

# Conversion of Symbols According to the Relief Needs of the Buddhist Community in Binh Dinh Province, Vietnam

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The two ancient stone statues worshiped at Nhan Son Pagoda in Nhon Hau Commune, An Nhon Town, Binh Dinh Province, Vietnam, have played different roles and been known by various names throughout history, each tied to mysterious and fascinating stories. To explain the shift from their role as Dharma protectors, known as Dvarapala, in the Do Ban capital temple complex of the Vijaya Dynasty, to their portrayal as close friends in Song Nghia Pagoda, and finally to their current identity as the Red and Black Gods who bless everyone, the author of this article conducted several field trips for deeper insight. The changing roles of these two stone statues at Nhan Son Pagoda reflect the flexible and creative engagement of the Buddhist community in Binh Dinh Province with spiritual symbols, adapting to evolving religious needs.

*Keywords:* Nhan Son Pagoda, Binh Dinh, Ong Do, Ong Den, symbol

## Introduction

Nhan Son Pagoda is one of the renowned pagodas in Binh Dinh Province. Currently, this pagoda houses two large ancient stone statues. Each statue stands 2.40 meters tall, appears majestic, and has a fierce expression. For a long time, many scientists and journalists have come to study and write about these two statues. Although they are all very interested, there are many different perspectives, leading to inconsistent opinions. Only a few views from foreign archaeologists and domestic Cham culture researchers align in regarding these two statues as guardian deities of Cham Buddhism.

According to research documents, the two statues have existed since the history of the Vijaya Dynasty, during the late 12th century and early 13th century. Nearly a thousand years have passed, resulting in many changes in the temple's name, appearance, and the spiritual role of the two statues. When they were first excavated, the local people built a temple to worship them under the name Thach Cong Tu, which means a temple for the stone god. Over time, the local community and the Buddhist congregation contributed their efforts and resources to renovate the temple, making it more spacious, and changed its name to Song Nghia Tu, associated with the story of two talented and virtuous generals who were close friends, loyal, and righteous. Day by day, the belief in the supernatural protection offered by the two statues deepened. Subsequently, they adorned the statues with robes, creating the sacred liveliness of Mr. Do and Mr. Den in Nhan Son Linh Tu, now known as Nhan Son Tu. Along with the changes in appearance and role, many mysterious stories imbued with miraculous spirituality have emerged about the two statues. In the minds of the Buddhist community in

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Binh Dinh, the two stone statues at Nhan Son Pagoda are sacred symbols that have helped them fulfill many wishes and overcome difficulties in life. The changes in the appearance and names of the two statues over time reflect cultural movements, leading to a transformation of symbols in the perception of the Buddhist community to suit their spiritual needs.

The process of interaction that transforms the spiritual meaning and religious practices of the community is expressed in two trends: First, the transformation of the perception of symbolic meaning leads to changes in behavior and religious practices, which is called consistent interaction; second, the transformation in the form of using religious behavior and practices to “camouflage” and conceal views, which is called inconsistent interaction.

To better understand this issue, we use the interpretive perspective of Clifford Geertz<sup>1</sup> (1926-2006) to reference data and make analytical arguments. According to Geertz’s viewpoint and ethnographic perspective, symbols are a means of expressing and transmitting culture. Through this means, people communicate with each other, remember, and develop knowledge about life, as well as form attitudes towards life (Geertz, 1973, p. 89). Additionally, he described culture as a social phenomenon and a system of intersubjective symbols and meanings (Parker, 1985). Therefore, in this article, we apply Clifford Geertz’s perspective to explain the inner meanings of the transformation of the form, name, and role of the two ancient stone statues being worshiped at Nhan Son Pagoda (Nhan Thap Village, Nhon Hau Commune, An Nhon Town, Binh Dinh Province, Vietnam).

