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## Social Media, Vernacularity, and Pedagogy

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## Social Media, Vernacularity, and Pedagogy: Youth and the Reinvention of Contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism

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Drawing on extensive fieldwork at Buddhist institutions in Ho Chi Minh City, this article explicates the recent proliferation of Buddhist educational programs for urban youth and examines the contours of what I conceive as an emerging youth-oriented Buddhism in contemporary Vietnam. It sheds light on how Vietnamese youth is situated at the center of ongoing projects to craft new forms of urban Buddhist identity and community. In so doing, the article investigates the co-working between urban monastics and lay Buddhist youth to reconfigure Buddhist knowledge and practices to appeal to young people's dispositions, life experiences, and knowledge. I show how these creative endeavors rely on the revision of Buddhist texts using vernacular Vietnamese, the strategic deployment of new media technologies, and innovation of Buddhist pedagogies.

**Keywords:** Buddhist education; youth; new media; Vietnam

*I*t was 6:00 am on a Sunday morning when I showed up at Giác Ngộ temple<sup>1</sup> (henceforth GN) in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) to attend an all-day retreat for lay Buddhist youth. Settling myself down quietly in a spacious worship hall with perfectly aligned rows of plastic chairs, I intently watched as groups of young people were ushered through the heavy wooden doors. At the front, three large golden Shakyamuni Buddha statues loomed over the youth as if they were carefully watching their every step. By 7:00 am, the worship hall had filled up, and temple volunteers began to direct latecomers to find seats on the upper floors of the temple, where there were television screens livestreaming ongoing activities. As more than two hundred young people managed to occupy their positions, they, under the instruction of the monastics, began a short period of chanting from a small booklet of Buddhist sutras produced by the temple. Initially befuddled by the unfamiliar chant, I soon realized the distinctive vernacular Vietnamese employed in the texts that distinguished itself from the Sino-Vietnamese versions in other temples I had seen. After the chanting, retreat participants were instructed to stand

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<sup>1</sup> I have maintained the names of the temple and the abbot. Names of lay Buddhists are pseudonyms. All translations are my own.

*up to welcome the Dharma teacher to the front stage. The Dharma lecture lasted about an hour. Some youth were paying attention; others yawned out of sleepiness from an early Sunday. When the lecture concluded, a young nun and the temple's choir team went up to the podium to attempt to wake up the sleepy crowd. They taught the young people a Buddhist pop song and its accompanying choreography. The music started, and everybody stood up to participate in the singing and dancing. Swaying their bodies and hands side to side, the youth engaged in what looked like collective effervescence.*

This intriguing scene from the weekend youth retreat at GN in early 2017 would be hard to imagine fifteen years earlier when I was growing up in Ho Chi Minh City. Buddhist temples in Vietnam were (and still are) frequented more often by the middle-aged and the elderly, who come to pray, chant sutras, make offerings, perform meritorious work, and engage in ethical cultivation in the later stages of life (Soucy 2012; Le 2017). Youth's visits to temples were typically limited to the first and the fifteenth of the lunar month or to important festivals, like the Lunar New Year and the Ullambana Festival. The mesmerizing sight of hundreds of young people gathering at GN that early Sunday morning to learn Buddhist teachings, songs, and dances, with guidance from the monastics, captivated me because it was a different kind of youth religious participation from the occasional devotional practices. During my twenty months of fieldwork at GN, as well as other Buddhist institutions and networks in the city, from 2016–2019, I learned that this was not a singular and short-lived phenomenon. Weekend retreats for young adults are one among many emerging Buddhist educational programs as part of the collaborative endeavors between monastics and youth to reconfigure Vietnamese Buddhism.

In this article, I use the case study of the educational programs at GN to shed light on how lay Buddhist youth play an important role in the development of an emerging youth-oriented Buddhism in Ho Chi Minh City.<sup>2</sup> Studies on youth in post-reform Vietnam<sup>3</sup> have mostly neglected youth's religiosity, focusing rather on their professional engagement and consumption culture (Earl 2014; King et al. 2008; Nguyen 2017; see Soucy 2012, Chapter 3 and 5; Swenson 2020 for exceptions). The rise in youth's participation in Buddhist activities I observed during my fieldwork thus calls for an examination of how lay youth participate in the transformation of urban Buddhism and how religion figures in their social lives in contemporary Vietnam. In examining the programs at GN, I contribute to the growing literature that explores lay Buddhist education as a space of interactions and negotiations between youth and monastics about Buddhist identity and community (Fisher 2014; Kim 2016; Kim & Choi 2016; McLaughlin 2019).

I argue that three components are central to the making of lay Buddhist educational programs at GN: the revision and recompilation of Buddhist texts using vernacular Vietnamese, the strategic

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<sup>2</sup> In this article, "youth," unless specified, refers to young adults aged eighteen to early thirties, as this was the main population who participated most actively in Buddhist educational programs at the temple.

