

The Buddhist Exchange Between China and Vietnam in the Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasties: Focusing on Shilian Dashan's Works

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Abstract

Hai Wai Ji Shi (Overseas Stories) records the history of Shilian Dashan being invited to visit Vietnam and his experience there. It reflects the social development of Vietnam from one aspect. Dashan claimed to be the heir of Master Juelang. However, his trace was secret, and he was closely related to the feudal king Shang Zhixin. Therefore, many people slandered it. Dashan had a tragic fate, and his writings were quite controversial. Soon after the book's publication (1699), some people accused him of "hurting the country and Buddhism". Finally, he was exiled and died on the road. However, his book made a relatively objective review of the development of Buddhism in Vietnam. According to the records, "all the common people there are all soldiers". To escape military service, people sent children to Buddhism to be monks. So, there were too many monks, but Buddhism declined. Therefore, he tried to give ordination to a large number of Vietnamese Buddhists, by doing so, he wanted to revitalize Buddhism. According to the existing literature on him, it's difficult to tell whether his visit is to "chase fame and wealth" or "promote Buddhism". Judging from his account, like Chinese Buddhism at that time, Vietnamese Buddhism also fell into a trough. There are two reasons for this phenomenon: one is that Chinese Buddhism has developed to a limit and there was no developing room; the other is that the political confrontation has caused a great impact on the development of Buddhism.

Keywords: *Hai Wai Ji Shi (Overseas Stories)*, Shilian Dashan, Vietnamese Buddhism

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Introduction

In ancient China, there were extremely close connections between Vietnam and the Chinese dynasties. Vietnam's Confucian and Buddhist cultures mainly originated from China. Even after Vietnam became an independent kingdom, its relationship with the Chinese dynasties did not cease. Throughout various dynasties, there were cultural envoys traveling between China and Vietnam. During the Ming and Qing periods, Shilian Dashan was a representative figure. As a monk, his interactions with both Vietnamese officials and the public had both the nature of "spreading Buddhism" and a strong secular aspect. Upon returning to his homeland, Dashan published his collection of writings, *Overseas Stories*. Due to defamation, this work brought him fatal consequences. This article does not intend to discuss the virtues or vices of Dashan himself but aims to explore the general situation of the development of Buddhism in Vietnam at that time through *Overseas Stories*. It also seeks to briefly discuss the interaction between Chinese and Vietnamese Buddhism and the "secularization" tendency of Mahayana Buddhism in its later development.

About Shilian Dashan

Shilian Dashan (1633–1705) was a famous monk, poet, and painter in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. He was possibly born near the Yangtze River. Coming from a poor family, he worked as an apprentice to the Suzhou painter Shen Hao (1586-n.d.) in his youth. Later, he converted to Buddhism under a Zen master named Daolang Juesheng and became a formal monk. During the Kangxi era, Dashan moved to the Guangdong region, where he interacted with local literati and received support from an assistant of Shang Kexi. He promoted Buddhism in temples such as Dafosi and Changshousi. In 1695, he was invited by the Nguyen in Vietnam for a visit, which brought him fame and fortune. However, his later years were tragic. Due to a conflict with Pan Lei, he was exposed, imprisoned, and died while being exiled shortly after.

Dashan's life was full of ups and downs, and his actions were eccentric. During the Kangxi era, he was widely discussed. After his passing, Qing dynasty scholars such as Shen Deqian and Mi Quansun provided commentary on him. Mi Quansun was even praised by Mr. Jiang Boqin as "the first scholar to establish an academic biography for Shilian." During the Republican era, Mr. Chen Yuan paid great attention to Dashan and related figures in his works, "restoring Dashan's rightful place in the early Qing Dynasty Zen history" (Jiang Boqin). In the latter half of the 20th century, Mr. Deng Zhicheng researched Dashan's later life, with Mr. Jiang Boqin commenting that "his evaluation of Dashan is very fair and appropriate." Mr. Rao Zongyi made a "special contribution" to the study of Dashan, affirming his achievements in literature and art, and considering Dashan's account of his trip to Vietnam in the *Overseas Stories* as a work worthy of study.

The trip of Shilian has long been a subject of interest in the academic circles of exchanges between China and foreign countries, but there seems to have been no substantial breakthrough for a long time. In 2018, Mr. Ye Shaofei wrote an article discussing this topic. After analyzing relevant historical materials, he pointed out that Shilian's activities "challenged the tribute system of the Qing Dynasty and influenced the Qing Dynasty's policies towards the Southeast Asian region, ultimately leading to the tragedy in his later

years”.¹ This study not only reexamined Shilian’s trip but also provided a new interpretation of the tragic outcome of his later years.

