

BUDDHISM IN VIETNAM'S THREE TEACHINGS CONFIGURATION: RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM AS A MODE OF LEGITIMATION

O budismo na configuração das Três Doutrinas no Vietnã: o sincretismo religioso como modo de legitimação

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Abstract

In Vietnamese history, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism coexisted both as three doctrinal traditions and as three symbolic resources mobilized by society to organize moral life, ritual practice, and political order. Yet existing scholarship either separates textual inquiry from social and institutional contexts, or frames the Three Teachings primarily as a discourse of “harmony,” and therefore leaves insufficiently answered a central question, namely why these three traditions could sustain durable co-presence across different historical periods. Addressing this gap, the present article foregrounds legitimation and, by adopting a lived religion perspective, clarifies how Buddhism was deployed as an ethical language through which social order and political choices were rendered legitimate. Methodologically, the study combines conceptual analysis, historical contextualization, source synthesis, and comparative examination to identify mechanisms of semantic translation and the coordination of values across divergent frames of reference. On this basis, the article traces the pathway from syncretic co-practice to a legitimating ordering of Buddhism within Vietnam’s Three Teachings configuration. It also highlights the risks that emerge when this mechanism becomes excessively institutionalized or overly ritualized, thereby weakening reflexive capacities and transforming intellectual dialogue into a formula for legitimating order.

Keywords: *religious syncretism, Vietnam’s Three Teachings, legitimation, ritualization, internalization.*

Resumo



Na história vietnamita, o budismo, o confucionismo e o taoismo coexistiram tanto como três tradições doutrinárias quanto como três recursos simbólicos mobilizados pela sociedade para organizar a vida moral, a prática ritual e a ordem política. Contudo, a literatura existente tende, por um lado, a separar a investigação textual dos contextos sociais e institucionais e, por outro, a enquadrar as Três Doutrinas sobretudo como um discurso de “harmonia”, deixando, assim, insuficientemente respondida uma questão central: por que razão essas três tradições conseguiram sustentar uma copresença durável ao longo de diferentes períodos históricos. Para enfrentar essa lacuna, o presente artigo coloca a legitimação no centro da análise e, adotando a perspectiva da religião vivida, esclarece como o budismo foi mobilizado como uma linguagem ética por meio da qual a ordem social e as escolhas políticas se tornaram legítimas. Do ponto de vista metodológico, o estudo combina análise conceptual, contextualização histórica, síntese de fontes e exame comparativo, a fim de identificar mecanismos de tradução semântica e de coordenação de valores entre quadros de referência divergentes. Com base nisso, o artigo reconstrói o percurso que vai da coprática sincrética à ordenação legitimadora do budismo no interior da configuração das Três Doutrinas no Vietnã. Destaca-se igualmente os riscos que emergem quando esse mecanismo se torna excessivamente institucionalizado ou excessivamente ritualizado, enfraquecendo as capacidades reflexivas e transformando o diálogo intelectual numa fórmula de legitimação da ordem.

Palavras-chave: *sincretismo religioso, Três Doutrinas no Vietnã, legitimação, ritualização, internalização.*

Introduction

In the history of religions, “syncretism” is sometimes understood as a natural, accidental blending, one that unfolds with little or no conflict. Yet on closer inspection, syncretism is rarely innocent. It is often accompanied by boundaries, selections, and quiet contests over who has the authority to name a practice as “right,” “wrong,” “deviant,” or “superstitious” (Shaw & Stewart 1994, 1-26). Even the term “religion” itself is not wholly neutral. It is a historically formed category that has gradually come to function as a purportedly universal grid for classifying societies, while obscuring the power relations



embedded in the very act of classification (Asad, 1993, pp. 29-30; Masuzawa, 2005, pp. 29-30). From this vantage point, the question is no longer whether the co-presence of traditions produces “harmony,” but rather how people in a socio-political community have lived with these traditions: how they have chosen, combined, and separated them, and how such boundaries have acquired efficacy in everyday life, even becoming grounds for legitimating order.

Vietnam provides a particularly revealing case because these three traditions did not enter society through the same pathways. Confucianism became closely tied to the state, educational institutions, civil service examinations, and norms of governance, entering primarily through institutional channels (Cooke 1994, 270-312). Buddhism, by contrast, took root early in decidedly practical needs such as healing, rainmaking, the management of uncertainty, and the search for support amid suffering, only later consolidating into doctrinal language, monastic organization, and disciplined forms of self-cultivation. Early traces point to a world of supplication, ritual efficacy, and the veneration of trees and stones more than to a closed, self-contained system of doctrine (Taylor 2018, 107-122). Daoism, in many contexts, tended to appear as a repertoire of ritual and therapeutic techniques, ranging from talismans and incantations to procedures for “working” with a cosmology, as evidenced in communal practice (Zavidovskaia, 2018). For this reason, Vietnam’s Three Teachings should be understood first as a shared field of practice, in which the traditions attach to social life through different anchors and are mobilized for different purposes. Out of these repeatedly enacted practical selections, a sense of what counts as “legitimate” gradually emerges, and social order gains additional reasons to be recognized.

