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**Vietnam's Caodaism, Independence, and Peace:  
The Life and Work of Pham Cong Tac (1890-1959)**

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# **Vietnam's Caodaiism, Independence and Peace: The Life and Work of Pham Cong Tac (1890-1959)**

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## **Abstract**

The Caodai religion was born in South Vietnam in 1926. Pham Cong Tac, popularly known as Duc Ho Phap by his devotees, became its powerful leader. Its spiritual centre is located in the Tay Ninh province, Northwest of Saigon. Under harsh French colonial rule the sect became both a religious and a nationalist force. In 1940 Duc Ho Phap was sent into exile in Comores, Madagascar, by the French authorities as part of their effort to curb his alleged anti-French activities. During his exile and throughout the period of the Japanese occupation of Vietnam, in part due to Caodai collaboration with the Japanese, the Caodai developed their own army. It was considered to have both a divine and a nationalist mission to bring independence and order to Vietnam.

This study offers insight into the historic development of the Caodai, including the development of their army. It focuses on the Caodai leader, Pham Cong Tac (1890–1959), the spiritual guiding force of the Tay Ninh Holy See and his political work after his return from exile in 1946 until his death in 1959. This period was most turbulent. It witnessed the re-establishment of French colonial authority and also the rise of the Viet Minh nationalist-communist force, followed by political partition of Vietnam in 1954. As a conclusion, the paper comments on this past political and military role of the Caodai in Tay Ninh, and the relevance of their history to the current suppression of Caodai by Vietnamese communist authorities today.

# **Vietnam's Caodaism, Independence and Peace: The Life and Work of Pham Cong Tac (1890-1959)**

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## **摘要**

1926 年高台教創立於南越。Pham Cong Tac (1890-1959，他以 Duc Ho Phap 之名為信徒所熟知) 成為它的強勢領袖。它的中心在西貢西北方的西寧 (Tay Ninh) 省。在法國粗暴的殖民統治之下，高台教變成一支宗教性的、民族主義的力量。1940 年 Duc Ho Phap 被法國殖民政府放逐到非洲的科摩羅群島 (Comoros，在馬達加斯加，Madagascar)，那是他們為了遏制他的反法活動所做的努力之一。在他被放逐、以及在越南被日本佔領時 - 部分由於高台教與日本合作的關係 - 這個宗教發展了它的武力。它被認為是有「為越南帶來獨立與秩序」之神聖的、民族主義的雙重使命。

本研究對高台教的歷史發展 (包括其武力發展) 做深入剖析。本文將焦點置於高台教的領袖 Pham Cong Tac，Tay Ninh Holy See 精神上的指導力量，以及他自 1946 年回國後、到 1959 年去世前的政治活動。這段時間是最動盪不安的。它見證了法國殖民威權在越南的重建、Viet Minh 民族主義-共產主義力量的崛起，和 1954 年的越南分裂。最後，本研究評論高台教在西寧的政治、軍事角色，並評論其歷史與目前越南共黨當局鎮壓高台教之間的關連性。

# **Vietnam's Caodaism, Independence, and Peace: The Life and Work of Pham Cong Tac (1890-1959)**

**Tran My-Van**

Few people, especially Westerners, understand Caodaism<sup>1</sup>—a religious and political movement that emerged in Vietnam during the 1920s under French colonial rule, as more than a sectarian or cult-like curiosity. Yet the founders of Caodaism drew their ideas of salvation, spiritualism, hierarchy and organisation from orthodox prevailing religious philosophies (Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Catholicism), even though they placed great importance in the performance of spirit-seances. Particularly intriguing to many is the Caodai pantheon of Great Spirits, of which the most revered are Kuan Yin, Jesus Christ, Joan of Arc, Li Po, Victor Hugo, and Sun Yat Sen—an unusual blend of famous Western and Eastern personalities. In addition, the Caodai movement developed an army of its own that was considered to have a divine and nationalistic mission to bring independence and order to Vietnam with a further agendum as a political movement.

The Caodai movement has been overshadowed by the Vietnam War and the eventual victory of communist North Vietnam which has received world's attention. This study seeks insight into historic developments of the Cao Dai, including that of its army. It focuses on the Caodai leader, Pham Cong Tac (1890–1959) - the spiritual guiding force of the Holy See in Tay Ninh and his relentless work of political nature that bears testimony to the spirituality, dedication and aspirations of the Cao Dai to achieve national independence, unity and peace in the turbulent atmosphere of the 20th century Vietnam.

## **Historical setting**

In the second half of the nineteenth century France gradually established control over Vietnam through a series of signed treaties (1862, 67 and 72) signed with the Nguyen Court under Emperor Tu Duc (r.1847-83). Further French military and political success over the “Annamites” finally brought an end to Vietnamese independence with

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<sup>1</sup> Caodaism derives from the two Vietnamese words Cao Dai, translated literally meaning High Tower/Palace- the place where God reigns over the Universe.

the Patenotre Treaty of 1884. As a consequence, 'the entire Vietnamese executive machinery became no more than puppets dangling from the strings of foreign puppeteers'.<sup>2</sup> Moreover the implementation of a ruthless taxation policy had a devastating effect on the local peasant economy. There were numerous episodes of resistance and the record of French suppression of Vietnamese rebellion was possibly unrivalled in terms of the many executions and exiles that occurred. It is in this environment of generally nationalist rebellion and suppression that the Caodai story must be set, along with better known movements such as that of the Communists and other nationalists.

In the first decade of the twentieth century there was renewed effort within Vietnam to turn the tide of colonial conquest, as nationalist leaders were gripped with the real fear of permanently losing their country. Most of them looked to Japan with great expectation as an alternative path for the self-preservation, national pride and independence of Vietnam. Two people who played a leading role in seeking Japan's guidance, support, and especially military assistance in ousting the French, were Phan Boi Chau (1867–1940)<sup>3</sup> and Prince Cuong De (1882–1953)<sup>4</sup>. Cuong De revealed his feelings then in his diary: 'We believed that if we asked Japan for help it would be readily given, because the Japanese and Vietnamese share a similar culture, and are of the Asian race.'<sup>5</sup> Vietnamese optimism regarding Vietnamese-Japanese relations as earlier aspired was soon aborted when Japanese help could not be materialised.

In the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the year 1916 witnessed the last anti French attempt of the Nguyen Royal House by the young emperor, Duy Tan.<sup>6</sup> He was forced to abdicate and then exiled to far away Reunion Island. From that time on successive emperors could only reign not rule, and the scholar officials became even more detached from the central authorities. Consequently some Vietnamese elites including the first Caodai followers involved themselves in spiritual and religious pursuits as a panacea for the turbulent times. These spiritual pursuits often provided the type of safe haven and

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<sup>2</sup> Tran My-Van, *A Vietnamese Scholar in Anguish, Nguyen Khuyen and the Decline of the Confucian Order, 1884-1909*, (Singapore: Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 1992), p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Phan Boi Chau (1867-1940) was a nationalist, an activist, and a prolific writer. He believed in the need to secure outside military assistance to overcome the might of France. He travelled widely to instil revolutionary thought and activities.

<sup>4</sup> He was the son of Crown Prince Canh, the eldest son of Emperor Gia Long, the founder of the reigning Nguyen dynasty. Crown Prince Canh had died prematurely, and until 1816 it was generally assumed that the succession would continue through his line.

<sup>5</sup> Cuong De, *Cuoc Doi Cach Mang*, (Saigon: Trang Liet, 1957), pp. 31-33.

<sup>6</sup> For this episode see, Vu Ngu Chieu, *Hoang Tu Vinh Sang*, (Houston, Texas: Van Hoa, 1992), pp. 20-39; Hoang Trong Thuoc, *Ho So Vua Duy Tan*, (San Francisco: Mo Lang, 1993), pp. 133-193.

convenient disguise for their political activities and aspirations in a manner familiar today from certain Chinese examples like the Fa Long Gun.

