

Thai and Vietnamese proverbs and common expressions: The influence of Buddhist and local beliefs^{*}

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how Thai and Vietnamese proverbs and expressions are influenced by Buddhism and local beliefs. The data used in this study evaluates 150 Thai and Vietnamese proverbs and expressions, which are all, to various degrees, influenced by religious and local beliefs. Buddhist precepts provide the framework of analysis.

Although Thai and Vietnamese people follow different sects of Buddhism, there is no difference in terms of applying Buddhist precepts in daily life. Thai and Vietnamese proverbs and expressions reflect similarities which have been influenced by Buddhism and local beliefs, as follows:

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|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| - right behaviour | - moderation |
| - gratitude | - self-dependency |
| - right effort | - using wisdom |
| - benevolence | - being good people |
| - association with good people | - uncertainty of life |
| - right speech | - final pacified life |
| - right resolve | - right occupation |

Thai and Vietnamese proverbs reflect the Four Noble Truths. In particular, some of the Eightfold Path and other Buddhist precepts are implemented and absorbed in their spirit. Thai and Vietnamese people also share beliefs about supernatural things, especially spirits or “ghosts”.

Points of difference between Thai and Vietnamese perspectives are as follows:

In Vietnamese proverbs, the role of monks and nuns are mentioned rarely, while they occur frequently in Thai proverbs.

In the Vietnamese Buddhist concept, Buddha is in the human heart which relates to the person’s good deeds.

Buddha in the Vietnamese concept is like a local personality.

Vietnamese people have been influenced by Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. However, Thai and Vietnamese can absorb and integrate Buddhism and local beliefs in their ways of life harmoniously.

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While both Thailand and Vietnam are Buddhist countries, they are dominated by different sects. Most Thai people (95% of approximately 62 million) adhere to Theravada Buddhism (Hinayana). The remaining 5% include Mahayana Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Christians. In Vietnam, there are about 80 million people. The religions in Vietnam are: a synthesis of Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism (called the "triple religion" or *tam giáo*). There are significant minorities of adherents to Roman Catholicism, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao. There are smaller minorities of adherents to Protestantism, Islam, and Theravada Buddhism. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Vietnam). Vietnam is considered to be a museum for religions and beliefs in the world. Both Thailand and Vietnam have a wealth of other religious practices. However, this paper focuses particularly on the contributions of Buddhism. Apart from Buddhism, Thai and Vietnamese people have practiced local beliefs harmoniously.

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This paper begins with a brief introduction to Buddhism and local beliefs in Thailand and Vietnam. This is followed by a comparison between Thai and Vietnamese proverbs and common expressions influenced by Buddhist and local beliefs.

1. A brief introduction to Buddhism and local beliefs in Thailand¹

Thailand has had a series of Buddhist kingdoms beginning with the Sukhothai. Sukhothai's King Ramkhamhaeng (1275-1317 A.D.) established Theravada Buddhism as Thailand's dominant religion. It reached its height under the reign of King Li Thai (1347-1368 A.D.) who was King Ramkhamhaeng's grandson: about 30 volumes of the Buddhist scriptures were studied and rewritten by the king into one volume, the Tribhumikatha, the first treatise by a Thai. It was also the first known Thai Buddhist addidactic literary work. Another Thai kingdom to develop later was called the kingdom of Ayuthaya (1350-1767 A.D.). Ayuthaya kings continued to encourage Buddhist study and worship.

When Ayuthaya fell to the Burmese in 1767 A.D., Buddhism declined through lack of discipline and the loss of most of the religious books as a result of fire. The new kings in the Thonburi and Ratanakosin reigns tried to revive it by collecting the scattered religious books together, purifying the conduct of the monks, and promoting a heavy programme of building temples and images. Buddhism flourished again during the Ratanakosin period.

¹Wide report available at the website of the Thai Buddhism: <http://www.ThaiBuddhism.htm>, 30/10/2004.

Through the centuries Buddhism has been the main driving force in Thai cultural development. There are many cultural Thai art styles, particularly in the fields of architecture, sculpture, painting and early literature which are of a Buddhist nature. Now Buddhism has coloured everyday Thai life. Mahayana Buddhists are found primarily among Chinese and Vietnamese ethnic groups in Thailand. Monks wear orange jackets and trousers. They are strict vegetarians.

