

Our Divine Mother of Carramar: The Australian Điện Thờ Phật Mẫu of Caodaism

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Table of Contents.

Preface

1. What is Caodaism?

2. The Divine Mother in Caodaism.

3. The Spiritual Banquet.

4. The Ritual of the Divine Mother.

5. The Divine Mother and Her Architecture: Inspiration for the Temple in Carramar.

6. Conclusion

Appendix One: The Prayer to the Divine Mother with an explanation by Phạm Công Tắc

Preface

On Sunday 10 November 2019, a beautiful sunny day in Sydney, 300-odd esteemed guests, interested visitors, and Caodaists attended the opening of the Điện thờ Phật Mẫu or Holy Mother Temple of New South Wales on Wattle Avenue, Carramar. To mark this special occasion, this booklet has been written to explain something of Caodaism and then consider aspects of the construction of this temple, its style, its rituals, and most significantly, the unique aspects of the deity it honours – exploring her importance in the faith and throughout East Asia.

In the year 2000, I prepared a similar booklet for the opening of the Caodaist Temple (a local temple or thánh thất to Đức Cao Đài or God the Father) in Wiley Park (this is available at <https://sydney.academia.edu/ChristopherHumphreyHartney>). This was the first temple built by the Caodaists of New South Wales. Since its opening, this building has become a remarkable example of the diverse nature of the religious life of our city. At the time that the Wiley Park Temple opened, I was writing my doctoral thesis on Caodaism and I had spent a great deal of time in the shell of the building watching and recording the construction process. When the Wiley Park temple opened, it was a moment of quiet triumph for this community of about 700.

Quite a few adepts who worked on that temple had risked everything by fleeing Vietnam on small and leaky boats. The trauma of that mass exodus was caused by the loss of South Vietnam to communist forces on 30 April 1975. To escape, many Caodaists, like their fellow Vietnamese in the diaspora, had to suffer the threat of storms and drownings on these little boats as they headed out into the high seas. There they had encounters with pirates and were constantly beset by the fear that they would never see their families or their homeland again. Those Vietnamese who were welcomed into Australia had very little understanding of what our country was or what living here would entail. Nevertheless, these first-generation Vietnamese persevered. They settled, got jobs, learnt English, raised families, and began to live their lives as Australians. Whilst doing all this, they also found time to establish their religions here as well.

By a strange turn of luck, a good number of Vietnamese who arrived in Sydney were members of the new religion of Caodaism (founded 1926 – see below). The community of Caodaists in Sydney has, as a consequence, always been a vital and active site in this global religion. It is the reason why many firsts have been achieved in Sydney rather than in the United States. Although many more Vietnamese were welcomed as US citizens and, although there are many more Caodaists in North America, they are more widely spread there than they are in Australia. This has resulted in the first purpose-built Caodaist temple to Đức Cao Đài/God the Father opening outside of Asia (The Caodai Temple of New South Wales, Wiley Park, 2000) and now the temple at Carramar (The Holy Mother Temple of New South Wales, 2019) is the first purpose built temple of its kind outside Vietnam.

These achievements, however, have not been easily won.

Sydney Caodaists had much to learn before they could start to build the Wiley Park temple. Leaders of the community had to understand planning procedures, how a community group could apply for assistance in purchasing excess state land and, more generally, they had to learn how to negotiate the nuanced political system that could permit or deny building applications that, if they were for a temple, were neither residential nor commercial and thus open to much

manipulation, fearmongering, and arbitrary rulings by local authorities. Caodaists had to settle the fears of neighbours who were reticent to accept a strange new building in their neighbourhood. They also had to deal with a local council (Canterbury) that on one hand, celebrated its multicultural ethos while at the same time using parking concerns as a way of escalating local xenophobia.

Because these were all new battles, once the Wiley Park Temple opened, a strong sense of achievement pulsed through the community. But this wasn't enough. As I hope the following makes clear, the worship of the Divine Mother is as vitally important in Caodaism as is the worship of Đức Cao Đài/God the Father. This meant that Caodaists could not be completely at home in Sydney, on a spiritual level, without a second building eventually being erected (and with very few exceptions temples to these two deities should not be on the same site). In 2004, a modest fibro house was purchased by the community in Carramar. An altar was installed in the lounge room and it was here that worship took place for more than a decade. It was in 2016 that the community's finances were stable enough to plan the demolition of the house and the construction of a purpose-built temple. A building application was made. 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.

Sadly, as with the development at Wiley Park, the same local battles had to be fought all again. A reluctant council (this time Fairfield) dragged its feet as locals raged against the possibility of a strange building going up in their neighbourhood. There were numerous complaints about noise and the smell of incense being too prominent. Although "parking" is a constant issue in many suburban battles against places of worship, this time the locals were particularly worried about noise. They complained to Council that the gentle chanting coming from the temple would be too much to bear. When one considers that Wattle Avenue has a heavy-rail goods line directing 40-wagon trains down beside it day and night, it is easy to see how these complaints were little more than xenophobic. For the Caodaist community, these battles are past and not worth mentioning. But for a scholar such as myself who has charted the development of numerous temples in Sydney, these struggles are very much worthy of remembrance.¹ There is present on our secular streets a feeling that "freedom of religion" means, somehow, "freedom from religion" and residents can become instantly and unreasonably irate when new temples are proposed. Against this sentiment, the Caodaists of Sydney responded with kindness and humility and the building process continued until completion. It is noteworthy that the same gracious declaration was made at the opening of the Holy Mother temple as at Wiley Park – that this new worshipping space was not simply a Caodaist building – it was a gift to all Australians.

Unlike my years studying Caodaism in Wiley Park, I was less connected with the building process of the Holy Mother Temple in Carramar. I did visit, however, at various stages of construction and watched as this remarkable building came into existence. On no visit did I lose sight of the fact that the edifice that now stands at number 84 is another remarkable addition to the religious life of our city. It is made more remarkable by the fact that it is a building unique to the world outside of Vietnam. And finally, which is the most exceptional feature of all, this is one of the few religious buildings in Australia wholly dedicated to an

¹ See, Christopher Hartney: 'Performance of Multiculturalism: South Asian Communities in Sydney' in Knut A. Jacobsen and P. Pratap Kumar: *South Asians in the Diaspora*, Leiden, Brill, 2004, pp.435-453.

ultimate female deity. On this point alone, the Caodaists of Sydney have made a remarkable contribution to the multicultural fabric of our city and I heartily congratulate them on this singularly beautiful and impressive achievement.

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1. What is Caodaism?

Caodaism is a new religious movement that exploded onto the social scene of Vietnam in 1926. Called on to act through *séance*, and other complex processes of spirit communication, the first adepts of this new religion sought to bring together a vast range of religious traditions prevalent in Vietnam, China, and France at that time. Chief amongst these leaders was Phạm Công Tắc (1890-1959). Like many of his associates, he was trained by the French in the French language to help them operate the colonial machinery of the Indochinese colony. In addition to this, once he left school, he became a passionate political activist and nationalist. Later, he became a poet and then a medium who would go on to lead Caodaism during the golden age of its development until he was forced into exile in 1956.

The most essential elements in this new religion were the East Asian trinity of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Elements of spiritism, Catholicism, French Masonry, Hinduism, and other religious traditions are also present in the doctrines of this new faith. What is most exceptional about the movement, however, was its incredibly fast rise to national prominence. In the first years of its existence, Caodaism had already won for itself a million followers. Today the number of Caodaists worldwide may tally upwards of 2 million with perhaps even 6 or 8 million adherents (census data in neither Vietnam nor the United States collects information on religious affiliation). Taking the mid-range of these figures as an indication of general numbers, Caodaism can claim to be the largest indigenous faith in Vietnam and its third largest tradition – trailing in numbers behind Buddhism and Catholicism. It is also presently becoming a substantial world religion and recent activities in Sydney attest to this.

Caodaism formally began in the months leading up to 25th December 1925. A number of voices from the recently-deceased were contacted by a group of young men in Saigon excited by new developments in spiritism that were trending in Europe. After this initial contact, voices that were increasingly divine were invoked using predominantly Western *séance* techniques. These techniques for contacting heaven included table-tipping and, later, the use of a “beaked basket.” This instrument was up-turned drum held by several mediums. It had a long arm extending from the basket and a writing instrument of some sort positioned at the far end to receive divine messages.² Within a short time, this group of friends, headed by Phạm Công Tắc, met with other persons more versed in traditional East Asian automatic writing and divination. From this contact the movement grew exponentially. A voice arrived on Christmas eve 1925 that revealed itself as the great god of the universe (Đức Cao Đài). This voice proclaimed:

Đêm nay, 24 Décembre phải vui mừng vì là ngày của Ta xuống trần dạy Đạo bên Thái Tây. Ta rất vui lòng mà thấy đệ tử kính mến Ta như vậy. Nhà này sẽ đầy ơn Ta.

Tonight, 24 December, rejoice, be happy. This is the day I came to earth to spread my message to Europe. I am glad to see you disciples offering me such respect. This house will be full of My beneficence.³

² This could be a pen but was often a pointer that traced words on burlap, or traced words on a surface after some wine had been tipped thereon.

³ I provide a more complete explanation of this collection of Divine Messages in: Christopher Hartney, ‘The Thánh Ngôn Hiệp Tuyển, Introducing the Central Scripture of Caodaism as a Paradigmatic

Thánh Ngôn Hiệp Tuyển 25-12-1925

In subsequent messages, this voice called for the unification and harmony of the French (colonial masters of Vietnam at the time) and the Vietnamese. As a consequence, the voice of Cao Dai encouraged the entire world to come together for what was described as the third and last period of human salvation.

An extensive message from Đức Cao Đài on 27 October 1926 declares that “Dân tộc Pháp-Việt là hai giống dân được nhiều huệ phúc nhất.” The message is then repeated fully in French, “La race française et la race annamite sont mes deux bénites.” Essentially the French and Vietnamese peoples are the most blessed of Đức Cao Đài - and will form the core of a new world unity. Reference is made in these early messages to the times of Moses and Jesus which, respectively, represent the first and second periods of divine salvation. The messages from 1925 onwards represent the third period.⁴ Thus these early messages imply a certain millennial intent: that we are now living within humanity’s last chance to listen to heaven directly and to act accordingly for our salvation. Whereas in Christianity salvation maybe available at any time until the apocalypse, in Caodaism’s understanding or time, the possibility of salvation is heightened during certain time periods when enlightened souls reincarnate on earth to guide others. The voice that appeared to this group of friends at Christmas 1925 confirms the commencement of a similar global and salvational amnesty. These messages make a distinction between an “un-modern” past and this new “modernist” period in Vietnam (and the world) where a new religious unity is declared. This is explained in a message received during April 1926.

Tùy theo phong hóa của nhân loại mà gây Chánh giáo, là vì khi trước Càn vô đức khán, Khôn vô đức duyệt, thì nhơn loại duy có hành đạo nội tư phương mình mà thôi.

Còn nay thì nhơn loại đã hiệp đồng, Càn Khôn dĩ tận thức, thì lại bị phần nhiều đạo ấy mà nhơn loại nghịch lẫn nhau, nên THẦY mới nhứt định qui nguyên phục nhứt.

Previous to this point humanity did not have an intimate knowledge of the entire world, humans simply practiced the religions that, regionally, were given to them. This prevented a global religion from developing.

But now humanity is in global contact. It has expanded its knowledge. Unfortunately, the result is that these regional religions are now in conflict with each other. That is why I have decided to return all religions to the unity from which they have come.

Thánh Ngôn Hiệp Tuyển 24-4-1926

It seemed to those channelling these divine messages that a new era in heavenly communication and heavenly intent had commenced.⁵ With deep knowledge of world religions one can also

Explanation of Vietnamese Modernism’, in *New Religious Movements in Modern Asian History: Social Transformation of Asia*, ed. David Kim (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

⁴ Thus the official name of the religion Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ- literally “Great Religion, Third Period, Salvation”

⁵ Jammes has provided the most extensive historical examination of influences on the religion. His text is in French, but an English translation is presently being prepared: Jérémy Jammes, *Les Oracles Du Cao Đài: Étude d’un Mouvement Religieux Vietnamien et Ses Réseaux* (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2014).

find references in Caodaist Scriptures and architectural features to Hinduism, Islam, pre-Socratic thought in Greece and so on, however, these references remain discrete. They serve the purpose of proclaiming the new faith's universalism rather than contributing significantly to its theology. This urge to universalism or globalism was many things, but it was powered by a remarkable tension between, on the one hand, reviving Vietnamese Tradition, and on the other, forging a movement that celebrated its uniqueness and aptness for its times. The leadership of the new movement managed its early steps with occasional controversy, and the French sought to do what they could to control, but not destroy, the new faith. Yet, in the main, Caodaism proved remarkably successful. Between 1925 and 1940 Caodaism had accumulated millions of followers. After 1945 it also gained much political power, and temporal influence – with some areas of Southern Vietnam coming under the complete control of the new religion.

As the rise in numbers continued, a sprawling and complex bureaucracy developed. A lodge-style administrative body set over nine levels, and called the *Cửu Trùng Đài*, provided the day-to-day governance of the new faith. It was democratic and included male and female streams. The second body was smaller, self-appointed, and consisted of judges and auditors to ensure the administration was carried out according to the rules of the organisation. At the very top of this second organisation (or *Hiệp Thiên Đài*) was the College of Mediums. Phạm Công Tắc took his place as head of this second hierarchy and, after the death of the leader of the administrative section, both hierarchies came under his control in 1936. This move was a reaction to a number of break-away movements that had developed, but it also consolidated power in *Tây Ninh* – an area to the north-west of Saigon where the headquarters of the faith was established. From the mid 1930s, Phạm Công Tắc assumed a position of supreme power in the faith. The Vichy French regime in Indochina exiled him to Madagascar in 1941. World War II interrupted many of the plans of the new religion including their massive building regimen. One development during this period, however, was the training of a Caodaist army by the Japanese who, together with the Vichy French ran a dual-occupation of Indochina until the war's end. In reclaiming their former colony from the defeated Japanese, the returning Republican French permitted the return of Phạm Công Tắc in 1946. Once back in Vietnam, both he and the religion were to experience a period of power and influence unrivalled in the south for any similar social organisation. This link between Caodaists and their contribution to anti-Communist forces provides a significant reason why so many Caodaists were persecuted under the communists when the war concluded - and why they chose to leave their homeland after 1975.

