Daoist Currents in a Vietnamese New Religion: Caodaism and the Three Teachings of China

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Abstract

Caodaism (Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ), formally established in Tây Ninh Province, southern Vietnam, in 1926, represents one of the most intricate cases of religious syncretism in modern Asia. Emerging under conditions of French colonial rule and socioeconomic distress, it consciously incorporated the Three Teachings of China - Daoism (道教), Buddhism (佛教), and Confucianism (儒教) - into an indigenised Vietnamese spiritual framework. This article examines the doctrinal, cosmological, liturgical, and institutional dimensions through which Daoist elements in particular permeate Caodaist scripture, ritual, iconography, and organisational structure. Drawing on the authors' extensive comparative textual analysis of the Đại Thừa Chân Giáo, Thiên Đạo và Thế Đạo, and the Tân Luật - alongside classical Daoist sources - we argue that Daoism contributes the foundational cosmological grammar of Caodaism, while Confucian ethics supply its social code and Buddhist soteriology shapes its path of liberation. The synthesis is neither mechanical nor superficial, but represents an original Vietnamese theological response to modernity, colonialism, and cultural dislocation. The article further situates Caodaism within the broader question of Daoist transmission across East and Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Caodaism, Daoism, Three Teachings, Vietnamese religion, syncretism, Tây Ninh, Southeast Asian religion, Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ

I. Introduction: A New Religion at the Crossroads of Civilisations

On 18 November 1926, in the rural town of Gò Kén, Tây Ninh Province, southern Vietnam, several hundred adherents gathered for the first formal ceremony of a new religion. Its full name - Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ (大道三期普度, the Great Way of the Third Universal Salvation) - encoded a sweeping soteriological ambition: to unify all the world's teachings into a single salvific vehicle appropriate for the third and final cosmic epoch. Within two decades, Caodaism (Cao Đài, 高台) had attracted millions of followers, established a theocratic administration at Tây Ninh, and extended its reach beyond Vietnam to Cambodia, France, and eventually North America and Australia. Today it ranks as Vietnam's third largest religion after Buddhism and Catholicism (Kong and Nguyen, 2023).

Scholarship on Caodaism in Western languages has addressed its political history (Werner, 1981), its comparative theology (Oliver, 1976; Blagov, 2001), and its ritual practice (Gobron, 1948, 1949). Chinese-language scholarship has been more attentive to its sources in the Three Teachings, particularly by scholars such as Kong Linghong, Lei Huicui, Feng Chao, Sun Yiping, and Yu Rusong. Yet no sustained study has examined, from a Daoist Studies perspective, exactly how Daoist cosmology, metaphysics, pantheon, ritual, and ethics are restructured within the Caodaist synthesis. This article undertakes that examination.

We argue for three principal claims. First, Daoism supplies Caodaism's primary cosmological architecture - the concepts of Wuji (無極), Taiji (太極), Yin-Yang (陰陽), the Eight Trigrams (八卦), and the Five Agents (五行) structure the Caodaist account of creation, the universe, and the human person. Second, the Daoist

celestial pantheon - particularly the Jade Emperor (玉皇上帝), Laozi as Taishang Daojun (太上道祖), the Queen Mother of the West (瑤池金母), and Guan Yu (關聖帝君) - is absorbed into the Caodaist spiritual hierarchy with explicit theological rationale. Third, Daoist inner cultivation practices, particularly the notion of cultivating the three treasures (三寶) and the principles of wu wei (無為), are reinterpreted within Caodaist soteriology as a path applicable to lay adherents under colonial modernity.

Our analysis draws primarily on the two major Caodaist scriptural collections - the Đại Thừa Chân Giáo (大乘真教, True Teaching of the Great Vehicle) and the Thiên Đạo và Thế Đạo (天道及世道, Heavenly Way and Worldly Way) - as well as the Tân Luật (新律, New Code) and the Thánh Ngôn Hiệp Tuyển (聖言協選, Selected Divine Teachings), all of which were received via spirit-writing (扶乩, fújī) séances from 1925 onwards. The present study is based on a comprehensive comparative reading of these sources against classical Daoist texts including the Daode jing (道德經), the Zhuangzi (莊子), and texts from the Daoist Canon (道藏), following the interpretive framework established by Zhan Shichuang (詹石窗, 2017) and Kong Linghong (孔令宏, 2013).