## **Overview of Documents and Research Methods**

### **Overview of Documents**

In the history of the Champa kingdoms, many valuable tangible and intangible cultural heritages have been left behind. In particular, the Buddhist sculptures and the system of temples and towers that the Cham people built in the central region of Vietnam over many centuries AD stand out. Binh Dinh Province was chosen as the capital of Do Ban, which existed for five centuries under the Vijaya Dynasty. To study and research the history of Champa culture in Binh Dinh, Vietnam, Mr. Charles Lemire<sup>2</sup> (1839-1912), a French envoy who worked in Quy Nhon City (present-day Binh Dinh), and Mr. Henri Parmentier<sup>3</sup> (1871-1949), an architect and archaeologist with the Indochina Archaeological Mission, played significant roles. These two men are considered the first to research and discover many antiquities, such as statues of gods and goddesses, altars, linga-yoni idols, sacred objects, and structural elements of ancient Champa Buddhist architecture and sculpture from the Vijaya period. Parmentier himself conducted surveys and uncovered numerous Champa relics in Central Vietnam, particularly in Binh Dinh Province, establishing the first chronology for the system of Champa Buddhist architecture and sculpture. This chronology is crucial for describing cultural heritage and creating a foundational basis for subsequent research and classification. Additionally, he produced many drawings of Champa temples and sculptures.

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford James Geertz is an American anthropologist. His works are considered classics of the ethnographic method by researchers. He is a professor at the Institute for Development Studies at Princeton University.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Lemire (1839-1912) was a French consul who worked for the French colonial government in Quy Nhon in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was both a researcher and collector of Cham antiquities.

<sup>3</sup> Henri Parmentier was born in 1871 in Paris, France, and died on February 22, 1949, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. He participated in archaeological excavations at My Son (Quang Nam, 1901-1904), Dong Duong, and Chanh Lo (Quang Nam, 1905) and was responsible for the restoration of the Po Nagar Towers (Nha Trang) and Po Klaung Garai Towers (Phan Rang, 1905-1908).

Next, we have the research of Jean Boisselier<sup>4</sup>, a French archaeologist and ethnologist, who was an expert in Buddhist thought and symbolism. He belonged to the generation after Henri Parmentier and worked for the Indochina Research Delegation. Boisselier authored several works and research documents on Champa temples and sculptures in Binh Dinh Province, published in various collections on Southeast Asian art and religion.

The study of the two statues in Nhan Son Pagoda also involves the work of domestic researcher and Champa culture expert Ngo Van Doanh<sup>5</sup>. He visited Nhan Son Pagoda to examine the two ancient stone statues and provided insights on them. These statues reflect the style of Champa sculptures and are associated with the Do Ban citadel temple complex. He stated,

The hypothesis of a Champa architecture is confirmed by the existence in the east, at the foot of the hill, where the slope is gently inclined, of two giant Dharma protector statues that today adorn Nhan Son Pagoda in Nhan Thap Village, An Nghia Commune, An Nhon District. (Ngo, 2006, p. 107)

Sharing the same opinion as the above researchers, Mr. Nguyen Thanh Quang, a former staff member of the Binh Dinh General Museum, also asserts that the two statues at Nhan Son Pagoda belong to Champa sculpture art. This was detailed in his presentation at the Proceedings of the Scientific Conference on Buddhism and Binh Dinh Literature. The author describes the guardian deity statue as being carved from a single block of stone, featuring a steady standing posture on a round pedestal adorned with a pattern of two rows of symmetrically carved lotus petals, with a band of nipples running through the middle. The ears are stylized in a spiral shape, and both the nipples and knees are decorated with round, multi-petaled flowers (Nguyen, 2018, pp. 63-71).