Deities

Caodaism declares itself to be a fully-functioning monotheism. The central monotheistic deity, Đức Cao Đài,⁶ is masculine and is, for Caodaists, the same god who spoke to Moses and shepherded Jesus through his ministry. In the Caodaist model of heaven, Đức Cao Đài rules like a [Chinese] Jade Emperor – he commands a vast spiritual hierarchy of divine officials who hold various ranks celebrating the spiritual expertise of buddas, saints, immortals, local geniis, and at the fifth level, the full development of humanism through the doctrine of Confucianism. Caodaism is also distinguished by the presence of a deity whose importance is almost equal to that of Đức Cao Đài. This is his consort – the Divine or Holy Mother.

There are a range of other dimensions to this religion that are worthy of note – and some of

⁶ The Vietnamese term “Cao Đài” is based on two Chinese characters “gao” and “tai” literally meaning “high tower” – this name for God is thus a poetic pseudonym rather than the actual name of the deity.

these will be further explained in the following chapters.⁷

⁷ A range of good scholarship examining the religion can be found in the following sources: Sergei Blagov, *Caodaiism: Vietnamese Traditionalism and Its Leap into Modernity* (Huntington, N.Y: Nova Science Publishers, 2001). Jayne Susan Werner, *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism: Peasant and Priest in the Cao Dai in Viet Nam* (Yale: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1981). Victor L. Oliver, *Caodai Spiritism: A Study of Religion in Vietnamese Society*, Studies in the History of Religions, Supplements to Numen 34 (Leiden: Brill, 1976). R.B. Smith, 'An Introduction to Caodaiism', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* XXXIII, no. iii (1970). And, as noted above but presently only in French, Jammes, *Les Oracles Du Cao Dai*.

2. Đức Phật Mẫu/The Buddha Mother/The Holy Mother/The Divine Mother and Caodaism

Caodaism can claim to honour many of the values we cherish in the modern world. The structure of the religion is designed to operate democratically, and there are two streams in the hierarchy of this faith; one male and one female. This, say Caodaists, guarantees equality between the sexes in worship and in the administration of their faith. The importance of singling out male and female qualities in the hierarchy is also reflected in the worship of the faith. Worshippers are divided into male and female streams as Caodaists stand before the altar. The ritual commences when these groups turn, acknowledge each other and then face back to the altar. This ritual action recognises the yin and yang balance of the cosmos – one that is divided between female and male energy. This division has its ultimate manifestation in the two central deities of the faith. When Cao Dai created the universe, his first duty as the embodiment of “yang” or male energy was to create the yin or feminine force. In this way his consort, the Divine Mother, came into existence before the rest of existence was constituted.

Ideas of Universal Creation.

In a sermon delivered at *Tây Ninh* in 1928, Phạm Công Tắc provided a brief explanation of how the cosmos was created in Caodaists terms. It reflects aspects of Chinese cosmology with reference to the Thái Cực/ Taiji or foundational principal/supreme ultimate force discussed in various Confucian and Neo-confucian schools. It also follows a pattern of emanation from one primordial force that divides itself then goes on to create the myriad phenomena of the cosmos. This pattern is enunciated most famously in Chapter 42 of the *Dao De Jing* – the founding text of Daoism (c.300BCE) – which I note in more detail on the section concerning the origins of the Divine Mother below.

There had been nothing before the creation. Then the two masses of air called Hư Vô Chi Khí⁸ came from nowhere and smashed into each other. God’s soul was formed from this, and His Throne called Thái Cực⁹ came to exist. The fiery globe called Thái Cực, which is the mechanism of the material, divided itself under God’s orders into the Lưỡng Nghi¹⁰ and the Tứ Tượng,¹¹ and then the Bát Quái was created.¹² This is called the mechanism of Nhơn Đạo.¹³ Next, millions of earths were produced throughout the universe. Seventy-two of these are presently inhabited by humankind.

We see in this conceptualisation that the “Thái Cực” divides into forces of “yin” and “yang” –

⁸ Hư Vô Chi Khí – relates to the Chinese concept of Wu wei (無爲) which can mean in action, effortless action and peraps in this instance air or the void.

⁹ Thái Cực, Taiji, (太極): The “Supreme Ultimate” in East Asian cosmology.

¹⁰ Lưỡng Nghi: The two forms, i.e. - Yin and Yang.

¹¹ Tứ Tượng: The four phenomena.

¹² Bát Quái, The Bagua (八卦): The eight trigrams.

¹³ Nhơn Đạo: The way of humanity; Confucianism; humanism.

in many ways, these are the cosmic complementarities of yin and yang personified by God the Father and God the Mother. There is, however, a much less cosmological explanation of the development of the Divine Mother. It can be traced from a long tradition in China and Vietnam of female deities. The names Caodaists use to refer to the Divine Mother reflect this history.

Her Names

In Caodaism the Divine Mother has numerous names. In this present text she is referred to as ‘The Divine Mother’ – this is a term I and other scholars have used to translate the title Đức Phật Mẫu. This term translates directly as “Venerable Buddha Mother.” But “Buddha Mother” is a term some scholars do not use because it suggests this deity is “only” Buddhist in the way she influences Caodaism. This is not so. To add slightly to this confusion, the temple in Carramar is called in English, the ‘Holy’ Mother Temple. In this booklet ‘Holy Mother’ and ‘Divine Mother’ are the same deity and while I use the latter to describe the deity, I will use the former when discussing the temple.

The variety of epithets that are used in Caodaism to refer to the Divine Mother is also a good indication of the extensive development behind her long manifestation in East Asian religious history.

1. Đức Phật Mẫu – literally “Venerable Buddha Mother.” A term 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 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 region where her celestial 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* – we will return to this text in the description below.
8. Cửu Thiên Huyền Nữ (九天玄女) Profound Mother 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 Thiêng-Tôn – a name used in the main ritual to the Divine Mother literally (Nacre-Lake, Golden Mother, Infinite, Divinely Honored).

Names 7 and 8 were used in poems received by the religion during the feast of welcome held for the Divine Mother in Saigon in 1925. They are more completely explained in the following chapter.

Her History

Sinologists trace the existence of 西王母 (Xiwangmu) or Queen Mother of the West back at least 3500 years ago when this name appears on oracle bones from the Shang Dynasty. These bones, covered in writing, were only unearthed during the twentieth century, but the evidence they supply about the origins of writing in China and the religious and social life of the Middle Kingdom at this formative stage is remarkable. It is quite possible, however, that the original meaning of Xiwangmu had more to do with the mechanics of ancestor worship than as the specific name of a goddess as we use the term today.¹⁴

We find early textual references to her in two central works. The first is in 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. Both attest to the abiding presence of this female deity throughout Chinese religious history. Moreover, these texts come from emerging and divergent religious and philosophical systems. 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. The general idea of filial piety in East Asia is another significant reason why celestial parents are seen to abide in heaven. One important Caodaist text where Phạm Công Tắc recounts the offices of heaven, explains that if a believer is able to approach the Divine Mother in heaven then the face of this goddess will be the same as one’s earthly mother.¹⁵ In this way the conflation of filial piety between one’s earthly mother and the Divine Mother is very apparent.

There also are more oblique, but no less important, references to a powerful originating force that divides itself into two. This description can be found in Chapter 42 of the Daoist Classic the *Dao De Jing* (c.300sBCE) and Caodaists use it to explain how the Divine Mother came into existence in relation to Đức Cao Đài.

¹⁴ 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.”

¹⁵ 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, 2019).

道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為和。

The Dao (the Way) gave birth to the One, this One gave birth to the Two, the Two birthed the Three, the Three generated all things. All things leave behind them an obscurity, and go forward to embrace the brightness, while they are harmonised by the breath of emptiness.

If we relate this to Daoist cosmology we can say that the one is “Cao Dai”. Whereas the “two” that divides from the primordial one is taken, in Caodaism, to be the forces of “yin” or feminine energy and “yang” or male energy – the two main energies that pervade all existence. Although Cao Dai represents the originating force for Caodaists, he also is replicated at the next level and represents the yang or masculine force. His first act is to create the yin. Once he has done this, the yin comes to be personified by the Divine Mother. After this initial act of creation by Cao Dai, all things are created. I will expand on the connection between yin/yang and Cao Dai/Divine Mother in the section on ritual.

A Chinese Imperial Edict of 1007CE officially canonises the divine personality of 玉皇大帝 /Yu Huang Da Di or The Jade Emperor. This figure became increasingly popular in Chinese religious history over the last 1000 years and is based on mythical dimensions of kingship which were an integral part of the Chinese political system.¹⁶ This Chinese supreme deity was given a certain amount of omniscience and omnipotence and had a divine female consort. Between the Jade Emperor and his consort, they operated heaven and the cosmos in much the same way that the earthly emperor and empress ran the Middle Kingdom – through a vast hierarchy of bureaucrats given, in the heavenly version, the titles of saints, immortals, buddhas, and local folk-religion deities (geniis). It is this idea of an “imperial” heavenly government, with ranks, tasks, and bureaucratic checks that goes on to have a powerful impact on popular religious literature – a literature that would heavily influence Caodaism.

Two Ming Dynasty novels dealing with this concept of a government of heaven were well loved also in Vietnam and made a long-lasting impression on local religious understandings. One of these novels was particularly Daoist in intent and contains many references to Chinese folk-religion, the other novel was far more Buddhist in intent and has subsequently become a part of global folklore.

The immensely popular Chinese novel of the late 1500s, *Journey to the West* [西遊記], although Buddhist in point of view, nevertheless confirmed the renown of the Jade Emperor amongst worshippers. In the late 1500s this novel’s near-contemporary Daoist counterpart *Canonisation of the Deities* [封神演義] presents us with a heaven that is depicted in its court-like structure and populated equally by Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist personalities. Both novels feature significant female deities including the Queen of Heaven, and the Bodhisattva Quan Yin.

¹⁶ Julia Ching, *Mysticism and Kingship in China: The Heart of Chinese Wisdom* (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Finally, in this potted history, if we consider the religious life of China and Vietnam from the 1500s to the 1800s, we see the Divine Mother's importance continue to grow – particularly in less official lay movements. It is from the 1500s in China that a number of these lay traditions come to prominence. The 寶卷/Bai Luan or Precious Scrolls tradition is one of these. The scriptures made manifest in these movements were created through spirit writing and distributed through the work of lay communities that sought both religious and political change. An example of one of these texts is 古佛天偵考証龍華寶經 or *The Dragon Flower Scripture Verified by the Old Buddha Tian-chen*. This document promoted the idea of a future great meeting of souls where those who prayed in a particular way would be elevated to a heavenly rank. In this work Maitreya Buddha features strongly – but so too does his mother the Queen of Heaven, referred to here as 無生老母 or the Eternal Venerable Mother. She appears also in movements called “White Lotus” groups. These groups increased in popularity at a time when China was controlled by Manchurian foreigners. Many rebel supporters of the last Han Chinese Dynasty (The Ming 1368-1644) fled south to find political security in Vietnam thus bringing these religious influences with them. Sergei Blagov, a commentator on Caodaism at the start of the century correctly supposes that these deities 無生老母/*Wu Sheng Lao Mu*/ Vô Sanh Lão Mẫu, or 無生佛母/*Wu Sheng Fa Mu*/ Vô Sanh Lão Mẫu, develop into the Phật Mẫu or the Buddha Mother of the Caodaists: “[the] Caodaist female deity seems to replicate [the] Eternal Mother” he concludes.¹⁷

This eternal female deity links a number of Caodaist philosophical ideas together. This includes yin-yang philosophy and the three-stage time system found initially in the White Lotus tradition – a time-system that gives Caodaism its macro-history. The other significant influence that comes from these movements is the idea that spirit writing is *the* “new religious technology” to connect heaven to earth. Jordan and Overmyer, two commentators on popular Chinese traditions, 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 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 anew the moral and religious teachings that had been lost. This was a new dispensation, the last chance for human beings to change their ways and for society to reform.¹⁸

Although the early followers of Caodaism used Western divination techniques to contact heaven, they very quickly connected themselves with more traditional and Chinese groups that also used divination. Vietnam is one place where there is a merging of all these cultural and religious vectors – although we can also see similar things happening in other parts of East Asia. One of the non-Vietnamese traditions that shares many similarities with Caodaism is the 一貫道 or Yi Guan Dao tradition of Taiwan. I visited their headquarters in Taipei in 2001. This

¹⁷ Blagov, 2001, *op cit*, 4.

¹⁸ Jordan and Overmyer, *op cit*, 17.

faith has a worshipping space and ritual quite familiar to any student of Caodaism. Their temples include a pantheon of deities that have little variation from those worshipped in Tây Ninh, Wiley Park, and Carramar.¹⁹ This religion serves as living proof of the deep Chinese heritage that Caodaism draws upon for its theology and the heritage of its deities including the Divine Mother.

There are also deep Vietnamese cultural and mythic reasons why the presence of the Divine Mother in Caodaism is so important. If we examine Vietnam's foundational myth, we see that it tells of a primordial couple (the dragon lord Lạc Long Quân and the mountain-dwelling fairy Âu Cơ). This couple unite to create the Vietnamese people and the nation.²⁰ Similarly, the idea of a couple commanding heaven can be found in a series of early poems composed by Phạm Công Tắc. These were written before Caodaism officially commenced. Entitled *A Visit to Celestial Realms/ Thiên Thai Kiến Điện* (1927) we find in this work descriptions of the Bát Quái Đài, or palace of heavenly command is under the control of Lôi Công (雷公/Leigong) the god of thunder and his consort 電母/Dian Mu (Leizi)/ Điện Mẫu the female deity of lightning. These poems stress that it is a divine couple that command heaven. Much more work could be done to investigate how all these figures converge and inspire each other's development, but the prevailing theme is clear – any supreme deity in the heavens must come with a powerful and influential consort of some kind.²¹

Regrettably Đức Phật Mẫu the divine mother, the architecture of her temples, the rituals that pertain to her, and her nature as a deity are all understudied areas in Caodaism.²² Because of this, her impact on the faithful is often under-estimated by outside observers. I hope that the new temple in Carramar will encourage new interest in her and effect a change in scholarly focus. To begin this, a clear understanding of her first appearance in the religion is the most important place to start. This brings us to the spiritual banquet of 1925.