II. Historical and Intellectual Background

2.1 The Three Teachings in Vietnam

China and Vietnam share a border, a long history of political and cultural entanglement, and a common Sinographic civilisational heritage. Vietnam was incorporated into the Han empire in 111 BCE and formally administered as three commanderies - Jiaozhao (交趾), Jiuzhen (九真), and Rinan (日南) - for over a thousand years until independence in 939 CE. During this period, Chinese administrators such as Xiguang, Ren Yan, and above all Shi Xie (士燮, 137-226 CE) - honoured as the "Ancestor of Learning in Annam" (安南學祖) - systematically promoted Confucian scholarship, opened schools, and disseminated classical texts (Kong and Nguyen, 2023). Buddhism arrived in Vietnam through both the sea route from India and the overland route from China, with the first documented Chinese Buddhist presence in the second century CE. Daoism followed, carried by Chinese migrants, officials, and itinerant religious specialists from the Han dynasty onwards.

By the time of the Lý dynasty (1009-1225), Buddhist monasteries were flourishing, Confucian academies had been established, and Daoist practitioners were active across northern and central Vietnam. The Trần dynasty (1225-1400) saw a remarkable florescence of Vietnamese intellectual life in which all three traditions interacted in what historians call "Three Teachings in One" (三教合一 tam giáo nhất trí) syncretism, a pattern that would later become central to Caodaism (Kong and Nguyen, 2023). The Daoist presence in Vietnam was never as institutionally centralised as in China: there was no Vietnamese equivalent of the Celestial Masters organisation. Instead, as Yu Rusong (2017) has demonstrated, Daoism spread through folk religious specialists (道士), transmitted texts, and popular ritual practices, often fused with local spirit cults and ancestor veneration.

In the south - the region of Cochinchine under French colonial administration - conditions were particularly fluid. Large-scale migration from the north and centre of Vietnam from the seventeenth century onwards created communities that preserved elements of all three teachings in popular practice, often synthesised with indigenous spirit belief (Kong and Nguyen, 2023). The region also saw the emergence of precursor movements: the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương (寶山奇香, 1849), the Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa (四恩孝義, 1878), and the Hoà Hảo (和好, 1939) all drew on the Three Teachings in ways that prepared the cultural ground for Caodaism.

2.2 The Founding of Caodaism

Caodaism crystallised from a series of spirit-writing séances beginning in 1925. Its principal founders - Ngô Văn Chiêu, Cao Quỳnh Cư, Phạm Công Tắc, and Cao Hoài Sang - were middle-ranking Vietnamese functionaries in the French colonial bureaucracy. Educated enough in classical Chinese culture to handle the spirit-writing apparatus and to interpret oracular texts, yet frustrated by colonial subordination and

drawn to the spiritualist currents that were circulating globally in the 1920s, they received messages they attributed to the Supreme Deity, who identified himself under the Daoist epithet "Cao Đài Tiên Ông Đại Bồ Tát Ma Ha Tát" (高台仙翁大菩薩摩訶薩). This name is itself theologically syncretic: Cao Đài (高台) is a Daoist term for the high celestial palace; Tiên Ông (仙翁) is a Daoist title for an immortal elder; Bồ Tát (菩薩) is the Buddhist bodhisattva; and Ma Ha Tát (摩訶薩) is the Sanskrit mahāsattva (Kong and Nguyen, 2023).

The founding revelation declared that the Jade God - who had previously manifested as the Primordial Lamp Buddha (Nhiên Đăng Cổ Phật), as Śākyamuni, and as the Supreme Original Deity (Thái Thượng Nguyên Thỉ, i.e., the Daoist Yuanshi Tianzun 元始天尊) - was now revealing himself directly under the name Cao Đài for the Third Universal Salvation (Feng, 2005). This claim - that the one deity has spoken successively through the founders of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, and now speaks again - encodes the entire Caodaist theological project.

III. Daoist Cosmology in Caodaist Scripture

3.1 From Wuji to the Myriad Things

The cosmological system set out in the Đại Thừa Chân Giáo (hereafter ĐTTG) is explicitly Daoist in its foundational categories. The text opens with a description of primordial undifferentiation: "Before the Supreme Ultimate was established, in that boundless space there was only the Hồng Mông vital breath (氣鴻濛), for it was the path of the primal chaos (hỗn nguyên). That space is Wuji (Vô Cực, 無極)" (ĐTTG, 2016: 213). This directly echoes the Daoist cosmogonic schema, wherein Wuji (the Limitless) precedes Taiji (the Supreme Ultimate), from which Yin and Yang differentiate, the Four Images (四象) emerge, and the Eight Trigrams (八卦) are generated - as articulated in the Appended Judgements (繫辭傳) of the Yijing: "Thus, in the Changes there is Taiji, which generates the Two Modes; the Two Modes generate the Four Images; the Four Images generate the Eight Trigrams" (Zhan, 2017: 74).