During the colonial history of Vietnam its road to independence, peace and prosperity was long and hazardous due to the harsh controls of the French. The quest was further complicated by the Japanese occupation with its Imperial Army from 1940–45. During the period up to 9th March 1945 the Japanese were, ironically, allies of the French. With the downfall of the Japanese at the end of the Pacific War, the seriousness of a political vacuum was aggravated and many national forces and parties exerted their influence. The triumph of the Communist party under Ho Chi Minh, the return of the French colonial masters and the resulting division of Vietnam in 1954 further complicated the issues of self determination, peace and unity for which most Vietnamese Southern nationalists have tenaciously fought. It was against this background that Pham Cong Tac made his mark, giving rise to the significant Caodai movement as not only a religious but also military and nationalist force. Primarily based in Tay Ninh Province, Caodaism with its Holy Temple landmark has impinged upon the socio-political landscape of Vietnam ever since.

### **Pham Cong Tac: his early years**

Pham Cong Tac was born (21 June 1890) in the village of Binh Lap in Chau Thanh District, Long An Province, where his father was working temporarily. Tac was the eighth child of Pham Cong Thien and La thi Duong, who were normally residents of An Hoa village in Trang Bang District, Tay Ninh Province. Because his father was Catholic, Tac was baptised as a baby—although his mother was a Buddhist.<sup>7</sup> At an early age Tac proved to be hard working, intelligent, pious and respectful of the family hierarchy; hence, he was popular among his teachers and his peers. Although he appeared healthy, he often fell into long, deep sleeps—a condition which greatly disturbed his mother who tried unsuccessfully to find a cure.

At the age of sixteen, Tac went to study at a French lycee named Chasseloup Laubat in Saigon. Here he became involved in the national politics surrounding Vietnam's strenuous efforts to liberate itself from French rule through Japanese relations. Like many of his elders Tac was aware of Japan's dramatic victory in the Russo–Japanese war

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<sup>7</sup> See Huynh Tam, *Tieu Su Duc Ho Phap Pham Cong Tac*, (Paris: Ban Dao Su Cao Dai Au Chau, 1990), p.20.

(1904-5) as it instilled in them a confidence in the strength of the Asian race. Equally, Tac was aware that both Chau and Cuong De made visits to Japan and were highly impressed by the fruits of its restoration—under Emperor Meiji in the late nineteenth century which had saved Japan from the onslaught of the West. In fact, in response to Chau’s initiative of sending Vietnamese students to study in Japan, as a means to having ‘both their minds and their vision transformed’,<sup>8</sup> many clandestine networks were set up in Vietnam to propel this international venture, known as the Phong Trao Dong Du (Travel to the East Movement) with much financial support from the Southern Vietnamese. Three student groups had been successfully sent to Japan by the time Tac was selected to go in the next group. He was seventeen years old, in his second year of studies, and acutely aware of the nationalists’ aspirations and the daunting task ahead of him.

However, what would have been a great challenge and experience for Tac was suddenly curtailed when the French authorities, with the aid of the Secret Police, discovered the covert study program and launched a raid on its Saigon headquarters. The police captured many documents that included the lists of promising students to be sent to Japan. In fear of being arrested, Tac interrupted his studies and temporarily returned to his own village. Here he soon realised that his chance to go to Japan had vanished due to an alliance between the Japanese and the French. This signed agreement prompted the expulsion of Vietnamese students from Japan, which included Chau, the mastermind of the “Travel to the East Movement”.<sup>9</sup>

On 30 May 1911, Tac was married to Nguyen thi Nhieu with whom he had two daughters—Pham thi Cam and Pham tan Tranh; however, there is little record of his family life. During the period 1910–28 he undertook various jobs, mostly at the Customs Office in Saigon where he slowly moved up from clerk to junior secretary. From 1915 to 1920 however, he worked in the central part of Vietnam known as Qui Nhon, where he came into contact with many youths and elites of the region. Under the pen-name Ai Dan, he contributed many articles to the *Van Dan Thi Xa*—a literary journal he had helped establish.

Upon his return to the Saigon, Tac continued to engage in poetic exchange and political and religious debate with like-minded friends. The issues he discussed were

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<sup>8</sup> Phan Boi Chau, *Nguc Trung Thu, Doi Cach Mang*, trans. Dao Trinh Nhat, (Saigon: Vi Nuoc, 1983), p.43.

<sup>9</sup> The agreement was signed in July 1908 and the Banishment Ordinance was immediately put in place to expel Vietnamese students from their sanctuary in Japan.

often conveyed in the many articles that he wrote for two noted Vietnamese newspapers, *Nong Co Minh Dam* and *Luc Tinh Tan Van*, and for the French language publications *La Voix Libre* and *La Cloche Felee*. The general thrust of these publications was to be critical of the colonial government. Eventually, in an effort to find solace in life, Tac became involved in communication with the spirits.

### **‘Spiritism’: Pham Cong Tac’s path to salvation 1921-1925**

Spiritism as an approach to communicate between the material world and the spirit world had long existed in both Europe and Asia. Moreover, from the 19th century the works of A. Kardec and Durville began to be known in Vietnam among elites who were not only able to read them but also wanted to broaden their knowledge on the topic—spiritism.<sup>10</sup> The reason was many native elites felt deprived and discontent under French colonial rule, and as part of their response to the unpalatable situation some chose to gather secretly at different locations to commune with spirits. Stories of miracles and inspirational discussions with spirits became common, and so spiritism soon found its way to Tac—though he later stressed that at first he held ‘no faith or belief at all’;<sup>11</sup> he was simply curious to test the existence of the unseen world.

With his friends, notably Cao Huynh Cu and Cao Hoai Sang, Tac began to contact spirits through seances. Of the group’s initial activities in 1925, Cao Hoai Sang recorded:

...Being poetic, and holding deep in their hearts a resentment of living in a conquered nation, the trio indulged in the pleasure of evoking spirits, using the table,<sup>12</sup> to raise questions about the country’s future and to compose and exchange poetry as a pastime. ...In the beginning there was difficulty, as during the first night the trio—who sat and placed their hands on the table from 9 p.m. to 2 a.m. after burning incense sticks and praying—failed to get any result. Making an effort to be more patient the

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<sup>10</sup> Of note are A. Kardec’s *Le Livre des Esprits* and *Le Livre des Mediums*.

<sup>11</sup> Ho Phap’s sermon delivered on 17 August 1953 see, Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do, *Dao Su*, Vols.1 and 2, (California: Thanh That Toc Dao Westminster, 1995), p.2.

<sup>12</sup> This practice referred to in Vietnamese as Xay Ban on ground that a 4-legged table was used. During the séance one leg of the table was lifted and upon the entry of the spirit force the raised leg of the table begins to tap. Each tap is translated into syllable then they are all added up into words.



trio sat again for the second night [26 July 1925] and at exactly midnight a spirit entered the table, which began to tap.<sup>13</sup>

The spirit, which left messages in the form of a poem, was none other than that of Cu's father who had passed away 25 years earlier. Not long after Tac was "fully engrossed and enthralled" in seance sessions, in which spirits allegedly even revealed their backgrounds, answered questions, and expressed themselves in known texts (including poems in English, French and Chinese).<sup>14</sup>

From that time on there was no return to normal life for Tac and his two friends. The date 16 December 1925 marked the beginning of their commitment to undertake the task of emulating Cao Dai by following the instructions of Cao Dai Thuong De (Cao Dai Supreme God). The God finally revealed his true identity to them instead of registering himself as AAA as on many earlier occasions. HE even directed them to contact other like-minded personalities/groups. In this context, the trio can be regarded as the first group of mediums who were to play an essential role in establishing the Caodai religion, which later flourished in Tay Ninh Province.

