Divine Mother of Carramar: The Motivations, Construction, and Stylistics of Caodaism's Second Sydney Temple.

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Abstract

In November of 2019, the Caodaists of Sydney opened their second temple – a Điện Thờ Phật Mẫu or Holy Mother Temple in the South-western Sydney suburb of Carramar. This is a remarkable achievement given the small size of the Caodaist community in New South Wales. [98] This second temple was not constructed to accommodate new worshippers nor spread the presence of this religion further across the city but was dedicated wholly to another deity; Đức Phật Mẫu – or the Divine Mother. It is a temple to her alone and serves as a complimentary temple to the one built for her consort Đức Cao Đài or God the Father in the nearby suburb of Wiley Park.[99] The need in Caodaism for separate divine mother and father temples is a consequence of this religion's growth and development during the twentieth century. In this research I will outline this history as a background to a more theological explanation of this new building. I will also examine how this temple came to be built in Sydney, outline the ways in which it

[98] In the 2016 Australian Census, 273 residents of New South Wales identified religiously as Caodaists. This was a fall from peak numbers of 336 in the 2011 Census, but still more than the 97 who identified as Caodaist in New South Wales in 2011. In the more recent Census data around 600 citizens identify as Caodaist nationally. The question on religious affiliation is a non-compulsory question in the Australian census. See, https://www.abs.gov.au.

[99] In a wide-ranging translation project currently underway and under my direction our team is rendering the term Đức Phật Mẫu as "Divine Mother." This Vietnamese term literally translates as "Venerable Buddha Mother" – but Caodaism's relation to Buddhism is complex and we sought to avoid linking what was a "universal" mother figure to Buddhism alone as this may, in some reader's minds, limit the scope of her universality or limit the breadth of her origins to something singularly Buddhist. This is not so. Her origins are deeply connected to Daoism and Chinese folk religions as much as they are to Buddhism. In English, the Caodaists of Sydney have called their new temple a "Holy Mother Temple." Thus, in the following "Holy Mother" will refer only to the temple whilst "Divine Mother: will refer to the deity. There are at least twelve other names used in the religion to refer to this deity. See my description of this temple and a full translation of the central prayer to this deity at: Christopher Hartney, *Our Divine Mother of Carramar: The Australian Điện Thờ Phật Mẫu of Caodaism*, accessed 14 February 2020, https://www.academia.edu/41766631/Our_Divine_Mother_of_Carramar_The_Australian_%C4%90i%E1%BB%87n_Th%E1%BB%9D_Ph%E1%BA%ADt_M%E1%BA%ABu_of_Caodaism .

functions as a social hub for Vietnamese Australians, and finally consider how it operates as an Australian-Vietnamese reli-gious space.

Caodaism

This new religion explodes onto the social scene of French-colonised Indochina in 1926. The new faith weaves Chinese processes of spirit communication with Western traditions of séance. Early disciples received messages (in French and Vietnamese) from a supreme deity Đức Cao Đài (Venerable 'High Tower' – a divine pseudonym) and other divine beings – many from the pantheon of Chinese folk religion.[100] The religion's popularity dramatically increased either side of World War II when it constructed a great sacred city in Tây Ninh province. In the early 1930s, the religion shattered into a number of sects, but the main group at Tây Ninh continued to grow in numbers and national importance. With French complicity, the religion was able to extend temporal control over large areas of Southern Vietnam. During the mid-1950s, with the fading of French power in Indochina and the rise of American influence in the South, Caodaism's political prestige was significantly diminished. The religion developed slowly through to 1975 when it came under strict control from Hanoi.[101] At this time séance was banned and a government management committee appointed to run the faith. This situation continues through to today.

When the new government took control of their religion, many Caodaists decided to flee the nation. This arose in part because of the religion's military activities. During the Japanese occupation of Vietnam (1940-1945), a Caodaist army was formed and trained by the occupiers to assist them in their control of Indochina. When the Japanese were defeated, the Caodaist army remained a potent force in Vietnam. During the latter part of the 1950s, this religious army became integrated into the fighting forces of the Republic of South Vietnam. When this army was defeated in 1975, many Caodaists involved in defending the South against the Communists found that their best option for avoiding persecution by the new national government was to leave. They joined an exodus of Vietnamese leaving Vietnam. The numbers of refugees exiting the country from 1975-2000 is estimated at 800,000.[102] Caodaists constituted a solid proportion of this exodus.

Local Conditions Amongst Caodaists in Sydney

Unsurprisingly, homesickness and a lack of familiarity with cultural contexts are guiding themes in the Vietnamese diaspora in the West. These feelings were even more acute for those

[100] See, Sergei Blagov, *Caodaism: Vietnamese Traditionalism and Its Leap into Modernity* (Huntington, N.Y: Nova Science Publishers, 2001); Christopher Hartney, 'Caodaism', in *The Sage Encyclopedia of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Adam Possamai and Anthony J. Blasi (California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2020); Jérémy Jammes, *Les Oracles Du Cao Dài: Étude d'un Mouvement Religieux Vietnamien et Ses Réseaux* (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2014).