From this perspective, the present article neither celebrates a formula of “harmony” nor reduces the phenomenon to mere “mixing.” It approaches syncretism as a concrete social



process, unfolding both within institutions and in everyday life. As Buddhism entered practical domains, it simultaneously had to alter modes of expression and recalibrate practices in order to be acknowledged within an existing spiritual order. Syncretism therefore entails semantic translation: the same idea or ritual, once situated in a different context, can be understood and employed differently (Gadamer 2004, 385-386). What requires attention, in other words, is not simply the simultaneous presence of traditions, but the operations that make such co-presence repeatable, and thereby incorporable into an order.

On this basis, the article places “legitimizing ordering” at the center of analysis. Here, “legitimation” is understood in a straightforward sense as the process through which an order or a role comes to appear “reasonable,” “credible,” and “worthy of adherence” in the eyes of the community (Berger & Luckmann 1991, 109-111). “Ordering,” meanwhile, emphasizes the operational direction of this process: standards of validity are rearranged and stabilized in lived practice, entering sermons, rituals, and forms of spiritual authority until they become familiar ways of understanding and acting (Suddaby et al., 2017). If Confucianism supplies a normative framework for naming order and social position, Buddhism often offers an ethical and soteriological language of compassion and the relief of suffering through which that order becomes more acceptable. Accordingly, the article’s emphasis is not to present the Three Teachings as a symmetrical synthesis, but to clarify Buddhism’s role within this configuration as a mechanism of moralization and internalization that can sustain, and at times legitimate, social order.

The article proceeds along two axes. The first outlines the context of Buddhism’s introduction and the conditions that enabled deep localization. The second traces the processes of encounter and adjustment between Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism across two temporal layers: an initial layer, roughly from the second to the fifth centuries,



examined through textual traces and missionary practice in order to identify early modes of semantic translation and conditions of recognition, and a crystallizing layer in the Ly and Tran periods, when co-presence was consolidated through institutions, rituals, and social role differentiation. Focusing on the initial layer makes it possible to observe formative operations, while comparison with the Ly and Tran periods reveals how these operations were stabilized within a specific historical order. From here, the article pursues a set of questions: In what context did Buddhism enter Vietnam, and which social needs sustained it? Why, despite shared influences from India and China, did Vietnamese reception generate a distinctive landscape of practice? In the process of coexistence, how did the traditions differentiate roles and delimit one another? Finally, how should the model of “co-presence of the Three Teachings” be understood as a lived choice of the community rather than as a conciliatory slogan (McGuire, 2008, pp. 13, 15-16; Orsi, 1997, pp. 3-21; Hedges, 2017, pp. 48-72)?

Literature review

Research on the Three Teachings in Vietnam is extensive, yet overall it remains fragmented. It can be summarized into three main trajectories. The first comprises historical and intellectual studies of Vietnamese Buddhism, emphasizing Buddhism’s role as a major spiritual current in the nation’s history. The second examines the concept often discussed as the “common origin of the Three Teachings” thesis (Vietnamese: *tam giáo đồng nguyên*, literally “the Three Teachings sharing a common origin”) as a hallmark of Vietnamese intellectual identity. The third consists of more recent studies in anthropology and the sociology of religion, concentrating on contemporary practice and the structure of lived belief.

Studies on Vietnamese Buddhist thought and history



The works of Nguyễn Lang, Lê Mạnh Thát, and Tran Van Giap constitute a foundational evidentiary base for any serious discussion of Vietnamese Buddhism. In *Việt Nam Phật giáo sử luận*, Nguyễn Lang presents Buddhism as a historical tradition with identifiable stages and centers of development, while also suggesting early contacts and forms of religious accommodation within local milieus (Nguyễn 1973, 21-33). At the historiographical level, Tran Van Giap's studies provide philological tools and a bibliographic apparatus that keep scholarship on Buddhism anchored in sources rather than impressionistic judgments (Tran 1968, 49-52). Lê Mạnh Thát, in major syntheses of Vietnamese Buddhist history, further expands this picture through textual comparison, chronological reconstruction, and attention to the connections between Buddhist thought and socio-political contexts (Lê 2001, 55-78).

The strength of this tradition lies in its clear temporal narrative, dense documentation, and sustained effort to reconstruct context, thereby enabling many claims to be verified. Yet precisely because it privileges textual narration and descriptive historical development, some studies leave open a mechanistic question: how Buddhism coexisted with, adjusted to, and reconfigured its relations with Confucianism and Daoism within the same cultural space, and through which operations such adjustments occurred at the levels of meaning and practice. Mậu Tử is often treated primarily as an apologist defending Buddhism against contemporary challenges, rather than as an author whose argumentative strategies reveal how dialogue across distinct frames of reference becomes possible (Mouzi 1973, 19-32). As a consequence, the philosophical dimensions of Buddhism within the Three Teachings configuration frequently appear as the “content” of a discrete tradition, rather than as an interactive force within a dialogical whole that takes shape from the lived realities of syncretic coexistence.

The “common origin of the Three Teachings” thesis as an identity discourse



This line of research has helped shift the focus from merely describing co-presence to conceptualizing the phenomenon as an intellectual modality. Many scholars treat “common origin” as a shared moral ground or a syncretic tendency, and on that basis present the Three Teachings as a distinctive feature of Vietnamese intellectual identity. Nguyễn Đăng Thục, for example, emphasizes convergence at the ethical level (Nguyễn, 1964, pp. 12-19). From the perspective of patriotic intellectual history, an influential account suggests a functional differentiation: Buddhism softens power, Confucianism provides an organizational framework, and Daoism preserves a space of inner freedom (Trần, V. G. 1993, 253-259). In cultural studies, Nguyễn Duy Hinh describes co-presence as a form of cultural flexibility, in which values that appear opposed can nonetheless coexist within historical reality (Nguyễn, D. H 1993, 145-158).