<sup>3</sup> In 1986, Vietnam underwent a series of economic reforms, resulting in Vietnam's shift from a centrally planned economy to a "market economy with a socialist orientation." The reforms have led to the gradual flourishing of the private sector, access to global socio-economic resources and opportunities, and a new middle-class, but they have also engendered new anxieties (Leshkowich 2006; Schwenkel and Leshkowich 2012).

deployment of new media technologies, and the innovation of Buddhist pedagogies. Conceptually, these three components form a mutually-reinforcing tripartite that together fashion a Vietnamese Buddhism and Buddhist community that are appealing to the dispositions, knowledge, and life experiences of urban youth. I show how the programs at GN are aimed at creating a new generation of self-reflexive, intellectual young *Phật tử* (lit. “children of the Buddha”) who actively participate in the administrative and educational functioning of Buddhist institutions. They exemplify an intensifying effort to implement a large-scale urban religious project that seeks to popularize a modernist<sup>4</sup> vision of Buddhism, one that is youth-driven and cosmopolitan yet no less nationalistic.

Although such a vision of Buddhism resonates with what Alexander Soucy has identified as “reformed Buddhism” in Vietnam, propagated by “the elite, the secular state, and the Buddhist reformers” in opposition to popular, devotional Buddhism (2012: 59), I argue that the emerging youth-oriented Buddhism in Ho Chi Minh City should not be characterized strictly as “elite,” nor should many of the young Vietnamese participating in its construction be considered as such. While most young people at GN were pursuing or had finished higher education, they came from various socio-economic backgrounds, with different levels of social power. As Thomas Tweed argues, scholars of religion, since the 1960s, in focusing on “everyday religion” of ordinary people, have oftentimes perpetuated the binary between “elite” and “popular” by privileging the latter element and neglecting the interplay between institutional elites and regular followers (2015: 376–379). Taking cue from Tweed’s notion of “vernacular intellectualism” that calls for a consideration of how “ordinary devotees” contribute to “the realm of ideas” (2010: 284), I elucidate in this article how certain modernist articulations of Buddhism resonate with the socio-cultural and spiritual aspirations of urban youth, and how many young Vietnamese have increasingly participated in the formulation and implementation of lay Buddhist education.<sup>5</sup>

I will first situate the emerging form of lay Buddhist education in Ho Chi Minh City in the socio-political context of southern Vietnam, highlighting the religious history and social conditions contributing to the creation of the educational campaign at GN. Drawing on the perspectives of youth and monastics from interviews and participant observation, I will then analyze the three elements constitutive of the temple’s programs. Finally, I will conclude by showing how the temple’s agenda for lay Buddhist education forges a new Buddhist identity and community in post-reform Vietnam.

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<sup>4</sup> In using the term “modernist” here, I follow David McMahan’s general articulation of “Buddhist modernism” in which Buddhism is portrayed as a world-affirming philosophical and ethical tradition compatible with science and modernity (2008).

<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that in Soucy’s studies of Buddhism in Hanoi, lay Buddhists are excluded from the reformed/institutional view of Buddhism propagated by the religious elites. As Soucy shows, many Vietnamese, particularly men, in their later stages of life, turn to Buddhist learning and orthodoxy as a way to practice self-cultivation and perform authority (2012; Chapter 9). In his investigation of Trúc Lâm Zen and Sùng Phúc Monastery in Hanoi, Soucy documents how the monastery has propagated Buddhism as form of “total practice” among the laity, including young people, by offering meditation programs, Dharma lectures, daily Penitence ritual, and Buddhist weddings (2017b: 155–157).

### “Erasing Dharma Illiteracy:” A Paradigm for Urban Vietnamese Buddhism

At GN, the formal study of Buddhist teachings is emphasized. This comes out clearly in an encounter I witnessed between the temple’s abbot and a young lay woman. The woman from Hanoi was traveling to see her friends in Ho Chi Minh City when she paid GN a visit. Donning a maroon shirt with the mantra *Aum maṇi padme hūm* in yellow Tibetan scripts, the woman asked the monk whether GN incorporates Tibetan practices in its programs. No, the abbot replied in a resolute tone and patiently explained that at his temple, Buddhists are encouraged to learn “original” Buddhist teachings found in the Pali *Tiṭṭaka* and the *Āgamas*. He then averred that while Tibetan Buddhism draws on core Buddhist teachings, Tibetan lamas and their followers tend to emphasize the efficacy of tantric practices, without proper attention to the Buddha’s teachings and their applications to society. Upon hearing this, the woman turned uneasy, claiming that she owed her dedication to Tibetan Buddhism to her *duyên* (“predestined affinity,” Swenson 2020: 76)<sup>6</sup> with the tradition.<sup>7</sup> The monk chuckled slightly, telling the woman that it was not because of her *duyên*, but simply because she had not made an effort to diligently read and study Buddhist teachings. He then gifted the woman a copy of the edited volume of Buddhist sutras produced by the temple and suggested that she read through the text.

