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The ‘People of the Pagoda’ and the 1963 Buddhist Mobilization in Huế, Vietnam

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Abstract

A new, ground-up narrative of the Buddhist Mobilization of Huế in central Vietnam in the summer of 1963 highlights the voices of its participants – the ‘People of the Pagoda’. Drawing on local records and personal narratives, the article explores the process of how the ‘People of the Pagoda’ forged a collective identity from daily activism and protests for religious equality. Months of various nonviolent collective actions – in the form of demonstrations, hunger strikes, and self-immolations – developed a strong, broad community within the distinctive spaces of Buddhist temples. The article emphasizes the relevance of culture, morals, emotions and identity in the Buddhist Mobilization’s enduring impacts on personal awareness and community networks. In contrast to much top-down, politically-oriented, and Sài Gòn-centric scholarship on this event in Vietnam War historiography, this essay examines the mobilization as a social movement in its own right and seeks to restore Huế’s significant historical role as the birthplace of this movement.

Introduction

On 8 May 1963, Buddhists in the Vietnamese former imperial capital of Huế celebrated Vesak, commemorating the Buddha’s birthday. In the weeks leading up to the ceremony, families hung up Buddhist flags and silk and paper candle lanterns outside their houses. What made this particular Vesak different from previous ones, however, was a new government ban on public display of religious flags, which was issued two days prior to the event. This inspired a large procession across the city attended by thousands, followed by an inspiring speech by the head of the city’s Vesak organizing committee, the Buddhist monk Thích Trí Quang.

An informant whom I will call Đánh Thức, then a young monk from Báo Quốc pagoda, recalled hearing rumours of a protest taking place that afternoon in reaction to the government order.¹ Inspired by Trí Quang’s speech that morning, Đánh Thức decided to take action to protest the government’s suppression of Buddhist organizations. He biked to the radio station where a special evening report on the Vesak ceremony would soon be broadcast. At a busy intersection, he climbed on a

¹Since these topics are still sensitive, both in Vietnam and among overseas Vietnamese, pseudonyms are used for informants who requested anonymity.

traffic pedestal and waved a large five-coloured Buddhist flag. ‘People were amazed’, he recalled. ‘They found it so strange. Drivers and pedestrians stopped to see what was going on. It got more and more crowded.’ He then carried the flag up to the second-floor balcony of the radio station. When asked fifty years later about how this felt, he only smiled: ‘Me, I liked it. I was young, and unafraid. I did not think of risk or death. I was overjoyed.’²

The city government later labelled *Đánh Thức* one of the ‘agitators’ of the Buddhist problem.³ In fact, that Vesak in Huế marked the beginning of the Buddhist Mobilization [*Cuộc Vận Động Phật Giáo*] for religious equality and social justice throughout summer 1963 in the Republic of Vietnam (commonly known in English-language publications as ‘South Vietnam’, hereafter RVN). The story of *Đánh Thức* waving the Buddhist flag illustrates the broader grassroots engagement in social activism in 1960s southern Vietnam. His decision to enter the radio station was an inspiring act that cultivated a seed of activism not only in himself, but among hundreds of bystanders, radio audiences and the wider community, at both the individual and collective levels. In a larger context, the Buddhist Mobilization vividly illustrated what Zen master and Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh termed ‘Engaged Buddhism’.⁴ It actualized Buddhist ideals while transforming the community of Huế. For thousands of mostly young Vietnamese like *Đánh Thức*, the movement deepened their understanding of self, in addition to strengthening community connections in the imperial city of Huế. Starting as a spontaneous local response to a religious policy, the Buddhist Mobilization quickly grew beyond its birthplace in Huế. Within days it spread to other cities and developed into an organized, nationwide social movement. The mobilization served as the main grassroots movement behind the collapse of Ngô Đình Diệm’s regime six months later, ending his nine-year term as the first president of the RVN.

The complicated historiography of Vietnam War studies is exemplified by present works on the movement, which centre the political aspects of the war and largely ignore the social and cultural life of people on the ground. In the context of the escalating war and the war historiography, the Buddhist Mobilization has been labelled and viewed from a variety of approaches. While Buddhists and lay participants identified it as the Buddhist Mobilization,⁵ as I will here, the most common terms in Vietnamese and English-language publications are the ‘Buddhist Struggle’ and the

² *Đánh Thức*, interview by author, Huế, 22 August 2014.

³ *Document of the Incidents in Huế during the Vesak Ceremony in 1963*, Office of the Presidency of the First Republic Series, Folder 8169, Vietnam National Archives No. II, Hồ Chí Minh City (hereafter VNA-II).

⁴ According to Thích Nhất Hạnh, Vietnamese Buddhist scholars initiated the idea of socially engaged Buddhism in the 1930s. The term refers to ‘the active involvement by Buddhists in society and its problems’ that ‘seeks to actualise Buddhist traditional ideals of wisdom and compassion in today’s world.’ See Arnold Kotler, *Engaged Buddhist reader: ten years of engaged Buddhist publishing* (Berkeley, CA, 2000), p. 65; Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Đạo Phật đi vào Cuộc đời* [*Buddhism entering life*] (Sài Gòn, 1964).

⁵ The term ‘mobilization’ [*cuộc vận động*] or ‘*cuộc tranh thủ*’ first appears in various 1963 official documents, as well as in accounts by Buddhists and followers, especially in the 1960s. See articles on *Liên Hoa Monthly Journal* (Huế, 1963–64); *Lập Trường Newspaper* (Huế, 1964); *Hải Triều Âm Newspaper* (1964). Recently, several Buddhist accounts have revisited the movement and include new materials; see, for example, Thích Hải Ấn and Lê Cung, *Cuộc Vận Động Của Phật Giáo Việt Nam Năm 1963 Qua Tài Liệu*

'Buddhist Movement'.⁶ Policymakers in Sài Gòn and Washington, as well as other foreign observers, called it the 'Buddhist problem'⁷ or the 'Buddhist Crisis', mainly analysing its political effects on leaders and US policies relating to the escalation of war.⁸ Some portrayed Buddhist leaders as having political desires to overthrow Ngô Đình Diệm's government, while others suggested the Buddhist uprising was infiltrated by communists or even orchestrated by the CIA.⁹ Another interpretation connects the Buddhist Mobilization with 'the politics of nation building' and national identity.¹⁰ An alternative interpretation depicts the Buddhist Mobilization and its political impacts as resistance against foreign aggression under the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party and the National Liberation Front.¹¹ While most scholarship on social movements during the Vietnam War era discusses the anti-war movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, only a few scholars have

Của Các Cấp Phật Giáo [*The Vietnamese Buddhist Mobilization in 1963 via documents of Buddhist ranks*] (Huế, 2013).

⁶Many authors supported the movement in the 1960s–70s. Major Vietnamese writings include Quốc Oai, *Phật giáo Tranh đấu* [Buddhists struggle] (Sài Gòn, 1963); Phạm Văn Minh, *Vietnamese Engaged Buddhism: The struggle movement of 1963–1966* (Westminster, CA, 2002); and Vũ Văn Mẫu, *Sáu tháng Pháp nạn 1963* [Six months of Dharma persecution 1963] (Garden Grove, CA, 2003). Non-Vietnamese works expressing similar views include Erich Wulff, *Vietnamesische Lehrjahre* [Teaching years in Vietnam], No. 73 (Frankfurt, 1972); and Howard Jones, *Death of a generation: How the assassinations of Diem and JFK prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York, 2003). Notable later works reflecting on the movement include 1963–2013: *Năm mươi năm nhìn lại* [1963–2013: Fifty years looking back] (Garden Grove, CA, 2013); Thích Nhật Từ, Nguyễn Kha, et al., *Pháp nạn Phật giáo 1963: Nguyên nhân, Bản chất và Tiến trình* [The Buddhist persecution of 1963: causes, essence, and progress] (Hà Nội, 2013).

