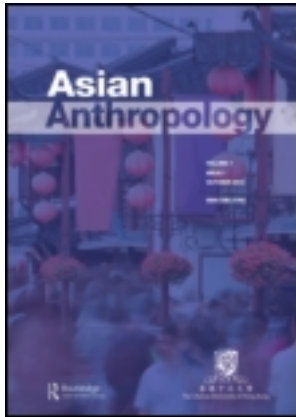


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REPORT

The Caodai Mother Goddess in a globalizing world: mediation between religious universalism and homeland orientation among Vietnamese Caodaists in the United States

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The Mother Goddess in Caodaism has emerged in an American context as a focus for tracing the centralization and transnational development of the Tay Ninh Caodai community, specifically in exchanges with coreligionists in Vietnam. This religious group has bifurcated into two distinct strands since its arrival to the US in 1975. The nondenominational branch has strategically erased the Mother Goddess in an effort to build a cross-sectarian base. It has aimed at universalizing Caodaism by de-emphasizing the significance of the Tay Ninh Holy See. In contrast, the other group has institutionalized itself around the Mother Goddess in order to assert the significance of the Tay Ninh Holy See. Paradoxically, the latter but not the former strand has become increasingly transnational despite its non-universal aspirations. This is precisely because the organization's centralization around the Mother Goddess reorients believers to their homeland and reactivates their ethnic identity.

Keywords: Caodaism; transnationalism; Mother Goddess; Vietnam; Tay Ninh Holy See

On 23 September 2010 (the 15th day of the eighth lunar calendar month), more than 100,000 people gathered at the Tay Ninh Holy See (*Tòa Thánh Tây Ninh*) in southern Vietnam, to attend the most popular Caodai event – the Mother Goddess Annual Festival (*Hội Yến Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu*) (Baomoi 2011). For the first time since 1975, when Caodaism and its highest ranking ecclesiastical body – the Caodai Holy See – came under the strict control of communists, delegations from the US, Cambodia, Canada, and Bangladesh were invited to attend the celebration. One of the liveliest programs was the evening parade that immediately preceded the midnight service. The grand and much-awaited float carried a statue of the Caodai Mother Goddess (*Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu*),¹ surrounded by 13 female fairies and immortals. She is depicted as an Asian woman with black hair, wearing an elaborate imperial yellow dress and sitting on top of a phoenix-like animal (CaodaiFrance 2012). The original model of this set of statues was constructed in 1951 and is displayed in the Temple of Gratitude at the Caodai Holy See (see Figure 1). Up to this day, there are no other statues of the Mother Goddess. Although this is only a temporary sanctuary for the Mother Goddess, Chief Pham Cong Tac's 1951 decree stated that only buildings within the Holy See compound could serve as the official Mother Goddess "temple" (*đền*) while other worshipping centres are simply "shrines" (*điện*). These shrines can only represent the Mother Goddess through four classical Chinese characters, 瑶池金母 (Golden Mother of the Resplendent Lake), and are not allowed to hold the annual

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Figure 1. Statue of the Mother Goddess inside the Tay Ninh Caodai Holy See.

festival. As a result of these restrictions, the Caodai Mother Goddess has become a mediator of unity and the basis of institutional centralization among Tay Ninh Caodaists, who have historically constituted approximately 70% of all Caodaists and continue to do so (Jammes 2009): There are approximately 2.2 million Tay Ninh Caodaists among 3.2 million total Caodaists in Vietnam, a country of 90 million people.

In 1926, after receiving spiritual messages from the Mother Goddess about a universal God named Cao Dai, three Vietnamese Confucian scholars officially declared the name of the new religion – “The Great Way of the Third Period of Salvation” (*Đạo Đại Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ*). It is abbreviated and informally referred to as “Caodaism.” *Cao Đài* in Vietnamese literally means “high palace,” referring to the Supreme Palace where the Caodai God reigns. Under the conditions of colonialism and contacts with different cultures, the religion aimed to create harmony between Eastern and Western religious philosophies by uniting people across political, social, and ethnic strata under the universal Caodai God (Werner 1981). During its first two decades, Caodaism’s global outreach included exchanges with disciples from Cambodia, France, India, and Japan.

Caodaism first arrived in the US in 1975 as a result of the massive influx of Vietnamese who were fleeing from communism in Vietnam. This report illustrates how, in the American context, the Mother Goddess has emerged as a focus for tracing the centralization and transnational development of the Tay Ninh Caodai community, specifically in exchanges with coreligionists in Vietnam. It shows that this group has bifurcated into two distinct strands since 1975, when the first large wave of Vietnamese Caodaists fled communism in Vietnam and resettled in the US. The nondenominational group has strategically erased the Mother Goddess in an effort to build a cross-sectarian base. It has aimed at universalizing Caodaism by de-emphasizing the significance of the Tay Ninh Holy See. In contrast, the other group has institutionalized itself around the Mother Goddess in order to assert the significance of the

Tay Ninh Holy See before it submitted to the control of the Vietnamese communist government in 1975. My research reveals that, paradoxically, the latter but not the former strand has become increasingly transnational despite its non-universal aspirations. This is precisely because the organization's centralization around the Mother Goddess reorients believers to their homeland and reactivates their ethnic identity.