[101] Sergei Blagov, 'Caodaism in Vietnam: Religion versus Restrictions and Persecution' (International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), University of British Columbia, Canada, 31 July 1999), http://lecaodaisme.free.fr/caodainet/English/Htm/Caodai_inVN_SB.htm.

[102] UNHCR, 'State of the World's Refugees', 2000, 79–80, https://www.unhcr.org/en-au/publications/sowr/3ebf9bad0/state-worlds-refugees-2000-fifty-years-humanitarian-action-chapter-4-flight.html.

Vietnamese who arrived in Australia. During the long period of French control of Vietnam (c.1862-1954) and the subsequent involvement by the United States, the Vietnamese had developed sophisticated ideas about Europe and North America. With the exception of some participation by Australian troops in the American War (1955-1973), Australia had remained a *tabula rasa* for the majority of Vietnamese. This had consequences for those who eventually settled here. As Nguyen Cam explains,

> …many highly placed and highly educated Vietnamese had received their education in France or the U.S. and therefore most of them and their extended family preferred to settle in these two countries. Canada is also a preferred destination as it enjoys the double advantages of being close to the U.S. and offering the possibility of using the French language. I am afraid that Australia [for resettling] is very much a fourth choice.[103]

This suggests that less socially adaptable Caodaists chose, or were forced to choose, Australia. This is not a solid rule but carries some truth when compared to, say, Canada.[104] Many of the Sydney Caodaists I have interviewed had little understanding of this nation before their arrival and no idea that they would end up settling here when they began their exodus.[105] Like other Vietnamese settling in Australia, Caodaists kept themselves to specific enclaves in the suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne and to a lesser extent other capital cities. Here they were able to open shops and other social spaces that resembled home. One of the significant primary uses, then, of the two Caodaist temples in Sydney is to recreate intensely symbolic Vietnamese cultural spaces - temples which are indeed sacred but also redolent of home culture. At the official openings of these two temples (in 2000 and 2019 respectively), Caodaists were proud to declare that each temple was a gift from their community to all Australians. Both buildings are open to the general public and receive many non-Vietnamese visitors each year. But it is worth noting that these 'gifts' do not come with easy modes of interface for non-Vietnamese. To the general non-Vietnamese Australian visitor both temples remain dazzlingly alien to the surrounding suburban landscape.

If we compare the Sydney community and its buildings with the work of Caodaists centred around (recently deceased) Dr Bùi Đắc Hùm in California – to choose one example – we can note some significant differences. Firstly, the Californian congregation is ecumenical. It is welcoming of all Caodaists outside of Vietnam no matter their sect affiliation and, for a time, this group even

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[103] Nguyen Cam: 'Barriers to Communication Between Vietnamese and Non-Vietnamese' in V*ietnamese Studies in a Multicultural World,* (ed. by Nguyen Xuan Thu, Melbourne, Vietnamese Language and Culture Publications, 1994) p.69.

[104] See, Louis Jacques Dorais, 'Faith, Hope and Identity: Religion and the Vietnamese Refugees', *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (1 January 2007): 57–68, https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdi0227; Louis-Jacques Dorais, 'The Vietnamese in Montreal, Canada: Reflections on Intangible Capital and Immigration', *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 18, no. 2 (June 2009): 231–54.

[105] Christopher Hartney, 'A Strange Peace: Dao Cao Dai and Its Manifestation in Sydney' (University of Sydney, 2004). esp. Chapter Five.

received some non-Vietnamese converts. Bùi Đắc Hùm, his wife Bùi Đặng Cẩm Hồng, and their co-religionists have done much to spearhead early translations of Caodaist scripture into English. They have also worked to extend information on their faith in English and other languages to the wider American public, translate prayers, and explain Caodaist rituals to non-Vietnamese.[106] This Californian group has an easy-access website and much information loaded onto online video presentations.[107] By comparison we can say that the Sydney community is much more insular. Both Sydney temples are strongly affiliated with the central group of Caodaism focused on the Holy See at Tây Ninh. This uncompromising stance makes it difficult for non-Tây Ninh Caodaists to feel completely at home in these spaces. The Sydney group has been long associated with the "Caodaist Overseas Missionary" – a body that started specifically within Tây Ninh (pre-1975) and was re-adapted by some overseas communities (from 1983 in NSW) to keep Tây Ninh-affiliated Caodaist groups working together.[108] These groups, including the Sydney community, are devoted to the religious mission of Tây Ninh's most prominent leader Phạm Công Tắc (1890-1959) a *force majeur* in driving the development of Caodaism but who, in other less populous branches of the religion, remains a controversial if not divisive figure.