Ngo Van Doanh's viewpoint further affirms that the two statues at Nhan Son Pagoda are Dvarapala Dharma protector statues belonging to the ancient Champa Buddhist sculpture tradition:

Currently, in the Nhan Son Pagoda of the Vietnamese in Nhan Thap Village, there are still two large stone statues mentioned in the book *Dai Nam Nhat Thong Chi*. The local people still pass down the story of two Vietnamese named Hoang Tan Cong and Ly Xuan Dien—who helped the King of Champa defeat the Siamese army—attributing these two stone statues in Nhan Son Pagoda to them. However, in fact, these are two ancient Champa gate gods. Like other gate god statues (such as those in Hoa Lai and Dong Duong), the two gate gods in Nhan Son are depicted facing each other, twisting and leaning forward. Their faces, weapons in hand, and snakes on their bodies all convey a threatening impression. Considering the position and the enormous mass of the two statues (which are 2.40 meters high, not including the pedestal), we believe they have existed here since ancient times, and Nhan Son Pagoda must have been built on the foundation of the gate leading to the ancient Champa temple complex. (Ngo, 1994, p. 81)

In addition to the studies mentioned above, there are other research documents about Nhan Son Pagoda and Buddhism in Binh Dinh Province that discuss the two statues in the book *Nuoc Non Binh Dinh* by Quach Tan<sup>6</sup>, published in 1967. One passage reads:

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<sup>4</sup> Jean Boisselier was born on August 26, 1912, in Paris, France, and died on August 26, 1996, in his hometown. He was an archaeologist, ethnologist, and art historian, specializing in Khmer studies and Southeast Asian research.

<sup>5</sup> Ngo Van Doanh was an archaeologist and researcher of Vietnamese culture, with numerous works on Vietnamese culture, particularly on Champa culture.

<sup>6</sup> Quach Tan was born on January 4, 1910, in Truong Dinh village, Binh Khe District (Tay Son), Binh Dinh Province. He died in 1992 in Nha Trang, Khanh Hoa. *The Country of Binh Dinh* is a collection of local histories of Binh Dinh. Nam Cuong Bookstore, Saigon published it in 1967, and it was republished by Thanh Nien Publishing House in 1999.

...The architecture of the pagoda is not unusual, and the name Nhan Son was given later. It was previously called Thach Cong Tu, commonly known as Ong Da Pagoda, because there are two very large stone statues inside. These statues face each other. Each statue is three meters tall and as large as two adult arms. They wear large robes, Vu Dang hats, and hold weapons in their hands (one statue holds a staff, while the other holds a sword). Their faces are fierce, and the faint-hearted do not dare to stand near them. People say that these are the statues of Huynh Tan Cong and Ly Xuan Dien from the Tran Dynasty. (Quach, 1967, p. 252)

Articles by Thich Dong Niem and Nguyen Thi Tam Anh in the Proceedings of the Binh Dinh Buddhist and Literature Conference, held in August 2018, also mention Nhan Son Pagoda and especially the two stone statues. Additionally, newspapers and magazines published in recent years have discussed these statues, such as the article “The Mysterious Story of the Two Giant Statues of Ong Do and Ong Den” by Doan Cong in *Dan Tri* newspaper, published on November 24th, 2016; the article “The Mystery of the Two Treasures Ong Den and Ong Do Dating Back Hundreds of Years” in *Phap Luat Online* by Thang My and Dinh Khanh on December 16th, 2016; the article “Unique Nhan Son Pagoda” by *An Nhon Town Tourism Magazine*, published on July 13th, 2017; and the article “The Mystery of the Two Statues of Ong Den and Ong Do at Nhan Son Pagoda” by Dinh Phung in *Lao Dong* newspaper, published on June 18th, 2018.

Most of the content in these articles mainly focuses on comparisons to explore the art of sculpture and determine the age of the statues, along with some myths and folk legends about them. However, there are no documents, works, or articles analyzing the interaction and connection between the symbolic spiritual meaning and the religious movements of the local community and the Buddhist community in Binh Dinh Province. Therefore, the author of this article wishes to delve deeper into understanding and researching the influence and interaction between the community of believers in Binh Dinh Province and the Buddhist symbol through the transformation of the “identity” of the two stone statues in the formation of spiritual meaning and role, to fulfill the beliefs and sacredness that they represent.