Historical background

Despite its all-encompassing teachings, Caodaism developed into many sects during its early years due to intense internal infighting among believers over leadership positions at the Tay Ninh Holy See, the headquarters of supreme leadership and authority of the religion (Ho Tai 1983; Hartney 2004; Oliver 1976). Within this context, the Mother Goddess became a distinctive representation and centralization of Tay Ninh Caodaism, the original and largest branch of Caodaism. In 1928, two years after Caodaism was declared a religion, the first Mother Goddess temple in Vietnam was built in My Tho, approximately 135 km from the Holy See (Bui 1986; Caodai Overseas Missionary 2012). Pham Cong Tac, one of the Caodai founders, led the construction project of the My Tho temple under the spiritual guidance of the Mother Goddess. His aim was to preserve the "original" Caodai teachings associated with the Tay Ninh branch.

Tac's work immediately followed his visit to the first Mother Goddess Temple based in Phnom Penh on the occasion of the Mother Goddess Annual Festival in 1927. At this event, he and other Caodaists received the first set of spiritual messages detailing the significance of the Mother Goddess in Caodaism. They learned that she holds equal and complementary status to the Caodai God, whose energy is Yang while hers is Yin. While all living and non-living things originated from God, the Mother Goddess created them by unifying the Yin and Yang energy, they were told. Through later successive exchanges, they also discovered that she had descended to earth at least nine times as mythological and historical figures in different cultures, including Hera (wife of Zeus) and Mary (mother of Jesus).

Between 1941 and 1946, when Pham Cong Tac was forced to go into exile in Madagascar by the French government, the Mother Goddess temple in My Tho was relocated to Truong Qui Thien, 3 km southwest of the Tay Ninh Holy See. Tac hoped that the transfer would centralize the Tay Ninh Caodai community and facilitate internal support among Caodaists during his absence and during the political turmoil in Vietnam.

Immediately after Tac returned from his exile, he further focused his efforts on centralizing Tay Ninh Caodaism through devotion to the Mother Goddess, distinguishing his branch from other Caodai sects. On 1 February 1947, he transferred the altar of the Mother Goddess from Truong Qui Thien to The Temple of Gratitude (*Ba'ô Ân Từ*) inside the Tay Ninh Holy See compound.² Beginning that year, the Temple of Gratitude replaced Truong Qui Thien as the primary host of the Mother Goddess Annual Festival. In 1951, Tac instructed the Committee of Construction to make statues of the Mother Goddess based on the painting of her on the altar.³ He also asked the men to add 13 additional female figures – four fairies that collectively form a choir (*Tiên Đòng Nữ Nhạc*) and nine mythological and historical figures who had obtained immortality through good deeds during their lifetime as humans. During the same year, Tac declared that no other places outside of the Caodai Holy See compound could legitimately consider themselves as Mother Goddess temples (*đền*) but only as shrines (*điện*) (Tran 2011; Kim 2011). By 1954, the Holy See became the primary Mother Goddess devotional site as Truong Qui Thien was reorganized into another area of religious devotion (Cao Dai Tu Dien 2003).

The Vietnamese Caodai community in the United States

Since the fall of South Vietnam to communist-controlled North Vietnam in 1975, more than two million Vietnamese have escaped Vietnam and resettled in new countries, not counting perhaps one million other Vietnamese people who did not survive their flight (Coughlan 1998; Robinson 1998; Tran 1997). Unlike the small number of Vietnamese who chose to live outside the country prior to this political upheaval, they were mostly refugees who were compelled to flee from their homeland because of fears of persecution. As a result of their traumatic exodus, Vietnamese-American civic involvement continued to be concerned with Vietnam while also engaging in the politics of their new permanent home in the US (Ong and Meyer 2004). Despite language differences and their recent arrival, many studies have shown that their rate of political activism is exceptionally high among all immigrants (Collet 2000; Vigdor 2008; Zhou and Bankston 1998). Through their political activism, Vietnamese-Americans have contributed to multiculturalism in the US by raising awareness about issues related to Vietnam and the significance of working across ethnic boundaries in American politics. Caodaists are particularly concerned with the control of the Tay Ninh Holy See and other religious institutions under the Vietnamese communist government. They have worked with other Vietnamese-American religious groups to lobby for religious freedom in Vietnam and have organized campaigns to assist coreligionists in their homeland as well as in other countries (Bui, personal communication 2012; Ninh 2010).

