

Huỳnh Phú Sổ

Huỳnh Phú Sổ (Vietnamese: [h^wìn fũ sô]; January 15, 1920 – April 16, 1947), popularly known as **Đức Thầy** (lit. "Virtuous Master") or **Đức Huỳnh Giáo Chủ** (lit. Virtuous [Sect] Founder Huynh), was the founder of the Hòa Hảo religious tradition.

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Early years

Born in the village of Hòa Hảo, near Châu Đốc, Vietnam, French Indochina, in 1920, Sổ was the son of a moderately wealthy peasant. Plagued in his youth by illness, he was a mediocre student and graduated from high school only because of his father's influence. He was a brave child, so his father sent him to Núi Cấm in the Seven Mountains to learn from a hermit who was both a mystic and a healer. After some training, Sổ made his mark during a stormy night in May 1939, having returned to his village after his master's death.^[1] While in an agitated state, Sổ appeared to have suddenly been cured of his illnesses^[2] and started to propound his religious teachings, which were based on Buddhism, on the spot. According to observers, he spoke for several hours spontaneously *"with eloquence and erudition about the sublime dogmas of Buddhism ... The witnesses to this miracle, deeply impressed by the strange scene, became his first onverts.*^[1]

His simplified teachings were designed to appeal primarily to the poor and the peasants. He attempted to win supporters by cutting down on ceremonies and complex doctrines, eschewing the use of temples. He won over followers by offering free consultations and performing purported miracle cures with simple herbs and acupuncture, and preaching at street corners and canal intersections.^[1] He quickly built up a following in the southern Mekong Delta and was looked to by his disciples for guidance in their daily lifestyles. In a time of colonial occupation, a native religion appealed to the masses who were displaying nationalist sentiment. Unlike Gautama Buddha or Jesus, Sổ was Vietnamese. As a result, Sổ became a nationalist icon and became a wanted man for the French colonial authorities, having gained 100,000 followers in less than a yearHe predicted that politics would be the cause of his premature death.^[3]

The cult must stem much more from internal faith than from a pompous appearance. It is better to pray with a pure heart before the family altar than to perform gaudy ceremonies in a pagoda, clad in the robes of an unworthy**bonze**.^[1]

Huỳnh Phú Sổ



A digitally remastered photo of Huỳnh Phú Sổ.

Born	January 15, 1920 An Giang, Cochinchina
Died	April 16, 1947 (aged 27) Long Xuyên, Cochinchina
Other names	"Đức Thầy" (lit. "Virtuous Master") "Đức Huỳnh Giáo Chủ" (lit. Virtuous Founder [of our sect] Huynh)
Known for	Founding of Hòa Hảo

Proselytising and imprisonment

In early 1940, after a few weeks in retreat to compose and put on paper oracles, prayers and teachings, Số launched a major campaign through the Mekong Delta. He recruited tens of thousands of converts to his movement, many of whom followed him around in his travels. His reputation grew immensely after a series of his predictions came true: the outbreak of World War II, the fall of France to Nazi Germany, and the Japanese invasion of French Indochina. His prediction of a Japanese invasion prompted many rice farmers to desert their farms *en masse* and flee to the hills. The French derided him as the "mad bonze". As his movement became politicised, it began to attract aspiring politicians, with the likes of Le Cong Bo, a prominent landowner, and its future military commanders, Trần Văn Soái and Lâm Thành Nguyên. Nguyen claimed that Số had cured him from illness.^[3]

Fearing anti-French demonstrations and revolts would occur as a result of Số's following, Vichy French governor Jean Decoux decided to act. In August, he was detained in the psychiatric hospital at Chợ Quán hospital near Saigon under the reasoning that he was a lunatic. Số famously succeeded in converting his psychiatrist, Dr. Tam, who became an ardent supporter (Tam was later executed by the Việt Minh for his activities). A board of French psychiatrists declared him sane in May 1941, reporting that he was "a little maniacal, very ignorant even in Buddhist practices, but a big talker."^[3] He was exiled upon his release to the coastal town of Bạc Liêu in the far south. His key supporters were sent to a concentration camp in Nui Bara. The French restrictions strengthened his nationalist appeal, and Bạc Liêu soon became a place of Hòa Hảo pilgrimage, although it was far from the movement's strongholds.^[3]