The advantage of this trajectory is that it moves the study of the Three Teachings beyond descriptive co-presence toward conceptualization as a culturally and intellectually localized phenomenon. However, its key limitation is also located here. When “common origin” is treated as a prior assumption, it can remain at the level of naming an outcome rather than explaining the mechanisms that produced that outcome. In principle, syncretism should not be understood as a self-evident state, but analyzed as a mediated process involving selection, negotiation, and the distribution of interpretive authority. Scholarship on syncretism has emphasized that syncretic formations are entangled with disputes over orthodoxy and interpretive power, and therefore cannot be described simply as “harmony,” but must specify the social conditions and meaning-making mechanisms through which such harmony becomes possible (Shaw & Stewart 1994, 1-26). At the same time, critiques of the category “religion” underscore that naming and classification are not neutral, and may obscure concrete mechanisms at work in particular historical contexts (Asad 1993, 29-30; Smith 1982, xi).



Anthropological and sociological research, and the level of practice

From the late twentieth century onward, anthropological and sociological approaches have brought the study of Vietnam's Three Teachings out of the textual domain and back into the terrain of lived practice. Studies of ritual, popular belief, festivals, and sacred spaces show layered symbolism in communal houses, temples, and pagodas, as well as the interlacing of religion, moral norms, and communal order. In international scholarship, many ethnographic works emphasize that Buddhism in village settings is closely bound up with communal memory, relations of power, and the need for social cohesion, and thus cannot be understood as a purely interior life detached from society (Taylor, 2004; Malarney, 2002).

The strength of this approach lies in its thick empirical texture and its capacity to capture how religion is lived and mobilized in everyday life. Nonetheless, when research moves deeply into the micro-level, it sometimes connects insufficiently with the historical transformation of key conceptual categories. How do notions such as non-self, filial piety, legitimation, non-action, compassion, and others shift in meaning when they enter contexts of state power, village life, or different political periods? Put differently, anthropology offers a richly material picture, yet it still requires an explanatory framework fine-grained enough to show why syncretism is not merely "mixing," but a historically structured process of semantic translation. The lived religion perspective suggests that if we view religion only as a normative doctrinal system, we will fail to grasp how meaning is produced through practice and interaction, while simultaneously placing the demand to move from description toward an account of operative mechanisms (Ammerman, 2016; Knibbe & Kupari, 2020; McGuire, 2008, pp. 13, 15-16; Orsi, 1997, pp. 3-21).

The author's approach



Across these three trajectories, a clear gap becomes visible. Although there is abundant documentation and description of the co-presence of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, there remains a lack of a sufficiently sharp explanatory framework to answer why this syncretic coexistence could operate durably in Vietnamese history, while also producing a shared sense of “reasonableness” with regard to a common order. In recent scholarship on East Asia, inter-traditional syncretism is often not understood as accidental fusion, but as ongoing operations of contact, adaptation, reinterpretation, and, at times, the formation of unifying discourses robust enough to function as socially efficacious cultural and epistemic frameworks (Li, 2025; Wu, Y., 2025; Yang & Ouyang, 2025). Historical narratives excel at reconstructing sequences, yet they often do not specify how value systems act upon and recalibrate one another. Conceptualizations of “common origin” tend to gravitate toward describing identity, and thus underanalyze the conditions that make coexistence workable. Anthropological studies foreground religion as living practice, yet frequently do not connect the micro-level to questions of order and legitimacy, even as some recent work suggests that ritual practice, embodiment, cosmology, and emergent modes of organization are precisely where such junctions become visible (Wu, N., 2025; Yang & Sun, 2025).

In this article, I propose approaching the Three Teachings as a process of intellectual dialogue among three philosophical traditions that differ in ontological premises, epistemological orientations, and ethical ideals. The focus is not on listing the “influences” of each tradition, but on tracing the internal logic of syncretism: how a category changes meaning when it moves across contexts, how a norm is legitimized, and when syncretic formation produces a moral balance versus when it blurs the boundary between moral reasoning and instrumentality. On this approach, the Three Teachings are not treated as a fixed cultural model, but as a dialogical space in which Vietnamese thought is formed and recalibrated through history. This perspective therefore pursues two aims simultaneously: to



address the mechanistic gap left by earlier trajectories, and to place the Vietnamese case in dialogue with broader problems in the study of religion and in the philosophy of religion.

Research methods

This article adopts a combined methodological approach. At the conceptual level, it employs conceptual analysis to clarify syncretism as a process of semantic translation and the coordination of interpretive authority, while defining legitimation in an operational sense, that is, as the making of an order appear “reasonable” within a community’s shared sense of what is warranted (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, pp. 109-111; Suddaby et al., 2017). At the historical level, the article examines the multi-route introduction of Buddhism and compares historical periods in order to identify both the conditions of reception and the operations through which forms of stability were produced, with particular attention to the early centuries of the Common Era and the Ly and Tran dynasties (Coedès, 1968, pp. 36-41; Taylor, 1991, pp. 38-41; Kim, 2015, pp. 11, 15-16; Li, 2016, pp. 355-356). At the level of practice, the study approaches religion as lived life, attending to ritual rhythms, communal habits, and ethical techniques, thereby reading syncretism as a social mechanism rather than merely as doctrinal content (Ammerman, 2016; McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 1997). On this basis, the article also employs comparative analysis across East Asian cases to sharpen the identification of legitimating operations, without collapsing the Vietnamese case into Chinese or Korean models.