There are about 50 Tay Ninh Caodai temples outside Vietnam, nine of which are in California. Five of the nine temples in California are affiliated with Tay Ninh Caodaism: the Chestnut Caodai Temple, the California Caodai Temple, the San Jose Caodai Temple, the San Diego Caodai Temple, and the Sacramento Caodai Temple. Two other California temples are Tay Ninh-led but are nondenominational: the Anaheim Caodai Temple and the Pomona Caodai Temple. Only the temples in San Jose (northern California) and on Chestnut in Westminster (southern California) have altars of the Mother Goddess.

According to email exchanges with Kham V. Pham (2010), the highest-ranking religious leader of the Diocese of California, there are approximately 1350 Tay Ninh Caodaists in the US, constituting nearly 90% of all Caodaists in the country. Usually, Tay Ninh Caodai temples have at least three religious leaders, who usually do not work and devote most of their time to religious life at temples. In addition, about 10% of the followers are lay volunteers. As a result of this high level of involvements, the Head of the Diocese of California believes that “Caodaism is blossoming all over the world.”

Since their arrival in 1975, the first and largest number of Caodaists resettled in southern California but they were dispersed throughout the region. Because of their traumatic, unexpected, and abrupt exodus from their homeland, they were not able to immediately institutionalize their religious life in a new land. Caodaists were primarily concerned with adapting to the new society – such as learning English, securing employment, and reuniting with friends and family members. A number of them also converted “on paper” to Christianity in order to express gratitude to their Christian American sponsors (Hoskins 2006). Others set up private altars at home, practiced vegetarianism, and meditated regularly. However, over the course of the past three decades, the Tay Ninh Caodai community in the US has gradually reinstitutionalized itself. It has developed into two branches mediated through devotion to the Mother Goddess. One group has de-emphasized the role of the Mother Goddess in order to advocate for a universal, nonsectarian vision of Caodaism. The other has centralized itself around the Mother Goddess in order to preserve the Tay Ninh traditions amid the threats of communism in Vietnam since 1975.

Cross-sectarian Caodaism transplanted in the United States

Early non-denominational gatherings: the Mother Goddess de-emphasized

When a group of five Vietnamese-American Caodaists first met each other in 1979 through informal ties, word of mouth, and newspaper advertisements, they did not centralize the significance of the Mother Goddess in their communal religious functions in order to build bridges across sectarian differences. As detailed in the previous sections, the Mother Goddess represents the centralization of Caodaism under the Tay Ninh Holy See in Vietnam, which is the only place that could have a temple (*đền*) and annual festival for the Mother Goddess. As much as Tay Ninh Caodaists embrace the Mother Goddess as a symbol of their unity, members of other Caodai sects de-emphasize her significance in order to assert their distance from the Tay Ninh branch. Caodaists in the US must contend with this important difference in their efforts at constructing a nondenominational group. Although they all recognize the Mother Goddess, they have intentionally marginalized her presence in their collective rituals and space of worship. This erasure has been strategically mediated through a universal perspective on Caodaism, mitigating the dominant influences of the Tay Ninh Caodai branch and its Holy See. According to a Tay Ninh Caodaist, the significance of the Mother Goddess to Caodaists is analogical to that of the Virgin Mary to different Christian branches – Catholics worship her but Protestants do not.

These early Caodai leaders gradually built their community under the leadership of Do Vang Ly, introduced to them by a Caodai dignitary in France. Do was the former Ambassador of the Republic of Vietnam to the US and a member of the Centre for the Propagation of Caodai Teachings (Cơ Quan Phổ Thông Giáo Lý), which presents itself as a non-denominational research institute, but Tay Ninh Caodaists have generally considered it as a sect. He regularly welcomed them to his home in Los Angeles, a space of worship that became known as the “Caodai Temple of Los Angeles.”

During the early 1980s, many Caodaists from Orange County stopped attending Do’s temple due to the long-distance travel of approximately 80 km. Nevertheless, despite the reduction in the size of the community, Do and his remaining followers were able to make a down-payment for a home on a large piece of land in Perris, some 80 km east of Orange County. Their vision was to construct another Tay Ninh Holy See or a similar institutional umbrella on this property. Meanwhile, they remodeled the home into the “Caodai Temple of Perris” and established the Caodaism of the Overseas Vietnamese Organization with the aim of bringing Caodai teachings to non-Vietnamese.

Caodaists from Orange County sometimes congregated at the temple, especially during financial difficulties that restricted them from renting a local home for worship. However, the long distance discouraged many from returning permanently. Currently, about 40–50 Caodaists regularly attend the Caodai Temple of Perris, many of whom belong to Mr Do’s sect. Since the death of Mr Do in 2008, which left a leadership vacuum, this group has been struggling to regain its momentum.

