

# THE CAO DAI

The Cao Dai religion of South Vietnam, which first appeared in 1919, is an important segment of Vietnamese religious life. It claims about two million adherents throughout the country.

Cao Daism began as an indigenous Vietnamese religion composed of "spiritism" or "spirit mediums" and a "ouija-board" type device called *corbeille a bec* (beaked bag). It sought to form a synthesis of the fundamental doctrines of Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity, and a Roman Catholic type church organization. It was formed in an attempt

to create a universally acceptable religion in an area of the world where there is an intermingling of many religious beliefs often found in the same individual.

A corollary goal was the promotion of harmonious human relationships by means of a common spiritual life devoid of any religious discrimination. Some Vietnamese religious leaders, who are not adherents of this faith, call it a "salad-religion" because of the bits of many religions which are blended together in it.

The Cao Dai believe there have been three major revelations of divinity to mankind. The First Revelation was given to several "missionary saints": Nhiem-dang Co-Phat for Buddhism, Thai Thuong Lao Quan for Taoism, the Emperor Phuc-Hy for Ancestor Worship, and Moses for Judeo-Christian religious concepts. The Second Revelation came later during the period of 500 B.C. to after 600 A.D. — through Lao Tse for Taoism, Confucius for Confucianism, Cao Kyamuni for Buddhism, Jesus Christ for Christianity, and the Prophet Mohammed for Islam. The crowning or Third Revelation of God, according to all Cao Daists, was given on Phu Quoc Island, South Vietnam, in 1919.

## Third Revelation

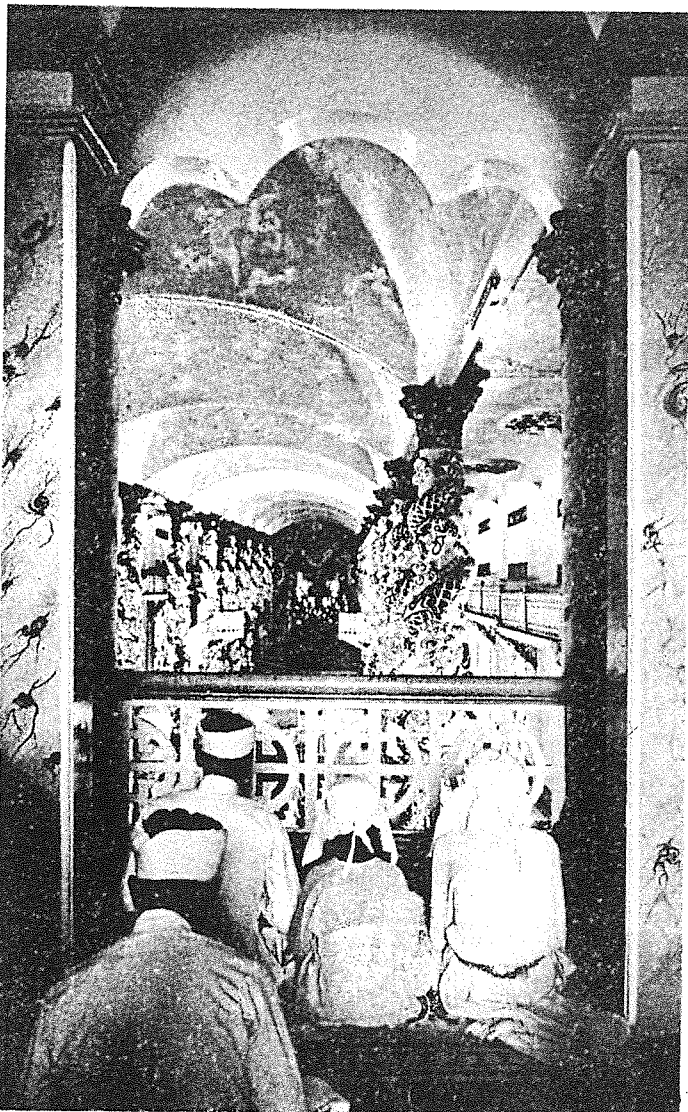
The official title Cao Dai translated into English is Doctrine of the Third Revelation. This revelation was given by God to Ngo Van Chieu, the first Cao Dai apostle. The Third Revelation is updated from time to time through the spiritual mediums who utilize the *corbeille a bec* which spells out current revelations by pointing at letters of the alphabet lying on a board, as some in the Western world use the ouija-board.