Findings and discussion

Vietnam’s open cultural context: preconditions for the introduction and localization of Buddhism



Buddhism did not arrive in Vietnam through a single route. It entered through a complex intercultural trajectory via two major vectors of transmission from India, one by way of China, and another along maritime routes into Southeast Asia. A wide range of classical and contemporary studies suggest that these two currents were present simultaneously, from India by sea into Luy Lau and the southern regions (Nam Bo) (Coedès 1968, 36-41; Nguyễn 1973, 22-33; Tran 1968, 42-49), and from China into Giao Chau through layers of Han cultural influence (Taylor 1991, 38-41). In this multi-route context, the question is not only which routes Buddhism took, but under what conditions local culture received and interpreted these currents of influence, and why Buddhism could coexist with relative ease alongside Confucian and Daoist value systems that were already present.

To address this question, it is necessary, in my view, to return to the “openness” of Vietnamese culture in the pre-Buddhist period. Social conditions at that time had not yet produced a sufficiently strong and stable mechanism of orthodoxization capable of monopolizing intellectual orientation at the level of society as a whole. In contrast to China, where from the Qin and especially the Han the state established an orthodox governing ideology grounded in standardized ritual and canonical texts (Lewis, 2007, pp. 180-195), and to Korea, where Confucianism was elevated under the Joseon state to the status of official orthodoxy and penetrated law, ritual, and bureaucratic organization (Deuchler, 1992, pp. 33-39), several studies of Vietnamese history suggest that prior to the second century local society operated primarily within an agrarian space tied to dispersed local settlement communities, and had not yet formed a stable orthodoxizing apparatus capable of uniformly directing the reception of exogenous philosophies across society (Li 2016, 355-356; Kim 2015, 15-16). Under such conditions, the reception of new ideas often occurred through points of contact in everyday life before being stabilized into a system (Kim, 2015, p. 11). This context made it possible for Buddhism, arriving along commercial routes and through



forms of social transmission, to permeate life without necessarily depending on a court-sponsored official mission. Traces at Luy Lau, together with an early temple network (Hall 2011, 80; Lê 2017, 68), are important indicators that Buddhism was linked to popular and commercial exchange networks and was relatively non-dependent, from the outset, on an integrated structure of religious and political power. This yields a distinctive point that deserves emphasis: Vietnamese Buddhism can be viewed as the outcome of a process of “social permeation,” rather than as a coercive dissemination driven by political power.

These considerations help clarify how Buddhism entered Giao Chi as a social current. What requires further explanation, however, is not merely the route of entry, but why Buddhism could penetrate deeply into everyday life and stabilize its position within the local spiritual order. Competing interpretations have been offered. Nguyễn Thế Anh emphasizes a mechanism of political legitimation: through dynastic patronage, Buddhism became a means by which royal power could penetrate and integrate local political structures, and therefore stabilized as part of the governing order, not merely as a private belief (Nguyễn 2002, 225). By contrast, Taylor begins from popular religiosity and the Vietnamese tendency toward animistic orientations, arguing that traditional practices such as the veneration of trees and stones and rainmaking rituals constituted a pre-existing sacred ground that enabled Buddhism to sink into local culture (Taylor, 2018, pp. 107, 109). While both lines of explanation have merit, each can readily slip into a one-sided account, attributing stability primarily either to political sponsorship or to popular compatibility. My own view is that Buddhism’s incorporation and social diffusion in Vietnam resulted from multiple interwoven forces. Yet the deeper and primary source may be located in the social conditions of local life itself: a smallholder agrarian economy and a dispersed settlement pattern, in which what is received first tends to be practices capable of responding to communal needs, only later undergoing interpretation as an articulated ideological system. This functional mode of reception helps



explain both why Buddhism could enter without provoking strong resistance at the level of everyday life, and why, when confronted with the state's need for legitimation, it could shift from initial rooting to long-term stability within the local spiritual order.

From the standpoint of the sociology of religion, it is precisely the flexibility of the indigenous belief structure that allowed exogenous elements to be attached to communal life through ritual. Durkheim underscored the role of ritual in consolidating community and addressing collective anxiety (Durkheim 1995, 389-392). On this reading, it becomes clearer why Buddhism, by bringing rituals of peace-making, requiem and relief rites, and practices oriented toward spiritual reassurance, was received with relative ease. Studies based on ethnographic observation likewise suggest that people seek temples as spaces of “reassurance” and “healing” (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2023; Nguyen, 2025, p. 741). Buddhism's presence was not set against Mother Goddess worship or the cult of village tutelary spirits, but more often supplemented an existing communal ritual repertoire (Ngô 2019, 218-220). It is at this practical level that one can better understand why, in many contexts, Vietnamese actors can draw upon multiple reservoirs of meaning at once. The Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist traditions thus do not typically appear as three antagonistic systems in everyday life, but as three meaning repertoires mobilized according to need. This suggestion also resonates with some recent observations in East Asian religious studies, where ritual is treated as a point of articulation that brings body, cosmology, and symbolic order into alignment, thereby generating the social efficacy of belief (Wu, N., 2025).