### **Research Method**

To achieve this, in addition to accessing secondary sources, the author conducted ethnographic fieldwork at Nhan Son Pagoda and within the Vietnamese community living around the pagoda area. During the fieldwork, the author collected information through participant observation and in-depth interviews. In particular, the author attended and observed the ceremonies and offerings made by the people and the community of followers of Nhan Son Pagoda, especially focusing on their offerings at the two statues within the pagoda. Through this observation, the author recorded the behaviors, expressions, and prayers of some individuals as they approached the two statues, demonstrating absolute faith in their responsiveness.

The author also conducted five in-depth interviews with: Venerable Thich Thi Hoan, the Abbot of Nhan Son Pagoda (one interview); residents living in the area around Nhan Son Pagoda (two interviews); and visitors who came to offer prayers to the two statues (two interviews). These interviews aimed to gather insights into the history, transformation, and spiritual significance of the two statues, as well as the beliefs of the Buddhist community regarding them and their ceremonial practices.

By combining notes taken during observations and in-depth interviews with a search for secondary sources, the author compares, contrasts, and synthesizes the information to clarify the religious movements of the Buddhist community in Binh Dinh Province, Vietnam, highlighting the flexibility and creativity involved in transforming the spiritual symbolic role of the two ancient stone statues at Nhan Son Pagoda (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Author Nguyen Van Du field trip to Nhan Son pagoda in 2018 & 2023.

## Research Content and Discussion Results

### Discovery of the Two Statues and the History of Nhan Son Pagoda

According to long-time residents of the Nhan Son Pagoda area, these two statues were discovered long ago when they were buried at the foot of Tam Thap Mountain (also known as Long Cot Hill or Nhan Son Mountain). Due to prolonged rainwater flow, landslides gradually revealed tufts of hair on the statues' heads, eventually exposing their unusually large heads with fierce faces. Local people believed this was a phenomenon of gods descending to earth to save the people, so they excavated the two giant statues and built a pagoda made of bamboo, wood, and thatch to worship them. This pagoda was named Thach Cong Tu (thach: stone; cong: grandfather; tu: pagoda), meaning "Ong Da Pagoda" (fieldwork: 2018).

The location where these two stone statues were discovered is at the foot of Long Cot hill, which is considered a feng shui position to guard and guard temples and towers for peace (Lafont, 2011, pp. 155-161). During the Tay Son Dynasty, Nguyen Nhac constructed the Hoang De Citadel here. Due to its favorable location and historical significance, the folklore surrounding these two stone statues evolved from being associated with Champa culture to adopting Vietnamese figures named Huynh Tan Cong and Ly Xuan Dien, depicting them as soul mates. Subsequently, the pagoda was renamed Song Nghia Tu (song: pair; nghia: chivalry; tu: pagoda), meaning the pagoda worships two people of deep affection and chivalry.

Residents in this area often praise the spiritual responsiveness of the two stone statues at Song Nghia Pagoda. Legend has it that the governor of An Nhon once invited Venerable Chon Hue—Chi Man to Song Nghia to preside over a rain-praying ceremony, which was confirmed to be effective. The story goes:

In June of the year Ky Mui (1919—Khai Dinh Year 3), while the entire region was as dry as if being burned under the blazing sun, Venerable Chon Hue—Chi Man ascended the altar to burn incense and complete the ceremony, causing the sky to suddenly darken as black clouds gathered. People knelt and prayed everywhere, and the sky poured down refreshing rain. The whole land seemed to be bathed in the sacredness of the two Stone Men. (Thich, 2018, p. 556)