Non-denominational centralization: the invisibility of the Mother Goddess

In 1983, a Tay Ninh Caodai-led strand split from Do’s group in order to build a local institution in Orange County. Following the model coalesced under Do’s leadership, the role of the Mother Goddess was de-emphasized in order to create a broad cross-sectarian coalition. This was particularly important because, on the practical side, these Caodaists depended on regular donations from members to pay off the monthly rent of a house that they used as a temple. Although they had previously met at a private home in order to

reduce housing expenses, this small space could not accommodate the growing Caodai community as a result of the influx of newly arrived Vietnamese refugees.

In 1986, under Che Thuan Nghiep, non-denominational Caodaists in Orange County successfully raised enough funding to purchase a home in Anaheim, Orange County. They converted the property into the “Caodai Temple of Anaheim.” The role of the Mother Goddess remained nearly invisible as this non-denominational community struggled to institutionalize itself. They did not allocate space for a Mother Goddess altar or observe the Mother Goddess Annual Festival, although the home has several spare rooms.⁴ Members formed the “Association of Caodai Seniors of Southern California” in order to facilitate leadership within the community.

In 1992, they led the establishment of the first nondenominational international Caodai group, known as the “Confederation of Overseas Caodaists.” During the 1990s, these Caodaists also expanded locally through the purchase of another temple in Pomona and a piece of land in Riverside. In 2008, the group sold some of its assets in order to purchase a property to build the “Caodai Center” in Anaheim. This center is focused on putting faith into practice by engaging in community activities such as holding meditation classes, distributing food to the homeless, and organizing cultural events for children. Through these outreach programs, nondenominational Caodaists in southern California hope to attract non-Vietnamese converts and build a communal space for the next US-born Vietnamese Caodai generation. They were not focused on reviving the Mother Goddess traditions.

The Tay Ninh Holy See decentered: Caodai universalism erases the Mother Goddess

Tay Ninh Caodaists in the nondenominational group have criticized the Tay Ninh branch for its arrogance. They believe that Tay Ninh Caodaism contradicts the universal theology of Caodaism in assuming that it is the “authentic” and central form of Codaism. As a dentist I interviewed said, “You just say that you are a Caodaist . . . It’s good enough. Caodaism is not called Tay Ninh Caodai. It’s just Caodaism.” A medical doctor further asserted that Tay Ninh Caodaism carries with it pride as well as the potential for exclusion. She said, “It [Tay Ninh Caodaism] is something to be proud of. But I think it’s wrong to say that you’re it . . . and then exclude everybody. Because I think you’re going against the doctrine of Caodaism.” The central philosophy of Caodaism is the belief in a universal God shared by everyone. She maintained that this is the foundation on which Caodaism teaches religious tolerance. However, she denounced Tay Ninh Caodaism for deviating from this fundamental belief by neglecting other Caodai perspectives and assuming superiority.

While this anti-Tay Ninh Caodaism stance has advocated an encompassing religious teaching, it has also undergirded disaffiliation from the Caodai Holy See in Vietnam. For example, an accountant discounted the significance of the Holy See in order to assert a nonsectarian view of Caodaism. She explained, in Vietnamese:

It [the Tay Ninh Holy See] is nothing special to me. Because in my religion, I believe in reincarnation. I have been born into so many lives, who knows where my origin is from . . . Possibly in a previous life, I was born in China, India . . . I cannot possibly know. That is why it [the Caodai Holy See Temple] is only a location. I do not have to think that I am from Tay Ninh, I only know the Caodai Tay Ninh sect. Caodai Ben Tre sect and Cao Dai Dao Phat sect – I do not need to know. I am not that closed-minded.

Although she once revered the Caodai Holy See as a child growing up a Tay Ninh Caodai household, she no longer saw it as “special” or more important than any other religious sites. The accountant suggested that she could have followed any religion, depending on chance and her birthplace.

Other Tay Ninh Caodaists in this nondenominational group shared this perspective. During an informal conversation, a college student informed me that she last visited the Tay Ninh Holy See in 2005 but, contrary to her expectations, she did not feel she belonged there. She explained that the people were not welcoming like those at her temple in California. Likewise, an engineer expressed that the Holy See Temple is “only a place.” During his trip to the Tay Ninh province in 2003, he did not feel compelled to visit it amid his “busy schedule” with family and friends. Although these participants recognized the important role of the Holy See in the history of Tay Ninh Caodaism, they expressed a skeptical view toward its claim as the “center” of Caodaism, the place that unites all Caodaists and guides the religion.

These people believed that the Caodai God exists in many other sacred places outside of the Tay Ninh Holy See. During several scripture sessions, they discussed “the body is the temple” because God resides within each of them. As the medical doctor said,

So each one of us has some components of God. For me, my own belief of it is your conscience. Like when you do something, you feel bad, your heart’s pumping fast, that’s part of God in a way . . . telling you that that’s not right.

In addition to the embodiment of God, they believed that the Caodai God exists in many places. As an informant said, in Vietnamese:

To me, wherever there is God, then we can go there to pray. It does not mean that we have to go to the temple at the Tay Ninh Holy See, the Pomona Temple, or the California Temple . . . Wherever there is an altar, then there is God, and we can just go there to worship.