Yet the openness of the pre-Buddhist cultural environment explains only the social conditions of reception. It does not fully explain why Buddhism entered Vietnamese life with relatively little resistance and rapidly secured a stable position within the local spiritual order. At a deeper level, its penetration was also bound up, in my view, with mechanisms of power.



Buddhism was not only received as belief, it could also be mobilized as a symbolic resource for governance. This framing is consistent with Asad's and Orsi's insistence that "religion" is not a transhistorical category, but a historical concept tied to mechanisms of power and social discipline (Asad 1993, 29-30; Orsi, 2005). From this vantage point, rather than viewing Buddhism as a block of doctrine that arrives and replaces what came before, it is more appropriate to treat it as a constellation of practices, symbols, and ethical techniques that communities receive, select, and attach to life.

Historical experience suggests that political power often requires symbolic forms to soften the coercive character of rule. Law and force may compel compliance, but compliance is difficult to sustain without a moralizing idiom. Here, Buddhism, with its language of compassion, suffering and its relief, karma, and rebirth, opens a pathway for transforming social order into moral order, such that obedience can be presented simultaneously as obligation toward the state and as a virtuous mode of life. Other East Asian cases likewise show that religion can be organized through policy and institutions, thereby foregrounding the power dimension of legitimation processes (Li, 2025; Yang & Sun, 2025). In this sense, Buddhism may be said to exercise a form of "soft efficacy" through its capacity to touch what Tillich called human beings' "ultimate concern," that is, when belief becomes the deepest point of convergence of life, it can shape moral sensibility and increase the voluntary character of conduct (Tillich 1957, 1-2).

From syncretism to legitimation: statecraft morality within the Three Teachings order

Within the trajectory of Vietnamese intellectual history, Buddhism appears both as a religious tradition that at times had to negotiate, and even contest, its position vis-à-vis Confucianism and Daoism (Lê & Trần, 2024, p. 81), and as a powerful contributor to bringing



moral reasoning into inner life, transforming externally imposed “must-do” norms into a need for self-discipline, self-examination, and self-regulation (Nguyễn 2021, 121-123). In this way, the encounter among the three traditions does not remain at the level of mere co-presence as separate domains, but can be understood as a process of interaction in practice and in the shaping of order, ranging from everyday moral conduct to conceptions of governing (Lê & Trần 2024, 81-83). Yet if this phenomenon is named only through a descriptive label such as “Three Teachings syncretism” in the sense of amicable harmony, one is unlikely to reach what is decisive in the problem. The focus of this section is not the question of how the three traditions influenced one another, but the question of mechanism: through what means religious resources are mobilized, coordinated, and rendered effective so that an order marked by coercion comes to appear “reasonable,” “credible,” and “worthy of adherence” within the community’s moral sensibility. In other words, here syncretism functions as the historical and cultural condition that enables a shared semantic field to emerge, whereas the analytic object is religious legitimation within the Three Teachings order.

Accordingly, Three Teachings syncretism is understood primarily at the level of ritual practice, everyday moral conduct, and socio-political modes of organization, rather than as a thoroughgoing fusion of doctrine (Shaw & Stewart 1994, 1-2; McGuire 2008, 12). The central question may therefore be stated directly: considered as a social phenomenon, is Three Teachings syncretism ultimately chiefly a condition of spontaneous coexistence, or is it a mode of coordinating meanings that can legitimate statecraft morality. I incline toward the second possibility. But to avoid grounding the argument in intuition, it is necessary to specify the operations through which legitimation works. In this subsection, I propose an analytic axis composed of three interlinked operations: moralization, internalization, and ritualization. By “moralization” I mean the process through which governing norms are



articulated in a language of moral reasonableness, such that order is named as morality, duty, and obligation. By “internalization” I mean the shift from external compulsion to internal self-binding, in which what is “right” is no longer simply obedience, but becomes self-admonition, self-scrutiny, and self-limitation. By “ritualization” I mean the consolidation of order through the repetitive rhythm of practice, calendrical cycles, embodied routines, and communal participation, such that what is “reasonable” becomes sensible and doable, and thus durable.

This analytic axis is developed through engagement with three major emphases in the literature, but is reconfigured to meet the demands of a legitimation-centered question. The first emphasis concerns projects of “unifying the Three Teachings” (三教合一), which treat unity as a constructed outcome rather than a natural condition. In Timothy Brook’s account, the “unity of the Three Teachings,” linked to practices of “joint worship,” suggests that unity does not reside merely in discourse, but is embedded in structures of worship and habitual ritual routines (Brook 1993, 13-44). Along the same line, Yuhao Wu shows that the Unity of the Three Teachings movement can be concretized through salvific doctrines, where the Confucian-Buddhist-Daoist combination operates as a complementary schema that legitimates an ideal of both “inner cultivation” and “outer governance” (Wu, Y., 2025). What I take from this body of work is the trace of an agentic project and a purposive orientation: unification always has makers, focal points, and strategies. Yet caution is required here as well, because if the label “syncretism” is retained as a neutral designation, analysis risks flattening the asymmetries and contests that accompany processes of unification. Shaw and Stewart explicitly warn that syncretism is not innocent, since it raises the question of who has the authority to name a tradition as syncretic, and what political consequences follow from such acts of naming (Shaw & Stewart 1994, 1-2). For the problem of legitimation, this



warning functions as a reading principle: to see syncretism at work, one must also see the power of interpretation.