Central to the design of GN’s educational programs is the campaign to “erase Dharma illiteracy” (*xóa nạn mù chữ Phật pháp*). On different occasions, the abbot of GN, Thích Nhật Từ, argued that the majority of Buddhists in Vietnam do not know or understand fundamental Buddhist teachings. In an opening lecture to a group of new students in the temple’s basic course on Buddhism in 2017, he painted a dire picture of Vietnamese Buddhism:

Currently, even though there are about 17,000 temples nationwide, the number of temples that organize retreats can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Most temples do not have Dharma classes or organize activities on Sunday. Lay Buddhists who go to temples only stop at praying, chanting, bowing, and doing meritorious work. The consequence of such a method of Dharma promulgation is collective Dharma illiteracy.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In this article on nun ordination in Vietnam, Sara Swenson approaches *duyên* as *nhân duyên*, namely, “the consequences of past-life relationships which cause predestined inclinations toward people, places, things, and preferences in this life” (2020: 76). In my study, monastics and lay Buddhists also treated *duyên* as a “causing condition” that can be cultivated (*gieo duyên*; lit: to sow a *duyên*) in this lifetime to facilitate certain outcomes. Lay Buddhists at GN have described to me the temple’s education programs as an effort to sow *duyên* to attract young people to Buddhism.

<sup>7</sup> Interest in Tibetan Buddhism has grown among Vietnamese Buddhists. During my fieldwork, I attended an event at a hotel conference room where the Dalai Lama delivered a lecture to lay Buddhist congregations in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Đà Nẵng via virtual conferencing. Many lay Buddhists have also organized trips to visit the Dalai Lama in India.

<sup>8</sup> By using the term “illiteracy,” the abbot evoked the popular image of the governmental programs to erase illiteracy among the poor and ethnic minorities. These programs dated back to the original campaign initiated by the Communist Party in northern Vietnam in 1945. The literacy campaign was designed to educate the mass in the reading and writing of *quốc ngữ* (Romanized Vietnamese scripts), and it treated the struggle against illiteracy as one of the key pillars of anticolonial revolution (Marr 1984: 184–186).

He argued that the lack of basic understanding of Buddhism has resulted in many converting to Christianity when being “seduced” or “pressured” by Christian churches.<sup>9</sup> In the same lecture, he suggested that Christian churches are successful because they manage to get their adherents to contribute to their administrative and educational structures, thus increasing the commitment of followers. He then pleaded with the students of the Buddhist class, especially youth, to participate further in the design and implementation of GN’s educational programs.

GN’s campaign to “erase Dharma illiteracy” thus is predicated on two imperatives. First, the abbot called for a reconfiguration of lay Buddhist education. He contended that the overemphasis on devotional practices at the majority of Buddhist temples in Vietnam, including the chanting of a limited repertoire of Buddhist texts from Chinese Buddhism written in difficult Sino-Vietnamese,<sup>10</sup> has resulted in most Buddhists’ approaching Buddhism as a performance of religious beliefs (*tín ngưỡng*).<sup>11</sup> This has led youth and intellectuals to grow indifferent to Buddhism, he opined. As the abbot argued in his publications and different Dharma lectures, Vietnamese Buddhism is strongly influenced by Confucianism and Daoism, on the one hand, and “Patriarch’s Buddhism” (*Đạo Phật Tổ sư*) built around Chinese patriarchs’ preferential propagation of a few selected sutras and practices, on the other (Thích Nhật Từ 2017, Chapter 5). He thus advocated that Buddhist teachings from the Pali *Tiṭṭaka* and the *Āgamas*, especially those focusing on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, must be incorporated in lay Buddhist education to present a more holistic and systematic approach to Buddhism.

Second, the campaign emphasizes that for Vietnamese Buddhism to thrive in the future, it needs a new generation of young Buddhists. These young Buddhists should not only have a strong grasp of Buddhist teachings and practices, but also contribute to the promulgation of Buddhism and temples’ activities. For the abbot, Buddhist learning and cultivation should be done diligently at a young age because it allows youth to foster good moral habits and develop a deeper understanding of Buddhism (Thích Nhật Từ 2017: 101–103). Moreover, young people play a crucial role in the future of Vietnamese Buddhism, since they possess the knowledge of new communication technologies, educational pedagogies, and popular culture that, as I will show, proves essential to the development of lay Buddhist education.

GN’s initiative to reconfigure lay Buddhist education and encourage youth’s participation resonates with earlier Buddhist educational projects emerging out of the Vietnam Buddhist Revival

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<sup>9</sup> For a study of Christian conversion in Vietnam, see Ngo 2016.

<sup>10</sup> While different temples incorporate different sutras in their rituals and daily chanting practices, Buddhist sutras commonly used in Vietnamese temples include the Lotus Sutra, the Amida Sutra, the Diamond Sutra, the Kṣitigarbha Sutra, the Heart Sutra, the Śūraṅgama Sutra, the Vimalakīrti Sutra, and the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment (Soucy 2017a: 185). During my fieldwork, I noticed many temples also used the Medicine Buddha Sutra. The abbot’s critique stems partly from the fact that at most temples in Vietnam, lay Buddhists chant, as Soucy observes, not complete sutras but liturgical texts containing sutra excerpts mixed with transliterated Sanskrit *dharani* (2017a: 185).

