USE OF THESES

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THE MOUNTAIN’S SHADOW AND REFLECTION
IN THE RIVER:

Vietnamese Supernaturalism in the Mekong Delta

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
at the Australian National University

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This thesis represents the results of my own research. Where I have drawn on the work of the other scholars, due acknowledgement has been made in the text.

M. Thien Do
ABSTRACT

This study aims to provide an overview of Vietnamese supernaturalism in the Mekong delta through an examination of four different realms. They are: the village communal house, or dính, the Buddhist-Daoist private temple, or chua, mediumistic practices, and the practice of self-cultivation, among whose outstanding proponents were the Daoists (Ông Đạo). These four realms permeated with two major southern Vietnamese concerns: an abiding interest in alternate states of consciousness, and the way in which people appropriate meanings and rituals to effectively resist, negotiate or assert social power as part of the protean art of daily survival.

A central objective of this study is to represent the differing local perspectives of southern proponents and practitioners of supernaturalism. To that end, I have consulted such sources as oral histories, popular literature, and trance writings, revealing a richness and diversity in materials so far neglected or undervalued. An appreciation of the above-mentioned aspects of supernaturalism, which include spiritual responses to personal crises, healing and social action, and which have been hitherto considered as pertaining to marginality and idiosyncrasy, can only complement the historiography of national consolidation, of local resistance to and exploitation by the centre.
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ABBREVIATIONS

S.E.I. : Société des Etudes Indochinoises.
Figure 1. Vietnam around 1900
Figure 3. Main temples in Cần Thơ City, 1992.
INTRODUCTION

This thesis began with my impression of some profound disquiet registered by early Vietnamese settlers in the South, as echoed by an example in oral poetry:

*This country is so strange to us newcomers,*
*Fears are the bird calls, frightful the lashing sound of fish.*

This apparent disquiet led me to pose questions on what Vietnamese history can offer beyond aspects of national consolidation, conquest and resistance that have been dealt with extensively by histories of great events. How are cultural issues addressed, concerning the lived experience of meaningful events, the grounding of that experience in the Mekong delta landscape and the social world of the actors? What indigenous explanations can be found? What can solutions to personal traumas experienced in a rapidly changing society tell us?

This study therefore is an attempt to cover some of the many aspects of Vietnamese response to spiritual challenges thrown up by the 'southward advance' (*Nam Tiễn*) and afterward. I choose to examine 'folk religion' through a multi-faceted perspective. I understand 'religion' not as confined to mainstream perceptions of orthodox Islam, Hindu, Christian, Buddhist or the newer Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo groups. Religion, as a principal component of culture, is therefore considered, beside its spiritual and mystical aspects, as 'the protean act of daily resistance and survival', to use a phrase of Faure's. Thus what is so far termed *folk* or *popular religion* partakes of the potentials and capacities of social negotiation, exploitation as well as the dialectical aspect of resistance and marginalisation.

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1 My translation of:
*Tôi ấy xỉn số là rừng,*
*Chim kêu cũng sợ, con cá vọng phải kính.*

Popular religion forms an inextricable part of those social and ecological responses to challenges thrown up by history. As such, it has much to offer in understanding the history of southern Vietnam in the dynamic process of adaptation to a constantly changing environment. Our view of Vietnam’s past can only be enriched by what religion reveals, beside the lessons offered by histories of intellectual and physical struggles.

To obtain an overview of southern folk religion, I will focus on four distinct realms: the village communal house, called đền, a private Daoist-Buddhist temple, or chùa, mediumship, and self-cultivation. This choice is contingent and fairly arbitrary. It is my way of constructing openings through which I can view distinct aspects of supernaturalism. By interpolating ethnographic and historical data, especially for the first two realms, and by theoretical explorations of the phenomena of supernatural powers and responsiveness, I aim to uncover commonalities that enable new and more comprehensive means to understand what has been overlooked in current historiography.

DEFINITION AND DELIMITATION

At the beginning of his chapter on self-cultivation and the reclusive life, in Minor Compilation of Things Seen and Heard (Kiến Văn Tiểu Lục), the eighteenth-century scholar mandarin and literary genius, Lê Quý Đôn, wrote:

Amidst the revolving vast earth, strange things happen in an unfathomable way. Humans are only small, even those whose talents and intellect can dominate the whole realm and control the nine provinces, but not having seen and heard enough of the wide world, whenever they read old books, they show such adamant disbelief about the supernatural responsiveness of spirits, animals and plants that can change and transform mysteriously, as well as distant images, strange and odd spectacles, that they even berate Immortals and Buddhas. Why are they so narrow minded?²

If the supernatural then was not to be scoffed at by the learned, as Lê Quy Đôn warned, it would be thought much less a matter of contempt among ordinary people. After a century of French colonisation, preoccupation with such intangible powers has been arguably undiminished in intensity. Cadière’s discussion on ordinary people’s responses early in this century is informative here.\(^4\) Supplicating, vowing and pleading (cầu, khẩn, vui) with the highest divine beings as the case may be—Heaven, Buddha or Holy Sage (ông Trời/Phật/Thánh), constitute one simple mode in a three-variation range of relations: between people and spirits, spirit(s) and spirit(s), people and people.

This thesis focuses on a group of divinities beside the above, although not exclusive of them. Thus by ‘Vietnamese supernaturalism’, the subject of this dissertation, I refer to a ‘folk religion’ that can be identified by the ritualistic propitiation of spirits and deities of the following typology throughout the country:

1. The tutelary or guardian spirits - either originally worshipped by the villagers or historically instituted by Vietnamese or Chinese rulers: they include the nation-founding Patriarch, past male and female heroes, and able ministers,

2. The Nature Spirits of the grottos, rocks and trees, rivers and ocean,

3. Those Immortals (Tٱen) and Holy Sages (Thánh), in the Daoist pattern,\(^5\)

4. Lady Liễu Hạnh and Affiliates, including the ‘Mandarin’ Snakes, the Five Tigers (Agents), together with the above group 3) forming the chư vật (divine ensemble) propitiated by sorcerers and mediums,

\(^4\) Cadière, L., Croyances et Pratiques Religieuses des Vietnamiens, vol.1, Société des Études Indochinoises, Saigon, 1958, pp. 193-205. Cadière was impressed by a respondent’s statement, that seeking aid from another person and the ensuing act of offering gifts is the same as a ritual offering to spirits. Other modes of interaction with supernatural beings, however, prove not as simple as this one-to-one parallelism of etiquette.

\(^5\) They are associated with two groups: Nội Đạo Tràng (the Inner/southern School) founded in the eighteenth century with a Vietnamese Daoist patriarch, and the older Outer/northern School (Ngôi Đạo Tràng) with Chinese-adopted Daoist Immortals, e.g. Lao Tzu and other Immortals.
5. Deities of Cham and Khmer origin, such as Po Yan Inu Nagar, the whale spirit, and the rocks Neak Ta ( ngx Ta ).

This list is provisional. There are in addition the divinities of millenarian groups and of the Baha‘i, Buddhist, Christian and Islam communities, who may also be appropriated for worship by non-adherents. So, to a lesser extent, are the founding patriarchs of the crafts, the domestic deities, demonic spirits and lonely ghosts. I will only make indirect references to these final four groups. How the divinities emerge and secure their respective status within conceived hierarchies of power and efficacy are difficult to determine. Analysis of their birth and transformation, however, is integral to an understanding of changing socio-economic and political relations.

In brief, I wish to highlight interpersonal relationships or the interactive zone that informs both the personal and the social spheres in the construction of practices and meanings. They involve mainly what goes on betwixt and between individuals, groups and their divinities. That is why the function and patterns of propitiation by an individual in his or her own private space, aimed directly to the spirit/deity concerned, will be excluded from this study. I will, at this juncture, elaborate on some circumstantial reasons for the direction I have taken in pursuing the above line of investigation.

FOREGROUND

Coming from a southern Vietnamese urban background, my early vision of the world was conditioned mainly by parental aspiration towards attaining Western techno-scientific ideals. The orientation to that end involved the exclusion of day-to-day challenges and discourses of conflicting social interests and powers from my learning experience. In compensation, I was left pretty well alone for occasional excursions into the ‘water-locked’ mental landscape, replete with uncanny events, that occupies a more prominent place than I could fathom in the southerners’ imagination. However, the world of gods and spirits remained intriguingly distant. Although my grandfather went to the diuh on festival days, my parents attended their chua regularly, trance mediums
were around in our area every so often, and ordinary people practised self-cultivation widely, I had no opportunity to explore closely any of these realms.

I therefore admit that my research on southern supernaturalism is largely motivated by a desire to look at my own roots. Historically, they are located in a past spanning no more than a century. Apart from the relative ease of obtaining first-hand ethnographic material, the specific choice of two temples near my childhood home (Chapters One and Three) was logical only in terms of this personal quest.

That being acknowledged, the influence of such authors as Said and Foucault on history, anthropology and literary studies also reflects my theoretical considerations.6 Nevertheless, I hold as a challenge the possibility of viewing through the gaps offered by post-colonial, gendered and Third World inter-cultural perspectives. One reason for this hope is that the debate on what constitutes agency is far from conclusive. My faith in the potential for Western philosophy to resolve this issue is shaky. On the other hand, condescending modernist interpretations understate the degree to which rituals can facilitate resistance against suppression of local identity.

The 'big and little tradition' model of cultures is another instance of those interpretations. Fraught with problems of a non-gendered rationalism in historiography, they conveniently justify an imperialist perspective and ignore how deeply court culture was intertwined with local village patterns.

At a more concrete level, there is a view that for Southeast Asia, as far as supernaturalism is concerned, historians' descriptions are pieces of an incomplete mosaic. That is probably why Tambiah, in his anthropological study of Buddhism and spirit cults in Northeast Thailand, elects to use history in a piecemeal manner to contextualize some disparate aspects of present

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'village religion'.7 This approach may be justified for the early part of Vietnam's history, if we can assume that 'village religion' exists in its entirety, and is amenable to being pieced together one day.8

The problems encountered in such reconstruction are instanced by views on the polity during Lý rule (1009-1224). The realm was mainly administered through what Taylor terms the 'Ly dynastic religion'. Popular supernatural practices were marshalled by the Court's ideology into a centralising force to legitimise and maintain dynastic power. The Lý dynasty has been labelled a 'shamanistic rather than law-based' regime, partly because there existed no hydraulic works to necessitate a bureaucratic organisation.9 Wolters discerns an enduring tension between what he calls the two subcultures, one of the Court leadership and the other of the villages. As men of prowess from the villages constantly posed a threat to the ruling class, the stability of government depended upon enticing such capable villagers to join the service of the king. And non-secular means were part of this threat-neutralising strategy.10

But how much more can history say about the socio-religious life of the villagers when they were not outwardly contesting central power? And when we refer to the past, how far back in the stream of time do we need to go to render a present event adequately meaningful? Cultural continuity has been highlighted as a framework for interpreting historical changes surrounding

8 Most details of the period up to the tenth century have to be gleaned from folk tales, Chinese records and complemented by archaeological findings. A laborious reconstruction has enabled historians of Hanoi to maintain that the 'Asiatic mode of production' sustained ancient Vietnamese society, where self-sufficient villages were under a elementary central rule. The apparent features of this rule vary with different viewpoints or focuses. See for example Phan Huy Lạc, Trần Quốc Vương, Hà Văn Tấn & Lục Tòng Ninh, *Lịch Sử Việt Nam* [Vietnamese history], vol.1, Đại Học và Giáo Dục Chuyên Ngành, Hà Nội, 1991, pp. 78-87.
10 Wolters, O.W., *Two Essays on Dai Viet in the Fourteenth Century*, Lac Viet Series No. 9, Yale Centre for International and Areas Studies, 1988, p. xxv.
spirit cults. Accordingly, if I understand Tạ Chí Đại Trường correctly, the
tension between the two aforementioned subcultures seems to be underpinned
by a common factor: a similar attitude towards the supernatural entities. Here
I find the work of Tạ Chí Đại Trường particularly helpful, for some of his
questions evade the trope of nationalism.\textsuperscript{11}

However, to translate this attitude to religious forms peculiar to ancient
Việt groups, and then to maintain that these forms persist over long periods, is
tantamount to taking up some 'essentialist' argument for Vietnamese cultural
identity. Identity issues must relate to cultural traits of many Austronesian
groups dotting the mainland and islands from southern China to the Malay
peninsula. Some of these groups are known to share various myths with the
Vietnamese, many of them would have come into contact with Vietnamese
groups, as well as having been 'sinicized'.\textsuperscript{12} As essentialist views tend to
indulge in over-simplification, they are not capable of the comprehensiveness
they often claim.

BACKDROP

Main traits commonly ascribed to Vietnamese culture have been attributed to
(a) Confucianist orthodoxy in the North to maintain national independence;
and (b) assimilation with the Cham and Austronesian, Khmer, Malay groups.
Academic constructions lean towards one or the other trait, combine or extend
both. To obtain a better explanation, we need to take into account variation
and commonality in the psycho-social aspects not only of myths, ceremonies

\textsuperscript{11} Tạ Chí Đại Trường, \textit{Thần, Người và Đất Việt} (Spirits, People and the Land of Viet),
Văn Nghệ, California, 1989.

\textsuperscript{12} See for examples, Dournes, J., 'La Mer et les Montagnards', and Maurice, A.-M., 'Les
Montagnards du Centre-Vietnam et la Mer', both in \textit{A.S.E.M.I.}, vol. XIV, nos. 3-4, 1983,
pp. 3-7 & 9-21 respectively. Here again, historical insights such as Tạ Chí Đại Trường's
are seminal and an important contribution to the debate on Vietnamese cultural
origin and identity, especially when the materialist visions and metaphors are showing
signs of wear and tear. This is not to say that I adhere to his scientific attitude to
religious practice, let alone some of his semantic extrapolations from scarce literary
evidence.
and festivals, but also of healing, charismatic leadership, and beliefs related to the knowledge/power of invulnerability and to millenarianism.

As backdrop to these interpretations, I will refer to a rich tropical delta, stretching from south of the plains of Đồng Nai and Vâm Cỏ river, through the Mekong branches and artificial canal networks to the tip of Cà Mau peninsula, bound to the northwest by a line joining Phú Quốc island with the small mountains near Tây Ninh. To a centralist historiography, this southern land can be considered a huge margin or periphery, lying much of the time under expanses of alluvium-bearing water. The sources of the big rivers are far off. So were the capital cities in the 1850s. Centuries of adopting Chinese and other cultural traits deposited many patterns in the southward expansion (Nam Tiến), with which Vietnamese migrants modified, adapted to or hybridised local ones along the way.

Before the Vietnamese presence became significant, large contingents of Ming loyalist Chinese went to the Mekong delta following the fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644. They founded well-constructed villages and towns between Biên Hòa and Hà Tiên, mixing with or encroaching on Cambodian habitation from Trà Vinh to Sóc Trăng. Hà Tiên city in particular was a notable centre

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13 In some respects, things are the same today. From my home town Cần Thơ, it takes at least four hours to reach Saigon by bus, and ferry, like it used to, thirty years ago.

14 Mặc Cửu, Canton born, arrived in Cambodia in 1671 at seventeen years of age, was employed by King Prea Batom Rechea to be intermediary for foreign merchants. Eventually, he was granted royal permission to govern Mang Khám region, which covered the area from Kompong Som (Sihanoukville) to the tip of Cà Mau peninsula. See Phù Lang Trương Bá Phát, 'Lịch Sử Cuộc Nam Tiến của Dân Tộc Việt Nam' [history of the Vietnamese southward advance], Tiếp San Sử Địa, no. 19-20, Khái Tí, 1970, pp. 118-119. See also Mông Tuyết, Nàng Ái Cự trong Châu Ương [Young Lady Ái Cự Inside an Upturned Jar], Bồn Phương, 1961, p.195.

In 1679, two military governors from Kwantung and Kwanzi areas with troops and their families numbering over 3,000 people, arrived in Đàng Trống on 50 boats. The two groups were granted permission to settle in Biên Hòa and Mỹ Tho respectively. See Trịnh Hoài Đức, Gia Định Thành Thông Chí [Gazette of Gia Định], vol.2, book 3, transl. Trú Trái Nguyên Tạo, Nhà Văn Hòa, Saigon, 1972, p.8.

15 See also Tấn Việt Diệu, 'Sông Núi MIDDEN Nam' [rivers and mountains of the South], Văn Hóa Nguyễn Сан, no. 33, 1958, p.800. Both Mặc Cửu and his son, Mặc Thiên Từ, had Vietnamese wives. See Sơn Nam, Đại Gia Định Xưa [The Old Region of Gia Định], TP
for the propagation of southern Chinese cultural influence. However, I will not elaborate the details of settlement history per se of the Mekong delta, which is well covered by authors such as Nguyễn Thế Anh, Sơn Nam and Huỳnh Lửa. Keeping in mind the rich inter-ethnic exchanges that characterised the South, I will, rather, consider the 'imagined' landscape, to borrow Benedict Anderson's term, as a conceptual overture to surveying southern supernaturalism.


16 Developed by Mạc Cửu from an already thriving Cambodian port with many groups of foreign traders before 1674, when he was captured by a Siamese army. See Vụng Hồng Sơn, Từ Vựng Tiếng Việt Miền Nam [Dictionary of Southern Vietnamese], Văn Hóa, Hanoi, 1993, pp. 460-461. Tấn Việt Dĩu gives 1713 as the first year of the town's establishment. Đại Nam Nhất Thông Chí does not record what date Mạc Cửu first came to this Cambodian port to develop it and surrounding areas. He offered Hà Tiên province to the Nguyễn in 1714. See Đại Nam Nhất Thông Chí, vol.2 (An Giang, Hà Tiên), transl. Tu Trại Nguyễn Tạo, Nhà Văn Hóa Phù Quóc Vũ Khánh Đặc Trạch Văn Hóa, Sài Gòn, 1973, p. 48.

His son Mạc Thiên Tú, who succeeded him in 1735, established a literary association and extended the Chinese cultural presence in the region. See Nguyễn Q. Thông and Nguyễn Bảo Thế, Từ Điển Nhân Văn Lịch Sử Việt Nam [dictionary of notable people in Vietnamese history], Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1992, pp. 427 & 438. For more details on the literary group (Chữ Anh Cắc) and seven Mạc generations in Hà Tiên, see Đồng Hồ, Văn Học Miền Nam..., pp. 149-156.

By 1853, following Nguyễn Tri Phương’s proposals, Từ Đức decreed to have settlers organised into groups after a military model, establishing đơn đồn - garrison-farm settlements, mainly in Hà Tiên and Châu Đốc, the two frontier areas. Nguyễn Tri Phương stayed down south as royal emissary until 1858, when he had to return to face the French attack at Đề Nẵng, Sơn Nam. Lịch Sử Kháng Hoàng Miền Nam [History of the Opening Up of the Southern Region], reprintt Da Nang, California, ?1989, p.101.