### **Cao Dai or Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do<sup>15</sup>**

In Vietnamese the words Cao Dai literally mean 'high platform' or 'high palace'—the place where God reigns over the Universe. The Cao Dai religion is also known as Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do ('The Third Great Universal Amnesty of God' or 'The Third Revelation of the Great Way'). This refers to the three major periods of revelation (as apparently instructed through divine messages) in the history of religion, and to the understanding that God decided to give a third and final amnesty and revelation to the world through His new religion—Cao Dai. Thus the Third Amnesty establishes a new

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<sup>13</sup> Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do, *Dao Su*, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Mrs. Cao Quynh Cu, known as Huong Hieu, performed an almost secretarial role at these seances, taking notes of almost every sign and tap of the table. She kept a most detailed diary of all activities, including participants, questions and answers received during these seances during the year 1925. Her notes were first printed as roneo copies. Later they were printed in the book form. See, Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do, *Dao Su*, p. 94.

<sup>15</sup> For information on the history, development, philosophy and religion of Cao Dai, see R.B. Smith, 'An Introduction to Caodaism', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*. Vol. XXXIII, parts 2 and 3 (1969-70); Dong Tan, *Lich Su Cao Dai* (Saigon, 1967); Jayne S. Werner, *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism: Peasant and Priest in the Cao Dai in Vietnam* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies No. 23, 1981); Victor L. Oliver, *Caodai Spiritism: A Study of Religion in Vietnamese Society* (Leiden: Brill, 1976); Gabriel Gobron, *Histoire du Caodaisme: Bouddhisme Renove, Spiritisme Annamite* (Paris: Dervy, 1948); Lap Chuc Nguyen Huy, *Triet Ly Dao Cao Dai*, (Montreal: Minh Thien, 1995).

Great Way for salvation and its fundamental objective is the unity of all religions. Against these backgrounds the Cao Dai hold a deep belief in the strong communication link between Heaven and Earth. They also embrace revelations that God is the father of all beings, the originator of all religions, and that He has manifested himself at various times and in different places. Furthermore, in every Caodai temple is a representation of the Divine Contract of the Third Amnesty (Third Alliance). This contract is written in French: Dieu et Humanite, Amour et Justice; and in Chinese: Tian shang Tien Xia Bo Ai Gong Pinh (literally in English God and Humanity, Love and Justice). Caodaists worship as the symbolic representation of their God, a Divine Eye (Thien Nhan) which denotes vision and omnipotence. Ngo Van Chieu, the first Caodai adept, who in his early communication with God allegedly saw this symbol.

The organisational structure of Caodaism reflects to a great extent its spiritist characteristics as transmitted by God and the Great Spirits. Thus the structure is divided into two powers: Spiritual Power and Earthly Power. These two encompass three branches as follows:

Bat Quai Dai (Council of the Holy Spirits): God Himself heads this supreme holy body. It directs all activities of the universe and gives orders and religious messages via mediums. This body (made up of holy and great spirits such as Buddha, Confucius, Lao Tse and Jesus Christ) is the spiritual power—the invisible part of the religion.

Hiep Thien Dai is the legislative power representing the Spiritual. As the medium branch of the religion, this body has the responsibility to receive divine messages by communicating with the spiritual power, and to preserve and control the application of religious laws. The head of the Hiep Thien Dai is Ho Phap (Law Protector) who has equal rank to the Giao Tong (Pope). Ho Phap is assisted by the Thuong Pham (Chief of the Sacerdotal Body), the Thuong Sanh (Lesser Order) and a college of mediums.

Hiep Thien Dai is viewed as holding mystic power, and its hierarchy of dignitaries is guided by divine instruction. The roles of its members are primarily as mediums, and secondarily as legislators who protect the sacred laws and ensure that all dignitaries in the executive body fulfil their tasks.

Cuu Trung Dai: The Cuu Trung Dai is entrusted with executive power and represents the Earthly. This is the administrative body of the religion and its missionary activities. Its hierarchy consists of nine ranks, of which the top five are restricted in

number as follows: one Giao Tong (Pope—the highest holiness of Cuu Trung Dai); three chuong phap (censor cardinals); three dau su (cardinals); thirty six phoi su (archbishops); and seventy two giao su (bishops). In addition there are 3000 giao huu (priests) and unlimited le sanh (student priests).

The Cuu Trung Dai has three phai (divisions):

- Thuong (Taoism); its symbol is blue
- Ngoc (Confucianism); its symbol is red
- Thai (Buddhism); its symbol is yellow

This symbolism is reflected in the tricoloured banner of Caodaism.

The guiding texts of the religion are:

- The Phap Chanh Truyen (The Religious Constitution of Caodaism) record Divine messages which contain information on the election of officials, their powers and ritual dress.<sup>16</sup>

- The Tan Luat (The New Canonical Codes) was made, corrected and approved by the Spiritual Realm. These codes are laws regulating religious, secular and monastic life.

The above Caodai structure with guiding texts which exists very much to this day was shaped by instructions/revelations by Duc Cao Dai (Caodai God - Duc means Venerable) and other Great Spirits, in particular Li Po, through a number of seances,<sup>17</sup> jointly arranged by Caodai founding members throughout 1926. During this time Cao Dai emerged not only as a new religion with many more adepts but also as an organised movement. Up to 20 oratories were established and many Cao Dai followers congregated around their leaders.<sup>18</sup> The Cao Dai movement continued to spread to neighbouring provinces and districts with small that (oratories) being opened. It was under the leadership of Le Van Trung, who was empowered by God to be Quyen Giao Tong (Acting Pope). The spirit of Li Po was regarded as the Permanent Spiritual.

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<sup>16</sup> For Phap Chanh Truyen (The Religious Constitution of Caodaism see, 3rd Amnesty of God in the East, *Phap Chanh Truyen*, (Sydney: Caodaist Association of Australia, NSW Chapter, 1992), pp. 1-245.

<sup>17</sup> See all instructions /messages as recorded from July 1926 to October 1926 *Dai Dao Tam ky Pho Do, Thanh Ngon Hop Tuyen va Tan Luat Phap Chanh Phap Truyen*, Reprint, (Louisiana: New Orleans, 1992), pp. 21-53; Huong Hieu, *Dao Su*, pp. 8-134.

<sup>18</sup> Thirteen of them were located in Saigon and the nearby Gia Dinh–Cholon areas.

To mark the new religion, on 29 September 1926 the Declaration on Cao Dai was announced with the presence of 247 people, including Pham Cong Tac, dedicating itself to 'complement and perfect the three ancient religions of Vietnam [Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism]'. The Declaration also registered one of the main goals of the Cao Dai: 'to work towards universal peace enabling humanity to experience a new epoch of utmost happiness beyond description'. On 7 October 1926 the signed Declaration in French was sent to Le Fol, the Deputy Governor of Nam Ky, for official recognition. There were 27 signatories, that included Pham Cong Tac to whom the Caodai God had bestowed the spiritual position as Ho Phap (24 April 1926). Apparently Ngo Van Chieu was present on this occasion but on account of his personal inclination, declined to put down his signature.

### **Evolution of Caodaism: 1927-1934**

The initial success of Caodaism, as reflected in its three days long inauguration ceremony (18–20 November 1926) at Go Ken Buddhist temple, with a large crowd and about 200 new converts, must have caused some concern among French authorities. They pressured the venerable Nhu Nhan to call for the return of the temple to the Buddhists. The Caodaists had no idea where they might find a new home for their activities, but surprisingly they received a spirit message directing them to go to a new place called Bau Ca Na in Long Thanh hamlet, Tay Ninh Province for the purpose 'to set up a Holy See'.<sup>19</sup> Acting on the instruction, Pham Cong Tac and some others headed to Tay Ninh in two cars. No one anticipated that the rough and isolated area, adjacent to Cambodian border, was to become the most prominent centre of the new religion.

At Bau Ca Na they were able to purchase, without difficulty, 96 acres<sup>20</sup> of forested land from a Mr. Aspar, for the price of 25,000 dong. Most of this cost was met by donations. In the firm belief that their God had responded to them, many followers dedicated their time and effort to clear the newly acquired land. Despite a lack of heavy equipment, 10 acres of forest was quickly cleared, and by the end of the same year the foundation for a new temple was firmly laid.<sup>21</sup> The clearing of the rest of the purchased land continued with help from volunteers, including many Cambodians. On 13 February

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<sup>19</sup> See, Huong Hieu, *Dao Su*, II, Roneo copy (Tay Ninh, 1969), p.222.

