

THE DISPOSITION OF
BUDDHIST TEMPLES
IN VIETNAM

THE COMPOSITION OF
THE BUDDHIST PANTHEON

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Mahayana or Big Vehicle of the Buddhist System

**THE DISPOSITION OF
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A RELIGIOUS AND HISTORICAL MONUMENT IN VIET-NAM

In examining the Buddhist system most people usually make a certain number of mistakes which many uninformed Vietnamese themselves make. Few writers have been able to make a difference between the « big » and « small » vehicles of the system on the one hand, and on the other, they have always ended up by confusing the names of the Blessed Ones.

The first thing one should know in this field is that the deities of the « small vehicle » are concerned with their own salvation, while those of the « big vehicle » have to delay their falling into the Nirvana so as to propagate virtuousness in the world, for the benefit of all living creatures.

It can therefore be said that the first difference between the two forms is due to the particular conception of the individualistic spirit of the first form compared with the collective ideal of the second.

The « big vehicle » school was introduced into North Viet-Nam by the « dhyana » or « thien » sect, whose founder is represented in all temples under the name of Bo De Dat Ma (Bodhidarma).

The Manushi-Buddhas are only five in number in the Vietnamese iconography, including Sakyamuni and Maitreya (Di Lac in Vietnamese).

As for the Buddhas which have never been incarnated, only one of them is known in Viet-Nam. He is A-di-Da (Amithaba). Manushi Buddhas are contemplative Buddhas. Other Buddhas after having acquired countless virtues during their various reincarnations have decided to put an end to the cycle of consecutive existences after enlightenment.

In the hall of cassolettes or thien huong, on a pedestal, can be seen the « statue » of Sakyamuni. It is surrounded by those of Ananda and of Kacyapa and by four Bodhisatvas, known sometimes as the keepers of the four cardinal points.

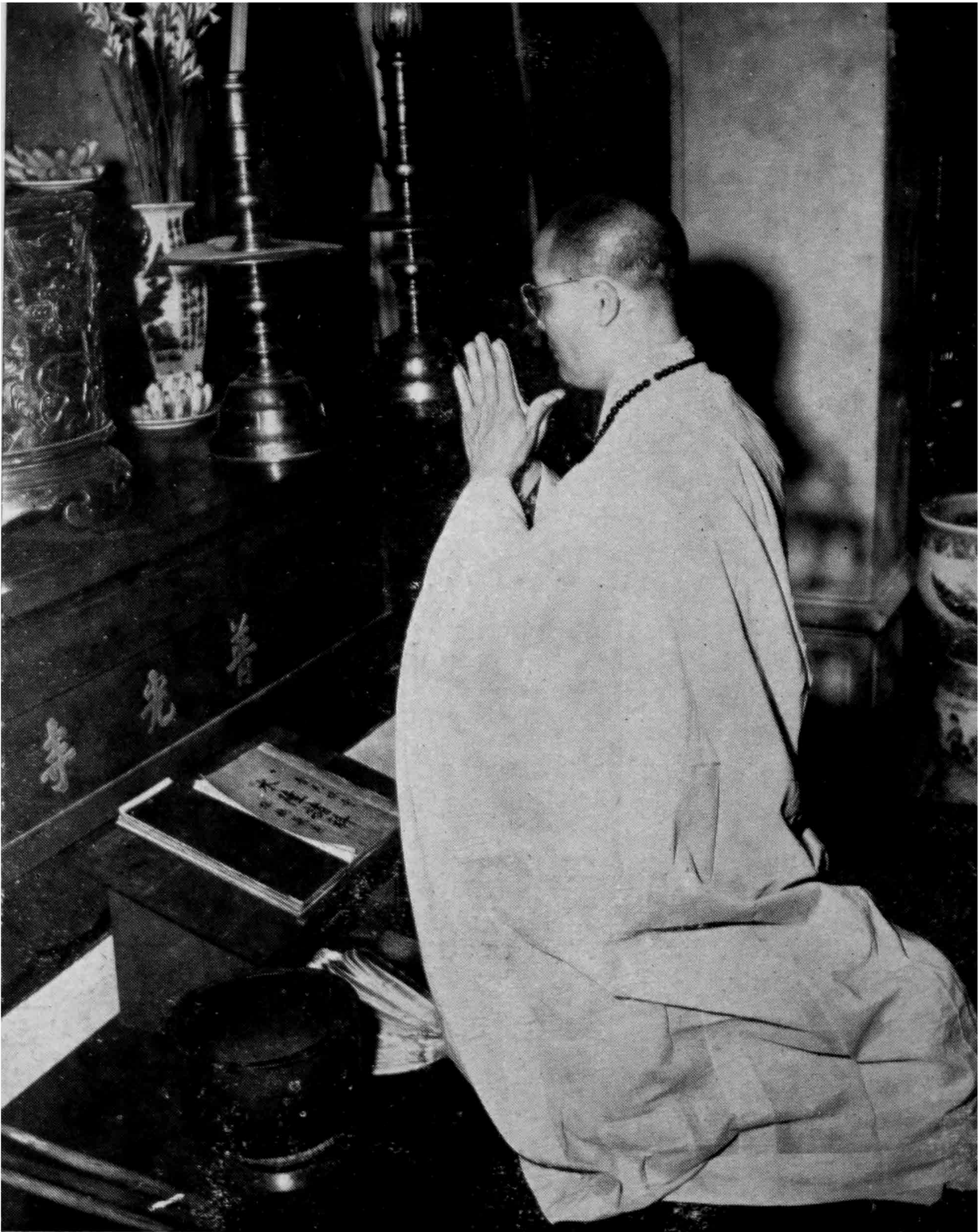
In the same row as Sakyamuni can also be seen sometimes the Jade Emperor or De Thich. These two divinities could be considered as being one and the same for the Jade Emperor is believed to be a Trinity as in the Christian religion.