After this event, the governor of An Nhon supported the reconstruction of the pagoda and requested Venerable Chon Hue—Chi Man to remain as abbot. Responding to the governor's concern and the pleas of the local people, Venerable Chon Hue—Chi Man accepted the request. He is considered the founder of this pagoda in 1927, later changing its name to Nhan Son Linh Tu. The two stone statues are still worshiped in the pagoda and are placed facing each other in the main hall as guardians of the northern sect. To this day, the pagoda has been passed down through generations of abbots, including Venerable Chon Hue—Chi Man (Founder), Great Master Nhu Dieu—Buu Lien, Great Master Nhu Y—Buu Chau, Great Master Nhu Nguyen—Tam Tao, Venerable Thi Vi—Thanh Ky, and currently Venerable Thich Thi Hoan (Thich, 2007, p. 49).

### **Origin of the Two Ancient Stone Statues**

There are two hypotheses regarding these two statues:

The first hypothesis: The two statues were carved by an old mandarin of Champa to commemorate and show gratitude to Mr. Huynh Tan Cong and Mr. Ly Xuan Dien. This story was recorded by author Quach Tan in the book *Nuoc Non Binh Dinh* (1967) as follows:

During the Tran Dynasty in Vietnam, there was a Mr. Huynh Tan Cong who was born and raised in a poor Confucian family in Hoa Chau. He was a man of both literary and martial skills. On his way to Thang Long, he found his uncle, a high-ranking official. During the journey, he encountered an accident and was rescued by Ly Xuan Dien from Ninh Binh Province. The two became close friends.

Ly Xuan Dien was also a talented individual and felt deep gratitude toward him. After meeting his uncle, Huynh Tan Cong shared his story. Huynh Tan Cong's uncle recommended Ly Xuan Dien to the king. At that time, the Northern Ming Dynasty was invading the border, and the king sent Ly Xuan Dien to lead the army against the enemy. Meanwhile, Huynh Tan Cong passed the imperial examination in the capital. However, as the Champa army flooded the southern border, the king sent Huynh Tan Cong into battle, where he achieved a great victory. Taking advantage of the situation, he attacked the capital Do Ban and fell into the Champa army's trap, resulting in his capture and subsequent exile. By chance, he encountered an old minister of Champa who took pity on Huynh Tan Cong and brought him back.

During a cholera epidemic in Champa, Huynh Tan Cong devoted himself to helping the old minister and the local people recover from their illness. After pacifying the North, Ly Xuan Dien returned and learned of his friend's plight. Deeply saddened, he gathered all his resources to go to Champa to redeem Huynh Tan Cong. The old minister, partly grateful for Huynh Tan Cong's care and partly moved by Ly Xuan Dien's kindness, allowed the two friends to return to Vietnam without accepting a ransom. After their return, the old minister missed them so much that he commissioned a craftsman to carve statues of the two so he could see them every day. The red statue represents Huynh Tan Cong, a civil servant holding a staff, while the black statue represents Ly Xuan Dien, a military mandarin holding a sword. In the beliefs of the local people, these two statues are sacred, and they often come to worship, praying for wealth, peace, and success in their studies. Particularly, families with children who are difficult to raise, sick, or prone to crying at night bring them to Nhan Son Pagoda to "sell the Buddha and the two statues". (Quach, 1967, pp. 251-257)

Although this story has some differing details about the names and characters compared to other versions, its purpose remains the same: to explain the origin of the two statues in a purely Vietnamese context. However, a comparison with the history of Vietnam during the Tran Dynasty shows that there were no notable generals named Huynh Tan Cong and Ly Xuan Dien. Moreover, the event of an old mandarin of Champa carving two Vietnamese figures as large guardian statues to show his merit is equally absent. Therefore, this hypothesis

contains several illogical points. It is likely that the story was created to Vietnamize the two statues, making them more relatable and friendly to the local community (Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* Venerable Thích Thi Hoàng, abbot of Nhan Son Pagoda, stands next to two stone statues of Huynh Tan Cong and Ly Xuan Dien (Photo: Nguyen Van Du 2023).