He suggested that the Tay Ninh Holy See Temple cannot represent the omnipresence of God nor does it have the sole central authority within Caodaism. He echoed other participants’ belief that the Caodai community exists under the eyes of the Caodai God rather than the Tay Ninh Holy See. During several youth scripture sessions, participants discussed that people’s “limited minds” and irrationalities are incapable of materializing a temple for God. This perspective opposes the Tay Ninh Caodai belief that the Holy See is sacred place because it was constructed under divine instructions, sent to Caodai founders through spiritual messages.

Through these rearticulations of the embodiment of the Caodai God and his omnipresence, Tay Ninh Caodai members in the nondenominational strand in the US have mitigated the centrality of Tay Ninh Caodaism and its Holy See. This disaffiliation and distancing has mediated the erasure of the Mother Goddess, who represents the spiritual and institutional centralization of Tay Ninh Caodaism at the Holy See. Over the course of two years of fieldwork, I observed that these nondenominational Tay Ninh Caodaists referenced the Mother Goddess only during scripture classes and virtual meetings as part of the discussions. However, as of today, they still do not hold the Mother Goddess Annual Ceremony nor do they have a Mother Goddess altar. Although members may attend the ceremony separately at a Tay Ninh temple, this is not popularly advocated or encouraged.

Tay Ninh Caodaism revived in the United States

The re-emergence of Tay Ninh Caodaism: the first Mother Goddess shrine, 1992–1998

As the nondenominational Tay Ninh-led Caodai branch in Orange County began to gain local and international momentum during the early 1990s, several Tay Ninh Caodaists branched off to form a sectarian group. Unlike the general demographics of members of the nondenominational group, most of these Tay Ninh Caodaists were not highly educated and were not from professional backgrounds. They were mostly refugees who escaped on

boats or former soldiers of the South Vietnamese army who were qualified for the US Humanitarian Order resettlement program implemented beginning in the late 1980s. Perhaps because of their recent and traumatic exodus from the homeland, many of them held strong oppositional orientation toward the Vietnamese communist government and wanted to preserve their Tay Ninh traditions overseas.

One of the most important traditions that they revived was the devotion to the Mother Goddess. This was their concerted effort to distinguish themselves from the nondenominational group. At their temple on Lampson street – nominally referred to as the “Lampson Temple” – they had an altar for the Mother Goddess. This was a first of its kind in southern California. Although space in the temple was tight because it was modeled from a garage attached to a humble home, these Tay Ninh Caodaists made the effort to revive the Mother Goddess traditions. The altar shared the same space as another one for the Caodai God although, normally, they should be in separate rooms or buildings. Every 15th day of the eighth lunar calendar month, they observed the Mother Goddess Annual Festival.

The transplantation of the Mother Goddess traditions paralleled the structural centralization of the Tay Ninh Caodai community. The reorganization was based on the five-level organizational hierarchy that existed under the Tay Ninh Holy See before 1975 (i.e., community, parish or temple, diocese, archdiocese, and Holy See).⁵ On 13 June 1992, these Tay Ninh Caodaists officially declared the establishment of the “Diocese of California” (*Châu Đạo California*) at the Vietnamese Convention Center in Westminster City. Under the leadership of a former dignitary who was ordained by Tay Ninh Holy See before 1975, Thuong Mang Thanh, the diocese functioned as the umbrella organization and representative of all other Tay Ninh Caodai temples in California. At the time of its establishment, it included one Caodai temple in Westminster, another one in Sacramento, and a Mother Goddess shrine and Caodai God temple in San Jose.

Structural centralization: the second Mother Goddess shrine, 1999–present

As the Tay Ninh Caodai community continued to grow, the Diocese of California decided to move to a more appropriate site for worship. In 1999, these Tay Ninh Caodaists purchased a Christian church with a large cross on its roof steeple. It is located on Chestnut Street in Westminster, home of the “Little Saigon” ethnic enclave. On 3 July 1999, the Diocese of California had the grand opening of its new administrative headquarters and temple, popularly known as the “Chestnut Temple.”

When the Chestnut Temple held its grand opening, it also introduced the Caodai community to the second Mother Goddess shrine built in southern California.⁶ The shrine is constructed from a room on the second floor, next to another room that serves as the temple for the Caodai God. The space could comfortably accommodate approximately 50 people although, during popular ceremonies, as many as 200 people filled the room and hallway.

The altar is set in the center against one side of the room. In the middle of the altar is a plaque decorated with three vertical lines in classical Chinese characters. From right to left, the first line reads 白云洞诸圣 (Nine Immortal Maidens), followed by 瑶池金母 (Golden Mother of the Resplendent Lake, which refers to the Caodai Mother Goddess), and lastly 九位仙娘 (Sages of the White Cloud) (see Figure 2). Surrounding it are religious offerings – usually, a vase with flowers, a cup of wine, a plate of fresh fruits, and an incense stick holder. In front and facing the altar is an open space of worship. Rows of white pillows are neatly arranged on the floors in front of the altar. This is where Caodaists kneel to pray during rituals.