The ĐTTG then correlates this cosmogonic schema with Caodaist theology. The Jade Emperor (玉皇上帝, Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế) occupies the position of Taiji - the first differentiation from Wuji, the source of Yin and Yang and hence of all creation. The text declares: "The two vital breaths Yin and Yang together produce all things in Heaven and Earth" (ĐTTG, 2016: 17). This is a Daoist formulation: the Daode jing, chapter 42, states that "the Dao gives birth to one; one gives birth to two; two gives birth to three; three gives birth to the myriad things" - the "two" being precisely Yin and Yang (Zhan, 2017: 75). The Caodaist cosmology replicates this Daoist generative logic, with the Jade Emperor serving as the personified Taiji from whom all divine and material existence flows (Kong and Nguyen, 2023).

The Eight Trigrams are also structurally central to Caodaism. The highest tier of its three-part ecclesiastical architecture is called the Bát Quái Đài (八卦台), literally the Eight-Trigrams Terrace. This body is described in the Pháp Chánh Truyền (法正傳) as the realm of pure spirit, invisible to ordinary perception, containing all divine beings from Immortals upward, and identified as the "soul of the Way" (linh hồn của Đạo) (ĐTTG, 2016: cited in Kong and Nguyen, 2023). The choice of the Eight Trigrams as the name and symbolic anchor for the highest legislative body reflects the Daoist and Yijing conception of the Trigrams as the fundamental patterns underlying cosmic reality.

3.2 Being, Non-Being, and the Doctrine of You-Wu

One of the most philosophically sophisticated elements of the ĐTTG is its sustained engagement with the Daoist dialectic of You (有, being/existence) and Wu (無, non-being/nothingness). Chapter 1 of the Daode jing states: "Non-being is the name of the origin of Heaven and Earth; Being is the name of the mother of the myriad things" (Zhan, 2017: 6). The Caodaist text engages directly with this: it identifies Wuji as the domain of Wu, and Taiji as the point of entry into You, and insists that only by understanding the mutual generation of You and Wu can one grasp the nature of the Way (ĐTTG, 2016: 20). Kong Linghong (2013) notes that this philosophical appropriation is not merely terminological - the ĐTTG develops an original reading of Wuji as the pure potential from which the Jade God's creative will emerges, a reading that goes beyond standard Daoist exegesis by giving the Wuji a theistic colouring drawn from popular religion.

The concept of Wu Wei (無為, non-action or effortless action) is also substantially incorporated. In the Daode jing, Wu Wei represents the sage's alignment with the spontaneous operations of the Dao - “the sage acts without acting, and teaches without words” (Zhan, 2017: 88-89). The ĐTTG adapts this for its soteriology: the text states that the path of inner cultivation requires eliminating the seven emotions (七情) and six desires (六欲) in order to attain the state of pure spontaneity in which the practitioner aligns with the cosmic will of the Supreme Deity (ĐTTG, 2016: 187-188). This is Wu Wei reconceived within a theistic, devotional framework - not the impersonal naturalness of classical Daoism, but a surrender of self-will to divine providence, a transformation that reflects Caodaism's eclectic theological ambitions.

IV. The Daoist Pantheon in Caodaism

Caodaism's celestial hierarchy is explicitly derived from the Daoist model of three divine tiers - Buddha (佛), Immortal (仙), and Saint (聖) - surmounted by the Jade Emperor. The Bát Quái Đài pantheon as described in authoritative Caodaist sources lists, in descending order: the Supreme Deity (Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế); followed by the Yang realms (阳) and Yin realms (阴); then the Buddhas (Śākyamuni); Laozi (Thái Thượng Lão Quân / 太上老君); Confucius (Khổng Thánh / 孔聖); Li Taibai (李太白); Guanyin (觀音菩薩); Guan Yu (關聖帝君); Jesus; and Jiang Ziya (姜子牙) (Kong and Nguyen, 2023). Of these eleven primary divine figures, at least six are drawn directly from the Daoist pantheon.