The second hypothesis: These are two Dvarapala guardian statues placed in the temple complex of the capital of Do Ban during the Vijaya Dynasty of ancient Champa. This is further confirmed by archaeologists and cultural researchers who conducted numerous surveys and studies in Binh Dinh and expressed similar opinions on this issue. They determined that these are two Dvarapala guardian statues of Champa Buddhism from the 13th century.

They noted that the guardian statues dating from the late 9th century at the Dong Duong Buddhist Institute typically stood on sacred objects, with their feet spread apart and a large support pillar behind them. In contrast, the support pillar for the two statues at Nhan Son Pagoda was cleverly replaced by an exaggerated extension of the belt behind each statue. The two statues were symmetrically carved, with their legs slightly bent, knees spread apart, bodies leaning slightly forward, necks stretched, and heads turned to look at each other. Both statues hold weapons raised to shoulder level, but their hands are broken (after the statues were lifted, people made two wooden swords to replace them).

From the remaining traces of the hilt, it can be inferred that the red-painted statue on the right holds a short sword, while the black-painted statue on the left holds a mace, characterized by a tall body and a fierce expression, with bulging eyes, flared nostrils, and prominent neck veins. The statues' costumes consist of a tight-fitting

loincloth secured by a large belt, with one end crossing the thighs forward and the other flowing down behind to form a support. A rope resembling a Naga snake is worn on the statue's body (Ngo, 2006, p. 109).

Additionally, miniature decorative bracelets, like jade bracelets, adorn the neck, wrists, biceps, and ankles of the statues, feature two lotus petals on each side and a snake in the middle. This is distinct from the statues at the Dong Duong Buddhist Institute from the 9th century. Furthermore, these two statues do not wear high hats decorated in layers like the statues at Dong Duong (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Red man's bun and black man's face of two ancient statues of Nhan Son Pagoda. Photo: Nguyen Van Du 2023.

This evidence indicates that the two statues at Nhan Son Pagoda are not only the largest but also the last works of the guardian statue genre in Champa Buddhism, dating from the second half of the 12th century to the early 13th century<sup>7</sup>. During surveys and excavations in Binh Dinh Province, archaeologists also discovered fragments of guardian statues, the most notable being the head of a guardian statue at Buu Son Pagoda (Tan Kieu Village, Nhon My Commune, An Nhon District, west of the ancient Do Ban Citadel) and the hand of a guardian statue at Banh It Tower (Dai Loc Village, Phuoc Hiep Commune, Tuy Phuoc District, southeast of the ancient Do Ban Citadel).

It is worth noting that these statues are all quite large; for example, the hand of the Dharma protector discovered at Banh It Tower is 0.47 meters high, comparable to the statue at Nhan Son Pagoda. Thus, based on the number and size of the known Dharma protector statues, along with a series of other Buddhist-related sculptures discovered, it can be concluded that Buddhism flourished in the 12th and 13th centuries in the ancient land of Binh Dinh Province (Nguyen, 2018, pp. 63-71).

This supports the second hypothesis: The two stone statues in Nhan Son Pagoda today are Dvarapala Dharma protector statues worshiped in the temple complex of the Vijaya Dynasty and initially buried underground. Later,

<sup>7</sup> After King Harivarman II passed away in 998, the new king of Champa, Yang Po Ku Vijaya Sri, moved the capital from Indrapura, which was too close to the Dai Viet border, to the south at Vijaya and built the capital Do Ban. Since then, Vijaya has been considered the political center of Champa.



the Vietnamese discovered them, unearthed them, and constructed a pagoda for their worship. Over time, they were Vietnamized, transformed into Vietnamese deities, and given specific narratives in the pure Vietnamese spirit (Ngo, 2006, p. 109).