A legend which calls for meditation.

For the sake of thoroughness a parenthesis should be inserted here to explain that Ngoc Hoang Thuong Dê, the Jade Emperor, bears some similarity to the monotheist Christian belief that God consists of a Holy Trinity. This similarity is striking in the evangelization of the countries of the North : a legend of pagan origin.

According to the book « Bac Du Chan Vo », the Jade Emperor one day considered that the time had come to push back the frontiers of barbarism in certain countries of the North. To that effect, he proceeded with the reincarnation of one of his souls on Earth to carry the Holy Truth to the tribes of the area and to fight the evil spirits.

The legend of the « Bac Du Chan Vo » is crowded with allegories and metaphors. The various sins are all personified and all are represented as evil genii likely to use supernatural weapons. Some of them can



A BUDDHIST MONK

fly as if they were riding jet planes. Others possess « tam giac kim chuyên » or « ngon lua tam mui » whose effects are similar to those of nuclear weapons and recall calamities described in the Bible.

The reincarnated soul of the Jade Emperor succeeded in triumphing over those formidable foes and gave men a new discipline.

In more than one respect this legend recalls the coming of Jesus Christ among the peoples of the Middle East.

In the Buddhist hierarchy, the Jade Emperor or Supreme Being, who rules over all of the cosmic worlds, agrees that Sakyamuni should have

an equal rank because of the Holiness he has developed during his several reincarnations.

The heathen legend says that it was Sakyamuni who disarmed the fallen angel « Te Thien Dai Thanh » who had well-nigh dethroned the Jade Emperor. This Angel Gabriel or Satan is supposed to have redeemed himself by participating in the spreading of Buddhism among the peoples of China.

The hall of Buddhist divinities.

Returning to the hall of cassolettes in which is situated part of the Buddhist pantheon, it should be noted that in Vietnamese temples one can see divinities of taoistic origin and sometimes heathen genii. These are divinities sprung from popular imagination and have no connection with those recognized by the great world religions.

It is thus that Diem Vuong, the king of hell, Nam Tao and Bac Dau (southern star and polar star) who are in charge of the registers for all the inhabited planets, can be seen.

The Holy place or Thu'ong Diên.

In all Buddhist temples there is a holy place, thuong dien, which is the seat of only strictly orthodox divinities. It is generally the third and innermost hall of the pagoda and it is loftier than all the rest.

A STATUE OF BUDDHA MEDITATING UNDER THE BODHI-TREE. IN FRONT OF THE GREAT SAGE A BIG BOWL FULL OF INCENSE ASHES, SYMBOL OF PURITY



The deities represented there are divided into four groups symbolizing « Qua khu, hien tai, vi lai » — the past, present and future generations.

In the three first groups are Amithaba, Sakyamuni and Maitreya, each with two disciples having lived a certain time on Earth.

Details about the Statues.

Only the Buddhas can be seated, as the Bodhisatvas must remain respectfully standing. That's why Buddhas are seen seated, with legs folded like Maitreya. To get an idea of this, one has only to buy a bronze or porcelain buddha from one of the curio shops.

An exception is made however, for two Bodhisatvas : Manjuceri and Samantabhadra who can be seated, the first on an elephant's back, the second on a lion. When alone, the bodhisatvas can sit down.

The three generations of the little vehicle.

A most popular Buddha — Quan Thê Am Bô Tat.

In certain pagodas of North and Central Viet-Nam and in almost all those of South Viet-Nam can be seen three generations dually represented by two different groups of deities.

In fact, besides the above mentioned group, one can see that of A-di-da, attended by The Chi and Quan The Am.

The latter, called in Indian mythology Avalo Kitessevara, a human Bodhisatva, had exceptional popularity in China under the name of Kwan Yin. According to several Catholic missionary writers, Kwan Yin was believed to be a divinity created by popular imagination. No trace of her birth, her life or death has been discovered.

Nevertheless this divinity is believed to have delayed reaching the Nirvana to be able to continue salvation work as long as possible by directing human efforts along the path of emancipation.

Quan The Am Bo Tat is said to listen to all prayers and to show her presence as soon as she is worshipped. She is also called Quan The Am Thien Thu Thien Nhan, i.e. thousand-handed and thousand-eyed Quan The Am or again Quan Am Tong Tu, giver of children.

Countless stories circulate about the polycephalous appearance of Kwan Yin, with multiple arms. The commonest represent the divinity with a head split by grief caused by some of the most violent wars. This is how Amithaba, her « guru » (thiên su), is supposed to have capitalized the fact to divide the head into many others. Her numerous arms are supposed to enable her to do the work required to help doomed souls having worshipped her.