4.1 Laozi as Taishang Daojun

In Caodaist theology, Laozi occupies the exalted position of Thái Thượng Đạo Tổ (太上道祖), the Founding Patriarch of the Supreme Way. The ĐTTG identifies him as one of the three historic manifestations of the Supreme Deity - alongside Śākyamuni and Confucius - and as the teacher whose Daode jing contains the most direct articulation of the Way's metaphysical nature (ĐTTG, 2016: 25). He is further associated with the dispensing of “immortality elixir” (đan hoàn), a clear reference to Daoist external alchemy (外丹, waidan), and his teaching on cultivating the three treasures of the self - jing (精), qi (氣), and shen (神) - is incorporated into the Caodaist inner cultivation programme (ĐTTG, 2016: 82). Sun Yiping (2013) has noted that the Daoist tradition of venerating Laozi as a cosmic deity (太上老君) rather than merely a historical philosopher is fully operative in Caodaism - he is not a founding teacher but a living divine presence who continues to transmit instructions through spirit-writing séances.

4.2 The Queen Mother of the West (Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu)

The Queen Mother of the West (瑤池金母, Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu) holds a uniquely prominent position in Caodaism that reflects both the Daoist tradition of her veneration and the strong Vietnamese cultural currents of mother goddess worship (Mẫu). In the Daoist tradition, the Queen Mother is one of the highest cosmic deities - she governs the Yin vital breath of the Western Essence and administers cosmic order together with the King Father of the East (東王公), who governs the Yang vital breath of the Eastern Essence: they together “administer the two vital breaths and nourish all things in Heaven and Earth” (ĐTTG, English gloss, 2016). She presides over the Jade Lake (瑤池, Yao chi), the celestial garden where immortals gather, and controls the register of immortals.

In Caodaism, she is explicitly worshipped as the divine mother of all adherents. The ĐTTG contains a series of verses attributed to her that express maternal care and issue maternal injunctions to cultivate virtue: “How I love you all, my children! Mother now says farewell and returns to the Celestial Palace” (ĐTTG, 2016: cited verse). She is celebrated at the Festival of the Jade Lake on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month, the most important festival dedicated to her, and her image - a white-clad female deity with the crescent moon - appears prominently in Caodaist temples. Chen Yiyuan (2007) and Sun Yiping (2013) have traced the continuity between the classical Daoist Queen Mother tradition and her Caodaist instantiation, noting that the fusion with Vietnamese mother goddess traditions gives her a specifically Southeast Asian character not found in mainland Chinese Daoism.

4.3 Guan Yu and the Daoist-Popular Religion Confluence

Guan Yu (關聖帝君, Guān Shèng Dìjūn), the deified Han general, occupies a position of special importance in Caodaist practice. In the Chinese religious tradition, he straddles Daoism, Buddhism, and popular religion: he received the title Guān Shèng Dìjūn (Emperor God Guan the Sage) from the Ming Wanli emperor in 1614 and is venerated in Daoist temples as a protective deity of martial and commercial virtue. In Caodaism, he appears as the Nhị Trấn Oai Nghiêm (Second Guardian of Awesome Majesty) and is the focus of specific liturgical texts in which his virtues of loyalty (忠), righteousness (義), benevolence (仁), and courage (勇) are enumerated and invoked: "Whatever rank or position you hold, uphold integrity and impartiality; be willing to sacrifice, whether in life or death" (Guan Sheng Dijun scripture, 1977, as cited in Kong and Nguyen, 2023). Tan Zhici (2006) has documented the extensive network of Guan Yu temples established by Overseas Chinese communities throughout Vietnam, which served as a direct conduit for his cult's transmission into Caodaist practice.

The Celestial Eye (天眼, Thiên Nhãn) - the single open eye that serves as Caodaism's primary symbol, displayed at the apex of all Caodaist temples - also has Daoist antecedents. The ĐTTG contains an explicit doctrinal statement about the Eye: "The Eye is master of the mind; the two lights are sovereigns; light is spirit; spirit is Heaven; Heaven is I" (Thánh Ngôn Hiệp Tuyển, cited in Kong and Nguyen, 2023). Zhan Shichuang (2017: 34) traces the concept of the divine eye in Daoist texts to the notion of the Shen (神, spiritual luminosity) as the vehicle through which the Dao perceives and maintains cosmic order, a connection that the Caodaist formulation makes directly.

