

The Anti-French Uprising Campaign by Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van in the Late 19th Century: From Nationalist and Religious Perspectives

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ABSTRACT: This article does not delve into reconstructing the entire process of force mobilization, developments, or outcomes of the uprising led by Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van in the late 19th century across Binh Dinh and Phu Yen provinces. Utilizing an interdisciplinary approach, the paper explains several intriguing aspects of this historical event, such as the harmony of nationalistic and religious elements in attracting a large number of diverse social classes to join the 1900 uprising in Phu Yen and Binh Dinh. Furthermore, the article offers an in-depth analysis of Vo Tru—a unique leader who guided the local population in their resistance against French colonialists under the banner of “Minh Trai Chu Te” (The Lord of Minh Trai) during the twilight years of the 19th century. Finally, the paper raises the question of whether there was a convergence between the movement of Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van and other religiously-colored anti-French resistance movements in Vietnam during the late 19th century.

KEYWORDS: Binh Dinh, Nationalism, Phu Yen, Religion, Tran Cao Van, Vo Tru.

1. INTRODUCTION

Following the decline and eventual dissolution of the Can Vuong movement under the orthodox banner of “vi quoc vong quan” (serving the nation out of loyalty to the monarch), the feudal ideology of the Nguyen Dynasty completely lost its historical role in rallying the nation. In this context, patriotic movements tended to seek out and rely on spiritual and religious banners as a means to awaken the populace and mobilize forces. Prominent within this historical current in the South Central Coast and Central Highlands was the uprising that erupted in 1900, led by the two leaders Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van. Distinct from contemporary military insurrections, this movement possessed a highly unique profile, unfolding across a vast inter-regional space that tightly connected the two provinces of Phu Yen and Binh Dinh. The strength and enduring nature of the uprising did not reside in its purely armed character, but rather crystallized in its ability to harmoniously and seamlessly intertwine nationalistic and religious qualities. It represented a convergence of Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist, and Christian ideological currents, alongside indigenous beliefs, collective ethnic memories, and the national psyche in the face of French colonial invasion. Utilizing an interdisciplinary approach that combines historical and logical methods with religious and ethnographic perspectives, this article elucidates the national and religious harmony involved in mobilizing diverse social classes to participate in the 1900 uprising in Phu Yen and Binh Dinh, while analyzing the distinctive leadership role of Vo Tru under the banner of Minh Trai Chu Te.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research works on the uprising led by Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van were often fragmented, focusing separately on the two provinces of Phu Yen and Binh Dinh, with the majority emphasizing the process of force mobilization and the insurrection within Phu Yen. Recently, however, the compilation of diverse archival sources—particularly the reports sent by the Residents (French administrators) in Quy Nhon and Song Cau to the Governor-General of French Indochina—has shed light on various aspects of this uprising. Subsequent literature and research articles on this topic notably include Cu Tran Cao Van (Mr. Tran Cao Van) by Hanh Son, Nhan vat Binh Dinh (Prominent Figures of Binh Dinh) by Dang Quy Dich, Danh nhan tinh Binh Dinh (Celebrities of Binh Dinh Province) by Bui Van Lang, Non nuoc Phu Yen (The Land and People of Phu Yen) by Nguyen Dinh Tu, Vo nhan Binh Dinh (Martial Figures of Binh Dinh) by the poet Quach Tan, and Binh Dinh dat vo troi van (Binh Dinh: The Land of Martial Arts and Literature) by Dinh Van Lien. Additionally, recent articles published in the Xua & Nay (Past & Present) journal, as well as the Phu Yen and Binh Dinh newspapers—such as Vo Tru and the Uprising in Phu Yen by Tran Dinh Than, The Legend of Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van in Phu Yen Land by the Buddhist monk Tran Truc Lam, The Uprising of Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van by Ba Da Rang, Vo Tru and the 1900 Uprising in Phu Yen by Dao Nhat Kim, and New Insights into the Vo Tru - Tran Cao Van Uprising in Phu Yen (1900) by Nguyen Van Giac—have collectively outlined the general profile of the 1900 uprising.