Foreign scholars' attention to Dashan mainly focuses on his trip to Vietnam. American scholar Liam Kelly, in his master's thesis, analyzed Dashan's descriptions of Vietnamese history, religion, and culture. Vietnamese scholars are more concerned with Dashan's influence on the development of Buddhism in Vietnam. However, they also recognize that Dashan is a "special monk": "Shilian is first and foremost an artist"; "Due to his reputation, his frankness and honesty, many people strongly hate him and become his enemies"; "Shilian's academic thoughts are nothing particularly profound."

This article focuses on the reflection of the Sino-Vietnamese Buddhist relationship by Dashan in *Overseas Stories*. Therefore, we cannot ignore the various controversies surrounding Dashan. I agree with Ye Shaofei's analysis in his paper: the tragedy of Master Dashan's later years is almost entirely caused by this manuscript.² However, considering the complexity of this figure, this article intends to briefly emphasize another reason for the tragedy of Dashan before introducing *Overseas Stories*, that is, his entanglement with Pan Lei. I believe that the unfortunate late years and tragic ending of Master Dashan were largely sparked by the publication of *Overseas Stories*; however, from a different perspective, this was also largely caused by Pan Lei. Pan Lei once wrote a book, collecting over twenty "crimes" of Dashan. In general, some of these "crimes" are one-sided accounts by Pan Lei, while others are based on secular prejudices at the time. From a contemporary standpoint, most of these accusations are difficult to substantiate. Wu Chao tends to affirm Pan Lei's account and belittle Dashan, a viewpoint with which I cannot agree.³ I believe the conflict between Pan Lei and Dashan is quite complex, but to a large extent, it is due to the "conflict of personalities" between the two. Wu Chao emphasizes: "Accusers believe that Dashan lacks true talent and learning, is cunning and good at amassing wealth, all of which are shameful aspects of Dashan".⁴ However, I believe these aspects precisely reflect the "secularization" of Buddhism in the Ming and Qing dynasties. From the perspective of historical trends, this is also where the vitality of "popular religion" lies. From this perspective, today's researchers do not need to excessively belittle Dashan; instead, we should strive to explore the characteristics of "Lingnan Zen Buddhism" manifested by Master Dashan. Moreover, he has left behind a "great work" that cannot be bypassed in the history of Sino-Vietnamese cultural exchange - *Overseas Stories*.

About *Overseas Stories*

In 1695, Dashan received an invitation from Nguyen Phuc Chau of Vietnam to spread Buddhism in Vietnam. This overseas journey brought both fame and fortune to Dashan. After returning to his country, he published a book called *Overseas Stories*, which documented the reasons for and consequences of his trip to Vietnam, his experiences along the way, as well as his personal poems and writings. Unexpectedly, the publication of this book became a turning point in his destiny.

¹ Ye, S. (2018). Dashan’s *Hai Wai Ji Shi* and the Request for the Title of “Dai Viet”. *Journal of Maritime History Studies*, 1(1), 53–67.

² *Ibid.*

³ Wu, C. (2010). Discussions of the Contact between Qu Dajun, Pan Lei and Shilian. *Eastern Forum*, 3(3), 100–105.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Overseas Stories was first published in 1699. After its publication, it came under attack by Pan Lei. There is currently no consensus in the academic community regarding Pan Lei's motives for accusing Dashan.⁵ Perhaps due to certain personal grievances, Pan Lei's accusations against Dashan were very intense. After reading *Overseas Stories*, Pan Lei commented that the book "contains mostly falsehoods, with only a bit of truth, and many errors. It brings shame to the country's dignity in secular society and hinders the development of Buddhism in religious terms. It may have negative social impacts in the near future and lead to karmic retribution in the long term".⁶ Pan Lei also wrote to Dashan, advising him to "destroy your work, go into hiding, and repent for your past mistakes".⁷ Dashan did not respond positively. As a result, Pan Lei "spread his writings everywhere," claiming that Dashan engaged in various "illegal" activities overseas.⁸ Among these, the most serious accusation may have been Dashan's "collusion with foreigners." In his writings, Pan Lei stated, "His most illegal behavior is colluding with foreigners. Although there are no longer restrictions on foreign exchanges, trade should be the domain of merchants. A monk interacting with foreigners is not appropriate. Shilian had dealings with foreigners, often passing on prohibited items to them for hefty profits. Those who heard about these incidents were shocked... The legal history prohibits the buying and selling of people, yet he purchased individuals to train as opera performers and then sold them off...".⁹ From Pan Lei's account, it appears that Dashan's "illegal activities" were not simply "colluding with foreigners," but rather, colluding with foreigners in the guise of a monk; apart from seeking high profits, some of Dashan's actions also involved suspected "human trafficking." However, Pan Lei himself admitted that the information he received was only based on hearsay and eyewitness accounts, so we cannot conclusively determine that these were ironclad evidence of Dashan's "illicit interactions with foreigners." Nevertheless, due to Pan Lei's accusations, Dashan was arrested and imprisoned. At that time, the feudal lord Dashan had originally aligned with had declined in power, and his former friends had turned against him, leading to his isolation and eventual exile. Unfortunately, Dashan passed away halfway through his exile due to illness.

