

# **The Mother Goddess of the Cao Dai Religion**

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In this presentation I discuss the beliefs and practices associated with the Cao Dai Mother Goddess, known as Đức Phật Mẫu or Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu. I focus on Her divine attributes, revealing her exceptional status among the historic and modern pantheon of the world's goddesses. I also describe how she has emerged as *the* embodiment of the Tay Ninh denomination of Caodaism.

At this conference we are honored by the presence of His Eminence Cardinal Thuong Tam Thanh, Chairman of the Sacerdotal Council, along with Archbishops and other Dignitaries of the Tay Ninh Holy See. I am grateful to my colleagues Reverend Canh Tran, Mr. Nguyen Tuan Em, and Professor Huong Ninh, who have generously shared their research and translations with me. I use English names and terms in this presentation, but have kept track of the Vietnamese terms to include in upcoming publications.

## **A SYNCRETIC FAITH**

In a world in which religious, political, and cultural sectarianism pits one group against the next, the Cao Dai tenets of inclusion and tolerance are remarkable. These traits are facilitated by the blending or syncretism of a number of belief systems. Note how many of these symbols from a site called "Religious Tolerance.Org" are under the umbrella of Caodaism. Syncretization

typically involves co-mingling elements of two single faiths. From about 500 years ago until the present, the Maya of Central America, for example, have taken their indigenous faith underground and thus protected it by equating Catholic saints with their earth lords and other animist spirits. But Caodaism's syncretism is comprehensive, blending eastern and western religious philosophies and cultures, elements of monotheism and polytheism, and animism and millenarianism under the single, universal God. He is known as the Jade Emperor or as Cao Đài, "the highest tower," whose mission is to establish the "Great Way of the Third Universal Redemption (or Amnesty, or Salvation)" (Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ). The fundamental objective of the Third Amnesty is the unification of all religions. The belief that "All religions have one same principle, and one same origin" accommodates all who believe in God in a world of true love, justice, and harmony. An expression of spiritual globalization, Caodaism is well-symbolized by the familiar sphere of Earth that actually represents the universe, looked after by the all-seeing left eye of God.

Vietnamese and some other East Asian cultures are uniquely predisposed to this kind of hybridization. A single person is often a fount of spiritual diversity, for example being Buddhist, espousing Confucian ethics, recognizing animist spirits, and revering one's own ancestors. This is similar to the multi-layered spirituality of many people in sub-Saharan Africa. But Caodaism's main roots are in the three Asian belief and social systems of Confucianism (symbolized by the color red), Buddhism (the color yellow), and Taoism (the color blue).

Caodaism is paradoxically universal and yet distinctively Vietnamese. Although appealing to be the spiritual vehicle for all peoples, this faith is also a window into Vietnamese culture. As Professor Ninh observes, Caodaism endorses the traditional five principles of Vietnamese behavior: benevolence, loyalty, politeness, intellect, and faithfulness. It prizes the

traditional Vietnamese veneration of ancestors, and taps into local animistic beliefs, as evident by the perispirits of soil, rock, plants, and animals. Vietnamese folk beliefs in Geniism are also present.

While a distinct deity, the Cao Dai Mother Goddess has a context within a great tradition of blessed and divine mothers and women throughout East Asia. Here in Taiwan, one of most revered is this Heavenly Mother Sea Goddess Mazu. Altogether there are between 50 and 75 goddess figures in Vietnam. UNESCO has recognized the Vietnamese complex of Mother Goddesses worship (Đạo Mẫu), which does not specifically include the Cao Dai Mother Goddess, and which does involve spirit medium rituals, as belonging to the intangible cultural heritage of mankind.

Caodaism is itself a spiritist religion, in which the divine communicates new scriptures to humanity through spiritual mediums, primarily with the use of the *corbeille a bec* or “beaked bag.” In séances held between 1925 and 1935, this instrument yielded to Cao Dai leaders and mediums the 170 divine messages constituting Cao Dai's holy scripture (Thánh Ngôn Hiệp Tuyển), and Constitution. In Vietnam and abroad the Tay Ninh branch of Caodaism, following Hanoi's perspectives on religious expression, currently observes a moratorium on séances.

