RESEARCH ESSAY

VO DUY THANH

The Great Unity: Hòa Hảo Buddhist Charity and Social Solidarity in the Borderland

I traveled along the Vĩnh Tế canal on my motorbike to visit a Hòa Hảo herbal medical clinic in Vĩnh Điều village of Kiên Giang Province, near the Vietnam-Cambodia border in April 2016. At around 9:00 a.m., I arrived at the front yard of the clinic where I could see nearly a hundred bikes and motorbikes. A considerable number of these motorbikes had Cambodian registration plates. Most young patients were gathering inside the herbal clinic, while elderly Khmer people were lying in hammocks hung around a mango garden in the front yard. A young herbal healer in her traditional southern Vietnamese black pajamas was diagnosing a Khmer man's lower back pain. I was looking for Hưng, the clinic assistant, whom I had met at An Hòa Tự—the Hòa Hảo central temple in An Giang—during the sect's Foundation Day the previous year. Hưng told me that this Vietnamese healer, with support from her better-off family and Hòa Hảo charitable networks, had recently constructed a charitable herbal clinic in this village. The herbal clinic, which also functioned as a hall of worship, provided care and charitable assistance. Thousands of poor Khmer patients on both sides of the border frequently received support when they visited the Hòa Hảo worship hall on special Buddhist occasions. Moreover, owing to support from the clinic's manager, who has connections with various Hòa Hảo donors in An Giang Province, many children from socially marginalized families have better access to schools.

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Hưng admitted that he originally saw this Vietnamese woman's acts of generosity toward Khmer people as strange, owing to the hostile and mistrusting relationship that has often existed between the two communities in the past. He brought up a popular tale about Thạch Sanh and Lý Thông, a story which has been narrated by many Khmers in the borderland, to illustrate this tension. Thạch Sanh was a brave and strong Khmer hunter who came to rescue a Khmer princess, Neang Pu, who was imprisoned by the King of the Bats in a deep mountain cave near Hà Tiên. When in the deep cave, Thạch Sanh tied a rope around the princess's waist and asked Lý Thông to pull her up out of the cave. After Lý Thông had done so, he left with the princess, leaving Thạch Sanh in the cave to his fate. This story portrays the morally perilous plight of the Khmers, represented by Thạch Sanh, who confronts trickery from dishonest allies, represented by his Vietnamese older brother Lý Thông, who later meets a bad end, while Thạch Sanh goes on to inherit the earthly kingdom.[1]

The borderland between Vietnam and Cambodia has been the site of a complex history of social struggles, political conflicts, and migrations that has produced tense relationships between Vietnamese and Khmers on both sides of the border. An elderly Vietnamese Kinh whom I met when he was fishing in the Vĩnh Tế canal provided an oral history: During the war in 1960, Cambodian soldiers occasionally crossed the border and kidnapped Vietnamese farmers for ransom, sometimes killing them and taking their cows or buffaloes. He recalled that during the Lon Nol regime (1970–1975), many Vietnamese civilians in Phnom Penh and its peripheries were massacred [*cáp duồn*], and their heads were dropped in the Mekong River, resulting in thousands of Vietnamese Cambodians having to flee back to Vietnam. During the dry season of 1978, the Khmer Rouge led brutal attacks into many villages along the border, during which almost all residences in the frontier were burned down. The Khmer Rouge killed thousands of Vietnamese, particularly the residents in the nearby town of Ba Chúc. This elderly fisherman told me that Vietnamese Kinh often express hatred toward the Khmer people because they think the Khmers in the borderland assisted the Khmer Rouge in killing people and destroying Vietnamese villages during the war. Having been marked by significant conflict, mutual aversion, and lingering bitterness,[2] the relationship

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between Kinh and ethnic Khmers had become even more hostile after this Khmer Rouge border attack, nearly forty years prior to my visit. An ethnographic study by Thái Huỳnh Phương Lan reveals that negative stereotypes about the Khmer and Kinh populations—rooted in this border war—are still strong in the frontier areas. The memories of historical tensions have led to the development of pejorative stereotypical judgments toward each other's ethnic groups, which further widens the distance between them. Hence, most people in the Mekong Delta view Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriages as abnormal and impossible due to the significant socioeconomic gap between the two ethnic groups.[3]

During my field research undertaken in 2016 and 2018 in this frontier village, the crowds flocking to this Hòa Hảo traditional herbal clinic were enormous. The number of patients of different social and ethnic backgrounds would rival those turning up each day at public hospitals. It brought to my mind the large crowds attending Buddhist temples during religious festivals. Based on my observations, and as confirmed by Hưng, the herbal clinic served about 150 patients per day, and the number could rise to 200 patients or more on weekends—mostly Vietnamese Khmer and Cambodian Khmer patients. Hence, I was surprised to see an herbal healer with a Vietnamese Kinh and Hòa Hảo background operating such a large-scale charitable herbal medical service to assist Khmer people. Equally unexpected was the smooth integration and interaction of Khmer patients with the Hòa Hảo herbal medical services run by the Vietnamese Kinh Buddhist. During my ethnographic research, I wondered what the meanings and motivations of Hòa Hảo Buddhist charitable actions were in the frontier, what the Hòa Hảo Buddhists had done to make their religious charity relevant to the political and ethnic reconciliation, and why such religious charitable activities were accepted by the Khmer people in the Vietnam-Cambodia borderland context.

In this essay, I show how distrust between borderland groups is overcome in the context of Hòa Hảo religious practices of charity. I explore the interconnection between religion and reconciliation in the borderland near Cambodia by looking at the relationship between the Hòa Hảo traditional healer and the patients, including ethnic Kinh, ethnic Khmers, Cambodians, and retired Vietnamese communist cadres. I argue that the healing practices

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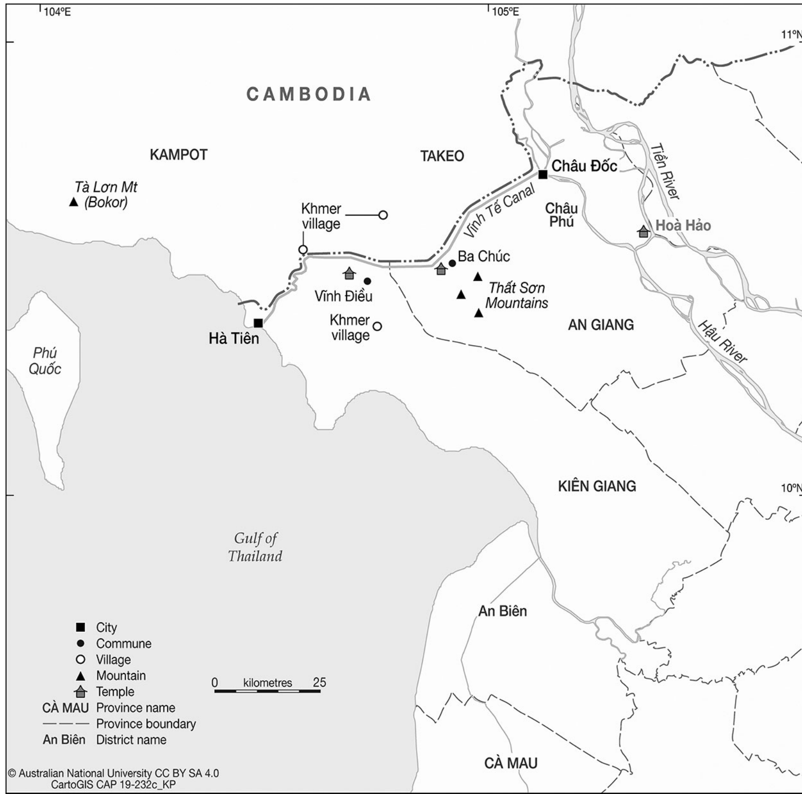

FIGURE 1: The frontier setting and Hòa Hảo temple in Vĩnh Điều village, 2016. Map by Australian National University.

in the frontier Hòa Hảo herbal clinic have been inclusive and have involved the participation of groups with whom the sect had formerly been in conflict. I found that the Hòa Hảo Buddhists have continued to build social solidarity in a pluralist borderland region, but do so for a more inclusive set of relationships than has previously been recognized in the literature. The findings of this research challenge the notions of previous scholars by highlighting more peaceful and charitable intercultural practices and emerging relations of trust.