When commencing their building projects in Sydney, Caodaists did not seek to imagine what an architecturally distinct Caodaist/Australian building might look like. They sought instead to create exact replicas of Vietnamese sacred buildings scaled to fit the site available. Building designs were done by Vietnamese, and the work carried out by volunteers using only the very basic materials. The façades of each temple seek to proclaim their difference to the surrounding urban landscape. Although much negotiation took place between local councils and the community during the planning and development stage of each building, the two temples present themselves as resolutely Caodaist in style. Where they differ from buildings in Vietnam, we find that the cause is more related to local government restraints and attempts to address neighbours' concerns in the scale of the building.[109] These markers of difference are also stressed in the online world. The Sydney temples have no dedicated website in English.[110] The cultural insularity of both temples is heightened by the fact that many co-religionists in the Sydney community knew each other or knew of each other's families when residents of Tây Ninh province before 1975. After resettlement, many Caodaist neighbours in Vietnam became neighbours once more in Sydney. This

[106] For example: Hum Dac Bui and Ngasha Beck, *Caodai: Faith of Unity* (Fayetteville: Emerald Wave, 2000); Hum Dac Bui and Hong Dang Bui, *Caodai: A Way of Peaceful Life* (Canada, 2018).
[107] See, www.caodai.org accessed 12 March 2020.
[108] See, https://www.acnc.gov.au/charity/426396283ef4f66119d236466c350a45, accessed 11 March, 2020.
[109] Christopher Hartney, *A Gift to Australia: Caodaism and the First Caodaist Temple of Australia* (Sydney: Caodaist Temple of New South Wales, 2000); Hartney, *Our Divine Mother of Carramar: The Australian Điện Thờ Phật Mẫu of Caodaism*.
[110] A Sydney Caodaist, who by profession is a library technician, created the website 'Centre for Studies in Caodaism, Sydney, Australia' (https://www.daotam.info/tam.htm). This is a comprehensive online library for Caodaist sources and a vital resource for researchers. It archives auxiliary texts on the religion, and numerous translations. It certainly contains information about the Sydney temples, but it is not, however, a simple landing page for Caodaism in Sydney nor is it primarily directed at welcoming the generally curious member of the general public into either building.

interconnectedness increases the regional, familial, and hence community tightness of the group. The other factor that deeply binds this community is a shared political outlook concerning Vietnam.

There remains a fervent and prevailing hope among first-generation Vietnamese in Australia that political conditions will change in the homeland enough to justify a relocation to Tây Ninh once religious freedom can be ensured. But this condition is yet to be met. Immediately after 1975, 40-odd leading Caodaists were executed by government forces and many of these died as retaliation for their roles in colluding with the French or the Americans.[111] Séance communications were banned at Tây Ninh and, after a failed attempt by the government to rid itself of new religions like Caodaism, a management committee was installed to control the day-to-day operation of the faith.[112] In 1986 the policy of *Chính sách Đổi Mới* led to a more relaxed approach to the outside world. It was at this point that the expectation of political change in Vietnam increased. But the change towards openness were limited and expectations of a free and safe return were not met.

Although Sydney Caodaists remain wary of Hanoi, in some regards temporary return has become easier for them. Changes in visa conditions now allow Australian citizens of Vietnamese birth to return and stay in Vietnam for extended periods – up to five years between visa renewals.[113] Nevertheless, government suspicion of new religions and Caodaism in particular remains palpable.[114] This is emphasised by the stories of community leaders in Sydney and elsewhere in the West who have been "invited" to intimidating interviews with the state security services when they have landed in Saigon. Additionally, second and third generation Vietnamese Australians have so entrenched themselves in their lives in Sydney, that as workers or retirees on the state pension, and also as parents and grandparents, there are compelling personal reasons for why first generation Vietnamese-Australians may not be able to return to Vietnam. As they age and face the reality of death in Australia, the Caodaists of Sydney have been increasingly eager to complete their religious responsibilities before reincarnation. This then brings us to one of the central religious motivations for the opening of this new temple. As we will see below, the Divine Mother plays a significant role in the soteriological mechanisms of the faith. Temple worship to her allays fears of death in numerous ways.

Mother Goddesses, Creation, and the Millennium in Caodaism

In the scriptures and prayers of Caodaism, the Divine Mother is referred to by at least a dozen names, each with their own substantial place in the religious history of East Asia.[115] Through these

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[111] Blagov, 'Caodaism in Vietnam: Religion versus Restrictions and Persecution'.

[112] Blagov.

[113] 'Five-Year Visa Exemption for Vietnamese and Family Members', accessed 14 February 2020, http://vietnamconsulate.org.au/en/services/5-year-visa-exemption-for-vietnamese-and-family-members-25.html.

[114] Sergei Blagov, 'Vietnamese New Religious Movements: An Introduction', in *Handbook of East Asian New Religious Movements*, ed. Lukas Pokorny and Franz Winter (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 547–64.