METAPHORIC IMAGINING

I have chosen to view Mekong delta supernaturalism through a metaphorlic landscape in order to highlight the relationship between the imagined and the historical. Vietnamese linguistic tokens for this new world are similar to either Chinese or Cambodian ones, but more surrealist: 19 non sông (hill and river), sông núi (river and mountain) with their Hán equivalent giáng sơn are terms that privilege the country (tọ quốc -- the ancestral sovereignty) as a lived environment. The terms associated with nước (water), refer more or less to the same entity: đất nước (soil and water), non nước (hill and water), làng nước (village and water), nước nhà (water and home). They indicate that this cultural emblem possibly existed before contact and conflict with Chinese imperial interests.

The mountain-river couplet may have come into Vietnamese literature and speech with a realisation, by both rulers and the populace, of the important strategic value of those hills and estuaries. Hills and rivers have been appropriated in discourses of solidarity of the realm, which is said to be founded by Hùng Kings since the third century B.C. This constructed solidarity is still much alive. So is centre/court legitimation, as evidenced in an historian’s articulation recently:

The mountains and rivers of Vietnam were also endowed with magical properties. The mountain spirit, residing in Mount Tàn, near Hanoi, won a contest against the water spirit for the hand of the beautiful princess whom both wanted to marry. Disgruntled, the water spirit attacked Mount Tàn by causing the waters to rise, but Mount Tàn rose even higher. Folklorists like to point out that this is a mythic re-enactment of the monsoon cycle. To the Vietnamese, the legend symbolizes their endurance in the face of harsh elements, and, by extension, their endurance as a people and a nation. The spirit of Mount Tàn keeps a watchful eye over Hanoi where, since the beginning of history, the

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19 By surrealism I mean the tendency to break down the barrier between the imaginary or dream world and the real, although maintaining the distinction between reality and unreality.
Vietnamese capital has been located (except under the Nguyễn dynasty...).  

Tạ Chí Đại Trương argues that the Mount Tấn Spirit was personified by marrying the human princess in a dynamic mythologising of Hùng Vương, who is held to be the founding monarch of the Vietnamese nation. Thus Lý and Trần rulers legitimised their reign using a ninth-century compilation on Mount Tấn legend.  

Local spirits or those of heroes who aided kings in defending Vietnam against Chinese, Nan Ch'ao, Khmer and Cham incursions, or in Vietnamese campaigns south, were mostly associated with strategic rivers and mountains. They were honoured with royal titles and installed in temples, or simply worshipped there on local initiatives. Some of the mountain or river tales from semi-official sources such as Việt Điện U Linh Tạp (Occult Powers of the Viet Palace) were recopied into the nineteenth century Đại Nam Nhất Thông Chí (Unified Record/Geography of Đại Nam), in a continuing reproduction of a geo-mytho-poetical identity of the polity.

In Đại Nam Nhất Thông Chí, there is a further means of investing symbolic significance in some mountains as micro-cosmic models of the realm. The Marble Mountain group of Quảng Nam, seven kilometres southeast of Đà Nẵng, is a case in point. Buddhist temples constructed by Vietnamese since the sixteenth-century, amongst and over the ruins of Cham shrines, added to the general aura of spiritual power of the locality. Popular legends reinforced the belief that the mountains' well-being was entwined with the fortune of the country and its people. The second Nguyễn king, Minh Mạng, made at least two visits there, to the consternation of some of his civilian mandarins, and had a number of temples repaired.

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20 Italics mine. Ho Tai, Hue-Tam, 'Religion in Vietnam, a World of Gods and Spirits', Vietnam Forum, no. 10, Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1987, pp. 113-145. Leaving aside the debatable beginning of history, the construing of a unified 'nation' and 'people' with some degree of homogeneity is tacitly accepted here. It confirms the issues I mentioned above regarding the politics of culture involved in the elite's construction of identity in the history of religion.

21 Tạ Chí Đại Trương, Thần Quốc., p.132.

When it came to southern sentiments, it is no wonder that chanting verses in folk literature would include those like:

*Birds fly in the sky but they have nests,
Fish swimming in midstream have their nooks and crannies,
People in the world have their fatherland and mountain and river,
Your mind and your will must harmonise with the hills and streams.*

Chinese settlers no doubt had made important contributions to the development of such meanings. For instance, they must have brought emblems preserved since the Han-era to their Vietnamese counterparts. Accordingly, some mountains are recognised as cosmic conductors, or nodal points of contact between Sky/Heaven and Earth. The symbolism is conceivably related to other similar Southeast Asian representations, such as the mountain-lingam ensemble of the Khmer and Pagan kingdoms. The natural environment of the hills, on the other hand, has been valued, mystically and practically, as a place to acquire knowledge, a source of wisdom.

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23 My translation of: *Chim bay trong trời chim còn có tổ,*
*Cái lồi giữa dòng còn có cố hơ hàng,*
*Nguời trên đời có tổ quốc giang san,*
*Tinh thần chỉ phải nhịp nhàng với núi sông.*
Quoted by Tạ Việt Điều, 'Đây Nơi Miền Nam...', p.803.

24 The mountain motif was the main design feature of the incense holder, representing the connection between Heaven and Earth. Being the *axis mundis*, the mountain is:acrilised by the ancient incense burner - *bosanhlu* (Vietnamese: *bụa sen lò* - precious mountain censer). See Erickson, S.N., *Bosanhlu* Mountain Censers: Mountain and Immortality in Western Han Period, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1989.
The various bands of the White Lotus secret society, originated in the n.lu-Sung period, had names taken from five motifs, among them, Mountain and Fragrance. This may have resonance in use of the words *sơn* (mountain) and *hướng* (fragrance) in the name of the millenarian sect *Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương*. See Chesneaux, J., Secret Societies in China, Heinemann Education Books, London, 1971, p.31.

25 The idea of a sacred mountain at the centre of the universe being represented by Angkor Thom and the Bayon monument that houses a lingam, was probably borrowed from India but localised in conception. The choice of location for Pagan, on the other hand, appears to have been a function of proximity to the Irrawaddy river and to Mount Popa, an ancient sacred place. See Keyes, C.F., *The Golden Peninsula - Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia*, MacMillan, 1977, pp. 70-71; Coedès, G., Angkor, an introduction, E. F. Gardiner (trans. and ed), Oxford University Press, 1963, pp. 40-46.
and of tremendous mystery. They were the sole repository of special wild herbs and medicinal plants, animal and mineral products whose powerful applications were the fare of magicians, reclusive master healers and meditators.

However, for the southern plain, the mountain holds a slightly different meaning to those kingdom-guardian hills of the North. To start with, the Vietnamese shared these mountains and the surrounding areas after the seventeenth century with a majority of Cambodian, Cham, Chinese, and other ethnic groups. Bordering Cambodia, the Seven Mountains (*Bài Núi, or Thất Sơn*) did not appear to have possessed the strategic importance of the mountains of the North. Armies moved about mostly by boat, or overland along the western bank of the Mekong, by-passing the mountains.26 Perhaps that is why they were not consecrated as border posts with guardian spirits installed, or believed to reside, in them.

The relative importance between mountains and rivers must have changed as Vietnamese left northern regions and central coastal plains to settle in the South. In a poem with many allusions, the early twentieth-century writer Tản Đà Nguyễn Khắc Hiếu, unintentionally evokes the distinctive southern supernatural landscape:

*Water and Mountain made a solemn vow to each other,*  
*But* water went away and does not return to the mountain.  
*Recalling the wish of water and the vow of the mountain,*  
*While water voyages on, the mountain still stands waiting.*27

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26 For example, the Siamese army in the famous battle with the Tây Sơn in 1784, came to Gia Định with 20,000 troops and 300 boats by a sea route via Rach Giá, while another expedition of 30,000 marched over the Cambodian border along the western side of the Hậu Giang (posterior Mekong) river, avoiding all mountains. Ủy Ban Khoa Học Xã Hội Việt Nam, *Lịch Sử Việt Nam* [Vietnamese history], vol.1, Khoa Học Xã Hội, Hanoi, 1976, p. 340.

27 My translation of:  
*Nước non nương một lời thơ,*  
*Nước đi đi mãi không về cùng non,*  
*Nhớ lời nguyên nước thơ non,*  
*Nước đi chưa lại non còn dưng trơ.*
In this allegory, water has forsaken the mountain not only because sông cái (the main stream), i.e. the Mekong, is far away from its source. By the time the river joins the southern ocean, it swells in great volume and richness from a greater number of catchment areas along its course. The two arms of the Mekong river, each on a 250-kilometre seaward leg from Châu Đốc, drop in level by only two metres between the Cambodian border and the coastline. Meandering slowly, in places up to three kilometres wide, it meets the sea through nine estuaries (hence the name Cửu Long - nine dragons), six to the ‘anterior’ Mekong (or Tiền Giang), and three to the ‘posterior’ Mekong (Hậu Giang or Bassac), with countless tributaries and canals, the highways and byways of the boating South.

Trịnh Hoài Đức, a famous southern-born scholar mandarin, recorded a lively riverine scene all over the South (then called Gia Định) in his eighteenth-century work:

Boats are everywhere in Gia Định, either as dwellings or as commuting transport to markets, or for visiting friends and relatives, or hawking firewood. They are very convenient. They crowd the rivers day and night, especially small boats, so much that collisions occur, causing damages leading to litigation ...

Water has become more inter-changeable with the living ‘earth’ element, while the mountain recedes to a mystified distance. Looking landward from the river, the traveller can only distinguish in succession:

Mấm bushes in front, mangrove trees behind, next come the paperbarks. Behind the row of Nipa palms, somebody’s house.

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While evoking the break between being and existence, structure and history, based on the patriotic lament of mất nước (loss of national autonomy), Tăn Đà possibly blames alienation and fragmentation on modernity at the same time. I am grateful to Dr. G. Lockhart for raising this point.

28 In Khmer, the name for Mekong is ‘mother stream’
29 The dragon motif is also close to the Naga serpent of Southeast Asian myths.
31 Trịnh Hoài Đức, Gia Định Thành Thông Chí..., vol. 3, book 4, p. 15.
32 Mầm plant, Avicennia marina, is a variety of mangrove.
The impact of the vast riverine expanses and the number of streams is instanced copiously in popular verses. In the following poem, the lifestyle of boat merchants epitomises the sentiment brought by this new habitat:

My grandparents rowed boats on the Hậu and Tiên Rivers, Selling thatch roofing for the settlers who opened up land to establish homes, Deep in the night, by the long and short strokes of oars, The wind took their sleepiness to the shore, My parents paddled their canoes to [River] Rach Gốc, Ô Rô, Picking up floating firewood in the rainy seasons, They sent the sweet potatoes to the high grounds, And stayed behind with the hot mint, and their own bitterness, Loving my parents and grandparents, I look for their old paths, Across the Rear and Front River, down to Ô Rô, Rach Gốc Following the song of those who blaze the water trail Would that my heart be steadfast and pure... 34

This floating sentiment is recognisable to anyone who has experienced river voyages on the Mekong and its tributaries. For generations of Vietnamese settlers, the super-abundance of water may also have triggered deep memories of a different environment in the obscure past, harking back to older themes of

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33 My translation of two verses in oral folk literature of the South: Mấm tràc, últéc sau, tran theo sát, Sau hằng dâu ngược, mai nhà ai. Nguyễn Công Bình et al., Văn Hóa và Cây Dân Dòng Bằng Sông Cửu Long, p. 34. For some information on paperbarks and Nipa palms, Nypa fruticans, see also Thạch Phương, Lưu Quang Tuyên (eds), Địa Chỉ Long An [monograph of Long An], Khoa Học xã Hội, 1989, pp. 132-135.

re-generation, or fertility, with sexually laden representations. We are dealing here with a resurrected ethos of seduction, in the sense of 'leading astray', as opposed to production, 'to show forth'. It is seduction associated with images of shadows, serpents, forests that enfolded into new local patterns.  

The association of goddesses with the soil and water subverts and radicalises traditions also by cross-cutting male symbolism. This results in the assignment of the goddesses' attributes to male gods and, in turn, suggests that an older Southeast Asian pre-monarchic/matriarchal ethos exists pervasively. It may therefore appear that I presuppose the matter/mother/ground matrix notions to be a set of sui generis conditions for regular revival and resurgence of supernatural beliefs and practice. But I wish to temper that set of notions with two discrete analytical elaborations: 1) an historical background delimiting the project of self-perfection (tu hành or tu thân), especially under the form of 'householder' self-cultivation (tu tài gia, tu nhà), which I explore in Chapter Six, and 2) some definitions of supernatural power (linh) influenced by structuralist thought in anthropology, which are examined below.

THE NATURE OF SUPERNATURAL POWER

Accounts of experience of the presence of spirits, ranging from dead relatives to guardian deities, may not qualify for 'hard history'. Ghostly encounters, oracular possession and dreams I have heard recounted, on the other hand, could probably rival any compilation in occult literature anywhere. The

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35 I borrow the definition of seduction and production from Jean Baudrillard, who uses them in the context of differentiating the political economy from the 'libidinal' one, not entirely unrelated to our case. As he writes: 'The original sense of "production" is not in fact that of material manufacture; rather, it means to render visible, to cause to appear and be made to appear: pro-ducere. ...To produce is to force what belongs to another order (that of secrecy and seduction) to materialise. Seduction is that which is everywhere and always opposed to production; seduction withdraws something from the visible order and so runs counter to production, whose project is to set everything up in clear view, whether it be an object, a number, or a concept'. Baudrillard, J., Forget Foucault, Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, Colombia University, New York, 1987, p. 21.
storytellers include village elders, scientists, academics and Catholic Christians. However, my aim is not to authenticate or disprove them. My basic assumption is that the way a deity or spirit is sensed and appreciated, or judged to be worthy of attention, to be feared or respected, or otherwise cajoled and laughed at, hinges on their *linh*, briefly meaning the power of supernatural beings to affect the world of the living, one of their important characteristics. The spirits' interaction with and effect on the community is attributed to their *linh* power, efficacy or responsiveness.

The structuralist and historicist explanations to Chinese religions by anthropologists which I will consider in my theoretical exploration below, however, are to be regarded as conceptual aids to approach Vietnamese supernaturalism. My interpretation of material gathered therefore needs to be seen less as a demonstration of the theories concerned than as a way of presenting data. Approaches to analysis of Chinese religion are helpful, as there are many common areas shared with Vietnamese beliefs and practices.

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36 Compound words containing the root word *linh* in them indicate a large semantic field. For example:

- *Linh - thiêng* = Sacred
- *Linh - hiền* = Prodigiously manifest
- *Linh - Ứng* = Responsive
- *Linh - nghiệm* = Efficacious
- *Linh - caskets* = Coffin
- *Linh - hồn* = Soul or spirit of a person
- *Vong - linh* = "of the dead before 'going over', (vong: dead).
- *Hương - linh* = "that has gone over, (huơng: fragrant).

Except for one word (thiêng), they are all of Chinese Hán origin. Cadière notes that thiêng, as a Vietnamese equivalent of linh, is a variation of the Hán Việt word tinh, which means choice grain, constitutive principle of being, most subtle essence of a thing, demon, intelligence, perspicacity. Cadière, L., *Croyances...,* vol. 3, p. 203. This is quite understandable given the entry of Daoism that could have preceded the year 732 A.D, when the first Lao-Tzu temple was presumably built in Viet Nam. Từ Chí Đại Trưởng, *Thiên Ngự Chế...* p.95, citing *Vững Điển U Linh Táb*, where a Huyễn Nguyễn Dế Quân (mysterious origin emperor) was installed by a Tang governor with a function similar to the earth god.

37 These findings indicate that the 'big and little tradition' model is no longer deemed adequate as a starting point of analysis. As Weller maintains, in tendencies for both unification and diversity, religion behaves like language and dialects respectively, that is, being shared by both élite and local groups. Furthermore, he shows there can be
While supernatural power is believed to influence individual and communal destiny, linh attributes are allegedly prone to human manipulation. One of the means of manipulation is divination. The application of principles of geomancy (phong thủy - feng shui) for instance, is claimed to alter individual fortunes. Thus beliefs in fate or predestination are predicated on notions of self and others, including the spirits. However, I do not proffer analysis of Vietnamese belief in fate. Rather, my focus is on another means to alter personal destiny: the project of self-cultivation. Its links with supernaturalsim will be discussed in Chapter Six.

If the concept of supernatural power, linh, can be explicated through structural analysis, I would nonetheless argue that this method needs to incorporate analysis of the relationship between psycho-social phenomena, history and structure itself. My efforts here will engage the views of Sangren


and Feuchtwang. There are notable overlaps between the two authors' positions, such as the importance of native/local historical consciousness, but I will try first to summarise their distinct themes.

According to Sangren, the Chinese pantheon is not a static 'model of and for' the real world but a complex language for speaking about and (re)creating social relations. The inter-relationships between ghosts, gods and ancestors on the one hand and social reproduction on the other, depends upon factors such as cosmological notions, the legitimacy of social institutions and authority.

Sangren proposes that the main schematisation in 'Chinese thought' is a binary opposition between order and disorder. Sangren further argues that this 'basic Chinese order/disorder' duality is hierarchical: order is preferred over disorder, yang over yin. Yang and order are associated with the male gender, prefiguring a hegemony within Vietnamese and Chinese cultures worth pondering.

Order is constructed, not in any nested hierarchy, by:

a) the Empire's domain under heaven and the barbarians outside,

b) the local community (with patrilineal kin ties and filial piety) as contrasted to outsiders, or

c) life against death and decay.

The way each of these constructions changes, for example, from ancestors, as a category representing order in the second domain (b), to that of disorder in (c), Sangren argues, is that spirits mediate yin (disorder) and yang (order) in a variety of contexts, and it is in this mediation that their power lies. Thus, the power and subversiveness of Kwan Yin bodhisattva


40 While Sangren's totalising term 'Chinese thought' is problematic, his framework nevertheless is useful provided we can be mindful of centralist and ahistorical assumptions.

41 Sangren does not make clear why order belongs to Yang, which is also associated with 天, brightness, heaven etc. Sangren, S., History and Magical Power..., p.143.
(Vietnamese Quan Thế Âm - hearer of the world’s cries), for instance, is understandable. This deity is represented, first, as a enlightened being who assumes form of a gentle maiden to help the living, and second, in the garb of a monstrous male general, as a fierce controller of homeless demons. Bivalence thus attests to Kwan Yin’s great power to ‘rescue those in peril and suffering’ (cứu khó nan).

Vietnamese equivalents include the naturalised Kwan Yin, whose statues have dotted the landscape since the 1960s; Princess Liễu Hạnh the Holy Mother, Bà Chút Xứ (Lady Queen of the Region) and Bà Đen (Black Lady) who are both worshipped near the Cambodian border. Animal motifs surrounding the goddess Liễu Hạnh include, besides the snake, an amphibian animal, the owl which takes night for day, the bat being half bird and half rat, the rooster who crows at the crack between night and day. They are referred to as linh animals, displaying also this mediating bivalence. Incidentally, the river dividing the country in halves by the Trịnh and Nguyễn lords in the seventeenth century was called Linh river, probably according to the same reasoning.