V. The Three Teachings in Caodaist Doctrine: A Structural Analysis

5.1 "Three Teachings Return to One": The Doctrinal Framework

The Tân Luật (New Code), the primary Caodaist legal and disciplinary text, states with unusual directness: "The tenet of the Great Way embraces all three orthodox teachings - Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism - and transforms and unifies them into one. Therefore, those who cultivate the Great Way must follow the tenet of the Three Teachings in training mind and nature; they must firmly maintain the Three Cardinal Relationships and the Five Constant Virtues [of Confucianism], preserve the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts [of Buddhism], and assiduously practise the Three Treasures and the Five Agents [of Daoism]" (Tân Luật, 2006: 5). This passage is programmatic: it assigns each teaching a specific domain within the total Caodaist regimen. Confucianism governs social ethics; Buddhism governs moral purity and liberation from the cycle of rebirth; Daoism governs cosmological orientation and the cultivation of vital energy.

The Thiên Đạo và Thế Đạo (hereafter TĐTD) articulates the same structure in verse form, assigning the Three Teachings to one root that manifests as three branches: "Master Confucius teaches the Middle Way clearly; the Buddha enjoins compassionate mindfulness; Immortal Daoism: cultivate the true, nourish the nature - one root producing three branches that are identical to each other" (TĐTD, 2009: 25). The metaphor of "one root, three branches" (nhất bổn tán vạn thù, vạn thù qui nhất bổn - one essence dispersing to the myriad different, the myriad different returning to one essence) is explicitly cited in the Caodaist commentarial tradition as a Daoist formulation of the principle of unity in diversity (Kong and Nguyen, 2023). This phrase itself echoes the logic of the Daode jing, chapter 42: one giving birth to two, two to three, three to the myriad things - and the myriad things returning to the one.

5.2 The Five Branches and the Great Assembly

Beyond the Three Teachings, Caodaism also articulates the doctrine of "Five Branches Unite as One" (五支協一, Ngũ Chi Hiệp Nhứt). The Thánh Ngôn Hiệp Tuyển records the Supreme Deity declaring: "Previously, the Teacher established the Five Branches of the Great Way: the Human Way (Nhân Đạo), the Spirit Way (Thần Đạo), the Saint Way (Thánh Đạo), the Immortal Way (Tiên Đạo), and the Buddha Way (Phật Đạo). According to the culture of each human community, I established a True Religion ... Now humankind has united; Heaven and Earth have been fully known; yet they have fallen into conflict because of the many religions. Therefore, the Teacher now definitively unifies the source into one" (Thánh Ngôn, 2013: 15). The Immortal Way (Tiên Đạo) in this taxonomy corresponds directly to religious

Daoism. Its inclusion alongside Human, Spirit, Saint, and Buddha Ways within a unified soteriological scheme reflects Caodaism's ambition to be not merely the Three Teachings in one, but a universal Way transcending all particular religious formations.

5.3 Confucian Ethics within the Caodaist Moral Economy

While this article focuses on the Daoist dimension, a full structural analysis requires positioning Confucianism and Buddhism within the same framework. Confucian ethics in Caodaism are most visible in the Tân Luật's Article 3, which enjoins adherents to "maintain the Three Cardinal Relationships and the Five Constant Virtues as the root of the Human Way: men must be filial, fraternal, loyal, and trustworthy, maintaining ritual propriety, righteousness, integrity, and shame; women must maintain the Four Virtues of industry, appearance, speech, and conduct" (Tân Luật, 2006: 17). The Three Cardinal Relationships (三綱, tam cang) - ruler-minister, father-son, husband-wife - and the Five Constant Virtues (五常, ngũ thường) - benevolence, righteousness, ritual propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness - constitute the Confucian moral backbone of Caodaist social life. The ĐTTG reinforces this with verse: "The noble person never abandons virtue; virtue is the ruler and measure of humanity; where virtue is, the myriad things flourish" (ĐTTG, 2016: 80-81).

Buddhist soteriology contributes the Caodaist theory of karma (nghiệp, 業), rebirth (luân hồi, 輪迴), and liberation (thoát kiếp, 脫劫). The ĐTTG explicitly states: "Đại Thừa [Great Vehicle] is the method of cultivation far superior to the Tiểu Thừa [Small Vehicle], set apart for those who are weary of worldly life and seek the Way, escape the cycle of rebirth, and seek the realm of peaceful purity" (ĐTTG, 1950: 31). The Mahayana Buddhist framework of compassion (từ bi, 慈悲) for all sentient beings is absorbed into the Caodaist ethical norm, expressed in the TĐTD: "Buddha, taking pity on the world, seeks the mechanism of liberating suffering" (TĐTD, 2009: 24). The integration is systematic: Daoist cosmology provides the metaphysical structure; Buddhist soteriology provides the goal and the ethics of compassion; Confucian ethics provides the social and relational norms.