<sup>20</sup> Huynh Minh, *Tay Ninh Xua va Nay*, (Tay Ninh: By the author, 1971), p. 266 recorded 146 acres were purchased.

<sup>21</sup> Huynh Minh, *Tay Ninh Xua va Nay*, p.266.

1927 the Caodai organisation was able to return the Go Ken temple to its rightful owners, and moved its activities to Tay Ninh Province.

Adorned by the Sacred Ba Den Mountain, and isolated from ‘noise and dust’ of colonial society, Tay Ninh soon proved an ideal place for the organisation’s development. A sacerdotal hierarchy was set up. The Caodai settlement grew to be self-contained, as the leaders had greatly encouraged collective agriculture, the development of handicrafts and small-scale manufacturing. The settlement had many workshops, and schools and playgrounds were set up for children. A market town known as Long Thanh was also established. The settlers were encouraged to donate rice and free labour to the temple.

From June 1927 to May 1928, Pham Cong Tac was in Phnom Penh to assist the Caodai leaders there to establish an Office for Foreign Relations. He succeeded in invoking the spirit of Nguyet Tam Chon Nhon (Victor Hugo)<sup>22</sup> many times for direction. On this account this Office was placed under his spiritual realm while Cao Duc Trong acted as head of the Caodai Phnom Penh branch.

By 1930 many Caodai followers had moved in and settled on the property in Tay Ninh, responding to an appeal from Le van Trung. It is recorded that Trung’s appeal was even placed in the press, *La Depeche*.<sup>23</sup> It is difficult to give an accurate figure regarding the Caodai population in the early years of its development; there is a noted discrepancy among the many available figures.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, what is certain is that there was a steady growth in the popularity of Caodaism.

However, the development and spread of Caodaism was not always smooth. Between 1931 and 1933 there was much internal conflict and rivalry among the Caodai ranks, resulting in various splinter groups and centres being formed in the name of Cao Dai.<sup>25</sup>

The death of the Caodai Superior, Le Van Trung, in 1934 was a sad loss to the Tay Ninh group; however, the Great Council of Tay Ninh—which comprised the Hoi Nhon

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<sup>22</sup> Victor Hugo (1802-85) was a French poet, dramatist and novelist.

<sup>23</sup> *La Depeche d’Indochine*, 28 and 30 August 1930.

<sup>24</sup> For example re 1931-1932 data: Nguyen Tran Huan, 1958, p.273 indicated 500,000 followers; Ellen J. Hammer 1954, p. 79 over one million; Gobron, 1950, p. 103 cites Mr. G. Abadie’s sources ‘more than one million out of three and a half millions inhabitants’.

<sup>25</sup> For more information on the variance of Cao Dai Groups, see Victor L. Oliver, *Caodai Spiritism: A Study of Religion in Vietnamese Society*, ch.3; Sergei Blagov, *The Cao Dai: A New religious Movement*, (Moscow: The Institute of Oriental Studies, 1999), pp. 102-129.

Sanh (Popular Council) and the Hoi Thanh (Sacerdotal Council)—had elevated Pham Cong Tac, as Trung's successor. Furthermore, Tac who was popularly known as Ho Phap (Law Protector).<sup>26</sup> became the Head of both Hiep Thien Dai and Cuu Trung Dai to guide them through difficult times and the internal rift. This new task reflected not only the faith that most Caodaists placed in him but also their good support for his challenging work in anchoring Caodaism both at home and abroad, particularly in the two neighbouring states of Cambodia and Laos.

### **Ho Phap Pham Cong Tac at the helm (1935-1941)- a continuing thorn in the eye of the French authorities**

From the time Ho Phap took the helm he embarked on restructuring campaign to establish a firm and comprehensive foundation for the Tay Ninh organisation. He also set up an internal security force known as Bao The Quan for The Holy See. (This force can be seen as the forerunner of Caodai private army of the 1950s). In an effort to expand the Cao Dai religion he sent emissaries to various parts of Vietnam to recruit followers. Moreover, Ho Phap successfully established a strong community in Tay Ninh; a community involved in a variety of economic, social and spiritual activities. To serve as a mouthpiece and dissemination for Tay Ninh Caodai activities a magazine called Duy Tam was circulated. By 1936—the tenth anniversary of Caodaism—the Tay Ninh Complex, popularly known as the Thanh Dia (the Holy See) had attracted followers from far and wide.<sup>27</sup> It became a seat of the religion. What is more the construction of a Den Thanh (Holy Temple) had begun in earnest with the help of many volunteers. Originally there was no architectural plan for the temple. The construction was conducted only step by step by strictly following spiritist messages. These came from Li Po which Ho Phap himself received in a series of seances.

Ho Phap duly became an irritation to the colonising French on account of his messianic popularity. Back in 1933, the French chief of Tay Ninh Province already regarded him as some kind of 'magician' and a powerful driving force of occultism. In reality, the French authorities were concerned with the underlying message of nationalism in his sermons and their inability to prevent the many conversions to Caodaism. As Ho Phap intensified his "evangelisation" the French paid more attention to

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<sup>26</sup> Ho Phap is also referred to as Duc Ho Phap, meaning Venerable Ho Phap.

<sup>27</sup> Gabriel Gobron, *History and Philosophy of Caodaism*, Tranlated by Pham Xuan Thai (Saigon: Le van Tan, 1950), p.175.

his organisation. They were keen to block its activities on account of its leader being “instinctive adversary to everything that is French”.<sup>28</sup>

In summer 1937 Duc Ho Phap made another trip to Phnom Penh for the opening of the Great temple and a Chapel dedicated to Kuan Yin. This occasion was attended by about 40,000 Cambodian and Vietnamese converters. The significant success of the Office of Foreign Relations which he himself had helped to establish back in 1927 caused some disquiet from the French and local authorities, even though religious freedom was tolerated there.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, Ho Phap continued the promotion of Cao Dai onto a wider world stage. Thus he delegated Gobron, a Caodai convert, to attend the World Congress of Religions, London (1936); and the International Spiritualistic Congress, Glasgow (1937).

At the outbreak of World War Two in Europe the French found further reason to keep a close watch on Ho Phap who now directed a group of nearly 2 million. The governor of Cochinchina, Veber brought him to the Correction Court on charge of display of swastika<sup>30</sup>. Even though he was acquitted, the swastika was banned. In reality all this was due to his reported involvement with the Phuc Quoc (Restoration of Vietnam) campaign under the auspices of Prince Cuong De. It was no surprise that Ho Phap supported Cuong De, who remained an icon of Vietnamese nationalism though he was living in Japan. Ho Phap continued to share Cuong De’s dream of independence for Vietnam with the help of the Japanese one way or other. Other leaders of the various Caodai branches also supported Cuong De by joining the pro-Japanese nationalist movement. Money was successfully raised, and part of it was sent to Cuong De.

From 1940 onwards the Cao Dai also found itself at odds with the Communist Party of Indochina (CPIC)<sup>31</sup>, partly because unlike the CPIC, it could attract many recruits, and partly because of its pro-Japanese stance.

Ironically given the developments of the cultures of the Cao Dai, of Japan and of the Axis, from late 1940 when the Japanese made more inroads in Vietnam, a curfew was placed on Caodai activities together with close watch on visitors to Caodai complex by French security forces. Soon after, a French raid took place. Various items were indeed

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted from Sergei Blagov, *The Cao Dai*, p.62.

<sup>29</sup> Huynh Tam, *Tieu Su...*, p.73.

<sup>30</sup> The Buddhist symbol mirrored.