⁷The term 'problem' appears in various RVN government documents of the Office of the Presidency of the First Republic Series, currently held at the NAC-II and the Office of Records and Archives under the Department of Domestic Affairs, Provincial People's Committee of Thừa Thiên Huế.

⁸Many accounts situate the Buddhist Mobilization in the larger context of the period of social unrest and struggles for peace and democracy, e.g. Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the lake: the Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston, MA, 2002); Robert J. Topmiller, *The lotus unleashed: the Buddhist peace movement in South Vietnam, 1964–1966* (Lexington, KY, 2002); and Lê Xuân Nhuận, *Biến Loạn Miền Trung* [Turmoil in the central region] (Alameda, CA, 2012).

⁹Accounts underscoring the political goals of the movement and understating its religious side include Jerrold L. Schecter, *The new face of Buddha: Buddhism and political power in southeast Asia* (New York, 1967), and David Halberstam's 1963 *New York Times* reports. Other works treat the Buddhist movement as infiltrated by communists, including Liên Thành, *Biến Động Miền Trung: Những Bí Mật Chưa Tiết Lộ, Giai Đoạn 1966–1968–1972* [Turmoil in the central region: undisclosed secrets in the period of 1966–1968–1972] (Berkeley, CA, 2008); Mark Moyar, 'Political monks: the Militant Buddhist Movement during the Vietnam War', *Modern Asian Studies*, 38 (2004), pp. 749–84; and James McAllister, 'Only religions count in Vietnam: Thích Tri Quang and the Vietnam War', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 42 (2008). Some suggest the Buddhist Movement was planned by the CIA: Lương Khải Minh and Cao Vị Hoàng, *Làm thế nào để giết một tổng thống?* [How to kill a president?] (Sài Gòn, 1970), while Vũ Quốc Thúc presents it as a media crisis in *Thời Đại Của Tôi* [My epoch] (Westminster, CA, 2010), vol. 2, pp. 409–412.

¹⁰Edward Miller revisits the Buddhist Movement as an episode in the RVN's nation-building process in 'Religious revival and the politics of nation building: reinterpreting the 1963 "Buddhist crisis" in South Vietnam', *Modern Asian Studies* (August 2014), pp. 1–60.

¹¹This view is popular in postwar Vietnam. Historian Lê Cung has written the most about the movement, including *Phong trào Phật giáo miền Nam Việt Nam năm 1963* [The Buddhist Movement in Southern Vietnam in 1963] (Hà Nội, 1999); and *Phong trào Đô thị Huế trong kháng chiến chống Mỹ 1954–1975* [The urban movement of Huế in the resistance against America 1954–1975] (Huế, 2001). See also Nguyễn Xuân Hoà, Lê Văn Thuyền, et al., *Lịch Sử Phong Trào Đô Thị Huế 1954–1975* [History of the urban movement in Huế, 1954–1975] (Hồ Chí Minh City, 2015).

touched on student and youth activism.¹² Most accounts focus on Sài Gòn in the south, only mentioning Huế – the most important city in central Vietnam – as a trigger site and support for the Sài Gòn-centred movement. Other modern Vietnamese movements for democracy, social justice, or freedom of the press appear only in memoirs and articles by mostly Vietnamese authors.

This article examines the 1963 Buddhist Mobilization of Huế from the perspective of its participants in an effort to remedy these imbalances in the war's historiography. In contrast to top-down, politically-oriented, and Sài Gòn-oriented scholarship on 1963's civil strife, the essay reconstructs the mobilization by presenting a new 'ground-up' narrative that emphasizes the voices of local people. Analysing Huế's Buddhist Mobilization as a social movement in its own right allows us to move beyond the simplified political and war-related interpretations, bringing to the fore the human experience in the emergence and development of social activism and engaged Buddhism. In the case of Huế, local Buddhist temples played a significant cultural role as centres of organization for the social movement. This essay also examines the process of social engagement in nonviolent acts and formation of the collective identity of its participants – the People of the Pagoda, as one participant identified it. Drawing on methodologies from the history of emotions and affect theory, the article highlights the role of feelings and affective ties in shaping the participants' actions and responses to events. Moreover, by studying the emergence and development of the movement in this city, this essay seeks to restore Huế's significant historical role as the birthplace of the movement as well as its continued contribution to the large movement. In the controversial and complex history of the prolonged Vietnam War, 1963's Buddhist Mobilization brought Huế back into the flow of Vietnam's modern national history after the city lost its political role as the nation's capital in 1945. Huế rapidly ignited the Buddhist movement – then again retreated from the scene as Sài Gòn stole national and international attention. Lastly, the essay emphasizes the mobilization's transformative impacts on Huế's engaged Buddhists and society. The social movement became a turning point in individual participants' lives, leaving in its wake profound legacies in communal connections. Growing far beyond its initial scope, the movement generated collective action frames and new political realities for social movements in the central region in the following years. The Buddhist Mobilization serves to show that Vietnam was more than a major battlefield in the 1960s; like elsewhere in the world, the country was facing social unrest and activism and many similar complex issues sweeping over much of the world in this tumultuous era.

This grassroots study draws upon local records and personal narratives, as well as a combination of state documents, provincial and city government documents, and newspaper and journal publications. To explore the social activism from a bottom-up perspective, this article foregrounds the unheard voices of participants via their

¹²See Van Nguyen-Marshall, 'Student activism in time of war: youth in the Republic of Vietnam, 1960s–1970s,' *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 10 (Spring 2015): pp. 43–81; Heather Stur, 'To do nothing would be to dig our own graves: Student activism in the Republic of Vietnam,' *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, Vol. 26, no. 3 (2019): pp. 285–317; and Phạm Chánh Trực et al., *Chúng ta đã đứng dậy: Truyền thống phong trào sinh viên học sinh Sài Gòn – Gia Định 1954–1975* [We stood up: Traditions of the Student Movement in Sài Gòn – Gia Định 1954–1975], 3 vol. (Hồ Chí Minh City: 2014).

testimonies in memoirs and oral histories, and unstructured interviews that I conducted over the past decade with representatives of a wide range of Buddhists and non-Buddhists. Now in their seventies and eighties, many informants still live in Huế while others have moved overseas to the US and France. Besides Buddhists like Đánh Thức, others were students and young professors at the University of Huế; many, but not all, came from Buddhist families.

To understand the grassroots development of Huế's engaged Buddhism, this essay traces the Buddhist Mobilization's chronological events through the summer months of 1963. It starts by sketching the social and religious context prior to Vesak Day on 8 May, when trigger events ignited the movement. The article focuses next on how 'the People of the Pagoda' constructed a collective identity within temple space, as well as the movement's internal dynamics and individual interpretations. It ends with an analysis of the Buddhist Mobilization's enduring impacts on Huế's local people and society.

I

The city of Huế had served as Vietnam's last imperial capital throughout the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945) and the French colonial period. After Hồ Chí Minh declared independence and founded the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945, Huế lost its central role in national politics. The Vietnamese then found themselves embroiled in a bloody war of decolonization with the French that ended militarily in 1954. At the Geneva conference negotiating table, Vietnam was to be temporarily divided by a de-militarized zone (DMZ) at the 17th parallel. Almost a million people from the north then departed for the south, most of whom were Catholics, providing foundational support for Ngô Đình Diệm, the first president of the RVN. With American financial and military aid, this Catholic leader established and led the First Republic from 1955 onward.

Located about sixty miles south of the DMZ, Huế in the 1960s was a vibrant mix of persistent and strict norms and customs, imperial tradition, and cultural heritage mixed with external modern influences. Both the northern and southern governments and the Vietnamese still considered it the national centre of culture, religion, and education, and it was renowned for its tranquillity and cultured ways. In addition to prestigious high schools, the University of Huế (established in 1957) provided the city with its national reputation as a city of students and intellectuals. In the 1960s, these professors, students, and the university itself played a significant role as agents of social change in the city and the nation's new realities.