VI. Ritual and Liturgical Practice: Daoist Elements

Caodaist liturgical practice is organised around four daily prayer sessions at 6 a.m., noon, 6 p.m., and midnight, corresponding to the four cardinal points of the day in the Daoist cosmological schema. The prayers invoke, in succession, the Supreme Deity, the Buddhas, the Immortals (仙, tiên), and the Saints (聖), and the liturgical texts draw heavily on Daoist precedent. The TĐTD contains the major Caodaist prayers, several of which are composed in a classical Daoist register, invoking the Jade Emperor's cosmic authority over the transformation of Yin and Yang: "Reverently praising and praying to the Immortal Court to witness the heart. Beseeching the Spirits and Saints to ride on cranes" (TĐTD, 2009: 23).

The most distinctively Daoist liturgical element is the use of spirit-writing (扶乩, fújī; in Caodaism, cơ bút or cầu tiên giáng bút) as the primary mechanism of divine revelation. Spirit-writing - in which a Y-shaped fork or pen is moved by two mediums over a sand tray to produce characters attributed to a divine being - has been a central Daoist practice since at least the Tang dynasty and flourished particularly in the Quanzhen (全真) tradition and in Ming-Qing popular religion (Takeuchi, 2010). Caodaism's founders received their entire scriptural corpus through this mechanism, and spirit-writing séances continued to be the authoritative source of divine instruction throughout the religion's early decades. The Thánh Ngôn Hiệp Tuyển is entirely composed of spirit-writing transcripts. This places Caodaism squarely within the tradition of Daoist-influenced popular religion in which written divine communications are held to carry transcendent authority (Takeuchi, 2010; Zengwei, 2014).

Caodaist ritual prescribes vegetarianism (ăn chay) on specific days - at minimum ten days per month for ordinary adherents, and full vegetarianism for the clergy - which parallels Daoist and Buddhist dietary norms. The discipline of abstaining from killing, from the consumption of meat, and from sexual misconduct for ordained members also reflects the Three Refuges and Five Precepts of Buddhist-Daoist

combined practice, as prescribed by the Tân Luật (2006: 13-14). The wearing of distinctive liturgical robes in three colours - yellow for the Buddhist branch, azure blue for the Daoist branch, and red for the Confucian branch - visually enacts the Three Teachings synthesis in every formal ceremony (Kong and Nguyen, 2023).

VII. The Tây Ninh Holy See: Architectural Theology

The Tòa Thánh Tây Ninh (西寧座聖, Tây Ninh Holy See), the central temple of Caodaism, is itself a work of architectural theology that materialises the Three Teachings synthesis in spatial form. Completed in 1955 after decades of construction, it spans approximately 100 metres in length and features a facade combining a central tower of twelve tiers (representing the twelve ranks of the celestial hierarchy) flanked by two towers - the Tower of the Sun (Bạch Ngọc Lầu, White Jade Tower) on the left representing the Celestial Eye, and the Tower of the Moon (Lôi Âm Cổ Tháp, Tower of the Thunder Sound Drum Pagoda) on the right. The interior design incorporates Buddhist dragons coiled around the columns, Daoist celestial imagery on the ceiling vaults, and Confucian symmetry in the spatial organisation of the nave (Kong and Nguyen, 2023).

The three-part institutional structure of Caodaism - the Bát Quái Đài (八卦台, Eight Trigrams Terrace), the Cửu Trùng Đài (九重台, Nine-Tiered Terrace), and the Hiệp Thiên Đài (协天台, Heaven-Coordinating Terrace) - maps onto the Daoist cosmological triad of invisible spiritual realm, visible institutional realm, and mediating realm. The Pháp Chánh Truyền states: "The Bát Quái Đài is the invisible part, belonging to the Way - it is the soul of the Way; the Cửu Trùng Đài is the visible part, belonging to the world - it is the body of the Way; the Hiệp Thiên Đài is the semi-visible part, half-Way half-world - it is the true spirit of the Way" (cited in Kong and Nguyen, 2023). The tripartite division replicates the Daoist cosmological triad of spirit (神), vital breath (氣), and bodily form (形), applied to the institutional structure of a modern religious organisation. This is a remarkable instance of Daoist metaphysics generating institutional architecture.