According to the Cao Dai, God first revealed himself in human form because the human spirit was not yet sufficiently advanced to receive God's teachings directly. At the present time, however, it is believed possible for divine messages to be given directly through spiritual mediums and the *corbeille a bec*.

## Major Doctrines

The major doctrines of beliefs of the Cao Dai are:

1. That Cao Daism is the Third Revelation of Divinity to allow general redemption to all men and, as such, supersedes or corrects misunderstandings of previous teachings.



Adherents of Cao Daism worship at main temple in Tay Ninh.

# Indigenous Vietnamese faith claims two million adherents

ence in order to realize a life of supreme perfection. To them, man is created through the natural cycle of life and death, and possesses an immortal soul which is sacred. This soul must eventually obtain release from the cycle for complete victory.

6. The worship of ancestors is a means of communication between the visible and invisible worlds; between the living and the dead; and forms a means of expressing love, gratitude and affection for the ancestors.

7. Cao Daism also teaches, in its ethical concepts, equality and brotherhood of all races, the love of justice, the Buddhist Law of Karma, Buddha's Five Commandments, as well as the Buddhist Eight-fold Path to Perfection and the Confucian doctrine of the Golden Mean.

8. Within Cao Daism is a pantheon of saints and deities. On the front of the Cao Dai temple in Tay Ninh, there are paintings representing Joan of Arc, Sun Yat Sen (the founder of the Chinese Nationalist Party), Victor Hugo (the 19th century poet and writer), and Trang-Trinh (famed Vietnamese prophet of the 18th century), etc.

9. Last, but no means least, is the doctrine that Divinity speaks to mankind through spiritual mediums utilizing the corbeille a bec, a bag which has a beak-like projection. When this beaked-bag is held by two members of the Law Protective Body of the Cao Dai over a board which holds the alphabet, divinity causes his spirit to move the bag so that the divine communication is spelled out by the beaked-bag tapping appropriate letters which sometimes take the form of verse. Only one beaked-bag exists. For such messages to be accepted as valid and official, the revelation must take place at the Tay Ninh temple. Other revelations may occur at the main temple of each sect.

## Organization

The administrative tasks of the Church are conducted by three major bodies: the legislative, the law protective, and the executive. The Legislative Body (Bat quai-Dai) is considered to be under the rule of the Supreme God who is regarded as the true and unique founder of Cao Daism. The Law Protective Body (Hiep-Thien-Dai) has the Ho-phap as Chief. The Executive Body, or Cuu Trung-Dai, runs the temporal affairs of the Church, and has a titular head called Giao-Tong or Pope. The Pope is reputed to be the Spirit of the poet Li Tai Pe (Vietnamese, Ly-thai-Bach), who lived during the Tong Dynasty. Le-van-Trung was until 1934 the interim Pope (the



Gate to sprawling Cao Dai compound in Tay Ninh province.

2. Cao Daism worships the Absolute Supreme God who is eternal without beginning or end, and who is the Creator of all, Supreme Father of all, and unique Master who created and creates all angels, buddhas, and saints.

3. Cao Daists believe in the existence of three distinct categories of invisible beings. These are:

(a) The highest deities composed of buddhas, saints, and angels;

(b) The medium beings which include sanctified spirits and the great benefactors of mankind;

(c) The lower beings which include both phantoms and devils.

This belief includes the concept that all three orders must pass through human existence in order to help humanity, and normally move from the lowest toward the highest forms. Of all living creatures, only man can become a devil or an angel because he has a special soul; and his position is determined by the effects of his works.