The Anti-French Uprising Campaign by Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van in the Late 19th Century: From Nationalist and Religious Perspectives

Among these works, the book *Vo nhan Binh Dinh* by the poet Quach Tan is particularly noteworthy for providing invaluable historical data regarding the uprising. As a descendant of the Quach clan, which has settled in Quy Nhon for over 300 years and made significant contributions to this legendary land of martial arts, Quach Tan inherited a rich ancestral legacy. *Vo nhan Binh Dinh* stands as one of the many literary heritages he bequeathed to posterity. Writing from an eyewitness and firsthand-account perspective (ears hearing and eyes seeing), Quach Tan meticulously documented former prominent figures of Binh Dinh from the Trinh-Nguyen civil war up to 1945. More importantly, his detailed records on the 1900 military insurrection of Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van allow researchers to fully assess the nature and scale of this movement. The work demonstrates that the Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van movement was a large-scale, inter-regional phenomenon that forged connections across the South Central Coast and Central Highlands provinces (including Da Nang, Quang Ngai, Phu Yen, and Binh Dinh), and crucially highlights the nationalistic and religious syncretism (fusion) within the uprising.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Historical Method: This method is employed to analyze the uprising within the specific context of Vietnamese history during the late 19th century—a period marked by a profound crisis in salvation ideologies, when the feudal system of the Nguyen Dynasty no longer possessed the capacity to rally the populace.

Logical Method: This approach aids in connecting and analyzing the causal relationships between objective factors (such as natural disasters, epidemics, and French colonial policies) and subjective factors (such as the reawakening of patriotism, public psychology, and the strategic adoption of amulets and prophecies as means to mobilize forces).

Historical Source Criticism (Critical Analysis of Historical Sources): The study compiles, cross-references, and analyzes a diverse range of historical materials. These include prior local research works and folk accounts, which are integrated with primary historical records.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. The Convergence of Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, and Folk Beliefs in the Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van Uprising

The uprising led by Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van was highly exceptional due to its syncretism of multiple religions; beyond the traditional “Three Teachings from the Same Source” (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism), it also integrated Catholicism and the folk beliefs of the Kinh (Vietnamese) people in Phu Yen and Binh Dinh provinces. Another intriguing aspect is that Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van strategically utilized specific religious doctrines to attract followers, tailoring their methods to different target groups and regions across the provinces of Gia Lai and Dak Lak.

Under intense pursuit by the French colonialists, Vo Tru and several remnants of the Can Vuong movement fled to Dak Lak, where he sought refuge and practiced monasticism at a temple in the mountainous region of Dong Xuan. Cross-referencing historical data regarding Buddhist temples in Dak Lak suggests that he might have been a disciple at Phuoc Son Temple (Dong Xuan, Dak Lak). Founded in the inaugural year of Emperor Gia Long's reign (1802), the temple's founding patriarch was Zen Master Lieu Nang, a 35th-generation monk of the Lieu Quán branch within the Lam Te (Linji) Zen sect in Dak Lak. By the late 19th century, the Phu Yen region was home to approximately 20 Buddhist temples scattered across various prefectures and districts. Most of these temples belonged to the Lieu Quán branch of the Lam Te sect, while a few followed the Chuc Thanh branch, with the resident monks being disciples of Grand Master Lieu Quán (Nguyen Dinh Chuc, Hue Nguyen, 1999, p. 70). Although Vo Tru stayed and studied Buddhism at Phuoc Son Temple for about seven years, he did not focus on orthodox spiritual cultivation; instead, he concentrated on winning the hearts of the local populace through faith healing, astrology, and misfortune-dispelling rituals. Within that short timeframe, he successfully gathered a large following among both the indigenous highlanders (Nguoi Thuong) and the lowland Kinh people in the Dong Xuan and Son Hoa regions (Quach Tan, 2001, p. 493). This indicates that Vo Tru's monastic retreat at Phuoc Son Temple was merely a temporary tactical step to seek a path for anti-French resistance and to win public allegiance by leveraging the prestige of Buddhism in Phu Yen.