Extended from this discussion, I have read Hòa Hảo prophecy books to explore the social charitable work of Hòa Hảo Buddhists. For example, the capability to integrate disparate ethnic groups such as the Khmers and

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engage them in a united social network has been demonstrated in Hòa Hảo philosophy such as *Thế giới Đại đồng* [The Great Unity]. This Hòa Hảo worldview is perceived as the main tenet of "trả ơn cho đồng bào nhân loại" [repaying debts to compatriots and mankind]. The Hòa Hảo prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ emphasized that

> Besides our fellow men, there are other peoples who are working hard to supply us with necessities. They are the human race, those who live with us on the earth. Hence, we must be grateful to them. We must think of them as we do of ourselves and of our own compatriots. There must be no discrimination of race. We should take responsibility to help them in case of distress regardless of their skin color, race, and social status according to the spirit of mercifulness and altruism.[4]

Very little ethnographic research has focused on the role of Hòa Hảo charity work as part of a process of ethnic and political reconciliation in the Vietnam-Cambodia borderland. The existing literature, which stresses conflict and enmity between groups, does not explore Hòa Hảo relations with other groups on an everyday basis and in times of peace. The revelatory testimonies by retired communist cadres, the Khmers, and the Hòa Hảo sectarians of Vĩnh Điều in this case study offer new insights into Hòa Hảo interactions with other political and ethnic groups and into the faith's capacity to improve intergroup relations in a socially plural area in the Vietnam-Cambodia borderland.

Tracing Ethnic Tensions across Time

Hòa Hảo is a millenarian Buddhist movement that emerged in the Mekong Delta on the eve of the Second World War. Scholars of Vietnamese studies describe the Hòa Hảo as a sect that emerged during a time of sociocultural crisis to provide solidarity to residents experiencing anomie and the disintegration of traditional community and familial and political bonds.[5] The Mekong Delta is a multiethnic region that became a major destination for migrants from elsewhere in Vietnam as well as from other countries. Colonized by France, it grew wealthy as a rice export–producing colony; however, in the early twentieth century it experienced booms and busts, social inequality, and severe social dislocation. Faiths such as the Hòa Hảo, founded by Huỳnh Phú Sổ in 1939, emerged in a context of extreme social

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inequality. Hòa Hảo provided inhabitants of the Mekong Delta—poor peasants, landless itinerant workers, migrants from other regions, and people from different families, localities, and classes—with a spiritual community and a new sense of belonging, protection, and purpose.[6]

The prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ founded Hòa Hảo Buddhism during a time of critical change—the violent and traumatic dislocation of the colonial era.[7] The prophet drew on millenarian roots directly connected to the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương (BSKH) religion, the preexistent traditional form of Hòa Hảo Buddhism, to make the Hòa Hảo into a moral system that was unified, renewed, and grounded in local cultural realities.[8] The Hòa Hảo prophet added to the fundamentals of BSKH a strong emphasis on society and people's social identities, including debt to parents and ancestors [*ân tổ tiên cha mẹ*], debt to the Three Treasures [*ân tam bảo*] (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha), debt to the country [*ân đất nước*], and debt to compatriots and mankind [*ân đồng bào nhân loại*]. The concept of these *Tứ ân* [four debts] emerged as a nexus around which the ideology of Hòa Hảo Buddhist charity evolved. The Hòa Hảo prophet illustrated that one had to adopt an attitude of being part of society, living with and rendering service to all people. This socially engaged aspect of Hòa Hảo Buddhism focuses on how to materialize the condition of indebtedness in practice and thereby create a moral infrastructure for society through generous acts of giving. The four debts became an inclusive philosophical framework that Hòa Hảo adepts were expected to follow.[9]

Many previous studies on the Hòa Hảo during wartime have drawn attention to the sectarians' tense relationships with other political and ethnic groups in their locality.[10] During the postcolonial period, a number of historical and political studies of the Hòa Hảo movement, conducted in the militarized circumstances of the First and Second Indochina Wars, situated this religious movement in the context of "Vietnam's clash with 'the West.'"[11] The Hòa Hảo tended to pursue their own frequently exclusivist visions of a postcolonial order. The sect was viewed as an ethnic religion that diagnosed conflict between worlds and embraced the apocalypse, the impossibility of peaceful solutions, and the futility of worldly actions. Scholars perceived the Hòa Hảo as "an agonistic creed, forged out of a clash of worlds" while officials and journalists during the 1950s treated the Hòa Hảo

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sect as either an element of instability that threatened the Sài Gòn regime or a solid barrier against the communists.[12]

An undeniable feature of the Hòa Hảo faith during wartime had been its challenging relationship with different secular authorities, including the French, the South Vietnamese regime, and the communists, whose bids for legitimacy had extended over the Mekong Delta. I argue that previous scholars have cast the Hòa Hảo as an intrinsically violent and conflict-prone religion due to the enormously violent context—the place and circumstances of the Mekong Delta during the wars—in which the sect emerged. After the disappearance of Huỳnh Phú Sổ in April 1947, the struggle of the Hòa Hảo sect with the communists became especially severe. The Hòa Hảo sect was split, as key leaders formed different private armies and ruled over their own autonomous localities in the western Mekong Delta, collecting taxes and operating protection rackets with armed bands. Some Hòa Hảo sectarians joined the French colonialists to combat the Việt Minh as they believed that the latter were trying to implement a totalitarian communist regime in southern Vietnam. From 1947 to 1954, almost no communist was able to operate their armed forces in the areas under the Hòa Hảo's control. For instance, An Giang Province, the center of the Hòa Hảo zone of control, became famous as the most "secure" province [*vùng an ninh*] in the south of Vietnam during the war. The Hòa Hảo also made a boundary between themselves and others to provide care and support for people inside their controlled territory.[13]

Several other studies also chart the conflictual relations between the Hòa Hảo religious sect and the Khmers during the French colonial period. Such studies provide in-depth analysis ranging from segregation and preferential avoidance between these two groups to intergroup enmity and overt conflict.[14] During the First Indochina War (1945–1954), Kinh and Khmer people rallied together in collective resistance against the French. Nevertheless, the relationship between Khmers and Kinh in many areas was often hostile and violent. As Shawn McHale observes, by 1947, the communist-led resistance unity had shattered, Khmer-Vietnamese ethnic violence had divided the Mekong Delta, and the war in the south turned into an overt civil war wrapped up in a war against France.[15] Many Khmers rallied behind local leaders to fight local rivals, such as the Hòa Hảo, for power, and there were

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a number of serious clashes. Amid the fighting, there were persistent rumors of massacres and counter-massacres between the Hòa Hảo and Khmers that led some Khmers in this region to consolidate a sense of themselves as under siege and at risk of losing their land to the Vietnamese and disappearing as an ethnic group.[16]

As described by Philip Taylor, during the First and Second Indochina Wars (1945–1975) the Mekong Delta region was a "theatre of fierce conflicts, which caused the massive displacement of its remaining Khmer population." The Hòa Hảo displaced many Khmers from their homes along the freshwater rivers of the Mekong Delta. The Khmers saw the Hòa Hảo as a great danger, even more than the French, during the war, when many Khmer villages and *wats* were attacked by the Hòa Hảo armed forces. According to elderly Khmers whom Taylor interviewed, during the fierce fighting between local Hòa Hảo and Khmers, many people died, and many houses were burned. Eventually, the Khmers, who were outnumbered in Ô Môn, abandoned their houses and fields and fled to the marketplace. When the war was over, the Khmers came back to their home villages and *wats*, but they were now entirely surrounded by Vietnamese families. These Khmers tried to eject the Vietnamese who were occupying their land but were unsuccessful.[17]

After 1975, the Hòa Hảo faced severe restrictions on their religious and political activities, in part because of their previous armed opposition to communist forces.[18] The Hòa Hảo sect was considered by the secular state as a superstitious, heterodox practice and was blamed for wasting the resources of people who should turn their attention to nation building. The new regime ordered the dissolution of the entire Hòa Hảo Buddhist church and placed the Hòa Hảo sect in the category of "reactionary groups with some religious trappings," likely because they were unable to absorb the Hòa Hảo adherents into the state's ideology.[19] Hòa Hảo studies were dominated by pro-government writers who perceived the Hòa Hảo sect as a threat to the communist regime or a hindrance to national modernization.[20]

Much of the scholarship cited above assigns blame to the Hòa Hảo for many of these tensions, describing it as "a conflict-prone sect," localized, exclusivist, prone to violence, and unable to cooperate with other social, political, and ethnic groups, especially the Khmers. But as this article

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illustrates, the Hòa Hảo have played a largely opposite role in contemporary Khmer-Vietnamese relations in the Mekong Delta. Today, Hòa Hảo Buddhists are visible in providing a range of social services that cater to the everyday needs of the poor, sick, and destitute, while also undertaking major initiatives such as the construction of rural transportation infrastructure and the operation of a regional ambulance service, where they are renowned for their high standards, efficiency, and transparency. During my ethnographic fieldwork in this frontier village, through participant observation and numerous conversations, I was struck by the distinctive belief system that informs Hòa Hảo charitable giving, the disparities and interactions between social and ethnic groups in the frontier context, and the role played by Hòa Hảo Buddhist charity as an integrating and healing practice.