<sup>31</sup> It was formally established in 1930 and Ho Chi Minh played a significant part in founding it.

taken and loaded on the trucks, including some important documents which dignitaries had kept hidden. As the story goes, these documents were seen to be loaded onto a truck marked No. 3; consequently, the Cao Dai contacted friends working at the military compound and had the documents discreetly removed from the truck. They were eventually returned to Duc Ho Phap.<sup>32</sup> The visits to Tay Ninh Holy See from three Japanese diplomats in May-June 1941 must have triggered the French's final act which was to arrest Pham Cong Tac once and for all.

### **Life of exile: Madagascar 1941-46**

The capture of Duc Ho Phap by the French Secret Police, who forced entry into the Tay Ninh temple on the night of 4 June 1941, marked the beginning of his life in exile. First he was sent to Djiring, in central Vietnam away from his base. On 11 July, the Secret Police presented themselves at other Cao Dai temples to make more arrests. Five high ranking dignitaries were taken to a jail in Saigon. On 27 July, all the Cao Dai leaders, including Duc Ho Phap, were taken to Saigon's seaport. A merchant ship was waiting there to transport them, together with a further twelve Vietnamese political prisoners, to far away Madagascar. Ironically, the Dumont d'Urvill<sup>33</sup> which carried Ho Phap and the five other dignitaries, made its last voyage from Vietnam since commercial activities were disrupted by the Pacific War.

After many days on the Indian Ocean the Vietnamese prisoners reached their destination (27 July 1941). They disembarked at Nossilave Port and were immediately taken to Nossilave, Comores jail, in the north of Madagascar. There they joined in another group of eleven Vietnamese prisoners, most of whom belonged to the Communist party. At the outset, Duc Ho Phap and the five dignitaries were kept under virtual "house" arrest.

In late 1942, the prisoners were transferred in trucks to the Voutrouzou prison farm in southern Madagascar. Their journey was rough and took five days, but ultimately welcomed as they experienced a positive change in their prison atmosphere. At Voutrouzou they had more living space and were allowed greater movement. Headed by a Frenchman, the farm held 20, 000 prisoners of all races, most of them from French colonies around the globe. Then, in 1943, the farm came under the guard of a British

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<sup>32</sup> Tac was popularly addressed as Duc Ho Phap, meaning Venerable Ho Phap.

<sup>33</sup> In Huynh Tam, *Tieu Su...* p. 83 the name of the merchant ship is recorded as the Compiège.



officer. The atmosphere became even more relaxed and the prisoners were better treated. During this time, by using their knowledge of the French language, Duc Ho Phap and the other dignitaries succeeded in spreading their faith among other prisoners. It is said they taught some prisoners to say prayers in front of the Divine Eye.<sup>34</sup> From those seeds of influence, Caodaism later spread into Africa via the former prisoners whom Duc Ho Phap had converted. Nguyen The Truyen, a nationalist who was in exile with Duc Ho Phap observed:

Only a great man like Pham Cong Tac could succeed in transporting Cao Dai from Vietnam to Africa. Living in prison he still preached. Seemingly religious beliefs are predestined. The prisoners and islanders admired his conduct and his ability.<sup>35</sup>

Interestingly, in late 1943 only four Vietnamese prisoners, all of them communist, were released. They were transferred to Calcutta for training and in 1945 brought back to Indochina by allied forces. There they joined the Communist base in Cao Bang to help launch a campaign against the Japanese.

During his stay at Voutrouzou Ho Phap got to know the locals well. He taught them how to polish rice and how to use a rice grinder the Vietnamese way. He also showed them how to use polished rice chalk to make cake. During times of drought he showed them how to collect water from the creeks and channel it to the valley using connecting bamboo tubes.<sup>36</sup>

Apparently communication between Ho Phap and his Caodai groups back at home was virtually impossible, due to distance and strict French control. In his own admission, years later, he suffered tremendous, mental anguish during his time of exile. What kept him alive was his faith otherwise he “could have died a million times”.<sup>37</sup>

## **The Cao Dai Army and the March coup**

Despite the rhetoric of its “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere”, Japan used Indochina mainly as a supply line and as a stepping stone in the conquest of other parts of

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<sup>34</sup> Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do, *Hoi Ky Tran Quang Vinh*, p.153.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted from Huynh Tam, *Tieu Su...*, p.83.

<sup>36</sup> Le Quang Tan, *Tieu Su Pham Cong Tac*, (Caodaist Association of Australia, NSW Chapter, 1991), p.59.

<sup>37</sup> Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do, *Loi Thuyet Dao Cua Duc Ho Phap*, Vols.1 and 2, Reprint, (Costa Mesa, California: TT.TN, 1996), pp. 8-9.

Southeast Asia. Consequently Vietnam was placed in a most peculiar situation which the nationalists failed to predict. Further, after their successful invasion of Southeast Asia and the Pacific, the Japanese were preoccupied with establishing their military presence and saw no need to change French civil control over their colonies. Thus began a new chapter for the Caodai movement, one of adaptation to war-time in the absence of its leader. The upshot was a 'collaboration' with the Japanese and the emergence of a Caodai army, with Bishop Tran Quang Vinh the mastermind.

Despite doubts about Japan's professed mission of securing "Asia for Asians", most Caodaists maintained a pro-Japanese stance, in the hope that Japan would eventually liberate Vietnam. This was due to their harsh experiences under the French. The presence of Japanese armed forces which had moved into Indochina in accordance with concessions made by the Vichy French, did not stop the latter from suppressing the Caodai religious activities. Admiral Decoux, Governor General of Indochina, argued that the Caodai movement was closer to a clandestine secret society than at least most religious groups.<sup>38</sup> During early 1942 more raids were launched against various Caodai oratories. Consequently, the Cao Dai moved their base over the Cambodian border. The forced exile of their leader, and the destruction of Caodai relics in the wake of French troops' occupation of their temples were cited as main reasons the Caodaists sought protection and collaboration with the Japanese. Interestingly during this time of distress, their protector-spirits conveyed messages (Seance-28 Oct. 1942) urging them to "invest in venture" to save religion, life and country.<sup>39</sup> Bishop Tran Quang Vinh, was entrusted with the task. Thus he led the Caodai into a collaborative venture with the Japanese,<sup>40</sup> having learned from the Kempeitei of the Japanese wish to seek assistance from the Caodai.<sup>41</sup>

Through an intermediary Vinh got the opportunity to propose a plan of 'mutual benefit' to Japanese officers. It involved providing "information" to the Japanese in exchange for Japanese protection of the Caodai religion. In the end the Caodai provided 3000 much needed workers for Japanese shipyards in Saigon.

Under Japanese "protection", Vinh launched a military venture in the shipyards. Two semi-military groups were set up who worked daytime and were involved in military

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<sup>38</sup> Decoux, *A la Barre de l'Indochine*, (Paris: Plon, 1949), p.235.

<sup>39</sup> Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do, *Hoi Ky Tran Quang Vinh*, p.125.

<sup>40</sup> See, Tran My-Van, 'Japan and Vietnam's Caodaists: A Wartime Relationship (1939-45)', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol.27, No. 1 (March 1996), pp. 179-193.

<sup>41</sup> See, Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do, *Hoi Ky Tran Quang Vinh*, p. 124.

practices at night time. Elsewhere in Cochinchina, up to 20,000 volunteers were prepared to back up the forces inside the shipyards to help bring independence to Vietnam. Religious fervor was one major reason why the Cao Dai dedicated their lives to the country. They believed to be entrusted by their spirited superior to the task of salvaging the country. On the practical level their work for the Japanese provided them with means to live and money to donate to the temples.

They were the only groups participating alongside the Japanese during the 8 March coup (1945) which ended 80 years of French rule. A significant setback befell the Cao Dai following the demise of the Japanese in Vietnam. Indeed their war-time collaboration with the Japanese backfired: Cao Dai leaders, especially Vinh faced a barrage of attacks, including arrest by the Communists. At the same time the returning French authorities began to retaliate soon after his escape from the communists. Their forces ransacked most Cao Dai temples and arrested dignitaries, including Vinh. Facing the total collapse of the organization, Vinh after consultation with some Cao Dai dignitaries, agreed to enter an alliance with the French in exchange for the total release of Cao Dai dignitaries and soldiers who had opposed the French and most importantly for the return of Pham Cong Tac. In return the Cao Dai Army was to cease fighting the French (the Treaty of 6 June 1946). This decision deemed primarily to ensure the survival of Cao Dai.