¹⁹ Edward Irons, "Tian Dao" in *Religions of the World*, J.Gordon Melton and Martin Baumann (eds), Santa Barbara, ABC Clío, 2002, Vol 4, 1275-1276.

²⁰ See, Keith Weller Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Pr, 1983).

²¹ It is in the Western monotheisms that the absence of a female consort to the chief deity is most prominent – although archaeological evidence and some Scriptural references note that in Judaism there was a "Queen of Heaven" who went by the name of Asherah (Jeremiah, 44:17).

²² I have written of the major annual ceremony to this deity in Christopher Hartney, 'Constructing the Cornucopia That Is Caodaism: Themes of Cultural Production in an Increasingly Acephalous Milieu', in *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production*, ed. Carole M. Cusack and Alex Norman (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 633–57.

3. The Spiritual Banquet of the Divine Mother

When we consider the impact of the Divine Mother on Caodaism, two unique aspects emerge. The first is the incredible celebration that takes place in her honour on the 15th Day of the 8th Lunar Month each year in the Caodaist ritual calendar. While East Asians more generally celebrate this day as the “Autumn Moon” festival (中秋節/ Tết Trung Thu), Caodaists stage extremely well-prepared rituals to the Divine Mother that last for days but which culminate on the day at the middle of this eighth month. The main ceremony to her is called the “Hội Yến Diêu Trì Cung” and replicates a spiritual banquet that took place in 1925 (more on this below). Just before this ritual, Caodaist village and provincial units will fashion fruit, vegetables, produce, and flowers into intricate displays in her honour – these can often be tableaux that include her and other deities. These dioramas may have motors and lights to animate their scenes as well. These are then brought to her main temple in Tây Ninh which takes on a great celebration of harvest and abundance. Stalls are set up around her temple and these display-offerings attract thousands. On the eve of the 15th day, the celebration reaches astounding levels of participation with a great parade through the centre of the Holy See. Floats representing various holy beings appear and the parade culminates in the manifestation of a statue of the divine mother herself flanked by nine female buddhas – these are her attendants. Thanks to the kind hospitality of friends, I was able to attend the Hội Yến Diêu Trì Cung in Tây Ninh in 2018. To calculate the number of people who were present, I did a rough estimation of the busses and coaches parked in and around Caodaism’s religious city. They were lined for miles and had the capacity to bring in, at the very least 50,000 people. In addition to these arrivals by bus, there were those who attended locally by foot or who drove or arrived by other means. Although officials were loathe to confirm the popularity of the event, numbers at the ceremony could have easily exceeded 100,000. The organisation on the ground in Tây Ninh to welcome the attendees included the offering of free meals while the ceremony lasted. So, although New Year or Tết remains the primary point of celebration in the Vietnamese calendar, in Caodaism the banquet of the Divine Mother is at least of equal importance in terms of attendance.

The second unique aspect of worship in Caodaism for the Divine Mother is based on the fact that she appears to the foundational mediums of Caodaism *before* the religion begins. It is during September of 1925 – three months before the religion is announced through séance by heaven - that a special ceremony takes place in Saigon. It is a banquet to welcome the Divine Mother and her nine attendant female buddhas. Early Caodaists were instructed through séance on how to set out this banquet and it is this event that forms the central part of the Hội Yến Diêu Trì ceremony and Caodaist worship of the Divine Mother more generally.

The venue for what is technically the first Caodaist ceremony was the house of Mr Cao Quỳnh Cư in Saigon. This man was a close associate of Phạm Công Tắc. When the banquet took place, he lived at 134 Bourdais Street in District One of Saigon City. This street was later named “Rue Calmette” and the road still bears this name today - although the building has changed significantly. Đức Cao Đài had still not revealed himself in séance messages – although Phạm Công Tắc and his fellow mediums were taking messages from an authoritative voice using a pseudonym that was based on the first three vowels of the Vietnamese romanised alphabet: “A Ấ Ấ.” This voice instructed the three mediums, Phạm Công Tắc, and his immediate associates

Cao Quỳnh Cư and Cao Hoài Sang to organise a vegetarian feast for 10 spiritual visitors who would come to the house from the Heaven of Creation.

After this, a séance voice explained that she was the seventh lady (Thất Nương) of the Female Buddhas who attended upon the Divine Mother. Through séance Thất Nương explained to the mediums who would be present at the banquet. She revealed that the Phật Mẫu/Divine Mother was the most significant figure in the realm of Cửu Thiên Nương Nương/九天娘娘 – or the Nine Heavens – and that it was she who governs this celestial realm. The three mediums then asked Thất Nương how to communicate in séance with the Divine Mother and it is here that a change in séance technology takes place amongst the founders.

Thất Nương advised the three Saigon mediums that they had to purify themselves by keeping to a vegetarian diet three days in advance of speaking with the Divine Mother. She explained that they must find a new divination instrument known as the corbeille à bec (beaked basket/Ngọc cơ/玉機 – explained in the first chapter). Today this instrument is used in the religion for all official séances. It is, thus, in preparation for this banquet that the first three mediums of Caodaism are instructed to use a more efficient form of séance equipment (they had started contacting the spirit world by using table tipping – this was a very time-consuming process using Morse-code like tapping). Thất Nương also advised that each of the three gentlemen had to make ready a poem of welcome and dedicate it to the Divine Mother.

The evening before the banquet, the voice A. Ằ. Ằ came to the house on Calmette Street and taught, through séance, how to prepare details for receiving the ten immortal beings. A. Ằ. Ằ instructed them on how to arrange the table and chairs for the banquet and how to decorate the house.

Cao Huệ Chương, a nephew of one of the mediums, was involved with the decorations of the house and attended the banquet as an observer. In his recollections entitled *Đại Đạo Truy Nguyên* he explained:

After keeping to our vegetarian diet for three days we came to the evening of the fourteenth day of the eighth month. The atmosphere in the house was light and bright and the breeze was cooling. Inside the house of my Uncle Tư (i.e. Mr Cao Quỳnh Cư), everything had been tidied and there was a feeling of cleanness and purification. Everyone was present exactly at midnight. I saw that my Uncle Tư had already set up and arranged a large table. Around the table he had laid out flowers. In the middle of the table there was a tea set. A cup was laid out for each of the Nine Female Immortals. Also, on the table there was a range of fruit set out - it looked like a very splendid banquet. Around the outside of the table nine cane chairs had been placed.

After the table was set up in this manner, my Uncle Tư burned incense and lit the candles on the table. Everyone then knelt and prayed. After this, the corbeille à bec was brought out to communicate with the Invisible Beings who had arrived. It is true that the Phật Mẫu manifested that night and also the Nine Female Immortals. Each of these beings who came greeted and communicated with the three mediums. At this time the Seventh Female Buddha asked the humans present to play their musical instruments and recite their poems as an offering to the spiritual beings who had seated themselves and who were listening.

When they arrived at the banquet, the beings asked the three mediums to join them at the feast. How sad were those three who were so concerned with etiquette that they dare not sit at the table. Only because the heavenly beings insisted, did they do so - it was very hard for them to refuse. They bowed respectfully before they sat.

I watched these men in how respectful they were being, I wanted to laugh, but under the circumstances I did not even dare raise a smile. I simply crossed my arms and continued listening to the ceremony.

After about 30 minutes, my Uncle Tu then commenced communication with the beings. The Divine Mother and the Nine Female Immortals passed their thanks and promised that “From now on, seeing you have the corbeille à bec, we will find it much more convenient to communicate with you. The Nine Female Buddhas from the Diêu Trì Cung will come and teach you on religious matters.”

So, on this night these mediums stayed up until three in the morning and only after the heavenly guests had departed did they go and rest.

Many years later, Phạm Công Tắc gave a sermon at the Holy See on 6th October 1949. In it he explained what had taken place from his own point of view. At this time, his sermons were recorded by stenographers and so we have his words very close to verbatim. He recalled:

The three of us had spent much time thinking about the Đạo (the Way) and religious matters had permeated our thinking. It was then that the Supreme Being asked us to organise a banquet. His instructions were to arrange this banquet in order to invite 10 Invisible Beings. These were Đức Phật Mẫu and the Nine Female Immortals. On the visible side of this banquet were three people: Thượng Sanh, Thượng Phẩm, and myself. The table was arranged by the female Archbishop Hương Hiếu (the wife of Mr Cao Quỳnh Cư). On an upper platform was the altar of Phật Mẫu and lower down there were nine chairs as if someone could sit there. There were bowls, chopsticks, spoons, forks, whatever was there for a normal banquet were all laid out – even though there were only three of us from the visible world who were at the table.

I then humbly asked the Supreme Being: what is this banquet?

He replied: “會宴瑤池宮 / Hội Yến Diêu Trì Cung”

I heard this and saw how it was to be organised, but I did not understand then what the significance of the Hội Yến/Banquet would be. At that time, I thought there was something important going on for the future of the Đạo, so I just did what I was told. Indeed, I did not understand the profound meaning of what was taking place.

The three of us sitting and eating together and the female archbishop Hương Hiếu was serving food to the Nine Female Buddhas and placing food on the altar of Đức Phật Mẫu/The Divine Mother - as if they were all present as beings in this world.

After the banquet had been completed, the Spiritual Beings were farewelled and took their leave. It was then that the Supreme Being/ [Đức Cao Đài] spoke through the corbeille à bec. Thượng Phẩm and I were curious, so we asked the Supreme Being: “At

the time when the Diêu Trì Cung came, were you also there? The Supreme Being replied: yes, certainly, I was there from the very beginning.

We asked: “Did You see the Diêu Trì Cung arrive?”

He answered: “I did, I also greeted them and made them feel welcome.”

Thượng Phẩm asked: “Did the Diêu Trì Cung see You?”

He answered: “No they didn’t.”

Then Thượng Phẩm asked why.

He replied: “I was able to conceal Myself.”

Because I was curious I continued by asking: “Can my younger sister who is the Seventh Female Immortal attain the Đạo (i.e. attain enlightenment).”

He replied “Of course she can attain it.”

Then Thượng Phẩm asked: “What one must do to attain the Đạo (i.e. achieve enlightenment)?”

He replied: “One must cultivate the Đạo /practise the Way, if one does not do this then one will be unable to attain anything.”

I then asked: “How long must one practise the Way in order to attain the Dao?”

At this question the voice of the Supreme Being fell silent. So, I then asked: “one year, five years, one thousand, ten thousand, one hundred thousand?” At all of these the Supreme Being remained silent. At this I was breathless and so stopped asking and I still don’t know how long it will take to attain the Đạo, we just must believe that it is possible.

Since this first banquet in 1925, offering food for the Divine Mother and her attendants at the time of the Autumn Moon has become the essential core of this ceremony in Caodaism. Phạm Công Tắc gave an additional, and this time much more mystical explanation of the banquet in 1951. He said:

Today is a day that all the children of the Supreme Being, both male and female, have gathered together as the great spiritual family that the Supreme Being has created. I would like to take advantage of this opportunity to explain the full meaning of the Banquet and the Festival of the Holy Mother.

What is it?

As all the children of the Supreme Being know, we practice The Way and the most essential thing from this action is the attainment of spiritual liberation, that is, to find a way to return to our spiritual origins. All the original souls in the universe arise from the authority of the Supreme Being – but he commissioned the Divine Mother with the creation of the eight types (levels) of souls which are; material, plant, animal, human, genies, saints, immortals, and buddhas. These eight levels of souls appear at the Golden

Basin of Buddha Mother (Kim Bàn /金盤). They appear here according to the ultimate law of the Supreme Being so that they can progress gradually and forever (through reincarnation). This law of progression applies to each stage of your soul's reincarnation. One must find some path towards practicing The Way – but what for? To make a spiritual position for ourselves. When souls attain a human level, they come from one of two sources, the first evolving upwards from material, plant, and animal souls – these are called ‘evolutionary beings’, the second sort of soul reaches human status directly from creation in The Golden Basin (Kim Bàn) of the Divine Mother. These are called original souls (元人/nguyên nhơn). These two kinds of souls, if they do not follow the “đạo đức /道德” (the wisdom and holiness, goodness, virtue, morality) at each stage, will not continue their rise towards Holy Virtue and attain the highest levels of spiritual revelation. If they do evil then they will sink down immediately to join the realm of perverse spirits.

Today the Holy Mother comes to create a chánh giáo/ Right way, that is to say – an orthodoxy/正道 - 正教. Her most authentic religion is before us and we can see her heart radiating unbounded love. How amazing that unlimited love is! Let us think about this – no one explains life or listens to our travails more than does our mother. No one guides us and has more influence over us than our mothers. The relationship of mother and child in this earthly realm demonstrates a power that is the same in the eternal realm as well.

In these sermons we can see how the banquet – and how serving a Divine Mother - is both an act of worship and a practice of extended filial piety towards the universal mother of all beings. 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.

4. Rituals of the Divine Mother

Caodaists maintain an understanding of the self that is tripartite. Accordingly, worship rituals are based around offerings by the believer of the Tam Bửu or three precious elements of human existence. At Caodaist ceremonies these are offered to heaven. The three elements are: Tinh, the physical body (represented in ritual offerings as a sacrifice of fruit or flowers upon the altar). The next element of the self is the energy of the spiritual mind referred to as Khí (represented by an offering of wine). The last element is the 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.²³ In both traditions the subtle or astral body or the 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.²⁴

Of these three personal elements, Tinh, or the physical body is the least important in a spiritual sense. It is the same material as the physical world around us and is often described in Caodaist theology as the “animal” or “fleshy” part of the human. In contrast to this is Thần or the soul which is gifted by Cao Dai and which is an essential part of him. The Thần is what reincarnates over many lifetimes in the Caodaist conception of rebirth and which, at the point of spiritual enlightenment, reunites with Cao Dai. It is the Khí in each of us that, Caodaists say, is created in the Golden Basin of the Divine Mother and gives to us our mind. Without her creative work the Caodaist self could not be complete. This in a nutshell explains her most vital role in the religion and amongst believers. Reference to her Kim Bàn /金盤 or golden basin is an allusion to the receptacle she uses to create these mind/souls.