Thai people integrate animistic beliefs with Buddhism in daily life such as in the concepts of *p^hĩ*: “ghost”, *c^hô:k* “luck”, etc. They believe that supernatural powers can affect our lives positively and negatively.

2. A brief on Buddhism and local beliefs in Vietnam²

As an agricultural society, the Vietnamese people throughout history have appreciated stillness over movement and natural phenomena. Vietnamese philosophy paid attention to relations typified by the doctrine of *yin* and *yang* and was manifested by a moderate lifestyle tending towards harmony. In addition to this cultural foundation, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism contributed to the development of Vietnamese society and culture. Buddhism was the earliest foreign religion to be introduced in Vietnam, arriving from India in the first century A.D. in the form of the Mahayana sect via China, and the Hinayana sect via Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. During the tenth-century feudal reign of Vietnam, Buddhism was considered a state religion. Mahayana Buddhism became the faith of most Vietnamese, whereas Theravada Buddhism was confined mostly to the southern delta region.

Mahayana ceremonies easily conformed to indigenous Vietnamese beliefs which combined folklore with Confucian and Tao teachings, and Mahayana’s “enlightened ones” were often venerated alongside various indigenous spirits. Vietnamese Buddhism stays on earth rather than ascending up to heaven, and attaches importance to exorcism and prayers for wealth, happiness and longevity rather than aspiring towards Nirvana. Only when Mahayana Buddhism approached the country from China did Vietnamese monks have the chance to carry out an in-depth study of Buddhism. Separate schools were later formed. The Truc Lam Buddhist School for example attached importance to the Buddha inside the human heart. In the Ly-Tran dynasties, Buddhism, though having reached its peak, still embraced both Taoism and Confucianism to create a cultural face with the three religions existing at the same time. Despite ups and downs throughout history, Buddhism has become quite familiar to the Vietnamese. According to a nationwide survey conducted in 1993, there were up to 3 million Buddhist believers and another 10 million frequently going to the pagoda for Buddhist worship.

Due to the fact that Vietnam is an agricultural society, it is characterized by village communities which have retained many ancient rituals

²Extensive report available at the websites of the religions and beliefs in Vietnam: <http://beliefs and religions.htm> 27/12/2003.

and beliefs. These include dualistic thinking, a concrete way of thinking that tilted words to emotional experiences rather than rational ones and preferred images to concepts. However, it was also a flexible, adaptable, and conciliatory way of thinking. This was a way of living that valued highly emotional ties and attachment to relatives and the community. This was a way of behaving toward conciliatory and relations-based settlement of conflicts and disputes to restore equilibrium.

On the scale of spiritual values, the Vietnamese highly appreciate “Benevolence” and closely combined it with “Righteousness” and “Virtues”; an absence of benevolence and righteousness is tantamount to an absence of virtue.

Local beliefs in Vietnam

Confucianism was introduced to Vietnam during the long period of Chinese domination. The Vietnamese did not abandon the traditions of Confucianism after national independence from China. It is clear that Confucianism has left a profound impression on Vietnamese social structure.

Taoism in Vietnam was derived from the doctrine of Lao Tzu, which is based on the participation of man in the universal order. This order depends on the equilibrium of Yin (negative) and Yang (positive) which harmonizes the duality of nature.

Many Vietnamese practice animism (concern with spirits and natural forces), ancestor worship, astrology, and many other beliefs regarding the supernatural.

The custom of worshipping ancestors is very popular, and has almost become a belief in itself. Some customs derived from Confucianist teachings, and others from popular superstitions and Taoist rites. The Vietnamese choose the anniversary of the death of family members rather than their birthdays to hold commemorative ceremonies for the deceased. The Vietnamese, like the Chinese, believe that people possess three souls (*linh hồn*): life, intelligence and perception. Human beings, having a monopoly on intelligence, are the only creatures which possess three souls, of which the *linh hồn* is the transcendental one. While the principles related to the organic functions wane with life, the *linh hồn* possesses the capacity for survival. This is the origin of the Cult of the Ancestors, which Confucius elevated to the level of a moral duty, regulated by strict rites. The male descendants perpetuate the Cult of the Ancestors. If there are no male descendants, daughters are permitted to carry on the cult. If any family does not have any descendants, the souls of the dead are doomed to eternal wandering—one of the most appalling maledictions which could afflict any family. Adoption is considered to be a last resort.