<sup>11</sup> The Vietnamese state and Buddhist institutions often refer to Buddhism as *tôn giáo* (“institutionalized religion”) with standardized teachings and practices, and differentiate it from *tín ngưỡng*. For a discussion of this distinction, see Soucy 2012: 31–35. Some Vietnamese monastics, however, have also contested the designation of Buddhism as a doctrinal religion, arguing that it is more of a practical philosophical tradition.

movement since the 1920s. Influenced by Buddhist reform movements in other Asian countries, the Buddhist Revival stemmed from, as Justin Ritzinger puts it (2017: 7), both the “push” against and “pull” toward modernization, French colonialization, Christian proselytization, and nationalist revolution (DeVido 2009; McHale 2004). While the movement entailed a myriad of approaches to Buddhist orthodoxy, practices, and identities, many Buddhist reformers stressed the need to revive Vietnamese Buddhism in the fields of education and social activities, crafting a Buddhism that was modernist and socially engaged. From the 1920s to 1950s, there was a proliferation of Buddhist associations across the country dedicated to the study of Buddhism, as well as publication of journals educating lay people how to be proper Buddhists and avoid superstition (DeVido 2007; Ngo 2015).

Buddhist youth education emerged as one of the key imperatives of the Revival. In 1940, for example, the Buddhist Family movement (known officially in 1951 as *Gia đình Phật tử*, commonly translated as “Buddhist Youth Association,” henceforth GĐPT) was founded by Dr. Lê Đình Thám and other influential Buddhist monastics, including Thích Minh Châu, who later played a central role in the founding of the famed Vạn Hạnh University. Starting in central Vietnam, GĐPT, by the early 1960s, “became one of the best-organized youth associations in the entire country, with 1,000 units comprising 70,000 young people and 3,000 leaders” (DeVido 2007: 268). The establishment of the Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam in 1964, after the violent Buddhist crisis of 1963 against religious discrimination policies of the government of the Republic of Vietnam under Ngô Đình Diệm,<sup>12</sup> contributed to the further development of Buddhist educational institutions, including Buddhist *Kiều Đàm* kindergartens, *Bồ Đề* elementary and secondary schools,<sup>13</sup> colleges, Vạn Hạnh University, and the School of Youth for Social Service (Thích Nhất Hạnh 1965: 180; 201–208). These Buddhist educational institutions laid the foundation for both monastic and lay education with the formalization of Buddhist curricula and training in social work to provide services to those gravely affected by the raging war.

GN, as I came to learn from the abbot, used to be one of the many *Bồ Đề* schools and served as a center for Buddhist education in Saigon from the 1960s to 1975. When communist forces took over Saigon in 1975, they severely restricted Buddhist training programs through the enforcement of collectivization and mass political re-education. The Buddhist school system was abolished, and in the city, according to the abbot, there were only three temples allowed to provide Buddhist education for monastics in 1979. GN was one of these temples, but the training programs were closed down in 1984 due to political restrictions. It was not until a few years after the establishment of the national Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam in 1981 that lay Buddhist educational activities slowly resumed, mainly in the form of regular Dharma lectures. At GN, this pattern continued until 2015 when, after several years of temple reconstruction, the abbot began to implement a diversity of Buddhist programs,

<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of the 1963 Buddhist crisis and the involvement of youth, see Miller 2015 and Nguyen-Marshall 2015.

<sup>13</sup> A report compiled by *Viện Hóa Đạo* (Institute of Dharma Propagation) in 1971 suggested that at these schools, students followed the formal curricula of the South Vietnamese government, with additional courses in Buddhism. In 1970, there were 137 *Kiều Đàm* and *Bồ Đề* schools in South Vietnam, with 58,466 students (Thích Thiện Hoa 1971: 23–24).

including weekend retreats, weekly Buddhist classes, meditation programs, and social engagement activities.

Before I examine GN's educational programs, it is instructive to briefly compare these programs with earlier Buddhist youth educational initiatives, particularly GĐPT. GĐPT is the only pre-1975 Buddhist youth organization that continues to exist in postwar Vietnam. Both GN's and GĐPT's programs share the goals of educating young Buddhists to have a foundational understanding of Buddhist teachings and contribute to the flourishing of society and Buddhism. The main differences, however, arguably lie in their organizational structures and approaches to pedagogies.

GĐPT was originally inspired by the global scout movement, and until this day, its educational programs continue to combine essential scouting skills, knowledge of Buddhist history and teachings, and community services. At GN, while there is an emphasis on Buddhist learning and social engagement, the scout component is absent. More importantly, GĐPT has a hierarchical structure of organization, with young members having to study for a series of exams and complete training camps to move up the leadership positions. Each local GĐPT unit also has to report to the provincial GĐPT sections that are governed by the national GĐPT board. From my observation during fieldwork, the GĐPT tradition remained strong in the central region of Vietnam, particularly in Hue city, while in Ho Chi Minh City, it appeared to be limited to a few temples.<sup>14</sup> This might be partly due to its structure of participation in which members are recruited from a young age and usually from families or temples already connected to the organization. Such a structure stands in contrast to the new Buddhist youth programs at GN and other Buddhist institutions and networks in the city, where the membership structure is more flexible and less hierarchical. In explanation, young people do not need to go through multi-staged training to start contributing to Buddhist programs, while the educational activities and curricula are less standardized, leaving the organizations more open to new adaptations. As I will show, the incorporation of social media and new pedagogies in GN's programs has attracted the participation of a large number of young Vietnamese, including those who have not paid much attention to Buddhism previously.