### **The Transformation of the Symbols and Spiritual Roles of the Two Stone Statues According to the Religious Needs of the Buddhist Community in Binh Dinh**

#### **From the role of the Dharma protector Dvarapala in the temple complex of the capital Vijaya...**

According to Buddhist interpretations, to protect their doctrine and institutions from enemies, the Vajrayāna<sup>8</sup> sect established a group of deities to safeguard individuals through prayer to the Sādhana<sup>9</sup>. This group includes real Dharmapalas (law keepers), such as MahāKāla (the big black man), who often represents the emotionless face of Avalokiteshvara<sup>10</sup>. In Tibetan Buddhism, all deities in the pantheon can embody both gentle and fierce aspects. For example, Avalokiteshvara is seen as gentle, while MahāKāla is fierce. Practitioners believe that the energies of fierce deities are essential and beneficial for achieving Great Enlightenment, as the illusions of the self hinder spiritual development and must be destroyed by these deities. This importance of negative energies is thus fully justified.

Tibetan Buddhism assigns the fierce deities a protective role, which is also reflected in the Dharmapālas known as Lokapālas (wardens of the area). These figures emerged from pre-Buddhist folk beliefs but were later integrated into the Buddhist tradition through their oath to respect the Buddha's teachings.

For Vajrayāna Buddhists, the function of the Dharmapālas is to protect them from dangers and negative influences that could hinder their spiritual progress. This protective principle is most effective when the believer has achieved a connection with their personal Yidam. In particular, MahāKāla (the protector of the Kagyupa and the Dalai Lama) is often depicted with a terrifying appearance. Represented with a jet-black body, MahāKāla performs four main activities: pacifying, enriching, attracting, and destroying. These activities can address both internal and external obstacles.

In Tibetan Buddhism, Padmasambhava's actions transformed the ancient Lokanālas of the Bon religion into Buddhist protectors. Most of these deities embody extreme forces of nature, except for the "guardians of the four directions", borrowed from Indian iconography, among whom is Kubera, the god of wealth (Laffont, 1997, p. 194).

Based on the interpretation of changes in ideological views through stone worship images in Buddhism, the two Dharmapala statues at Nhan Son Pagoda also belong to the Dharmapala group, serving as gate guardian gods in the Champa temple tower system in the Do Ban capital area. Over time, with the rise and fall of history, these two stone statues were buried following the collapse of the Vijaya Dynasty and the Do Ban capital in 1471. They remained buried until the end of the 18th century, during the attack on the Tay Son Dynasty's Imperial Citadel in 1799 by Nguyen Anh's army. Thus, the initial role of these two statues was to serve as Dharma protectors, functioning as gate gods in the temple tower complex of the Do Ban capital during the Vijaya Dynasty.

**To the role of the soul mate in Song Nghia Temple...** According to the oral tradition passed down through generations by the local people of Nhan Thap village, two statues emerged from the ground nearly three

<sup>8</sup> Vajrayāna is a late form of esoteric Buddhism that originated from Mahāyāna. Also known as Tantric Buddhism, it incorporates elements from Hinduism and remnants of Bon shamanism.

<sup>9</sup> Sādhana is a term for a means to accomplish something, or more specifically, a spiritual effort or practice.

<sup>10</sup> Avalokiteśvara is a Bodhisattva depicted in various Buddhist cultures.

hundred years ago. Initially, only the top of the hair bun was visible, followed by the head, neck, and eventually the whole body. The villagers worked together to lift them out of the ground. These two stone statues did not move or tilt but stood still, astonishing everyone. Some people scorned them, dismissing their presence as blind fear. However, when they touched the statues, they experienced headaches and dizziness, prompting them to return to the statues to seek forgiveness and quickly recover. Witnessing this miracle, the local people built a shrine made of bamboo and thatch. From then on, the name Thach Cong Tu was established (fieldwork by Nguyen Van Du).

