

ANH Q. TRAN [TRẦN QUỐC ANH]

Gods, Heroes, and Ancestors: An Interreligious Encounter in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam.

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GEORGE E. DUTTON

A Vietnamese Moses: Philiphê Bình and the Geographies of Early Modern Catholicism.

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Starting in the 1990s, several new monographs have explored the relationship between Vietnamese society, culture and religion, and the Catholic Church since the early seventeenth century. These works in Vietnamese, French, and English have advanced our understanding of the nexus between politics and religion, relying on archival repositories in Europe and Vietnam, and critically building on the labors of previous generations of missionary and colonial historians. Some of the best scholarship so far has focused on the first century of Catholic development (1615–1722) and on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—including the Nguyễn and colonial periods—but studies about the eighteenth century alone have been scarcer.

The two books under review here are thus a timely addition to the growing body of literature on Catholicism in Vietnamese history. They differ in content, style, methodology, and aims, but reading them in tandem was quite illuminating. In fact, they offer a complementary panorama of the religious landscape of northern Vietnam during a period of political and

social convulsion, while connecting Tonkin and its Catholics to broader Asian and European flows of knowledge, texts, and people.

My suggestion would be to read them in the order proposed here, as Tran's *Gods, Heroes, and Ancestors* offers, especially in its first part, a concise yet comprehensive survey of the socioreligious landscape of Vietnam at the time, while Dutton's *A Vietnamese Moses* plunges us into the momentous life of one individual, born out of that same Vietnamese environment but destined to live most of his adult life in Portugal.

Gods, Heroes, and Ancestors centers on a manuscript in romanized Vietnamese script (*chữ quốc ngữ*) preserved in the Archives des Missions Étrangères de Paris [Archives of the Foreign Missions of Paris] (vol. 1098, 104 folios), entitled *Tam giáo chu vọng* [三教諸妄; *Errors of the Three Religions*]. According to Tran, Ilario di Gesù Costa (1696–1754), an Italian Discalced Augustinian and the Vicar Apostolic of Eastern Tonkin between 1735 and 1754, was probably the main author of the *Errors* (72), although earlier writings by other missionaries may have been incorporated. The manuscript was completed in 1752, and Tran surmises that its relatively sophisticated presentation of Vietnamese religious and social practices could only come from an experienced man like Costa, as it required facility not only in vernacular Vietnamese but also in the more erudite written tradition of Sino-Vietnamese. *Errors* bears a strong resemblance in content to a contemporary Latin manuscript by another Italian Discalced Augustinian, Adriano da Santa Tecla (1697–1764), *Opusculum de sectis apud Sinenses et Tunkinenses* [*A Small Treatise on the Sects among the Chinese and Tonkinese*], translated into English by Olga Dror (Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2002). Tran, using the philological criteria developed by literary and biblical scholars, hypothesizes that both *Errors* and *Opusculum* derived from an earlier common source authored by Bishop Costa, the lost *Dị đoan chi giáo* (異端指教; *A Critique of Heterodoxy*) (70–71, 327–330). The verdict is out on how plausible this text-based attribution is until further research in archival correspondence in Paris and Rome can better clarify the composition and transmission histories of these manuscripts.

The *Errors*, introduced in part 1 (1–158) and fully translated into English with a commentary in part 2 (159–322), is a piece of “negative apologetics,”