The second emphasis foregrounds institutions and policy, treating syncretism as a mode of governance and integration. Xiaobai Li, in analyzing Yuan-dynasty religious policy surrounding devotion to the Buddhist canon, shows how religion may be mobilized to generate a form of religious consensus, thereby serving cultural integration and political consolidation (Li, 2025). This insight helps place legitimation on a top-down plane: patronage, resources, networks, and large-scale rituals can transform moral discourse into a stabilized order. Yet if analysis remains within this slice alone, it is likely to miss a bottom-up dimension, where syncretism is lived, negotiated, deviated from, or resisted in everyday life. For this reason, I deliberately return the analytic center to lived practice, following Nancy T. Ammerman's recommendation to attend to how ordinary people live religion rather than treating authoritative texts and institutional programs as the sole center of gravity (Ammerman 2015, 1-8). For a legitimation-focused inquiry, this is not only a change of observational object but also a change of criterion: order is not merely promulgated, it must be received, habituated, and become "reasonable" in the sensibility of those who live it.

The third emphasis places ritual and embodiment at the center, where order is not only articulated but trained into habit. Nengchang Wu shows that local Daoist ritual comprises a chain of operations linking the body, cosmology, altar space, and canonical texts, making symbolic order practicable and reproducible (Wu, N., 2025). Qixin Yang and Yanfei Sun, in discussing the organizational formation of Chan and Pure Land traditions in the Tang period, employ the concept of interstitial space to show how sites considered peripheral can become loci of innovation and institutional consolidation (Yang & Sun, 2025). The strength of this emphasis is that it brings analysis to where order is often most durable: ritual rhythms,



everyday routines, embodied practice, and calendrical repetition. Yet it can also become enclosed within a symbolic universe if it lacks a bridge to power. Catherine Bell notes that discourses of ritual tend to generate a closed mode of analysis, and therefore ritual should be understood as practice within social relations rather than as a self-sufficient layer of meaning (Bell 1992, xv, 8). For the problem of legitimation, Bell's point compels further questions: who defines a ritual as correct or incorrect, who benefits when an order is ritualized, and why the repetition of ritual can make governing norms appear "reasonable."

Out of this dialogue with the literature, the axis of moralization, internalization, and ritualization is used as three operations of legitimation in the Vietnamese case. Along this axis, one can describe a relative division of roles: Confucianism provides a language for locating order and obligation, Daoism opens spaces of retreat so that life is not rendered rigid by continuous control, while Buddhism generates a dimension of internalization in which what is "right" becomes the subject's self-binding (Lê & Trần, 2024; Ho, 2009, p. 273; Laozi, 1963, chap. 57). By focusing on operations, one avoids a mere inventory of influences and instead shifts to questions of functioning: through what language are governing norms moralized, through what disciplines are they internalized, and through what communal practices are they ritualized.

Turning to Vietnam, I analyze this mechanism on two interconnected planes. At the level of elites and the court, what must be emphasized is that the Three Teachings were not merely a spontaneous cultural phenomenon, but at times entered political logic as a way of organizing symbolic order. This is consistent with Lê Đình Sơn and Trần Trọng Dương's observation that the Three Teachings operated as a dynastic policy, and that their functioning involved role differentiation and regulation among traditions in the operation of ritual and power, rather than an agentless picture of "harmony" (Lê & Trần, 2024). Yet if analysis stops



at the level of policy, the decisive link of legitimation still does not fully appear, namely internalization. It is precisely here that Buddhism exercises its distinctive role: it relocates the ethical conditions of power into the subject's capacity for reflexive self-cultivation. An early and clear sign of this logic can be read in Tran-period texts, where the ruler's self-cultivation is posed as a condition of governing, and where the proposition "the Buddha is within our own mind" in *Khóa Hư Lục* underscores that moral order must be worked within the mind as a practice of self-governance prior to governing others (Trần Thái Tông, 1996, p. 4). From inner life, moral order then continues into everyday patterns through ritualization, that is, through repetitive practices that make order "sensible" and "doable" in community life. This is where the approaches of Ammerman and Bell are especially useful: syncretism resides not only in proclamations and authoritative texts, but also in how people live religion each day, in the repeated practical patterns through which order becomes durable from within (Ammerman, 2015; Bell, 1992, pp. xv, 8). In Vietnam, this means that co-presence among the Three Teachings should not be confined to court-centered narratives, but also unfolds in village life, in communal houses, temples, pagodas, festival cycles, ancestor worship practices, and in zones peripheral to political power, where order is sustained by habit and ritual no less than by texts and commands (Fanchette & Stedman, 2016, pp. 144-147, 155-167; Lê, 2013, p. 70; Võ & Nguyễn, 2020, p. 71).