Worship

There are three levels of prayer for the Divine Mother. The first takes place once a year in Tây Ninh and is the commemoration of the first banquet in 1925. The worshipping space for the Divine Mother is adorned with chairs and a banqueting table. These are laid out to properly welcome the Divine Mother and her attendants. At other times of the year, we see the second and third levels of worship taking place. At a local temple – such as The Holy Mother Temple of New South Wales in Carramar – major worship focuses on two monthly events. These take place on the first and fifteenth of every lunar month. It is at this time that Caodaists congregate to honour the Divine Mother. At the third level there are daily prayers at every Holy Mother

²³ 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).

²⁴ For an example of such astral journeys see: 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.*

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. Below, I have described the general process of the monthly ritual, and at the end you will find a brief explanation of how the daily rituals differ from the monthly events.

Ritual dress: Unlike rituals at a temple to Đức Cao Đài, adepts who attend a ceremony for the Divine Mother are required to dress in plain white. No symbols of rank or position in the religion can be worn in her temple. This stresses the idea that every soul is equal before her. Men wear a khăn đóng or simple black hat on their heads. No one is distinguished in the seating or kneeling order, those who arrive first are those who are able to take their positions up front.

A Description of Rituals and Prayers for a Monthly Ceremony

When a monthly ceremony is due to start the ritual officer will operate the great bell located at the front of the temple. The officer will strike this bell at three periods. The first and second bells are used to bring the congregation together. The third bell signals the end of the ceremony.

The First Bell

At the strike of each bell the ritual officer chants the following:

1. Văn chung khấu hướng huệ trường Càn Khôn, (strike)
2. Pháp giới chúng sanh đồng đăng bỉ ngạn. (strike)
3. Án Đà Ra Đế Dạ Ta Bà Ha. (strike)

- *Hearing the sound of the bell, bodies bow towards the Great Wisdom and Enlightenment of the Heavens and the Earth.*
- *Human beings all together reach the shore of liberation.*
- *(then a mantra from Sanskrit) "Praying for beings so they may destroy their bad karma and increase their merit"*

When the "first bell" is sounded those going into the temple will form themselves into a line so that the female adepts line up in front of the altar to female souls (which is to the left of the central altar to the Divine Mother). The men line up in front of the altar to male souls (which is to the right of the central altar). To start, the men and women face each other.

The Second Bell

The ritual officer then sounds the three strikes of the "second bell." As he does this he recites the following:

1. Nhứt vi u ám tất giai văn, (strike)
2. Nhứt thiết chúng sanh thành Chánh giác. (strike)
3. Án Đà Ra Đế Dạ Ta Bà Ha. (strike)

- *All within the limits of hell listen and realise.*
- *All human beings attain Buddhahood.*
- *(a mantra from the Sanskrit) "Pray for beings so they may destroy their bad karma and increase their merit"*

When this "second bell" is completed, the men and women bow to each other and turn to the front to face the main altar. At this point the ritual servant chants:

Nhạc tấu huân thiên (Play the music to welcome the Divine Beings)

If there is a significant difference between daily prayers and monthly prayers it is the presence of musicians. These are usually not present for daily prayers and the above announcement would not be made. At this point in a monthly ceremony five pieces of music are played. A ritual servant operates the gong three times and the congregation bows respectfully before kneeling or sitting.

Worshippers pray by offering greetings to the Divine Mother and the Divine Spirits. Then they raise their hands in the *bat an ty*²⁵ position and bow three times saying the following lines with each bow,

- Nam-mô Diêu-Trì Kim-Mẫu Vô-Cực Thiên-Tôn (I venerate Nacre-Lake, Golden Mother, Infinite, Divinely Honored)
- Nam-mô Cửu-Vị Tiên-Nương (I venerate the Nine Female Immortals)
- Nam-mô Bạch-Vân-Động Chư-Thánh (I venerate the Saints of the White Lodge).²⁶

After this the following prayers are chanted,

Niệm Hương:

Đạo gốc bởi lòng thành tín hiệp.
Lòng nung nhang khói tiếp truyền ra.
Mùi hương lư ngọc bay xa.
Kính thành cầu nguyện Tiên gia chứng lòng.
Xin Thần, Thánh ruổi dong cõi hạc,
Xuống phàm trần vội gác xe tiên.
Ngày nay Đệ tử khẩn nguyện,
Chín tầng Trời, Đất thông truyền chứng tri.
Lòng sở vọng gấn ghi đảo cáo,
Nhờ Ôn Trên bổ báo phước lành.

Offering Incense

The basis of the Dao is sincerity and faith.
As the scented cinder smolders into flame.
And the winding wisp ascends into the sky
The wafting scent of heaven stirs my mind.
To the Superior Spirits, I respectfully pray:
May this gesture sway Their Eminence to stay
If but a moment, should they deign to pass this way.
And at this time, as a disciple, I entreat

²⁵ This is the Codaist version of showing respect via the hands. The tip of the thumb of the left hand is tucked into the bottom joint of the ring finger. The fingers of this hand are then wrapped around the thumb. The tip of the thumb of the right hand is then tucked into the base joint of the index finger of the left hand. The fingers of the right hand are then wrapped around those of the left.

²⁶ These three points of veneration appear on the name plate upon the main altar and will be described in the chapter on architectural features below.

The sky above and the earth beneath my feet.
May my heart immersed in hope be recognized
As that pure space of spirit highly prized.
May blessings rain on us a shower of love,
As they make their calm descent from up above.²⁷

Prostrations are then made to the Divine Mother. The adept brings their head close to the ground three times for each prostration, making a total of nine nods of the head. At each lowering of the head the name of the Divine Mother is invoked. That is: “Nam-mô Diêu-Trì Kim-Mẫu Vô-Cực Thiên-Tôn.”

Khai Kinh

Biển trần khổ voi voi Trời nước,
Ánh Thái-Dương gội trước phương đông.
Tổ-Sư Thái-Thượng Đức Ông,
Ra tay dẫn độ, dày công giúp Đồi.
Trong Tam-Giáo có lời khuyên dạy,
Gốc bời lòng làm phải làm lành.
Trung-Dung Khổng-Thánh chỉ rành,
Từ-Bi Phật dạy: Lòng thành lòng nhơn.
Phép Tiên-Đạo: Tu chơn dưỡng tánh,
Một cội sanh ba nhánh in nhau.
Làm người rõ thấu lý sâu,
Sửa lòng trong sạch tụng cầu Thánh-Kinh.

Opening Prayers

An ocean of suffering floods the horizon
Whence beams yet the sun
But thankfully Lao Zi guides us in our service to humanity
As the three great religions have also taught
To be benevolent of both character and deed.
From Confucius we have learnt the middle way
From the Buddha we have learnt compassion;
The Way of Immortals leads us to spirituality.
From one root spring three counterpart stems.
Once it is well-comprehended
We shall purify our self and pray.²⁸

At the end of this recitation, the worshippers bow but do not prostrate themselves.

Phật Mẫu Chơn Kinh

²⁷ Prayer translations from - Ngasha Beck, ed., *A Guide to Caodai Spiritual Celebration*, trans. Bùi Đắc Hùm and Bùi Đặng Cẩm Hồng (Chicago: H&L eBooker, 2000), 25.

²⁸ Beck, 27.

Tạo Hoá Thiên huyền vi Thiên Hậu,
Chưởng Kim Bàn Phật Mẫu Diêu Trì,
Sanh quang dưỡng dục quần nhi.
Chơn linh phối nhứt thân vi Thánh hình.
Thiên Cung xuất vạn linh từng pháp,
Hiệp Âm Dương hữu hạp biến sanh,
Càn khôn sản xuất hữu hình,
Bát hồn vận chuyển hoá thành chúng sanh (sinh).
Cộng vật loại huyền linh đồ nghiệp,

Hư vô Bát quái trị Thần qui nguyên.
Diệt tục Kiếp trần duyên oan trái.
Chưởng Đào Tiên thủ giải trường tồn.
Nghiệp hồng vận tử hồi môn,
Chí Tôn định vị vĩnh tồn thiên cung.
Chủ Âm quang thường tòng Thiên mạng,
Độ chơn thần nhứt vãng nhứt lai.
Siêu thăng Phụng Liễu Qui Khai,
Tiên Cung Phật Xứ Cao Đài Xướng Danh.
Hội ngươn hữu Chí linh huấn chúng,
Đại Long Hoa nhơn chủng hoà ki
Tam Kỳ khai hiệp Thiên thi,
Khoa môn Tiên vị ngộ kỳ Phật duyên.
Trung khổ hải độ thuyền bát nhã,
Phước Từ Bi giải quả trừ căn.
Hưồn hồn chuyển đọa vi thăng,
Cửu tiên hồi phục Kim Bàn chưởng âm.
Thập Thiên can bao hàm vạn tượng,
Tùng Địa chia hoá trường Càn khôn.
Trùng hườn phục vị Thiên môn,
Ngươn linh hoá chủng qui hồn nhứt thăng.
Vô siêu đọa quả căn hữu pháp,
Vô khổ hình nhơn kiếp lưu oan
Vô địa ngục, vô qui quan,
Chí Tôn đại xá nhứt trường qui nguyên.
Chiếu ngũ linh Từ Huyền thọ sắc,
Độ anh nhi nam, bắc, đông, tây.
Kỳ khai tạo nhứt Linh Đài,
Diệt hình tà pháp cường khai Đại Đồng.
Hiệp vạn chủng nhứt môn đồng mạch.
Qui thiên lương quyết sách vận trù
Xuân Thu, Phật Chủ, Bát du
Hiệp qui Tam Giáo hữu cầu chí chơn.
Phục nguyên nhơn hườn tồn Phật tánh.
Giáo hóa hồn hữu hạnh hữu duyên.
Trụ căn qui khí cứu tuyền,
Quản khai thiên thượng tạo quyền chí công.
Linh Mẫu Hậu khai Tông định Đạo,
Ân dưỡng sanh đảm bảo hồn hài,

Càn khôn Tạo Hóa sánh tài,
Nhứt triều nhứt tịch kinh bài mộ khang.
Nam mô Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu Tạo Hoá Huyền Thiên cảm bái
Nam mô Đại Từ Bi năng hỉ xả, Thiên Hậu Chí Tôn Đại Bi Đại Ái.

Prayer to the Divine Mother (translation)

At the Heaven of Creation and Transformation reigns the mysterious Heavenly Queen.

She commands the Dieu Tri Palace, the Mother Buddha of the Golden Basin.
With the fluid of vitality, she nourishes all her children.

She creates them by unifying the spirit and the astral body to make a being on the spiritual plane.

This heaven creates the Ten Thousand Beings who must follow its dharma.
Uniting Yin and Yang harmoniously all beings are created.
Heaven and Earth created the visible realm,
The eight spiritual levels create and transform all living beings.

Gathering the spirits of all sentient beings to create a common karma.
The Universal Triad decides the incarnation and karma for each soul.
Because of reincarnation, the spirit evolves to attain the highest of positions.
Using the Void of the Eight Trigrams, the souls are brought back to their origin.

Destroying all our earthly bonds and the debts of our previous incarnation.
She bears the Immortal Peach and rewards souls who can attain the Way
and returns them to eternal life.
Her Great Work is to bring her children back to their original home in the spiritual realm.
The Supreme Being arranges a position for those souls who can then have eternal life in the spiritual realm.

She masters the yin energy and follows the Supreme Being
To guide our astral bodies as they go and return.
When our spirit returns to heaven – an immortal carriage takes us –
opens the gates to heaven.
From the realms of the immortals Cao Dai calls your name.

In this period the Supreme Being comes to teach all beings.
At the Dragon Flower assembly all races are united.
By the divine plan the Third Amnesty opens.
Immortals are tested for their Buddha potential.

In the middle of the ocean of suffering – the Prajna boat comes to save.
Through mercy their karmic account is erased,
Their souls, resurrected, transform from fallen to heaven,
The nine immortals guide Yin to the Golden Basin.

The ten celestial properties – which include all things
Combine with the 12 Zodiacs and heaven and earth expand.

Many times can a soul return to where it was at heaven's gate.
Original souls transform, perverted souls ascend and are saved.

There is no devolution, the effects of your past lives are decided by Divine Law.
There is no punishment because of your past lives.
There is no longer a hell, no gate to the devil.
The Supreme Being gives an Amnesty – all humanity is united.

The Mother of Mercy, directed by the Supreme Being, has ordered
That all her children be saved – North, South, East or West.
The opening of this period creates a single faith.
Other faiths are resolved into one, Great Harmony reigns.

Uniting the ten thousand beings, there will be one gate for all.
She plans to revive our spiritual consciousness.
The Classic of Spring and Autumn, the Whisk of Purification, the Buddha's
Begging Bowl
Unite the three religions and draw from them One True Way.

Guiding original souls – they return to Buddha nature.
Teaching all souls to have an affinity with the Way.
Constraining perverse spirits within the nine streams of hell
Opening the gates of heaven by the power of spiritual justice.

The order of the Queen Mother is to establish and inspire this religion.
By her grace and ability to protect and nourish, our souls and astral bodies are
maintained.
What she has done to create us, Heaven and Earth – nothing can compare.
We come morning and night to adore our Mother.²⁹

There are numerous allusions in this prayer to the cosmological and soteriological aspects of the Caodaist worldview. Some of these points are more completely explained in the translated commentary I have added in Appendix One.

Once this prayer is said, prostrations are then made to the Divine Mother. There are three prostrations. The adept brings their head close to the ground three times for each prostration, making a total of nine bows of the head to the floor. At each lowering of the head the name of the Holy Mother is thus invoked:

“Nam-mô Diêu-Trì Kim-Mẫu Vô-Cực Thiên-Tôn.”

The Offering of the Three Treasures (Dâng Tam Bửu)

These offerings are made in similar fashion to the offerings in the Cao Dai Temple. The three offerings are, flowers, wine and tea – and their relation to the Caodaist idea of the self was explained at the start of this chapter. The offerings are brought to the altar in turn, but instead

²⁹ This translation by Christopher Hartney and Đào Công Tâm based on our translation of the explication of this prayer found in Appendix A.

of the chant “cúi mong **Thượng Đế** rưới ân thiên” which is used when making offerings on the altar to Đức Cao Đài, in a temple to the Holy Mother the invocation is:

“cúi mong **Phật-Mẫu** rưới ân thiên.”

We bow and ask that

The Divine Mother

Show us with divine blessings.

Each offering - the flowers, the wine and the tea - is followed by three prostrations as noted above.