i.e., both an exposition of selected practices and beliefs of native religions and an attack on what was considered harmful to Catholicism in them. Structured as a dialogue between a Western and an Eastern scholar, it clearly derives its arrangement from the *True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (*Tianzhu shiyi*; 天主實義, 1603), a famous dialogical *catechismus* published in China by Matteo Ricci, S.J. In spite of its polemical aims, however, *Errors* describes in detail many ideas and practices of Tonkin's "Three Teachings," i.e., Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. In fact, many of those beliefs and observances, rather than being sectarian in nature, belonged to the unitary village- and family-based popular religiosity, including the worship of heaven, nature spirits, heroes, public figures, and ancestors. The manuscript thus offers a rare glimpse of eighteenth-century Vietnamese religions, although, as Tran observes, "[w]hether an accurate picture of the religious situations of eighteenth-century Vietnam lies behind this one-sided Christian description is impossible to ascertain, given the scarcity of available materials on the subject" (157). In spite of this limitation, with his book Tran intends "to contribute to the historical study of traditional Vietnamese religions" (xiii), while also offering "a preliminary attempt to provide the reader with an entry into the world of Vietnamese Christian apologetics" (157). Tension between these two aims occasionally transpires. Tran acknowledges at the end of part 1, for instance, that his study, rather than being about Vietnamese religions per se, explores "the issues arising from a Christian encounter with the Vietnamese culture and religions, and . . . the interactions with and the attitude toward the religious environment in which Christians found themselves" (158). Still, part 1 (especially chapters 3 and 4) offers a useful and balanced summary of religious practice in precolonial Vietnam based on traditional scriptures and modern ethnographic and textual scholarship, as well as a history of the Tonkinese Catholic mission and its literature. This prepares the reader to better understand the manuscript and its assault on the native religious landscape in part 2.

Part 2 includes the English translation of *Errors* with essential philological and historical footnotes, including renderings in Sino-Vietnamese characters of quotations from the Confucian classics or other religious scriptures, which are found only in romanization in the original manuscript. As

mentioned on page 160, “Due to limited space, the critical transcription and textual analysis of the original Vietnamese manuscript of *Tam giáo chú vọng* will not be printed here. It will be made available to the interested reader upon request.” Researchers interested in Vietnamese linguistics and religion might thus consider writing to the author at the Santa Clara University’s Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California, to obtain these extra materials extracted from Tran’s Georgetown University dissertation.

The manuscript is divided into three books, respectively on Confucianism [*Nho giáo*; 儒教; “Teachings of the Literati”]; Daoism [*Đạo giáo*; 道教; “Teachings of the Way”]; and Buddhism [*Thích giáo*; 釋教; “Teachings of Śākyamuni”]. Each book offers in dialogic form a simple and selective presentation of the tenets and ritual practices of the three traditions and popular practices subsumed under them, interspersed with objections by the “Western scholar” on “erroneous” beliefs, including mistaken views of God, idolatry, and superstitions. These categories, which Tran supplies to categorize the contents of the manuscript (136–40), are typical elements in Christian apologetics. In a neutral modern language, we can say that such theological frameworks cover, for example, Confucian cosmology; sacrifices to popular figures, spirits, and ancestors; magical healing; astrology; divination; and physiognomy.

One can wonder how a unique manuscript surviving in only one archive could have exerted any impact in Vietnam. In fact, other Catholic catechisms and apologetic writings in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries apparently found inspiration in the *Errors*, including the famous book in Sino-Vietnamese characters titled *Conference of the Four Religions* (*Hội đồng tứ giáo*; 會同四教; cf. an 1864 printed edition, available online at the National Library of Vietnam, call no. NLVNPF-0883, R 295). This work, therefore, clearly contributed to the development of a Christian tradition of exclusivist attitude and critical view toward Vietnamese traditional religions, which today we might see, as does Tran, as limitations (145–55). Still, Tran tells us too that the attempt to engage with local religions and the extensive use of Confucian and Buddhist literature showed “a willingness to meet [the Vietnamese] audience on their own cultural terms . . .” (153). This conclusion confirms how the *Errors* remains more an example of apologetics, rather than a detailed description of native practices, and how the focus of

Tran tilts more toward the field of Christian theological inculturation or interreligious encounter, rather than Vietnamese religious ethnography.

Some minor typographical and English spelling errors, occasional incorrect spellings of Italian names based on Spanish or Portuguese readings (e.g. Hilario Costa, for Ilario), and missing Sino-Vietnamese characters and titles in the glossary and the text (for instance, all titles' characters in this review have been supplied by the reviewer and cannot be found in the book) slightly detract from what is, all in all, a nice hardbound volume, available also online for academic library subscribers. The image used for the cover jacket is not identified and actually does not come from a Vietnamese source but rather from the *Bian zhengjiao zhenzhuang shilu* [辯正教真傳實錄; *Apology of the True Teachings*], a Dominican catechism in Minnanese Chinese published in Manila in 1593 by Juan Cobo OP.