Many people believe that the souls of their ancestors are the natural protectors of the family line. In wealthy families, the ancestral altar is a piece

of furniture of great value, made of hand-carved wood, painted red and gold on which are arranged brass candlesticks and perfume pans. The names of the ancestors for the past four generations are inscribed on mahogany tablets. The altar is placed in the main room (living room) of the house where the entire family gathers on the occasions of the main feasts of the year. It is a symbol of family solidarity. Major decisions of the family including marriages are made and consecrated before the altar.

3. A comparison between Thai and Vietnamese proverbs and common expressions influenced by Buddhism and local beliefs

This section will present the definitions of proverb and expression followed by a comparison between Thai and Vietnamese proverbs and common expressions influenced by Buddhism and local beliefs.

3.1 Definitions

For the purpose of this paper proverbs and expressions are defined as follows:

A Thai proverb is a short statement that advises or teaches about life.

A Vietnamese proverb is a concise statement expressing deep thoughts, practical knowledge, and experience-based judgements, covering all aspects of life, and bearing some flavour of a particular culture, sometimes in a specific period and sometimes beyond time limits. (http://sweb.uky.edu/~mnguy2/VN_proverbs.htm, 30/12/2003)

An expression is a phrase that has a particular meaning based on popular culture or contemporary contexts.

Both proverbs and expressions are initiated from the adult's experiences in life. They want to teach or advise the younger generations by using the proverbs with short rhyming phrases or sentences which can be remembered easily. Thai proverbs and expressions are written more often than they are spoken, whereas Vietnamese people used both spoken and written proverbs and expressions.

3.2 A comparison between Thai and Vietnamese proverbs and common expressions

Thai and Vietnamese people have been influenced by Buddhism and local beliefs, as follows:

3.2.1 Right behavior

Thai proverbs and expressions	Vietnamese proverbs and expressions
(1) /kò: læ:w tɔ̀:n sǎ:n/ “Never do things by halves.”	(5) Ác giả ác báo. “Who does evil will meet evil.”
(2) /kan wáj di: kwà: kǎ:/ “Prevention is better than cure.”	(6) Ai bảo trời không có mắt. “Who told (you) that Supreme Being does not have eyes?”
(3) /tʰam di: dâ:j di: tʰam cʰuə dâ:j cʰuə/ “Do good, get good. Do bad, get bad.”	(7) Nguyên nhân nào hậu quả đó. “Every cause has its consequences.”
(4) /pìt tʰɔ̀:n lǎŋ pʰraʔ/ “To stick a golden leaf at the back of the Buddha image.”	(8) Ai làm người ấy chịu. “Whoever does anything, he will suffer the consequences for his actions.”

Thai and Vietnamese proverbs and expressions teach the relationship between cause and effect, action and consequence, as in (3), (5), (6), (7) and (8), respectively, which relates to the concept of the Second Noble Truth (the cause of suffering). In (6), Vietnamese Buddhists believe that Buddha can see everybody’s behavior. Anyone who does good, will get good; if they do bad, they will get bad. This corresponds to the Buddhist concept of Karma. Moreover, Thai Buddhists believe that people will have to accept the consequences of their deeds. We should plan well or think carefully before doing any activities as in (1) and (2).

The proverb in (4) reflects Thai culture, wherein the Buddha image carries divine power and status. Thai people often stick gold leaves on the Buddha image to acquire merit while also decorating the image. Many people prefer to stick the gold leaves on the front. But there are some who stick it on the back of the image. This act is comparable to the act of doing unseen good deeds. In Vietnamese Buddhist culture, people do not stick the gold leaves on the image as the Thai people do. They do, however, burn gold and silver papers in a specific stove in each pagoda.

3.2.2 Gratitude

Thai proverbs and expressions	Vietnamese proverbs and expressions
(9) /kæ:n tɕuì:t tɕuŋ rú: kʰun klwə/ “We only appreciate the worth of salt when the soup is tasteless.”	(10) Ăn cây nào rào cây ấy. “When you enjoy the fruit of a tree, you have the responsibility to protect that tree.”
	(11) Ổn bằng cái đĩa nghĩa bằng con ruồi. “The obligations are like a full plate but the gratitude is as small as a house fly.”