Figure 2. The Mother Goddess shrine in Westminster, California.

During weekdays at six in the evening and on Sundays closest to the 15th and 30th of each lunar month at noon, Caodaists have congregated at the Chestnut Temple to pray. The ceremonies for the Mother Goddess and the Caodai God have been held at the same time. Usually, in Vietnam, the ceremonies occur at different times – at noon for the Caodai God and six in the evening for the Mother Goddess – so that everyone could participate in both events. However, according to one of the youth leaders at the Chestnut Temple, most Caodaists cannot devote half of their Sundays to temple activities and some must rely on other people's assistance for transportation to the temple. As a result, the concurrent services for the Mother Goddess and Caodai God have compressed time devoted to temple activities to only Sunday morning and early afternoon and are convenient for most people. Generally, female Caodaists tend to participate in rituals for the Mother Goddess more than their male counterparts.

As this is the only Mother Goddess altar in southern California, it annually attracts hundreds of Caodaists from across sects and regions to the "Observation of the Mother Goddess Annual Festival" (*Lễ Tưởng Niệm Hội Yến Diêu Trì*), held on the 15th of the eighth month of each lunar calendar year. While the ceremony is a religious celebration, it also memorializes a pre-1975 Tay Ninh Caodai community in Vietnam. Caodai leaders put strong emphasis on the rituals, replicating and reciting specific details as noted in Caodai books printed before 1975, when Caodaism was not under communism in Vietnam. As an informant said to me, everything from the flower arrangements to the footsteps and hand gestures of ritual performers is carefully presented with precise accuracy to reflect the "beauty of the Caodai God."

As in Vietnam, this Mother Goddess ceremony is the most popular annual Caodai event even though attendance is not compulsory. My informants usually attend the event because they want to meet old friends and receive updates on community activities. Often, it is at the Mother Goddess ceremony that they are recruited to join different religious programs even though the temple is open every day. Moreover, the Mother Goddess



Figure 3. Caodai Worshippers at a Mother Goddess ceremony. Photo provided by Chestnut Temple, Westminster, California.

festival is a uniquely Caodai event imported from Vietnam. It expresses, embraces, and celebrates both the cultural and religious significances of Caodaism. As for other important religious and cultural ceremonies such as Christmas for the Caodai God and the Vietnamese New Year, many Tay Ninh Caodaists go to other places of celebration rather than to the Chestnut Temple.

The Tay Ninh Holy See reimagined

Among Tay Ninh Caodaists in the US, devotion to the Mother Goddess has reflected and encouraged their institutionalization as a Tay Ninh Caodai group centralized around the Tay Ninh Holy See in Vietnam. This trajectory has departed from the universalism of nondenominational Caodaists in the US. At the same time, it has forced them to confront the disjuncture between their politics as anticommunist refugees and the present conditions of the Holy See under communism.

In their justifications for regrouping Caodaism in the Holy See, Tay Ninh Caodaists in the US have often conveyed relations with “the holy land” in filial and ancestral terms. As a youth leader at the Chestnut Temple told me:

The root of Caodaism is at the Tay Ninh Holy See . . . Everyone wants to keep the words “Tay Ninh Holy See” in order to remember the roots of where they came from . . . Vietnamese people always want to remember their roots . . . Just as in the family, we do not forget our father, mother, and grandparents.

Similarly, another worshipper from the Chestnut Temple referred to the Holy See as the ancestral root or “family nest” (*tổ đình*) that Caodaists must always remember and revere. He said:

[The Tay Ninh Holy See] is like an ancestral root. Firstly, it is the place where the Holy House was first constructed. Secondly, it is home of the universal Left Eye (the Caodai God), where we can hold important religious ceremonies. Thirdly, the Tay Ninh Holy See is where the Spiritual Pope sent [through séances] a blueprint of the Holy See to Chief Tac so that we could build it . . . This ancestral root is invaluable because history cannot be replaced.

These Tay Ninh Caodaists attenuated the Holy See's sacred status through filial terms. This "familization" of the Holy See – whether it is through the evocation of history or spiritual contacts – has transformed it into a living body to which all faithful have direct blood connection, and therefore to each other, as if the Holy See is their common ancestor. As a result, this filial relationship creates a sense of community – or, more specifically, of family – attached to religious experience. This discourse is different from the nondenominational group's articulation of the individual embodiment of God, which has denied the significance of the Holy See as the sanctuary of sacredness.

