conceive of Quán-Âm and how they explain the reasons for Quán-Âm being portrayed as a female. Whatever the origin, I feel that their conception of Quán-Âm as a woman is strongly related to the way that they view gender as a whole. As such, I believe that their conceptions of the characters and roles of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, is partially influenced by their views of gender.

#### Why Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) is Female

The perception of Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda is not necessarily tied to the view of Avalokiteśvara or Guān-yīn that is found in the sutras, and I have found most of the members of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda to be only vaguely aware of the history of Quán-Âm. The closeness between the Vietnamese people and Quán-Âm is evident in the reports that some people gave me about their mothers' frequent prayers to her. I was told by one person that he

does not remember any other statues from his childhood because his mother only prayed in front of Quán-Âm. This Bodhisattva is especially popular with women, and at the Pagoda it is usually women who are seated in front of her during the services every Sunday.

While everyone with whom I have spoken acknowledges that Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) comes from China, that is all that seems to be known about her historical background. As I mentioned above, I was told that Quán-Âm's form is empty, however questions such as "why is Quán-Âm in the form of a woman?" or "why is Quán-Âm a woman?" elicited such responses as to show me that if form was devoid of reality, it most certainly was not devoid of meaning. Many of the people with whom I spoke said that the main reason that she is female is that she is compassionate and that compassion is a female trait.

There is no doubt that this view of compassion as being an attribute of women stems from the mother figure. One of the most common explanation for the female form of Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) was that she was like a mother. Some of the responses concerning Quán-Âm as a mother figure were: "she is like a mother for the people", "she is female because she is soft like a mother, not like a father", "she is female because a mother is closer than a father" and "because it is easier to talk to a mother than it is to a father." In questioning one bhikṣu about the form of Quán-Âm I asked: "If form is empty, why do people want Quán-Âm to be

female?" He replied to me that "In Vietnam mothers are closer to their children. When they have problems, they go to talk with their mothers, then maybe after they go to their fathers. Mothers are usually softer." As this particular bhikṣu had said to me earlier that the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh is like a mother I countered by asking: "Like talking to the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh instead of your master?" He replied "Yes, the same as that."

Perhaps the most striking explanation that I received for the female form of Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) was that she served as an example. One bhikṣu told me that in traditional China women were not treated very well, and therefore Quán-Âm serves as an example of sexual equality. Most often this explanation of Quán-Âm as an example did not bear cultural or historical references. Many simply told me that Quán-Âm is portrayed or was born as a woman in order to show that women were also able to become Bodhisattvas. I usually received this response from members of the sangha which leads me to suspect that they had been taught this by either the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi or the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh. This does not detract from the fact that Quán-Âm serves as an example for religious equality.

#### Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) as the Helper in this World

As a Mother, Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) has an expected role, just as a mother has a role in the family. She is

prayed to and adored, and she is expected to be compassionate to her devotees. She has made a vow to help sentient beings. She is "the Regarder of the Cries of the World" (which is the meaning of Avalokiteśvara). She is the "Goddess of Mercy" (Tay 1976:147). People are well aware of her vow, and it has made her immensely popular. I was told countless times by the people at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda that people pray to her when "they have problems that concern this world", or to put it more bluntly: "people pray to her when they want something." (bhikṣu at Tam Ba'o Pagoda). She is believed to help those that are in danger. People pray to her when there are problems in the family, when there are problems at work, to stop suffering, and in the hope that they will gain material wealth.

As a mother or wife is concerned primarily with the welfare of the house and the family, Quán-Âm is concerned with the well-being of her devotees in this world. Salvation is not considered to be a part of her role. The fact that her sphere of influence is this world is reflected in the three figurines that stand below her, representing longevity, wealth, and good fortune. I was told by one bhikṣu that people would only ask her to stop suffering in this world, but never for things that are related to salvation. The Rev. Qua'ng Oánh told me that the divination ritual, xin xam, which is performed in front of Quán-Âm to discern the proper course of action, is never performed in order to determine whether one should join the sangha or

not. Furthermore, I once asked whether monastics ever performed xin xam. The answer that I received from the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh was that they had no need because, for a bhikṣu and bhikṣuṇī, every day is a happy day.