Here is the Vietnamese legend about Quan Am :

She was the third daughter of one of the kings of China. Early in her life she was drawn irresistibly towards Buddhism and decided to retire to a monastery. Her father who was no mysticist was determined to have her married, so that his son-in-law could succeed him on the throne after his death.

After many vicissitudes Quan Am managed to run away and was admitted into a monastery «bach dieu». She was discovered, taken home by force and sentenced to be beheaded. But during the execution, the executioner's sword broke and a god-sent tiger, dashing through the crowd, caught her in its mouth and carried her away to a temple which was on Vietnamese territory.

By several real miracles she relieved a great number of sick and poverty-stricken people. Her father himself was saved from death by her own sacrifice when she tore out her eyes to make a curing mixture. That is how the sovereign and all his family were converted and worshipped her. Her good deeds were so many that the Jade Emperor sanctified her as well as her family and two servants she had met during her stay at the Vietnamese temple of Huong Tich.

The two servants were a young man («kim-dong») and a girl («ngoc nu»). These two always accompanied the Saint and they can be recognized by their hands folded in prayer.

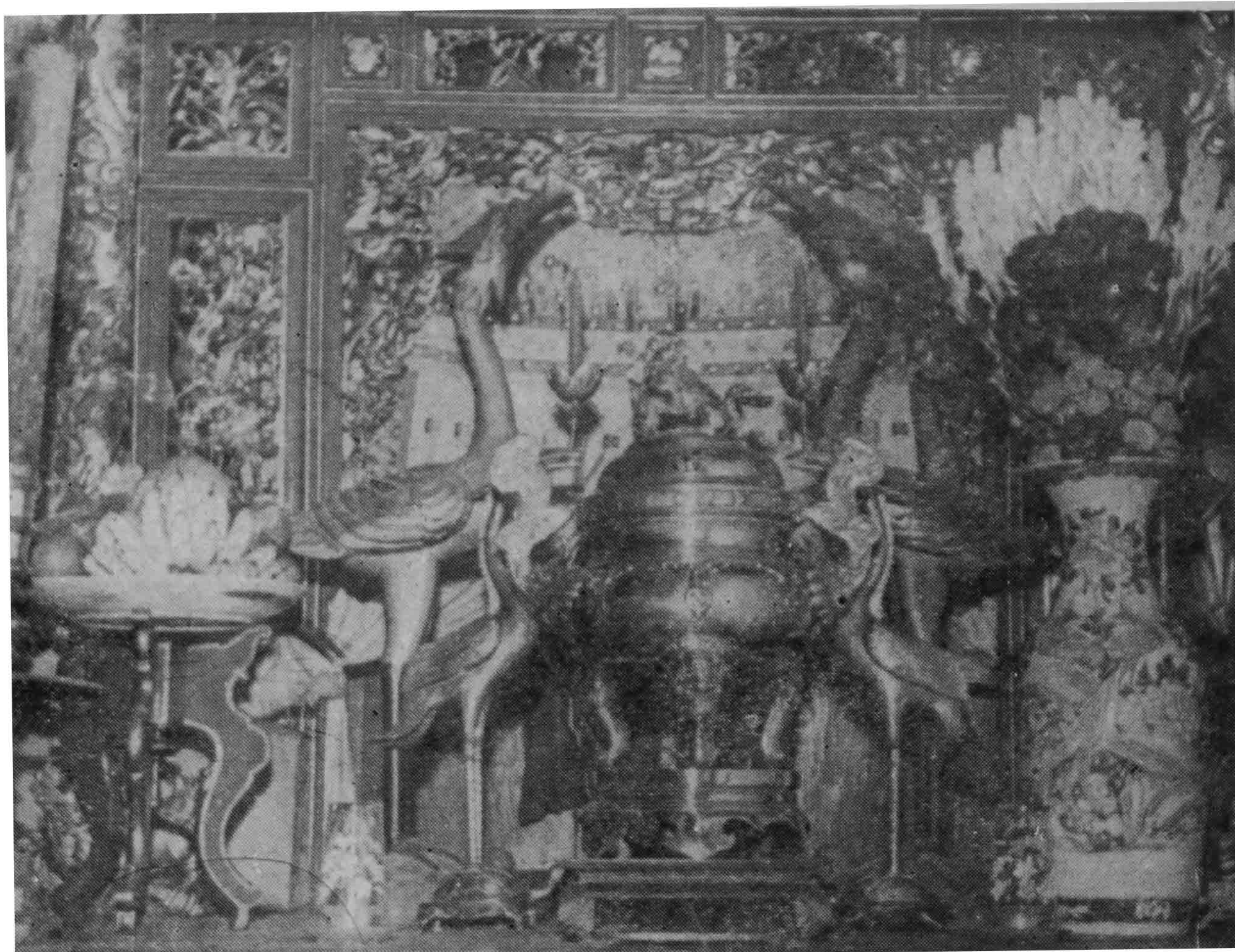
As is confirmed by all the above, Buddhism has not had any Bible or evangelist. Only in the case of Sakyamuni has there been the Abidharma and the volumes of the Tripitaka, but they were written after his death by Kacyapa and Ananda. Now, though the latter had a prodigious memory and attended all the lectures of the Master, he never took any notes. This mere fact is enough to lead to the conclusion that certain words of the Great Sage were later altered through bad recollection, passion or omission.