The Reading and Burning of the Petition (Sớ văn Thượng Tấu).

A petition is drafted before each monthly ceremony saluting the Divine Mother. It also explains who leads the worship. The petition is placed in a censer and burnt – the smoke rising to heaven. After the reading and the burning of the petition, prostrations are then made to the Divine Mother. This is followed by three prostrations with the adept bringing their head close to the ground three times for each prostration, making a total of nine. At each lowering of the head the name of the Holy Mother is once more invoked.

The Five Pledges (Ngũ Nguyện)

Once the prostrations are made the adepts present declare the following five pledges;

Nam-Mô Nhất-nguyện:

Nhi-nguyện:

Tam-nguyện:

Tứ-nguyện:

Ngũ-nguyện:

Đại-Đạo hoằng-khai.

Phổ-Độ chúng sanh.

Xá tội đệ tử.

Thiên-hạ thái-bình.

Thánh-Thất an-ninh.

1. May the Great Way (Cao Đài Religion) be proclaimed widely.
2. May salvation be granted to all beings.
3. May you bless with mercy and forgiveness all your disciples.
4. Please grant peace for all mankind.
5. Please deliver security for our temple.

The congregation then does three prostrations as noted above.

At this point the ceremony comes to a close. The worshippers stand and bow three times to the Divine Mother altar. As there is no Hộ Pháp altar (the altar at the rear of all temples to Cao Dai), the congregation do not turn and bow to the rear of the temple. The congregation then moves to the side. The men face the women and the women face the men. In this position, they wait for the “third bell.”

The 'Third Bell'

The operator of the bell chants the following words as he strikes the bell.

1. Đản tràng viên mãn, Chúc sắc qui nguyên,
vĩnh mộc từ ân, phong điều vũ thuận. (strike)
2. Thiên phong hải chúng, quốc thới dân an,
hồi hướng đàn trường, tận thâm pháp giới. (strike)

3. Án Đà Ra Đé Dạ Ta Bà Ha. (strike)

- You are blessed and filled with the grace of Đức Chí Tôn/The Supreme Being and Đức Phật Mẫu/The Holy Mother.
- Heaven grants to the people a prosperous nation and peace, toward merit our ceremonies then gather virtue in the realms of dharma.
- (a mantra from the Sanskrit) "Praying for beings so they may destroy their bad karma and increase their merit."

Adepts then exit the worshipping space.

Daily Ritual Ceremonies at local Holy Mother Temples

At local Holy Mother temples, leaving aside the great ceremonies, minor ceremonies, anniversary ceremonies, and ceremonies held on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month, daily ceremonies are also completed. There are four daily ceremonies held at:

- 12:00AM (*Thời Tý* / The Hour of the Mouse, 11:00PM - 1:00AM),
- 6:00AM (*Thời Mẹo* / The Hour of the Cat, 5:00PM - 7:00AM),
- 12:00PM. (*Thời Ngọ* / The Hour of the Horse, 11:00AM - 1:00PM),
- 6:00PM. (*Thời Dậu* / The Hour of the Rooster, 5:00PM - 7:00PM).

The ceremony is performed as outlined above. The following aspects of the ritual, however, are not performed for daily ceremonies:

1. Music to welcome the Divine Beings is not played
2. Regarding the offering of the three treasures, only one out of three is offered. At the midnight and midday ceremonies wine is offered, at the 6AM and 6PM ceremonies, tea is offered.
3. The ritual of *chính sát cúng phẩm* (ensuring that the offerings are correctly positioned) is not carried out.
4. The petition is not prepared nor burnt.

Daily ceremonies can include a choir and music - but most often do not.

Conclusion

We can glean from this description that there are some differences between the worship of the Divine Mother and Đức Cao Đài in Caodaism. Religious rank and official status is important in the latter, whereas the universality and equality of all beings is stressed in the former. In a worshipping space to Đức Cao Đài we find that a rear altar forms a part of the worshipping space. Adepts will turn to acknowledge this altar in their ritual. This rear altar is dedicated to the “Hộ Pháp” or protector of the dharma – but it is also a space with numerous esoteric uses that shall not be explained in this volume. We can say, however, that this rear altar enables the re-energization of the Khi or essence of its worshippers as they pray. Moreover, in a set of sermons from the late 1940s, Phạm Công Tắc revealed that the Great Divine Temple is also the central portal used by the dead to access heaven during the Third Period of Salvation. Given these important esoteric uses of this building, the features of the Great Divine Temple must be precisely constructed to fit a specific soteriological view of the world. These elements are missing from a Holy Mother temple.

The architecture of the main Holy Mother temple has been developed with less spiritual complexity. The history of her slow rise to prominence in the religion is reflected in how Holy Mother temple architecture developed – that is, slowly, and with much less of a constant focus. This attitude has helped condition the appearance and features of the Holy Mother temple in Carramar.

5. The Divine Mother and Her Architecture

Although present in the religion from before its start, the place of the Divine Mother has been, as Phạm Công Tắc admits in his commentary in appendix one, a slow rise to prominence, her impact only slowly realised. He notes:

...all that we knew at that stage [i.e. 1925] was that the Divine Mother had come to start our religion. With the poems and teachings of the nine female immortals we knew why she had come to open the religion, but we still had not, at that stage, realised her power and potential.

When it comes to architecture in Caodaism, the Great Divine Temple (or Tòa Thánh) - the great temple to Đức Cao Đài – is the standard for this religion’s particular style. This building was begun in the late 1920s but met with many construction problems and delays. It was only really brought to completion after 1946 and officially opened in 1953. While the dramas and delays behind this building were playing out, a very slow and piecemeal series of developments led to a number of temporary buildings being used for the Divine Mother and this is still the case today. I capture some of these staggered developments here because they help explain the stylistics of the Carramar temple. This slow and unfocused building process for the Divine Mother has meant that at Tây Ninh, her worship takes place in a severely undersized temple - one originally built for another purpose. A greater temple to her honour was planned for a four-hectare site just outside the Holy See in Tây Ninh. We shall examine below the séance message that explains how this building should look. This construction was never started – and the land that was set aside for the site came to be occupied instead by houses and shops. There are thus idealised plans of what the architectural style of a Divine Mother temple *should* look like, but there is presently very little chance of this ideal building ever being erected and certainly not in the location proposed. Because of a lack of a divinely-inspired exemplar, the Carramar temple to the Holy Mother seeks to reflect the atmosphere of the present temporary building in Tây Ninh rather than follow the style of the unbuilt and ideal model. In this chapter, I point out the main features of the present Holy Mother temple in Tây Ninh and explain how these have been reflected in the Carramar building.

Throughout the mid-part of the twentieth century, Caodaism sought to unveil a novel architectural style – one that struck a balance between visual uniqueness and the national style of religious architecture. This challenge was most successfully achieved in the slow development of the Tòa Thánh 座聖 or Great Divine Temple dedicated to Đức Cao Đài. In this edifice we see a number of influences, but also a very unique stylistic where two huge towers – decorated with pagoda-like finials – give each building to Đức Cao Đài the semblance of an indigenised cathedral. Holy Mother temples differ from this “eastern cathedral” look by having only one tower rising up over the front portal rather than with two towers flanking the main door.

When Phạm Công Tắc had returned from political exile in 1946, all focus was on completion of the Great Divine Temple. To explain the design and justify the esoteric power of the building, Phạm Công Tắc claimed to be in séance communication with the spiritual pope of the religion – the soul of the Tang Dynasty poet, Li Po/ Lý Thái Bạch (circa early 800sCE). Through spirit communication, this voice sent down measurements for the Tòa Thánh and

offered up building suggestions. There was, thus, a great atmosphere of official regard and mystical intent behind the building of this temple.³⁰

There was no such formal process for the development of Điện thờ Phật Mẫu or Divine Mother architecture. Although today a large number of temples dedicated to Đức Cao Đài are accompanied by a temple to the Divine Mother, this was not the case for many of the formative years of the religion.

Activity in Mỹ Tho

After the spiritual banquet of 1925 – which we examined in Chapter Three - the religious focus of Caodaism in its very early years turns to analysing and enacting directions from Đức Cao Đài. It is to Mỹ Tho (to the south of Saigon in the Mekong Delta) that the next part of the story of the rise of the Divine Mother takes place. The worship of Phật Mẫu/The Divine Mother comes to prominence in the village of Phú Mỹ (Mỹ Tho Province)³¹ at the temple of Khổ Hiền Trang (The Virtuous Suffering Retreat).³² It was here in 1928 that a poem was received through mediumship from Đức Phật Mẫu. It was called Thảo Đường.

Thảo Đường phước địa ngộ tông hoa,
Lục ức dư niên vũ trụ hòa.
Cộng hưởng phạm gian an lạc nghiệp,
Thế đặng Bồng đảo định âu ca.

From the thatched cottage on blessed land, the great way opens
and for 600 000 years or more the universe comes to peace
humans in this earthly world establish joy
it evolves into an immortal realm, everything is prosperous.

Inspired by this poem, Phạm Công Tắc asked his co-religionist Mr Đinh Công Trứ to build an altar to Đức Phật Mẫu at the Sở Thảo Đường (a charity house connected to the religion in Mỹ Tho). At this stage of the religion's history the worship of Đức Phật Mẫu was extremely basic.

Activity in Cambodia

In the 1930s, Phạm Công Tắc became increasingly active as a medium in Phnom Penh and received numerous otherworldly messages here in both Vietnamese and French.³³ It was here that the great poem, which is the centrepiece of Caodaist ritual to the Divine Mother was received. He explains:

³⁰ See for example: 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.*

³¹ Nguyễn Văn Hồng, *Báo Ân Từ*, Saigon, 1999.

³² Nguyễn Văn Hồng dictionary q.v.

³³ Christopher Hartney, *Les Messages Spirites - Personality, Performance, and Séance: Caodaist Spirit Messages Delivered in the French Language [1925-1938], Translated with Commentary and Including an Explanatory Essay on Caodaism by Gustave Meillion [1960] Also Translated by the Author.* (In press, 2019).

The Phật Mẫu prayer was given to the Religious Region/Trần Đạo, Kiêm Biên in Cambodia at the Temple to Gratitude. This was administered by the historian Huỳnh Hữu Lợi and his wife. At this time, there was no prayer to the Divine Mother, all that we knew at that stage was that the Divine Mother had come to start our religion. With the poems and teachings of the nine female immortals we knew why she had come to open the religion, but we still had not, at that stage, realised her power and potential (see appendix one).

Poetry granted through séance activity outside the usual centres of Saigon and Tây Ninh are what drives a more formal urge to recognise the Divine Mother – firstly in rituals and then, later, in architecture.

The Divine Mother in Tây Ninh

From 1941, the world war interfered with the progress of the area around Mỹ Tho and affected its security. Mr Đinh Công Trứ and others were evacuated to the village of Trường Hoà in Tây Ninh province where they formed the Trường Qui Thiện or School of Qui Thiện/Return to Goodness. In this institution, they continued to cultivate their faith, do charity work, and realise other good deeds. This group also built a temple... but it is not clear what kind of temple they erected at this stage. Presently, the site they utilised is noteworthy architecturally because a Đền Thờ Phật Mẫu (Holy Mother Temple) is built on the site with a smaller temple to Đức Cao Đài built above it on the second storey. This is one of the few examples where these two temples exist inside the one building. This temple is built in an area close to the Trí Giác Cung – which is one of the significant meditation centres in Tây Ninh.

It could be argued, then, that the worship of the Divine Mother was not a central concern in Caodaism until the 1940s. What evidence we have suggests that the worship of the Divine Mother in Caodaism still took place, generally, outside of the Holy See and in a very small number of lay-constructed buildings. This is emphasised when we turn our attention to the canonised messages received from the Divine Mother into the religion. These occur only sporadically. A range of mediums receive messages from her, but it is only in the 1940s and 1950s that the chief medium, Phạm Công Tắc, becomes increasingly involved in the reception of messages from her.³⁴ This also highlights her growing importance to the inner leadership of the faith.

The Temple of Gratitude (Báo Ân Từ)

In 1932, Phạm Công Tắc instructed a number of followers of the Phạm Môn /梵門 (A Charity Branch of the religion whose name means “The Buddhist Door” or “Buddhist School”) to dismantle three wooden houses it owned and asked them to rebuild the houses as a single hall on a site next to the Hộ Pháp Đường (or office of the Hộ Pháp [the Guardian of Dharma]) inside the walls of the Holy See. This is the area where the present Divine Mother Temple stands.

This new wooden building was to be called the Báo Ân Từ /報恩祠 or Temple of Gratitude. It was to be a shrine to filial piety and offer pictorial examples from the extremely popular Confucian book 二十四孝/Nhị thập tứ hiếu/24 *Examples of Filial Piety*. More generally, as

³⁴ See, *Thánh Ngôn của Đức Diêu-Trì Kim-Mẫu* (translated by Quách Minh Chương), Tây Ninh, Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ n/d. Archived at: https://www.daotam.info/booksv/khaitam/thanhngonducphatmau/HOLY%20MOTHER'S%20COLLECTED%20DIVINE%20MESSAGES.htm#_Toc415495140

we will see below, the hall was described as a Caodaist Pantheon. It would celebrate those souls who had helped the religion and highlight the work of sages both Vietnamese, Chinese, and from the West who would be venerated here. The building thus had quite a humanist purpose – celebrating the good deeds of humans who had achieved fame and divinity through their active benevolence. The building was constructed of wood and had a wattle and daub covering.

From 1933, the Sacerdotal Council of Caodaism made an earnest start on the Great Divine Temple, this time planning a large concrete construction. The extant but temporary Tòa Thánh had to be dismantled. It was at this point that the great globe that has sat above the altar to Đức Cao Đài since the very early years of the religion was moved to the Temple of Gratitude to keep it safe.³⁵

A long interval then ensued because of World War II. Additional building plans were only slowly realised in the second half of the 1940s. It was only in 1947, for example, that the Universal Globe was moved out of the Temple of Gratitude and relocated in the newly completed Bát Quái Đài /八卦臺 (Octogonal Divine Palace) or high altar area of the newly constructed Tòa Thánh temple.