Dashan is a very complex figure. He is a Zen monk, but at the same time, he is almost a "versatile talent" in the literary world. He excels in poetry and prose, is passionate about opera and painting, and even designs furniture and gardens. Dashan grew up near Yangtze River, where he began learning these skills from a young age. It is well known that in ancient Chinese society, traditional literati often viewed being an "apprentice in the art world" as a lowly background, and an obsession with opera was not necessarily in line with Confucian ideals. Perhaps for these reasons, Pan Lei and others suspected his identity as a "successor to a Buddhist master" and wrote extensively about the legend of his "human trafficking." There are also rumors that in his youth, Dashan had a homosexual relationship with his painting teacher.¹⁰ I speculate that these various factors may be some of the deeper reasons why certain mainstream figures in the intellectual community disliked Dashan.

Dashan excels in poetry and painting, but undoubtedly, his most important work left to posterity is *Overseas Stories*. This book mainly consists of two parts: one part is his

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Dashan, (2000). *Hai Wai Ji Shi*. Beijing:Zhonghua Book Company, p.3.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Shao,Y. (2012). Exploring Homosexual Themes in Ming and Qing Dynasty Paintings. *Art Research*,4(4), 47-58.

understanding of the development of Buddhism in China and Vietnam; the other part is his account of maritime transportation.

In Vietnam at that time, there were two powerful political powers in a state of confrontation: the Trinh and the Nguyen. Due to frequent wars between the two political powers, the areas under the rule of the Nguyen basically achieved "comprehensive militarized management". In his writings, Dashan described the "universal conscription" status he witnessed: "After inquiring, I learned that people in various professions in the country are also soldiers. In February and March every year, soldiers go to the countryside to recruit physically fit individuals aged 16 and above as soldiers... If farmers are willing to join the army, they will be assigned to learn a skill. After successful learning, superiors will assign them warships for training. If there are military activities, they will arm themselves and go to the battlefield Before the age of sixty, they are not allowed to return to their hometowns or see their relatives".¹¹ It can be seen that the people under the rule of the Nguyen bore a great deal of pressure. In addition, Dashan also described in *Overseas Stories*: the life of Chinese immigrants, transportation routes between China and Vietnam, maritime skills of Vietnamese residents, folk customs in central Vietnam, and so on. However, these are not the focus of this article. The following text will focus on the development of Buddhism in Vietnam as recorded in *Overseas Stories*.

The Historical Origins of Buddhism in Vietnam

Buddhism is one of the world's three major religions, originating in ancient India and spreading outward from the time of Emperor Ashoka. In terms of transmission routes, Buddhism can be divided into three branches: Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Vajrayana Buddhism. Among them, Theravada Buddhism was once derogatorily referred to as "Hinayana Buddhism" by the later Mahayana thought trend.

From a geographical perspective, Vietnam is located in Southeast Asia. However, unlike neighboring countries, Vietnamese Buddhism does not belong to Theravada Buddhism but rather to the Mahayana Buddhist system. This is determined by the historical ties between China and Vietnam: as is well known, Vietnam has maintained close ties with Chinese dynasties throughout history, and Vietnamese culture has been strongly influenced by Chinese culture. Vietnamese Buddhism has also been transmitted from the Chinese region. Therefore, although Vietnam is part of Southeast Asia, the development of Vietnamese Buddhism follows a trajectory similar to that of Mahayana Buddhism. Dasha had the opportunity to be invited by Nguyen Phuc Chau to propagate Buddhism in Vietnam due to this background.