The year 1894 marked a pivotal turning point in Vo Tru's ideological transformation and his quest for an anti-French resistance strategy, brought about by his encounter with the monk of Da Bac Temple in Binh Dinh. In 1894, a severe epidemic struck the villages of Phu Cat, causing catastrophic suffering among the local population. Capitalizing on this crisis, a monk locally known as the monk of Hang Temple or Da Bac Temple arrived at a cave in Ba Mountain (Chanh Danh village) to prescribe medicine and heal the sick. According to records by Quach Tan in *Nuoc non Binh Dinh* (The Land and Water of Binh Dinh) and *Vo nhan Binh Dinh*, Dang Quy Dich in *Nhan vat Binh Dinh*, and more recently Dinh Van Lien in *Binh Dinh dat vo troi van*, the Da Bac monk was a native of Binh Dinh who had received his ordination under Master Xa Bang in Ninh Thuan. After mastering the Buddhist sutras, he returned to practice asceticism at Hang Temple (also known as Thien Sanh Thạch Tu) between 1886 and 1916, at which time he was approximately 70 years old. He practiced the strict ascetic Dhutanga (dau da) discipline; though his dharma name remains unknown, his daily routine involved eating only once at noon, subsisting on wild leaves, roots, and forest fruits.

The Anti-French Uprising Campaign by Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van in the Late 19th Century: From Nationalist and Religious Perspectives

The healing practices of the Da Bac monk carried a messianic religious significance, as he employed Buddhist doctrines to alleviate the suffering of the Chanh Danh villagers. His remedy consisted of a talisman printed with five images of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva (known as the Ngu cong Quan Am talisman). Patients only needed to return home, chant “May the Bodhisattva deliver us from suffering and disasters”, and then burn the talisman, mixing the ashes with freshwater to drink. While this treatment might have seemed unconventional, it successfully cured the ailments, prompting residents from neighboring regions to flock to Chanh Danh to request the Ngu cong Quan Am talismans. Around this time, Vo Tru arrived in Binh Dinh and became a disciple of the Da Bac monk, assisting him in distributing the talismans to the impoverished locals. Following the passing of the Da Bac monk, Vo Tru inherited the Ngu cong Quan Am seal and continued his mission of delivering sentient beings from suffering in epidemic-stricken areas. Vo Tru adopted his master’s path, blending Buddhist teachings with esoteric faith-healing practices to win public devotion as a prelude to an anti-French uprising. This event also signified Vo Tru’s official alignment with Buddhism, utilizing this banner to rally the people of Binh Dinh into an insurrection against French colonial rule.

However, the Buddhist banner coupled with talismanic faith healing failed to attract the intellectual class of Binh Dinh, appealing instead only to impoverished peasants with lower literacy levels. Furthermore, Binh Dinh was a renowned land of both martial arts and literature, serving as a gathering hub for prominent Confucian scholars of the era; consequently, Vo Tru’s superstitious and mystical doctrines lacked the intellectual weight necessary to persuade this segment to join the cause. Vo Tru himself was unequipped to meet such demands, as his adoption of Buddhism focused primarily on esoteric talismans for faith healing rather than the profound mastery of Buddhist scriptures as an enlightened disciple. This limitation became the exact catalyst that bound Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van together from their very first meeting, representing an ideological harmony where they compensated for each other’s deficiencies to build a grander movement. Prior to meeting Vo Tru, Tran Cao Van had already harbored anti-French ambitions under a religious banner, having once practiced at Co Lam Temple (in Quang Nam) under the dharma name Nhu Y. As noted by Hanh Son: “Tran Cao Van possessed many extraordinary qualities; he was highly intelligent, eager to learn, exceedingly gentle in temperament, yet fierce in resolve”. Indeed, he was profoundly learned in both Confucianism and Taoism, which allowed him to practice as a geomancer upon entering Binh Dinh.

The meeting between Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van embodied the synthesis of the Three Teachings (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism)—essential components that mutually reinforced their shared objective of mobilizing forces to expel the French colonialists. Armed with his expertise in feng shui and divination, Tran Cao Van traveled down to villages in Phu Cat, Phu My, and Binh Khe to organize the masses. Many Taoist adherents voluntarily aided him, the most active among them being Madame Nghia and the occult practitioner Du Di. Madame Nghia managed a hermitage in the forests of Thuan An (Binh Tan, Binh Khe) dedicated to the Supreme Old Lord (Thai Thuong Lao quan), where she performed fortune-telling and prescribed herbal medicine. According to an anecdote in Quach Tan’s *Vo nhan Binh Dinh* regarding the Confucian scholar Nguyen Mong But of Phu Phong (Binh Khe district) who inquired about state affairs, Madame Nghia asked him to open his palm and wrote the verse: “Giai y tri tanh, Nguong thien kien danh” (Undo the robe to know the lineage, look up to the sky to see the name). Scholar Mong But, together with other erudite Confucians, interpreted the riddle and ultimately deduced that the hidden sage was Tran Cao Van (Quach Tan, 2001, p. 497). This story illustrates the methods used by Tran Cao Van and Vo Tru to win public devotion; only Taoist knowledge possessed the sophistication required to win over the Confucian elite, while also demonstrating the deep influence of Taoism on the daily lives of Binh Dinh residents in the late 19th century.