Thai proverbs and expressions	Vietnamese proverbs and expressions
	(12) <i>Sợ người ở phải, người cho ăn.</i> “The good and helpful people are hard to be blamed.” (13) <i>Thờ thì dễ giữ thì khó.</i> “To worship is easy but to remember and remain grateful to the goodness of ancestors are difficult.”

Thai and Vietnamese people teach that gratitude is a marker of goodness. We should remember to pay back the people who have done good things for us. This is reflected in (9)-(12).

Ancestor worship is one of the most important traditions of the Vietnamese people. Most Vietnamese families have an altar in their house. To worship ancestors is not just to perform rituals, such as offering a tray of food, candles and joss sticks and saying a few words and inviting ancestors to partake; it is much more than that. After the joss sticks are burnt, family members eat the offerings. But the deep meaning of worshipping on the anniversary of the death is to recollect the goodness of the ancestors, done for their descendants as stated in (13). Thai Buddhists, although lacking comparable proverbs, also express gratitude to departed relatives by offering food to the monks from time to time or on special occasions such as the death anniversary or on Songkran Day (Thai traditional New Year Day, 13 April.)

3.2.3 *Right effort*

Thai proverbs and expressions	Vietnamese proverbs and expressions
(14) /tɕoŋ p ^h â:k p ^h iən paj t ^h ə:t tɕàk kət p ^h ǒn/ “If one is industrious, he will be successful.” (15) /fǒn t ^h âŋ hâj pen k ^h ěm/ “To sharpen an anvil to be a needle.” (16) /k ^h wa:m p ^h ja: ja:m jù: t ^h î: nǎj k ^h wa:m sǎm rət jù: t ^h î: nân/ “Wherever great efforts have been made success will be.” (17) /kha jǎn muən mót/ “As diligent as an ant.”	(18) <i>Có công mài sắt, có ngày nên kim.</i> “Take a rod of iron and keep filing it until it becomes a needle.” (19) <i>Thất bại là mẹ thành công.</i> “To fail is the mother of success.”

Thai people believe that people should be diligent in earning their living, studying and doing other activities, as in (14)-(16) and (18). As ants are diligent despite their tiny size, so people are instructed to be diligent like ants (17). Vietnamese people believe that people should not be discouraged

easily after failure. They should try again and again to achieve success as explained by (19).

3.2.4 Benevolence

Thai proverbs and expressions	Vietnamese proverbs and expressions
(20) /mê:t ta: t ^h am k ^h ám tɛun lô:k/ “Benevolence supports the world.”	(21) Đường mòn nhân nghĩa không mòn. “A path may be worn down, but one should not wear down the good will of others.” (22) Kẻ có nhân mười phần “If a person has good character, then ten tasks may not be too difficult.”

Thai Buddhists believe that people should wish happiness for other people, as in (20). Vietnamese people teach their descendants to be ever more benevolent because goodwill cannot be worn out when time passes, as shown in (21). They also believe that anyone who has mercy will be blessed by Lord Buddha and respected by others. They will be happy as indicated in (22).

3.2.5 Association with good people

Thai proverbs and expressions	Vietnamese proverbs and expressions
(23) /k ^h óp k ^h on p ^h a:n p ^h a:n p ^h a: paj hă: p ^h it / /k ^h óp bandìt bandìt p ^h a: paj hă: p ^h ǒn/ “Associating with bad people will lead you to do wrong. Associating with scholars will lead you to do good.” (24) /k ^h óp k ^h on hâj du: nâ: súi: p ^h â: hâj du: nuố/ “To associate with someone, one should consider their face. To buy cloth, one should consider the texture.”	(25) Đi với Bụt mặc áo cà sa, đi với ma mặc áo giấy. “If you travel with Buddha, wear a saffronrobe, but if you go with spirits (ghosts), wear paper clothes.”

Thais teach that people will be influenced by their friends and their surrounding society. If people nearby are good, they will be good. But if they cannot distinguish good from bad and the company is bad then they will be bad inevitably, as in (23)-(24).