Vĩnh Điều: A Precarious Frontier and the Arrival of the Hòa Hảo Healer

During the first month of my ethnographic research in 2016, I remained in Vĩnh Điều village and participated in daily activities to explore the frontier landscapes and local people's ways of life. I engaged in informal conversations with interlocutors in the middle of their personal activities, such as working, eating, and chatting. An elderly Kinh farmer, whom I met in his rice field at harvest time, informed me that Vĩnh Điều is among the most ecologically, socially, and culturally precarious borderland areas. He explained that the soil has a high acid-sulphate content, which makes it marginal for rice production. Fresh water is critically scarce in the dry season due to low water flow and acidification. The road systems between settlements within the village are all muddy in the wet season. The scattered pattern of settlement along a dense canal network creates isolation between different groups of villagers. He recalled that the history of this frontier settlement is related to the migration movements of different social groups.

According to this farmer, the population of this swampy forested area before 1975 was around one thousand Vietnamese Kinh and Khmer residents. Although the Khmer people were perceived as local inhabitants, the Kinh comprised the majority of the population. Most of the Kinh people, originally from Ba Chúc, migrated to this area during the French colonial period. Due to cultural differentiation, the connection between the Khmer

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and Kinh people was relatively weak. Since 1975, intensive rice production has been promoted in the region in the form of *vùng kinh tế mới* [new economic zones] and *tập đoàn sản xuất* [agricultural collectives]. During the border war with the Khmer Rouge in 1978 Vĩnh Điều was almost destroyed, so most Kinh and Khmer residents moved away to escape the war. After the war, the local government urged former residents to return, and it encouraged landless people from other regions to settle in Vĩnh Điều. In the second half of the 1980s, the frontier area witnessed a significant change in its landscape as a series of canals were excavated to drain the acid and supply fresh water for agricultural production.

Another older Khmer farmer, who formerly worked as a member of the Vĩnh Điều Fatherland Front Organization, joined in our conversation to illustrate the mass inward migration to the region that occurred during the 1990s and resulted in the population of Vĩnh Điều almost tripling. He recalled that the first immigratory people were *Bắc Kì* [northerners]—as they were referred to by local Kinh and Khmer inhabitants—who came to establish cashew farms in Vĩnh Điều. The second migratory movement involved landless people from An Biên, Giồng Riềng, and Gò Quao Districts of Kiên Giang. The third migration was family members from Kiên Giang, Hậu Giang, and Cà Mau Provinces who were considered "significant contributors to the communist revolution" [*người có công cách mạng*] during the Vietnam War. Each household from these migratory movements was allocated one plot, called *lô,* of three hectares of land by the local government. These new settlers constructed houses along new canals and started cultivating *lúa thần nông* [high-yield rice varieties]. Large areas of the village and forest were earmarked for resettlement and agricultural conversion. By 2000, the canal excavation was completed. Modern rice was dominant in Vĩnh Điều. This Khmer elderly farmer suggested that since a large portion of Vĩnh Điều had been bisected by a network of excavated canals, it had some brackish water characteristics during the dry seasons. Consequently, most rice farmers encountered crop failures due to the brackish water and acidification. In 2001 and 2002, many farmers sold farmland to repay the debts from bad harvests. A large number of migrant farmers from Cà Mau and Hậu Giang had to flee back to their home villages, leaving hundreds of abandoned thatch houses along the canals.

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Despite these unsuccessful experiences of emigrants, people from different locales continued to migrate to this borderland to make new lives. Those who have suffered from social and economic crises such as indebtedness, broken love affairs, theft, murder, sickness, and other social problems in their hometowns wished to begin new lives in a completely new frontier. These landless families relied mainly on forest-based livelihoods or agricultural wage labor. The new migration movements had brought the village the burden of more social problems. The number of people who were struggling with daily subsistence had dramatically increased. Unemployment increased because many farmers abandoned their land due to the saline intrusion. The sense of community and connection between people was weak as people tended to not care about their neighbors. The poor worked hard all year round, but when they got sick, they usually had no money to go to a hospital. Vĩnh Điều was an ecologically precarious community, and then became a socially precarious place as well.

During my field research in early July 2016, I worked in the herbal clinic as a volunteer assistant. I helped the clinic sort out different kinds of herbs and made the place neat. Early in the morning, I assisted Hưng in chopping medicinal plants collected by the patients and the healer's father and drying them under the sunlight. This helped me build rapport and develop close relationships with the Hòa Hảo interlocutors. In the herbal clinic, I had many opportunities to spend time with Út Thu[21]—the Hòa Hảo herbal healer—and she was eager to share the story of her life and family. She admitted that the failures of local inhabitants and emigrants in rice production created new opportunities for large-scale farmers from An Giang Province, her father among them, to migrate to this frontier area. In 2003, her father decided to leave Châu Phú, a district near the headquarters of Hòa Hảo Buddhism, to bring his family to Vĩnh Điều. He purchased ten hectares of farmland in Vĩnh Điều from farmers who sold their land due to crop failures. Her father, together with her brothers-in-law—one of them a tractor engineer—started using agricultural machines to launch the farm. Surprisingly, they were successful right from the first crop. After four years, her father had enough financial capacity to purchase another ten hectares. By 2008, her family owned over forty hectares of farmland in Vĩnh Điều, one of the biggest farms in the borderland area.

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When Út Thu was twenty-four years old, she inherited five hectares of land from her father. Instead of accumulating more wealth like her father and other rural elites, she dedicated one hectare of farmland to build a Hòa Hảo place of worship. She explained that, according to the Hòa Hảo prophet's teaching, no new Buddhist temples or statues should be built beside existing shrines. The devotees do not need to permanently leave their family and community [*xuất thế*] when they enter the faith, but instead can practice Buddhism in their homes [*tu tại gia*], as laypersons, where they support themselves and family while also serving society. Út Thu decided to build this Buddhist temple due to the fact that there was no religious place of worship within this frontier region. She reminded me that she initially constructed a small house for religious activities and a charitable herbal clinic nearby. Later, she renovated these structures to become a concrete hall of worship with a large front yard. This was the only Buddhist religious place in the frontier area. Now this Buddhist temple also functions as a representative office of the Hòa Hảo Administrative Committee [*Ban Trị Sự Phật Giáo Hòa Hảo*] in Vĩnh Điều village. In an oral interview at the Hòa Hảo Buddhist temple, Út Thu described the borderland when she first came to this village:

> Everything looked strange to me, different from the Hòa Hảo holy land—my former hometown. There were so many poor people in this village; the Khmer people were even poorer than the Kinh people. I went along the village road, and I saw groups of elderly drinking alcohol in the afternoon. The drunk men sometimes fought each other at night. On the first and fifteenth days of each month, I came to Tà Êm Market but could not buy any fresh flowers for offerings to Buddhas. It was also hard to find any vegetarian soya cakes in this local market. I thought to myself that there might be no vegetarians and no religious worship activities in this strange village.[22]

Considering the disparities among people in the frontier, Út Thu told me that she had a feeling that most people in this place had similar sufferings. She wondered why they stayed in this precarious place, where local people describe themselves as of the same circumstances and defined the insecure and unstable frontier area as *vùng đất bạc phước* [demerit land]. In this place she could experience the kinds of societal problems found in many border regions, such as unemployment, cultural deprivations, acidification, water-borne diseases, at-risk agriculture, and big gaps between the rich and

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the poor and the Kinh and the Khmer people. She explained to me that even though these people might have different social and ethnic backgrounds, life histories, and causes of migration, they all suffered from the same thing; the frontier's natural and social problems tied them all together.