[115] Of these the main ones are: (1) Đức Phật Mẫu – literally "Venerable Buddha Mother." A title framed by Buddhist terminology. (2) Tây Vương Mẫu (西王母) Queen Mother of the West – a Vietnamese transliteration of a traditional Chinese term referring to the imperial consort of the Jade or Heavenly Emperor. Tây Vương Mẫu is worshiped in many Chinese local temples in Vietnam and is a figure of

multiple names we can trace an extensive syncretic urge to bring into the religion many of the supreme female personalities from Chinese folk religion, Daoism, Buddhism, and from nineteenth-century new religions that spread across much of the East Asian world. The religion regards these various motherly figures as a manifestation of the one supreme female deity. To do this takes some complex theological management. As we will see, each of these previous deities are used to re-construct a supreme female personality that, through her motherly characteristics, brings cosmogenic, soteriological, microcosmic, and millennial strands together in such a way as to make her an irrepressible force for worship.

Paradisical feasts hosted by the Divine Mother feature as a significant trope in the funeral prayers of Caodaism and in the main prayer to the Divine Mother (composed sometime in the mid-1930s). The poetic symbology in these prayers is intense. In the latter prayer the line "'Chưởng đào tiên thủ giải trường tồn" depicts the Divine Mother offering to believers the peaches of immortality. This links directly to Tây Vương Mẫu (西王母) or Queen Mother of the West – an immortal peach-bearing figure made most famous in the Ming Dynasty religious novel *Xi You Ji* (西遊記) - but whose antecedents are much older.[116] By tracing these antecedents we can state that the perennial existence of a mother figure in East Asian sacral systems seems to vastly precede the idea of a fatherly one. The Jade Emperor, upon whose lore Đức Cao Đài is partly formed, seems to be a much younger divine personality - at only about a thousand years old.[117] Although there is also a Christian heritage of monotheism interwoven into this supreme deity, Đức Cao Đài is linked also to the Neo-Confucian philosophical concept of the 太一 tai yi or ultimate principal.[118] Both traditions, nevertheless, remain younger than the extensive heritage of the Divine Mother.

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importance in Chinese literature. (3) Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu (瑤池金母) in Chinese literally "Golden Mother of the Nacre Lake" – a term that arises out of Chinese Dragon Flower Millenarian texts, particularly from the 19th Century. This name makes reference to the celestial region where her palace is located (beside the Nacre Lake). This is the name of the Divine Mother in Vietnamese as it is found on the main altar in the Carramar temple. (4) Diêu Trì Cung (瑤池宮)- Nacre Lake Palace – the palace name serves sometimes as a euphemism for the Divine Mother. (5) Kim Mẫu Nguyên Quân (金母元君) Golden Mother of the First Ruler – another traditional Chinese name rendered into Vietnamese. (6) *Vô Sanh Lão Mẫu* (無生老母). Literally "Not-born venerable mother" – i.e. the eternal mother that came before cosmic existence. (7) *Vô Sanh* Phật-Mẫu (無生佛母). Again literally "Not-born Buddha mother." These two terms can also relate to the "nameless" and "unborn" female force whose most well-known appearance is in the Daoist Classic *The Dao De Jing*. (8) Cửu Thiên Huyền Nữ (九天玄女) Profound Lady of the Nine Heavens. (9) Cửu Thiên Nương Nương (九天娘娘) Goddess of the Nine Heavens. (10) Đức Mẹ thiêng liêng – Venerable Divine Mother. (11) Mẹ sanh – Mother of Creation. (12) Diêu-Trì Kim-Mẫu Vô-Cực Thiên-Tôn – a name used in the main ritual to the Divine Mother literally (Nacre-Lake, Golden Mother, Infinite, Divinely Honoured).

[116] Our new translation of this prayer can be found, together with a commentary by Phạm Công Tắc at https://www.academia.edu/41766631/Our_Divine_Mother_of_Carramar_The_Australian_Điện_Thờ_Phật_Mẫu_of_Caodaism accessed 11/3/2020.

[117] Anna Seidel, 'Yü Huang', in *Encyclopedia of Religions* (New York: Macmillan, 1987).

[118] Paul Demiéville, 'Philosophy and Religion from Han to Sui', in *The Cambridge History of China*, ed. Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe, vol. 1 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 867.

Sinologists trace the existence of 西王母 [Xiwangmu] back at least 3500 years when this name appears on oracle bones from the Shang Dynasty. It is quite possible, however, that the original meaning of Xiwangmu had more to do with ancestor worship than as the specific name of a goddess.[119] This overlap between ancestor figure and goddess, as we will see, carries on in Caodaist conceptions and becomes key to understanding the need in Sydney for a temple dedicated to her.[120]

An abiding feminine force manifests most evidently in the Chinese Classic the *Dao De Jing* (c.300BCE). In Chapter 25 reference is made to the oblique force before heaven and earth which is referred to here as great, and as the mother of all things. This sentiment is amplified in the opening line of Chapter 42. And the pattern here is also partly reflected in Caodaist cosmogony…

> 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物
> (The Dao gives birth to the one, the one births the two, the two births the three, and the three births the myriad things.)