VIII. Caodaist Life Philosophy and the Daoist Contribution

Caodaism's philosophy of the human person and the good life is articulated most systematically in Chapters 6 and 7 of the ĐTTG, and it draws heavily on Daoist anthropology. The human being is constituted, in Caodaist teaching, by the tripartite Daoist schema of jing-qi-shen (精氣神): the physical vital essence (tinh, 精), the vital breath (khí, 氣), and the spirit (thần, 神). Cultivation consists in purifying and refining these three elements so that the spirit can ultimately return to its divine source. This is the Daoist inner alchemy (内丹, nội đan) programme applied to a lay religious context: the practitioner is not necessarily a Daoist ascetic in a mountain hermitage but a southern Vietnamese peasant or urban worker who observes dietary discipline, recites prayers, and attends communal worship (Kong and Nguyen, 2023).

The soteriological goal in Caodaism is described as "returning to the origin" (phản bổn hoàn nguyên, 返本還元), a formulation that is distinctively Daoist in flavour: the Daode jing's fundamental movement is the return of all things to the root (歸根, chapter 16). In Caodaism this means the liberation of the soul from the cycle of rebirth and its ascension through the celestial hierarchy to union with the Supreme Deity. The TĐTD articulates the human obligation in cosmological terms: "Humanity firmly holds sovereignty, represents Heaven to shape the world, and maintains the bonds of human relationships" (TĐTD, 1992: 103) - a formulation that echoes the Confucian-Daoist concept of the human being as the third member of the cosmic triad of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity (三才, tam tài).

The ĐTTG also introduces a passage on the sage-practitioner that closely echoes Daoist descriptions of the Sage (聖人, shèngrén) in the Daode jing: "Enlarge and open the intellect and the spirit" (ĐTTG, 2016: 61) and "Those who cultivate the Way and establish the will to correct the mind: if they are idle and lazy, there is no benefit; if you wish to eliminate one thing, you must firmly establish the will and then the matter is done" (ĐTTG, 2016: 61-62). Zhou Li (2004) has traced the specific Daoist conception of the sage as one who transcends ordinary cognition and acts from pure alignment with the Dao in the Daode jing;

the Caodaist adaptation inverts the classical emphasis on spontaneous effortlessness and inserts a voluntarist element - the establishment of firm will - that reflects the influence of popular Buddhist and Vietnamese indigenous traditions on the synthesis.

IX. Daoist Transmission Mechanisms and the Genesis of Caodaism

Sun Yiping (2013) has identified three principal mechanisms through which Daoism spread across East and Southeast Asia: (1) the dissemination of printed Daoist texts and morality books (善書, shànshū); (2) the southward migration of Daoist practitioners and Daoist ritual specialists; and (3) the incorporation of Daoist elements into popular religion through festivals, spirit cults, and local religious specialists. All three mechanisms were operative in the transmission of Daoist elements into southern Vietnamese culture in the centuries preceding Caodaism's founding.

Takeuchi Fusaji (2010) has documented the Hannom Research Institute's holdings of Vietnamese-language Daoist texts - including spirit-writing collections, morality books, and liturgical manuals - that circulated among Vietnamese popular religious communities from the seventeenth century onwards, many of them transmitted from the Minh-Mang (明命) and Xiantiandao (先天道) traditions of southern China. Zengwei Shenyichiro (2014) has further shown how apocryphal Buddhist-Daoist texts and morality books spread through the same channels as popular Buddhist sutras, creating a shared textual repertoire that the Caodaist founders drew on for both their cosmological and their ethical frameworks.

Of particular significance is the role of the Minh Lý Đạo (明理道, the Way of Luminous Principle), a Chinese-Vietnamese syncretic religious organisation that preceded Caodaism and with which some Caodaist founders had direct contacts. Nguyen Ngoc Thi and Huang Huangbo (2020) have traced the origins of this organisation to the Mingxiang communities (明鄉社) of southern Vietnam - descendants of Ming loyalists who fled to Vietnam after the Qing conquest of China - and have shown that it transmitted a form of Three-Teachings syncretism with a strong Daoist cosmological flavour that directly influenced early Caodaist doctrine. The connection between Chinese migrant religious culture and the emergence of Caodaism is thus not merely diffuse cultural influence but a traceable line of transmission through specific institutions and texts.