Vietnamese people teach their descendants that they should adjust themselves to their environment. If they go along with good people, they should behave well. If they go along with bad people, they should know how to be safe, as stated in (25).

The concept between Thai and Vietnamese proverbs differs in that the environment is seen as being able to affect Thai people easily and directly. For this reason, a person should not associate with bad people. By contrast, the Vietnamese teach that people should use their own judgment correctly to identify people.

3.2.6 *Right speech*

Thai proverbs and expressions	Vietnamese proverbs and expressions
(26) /k ^h ít læ:w tɕuŋ tɕe: ra tɕa:/ “Think before speaking.” (27) /faj naj jà: nam ʔò:k faj nò:k jà: nam k ^h âw/ “Don’t bring the internal fire out. Don’t bring the external fire in.” (28) /p ^h û:t paj sǎ:ŋ p ^h aj bîə nîŋ siə tam luŋ tho:ŋ/ “To speak gets only six Satang. To be quiet gets 20,000 Baht.”	(29) Ma nhà chưa tỏ ma ngõ đã tường. “House ghost is not yet aware, The alley ghost already knows.” (30) Mất lòng trước được lòng sau. “If you correct me, I won’t like it, but later I will realize it was for my own good.” (31) Một lời nói dối sám hối bảy ngày. “If you speak a lie once, you will have to repent seven days.” (32) Một câu nhin, chín câu lành. “To refrain from saying one harsh sentence is equivalent to nine gentle sentences.”

Thai people teach that one should think before speaking. They have a saying that, “Speech is our master”, as in (26).

Thai and Vietnamese teach that people should know what, when, where and to whom to speak properly. They should not reveal the hot internal issues (= ‘fire’) to others, and should not take in external issues, as in (27) and (29). They should keep things calm. The proverb in (29) reflects the Vietnamese belief that there are various kinds of spirits such as a house spirit (ghost), an alley spirit (ghost), etc. The house spirit represents internal affairs. The alley spirit represents external affairs. However, in (29), the implication is that the neighborhood knows about affairs in one’s household before some members of the household know.

In (30), the Vietnamese teach that when they contact others, they should speak openly and frankly to make everything clear, although sometimes it seems to be impolite. But when it’s clear, there is nothing in doubt. Therefore, a friendship will continue smoothly. But in the Thai proverb, there is a contradiction with the Vietnamese one, as shown in (28).

In (28), **p^haj** and **bîa** are old types of Thai currency which had little value. Two Phaj and one Bia are equal to six satang. –a tiny amount of money (contemporary Thai baht is equal to 100 satang). One Tamlung of gold is worth 20,000 baht in contemporary currency. This proverb reminds people that if their speech is not useful or if it is destructive, they should be quiet. It is compared in value to only six Satang. If they are quiet, they may get more money. This proverb is similar to the Vietnamese one in (32).

In (31), the Vietnamese ask people to refrain from telling lies because they will discredit themselves.

3.2.7 *Right resolve*

Thai proverbs and expressions	Vietnamese proverbs and expressions
(33) /buə māj hāj c ^h ām ná:m māj hāj k ^h ùn/ “Lotus should not be crushed. Water should not be muddy.”	(36) Một người lo bằng kho người làm. “It is more important to have one person planning than to have a whole group of people working.”
(34) /tɕá: tɕá: dâ:j p ^h rá: lêm ŋa:m/ “To be slow gets a beautiful large knife.”	(37) Cơm ai người nấy ăn, việc ai người nấy làm. “One should care for his own business and shouldn’t interfere in others’ affairs.”
(35) /tɕá: pen ka:n na:n pen k ^h un/ “To be careful and to last a long time are good for activities.”	

These Thai proverbs and expressions teach that people should think carefully and rightly before doing anything. They should not be too hurried before doing anything, as in (33)-(35). The middle way is very suitable for doing everything.

The Vietnamese teach that people who are responsible and take care of their own affairs well should be praised or supported. They should not interfere in others’ affairs, as in (36)-(37).