The xin xam ritual is one of the major activities that takes place in front of the altar of Quán-Âm. Often, I will see a woman on Sunday before the service shaking the jar of sticks. On the sticks, I have come to learn, are numbers that correspond to slips of paper that are located behind the statue of Quán-Âm. After the stick drops to the floor, the answer is verified by throwing two halves of a kidney-shaped piece of red wood. On New Years Eve this is a highlight of the night's celebrations. I have never been able to see how long it goes on, but I have left at two in the morning, with the "thika-thuka" sound of the sticks being shaken in the jar still echoing across the room. Although it is primarily women who can be seen doing this, at Tê't (New Years) there are some younger men whom I have seen shaking the jar. There are a number of questions that are suitable for this ritual, and all of them concern well-being in this life. People perform xin xam in order to help them make decisions, or to find out if the decision they have chosen is the right one. People ask whether they should get married, or whether they should move. People ask whether a store or business should open, and if so when. People ask questions about finance or about their studies. Because Quán-Âm is compassionate, it is believed that she will give

the right directions, and if someone asks for her help, she will give it if she sees that it will actually help them.

As I have alluded to above, Quán-Âm is very much a celestial mother. As such, her concern is with the well-being of her children in this world. Her identification as a mother figure seems fitting, for as the mother in the Vietnamese family is concerned with the affairs of the family and the home, so is Quán-Âm concerned with material problems. She is concerned with wealth, with marriage, and with childbirth. She is concerned with the family. A question that emerges is whether Quán-Âm is viewed as a woman because she fills this role, or whether it is because of her female form that she is regarded as filling this role. Whatever the case, gender views do not stop in the family, or even in the temple structure, and in the daily lives of sentient beings, but seem also to be projected onto celestial Bodhisattvas.

#### Thích-Ca (Sakyamuni)

It is clear that Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) is viewed as a mother and fills the role of a mother for her devotees. The next question that I had was whether there was a father. The answer to this question is that there most definitely is not. Neither A-Di-Đà (Amitābha) or Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) seem

to be viewed as a father in any way. That is not to say that their gender has no repercussions. I will now look at Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni), who is understood to be the most important Buddha for us in this world. Although there is no father-based symbolism attached to the figure of Thích-Ca, I will show that there are aspects of the way Thích-Ca is viewed that stand out against the perceptions of Quán-Âm (Guānyīn) and suggest that gender-role differentiation is present in more than just Quán-Âm's case.

The statue of Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) is almost always the central figure in Southern Vietnamese pagodas according to everyone with whom I have spoken. Hickey writes a description of a typical pagoda in the South of Vietnam (in this case a small Pagoda in Khanh Hau to the south-west of Saigon):

The sanctuary is dominated by a pyramidal altar on which a large gilded figure of Buddha occupies the highest level. Below it are figures of A-Ana, one of Buddha's assistants, Thich Ca, a reincarnation of Buddha, Ca Dip, who replaced Thich Ca after his death, Dat Ma, the twenty-eighth reincarnation of Buddha, Quan Am, the Goddess of Mercy, and Di Lac, the fat laughing Buddha on whom frolic six small figures representing Van Thu, the six temporal senses. On the lowest level of the pyramid there is a fearsome polychrome figure representing Quan Cong, the great Chinese warrior. There also are statues of Ong Tieu, who frightens away evil spirits, and Ho Phap, the protector of honest men (1964:61).