The goddesses are popular for being close to the ordinary individuals and interceding for them to the highest level in Heaven. They can by-pass the pantheon’s hierarchy. Bivalence, displayed by entities possessing linh, is also metonymic to the ‘inchoate order’ pertained to cosmic creation. This attribute is associated with the female God, and has been known to be deployed by local resistance against orthodox imposition and hegemony. The cults of the female cosmic creator and/or goddesses are therefore marked for suppression by the dominant group for their suspected facilitation of sedition.

More specifically, the linh power of an entity resides in mediation, which involves the shifting of status and function between one level and another.\(^{42}\)

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\(^{42}\) Linh power thus relates to social order the way Lévi-Strauss thinks food is classified according to the diachronic/synchronic opposition in linguistics. Supernatural power implies its nether-worldly position mediates the two arch-categories of order and disorder which, according to Sangren, govern social transformation. The relations of opposition and mediation can be depicted with a diagram homologous to Lévi-Strauss’ ‘culinary triangle’:
This also means the entity is eternally in transit, and thereby capable of occupying both spaces in the divided realms, of making meaning in more than one context. To see how a supernatural entity acquires linh, we must juxtapose it against other entities, in what Sangren calls "a framework of implicit contrast." This suggests an anarchic multiplicity of meanings for any symbolic universe.

One example can be drawn from an appendix of Viêt Điển U Linh Trepid to illustrate this point. This particular folk legend links the famous General Trần Hưng Dạo (Trần the Uplifter of the Way), who led the successful thirteenth-century battles against the Yuan (Mongol) incursions, with Nguyễn Bá Linh (Nguyễn the Noble Linh), otherwise known as Phạm Nhan, a traitor of mixed Chinese-Vietnamese parentage.

One day, Phạm Nhan, a doctoral laureate recruit at the Yuan Court, was caught sneaking into the forbidden palace, probably seeking women. To redeem himself, he volunteered to guide the Yuan army in their Vietnam campaign, but was captured by the Vietnamese. General Trần had him beheaded at his Vietnamese mother's village, An Bái, and his head cast into the

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\[ 
\begin{align*}
\text{(nature)} & \quad \text{(raw)} \\
\text{(culture)} & \quad \text{(cooked)} \quad \text{(rotted)} \\
\text{SPIRITS} & \quad \text{Linh Power} \\
\text{HUMAN} & \quad \text{Order} \quad \text{Disorder}
\end{align*}
\]

It is tempting to think of an analogy of the culinary triangle for the sociology of religion with its base formed by the opposition between Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss - who respectively see mentalité (belief system) as reflecting social structure, and conversely being reflected in it, while its apex is occupied by Bourdieu's or Weber's ideas, foregrounding domination in the mediation of those two aspects.

43 Approaches to the concept of linh therefore would demand as much caution as to the notion of magical power discussed in Rodney Needham's critique of essentialist views of headhunting, or the concept of mana as reconsidered by Roger Keesing. See Needham, R., 'Skulls and Causality', Man (N.S.), no.2, 1976, pp. 71-88; and Keesing, R., 'Rethinking Mana', Journal of Anthropological Research, vol. 40, no. 1, University of New Mexico, 1984, pp. 137-156.

44 Sangren, History and Magical Power..., pp. 141-162.
river. Before his execution, Phạm asked the general: 'Will you hold sacrifice for my soul?'. General Trần retorted: 'I will have you fed with menstrual blood.'

Not long after, two fishermen repeatedly caught his skull in their nets, instead of fish. So they prayed to Phạm’s spirit to help them with good catches, in return for enshrining him. He not only fulfilled their hope for good fishing but also made them successful in seducing village women. At least until the 1950s, women suffering post-partum illnesses were believed to have been harassed by Phạm Nhan’s spirit. The twofold cure involved the medium at one of General Trần’s temples communicating with his spirit, and the patient lying on, or being covered by one of the old mats used for prostration in the temple. The homologous contrasts can be listed in a nested hierarchy of polarities exemplified by the contrast of health and illness. Listed in various themes, they can be as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TRÂN HƯNG ĐẠO</th>
<th>PHẠM NHAN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CLASS:</td>
<td>Military aristocrat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEED:</td>
<td>Hero, realm defender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETHNICITY:</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETHOS:</td>
<td>Independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REALM BOUNDARY:</td>
<td>National Spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COVERT TENSION:</td>
<td>State Interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FERTILITY AMBIGUITY:</td>
<td>Pure breed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEREDITY:</td>
<td>Patrilineal succession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Literary bureaucrat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Treacherous coward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mixed Chinese-Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foreign invasion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local Spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hybrid vigour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mixed descent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The traits associated with Phạm Nhan are not only marginal but bivalent, hence dangerous and inimical: he had a double (ethnic) identity, a marginal status; his head was thrown into the river, probably a natural village boundary, and his flirtatiousness continued posthumously to create conjugal disorder. With all those requisite attributes for being linh, his power was to be

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46 According to the symbolism described in the Book of Change (I Ching), water is also represents danger or the abysmal.
subjugated by that of the General’s. We can explain the mediating power of General Trần's spirit to heal post-partum ailments in terms of "implicit contexts" as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YIN (-)</th>
<th>YANG (+)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PHẨM NHAN</td>
<td>PATRILINEAL ANCESTRAL WORSHIP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Nether world]</td>
<td>[Living world]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous, liminal</td>
<td>DESCENT PROBLEMS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(+)</td>
<td>(-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(+)</td>
<td>YANG</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As indicated by this diagram, the plus sign (+) represents linh power of any element within this matrix capable of mediating the opposite categories of yin (e.g. women’s illnesses, danger) and yang (General Trần, purity). The latter’s linh prevails over the problems to patrilineal kinship order caused by Phạm Nhan. On the other hand, Phạm Nhan and the male lineage, the two elements that pertain to a double yin and double yang realms, have no mediating linh power.47

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47 As seen from the above example, linh is a 'cultural logic of symbolic relations' which combines with a 'material logic of social relations'. This combination governs reproduction and change, the dialectics of structure and history. However, reproduction and change, as Sangren observes, are conveyed through the cybernetics of the total socio-cultural system, while the way in which effects feedback into this system, to become 'causes', is never as straightforward as that of biological cybernetics. The reason for this is: "Ling, which is conceived as power possessed by some supernatural agent, is at once the fetishized product of the production of social relations and the cultural logic that gives social relations meaning and values." Sangren, History and Magical Power... p.131
CONSTRUCTING HISTORY

As Tạ Chí Đại Trương notes, long before the rise of general Trần Hưng Đạo, or the Trần dynasty, Phạm Nhan may indeed have been a personified local river spirit propitiated by villagers. There is an intriguing ambiguity in the legend with which Tạ Chí Đại Trương underpins his hypothesis. For villagers, their main economic activity - fishing - and their difference from the ruling elite were reinforced by Phạm Nhan's 'misdemeanour'. The Trần having established hegemony, Phạm Nhan's spirit thus survived through a historical transformation into a contested identity. However, other motives of this contestation can be made more explicit to reveal levels of ambivalence attached. The evidence include a) spirits venerated by fishing groups of Đông Triệu province were called nhan, b) Trần Hưng Đạo's father, Trần Lệ, was granted land in Đông Triệu, an area where a village called An Bái exists; and c) the Trần clan also had a fishing background with the dynasty founder, Trần Thủ Đạo, known to be a fisherman, who could have propitiated the same nhan spirit. Thus General Trần's spirit can be seen as Phạm Nhan's transformed by royal appropriation.

Examining the Hưng Đạo/Phạm Nhan legend therefore reveals the ways in which different kinds of history are made. Here, Feuchtwang's propositions on histories are useful for elaborating this point. He maintains that, according to Durkheim's and Mauss' theories, 'in ritual and religion, people set up spatial and temporal boundaries'. This idea leads Feuchtwang to ask what it is that goes on at these boundaries. He labels the capacities to represent and identify, metaphoricity, a process setting apart and linking together differences. Sacred and secular powers intermingle when the boundary of a region is defined through supernatural mediation. History becomes a cultural construct. I return to the above example to illustrate this point.

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48 Tạ Chí Đại Trương, Thời Ngự... pp. 138-140.
The power of General Trầnpirit protects the places marked out by the procession of icons in the annual festival. According to the historical mythology surrounding the general, the procession is also the marking of a region against the threat of invasion. This military metaphor is widely adopted in regional and local cults. Through ritual re-enactments, the festivals celebrate the linh of protection against the linh of danger from invasion, both of which transgress the division between the past and the present.

The boundary is also, as Feuchtwang observes, crossed by sacrifice and inspiration. It includes the violence of animal sacrifice and of percussive noises that accompany the graceful ceremonial temple dances (to which I will return later). These propositions are useful in our understanding of temple festival features (see Chapter One). Feuchtwang's exposition helps to explain the role of incense burners, ancestral tablets and ash as boundary markers, in a complex interaction between the processes of identification, history, and belief formation. Texts such as the remembered content of dreams can be taken as

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50 To this extent at least, there is a close similarity between Hùng Đạo and Kwan Kung, the Chinese god of war. The huge temple of Trần Hùng Đạo erected in Saigon following the arrival of northern émigrés in 1954 proves to be an apt counterpart to the Kwan Kung temples of Chinese émigrés that have graced the city landscape of Đặng Trọng (southern Vietnam) since the seventeenth century.

51 In decreasing order of dependence on written texts, Feuchtwang distinguishes three types of history recognisable in Chinese popular religion:

a/ The classical mode: considering the multi-layered identity of the individual, each qualification for being Chinese is expressed by ritual occasions and refers directly to a well-defined tradition of text building. The occasions themselves refer to narratives which rely on writing and printing.

b/ Descent line (diachronic) and generation (synchronic): with birth, death anniversaries of ancestors, with family gatherings. This mode relies less on writing, more on rituals and objects marking the occasions. In southern Vietnam, one way to recognise lost relatives, for want of written records, is through the special food dishes they prepare for the death anniversaries of ancestors.

c/ Local festivals, fairs, theatre, displays and stories: to commemorate peculiar events, catastrophes and exceptional ritual remedies. These rely even less on the written forms. The ritual periodic repetition itself is the inscription of an origin and its renewal. This category unites diverse features such as Hát Bội, or classical theatre, at village festivals in southern Vietnam, and the performative rituals surrounding the telling of Buddhist Jataka tales in Thai villages. The absence of texts concerned with such religious phenomena makes the exercise of reflexivity imperative, if we are to
a product of popular historical consciousness, polysemic material analogous to James Scott's 'hidden transcript' with many versions. In this field, also including trance speech or spirit writing, the individual is the centre of actualising possibilities, represented by the acts and events indicative of direct intervention by the spirits.

The images and motivations of individuals, the purposes informing social relations, and the relations between representations all belong to different orders. They are interrelated without being reducible to any single one of them or to any order. This runs counter to the view that the supernatural world mirrors the secular one. It means that images and things pertaining to one order are not appropriated to simply mimic relationships in another order. Rationalist critics would never understand why one single Daoist deity should receive innumerable paper hats and pairs of boots; or why the Underworld King would accept having notes, printed with his portrait and labelled 'The Bank of Hell', sent to holy spirits and deceased souls; or why the goddess' statue is not the deity, but is, when ritually bathed, imbued with all her powers.

The view of linh as liminality implies creative potentiality, a possibility of constructing diverse kinds of social time and, perhaps, various other kinds of history. At the very least, in refusing the limitations imposed by polarities such as sacred and profane, purity and danger, Sangren and Feuchtwang can be said to have broken some new conceptual ground. They have at least stated that wherever linh power is referred to, religion, as practised at the cao linh or other temples, operates in terms of the demarcation of boundary around a consecrated space. This territorial cult model entails inclusion of identified members belonging to the bounded region, usually by virtue of excluding outsiders in the act of expulsion, or of internal assimilation through the eating

comprehend practices which have hitherto not been considered worthy of recording as historical and cultural material. See Feuchtwang, The Imperial Metaphor..., pp. 3-24.

of the sacrifice. An understanding of the nature of linh power is therefore essential in examining popular religion.

AGENCY

As mentioned earlier, my focus on linh hinges on the interplay between it and the notions of self-cultivation. Sociologically, linh is other-directed but can inhere in the individual’s consciousness as in the case of trance possession. On the other hand, self-cultivation is an individually based project. However, rather than defining the limits of the subject or agent, I see linh and self-cultivation being able to dislodge a whole series of Western assumptions about the self and agency.

If supernatural entities are appropriated in the construction of social hierarchies, the individual can also appropriate the potential of self-cultivation for change. To illustrate with an example in Vietnamese language:

(i) The word tu ("to correct","to improve") as in tu thân ("self-cultivation", including meditation) or tu sửa ("to correct","to repair"),

(ii) the word chữa ("to repair") as in sửa chữa ("correction and repair") or chữa trị ("to cure an illness"),

(iii) the word cứu ("to help","to rescue") as in cứu chữa ("to cure","to heal"), cứu rỗi ("salvation") and cứu mtọc ("to rescue the nation").

These terms reflect a conceptual gestalt that knits together the individual and the social in a Vietnamese universe of action. Thus the idioms 'tu tâm dưỡng tánh' (cultivate your heart-mind and nurture your essence), 'chữa bệnh trừ tà' (cure illnesses and banish harmful spirits), 'cứu nhân đổ thế' (help the people and save the world) often concatenate in popular discourse.53

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53 The implied ideals resonate to a Chinese belief expressed by Sun Sze-Mo, a physician of the 8th century A.D.: ‘The lower doctor heals the illness; the median doctor heals the whole person; the higher doctor heals human society’. Holbrook, B., The Stone Monkey, William Morrow and Co. Inc., NY, 1981, p.336. Another popular saying in Chinese is "Be a good healer if you can't be a good general."
To understand how composite beliefs and forms are arrived at may require some further conceptualising than merely accepting usual platitudes about syncretism and eclecticism. I will evoke Deleuze’s re-definition of the Baroque in Chapter Six, as a possible approach to understanding this phenomenon, visualising proximity and differences between popular religious groups in the South. One of the reasons is the development, for instance, of Leinitz’s ideas of folding enfolding and refolding matter, space and time, in Deleuze’s re-examination of the Baroque which offers a fresh look at the accumulative process of popular forms and practices.

OUTLINE OF THESIS

In brief, the above-mentioned four realms of Vietnamese supernaturalism are examined respectively in this study, with common themes weaving together these distinct realms. They are themes concerning aspects of social power contestation or negotiation, and of creative appropriation of belief and practice patterns in daily survival. Thus:

Chapter One begins with a revival scene in a village communal house in my home town. This kind of temple is called **dinh**, a public domain of male-dominated patterns of status-power. This particular festival shows a

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54 The southern popular culture has been noted as possessing Baroque characteristics by scholars such as Huỳnh Ngọc Tràng. I prefer to envisage this Baroqueness along Deleuze’s re-examination of Leibniz’ thinking. See Huỳnh Ngọc Tràng, ‘Tổng Quan về Văn Hóa Nam Bộ’ [Overview of Southern Culture], *Khoa Học Xã Hội. Viện Khoa Học Xã Hội tại TP Hồ Chí Minh* [Journal of the Institute of Social Sciences in HCMinh City], no. 11, 1992, pp. 59-70; Deleuze, G., *The Fold - Leibniz and the Baroque*, transl. Tom Conley, University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

55 As Tom Conley puts it; “The experience of the Baroque entails that of the fold. Leibniz is the first great philosopher and mathematician of the pleat, of curves and twisting surfaces... Included in the category of things folded are draperies, tresses, tessellated fabrics, ornate costumes...” And furthermore, “when the self moves into space, it transforms one of the corners of the square or rectangle of its periphery into the site of a new centre, around which new extremities are established... Everywhere the subject swirls in the midst of forces they exert stress that defines the individual body, its elasticity, and its bending motions in volumes that produce movement in and of extension.” See translator’s foreword, Deleuze, *The Fold...*, pp. xi & xvii.
multilateral relationship between various local groups, displays signs of innovative measures in responding to historical vicissitudes. Essential to the dynamics of this sociality are the beliefs in the tutelary spirit's powers and responsiveness (*linh thiêng*) expressed through the means and process of authentication.

Chapter Two continues the exploration of this realm by going back to the origin of the *dinh*. Two current hypotheses postulate the birth of the *dinh* to be in the fourteenth century and the fifteenth century respectively. Both theories assume the court/monarchic power to hold the central role in its birth delivery. However, this centre-margin paradigm is inadequate especially when it concerns the establishment of many other *dinh* in the Mekong delta. The processes of consecration, variation in ritual forms and practices suggest an interplay at all levels, where village as well as regional or central powers were appropriated or contested. The founding of the *dinh* was itself part of this ongoing drama.

Chapter Three looks at the practices of the commonly-held counterpart of the *dinh*, the *chùa*, or Buddhist pagoda. One of the twin temples in Cần Thơ under study presents a restricted form of public worship, catering for extended families and their friends of similar socio-economic background. With Immortals in their pantheon, the temple’s practice had strong origin in a three-religion pattern modelled after the Chinese *Minh Trị* school. Beside a Buddhist routine, spirit-writing was practiced. Protective talismans and traditional medicine were also dispensed. Trance writing also served as a means to express different local views or attitudes on matters of philosophical and political import.

Chapter Four explores a variety of trance practice hardly studied in depth: spirit possession with its feminine attributes, involves extensive recourse to altered states of consciousness. Mediumship is first examined in the northern context, with a focus on older fertility and goddess worship. The 1930s saw the women’s realm of empowerment and attendant issues of marginality and oppression brought into sharp relief with modernisation and colonisation.
Chapter Five examines the transformation of trance mediumship in contemporary southern practices. Historical changes since the southward advance (Nam Tien) had formal implications for older nature/female deities/fertility cults. Cham patterns offered Vietnamese mediums the opportunity to vary their skills, while influence from the Khmer and other local ethnic groups were highlighted by transformations in the cult of the Earth god.

Chapter Six deals with a practice that underpins agency in popular patterns of supernaturalism. Self-cultivation, or tu, is located in private homes or, with the Daoists in the next chapters, is as mobile and elusive as it is oriented to the mountain mystique. This individual project is an empowering matrix of potentials, with which the individual tackles personal crises by constructing new meanings. Especially since the 1920's, its popularity was buoyant, while its supernatural aspect seems to be shared by people from different social backgrounds. Its continued popularity calls for a review of our understanding of cultural transformation motivated by modernisation and westernisation.