At this point, the former Temple of Gratitude was renovated and began its use as a temporary space for the worship of Đức Phật Mẫu. A large ceremony was organised and a name plaque honouring the Divine Mother (and which read Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu/瑶池金母) was moved from the (originally-Mỹ Tho-based) Trường Qui Thiện Charity Body to the Temple of Gratitude. To accompany this plaque, Phạm Công Tắc ordered the ritual department of the religion to make two additional name tablets - one for male souls and one for female souls. These were placed on altars either side of the main shrine and in this way, the main-focus of the Divine Mother temple – the altar area – was almost complete.

Completion of The Present Điện Thờ Phật Mẫu in Tây Ninh

In sermons given in the late 1940s, Phạm Công Tắc made various comments on the pleasure Đức Phật Mẫu took in the development of the temple dedicated to her. Yet with the near competition of the magnificent Great Divine Temple in 1953, the Temple of Gratitude with its wooden construction and daub overlay began to look shoddy. A Female Archbishop, Hương Nhiều presented a petition to the Sacerdotal Council encouraging them to erect a building of concrete – albeit for the continued *temporary* worship of Đức Phật Mẫu.

It was in light of this suggestion that the present building was erected on the site of the older wooden building. Construction commenced on the 11th of February 1952. Phạm Công Tắc then carried out a mystical blessing and performed a ceremonial re-establishment of the altar on the 11th of September 1953. The temple was then officially inaugurated on the 9th day of the First Month, Year of the Goat. This consecration was a part of the greater ceremony for the official opening of the Great Divine Temple. Although there was now a similar level of ritual equality between the two deities, the temple space offered to each remained quite different.

³⁵ Sadly, because of a miscalculation, the Universal Globe did not fit through the door and was squashed to fit. Phạm Công Tắc remarked that because of this the charity body would have to endure much suffering.

The Future Temple to the Divine Mother.

Over several sermons, Phạm Công Tắc had mentioned that he was keeping aside 4 hectares of land about a kilometre outside Gate Number One of the Holy See in the direction of *Linh Sơn* mountain for a dedicated complex to the Divine Mother on the Bình Dương road. In a séance communication, he reported that the Divine Mother saw hard times ahead for the religion, she also saw that internal divisions that would erupt in the faith. Given these potential developments, she asked that she be worshipped at the Temple of Gratitude until such times came when it would be easier for a large temple to be built by the faithful.

The Idea of the Future Temple.

Upon the second exile of Phạm Công Tắc in 1956, his colleague and fellow medium from 1925, Cao Hoài Sang, returned from Saigon to Tây Ninh to lead the religion. He continued to complete many of the building projects in the Holy See. This included The Great Gate (Cửa Chánh Môn) and the other twelve smaller gates around the perimeter of the holy city. He was also permitted by spirit command to build more local temples including numerous local Holy Mother temples. Cao Hoài Sang also had a pressing desire to start work on the Holy Mother Complex. He engaged in extensive spirit communication with the Eighth Female Buddha (Bát Nương). She replied in one particular communication:

Where around The Holy City is there not holy land? Look at the Vạn Pháp Cung (next to Núi Bà / Linh Sơn Mountain) or even the block of land near the Office of The Sacerdotal Council of Honorary Dignitaries close to Gate Number Seven, all of these areas can be used for building the new Great Divine Mother Temple...

This statement demonstrated that the original site for the building complex was already being used for domestic and commercial purposes and very hard to clear for a temple. In giving this advice, the Eighth Female Buddha also supplied the dimensions of the proposed new building. The message ran as follows:

Regarding the size of the building, you will see that it is the same size as the Great Divine Temple. Around the towers we find a combination between the Great Divine temple and the current Temple of Gratitude. These are the constituents of the façade of the new building. It will look like the façade of the Temple of Gratitude. The differences will be that the middle of the façade will be a tall tower called the Lôi Âm Tự / 雷音寺 (The Temple of Thunder). Its height will be the same as the great bell tower of The Great Divine Temple (i.e. 36 metres). On the top of this tower there will be three mystical intertwined circles painted in the Three Colours of the Cao-Dai Religion. Either side of this central tower will be two smaller towers. These towers will be lower by six metres. The shape of these smaller towers will look like the bell tower but be flat on top like a pillar. The tower on the right side (the male side) will contain a depiction of the Ngạn Uyển Garden / 岸苑 (a sacred garden) which will evoke the face of the sun. On the left tower (the female side) you will represent the Ao Thất Bửu / Thất Bửu Lake (Seven Precious Jewels Lake) and evoke the face of the moon. On these four corners there are four pillars on the top of each with the shape of a dome that lend the building the appearance of the Taj Mahal in India.

In the Ngạn Uyển Garden you must grow flowers of twelve different colours to represent the Twelve Earthly Branches / 十二地支. And the Ao Thất Bửu / Thất Bửu Lake must have seven kinds of stones for the seven precious jewels: (These are the seven treasures

as found in the Amitabha Sutra - Kim: Gold, Ngân: Silver, Lưu ly: Lapis lazuli, Pha lê: Crystal, Xa cừ: Agate/Mother of pearl, Xích châu: Rubies or red pearls, Mã não: Cornelian).

At the back of the new Great Divine Mother Temple there must be an eight-sided tower (which looks like the Bát Quái Đài as at the Great Divine Temple). This tower is called The Tower of The Creation and Transformation Heaven.

According to the hymns sung in praise of Phật Mẫu:

協陰陽有合變生
乾坤產出有形
八魂運轉化成眾生

*By uniting Yin and Yang
The Phật Mẫu gave rise to the physical realm
The eight spiritual levels form the eight levels of existence.*

*Assembling the spirits of all sentient beings, taking that as her task
She opened a path in which all spirits assist each other in
Their spiritual progress.*

On the top of this tower there are representations of the Three Saints of the White Lodge.³⁶ Outside this tower there will be eight sides, but in the interior there will be a continuously circular space as a reference to the mystical nature of the circle. This is because the two Chinese scrolls at the front of the Divine Mother Temple will read:

八品真魂造世界化眾生萬物有形從此道

卦爻博愛定乾坤分等法一神非相治其心

*BÁT phẩm chơn hồn tạo thế giới hóa chúng sanh vạn vật hữu hình từn
thứ Đạo,
QUÁI hào bác ái định Càn khôn phân đẳng pháp nhất thần phi tương
trị kỳ Tâm*

Which translates as:

*The 8 souls were created in the universe
and transformed the 10, 000 beings.
All these visible things follow the 道/Dao.³⁷*

*There is only one invisible spirit that is master of the heart-mind who
utilising the law of love has arranged the 10,000 beings into their
various levels.*

³⁶ These saints will be explained below.

³⁷ A reference to the eight levels of soul – material, plant, animal, human, genie, saint, immortal, buddha.

The whole of the outside of the Temple is painted white. The roof, however, will be painted red and you will not be allowed to depict any other images on the outside.

Inside the Holy Mother Temple, we find that the layout is similar to the present temple and its way of worshipping. This means that one must set up the space in a similar way including the carving of the Nine Female Buddhas.

Opposite the statue of the Holy Mother (that is, near the front entrance to the temple as one walks in) there is a statue of Nam Bình Vương Phật / 南屏佛祖(南屏王佛) [...that is the statue of Phạm Công Tắc wearing Buddhist robes]. Inside the temple the paint scheme should be the same as in the present Holy Mother Temple.

From the statue of the Nam Bình Vương Phật through to the statue of the Divine Mother (at the altar area) there must be eight levels. These represent the Bát Cảnh Cung. This is compared to the Great Divine Temple which is built over nine levels (representing the nine levels of heaven). Behind the statue of the Nam Bình Vương Phật there will be a representation of Thiên Cơ Chuyển Hóa that is, the Divine Plan for Transformation and Evolution (i.e. the stages of the soul's movement in the 581 days after death). This narrative should illustrate the nine stories that were put together by the Charity Body and published by the Sacerdotal Council.³⁸

After receiving this message, Cao Hoài Sang explained further:

When the new Holy Mother Temple is completed the worshipping of the Holy Mother will be moved to the new building. At this time, worship in the Temple of Gratitude will be reinstated as described in the original teachings. This will mean that in the former Holy Mother temple there will be a representation of a globe which will be in blue. On the globe will be a map of Vietnam that appears in yellow. All of this will sit within a rectangular space painted white. Underneath this white space there will appear the name tablets or the pictures (that is not statues) of sages, outstanding scholars, kings and historical figures who have made a significant contribution to the life of humanity. Because the sparks of genius from all these figures come originally from the Supreme Being – even though they have different viewpoints and attitudes, this is only a conflict deployed for the sake of evolution. Just as there are bad people to allow us to understand what goodness is, then if there is no conflict struggle then there can be no progress in a society. Above the white platform there appears four words written in red “大同支法/Đại Đồng Chi Pháp” (The Universal Fraternity [or Harmony] of the Dharma). This is the aim of the Caodaist Religion - the coming world community that will emanate from this Divine Law.

On the left section of the white platform appear these four words “Hải Ngoại Chi Thế” that is: to worship the sages and heroes of the countries of the world. The Caodaist

³⁸ An extensive ritual process of mourning and filial respect for one's deceased parents is a major part of Caodaist rituals. See, Christopher Hartney and Từ Chơn (translators): *The Prayers of Caodaist Postmortem Rituals* 35 pages. Archived at <https://tusachcaodai.files.wordpress.com/2019/07/kinhcuuva.pdf>

hierarchies of the Chi Thế (Temporal Hierarchy) will be worshipped here after their disincarnation.

On the right side of the white platform there will be four words “Quốc Nội Chi Đạo” that is the aim of the Supreme Being to create this religion for the nation. This section is where we worship the unknown martyrs of the nation, its heroes and those members of the hierarchy who have perished for the Dao – they will be worshipped here when they disincarnate.

I have provided an extensive description of what the ideal Divine Mother temple should look like here for a specific purpose - to illustrate that a standard for Divine Mother architecture is yet to be realised and neither the present temple in Tây Ninh, nor in Carramar fits this ideal.

General Features of Phật Mẫu Temple Architecture.

The temple itself is understood as having 14 sections. The façade comprises two of these sections. The main body of the temple is divided into eight sections. Behind the main altar area is a room which is the main altars for the worshipping of one’s ancestors. This later room is more in keeping with the building’s original use as a Temple of Gratitude. No other local or regional Phật Mẫu Temple has such a room.

a. The Environs of the Điện Thờ Phật Mẫu

When we turn our attention to the Temple of Gratitude, the surrounds of this temple play an important part for the atmosphere of this part of the Holy See of Caodaism.

As one moves down the Boulevard Phạm Hộ Pháp from the Great Divine Temple one comes to the Divine Mother Temple on the right, whilst on the left, a large cultivated garden is seen.

At the front of the temple in Tây Ninh is a significant banner pole. Often a nine-metre-long banner is drawn to the top. With a width of 0.9 meters it is decorated with the three primary colours of the religion: yellow, blue and red. At the top of the banner is the image of the Divine Eye. This is accompanied by the emblem of religion (a Confucian book, a Buddhist begging bowl and a Daoist whisk). of the Hiệp Thiên Đài then the six Chinese characters that make up the official name of the religion. They read “Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ /大道三期普度/The Great Way of Third Universal Salvation.” There is the depiction of a basket of flowers at the bottom.

In Carramar the visitor will note the flag pole behind the main ceremonial gate. Due to council regulations, it is set at a much lower height than the community hoped to build.

b. Identifying the style of the Điện Thờ Phật Mẫu Metaphorically.

The temple architecture of the Temple of Gratitude is described as being linked to the concept of Vạn Pháp /萬法 . This is because the outside of the temple is decorated with swastikas (stamped on many of the roof tile finials) referred to by the Vietnamese as ‘Vạn’ (萬), internally the decorations of significant ritual tables contain the character ‘Pháp’ (法) or Dharma. The two terms together can mean “All Principles/All Dharmas”. This stresses the universality of the Điện Thờ Phật Mẫu.

In Carramar – these symbols appear at the base of many of the columns on the front façade.

c. The Structure of the Façade and Exterior.

At the front the Temple of Gratitude is built on two levels. There are also two layers to the roof with double tiling, that is, interlocked semi-circles making a yin-yang pattern. The finials of the roof have a distinctly East-Asian up-curve, this is in contrast to the roof structure Great Divine Temple.

The façade is divided and dominated by a single, central four-level tower. Three rooves of the tower can be seen and these are decorated in red tiles. The top of the tower is surmounted by the symbol of a lotus flower. A lightning rod rises above this with a swasticker attached to this surrounded by neon lights. A flagpole at 45 degrees is set protruding from the middle of the central balcony. Here the Caodai flag is flown.

In Carramar – again because of local council and local resident concerns the main tower of the façade is much lower than was originally planned.

At ground level we find three doors and three corresponding entrance ways through the veranda. The doors are flanked by two spiral stairways on the veranda that rise to the second floor.

In Carramar a single staircase breaks into two divisions from half-way up. Shoes are left at the bottom of these stairs. Men will proceed to the right of this division and women to the left. At the point where they divide is a foundation stone detailing the dates of the foundation of the building. There is another staircase that leads from the female side of the upstairs worshipping space to the eating and worship area on the first floor. This is a purely functional staircase with no religious meaning.

From the side of the temple there is a three-level roof with celestory appertures that admit the light and air. The roof is surmounted at the back by a Blue Female Phoenix / Thanh Loan.³⁹

In Carramar the roof seeks to capture the Asian look of the Temple of gratitude but is less complex. The community went to much trouble to source statues of the phoenixes. The phoenix positioned on the roof over the altar area is female. Her tail can be seen from ground level at the back of the temple, but this statue is otherwise obscured. This is a female phoenix and is the vehicle of the Divine Mother. On the front veranda of the temple close to the flagpole, a male phoenix statue is positioned and can be clearly seen.

Around the temple itself, there are 91 bas-relief scenes describing such human attributes as filial piety, faithfulness, compassion, righteousness and the story of many of the Divine Beings. These illustrations bring alive the scriptural dimensions of the building.

In Carramar – as with all local Holy Mother Temples, these features were once part of the “Temple of Gratitude” and not a part of the architectural style of the Divine Mother.

d. The Interior of the Temple.

³⁹ The importance of the phoenix connects with a system of Hindu godly vehicles. In Caodaist imagery, Đức Cao Đài flies by dragon, Đức Phật Mẫu by phoenix and, by extension these animals represent these deities.