## **Youth and the Reinvention of Lay Buddhist Education: Language, Social Media, and Pedagogy**

### *a. Language and the Buddhist Episteme:*

As mentioned, GN's abbot, Thích Nhật Từ, perceived that one of the obstacles to disseminating Buddhist teachings to the laity is language. Buddhist sutras and chanting texts commonly used in Mahayana temples in Vietnam entail a combination of vernacular Vietnamese, Sino-Vietnamese, and Romanized transcriptions of Sino-transliterated Sanskrit mantras. While a large portion of Sino-Vietnamese vocabularies makes up the daily Vietnamese parlance, Sino-Vietnamese and Sino-

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<sup>14</sup> According to an article on *Giác Ngộ* magazine, the official publication of the Buddhist Sangha in Ho Chi Minh City, there were 31 GĐPT units in operation in the city in 2019, with 271 leaders and 1,536 members, resulting in each unit having an average of 50 members (Như Danh 2019).

transliteration of Sanskrit words can be difficult for most lay Buddhists to comprehend. Despite such linguistic barriers, regular temple goers can recite from memory Buddhist chants and mantras. For the abbot, this is precisely the problem of current lay Buddhist education: too much rote chanting and memorization of Buddhist texts without comprehension of Buddhist teachings.

Consequently, since the early 2000s, upon obtaining his PhD in Philosophy from India, the abbot returned to Vietnam and initiated a comprehensive program to produce newly compiled and translated volumes of Buddhist teachings for the laity. The publications can be divided into a few types: Buddhist sutra and daily chanting books, Buddhist ritual books, books offering practical advice, and academic manuscripts on Buddhism. As a highly educated monk, the abbot has either authored or edited many of these books. One important feature of these publications, particularly the sutra collections and chanting books, is the deliberate usage of vernacular Vietnamese, instead of Sino-Vietnamese. A second is the stronger emphasis on sutras from the Pali *Tipiṭaka*, the early *Āgamas*, and later Mahayana sutras dealing with Buddhist philosophies, morality, and social relations.

The “Buddhist Sutras for Beginners” (2013), the sutra collection edited by the abbot and used for chanting at GN’s retreats, for example, includes sutras discussing dependent origination, non-self, moral social behaviors, and the four foundations of mindfulness. Besides being presented in vernacular Vietnamese, these sutras have been condensed, and certain vocabularies updated to the contemporary parlance. Most noticeably, excerpts from popular devotional Mahayana sutras, such as the Lotus Sutra and the Amida Buddha Sutra, are not included in the book. The shift in linguistic medium to vernacular Vietnamese is thus coupled with a restructuring of the textual repertoire for lay Buddhists. In so doing, the abbot distances Vietnamese Buddhism from the “Chinese” religious sphere, while encouraging lay Buddhists to focus more on sutras from the Pali *Tipiṭaka*, the *Āgamas*, and those focusing on social morality and Buddhist philosophies from the Mahayana canon.<sup>15</sup>

The linguistic preference for vernacular Vietnamese and the reconfiguration of Buddhist knowledge draw youth’s attention to the temple’s programs. Thành, a twenty-year-old university student majoring in education, once shared with me that his initial attraction to GN was due to its emphasis on the study of Buddhist philosophy. Growing up in a province in the Mekong Delta, he came to know Buddhism as a “funeral religion.” Throughout his school years back home, he was an active leader in the local Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union. He hardly ever went to Buddhist temples, except for the new and full moon days with his family. It was not until his first year in university that he stumbled upon the abbot’s lecture on YouTube debunking “superstitious” beliefs about ghosts and the dead. Thành suddenly saw Buddhism in a philosophical and scientific light. Fascinated by the abbot’s modernist approach, he sought out the temple and became a frequent temple’s volunteer. He offered free foreign language classes and assisted with the weekend retreats. He recalled that when he first read the temple’s sutra books in vernacular Vietnamese, he was able

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<sup>15</sup> This does not mean that popular devotional Mahayana sutras are entirely absent from the temple’s publications or rituals. The abbot has produced other sutra collections that include Pure Land Buddhist texts alongside with those from the Pali canon, as well as new translations of the Amida Sutra and the Medicine Buddha Sutra with added prefaces instructing Buddhists to read/chant these sutras for ethical cultivation, rather than as a means to be reborn in the Pure Land or receive protection from the buddhas.

to understand Buddhist teachings much clearer. His renewed interest in Buddhism led him to register for a part-time degree program at the Vietnam Buddhist University, to share the modernist vision of Buddhism with his family and friends, while incorporating Buddhist concepts in his classes at the temple.