Chapter Seven brings us to a group of southern exemplars in a particular type of self-cultivation. The mystique of the sacred mountains is one of the ingredients for authenticity. This group of ông Dao (Daoists) is first sketched from oral sources, ranging from the 'Daoist-Buddhist' millenarians of the nineteenth century to today's healer-mystics.

Chapter Eight looks at common aspects of the Daoists' multiplicity of lifestyles and aspirations. It shows how through the above diversity, the Daoists contributed to an image of southern innovative explorations at grassroots level. They achieved this by gathering diverse backgrounds and idiosyncratic means into a specialist occupation oriented in healing, salvation and teaching. More than just engaging national history, their action dealt with personal-existential issues and cosmological outlook as well.

The above elaborations need to be tempered by awareness of the ongoing dialectics of history and structure. The following example in semi-official history will illustrate the underpinning dilemma. In the tale of the Tree Demon
(Mộc Tinh) in Lệnh Nam Chích Quỹ (Wondrous Tales of Lệnh Nam), King Kinh Dưỡng of ancient time used spiritual powers to control the demons, but:

...demons disappeared in one place to reappeared at another. They were unpredictable, often captured and ate people alive. They had to be propitiated at temples, and each year on the thirtieth day of the twelfth month, a living person had to be sacrificed. ...During the era of King Đình Tiên Hoàng [968-979], there was a Chinese magician (Pháp sư) called Dũ Văn Mậu, adept in self-cultivation, who had obtained the technique called 'golden teeth and brass fangs', and was over forty years of age when he came to our country. King Tiên Hoàng welcome him according to usual protocol. Dũ Văn Mậu showed the techniques to trick the Xướng Cuồng [tree demon] Spirit then kill it. Those techniques included...[the act of] pretending to fall off a horse, to be a singer-actor, erecting every year, on the eleventh month, a flying tower (Phí luận) of twelve trượng high,\(^{56}\) with a pole in the centre... over the pole draped a rope which was divided into three strands, its ends pegged firmly in the ground. ...Two persons holding pennants were to walk on the rope. ...Or [the act of] jumping and hopping a few times, moving forward and back, balancing [on a plank placed over a high pole]. ...Or somersaulting into a fish-trap-like basket, landing upright. ...Or picking up an object on the ground while riding a horse. ...Or gathering a group of children together to sing and dance noisily, beating drums and gongs, and offering animal sacrifices to the Tinh Spirit, who would come to watch the games and eat the offerings. The magician was then to say his secret mantra and draw his sword to kill the spirit. Xướng Cuồng Sĩ and all his underlings were killed that way. Since then, the custom of annual offering of human sacrifice was eliminated.\(^{57}\)

Details like these, concerning Vietnam's ancient religious life, and similar disparate ones in official sources such as the fifteenth-century Đại Việt Sử Ký Tộển Thát and older semi-official texts, resonate in many ingredients of supernaturalism today. The ambivalent image of the magician or shaman, which evokes trickery and deception as well as beneficial ability, for instance, is obviously not new. From the performing arts involving dancing, singing and music, to those requiring acrobatic skills, the patterns resemble practices of mediums and Daoists up to the contemporary period.

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\(^{56}\) About forty-eight metres, if one trượng = ten thôéc (40cm).

\(^{57}\) Trần Thế Pháp, Lệnh Nam Chích Quỹ (Wondrous Tales of Lệnh Nam), Lê Hữu Mục transl., Khai Tri, Sài Gòn 1960, pp. 48-49.
The manner in which monarchic power took recourse to foreign expertise in subduing local nature spirits also has a familiar ring to it. However, it would be facile to claim continuity of these patterns, for each of their recognisable features is located uniquely in its time and space. On the other hand, the amount of evidence and problems of interpretation will allow for multiple explanations, views and paradigms.

In brief, I look at popular religious beliefs and practices through four windows: the village temple *dinh*; a Buddhist-Daoist temple; mediumship practice; and self-cultivation. Although different from each other by dint of adaptation to new settlement environments, they share the engagement with subconscious or spiritual life. Distinct traits of southern clusters of supernatural beliefs form and reform in the context of new settlement, as well as stemming from the believers’ notions of supernatural power. This power cannot be understood separately from changing social relations. The dynamics of change are fuelled by a play of memory.

Perhaps my approach can be elaborated in a slightly different way, again with the metaphorical imagery in mind. If ‘mountain’ is to be read as ‘religion’, with its textual unification and centralising orthodoxy, then supernaturalism in the Mekong delta is likened to both its reflection and shadow, mixed in the dancing gleams on the water surface. The reflected mountain mirrors centralism in those male-dominated forms such as the village communal house (*dinh*). The mountain’s shadow is analogous to the mediums’ and hybridised Buddhist-Daoist practices, with their excursions into alternate states of consciousness.

The action and discourse of those individualistic Seven Mountain Daoists partake of both the shadow and the reflection. So also do the two strands of millenarianism which crystallised into the Bầu Sơn Ký Hướng and the Cao Đài clusters: the former being minimalist, rationalistic, fundamentalist, while the latter pantheistic in its Catholic-like appearance and aggregationist tendency.50

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50 The main reason why I do not go into their historical formation is the considerable literature on these two groups already in existence. Two outstanding studies are Húe Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*, Harvard University
Like other forms of culture, they combine, enfold, totalise and evolve in a way that challenges analytical descriptions by the most astute of observers.

In the setting sun, the mountain casts a long shadow over the river's undulations. Whether these glistening shard-like fragments in the river twist and merge before joining the darkening folds of the evening, or acquire new shapes with the cycles of radiance and sombreness from the sky, the river's immense breadth will surely enthrall, providing the onlooker can hold a steadfast and responsive gaze.

CHAPTER ONE

REVIVAL AND SURVIVAL: ĐỊNH FESTIVALS IN CẦN THƠ

The shrines for Tutelary Spirits of Vietnamese villages are called \textit{đinh}, literally 'a courtyard, a hall or large meeting house'.\footnote{Huỳnh Tĩnh Paulus Cứa, \textit{Dictionnaire Annanite- Đại Nam Quốc Âm Tự Vĩ}, Imprimerie Rey, Curiol & Cie., Saigon 1895, p.301. Đào Duy Anh's \textit{Hán Việt Từ Điển} gives a separate gloss for the Han word \textit{đình} as 'courtyard- place for a tribunal', indicating one of its secular functions.} The word \textit{đình} has been translated as 'communal house' or 'village temple'. In the later sense, \textit{đình} can be seen as a traditional centre of the village territorial cult, where spatial as well as temporal demarcations are laid out by means of beliefs and practice concerning the tutelary spirits. I can recall in my adolescence no one in my family, apart from my grandfather, had anything to do with \textit{đình} affairs. My upbringing was such that most of the 'old ways' were kept away from my childish attention. My own knowledge about the \textit{đình} is therefore recent: much of it was gained during my field research into the southern \textit{đình} in the Mekong delta. Here, I describe the \textit{đình} territorial cult through three main parameters: a) its architectural and decorative forms, b) rituals I observed at its festivals, and c) authentication by tales of miraculous power of the tutelary spirits. Related issues concerning the cult's sinicised nature, the effects of historical change on local status hierarchy and ritual items will be simultaneously addressed.

When I was young, the two communal houses (\textit{đình}) nearest the centre of Cần Thơ City were the downtown \textit{đình} itself, called Tân An, and the one called Thới Bình, about 200 metres distant from my home. Their locations are typical of most \textit{đình} in the Mekong delta: close to a market place. These, in turn, were usually set up near a river junction, where boats could take advantage of the intersecting tidal currents to dock or move off easily.\footnote{There are two tides per day from the ocean going upstream of the Mekong beyond the Cambodian border. Those riverine stopping points are located at a spot along a stream where two opposing currents cancel out the flow. They are called \textit{chê giàp nước} - the place of tidal interface. Thus these spots are found all over the Vietnamese part of the delta. Boats that stopped at such a place to rest could move away twice a day in either direction with the tidal current. Markets grew from these resting points as people gathered, inns and shops cropped up.} When Cần Thơ province
was established in 1867, Thống Binh village had already developed on the western side of the town, with houses and shops near the market by the Cái Khê river.³ Cần Thơ city itself lies on the southwestern bank of the Hậu Giang ("Rear River"), the lower arm of the Mekong,⁴ Hậu Giang’s two tributaries, Cái Khê and Cần Thơ rivers, delimit the city. A chain of ever-growing mud islands disguises the immense width of its stream.

Thirty years ago mangrove around these islands was mostly intact. Water birds, such as white egrets, nested there by the thousands. Prawns and fish abounded. Nowadays it is recognised that there soon won’t be anything in the river to catch. As the cultivated area grew, wild life disappeared with the shrinking mangrove band. With mangrove disappearing due to land clearing, the island near Cái Khê gained in size from fast alluvial deposits. The watercourse has been reduced almost by half. In place of dense mangrove foliage with egrets' nests ringing a few rice paddocks, rows of fruit trees, areca nut palms, banana plots and houses now dominate the island’s vista.

Island prosperity, symbolised by the new brick homes of larger holdings, has been achieved at the expense of the former tidal environment.⁵ The rest of this riverine land is not much different. Recent rapid expansion of farming means three crops of Miracle Rice per year,⁶ new varieties of fruits, vegetables and other cash crops being tried out, on land as well as water. Fish farming, in small and large ponds, also gained in importance besides pig and poultry raising.

Throughout the country, with the change of the politico-economic system, many đình buildings were converted to barns or storage sheds. Particularly in southern Vietnam since 1975, religious buildings in general could not be

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³ See Sdn Nam, Lịch Sử Khẩn Hoàng Miền Nam, pp. 269-272.
⁴ The French called Hậu Giang 'Rivière Bassac'.
⁵ These neat tile-roofed buildings are highly visible by the waterways that crisscross the island, and where mangrove has been cleared.
⁶ Popular Vietnamese name for this rice is Thần Nông - the agricultural god.
properly maintained for many reasons. But from about 1988, with the upswing in economic fortune and a shift in official attitudes to cultural tradition, the dinh’s and other popular religious festivals have made a comeback. As in the past, Thôi Binh dinh’s organisers hold two annual events celebrating the beginning and end of the traditional rice growing season, rather than six times a year in conformity to the new cropping practice. However, in numerous other ways, there is a wide gap between claims to reproduce old values and patterns and the actual practice. Before discussing this phenomenon, I will first describe the festival scene I witnessed in December 1992, at the preparatory ceremony of the dinh in Cái Khê precinct.

THE EVE OF THE MAIN FESTIVAL - GLIMPSES AND IMPRESSIONS

It started at two o’clock in the afternoon, just as the program on the invitation note says. Between the pitches of the 1-3-4 drum beat, people drifted in through the masonry and tile gate, under a pair of ceramic dragons staring at their moon. Mingling with the crowd, as curious as any child there, I ambled past the cooking area with women busy chopping, youths stoking fires, vats boiling and water splashing, on my way to the Inner Hall. And, surrounding the central altar, a hushed crowd watched the Unicorn and Earth God masks, which, laid on the floor, were receiving drops of blessed alcohol. The announcer cried the prompts, two elderly officiants lit incense sticks, then did their prostrations. Woodwind music, drums, bells and firecrackers went off. Youthful dancers picked up the masks, the unicorn came to life.

The Earth god and the Unicorn team led people out, prancing ahead of the procession. In front were the notables who carried relics and two boxes containing royal edicts of two Guardian Spirits, who are now sharing the same curving roof. The procession made four right turns, covering the front street, main street, back street, then the side alley. Gentlemen and ladies of high station in áo dài tunics, the elders and then younger officials, then Buddhist

7 Command-economy measures in collectivisation was the main one. Restrictions or bans on temple maintenance, justified as public thrift, are usually suspected as a disguised part of the socialist government’s anti-religious campaign.
ladies in silky grey pyjamas, several in dark brown cotton pyjamas, the men with chignonned hair and wispy beards, unmistakably of the Tù Ân sect, and other townsfolk in neat or new clothes: they were all followed and preceded by a band of children, many of whom crowded near the temple door.\(^8\)

We spilled into the Middle Hall, firecrackers went off again like machine guns. The old ladies stepped cringing through the portal, in a haze blue and sulfurous. The cameras clicked. The solemn faces held in the glimmer of a certain pride. I could guess what they thought: The Head of the People’s Committee of the town had permitted a procession with much less fanfare and elaboration than the one last year really, but it did not seem to matter now. The omnipresent Party Provincial Religious Committee, who looked over and under the temple’s management activities, and who proceeded to ‘help’ with their cryptic instructions, had steered the application for a festival round and round a bureaucratic maze. It was a battle of wits and a test of patience to gain permission—and the smiling crowd that afternoon, especially, old Mr. Ban who spearheaded its representation and staged ‘the show’—claimed some victory.\(^9\)

And by coincidence I came to meet Mr. Ban through his Assistant Manager—my cousin’s boss. One afternoon, the Manager cycled, leading me to Mr. Ban’s single-fronted brick home in a busy lane. I was introduced to the wily octogenarian, who during the first pleasantry asked if I knew his son So-and-So who lives in Springvale (Victoria). ‘What? So-and-So who’s in Fitzroy now? Of course yes!’ Well, small world indeed. His tales flowed on from there. ‘The power of the Guardian Spirit is inexorable’ Mr. Ban asserted. ‘My daughter doesn’t respect it. That is why she couldn’t get out of the country no matter how much she wanted to’. He continued with several more recent accounts, of pain and misery suffered by those who, abusing their position and power, had done mean things to the less fortunate.

\(^8\) Tù Ân short for Tù Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, or four indebtednesses towards parental and meaningful relationships, one of the two main offshoots of the millennial Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương (strange fragrance of the precious mountain) group. Tù Ân followers are generally vegetarian.

\(^9\) All names and characters appeared in this study have been changed to protect the privacy of those who have given me generous help in my research.
Now, at the temple's Mid-Hall, Mr. Ban emerged to usher me in, and introduce me to other notables: the Senior officiants, the Master of the Rites, turbaned and shiny in traditional blue and brown long dresses. They were briefing the ceremonial students, whose new gowns had been donated by wealthier expatriates. I was then handed over to the Temple Secretary, a man of my age but with a much weathered look on his face. His eyes, by contrast, boast youth and ebullience, a good deal more than I had seen so far. 'You can't stop people keeping whatever tradition that they want to keep', he said. For my record, he informed me, he knew of at least three more temples in town for which the authorities were being petitioned for restoration by the locals.

Three p.m., two tall umbrellas were carried outside in escort of the officiants, the ceremonial students and the musicians, to the shrine of Thần Nông, the agriculture god. Mr. Ban told the funny myth, probably repeated every festival time now, about Lady Nữ Ông making Thần Nông jealous of her knowledge of architecture. 'That is why Thần Nông did not want to stay inside the main building', said Mr. Ban laughing, as we followed the band out. Already finishing their prostrations at the shrine were two informally attired ladies in their late forties. I had met them earlier, strolling around, lighting incense at altar after altar. They moved in the unison that reveals the sort of closeness of young twins, one no more than a step behind the other. Having spotted my camera, they shyly, but directly asked me, their voices suppressing thrill, to take a photo of them in praying posture with incense sticks, flowers, altar and all. The younger looking one, with impish twinkle in her eyes, was the main talker. 'We are trance dancers', she said casually.

'We used to go singing all over the countryside, but we don't do it now. No, we can't sing any more. It is banned, strictly forbidden, outlawed. ...You must come visit us at Xóm Đất (lower hamlet)'.

I thanked them and hoped, who knows, and so on.

Eight o'clock that night, the Túc Vực (getting ready) ritual to prepare for tomorrow's main ceremony started. A second message was read and sent to the Guardian by 'Combustible Mail', the first one having been incinerated at the shrine of Thần Nông in the temple yard. Now more people arrived, after the working day, to pay respects or watch, standing in rows by the reed mats, where
the action was. Every offering of incense, alcohol or tea was followed by four prostrations, then the convoluted-stepping march of the rite students from the front altar to the inner main shrine. A mellifluous music of strings and woodwind was punctuated with cymbals and drums. Then we sat down to tea or rice wine: It was time for postulations on world affairs, subdued ripostes, and tipsy heads nodding.

I talked to a young man with an eye-catching jacket. I had seen him move around with the bearing of an appointed marshal. He himself had designed the insignia sewn or drawn in ink onto the jacket, he said. Scout symbols, made-up Chinese-looking characters, lines of couplets next to the picture of a sword and a few floral shapes. His manner was pleasant and his voice gentle. He alluded to a spirits' Security Force that keeps order during festivals. 'I now serve the Tutelary Spirits full time', he said simply. I asked how he came to do this work. He recounted the spirits' orders, received in a dream-like state when he was sick. 'Then I was sent for training', he said without elaborating. He used to look after flocks of ducks, the type raised for meat. I was later told by his uncle, one of the officiants, that something had happened to his nephew's mind during an illness. 'The poor lad is a bit off his head since', he said, 'and can't hold down any job.' I saw the young man again a month later, at a similar đình festival six kilometres further upstream, quietly mingling with the same assured gait.

The drum beater, uncle Tâm, came over to my table and introduced himself. He was no local, he said, but a visitor from one of the large islands, where he grows bông Huế lilies for the market. He looked fit and substantial - sixty-four and going strong.

'I used to drive cars, trucks, bulldozers, tractors, you name it. Once I drove a pretty big crane. Now I've got acid soil problems, am trying out a few tricks to get around them. And the buyers, they're in cahoots to rob me. Every time I held out for a good price, the next fellow comes along with a lower bid still. ...I was Commander of the Neighbourhood Security you know, when I first came back there in 1975.10 I was pretty good at my job. Early on, I managed a peaceful handing-over of a cache of guns and grenades that could have spelled the death of many. Then a few years later,

10 Công An Phường - local police force.
someone must have had it in for me. They wanted to transfer me to Woop Woop. I didn’t jump to that, so I requested a very long service leave. Now I help to restore our local dinh. You’ll be most welcome to our festival next weekend, if you don’t mind the shabbiness. We’ll go ahead this year, we’re going to hold it and don’t care if they won’t give us permission.’

It was getting late now, the temple was emptying. Then out of nowhere a group of young men swarmed the compound, some of them in green Army shirts: it’s the militia on patrol. The leader recognised me, we shook hands. The youngest son of a barber, he is now in charge of security at the intercity coach station. They used to live near us, one of his brothers was my occasional playmate, who died crossing the ocean in the exodus of the early 1980s. Their father, lame from tortures and long imprisonments, was a staunch labour leader in the N.L.F. Now almost eighty, the old man can still recall the trance medium séance at every dinh festival, until 1956. The militia chief lit some incense sticks and signalled his troops over, to pray with him at the main altar.

Before the place was shut for the night, I decided to leave. The air was cooler outside and the traffic sparse, now that the mad scramble had died down. It was gentler on the nose with less fumes and dust. In the soft breeze I could almost smell the river. A star fell behind the row of trees. A sad Vọng Cô song was drifting from a tape player. The odd few bottled-petrol sellers and food stalls were still up, keeping company with their jagged shadows under the yellow flicker of tiny kerosene lamps.