When we enter from the front of the temple we come to a vestibule area terminated by a wall. The wall is decorated by a five-star lantern. Either side of the lantern are two columns of Chinese characters.

八品真魂造世界化眾生萬物有形從此道
卦爻博愛定乾坤分等法一神非相治其心

- *BÁT phẩm chơn hồn tạo thế giới hóa chúng sanh vạn vật hữu hình tùng thủ Đạo,*
- *QUÁI hào bác ái định Càn khôn phân đẳng pháp nhất thần phi tướng trị kỳ Tâm.*

Which translates as:

The 8 souls created the universe and transformed the 10, 000 beings.
All these visible things follow the Dao.⁴⁰

There is only one invisible spirit that is master of the heart-mind who utilising the law of love has arranged the 10,000 beings into their various levels.

(In the creation of heaven and earth the Supreme Being utilised The Law of Love to arrange and order the 10 000 beings into various levels, there is a great and invisible soul which is the master of the (xin/心/Tâm – heart-mind)).

In Carramar this poem does not exist as a feature.

Around the temple there are twelve windows along either side of the temple. The two nearest the front carry the character “Báo /報” (returning) on the left side of the temple and “Ân / 恩” (appreciation/favour/grace) on the right side of the temple. The remaining 11 windows on each side are open and unadorned with words.

In Carramar for design purposes and to protect the privacy of neighbours, windows in the worshipping area are small and high up the wall.

Behind the vestibule area we find a wide frame mounted on the wall. Presently there is no image inside this frame. The white colour infers 氣 qi or vital image. There is the suggestion that in the newly designed Điện thờ Phật Mẫu a specific symbol will be put here referring to the Hộ Pháp, or guardian of the Dharma dressed humbly in the robes of a Buddhist monk.⁴¹

In Carramar this feature does not exist. There is however at the back of the worshipping space a gallery window which, as I write, remains blocked up. This may be opened at a future occasion and used as a gallery for musicians.

The nave of the temple is divided in its interior in eight sections or bays. These sections are marked off by columns and arches in the roof. The second bay from the front door is where the choir stands to chant prayers, there is also usually a low table here for musicians.⁴²

⁴⁰ A reference to the eight levels of soul – material, plant, animal, human, genie, saint, immortal, buddha.

⁴¹ According to words on the future temple here will be the image of the Nam Bình Buddha 南屏佛祖. (source- verbal accounts of the sayings of His Holiness Hộ Pháp).

⁴² When a great ceremony takes place the musicians and choir move to the upper level.

In Carramar the nave is not long enough to make these divisions evident.

The eight sections of the temple are referred to as the Palace of the Eight Sites / The eight-scenery palace (八境宮 / Bát Cảnh Cung). This represents the Bát Cảnh Cung of the Phật Mẫu in the heavenly realm, it is large house with eight compartments which represents the power of God the Mother. When one looks to the ceiling there are images of a white dragon, appearing and disappearing within the clouds there depicted.

In Carramar a great dragon is depicted moving through clouds either side of the celestory aperture in the nave.

e. The Main Altar and Images.

The main image at the back wall of this space is a colourful depiction of Đức Phật Mẫu accompanied by the Nine Female Buddhas and four celestial attendants. They all ride on the back of a Blue Phoenix with its wings outstretched ready to land.

In Carramar this feature is represented in another manner – rather than seeing a panoply of carved figures, over the altar we find a screen depicting the *accessories* of the Nine Female Immortals. These are:

The First Female Buddha – symbolised by a lute.

The Second is depicted by an incense burner.

The Third who holds a Long Tu (or Dragon-Whisk) fan.

The Fourth holds a golden name board (or Kim Bảng).

The Fifth Female Buddha grasps a Như Ý (a wand of contentment).

The Sixth Female Buddha carries the Tiêu Diêu (a banner of wandering freedom).

The Seventh Female Buddha bears a lotus flower (representative of enlightenment).

The Eighth Female Buddha holds a symbolic basket of flowers.

The Ninth Female Buddha is represented by a flute.

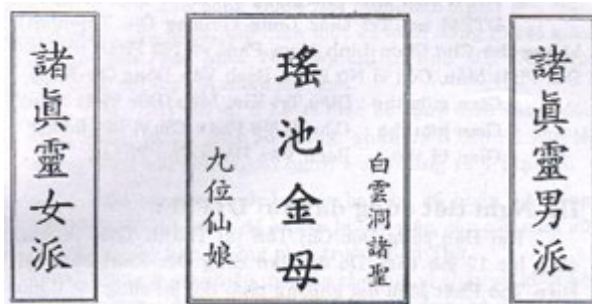
In the Tây Ninh temple – we find the above symbols are part of a wider collection of statues of the Divine Mother and her Nine attendant immortals. This collection includes a statue of the Immortal Đông Phương Sóc / 東方朔 / Dongfang Shuo. Standing straight he is holding his two open hands two his forehead waiting to receive the four peaches of immortality which were given by the Buddha Mother to the emperor Wu.

In the Tây Ninh statuary we also see that to the left beneath the image of the Divine Mother is a representation of a pagoda bedecked with flowers. In the courtyard of this pagoda is a statue of His Holiness Thượng Phẩm who is holding the Long Tu Phiến (– the fan of 36 feathers for encouraging souls on their passage through the afterworld). His is kneeling with his face uplifted paying respect to Đức Phật Mẫu.

In Tây Ninh the centrepiece of all these images is a representation of Đức Phật Mẫu modelled in the centre and riding on the back of a blue phoenix. On her left and right are the Nine Female Buddhas/Immortals. Their hands are holding the symbols listed above.

In Carramar these images are not depicted.

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.



In Carramar – 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 local temples to Duc Cao Dai. The main difference between a father and mother altar being that in mother temples there there is no lamp representing the Universal Monad. There is a ritual light over the altar however and it is called the Đèn Vọng (bright lamp). There are also two incense burners. One is placed higher than the other. It has five incense sticks and is for Phật Mẫu herself. The lower incense burner burns with nine incense sticks divided into three equal rows. These are offered to the nine Female Buddhas.

f. Other Ritual Features

The section of the Phật Mẫu altar just described is referred to as section number one out of the eight sections of a space dedicated to the Divine Mother. The second section is decorated each side of this altar with three ceremonial parasols. Each is coloured differently – yellow is closest to the altar followed by blue and then red. In the third section of this space we see eight staffs are inserted into a wooden holder. These protect the space. The staffs are flanked by two ceremonial parasols.

Between the columns that divide sections two and three, there is a small altar which operates as the internal table. This table contains a vase of flowers, a dish of fruit and a censer. During ceremonies a pair of candles and three incense sticks are burnt here. There are also two stools

on either side which hold the wooden fish and a gong. These are used to chant the Di Lạc Chơn Kinh/Truth of Maitreya Sutra every day after the ceremony at 6PM.

Finally, Downstairs...

Behind the main staircase we find an altar to the three wise ones where three traditional Chinese folk deities are honoured. This altar dominates an open space that can be used for meals and community gatherings. These three are known in China as the 三星 or three stars. In Vietnamese they are called collectively “Phúc Lộc Thọ” and represent the qualities of prosperity, status, and longevity.

Ông Phúc/*Fuxing* 福星 personifies Jupiter and is linked to good fortune.

Ông Lộc/*Luxing* 禄星 personifies Ursa Major and is linked to status and influence.

Ông Thọ/*Shouxing* 寿星 personifies the star Canopus (the Chinese south pole star) and is linked to longevity.

Conclusion

A comparison between the Divine Temples of Tây Ninh and Carramar reveals that the Australian version has a reduction in detail and, for its size, cannot be laid out in a manner that strictly parallels the Divine Mother in Tây Ninh. But the community members who spent years both building and decorating the temple have done their best to incorporate the limitations of the site, with the demands of council and still produce a building that has the same venerable atmosphere to the Divine Mother that one finds in Tây Ninh.

Conclusions

As a spirit voice The Divine Mother makes a minor contribution to Caodaist scripture,⁴³ but it is her rise to almost co-equal “presence” at a ritual level with Đức Cao Đài/God the Father that is most noteworthy in this deity’s rise to prominence. Before the religion officially commenced, The Divine Mother and her nine attendant buddha handmaidens visited and sat at a spiritual banquet with Phạm Công Tắc and his associates in the later part of 1925. Their presence hinted at the great things this religion was to become, but in séance other voices took over and the Divine Mother seemed to have only a background part to play as this new religion became a national phenomenon. In an ironic way, it was because of the banquet that Caodaist mediums saw a significant development away from the table-tipping séances that had characterised the religion’s slow and insular development to that point. This made communication processes with heaven far easier – but the immediate focus was on God the Father or Cao Dai.

From messages received on the outskirts of the Caodaist world – such as those which manifest in Mỹ Tho in 1928 – attention on The Divine Mother in Caodaism continued to increase. Rituals to her became slowly more evident and through the 1940s and 1950s she achieved an importance in the religion almost equal to that of Cao Dai. But this importance remained focused on ritual than anything else. The spiritual banquet of 1925 formed the basis of the Hội Yến Diêu Trì. Which has grown in prominence so that today it is one of Caodaism’s largest celebrations. Although her worship is still located in a temporary and barely-adequate building in Caodaism’s Holy See in Tây Ninh, many local temples were constructed for her veneration throughout the south of Vietnam in the post World War II period.

The temple in Carramar is the outcome of these developments and, of course, the recent vicious history of Vietnam. It is a religious building that is unique to Australia. It permits the worship of a deity who is seen as a universal mother, a personality vital to the formation of spiritual souls and to the salvation of believers. The Carramar temple is not only the result of thousands of years of religious development in East Asia, it is also the result of exacting hard work and determination by a dedicated group of Australian believers. The moment the building officially opened it was already a significant example of Australian religious diversity. I hope this small book explains how important this building is, and I hope you get the chance to visit it and the welcoming community who care for it.

⁴³ Quách Minh Chương, trans., *Thánh Ngôn Của Đức Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu/Collected Divine Messages of the Divine Mother.*, accessed December 17, 2018, https://www.daotam.info/books/khaitam/thanhngonducphatmau/HOLY%20MOTHER’S%20COLLECTED%20DIVINE%20MESSAGES.htm#_Toc415495140.

Appendix One:

Annotation on the Prayers to the Phật Mẫu /Divine Mother

Phạm Công Tắc, the “Hộ Pháp” or “Guardian of the Dharma” in Caodaism delivered the following sermon at the Temple of Gratitude/Holy Mother Temple, on 4PM 15th Day of the Eighth Lunar Month, Year of the Pig (1947). In it he explains line-by-line the central prayer to Đức Phật Mẫu.

This translation by Christopher Hartney and Đào Công Tâm.

Today we hold the Great Ceremony for the Golden Mother of the Bejewelled Lake, I think that everyone in the religion should know the power of our Divine Mother. So let us ask: “what is her power and why do we worship her?”

In order to know this power, I will in this sermon explain the prayer we offer to the Divine Mother - the one we often recite on a daily basis. Before I begin to explain it, however, I would like to point out how we got this prayer, when it was given to us and where.

The Phật Mẫu prayer was given to the Religious Region, Kiêm Biên in Cambodia at the Temple to Gratitude. This was administered by the historian Huỳnh Hữu Lợi and his wife. At this time, there was no prayer to the Divine Mother, all that we knew at that stage was that the Divine Mother had come to start our religion. With the poems and teachings of the nine female immortals we knew why she had come to open the religion, but we still had not, at that stage, realised her power and potential.

At this time in Cambodia, during my visit there, all our dignitaries in the Overseas Missionary came to attend the prayers for the Divine Mother ceremony. The eighth female immortal descended at this time and appeared at a séance that we held. I operated the corbeille à bec in front of the altar (the spirit pen used to receive heavenly messages). At this séance there were many witnesses. There were both many co-believers present and a person who had no idea of the Way. This was my nephew Mr Hiếu who was waiting in the front yard. While he was relaxing outside, he saw a great halo descend upon the temple at the time of the séance. After the séance was completed, everyone began discussing the presence of the halo inside the temple - even though those who were outside the temple and who saw the halo descend were not aware that there was a séance taking place inside. My nephew and many other co-believers witnessed this.

Now I would like to explain each of the sentences in the prayer so that it can be understood.

'Tạo Hóa Thiên huyền vi Thiên Hậu,
Chưởng Kim Bàn Phật Mẫu Diêu Trì.'

造化天玄微天后
掌金盤佛母瑤池

At the Heaven of Creation and Transformation reigns the mysterious Heavenly Queen,
She commands the Dieu Tri Palace and is called the Mother Buddha of the Golden Basin.

At the Ninth Heaven – called the Heaven of Creation – there is a being who holds the power of creation. She is referred to as the Heavenly Queen. She holds the golden basin and has the spiritual rank to direct souls. Thus, she is called the Precious Bejewelled Lake Buddha Mother.

To the east, people often refer to the Buddha Mother as the Birth Mother and often worship her using an idol. As we see with the teachings of the nine female immortals, all the people of East Asia recognise the Buddha Mother, that is, the birth mother of all humanity.

'Sanh quang dưỡng dục quần nhi'

生光養育群兒

With the fluid of vitality, she nourishes all her children.

Using this fluid of vitality, The Buddha Mother elevates and nourishes all beings.

'Chon linh phối nhứt thân vi thánh hình'

眞靈配一身為聖形

She creates them by unifying the spirit and the astral body to make a being that exists on the spiritual plane.

The astral body or the peri-spirit is formed by the Buddha Mother using the spirit energies of the Supreme Being. By uniting this with our astral body she fashions a being on the spiritual plane. When we die, this astral body is what exits our corpse.

'Thiên cung xuất vạn linh tùng pháp'

天宮出萬靈從法

This heaven creates the Ten Thousand Beings who must follow its dharma.

From this heaven, the realm of the Supreme Being, all lesser beings are created and so all beings should follow the dharma of the Supreme Being.

'Hiệp âm dương hữu hợp biến sanh'

協陰陽有合變生

Uniting Yin and Yang harmoniously all beings are created.

Using the yin and yang energies and by uniting them harmoniously the ten thousand beings are created.

'Càn khôn sản xuất hữu hình'

乾坤產出有形

Heaven and Earth created the visible realm,

Before this, heaven and earth was a void. The Buddha Mother created all ten thousand beings.