Huế also served as a national religious centre for Buddhists and Catholics. The urban and suburban landscapes were dotted by many century-old churches, pagodas, and temples, whose peaceful atmosphere offered a calm respite for many locals. As president Ngô Đình Diệm's family hometown, Huế continued to develop its Catholic influence. The president's older brother, Ngô Đình Thục, Archbishop of Huế from 1960 to 1968, led a high-profile programme of church renovation and construction. Their youngest brother, Ngô Đình Cần, was well-known among the people as 'the Lord of the Central Region', doubling the government's tight control over Huế and central Vietnam.

As Buddhism had long been the most popular religion throughout the country, millions of Vietnamese retained certain ties with Buddhism, from daily rituals to important life events. In addition to providing the nation with many talented monks, the nation-wide Buddhist revival of the 1930s–40s also laid the foundation for important Buddhist organizations, such as the Buddhist Youth Association, while an explicitly religious school system expanded Buddhist influence among younger generations. By the time the General Buddhist Association of Vietnam [*Tổng Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam*] was founded and headquartered in Huế in 1951, the city had clearly become the capital of Vietnamese Buddhism. It was commonly known that Huế's population comprised roughly 80 per cent Buddhists and lay followers. With Buddhist values firmly embedded in local life, many of Huế's children grew up in an environment where Buddhist ideals came naturally as part of traditional culture.

Despite the proliferation of Buddhist ideas even among non-believers, many Buddhists felt President Ngô Đình Diệm's regime discriminated against them. According to various Buddhist documents, the government privileged Catholics in public service and military promotions. They also provided Catholic societies with more freedoms while suppressing Buddhist organizations.¹³ Buddhist grievances had been growing since the late 1950s – and particularly in 1960–2 – due to increasing anti-Buddhist policies and incidents such as restricting rights, removing Buddhist holidays from the national holiday calendar, and encouraging anti-Buddhist literature.¹⁴ These pointed efforts of the state to suppress Buddhist voices triggered resistance among Buddhists. Both Đánh Thức's action on 8 May and the Buddhist Mobilization at large can thus be understood as a rupture in the long history of religious plurality of Huế.

II

Đánh Thức's waving of the Buddhist flag was especially potent in 1963 because of a brewing battle over flags.¹⁵ On 6 May, Telegram 9195 from the President in Sài Gòn decreed that religious flags could only be displayed within religious spaces, not in front of houses or along streets and highways.¹⁶ Two days earlier, on 4 May, which marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of Ngô Đình Thục's appointment as bishop, Catholic banners were flown over all public places in Huế. For the government to issue a ban of the public display of religious flags at such a sensitive moment – just before the most important Buddhist festival of the year – provoked the Buddhist

¹³Ordinance number 10, signed by head of state Bảo Đại on 6 August 1950, was still in effect during Ngô Đình Diệm's regime (1955–1963).

¹⁴On anti-Buddhist policies, see Tâm Phong, 'Nhớ lại Cuộc Vận động của Phật giáo' [Remembering the Buddhist Mobilization], *Hải Triều Âm Weekly* 18, 20 August 1964; Thích Hải Ấn and Lê Cung, *Cuộc Vận Động Của Phật Giáo Việt Nam Năm 1963 Qua Tài Liệu Của Các Cấp Phật Giáo*, ch. 1; and unpublished documents held at Từ Đàm Pagoda.

¹⁵For a detailed analysis of the cause of the crisis, see Edward Miller, 'Religious revival and the politics of nation building...'; Chính Đạo, 'Mùa Phật đản đẫm máu' [Bloody Vesak Season] in *1963–2013: Năm mươi năm nhìn lại*, pp. 30–93.

¹⁶*Document of Anti-government Activities of Buddhists and Students in Huế, 1963*, Office of the Presidency of the First Republic Series, Folder 8529, VNA-II.

community, unleashing long-simmering resentment at religious inequality in the RVN.

On the afternoon of 7 May, police went to every neighbourhood to enforce the government order. As flags and lanterns came down, many grumbled with bitter indignation, but no one dared resist. About 5 p.m., approximately 40 monks and 300 laypeople carrying a Buddhist altar and a giant sign featuring a lotus flower – the symbol of the Buddhist Family organization – marched to the provincial headquarters to demand an explanation of the ban. To the march's participants and witnesses that afternoon, the image of the monks' orange robes and the Buddhist Family sign represented the first direct confrontation between Buddhists and the government.¹⁷ After the city council agreed that Buddhist flags could be displayed, the crowd dispersed. Yet the city remained abuzz with whispers of discontent.

The next day, Vesak, two precipitating events ignited the social movement. The first was a historic speech that morning exposing critical problems to the local Buddhist community at Từ Đàm Pagoda. About 7 a.m., the annual procession left Diệu Đế Pagoda, proceeding down the city's main streets bearing five banners denouncing the government's religious policies, stopping in front of the provincial headquarters and government offices.¹⁸ See figure 1 on arriving at the central Từ Đàm Pagoda, monk Thích Trí Quang, head of the Vesak ceremony organizing committee, had the protest banners unfurled again so he could explain them aloud. Before thousands of attendees, he delivered an unscripted speech on the persecution endured by Buddhists, first during colonial rule and now under Ngô Đình Diệm's regime.¹⁹ This was the first time Huế's Buddhist leaders had publicly spoken out against the government. Most of the sangha [community] members and thousands of laypeople present were totally unprepared for both the speech and overt acts of protest. People like monk Đánh Thức were inspired seeing the banners and hearing Trí Quang's speech. Emotions played a central role in accelerating personal motivation to act; in turn, unplanned individual action precipitated further collective affects and actions. Unafraid and overjoyed, Đánh Thức's flag-waving in front of the radio station stimulated street crowds that afternoon.

A second event – this time tragic – took place a few hours after Đánh Thức's episode. As in previous years, many people gathered at the radio station to listen to the special broadcast of the morning ceremony scheduled at 8 p.m. However, as the station staff lacked the authority to censor the content of Thích Trí Quang's 'anti-government' speech, they refused to broadcast it. Many people turning on their radios at home then flocked to the station, curious why it was playing non-Buddhist music.²⁰ The crowd waited patiently as Buddhist leaders and government officials

¹⁷ Quý Linh, 'Mở đầu cuộc đấu tranh' ['Beginning the struggle'] in *Trước cơn Sóng Gió* [Before the storm], Vol. 1 (Huế, 1964), p. 17; Hoàng Nguyên Nhuận, 'Ánh đuốc Quảng Đức' ['Quảng Đức's torch'] in *Bồ Tát Quảng Đức: ngọn lửa và trái tim* [Bodhisattva Quảng Đức: the Fire and Heart], ed. by Lê Mạnh Thát (Hồ Chí Minh City, 2006).

¹⁸ *Document of the Incidents in Huế...*, Folder 8169, VNA-II; *Document of Anti-government Activities...*, Folder 8529, VNA-II.

¹⁹ *Document of the Incidents in Huế...*, Folder 8169, VNA-II; Thích Trí Quang, *Trí Quang tự truyện* [Trí Quang's memoir] (Hồ Chí Minh City, 2011), pp. 100–107.

²⁰ *Document of the Incidents in Huế...*, Folder 8169, VNA-II.