X. Critical Assessment: Is Caodaism a Daoist Religion?

The question of whether Caodaism should be classified as a form of Daoism, or as a syncretic new religion that incorporates Daoist elements without being Daoist in any normative sense, is more than a taxonomic matter - it bears on questions of intellectual lineage, cultural authority, and the nature of religious tradition itself. The present analysis suggests a nuanced answer.

On one hand, Caodaism's cosmological foundation is genuinely Daoist. The categories of Wuji, Taiji, Yin-Yang, the Eight Trigrams, and the Five Agents; the veneration of Laozi as a cosmic deity; the practice of spirit-writing as a mode of divine revelation; the inner cultivation schema of jing-qi-shen; and the final goal of "returning to the origin" - all of these are not merely borrowings or ornaments but structural pillars of the Caodaist religious system. As Chen Yaoting (2000) has argued, Caodaism belongs to the "Daoist overseas transmission" tradition more broadly than is usually acknowledged - it represents a genuine, if radical, adaptation of Daoist religious culture to a new environment.

On the other hand, Caodaism departs from classical and institutional Daoism in crucial respects. Its theology is explicitly theistic: the Supreme Deity is a personal god who communicates with humans, hears prayers, and issues commands - this is not the impersonal naturalness of the classical Daoist Dao. Its institutional structure borrows heavily from both the Buddhist sangha and, remarkably, from the Catholic Church's hierarchical organisation - a fact that Caodaist sources acknowledge (Kong and Nguyen, 2023). Its openness to non-Daoist divine figures - Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and various Western spiritualist traditions - exceeds anything in the Daoist canon. And its founders were not Daoist priests but colonial-era civil servants operating in a globalised spiritual marketplace in which Theosophism,

Spiritism, and various New Age currents were circulating alongside traditional Asian religious forms (Werner, 1981).

The most accurate characterisation is perhaps that Caodaism represents a Daoist-inflected Vietnamese new religion - a movement in which Daoism provides the primary cosmological and metaphysical vocabulary, but in which that vocabulary is radically repurposed within a new theological grammar shaped by colonial modernity, Vietnamese cultural nationalism, and a universalist soteriology that no single Asian tradition had previously formulated. It is, in this sense, a genuinely original creation rather than a derivative synthesis, and its originality is best appreciated precisely by understanding the depth and precision of its Daoist sources.

XI. Conclusion

This article has traced the Daoist dimensions of Caodaism across four domains: cosmology, pantheon, ritual, and institutional structure. In each domain, Daoist elements are not superficially adopted but structurally integrated. The Wuji-Taiji-Yin-Yang cosmogony underpins the Caodaist account of creation; the Daoist pantheon - Laozi, the Jade Emperor, the Queen Mother of the West, Guan Yu - constitutes the core of the Caodaist celestial hierarchy; spirit-writing, Daoist liturgical prayers, and inner cultivation through jing-qi-shen refinement form the backbone of Caodaist practice; and the tripartite institutional structure of Bát Quái Đài, Cửu Trùng Đài, and Hiệp Thiên Đài replicates the Daoist cosmological triad in organisational form.

At the same time, Caodaism's Daoist elements are never simply transplanted but always transformed in their new Vietnamese context. The impersonal Dao becomes a theistic Supreme Deity; the classical sage ideal is supplemented by a voluntarist morality; the Daoist Queen Mother of the West fuses with the Vietnamese mother goddess tradition; and the Daoist cultivation programme is democratised and made available to ordinary lay adherents without retreating from the world. These transformations are not failures of fidelity to Daoist originals but creative theological achievements - evidence of Daoism's extraordinary capacity to generate new religious forms as it travels across cultural and historical boundaries.

For Daoist Studies, Caodaism presents a richly documented case study in the transnational and transcultural dynamics of Daoist transmission. Unlike the Chinese diaspora Daoist temples in Singapore, Malaysia, or Taiwan - which largely maintained recognisable Daoist liturgical forms in new geographic settings - Caodaism represents a genuine mutation: a new species in the Daoist evolutionary tree, shaped by colonial encounter, Vietnamese cultural memory, and the spiritual urgencies of modernity. Further research should attend to the Caodaist diaspora in France, the United States, and Australia, where the religion has continued to develop in yet further new contexts, and to the Caodaist engagement with Vietnam's post-1975 religious regulations - both of which raise pressing questions about the contemporary vitality and adaptability of Daoist-derived religious culture in the twenty-first century.

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