PARTICIPANTS

If the sample of identities at the festival constituted a diverse local social portraiture, their reasons and imperatives for participating were no less varied. A quick survey of participants, either when they queued up for altar formalities or when they sat down at the tables, would reveal heterogeneous grouping in terms of age, gender, education and economic status.12

11 National Liberation Front, as the anti-government insurgency movement in South Vietnam was called before 1975.

12 Formerly, a ‘superior table’ (bàn thọ) was reserved for the elders, the ‘first table’ (bàn nhất) for village officials, who may number up to twelve, then comes a table for
There were Buddhists among the ladies, those in grey 'pyjamas' belonging to the laity of most groups identified as the Mahayana School, or Greater Circle (Đại Thừa). Grey clothing is also worn by monks and nuns when they are not in a formal situation, i.e. performing ceremonies. For a lay person, wearing grey signals either a formal occasion or a serious commitment to self-cultivation. However, within the Great Circle are several different schools, with self-cultivation practices varying in details for each of these.\(^{13}\) These differences cannot be detected by dress code. The Tự Ân followers were the next most visible group, wearing brown clothing on formal occasions. Tự Ân men, emulating their founder’s appearance, keep their hair and beard, and sometimes fingernails, uncut as a sign of filial piety. A great number of the island population of Côn Thượng province are known to be followers of this branch of the Buddhist millenarian group called Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương (“Strange Fragrance of the Precious Mountain”).\(^{14}\) I was not able to confirm the presence of Cao Đài sectarianists, who are members of another large millenarian group. If they came, it would be impossible to detect by sight anyway, as they would only put on their distinct formal attire for Cao Đài occasions.

Among the notables, more of whom turned up the next day for the main ceremonies, I recognised familiar faces such as those of the owners of the ice cream factory and retail stores in town. Now retired, they have joined the ranks of elders. Provincial party officials representing the authorities sat with the temple management committee members, others of whom shared another table (each table has eight to twelve stools) with the school teachers and

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13 Greater Circle groups are dominated by three schools: the Tantric (“mystic” or “esoteric”) school, Mật Tông, the 'Southern Zen' (Thiên Nam Tông - putatively of Hui Neng lineage) school and the Pure Land (Tịnh Độ) school.

14 The other offshoot, the larger Hòa Hảo Buddhist movement, was led by Huỳnh Phú Sổ (1919-1947), who claimed to be a reincarnation of the founder of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion. It is difficult to determine precise adherence, however, as the present political climate finds Hòa Hảo sectarianists keeping a low profile.
businessmen. A distinguished couple in their sixties were seated among the elders group. Ex-residents of Căn Thơ who now live in France, they have been important beneficiaries to the temple.

One table was reserved exclusively for women, who were subsequently joined by the kitchen hands. This latter group, called Ban Thiện Phòng ("food provision committee"), headed by an elected executive, are the equivalent of the ladies' Auxiliary of Australian Christian churches. Responsible for preparing altar display and community meals during the festival, their tasks include planning, shopping, rostered work in the kitchen area, and also some tidying up with the help of the diính caretaker and young men at the end of the day. Other women came at various stages of the two-day ceremony to pay respects at some or all of the altars, without staying for conversation or feasting at the tables. Some came with their spouse and children to prostrate together at the altars. Women traders from the two markets, Mid-City (Chợ Giữa) and Cái Khê, make up the majority of contributors and devotees to the Guardian Spirits.

A group of writers, journalists and teachers were found at one table, where I also sat. From the 1950s, school teachers were not seen at diính gatherings. Espousing a new "western" attitude, which entailed a break with Confucian or monarchist traditions, most teachers avoided diính activities. They might, from time to time, attend Buddhist temples, which were considered more progressive. Now a few members of the intelligentsia have found their way back to the diính. They express implicitly an attitude of resistance to the current political regime, a resistance channelled through a widely expressed will to seek a new direction in the preservation of heritage. Putting aside the likelihood of the interest to preserve tradition being an expedient means to negotiate social power, this attitude has become a rallying point for diverse groups. It has also been bolstered by the easing up of political control on freedom of speech that came with the 'đổi mới' (renewal) policy. According to locals, this relaxation was only felt at street level from about 1989 or 1990 in Căn Thơ. Thus tension

15 Thiện phòng, according to Dạo Duy Anh's Hán Việt dictionary, means "the royal kitchen."
between the political regime and local conservatism, hitherto covert, has been brought out in the open with 'đổi mới'. The commercial ferment resulting from the latter in turn strengthened commitment to 'preserve heritage', with the financial contributions increasing. This may set up a 'positive feedback circuit' - more money for festivals, more power to local dinh participants - which constitutes a dilemma for the socialist government.

With the festival, Thổ Binh dinh, as one of the first to rejuvenate, expanded its range of influence to a multi-village area. The two officiants mentioned above became involved in training new 'students of rites' and conducting the rituals at two other smaller dinh on the islands. This is a significant development: previously, rites students' training was conducted by their fathers. Judging by the number of neophytes, transmission must now be beyond the family lineage, although it may be restricted to the teacher's hamlet. Some of the students of rites came from the islands. I recognised them two weeks later on my visit to their local festivals.

An extra officiant at Thổ Binh is also a new recruit from upstream Bình Thủy. Regional networking has meant smaller villages can be resourced and, at the same time, controlled by larger and better established ones. They in turn help the latter if required.

The attendance of disparate groups - epitomised by the two distinctly-garbed Buddhist groups, the ancien-régime intelligentsia and disgruntled nouveau-régime military and worker leaders, incorporate statements of separate identities. On the other hand, their collective presence was symbolic of local solidarity, at least in the name of village tradition. Only some school teachers and professionals take part in dinh affairs. The limited numbers who do, however, suggests the intelligentsia from this section of town are strongly committed to popular religion.

The dinh's role in reinforcing new networks and renewing old ones is therefore hard to deny. Festival participation involves a sharing of ritual motifs, physical settings, and forms and practiced of the dinh. Curiously enough, these have been described by French and Vietnamese scholars as monarchy-oriented,
male-dominated, status-driven and essentially Chinese. If this is true, how did it all come about? It may help first to examine the dinh's short architectural history.

**CHINESE FEATURES IN LAYOUT AND DÉCOR**

When Núm Tiên ("Southward Advance"), the Vietnamese territorial expansion, had reached a limit in the eighteenth century, economic and ethno-cultural adaptation processes went on intermeshing, and no doubt continue to do so with gusto. Key contributive elements in the forming of local identity emerged quite differently from what has been observed elsewhere in Vietnam.

The imprint of Ming emigré culture since the seventeenth century, for example, has been underestimated. By the nineteenth century, Chinese settlement villages were the envy of ethnic Vietnamese, who regarded them as models of ‘high living’. Whilst Chinese influence before and after the seventeenth century was not the same, sinicization in dinh layout and décor was not a simple one-way process.

As a rule, dinh buildings south of Huế have on-ground floors like Chinese temples, unlike some older ones in the North with a wooden floor on stumps. None of the elderly people I approached could tell me how old the Thối Bình temple building is. The royal decree for investiture of the Tutelary Spirit is dated in 1852. Thus it must have been established earlier. Even though one informant said that the temple was built in bricks and mortar right from the beginning, there is reason to believe it may first have been under thatch.

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17 Huỳnh Ngọc Trưng, 'Tổng Quan về Văn Hóa Nam Bộ', p.62.

18 A record of land and money donations inscribed in a wooden plaque at Thối Bình temple shows names and amounts, but no date.
Fig. 4. Cải Khê Đình - plan and elevation - not to scale
Moreover, at the turn of this century, Binh Thuy, together with O Mon further upstream, were considered major market centres of Can Tho province. Larger and more ornate, Binh Thuy temple is definitely known to have been rebuilt in bricks only in 1911. It is therefore probable that prior to 1852 the dinh of Cai Khe would have looked like a large thatched house of the rural south, rather than being constructed with bricks and mortar. Stepping inside the dinh now, visitors will notice the masonry structure as being influenced by French building techniques early in this century. The layout and decor, however, is another story.

Thoi Binh dinh compound is fenced, its gate decorated with ceramic motifs of two dragons with a fireball in the middle, 'fighting for the pearl' (luong long tranh chau). Otherwise they are said to form a 'two dragons gazing at the moon' (luong long vong nguyet) motif, also seen on all Chinese-built temples in the South. The roof ridge is decorated with a pair of unicorns, also gazing at a moon. There is a yard around the buildings, with the greatest area in front. At present, houses have cramped right next to the side and rear walls of the temple. It is no longer possible to see its roof from the main road (Nguyen Trai street), unlike twenty years ago.

The front yard of southern country dinh sometimes has a raised platform of about twenty square metres or more in area, called the Village-and-Field Platform (Dan Xa Tac), with a masonry screen decorated with the dragon-and-

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20 R.A. Stein points out that the dragon-like fish decoration on the roofs of temples were a Vietnamese feature, as evidenced in the recorded Han king's consultation in 104 B.C. with a Viet sorcerer. The dragon pair as a rain-making motif was then re-imported into Vietnam under Chinese format. See Tria Chi Dai Truong, 'Mot Van De Su Hoc: V Tr of Dai Viet, Chiem Thanh, Phu Nam trong Lich Su Viet Nam' [An Issue in Historiography: The Position of Dai Viet, Champa, Funan in Vietnamese History], Tap San Su Dia, no. 1, 1966.
tiger or white-tiger-and-pine-tree motif.\textsuperscript{21} The platform at Cái Khê had been flattened to give way to invading houses. For other dình without a platform, a stele with tiger motif is placed on a rectangular base in the central front of the yard instead.\textsuperscript{22} Both the above features are believed to have a talismanic power of preventing harmful spirits from entering the temple. For city dính such as Thổ Bình, there is instead a masonry screen placed immediately inside the front entrance, abutting an altar.

The front hall of the dính is a special area for theatrical performances, called vô ca (house for singing, or vô ca - dancing and singing), with enough room for a stage to be set up.\textsuperscript{23} This indicates how important theatrical performances must be.

The entrance to the Middle and Inner Hall is separated from the Front Hall by a shallow courtyard with a large pot plant.\textsuperscript{24} Whatever the symbolism may be, this courtyard functions as a buffer zone between the halls, allowing just enough natural light into the Inner Hall without affecting its solemn and somber ambience.

In the Middle and Inner Halls, altars are arranged along the centre line as well as the side walls. The first 'incense altar' (liêng din), facing out, and placed

\textsuperscript{21} Another gloss for Xã is the Soil deity and Tắc the Rice Plant deity i.e. the Agriculture god. See Sơn Nam, Dinh Miếu và Lễ Hội Dân Gian [The Dính and the Miếu Temples and Folk Festivals], TP Hồ Chí Minh, 1992, p.72. See also Huỳnh Ngọc Tráng, Trưởng Ngọc Tường & Hồ Tường, Dính Nam Bộ, Tin Nguồn và Nghĩ Lẽ [The Southern Dính, Beliefs and Rituals], TP Hồ Chí Minh, 1993, p.26.

\textsuperscript{22} Trần Thị Ngọc Diệp, 'Một Ngôi Dính Miền Nam' [A Dính Temple in the South], Việt Nam Khảo Cổ Tạp San, No.5, Viện Khảo Cổ, Saigon, 1968, pp.112-119. The White Tiger Spirit was considered important to Vietnamese settlers in the days of opening up forested and wet land. Sơn Nam states that the White Tiger may not come from a Feng Shui motif (phong thủy - geomancy) in conjunction with the 'Blue Dragon'. Sơn Nam, Dính Miếu..., pp. 48 & 73.

\textsuperscript{23} The word vô also means martial arts. In Paulus Huỳnh Tỉnh Cunsafe, dictionary, vô (with a different diacritic, but the same intonation for southerners) means house, as in prayers to spirits: "nhờ Thần linh thỏ vô..." (requesting a favour from powerful spirits of the land and houses).

\textsuperscript{24} The usual feature in this spatial hiatus is a 'bonsai' mountain setup, probably representing the cosmic mountain, if not the abode of immortals. In Chinese temples, this area is called a 'sky well' (thiên đình). The sky well, as an in-between space, highlights the above/below, macro/ microcosm and inner/outer binarisms.
outside a wooden partition, is for the supra-regional, or State level. It is supposedly kept up to date with the portrait of the national leader of the day. President Ngô Đình Diệm’s portrait was there in the 1960s. Today however, that of deceased Chairman Hồ Chí Minh still graces the central spot, suggesting a different regard for present national leaders.

In the Inner/Posterior Hall, the altar immediately behind the partition, facing in, would be for the village founders, with gilded memorial tablets of illustrious personages. Abutting it is a divan (giường thờ - altar bed) where food offerings can be displayed. A simply carved frame, to support the whole roasted pig, is placed near a wooden jar and a ladle made of coconut shell with a longish handle.

The jar appeared empty throughout the festival I attended. In the past, fresh rain water was put in the jar each festival, representing heaven’s bounty. A custom widely observed in country houses in the South, during New Year’s Eve, is the display of a jar of rice and a jar of rain water, both full to the brim, to augur prosperity. These items on the divan mark the commonality between Tết (New Year) and dinh festivals. If the sense of renewal from the đền festival was not sufficiently conjured by such items and the Giao-type rituals discussed later, it was well compensated by the Tết atmosphere that I felt was decidedly created and enjoyed by the participants themselves.

Southern dinh rarely have statues of the tutelary spirits, perhaps for want of ‘real’ biographical records. On the altars lining the side walls are the memorial tablets (long vị - dragon throne) of predecessors and founding notables, in carved wood inscribed with gold-painted characters. Images of other divinities, both Daoist and Buddhist are also found here. The most noticeable interior décor items, not unlike those seen at Chinese Taoist/Confucian temples, are the sacred animals, omens of good fortune. Among those usually seen are:

25 Thus altar arrangement in the inner hall allows for salutations in four directions.

1. The four supernatural-power animals (*tử linh*): the dragon, the turtle, the unicorn and the phoenix. Dragons and phoenixes are favoured on roof ridges, and on top of gate arches.

2. White Tigers whose demon-subduing power accounts for its role of temple gate keeper, as mentioned above.

3. Other animals such as the 'dragon' horse, the crane, the fish and the sea monster (*con nga*). Except for the two large brass cranes, these animals are not found in Thổ Bình *đình*.

The central inner altars are set under a large plaque with the Chinese character Thận (shen), apparently considered as the equivalent of a statue. On them are cabinets containing the royal certificates of the two spirits in their respective wooden cases and relics such as hats, swords, wisps and boots. The royal certificate is in the form of a paper scroll about 100cm long and 50cm wide. On it one finds a royal decree written in Han Chinese characters, appointing a spirit of such-and-such name and title, to look after the well-being and clemency of climate for the village, named so-and-so of such-and-such district. A stamp of the royal seal with the reign date of issue conclude the message (see Appendix A).

Carved and painted Han characters form an important part of the décor. However, hardly anyone can read or cares to read them nowadays. During the filming of a Thổ Bình- Tân An festival in 1991, a knowledgeable *đình* committee member gave a running translation of the elegant sayings and couplets etc. under focus of the video camera. The crowd’s reception was of bemused interest. Coming from a discourse with a pro-monarchic and Confucian overtone of the distant past, those words assumed the quality of ancient relics. Whether they evoke in the audience a sense of urgency in recovering that past, it is difficult to tell. I will return to this point later, in relation to the Spirits' royal certificates of investiture.

By contrast, the texts of 'petitions to spirits' to be read and burnt at the altars at various stages of the ceremony have been continually revised by the local expert in classical Chinese, 'because they are not syntactically correct
Hán. Not only Hán texts were written in Vietnamese syntax, it has also been observed that, unlike their counterparts in the North, a lot of demotic Nôm characters also found their way into southern temples’ décor.

Thời Bình dính shelters temporarily the Tần An dính’s Spirit, as well as two altars for the above-mentioned Chinese deities, set up in the Middle Hall. The latter were additions since the early 1980s, thanks to Mr. Ban’s initiatives, when their temple in Tham Tướng was emptied out to be converted into a community meeting hall. The accumulation was an added benefit to the host temple, since it has attracted increased attendance. As for the Tutelary Spirits, the number of relic objects (e.g. officers hats, shoes) on the Inner altars at Thời Bình was doubled. The temple’s name has also been doubled to ‘Thời Bình – Tần An’, which means, optimistically, ‘Peace - New Calm’.

It is worth noting here that the procession, which shows off the votary objects and cult relics at the beginning of Túc Yö (“Preparatory”) ceremony in Cái Khế, as well as a shorter one on the following morning in 1991, did not take place until that year. Together with the suspension of trance mediums formalities, these variations mark the changing circumstances and aspirations over the last thirty years. In bringing off the processions, thus coping with local

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27 So I was told when I sought to obtain copies of these petitions. The Hán literature expert, well recognized for his scholarship, is an elderly Buddhist monk in Bình Thủy.

28 Private correspondence from Mr. Khoa Năng Lập, History and Geography Department, Cạn Thọ University, 1993.

29 The Tần An spirit’s accommodation problem from the 1880s betokens changes of Cạn Thọ. Shifted to near Tham Tướng Bridge, south of town, in 1889, confiscated by the French Army to store ammunition in 1945, it was destroyed in a bomb explosion in 1946. Temporarily occupying the Town Hall upper floor since then, it was given a new site on the island adjacent to Cái Khế. Its rebuilding started in 1973, only to be discontinued in 1975.

30 At about the same time, a large Kwan Kung temple in Cái Rạng district, six kilometres south of Căn Thọ city with an important Chinese presence, was also emptied out to be converted to different state-run types of community centre at various stages. This event took place at the time of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict, together with the state campaign in purging the South of bourgeois class. Not until 1991 was this temple returned to local Chinese management and its original functions.

31 It would not be far fetched to credit these extra items to Mr. Ban’s charisma and organizing talent.
authorities’ restrictions and regulations, the *dinh* participants are making a statement about their identity and collective response to new challenges. As Feuchtwang suggests, they are writing history in their own local manner with the ever-modified ceremonial procedure.\(^{32}\)

CEREMONIAL PROCEDURE

The main thrust of the rituals is to invite the Guardian Spirit in to preside over the offered food and drinks and to receive the villager’s petitions, thereby to ensure another year with clement: weather, fertility, good health, order and harmony. Thus the fundamental pattern of ancestral worship can be observed akin to that of domestic commemorative ceremonies coupled with renewal celebrations. The stages of the arrival of the Spirit are indicated by the smaller drums, i.e. a drum roll signals that he is on his way, then wooden drum, then gong, then big drum are sounded to welcome the deity entering the temple by increasing depth. Once he is ‘settled’ into his altar, the music begins. After the arrival of the Guardian(s), a number of participants take turns to pay respects, by order of status. Next, alcohol, tea and fruits are brought by the ceremonial students, marching to the cue of the music in high and convolute stepping.