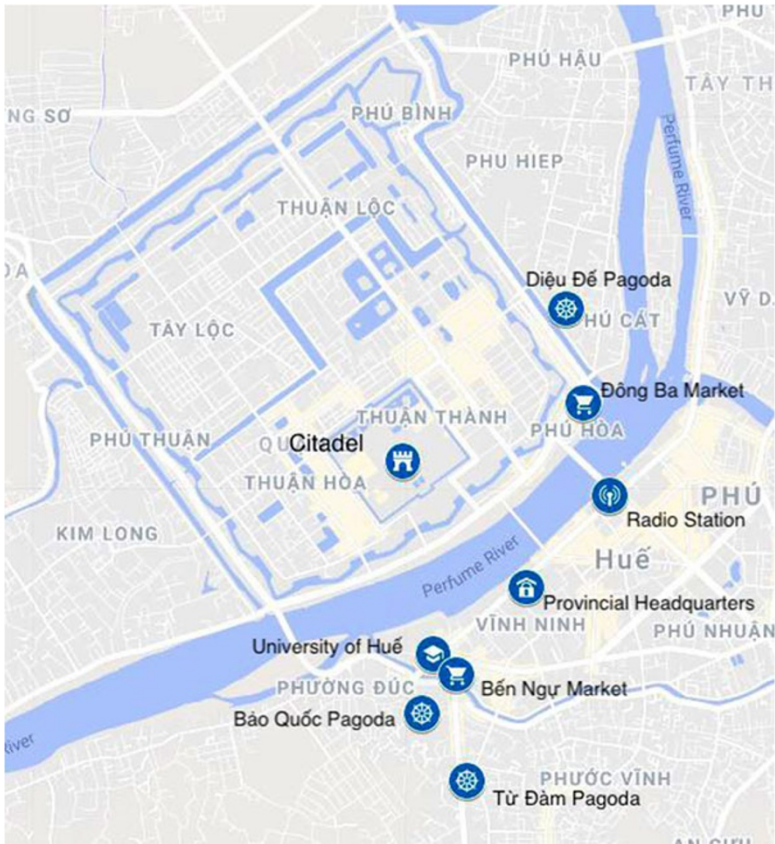


Figure 1. Map of the city.

discussed the issue inside the station. At about 8:30 p.m., a deputy province chief mobilized security guards, soldiers, fire trucks, and armoured cars to relieve the ‘besieged radio station’. Half an hour later, as police and special forces surrounded the crowd in the station’s small yard, there was a sudden explosion. Tear gas spread in the middle of the confused clamour, followed by a burst of gunfire from one of the armoured cars to disperse the crowd. In the ensuing melee, eight civilians – all under age twenty – were crushed to death, and fourteen were wounded.²¹ Horribly frightened, many people rushed home; some youths led hundreds of others down two main streets, shouting pro-Buddhist slogans and waving Buddhist flags and banners until 2 or 3 a.m.²²

²¹Other accounts published in the 1960s and more recently have described these events in more detail; see, for example, Edward Miller’s ‘Religious revival and the politics of nation building...’, or *Trước cơn Sóng Gió* [Before the storm] (Huế, 1964).

²²*Document of the Incidents in Huế...*, Folder 8169, VNA-II; Lê Công Cơ, *Năm tháng dâng người* [Dedicated Years and Months] (Hô Chí Minh City, 2012), 128.

The killings immediately sparked a sense of profound moral outrage in Huế and across the country. The event's unseen, sudden 'moral shock'²³ had a primary cognitive effect on many eyewitnesses that rapidly spread to thousands more in their families and networks. It aroused shared moral sensibilities mobilizing the crowd, providing the conditions necessary for recruiting participants for the struggle. Mass enthusiasm and highly charged emotions created the Buddhist Mobilization's affective context, pulling many individuals into a heretofore unforeseen social movement.

III

The two trigger events of 8 May were a spontaneous moment of the Buddhist Mobilization. Its most important affective dynamic lay in ordinary people's shared awareness of moral principles, and Buddhist leaders' determination to actively speak against the government's policies and handling of the issue. Following the Buddhist sangha's guidance, the movement instantly organized and began recruiting and retaining participants. Many Buddhists and laypeople solidified their collective affect within Huế's specific social, cultural, and historical environment. They gradually recognized themselves as parts of a larger social fabric, uniting in shared Vietnamese and Buddhist cultural ideals and in the struggle's goal to engage in collective activism.

Like the vital roles played by Black churches in the success of the American civil rights movement, local pagodas, especially Từ Đàm and Diệu Đế, served as focal spaces for engaging in collective actions for the movement's participants.²⁴ Từ Đàm, the national General Buddhist Association of Vietnam's headquarters since 1951, instantly became the centre of the Buddhist Mobilization's operations and information for Huế, its suburbs, and the central region. In addition to their usual tranquil environments for calm souls, pagodas Diệu Đế, Báo Quốc, Linh Quang, Tường Vân, and many other temples in the city now offered Buddhists and new supporters venues for sharing individual perceptions with their community. Via various daily activities and mass religious practices, they provided necessary emotional, moral, and spiritual support for forging new inter-personal, trans-family, and communal attachments. Monks from national Buddhist associations and these pagodas, such as Thích Trí Quang, Thích Tịnh Khiết, and Thích Thiện Minh, took leadership roles. Their personal charisma provided the movement with a moral framework, loyal followers, and material resources for mobilizing people. Their networks with other Buddhists in Sài Gòn and other provinces also helped organize the mobilization on a national level.

While the initial activism was spontaneous, the Buddhists rapidly organized and developed a strategic perspective. Throughout the month of May, the mobilization grew from cognitive commitment into various forms of action. Huế now overflowed

²³See James M. Jasper, 'The emotions of protest: affective and reactive emotions in and around social movements', *Sociological Forum*, 13 (1998), pp. 409–410.

²⁴There are various accounts on the role of the Black churches during the civil rights movement. For example, see Allison Calhoun-Brown, 'Upon this rock: the Black church, nonviolence, and the civil rights movement', *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33, no. 2 (2000), pp. 169–74.

with statements, letters, mass meetings, prayer ceremonies, and demonstrations. Between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m. on 9 May, hundreds to thousands of people from all walks of life, all galvanized to action by the deaths of innocent young civilians, gathered in almost every part of the city.²⁵ Leading monks sent an open call for action to the faithful: 'All Buddhist followers, regardless of whether ordained or part of [a Buddhist] household, Vietnamese or foreigner, everyone who was still passionate for religion, we kept our cool, always all as one, ready to be martyred, defending our way.'²⁶ On 10 May, Từ Đàm Pagoda organized a mass meeting to canonize the victims at the radio station and publicly release their 'five aspirations' manifesto to the government. The manifesto's first codicil, dated 23 May, declared the movement's first ideal to be equality of religion, a notion connected to social justice ideals.²⁷ From the first day, their five aspirations – and the nonviolent method of struggle – remained intact throughout the entire movement.

The Buddhists then began to organize more powerful actions, attracting a wide range of supporters for their mobilization. On 27 May, from Huế, Buddhist leaders called all monks to stop their activities and participate in the first nationwide forty-eight-hour hunger strike.²⁸ They considered the hunger strike a form of 'prayer to purify our hearts, consolidate our will, and arouse awareness and compassion in others'.²⁹ The Từ Đàm pagoda monks' collective act indeed aroused new awareness and affects, mobilizing wider networks of support beyond the Buddhists. Many other youths responded to their call and followed their act. Huế's Buddhist Student Association quickly took a central role, spreading energy to other social groups. Within several hours, the fast enlisted seventy volunteers – increasing to more than 200 by the next day. They assembled in Từ Đàm pagoda's yard, five strikers per row: students and retired officials, shopkeepers and housewives, young and old; all patiently endured hunger and intense summer heat.

University students' participation activated the community. Given the limited access to university degrees in Vietnam, advanced students were an especially respected group. 'Students back then brought great honour and financial support (thanks to their scholarships) to their families, so their mothers and sisters were greatly offended and hurt when they were starved, beaten or arrested', explained Khai Thông, a striker and student at the University of Huế's medical school, his voice thick with emotion fifty years later.³⁰ People from near and far flocked to Từ Đàm

²⁵Document of Anti-government Activities..., Folder 8529, VNA-II.

²⁶Open letter by monk Thích Tâm Châu from Sài Gòn, 9 May 1963, in Nam Thanh, *Cuộc tranh đấu lịch sử của Phật giáo Việt Nam [The historic struggle of Vietnamese Buddhists]* (Sài Gòn, 1964), n.p.