In June 1919 (the third year of Khai Dinh), when the governor of An Nhon invited the Venerable Chon Hue—Chi Man to hold a prayer ceremony to relieve the drought in the area, the responsiveness of the two stone statues significantly increased. Since then, Thach Cong Tu was renovated and expanded. Subsequently, the story of Huynh Tan Cong and Ly Xuan Dien was created to connect with the identity of these two statues, along with the renaming of the pagoda to Song Nghia Tu, which transformed the role of the statues. At this point, the two statues became revered as gods of the Vietnamese people. They were given beards, hats, and robes, adopting the style of the deities worshipped in Binh Dinh Province.

As a result, the belief in the sacredness of these two statues among the people grew immensely. Rumors spread that,

If anyone despises these two gods, they will immediately suffer disaster. Even women with unclean bodies who come near the statues are reprimanded, and when they return home, they become ill and experience unusual hot and cold symptoms. Moreover, men from Nhan Thap village who marry women from other places, or women from this area marrying abroad, must pay homage and pray to the two statues to witness their sincerity so they can receive protection and blessings. (fieldwork data by Nguyen, 2018)

Since then, the people of Nhan Thap village and surrounding areas have revered the sacredness of the two statues. They frequently come to pray and seek help from these gods. According to the locals, since this belief took hold, those living nearby have become increasingly prosperous, enjoying good business, favorable weather, and bountiful harvests. People from various places have come to pray to the two statues for blessings, resulting in a growing number of visitors.

**And the blessed manifestation of Mr. Do and Mr. Den.** In the early 20th century, after archaeologists and cultural researchers studied and determined the origin of the two statues, the local community's perception of them changed. They no longer viewed the statues as purely Vietnamese; instead, they did not fully acknowledge them as gods of Champa Buddhism either. Consequently, the images of the two statues were transformed according to new spiritual symbolic tendencies. They became known as Mr. Do and Mr. Den. Mr. Do embodied luck, saving people from danger, while Mr. Den served as a witness and supporter of Mr. Do's blessings. Additionally, Mr. Den had the duty to deter those who disregarded the miraculous nature of the two statues. Since then, the presence of Mr. Do and Mr. Den has deepened within the religious consciousness of the local community (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Two ancient stone statues have been painted as Ong Den and Ong Do (Photo: Nguyen Van Du 2023).

Currently, the two statues are seen as saviors for those who encounter misfortune or face deadlocks and dire situations in life. When confronted with such difficulties, people often seek help from the two figures, especially from Mr. Do, whom they believe to be a god of good fortune, specializing in aiding and rescuing people from suffering. In contrast, Mr. Den is viewed as a punisher for those who commit sins (fieldwork data from Nguyen Van Du 2023).

### Conclusion

Thus, the case of the two Dvarapala Dharma protector statues of Champa Buddhism being worshiped at Nhan Son Pagoda in Binh Dinh Province, Vietnam, along with the religious movements of the local community, has changed the role of the two statues over time. This transformation process may vary depending on the influences of contemporary economic, political, and social factors, but there always exists a symbol with spiritual significance in the religious life of the community. In this sense, the flexibility and creativity in transforming symbols to meet spiritual needs further strengthens local identity and consciousness, maintaining religious symbols in the minds of the community.

The story of the two Dvarapala Dharma protector statues transforming into the pair of friends Huynh Tan Cong and Ly Xuan Dien, and later into Mr. Do and Mr. Den at Nhan Son Pagoda, reflects human curiosity. However, it also highlights the inherent spiritual consciousness that is always present in the minds of each community when they need it. In short, the two statues have contributed to the solemnity and grandeur of Nhan

Son Pagoda. The local people and the Buddhist community in Binh Dinh Province, Vietnam, take great pride in the pagoda that preserves their spiritual symbols. The two Dvarapala Dharma protector statues of ancient Champa Buddhism are worshiped in the Northern Buddhist pagoda as a replacement for the Dharma Protectors Vi Da and Tieu Dien Dai Si of Mahayana Buddhism. This represents a symbolic transformation in religious beliefs to adapt to the spiritual needs of residents and the Buddhist community in Binh Dinh Province, Vietnam.

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