### **The return of Ho Phap**

In 1945 Madagascar was granted independence. The local people and authorities, sympathetic to the exiled Vietnamese prisoners, requested that they be released. Simultaneously, the Cao Dai within Vietnam agreed to cease fighting the French authorities in exchange for the prompt return of their leader. Consequently, Ho Phap was allowed to go home. By then, two of the Cao Dai dignitaries had passed away. In mid 1946 he boarded a commercial ship which made a stop at Diego Suarez port then onto Vietnam.

The timing and means provided by the French authorities for Ho Phap's return to his home land were clouded in uncertainty: At one stage he was said to be on board the Ile de France, at other times aboard a plane causing some Cao Daiists to believe that the impending return of their leader was a hoax. Finally, the good news was confirmed to Tran Quang Vinh that the Ile de France arrived in Vung Tau with Ho Phap on board. Immediately Mr. Fremolle, the representative of the Commissioner of Cochinchina,

Basin, the Security Chief, and Vinh flew out to Vung Tau. There M. Ropion, the province chief, joined them. Together they boarded on a small canoe to go to the Ile de France to meet Ho Phap on board. Interestingly, Ho Phap was cordially and sincerely welcomed back by the French authorities, who had earlier exiled him.<sup>42</sup>

It was at the residence of the Province Chief of Vung Tau that Tran Quang Vinh briefed Ho Phap about Caodai developments during his absence. He also gave him two important documents: the Cao Dai Report 1941-1945 and the Treaty of 6 June 1946. Vinh recorded that Ho Phap expressed his understanding and approval of what had been done so as caodaism and peace could be re-established during the tumultuous time.<sup>43</sup>

When Ho Phap, accompanied by Vinh, turned up at the doorstep at the residence of a Caodai dignitary, a small group of Caodai leaders, who had gathered since dawn, rushed out to meet him with great elation and emotion. Using his week long stay in Saigon Ho Phap met with some French authorities seeking their firm commitment to religious freedom for his followers, at the same time affirming his agreement to the terms of the June Treaty (see above).

### **Back at the helm (1946-1956)**

30 August 1946 marked a new phase of “entente cordial”- between the French authorities and the Cao Dai with the return of Ho Phap to his headquarters, in a grand fashion of ritual and pomp, amid “ tears, cheers, and flag wavings”.

It happened that he returned in the most turbulent time. This was due to the political, and military confusion following the sudden capitulation of the Japanese Army, the re-establishment of the French colonial masters and the increasing power of the Communist Party which had close link with the Comintern. From the nationalists’ perspective no early improvement to the national scene seems likely: On the external front there was no firm agreement between the French and the Communist led Vietminh authorities on the core issues of “free” Vietnam or independence and on the unity of the three Ky (Annam, Tonkin and Cochinchina).<sup>44</sup> On the internal front there was agitation, conflict of interests and division among the many political, religious and social groups. The Communist Party

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 286-288.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p.288.

<sup>44</sup> The 6 March 1946 Accord which was reached by Ho and Sainteny allowed the French to return to the North and recognised Vietnam as a free state within the French Union.

under the skilful leadership of Ho Chi Minh was perceived as reaping the greatest benefit following the abdication of Emperor Bao Dai (24 August 1945) and through its utilisation of the nationalists' patriotism to its advantage. Furthermore, despite the façade of collaboration in the struggle against French colonialism, the tension between the communists and the nationalists had been intensified on account of the former's extermination and/or elimination of nationalists through its death squad methods to consolidate its power. The disappearance of non-communist leaders, eg Truong Tu Anh, the leader of Dai Viet, a pro-Japanese Party caused great concern among the non-communist camps.<sup>45</sup> Indeed Ho Phap remarked: "the communists are terribly violent".<sup>46</sup> Against this background, Ho Phap's increasingly direct involvement in the political arena from this time on can be understood. First and foremost, his immediate concern was with his followers. They, like the Hoa Hao and Dai Viet, were perceived as "collaborators with the Japanese" or "traitors", thus becoming acceptable targets for elimination. Second, and no less important was the existence of a Caodai army within a religious organisation.

In balancing the options for Vietnam from internal perspective, Ho Phap had to choose the lesser of two evils. He wrote to the French Foreign Minister, urging more French efforts to bring a peaceful solution to Vietnam. This action implied his support for Bao Dai, as at that time the Bao Dai solution was on the French agenda to be played against the militant Vietminh. There is no denial that Ho Phap distrusted the communists whom he regarded as "immediate enemies with sufficient potential to destroy us (Caodaists), to render people physically and mentally weak and to cause them keeping on fighting".<sup>47</sup> His choice of the Bao Dai solution in this context implies more negotiation, less actual fighting, and bloodshed. Furthermore, his immediate aim was to see a more united Vietnam under a kind of constitutional monarchy that could restore more rights, equality and peace to the Vietnamese.<sup>48</sup> Nguyen van Sam, founder of the Front for National Unity shared Pham Cong Tac's view, as he stated: "The government of Ho Chi Minh is a communist one ...applying communist ideology and its authoritarianism".<sup>49</sup> Sam soon faced extermination allegedly by the Communists hands. The same fate befell on Huynh Phu So, the most venerable leader of the Hoa Hao. Against this background it

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<sup>45</sup> For the list of nationalist leaders who either disappeared mysteriously or executed during the period of 1946-1947 see, Nguyen Khac Ngu, *Bao Dai va Cac Dang Phai Quoc gia*, (Montreal: Tu Sach Su Dia, 1991), pp. 148-149.

<sup>46</sup> Pham Cong Tac, *Loi Thuyet Dao cua Duc Ho Phap*, (Tay Ninh, 1970), p.83.

<sup>47</sup> Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do, *Loi Thuyet Dao cua Duc Ho Phap*, p.65.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p.34.

<sup>49</sup> Phan Khac Ngu, *Bao Dai Cac Dang Phai Quoc Gia*, p.8.

is understandable why Ho Phap undertook to write letters (notably that of 17 March 1947) to ex Emperor Bao Dai, who had been living in Hongkong since his disengagement from the Vietminh, urgently requesting him to undertake the broker role for the sake of the nation.

Pham Cong Tac was pleased with his effort in fostering a peaceful solution for Vietnam, as an agreement known as the Elysee Agreement (8 March 1949) was concluded between Bao Dai and French President Vincent Auriol.<sup>50</sup> Under its terms, Vietnam was granted independence as an Associated State within the French Union. In addition a Unified Vietnam was to be under Bao Dai's control thus ending Cochinchina's separation from Annam and Tonkin. Despite the communists' claim that the solution was only a 'colonial trick', the Cao Dai were not swayed. To them, given the political turmoil of 1946-1947, Bao Dai was in a much better position than Ho Chi Minh to serve as a focal point to unite the whole population. Bao Dai's abdication and his preference "to be a citizen of a free country than emperor of a slave state" to a great extent demonstrated his capacity to put the nation's interests above his own. That, Bao Dai professed to pursue full independence for Vietnam from the French, in all the discussions about the future of Vietnam with various nationalist leaders who sought his audience, suggests his commitment to true independence. Another reason why some nationalists, despite their doubt about Bao Dai's capacity, still accepted Bao Dai was their fear of the communists:

We had seen the Vietminh's colours already- the people's committees, the security apparatus, the assassination squads, the compulsion to arrogate all power to themselves. Once they achieved full control, the Vietminh would never let us live.<sup>51</sup>

Between 1950-1954, Ho Phap's position as a politician, statesman and policy maker was at its height, judging from his political activities within Vietnam and overseas. His efforts were all for the sake of accelerating an independent and unified Vietnam as already set forth in the Elysee Agreement. His extensive involvement in the politics of the time can be seen, partly, as a commitment to good deeds as expected of all Caodai adherents: that is, to serve the earthly life which includes self, family, society, country and humanity. Equally, it was prompted by Northeast Asian politics at the time, which were dominated by Mao's communist success in China; the Korea War and Peking-

<sup>50</sup> For more information regarding this episode, see, Bao Dai, *Con Rong Viet Nam- Hoi Ky 1913-1987*, (Los Alamos: California: Nguyen Phuoc Toc Xuat Ban, 1990), pp. 331-348.