All ritual form and movement are to be replicated ‘correctly’. In monarchic times, according to Sơn Nam, any error or deviation from the prescribed form would be regarded as an act of sedition.\(^{33}\) Yet elsewhere, he observes that the elders continued to modify a little the procedure to fit the circumstances.\(^{34}\) Even new tradition was invented when the southern Governor Lê Văn Duyệt introduced female singers into *dinh* main ritual.\(^{35}\) If appropriation of ritual forms was a way to delineate power structure, then their variations,

\(^{32}\) Feuchtwang, *The Imperial Metaphor...* pp. 3-24.

\(^{33}\) Sơn Nam, ‘Ý Nghĩa Hội Lễ Dinh’ [The Meaning of *Dinh* Festivals], talk given at Nhà Văn Họa Thanh Niên (Youth Cultural Centre), Ho Chi Minh City, 23/8/92. Taped recording in my possession.

\(^{34}\) Sơn Nam, *Dinh Miếu ...*, p. 46.

\(^{35}\) Sơn Nam, *Dinh Miếu ...*, p. 58. The singers are called *dho thái*, who accompany the rite students with songs of praise for the quality of offerings.
however small that may appear, indicate internal juggling of status/power, as
instanced by the local Hán scholar’s reworking the petition text as mentioned
above.

After the petition is burnt and the main ceremony ends with the offi-
ciants’ final prostrations, people sit down to lunch. Throughout the day, don-
ors are collected at the Treasurer’s table. To recoup the expenses, if there is any
shortfall, wealthy notables are expected to make it up. Following lunch, the
women go out to pay respect at the small shrines outside the temple. These
were built by benevolent donors to honour, besides the God of Agriculture,
the Goddess of the Region (Bà Chúa Xứ) and the Mountain Spirit (Sơn Thần).
According to the treasurer’s estimate, about 65% of the total number of donors
in the annual list of contributors in 1991-92 period were women, who are
retailers or merchants from at least three markets around the city besides Cái
Khê. The high contribution by women probably betokens their traditional status
throughout Southeast Asia.

In a recent study of southern dình, Huỳnh Ngọc Trạng also notes the
increasingly high status southern women have enjoyed since the end of the
nineteenth century. But present ritual format at the southern dình of inviting
fertility and prosperity is rooted in Han/Ming Chiao style, and is different from
that in the many other communities in Southeast Asia with ‘nature worship’
patterns. The shift to this distinction, as Georges Boudarel tries to
demonstrate in the case of northern Vietnamese villages, may have resulted
from marginalisation of women since the thirteenth century, in conjunction
with the change of emphasis from an agrarian to a ‘consumption and status’
economy.

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36 Huỳnh Ngọc Trạng, Địa Ngust, Chặp Bồng Trưng Hải Nam Bộ [Earth God and the
Immortal Maiden, Southern Short Comic Play as Part of the Mediumistic Ritual], TP
Hồ Chí Minh, 1992, pp. 11-12.

37 The word ‘nature’ is used with reservation, otherwise defined as the ensemble of
ecoligcal features.

38 Boudarel, G., ‘L'Insertion du Pouvoir Central dans les Cultes Villageois au Vietnam’, in
Cultes Populaires et Sociétés Asiatiques, Alain Forest, Yoshiaki Ishizawa and León
Vandemmersch [Eds.], L'Harmattan, Paris 1991, pp.94-99. I will discuss further
Boudarel’s hypothesis in Chapter Two.

52
Meanwhile, the festival ends with hát bội theatre if the village can afford it, and if a troupe passes by in the area. Otherwise, hát Tiều, or Teo Cheou theatre (performed completely in Chinese) can be a substitute. Southern hát bội (gestural theatre), is a form of operatic theatre based on classical stories, mostly Chinese, which tend to extol the three Confucian values of filial piety, subjects' loyalty and righteousness. In 1968, a military telecommunication centre was built near Thời Bình đình. Hát bội and hát Tiều were discontinued since then, allegedly for security reasons -- perhaps also because of the changing tempo of the war.

Formal strictness in hát bội is partly expressed in the beating of a large drum called Choutu (Court Audience) throughout the show by a notable elected to 'mark' an actor's performance with this method. The 'instant critic' is said to represent the tutelary spirit. The Nguyễn lords from the seventeenth century were known to wield the Choutu drum at court performances. Hát bội is also part of an arena where various social tensions are displayed and played out. Unpopular notables wielding the drum truncheon may receive veiled insults from actors, who, through their impromptu delivery, align themselves with the grass roots.

Hát bội's formal strictness is in stark contrast to other southern village ritualized performances, such as those humorous acts that caricature Vietnamese exchanges with other ethnic groups. From the character that straddles the two Indic and Chinese origins -- the Monkey Sage as Hanuman in Ramayana epics and as the Sage Equal-to-Heaven from Tây Du Ký (Hsi Yu Ki - journey to the West, by Wu Cheng Eng), seen in street processions at đình

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39 The popularity of Chinese historical fiction is believed to be aided by the growth of quoc ngu (romanized Vietnamese) and printing from the late nineteenth century. Hát Bội’s origin is still debated, although there is general agreement that it was promoted south of Huế by the Nguyễn lords. From the seventeenth century up to the early twentieth century, Hát Bội held a prominent place in the spectrum of southern performing arts.

40 For popular anecdotes of Tây Ninh and Long An areas about village officials copping abusive insults through spoonerized lines from actors, see Huỳnh Ngọc Tráng, Trương Ngọc Tường, Nghĩa Nam Bia Miễng [One Thousand Years on the Stole of People’s Mouths], vol.1, TP Hồ Chí Minh, 1992, pp. 496-502.
festivals prior to 1975 -- to the comic Earth God dallying with immortal maidens, these performances indicate a complex pattern of cultural adaptation in the delta. The latter type is linked with trance mediums. 41

As far as Cham influence is recognised, the trance dances of floral offering to the goddesses are still performed in a number of đinh around Ho Chi Minh City with substantial shrines built for them outside the main buildings. I will look at more details concerning these practices, their gender aspects and implications in Chapter Six.

At Cái Khê đinh, Daoist features included those with a sorcerer’s group enlisted to cast away plague, pestilence and other demonic spirits. 42 There were two types of tông gió (sending the wind away) exorcism. One specifically against the demonic spirits of epidemics (ơn dịch), was performed in the hot season, when villages were often struck by those calamities. Reportedly with improved public health and hygiene, it was discontinued sometime in the 1940s. The other was seen until 1978 at đinh festivals, designed to expel harmful ghosts. These included ồn bính (“soldier spirits”) and cô hồn (“homeless ghosts”), who are yet to be re-incarnated. By offering food to the homeless spirits on a raft made of two to five lengths of banana trunks tied together and sent off down the river, the villagers believe they could be lured away.

Trance possession activities at Cái Khê, over forty years ago, was part of the festival programme. The spirit of Võ Tánh, a Gia Định-born Nguyên general who died in 1801 fighting the Tây Sơn in Qui Nhơn, central Vietnam, reportedly talked through a medium at every festival. Besides the medium, who was a building contractor in normal conditions, the sessions also required an interpreter. The latter’s secular profession of policeman was no obstacle. His

41 They include the play Địa Nàng [Earth god and Immortal maiden], associated with Bồng Rơi [trance dance] honoring the goddesses, and those surviving up to the turn of this century in festival processions such as Ông Tơ (the Monkey Sage of Tsi Yu Kì - the Journey to the West) and Chmia Ngu (an ethnic minority spirit) enactments found around Ho Chi Minh City today.

42 This practice of tông gió was still performed in the 1960s by the sorcerers troupe at Hậu Nghĩa village, northeastern part of the delta, as observed by Gerald Hickey. See Hickey, G. C., Village in Vietnam, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1964.
job was to render the messages intelligible to the locals, 'because of the General's heavy central Vietnamese accent'. An eyewitness still recalls the change in demeanour that came over the medium, who suddenly would leap up from the chair to the divan with great agility. The spirit answered personal queries put by the villagers, scolded some and admonished others about the moral way of life. The sessions became more sporadic from 1951, due to the unsettled war situation. This practice went out after 1956 with the death of the medium, a successor for whom could not be found.

To return to food offerings, the chain of representations of feeding retains its Daoist structure in imperial formats of royal Giao (Chinese Chiao) festivals. Two features depicting the maintenance of social hierarchy in dinh ceremonies are cúng (offering) and kiêng (presenting). 'Có cúng phải có kiêng' - offerings must go with presenting - is the common saying related to this pattern. It means that after the ceremony where the pig has been offered to the spirits, its various portions are presented to the notables to take home. Each gift portion is to be commensurate with the receiver's status, as token of the villagers' appreciation for their work and standing in the community.

In southern Vietnam, however, status-orientation through kiêng is believed to have lost its favoured place in practice. For the authors of a recent study on southern dinh, it has in fact become farcical compared to that of the North. They cite a poem written by a minor ritual officiant (hựơng bái), who was given a wrongly cut portion of pork reserved for a lower position, yet could not be bothered to do anything about this loss of face. This shift in status-orientation may also result from the French 1904 reformation of village council structure in Cochinchina, with collaborating land owners assuming 'secular'...
administrative power and status at the expense of those in ceremonial positions. On the other hand, the same cannot be said for some other clusters of values. The village elite's attitude towards the spirit's royal certificate, as I will consider next, remains basically unchanged.

INVESTITURE AND CERTIFICATES

Thời Bình and a large number of đinh in the Mekong delta received certificates among a total of 13,069 issued to the whole country by Nguyễn king Tự Đức in 1852, five years before the first attack by French naval forces on the port of Đà Nẵng. Spirits are generally drawn from the ranks of people whose lives were considered or approved by the king on advice to villagers' petitions, to be examples of great achievements in serving the monarchy or the people in a region. Whether or not the massive issue of tutelary certificates was a preemptive effort to consolidate the realm in the face of demands for opening up Vietnam to foreign trade by Western powers, remains to be settled.

One consequence of this great number of certificates was that many bear only titles, and no name, indicating a deviation from the inherited Han Chinese pattern of 'celestial appointment' and pro/demotion of historical personages as wall-and-meats spirits. Nonetheless, these nameless certificates are valued by villagers as indispensable credentials to a village. Moreover, there were new đinh established without one. Theft of certificates, such as occurred towards the end of the nineteenth century at Tân Hưỡng village of Bạc Liêu province in the southeastern part of the delta, was known to happen. The loss of a certificate at this village was said to lead to a notable falling into trance during which the tutelary spirit revealed that the thief was a resident of Tân Hưỡng who stole the document to sell to nearby village.

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47 Huỳnh Minh, Bạc Liêu Xưa và Nay [Bạc Liêu Past and Present], published by the author, Saigon, 1966, p.149. The exact time of theft was not known, as it is said to have
However, having no names renders the spirits into a symbol with incomplete referent, effectively a signifier without its subject-signified, almost a simulacrum. Thus the historian Tất Chí Đại Trương was quick to label đinh practice in the south as a concept-driven undertaking, with the real agenda answering a slightly different need:

Together with the lack of hagiographies for Tutelary Spirits in the southernmost region, the theft of certificates happened only to signify that there was a need to have evidence of a supreme ruler, therefore the notion of a Spirit was more prominent than an actual deity.48

Does this mean, without an actual spirit, the villagers have been treating ritual as no more than a theatrical sleight-of-hand? My field data indicates that is not quite the case. I was assured by the elder notables that Thới Bình and Tân An spirits’ actual names are on a list kept in the archives somewhere in the palaces of Huế, and if they wanted to, they could request a sighting. By so saying, the notables are exercising more than the expedient art of fictive imagination. It means that the village as a social entity determines its boundary and coherence through the sacralizing of this artefact among other ritual items, with attendant rituals that do not depend on or relate to the content of writing in the paper document.

This treatment of the certificate reminds us of Lévi-Strauss’ description of Australian aboriginals’ churinga, being comparable to modern (Western) archival documents and other historical ‘relics’. Thus, as tokens of local identity, certificates without names accentuate ‘the incorporation of history in a mythic system’, as Lévi-Strauss further points out.49 Such incorporation forms part of the whole spectrum of native ways of ‘writing’ history. Relating the tales of supernatural power is another example.

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48 Tất Chí Đại Trương, Thần, Người..., p.240.

SUPERNATURAL RESPONSIVENESS

Beliefs in the presence and power or responsiveness (*linh thiêng*) of the Spirits are central to key practitioners, such as members of the *đình* managing committee. Each *đình* has its own collection of miracle tales. Most of them are told by elder notables, chief agents in the authentication of the spirits' power (*linh*). In many of these stories, communication from the spirits happened in dream or trance states. Authenticating supernatural power is obviously important to the continuation of worship and popularity of the temple. But *linh* as an operative factor cannot be sufficiently understood simply as causal relationship. As Sangren points out in his study of a Taiwanese town, only by paying attention to the multiple contexts of linh-attributed claims can the social relations involved reveal to us more about beliefs and practice. Let us examine a few tales.

For Thôi Binh *đình*, Mr. Ban of the temple committee knows of a number of village officials, within living memory, who abused their power and suffered madness in their old age.\(^{50}\) As for himself, he has had experiences of possession. These occasions involved dramatic assertions of the power of the spirits through his display of persuasive speech and behaviour (such as toward provincial cadres as told above) or extra-sensory perception. Other stories involved people in various walks of life. For example in 1991, a prayer to win the lottery with a promise to offer half the prize money to the spirit was answered.\(^{51}\) In 1992, the son of a large store's owner fell seriously ill. His mother prayed to the spirit for

\(^{50}\) These examples are regarded as punishment meted out by the tutelary spirit. One *hùtông quan* (police officer) named Phương used to scrape the sewer and eat the dirt furtively. Another case of madness was Cai ‘warden/warrant officer’ Ngọc, a prison guard who used to mistreat those who failed to pay tax and had to go to jail for three to five days. If they could not bribe him, they had to carry the cans of the towns' night soil down the river, and empty them where the water level was up to their nose. In his old age, Cai Ngọc ate excrement during his demented moments.

\(^{51}\) The winner's 1,250,000 đồng donation was recorded in Thôi Binh - Tân An *đình's* 'golden ledger' on this occasion. The committee was not slow in publicizing this story.
help, pledging a pig offered to the temple as appreciation. Her son recovered and she kept her promise.\(^{52}\)

For Tần An dình, the head officiant of the 1960s related cases of punishment by the spirit to those who showed disrespect while passing by the temple, or who handled or touched off-handedly any of the cult objects in it. They would experience pain or illnesses as a result, and could only be relieved by showing repentance and offering propitiation.\(^{53}\) The wooden plaque bearing the gilded character Thiên (Chinese shen), was said to be linh (imbued with power): It was flung three kilometres away when an explosion destroyed the building in 1947, but was found intact.\(^{54}\)

In nearby Bình Thủy village, Long Tuyền dình's huge brass incense urn was stolen during the Second World War. Through a notable's dream several years later, it was located in a Buddhist temple in Châu Đức, near the Cambodian border, and successfully retrieved. This event continues to puzzle the sceptics.\(^{55}\) On one of the islands, at Tân Quới dình during the Second World War, a shaft of light was reported to have issued twice from the inner hall, each time knocking the portrait of Marshal Pétain off the front altar, placed there by colonial authorities' order. The local Guardian Spirit also communicated to notables through dreams on events such as a cholera epidemic and temple rebuilding.

\(^{52}\) As related by the temple secretary, 1993. Written communication in my possession.

\(^{53}\) The plaque bearing the Han character Thiên (Chinese shen- tutelary spirit) was subsequently believed to cause the illness of a painter/ calligrapher hired to repaint it but neglected this work. He dreamed of being scolded by the spirit, and recovered only after expressing his repentance and propitiation. From interview with Mr. Ban, 1/11/1992.

\(^{54}\) In 1945, the French used the Tần An temple to store ammunition. Huỳnh Minh, Cận Thờ Xưa và Nay ..., p.142. Towards the end of 1946, two women allegedly from the Việt Minh resistance movement, carrying bombs, managed to get past the guards by pretending to befriend them, then blew up while inside. Another theory insists the two women were prostitutes brought there by French guards, causing the spirit to wrathfully 'eject' the cult plate away from the scene of desecration by an explosion. Otherwise, it is argued that such heroic death by a suicide team would not have been lost to the Việt Minh propaganda machinery at that time, and some record would have been found today. From my 1992 field notes.

\(^{55}\) Huỳnh Minh, Cận Thờ Xưa và Nay ..., pp.147-148.
These tales have gained higher currency since the recent 'revival' of popular religion and tradition. However, it is not because spirits' power and responsiveness (linh) has been found to vary through time, as indicated by the mounting or falling frequency of such miracles, that popular cults disappear and revive, a claim often made by participants themselves. Such argument would be tautological unless, as Sangren suggests in his study of a Taiwanese community, the idea that linh is primarily an aspect of individual belief is also abandoned.  

This means supernatural practices wax and wane because social relations themselves wax and wane. In other words, changes in ritual and intensity of authentication of spirits' power are parts of the collective process of making a 'model of and model for' reality, where spirits are both culturo-social operators as well as symbolic entities. Thus the spirits of Thôi Binh dinh are supernaturally powerful (linh) not in terms of what the spirits are believed to have done what to whom. Rather the issue here is which deity is dinh in which social context. Otherwise we can hardly discern, as Sangren puts it, 'the link between ritual and history in native thought', and how this linkage actually reflects social power within the collective endeavour to reproduce some values and at the same time establish anew the felt significance to ongoing changes.

CONCLUSION

As shown above, historical contingencies impinge upon the structure of beliefs and practice. Changes in the socio-economic climate are thus reflected by changes in ritual formalities, as in the abandonment of the water jar display. On the other hand, certain belief structures, such as that attached to the authentication of supernatural power, persist by subsuming contingencies under a local historical framework. And local status hierarchy, as intimated by

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57 Ibid., p.4.
58 Ibid., p.8.
the rewriting of petition texts in correct Hán Chinese syntax, reasserts itself in a contest of representations.

While the changing forms and practice indicate that the *dinh* continues to be a site of contestation for social power under different guises, it does not necessarily mean the celebrants always identify themselves as the oppressed, as Sangren argues.59 For provincial cadres, it is an opportunity to prove that the Party has a mass base, and implicitly to legitimise popular feeling towards existing living conditions. The grass-roots community thereby can get on with furthering new socio-economic exchange networks. Daily survival tactics thus culminate in mutual legitimisation through the festival format, where contestation and negotiation are intertwined. In that sense, popular religion has always been a storehouse of human resources, and the creative manipulation of their representations happens to be what communities do in the making of their kinds of history.