3.2.8 Moderation

Thai proverbs and expressions	Vietnamese proverbs and expressions
(38) /plù:k ruən p ^h ɔ: tuə wǐ: hǔə p ^h ɔ klâ:w/ “Build a house suitably with your ability. Comb your head sufficiently for gathering into a knot.”	(41) Cơm có lửa quá hoá khô. “Strong fire burns rice.”
(39) /nók nó:j t ^h am ran nó:j tæ: p ^h ɔ: tuə/ “A small bird should nest suitably with its shape.”	(42) Chín quá hoá nẫu. “Things left undone too long will be spoiled.”
(40) /nũŋ tɕiəm hòm tɕiəm/ “Dress modest.”	

Thai and Vietnamese people believe that the middle way in daily life should be practiced in order to have a happy life. Satisfaction with what we have is also important for our a peaceful life, as in the above examples.

3.2.9 Self-dependency

Thai proverbs and expressions	Vietnamese proverbs and expressions
(43) /ton nán læ: pen t ^h ɪ: p ^h uŋ hæ:ŋ ton/ “Depend on oneself.”	(45) Của ở bàn chân bàn tay. “One’s best assets (possessions) are one’s hands and feet.” (One’s skills are more important than any other possessions.)
(44) /ná:m p ^h uŋ ruə suə p ^h uŋ pà:/ “Water depends on a boat. “A tiger depends on the forest.”	(46) Hay làm thì giàu, hay cầu thì nghèo. “Those who are diligent in working will prosper, but those who beg will be poor.”
	(47) Không làm đừng ăn. “If you don’t work, you don’t eat.”

Thai and Vietnamese people teach that people should not wait for assistance from others all the time. They should do some things by themselves, as in (43), (45)-(47). But for some activities, if they cannot be done alone, Thais also teach that people can ask for help from others. Sometimes, people should help each other, as in (44).

3.2.10 Using wisdom

Thai proverbs and expressions	Vietnamese proverbs and expressions
(48) /pan ja: pra nuəŋ daŋ ʔa: wút/ “Wisdom is like a weapon.” ³	(49) Khôn làm cột cái, dại làm cột con. “The wise are like the main pillars in a building, the foolish are like the marginal posts.” (Wise people have a central place in life; fools are insignificant.) (50) Khôn ăn người, dại người ăn. “If you are wise, you will have victory over other people, If you are foolish, other people will have victory over you.” (51) Khôn lắm, dại nhiều. “The more you act wise, the more you look foolish.”

Thai and Vietnamese proverbs and expressions teach that people should use wisdom when confronted with the problems of life and use wisdom in the right way, as in (48)-(49). But Vietnamese proverbs, as in (50), suggests that wise men can vanquish foolish ones. In terms of human life, if wise men use their wisdom in the wrong way, of course, they may defeat inferiors. However, this does not mean that others are foolish, but, rather that sometimes, a lack of opportunities in life makes them fail. Vietnamese also teach that people who always think that they are wise, in fact, are stupid sometimes, like a bird, as in (51). They should regularly and consistently reflect upon themselves.

3.2.11 Being good people

Thai proverbs and expressions	Vietnamese proverbs and expressions
(52) /c ^h â:t di: sǐ: tō:ŋ dɛ:ŋ/ “Good rouge must be red.” (53) /k ^h on di p ^h ǐ: k ^h úm/ “Good people are protected by ghosts” (54) /tòk ná:m mǎj lǎj tòk faj mǎj mǎj/ “(Good people) fall into water but aren’t swept away. (They) fall into fire but aren’t burned.”	(55) Cái nết đánh chết cái đẹp. “Good character is better than beauty.” (56) Tốt danh hơn tốt áo. “Good reputation is better than beautiful clothes.” (57) Cây ngay không sợ chết đứng. “The straight tree is not afraid of dying straight.” (A person with good character is not afraid of dying because he is leaving behind a good reputation.)

³Thai people compare wisdom to a weapon because it can be an effective tool for passing through any hard things. In terms of Buddhism, people who have wisdom can use the Dhamma to solve life’s problems according to the fourth Noble Truths.

Both Thai and Vietnamese teach how to behave properly and that the way that good people should live is according to the precepts of their religion. For Buddhists, this would mean that people should accumulate goodness by always doing good deeds, as in (52)-(56). (53) reflects Thai beliefs about animism, especially ‘ghosts’. Ghosts can cause good and bad to people. Thai people believe that both Lord Buddha and ghosts protect them.