In a séance in Phnom Penh in 1927, the Eighth of the Mother Goddess' Nine Muses, whom I will introduce later, revealed to His Holiness Ho Phap (Master of Mysticism and Guardian of Religious Law) Pham Cong Tac the Cao Dai creation story, with details on the powers of the Mother Goddess, and the responsibilities of her Muses. According to the Cao Dai cosmology, before the Big Bang there was the "Dao," the infinite, nameless, formless, unchanging, eternal source. This primordial force transformed into the first divinity, the

Universal Monad called Venerable God the Father or Venerable High Lord, *Đức Cao Đài*, and also the Jade Emperor, whose other names are on this slide.

From the Monad sprang the two opposing entities or energies of the Diad, the Dual Principles of God's Yang Energy -- the Active Cosmic Primary Principle -- and The Yin Energy - - The Feminine Passive Cosmic Principle. (Incidentally, the left eye of God represents the Male Yang principle in the duality of *yin and yang* concepts borrowing from Taoist tradition). The Yin was not controlled by anyone at this time because the Jade Emperor was the only Spirit in the universe. Then he imbued part of himself into the Holy Mother Goddess, who thereafter held half of the Jade Emperor's power and controlled the Yin energy. Upon God's command, the Holy Mother Goddess used her Yin Energy to attract the Yang energy of the Monad, combining the two energies to create the universe with its different celestial planes, 36 heavenly levels, the stars, and 72 inhabited planets.

Then the Holy Mother Goddess -- whose other names are on this slide -- created all living beings in the invisible world, embedding them in eight grades of spirit: metal and stone (or matter), Vegetal, Animal, Human beings, Sages, Saints, Immortals and Buddhas. Four of these transformed into living beings having earthy lives as Matter, Vegetation, Animals, and Human Beings.

These two supreme spirits of God and Goddess are the sacred parents of the universe in the invisible world. Each spirit being in the invisible world has two essential elements: the Spirit or Soul given by God the Father, and the Perispirit, the invisible holy essential element given by the Holy Mother Goddess. When a spirit is incarnated in the earthly world, its given spirit and perispirit combine with a physical body borne by an earthly mother.

My research so far suggests that Caodaism is unique because in other monotheistic religions, only the typically-gendered male God is worshipped. Here the Mother Goddess holds equivalent and complementary status with God. In some respects she is analogous to Catholicism's Virgin Mary, especially in her capacity to attend to the interests of women. Caodaism is unlike Catholicism however in that the Holy Mother is worshipped, while the Catholics' Virgin Mary is mainly revered. In Caodaism Goddess and God are on such equal footing that there is even debate in some denominations about whether The Mother Goddess or the Jade Emperor is the primary source of creation.

The heavenly prominence of The Goddess is mirrored in the earthly status and roles of Caodai women. While they are segregated at ceremonies, with each gender having its own organization and authority, in many respects Caodai women and men are equal. It was revealed in a séance that *"The dignitaries, whether masculine or feminine, who are on the same levels (in ranks and hierarchy) have the same powers."* There are certain privileges a woman cannot have, though: while equal with a man in ranks and hierarchy and eligible to hold the rank of Cardinal and Archbishop, she cannot be the Pope. This is apparently because destruction is associated with yin power in the traditional duopoly. Janet Hoskins reports that in a 1934 séance in Tay Ninh, St. Joan of Arc brought up gender equality in Caodaism, saying *"Yes, this is the only religion which grants to women a spiritual power which is virtually equal to that of men. This will show a kind of justice that Christianity has for a long time denied women."*

In every faith in which she exists, the Goddess is the go-to figure for women. In feminist terms, as Carol Christ wrote "The symbol of Goddess has much to offer women who are struggling to be rid of the powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations of

devaluation of female power, denigration of the female body, distrust of female will, and denial of the women's bonds and heritage that have been engendered by patriarchal religion.”