'Bát hồn vận chuyển hóa thành chúng sanh'

八魂運轉化成眾生

The eight spiritual levels create and transform all living beings.

In the eight spiritual levels (the material, vegetable, animal, human, genie, saint, immortal and buddha levels) all these come from the golden basin of the Buddha Mother. The eight spiritual levels transform in order to create the first four levels (the material, vegetable, animal and human) this is the realm of all living beings.

'Cộng vật loại huyền linh đồ nghiệp'

共物類玄靈圖業

Gathering the spirits of all sentient beings to create a common karma.

Bringing together all sentient beings for the sake of great karma the Buddha Mother opens a path for establishing spiritual positions for one another.

'Lập tam tài định kiếp hòa căn'

立三才定劫和根

The Universal Triad decides the incarnation and karma for each soul.

The Universal Triad (heaven, earth, humanity) and the Buddha Mother decides the incarnations and the paths for every soul who incarnates through this earthy realm.

'Chuyển luân định phẩm cao thăng'

轉輪定品高升

Because of reincarnation, the spirit evolves to attain the highest of positions.

Our reincarnation, the path of life and death, is the path of attaining a higher spiritual position. We are born in order to transform our karmic account according to the law of cause and effect. We are born in order to create good karma for ourselves, we are born in order to attain for ourselves the highest possible spiritual evolution.

'Hư vô Bát quái trị thần qui nguyên'

虛無八卦治神歸元

Using the Void of the Eight Trigrams, the souls are brought back to their origin.

Using the Great Void to establish the Eight Trigrams our spirits are permitted to return to their points of origin. It is the Buddha mother who has the power to bring these souls back to the Supreme Being.

'Diệt tục kiếp trần duyên oan trái'

滅俗劫塵緣冤債

Destroying all our earthly bonds and the debts of our previous incarnation.

We can ask the Buddha Mother for aid in determining how we can repay our karmic account. She has the power to adjust the process of our reincarnation. She also can guide us in how we contribute to repaying our karmic account.

'Chưởng đào tiên thủ giải trường tồn'

掌桃仙守解長存

She bears the Immortal Peach and rewards souls who can attain the Way and return them to eternal life.

At the Palace of Diêu Trì the Buddha Mother gathers and concentrates the vital fluid and transforms it into an immortal peach. This peach is enough for eternal life in the spiritual realm and the Buddha Mother holds the power for our astral body to return and attain the Way in this spiritual realm.

'Nghệp hồng dẫn tử hồi môn,

Chí công định vị vĩnh tồn Thiên cung'

業洪運子回門

至公定位永存天宮

Her Great Work is to bring her children back to their original home in the spiritual realm.

The Supreme Being arranges a position for those souls who can then have eternal life in the spiritual realm.

The Buddha Mother calculates the results of our karma. She then is able to return us to a more pristine karmic position and the Supreme Being, taking this more pristine karma into account, creates a spiritual position for us.

'Chủ âm quang thường tùng Thiên mạng,
Độ Chơn Thần nhứt vãng nhứt lai.'
主陰光常從天命
度真神一往一來

She masters the dark/yin energy and follows the order of the Supreme Being.
In guiding our astral bodies as they go out and return.

This Dark/Yin Energy is within this Earthly Realm. The Dark/Yin Energy forms the border between hell and heaven. Following the order of the Supreme Being, the Buddha Mother maintains and protects our astral body on its journey out and its return.

'Siêu thăng phụng liễn qui khai.'
超升鳳輦歸開

When our spirit goes back to heaven, there is an immortal carriage to convey us and to open the gates of heaven.

When one ascends to heaven, we need assistance from the carriage of the immortals – that this the Phụng Liễn or Phoenix Carriage – it helps us open the gates of heaven.

'Tiên cung Phật xứ Cao Đài xưng danh.'
仙宮佛處高臺唱名

From the realm of the immortals and the buddhas, Đức Cao Đài will call the name of your soul.

From the immortal realm and from the realm of the buddhas, the Supreme Being will call your soul's name - but He does so following the rules and using the powers of the Buddha Mother.

'Hội nguơn hữu chí linh huấn chúng'
會元有至靈訓眾

In this period, the Supreme Being comes to teach all beings.

The first age transforms into the middle age and then we have the final age which is our era. This last transition is about to come to an end. When this end takes place, the four upper transitions will commence. It is at this point that the Supreme Being will come down to teach and guide all living beings.

'Hội Long Hoa nhơn chủng hòa ki (cơ)
大龍花人種和機

At the Dragon Flower Assembly all the races will be united.

The Great Dragon Flower Assembly is already predicted. This is the amnesty for all souls which will not distinguish between race, creed, or personality and humanity will become united as if one.

'Tam kỳ khai hiệp Thiên thi,
Khoa môn Tiên vị ngộ kỳ Phật duyên.'

三期開合天書
科門仙位遇期佛緣

According to the Divine Plan, The Third Amnesty is opened.
To test immortals for their Buddha affinity.

As foreseen, The Third Amnesty is now open as an instrument of the Divine Plan which is a meeting for the Dao-level immortals to be examined for their elevation to buddhahood.

'Trung khô hải độ thuyền Bát Nhã,
Phước Từ Bi giải quả trừ căn.'

中苦海度船般若
福慈悲解果除根

In the middle of the Ocean of Suffering the Prajna boat saves the beings.
Through mercy their bad karmic account is eliminated.

The Divine Mother takes the boat of prajna/salvation to ferry to safety souls from this earthly ocean (i.e. ocean of suffering) and does so with the mercy and the blessings of the Supreme Being to free the karmic account of all living beings.

'Huòn hồn chuyển đọa vi thăng'

還魂轉墮為升

The soul, now resurrected, can transform from its fallen situation in the underworld and can ascend to heaven.

Even souls who have been condemned to the lowest of hells can still find resurrection through the prayers of Caodaism.

'Cửu Tiên hồi phục Kim Bàn Chưởng Âm.'

九仙回復金盤掌陰

The Nine Immortals return to the Golden Basin guiding yin energy.

The nine female immortals return to the Golden Basin at the Bejewelled Palace in order to help the Divine Mother govern the energy of yin.

'Thập Thiên can bao hàm vạn tượng,

Tùng địa chi hóa trường cần khôn.'

十天干包含萬象
從地支化長乾坤

The Ten Celestial Properties which include all things
Combine with the 12 Zodiacs – and Heaven and Earth expand

The Ten Celestial Properties are: Giáp, Ất, Bính, Đinh, Mậu, Kỷ, Canh, Tân, Nhâm, Quý. These combine with the 12 Zodiacs, mouse, buffalo, tiger, cat, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig. These are able to change and transform to become heaven and earth - these are ever expanding.

'Trùng huân phục vị Thiên môn.'

重還復位天門

On many occasions a soul is allowed to return to its former position at heaven's gate.

We are allowed to return to our original home, that is to return to the gate of heaven.

'Nguơn linh hóa chủng quỷ hồn nhưt thăng'

元靈化種鬼魂一升

Original souls can transform just as perverted souls can ascend and be saved.

Original souls can transform into many forms, that is, they can transform themselves through missions to spiritually elevate lower beings. They do this in order to attain a higher spiritual position. By descending they establish a position for themselves. Perverted spirits can also ascend and are allowed to walk the same paths as genies, saints, immortals and buddhas to fashion their next incarnation.

'Vô siêu đọa quả căn hữu pháp'

無超墮果根有法

There is no descent, the effect of your past life is decided by the Divine Law.

There is no descent to punishment, the effect of our past lives still has, however, a limiting effect on how we may rise.

'Vô khổ hình nhơn kiếp lưu oan,

Vô địa ngục vô quỷ quan.'

無苦刑人劫留冤

無地獄無鬼關

There is no punishment because of the effect of your past lives.

There is no longer a hell, no gate to the devil.

There is no longer punishment, the Buddha Mother eliminates all retribution for evil in the realms of hell. There is no longer a gate for devils.

'Chí Tôn đại xá nhưt trường qui nguyên.'

至尊大赦一場歸元

The Supreme Being has granted a great amnesty so that all humanity can be united.

Because of this Amnesty our religion is called the Troisième Amnistie de Dieu en Orient [The Third Amnesty of God in the East]. The Supreme Being granted an amnesty of forgiveness to bring all humanity back into unity with Him.

'Chiếu nhũ lịnh Từ Huyền thọ sắc

Độ anh nhi Nam, Bắc, Đông, Tây.'

照乳令慈萱受敕

度嬰兒南北東西

The Merciful Mother, following the Supreme Being, ordered that
All her children be saved whether to the North, South, East or West.

Following the order of the Supreme Being, the Merciful Mother is our birth mother, to save the Ten Thousand Beings in the Four Directions. No one is left behind or allowed to go missing.

'Kỳ khai tạo nhứt Linh Đài,
Diệt hình ta pháp cường khai Đại Đồng.'

期開造一靈臺
滅形法強開大同

The opening of this period creates a single faith
It will eliminate heterodox beliefs, and profoundly establish a Great Harmony.

The period of the opening of the Third Amnesty includes the gathering of all the faiths of all humanity with enough power to eliminate or destroy all heterodox beliefs. In this way all humanity is brought into unity.

'Hiệp vạn chủng nhứt môn đồng mạch'
協萬種一門同脈

Uniting the ten thousand beings, with one gate/one faith for all.

Uniting humanity into a single house, the Way will be the only path. It will be the same faith with no distinction between countries, races, or religions. When this day comes there will be peace.

'Qui thiên lương quyết sách vận trù'
歸天良決策運籌

She makes plans to revive our spiritual conscience.

The Buddha Mother gathers the spiritual conscience of all her children to harmonise all those who have a good heart.

'Xuân Thu, Phất Chử, Bát Vu
Hiệp qui Tam Giáo hữu cầu chí chơn'

春秋拂塵鉢盂
協歸三教有求至真

The Spring and Autumn Classic, The Feather Whisk of Purification, the Begging Bowl of the Buddha

Uniting the three religions and desiring from them the One True Way.

Using the three philosophies of the three Chinese religions, the Classic of Spring and Autumn represents the way of the saints, the Feather Whisk represents the Way of the Immortals and the Begging Bowl represents Buddhism. The uniting of these three traditions will forge the true Way of the Supreme Being.

'Phục nguyên nhơn huòn hồn Phật tánh
Giáo hóa hồn hữu hạnh hữu duyên'

復元人還存佛性
教化魂有幸有緣

Guiding the original souls to return to their Buddha nature
Teaching the souls who have an affinity with the Way and its cultivation.

This returns the Buddha nature for original souls. These original souls who are sent down to earth by the Supreme Being are sent to befriend and to save the living beings (material, vegetable, animal and human beings). Because these attach themselves to earthly life - the Supreme Being needs to remind us of our Buddha nature in order that we be saved and return to our true home. Approximately one hundred times one hundred thousand original souls, the Master of Buddhism has already saved six times one hundred thousand souls, Lao Zi has saved two times one hundred thousand, that leaves 92 times one hundred thousand souls left in the lower worlds. This is why the Divine Mother has come to teach and to decide their fate.

'Trụ căn quỷ khí cửu tuyền
Quảng khai Thiên thượng tạo quyền chí công'
住根鬼氣九泉
廣開天上造權至公
Constraining the perverse spirits within the nine streams [hell]
Opening the gate of heaven, demonstrating the power of spiritual justice

The Divine Mother constrains the perverse spirits in hell/the realm of darkness and opens the door of heaven in order to demonstrate the power of the Supreme Being in this earthly world.

'Linh Mẫu Hậu khai tông định Đạo.'
令母后開宗定道
The order of the Queen Mother is to establish and inspire the Religion

The Queen Mother is Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu or the Heavenly Queen or Holy Mother, she comes to open the way for us.

'Ân dưỡng sanh đảm bảo hồn hài,
Càn khôn Tạo Hóa sánh tài.'
恩養生擔保魂骸
乾坤造化逞才
By her grace and her ability to protect and nourish, our souls and our astral bodies are maintained.
What she had contributed to the creation of Heaven and Earth and all beings, nothing can compare!

Giving birth, nourishing and caring for the physical body - these acts are so significant that they can be compared with Heaven and Earth themselves.

'Nhứt triều, nhứt tịch kính bài mộ Khang.'
一朝一夕敬排暮康
We come morning and night to adore our Mother

Morning and evening we come to visit our virtuous Mother, that is, we visit our Merciful Mother. We ask about our Mother's health both morning and evening.

'Nam Mô Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu Tạo Hóa Huyền Thiên Cảm Bái.'

'Nam Mô Đại Từ, Đại Bi Năng Hỉ Xã Thiên Hậu Chí Tôn Đại Bi Đại Ái.'

The Being who holds the power to create the universe is called the Heavenly Queen, the supreme heavenly being who is Đức Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu is of the greatest kindness and compassion.

According to the precepts of The Secret Dharma, the mechanism of creation must contain both the Yin and the Yang. In these energies we have a balance of the positive and the negative just as in humanity we need a balance between male and female. Any religion which has the correct levels of Yin and Yang can produce paths to the eternal, - consider Jesus Christ nailed to the cross, his head yearning upwards towards the Yang. In like manner, Saint Peter was crucified, but in this instance upside-down, his head yearned towards the earth that is towards the Yin. Here we see the harmony of Yin and Yang matching with that of the Secret Dharma. In this way Christianity (The Way of the Saints) was able to last 2000 years and no one had the power to destroy it.

The Supreme Being can send his children down to establish a religion – examples include Sakyamuni Buddha, Jesus Christ, Confucius and so on... But now, to the contrary, He uses a segment of His divinity to come down to the earth to save us directly. This is most significant. When opening the religion of Caodaism, the Supreme Being decided that the role of the Divine Mother was to come here to companion us. In this way she is able to protect and nourish us and this blessing from her is the most important part of this process. Nothing can compare with this. This is because no one can love us as children in the way that our mother can. The Divine Mother has come to form our religion in its completeness before she hands it back to the Supreme Being. The Divine Mother, who is in charge of the Yin energies thus works with the Supreme Being who is master of the Yang energies, thus the Yin and Yang harmonise with each other. The Caodai Religion applies and develops these principles of Yin and Yang. The abilities that we know are present in the energies of heaven and earth, it is these energies that will one day be commanded by the Caodaist Religion.

Sermon 64 of the *Thuyết Đạo*, Volume One, 1948.