The Vietnamese teach that people should be good by comparing a tree with a straight trunk to good people. The upright tree gets sunshine directly, so it is green and strong. It is like a good person who can help others as much as possible with happiness. Such people live happily, as in (57).

3.2.12 *Uncertainty*

Thai proverbs and expressions	Vietnamese proverbs and expressions
(58) /p ^h iː sǎm dām p ^h lɔːj/ “Bad luck happens continuously.”	(59) Ma không thương người ốm. Trộm không thương nhà nghèo. “Ghosts have no pity on the sickly. Robbers have no pity for the poor.” (Regardless of what you might expect, bad things may happen. Do not expect life to go smoothly.) (60) Người có lúc vinh, lúc nhục. Nước có lúc đục, lúc trong. “People sometimes receive praise and sometimes shame, just as water is sometimes muddy and sometimes clear.” (You cannot expect that you will always receive honor through life.) (61) Người sống của còn, người chết của hết. “Property remains when the owner is alive. It will be lost when the owner passes away.”

Thai and Vietnamese people teach that the course of life goes up and down, never smooth all the time. Sometimes when their life is in bad shape, they suffer ill luck again and again. Life is uncertain, as in (57)-(60).

Vietnamese people also teach how to manage property. They advise people not to be stingy because, when someone dies, they cannot take money

with them. Their property will belong to other people, as in (61). Thus people should not be attached to anything.

3.2.13 *Final pacified life*

Thai proverbs and expressions	Vietnamese proverbs and expressions
(62) /ta:j ta: làp/ “Die with closed eyes.”	(63) Ai chết trước thì được nắm mồ. “Whoever dies first gets the tomb.” (First come, first served.)

Both Thai and Vietnamese believe that the end of one’s life should be peaceful, with nothing to worry about, as in (62).

Vietnamese bury the dead. In the past, life was very difficult, therefore, many people prepared coffins or graves while they were alive because they wanted to make sure that there would be a peaceful resting place for themselves after death, as in (63).

Normally, Vietnamese people want to have a house when they are alive. After death, they also want to be buried in a peaceful place prepared by their descendants. The descendants should respect and take care of the ancestor’s tomb regularly. Vietnamese believe that the ancestors are always with the live descendants. This concept has been influenced by Confucianism. Thai Buddhists on the other hand, are cremated after death, and Thais believe that the soul of the dead person will go to a good place (heaven) if they have done good during their life, and go to hell if they did bad.

3.2.14 *Right occupation*

Thai proverbs and expressions	Vietnamese proverbs and expressions
(64) /sìp rú: māj thāw nūn tɛ̌ʰam na:n/ “One well learned skill is better than ten theories.” (65) /kèp lék pʰəsǒm nǒ:j/ “Save bit by bit.”	(66) Một nghề thì sống, đồng nghề thì chết. “If you stick to one occupation, you’ll succeed, but if you try to do many things, you won’t do anything well.” (67) Của rẻ rẻ không bằng nghề trong tay. “Lazily made cheap stuff is not equal to handmade products, skillfully made.” (68) Quan thấy kiện như kiến thấy mỡ. “Officials are attracted to law suits (for their own personal gain) like ants are attracted to cooking fat.”

Thai and Vietnamese people teach that people should survive by having one occupation that requires skill and doing it well, as in (64), (66) and (67). Saving should be done too, as in (65). (68) is a fact of life in many societies. It reflects the fear that some dishonest government officials will often take advantage of the common people and that such activities must be shunned.

However, there are some different points between Thai and Vietnamese proverbs reflecting religious and local beliefs.

1) In Vietnam, monks and nuns play a very minor role in Vietnamese proverbs, whereas monks and nuns appear more frequently in Thai proverbs, as in the following examples:

(69) tɛ̌a:w māj mi: sǎ:n sǒm p^ha:n⁴ māj mi: wát
 holy being no have spirit house abbot no have temple
 “The holy being has no spirit house. The abbot has no temple.”

(70) tɛ̌h^huə tɛ̌h^hâ:ŋ tɛ̌h^hi: di: tɛ̌h^hâ:ŋ sǒŋ
 bad leave nun good leave monk
 “Let it be, do not take anything seriously.”

(71) tàk bà:t jà: t^hǎ:m p^hrǎ?
 present food to monk not ask monk
 “To ask no question to the willing one.”