A CROWD OF WORSHIPPERS GATHERED ON THE OCCASION OF AN
ANNIVERSARY OF BUDDHA



As for Kacyapa who was the author of the Abidharma and one of the principal disciples of the Buddha, he can be recognized by his hands folded at chest level.

Kacyapa lived with his two brothers among a community of anchorites near the place where the Buddha was enlightened. The Buddha converted the three brothers and Kacyapa was the first patriarch who succeeded Sakyamuni after his death. Here again, the Chinese version varies from the Indian. According to the latter, the Kacyapa converted by the Buddha was not the patriarch of the same name who succeeded the Buddha.



THE TWO PHOENIXES ONE CAN FIND IN EVERY TEMPLE

Maitreya — the Buddha of the future.

As for Maitreya, who was mentioned at the beginning of this article and who is the best known buddha judging by the numerous bronze and porcelain statuettes symbolizing the enjoyment of life, he is the Buddha of the future.

According to legend, he was a disciple of Sakyamuni and was then called Ajita. The Supreme Being himself is supposed to have predicted for him a new life on earth for the redemption of Humanity.

Maitreya is actually believed to belong to the fifth cycle Tsu-gi-Ta (the world of superdeveloped beings). According to the same oral tradition, Buddha allegedly made precise forecasts to Maitreya, leaving no

doubt about his future reincarnations the names of the country and of the city of his rebirth, the names of those who would be his parents were included.

The names of the bodhisatvas seen on either side of him are Van Thu and Pho Hien (Manjucri and Samanthabadra in Sanskrit).

A Chinese Buddha.

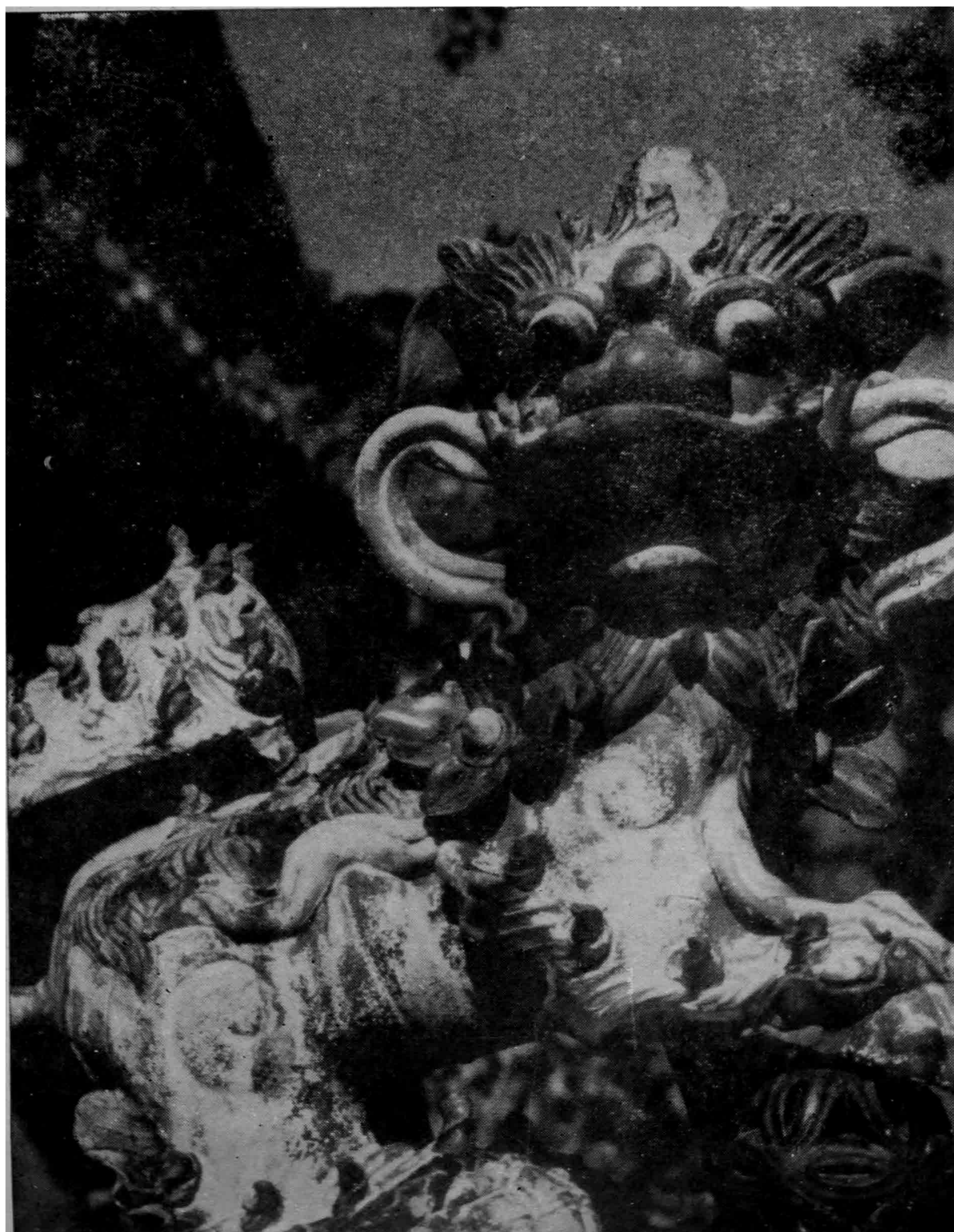
Samanthabadra deserves to be mentioned particularly, as he is at the origin of a striking Chinese « depravation ».