4. Cao Daists believe that the human soul may "go up" or "go down" the ladder of existence, and that man by his will and action determines the direction.

5. The ultimate goal of Cao Daism is the total deliverance of man from the endless cycle of exist-

# ' Sacred Eye '

(Phai Thai) who wear yellow robes as the symbol of the virtue of love ; the Taoist group (Phai Chuong) who wear blue robes as the color of peace, and the Confucian group (Phai Ngoc) who wear red robes as the symbol of authority. These vivid colors are normally worn only for special occasions and religious rites. Otherwise, the Cao Dai priestly ordered wear white robes, but the wearing of black robes has occasionally been observed.

Currently, Cao Daism has the positions of Interim Pope, 3 Censor Cardinals, 3 Cardinals, 36 Archbishops, 72 Bishops, 3,000 Priests, an unlimited order of ritual priests, the order of ritual servers or temple servants, and the laity.

Ordinary members of the Cao Dai clergy may marry and raise families, as do some of the members of the Eastern Orthodox and some of the Oriental Rites of the Catholic Church. Those above the rank of priest are not allowed to marry and must remain celibate in order to commit their total energies to the regious life. Nuns may occupy all positions up to Cardinal. Vegetarianism is required of all orders of the priesthood, but not for the laity.

## Major Sects

Currently there are several major sects or denominations of the Cao Dai whose existence dates from the time of the French occupation of Vietnam. But these have considerable interaction as all recognize the corbeille a bec which is kept at Tay Ninh temple as the channel whereby dogma for the faithful adherents is pronounced for the first time.

The Cao Dai denominations and the locations of their headquarters are : (1) Chieu-Minh at Can-Tho ; (2) Minh-Chon-Ly at My-Tho ; (3) Tien-Thien at Cai-Lay and at Soc Sai Ben-Tre ; (4) Chinh-Dao at Ben-Tre ; (5) Minh-Chon-Dao at Bac-Lieu ; (6) Hoi-Thanh Truyen-Giao Cao Dai (Cao Daist Missionary Church) at Danang ; and (7) the basic Cao Dai Church at Tay Ninh.

In 1936 an association called the Lien-Hoa Tong-hoi was formed to unify all the Cao Dai denominations, and it does have some influence. In addition to the formal denominations, there are several other lesser divisions called Minh Ly, Minh Su, Minh Thien, Minh Tan, and Minh Duong.

The differences between the sects or denominations of the Cao Dai may be much less than the differences which divide the "liberal" and "conservative" churches in America, and are certainly not nearly so large as those factors which separate the Cao Dai from the religions in Vietnam. While Cao Daism has a number of essentially Buddhist elements, the Budhists of Vietnam disclaim any relationship to them. This attitude may be modified from time to time due to the religio-political struggles, but does



Globe of the world with a human eye forms main altar.

living head of the Church), but following his death, differences of personality and opinion have precluded any others having this title or honor.