According to the mainstream belief in the Buddhist community, Buddhism entered the Central China in the year 2 BC. As for Buddhism in Vietnam, there are records stating that during the Eastern Han Dynasty, a man named Mou Rong (?—79) sought refuge in Jiaozhi, which led to the introduction of Buddhism into Vietnam. However, there is still no consensus among Buddhist historians regarding the relationship between Mou Rong and Buddhism. What can be confirmed is that based on records in Chinese historical texts, many "foreign monks" had been traveling through Vietnam to the Central Plains since the 3rd century AD. There were also instances of Chinese monks seeking refuge or spreading Buddhism in

¹¹ Dashan, (2000). *Hai Wai Ji Shi*. Beijing:Zhonghua Book Company, p.3.

Vietnam. Therefore, it can be seen that Vietnamese culture was influenced by Chinese Buddhism as early as the 3rd century AD.

Zen Buddhism may have the deepest connection with Vietnamese Buddhism. According to records, a disciple of the Zen master Sengcan once established a sect in northern Vietnam, which can be considered as a branch of Chinese Zen Buddhism in Vietnam. This sect was popular in Vietnam for a long time, from 580 AD to 1216 AD. Around the year 820 AD, a disciple of the Zen master Baizhang Huaihai established another Buddhist sect in Vietnam, which lasted in Vietnam until the 13th century.¹²

From the 10th century onwards, Vietnam went through several dynasties. During this period, Buddhism held a high social status in Vietnam and even served as the state religion for a significant part of its history. Although Buddhism in Vietnam experienced rapid development during this period, its ideological resources mainly came from the Zen school. Many sects of Vietnamese Buddhism leaned towards the Southern Chan school in terms of theoretical style and had very close ties with Chinese Zen Buddhism. From 1428 to 1527, Buddhism in Vietnam faced severe suppression. Against this backdrop, when Dashan arrived in Vietnam in 1695, the country was in turmoil politically, with the Trinh and Nguyen factions in a north-south confrontation. The cultural landscape was also in decline - Buddhism had been severely damaged, and Confucian ethics had been seriously undermined. Due to these circumstances, in the eyes of Dashan, the Buddhist world of the Nguyen Kingdom was in chaos, and the cultural literacy of the people was generally low.

The Impact of the Nguyen's High-Pressure Regime on the Development of Buddhism

Shortly after Dashan arrived in Vietnam, he observed a special phenomenon, that is, the highly militarized nature of the Nguyen's regime. As mentioned earlier, Dashan's observations revealed that every year soldiers would go to the villages and forcibly recruit able-bodied individuals into the military. Yu Sili, the compiler of *Overseas Stories* emphasized, "it can be seen that the 17th-century Vietnamese Hue regime was like a large military camp."¹³ Obviously, the Nguyen's ruthless exploitation and oppression of the people were aimed at ensuring the strength of its military power, without which it would not be able to contend with the northern regimes. However, this policy that excessively emphasizes "military force" has caused severe damage to "culture", hindering not only the development of Buddhism but also affecting various aspects of culture, education, and more.

When it comes to Buddhism, the most direct consequence of militarized management is that it forces people to use the way of taking refuge in Buddhism to evade military service, leading to a decline in the quality of personnel within the Buddhist community. On the surface, Buddhism thrived under the rule of the Nguyen Dynasty, but upon closer inspection, its essence had become very corrupt. Dashan commented, "Parents fear their children being conscripted into the military, so they send them to become monks at a very young age to avoid military service. As a result, there are many monks, but their theoretical literacy is very poor."¹⁴ Consequently, Vietnamese Buddhism not only fails to develop healthily but also its social reputation will inevitably deteriorate. Clearly, the main reason lies in the high-pressure approach of the Nguyen's regime in its management.

¹² Huang, X. (1988). *The World's Top Ten Religions*. Beijing: Oriental Publishing House, p. 155.

¹³ Dashan, (2000). *Hai Wai Ji Shi*. Beijing:Zhonghua Book Company, p.7.

¹⁴ Dashan, (2000). *Hai Wai Ji Shi*. Beijing:Zhonghua Book Company, p.16.