The Hòa Hảo healer told me why she decided to build a charitable herbal clinic in the borderland:

> In 2009, a volunteer group of doctors and nurses from Hồ Chí Minh City visited the village and provided medical assistance for local people. It was hard to believe how many people were standing in the long line waiting their turn to see the doctors. It was sad because only those villagers who came early could get medicines. At that moment, I asked myself why there were so many poor and sick people in this village. The frontier public clinic was underdeveloped, and people could not access adequate health care. The poor, especially the landless Khmer, were desperate and dying from sicknesses.[23]

Soon thereafter, she built an herbal medical clinic and invited voluntary herbal healers from An Giang to come and help the patients. However, due to the isolation and hardships of the borderland, herbal healers tended to leave Vĩnh Điều after a few months. This motivated Út Thu to learn about herbal medicine so that she could eventually operate the herbal clinic on her own. Encouraged by her father, Út Thu attended an herbal medicine college in Cần Thơ and earned a degree after two years of study. Út Thu said that her father inspired her to construct her life around this charitable herbal clinic. Her father used to be a *bác sĩ quân y*, a doctor who treated wounded soldiers in the forest during wartime, and he currently worked as an assistant in the herbal clinic. Út Thu contended that her father was able to distinguish various kinds of herbs and knew how to use different parts of these plants for medicines. Her father told her that the herbs that grow wild on Tà Lơn [Bokor Mountain] of Kampot and Thất Sơn [Seven Mountains] of An Giang had the best curing properties. These rare herbal medicines were hard to find elsewhere. Every two or three weeks, her father drove a small truck, crossing the Vietnam-Cambodia border, heading to the herb collecting site on the Bokor Mountain slope. As he visited Bokor Mountain many times, he knew exactly what kind of herbs needed to be collected and where they were in the forest.

Hòa Hảo herbal medicine has roots in "southern medicine" [*thuốc nam*]—the herbal health tradition prevalent in precolonial Vietnam.[24]

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In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, prophetic leaders in the western Mekong Delta, such as Buddha Master of Western Peace [Phật Thầy Tây An], Buddha Acolyte [Phật Trùm], and True Eremite [Đức Bổn Sư Ngô Lợi], used herbal medicines along with other reputedly magical cures in an attempt to cure serious diseases such as cholera at a time when disease and environmental crises were prevalent and social inequality was growing. Apparent proficiency in such cures was key to the charisma of leaders and to the following they attracted. Similarly, healing was an important feature of Huỳnh Phú Sổ's work throughout his career. He performed cures with simple herbs and acupuncture, did not ask for reward, and offered his home as a shelter for the poor to have treatment. The Hòa Hảo prophet graduated quickly to performing miracle cures, preaching, and carrying out acts of extreme charity for poor peasants. He emphasized that the act of giving could be considered a means to improve oneself, as human greed and selfishness would be quenched through charitable practices.[25] During this time in the Mekong Delta, the welfare work of several other indigenous lay groups, such as Cao Đài and Tịnh Độ Cư Sĩ, formed in southern Vietnam in 1926 and 1934 respectively, also placed great emphasis on promoting traditional herbal medicine, which these sects consider as important as the pursuit of self-perfection.[26]

The modern-day Hòa Hảo herbal clinic featured in this article would seem to exemplify this tradition, with a charismatic healer prescribing herbs with reputedly miraculous properties gathered from the sacred Bokor Mountain and Seven Mountains. Hundreds of sick clients per day flocking for this herbal medicine cure could be read as a sign of the inadequacy of modern health services in the borderland area. The Hòa Hảo healer's miracle treatment and her charitable acts became famous in a precarious frontier like Vĩnh Điều as people from different ethnic, class, political, and social backgrounds, including those suffering from chronic diseases, all seized the same opportunities and were treated alike.

The frontier herbal medical clinic of the Hòa Hảo illustrates the inclusive nature of contemporary Hòa Hảo Buddhism. By being involved in the practice of giving charitable herbal medicines to the local Khmer population, the healer worked to harmonize social relationships. She emphasized that people should love each other more and do more to help those outside their

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own families and ethnic and religious groups. She committed enormous resources to build the Hòa Hảo Buddhist temple and herbal clinic. What is notable about this generosity is that one part of her original intention appears to be to repay debts to humankind as a typical Hòa Hảo Buddhist. Like other Hòa Hảo followers, the practice of the *Tứ Ân* [four debts] was the critical factor that brought Út Thu to carry out many charities for the marginalized in Vĩnh Điều. She noticed that repaying debts to humanity is a rite, an act of filial devotion, at once expected and demanded, forced and desired.

The herbal healer also told me that following the teachings of the prophet, she intended her sacrifices to fulfill her obligations to the community. She originally wanted to build a united community of different ordinary people in the village by sharing her prosperity with the marginalized people and meet her familial obligations. By sacrificing personal property, land, and money for the herbal clinic to help the Khmer people to mitigate their hardship, she emphasized that the Hòa Hảo did not discriminate or have narrow thinking about different ethnic groups. She wished to construct a moral and secure society with a sense of intimacy between Kinh and Khmer people by recruiting them into a social network of friendship. This will be illustrated in following sections.

The Spiritual and Psychological Transformation of a Retired Communist Cadre

Given the hostility and conflict between the Hòa Hảo and communists in the past, this section documents the Hòa Hảo healing practices and charitable activities in contemporary times, which challenge depictions of the sect as a crisis-based, localist conflictual, and oppositional creed and instead shows that the Hòa Hảo have promoted social cohesion, connected people, and encouraged them to leave behind their past hostilities toward others. This section explores the personal benefits and transformations experienced by a retired communist cadre who is involved in healing the sick and other charitable practices in the Hòa Hảo herbal clinic. It looks closely at the transformation of identities, roles, and interactions between the communist cadre and the Hòa Hảo healer in the clinic.

I met Hưng again at the frontier Hòa Hảo Buddhist temple during the 2018 Vu-Lan Festival [Ullambana], which occurs on the fifteenth day of the

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seventh month of the lunar calendar and honors deceased ancestors as well as living parents and provides offerings to the wandering ghosts who lack means of propitiation. At the first sight of his uniform, one might think Hưng was a local policeman who was assigned to maintain security during religious festivals. However, he told me that he was a "real" Hòa Hảo Buddhist, and he recently become one of the key members of Vĩnh Điều's Hòa Hảo Administrative Committee. He shared his family background and life story, which, as he emphasized, included hardships and suffering before he committed himself as a Hòa Hảo Buddhist.

Hưng was a hamlet's police headman in An Biên District of Kiên Giang after 1975. Hưng told me that during the war, An Biên, near U Minh Thượng forest, was a guerrilla base heavily controlled by National Liberation Front (NLF) forces. Consequently, there were almost no Hòa Hảo Buddhists living in the area. Hưng stated that he knew little about the Hòa Hảo sect and its philosophy; his hatred of them was due to the continuous negative propaganda about the Hòa Hảo from the NLF. This oral story is similar to how Shawn McHale describes the propaganda on race hatred and cannibalism deployed by communists during the First Indochina War and its relationship to violence and the breakdown of social trust in the Mekong Delta.[27] Hưng summarized the message that was widely spread at the time:

> The Hòa Hảo were so violent, agonistic, and superstitious. Ordinary people were very scared of being murdered by the Hòa Hảo. Members of the sect often killed people at night, took their livers out, and ate their flesh. During the Vietnam War, some Hòa Hảo sectarians betrayed the liberationists as they cooperated with Nguyễn Văn Thiệu to fight against the communist revolution. Hence, any Hòa Hảo appearing in *vùng giải phóng* [the liberation area] was to be reported to the Việt Cộng resistance.

Hưng shared his personal story of when he first interacted with an actual Hòa Hảo at An Biên in 1983. One night, he had been assigned by the village's headman to arrest a Hòa Hảo who had just visited the village late that afternoon. He went with other policemen to check the house in question with a gun in his hands. He entered the dark house to take the man, but soon realized that the Hòa Hảo man they arrested was his uncle-in-law from the Hòa Hảo holy land of An Giang. He recalled that he apologized for the event, but he had no choice but to send the man straight to the police office. Hưng

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did not dare to reveal his relationship with the man. Early the next morning, he went to the village police station and met his uncle. He asked him in a low tone, "Are you fine, uncle? Did they [the village policemen] beat you hard?" His uncle responded, "No beatings, no kicking. Yet I was educated and insulted the whole night."

He continued to ask his uncle, "And . . . where is your long hair then?!" His uncle replied, "The police headman told me that I looked like an alienated man with the long hair.[28] Ordinary people should have the same short hair. Then, another guy came to cut my hair." The next day, the village police office agreed to free the Hòa Hảo man since they knew he was Hưng's uncle-in-law. When leaving, Hưng believed his uncle would never come to visit An Biên again.