Furthermore, Tran Cao Van capitalized on local folk beliefs in Binh Dinh. He visited shrines of spirit mediums and shamans (am ong Dong, ba Cot) to enlist them in propagating their anti-French resistance path. Those who frequented these shrines sought fortunes, destiny readings, or business prospects—aspirations unfulfilled in their daily lives, which led them to place absolute trust in the divine revelations delivered through mediums during trances. Tran Cao Van leveraged this psychological element, borrowing the words of the spirits to prophesy a future society that he and Vo Tru were working to establish.

The uprising of Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van also attracted a significant portion of Catholic followers, primarily located in Phu Yen. These individuals participated as insurgents in the Phu Yen uprising (1897–1900), meaning their role was strictly logistical and numerical. Moreover, Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van did not exploit Catholic doctrines to induce these followers to join the anti-French movement. Nevertheless, this remains an intriguing facet of the uprising, demonstrating a level of religious inclusivity aimed at unifying the peoples of both Binh Dinh and Phu Yen.

The strategic acumen of Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van was further demonstrated by their judicious application of religious elements tailored to specific regions. In Binh Dinh, they integrated elements of the “Three Teachings from the Same Source” (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism), aligning these doctrines with the preferences and literacy levels of the local populace without leaning heavily toward any single ideology. Conversely, in Phu Yen, they exhibited a stronger inclination toward Buddhism, utilizing the Buddhist banner continuously throughout the insurrection. Buddhism held a profound influence over the spiritual life of the Phu Yen populace. Because the Confucian scholar class in Phu Yen was scarce, the education of local disciples was predominantly conducted by Buddhist monks. This deep-rooted affection, combined with a gentle public temperament aligned with Buddhist tenets,

The Anti-French Uprising Campaign by Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van in the Late 19th Century: From Nationalist and Religious Perspectives

enabled Vo Tru to successfully rally various social strata in Phu Yen to join the cause. A popular proverb from the Southern vernacular states: “Tu Phat Phu Yen, tu tien Bay Nui” (Practice Buddhism in Phu Yen, practice Taoism/immortality in Bay Nui), which clearly underscores the flourishing state of Buddhism in Phu Yen, suggesting that those seeking true Buddhist cultivation should journey to Phu Yen, while those pursuing Taoist immortality should head to the Bay Nui (Seven Mountains) region in An Giang. It was precisely this pervasive spiritual influence of Buddhism that provided fertile ground for Vo Tru to galvanize the social classes of Phu Yen.

4.2. Ethnic and Social Stratum Fusion in the Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van Uprising

The uprising led by Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van succeeded in mobilizing a vast number of indigenous ethnic minorities, including the Ba Na, Cham, and Ede peoples in Dong Xuan and Son Hoa (Phu Yen province), as well as Van Canh and Binh Khe (Binh Dinh province). Beyond Vo Tru's persuasive eloquence and mystical practices, this widespread mobilization can be attributed to the enduring Tay Son legacy embedded within the collective memory of these indigenous communities. According to Quach Tan's *Vo nhan Binh Dinh*: “The majority of the Binh Dinh tribes, especially the highlanders of Tho Lo and Xa Dang, believed he was a descendant of King Thai Duc [Nguyen Nhac], and thus offered him their utmost reverence and loyalty” (Quach Tan, 2001, p. 496). The historical legacy of the three Tay Son brothers remained vividly preserved across the ethnic minority villages in Binh Dinh. These communities perceived Vo Tru as a direct descendant of King Thai Duc Nguyen Nhac, a historical figure venerated as a divine “Heavenly King”. Vo Tru embodied traits reminiscent of Nguyen Nhac—he was proficient in martial arts, skilled in esoteric rituals, and possessed an eloquent, sermonic charisma. These shared characteristics convinced the local populations of his royal lineage, compelling them to serve him with absolute devotion.