The dark side of syncretism: consensus, stagnation, and conservative tendencies

In Vietnam, the Three Teachings are often interpreted as an instance of cultural accommodation and flexible localization (Roszko, 2021). Yet this reading can lead us to overlook a more fundamental question: what kind of consensus does syncretism produce, and by what means is it sustained. If we stop at the praise of "harmony," we will fail to see the



costs of stability, and we will also miss the points at which syncretism may weaken reflexive capacity.

Consensus can serve as a form of cultural adhesive, but it can also become a surface that blurs conflict and weakens the demand for critique. For this reason, it is unhelpful to assume that reform, or the top-down imposition of moral templates, will automatically yield a durable consensual order. Recent studies on normative regimes in Vietnam indicate that a gap frequently exists between official norms and practical norms. Even programs designed to correct customs and ritual practices commonly enter everyday life through pathways of selective reception and modification in accordance with communal needs. When applied to the Three Teachings, this suggests that syncretism should be treated as an organized outcome involving role differentiation: it can stabilize moral order, yet it can also flatten difference and reduce the capacity for self-questioning, because harmony can sometimes function as a technique of governance rather than as a spontaneous condition (Lê & Trần, 2024, pp. 81-82; Pannier & Bruckert 2024, 395, 397).

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that a tradition frequently read as oriented toward liberation, yet capable in modern interpretations of strongly emphasizing this-worldly concerns (Jai 2020, 202-213), a this-worldly ethical and political system such as Confucianism (Martínez Zubillaga 2025, 3-5), and a Daoist ideal of *wu-wei* (Slingerland, 2000, p. 296) could coexist without generating tensions. The relatively stable co-presence of these three ideological formations in Vietnamese history therefore cannot be sufficiently explained as spontaneous internal harmony. It suggests that there were modes of organization and regulation through which differences could be made to cohabit within a shared order, and that this order was maintained not only by law but also by a network of moral norms that rarely appears as overt coercion. Haack and colleagues' analysis of legitimacy as a socialized



condition at the level of judgment and consensus (Haack et al., 2021), together with Scheer's conceptualization of governance as a long-term reflexive process (Scheer, 2025), allows this co-presence to be read as a form of soft control established through habits, judgments, and repeatedly enacted moral standards in everyday life.

Along these lines, if one observes the period from the Ly dynasty to the Tran dynasty, the Three Teachings can be seen less as three voices sounding symmetrically in unison than as an ideational order of differentiated roles, in which sacred resources were mobilized to sustain power and to organize order within communal sensibility (Nguyễn, 2002, p. 225; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024, pp. 234, 237; Lê & Trần, 2024). In such a formation, what stands out is not necessarily a mechanism of power-sharing in a modern sense, but a functional division of intellectual labor, in which moral discourse can operate as a technique of reassurance and social organization. Beneath the surface of the common-origin thesis, this structure evokes a form of soft totalism, in the sense that it need not rely primarily on violence, but instead aims to produce a subject that has been adjusted from within through moral consensus and moralized habits of obedience.

The elevation of Buddhism to the status of a state religion during the Ly–Tran period (1009–1400), with rulers who were simultaneously Buddhists, lay practitioners, or patron-monk figures (Thích Thiện Châu, 2019, pp. 70-71; Thích Tâm Đức, 2019, pp. 12-13), not only reflects a fusion of politics and religion, but also reveals an attempt to moralize power. A similar process unfolded with Confucianism from the early Le period (1428-1527), when it became the official ideology, standardized the examination system, trained the bureaucracy, and consolidated a hierarchical social order (Cooke, 1994). What is notable, however, is that even when Confucianism held political primacy, Buddhism and Daoism were not eliminated, they continued to persist in popular religion, festivals, and village spiritual life (Ngô &



Nguyễn, 2021). This reality is often read as evidence of cultural tolerance. From a reflexive perspective, however, it also contains a paradox: the more ideational traditions are harmonized, the greater the risk that they become ritualized, reduced to a set of symbolic institutions, and thereby lose their critical and emancipatory potential. The question is therefore not whether the Three Teachings are harmonious, but to what extent that harmony rests on dialogue and intellectual freedom, or whether it is the product of flattening differences in order to secure stability.

It cannot be denied that in many historically turbulent periods, the Three Teachings provided a moral foundation that helped Vietnamese communities maintain resilience (Võ & Nguyễn, 2020). Confucianism supplied an order of moral hierarchy and obligation (Lê & Trần, 2024). Buddhism contributed a language of relief and self-binding that could transform must-do norms into capacities for self-examination. Daoism opened a zone of spiritual retreat so that life was not rendered rigid by continuous control, and the Chinese ideal of *wu-wei* offered a notable support for such a maneuver (Laozi, 1963, chap. 57; Slingerland, 2000, p. 296). This co-functioning could generate a soft balance between governing, pacifying society, and self-cultivation. Yet it could also create an overlapping zone in which norms are received in a pragmatic manner, selectively and opportunistically, without consistency in reflexive criteria (Yang & McPhail, 2023). Put differently, if the Three Teachings coexist chiefly as repositories of morality drawn upon according to circumstance, without sustained work of interpretation, conceptual differentiation, and critical dialogue, belief can slip into a syncretic mélange, and the boundary between ethical commitment and instrumentality becomes blurred (Li, 2025; Li et al., 2025).