In the temples of China and Viet-Nam can be seen a very popular dignity : Quan Cong or Quan Thanh De Quan.

This great warlord of the period of the Three Empires, highly comparable to the French Bayard, and whose real name was On Tsiang in Chinese mandarin, is said to have become the Buddha Gia Lam in the following circumstances :

While he was fighting at the frontier of Nepal, the invincible Quan Cong fell in an awful ambush which caused his death. His enemies beheaded him.

MYTHOLOGY : A SACRED ANIMAL OF BUDDHISM





THE GODDESS KWAN YIN (KITESSEVARA)

But at night fall, Quan Cong appeared at the top of a hill to the eyes of his terrified enemies. Riding his famous horse Xich Tho, he shouted : « Men of the country of the Hans of the North give me back my head »...

Pho Hien, who was meditating, immediately had sandal and incense sticks burned, sounded the gongs and, in his turn shouted : « None of the men you have beheaded, including Nhan Luong or Van Su, has claimed back his head from you. Why then should you prove less worthy ?... »

The ghost of the great conqueror then restrained its spite and instead of avenging itself finally found the path to the state of Nirvana.

The « Thich Ca Cuu Long » group.

In some pagodas can be seen the « Niet Ban » statue, which represents the death of the Buddha

wherein the Buddha is represented lying horizontally.

In front of this statue is a group called in Vietnamese Thich Ca Cuu Long, or Sakyamuni and the nine dragons. Connoisseurs of the Buddhist system will certainly wonder on reading this description what the fabulous animals are doing near the greatest Buddha.

Here again, it is a Chinese interpretation which Viet-Nam has adopted.

It is known that Prince Siddharta was born through the right hip of Queen Maya who was standing at the moment of the miracle. Indra received the Perfect One, who walked seven steps towards each of the four cardinal points.

Next, according to Indian oral tradition, two Naga emperors (symbolized by two elephants in the bas reliefs), Nanda (who should not be confused with Ananda,) — and Upananda washed the future Sakyamuni. Chinese legend has replaced the two Nagas by nine dragons which, from heaven, shower rain.

The « arhats » of the cassolette-hall.

We should also mention among the divinities having their place in the hall of cassolettes the arhats or « La Han » in Vietnamese. It is generally known that they have been sanctified and are entitled to the Nirvana like the Buddhas. However, in their wisdom and with the desire of serving Humanity, they have delayed the moment of entering into Nirvana. They are said to have decided to wait for the return of Maitreya to Earth.

If we believe the Upanishads, they were originally four in number. They are now several hundred in China and eighteen in Viet-Nam. As their number varies according to different countries, so also do their names and for a very good reason.

According to Vietnamese legends, Ananda and Maitreya are said to this group of saints, while they are believed to be included in the Fu-gi-Ta by the Chinese. As for the La-Han Tan Dan Lu worshipped formerly in North Viet-Nam, he is unknown in South Viet-Nam's Buddhist Olympus.

An idol of either hall also deserving mention is the Bodidharma : 28th and last Hindu patriarch. He arrived in China in 520 A.D. and was the founder of the dhyana sect in that country. When he had to cross the Blue River, he took a piece of reed on which he blew and transformed it into a raft.

This Buddhist Lazarus was found in China where he continued to preach for a certain time after his death. His distinctive sign was that he was holding a slipper in one hand and the other hand was in his coffin where he was discovered intact at the time of his famous exhumation which was meant to confound infidels.