This pattern of cosmogonic development is found in a sermon from 1928 by the Caodaist leader Phạm Công Tắc. Here he explains creation. But switches the primary force of the universe to a male force:

> There had been nothing before the creation. Then the two masses of air called Hư Vô Chi Khí [which relate to the concept of Wu wei (無爲) or void - CH] came from nowhere and smashed into each other. God's soul was formed from this, and His Throne called Thái Cực [Taiji, (太極) or Supreme Ultimate - CH] came to exist. The fiery globe called Thái Cực, which is the mechanism of the material, divided

[119] See Paul R. Goldin, 'On the Meaning of the Name Xi Wangmu, Spirit-Mother of the West' in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol 122 no. 1 (2002) pp.83-85. Here the author suggests, quoting a passage from the 爾 雅 *Er Ya* - an early thesaurus (c.200sBCE), that the term 王母 originally relied on 王 meaning not 'ruler' as it is most often understood, but powerful spirit. Thus 王母 can refer to one's deceased paternal grandmother. In light of this 西王母 may have originally meant specifically "deceased paternal grandmother of the west."

[120] Other early textual references to a significant female divine force can be found in two central Chinese works. The first is the 庄子 *Zhungzi* (c.300sBCE), where Xiwangmu is depicted as a great and venerable goddess sitting on a mountain peak in the West and in the 荀子 *Xunzi* (c.200sBCE) where the author of this work depicts the discipleship of an ancient ruler Yu: he says 'Yu studied with the Queen Mother.' Both these texts are much younger than oracle bone evidence, but they are still quite ancient. The *Zhuang Zi* is one of the earliest texts of Daoism (c.300sBCE) and is quite possibly an earlier work than the more famous *Dao De Jing.* The *Xun Zi*, on the other hand, is one of the formative texts of the newly developing school of Confucianism. That both traditions hold Xiwangmu in mutual esteem and see her as a religious authority is noteworthy for a religion like Caodaism where Daoism and Confucianism play such an important role.

> itself under God's orders into the Lưỡng/Nghi [yin/yang]…[121]

This passage seeks to demonstrate how Cao Đài came into existence from clashing winds of the void. It goes on to posit that Thái Cực's first duty is to separate out the male and the female. Only when this is done can life develop as a gendered yin/yang syzygy. Cao Đài then becomes the male aspect and his co-equal becomes Phật Mẫu or the Divine Mother. She represents the yin aspect of all creation. It is from this position of almost co-equality that her millennial aspects begin to emerge in Caodaism. It is because Thái Cực is considered primary yet also analogous to Cao Đài (and not Phật Mẫu) that Caodaism claims to be a monotheism ruled by a male deity. It is to this deity that dispensations of salvation have been offered across human history. Although this idea is originally more closely connected to the development of a mother goddess.

The millennial dimensions of Caodaism are drawn from vernacular traditions that develop from as far back as, at least, the 1500s with the 寶卷/Bai Luan or Precious Scrolls tradition of lay scripture. These emerged in China during the Ming and flourished during the foreign/Manchurian Qing dynasty. These precious scrolls, delivered through automatic writing, often referred to a major female deity. These groups also expressed coded political dissent and appealed to a newly literate class of worshippers who reacted against the Confucian (and patriarchal) orthodoxy that, during the Qing, found itself in the service of China's foreign rulers.[122] One noteworthy example of these texts is 古佛天偵考証龍華寶經/*The Dragon Flower Scripture Verified by the Old Buddha Tian-chen*.[123] This work, like many of its kind, promoted the idea of a future great meeting of souls where the worthy would be given high rank in heaven. This idea flows through into Caodaism and helps explain the official name of the religion - *Đại-Đạo Tam-Kỳ Phổ-Độ - (Great Religion for the Third Period of Salvation).* Other vernacular religions referred to an "Eternal Venerable Mother" and gave her a central place in these schemes of salvation. This was especially so in White Lotus groups and amongst those fleeing Qing persecution by moving to Taiwan, Vietnam, or further afield.[124] Most importantly, Chinese movements venerating a supreme female deity help enervate the tradition of spirit writing as *the* "new religious technology" of these times. As Jordan and Overmyer explain,

> The venerable mother myth is related to a three-stage time scheme of Buddhist origin in which the moral quality of the world gradually declines. In sectarian belief, the third stage is upon us, marked by a moral decay, rejection of religion, and the disappearance of traditional forms of teaching. While in the Ming and Qing periods

[121] Translation archived at: https://www.academia.edu/42204489/A_Sermon_On_the_Process_of_the_Creation_of_the_Cosmos_from_a_Caodaist_Perspective_and_Other_Subjects, accessed 11 March 2020.
[122] Daniel L. Overmyer, *Precious Volumes: An Introduction to Chinese Sectarian Scriptures from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), passim.
[123]Anonymous, '古佛天偵考証龍華寶經', accessed 12 December 2018, http://www.taolibrary.com/category/category50/c50039/01.htm.
[124] Blagov, *Caodaism*, 4.

