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The Tuệ Tĩnh Đường Medical Clinic and Contemporary Engaged Buddhism in Vietnam

Until the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802-1945) in Vietnam the Royal Court relied on Buddhist institutions for its public health care programs. Buddhists also acted as political advisors to emperors and the monk physician Tuệ Tĩnh was sent as living tribute to the court of the Ming Dynasty in 1385. Buddhist involvement in health care in Vietnam dissipated during the Nguyễn and the early decades of French Colonial rule (1862-1954). But the Great Depression in the late 1920s and 1930s saw a resurgence of Buddhist involvement in health care for the growing numbers of desperately poor Vietnamese. World War II intensified these conditions and by early 1945 Buddhist monks were among the traditional medical practitioners caring for Việt Minh troops fighting the Japanese and then the French. This paper will give an overview of Vietnamese Buddhist involvement in health care and will move onto a discussion of changes in Vietnam which resulted in a resurgence of Buddhist political and medical activity culminating with the Buddhist protests of the 1960s. This deliberate involvement in the cares of the world is usually referred to as 'Engaged Buddhism.' After the relaxation of social and religious restrictions in the 1990s Engaged Buddhism has emerged again with a group of charity medical clinics which directly reference the 14th century Buddhist monk Tuệ Tĩnh in their name, Tuệ Tĩnh Đường which can be loosely translated as 'Tuệ Tĩnh's Place'. Worldwide medicine and politics are intimately entwined and while the health care offered at these clinics is interesting in and of itself perhaps what is most interesting about them is the Vietnamese government's toleration of them. This paper will conclude with an exploration of that subject.