In the transition to the late modern period, studies of religion and morality in colonial and postcolonial contexts suggest that discourses of tradition, morality, and belief can be



mobilized as techniques of governance and social discipline, rather than maintained as independent critical resources. David Scott uses the concept of colonial governmentality to describe a form of power that rules by organizing knowledge, standardizing life, training habits, and cultivating dispositions of compliance, rather than merely issuing commands (Scott, 1995). Ladwig and Roque further emphasize a dimension of imitation and standardization, in which the state constructs order through programs of moralization and civilizing projects that lead the governed to view themselves through designed normative templates (Ladwig & Roque, 2018). This dynamic increases the risk of transforming a philosophically vital Three Teachings configuration into a form of spiritualized order, one that soothes conflict while reproducing structures of submission.

When the Three Teachings are drawn into the orbit of power and the market, they can drift away from formative, educative functions and become a form of symbolic diplomacy, used to decorate and distribute prestige rather than to cultivate character. Laurel Kendall notes the proliferation of material sacred life and devotional commodities in contemporary contexts, where the sacred can move in step with market rhythms (Kendall, 2008). Kirsten W. Endres describes *lộc* as a materially charged form of blessing that can be carried, transmitted, and readily quantified through transactional logics (Endres, 2015). Against the broader critique of neoliberalism and the capitalization of the sacred, Carrette and King describe this dynamic as commodification, in which claims to authenticity are themselves sold and traditions are packaged as ideational assets (Carrette & King 2005, 15). Under such conditions, the Three Teachings may appear densely in the landscape as monuments, projects, and festivals, yet remain absent from the decisive site, namely the formation of reflexive capacities, civic virtues, and disciplined self-governance.



Given these limits, the article's argument is not to negate the Three Teachings, but to articulate a condition: without reflexive work, syncretism can slide into functionalization, and the capacity to form critically conscious individuals will weaken, with adverse consequences for emancipation and democratization, both of which require principled coherence and the subject's ability to interrogate itself. The task, therefore, is not to restore Three Teachings forms as a symbolic heritage, but to re-philosophize the three traditions as reflexive resources for modernity, so that they move away from the role of a triangle of power and become a triangle of dialogue, no longer serving as techniques of rule, but as a foundation for an emancipatory pluralist model.

Conclusion

This article has centered on the role of Buddhism within the Three Teachings configuration in Vietnam and has proposed an understanding of religious syncretism as a mode of legitimation in an operational sense. The Three Teachings is treated here not as a balanced description of three traditions, but as a historical field of forces and a shared space of practice in which Buddhism, while coexisting with Confucianism and Daoism, continually adjusted its modes of expression, forms of practice, and strategies of positioning in order to be recognized as legitimate. On this basis, the article shifts away from narrating syncretism as benign blending and instead traces the conditions through which Buddhism could coexist durably, be socially mobilized to meet diverse needs, and ultimately contribute to rendering an order "reasonable," "credible," and "worthy of adherence" within a shared moral sensibility.

From this perspective, the article's main contribution does not lie in listing influences among the three traditions, but in identifying the pathway by which Buddhism moved from syncretic coexistence toward a legitimating ordering. Buddhism did not enter Vietnamese life



through a single route. In its formative phase, it took root early through concrete communal needs, the management of uncertainty, healing, rites for peace and protection, and the handling of suffering, only gradually crystallizing into doctrinal language and monastic organization. In a setting marked by a flexible indigenous belief structure and the absence of a sufficiently strong orthodoxizing apparatus capable of monopolizing meaning, Buddhism was able to undergo a process of social permeation, attaching itself to life through practice before being systematized into a discursive formation. In the crystallizing layer of the Ly and Tran periods, co-presence was no longer merely a matter of belief, it was consolidated through institutions, ritual, and differentiated social roles, thereby enabling Buddhism to enter political life as a symbolic and moral resource.

The article argues that Buddhism's distinctive role within the Three Teachings configuration lies in its capacity for moralization and internalization. If Confucianism typically provides normative frameworks for naming order and social position, and Daoism often appears as a repertoire of ritual and therapeutic practices along with techniques for working with a cosmology, then Buddhism, in many contexts, is able to transform must-do norms into practices of self-admonition, self-examination, and self-limitation. What is often described as Buddhism's capacity to soften power should therefore not be understood as a sentimental gesture of reconciliation, but as a shift from external compulsion to internal self-restraint, from compliance grounded in command to compliance sustained by moral sensibility. When internalization enters everyday life through repeated practices and the communal cadence of calendrical ritual, order is not merely proclaimed but lived, and it is precisely here that syncretism can operate as a form of legitimation.

At the same time, the article emphasizes the ambivalence of this process. Moral legitimation can sustain stability, yet it can also slide into mere justification when syncretism



becomes excessively institutionalized or overly ritualized. In such circumstances, intellectual dialogue diminishes, reflexive capacity weakens, and syncretism gradually turns into a formula that flattens difference in the service of stability. Conversely, when zones of overlap among normative systems are received in pragmatic, opportunistic ways, without conceptual differentiation and without reflexive work, belief can shift toward an undifferentiated *mélange* in which the boundary between moral commitment and instrumentality, between spiritual relief and techniques for legitimating order, becomes blurred. In contemporary conditions, where political power intersects with market dynamics, the risk of hollowing out moral life becomes more acute: tradition may appear densely as a symbolic landscape, yet remain thin in capacities for self-interrogation and disciplined self-governance.

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