In Phu Yen, Vo Tru similarly employed esoteric rituals to gain the allegiance of the Ba Na, Cham, and Ede communities in Dong Xuan and Son Hoa. According to Dang Quy Dich, the ethnic minorities in Phu Yen referred to Vo Tru as Dua, which the author interpreted as Vua (King) (Dang Quy Dich, 1971, p. 137). However, in our view, this phonetic term is more likely a colloquial corruption of the word Giang (God/Spirit). Upon visiting the Cham, Ba Na, and Ede villages, Vo Tru demonstrated his supernatural feats before the village elders, thereby earning their veneration, leading them to revere him as Giang. For the Ba Na and Ede peoples, Giang represents supreme, sacred deities to whom they maintain unwavering loyalty and devotion.

The uprising also successfully consolidated numerous distinct social classes across Binh Dinh and Phu Yen. This inclusive dynamic was most vividly manifested during the *Sông Cầu* insurrection in 1900, where thousands of individuals from all walks of life—ranging from impoverished peasants to mandarin officials in Dong Xuan and Son Hoa, and from Buddhist adherents to Catholic devotees—united to support the military campaign. Wherever Vo Tru's forces marched, local villagers enthusiastically responded and enlisted, swelling the ranks to 6,000 insurgents at its peak. According to the rationale provided by Celeron de Blainville, the French Resident of Song Cau—which was later cited by Quach Tan—the majority of the inhabitants in Dong Xuan and Son Hoa were descendants of anti-French resistance fighters from Cochinchina (Southern Vietnam) who, refusing to submit to French colonial policies, had migrated northward to the South Central Coast provinces (Celeron de Blainville, political report of Song Cau, July 29, 1900).

This migratory resistance movement had intensified after 1874, following the Hue Court's formal recognition of French sovereignty over the three western provinces of Cochinchina. Many patriotic scholars and literati (*si phu van than*) opposed this capitulation policy and refused to cooperate with the French administration, initiating the *ti dia* (land-evading non-cooperation) movement by relocating to the South Central Coast, exemplified by figures like Ky Xuyen Nguyen Thong and Phan Van Tri in the Binh Thuan region. By 1881, with new decrees officially establishing Cochinchina as a French colony, more royalist scholars loyal to the Nguyen Dynasty abandoned their Southern homelands to move to Central Vietnam, which they still considered sovereign royal territory. Here, the Hue Court facilitated their resettlement and agricultural endeavors in these new territories, leading to the formation of numerous Southern-established villages in the South Central Coast, most notably Dong Chau in Phan Thiet (Huynh Van Tong, 1973, p. 34). Harboring deep-seated resentment toward the French colonialists, these settlers readily embraced the banner raised by Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van.

On the other hand, the implementation of French colonial administrative policies directly infringed upon the economic interests and socio-political status of several prominent landlords in Dong Xuan and Son Hoa. The colonial government showed little regard for these local elites, thereby engendering a “latent” and covert intellectual resistance among influential figures in these two regions (Celeron de Blainville, political report of Song Cau, July 29, 1900). Compounding this political friction, severe natural disasters struck Phu Yen in 1898 and 1899, leading to catastrophic crop failures and leaving the population unable to pay colonial taxes. Amidst these tribulations, the circulation of propaganda verses denouncing French atrocities served to inflame the anti-French sentiment among the masses. Vo Tru's propaganda verses remain deeply etched in the memories of the Phu Yen people:

“Since the two years of Tuat and Hoi, Houses stand empty, and fields lie desolate. To the forest we fear the tigers and wolves, To the river we fear the fish, to the village we fear ghosts. Out of ten parts, seven perish and three remain, When two more die and one is left, peace shall reign. Poised between the threshold of life and death, Arise, strike the French, to save ourselves and the people”.

The Anti-French Uprising Campaign by Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van in the Late 19th Century: From Nationalist and Religious Perspectives

Vo Tru also disseminated prophecies regarding political shifts to draw the populace to his cause. The most influential prophecy among the various social classes in Phu Yen and Binh Dinh was: “When the Saint arrives at Hon Vang Mountain, our people shall achieve complete freedom” (Celeron de Blainville, political report of Song Cau, July 29, 1900).