George Dutton's *A Vietnamese Moses*, although also based on a set of extraordinary *quốc ngữ* manuscripts, is quite different from Tran's textual study. The book is the epic narration of one life, that of the Tonkinese priest Philiphê Bình (1759–1833), born Nguyễn Văn Bình in the “province of Hải Dương, prefecture of Hạ Hồng, district of Vĩnh Lại, village of Ngải Am, hamlet of Địa Linh” (23) in Eastern Tonkin, today in the territory of Hải Phòng city. Also known in Portuguese as Filipe do Rosário, in Dutton's pages Philiphê Bình comes across with great vividness and immediacy. This, however, is no mere biography. In fact, the subtitle of the book reveals the author's broader ambition to use the concept of “geographies of early modern Catholicism” as the main theoretical framework—partly inspired by Thongchai Winichakul's *Siam Mapped* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1997)—to contextualize Philiphê Bình's life and the story of the small Vietnamese Catholic community he came from. These Tonkinese Catholics were the last remnants of a Jesuit mission evangelized under the auspices of the royal patronage (*padroado*) of Portugal. Following the expulsion of the Jesuits from the Portuguese domains in 1759 and the dissolution of the Society of Jesus in 1773, only a few elderly ex-Jesuits and some younger Tonkinese clergy continued to minister to local Christians. This small Vietnamese community of *padroado* Christians became formally part of missionary dioceses known as *vicariates apostolic*, tended by Spanish Dominicans and the Missions Étrangères de Paris, both under the umbrella of a papal

dicastery, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith [Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, commonly abbreviated as Propaganda]. Propaganda reflected the Holy See's ambition to control all global Catholic missionary activities and to reduce the ecclesiastical latitude given to the Spanish and Portuguese Crowns through their patronage on evangelization at the time of the conquest of the New World.

Vietnamese Catholics lived in a complex geopolitical landscape, layered with state administrative borders, but ultimately focused on the village and its ritual and familial networks. On top of these traditional borders, missionaries superimposed new lines of Catholic ecclesiastical authority, anticipating the colonial redrawing of demarcation lines in the nineteenth century. Dutton argues that the creation of vicariates and parishes "created new structures of division that brought with them a politics of their own" (13), in particular the politics of negotiating authority between the papacy, the religious orders, and their secular sponsors, on the one hand, and local converts, on the other. These divisions in turn provoked a geographical shift among Catholics that was "mental and ideological" rather than physical, and that generated "alternative conceptualizations of the world and the place of the Vietnamese in it" (15). Philiphê Binh traveled to Europe to challenge Propaganda's encroachment on the *padroado* and preserve the Portuguese ritual customs of his community, and his writings are the most spectacular—indeed unique—expression of Vietnamese "alternative conceptualizations of the world" within the early modern geographies of Catholicism (15).

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 reveal the broader context of the ecclesiastical politics of Vietnam and Europe, which determined the life trajectory of Philiphê Binh. This first part of the book introduces the history of the Tonkin mission and its complicated "geographies," and then reconstructs Philiphê Binh's formative years in Eastern Tonkin and his travels to Macao, Goa, and Lisbon to defend the interests of his *padroado* community. The second part of the book (chapters 4–7) is richer in details, with a finely textured reconstruction of Philiphê Binh's efforts to obtain from the Portuguese Prince Regent a bishop for Tonkin, to defend the traditions and prerogatives of *padroado* Christians, and to communicate in writing with Vietnam through some Tonkinese brothers stationed in Macao. We also learn much about the geographies of Lisbon itself, as well as the daily life of Philiphê Binh and

his Vietnamese companions at the royal court and in the ecclesiastical life of Portugal. Chapter 7 shifts to a literary analysis of the collections of “tales” [*truyện*] written by Philipê Binh, and how they fit within preexisting Vietnamese narrative forms and Catholic hagiographies, but also how they innovated the tradition using *quốc ngữ* and represented a new, autobiographical, almost individualistic vein in Vietnamese modern literature.