The policy forces people to use religion to evade military service, leading to the decline of Buddhism. This is not a unique phenomenon in Vietnamese history. It is understandable that people seek refuge in temples for survival, which is human nature. For the rulers of the Nguyen, they may have been somewhat aware of this situation, but it was difficult for them to find a balance between "culture" and "military power" in the context of the North-South confrontation at that time. As a guest, Dashan may have felt it inappropriate to comment further. This created a very awkward situation: on one hand, the Nguyen hoped to use Buddhism to maintain social stability, even at the cost of inviting Chinese monks to Vietnam to support Buddhism; on the other hand, the more they "struggled" to govern, the more Buddhism deteriorated, and society became more chaotic. This dilemma was fundamentally caused by the North-South confrontation and was not something that individuals could easily change. Therefore, although Dashan was aware of this issue, he did not express his opinions at a macro level but only provided his views and suggestions to the Nguyen regarding certain micro-level phenomena.

Dashan's Three Suggestions

Dashan wrote a long article, presenting his three views. Yu Sili believes, Dashan only understands some superficial knowledge of Buddhism and does not have much learning. What he propagates in Vietnam is the theory of the unity of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. However, from Dashan's expression, his criticism of Vietnamese Buddhism is still quite sharp, and his theory is not simply "the unity of the three teachings."

Firstly, Dashan emphasized the seriousness and importance of Buddhist precepts. In his writing, he said, "The Buddha established precepts, just like Confucius proposed 'rituals'... Our Buddha, considering the deep-rooted desires and emotions of humans, which are difficult to break free from, thus established precepts."¹⁵ The Buddhist precepts and the Confucian pursuit of "rituals" are certainly not the same. Here, Dashan juxtaposes the two, in fact, continuing the tradition of Chinese Buddhism, that is, using a familiar language to interpret foreign cultures, which is quite suitable for the Nguyen in Vietnam.

Furthermore, Dashan pointed out that there are some monks in Vietnam who do not value precepts, and this attitude "harms both Buddhism and believers".¹⁶ "There are some fake monks who do not follow the proper procedures to arrange religious ceremonies for believers. Regardless of who the other party is, as long as they give money, they will be recognized as official Buddhists."¹⁷ In other words, Dashan discovered the phenomenon of "buying and selling Buddhist identity documents" in Vietnam at that time, making religious ceremonies more like joke. Undoubtedly, this is a great blasphemy against the sanctity of Buddhism.

Next, Dashan criticized that there was a group of pretentious and misleading monks in Vietnam at that time: "Recently, I have found a group of fake monks who know nothing about Buddhism and deceive people everywhere."¹⁸ Dashan believed that this was a chaos in Vietnamese Buddhism, and these "monks" were only driven by material desires. He warned that tolerating them would inevitably lead to further decline of Vietnamese Buddhism. Therefore, he said, "Although I am old and have limited abilities to help Buddhism in any way, I am very clear about these monks now. They do not understand the theories and

¹⁵ Dashan, (2000). *Hai Wai Ji Shi*. Beijing:Zhonghua Book Company, p.16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

systems of Buddhism, which is a root cause of the problems in Buddhism. I have to comment on this."¹⁹

Finally, Dashan also specifically mentioned the development of the Zen sect. Zen sect claims to be "unique within Buddhism," therefore, it places special emphasis on its "lineage". However, in Dashan's view, Zen sect in Vietnam not only lacks a clear lineage but also the local "Zen masters" do not have a specific educational method and lack a deep understanding of Zen theories. Dashan expressed strong dissatisfaction with this bleak situation in Vietnamese Zen sect: "As inheritors of Buddhism, we should firmly uphold our faith and help others awaken based on this foundation. We should realize that the current development of Buddhism is already very bad, how can we deceive each other? Monks across the country do not understand the true pursuit of Buddhism, everyone is deceiving each other, how can I remain silent? I can only speak out my true thoughts, regardless of the consequences!"²⁰

The Dilemma of Chinese Buddhism in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

Dashan has put forward three suggestions for Vietnamese Buddhism. Objectively speaking, these three suggestions are somewhat superficial because the complex situation of Vietnamese Buddhism at that time was caused by the era's background. What Dashan discussed was only the surface chaos. Setting aside whether these chaotic situations can be governed, even if they can be resolved, will Vietnamese Buddhism be able to revive after the chaos is eliminated? In simple terms, we can at least see the decline of Vietnamese Buddhism from two perspectives: first, it is due to reasons within Vietnam itself; second, the decline of Vietnamese Buddhism is a microcosm of the overall decline of Chinese Buddhism. Now I will elaborate on these two aspects separately.