(72) sǒ:n nǎŋ suǐ: sǎŋ k^ha rǎ:t
 teach book patriarch
 “Teach things that person already knows.”

In Vietnam, people mostly follow Mahayana Buddhism while most Thai people follow Theravada Buddhism. This situation might lead to the differences in expressing proverbs. For example, we can come across a proverb as below in the Vietnamese proverbs:

(73) Cứu được một người phúc đặng hà sa.
 “If you can save one life, you will have much happiness and virtue.”

It is obvious that there are only a few Vietnamese proverbs which mention the role of monks. If reference is made to them, it is about bad character traits of some Buddhist monks and nuns in order to draw a moral from that, for example, Buddhist monks who eat meat, or Buddhist monks who do not practice Buddhist ways.

2) The Vietnamese have the concept of **Phật tại tâm** [Buddha at heart] “Buddha is in the human heart,” which emphasizes that actions and thoughts should be suitable according to social values of morality.

⁴The word sǒm p^ha:n “abbot” is another Thai word for referring to the abbot instead of the formal word tɛ̌a:w ʔa:wǎ:t.

When we surveyed the Vietnamese proverbs which were connected to Buddha or Buddhism, we found out that there were many proverbs which talked about Buddha and sky, spirit or ghost, in parallel. For example:

- (74) **Trời Phật** ở trên đầu trên cổ.
 “Sky and Buddha are on the head of man”.
 (Sky and Buddha know everything.)
- (75) **Trời Phật** thì ở trên mây, nhiều tiền đong đầy, ít tiền đong vơi.
 “Sky and Buddha are on the clouds; if you have much money, you will spend much and vice versa.”
 (Sky and Buddha know everything so you should do everything in a suitable way, but do not go too far.)
- (76) **Phật** chưa ra, **Ma** đã vào.
 “Buddha has not come out yet, ghosts have come in”
 (Someone has not finished his work yet, but bad persons came to make trouble.)
- (77) **Bụt** không ăn mày **Ma**.
 “Buddha does not beg Ghost.”
 (A Gentleman does not beg the small-minded persons.)

From this data, can we ask “Is there any mix of beliefs in one proverb sentence?” The history of Vietnamese ideology answers this question since the three religions of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism have peacefully co-existed in Vietnam for centuries.

3. There are many Vietnamese proverbs, which connect the Buddha to a village or area. In this usage, Buddha is seen as a local personality:

- (78) **Chùa** nào, **Bụt** ấy.
 “Each pagoda has Buddha itself.”
- (79) **Bụt chùa nhà** không thiêng.
 “Native Buddha is not holy.”
- (80) **Bụt Nam Hạ** lại từ oản chiêm.
 “Nam Ha’s Buddha refused un-valuable cake.”
- (81) **Bụt Nam Xương**, thành hoàng Cao Ky.
 “Nam Xuong’s Buddha, Cao Ky’s tutelary god.”

4. Summary

In principle, although Thai and Vietnamese people follow different sects of Buddhism, there is no difference in terms of applying Buddhist precepts in daily life. Thai and Vietnamese proverbs and expressions reflect similarities which have been influenced by Buddhism and local beliefs, as follows:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| - right behaviour | - moderation |
| - gratitude | - self-dependency |
| - right effort | - using wisdom |
| - benevolence | - being good people |
| - association with good people | - uncertainty of life |
| - right speech | - final pacified life |
| - right resolve | - right occupation |

Thai and Vietnamese proverbs reflect the Four Noble Truths. In particular, some of the Eightfold Path and other Buddhist precepts are implemented and absorbed in their spirit. Thai and Vietnamese people also share common beliefs about supernatural entities, especially spirits or “ghosts”.

Points of difference between Thai and Vietnamese perspectives are as follows:

In Vietnamese proverbs, monks and nuns are mentioned only rarely, while they occur frequently in Thai proverbs.

In the Vietnamese Buddhist concept, Buddha resides within the person’s heart which relates to his or her good behavior or deeds.

Buddha in the Vietnamese concept is like a local personality.

Vietnamese people have been influenced by Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. However, Thai and Vietnamese have been able to absorb and integrate Buddhism and local beliefs into their ways of life harmoniously.

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