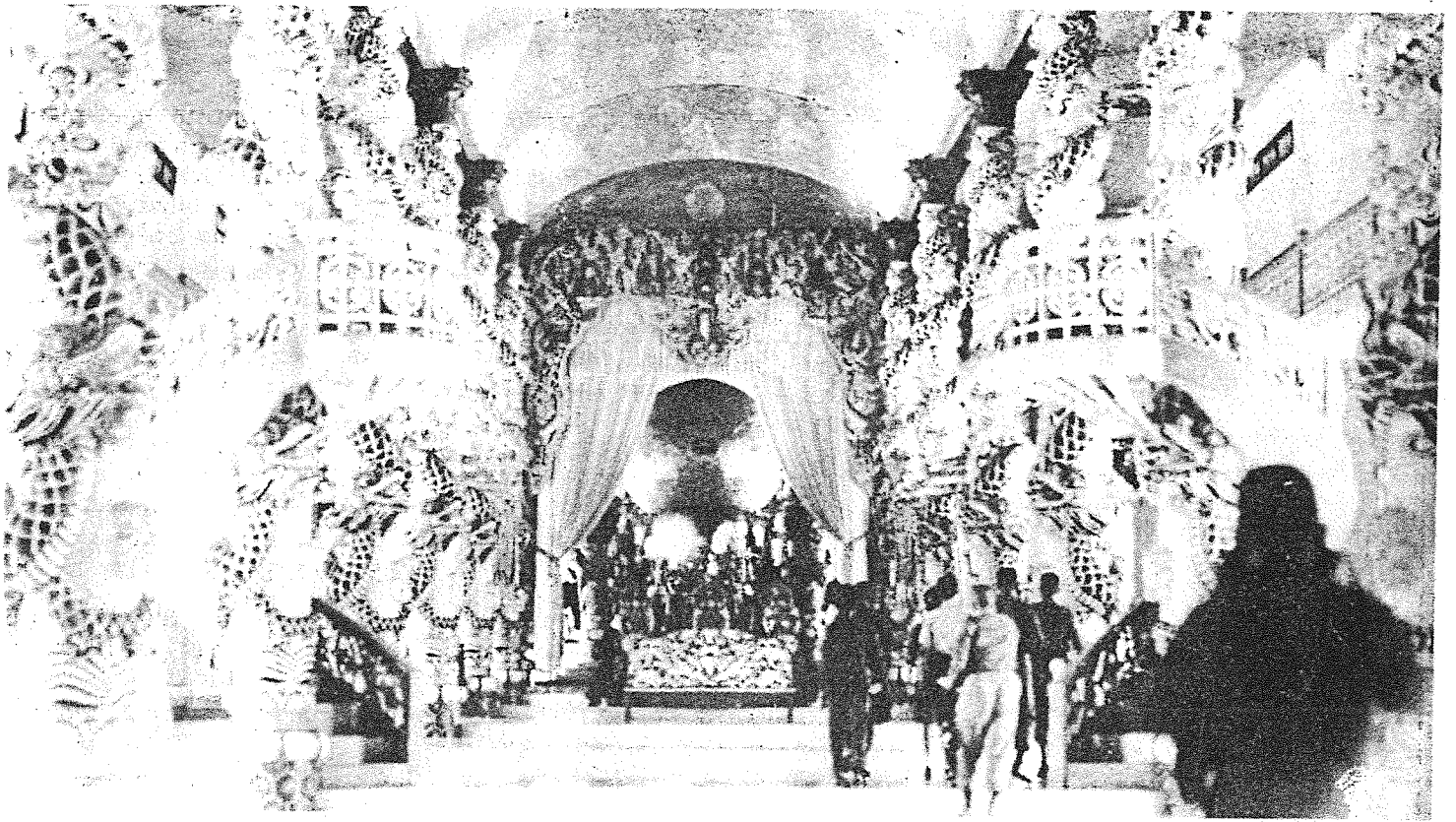
The Executive Body is composed of a Pope, Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, Monks, Nuns, and some aity. The Law Protective Body is composed of a 15-nan college of spiritual mediums that regulates the use of the beaked-bag.

The Executive Body is the third major body of the Cao Dai administration. This body has three agencies : the Administrative Agency, the Agency for the Propagation of the Faith, and the Charity Agency. Each Agency has three institutes, each carrying on a specific task. The Charity Agency has the duty of caring for the sick by operating hospitals, aiding the needy, including orphans, the physically or mentally handicapped, and the aged.

## Three Major Branches

Within the hierarchy of Cao Daism are three major branches : the members of the Buddhist group

# is guide to course of action



Ornate interior of Cao Dai temple in Tay Ninh has unusual architectural design and features.

not infer an acceptance of the Cao Dai as a valid expression of Buddhism. The Cao Dai, however, with a multi-source religious concept and the conviction that all religions proceed from the same God, might view the matter quite differently.