<sup>51</sup> Bui Diem with David Chanoff, *In the Jaws of History*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987), p.60.

Moscow friendship. These factors were of influence on account of Ho Chi Minh's visits to both Peking and Moscow, seeking military assistance and support for his military struggle against the French which already began in earnest around Cao Bang.<sup>52</sup> In his meeting with Bao Dai in Da Lat (27 March 1950), Ho Phap expressed his concern about world politics- an obstacle in the path of Vietnamese aspirations for self determination. In his view, the less external influences on Vietnam, the easier it would be to sort out its internal problems.

On 29 March 1950 during his visit to Phnom Penh on behalf of Bao Dai, using his audience with king Norodom Sihanouk, he discussed the security and peace issues which were of common concern to both countries. He reinstated his concerns over new external pressures. In addition, in view of the many Caodai followers- who lived in Cambodian territory he requested that their religious position be accepted.<sup>53</sup>

On his 60th birthday, (21 June 1950) an occasion much celebrated in the Vietnamese tradition to mark the successful completion of one's life, Ho Phap received 22 representatives from the diplomatic corps, and a big Caodai crowd, in addition to many letters of congratulations from friends at home and abroad. This illustrated the high regard many people of different backgrounds have held him.

To foster more unity among different nationalist and religious groups, Ho Phap made a special visit to Hanoi (18 October 1950) to meet with their leaders. He keenly acknowledged the necessity of collaboration between the Northern and Southern population to advance the national agenda. In his address at Hoa Ma Oratory in Hanoi, he called on the people to "unite, to embrace love and compassion in sorting out any challenge that might lie ahead".<sup>54</sup> Before his departure he offered them an eight lined poem to commemorate his visit, purposely to reinstate his hope for unity among the Vietnamese. As his ending line reads "what's still lacking is human harmony", his concern over the division between North and South is clear.

While Vietnam faced an uncertain future in relation to the issue of full independence from the French and the guerrilla warfare waged by the communist group, Pham Cong

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<sup>52</sup> For Chinese military assistance to Ho during 1950 see, Vo Nguyen Giap, *Duong Toi Dien Bien Phu*, (Hanoi: Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 2000), pp. 107-109; Chien Jiang 'China and the First Indochina War, 1950-1954' *The China Quarterly*, (August 1983).

<sup>53</sup> There were 64,954 Vietnamese and 8,213 Cambodians, see Le Huong, *Viet Kieu o Kampuchia*, (Saigon: Tri Dang, 1971), p.140.

<sup>54</sup> Huynh Tam, *Tieu Su*, pp. 100-101.

Tac continued to place much faith in the role the Cao Dai Army to help bring independence and peace to Vietnam. Firstly it had strength by 1948 already reaching 10,000.<sup>55</sup> Secondly, its participation along side the Japanese in the March coup certainly demonstrated its role in help bring an end to French rule. Thirdly, its force since its inception had been regarded as sacred army (thien binh), entrusted by Caodai God to carry out its duties, under the Banner Flag of Saving Life (Co Bao Sinh):

The Caodai Army has the divine mission to render peace, and order to life on earth (doi); to create happiness for everybody to share and to present a model for peace to the country as well as to the neighbouring states".<sup>56</sup>

In this context it is not surprising that Pham Cong Tac suggested the Caodai Army could provide a model for the International Army and act as an 'agent for Universal Peace'.<sup>57</sup>

The defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu (1954), and their coming direct negotiation with Ho Chi Minh at the international Conference in Geneva deeply concerned Ho Phap over the future of Vietnam. He lead a Caodai delegation to Paris to have direct audience with the President of France, Rene Coty, to request French sincerity in returning Vietnam's independence. Equally, on the eve of the Geneva conference he met with Foreign Minister Pham van Dong, representing Ho's government, seeking his assurance that Vietnam would not fall into the same "sorry fate" of the past known as the "Trinh and Nguyen Rift".<sup>58</sup> Thus he urged Dong to firmly object to any treaty which would bring division to the country. Nevertheless, Cold War conditions dictated that Vietnam be temporarily divided at the 17th parallel by the terms of the Agreement.<sup>59</sup> In effect two zones were created: North Vietnam to be administered by Ho's government in Hanoi and South Vietnam by Bao Dai's government in Saigon.

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<sup>55</sup> Quoted from Sergei Blagov, *The Cao Dai*, p. 76; J. Verner, *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism*, p.44.

<sup>56</sup> Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do, *Loi Thuyet Dao Cua Duc Ho Phap*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>57</sup> Pham Cong Tac, *Loi Thuyet Dao Cua Duc Ho Phap*, (Tay Ninh, 1970), p. 24; Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do, *Loi Thuyet Dao Cua Duc Ho Phap*, p.14.

<sup>58</sup> "Trinh Nguyen Phan Tranh" lasted over 200 years (16th-18th centuries) and had River Gianh marked as the division.

<sup>59</sup> See, "Agreement on the cessation of hostilities in Vietnam" in M.E. Gettleman, ed, *Vietnam: History, Documents, and Opinions*, (New York: New American Library, 1960), pp. 164-182.



Without waiting for the promised unification election to take place, Ho Phap decided to press on with his own version of a united Vietnam. His priority is to achieve political stability of South Vietnam in the first instance. His concern lay with the weakness of the State of Vietnam government under Bao Dai, as reflected by a succession of Prime Ministers from 1950 to 1954. Thus, upon his return from France, Ho Phap immediately established the United Front of Nationalist Forces (Mat Tran Thong Nhat Toan Luc Quoc Gia) to unite all religious-oriented political groups and to consolidate the Southern position to deal with the North. This optimistic exercise was to inject much needed strength into Bao Dai's government to help withstand the challenge of the Vietminh. Unfortunately, Ngo Dinh Diem, whom Bao Dai had chosen to be Prime Minister since June 1954, saw this as a challenge to his own power base. This was the beginning of the rift between Ho Phap and Diem.

In 1955, due to the cold war atmosphere and against the backdrop of human sufferings, he travelled to both South Korea and Taiwan to promote Caodaism as an agent of international peace. However, his visits which were at the invitations of the leaders of both countries, Chiang kai- shek and Syngman Rhee, indicate a political agenda: to stem further spread of Communism. Finally he travelled to Tokyo to bring the ashes of Prince Cuong De, who passed away in 1951, back to Tay Ninh Holy See. This was the latter's request as recorded in his will.

### **Problems with Ngo Dinh Diem Government (1955-1956): different "sects wars" against the authorities**

When Bao Dai created the first Vietnamese commanded national armed forces (Feb 1955) most of the Caodai operations remained isolated in the country-side. Furthermore, Ho Phap's request to Bao Dai to improve the resources of the Caodai Army went unheeded. Total US support for Diem, through Colonel Lansdale, Diem's personal adviser, put a further nail in the Caodai coffin.<sup>60</sup> In April 1955 Lansdale arranged a Franco-American meeting with politico- religious leaders who had begun opposing Diem's authoritarian regime. Though they all stated they wanted no bloodshed, Diem still ordered attacks on all opposition. Apparently the US as much as Dulles, considered

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<sup>60</sup> See, E.G. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: an American Mission to Southeast Asia*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

withdrawing their support for Diem due to these attacks. However, when Diem appeared to win the US reversed their decision.<sup>61</sup>

In the military confrontation between the religious 'sects' who tried to block Diem's quest for power, the former were slowly crushed. The Caodai failed to emerge as a strong enough force to withstand Government pressure. Worse, in a national referendum (23 Oct. 1955) initiated by Diem, Vietnam was transformed from a monarchy to a Republic with Diem as President.<sup>62</sup> The skilful removal of Bao Dai by Diem, which ended the potential role Bao Dai may have played in sorting out the fate of South Vietnam, making Pham Cong Tac a loser. Then, the departure of Trinh Minh The, a "true baby of Cao Dai" from the Caodai forces to join Diem's US backed national army was followed by his violent death by a single shot, causing much disillusion and sadness in the Caodai camp.<sup>63</sup> Pham Cong Tac in the end faced a breakdown of Caodai solidarity: Nguyen Thanh Phuong, a former Caodai General, moved to the Diem camp (allegedly having been bought by a big sum of money), disarmed the Divine Guards of Tay Ninh Holy See, and arrested the two daughters of Pham Cong Tac.