> the onset of this third stage could signal the arrival of the Maitreya, come to renew the world, by the nineteenth century the new age was understood in some groups to be manifested in a new, more direct form of revelation. This was *fu-chi*, which was employed when in desperation, the Mother emptied the heavens, ordering all the gods and saints to descend to communicate a new moral and religious teaching. This was a new dispensation, the last chance for human beings to change their ways and for society to reform.[125]

From Xiwangmu of popular Chinese literature to the Eternal Mother of Buddhist-inspired popular and millenarian movements, we can glimpse at how the Divine Mother of Caodaism develops compelling (and competing) antecedents and combines them. The newly integrated deity is seen as central to the original creation event of the universe and now offers millennial promises of salvation. But the philosophical impact of the Divine Mother does not end here.

Microcosmic Corporeality and Filiality

In Caodaism the self is understood as a tripartite entity. The foundations of ritual to Cao Đài *and* Phật Mẫu are based on worshippers offering these three elements of self to the altar (and thus to heaven). *These are the* Tam Bửu, or three precious elements: tinh, the physical body (represented in ritual offerings as a sacrifice of fruit or flowers upon the altar), the spiritual mind referred to as khí (represented by an offering of wine), and energy of the transcendent soul or thần (represented by an offering of tea). These elements can be traced from both the Chinese tradition of Daoism and the Western movement of spiritism.[126] In both traditions the subtle, or astral body, or perispirit, was seen as the third part of the self that communicated with the spirits during séance and, with training, could write with, speak on behalf of, and even visit the celestial realms in shaman-like journeys.[127]

Tinh is the same material as the physical world around us and is often described in Caodaist theology as the "animal" part of the human which the more elevated parts of the self ride through

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[125] David K Jordan and Daniel L. Overmyer, *Flying Phoenix.* (Princeton University Pres, 2016), 17.

[126] These three aspects link back to concepts of the body in the tradition of Religious Daoism and in particular the concepts of 精 (Jing – essence or seed), 氣 (Qi – breath essence) and 神 (Shen – soul divine spark). This then has a correlation to spiritist understandings of the body (flesh, perispirit, and soul). See, Isabelle Robinet, *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*, trans. Phyllis Brooks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). And also, Allan Kardec, *Le livre des esprits: contenant les principes de la doctrine spirite sur l'immortalité de l'âme, la nature des esprits et leurs rapports avec les hommes, les lois morales, la vie présente, la vie future et l'avenir de l'humanité* (Paris: Dervy-Livres, 2007).

[127] For an example of such astral journeys see: Christopher Hartney, *How Heaven Operates: The Confucian/Daoist/Buddhist Afterworld of Caodaism as Envisioned by Phạm Công Tắc. Being the Original Text, English Translation and Commentary on the Book Con Đường Thiêng-Liêng Hằng-Sống or The Divine Path to Eternal Life – a Celestial Journey and Esoteric Mapping of Heaven Delivered in 35 Sermons during the Years 1948 and 1949 by Phạm Công Tắc Leader of the Vietnamese New Religion of Caodaism.* (In press, 2020).

life. In contrast the Thần is our soul which is gifted by Cao Đài. It is seen as an essential part of his existence and which, after numerous reincarnations in the sub-lunar world, eventually reunites with him. It is the Khí that, Caodaists say, is created in the Golden Basin (kim bàn /金盤) of the Divine Mother and gives to us our mind. Without her creative work, the Caodaist self would not be complete. It is in this way that Caodaists refer to her as the foundational mother of all beings.

This final point is stressed in an innovative set of sermons delivered by Phạm Công Tắc in 1948 *where the leader of Caodaism visualised heaven for those present and escorted them through its various offices and palaces in a shaman-like visualisation process. In the Fifth Sermon of this series,* Phạm Công Tắc escorts his followers into the heavenly palace of the Divine Mother and explains what will happen when each person looks at her:

> When we are able to enter here, we even see our own mother! If a grandfather looks up, he will see his mother; if a grandchild looks up, he also will see his mother. Our personal love will be directed towards this complete love. On earth, mothers often scold, but when we return to this realm our heavenly mother is filled with love. This mother doesn't behave like mothers on earth. When we see her, all our past love returns. It is indescribable; even those who are hard-hearted will become emotional and burst into tears when they see the noble love embodied in this great mother. Many people who believe in and understand the Way do not realise this. Even Đức Phật Di-Lạc (Maitreya Buddha) who holds a high and honourable position as the head of many heavens is still his mother's child.[128]

This passage stresses that universal motherhood connects us all and by this image, Phạm Công Tắc redirects intense feelings of filiality to this deity. In this way, Cao Đài *and* Phật Mẫu become ideal parents deserving of the highest filial respect far beyond that of one's own earthly parents. I have charted elsewhere the peripheral and scattered history of the worship of Phật Mẫu in Caodaism before the 1940s. The wide renown of these sermons amongst Tây Ninh Caodaists from 1948 coincides also with the start of Phật Mẫu's rise to intense popularity in the religion. I think this is no coincidence.[129]

The Carramar Temple Context

When we examine the community locations of Vietnamese Australians across Sydney there are three main areas of settlement. Marrickville in the inner-West of the city, Bankstown in the South-west, and Cabramatta, still in the South-west but much further from the heart of the city. It is this latter suburb that is the most highly populated with Vietnamese-Australians. The community's first worshipping space was established in the 1980s. It was a rented house located in the Inner-west at St Peters (close to Marrickville). This was an early half-way house for Caodaists newly arrived in Sydney. It had a modest ritual area for ancestor worship and an altar to

[128] Hartney.
[129] Hartney.