First, the decline of Buddhism in Vietnam did not happen overnight. In several dynasties before the Nguyen, Buddhism had already begun to decline. During certain historical periods, Confucianism was designated as the state religion, and the status of Buddhism was very low. Between 1460 and 1497, there were imperial orders that required "temples were not allowed to develop properties, and officials were not allowed to interact with monks and Taoists", causing Buddhism to "go underground". Although later, during the period of division between North and South, both sought to protect and promote Buddhism, by then Vietnamese Buddhism was already critically ill, making it difficult to be rescued through policy support. Furthermore, the management style of the Nguyen regime did not bring any long-term benefits to Buddhism, leading to a rapid decline in the quality of Buddhist practitioners. Nguyen Phuc Chu cannot evade responsibility. Dashan, being a foreign guest, finds it hard to blame Nguyen Phuc Chu on this issue. Instead, he reluctantly praises the Nguyen regime's "military strength, which is rarely seen now, even in ancient powerful countries, it was almost like this."

We even find a certain special change in Vietnamese religion: one year after Dashan's visit (1696), a monk in Vietnam created a heretical sect, "he imitated the organization of the Chinese White Lotus Sect, combined a set of theories, and created a heresy called 'Lian Society', which had a significant influence among the farmers in northern Vietnam."²¹ This article does not intend to explore how heretical the White Lotus Sect in China is, but simply from the perspective of this development in Vietnamese Buddhism, the vitality of mainstream

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Huang, X. (1988). *The World's Top Ten Religions*. Beijing: Oriental Publishing House, p. 157.

Vietnamese Buddhism is already weak. In this situation, how could Dashan possibly help Vietnamese Buddhism return to the right path through a few suggestions? Optimistically speaking, it is wishful thinking on his part; pessimistically speaking, his suggestions are just empty words.

Secondly, Vietnamese Buddhism itself lacks originality, with its sects and theories mostly being copied and improved versions of Chinese Buddhism. Therefore, the decline of Vietnamese Buddhism also reflects an awkward situation faced by Chinese Buddhism during the Ming and Qing dynasties: it could no longer provide nourishment for the development of Vietnamese Buddhism. For Chinese Buddhism, Tang Dynasty was a peak period of development, with eight major sects of Buddhism and a much stronger influence compared to Confucianism and Taoism. By the Song dynasty, the Zen sect still had significant influence, but during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, Chinese Buddhism lost its internal drive and could only barely survive on some historical resources. In this context, as a descendant of Chinese Buddhism, how could Vietnamese Buddhism thrive? The decline of Vietnamese Buddhism also indicates the overall decline of Chinese Buddhism, a historical trend that seems unavoidable.

Conclusion

At the end of this article, we can also explore a question: Can Chinese Buddhism still find vitality? We can briefly discuss it through Dashan's visit. The fundamental reason for the invitation lies in an inherent contradiction within Vietnamese Buddhism: on one hand, the Nguyen needed Buddhism; on the other hand, Vietnamese Buddhism at that time could no longer meet their needs. Therefore, Nguyen Phuc Chu turned his attention to China. Yu Sili believes that Shilan had no real talent or learning, and his motive for the visit was to make money: "He was originally an idler within the Buddhist community, a speculator pursuing fame and fortune. He wanted to engage in greater risky activities in order to gain more wealth for enjoyment." I completely disagree with this view. The subjective motive behind Shilan's visit is beyond our speculation. Although he achieved fame and fortune upon returning home, we do not have enough evidence to prove that his purpose for the visit was solely to "pursue fame and fortune." After all, individual motives are beyond our conjecture. However, by observing his actions, we can propose a hypothesis: Shilan's visit reflects the "secularization" of Buddhism during the Ming and Qing dynasties, which aligns with the trend of religious history development and is not purely driven by individual motives. Faced with the dilemma of development, "secularization" may be the only way out for Chinese Buddhism: only by actively adapting to social changes, embracing commercial development, can Chinese Buddhism have the opportunity to survive and continue to develop. Shilan's choice, rather than being attributed to his pursuit of fame and fortune, can be seen as him unconsciously conforming to the historical trend of "secularization". By the Ming and Qing dynasties, Buddhism had reached a theoretical dead-end, with no further room for development except towards a more "secularized" direction. There were no other possibilities its development. However, due to various historical factors, Shilan's life could only end tragically.

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