Some Caodai seemed to move closer to the Vietminh position as these events unfolded. However, Ho Phap did not clarify his position forcefully. Instead he accused Diem of setting up a dictatorship: "Diem arrested his enemies, so, he must now arrest all Vietnamese."<sup>64</sup> This statement killed whatever relationship was left between Pham Cong Tac and Diem. Not long after, government troops occupied Tay Ninh- the seat of the Caodai religion. Pham Cong Tac, General Le Van Tat and some of his most trusted dignitaries fled to Cambodia under the cover of darkness. The remnants of Caodai troops loyal to Ho Phap were crushed. After hot pursuit by Diem's military forces backed by the US some of them took refuge among the Vietminh.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> See, William Henderson, "South Vietnam Finds itself", *Foreign Affairs*, XXXV (Jan 1957).

<sup>62</sup> Diem received 5,721,735 votes against 6,017 for Bao Dai, see J. Buttinger, *The Unforgettable Tragedy*, (New York: Horizon Press, 1977), p.35. On this election Bernard Falls, *The Two Vietnams*, (New York: F.A. Praeger, 1968), p.257 commented "There is no doubt that this plebiscite was only a shade less fraudulent than most electoral test under a dictatorship". For further information on the demise of Bao Dai see, Bruce, M. Lockhart. *The End of the Vietnamese Monarchy*, Lac Viet Series 15 (New Haven: Yale Centre for International and Area Studies, 1993, pp. 165-175).

<sup>63</sup> To date it is still not known who actually shot General The. Some sources pointed to the French, some Caodai sources suggested that he was killed by Diem camp to eliminate future implication as General The allegedly rejoined the Caodai Front headed by Pham cong Tac.

<sup>64</sup> From an interview by Max Clos, special correspondent for *Le Monde* (3 June, 1955).

<sup>65</sup> It was estimated that S. Vietnam had received during 1955-1956 half a billion dollars of American aid. 340,000,000 of which went into building up and maintaining the armed forces, J. Buttinger, *The Smaller Dragon*, (New York: F.A. Praeger, 1962), p. 469; In Gravel edition, *The Pentagon Papers*. I (Boston:

By mid 1956 Diem had prevailed over all rival forces. In fact, he was riding on absolute power supported by the US as champion of South Vietnam as a model anti-communist state.<sup>66</sup>

## **Exile in Cambodia**

During his exile Ho Phap became a tireless advocator of human rights, peace, unity and neutrality for Vietnam. Despite the political quagmire created by foreign powers in his home country, he continuously called for global observation of non-interference in its domestic affairs. To this end he wrote letters to many world leaders and the UN. Still regarding a policy of peaceful co existence as valid in time of national division, he wrote to both Ngo Dinh Diem and Ho Chi Minh (21 June 1956) urging them to work towards “peace, happiness and democracy for all Vietnamese”. Also he urged his followers in South Vietnam to set up committees to pursue his idea of coexistence and peace. On his order, 4 Caodai emissaries went to the Ben Hai river bridge- the landmark of Vietnam’s division- to position Cao Dai flags. This was to highlight Peaceful Co Existence - Ho Phap’s enduring dream. This initiative backfired. His envoys and helpers were arrested. Against the backdrop of Diem’s anti communist stand such action was construed as pro-Hanoi. Most Caodai campaigners for Peaceful Co Existence shared the same fate as earlier crusaders.

In late 1958 Ho Phap refused Diem’s offer of “safe return” to Tay Ninh. This was because his demand for the release of all imprisoned Cao Dai was not met.

## **Exit from the world**

*Only when our beloved country Vietnam is truly united along the path of peace and neutrality, in accordance with my lifelong goal, shall our followers bring my remains back to the Tay Ninh Holy See*

The above message was in the will that Pham Cong Tac wrote on his deathbed at the Calmette hospital, one week before his death. He passed away on 17 May 1959. His last

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Beacon press), p. 268 it is recorded “... Thus at least \$8 out of \$10 of (US) aid went directly to security” meaning Government of South Vietnam’s military budget.

<sup>66</sup> See, ‘The US and Ngo Dinh Diem’ in R.B. Smith, *An International History of Vietnam War*, Vol. 1 (London: McMillan Press, 1983), pp. 35-53.

request was that his body be temporarily kept in Cambodia as witness to a Vietnam divided.

## **Conclusion**

The fact that in 1954 Caodai forces stood at 25,000 and by 1956 were just 1000 marks the drastic decline of the Caodai as a political and military force. Caodai opposition to Diem from 1955 both lacked resources and opposed US support for Diem. As a result it was the meat in the sandwich; on the one side was the US and Diem and on the other side, the communist- led Vietminh. Ho Phap had to walk a tight rope. Interestingly, his continuing support of a Bao Dai government, although legitimate in Caodai perspective, did not bear fruit. In the end Vietnam was divided and the Communist government of Ho Chi Minh bathed more in the glory of success against the French colonialists.

Nevertheless Pham Cong Tac's activities drew the Cao Dai into national politics. Most peasants who had lived in Caodai zones became more politically aware and mindful of both their country and their religion. As leader of the Caodai religion, known as "The Third Great Universal Religious Amnesty", Ho Phap viewed himself as under God's instruction to bring order and peace. This religious belief prompted his actions, however political they might seem.

His activities, through his later life were significantly drawn from his commitment to Caodai as a religion and to Vietnam's independence and peace. His faith in the Caodai ability to lead Vietnam out of political quagmire onto peace, was derived from his perceived direct communication with the unseen world. He must have strongly believed in the messages of the Caodai God that Cao Dai has the mission to bring peace to the world. Thus, first and foremost the independence of Vietnam must be restored and Cao Dai as a religion must survive.

Sadly, the collaboration of the Cao Dai with the Japanese and later with the French may have given the communist forces reason to punish the Cao Dai severely. The Cao Dai saw their actions in terms of God's message, while the Communists saw them as purely political enemies to be eliminated. This was made worse when the Vietminh utilised the sacrifices, and patriotism of the nationalists to their advantages.

The return of the French to re-establish their rule, the rise to power of Communist force led by Ho Chi Minh, the cold war atmosphere and the conviction in the divine role of the Cao Dai under Pham Cong Tac, have contributed to making recent Vietnamese history complex and colourful. Furthermore, it has been a tragic history with much disappointment and suffering experienced by many. The leader of the Cao Dai stood out in this crowd. Despite his great dedication, peace and unity in Vietnam was not restored.

Forty two years have gone since his passing away. In today's political environment, it is impossible for the Cao Dai to play any significant political role. Since the reunification of Vietnam under the communist rule the Tay Ninh groups have become worst off due to their political activities in the past. However, the Holy See which Ho Phap established continues to dominate the sky in Tay Ninh, and the spirit and the teachings of Ho Phap live on among the Cao Dai both at home and abroad. It is certain that they were not prepared to give up their religion judging from the establishment of a US based Caodai Overseas Mission and of new temples around the globe by overseas Cao Dai to continue to carry their message. What is important to them is that their spiritual leader's last request is yet to be realised. It remains hard to predict when true "peace" will come to the Cao Dai so that Ho Phap's remains can be brought back to the place where they belong.

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