Đức Cao Đài. After seeking to relocate to something more permanent, in the early 1990s, Caodaists started searching for vacant land for a dedicated temple. I have covered this development elsewhere in detail.[130] The building of this temple was a decade-long undertaking of significant difficulty involving the acquiring of cheap excess vacant land from the state of New South Wales, a lengthy planning procedure with Canterbury Council, and extensive building works. This first temple opened in 2001. The community sought to avoid these complications when constructing their temple to Đức Phật Mẫu. So in 2004 a modest fibre-board house was purchased in Carramar – a satellite suburb of the Vietnamese cultural centre of Cabramatta.

An altar to Đức Phật Mẫu was installed in the lounge room of this old house. The bedrooms were used to house (female) temple guardians. A shed in the back yard of the property provided community space, kitchen, and eating areas. Worship to the Divine Mother took place in this modest manner for more than a decade. In 2016 the community's finances were strong enough to demolish the house and construct something purpose-built. Plans were submitted to Fairfield council and, as is often the case with new temples in Sydney, substantial resistance was met from local residents.[131] Wattle Avenue is a withered shopping precinct dotted with mostly bordered-up shops. The street runs alongside a suburban and goods railway line which provides noise disturbance throughout the night. Despite this on-going noise pollution, residents complained to Council that the gentle chanting coming from the temple would be too much to bear. These complaints were little more than xenophobic. The Caodaists were required to attend a number of community meetings with Council and residents before planning was approved.

During September 2018, the altar inside this new building was finally dedicated, and a year later, on the 10 November 2019, the Holy Mother temple was officially opened with a crowd of several hundred adepts and supporters present. Before explaining the final form of the building, worship processes should be outlined first.

Processes of Worship

The presence of the Divine Mother in Caodaism was perhaps the first major event of the religion. D*uring September 1925 – three months before the religion was announced through séance by heaven – a special ceremony took place in a private residence in Saigon. It was a banquet to welcome the Divine Mother and her nine attendants – each a female buddha. Early Caodaists were instructed, by séance, on how to set out this banquet with a table, vegetarian food, tea, and empty chairs. Once seated, the invisible spirits were served, then they departed. This event then set the practice of Caodaism's* Hội Yến Diêu Trì, or feast of the Divine Mother. It is now an annual ceremony central to the Caodaist ritual calendar and held on the *15th Day of the 8th Lunar*

[130] Hartney, 'A Strange Peace: Dao Cao Dai and Its Manifestation in Sydney'; Hartney, *A Gift to Australia: Caodaism and the First Caodaist Temple of Australia.*

[131] See, Christopher Hartney, 'Performances of Multiculturalism: Three South Asian Communities in Sydney', in *South Asians in the Diaspora: History and Religious Traditions*, ed. Jacobsen A. Knut and P. Pratap Kumar (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

*Month while East Asians more generally celebrate the "Autumn Moon" festival (*中秋節/ Tết Trung Thu*).*

In the sermons of Phạm Công Tắc we read how serving food and drink to the Divine Mother at this banquet is both an act of worship and a practice of heightened filial piety. It is these combined aspects of the banquet that has helped make this ceremony one of the most popular in Caodaism and, for Caodaists, a ceremony that is essential to both a demonstration of (celestial) filial piety and their own personal salvation. This ceremony, however, was not central to Caodaist concerns before the 1930s and no significant space in Tây Ninh was set aside as a temple to her veneration. During the 1940s, a temple that was designed to celebrate filial piety more generally was remodelled to become the main temple to the Divine Mother. This was more an afterthought than a specifically planned building. This fact has had consequences for the build in Carramar. When building the temple to Đức Cao Đài in Wiley Park, local Caodaists had to reconstruct hundreds of features that appear originally in the official temple to Cao Đài in Tây Ninh (completed in the years after World War II). Because the temple architecture to the Divine Mother remains more temporary, more flexibility was possible.

In addition to the annual welcome and feast for the Divine Mother, monthly and daily ceremonies have been added. Monthly worship takes place on the first and fifteenth of every lunar month. It is at this time that Caodaists congregate to venerate this deity. Additionally, there are daily prayers at every Holy Mother Temple. These are offered four times a day at 6AM, Noon, 6PM and Midnight. Caodaists present in the temple or near-by will join these short prayers, but often only the temple's caretakers will be present for these briefer daily ceremonies.