The communal, filial tie is further perpetuated by the collective dependence on and orientation toward the Tay Ninh Holy See. They have maintained that "the holy land" is the only place that can perform all Caodai practices and rituals and the sacred repertoire of Caodai religious teachings. For example, they have asserted that séance, as a means of communication with the spiritual world, can only be performed inside the temple. And, because religious teachings are transmitted through séance, only those that are printed and propagated by the Tay Ninh Holy See are given credence. As a dental lab assistant explained:

Well, *cầu cơ* [séances] can only happen inside Tòa Thánh Tây Ninh [the Tay Ninh Temple]. So anything outside Tòa Thánh Tây Ninh, we always have doubts. But whatever that comes from the Tây Ninh Temple, we don't have doubts.

A leader of religious ceremonies said that he refused to use any books printed without the signature and stamp of the Holy See. He noted that many books on Caodaism are printed by Caodaists in the US but he cannot reference them because they were not produced under the authority of the Holy See. Through these articulations, these participants have contended that "the holy land" is not only their place of origin but also their source of religious guidance and affirmation. This collective affinity toward the Tay Ninh Holy See solidified their sense of community as a family.

This filial connection has created a sense of collective ethical responsibility, as good children have to their forebears, a relationship that they cannot deny, forget, or erase. For Tay Ninh Caodaists in the US, this responsibility entailed the preservation of the Holy See in its pre-1975 "pure" form, when "the holy land" was not under the control of the Vietnamese communist government. As a result, they have re-established Caodai life in the US as if the communist-free Holy See were still in existence. This is accomplished not by complete disassociation but by reinforcement of oppositional, dialectical relations with the present Holy See in Vietnam. It is precisely this binary relationship through which Tay Ninh Caodaists have continued to reflect on and organize their relations with their homeland, in contrast to their nondenominational counterparts, who have asserted complete disaffiliation with the Holy See in the effort to universalize Caodaism.

For example, the leader of religious ceremonies professed that he still maintains direct contact with religious authorities in the Tay Ninh province for guidance on religious rituals and practices. However, he emphasized that he relies on only those who have been "ousted" from their religious positions at the Tay Ninh Temple and are now living "near" it. Similarly, the secretary of the Diocese of California indicated that Tay Ninh Caodaists continue to send financial assistance to coreligionists in Vietnam, but only through those whom they personally know and trust.

Tay Ninh Caodaists in the US have also institutionally organized their political opposition to the Vietnamese government. For example, in 1998, when the Diocese of California hosted the second meeting for dignitaries of the pre-1975 Tay Ninh Holy See, the attendees successfully passed a declaration that they “do not accept the Sacerdotal Council [at the current Tay Ninh Holy See], a movement that is established by the communist authority [of Vietnam] and does not follow religious orders” (Ban The Dao 2012). Similarly, in August 2012 and also under the leadership of the Diocese of California, Tay Ninh Caodaists publicly announced three regulations against the current Holy See and Vietnamese government: “First, do not follow the orders of the current Holy See under the management of the Sacerdotal Council and recognized by the communist government of Vietnam. Second, refuse to welcome anyone who belongs to the communist Holy See and the Ministry of Religion. Third, do not collaborate with the Ministry of Religion, which conceals the activities of the communist government of Vietnam in plundering, deceiving, and hindering the progress of the Caodai religion overseas” (Ngoc 2012).

By upholding a collective and oppositional relationship with the current Holy See in Vietnam, Tay Ninh Caodaists in the US have advocated a communist-free “pure” form of Caodaism outside of its native land. This centralized, cohesive mobilization is grounded on a collective orientation toward the Mother Goddess. As mapped out by Chief Tac during the early years of Tay Ninh Caodaism in Vietnam, the Mother Goddess has served as the mediator of centralization among Tay Ninh Caodaists in the US. She is the distinctive religious and cultural symbol of Tay Ninh Caodaism, marking it as different from nondenominational Caodaism and elevating it to a transnational level of institutionalization. Unlike nondenominational Caodaists, Tay Ninh Caodaists did not universalize Caodaism as a “free floating” religion. Instead, they have regrounded it to the Tay Ninh Holy See as it had existed before 1975 in Vietnam, under the conditions in which the Mother Goddess distinguished Tay Ninh Caodaism from other sects. Tay Ninh Caodaists have derived, imagined, and projected such a Holy See from their anticommunist and oppositional relationship with the current Holy See under the Vietnamese government.

Conclusion

This paper has traced the institutionalization of the Tay Ninh Vietnamese Caodai community in the US. Since 1975, these Tay Ninh Caodaists have divided into two groups. The nondenominational strand has strategically erased the significance of the Mother Goddess in communal settings and practices in order to build cross-sectarian ties. Without the mediation of the Mother Goddess, members have become locally centralized on the universal grounds of Caodaism and have avoided re-establishing homeland relations. The Tay Ninh Caodai offshoot in the US, on the other hand, has developed from the nondenominational branch, distinguishing itself by transplanting devotional practices for the Mother Goddess. In particular, the Mother Goddess shrine at the Chestnut Temple has mediated the centralization of the community through imagining the Holy See as it existed up until 1975, denying and condemning the current Holy See under the control of the Vietnamese communist government.