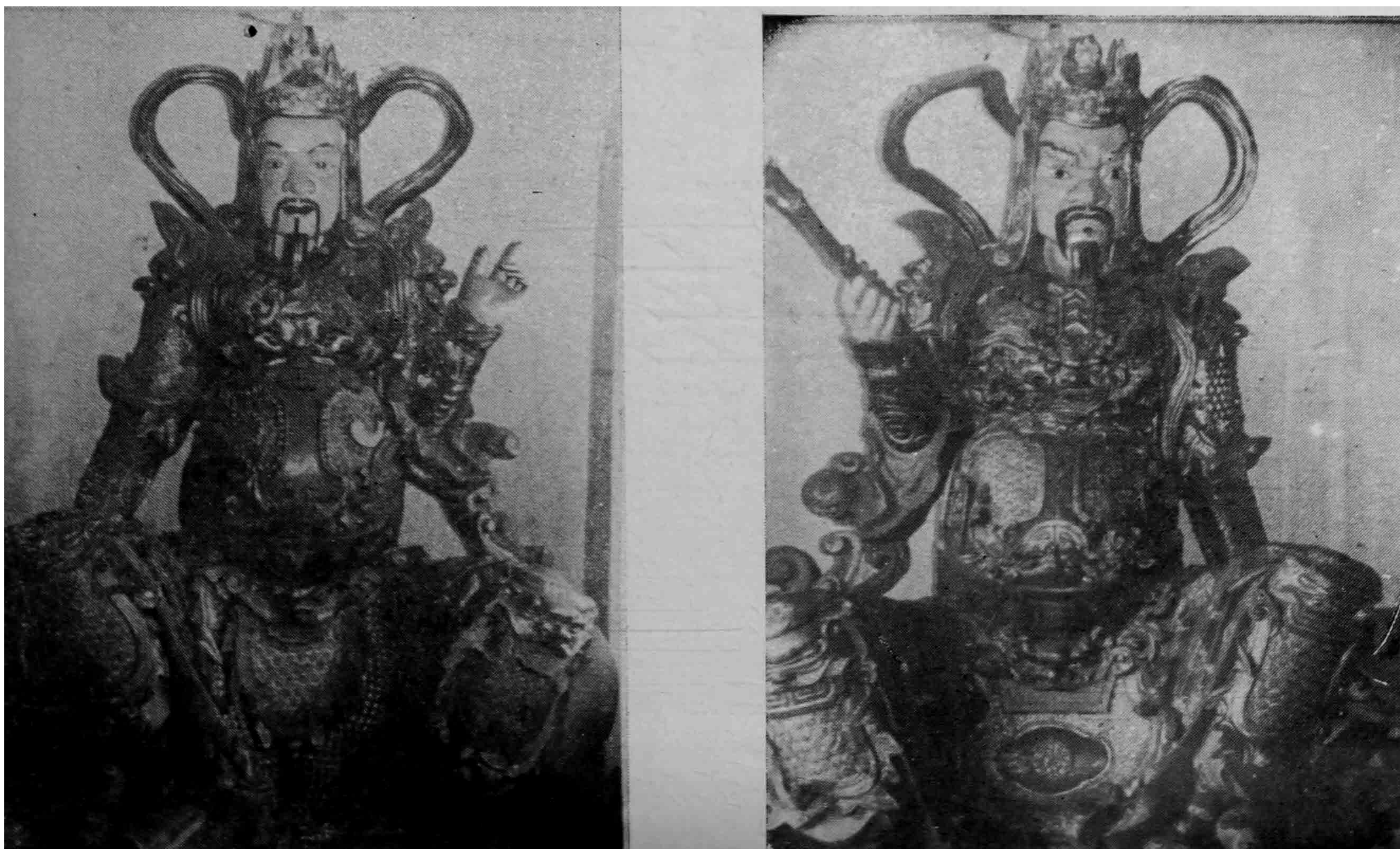
Two Chinese deities : the « Hô Phap ».

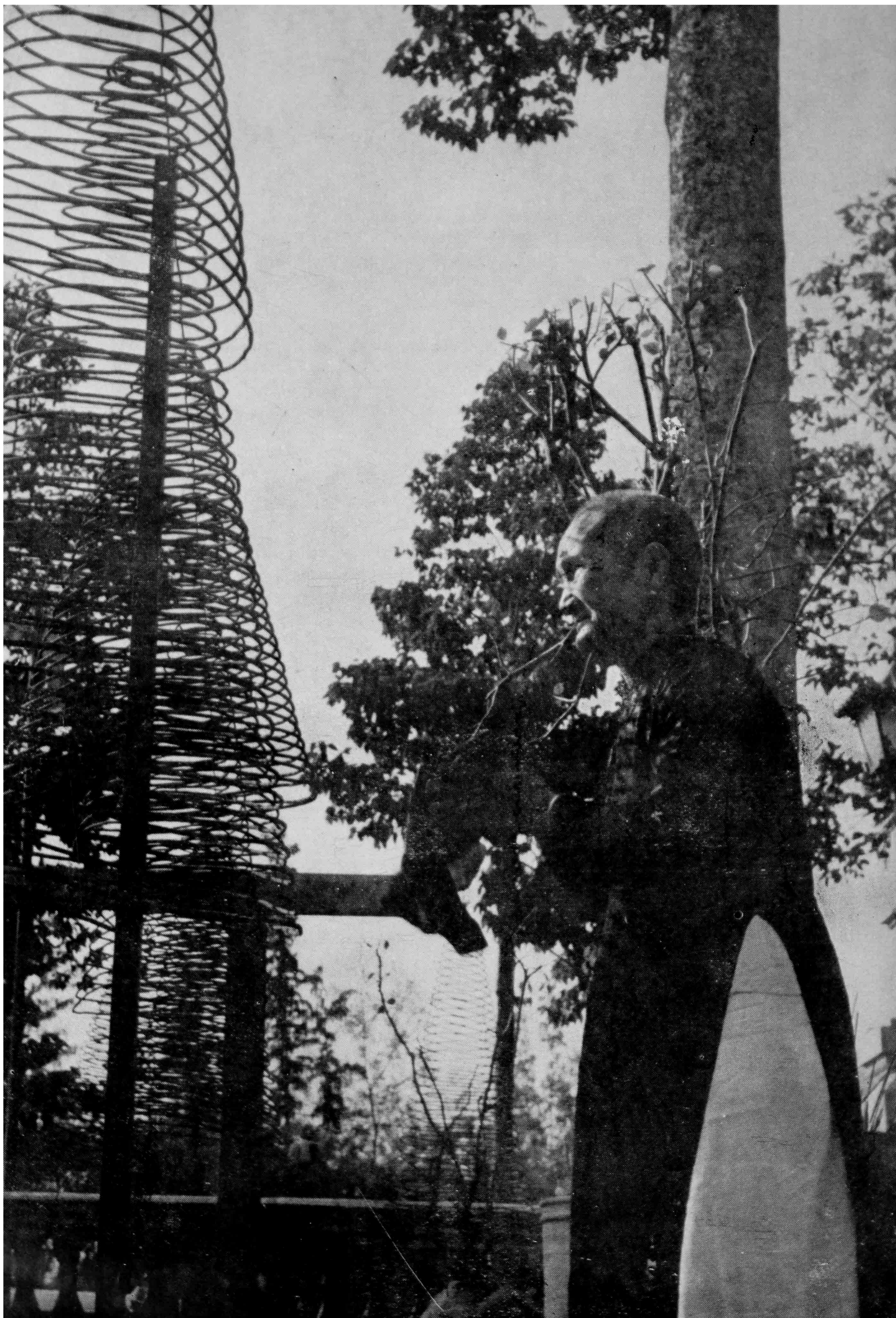
In the entrance hall of Buddhist temples can be seen two figures with harsh faces. They are « Thien Hui » and « Ac Hui », sort of procurators of good and evil who were also figures of the Chinese legends. Their part is to remind human beings that a record of every human being's deeds is carefully kept for good and for evil.