Although Hickey makes an error by not identifying Thích-Ca as "the Buddha", he nonetheless seems to describe

what the people that I have spoken with have described as the principle Buddha and Bodhisattva figures that are present in the pagodas of Vietnam. In some pagodas, however, A-Di-Đà (Amitābha) is the central figure, and Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) is situated below him. Two such cases are the Giac Lam Pagoda, and Giac Viên Pagoda, both situated in Saigon. (Storey 1993:175-177)

Descriptions that I have received have upheld that the pagodas in Vietnam all were like the Tam Ba'o in regards to their placement of statues. Only one person with whom I spoke said that the selection and placement of statues varied from pagoda to pagoda. The overwhelming majority said that Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) was always (or almost always) in the center. Many told me that while Thích-Ca was always the central figure the others were interchangeable. Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) is always present, but does not necessarily maintain the same position. Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) is not always present, and Di-Lặc (Maitreya) often replaces his presence. A-Di-Đà (Amitābha) sometimes occupies a more central position, but I have been told that he is not always represented. I have also been told that in some pagodas Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) is the only statue. Furthermore, at altars in the home Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) and Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) seem to be the most often represented.

When I first started doing research at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, I was under the impression that it practiced Pure Land Buddhism. As such, I found it very odd that A-Di-Đà



(Amitābha) was not more prominent in the Pagoda. Although there were statues representing him, they were not central. Each of the statues were only about one and a half feet in height. Furthermore, the number of statues of A-Di-Đà (Amitābha) seemed to change. I found out that these statues belonged to members of the laity who had ordered them from the Pagoda and that they were in position on the main altar in order to be charged spiritually. After they have remained on the altar for a period of a few months, they would be taken to the home of the lay person and placed on their own altars.

My mind became occupied with the question of why the statue of Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) was so prominent and central, towering over the small statues of A-D-Đà (Amitābha), when to my understanding it was A-Di-Đà who vowed to help his devotees be reborn in the Pure Land (Cử'c-lạc). Fairly often, I received the response that it is only form, and most people told me that their size or prominence was not indicative of their greatness. Some people told me that there is only one Buddha who appears differently in different situations. Others told me that in fact Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) and A-Di-Đà (Amitābha) are identical, and some just said that all Buddhas are equal.

These explanations did not serve to explain why Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) was the most prominent, and if the above explanations were given at all, then they were usually followed by a more satisfactory explanation. The main reason

that was given for the prominence of Thích-Ca was that it is because he lived in this world and he is the founder of Buddhism. He was the first to become a Buddha for the time in which we now live, and he serves as an example for us. The variations on this reason are many, and include "he is the leader of this earth", "he is closer to the people than the other Buddhas", "he is the Buddha for this world", "he represents the Buddhas in this world", and more interesting "he is the most important because he taught us about all of the other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas." Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) is regarded as the head for Buddhism in this world. He is the founder, and the leader. It is in this respect that he can be seen as having a role that is traditionally viewed as a male role.

Although he is the leader of this world, people do not pray to him for worldly things as they do to Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn). A few individuals have said to me that because all the Buddhas are the same Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) may help you in this life. One bhikṣu with whom I talked told me that he prays to Thích-Ca to help him with spiritual progress in study and practice. The Rev. Qua'ng Oánh told me a story of when she was in college. It was the night before the exam and she was absolutely unprepared for it. Rather than trying to cram the large amount of information that she needed to know into her memory, she spent the night chanting the name of Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni). As it turned out, she ended up passing the exam and actually doing quite well.

The majority of people, however, pray to Thích-Ca for spiritual help rather than worldly help. I have been told by some that no one would pray to him for things in this world. They pray to him because he is the founder, and he is an example. Most often it has been indicated that they pray to him out of respect and a deep reverence, but not to achieve a particular aim, as is the case with all the other prominent Buddhas at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) is the figure-head or leader of this world, and as such he fulfills a role that is not dissimilar to the traditional conception of the father in the family, who is the head of the family, but who does not actively concern himself with its well-being, other than providing the money for its support. At the opposite end, stands the mother and Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) whose main concern is the physical and tangible welfare of the family and of the devotees who go to her seeking aid and comfort.

**Đia-Tạng**  
(Kṣitigarbha)

Đia-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha), despite being one of the three most prominent statues at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, remains a fairly vague figure. More than any other of the Buddhas or Bodhisattvas, people paused, hesitated and sometimes admitted ignorance when I asked about Đia-Tạng

(Kṣitigarbha). Despite this seeming remoteness of Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha), every Sunday before services begin, some of the lay people arrive early, and when they enter they usually make the rounds, prostrating before Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni), Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn), Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha), the guardian and in front of the ancestor altar. Usually it is women that I see doing this. When I see men prostrating, it is generally before Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) and the ancestor altar.

Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) seems to be particularly important to men. During the regular services every week, there are, as I have previously mentioned, very few men who attend. Of the men that attend there are a few younger men, in their mid-twenties, and some older men. While the younger men often show up at the last minute, or even a little late, and are forced (or choose) to sit in the doorway at the back as there is no other spaces remaining, the older men usually sit right up in front of the altar to Địa-Tạng. Even when there is very little space, there are a number of older men who will make room for themselves in order to sit there. When I first started to attend the services a few years ago, I had no idea where the appropriate place for me to sit might be. Usually one of the elderly woman would beckon me to sit with them, or direct me towards a place to sit. As a result I ended up usually sitting in the back on the left hand side of the sanctuary room (the side which had the altar to Địa-Tạng and the ancestor altar). I became

accustomed to sitting there, and after a while I would make my way to there, even when there was room farther up. It was not until I started to get to know some of these women that I was corrected. One day, I came fairly early and took my seat beside an elderly woman who I had recently interviewed. As I sat down she told me that I should sit farther up front. I told her that I liked to sit there, and that I found it convenient to sit closer to the back where I could watch people. She probably would not have continued, except that I became suspicious that I was missing something, so I asked why she thought that I should sit farther forward. She told me that it was a better seat: it was closer to the altar and to the bhiksus and bhikṣuṇīs. When pressed, the real answer finally came out amidst a few chuckles from my guide and from the women who sat around her. I should sit farther up front because the back is where old women sit. Although there were no particular rules, there were certain tendencies. Older women would sit in the back-left facing the statue of Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha), older men would sit farther up on that side, the middle was usually reserved for those in mourning, and the right-hand side, in front of Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn), was usually crowded with women.

Needless to say, I began to ask why the spot in front of Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) was desirable (and usually kept open) for men, particularly older men. The answers I received were usually vague. People would tell me that it was out of habit, or custom or: "they like it there". One

person told me that it was to be closer to the bhikṣus. An interesting response that I received from a couple of people were that men were forced to sit in front of Dia-Tang (Kṣitigarbha) because the women take up all the other places (especially in front of Quán-Âm [Guān-yīn]), forcing men to sit in front of Dia-Tang (Kṣitigarbha). Although this is interesting in that it shows the close relationship between women and Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn), I do not believe it is actually true. The men who sit in front of Dia-Tang (Kṣitigarbha) usually do so even if there are a number of other places to sit. Perhaps a little more enlightening was the explanation that they sit there because it is a place of distinction. Perhaps most enlightening was the view that men sit there because it is the form that they feel closest to, but considering that Dia-Tang's main role was to save damned souls from hell, why would men have this sense of closeness.

Dia-Tang (Kṣitigarbha) is believed to have taken a vow to save souls from hell. This makes Dia-Tang very important for the ancestor cult. Williams writes:

The real reason for Kṣitigarbha's importance in East Asian Buddhism, however, is probably his central role in the Ti-tsang p'u-sa pen-ying Ching (Kṣitigarbhabodhisattvaprāṇidhāna Sūtra?), a sūtra which seems to be of Chinese or just possibly Khotanese origin, and is not known in any Tibetan version. A principal theme of this work is filial piety, and particularly the deeds of Kṣitigarbha in saving the dead from even the lowest hells...Thus Kṣitigarbha in Chinese Buddhism became associated in particular with rituals that can be performed by those who remain behind for the welfare of their ancestors (Williams 1989:241-242).

This view of Bīa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) being closely associated with ancestor worship and with the dead is perhaps the most frequently expressed view that I received during my study, although not everyone was entirely clear about the role of Bīa-Tạng. Answers such as "I don't pray to him", "I don't know", or "he has something to do with dead people...I think", which seemed to indicate that he was not a Bodhisattva who was really understood or felt to be close to the people. A few others made it clear to me that Bīa-Tạng was not a particularly popular Bodhisattva by telling me that they did not know anything about him before coming to the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. A few monastics told me that they learned about him from the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi.