²⁷The Vietnamese Buddhist Clergy and Faithful's manifesto, dated 10 May 1963, outlined five aspirations: 1. That the government permanently allow display of the Buddhist religious flag; 2. that it permit Buddhists the same legal rights as Catholics; 3. that it halt the arrests and intimidation of Buddhists; 4. that it allow Buddhist monks and followers to practise their religion freely; and 5. that it compensate families of those killed and punish the perpetrators. See Thích Hải Ấn and Lê Cung, *Cuộc Vận Động Của Phật Giáo Việt Nam Năm 1963...*, the manifesto on p. 98; and codicil, pp. 107–112.

²⁸Announcement of 27 May 1963, signed by Vice President of General Buddhist Association of Vietnam Thích Tâm Châu, from Từ Đàm Pagoda's collection.

²⁹Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Love in action: writings on nonviolent social change* (Berkeley, CA, 1993), p. 41.

³⁰Khai Thông was raised in the former Nguyễn Emperor's elite family in Huế. Interview by author in Huế, 20 February 2014.

pagoda to see the suffering with their own eyes, and express their love, respect, and appreciation for the young 'heroes' of their city. They brought with them dozens of bags of rice, sugar, salt, sauces, tofu, sesame, etc., for strikers to eat afterwards. For many, it was the first time they had witnessed a different side of the studious, bookish students. Under the tropical heat in the pagoda's yard, elderly laypeople held the hands of the fasting students, sobbing: 'Oh Buddha, why? Pity them! They are so skinny, and they are going to starve themselves.'³¹ The hunger strike forged a new sense of identity, mobilized solidarity, and strengthened communal attachment among participants. As the group's newly imagined unity became evident, even more people became motivated to participate in collective activism.

While the monks and students were fasting at Từ Đàm, other social actions spread in the city, peaking in early June. The morning of 1 June, thousands of demonstrators from Từ Đàm and Diệu Đế pagodas marched to the provincial headquarters with national and Buddhist flags and banners, appealing directly to international audiences using multiple languages (two banners were in Vietnamese, two in English, and one in Chinese): 'We Vietnamese Buddhists Ask the Government to Satisfy our Five Aspirations'; 'We Ask for a Government Policy Based on Equality in Religion and Justice in Society'.³² The third day of June witnessed hunger strikes and gatherings of about one thousand participants at Từ Đàm Pagoda from 7 a.m., and several later protests at other locales attracted hundreds to thousands. The government attempted to disperse the crowds using tear gas, smoke grenades, and attack dogs. The scene repeated the next day. A total curfew was called, main streets and markets closed. According to Buddhist organizers, casualties from the two days included 142 wounded civilians and sixty-nine seriously injured protesters; twenty suffered asphyxiation.³³

Within weeks, the Buddhist leaders' words and acts entered into and influenced Huế's social and cultural life. From demonstrations to hunger strikes, Từ Đàm, Diệu Đế and other pagodas became sites for actualizing the movement's activism, spreading Buddhist aspirations and determination to other elements of society to gain support. The continuing protests and multiple threads of collective action both inside and outside the temples allowed the Buddhist community to lay foundations reinforcing solidarity and commitment to the movement. This deep and broad engagement in various forms of activism transformed individuals' Buddhist consciousness, forging the Buddhist Mobilization's collective identity.

IV

As the movement entered its second month, its participants strengthened reciprocal emotional ties and reshaped their view of the surrounding world, constructing

³¹ Thái Kim Lan, *Phượng trên trời Hải đường dưới đất*, unpublished memoir.

³² *Document on Anti-government Activities...*, Folder 8529, VNA-II.

³³ *Investigation Document of the National Police Department of the North Central Region in 1963*, Folder 1786, Office of Records and Archives in Huế (hereafter RAH); *Document of Some Young Men [who] Provoked the Army Force in front of the Provincial Headquarters and Bến Ngự Bridge in 1963*, Folder 492, RAH; *Document of Anti-government Activities...*, Folder 8529, VNA-II; Secret Reports of the Central Region to the National Department of Domestic Affairs, 5 June 1963, in *Mật điện đến Trung Nguyên* [Secret Decrees to the Central Region], Office of the Presidency of the First Republic Series, Folder 1320, VNA-II.

collective identity in a dynamic process.³⁴ The spiritual space of local Buddhist temples continued to offer a set of cultural bases from which participants developed a particular perception of individuals and community. They started to think of themselves within a larger group, and their individual actions as collective actions, with a new sense of 'we-ness'. As many participants later reflected, their individual identities collapsed into the collective, using 'we' instead of 'I' as they told their stories. They gradually discovered a collective agency they had never experienced prior to the events of Vesak day.

The 4th of June initiated a new period in Huế's Buddhist Mobilization. Government forces besieged Từ Đàm Pagoda while hundreds of police surrounded other temples, such as Diệu Đế, Báo Quốc, and Linh Quang. About 500 people, half of whom were students (the rest included intellectuals and labourers of all professions), were trapped at Từ Đàm for a week.³⁵ To the surprise of the locals, the pagoda was surrounded by barbed-wire fences and armoured cars, and besieged day and night by armed police and undercover guards. The pagoda's electricity and water were also cut off. This only strengthened the connection between diverse elements of Huế's society and Buddhism forming the group's collective identity, described by one participant as 'the People of the Pagoda' [*Người của Chùa*].³⁶

The concept of 'the People of the Pagoda' portrays the participants of the Buddhist Mobilization as an imagined community sharing their consciousness, aspirations, experiences, and moral and cultural ideals. These Buddhist citizens – remaining faithful to Buddhist values and their ancestors' beliefs, being deeply touched by fatal incidents, experiencing and witnessing others' suffering from immoral and hostile repression – saw no alternative but to follow their conscience and moral principles to act for the common goals. They felt that they must respond: 'Facing a situation of barbaric oppression, Buddhist novices just eight or nine [years old] had to lie under tank treads to be shredded bit by bit; how can we (just) stand by watching with crossed arms?'³⁷ Some participants had thoroughly considered their actions: 'When having thought about it and considered it right, I set off with very little hesitation, and was willing to engage [in the struggle] regardless of the challenges and dangers waiting out there.'³⁸ Others responded intuitively, simply following the mass without deep thought: 'When Buddhism in peril calls, we hear and come running.'³⁹ Government oppression apparently did not bother them; the more severe the suppression, the more enthusiastic these people were. To Hoàng Nguyên Nhuận it

³⁴As one of the key concepts in the study of social movements, collective identity is identified as a constructed process influenced by emotions and affective ties, with a network of active relationships. Of the many definitions of collective identity, I find Polletta and Jasper's, which emphasizes 'an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution', particularly useful in understanding social movements. See Francesca Polletta and James Jasper, 'Collective identity and social movements', *Annual Review of Sociology* 27(1) (2001): pp. 283–305.

³⁵*Document of Anti-government Activities...*, Folder 8529, VNA-II.

³⁶Hoàng Nguyên Nhuận, 'Cuộc chơi nửa đời người' ['The half-a-life game'] <http://sachhiem.net/HOANGNN/Hoang13.php> (accessed 8 May 2022).

³⁷Lê Công Cơ, *Năm tháng dâng người*, p. 132.

³⁸Trần Kiêm Đoàn, 'Sen đồng và Nắng hạ 1963', p. 126. Quotation marks in original.

³⁹Hoàng Nguyên Nhuận, 'Ôi thân yêu bóng chùa Từ Đàm' ['Oh Beloved Từ Đàm Pagoda'], <http://giaodiemonline.com/2010/09/tudam.htm> (accessed 8 May 2022).

was 'a little bit of youthful fun-loving',⁴⁰ and Khai Thông willingly confronted challenges: 'We considered it a big game, that was it. Having something to cope with was fun.'⁴¹ The collective spirit pervaded everyone. As one female market vendor explained: 'At the time the spirit was so high, our group was so crowded and unanimous that we were all no longer afraid.'⁴² They became free from fear and personal desires in order to fight for what they believed so that Buddhist aspirations could be implemented.⁴³ In the words of Thích Trí Quang, it was the 'Buddhist consciousness' [*ý thức Phật tử*] with the characteristics of fearlessness and benevolence that motivated the People of the Pagoda to participate in the mobilization.⁴⁴ Engaged Buddhism profoundly connected them all.