Along the walls of the entrance hall are also the ten kings of the ten hell chambers (thap-dien).

Every soul has to go successively through the ten chambers, which have different punishments in store, before reaching the last one for reincarnation. Here, before beginning a new life on Earth, the life of a man, an animal or an insect, each soul has to drink the draught of oblivion from the hands of the goddess Manh Ba.

THE TWO GENII AT THE ENTRANCE OF A TEMPLE





SHE IS PRAYING FOR A NEW DAWN FOR MANKIND

Buddha's vow concerning respect for life

The Trung Nguyên is almost a national ceremony, as foremost among the dead are those who died for the Fatherland.

The evolution of religions among certain collectivities is a natural phenomenon which is worth studying as it sometimes shows a particular condition of the soul, a loftiness of feelings which defeats the rules of logic.

In fact, as has been written by Emile Zola, renowned French writer at the end of the XIXth century, « all religions except the Roman Catholic religion undergo a process of evolution. »

This observation was marked by common sense, as through pragmatism the Catholic Church alone has given its religious tenets such a permanence that the conceptions of Catholicism even in the gloomy days of the Council of Pisa, when three Popes were pitted against one another in a struggle for power, never varied. This explains why during its long period of history, Christendom has had only one serious schism, that of Luther. It proves that it is impossible for the Christian thought to evolve along the lines planned by Jesus Christ when he set up St. Peter's throne.

It is quite different with all other schools of philosophy. However great or strong they may be, owing to the very absence of any dogmatic frame or scriptures, they are subject to deep evolution.

Thus, we find across the world several forms of Buddhism. In Viet-Nam particularly, there are several variants of the doctrine due to the sources from which the religion was introduced or to the superimposition of certain principles such as confucianism, for instance. The greatest corruption of the initial doctrine — the Little Vehicle Buddhism came from the contemplative bonzes who are especially numerous in China and Burma. Besides this, we have a particularly interesting evolution which took place in Viet-Nam under the influence of the Khmer and Cham peoples.

It is well known that in the great Vehicle Buddhism, which is of purely Indian origin and which was preached by Gautama or Sakyamuni, Buddha was introduced into North Viet-Nam by the famous bonze Vinitarucci of the dyana sect. His teachings were devoid of any personal interpretation. They were based upon the Upanishads and the Anguttara Nikayo, which had themselves been adapted from the Tripitaka and the Abhidharma annotated by Ananda and Mahakacyapa long after the death of Gautama Buddha.

The Ullumbala or Sakyamuni's respect for life.

According to these two works, the Office mentioned in Sanskrit under the name of « Ullumbala » came into existence following a vow taken by Gautama Buddha. Gautama had noticed that early in the rainy season there was a resurgence of wild life in India ; snakes, frogs, mice and insects swarmed. Indian peasants then committed real mass slaughters, not so much for the sake of food as for self-preservation and, especially, because of their passion for hunting (cf. Krishna Murti — The Origins of Theosophy, published in London, with comments by Leedebeater).

With his deep respect for life, Sakyamuni decided to put a stop to those slaughters. He therefore chose the 15th day of the 7th lunar month which marks the opening of the rainy season to teach his disciples respect for life by performing a religious Office.

Some sacredness had to be given to the ceremony to produce practical effects and to associate Heaven and Earth together.

The great Sage who was meditating under the Bodhi tree was given the opportunity of preaching this by his faithful follower Ananda, formerly a maker of arrow-shafts. Ananda played a considerable part in the enlightenment of the Sage who was later to become the Supreme Buddha.