As James Hoesterey notes, translation is not just about language, but it entails a shift in “the epistemological, moral, and narrative frames” (2016: 75). While written Chinese continues to hold symbolic significance in religious rituals (Soucy 2012: 187), Vietnam’s recent geopolitical tension with and wide-spread domestic protests against the incursions of the People’s Republic of China into the South China Sea reinvigorate long-standing debate over Vietnamese cultural identity and political sovereignty (Vu 2014). Among Vietnamese Buddhist institutions, the “China question” lends itself to the debate about what constitutes “Vietnamese” Buddhism. For GN’s abbot, the strong preference for vernacular Vietnamese as a medium to communicate Buddhist teachings and the recompilation of the Buddhist textual repertoire are central to the endeavor to carve out a more identifiable Vietnamese Buddhism, one with which youth can better engage intellectually and philosophically.

*b. Social Media: Changing Methods of Transmission and Piety Disciplining*

Similar to Thành, many young people learn about Buddhism through different social media channels. In Vietnam, urban Buddhist institutions have a strong online presence, as more temples are utilizing social media sites, such as Facebook and YouTube. GN is one of the pioneering temples that recognizes the centrality of social media in Dharma promulgation and social mobilization. Besides its main website, multiple Facebook pages with hundreds of thousands of likes, and YouTube channels that boasted over 497,000 subscribers (as of early 2021), the temple offers mobile applications, allowing anyone to access hundreds of Dharma talks by the abbot and listen to audio recordings of various Buddhist sutras on their smartphones. As these technologies contribute to the creation of a large digital corpus of Buddhism-related materials, they afford a new participatory mode of Dharma learning. Fully understanding the livestreaming functions of Facebook and YouTube, the temple’s monastics have taken advantage of these features to live-broadcast the diverse range of activities at the temple, including weekend retreats, Buddhist classes, volunteering activities, wedding ceremonies, and even pilgrimage trips to famous Buddhist sites abroad.

Monastics and lay youth at GN have found ways to foreground Buddhist teachings in the dizzying midst of popular online content. During my fieldwork, the abbot was quick at incorporating popular references into his sermons on weekend retreats. He also provided commentaries on controversial social issues via the temple’s livestream programs. Since 2015, while the temple’s social media pages are managed by a young monk, he has relied on the assistance of a large group of lay Buddhists, predominantly young people, to post and repost materials produced by the temple. Frequent young participants in the temple’s programs also shared these contents on their personal Facebook profiles, thereby introducing people in their networks to Buddhist teachings. Noticeably, the temple caught on youth’s pattern of online media consumption. Besides posting full Dharma talks, the social media team selected short five-to-fifteen-minute segments from these lectures with important messages and reposted them at regular intervals. These shorter segments received high

number of online engagements via likes, comments, and shares because they worked well with Facebook's approach to "quick-bite" media consumption.

New social media platforms thus have allowed Buddhist monastics and youth to disseminate Buddhist teachings quickly and extensively. They also have afforded new modalities of piety disciplining. In the summer of 2019, for example, the temple's monastics and youth took to Facebook to criticize a popular music video. Entitled "*Độ ta không độ nàng*" (Why bless me, but not her), the song captured the lament of a young monk over the death of his previous love interest, a princess, who had committed suicide after being raped by a prince. Out of vengeance, the monk killed the assailant. Despite its popularity on social media, monastics and youth at GN strongly criticized the song lyrics for having mischaracterized Buddhism and offended the monastic community. In fact, the abbot completely rewrote the song lyrics to discuss instead the Buddhist teachings on non-attachment and compassion. The new song, while maintaining the same catchy melody, was recorded by a professional singer, and promoted across the temple's online platforms. The engagements of Buddhist monastics and lay youth with social media at GN, as such, constitute a form of "Buddhist technoculture" that is "invested in sharing and the social," while providing a framework to construct and enforce Buddhist piety through media consumption and exchanges (Tarocco 2017: 169).

### *c. Pedagogical Innovations: From Classroom Learning to Talk Shows*

Besides the publication of Buddhist texts and Dharma propagation over social media, the weekly Buddhist classes and the weekend retreats at GN are important sites of Buddhist education. During my fieldwork, the temple offered a weekly basic Buddhism course, as well as an advanced one, and a sutra-specific course. The basic Buddhism class was the starting point for most lay Buddhists. The course had two components. On the one hand, it introduced students to basic Buddhist philosophies, including the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, dependent origination, as well as the historical spread of Buddhism. On the other hand, it incorporated transnational Buddhist meditation practices into the curriculum by teaching students the basics of vipassanā meditation and of Thích Nhất Hạnh's Plum Village's mindfulness practices.<sup>16</sup>

Many participants in these Buddhist classes were university students and young professionals. Noticeably, women in their twenties and thirties composed a large portion of the student population. In these classes, the monastic teachers utilized pedagogies similar to those found in a classroom setting. These monastics themselves have studied at secular and Buddhist universities in Vietnam and abroad. While lectures were delivered with the aid of PowerPoint and YouTube videos, the teachers encouraged small group discussions, debates, and presentations. During my time participating in one of these courses in 2017, I observed many spirited discussions surrounding Buddhist ethics and its applications to daily life. What stood out to me was, contrary to the common perception in Vietnam, as Soucy has documented, of female Buddhists being more active in

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<sup>16</sup> Vipassanā meditation and Thích Nhất Hạnh's Plum Village's mindfulness practices have been growing in popularity among young Buddhists in Ho Chi Minh City. As I have argued elsewhere (Nguyen 2020), the popularization of mindfulness and meditation stemmed partly from the increased interest in psychology and mental health in the city.

devotional practices and not as involved in philosophical debates (2012: 163), young women in these courses were passionate about learning and discussing Buddhist teachings.