As the head of the hamlet police, Hưng used to hold much power in the village. He recalled that local communist authorities usually had a great deal of power in rural areas during the postwar period. They regularly used their power to control people, and as a result they were feared by neighbors, villagers, and even relatives. Hưng admitted that he was the kind of person who *ăn thịt chó không từ* [never said no to dog meat] during the time he worked as a hamlet policeman. His colleagues frequently came to his house on the weekends for drinking. Their favorite food was dog meat. Hưng told me he never thought that one day he would become a Hòa Hảo Buddhist, who must avoid killing animals, especially dogs, buffalos, and cows. As a communist, he did not believe in reincarnation, samsara, or punishment in hell if he acted unethically in this life. He emphasized that communist cadres were not superstitious.

When he was fifty-five years old, he had a serious health problem that prevented him from working. He struggled with terrible headaches that made him unable to sleep. Even Western medical doctors could not understand what was happening to him. He resigned his position as head of the hamlet police. His wife left the family. His son and daughter dropped out of school and migrated to cities seeking jobs. He stayed alone in his house, struggling with his illness and suffering from his family crisis. He said that he started to think about his life. He regretted his misbehavior with his Hòa Hảo uncle and the fellow villagers when he worked as a hamlet policeman. He felt sorry for killing many dogs and for his drinking. He believed that he

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had lost almost everything because he did so many bad and immoral things in this life.

In 2008, Hưng migrated to Vĩnh Điều to help his brother-in-law operate a rice farm. He told me that he also wanted to escape his disastrous life in An Biên and find social and spiritual tranquility in a new land. However, he soon realized that Vĩnh Điều was more complicated and chaotic than he thought. In the quiet environment of the isolated area, he got bored in his new life not long after settling and made friends with those who were "stubborn and undesirable newcomers" [*thành phần bất hảo*] who came from different locations. He admitted that the sum of money earned after harvesting rice crops was not enough for him to spend with these new friends.

He was addicted to alcohol. His health had gotten even worse. Again, he visited a Western doctor several times, but the pain relievers had not helped much. One day, he met a fortune teller, who was also a shaman, to resolve the headache:

> He said that my sickness was unable to be cured because of my bad karma [*căn nghiệp đã tới*]. I must give up my bad habits [*quay đầu là bờ*], particularly alcohol and dog meat. He demonstrated that I have a heavy debt to pay because I beat the heads of dogs for food. Now I must suffer from pain in my head.

Hưng had no doubt this was the problem. He believed his chronic pain stemmed from his wrong actions in this present life and now his karma had come to an end. If he did not turn his head to do good deeds, the ancestors would take his life. One day, his nephew told him about the black-pajama-clad lady who was good at using herbal medicines to cure various diseases. His nephew advised him to come and see the young Hòa Hảo healer since even the shaman and Western doctors could not cure his sickness. Hưng met Út Thu the next morning at the herbal clinic. She diagnosed his health problem by touching his hands. She looked him over, then gently asked, "What is your occupation?" "I used to be a hamlet policeman in An Biên," he replied. He promised the healer that he would stay at the herbal clinic and do the temple's charitable work [*làm công quả*] if his sickness was cured. The sickness reminded him of all the wrongs he had committed in this life and

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others. He told the healer that he had never been guided by the folktale about the weighty presence of karma in his life. Then, he asked Út Thu to instruct him to take refuge under the Buddha.

The herbal doctor carefully listened to his story. After, Út Thu asked Hưng to wear the long, brown dress that was the traditional Hòa Hảo Buddhist costume. Út Thu started to explain to Hưng about the place of Hòa Hảo worship. There was no Buddha statue on the highest altar, only a piece of brown cloth. Under the Buddha's altar was the ancestral altar for the cult of ancestors [*cửu huyền thất tổ*].[29] In front of the worship house was a heaven's altar to enable communication between the earth and the sky. Only pure water, flowers, and incense sticks were needed to worship Buddha. She explained that fresh water represents cleanliness and flowers are for purity, while incense is used to refresh the air. Hòa Hảo adherents worship Buddha at least twice a day: in the early morning from 4:00 to 6:00 and in the evening from 5:00 to 7:00. On the first and fifteenth of each lunar month and on Buddha's Holy Days, followers go to Hòa Hảo temples or community places of worship to pray and listen to sermons.

Hưng remembered that Út Thu instructed him to kneel in front of the ancestral altar, sitting before the Buddhist brown cloth. Behind him was a large image of Huỳnh Phú Sổ in the middle of the place of worship, looking toward heaven's altar. Following her instructions, Hưng held incense sticks in his hands and kowtowed three times. He planted the incense sticks in the incense holder, then standing straight, prayed the prophecies and sutras of prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ with hands joined and touching his forehead. Finally, Út Thu guided Hưng to kowtow four times to end the prayers. She said, "stay still and be silent." He closed his eyes, smelled burning incense and listened to the preaching of Út Thu. After nearly an hour, the ritual practice had fully transformed Hưng into a true Hòa Hảo Buddhist. At this moment, the religious place of worship and herbal clinic had become the spiritual and psychological school to transform his life.

From that day, Hưng stayed in the herbal clinic, using the herbs and assisting Út Thu by drying fresh herbs during the day. He learned about Hòa Hảo ritual practices when Út Thu prayed in the early morning and at night. He was keen to read Hòa Hảo sutras and prophecies whenever he had free time. "The words in Hòa Hảo books are simplified, so I could easily

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understand. I would ask Út Thu whenever I had any questions about Hòa Hảo doctrine and she was eager to explain," said Hưng. In the following days, he started having vegetarian food twice a week and gave up eating dog meat. After taking herbal medicine for a month, he felt that his sickness had gradually become milder. When Hưng's chronic headache was relieved, despite the short treatment time, he saw it as a miracle:

> I got better quickly. The headache had gone, so I was able to participate in the various daily activities of the herbal clinic and ritual practices. After worshiping Buddha in the early morning, I helped Út Thu sort out different kinds of herbs and tidied the clinic. I chopped herbal medicines that were collected by Út Thu's father and patients. In the clinic, I had the chance to chat with Kinh and Khmer patients who had similar life stories as me. Everything seemed to be more relaxing to me. I could share my personal life and hear their stories.

The retired cadre told me that he was indebted to Út Thu—a Hòa Hảo Buddhist who saved his life from physical pains and enlightened his mind. Since he started working in the herbal clinic as an assistant, he had learned about the philosophy of the four debts, the three karmas, and the Noble Eightfold Path. He found himself to be committed to the principles of the three karmas (physical karma, verbal karma, and mental karma), such as not killing living creatures (dogs, cats, or buffalo) for food. He interpreted his misfortune as a result of his actions from this life (karma) when he did not repent or accomplish good deeds.

Observing the enthusiastic participation of Hưng in the herbal clinic, Út Thu decided to include this retired communist cadre in the current charitable network. One year after healing his sickness, Hưng was selected to be the secretary of the Hòa Hảo Administrative Committee of Vĩnh Điều. As a retired communist cadre, he had a close relationship with his brother-in-law and other local authorities who could support the religious activities of Hòa Hảo Buddhists at the temple during the Buddhist festivals. In particular, Hưng maintained a good connection with the village's Fatherland Front Organization in order to coordinate the delivery of charitable support to poor families in the village. As a rice farmer, Hưng also had many chances to communicate with other Kinh rice farmers and convince them to participate in the Hòa Hảo charitable network.

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During my ethnographic work in Vĩnh Điều, I also had the chance to talk with different local government officers who knew about Út Thu's herbal medicine practices as well as the other charitable activities of the Hòa Hảo temple. Unlike Hưng's acknowledgment of the spiritual benefits, the local authorities tended to emphasize the practical benefits of the Hòa Hảo charitable activities. Local officers commented on the educational benefits to a number of poor students who had recently received support such as backpacks, books, and bicycles from Út Thu to maintain their schooling. They also highlighted the significant contribution of the Hòa Hảo charitable herbal clinic toward improving the community's health care services, especially for the Khmer residents.