4.3. The State Model Under the Revolutionary Banner of Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van

To comprehend their political vision, one must first interpret the four-character Sino-Vietnamese phrase “Minh Trai Chu Te”, which carries multiple layers of meaning. In our view, the first hypothesis suggests that the phrase explicitly denoted Tran Cao Van and Vo Tru as the twin leaders of the 1900 anti-French uprising. This hypothesis is grounded in their respective aliases: Minh refers to Tran Cao Van, derived from his courtesy name Chanh Minh (Hanh Son, 1952, p. 53), while Trai may be a phonetic corruption of Vo Tru's name. This title served to signify their supreme leadership while simultaneously evading detection by French intelligence during the initial stages of the insurrection.

The second hypothesis posits that “Minh Trai Chu Te” referred exclusively to Vo Tru, who held the supreme title of Minh Trai during the 1900 uprising. Aggregating the semantic components of the phrase yields the definition of a monarch endowed with Buddhist virtues. Thus, the term served both as Vo Tru's leadership title and as an invocation of a righteous Buddhist king. This hypothesis is supported by records of the flag-consecration ceremony on May 14, 1900, during which the insurgents formally proclaimed Vo Tru as the Minh Trai Chu Te, Tran Cao Van as the Military Strategist (Quan su), Nguyen Khoe as the Grand General, and Huynh Cu as the Deputy General, alongside other functional appointments based on individual capabilities (Quach Tan, 2001, p. 508). Later historical records by Dang Quy Dich also explicitly refer to him as Minh Trai Chu Te Vo Tru (Dang Quy Dich, 1971, p. 138).

Consequently, the second hypothesis appears more plausible and reflects the core political ideology of the 1900 uprising. The governance model envisioned by Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van was a monarchy helmed by a sovereign embodying Buddhist principles. This was clearly demonstrated during the interrogation between French Resident Blainville and Vo Tru: “When questioned about the objective of his military campaign, Vo Tru resolutely replied that it was to overthrow the current regime and replace the reigning monarch with a new dynasty led by a holy king who possesses the supreme Buddhist virtues of Benevolence (Bi), Wisdom (Tri), and Fortitude (Dung)” (Celeron de Blainville, political report of Song Cau, July 29, 1900). The state model they aspired to establish was a Buddhist monarchy, where the sovereign guided by Bi, Tri, Dung would maintain a closer, more compassionate relationship with the populace.

4.4. The Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van Uprising in Relation to Other Religiously-Colored Anti-French Movements

Most historians concur that the emergence of religiously-colored anti-French movements in Vietnam during the late 19th century stemmed from the profound crisis within the traditional feudal ideology, which had lost its efficacy in rallying the nation for salvation. In Tonkin (Northern Vietnam), the movements of Ky Dong and Mac Dinh Phuc (1895–1897) spread rapidly across the provinces of Quang Ninh, Hai Duong, Hung Yen, Kien An, Thai Binh, and Nam Dinh. Similarly, the resistance led by Vuong Quoc Chinh (1895–1898), who was revered as a National Preceptor (Quoc su) and claimed lineage from the royal Ly Dynasty, traveled through various Buddhist temples in Nghe An to mobilize anti-French sentiment. In Cochinchina (Southern Vietnam), notable movements included the Bay Thua uprising (1867–1873) led by Tran Van Thanh in An Giang, the resistance of Ngo Loi, and various religiously-colored Secret Societies (Hoi Kin) that developed primarily across Eastern Cochinchina, consisting predominantly of peasant adherents.

During the late 19th century, these religiously-colored anti-French resistance movements erupted sporadically across all three regions of Vietnam. Despite diverse manifestations, they shared a common denominator: leveraging religious frameworks, amulets, and esoteric practices to mobilize the populace. A critical question arises as to whether there existed a concrete organizational connection among these movements, or if they represented a purely coincidental convergence brought about by the ideological crisis in national salvation during the late 19th century. This question directly informs our analysis of the Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van movement in Binh Dinh and Phu Yen. Specifically, we investigate whether there was a shared nationwide doctrine for religiously-colored anti-French resistance, and whether Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van's movement intersected with contemporary movements elsewhere in Vietnam. In our view, the most crucial historical pivot occurred in 1894 when Vo Tru met the monk of Da Bac Temple, inheriting this monk's strategic framework of combining national salvation with Buddhist principles. To date, aside from Quach Tan's Nuoc non Binh Dinh and Dinh Van Lien's Binh Dinh dat vo troi van, no existing historical works have shed light on the personal history of the Da Bac monk. Due to the scarcity of archival data regarding his background and his religious education under Master Xa Bang in Ninh Thuan, determining whether the Da Bac monk maintained direct or indirect connections with Southern anti-French movements remains a challenging academic question that warrants further historical research.