The *dinh* is therefore a remarkable meeting point for many groups and purposes under the rubric of spirit cult. To view popular cults as being revived by economic circumstances, or just surviving as froth bubbles on the crest of political waves, is to miss the point, to wit, that popular cults offer the potentiality for communities to juggle creatively what is predicament and what is disposition. In other words, enmeshed in the interplay between historical contingency and structure is the struggle for choice amidst necessity. It is therefore less important to ask whether popular religion or supernaturallism is being revived or is surviving in the Mekong delta now, or elsewhere for that matter, than to wonder how people ever manage without it, in their endeavour to face the new.

59 ibid., p.156.
CHAPTER TWO

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DÍNH

'Le dinh, où demeure le génie protecteur de chaque village, est le foyer de la vie collective de la communauté.'

The above quotation in the French refers to a collective life of each village community having the dính as its centre. But what are the main cultural traits which characterise this life? And if popular culture is, among other things, a ‘protean phenomenon and the totality of everyday tactics’ through which subaltern classes appropriate the discourses imposed upon them, should not the dính well qualify as an icon of popular culture?

Examining the history of this icon may help us to discern those traits. Its birth, for instance, has been reconstructed in at least two versions. One version, proposed by Georges Boudarel, is mainly idealist. The other, by Tạ Chí Đại Trường, is more materialist in its assumptions. While Boudarel focuses on cultural changes wrought by a political grafting of central power onto the village religious structure, Tạ Chí Đại Trường looks at a fateful granting of the temple’s economic independence as its socio-political beginning.

In this chapter, I will discuss these two reconstructions and aspects not covered by either of them. The evolution of the dính, with a focus on the South, is therefore glimpsed through issues concerning the installation of tutelary spirits, the origin of its building, and the founding of new villages.

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2 For a general discussion on popular religion/culture, see Faure, B., *The Rhetorics of Inimediacy...*, p.83.

3 The B.E.F.E.O contains pioneering works by Nguyễn Văn Khoan on the stereotypical dính, and Nguyễn Văn Huyễn on the cult of Lý Phúc Man. Both articles focus on the dính in North Vietnam. Lê Văn Hảo’s ‘Introduction à l’Ethnologie du Dính’ still does not address southern temples. Vietnamese works on culture from Phan Kế Bính’s *Viet Nam Phong Tục* [Vietnamese Customs] published around 1914, and Đào Duy Anh’s *Viet Nam Văn Hóa Sử Cuong* (An Outline History of Vietnamese Culture), first appeared in 1938, to Toan Anh’s series on customs in the 1960’s, do not deal
These features mark the *dinh* as distinct from many other types of temples and shrines. Let us turn first to the background of the term *dinh* itself, in order to better locate *dinh* temples in the range of local religious edifices.

**NOMENCLATURE AND CLASSIFICATION**

There has been no universally accepted way of labelling temples and shrines. Local plebeian usage differs from élite and court nomenclature. Phan Kế Bính distinguishes two types of village communal temples: *dinh miếu* -- those called *miếu* are built at fairly secluded places and their exclusive function is 'principal worship' (*thờ chính*), while those called *dinh* are *thờ vong* or 'emissary' (i.e. secondary) worship buildings, nearer habitation or where it is convenient for villagers to meet and notables to carry out administrative duties.\(^4\)

At the time of Nguyễn Văn Khoan's 1930 study, the procession during the annual festival of An Sở village indicates a division of function. From the *dinh* the procession headed for the *miếu*, where the royal certificate(s) could be brought out, to be carried to the *dinh* altars for the ceremonies, then carried back to the *miếu* at the end. This formality also implies a generic formation of the *dinh* itself. Another type of edifice attached to the *dinh* with different significance for the court and the villages is *diàn* (literally 'raised ground', 'platform'), which I have mentioned in Chapter One and shall return to later.

That seems to be the pattern in the North. In Southern popular parlance however, the *dinh* may have an inscribed name of *miếu*, e.g. Long Tuyền Cổ

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Miếu ("Ancient miếu of Long Tuyễn"), while the next type of shrine (dền) is lumped together with Buddhist temples as well as large miếu. They are all simply called chùa. In contrast, Sơn Nam draws four broad categories of temples from his own observation in the South which approaches popular usage:

1. Dinh, where the Tutelary spirit(s) and associated deities are worshipped,

2. Dennen, the shrines for locally deified heroes, past kings and other legendary figures. Dền, dinh, phù, dật and tính are variants of dền, often smaller, usually dedicated to deities of non-orthodox cults.

3. Chùa, or pagodas, being mainly Buddhist and often situated in secluded spots. Near a cemetery they are called chùa âm hồn ("Yin soul pagodas"), or ann chủng sinh ("ashrams for sentient beings").

4. Miếu, shrines which are of smaller sizes, for spirits at the lower echelons of the pantheon e.g. the Earth god, the god of Agriculture, the goddesses of Water, of Fire... The ones dedicated to the family ancestors are called gia miếu ("family chapel"), to the royal lines, thị miếu ("generation shrine"), to Confucius and literati: văn miếu, to medicine y miếu. Near a cemetery, there can also be a miếu cồ hồn ("shrine for lonely ghosts").

The above four categories are, by implication, further grouped into two: dinh, dền, mimicking imperial palaces, are communal buildings in the pattern of ancestral worship; and chùa, miếu, are private or communal facilities honouring mainly celestial beings. The corresponding deities they house further reflect a dual category: Thần, Thánh ("tutelary spirits" and "holy beings") and Tiên, Phật ("Immortals" and "Buddhas") respectively. This division mirrors the opposition of Confucianism and Daoism/Buddhism which is reflected in both the elite and popular conceptions in Vietnamese speech.

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5 This way of naming (cồ miếu) is likely an instance of emulating the typology for older Chinese temples in the South with territorial cult of Kwan Kung, Tien Hu or Ma Chù.

6 Sơn Nam, Dinh Miếu..., p.18.

7 Sơn Nam, Dinh Miếu..., p.18.
Other terms for public or royal buildings such as cung ("royal palace") and phù ("princely/lordly palace") are also used for those shrines of various sizes associated with the mediums’ cult of the Immortals and the Nature Spirits. Such terms are thought to correctly refer to the original purpose of those monuments when they were erected by locals to accommodate the king or his ministers in transit. As a kind of stage hotel, they were instances of proto-dinh.8 These were built for local deities. The nineteenth century Nguyễn dynasty text of geography, Đại Nam Nhất Thông Chí, distinguishes two categories in its description of monuments in the provinces.9 Đền miếu is the designation for temples classed in the first group, which includes:

a. Đền (a raised ground), as mentioned above, for the worship of the Spirit of đất tắc ("soil and field"), sơn xuuyên ("mountain and river") or of Tiên Nông ("God of Agriculture").10

b. Miếu Hội Đồng (shrine of the assembly of Spirits) consecrated national heroes; miếu Thành Hoàng ("shrine for the Wall and Moat Spirit") where the village Tutelary Spirit is installed, and other miếu as mentioned above.

c. Various đền for the worship of any deities or spirits considered to be powerful and responsive to people’s prayers or supplications. These may be erected privately.

In this typology, the dinh has the sinicised name of miếu Thành Hoàng, being a subclass of miếu in group b. The inscribed name of the dinh for Bình Thủy village, mentioned in Chapter One, being Long Tuyền Cố Miếu, is an example of this court classification. On the other hand, Miếu Hội Đồng is a type of dinh known to be established in the South towards the end of the

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8 Nguyễn Văn Hảo, 'Essai ...', pp.110-112.

9 This classification, applied to most of the Mekong delta, is putatively king Minh Mạng’s. It was fashioned after local tradition of Thánh Hóa province, the Nguyễn’s country of origin. Sông Nam, ibid.

10 Lê Quy Đôn in 'Kiến Văn Tiếu Lực' mentions an earlier type -- đền Phong Văn (wind and cloud platform) with a building on it, as with đất tắc and nam giao platforms. After 1533, phong văn platform was rid of buildings. See Lê Quy Đôn Toàn Tập, vol.2, Khoa Hoc Xã Hội, Hanoi, 1977, pp 58-60. There is no mention of phong văn platform in 'Đại Nam Nhất Thông Chí'. Could sơn xuuyên be its substitute?
eighteenth century without local expectation of royal recognition. They were, according to Tạ Chí Đại Trường, listed because of the attention the court wished to give to southern villages in fortifying central control.

The second group named in nineteenth-century Đại Nam Nhật Thông Chí is từ quân (“pagodas and shrines”) which refers to those categorised as Buddhist. This court classification shows not only a duality which consisted of Confucian-Daoist beliefs on one side and Buddhist ones on the other, but also a different meaning to the word “quân”. Nguyễn Văn Huyên points out that the word “quân”, in Northern Vietnam, is interchangeable with “miếu” in designating those đình having only a memorial function. Huỳnh Tịnh Của’s dictionary denotes, presumably for the south, quân as a miếu for spirits and immortals, implying its general Daoist character.

The inconsistent typology and nomenclature of the village communal halls, together with a complex process of consecration, which I will elaborate later, hint at competing views of, and attitudes to, the nether world. This competition no doubt indicates changing social relations over time. Elite classification -- of Daoist component either with Buddhist or with Confucian categories -- was made for reasons to do with the debate between central and regional groups. Fundamentally, these categories are polysemic and are discursive objects within élite groups.

Finally, we may note the perceptual framework of two contemporary ethnologists, Cadière and Lê Văn Hảo. In his perception of the two Confucian and Buddhist-Daoist bodies of beliefs, since the late nineteenth century, Cadière alludes to a balance between the social importance of đình and chùa (Buddhist temple). Lê Văn Hảo seems to concur with this dualism in his

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11 Đại Nam Nhật Thông Chí for the six southern provinces mentions several miếu đời Đàng, the earliest of which was built in the late 18th century. See Đại Nam Nhật Thông Chí - Lục Tỉnh Nam Việt, Tu Trại Nguyễn Tạo transl., Nhà Văn Hóa, Saigon, 1973, vol.1, pp.40 & 93; vol.2, pp.27 & 65; vol.3, pp.71-72.

12 Tạ Chí Đại Trường, Thần, Ngữ., pp.237-238.

13 Nguyễn Văn Huyên, Contribution..., p.34.

14 Huỳnh Tịnh Của, Việt Nam Quốc Âm..., p.221.

15 Cadière observes that, although every village has a Buddhist temple and that Buddhism is patronised by the State, those temples that are under the care of the
writings on northern temples, placing the *dinh* in contrast with the other large temples (*đền* and *chùa*). Cadière may also imply an underlying mutuality as well as a symmetrical tension between the so-called élite and popular groups of practitioners, when the same notables attended both *dinh* and *chùa* gatherings. This multi-lateral relationship is not consistent with a model of male/Confucian dominance in popular beliefs such that the social life of the village is centred around the *dinh*. A look at the tutelary spirits may throw more light on this issue.

**TUTELARY SPIRITS AND THEIR CONSECRATION**

In some contemporary southern *dinh*, up to forty spirits may be worshipped, with one or more royally certified tutelary spirits on the central altar. The earliest surviving record detailing Vietnamese deification practices, the fourteenth-century *Việt Diên U Linh Túp* (Occult Powers of the Viet Palace), written and appended by court literati, is basically a compilation of posthumous biographies and folkloric legends of spirits and their subsequent royal certification (*sắc phong*). While its content, as Taylor points out, serves to open legitimising space for the court’s exercise of power and influence, its tenor portays the efforts of an élite trying to distance themselves from popular beliefs in the supernatural.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, the Chinese word *ling* associated with supernatural power had probably been in wide currency long before this, possibly even before the eighth century, when the first Vietnamese temple dedicated to Lao-tzu was thought to have been erected. We could postulate

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State or private management are in bad repair. Only those run by particular foundations, or cult associations, are well maintained. On ceremonial days, the pagodas are attended by community representatives or village notables. See Cadière, L., *Croyances...*, vol.1, p.5.


there was an overall ideology subsuming a number of opposing *linh* powers. This ideology was patterned after the opposition between Order and Disorder, where Order was understood to be on the side of the male-dominated ruling establishment. Thus the monarchs justify their claims to power by ostensibly co-ordinating heavenly (*linh*) forces to

a) protect the nation against invaders,

b) secure supernatural assistance in the harmonious growth and prosperity of the nation,

c) marshal the spirits already in the service of the villagers.

For the first, the king ‘installed’ spirits to guard the frontier posts and/or the village boundaries, with official decrees bearing the spirits titles and honours. From the Lê to the Nguyễn, the Rites Ministry was ordered to list tutelary spirits appointed to all villages with grades, promotion and demotion. Hundreds of certificates and hagiographies were then issued on each of those occasions to the villages.

Court consecration is usually regarded by scholars as the creation of a spirit parallel of the human mandarinate itself. However, this parallelism of the spirit and the living world is more an ideal promoted by the centre than a reflection of the actual relationship between court and villages. In the process of certification, conflict of interests among members of ruling court élite found a way to surface. As far as the villages were concerned, influence of the court appeared to wither beyond the conferring of certificates.\(^9\) The following example will illustrate this issue.

To bolster his image of establishing the Nguyễn rule over the North, King Gia Long conferred titles and honours to over 500 names qualified as tutelary spirits in his 1811 decrees.\(^9\) Two northern mandarins in charge of certifying tutelary spirits conspired to include a Trịnh general, considered enemy of the

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\(^9\) *Dai Nam Thuc Lu*, vol.4, pp.119-120.
king, in the list.\textsuperscript{20} A junior mandarin assisting the compilation also slipped the names of his ancestors and parents-in-law in the list to be certified as Spirits of Good Fortune (phúc thần), probably to be honoured in his own village. The severe punishment Gia Long meted out to the above mandarins and accomplices showed how serious he was about this enterprise. That the offenders did not realise the grave consequences of their action may also betoken a glaring difference between local and court sense of history. Thus, the king who was preoccupied with a national consolidation mythology and his mandarins and their villages with local practices, displayed varied shifts of the meaning of installing phúc thần.

For the second royal measure to co-ordinate spirits powers, court rites honouring Heaven and Earth and other-worldly powers were periodically performed by the king. Their approved versions were taken up by village notables, usually through the persuasion of local lettered élite group. Again, various regional and local influences are at work in the determination of ritual formats. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Lê Văn Duyệt in the nineteenth century introduced female singers in diính ceremonies at the risk of offending the Huế court.\textsuperscript{21} Nevertheless this new format became routine in the South.

For the third measure, the purpose of eradicating practices such as human sacrifices, or other 'perverted faiths', was also to bring village ideologies into line. Thus in demarcating the religious space, the acts of absorbing, neutralising, eliminating, expelling unwanted elements ('impurities'), coincided with polity founding.

In brief, consecration of the divinities may have been carried out initially by local choice, following which villagers could later review the status of their

\textsuperscript{20} Hoàng Ngụ Phúc, the Trịnh general in question, led the invasion of Đặng Trong in 1774, and died on return to the North, hence was considered an enemy of the Nguyễn. The royal fury unleashed on the two mandarins was, as Cooke rightly points out, indicative of a north-south cultural difference. But the offenders' motive is also worth examining. Cooke, N., Models and Mirages: Nguyễn Vietnam and the 'Chinese Model' Reconsidered, paper for the Conference on the Last Stand of Autonomous States in SE Asia and Korea, Bali, 19-21 August 1994, pp.18-19.

\textsuperscript{21} See footnote 35, p. 51, Chapter One.
guardians. Existing or newly appointed guardian spirits at a dinh could be certified by monarchs who from time to time would promote or demote them on the basis of their manifestation of responsiveness. Again, this formality modelled after the appointment system for mandarins. Promotions initiated locally without royal certification also occurred in parallel and perhaps complementary to central process. On the whole, consecration reflected the interaction not only between the court and the villages, or in other cases, a lack of it, but also of local relations.

Let us examine this issue through the intangible party in the centre-margin game: the village Tutelary Spirits. In order of their antiquity, we could list:

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22 Trân Văn Quy reports that within the last few decades, many certificates bearing the title Đại Vương (great king) at Hòa Hải village in Nghệ Tĩnh province, among them, that of a Trần prince, were thrown to the fire, effectively eliminating those spirits from the local pantheon. The villagers maintain that the certificates became less efficacious after many promotions to the Superior-Superior-Superior-Superior class (fourth degree level) over centuries. See Trân Văn Quy, 'Lễ Lạng và Phép Vua Đặng Sau một Đạo Sắc Thân' [Village Customs and Royal Regulations behind a Tutelary Spirit Certificate], Văn Hóa Dân Gian, no.1 & 2, 1988, p.52.

23 Nguyễn Văn Khoan cited Hoàng Cao Khải and Nguyễn Cảnh as two examples of mandarins being worshipped, in the 1910’s while alive, as Tutelary Spirits. Both the villages of Thái Hà in Hà Bạc and Động Làn in Hải Dương. North Vietnam, were respectively founded by the two mandarins. Their portraits were procured and displayed upon the altars for annual offerings by the villagers. See Nguyễn Văn Khoan, 'Essai sur le Dinh...', p.117.

Toan Ánh recounts another case of consecrating a living person whom he personally knew. About 1938-1940 in Khai Quang village, tỉnh Hà nội province, also in North Vietnam, for several times the memorial throne in the temple fell over frontwards whenever the guests and their herder went past. On prayerful queries, the Spirit announced in an elderly noble's dream that He had to vacate the guardianship on Heavenly decree to take up a post elsewhere, and the goatherd, Mr. Nguyễn Đình Cảnh, was to replace him. The throne fell over because He knew it each time he rushed out to greet the newly appointed guardian. Having overcome their embarrassment, the notables now faced the difficulty of persuading Mr. Nguyễn to fulfil the departed Spirit's advice. By the time Mr. Nguyễn acquiesced in order to avoid being further pressured, the village had been through a period of misfortune: house fires, stock loss, old people got sick etc. Once the new memorial tablet was enshrined, things returned to normal. Toan Ánh, Nếp Cüß - Tín Ngưỡng ở Việt Nam, [Old Ways - Vietnamese Beliefs], vol.1, republished by Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh 1992, pp. 134-138.
1. Stone/rock and tree spirits, as generative/regenerative powers.  
2. Mountain and river spirits, subsequently given human identity by a royal edict and revered as national heroes.  
3. Goddesses associated with nature and wet rice growing, later joined by Cham, local ethnic and Khmer/Indic goddesses.  
4. Important members of the village or founders of the local professions and crafts, and those who died at a propitious time e.g. a beggar, a nightsoil carter, a child; also those with obscure or unknown origins such as the Lustful Spirit (Đasmine). Most of these are not certified by the monarch. 
5. Wail-and-Moat and local tutelary spirits, introduced by Chinese rulers since the 9th century, and  
6. Mandarin 'installed' while alive.  

In Việt Điện U Linh Tịnh, the spirits are divided into three types: historical royalty, historical ministers, and mythical heroic spirits. The last type includes the first three categories listed above: they are also called "heavenly spirits" (thiền thần) and "nature spirits" (mệnh thần), to differentiate them from the human category (mệnh thần).  