Among those who did know about Bīa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) and his relation to the dead, the most usual responses that I received were fairly simple, indicating that he saves people from hell. One person told me that people pray to Bīa-Tạng when relatives die, to take them out of hell (if that is where they ended up), or they pray to him if they are not sure where a person will be reborn. Another lay person told me that she prays to him for her mother. Although in this case, Bīa-Tạng is prayed to for the benefit of a specific individual. The most common explanation of Bīa-Tạng was not in terms of saving specific individuals, but saving people in general who have gone to hell. I was told that Bīa-Tạng is responsible for saving

souls, that he goes to hell to help people, or that he is for people who die and go to hell.

Đia-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) appears to be rather ambiguous. On the one hand, he can be regarded as a part of the ancestor cult and as such can be considered to play a part in this world, for as the dead are still considered part of the family, their welfare is tied to the welfare of the family. It is with this closeness that the photographs of revered, deceased bhikṣus have been placed on his altar, but I have been told that they were placed there because there was no room for a separate table to accommodate the photographs, as there might have been in other pagodas. I also sought to attach Đia-Tạng to the ancestor cult by virtue of the ancestor altar being on the same side of the room as him. Although one person agreed with me that this might indeed be the case, the majority of those with whom I spoke thought that there was no connection, and the coincidence was due to there not being enough room to house the ancestor altar behind the main altar as would have normally been the practice.

On the other hand, Đia-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) is often considered in a more abstract manner, as the saviour of those in hell. In this case Đia-Tạng would not be considered to have much to do with this world. The gender model that I have been examining could therefore work or not work in this particular case, and there are certainly clear arguments for both. My impression, however, is that even as a part of the



ancestor cult, his ties with the world do not seem as immanent as do those of Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn). Furthermore, the vagueness with which nearly all people responded to my questions about him indicated that Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) did not have the import in the lives of the people that Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) and Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) do.

There are some similarities between the way that Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) and Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) are viewed. Whereas Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) does not seem to play a major role in actively saving people, Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn), and Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) are known and worshipped primarily for their ability to help people. This is probably a function of their being Bodhisattvas and not Buddhas, whose main job it is to rule over a Buddha Field. The Bodhisattvas, on the other hand, are believed to be the embodiments of compassion, and they therefore take a more active role in helping the people of this earth, and performing various compassionate actions. It is significant that the compassionate actions of Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) are centered on this world whereas Địa-Tạng's (Kṣitigarbha) are centered on hell. It is also significant that the men at the Pagoda sit in front of the Bodhisattva that is concerned with hell rather than with the world, and it is women who gather in front of the statue of Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn), as it further stresses the tie between the feminine principle and worldly affairs.

**A-Di-Bà**  
**(Amitābha)**

A-Di-Bà (Amitābha), like Dia-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) has an ambiguous position in terms of his dealings with the world. He is perhaps more closely associated with the ancestor cult and with funerals than is Dia-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) by virtue of his vow to help people be reborn in the Pure Land (Cụ'c-lạc) if they recite his name.<sup>1</sup> He is specifically prayed to when someone dies in order to aid in their rebirth. One woman told me that she prays to him every day for her mother and her mother-in-law. His connection with the ancestor cult is made undeniable by the presence of a statue of him that stands on a lotus above the ancestor altar.

More often, A-Di-Bà (Amitābha) is addressed not for the dead but for personal salvation. People pray to him

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<sup>1</sup> I have not done research into what the Vietnamese believe is the actual process by which one attains birth in the Pure Land. One bhikṣu with whom I spoke told me that one must first concentrate on the name of A-Di-Bà; to simply recite it is not enough. Furthermore, one would need to die at that exact second to be reborn in Cụ'c-lạc (Pure Land), for we gather karma constantly. For that reason, it is important to join the sangha so that more time may be spent in prayer and less in gathering karma in the world. I would imagine that if I did the same sort of research that Spiro did in Burma, I would end up with results that were as varied as his, reflecting the breadth of common understanding.

primarily to be reborn in Cự'c-lạc (the Pure Land). The chanting of his name becomes a religious practice with the purpose of salvation: "the easiest way to become better is to chant the name of A-Di-Bà Phật," one person told me. A number of people told me specifically that the purpose of praying to him was to save yourself.