Hòa Hảo philosophy indicates that human actions themselves are considered neither good nor bad, only intentions and thoughts make them so. Hence, Hòa Hảo Buddhists give out of compassion and kindness when they realize that someone in the community is in need of help. The Hòa Hảo worldview emphasizes that one's own good fortune should be shared for the benefit and happiness of others, particularly the unfortunate. For Hòa Hảo followers, charity is informed by a sense of personhood defined by obligation. Hòa Hảo Buddhists are taught that giving defines what it means to be a good person, act correctly, have good relations with others, and show respect. Giving makes oneself recognizable, not strange to other people. Above all, to give is to manifest gratitude [*biết ơn*]: the self-awareness that one's life is owed to the generosity of others. Thus, charity is experienced as a voluntary act, yet it is subtly compelled by social norms. Such norms can be summed up as the obligation, defined by Marcel Mauss, to reciprocate "the gift."[30] That explains why many Hòa Hảo charitable donors sacrifice money, time, and labor for charity, yet do not expect any kind of return from the receivers. They act according to certain standards, out of a sense of responsibility, in reciprocation of the multistranded relations of debt in which they are entangled.

The Khmers in the Hòa Hảo Herbal Clinic: Healing the Sick or Healing the Disparity?

Observations of the current circumstances of the Khmer residents in this frontier locality contrast with the significant change in fortune experienced

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by Thạch Sanh, who rose to become king of Cambodia, the story mentioned at the beginning of this essay. As Philip Taylor suggests, the security of many Khmer in Vietnam has been threatened in recent decades by unrestrained resource extraction that is undermining the foundation on which the Khmer presence in this region has long been based. Most Khmer people in the borderland have remained poor or landless while outsiders have become wealthy.[31] Khmer Vietnamese in this region are often described as "the excluded," made landless or displaced by more powerful ethnic groups.[32]

This section draws upon my ethnographic observations and oral interviews in 2018 with local Kinh and Khmer Vietnamese, as well as Cambodian nationals who visited the Hòa Hảo herbal clinic to heal. It uncovers the disparities and interactions between the two ethnic groups in the frontier context and the role played by the Hòa Hảo Buddhist charity as an integrating and healing practice. Vĩnh Điều has recently witnessed a notable increase in the number of young Khmers suffering from chronic health problems, particularly stomachaches, joint pain, and disorders of the spine. As stated by the healer, these disorders were previously commonly seen only among older Khmers. These health problems have resulted in the young being unable to work, either temporarily or permanently, and, therefore, to generate money, which adversely affects their family life and socioeconomic status. An elderly Khmer patient described the current circumstances of the Khmer people in the frontier area:

> This is a sick and poor village. The Khmers were either struggling day by day to make a living or suffering from physical pain. They are so weak, as they no longer have well-balanced meals due to their underprivilege. Sickness is one of main reasons that Khmers are hindered from making a living. In this frontier, life is just so much harder for the marginalized.

As observed in the herbal clinic, I was rather surprised by the dominant number of Khmer patients who were from different Khmer villages in nearby Vĩnh Điều. About a quarter of patients came from neighboring villages in Cambodia. Most of them were repeat patients, so they knew each other quite well. Only three Cambodians from Kampot were new patients. This herbal clinic had more Khmer patients than any Hòa Hảo herbal clinic I had observed in An Giang Province. Some Khmer patients chatted to each

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FIGURE 2: Khmer patients gathering inside the Hòa Hảo Buddhist temple, 2016. Photo by Vo Duy Thanh.

other in Khmer. These Khmer patients usually come to the clinic in groups of four to six people, including husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, relatives and neighbors. The majority were small-scale rice farmers or landless agricultural wage laborers.

I met Chau Um, a fifty-year-old Khmer patient who was visiting the Hòa Hảo herbal clinic due to his back pain. Chau Um provided an oral story about his health problems as well as the social and economic disparities recently generated between the Vietnamese farmers and Khmer inhabitants in this amorphous frontier. Unlike the ethnic Kinh large-scale farmers, the common experience for local ethnic Khmers was of landlessness and struggle to make enough for subsistence. The Khmer laborers were mostly employed by the Kinh landowners; many did not have alternative livelihoods since the local Khmer residents no longer had access to forest-based livelihoods. According to Chau Um, about thirty years ago this area was covered by a permanent swamp, seasonal inundated grassland, and melaleuca forest. The Khmers inhabited only the dry places along the banks

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of canals; they harvested lepironia in the swampy plain between the Vĩnh Tế canal and Kiên Lương Town as they had in the past and sold it to Vietnamese from Ba Chúc Town to produce handicraft mats. During that time, Khmer people could also make a good living from other forest products, such as melaleuca wood and honey, as well as from fishing, which was abundant in the inundated forested swamp.

Since the additional canals dredged during the 1980s helped to drain the swamps and channel in fresh water, most of the swampy land was converted into commercial rice land, which allowed the cultivation of up to two crops of rice each year under the local government's sponsorship. Due to unsuccessful modern rice production, many Khmer families fell into debt. The Khmers were perhaps the poorest inhabitants in this frontier area. Recently, agricultural machines, especially combine rice harvesters, have become so dominant in rice production in the frontier that it is having severe effects on the way of life of landless Khmer. In the rice fields, almost all human labor has been replaced by machinery, which threatens the subsistence of local Khmer farmers, especially the landless poor, elderly, and disabled. Chau Um explained that most landless Khmers in Vĩnh Điều do not earn enough for daily subsistence. Chau Um was concerned about the scarcity of available work in the borderland and its negative effects on Khmer people:

> The Kinh large landholders usually prefer efficient machinery to work their farms rather than hire Khmer laborers. The only "hard and dangerous" tasks that still require the employment of laborers are spaying pesticides and loading and transporting paddy rice to the landowners' homes. As a reward, the Khmer wage laborers like me can earn some more money. However, as the herbal healers indicated, my back pain and disorder of the spine might be a result of these heavy jobs. I have almost no savings after nearly twenty years of working but now suffer from permanent back pain.

Chau Um raised another issue of recent unfavorable natural conditions that had caused insecure land tenure among Khmer small landowners. Owing to the lack of fresh water for irrigation due to a serious saline intrusion in 2016, Chau Um and other Khmer farmers lost almost all their rice crops. As most farm inputs, such as fertilizers, fungicides, and pesticides, are bought on credit from local private enterprises, Chau Um was unable to pay off the debt to these agricultural business owners. Hence, his land title was currently

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being held by a local creditor, and he could not operate the farm anymore. Many Khmer families had the same problem, which resulted in young members fleeing the village for urban cities to seek new opportunities. The only people remaining were children, the elderly, and the infirm.

The Hòa Hảo healer sought to solve this social problem by advocating for good care for Khmer patients, no matter if they were living in Vietnam or Cambodia. They would all be treated the same, she claimed. She had recently installed some hammocks, especially for the elderly, to rest while awaiting their turn. The healer suggested that old patients, particular those who traveled a long way from the Takeo and Kampot Provinces of Cambodia to reach the clinic, needed to have a rest before undergoing any treatment. Patients could also take a short nap to wait until the early afternoon if the clinic was busy in the morning. Khmer patients were usually unable to speak Vietnamese. The Hòa Hảo healer spoke limited Khmer. If she wanted to communicate with a Cambodian Khmer patient, she usually asked for assistance from a local Khmer who could also speak Vietnamese. The healer sometimes made jokes with the Khmer patients so that they could enjoy their time in the herbal clinic. She shared with me that she wished the Khmer patients could be more relaxed because that was also an important part of her treatment method.

As I observed the healing process and interviewed different patients in the herbal clinic, they told me that they felt happy with the healer's treatment because their sickness had been gradually cured. They strongly believed that the herbal doctor could heal their sickness, so the majority tended to follow the treatment until their current health situation improved. Before leaving the clinic at the end of the day, they also joined hands and prayed, touching their foreheads toward the ancestral altar of the Hòa Hảo temple. As observed, the Khmer patients, particularly those from Cambodia, usually put a sum of money into a charity box in the last days after their sickness was completely healed. They said to me that they did not know how to repay the debt to the herbal healer, except through respect and a small amount of money donated to the herbal clinic. Chau Um had another way of returning what he said he was indebted to the herbal clinic. Whenever he came to the clinic, he collected a big bag of fresh herbs around his home and carried them to the herbal clinic. He mentioned that he could experience the

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hardship of the healer's father, who had alone collected a huge amount of herbal medicines from Bokor Mountain and brought them back to the clinic in order to treat a large number of sick Khmers. Chau Um respectfully mentioned the voluntary work of the healer's father, a retired large-scale Kinh farmer who once came to exploit this frontier land for profit accumulation, yet now sacrificed his time, energy, and resources to heal the sick and the disparity between the Kinh and Khmer people.