Caodai women had an outsized presence during Vietnam’s violent 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the American War, they were not deterred by military service or time in detention, and thus had longer years of service than men. They were often the only guardians of Caodai temples during stressful times, Janet Haskins writes, adding “Membership in many denominations has been feminized with many more women attending ceremonies than men, perhaps because they are less likely to suffer the social censure that being religious may bring to professionals and civil servants in Vietnam today.”

As in other belief systems, female power in Caodaism symbolizes fertility, birth, fecundity, and perpetuity. In Caodaism she also symbolizes rebirth. In Vietnamese culture the number nine, so often associated with her, means “eternity” and “everlasting.” Her association with fertility is also evident in the correspondence of her feast day, the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, with the Mid-Autumn Festival celebrating the harvest.

While a nurturing and caring figure, the Mother Goddess is also a kind of Superwoman, associated with some of the strongest and holiest women in the annals of history and spirituality. Tradition holds that she descended nine times from heaven to earth, each time as a prominent woman in different religious and cultural traditions. Congruous with the syncretic traditions of Caodaism, these diverse figures are on the accompanying slide.

Souls go to heaven or hell after the body dies. In order to finally be released from the cycle of reincarnation, Caodai disciples are required to have led moral lives and devoted themselves to spiritual causes, social service, and meditation. While they cannot escape the cycle of birth and death without such merits, they can reach better places in the universe,

including the 72 planets (ours is the 68th), the 3,000 worlds, the four great cosmic regions, and the 36 heavenly planes. True liberation can only come when souls reach Nirvana, the realm of Divine Beings with the most virtues, merits, and wisdom. A great reward awaits them there: the life-cycle is complete when the souls see both of their Mothers, the Goddess and their birth mothers, as revealed in this message: *“When we enter Her palace to have an audience with Her, we look at her face and we see the face of our own mother, that is, the mother who gave birth to us in our last earthly life.”* Then comes this important instruction on how to behave in this life to reach the next: *“Maintain filial piety with your parents!”*

The Mother Goddess and her Nine Muses, seen in this slide, play central roles in the process of reaching Nirvana. The Holy Mother Goddess is the Chief Provider of Salvation, defined as freedom from rebirth, to her children. With the specialized intercession of her nine muses, fairies, or immortals, who have had a variety of previous lives, and who look after the nine levels of heaven, she frequently visits Earth and uses all available educational means to help her children reclaim their primordial positions in God’s kingdom. Reverend Canh and Tuan Em Nguyen provided me with the details about the muses that I summarize in this three-page table. Time does not allow me to discuss these, but you may read the details in the PowerPoint accompanying this paper.

## THE MOTHER GODDESS TEMPLE

The Tay Ninh denomination deals with the equivalence of the female and male deities by providing temples to each of them. The Great Temple (Thanh That), venerating God, had to be built first. While the Great Temple has this depiction of the Mother Goddess and her muses and acolytes, God instructed His Holiness Pham Cong Tac to venerate the Holy Mother in the Holy

See's separate Temple of Gratitude (“Báo Ân Từ”). Its original function was as the Caodai Pantheon, honoring distinguished persons who provided exceptional services to the religion and to the country. When His Holiness Pham Cong Tac returned from his French-imposed exile, he focused on centralizing Tay Ninh Caodaism and distinguishing this branch from other Caodai denominations through devotion to the Mother Goddess. The Temple of Gratitude is only a temporary or transitional Mother Goddess Temple; the permanent Temple for the Holy Mother Goddess has not yet been built. At an unknown time in the future, the Caodai Sacerdotal Council will build the official Holy Mother Goddess temple according to her exact instructions. His Holiness Pham Cong Tac had a revelation that the Mother Goddess wanted to be venerated outside the Holy See, and he bought a large piece of land for that purpose. The construction date is uncertain because after the country's reunification in 1975, the government appropriated all Caodai land holdings, and those outside the Holy See are now privately owned (as Jason Greenberger related in his paper here at the conference, it was foretold that “the land around our Holy See will be as precious as treasure”). This is also a debacle because a séance is required for the Holy Mother to reveal the location, design, and other details of her permanent place of worship – and of course séances are not permitted.