These bifurcated orientations toward the Mother Goddess show how the United States has served as a space for Tay Ninh Caodai followers to reconstitute and reorganize a religion imported from their Vietnamese homeland. The centralized institutionalization within Caodaism does not necessarily travel well across borders to a new host society.

While grounded in Caodaism's global orientation, Tay Ninh Caodaists in the US have had to negotiate local forms of intercultural mixing, strategies of accommodation, and religious receptivity. They have evoked devotion to the Mother Goddess as a form of tradition that could mediate this organizational transformation rather than replicating past patterns. This tradition also internalizes changes in this process: devotion to the Mother Goddess has become suppressed to espouse religious universalism or revived to construct an ethnic homeland orientation. The divergent paths of centralization among Tay Ninh Caodaists in the US are less about opposition to each other than about the great potentiality for changes in and through traditions.

Through these different forms of cultural reconstitution, Tay Ninh Caodaists in the US have transposed their conditions of displacement, reinterpreting their experiences of exile as hope- and purpose-filled. These experiences echo what Fjelstad and Nguyen (2012) have observed of Vietnamese-Americans who follow the spirit mediumship Mother Goddess religion of Vietnam. Although their informants have been distant from Vietnam for many decades, they have adopted and transformed this homeland religious practice in order to reorganize their sense of community in American society. Devotion to a female deity, saint, or goddess among immigrants has also been popular with more universal and less ethnically bounded religions, such as Marianism among Cubans and Mexicans in the US (Tweed 1997; Horsfall 2000; Duricy 2008). These studies reveal that mother religious figures emerge most vividly in the contexts of pain, suffering, and mourning associated with displacement, isolation, and migration. Spiritual mother figures could help overcome these feelings by facilitating sympathy, acceptance, and solace among their followers. In particular, the ethnic underpinnings of mother figures, such as their imagery and historical roots, could create, re-link and solidify familial, cultural, and physical bonds among members of shared ethnicity. Mother worshipping, therefore, is less bound to the commands of traditions than to the demands of contemporary experience and struggle among men and women in today's globalizing world.

Notes

1. The name "Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu" (the Mother Goddess in Caodaism) is synonymous with "Tây Vương Mẫu," a spiritual mother in Taoism who lives in a heavenly garden of peaches of immortality in heaven. "Diêu Trì" or "Đạo Trì" in Chinese refers to her spiritual residence. "Kim" means heaven or imperial. "Mẫu" is "mother" in Chinese and Vietnamese. Her other names include, Buddha Mother (Phật Mẫu), Holy Mother (Đức Mẹ), Immortal Empress Mother (Bà Chúa Tiên), Birth Mother (Mẹ-Sanh), Immortal-Fairy-Saint Mother (Tiên-Thiên Thánh-Mẫu).
2. The Temple of Gratitude is often mislabeled as the "Temple of the Mother Goddess" although it is only a temporary sanctuary. The permanent and future temple for the Mother Goddess had been planned by Chief Tac to be built approximately 12 km north of the Caodai Holy See compound, on Binh Duong Street at the Phan Dao Thap That village (Phận Đạo Thập Thất) and near the bottom of the Black Lady Mountain. There had been many temples and worshipping centers around this area because the mountain was considered sacred to many people, including Khmers (Taylor 2004). Chief Tac had allocated a large piece of land for the temple, expecting it to be as large as the completed temple for the Caodai God inside the Holy See. Due to political instability and violence, particularly around the Black Lady Mountain as it was used as a strategic surveillance site by all military forces, the construction of the temple was never initiated. In 1954, as Truong Qui Thien was restructured into one of three areas of religious devotion known as "Trí Giác Cung," this region encompassing the future Mother Goddess temple was reorganized into a unit called "Van Phap Cung." Today, this area is still functioning as a Caodai gathering site although it is unclear whether a future Mother Goddess would be built here since the Tay Ninh Holy See came under the control of the communist Vietnamese government in 1975. There are altars to worship the Caodai God as well as the Mother Goddess.

3. His motivation to make statues of the Mother Goddess and the accompanying females was probably inspired by his childhood exposure to Catholicism, which has many statues of saints and God. Chief Tac grew up in a Catholic family and, between 1941 and 1947, he was exiled by the French government to Madagascar, which has a significant Catholic population.
4. During my fieldwork, I observed that one room houses several altars for ancestors. However, I could not find any altar for the Mother Goddess.
5. Since 1975, the Vietnamese government restructured the Caodai community into two levels, parish (temple level) and the Holy See, in order to centralized its power over the religion.
6. The first Mother Goddess shrine was built in 1992 in San Jose, California.

Notes on contributor

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