Charity is a social practice through which people define not only their class-specific identity, but also their moral status in society.[33] The Hòa Hảo healer attempted to build her moral status by expanding her charitable activities; providing herbal medicines and healing the sick were not the only charitable activities of the frontier clinic to help the Khmers. She occasionally distributed food and other gifts to the Khmers. She shared with me that when she was confronted with poor patients, particularly those who had serious health problems and were unable to make a living, she felt she should give them support, such as a ten-kilogram bag of rice and a pack of noodles

FIGURE 3: Charitable gifts for impoverished Khmers during the Sangha Buddhist Day, 2018. Photo by Vo Duy Thanh.

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or more, depending on the patients' circumstances. She responded compassionately by personally offering them further charitable gifts, sometimes an amount of money, to assist them until they overcome their hardship. Furthermore, the healer cared for the children of these Khmer patients. She said the money from the charity box would be used to buy school stationery for Khmer students when they started the school year. The previous year, she was invited to become an honorary member of the Village's Educational Promotion Association [Hội khuyến học]. The Hòa Hảo healer continued to contribute to the education fund for assisting poor students. She had recently called for more charitable resources from Hòa Hảo Buddhists outside the community and had contacted several charitable donors from An Giang, Rạch Giá, and Hồ Chí Minh City to purchase bicycles for poor Khmer students so that they could go to school during the rainy season.

Most of the Khmer patients and Khmers who had previously received charitable gifts from the herbal clinic came to the Hòa Hảo temple during Buddhist festivals. On one occasion when I took part in one of these festivals, the Khmer people walked inside the temple to explore the house of worship. They curiously stopped at a series of pictures about *Vòng Luân hồi* [samsara] hanging on the temple wall, just behind the herbal clinic.[34] A Khmer resident who visited the temple during this Buddhist occasion told me that she simply knew that if people perform ethical actions in this life, they will be reborn into human beings and enjoy a happier life afterward.

A young Khmer woman who visited the Hòa Hảo temple during the Full Moon Festival in 2018 told me that this was the fourth time she had attended a religious event at this Hòa Hảo temple. She shared her thoughts about how the Hòa Hảo Buddhist temple benefits the Khmer residents in the borderland:

> The Hòa Hảo teachings are quite similar to Khmer Buddhist teachings, even more simple than what I had learned in the Khmer temple, which has been abandoned since the Khmer Rouge attacked the frontier area in 1978. Although I am unable to read Vietnamese, by looking at the pictures in the Hòa Hảo Buddhist temple, I could understand that we should perform good deeds in this life so that we will not suffer in the next life. Like me, other Khmer people regularly come to the Hòa Hảo temple on the occasions of Buddhist festivals, even after their sicknesses have healed. During the Full

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FIGURE 4: Khmers in Hòa Hảo traditional dress during the Ulambana Festival, 2018. Photo by Vo Duy Thanh.

> Moon Festival, Kinh and Khmer children in this village are excited to play together in the temple's yard, where they will receive colorful lanterns, together with small gifts. These things, in this frontier area, never happened before the Hòa Hảo black-pajamas lady appeared.[35]

The great unity in this precarious frontier came from the love and compassion of the Hòa Hảo healer, who felt she suffered herself if she did not share with the poor or get along with the Khmers. The efficacy of healing the sick and the generous gift giving of the Kinh woman became a popular topic of discussion among the Khmers during the Buddhist festivals. The Hòa Hảo Buddhists, who were previously depicted as intolerant toward other ethnic groups, are now accepted by the Khmers. The honor that the Khmers reserve for the herbal healer encourages her to maintain the charitable practices and nurture new ideas for the future, especially for the young Khmer students—for example, her plans to build a charitable rice kitchen nearby a school to assist poor students.

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FIGURE 5: Khmer and Kinh students offering incense in front of the ancestral altar in the Hòa Hảo place of worship, 2018. Photo by Vo Duy Thanh.

When I asked a local Khmer what she thought about the Hòa Hảo herbal healer, she said that the Hòa Hảo lady is an actual *Bồ tát* [Bodhisattva-hearted lady] because she healed sick Khmer people and gave them rice when they were unable to work. Another Khmer patient told me that the Hòa Hảo healer had shown compassion and kindness to the Khmer people. She emphasized that the healer gave a lot of personal resources to her charity, but she was humble about what she had done for the poor people in this borderland.

Thorstein Veblen emphasizes that individual conspicuous giving to charity is considered a means to display wealth and social status. On the other hand, Marxists construe charitable activities as a way to legitimate wealth and social power, and charity further enhances the social status and recognition of the upper class.[36] One scholar who has illustrated this paradigm is Katherine A. Bowie. In examining merit-making practices among Theravada Buddhists in Northern Thailand, Bowie shows how generous gift giving and charity entails a class element. She suggests that gift giving to monks and

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temples among Thai Buddhists is not necessarily altruistic because it emphasizes the selflessness of giving, which earns merit and a future better life for the giver, rather than relief for the poor or the recipient of the gift. Bowie concludes that generosity through charitable giving is central to the political dynamics of the relations between elites and subalterns in class stratified societies.[37]

The case of Hòa Hảo charity is somewhat different from the insights from Veblen and Marx given the amorphousness of Mekong Delta society and the suppressed emphasis on stratification in Vietnam's socialist culture. It is probable that the prominent support given by Hòa Hảo rural elites responds to the sect's religious critique of greed, selfishness, exploitation, and power abuse as not just immoral, but as personally and cosmically ruinous. As such, Hòa Hảo rural elites' support for charity in the borderland squares with the paradigm inspired by Veblen and Marx, which views charity as a form of status enhancement and elite legitimation, potentially building elites a reputation as ethical and responsible social actors. However, I was struck by the broadly participatory nature of Hòa Hảo charity, which, far from being predominantly an elite concern, elicited contributions from all sectors of society—rich and poor, local residents and emigrants, Kinh and Khmers—be that in funds, volunteer labor, or material and psychological support. The hands-on, inclusive, and participatory nature of Hòa Hảo charity has led me to favor a Durkheimian and Maussian view of such charity as an infrastructure for the creation of social solidarity, cohesion, and moral purpose, rather than as a mechanism for entrenching social stratification.[38]

Conclusion

This essay sheds light on how Hòa Hảo religious values have been deployed by a Hòa Hảo traditional healer to build solidarity in a frontier milieu that was once seen as chaotic, violent, poor, precarious, and marginalized. The precarious context of the borderland provided an opportunity for Hòa Hảo members to intervene and undertake community development activities—specifically, providing an herbal clinic offering traditional medical remedies to frontier dwellers—in the name of building "the great unity." Hòa Hảo religious doctrine contributed to building solidarity in the borderlands with

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its emphasis on the debts that all people have to humankind, regardless of lineage, ethnicity, or place. Since they came to this region and began offering cross-cultural medical charity to all, the Hòa Hảo created a new sense of intimacy between people who previously had been strangers in the borderland. Their patients included newcomers and locals, the poor and the rich, communist cadres and ordinary civilians, ethnic Kinh and Khmers, and Vietnamese and Cambodian citizens.

Drawing on insights derived from Marcel Mauss, who sees charity as inspired by the obligation to reciprocate,[39] and on Weber's emphasis on the meaning of social action,[40] I surmise that the idea of debt and specifically the obligation to repay the four debts expounded by Hòa Hảo Buddhists is a driving factor motivating Hòa Hảo Buddhist charity. Being nurtured in the precarious natural and cultural milieu of the frontier region led local people to feel and embody a sense of multistranded obligation. Through the obligation of repayment, by practicing the act of giving, Hòa Hảo Buddhists enact religiously inspired ideals of relatedness that are believed to render life secure and meaningful. Through various stages of work to provide social services to Khmer patients, Hòa Hảo Buddhists voluntarily devote their time, labor, and expertise to provide herbal medicines and other support. The interactions and connections between charitable givers and receivers, between Kinh and Khmer people, between Hòa Hảo and non–Hòa Hảo followers, and among Khmer patients on both sides of the border have consolidated social networks and social cohesion within the community.