Participating in the movement provided an avenue for awakening individual awareness among the People of the Pagoda and deepening their self-realization, while also fulfilling family values and social duties. Affective ties of solidarity and loyalty to Buddhism became a form of power: 'We were better aware of our partnership and clanship, the spirit of people with common interests and ideals, regardless [of whether] we were close or strangers, old or young, we were [as] intimate as siblings, stayed close, truly understood and took care of each other.'⁴⁵ Supporting these 500-odd besieged pagoda individuals were thousands of their relatives, families, and friends. Many volunteered at the pagodas and hospitals to cook food, wash clothes, and look after other members of their community. For a month Buddhist nuns and laypeople cared for more than a hundred protesters injured on 3 and 4 June. Many stayed at the hospital day and night to help: 'We young men and women became nurses without any professional training. We have invaluable guidance: the call for altruism and collective duties.'⁴⁶ When the government forced them to leave the pagoda after a week, no one wanted to go. As Tâm Chánh admitted, 'We felt like we went against our conscience ... that it was lack of social duty which no faithful Buddhist wanted to do.'⁴⁷ Khai Thông's recollection reflected a strong connection: 'I thought if I left the pagoda, I would abandon my fellows; it felt like deserting the group.'⁴⁸ Though not everyone used the term 'the People of the Pagoda' at that time, the close attachment between Buddhism and the participants was visible. Seeing themselves in communal rather than individual terms gave the People of the Pagoda both pleasure and a sense of obligation to act as members of a group. The movement's religious culture mobilized individual determination, compassion, and sacrifice, empowering the community of the People of the Pagoda to struggle for religious equality and social justice.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Khai Thông, interview.

⁴²*Liên Hoa Monthly Journal* (29 January 1964), p. 91.

⁴³Phạm Văn Minh, *Vietnamese Engaged Buddhism*, p. 17.

⁴⁴Thích Trí Quang, 'Thư về Huế' ['Letter to Huế'], *Lập Trường* 10, 23 May 1964.

⁴⁵Tâm Chánh, 'Chùa Từ Đàm bị phong tỏa' ['Từ Đàm Pagoda is besieged'] in *Trước Con Sóng Gió*, p. 95.

⁴⁶Tâm Phùng, 'Những ngày ở bệnh viện' [Days at the hospital] in *Trước Con Sóng Gió*, p. 71; see also *Investigation Document of the National Police Department...*, Folder 1786, RAH.

⁴⁷Tâm Chánh, 'Chùa Từ Đàm bị phong tỏa', in *Trước Con Sóng Gió*, p. 94.

⁴⁸Khai Thông, interview.

Many of the People of the Pagoda came from diverse backgrounds among the urban population and surrounding suburbs. Before 1963, they may have joined various Buddhist associations, the Buddhist Family, or Buddhist Scouts, or just become new members of these groups during the summer of 1963, or only worshipped their ancestors at home. As in many other social movements in the global 1960s, student youth – both at the high school and university level – brought crucial enthusiasm and energy to the struggle. Among the young participants, many were children of aristocratic and wealthy families. Besides these core youths, another important element of the participant body was shopkeepers and street vendors. Thousands of tailors, barbers, drivers, construction workers, and various labourers participated in the mobilization from its first days.⁴⁹ Many came from rural districts of Thừa Thiên province and other central region provinces. Outside the mobilization, such diverse backgrounds might have distinguished different groups, but Buddhist social engagement united them all in a nonviolent movement. This close connection created a strong internal dynamic among the People of the Pagoda.

As in other social movements, the Buddhist Mobilization expressed its collective identity via cultural materials, from names and language to ideas and clothing.⁵⁰ In response to a social crisis, their language reflected that of responsible citizens. On 30 May, Huế's Buddhist Student Association reached out to all university and high school students in the country:

Facing the heartbreaking situation that the entire Buddhist community is forced to fight against, no matter how difficult the challenges, we will not give up. We are young and enthusiastic people who cannot ignore and watch our parents, who are shedding sweat and tears for the spiritual life of our nation and ourselves tomorrow and in the present.⁵¹

Five days later, their letter called all fellow countrymen to solidarity and commitment:

We urgently sound the alarm for compatriots throughout the country to know that religious discrimination has reached a serious phase [...] we all claim in solidarity that [...] everything [is] for Buddhism, for the ideal of religious equality in the social justice.⁵²

Throughout the summer, many associations and groups sent the government letters and requests with similar voices expressing their desires and vows to the mobilization's five aspirations.⁵³

⁴⁹*Liên Hoa Monthly Journal* (29 January 1964), pp. 97–8.

⁵⁰For more information on cultural materials and collective identity, see Francesca Polletta and James Jasper, 'Collective identity and social movements', *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001), p. 285.

⁵¹Thích Hải Ấn and Lê Cung, *Cuộc Vận Động Của Phật Giáo Việt Nam Năm 1963*, p. 131.

⁵²*Ibid.*, pp. 129–130.

⁵³See various documents in Thích Hải Ấn and Lê Cung, *Cuộc Vận Động Của Phật Giáo Việt Nam Năm 1963*, chs. 2 and 3; and unpublished documents held at Từ Đàm Pagoda.

Moreover, their connection to Buddhism and the movement prompted participants to observe matters of daily life they had never noticed before. In the case of Trần Kiêm Đoàn, his Buddhist uniform connected him to the group. As he biked daily to Từ Đàm Pagoda for updates, his old rattling bicycle was less problematic than considering what to wear: 'Wearing the uniform of the Buddhist Association, I was worried about my safety. Wearing non-Buddhist clothes to Từ Đàm Pagoda, I felt like an outsider.'⁵⁴ To Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, an education student, praying at mass meetings enabled him to see his belief system anew: 'Hands pressed together, we mumbled prayers from the Buddhist scripture. I learned these teachings by heart since I was a child, but not until that day did I realise their full meaning.'⁵⁵ Such daily collective rites stirred up strong affect in participants, reinforcing solidarity with the group. Imagining themselves through lenses of compassion and unity, the People of the Pagoda community developed complex dynamics of affective commitments, empowering the movement to reach a new scale.

V

Echoing other social movements in the world, the 1963 Vietnamese movement used nonviolence as 'the answer to the crucial political and moral question of our time', as Martin Luther King, Jr. said in his acceptance speech on receiving the 1964 Nobel Prize.⁵⁶ From the beginning, the Buddhists specified clearly and publicly that they chose nonviolent techniques, taking Gandhi as their model, using sacrifice as the ultimate weapon to confront oppression in hopes of changing policies as well as transforming people's hearts and minds.⁵⁷ Under the sangha's guidelines, the People of the Pagoda implemented Buddhist principles in their struggle: accepting the existence of suffering, believing there was a cause and an end to all suffering, and following the moral and righteous path to end it. They were aware of the core significance and consequence of the principle that the 'nonviolent method makes Buddhism viable, and that viability does not cause pain to others, although it could greatly increase the sacrifice of Buddhists'.⁵⁸ In their demonstrations, the People of the Pagoda always strictly implemented nonviolent methods, showing discipline and patience by sitting down and praying when confronting repression. The Buddhist Mobilization's various collective actions and consistent struggle method cultivated the seeds of actions for later social movements in the RVN in the mid-1960s.

In these nonviolent settings, suffering and sacrifice became a medium for communicating with those who did not recognize the Buddhist will. Throughout the

⁵⁴Trần Kiêm Đoàn, a student of Education at the University of Huế and a leader of Buddhist Scouts, wrote various short accounts on the mobilization. Trần Kiêm Đoàn, 'Sen đồng và Nắng hạ 1963', p. 116.