A-Di-Bà (Amitābha), like Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) can be regarded as being involved in this world, through the ancestor cult, or being removed from this world. I believe that, though A-Di-Bà is invoked for the aid of dead relatives. He is nonetheless viewed by the Vietnamese as being not related to this world. I have been told by some that A-Di-Bà is the Buddha of the Cự'c-lạc (Pure Land) and that his representative on earth is Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni), and this view was reinforced by people who said that we would not know anything about A-Di-Bà if not for Thích-Ca, as an explanation for why the statue of Thích-Ca was big, despite the fact that A-Di-Bà was central to the beliefs and practice of Pure Land Buddhism. Furthermore, the principle role of A-Di-Bà is salvation, whether it is personal or that of a friend or relative. In this light, it would be difficult to justify saying that A-Di-Bà's influence is centered on the happenings of this world.

### Conclusion

I have attempted to show that gender-role differentiations are to a certain extent projected onto the various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. My conclusions may or may not be applicable to all Vietnamese Buddhists or Buddhists of the Chinese Pure-Land tradition. I do not purport to give a thorough presentation of the lay view of the Buddhist cosmology. Rather, I have tried to show that in many ways, the ways that genders are viewed in society, especially in relation to the family, are also applicable to the ways that Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are regarded, and the ways in which their responsibilities are divided.

The centerpiece of my discussion is the figure of Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn). She is the only female Bodhisattva that is represented at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, and she is the most important both in the Vietnamese and the Chinese tradition.<sup>2</sup> It is against her symbolism as a mother that I base my notion of a "celestial" division of labour on gender lines. She is openly acknowledged as a mother figure; her devotees become her children, and the world becomes the home. Her main concern, like the mother of traditional Vietnamese conception, is the material welfare of her family. In

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<sup>2</sup> There are other important female deities and figures in the Chinese tradition, but Guān-yīn is the most important Buddhist figure.

particular, she is concerned with finances, with childbirth, and with easing the general suffering of her children - all things that are traditionally the concern of Vietnamese women.

Standing against Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) are principally Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni), but also Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) and A-Di-Đà (Amitābha) as male figures. Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni) is not an exact counterpart to Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn), since he is not seen as a father. Nonetheless, he is seen as an authoritative figure-head in this world, as a father is for the family. Like the father, his responsibilities take him outside this world. He is highly regarded and openly acknowledged as being a very important figure for Vietnamese Buddhism, but he is not concerned with succouring his devotees. He is primarily viewed as an example and as the Buddha for this world. Likewise, the roles of Địa-Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) and A-Di-Đà (Amitābha) are related with things outside this world. It would seem, then, that even though the "normative" model of the Vietnamese family is more an ideal than a reality for those who participate in the life of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, this model is applied in the way that Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are conceived of. This is especially true in the case of the modelling of the roles of women, and specifically that of the "mother," as being primarily concerned with the material well-being of her children.

## Chapter 5:

### Conclusions and Remarks

The bhikṣus, bhikṣuṇīs and members of the laity at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda have been faced with a number of challenges due to the immigration from Vietnam to Canada. One of the many changes that they have had to face was what to do about gender roles within the Pagoda - a problem that they would not have had to deal with in Vietnam.

In Vietnam, bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs did not live in the same pagodas. They lived separately and were self-regulating. For bhikṣu pagodas there would be a male abbot, and there were abbesses for bhikṣuṇī pagodas. Things are very different in Canada. The sangha is very small, and the country is very large. The resources are not sufficient to support two separate organisations, and therefore they have been combined at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. The leadership roles have been assumed by the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi and his niece, the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh as a direct result of this merging of the bhikṣu and bhikṣuṇī sangha.