## Center of Faith

The original center of the Cao Dai faith is at the city of Tay Ninh which is about 70 miles northwest of Saigon, and within 15 miles of the Cambodian border. The Tay Ninh Temple to the Cao Dai is the equivalent of St. Peter's Cathedral to the Roman Catholics. The temple is built on the same pattern as other Cao Dai temples, but in a more grandiose style. Here in a large and an extremely well-ordered compound are found the Temple, a school, a hospital, an orphanage, a home for the aged, a residence for nuns, etc. The very order and neatness of this site, like that of other Cao Dai temple areas, is in stark contrast to the disorder and disarray of the Orient as seen by the "Western eye."

The Chinese-type ornamented temple at Tay Ninh, with its unusual architectural designs and features, has nine floor levels. These levels which start at the front door of the temple and rise toward the altar, represent the nine levels of spiritual ascension possible to the Cao Dai adherent; and also

represent the nine orders or divisions of the hierarchy of Cao Daim.

The main altar of the Cao Dai Temple is a huge globe of the world symbolizing the universe, and has a painted human eye on it, which symbolizes the all-seeing eye of Divinity and the source of universal life. Inside the globe is a spherical burning lamp which represents the universal monad (something which is absolutely indivisible). Lights on both sides of the globe represent the male and female elements of the world. The Supreme Eye is normally formed within a triangle, and serves to remind the Cao Dai worshipper that the Supreme Being witnesses everything, everywhere, all the time.

Cao Daists believe the "sacred eye" on their altar observes, supports, helps, judges and impels them to the right course of action at all times.

## Worship

The laity of the Cao Dai are to pray at least once each day, and may choose one of four set times each day at home or at the temple, at 0600, 1200, 1800, or 2400. Additionally, there are special occasions for services, such as the 9th of January, the anniversary of the First Cao Dai Revelation; and 15 August, which honors Tay Vuong May, the "Holy Mother"



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of Ngo Van Chieu. A Cao Dai altar can be recognized by the picture of the all-seeing eye which is often surrounded by painted cosmic beams which symbolize the Supreme Being's lightened glory.

### Symbols

The Cao Dai use tea, flowers, and alcohol offerings, representing the three constitutive elements of human beings — intelligence, spirit and energy. Five joss sticks are used in worship and represent the five levels of initiation, which are purity, meditation, wisdom, superior knowledge, and freedom from Karma (the cycle of existence). Also seen in Cao Dai temples is their religious flag, a three section horizontal flag with the top one third yellow, the middle third blue, and the lower one third red. These colors represent the major elements of Cao Daism and also the virtues or qualities admired by the Cao Dai. The red is for Confucianism or courage and authority, the blue for Taoism or freedom, and the yellow is for Buddhism or the virtues of peace and love.

### Major Appeal

The appeal which has made the Cao Dai faith so successful in South Vietnam may be traced to several factors :

- (a) Pride in the fact that this is an indigenous religious faith ;
- (b) The appeal of pomp, pageantry and ceremonies of the temple rituals ;
- (c) The content of Cao Daism, which includes features and elements of the several religions of South Vietnam ;
- (d) The claim of communication with the "world beyond" in a basically animistic culture ;
- (e) The active missionary spirit and the sacrificial attitude which is encouraged ; and
- (f) Its organizational structure which provides methods, plans and techniques for a semi-unified working faith with some area in which every adherent may participate or make a contribution.

### Miscellanea

The Cao Dai have a short history which includes involvement in religious, political, and military activities. The Cao Dai largely control certain provinces where they constitute the major population ; while in others they often form a strong part of the governmental force.

The continuing struggle in Vietnam has witnessed a number of violent actions by the Viet Minh and the Viet Cong, that in general have turned the Cao Dai away from the Communist way of life. Particularly offensive was the massacre of 2,791 Cao Dai priests and followers by the Communists in Quang Ngai in August 1945.

The Cao Dai recognize education and cultural and social action as methods whereby good can come to Vietnam and to the Cao Dai.