⁵⁵Nguyễn Đắc Xuân was a Buddhist and student of Education and Sinology at the University of Huế. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Từ Phú Xuân đến Huế* [From Phú Xuân to Huế], vol. 2 (Hà Chí Minh City, 2012), p. 30.

⁵⁶Martin Luther King Jr.'s Nobel Prize acceptance speech, 1964, <http://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/26142-martin-luther-king-jr-acceptance-speech-1964/> (accessed 16 August 2022).

⁵⁷See the codicil of the 10 May manifesto, in Thích Hải Ấn and Lê Cung, *Cuộc Vận Động Của Phật Giáo Việt Nam Năm 1963*, pp. 107–112.

⁵⁸Thích Trí Quang, 'Thư ngỏ' ['Open letter'], *Lập Trường Journal*, vol. 26, 3 October 1964.



Figure 2. Picture of banner.

summer the Buddhist Mobilization witnessed various participants' sacrifices as powerful rhetorical acts. Sacrifice varied from spending days and nights participating in mass gatherings and demonstrations, to going on hunger strikes, to being incarcerated or martyred for the common cause. When their words and nonviolent acts failed in the face of the government's uncompromising attitudes, severe suppression, and arrests, Buddhist leaders and laypeople became determined to persuade the government and the public with more powerful sacrifice. They willingly chose the utmost sacrifice to express their courage and compassion for the suffering of all life: self-immolation. This determination to fight for their religion was reflected in a banner reading: 'We have reached the point where we are forced to fight for an equitable religious policy. We do not reject any SACRIFICE'⁵⁹ See figure 2 (emphasis in original).

It is important to note that while the movement was born and continued to develop in Huế, protesters quickly gained the attention of national and international officials, diplomats, and journalists in the capital city of Sài Gòn. Social activism became vibrant nation-wide, and the movement's statements circulated internationally.⁶⁰ From late May onward, Buddhists and followers started staging non-violent demonstrations and hunger strikes. They memorized Vũ Hoàng Chương's poem 'Lửa Từ bi' [Compassion Flame]: 'Poems burn up with prayers/Prayers for humanity at peace/Forever this everlasting brotherhood' [*Thơ cháy lên theo với lời kinh/Tụng cho nhân loại hòa bình/Trước sau bền vững tình huynh đệ này*]. In July they attended the funeral of famed writer Nhất Linh, who committed suicide to protest government religious policy. At spiritual spaces such as Xá Lợi and Ấn Quang pagodas in Sài Gòn and many Buddhist temples throughout the country, the movement's activism on the national level played a significant role in leveraging its power

⁵⁹ Document on the Incidents in Huế..., Folder 8169, VNA-II.

⁶⁰ Many statements and letters were sent to the World Buddhist Committee, the United Nations, and many foreign embassies and consulates.

to speak directly to the government and the public around the world, in turn affecting the movement in Huế. One profoundly influential action was the world-famous self-immolation of senior monk Thích Quảng Đức on 11 June in Sài Gòn – the first self-immolation of the Buddhist Mobilization. Various sacrifices and self-immolations in several cities, including Sài Gòn, Nha Trang, and Huế, followed throughout the summer.

Vietnamese Buddhists did not view self-immolation as suicide but as a part of the repertoire of non-violent struggle – even an act of love: ‘Those who burned themselves had lost neither their courage nor desire to live. They were extremely courageous and aspired for something good in the future. They sacrificed themselves in order to seek help from the people in the world.’⁶¹ As monk Thích Nhất Hạnh explained to Martin Luther King, Jr., Vietnamese monks, nuns, and laypeople were ‘saying with all their strength and determination that they were willing to endure the greatest of suffering in order to protect their people’.⁶² Following Thích Quảng Đức’s self-sacrifice, two monks in Huế set themselves on fire in August 1963, intending to move the hearts of the government and draw public attention to Buddhist suffering. These monks chose to send their message from the sanctuary where they felt most secure and protected, again reinforcing local pagodas’ central role in cultivating participants’ thought and rhetorical activism. At 2 a.m. on 13 August at Phước Duyên pagoda, novice Thanh Tuệ, eighteen, set himself on fire to support the Buddhist struggle. The next day, hundreds of the People of the Pagoda wore a scrap of yellow cloth on their shirts to commemorate him and show their great admiration for the young monk.⁶³ Three days later, monk Thích Tiêu Diêu, seventy-one, self-immolated in the yard of Từ Đàm Pagoda before many People of the Pagoda. These living torches shocked the city, inflaming the spirit of struggle and further amplifying motivation to act. In this fiery public atmosphere, self-immolation appeared so simple that many were willing to sacrifice themselves for Buddhism. In Diệu Đế Pagoda’s front yard, university students brought gasoline drums and wood, built pyre-like heaps, and declared their willingness to immolate themselves. When students proclaimed that one student would self-immolate for each professor arrested, seven students volunteered.⁶⁴ One who stayed at Diệu Đế for several weeks recalled that ‘self-immolation for rights [was] not a big deal at all’.⁶⁵ A member of the Buddhist Family organization in Liễu Hạ district described collective immolation as participants journeying to heaven together.⁶⁶ By enduring the greatest suffering, these engaged Buddhists awakened many non-Buddhist hearts and minds.

⁶¹Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Love in action*, pp. 44–45.

⁶²Thích Nhất Hạnh, Letter to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1 June, 1965 in *Vietnam: Lotus in a sea of fire* (New York, 1967), pp. 106–108.

⁶³*Document of Anti-government Activities...*, Folder 8529, VNA-II.

⁶⁴Nguyễn Ngũ Í, ‘Đại học Huế tranh đấu chống chế độ cũ – Qua hai giờ nói chuyện với giáo sư Lê Tuyên’ [‘The University of Huế struggles against the old regime– via two hours talking with Professor Lê Tuyên’], *Bách Khoa Journal*, vol. 172, 1 March 1964, p. 29.

⁶⁵Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Từ Phú Xuân đến Huế*, vol. 2, p. 39.

⁶⁶Trần Kiêm Đoàn, ‘Sen đồng và Nắng hạ 1963’, pp. 122–123.

Besides these sacrifices, in the tense and eventful month of August 1963, the People of the Pagoda's nationwide struggle increased in attendance, broadened its sphere of action, and developed its objectives. The spirit of the Buddhist community's movement spread to other elements of the society. Its framework was no longer limited to the religious sphere but expanded beyond Buddhist leaders' initial plans to respond to larger social problems. On 16 August, the RVN government replaced the University of Huế's rector, Father Cao Văn Luận, who had implicitly supported the students' participation in the Buddhist Mobilization. The next day, approximately 500 protesters gathered on campus to express their disapproval.⁶⁷ Besides Buddhist students, the meeting brought together many professors, as well as a number of Catholics, Catholic school alumni, and many privileged sons and daughters of high-ranking government officials.⁶⁸ On 17 August, more than forty-five university faculty members resigned in response to the government's suppression of Buddhism.⁶⁹ The social movement now represented a new, united front of people of all religions and backgrounds against the RVN government.

Every day from 17 to 20 August, morning and afternoon, thousands of People of the Pagoda and others staged large demonstrations while government suppression reached new levels of violence.⁷⁰ Streets were blocked, markets closed, schools shut down, exams cancelled. The government imposed a total curfew. On 21 August 1963, the government's Operation Deluge marked a nationwide crackdown on Buddhist demonstrators. Hundreds of armed soldiers raided the Từ Đàm and Diệu Đế pagodas, arresting nearly one thousand unarmed Buddhist monks, professors, students, and other People of the Pagoda.⁷¹ Commonly known as the mobilization's 'Day of Dharma Persecution' [*Ngày Pháp Nạn*], many also considered it a 'Day of Awakening' [*Ngày Thức Tỉnh*].⁷² As one participant insisted, '[that day] only temporarily concluded our struggle, yet started an awakening period [when we] strengthened and broadened our struggle'.⁷³

The raid on pagodas marked the declining phase of the Buddhist Mobilization. Due to Ngô Đình Diệm's mishandling of the Buddhist crisis, a circle of military plotters in Sài Gòn ultimately toppled his government in a coup on 1 November 1963, citing the Buddhist problem as one reason. After almost six months of non-violent struggle for religious equality and social justice, the imprisoned People of the Pagoda were released in early November to a warm welcome by the public.