The second difference that has affected the roles of gender in the Pagoda is the creation of a board of directors in order to comply with Canadian law. In Vietnam there were no laws that dictated how a Pagoda ought to be run.

Leadership was solely in the hands of an abbot or abbess and a vice-abbot or abbess, and both positions were assumed by members of the sangha. In Canada most of the positions were assumed by members of the laity, bringing about the problem of division of labour within the board of directors. This was not a situation that had ever been encountered before.

In Vietnam the "normative" dichotomy of women as being part of the domestic sphere of activity (internal affairs), and men being part of the public sphere (external affairs), participating very little in the running of the household and in the bringing up of children, does not seem to be a dichotomy that is applicable to the family structure of those who attend the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, due to their regional and economic history. Such strict differentiations based on gender belonged to the upper class - those who could afford not to have their wives work - and were a bigger factor in the north and center of Vietnam. That is not to say that the ideal was not present for the lower-middle class South Vietnamese...it just was not practical. Even before the migration to Canada, the ideal "normative" system was not as salient as a factual system in which women and men were on more equal footing.

The "normative" system was further challenged by "modernity" and by the influence of the West, which is perceived as symbolising sexual equality. The Rev. Qua'ng Oánh as a strong proponent of equality and as a capable and charismatic leader, has driven the message home and her

opponents out of the Pagoda. The result of this is that equality of gender is firmly held by the members of the Tam Ba'o as something essentially valuable, and I have been told that it is a reality. This has resulted in an ideal "normative" (traditional) system on the one hand, and an ideal "modern" system on the other, both of which are held to be systems that are actually followed. In the middle we find the "factual" system, which combines the "normative" and the "modern". Women are working and receiving education, and men help with the raising of children, and are said to treat their wives as equals, but at the same time, people understand the role of women to be to stay home to take care of the family, and say that men are the head of the family and have final decision making authority.

In general, the dichotomy of female and male as engaged in internal affairs or external affairs is actually much more apparent in the Pagoda than it seems to be in the family. If the structure of the Pagoda is taken as a family of sorts, one can see many parallels with the internal/external model of the upper class Vietnamese family (or the Confucian ideals of the Chinese family.) Perhaps the strongest evidence of this is the way in which the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh takes care of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, and the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi remains largely the figure-head and is occupied as the president of the Union of Vietnamese Buddhist Churches in Canada (UVBCC). The Rev. Qua'ng Oánh appears to be regarded as a mother-figure. She is regarded



as more approachable and takes a more active role in the day-to-day running of the Pagoda. The Venerable, on the other hand, spends much of his time visiting other pagodas and attending to the needs of the UVBCC. When he is home, at the Pagoda, he seldom participates in the services, but leaves that to the Reverend.

There is a possibility that they fill these different roles not out of gender-based division of labour, but out of seniority, and there would be a measure of truth in this. Both the Ven. Thích Thiện Nghi and the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh are strong proponents of equality, both in the sangha and in the family. Nevertheless, I would speculate that if the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh had been a male rather than a female, then his role both in the Tam Ba'o Pagoda and in the UVBCC would have taken on a different character. The jobs would still need to be performed, but they would not be performed in ways that seem to be based largely on the division of labour within the "normative" Vietnamese family.

The second indicator that this gender structure is a part of the organisation of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda is that the positions that are held in the corporate structure of the Pagoda's board of directors seem to be divided along the lines of gender and gender/labour expectations. As a result, the president is male, the vice-presidents in charge of internal affairs and external affairs can be either a man or a woman, the treasurers and secretaries are women, as is the person who is in charge of greeting official guests. With

the exception of the vice-president positions, the division of labour is the same in this structure as it would be in the Vietnamese family.

Both of these instances would not have happened in Vietnam as the pagodas for bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs are separate, and are run independently. The corporate structure that is required by Canadian law has defined roles and a hierarchy that are foreign to the traditional structures of Vietnamese Buddhism. In Vietnam, the abbot is the absolute head, and no board is needed to decide the inner workings of the Pagoda. Finally, the laity do not provide the volunteer labour in Vietnam that is required in Canada, so the differentiation of types of volunteer labour has not been as prominent.