A short review cannot do justice to the richness of the story Dutton weaves out of both Philipê Binh’s own copious writings (ten thousand folios in *quốc ngữ*, Sino-Vietnamese, Portuguese, and Latin) and research on the various geographical and social landscapes the Tonkinese priest inhabited, especially in Lisbon, including the convents he lived in, the libraries he used, the bookstores he might have patronized, the royal palaces he visited, the curative spa he and his companions used during illness, and so on. As Dutton tells us, his “primary objective throughout is to tell a story of Binh as a person” (20), part of a larger historiographical effort to consider the life stories of ordinary people and make concrete within particular individuals “the abstractions of European missionary work, transcontinental cultural interactions, political violence and turmoil, and linguistic evolution” (20–21). This emphasis on the individual as “engine of historical change” is today shared by many historians who have chosen to explore global connections in microhistorical detail.

Philipê Binh emerges as a stubborn, resourceful man whose faith in himself (but never in his God) perhaps vacillated in his final years, after all his efforts were crushed by courtly plots and historical events like the Napoleonic invasions and the exile of the Portuguese king to Brazil. This “Vietnamese Moses”—the biblical figure being his own explicit religious alter ego—wrote thousands of pages in Vietnamese, but it is unlikely that anybody else read them while he was alive. For whom did he write? Dutton observes that through his *quốc ngữ*, for instance, Philipê Binh “was making a vast array of European-produced religious literature accessible to a Vietnamese reading audience” (my emphasis, 244). In fact, if that was the purpose, Philipê Binh failed to reach his contemporaries. If ideally Philipê Binh was writing for his community back home, in fact he probably mainly wrote for himself to keep his sanity and sense of purpose after so many setbacks. His individualism is unequivocal, as Dutton senses from this note

Philiphê Binh left: “If one produces a book and does not record one’s name in it, then that person is a scoundrel, and for this reason I will write my name here in order that everyone will know who wrote this book. I am the priest Philiphê Binh” (236).

Philiphê Binh’s community never read him, but he certainly reached us in posterity. His manuscripts were first presented in 1951 by Georg Schurhammer, S.J., over a century after his death, and one of his notebooks was published in a photostatic edition in Vietnam for the first time in 1968. However, aside from individual articles and essays in Vietnamese and French, Dutton’s book is the first extensive academic publication to tackle Philiphê Binh’s life and production in such depth. The book is a pleasure to read and successfully weaves the theme of “mental geographies” in the life of Philiphê Binh, resuscitating his willful voice in his own words and language.

One of the strengths of the book is its admirable use of Philiphê Binh’s autographs kept in the *Borgiano Tonchinese* section of the Apostolic Vatican Library. Dutton is not sure when and why those manuscripts reached Rome: “Sometime after his death in 1833, virtually all of Binh’s notebooks were deposited in the Vatican Library and attached to the Borgia collections . . .” (17). In fact, the Tonkinese codices were originally in the Museo Borgiano of Propaganda Fide’s Urban College at Piazza di Spagna in Rome. They were included in an 1855 catalogue of the museum’s collection, which indicates that they reached Rome between the 1830s and the 1850s. They were transferred to the Vatican Library only in 1902 (see *Il fondo Borgia della Biblioteca Vaticana e gli studi orientali a Roma tra Sette e Ottocento* [The ‘Borgia’ Section of the Vatican Library and Oriental Studies in Rome between the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries], by Paola Orsatti, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1996, 187–89). It is likely that some agent of Propaganda in Lisbon (possibly the nuncio?) came into the possession of these materials in the 1830s or 1840s and decided to ship them to Rome for safekeeping, perhaps also to make sure that nothing embarrassing or heterodox would circulate further.

Studying materials from Propaganda Fide or the Lisbon Nunciature could in fact offer answers on the transmission of Philiphê Binh’s papers and his legacy, as well clarify details on his life from independent sources. It is in this respect that Dutton’s book shows some limitations, as he acknowledges:

“Some of the information contained in [Philiphê Binh’s] notebooks can be verified through references in other sources, but much cannot” (19). What are these “other sources”? Dutton uses manuscript letters contained in the Archives des Missions Étrangères de Paris and complements them with printed primary sources (such as the *Gazeta de Lisboa* [Lisbon Gazette]) and secondary materials. However, he uses only very few archival records from Philiphê Binh’s counterparts, i.e., the Portuguese court and the papal ecclesiastical establishment. Dutton was in fact very close to repositories in Rome and Lisbon where he could have found such primary sources. The Vatican Archives [Archivio Segreto Vaticano], which share the same courtyard with the Vatican Library where Philiphê Binh’s manuscripts are preserved, for example, contain the papers of the Lisbon Nunciature, with at least thirty documents on Philiphê Binh and the Tonkin mission, revealing the rather negative view the papal bureaucracy held of our hero. Dutton captured the animosity of Rome and its allies nonetheless, but only used João Francisco Marques and José Carlos Lopes de Miranda’s short summaries of nine of those documents (*Arquivo secreto do Vaticano: Expansão portuguesa, documentação, vol. 2, Oriente* [Documents on the Portuguese Expansion in the Vatican Archives, vol. 2, Orient], Esfera do Caos, 2011). Checking the original documents and other materials sent from the nuncios, the vicars apostolic in Tonkin, the Propaganda Fide procurator in Macao, and the bishops of Macao would have eliminated any possible doubt about missing facets of the story.

One also wonders why the Archives of Propaganda Fide in Rome (today called Historical Archives of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples or *de Propaganda Fide*) have not been consulted, and if they have, why no mention of them is to be found in the book. The vicars apostolic in Tonkin and the procurator of Propaganda in Macao (Dutton erroneously calls him a “nuncio”) had the duty to write detailed reports to Rome, and they did so copiously. Even if communications were somewhat disrupted during the Napoleonic period, when the archives were temporarily transported from Rome to Paris, nonetheless today several relevant volumes on Tonkin remain that deserve examination for possible missing sources and clarification of facts. The archival series *Scritture Originali della Congregazione Particolare dell’Indie Orientali e Cina* [Original Documents of the

Special Commission for the East Indies and China], for example, contains several volumes on Tonkin for the years 1801–1833 (vols. 70–75). So does the series *Scritture riferite nei Congressi - Cina e Regni Adiacenti* [Documents Referred to in the Weekly Meetings – China and Adjacent Kingdoms] for the period 1800–1830 (vols. 1–7). Finally, the series of the *Procura* [Procurator House] of Macao contains at least one box of documents on Tonkin for the period 1720–1860.

The same applies to Portuguese archives. Dutton mentions in his preface that he checked “countless boxes of materials” at the Torre do Tombo National Archives in Lisbon. However, no sources from those archives are cited in the endnotes or bibliography. In fact, Torre do Tombo preserves an entire codex (series *Arquivos das Congregações Religiosas* [Archives of Religious Congregations], book 1139) of petitions and documents in Portuguese, Latin, and Chinese—possibly Sino-Vietnamese—written by Philipphê Binh and his companions to the queen and the Portuguese government, catalogued in *Macao e o Oriente nos Arquivos Nacionais Torre do Tombo* [Macao and the Orient in the Torre do Tombo National Archives] (by Isau Santos, Instituto Cultural de Macau, 1995:85) and also found in the online catalogue of Torre do Tombo. The other omission is a small cache of documents by, or related to, Philipphê Binh in the Arquivo Historico Ultramarino in Lisbon (series *Macao*, box 20, documents 19, 20, and 24), described in *Macao e o Oriente no Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino* [Macao and the Orient in the Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino] (by Isau Santos, Instituto Cultural de Macau, 1996, 2:356–58). Document 19 is a petition by “Filipe do Rosário” (a. k. a. Philipphê Binh) and his companions to the queen; document 20 is Philipphê Binh’s request to send a Bishop of Tonkin; document 24 is a memorial on the mission of Tonkin. The materials in Torre do Tombo and the Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino are in all likelihood some of the Portuguese-language original documents translated or transcribed in Philipphê Binh’s Vietnamese versions.

In sum, the two books under review here offer a sophisticated and complementary examination of Vietnamese Catholicism and religious culture, and their relationship with European institutions like the papacy, the missionary religious orders, and the Portuguese monarchy. They proceed from a sympathetic viewpoint, privileging the voices of native actors as much as

sources allow and pushing the borders of what we know about Vietnam's engagement with global networks in early modern times.¹

Eugenio Menegon, Boston University

Note

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