Although the monastic teachers still occupied a role of religious authority, they relied heavily on young Buddhists for the execution of the course materials. At the beginning of the basic course, for example, the teachers nominated two young students to be the “class presidents,” who were responsible for the layout, printing, and distribution of the learning materials via Facebook and e-mail. Every few weeks, instead of a regular lecture, the teachers held a Dharma forum, where students were encouraged to share problems from their daily lives. At the end of the course, students took an exam and received a certificate of completion. Unlike the precept certificates and lay cards given out by the Chogye sect in South Korea that serve as a requirement to be “officially recognized as a Chogye-affiliated Buddhist layperson” (Kaplan 2017: 152), receiving a certificate from GN does not bind one to a certain sect, school, or stream of Buddhism. Though some youth rarely returned to the temple after the course, many others continued to take other advanced courses, participate in the ritual of taking the three refuges and formally receive a Dharma name, and/or assist with other activities at the temple.

In my conversations with a few students who participated in the course, they found its systematic approach to Buddhism appealing. Tuyét, a third-year medical student in her early twenties, explained to me that after attending a few weekend retreats at the temple, she wanted a more structured introduction to Buddhism. Tuyét’s family had followed Buddhism for a long time, but she described her family’s approach to be more “superstitious.” At the time of my interview with Tuyét in late 2017, she had finished the basic Buddhism course and was pursuing further Buddhist learning with the intention of following the monastic path. She revealed that her attraction to Buddhism was motivated by the suffering she had witnessed as a medical student. “Being a medical doctor . . . it does not help people end their suffering. If you are a dedicated doctor, you can cure patients of illnesses, but then they will return once their illnesses come back or when they contract other issues. It’s a continuous cycle. Medicine is not appealing to me anymore, and so I have to search for another path,” Tuyét shared. The basic Buddhism class at GN, in many ways, provided her with not only an introduction to Buddhism, but also a space for her to contemplate human suffering and to seek an alternative path.

Besides the classroom-based programs, GN offered weekend retreats for children (from three to thirteen) every Saturday afternoon and for adolescents and young adults (from fourteen to early thirties) on selected Sundays of the month.<sup>17</sup> An average of 500 young people attended these retreats, according to temple-reported statistics. While the young children retreat emphasized the teaching of proper lay Buddhists’ bodily behaviors, the retreat for young adults entailed the learning of Buddhist Dharma through lectures given by monastics and “talk shows” with successful Buddhist intellectuals, businesspeople, and celebrities.

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<sup>17</sup> From 2016-early 2018, the young adult retreat was a full-day event on one selected Sunday of the month. Since April 2018, it has shifted to a half-day event that occurs every or every other Sunday afternoon depending on the month’s program schedule.

The curriculum for the young children retreat was developed and implemented collaboratively by monastics and lay Buddhists, many of whom were young women with training in social work, psychology, or education. In this retreat, besides chanting, bowing, and basic sitting meditation, children learned about Buddhism through singing, dancing, and picture painting. They also learned important life skills, including self-protection, traffic safety regulations, and first aid. During my fieldwork, the temple's abbot and another young lay Buddhist were developing a textbook series to be used for later retreats. The young Buddhist told me that he consulted multiple sources, including the GDPT's teaching materials, civic textbooks from the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, "Dharma school" models from Buddhist groups in Singapore, Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, as well as the organizational structure of Catholic youth groups in the city. In one of our chats, he excitedly showed me pictures of Catholic youth organizations and explained that the Catholic youth programs are clearly structured into sequences from kindergarten to high school and beyond. He wanted to develop something similar for GN and had already crafted a proposal that received much support from the abbot.

While the young children retreat was aimed at introducing young children to Buddhism, the retreat for young adults was designed to inspire interest in Buddhism and address socio-emotional concerns of university students and young professionals. Here, young adults listened to Dharma lectures by prominent monastics in the city on Buddhist philosophies, but also on issues related to family, romantic relationships, mental health, and professional development. To attract youth's attendance, the temple added a "talk-show" series in which well-known successful lay Buddhists were invited to discuss how Buddhism had helped them in their personal and professional lives. These talk shows took the form of interviews between a monastic or an MC and the famous figure, allowing youth to learn about the life experiences of the public personality as they strove to be a good Buddhist and established themselves economically. The inclusion of lay Buddhist businesspeople, intellectuals, and celebrities illustrates the temple's effort to provide youth with guidance on how to be pious Buddhists while successfully navigating the challenges of the market economy. Similar to other programs, many young Buddhists actively contributed to the organization of the retreat, assisting with event registration, activity coordination, and outreach efforts through social media.