The dichotomy of internal and external affairs that I have just described is by no means total. The Pagoda, for one thing, need not be regarded as a private sphere that mimics the family, though the similarities have compelled me to draw this analogy. If taken as public rather than private, then the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh is playing an important role as an influential public figure. Furthermore, the Rev. Qua'ng Oánh also fills roles that are indisputably public, such as appearing as a guest lecturer at colleges and Universities in Montréal.

Nevertheless, I believe that the parallels are sufficiently compelling to warrant their suggestion. I propose therefore, that, though the Vietnamese families that

attend the Tam Ba'o Pagoda do not follow the "normative" model, its influence is sufficiently powerful to have been adopted as a guideline to manage gender/task situations within the Pagoda that had no precedent in the running of pagodas in Vietnam.

The "normative" model of the division of labour along the lines of gender can also be seen in the conception of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda. The figure of Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn) has a number of parallels with a mother in a Vietnamese family. She is compassionate, which is considered to be a female trait, and I am told that she is approachable like a mother. More importantly she is concerned primarily with the material well-being of her devotees. She cares for them as a mother would her children. She is never called upon for salvation, however. Like the mother, she is in charge of "internal affairs" - things of this world.

Thích-Ca (Śākyamuni), unlike Quán-Âm (Guān-yīn), is not at all concerned with the material well-being of his devotees. He is described as the founder of Buddhism and the figure-head of this world. He would never be approached for wealth, and the xin xam ritual would never be performed in front of him. In fact, requests do not seem to be made of him at all. He is prayed to out of reverence and respect. As the figure-head, he fills a role that is typical of the father in the "normative" Vietnamese family. He is respected and highly regarded, but he is not particularly immanent.

**Điạ-Tạng** (Kṣitigarbha), as a Bodhisattva, has more affinity with **Quán-Âm** (Guān-yīn). He is prayed to for a particular request and is assigned a particular role. He is compassionate and will help those who pray to him, but unlike **Quán-Âm** (Guān-yīn) he is not concerned with the affairs of this world. His only connection with this world is through the ancestor cult: he is prayed to in order that he may free the dead from hell. As such, though he is important to the ancestor cult, his sphere of activity is not of this world, and he does not do anything that would affect the material well-being of those who pray to him.

Finally, **A-Di-Đà** (Amitābha) as the fourth major figure in the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, also fills a role that is typically male according to the "normative" Vietnamese tradition. He is engaged in the ancestor cult, as is **Điạ-Tạng**, but his role is purely salvatory. By reciting his name with a pure heart, he is said to assist in having the person be reborn in his Pure Land (Cự'c-lạc). Even as part of the ancestor cult, his role does not affect the activity of this world.

The primary roles of aider of this world, figure-head of this world, saviour from hell, and guide to the Pure Land (Cự'c-lạc) are divided up in such a way as to suggest that there is a connection between their perceived roles and the division of labour within the "normative" Vietnamese family. If the female role can be typified as concerned with "internal affairs" and the male role with "external

affairs", then activity in the material world could be seen as part of a "normative" female role, and involvement in things outside this world could be seen as a "normative" male role. Drawing these parallels would place the central Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the Tam Ba'o Pagoda in roles that could be characterised as "male" and "female" under the "normative" Vietnamese conception of the family.

It is difficult to view things, or to run things without a model, and models are not functional unless they are very simple. The distinction between men and women is a dichotomy that can be said to be at the base of great deal of our understanding of the world around us. The bringing together of the male and the female is a fundamental symbol of creation, and the family serves as a principle forum in which male and female are conceived of in union. As such, it is not surprising that when men and women are brought together, the family, and the division of labour that makes a family functional, serves as a primary model. I have shown that at the Tam Ba'o Pagoda, the Vietnamese model of the family has served to provide a symbolic structure at a number of levels, including lay involvement in the affairs of the Pagoda, monastic leadership, and with conceptions of the character roles of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

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