One day, when all the disciples were assembled around the Master, Vijaya brought the ill-tiding of the illness of Suddhodana, father of Sakyamuni. Ananda said : « O Master, how could we alleviate the sufferings of the souls who are undergoing damnation in hell ? ».

The Sage replied : « The XVth day of the 7th lunar month, o bonzes, is a day of contemplation devoted to respect for life. Pray fervently to avoid being yourself caught among the mass of souls doomed to damnation. You may thus be blessed with the divine grace ».

The ambiguity of Sakyamuni's reply is striking, as it did not make clear the nature of the damned souls nor where they were. In his opinion nothing is everlasting. The Self cannot keep its « self-consciousness » in the cycle of reincarnations (see Horizons, Tet issue : « Was the Buddha a mathematician » ?).

Owing to the fact that Buddhism has had no evangelists, the oral tradition has often been warped. This is the case, for instance, with the doctrine of metempsychosis which is flagrantly in contradiction with the Buddha's doctrine of non-permanence. As a matter of fact, if the Buddha advised his disciples to subdue all human passions to be freed from the cycle of rebirths, this by no means implies the affirmation of the certainty of one or more reincarnation after death. One can only say about his statements that he considered the thing as possible, but he certainly never mentioned the « nine paths to reincarnation » (cuu dao luan hoi) which certain writers have attributed to him and which the little Vehicle Buddhism often mentions.

Moreover, bonze Vinitarucci (like the later dhyana bonzes) said that the Ullumbala worship (It was the Vu Lan rite which is also performed the same month) resulted from Sakyamuni's respect for life.



A VIEW OF A RELIGIOUS CEREMONY

It is following this precept that the Buddha's disciples swept the path ahead when they walked so as to avoid walking over any living being.

An interlineation to the Ullumbala worship : the Vu Lan.

In the nineteenth century of the Christian era the Buddhist school, born from the Little Vehicle, taught in North Viet-Nam a variant of the Ullumbala worship. It was the Vu Lan rite which is also performed on the same day of the lunar calendar.

The origin of this rite, as its name Vu Lan indicates, is Chinese. It deals not only with the respect for life. It emphasizes, in fact, the need of redeeming fallen souls by prayers.

Bonzes make it clear to worshippers that all those who die a sudden and violent death (bat dac ky tu) accidentally, are looked up with penitent souls in the Phong Do jail. Those souls are all doomed ; no one can do anything for them. However, once every year, at the time of the celebration of the Vu Lan, Heaven's special envoy Thai At Thien Ton, carrying the Tich Truong wand, opens the gates of the terrible jail and gives the Cam Lo to drink to the tormented souls, enabling them thus to recollect the circumstances of their deaths and their sins and giving them the chance of winning forgiveness.

The Vu Lan rite is in some way a link between the living and the dead, since it is possible for the living by prayers and righteousness to contribute to the salvation of the dead.

To illustrate this principle, the case of the great bronze Mandgalayana or Kieu Lien, as he is still known — really a bonze from South China — is quoted. By his filial piety he succeeded in touching the Buddha so much that his mother Thanh Dê, who had been punished for the greatest of crimes — giving dog's flesh to monks — obtained remission of her sins and was even admitted to the Nirvana with the name Kiet Ky Da Thanh Mau.

The great piety of the Vietnamese people.

It is well known that in Viet-Nam the dead never fall into oblivion. It is clear then that the Ullumbala and the Vu Lan were to meet in this country with a never failing success.

On the 15th day of the 7th lunar month liturgical rites are celebrated in all pagodas. A great many peasants do not hesitate to perform useful public works of a religious nature on that day.

In most families, altars are laden with offerings of Tam Sinh and Ngu Qua — meat, fish shrimps and five varieties of fruits. Votive papers symbolizing monetary wealth and clothes are burned in favor of stray souls or Co Hons. On that day no life is killed and only vegetarian diets are eaten. Valuable gifts are made to the Buddhist temples, and some people even make a long retreat during the period.

What could never be over-emphasized is the fervor which fills the heart of every Vietnamese Buddhist in that day. Countless families make a real self-analysis and make resolutions which will be followed throughout the year.

To sum up, the Trung Nguyên is the beseeching of pardon for the dead, the living, and for one's own self. That is why this religious festival has a deep national meaning because according to the Scriptures, foremost among the dead are those who died for their Fatherland.

But what should be particularly stressed is the generosity of feeling which fills the hearts of the Vietnamese masses on that occasion. At nighfall, offerings are laid at the foot of trees (for once they are released the doomed souls often haunt big trees), coins are thrown out — for the Co Hon Song or fallen souls that are still alive — and votive paper burned.

Everyone recites prayers asking forgiveness for those who died anonymously in the forests, killed by a wild animal or crushed by a falling tree, for those who died on lonely beaches or in the hollow of rocks, in short for all those who died without any one knowing about it.

It is in fact the spirit of love of neighbor which springs from the minds of the living, each one endeavouring to obtain Heaven's blessings for those who died without a burial-place. The Trung Nguyen is the day when the living and the dead meet in communion of thought.



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