In 1942, the French could no longer withstand the growing popular reactions generated by Số's oracular pronouncements and political instructions. They exiled him to Laos. By that time the Japanese had taken over French Indochina, but had left the French apparatus in place, intervening only when they saw fit. The Japanese intercepted the transfer of Số with the help of some Hòa Hảo followers and brought him back to Saigon. The Kempeitai kept him under protection and the Japanese authorities rebuffed French protests and demands for extradition by saying that he was held as a "Chinese spy".^[4] He avoided accusations of being a Japanese collaborator by predicting their demise, but his contacts with them allowed his supporters to gain weapons.^[5]

Military campaign

In 1945, as the Japanese were defeated and Vietnam fell into a power vacuum, Số ordered the creation of armed units for campaigns against the local administration, landowners and French colonial forces. This led to the Hòa Hảo becoming less of a religious and more of a military-political movement, as people such as landowners converted in the hope that they could buy protection.^[6]

As the Hòa Hảo began battling the French, they also came into conflict with other military organizations such as the Việt Minh and Cao Đài who were also fighting the French. The Hòa Hảo were in control of most of the Mekong Delta and was unwilling to toe the Việt Minh line from Hanoi. On 9 September 1945, a confrontation arose when a band of 15,000 Hòa Hảo, armed with hand-to-hand weapons, attacked the Việt Minh garrison at Cần Thơ. With their antiquated weapons, Số's men were slaughtered, losing thousands. Số's brother and the brother of his commander Soái were captured and executed. The return of French forces helped to keep the Hòa Hảo and the Việt Minh apart, but the Hòa Hảo periodically sought vengeance on the Việt Minh by tying sympathisers together and throwing them into the river to drown. The Việt Minh were worried by Số's nationalist credentials and social structure, and attempted to co-opt him into a National Unified Front. It was dissolved in July 1946 after it was apparent that Số would not follow the Việt Minh. Số entered politics openly by creating the Viet Nam Democratic Socialist Party, known as the ***Dân Xã***. This defiant move made him a target of the Việt Minh as relations deteriorated.^[5]

Disappearance/Death

The southern Việt Minh leader, Nguyễn Bình, realising that Số would not subordinate himself to the Việt Minh, set up a trap. Số was caught and executed. His body was dissected into many small pieces and scattered so that his followers could not gather them and turn it into an object of veneration or as a shrine.^[7]

The story of his death:

On April 16, 1947, the Việt Minh invited Số to Tân Phú, Đồng Tháp Mười to reconcile the conflict between the Việt Minh and Hoà Hảo Buddhism. Following their master, two disciples rowing Số and four bodyguards led by Mười Tỷ to start from Ba-răng from 6

pm. When the boat hit Tân Phú wharf 2 hours later, there was a militia squad of Bửu Vinh welcome them. In front of Tân Phú wharf is a brick house for communication, in the house lit a kerosene lamp. Bửu Vinh is also present at Tân Phú wharf to welcome SỔ. From the boat step up, Bửu Vinh pays SỔ's greeting and invited the Master to go directly to the brick house in front. Four guards guarding the Master immediately follow their master. 4 bodyguards approached the Master, 8 cadres of Việt Minh follow them. As they planned, Bửu Vinh "accompanies" the Master while the Việt Minh escorted SỔ's bodyguards with one holding their necks and the other pulling their knives to kill them. Their action made Mùròi Tỷ, who is a well-trained martial arts guard and the survivor only in this ambush, must beware, when Tỷ saw the Việt Minh officer tried to hug him for the other stabs him, Tỷ dodges behind him in time. So that, the guy tried to hug Mùròi Tỷ was stabbed by his own ally, shouted a tragic voice only. Mùròi Tỷ ran to the wharf, while running he looked back at the house, he saw the Master approached to blow off the kerosene lamp, which made the house become dark, SỔ was disappeared. Mùròi Tỷ quickly avoided the attack from Việt Minh and fired back. However, due to his gun ran out of bullets, Tỷ tried his best to ran back to Ba-răng to inform Hoà Hảo followers of the bad news that their Master had been harmed by the Viet Minh and three bodyguards were killed. Everyone was choked with tears when they heard that the Master was harmed. The leaders of Dân Xã all lead their army to Tân Phú, decided to have a life-and-death with Bửu Vinh to save SỔ, then a letter of the Master was sent to them, the following text:

"Trần Văn Soái and Nguyễn Giác Ngộ,

I had a meeting with Mr Bửu glory. Suddenly something happened, me and Mr Vinh nearly died, unknown cause investigated; In the defense brothers, if someone doesn't die or escape and return to report that I was captured or murdered, do not believe and do not disturb.

Forbidding only rumors, forbidden to pull troops to rescue, please place military medical on-site.

In the morning I will thoroughly investigate with MrBửu Vinh then later.

Must strictly ad here to

April 16th-17th; 9:15 pm

Signed: SỔ"

Reading the letter of SỔ made everyone is shocked because this is the real characters and signature of their master. Even though SỔ sent his letter, the Hoà Hảo disciples can't feel secure when listening to Mùròi Tỷ, the only survivor escaped from the ambush and reported that Bửu Vinh had harmed the Master. His disciples and the Dân Xã still wait for his news and even send scout to search for SỔ. They plan to disguise to come to Tân Phú to see how the situation is and if the Việt Minh team is also there. Other way, the army is also ready to listen to the Master's message, if he was kidnapped, they will come to rescue him immediately. That afternoon, the scout back and say, he has come to the house, Bửu Vinh and the Việt Minh have all gone. There is no one left. The home used to contact with the Master to the conference have many bullet holes shot on the walls. There, on the walls, blood splashing proves that there has just been a war. Since the day of April 16, 1947, no one knows for sure where is the Master but they believe that SỔ can't be killed easy because Việt Minh tried to assassinate him much times but he overcame a very strange way. 3 days later, the Việt Minh spread the rumor that they have killing SỔ and cutting off his body into three drops before throwing in the river. They thought that was a terror news for the believer's spirit, reducing the faith of the followers of the Master. But they were wrong: Nothing can change their faith with SỔ and the news Việt Minh killed their master only makes they more and more hate Việt Minh.

Following his death, the Hòa Hảo's political and military power diminished as the various commanders began infighting without a centralised leadership structure and without a leader ; it became basically a network of war lords, the most famous being Trần Văn Soái, named a "one-star General" by the French (a rank which does not exist in the French Army, so Văn Soái added a second one on his képi), and Ba Cut. To avenge the murder of So, the Hòa Hảo joined the French in their fight against the Vietminh, with numerous betrayals and re-rallyings (5 by Ba Cut, who was eventually guillotined). The religion continues to grow over decades after 1975 and now has been recognized as one of Vietnam's major religions. In 1999, after the many long years of appeals by loyal and faithful followers, the Central Communist Government only permitted the Hòa Hảo to celebrate a few of their religious holidays under closely watched monitoring.

However, there were still some sources said that SỔ was still alive, he was captured by Việt Minh only but he escaped from them in October 1955.^[1]

References

1. Fall, pp. 151–52
2. Huỳnh Phú Sổ profile (<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9041661/Huynh-Phu-So>) *Encyclopædia Britannica*
3. Buttinger, pp. 255–57.
4. Buttinger, p. 259.
5. Fall, pp. 151–53.
6. Buttinger, p. 260.
7. Buttinger, pp. 409–11.

Sources

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 - Fall, Bernard (1963). *The Two Viet-Nams*. New York: Praeger Publishers.
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