In 1951, His Holiness Pham Cong Tac commissioned this statuary of the Mother Goddess (Die<sup>u</sup> Tr<sup>ı</sup> Kim Ma<sup>u</sup>) -- the only such statue in Vietnam -- and her Nine Muses and Four Acolytes or Immortals. These are housed in the Temple of Gratitude. It was also in 1951 that Pham Cong Tac declared that no other places outside of the Caodai Holy See compound could be considered as Mother Goddess temples (đe<sup>n</sup>), but only as shrines (đie<sup>n</sup>). This distinction exists to this day in Tay Ninh Caodaism.



## THE MOTHER GODDESS FESTIVAL

The Mother Goddess Annual Festival and Banquet, in honor of the Great Mother and her Nine Goddesses (of the Dieu Tri Palace), is one of the most prominent ritual days for the Tay Ninh denomination. It takes place on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August in the lunar calendar, this year falling on the Gregorian calendar date of September 24. I hope to see some of you there.

It is expected that as in recent years, tens of thousands will attend this year's celebration. The statues of the Holy Mother Goddess, her nine Muses, and her four acolytes will be taken on procession through the grounds of the Holy See. The concurrent celebration of mid-Autumn will add to the event's jubilation, color, and cacophany.

### The Diaspora

I conclude by discussing the sectarianism that developed within American Caodaism, and the associated beliefs and practices relating to the Mother Goddess. When Saigon fell in 1975 many Caodaists, were among the first group of refugees to flee Vietnam. Since that time they have established 44 temples associated with the Tay Ninh denomination, and 25 affiliated with other denominations. These are in France, Australia, Canada, and several other countries. This is the Sydney Temple which I had the privilege to visit with the help of my mentor Reverend Trần Quang Cảnh. Incidentally, Professor Ninh informs us that in 2011 the official religious hierarchy became transnational when Reverend Cảnh became the first American citizen to be admitted into the Tây Ninh administrative hierarchy. Serving as head of the Caodai Overseas Missionary and residing in Westminster California, he shuttles frequently to the Holy See. In the US today there are about 20,000 Caodai faithful, most of them in California. Temples based on Tay Ninh's distinctive architecture are located in Garden Grove, California; New Orleans; Dallas; Houston; and Wichita, Kansas.

Many Caodai in the US regard the Tay Ninh branch as effectively guilty by association with Hanoi, and so two distinct branches developed in the American diaspora. One, which Dr. Ninh calls the “nondenominational branch,” focused on universalizing Caodaism by de-emphasizing the significance of the Tay Ninh Holy See. Most remarkably, this non-denominational branch zeroed in on The Mother Goddess as *the* identifying cornerstone of the Tay Ninh denomination. To distinguish and distance itself from Tay Ninh and to build a cross-sectarian base, this branch de-emphasized the Mother Goddess. Meanwhile, the Tay Ninh denomination embraced the Mother Goddess as a symbol of its unity, and dedicated altars to her in California’s San Jose and Chestnut Street Temples. While perpetuating and emphasizing Mother Goddess worship, members of this denomination identify themselves as the true chosen leaders of Caodaism, responsible for spreading The Great Way throughout the world. With Reverend Canh they have assumed the difficult challenge of nurturing Caodaism in an unfettered state, with freedoms that would include the renewed practice of séances and the building of the Mother Goddess Temple. Professor Ninh reports that the non-denominational American branch does not recognize the restriction on séances, and continues to practice them. She also relates the paradox that the Tay Ninh branch, despite its non-universal aspirations, has become increasingly transnational as it reorients the faithful to their homeland and reactivates their ethnic Vietnamese identity.

As Cardinal Thuong Tam Thanh informed us yesterday, with worship of the Supreme Being, the Third Period of Redemption brings endless freedoms to humanity. And so I end with a wish and prayer: Let us anticipate the days when the Caodai in Vietnam are free, and when the Mother Goddess calls each one of us, Her children, home.

*The article represents the position of the author as presented in a CESNUR conference, rather than of CESNUR or its directors.*

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