### **Conclusion: Envisioning a New Vietnamese Buddhist Subjectivity and Community**

GN's educational programs demonstrate the collaborative efforts between monastics and lay Buddhist youth to craft a youth-oriented Buddhism in Ho Chi Minh City. Such a project, as I have shown, involves two simultaneous processes. Monastics and youth work together on the one hand, to transform Buddhist knowledge, practices, and pedagogies to respond to youth's life experiences, and on the other hand, to carve out an educational space in which youth want to actively participate. The goal of this form of lay Buddhist education is to create a new generation of self-reflexive and intellectual Buddhists who have a strong grasp of Buddhist teachings and identify themselves as *Phật tử*, as well as a lay community that participates in the administrative and educational functioning of Buddhist institutions.

Although it continues some of the key imperatives of the Buddhist Revival from the 1920s, GN's lay education project is constructed in response to a different kind of public sphere in which anti-China sentiments, new developments in communicative technologies, and the market economy shape the morale and life experiences of urban youth. While the conscious use of vernacular Vietnamese exemplifies an effort to "Vietnamize" Buddhism, monastics and lay youth draw on transnational vipassanā meditation and the Plum Village's mindfulness practices, new global forms of social media, and innovative pedagogies to render this Vietnamese Buddhism modernist and cosmopolitan. The programs at GN thus emerge out of the "confluences" of different transnational religious and non-religious "flows" (Tweed 2008: 54). At the same time, the vision of Vietnamese Buddhism promoted by GN reflects a conscious endeavor to regulate certain flows: in the temple's formulation, Vietnamese Buddhism needs to be "purified" of Chinese religio-cultural influences, while drawing more on the Pali canon and practices from Theravada traditions. This articulation exemplifies what Thomas Borchert (2008) has identified as the tension between national and transnational forms of Buddhism, in which Vietnamese Buddhism is constructed in relation to Vietnamese nationalistic politics and the shifting geopolitical relationships among Vietnam, China, and other Buddhist heartlands.

Moreover, rather than being antithetical to the Vietnamese state's "secular" market socialist ideologies, GN's programs encourage youth to approach Buddhism intellectually, while promoting engagement with the market economy. As I have argued elsewhere (Nguyen 2020), the visions of Buddhist subjectivity and community promoted by many urban Buddhist programs at times reinforce middle-class personhood. In the case of the educational programs above, the goal is to train a new generation of young lay Buddhists, who dedicate time to Buddhist learning and ethical cultivation. In post-reform Vietnam, these activities, as Ann Marie Leshkovich argues, can be linked to a form of middle-class religiosity (2006). Among many young Buddhists at GN, this middle-classness is still aspirational, as they endeavor to establish themselves socially and economically.

The modernist envisioning of Vietnamese Buddhism and the configuration of the temple's structure to encourage youth participation have allowed GN to gain a significant youth following. The active involvement of youth—many of whom were university students who had migrated from provinces outside of the city and were not financially or socially advantaged—in the design and implementation of the temple's educational programs, I argue, encourages us to rethink what "elite" Buddhism in Vietnam might mean. While the type of Buddhism promoted by the temple indeed corresponds to the modernist agendas of both the Buddhist revival and the Vietnamese state, it is constructed by not just highly educated monks and political elites, but also youth from many different backgrounds. In my conversations with these youths, I found that one key dimension to their attraction to Buddhist educational programs is the desire for self-cultivation, be it intellectually, spiritually, or ethically. The Buddhist programs offer sites where young men and women can engage in intellectual debates, foster social relationships and community, and contribute their skills and knowledge.

In this regard, young people at GN arguably represent what Tweed has referred to as "vernacular intellectualism," a concept that calls for a consideration of how ordinary devotees,

including those typically ascribed to the realm of feeling and ritual like women, contribute to the domain of ideas and intellectual thinking (2010: 284). As I have shown, the lay Buddhist educational programs at GN are the results of the collaboration between monastics and young people, of the interplay between formal Buddhist learning and the life experiences and aspirations of many Vietnamese youth. Young women at the temple, in particular, demonstrated great interest in Buddhist learning and contributed actively to the formulation and implementation of Buddhist educational programs.

The heightened participation of youth in Buddhist education in Ho Chi Minh City is comparable to the rise of young people's interest in Buddhism in South Korea (Kim 2016; Kim and Choi 2016) and China (Fisher 2014). As many young people in Vietnam grow disenchanted with the Communist Party and restless with the pressures of the market economy, the new project of constructing a youth-oriented, cosmopolitan, and identifiable Vietnamese Buddhism captures their imagination, allowing them to find new ways to craft themselves as ethical and socially engaged citizens. As such, among the young population in Ho Chi Minh City, "elite" modernist Buddhism can speak to "popular" aspirations among youth to carve out a religious space that allows for other modes of spiritual and community engagements, besides the predominant devotional practices.

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