The 'Look' And Function Of The Carramar Temple

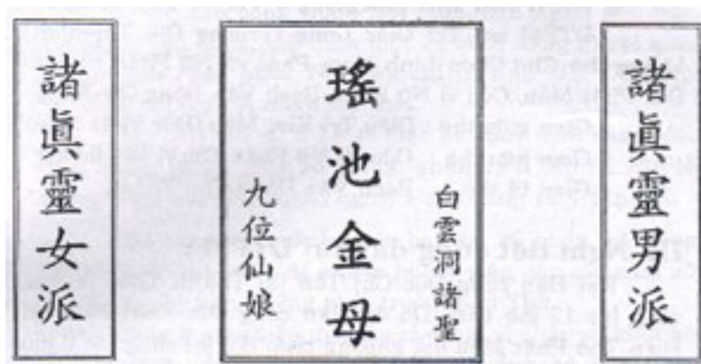
As with local Phật Mẫu temples in Vietnam, the Carramar temple is distinguished by one central tower over the main door (temples to Cao Đài have two towers either side of the main door). Although this tower has been lowered considerably to comply with local planning dictates. Whereas a Phật Mẫu temple in Vietnam would give as much height as possible to the worshipping space, in Carramar the worship space is confined to the upper story of the building. This is reached from a main staircase just inside the front door. Here, windows are set high in the wall to protect the privacy of neighbours. In Vietnam much larger windows would be used. The height in the upstairs area is amplified by a clerestory ridge in the roof admitting additional light. On the ground floor toilets, a kitchen and eating area and other administrative areas are located.

With the main banquet ritual permitted only in Tây Ninh, the Carramar temple only needs to accommodate monthly and daily prayers. These are facilitated by three altars lined up along the rear wall of the upstairs space. Instead of statues of the nine female buddhas who attend the Divine Mother, in Carramar there is a raised altar screen flanked by two columns on which the following objects appear:

A lute – symbolising the First Female Buddha
An incense burner symbolising the Second.

A ‘dragon-wisk’ fan representing the Third
A golden name board symbolises the Fourth
A ‘wand of contentment’ represents the Fifth Female Buddha
A banner of ‘wandering freedom’ represents the Sixth
A lotus flower represents the Seventh.
A basket of flowers symbolises the Eighth
And a flute represents the Ninth.

When we turn our attention to the name plaque on the altar we see the following characters. This plaque is dominated by the name of Phật Mẫu using the following words from top to bottom.



On the left side of this central name in the collective title of the nine female immortals.

1. Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu /瑤池金母 – see chapter two for a more complete explanation of this and other names applied to this deity.
2. On the left of this central name is the collective title for the Nine Immortals: Cửu-Vị Tiên-Nương /九位仙娘.
3. And on the right side of this central name is the title of the “Saints of the White Lodge” or Bạch-Vân-Động Chư-Thánh /白雲洞 諸 聖.

The reference to “White Lodge” here refers to the moon which, in Caodaist cosmology is seen as a sacred way-station where souls with advanced merit prepare themselves for reincarnation into life on earth with the express duty of promoting religious advancement. Many of the early founders of Caodaism were assumed to be advanced souls and would have passed through the White Lodge before their birth into Vietnam in time for the start of Caodaism.

On the altars at both Tây Ninh and Carramar the layout of various objects is consistent with other Caodaist altars. Offerings of flowers, fruit, wine, tea, candles and incense are placed here in a similar way to the altar in the Great Divine Temple and at Wiley Park. The main difference between a father and mother altars being a lamp over the former that represents the Universal Monad and brings us back to the theological place Đức Phật Mẫu holds in Caodaism: a being who is co-equal to Đức Cao Đài in most respects, but who does not precede him.

Conclusions

In this religion's brief history, the voice of the Divine Mother was one of the first to manifest to the earliest disciples in séance during 1925. It was a voice, however, that was obscured by other concerns and other divine messages as the religion grew to prominence across the French colony of Indochina after 1926. Only in the mid 1940s does she return as an increasingly central concern for Caodaists. In this period she rises almost to co-equality with Đức Cao Đài and her presence seems to challenge the monotheistic claims of a religion that now so devotedly worships this divine couple through the filial paradigm explained here. We have seen here how the Divine Mother has developed in Caodaism theologically. Made from a composition of motherly deities from East Asian religious systems, both ancient and more recent, she takes on what Caodaists consider vital soteriological and millennial dimensions. As such, when the aging Caodaist population of Sydney got the chance, they dedicated serious resources in time and money to construct a temple specifically to her. Closer to the heart of the Vietnamese community in Sydney than their first temple, this new build allows them to complete their religious duties without necessarily returning to Vietnam – an option that remains politically limited. Given the 'temporary' nature of the main temple to Đức Phật Mẫu in Tây Ninh, Caodaists were not bound to incorporate a wide range of details into this new temple – as they did with their first temple. And, as we have seen, local council pressures and neighbourly concerns have additionally altered the nature of this new building. But for a small community still dealing with the impact of homesickness, their new temple in Sydney does much to create a cultural home space for this exiled group. It is both a religious and a political statement about their place as Vietnamese and Australians and is a religious site that warrants much more study, which I hope this initial research encourages.

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