The existing studies on Vietnamese Buddhist charity see charitable work as a means for people to legitimate their identity, social class, and moral status. The most recent ethnographic study on Buddhist charitable work of small traders conducted in Hồ Chí Minh City illustrates the effort of this religious group to negotiate and define their social and moral status in Vietnam's society. The study argues that the charitable work of urban Buddhist traders is inherently an intensive, socially engaging practice, so it offers a platform for many people from different social classes and backgrounds to meet and interact. This provides petty traders opportunities to identify themselves as a moral social class and position their role in modern society.[41] Similarly, the significant contributions to social welfare made by better-off Hòa Hảo in the frontier region can be seen as a means for rural elites in the

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Mekong Delta to gain an ethical reputation as "responsible" or "good" persons, thus legitimating their social and moral status. This paper contributes to understanding Hòa Hảo Buddhist charity in light of practitioners' perceptions of religious doctrine and social responsibility, and thereby to understanding the motives and nature of contemporary Hòa Hảo Buddhist charitable practices and the kinds of relationships that are created through the acts of giving.

This study also engages in current discussions by Sara Swenson about contemporary Buddhism volunteerism in Hồ Chí Minh City. Swenson suggests that Buddhist charity volunteers in Vietnam interpret significantly increasing cancer rates through understandings of karma. These charity workers believe that the noticeable number of patients who suffer from this chronic disease is a product of collective moral failure, caused by the corruption in public food production. By contrast, charitable work at cancer hospitals could generate merit, which improves collective karma, so the altruism can bring benefits to all living beings.[42] Hòa Hảo Buddhists also believe that a person's sickness in their present life is because of bad karma caused by unethical acts in past lives, so the act of giving herbal medicines to sick people in the community is perceived by Hòa Hảo Buddhists as a necessary means for self-cultivation. As such, herbal remedies are a moral cure. The Hòa Hảo healer emphasizes that taking a long course of herbal medicines not only effectively heals the physical body's sickness but also helps patients become more calm, gentle, and forgiving. For the herbal remedy to work, sick people must learn control, discipline, and mindfulness to avoid social ills such as smoking and drinking that can create bad karma for the sick, rather than retain their good merit. Practicing the disciplines of mindfulness and self-control during the Hòa Hảo healing practice restructures the selfhood of patients.

For many individuals, participation in Hòa Hảo charity is a morally transformative experience. In a contemporary social environment characterized by amoral materialism, anomie, and disorientation,[43] personal involvement in Hòa Hảo charity gives people a framework within which to engage in purposeful acts motivated by gratitude and humility. Charity offered at an herbal clinic on the Vietnam-Cambodia border overcame tensions, misunderstandings, and long-held suspicion between ethnic Khmers

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and ethnic Kinh, both of whom joined in the provision and receipt of healing services. Given a newly settled frontier milieu characterized by high migration flows, mistrust between neighbors, and precarious livelihoods, the charitable services offered by Hòa Hảo sectarians provide an opportunity for strangers and former adversaries to meet and get to know each other. This ethnographic work follows in the footsteps of previous scholars such as Eric Wolf, Hue-Tam Ho Tai, and Neil Jamieson, who interpret indigenous Buddhist faith in the western Mekong Delta, such as the BSKH tradition and Hòa Hảo, as having emerged in conditions of anomie, disintegration of traditional social structure, and social conflict.[44] This article adds new knowledge on how today Hòa Hảo Buddhists have navigated entrenched hierarchies that have long existed between Kinh and Khmers in the borderland by performing moral acts of kindness that help to reduce historical mistrust in a place where collective memory of enmity prevails—this charitable work is meaningful to people despite social and ethnic differences. The Hòa Hảo Buddhist charity in the contemporary borderland context reveals the Hòa Hảo to be open to and welcomed by former enemies and sociocultural "others," thus showing this once conflict-prone faith to be more inclusive and unifying than previous generations may have expected.

Vo Duy Thanh is a researcher and lecturer at the Research Center for Rural Development, An Giang University, Vietnam National University, Hồ Chí Minh City. This article is based on a chapter from his PhD dissertation conducted at Australian National University. This research was financially supported by the Australia Awards Scholarships. He is grateful for all the Hòa Hảo Buddhist interlocutors who shared their personal stories and perspectives on Hòa Hảo charitable practices. He also acknowledges Professor Philip Taylor and two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the interconnections between Hòa Hảo religious practices, charity, and reconciliation of ethnic and political conflicts in the contemporary Vietnam-Cambodia borderland by looking at the relationship between Hòa Hảo traditional healers and patients of Kinh and Khmer

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backgrounds, Cambodian nationals, and retired Vietnamese communist cadres. It argues that the healing practices in a frontier Hòa Hảo herbal clinic have been inclusive and have involved the participation of diverse groups with whom the practitioners were formerly in conflict. The essay shows how the Hòa Hảo continue to build social solidarity in a pluralist borderland region with a more ethnically diverse set of relationships than has been previously recognized.

KEYWORDS: *Hòa Hảo, Kinh-Khmer relationships, Buddhist charity, herbal medicine, social solidarity*

Notes

1. Philip Taylor, *The Khmer Lands of Vietnam: Environment, Cosmology, and Sovereignty* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014), 191–192.
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4. Translated from texts in *Sấm Giảng Thi Văn Toàn Bộ của Đức Huỳnh Giáo Chủ* [The Complete Works of Prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ] (Ấn Hành: Ban Phổ Thông Giáo Lý Trung Ương, 1966), 183–184.
5. See, for example, Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); John T. McAlister and Paul Mus, *The Vietnamese and their Revolution* (New York: Harper, 1970); Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).
6. Vo Duy Thanh, "Repaying the Debt, Remaking the World: Hòa Hảo Buddhist Charity as Vernacular Development in Vietnam's Mekong Delta" (PhD dissertation, Australian National University, 2020).
7. Philip Taylor, "Apocalypse Now? Hoa Hao Buddhism Emerging from the Shadows of War," *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 12, no. 3 (2001): 339–354.
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10. See, for example, Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950's Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Bernard B. Fall, "The Political-Religious Sects of Viet-Nam," *Pacific Affairs* 28, no. 3 (1955): 235–253; David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885–1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); Philip Taylor, "Apocalypse Now?"; Alexander B. Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976).
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17. Taylor, *The Khmer Lands of Vietnam*, 104, 118.
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20. Trương Như Vương, *Đạo Hòa Hảo và những vấn đề đặt ra cho công tác an ninh trật tự xã hội hiện nay* [Hòa Hảo Buddhism and Some Issues Associated with the Social Order and Internal Security] (Hà Nội: Đề tài cấp Bộ, Viện Khoa học Bộ Công An, 2001).
21. The name Út Thu is a pseudonym. Most of the names of the interlocutors in this article have been changed to protect their confidentiality.
22. Interview with Út Thu, July 24, 2016, Vĩnh Điều.
23. Interview with Út Thu, July 24, 2016, Vĩnh Điều.
24. See, for example, Michele Thompson, *Vietnamese Traditional Medicine: A Social History* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2015); David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).
25. See, for example, Do Thien, *Vietnamese Supernaturalism: Views from the Southern Region* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); Nguyen Long Thanh Nam, *Hòa Hảo Buddhism*.
26. Elise A. DeVido, "The Influence of Chinese Master Taixu on Buddhism in Vietnam," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 10 (2009): 413–458.
27. Shawn F. McHale, "Understanding the Fanatic Mind? The Việt Minh and Race Hatred in the First Indochina War (1945–1954)," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4, no. 3 (2009): 98–138.
28. As Philip Taylor notes, Hòa Hảo followers have expained that the black silk pajamas worn by the faithful are perceived as a symbol of the Vietnamese farmer, and many wear their hair long in what they say is the traditional Vietnamese style. See Taylor, "Apocalypse Now?"
29. According to the Hòa Hảo herbal healer, this is the collective ancestral altar. The altar is not for worshiping the prophet's ancestor, the temple's founder, or any private family but is dedicated to "a hundred lineages." The collective ancestral altar in this Hòa Hảo temple is particularly important for the immigrants in this frontier context. When the immigrants kneel in front of this collective ancestral altar, they preserve the honor for the ancestor of their lineage. In this regard, the Hòa Hảo temple is considered a window for these immigrants who can worship their ancestors far from their homes. The Hòa Hảo temple in the context of migration is very open and inclusive. It bears a meaning of solidarity for many generations as people from different social, political, and ethnic backgrounds come together to the same temple and kneel at the same ancestral altar.
30. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Cohen & West, 1970 [1925]).
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33. Ann Marie Leshkowich, *Essential Trade: Vietnamese Women in a Changing Marketplace* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014).
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35. Interview with a young Khmer woman, July 15, 2018 (lunar calendar), Hòa Hảo Buddhist temple.
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44. See, for example, Wolf, *Peasant Wars*; Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics*; Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*.

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