⁶⁷ *Document of Anti-government Activities...*, Folder 8529, VNA-II.

⁶⁸ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Từ Phú Xuân đến Huế*, vol. 2, p. 43.

⁶⁹ Nguyễn Ngu Í, 'Đại học Huế tranh đấu chống chế độ cũ' ['The University of Huế Struggles against the Old Regime'], p. 46.

⁷⁰ *Document of Activities of Students in Huế by the National Police Department of the Central Region, 1963*, Folder 1861, RAH; *Document of Anti-government Activities...*, Folder 8529, VNA-II.

⁷¹ *Daily Reports of the National Police Department of Thừa Thiên Province in 1963*, Folder 1862, RAH.

⁷² Tâm Hoài Tâm, 'Nhật ký Lập Trường' ['Lập Trường diary'], *Lập Trường* 23, 29 August 1964.

⁷³ Thái Lan, 'Hoài niệm 20 tháng 8' ['Remembering 20 August'], *Lập Trường* 22, 22 August 1964.

VI

In addition to its political legacy, the Buddhist Mobilization left a strong social and cultural impact, both internally and externally, on both its participants and the community of Huế during and after the movement. Internally, many People of the Pagoda found a deeper spiritual orientation in socially engaged Buddhism as the mobilization re-awakened national cultural values. In a short period, engaging in a social movement to change the outside world strengthened people's inner world – namely, their individual beliefs, practices, and identities. Thanks to the Buddhist struggle, some came to identify with the faith and joined various Buddhist organizations.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, new human relations emerged in the community of Huế on many levels. People from various social strata, including professors and students, shopkeepers and government officials, royal family members and housewives, were united around a common belief and commitment. Many women in Huế's patriarchal society now found themselves confidently engaging in diverse spheres of civil life with their male fellows. In this city of students, the classic image of students in their traditional long dress uniforms dimmed, replaced now by swelling ranks of active participants launching hunger strikes and demonstrations. The People of the Pagoda earned trust, respect, and material and emotional supports from the large community of Huế.

The Buddhist Mobilization's lasting legacy lay in changes in awareness at the personal level. Engaging in collective activism provided the People of the Pagoda with a variety of ways to contribute as individuals in the struggle for religious equality and social justice – and, more importantly, for civil roles in their changing society. Those who participated in the mobilization fully or partially, whether directly or indirectly, were inspired to think about their ability to act beyond the limits of traditional social frameworks – many for the first time. As Quán Như Phạm Văn Minh put it, 'if there was no such thing as the Buddhist upheaval, we could have become, in the words of Herbert Marcuse, some sort of "one-dimensional" class willing to protect the regime, since destroying the current regime also meant demolishing the privileged position of the elites like ourselves'.⁷⁵ Known primarily for their traditional, modest characteristics, imperial Huế's citizens now witnessed and became victims of repression, arrests, and imprisonment, prompting them to join in various protest actions. Social activism opened a new world of spiritual and engaged Buddhism where they could fulfil their social duties as responsible citizens. As reflected in non-violent activism, Buddhist teachings of compassion, sacrifice, and a fearless spirit awakened participants and empowered them to stand up first for freedom of their own religious practice, then for social justice and other national issues. Thanks to the mobilization, a significant number of Huế's populace began to appreciate the political dilemmas facing their nation, becoming more attentive to politics. The nationalistic consciousness of the People of the Pagoda matured, revealing an inseparable link between Buddhism and nationalism.

⁷⁴Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the lake: the Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*, p. 134; Erich Wulff, *Vietnamesische Lehrjahre*, p. 132.

⁷⁵Quán Như Phạm Văn Minh, 'Sáng mai Chim hót' ['Birds will sing tomorrow morning'], in 1963–2013: *Năm mươi năm nhìn lại*, vol. 3, p. 409.

Analysing the Buddhist Mobilization from its participants' perspectives enables us to better understand socially engaged Buddhism using a bottom-up approach. The human experience – the participants' thoughts, feelings, and motivations when engaging in social activism – provide new insights into both the Buddhist movement and Vietnamese social life. The movement's participants and supporters gradually foresaw in Buddhism and its socially engaged movement the necessary conditions for making change: a righteous cause in a trusted faith, organization, and leadership. This approach also explains the formation of networks and community – in other words, the progression of how the movement was able to gain power and grow strong in such a short time.

Starting as a spontaneous, local religious movement, the mobilization quickly developed into a fully-fledged, nation-wide social movement. In response to the government's hostility toward Buddhism and the nation's moral standards, the Buddhist Mobilization expanded to Sài Gòn and other places, successfully contributing to a fundamental political change in the RVN. If Thích Trí Quang's morning speech was unscripted, *Đánh Thức's* action in the afternoon was emotion-led, and the evening gathering at the radio station on Vesak was spur-of-the-moment, subsequent social actions left such spontaneity behind. Only days after the first events, Buddhists organized themselves around the common cause of justice for their faith. The fact that the Buddhist sangha instantly presented and insisted on their struggle method and programme throughout the movement demonstrated their leadership capability. Moreover, *Từ Đàm*, *Diệu Đế* and other temples offered vibrant space for constructing and developing collective identity, strengthening the community's capacity for enduring government repression and powerfully cultivating the seeds of engagement in social activism.

Within weeks, the People of the Pagoda developed a strong, broad community through various nonviolent collective actions. By strictly following Buddhist leaders' guidelines, thousands of people shared common interests, emotions, and determination, including sacrificing their lives for a religious purpose. Their utmost belief in Buddhist cultural and moral values and the mobilization's goals helped them develop a fluid relational network, strengthening their solidarity and commitment. Engaging in the movement provided participants with unique experiences and opportunities that transformed their sense of self, family, and community, shaping their worldview during and after the movement. In the historical and cultural traditions of both Huế and Buddhism, the People of the Pagoda's collective identity was determined by dynamic interactions on the individual level, which in turn shaped the collective struggle. As Hoàng Nguyên Nhuận put it: 'Although taking pleasure in the fear, although at times dispirited and broken-hearted, although at times alarmed and in doubt, although at times dead and alive, dead and alive [...] those who stayed at the pagoda will forever be the People of the Pagoda.'⁷⁶ Thanks to the People of the Pagoda, the mobilization's values, rituals, discourse, and *zeitgeist* lived on, inspiring successive social movements in the RVN in the mid-1960s.

⁷⁶Hoàng Nguyên Nhuận, 'Cuộc chơi nửa đời người'.

Interpreting the 1963 Buddhist Mobilization as a germinal social movement is essential to understanding the immense waves of change that later roiled the city of Huế, leading central Vietnam into further chaos as it struggled for peace, national self-determination, and democracy from 1964 to 1966. Buddhist leaders' ability to successfully mobilize a mass movement – with support from both lay followers and non-Buddhists – to openly challenge the government and bring down the regime greatly motivated the public to participate in future social activism. The dominant method continued to be nonviolence, while its moral frames, protest traditions, resources, and spirit brought cultural energy to the subsequent struggle movements. Moreover, thanks to the Buddhist Mobilization's most important impact on its participants – awakening the younger generation to national issues – central Vietnam's later struggle movement extended beyond the Buddhist community to become the people's movement for peace, independence, and democracy. Many People of the Pagoda later became the core of the 'People of the Movement' [*Dân phong trào*] in the later years. The grassroots history of Huế's movement shows that there was much more to 1960s Vietnam than the political changes and the escalating conflict. Within Vietnam itself, like elsewhere in the world, social movement was also a key theme of the long decade of political and social flux. Huế's 1963 Buddhist Mobilization opened an embryonic space for social activism and played an essential role in defining the spirit of the 1960s in southern Vietnam.