The Anti-French Uprising Campaign by Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van in the Late 19th Century: From Nationalist and Religious Perspectives

5. CONCLUSION

The uprising led by Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van was a prominent inter-regional movement that succeeded the Can Vuong movement across the South Central Coast and Central Highlands provinces during the twilight years of the 19th century. This exceptional insurrection demonstrated a profound syncretism of diverse elements—including nationalism, religion, and folk beliefs—and successfully mobilized a vast numbers of social classes across Binh Dinh and Phu Yen (extending into present-day Gia Lai and Dak Lak provinces). Furthermore, the uprising highlighted the exemplary leadership of Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van in force mobilization, underscored by their meticulous understanding of the localized cultural characteristics within Binh Dinh and Phu Yen. Through this movement, the cultural practices, human temperaments, and historical context of these two regions during the late 19th century were vividly illuminated.

Erupting at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van uprising was not merely a politico-military campaign against French colonialism, but also a highly unique historical and cultural phenomenon within the South Central Coast and Central Highlands. Viewed from an interdisciplinary perspective, the movement's initial success in popular mobilization and its enduring resilience offer profound theoretical and practical insights into the art of organizational leadership grounded in nationalistic and religious harmony.

Regarding its religious dimension, the uprising vividly reflected the spiritual life, popular psyche, and human character of Binh Dinh and Phu Yen within a highly volatile historical context. As the orthodox feudal ideology of the Nguyen court collapsed into a crisis and lost its capacity to rally the nation, the leaders astutely sought refuge under a spiritual banner, utilizing it as an effective medium for folk political communication. By seamlessly weaving the “Three Teachings from the Same Source” (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism) and Catholicism alongside indigenous beliefs (such as amulets, prophecies, and spirit mediums), Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van forged an accessible, common vernacular. This approach struck a chord with the subaltern populace’s yearning for salvation amidst catastrophic natural disasters, epidemics, and the oppressive, arbitrary taxation imposed by French colonial rule. The banner of “Minh Trai Chu Te” and the vision of a “Buddhist Monarchy” grounded in the supreme virtues of Benevolence (Bi), Wisdom (Tri), and Fortitude (Dung) represented the zenith of this ideological fusion, aspiring toward a compassionate society dedicated to the welfare of the masses.

Regarding its nationalistic and social dimension, the uprising stood as a benchmark for the capacity to forge cross-regional and inter-class solidarity. Both leaders demonstrated outstanding acumen in thoroughly understanding ethno-cultural nuances to ignite patriotic fervor. By leveraging the collective memory of the Tay Son dynasty alongside the sacred spiritual symbol of Giang (God), they established an unbreakable bond between the lowland Kinh people and mountain ethnic minorities (such as the Ba Na, Cham, and Ede). Beyond this, the movement successfully integrated a resistant network of Southern *ti dia* (land-evading) refugees with local landlords and mandarins who were deeply disaffected by the colonial regime. This widespread consensus dissolved boundaries of ethnicity and social hierarchy, generating an expansive resistance force numbering in the thousands that enveloped territories stretching from the fertile plains to the perilous mountain villages.

In summary, although it ultimately shared the tragic fate of failure common to its era due to historical limitations in armaments and the absence of a vanguard leadership class, the Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van uprising retains a distinctive position within the current of national history. The movement served as a vital historical nexus, embodying an ideological convergence with other religiously-colored messianic resistance movements in late-19th-century Vietnam. The lessons garnered from this uprising—namely, respecting regional cultural specificities, awakening historical consciousness, utilizing spiritual symbols to consolidate public devotion, and unifying the Kinh and highland peoples—remain scientifically invaluable today when examining the endogenous strength of national solidarity.

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The Anti-French Uprising Campaign by Vo Tru and Tran Cao Van in the Late 19th Century: From Nationalist and Religious Perspectives

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