# VIETNAM

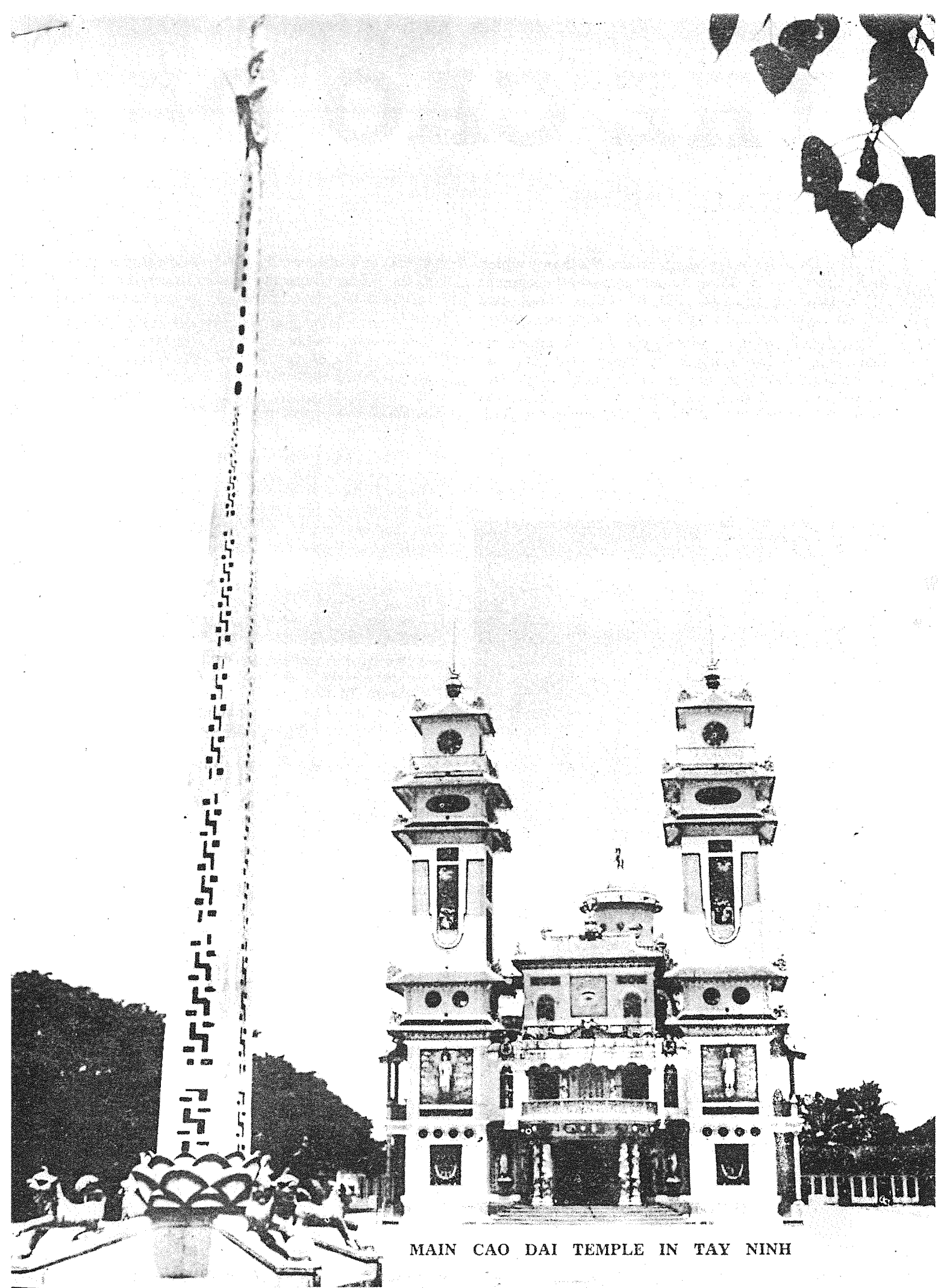
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MAIN CAO DAI TEMPLE IN TAY NINH