Consacration has a deep history, and the popular personification of rock spirits is evidence of this. To better discern the interaction between élite
legitimation through the appropriation of this practice and popular beliefs, let us consider the myths surrounding rock spirits.

**ROCK SPIRITS**

According to Han records, King An Duong of pre-Han Vietnam was served by a Cao Lồ ("Tall Looming Presence"), whose 'secular title' was Dỗ Lồ ("Handsome Looming Presence"), or Thạch Thần ("Rock Spirit"). 26 Việt Điền U Linh Tạp hints at the ethereal quality of this minister. The thirteenth-century royal accolades given to Cao Lồ contain words such as questi nghi ("tough and resolute") and cường chinh ("hard and righteous"), properties obviously linked with rock and stone. Today the annual ritual at Nhói village in Hà Nội includes a re-enactment involving king An Duong going to the temple to pay respects to Trần Thiện Huyền Vũ, a Chinese Daoist deity who is said to have helped him found the capital Cổ Loa. However, Cao Lồ was known to have helped An Duong in that project. 27 The obvious anomaly in protocol—wherein a king must kowtow to a tutelary spirit—therefore betrays the popularity of a rock spirit that must be still worshipped after An Duong lost his kingdom. 28

According to Việt Điền U Linh Tạp, when Kao P'ien had vanquished the Nan Chiao rebellion towards the end of the ninth century, he saw Cao Lồ in a dream recounting the latter's conflict with king An Duong. Asked to explain, Cao Lồ said An Duong was a rooster spirit who favoured Count Lực, a gibbon spirit, and they both ganged up against him, a mountain rock. Tạ Chí Đại Trường interprets this as revealing a complicated ethnic situation when, under

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26 The historian Dỗ Thiên who is quoted in Việt Điền U Linh Tạp, refers to a non-extant Ciao Chí Ký [History of Chiao-chih], where the spirits' secular names were all titles.

27 Việt Điền notes that Cao Lồ according to Việt Sĩ Lược (brief history of Viet- circa 1340-1377) was the spirit who helped An Duong Vụng build the magic cross bow that could shoot ten arrows at a time, set up to defend Cổ Loa. Fallen out of the king's favour, Cao Lồ left. Việt Điền U Linh Tạp, op. cit., p.166.

In another legend, the magic bow's trigger was given to princess Mỹ Châu (cereal gem) to guard over. She lost it to her northern suitor, prince Trọng Thủy (hydraulic control) and was killed by her father An Duong Vụng.

28 Tạ Chí Đại Trường, Thần, Người..., pp.38-40.
Chinese pressure from the north, cohesion between the highland and riverine groups of the Red river delta was crucial for their collective survival.

The next rock spirit mentioned in Việt Điện U Linh Tập was at Bạch Hạc river, towards the highland north of the Red river. Triệu Xương, the T'ang governor of Annam (791-803) wrote about Giao Châu's governor between 650-655, Lý Thường Minh, who, wanting to install a Họ Quốc Thần (Realm-Protector Spirit) at the fork of Bạch Hạc river, had a rock statue made. Dreaming, he saw two giants identified as Thọ Lệnh Trưởng (indigenous chieftain) and Thạch Khanh (rock brother). He asked the two for a contest of their power, and the Rock lost to the Chieftain. The latter was installed as Good Fortune spirit (Phúc Thần) - a Chinese precursor of village tutelary spirits, at Bạch Hạc village, while Thạch Khanh was worshipped at another. To accede power to the ruling group's spirit was understandable. What was more remarkable was the persistent local worship of rock spirits. Their popularity was evidenced in Việt Điện U Linh Tập in phrases like 'reverence by the Thọ (autochthonous) inhabitants', and of 'continual burning of incense and lamp'.

**CONSECRATION BY ROYAL DEGREE**

Since regaining independence from China in the tenth century, Vietnamese rulers from the Ngô to the Anterior Lý paid particular attention to religious activities within the polity, in which the rulers themselves took part. Up to the twelfth century, the Vietnamese cultural environment is said to have exhibit a poetic mode in literature and mythology that preceded the distancing of the court from plebeian practice. Đại Nam's independence in the eleventh century meant that local customs and popular religions came under active

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29 Tạ Chí Đại Trường, ibid., referring to Việt Điện U Linh Tập, op. cit., p.92.

30 Đăng Văn Lượng, 'Triệu Tĩnh Âu Ca Lạc Thiện Thi' (When a Million People Sang In The Joyful And Prosperous Time), in Tìm Hiểu Xã Hội Việt Nam Thổ́ Lý-Trần (understanding Vietnamese society in the Lý-Trần era), Khoa Học Xã Hội, Hanoi 1981, pp. 517-551. Indirectly, he warns that dualistic concepts spawning from a Hegelian master-servant model are problematic, as they tend to oversimplify.
attention of the new regime. In its effort to strike a balance between pragmatic sinicisation and ideological quest of identity, the Court transformed the *dinh* into depositories of forms affecting village supernatural practices.

Centralisation achieved through deification by royal decree, which was a means of legitimation and of undermining possible sedition, also led to a distancing of court from villages. However, more than two centuries taken to institute Confucian rituals accounts for an adaptation that was not as radical and urgent as later Vietnamese Confucian historians would have us believe.

From the crisis of Đại Việt polity towards the end of the fourteenth century, through a century of Ming occupation, to the instability caused by Trịnh-Nguyễn tension up to the eighteenth century, centralisation through supernatural means had seen various peaks and troughs. By the time King Gia Long tried to systematise the village pantheons in 1804, central influence through village spiritual matters must have been considerably weak.

According to a decree in that year, certificates divided tutelary spirits into three classes. First-class spirits were celestial and mythical beings, including nature spirits, great kings and ministers. Second-class spirits were supernaturally responsive entities who showed their power posthumously, or they were patriarchs of the professions and crafts. The third class included pre-existing spirits propitiated by local populations, virtuous women, officials or mandarins to whom the village was indebted. Besides, there were 'Generals' (*Tướng Quan*), such as spirits of the whales at coastal villages, sometimes ranked in the first class. The seals believed to have saved king Gia Long's life, when he was fleeing the Tây Sơn, by wiping out his footprints also were given the 'Generals' title.

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31 Huỳnh Ngọc Tráng *et al.* mention without quoting source, king Gia Long's new terms designating the three classes, *Thặc Cánh* (extensive vigilance?) for first class spirits, *Quang Ý* (brilliant will power?) for the second class, and *Linh Phù* (protective linh power) for the third class, Huỳnh Ngọc Tráng *et al.*, *Dinh Nam Bổ...* p.47.

By the 1840s, King Thiệu Trị decreed the elimination of a number of royal titles conferred on spirits, restricting local initiatives to use the same honours on spirits consecrated without royal certificates. This restriction was aimed at the northern villages where claimed loyalty to the previous Lê dynasty, legitimating uprisings, was more widespread. The adding of new titles to spirits, if it occurred in the South, was not an issue for the court. Moreover, royal certificates were valued by new southern villages as credentials. What is the relation between such a centralist formality and the village construction of identity? A brief history of the diJOIN building may further allow a specific look behind the oft-cited court penetration into the villages and the latter’s resistant capacity to preserve identity or independence.

ORIGIN OF THE BUILDING

The official comments about "the cult of spirits and Buddha" in the 1804 decree, not long after Gia Long ascended the throne, throw some light on the northern village scene:

Lately, there are many who ingratiate themselves with the spirits, building fancy doors and tiled roofs, carving beams and columns, decorating cult objects with gold and silver, ornately embroidering their curtains, umbrellas, fans, flags and pennants, celebrating Springs and Autumns, singing and performing at the main ceremony, the longest of which last dozens of nights and days, the shorter nine or eight. They perform Chêu (Boat Rowing) and Tiềng (Speaking Play), Thướng (Paid by Reward/Tip) and Lào (Laotian?), and hold extravagant feasts, sparing no expense. Moreover, they race boats, show water puppets, all sorts of games, also they pick young men and women to play chess and cards. In name they worship spirits, in truth they want to satisfy their lust. They also make people contribute dearly with money. From now on, for those meritorious spirits who require ox sacrifices, sacrifices can or have been made on application to the district mandarin, for consideration of approval. Repair and renovations to the shrines are restricted to the inner sanctum and the three middle rooms.

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the two gate columns are not to be carved or painted with decorations. The temple/shrine building cannot be called diên (“palace”); cult objects are not allowed to be painted with red and overlaid with gold; curtains, umbrellas, flags and fans are to be made with died cloth and silk, with no embroidery allowed. Annual ceremonies with singing and theatre are to last one day and night, singers are not to be excessively tipped.34

How did this state of affairs come about? The reconstruction of the dinh’s birth by historians has been premised on a political merging of its religious functions and the entire social structure of the village. As yet, no convincing date for this merging and emergence of the present stereotypical dinh has been established. Georges Boudarel suggests it was the day when Trần Thủ Độ marched into a village in Thanh Hóa-Nghệ An area to set the foundation for state intervention into village administration?35 Maybe it was 1496, as Tạ Chí Đại Trương avers, the year a royal edict initiated some economic independence to the dinh. And it was a small ‘twist of fate’ which set a particular form of village parochialism firmly in many Northern villages until today.36

These broad strokes do not show us the ambiguity of hegemony, or the equivocation underlying compliance on the villagers’ part. Boudarel’s proposition implies a robust court dominance, while Tạ Chí Đại Trương’s suggests a positively catalytic effect of the court’s irreversible centralisation. Neither of these centrist views, which I will go over in more detail later,

34 Đài Nam Thục Lục Chính Biên, vol.2, p.166. Cooke has corroborated evidence from Phan Thúc Trực’s Quốc Sử Đại Biên [A Different National History], written in the early 1850’s, to confirm that Gia Long’s edict was aimed at northern villages. However, the content of the accusations itself - regarding games and group singing, which did not and still do not exist in the south - is another proof. Cooke, N., Models and Mirages..., pp. 15-16.

35 Boudarel, G., L’Insertion du Pouvoir Central dans les Cultes villageois au Vietnam’, in Cultes Populaires et Sociétés Asiatiques, Alain Forest, Yoshiaki Ishizawa and Leon Vandermeersch (eds), L’Harmattan, 1991, pp.87-146. Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư records an inspection of village registers by Trần Thủ Độ in 1264, when the queen asked him to put a village in the position of cữuRESS in charge of arrests. Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư, vol.2, book V, p.34. This position is believed to be one of the village official positions appointed by the court. See Trần Tư, Cố Cửu Tổ Chức ..., end note 28, p.142.

36 Tạ Chí Đại Trương, Thần, Ngộ... p.170. King Lê Thành Tông decreed in 1496 that villages were to finance their own communal temple affairs. This means public land was to be allotted to these temples for collecting rent. Further details later.
considers the village communal house as a site for various forms of resistance to and negotiation with dominating groups, whether central, regional or local authorities.

INITIAL FUNCTIONS OF THE ĐỊNH

Tạ Chí Đại Trường’s attempt to reconstruct the birth and evolution of the đinh is based on sparse references from stelae and disparate historical records. He postulates that the earliest initiative was king Lý Thái Tông’s decision in 1010 A.D., soon after enthronement, to move the capital from Hoa Lư (today’s Ninh Bình) back to Đào Ía (today’s Hanoi). This entailed expanding the country’s communication and transport infrastructure. The need for resting stations for land and river travellers was generally met with buildings erected with local resources.37 A stele at Linh X定量 pagoda in Thanh Hóa province, dating from 1126, mentions ‘a small đinh by the river where boats often stop to rest’; the name given to these stations, borrowed from the Han word đinh, also means ‘stop’.39

The đinh’s official name in historical records was hành cung (“royal travel palace”).40 These hotels were reserved for royal personages. A stone tablet, dated 1173, has a reference to one of the earliest đinh to assume some palatial dimensions. Smaller state-built stations that offered accommodation for foreign visitors are mentioned in tablets dating from 1043. A large number of early đinh were found in the areas with farming land owned by the ruling Lý family.

37 Tạ Chí Đại Trường, Thận, Nguội,... pp.160-161.
38 Quoted by Huỳnh Ngọc Tráng et al. in Dinh Nam Bộ,... p.20.
39 Glosses of the word đinh include ‘arrest, pause, delay, adjourn’...Ngô Huy Quỳnh mentions the original Han characters for đinh indicating three functions of this building during the Han period: (i) a shelter for travellers, (ii) a rest station for messengers, mandarins or travellers, built at ten li apart, and (iii) a meeting place to deal with communal affairs. See Ngô Huy Quỳnh, Tìm Hiểu Lịch Sử Kiến Trúc Việt Nam [Understanding the History of Vietnamese Architecture], vol.2, Nhà Xuất Bản Xây Dựng, 1991, p.56.
40 Tạ Chí Đại Trường, Thận, Ngrẻü.... p.161.
The great majority of *dinh*, however, were privately built. Constructed to disparate standards, they had different religious motifs to depict their function. A *dinh* serving as public shelter would contain Buddhist icons representing the compassionate salvation theme. Many contained those locally-installed deities that would not necessarily be approved by the ruling Centre.  

According to Tạ Chí Đại Trưởng, the most important of Lý-installed spirits in the new capital represented a gathering of outlaying local nature spirits to Đại La to defend the seat of monarchy, although legitimisation entailed a continuation of the Chinese administrative and legitimating pattern established by the previous Chinese colonisation. To complicate the picture, the Lý era saw Buddhism, reach official prominence. The first Lý king was an adopted son of the monk Lý Khánh Văn and a student of Zen master Văn Hạnh, who was a senior minister to the previous Lê king. In 1014, not surprisingly, three hundred pagodas were built at the king’s order. In 1031, the court reportedly paid for the building of 950 pagodas. Other practices were also patronised by the court: in the same year, Daoists in the capital were promoted as clerics. In 1057, Brahman and Indra statues were cast in gold and consecrated at two temples. In 1129, the completion of 84,000 Buddhist terra cotta stupas was celebrated.

Nevertheless, as far as the *dinh* were concerned, a spread of Lý-clan spirits to the capital was followed by Lý-investitured territorial guardians at local level. A recent count of certified spirits at forty-one temples in Thái Bình province reveals that, of those with written historis, twenty-three out of

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42 Nguyễn Bá Lăng, *Kiến Trúc Phật Giáo Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Buddhist architecture), Văn Hạnh University, Saigon 1971, p.60.


45 *Lịch Sử Việt Nam*, vol.1, p.163.

46 At the northern coastal base of the Red River delta (just South of Hải Phòng).
fifty-one were installed during the Lý dynasty. For the twenty-one spirits with oral histories, nine were born in the Lý era alone. As for seventy-seven written legends about all kinds of spirits, the gender proportion shows seventy-three percent male; whereas among sixty-seven oral histories, fifteen percent are male, seven percent are female and seventy-eight percent are of undetermined gender. Overall, if we assume oral accounts are mostly of older origin, and written accounts reflect of the ideology of the ruling elite, a male-dominated pantheon prefigured since the Lý era.

Streamlining administration favoured the ascendancy of the Confucian-inclined mandarins through to the end of the Trần dynasty. It resulted from a combination of three equally important factors. Firstly, the available service of a small band of scholars provided a convenient solution to the monarch’s need either to control factional fighting within the ruling clan, or to legitimise by centralisation. Secondly, families of upper class Han migrated to Vietnam, providing the court of Lê Hoàn (980-1065) with Chinese learning and contributing to a two-way acculturation of Vietnamese ruling groups which facilitated the Chinese legitimating pattern. Patriarchy and monogamy was introduced under Han rule, as Taylor points out, enabling simpler tax collection and other administrative machinery. Thirdly, Buddhism having entered Vietnam through a popular route earlier on, the court’s distancing from the populace was further aided by a non-Buddhist, if not anti-Buddhist, model bequeathed by centuries of Han colonisation. Both the secular advis-

47 Diệp Đình Hòa, ‘Vài Văn Đề về Văn Hóa Nước Việt Vương Bác Huyện Quỳnh Phụ - Thái Bình qua Tín Ngưỡng Thờ Ưu Định’ [Vietnamese Cultural Issues in Northern Areas of Quỳnh Phú District, Thái Bình Province, Related to the Religious Practice at the Định], Tạp Chí Đạo Tộc Học, no.1, 1981, p. 44. While I acknowledge that the Thái Bình region is newly claimed from the sea, as pointed out by Diệp Đình Hòa himself, I do not insist, as he does, in postulating a harmonious continuity from the Bronze Age to the present in Thái Bình, just because some Đông Sơn type culture existed near here. I also realise the problem of dating the hagiographies in Thái Bình as having true Lý or pre-Lê origin. Nevertheless, even if cult biographies were not entirely a contemporary invention, they would have been introduced by incoming migrants. They would indicate that overall, the holding a stronghold in local historical imagination.

who were mostly Chinese-born, and the Vietnamese-born Buddhist monks, who provided the intellectual content to court religious and administrative policies, contributed to the above mentioned pattern, at the same time they were locked in covert competition to monopolise influence.\textsuperscript{49} This administrative 'rational model' must therefore have had ample time to maximise its effective reach during the Lý and Trần eras.

TRÀN COURT AND RELIGION

If the Lý were eclectic in their establishment of 'dynastic religion', Trần monarchs showed no less adherence to a mixture of beliefs. While Buddhism continued to enjoy royal following, the Trần kings were also partial to Daoist practice. In 1248, Trần Thái Tông ordered nhã phong thủy (feng shui experts) to find all the inauspicious places in the country and place them under controlling manipulations by geomantic techniques.\textsuperscript{50} In 1255, a Daoist named Thẩm, petitioned Heaven for the king to have a son who was the reincarnation of an Immortal.\textsuperscript{51} This wish was apparently fulfilled, and the prince, Nhật Duật, grew up to be learned as well as proficient in Daoist magic. When the king was sick, he ordered Nhật Duật to cure him with talismans.\textsuperscript{52} Under Thái Tông's rule, in 1277, soothsaying was sought by the king's father, Trần Thái Tông, who jokingly ordered a clairvoyant (minh tể) called Nguyễn Mặc Lão to 'look inwardly' for the explanation to his dream. Mặc Lão came back the next day with an interpretation, which had probably been accessed through trance or

\textsuperscript{49} Tạ Chí Đại Trưởng, Thần Ngữõi..., p.137.

\textsuperscript{50} Mã and Lế (Chu) rivers were redirected, Chieu Bạch mountain chiselled in Thanh Hóa according to phong thủy (feng shui) rules. Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thập [The Complete History of Đại Việt], vol.2, Hà Văn Tân (ed), Hoàng Văn Lâu transl., Khoa Học Xã Hội, Hanoi, 1993, p. 22.

\textsuperscript{51} Thẩm told the king: 'The Supreme Emperor agreed, and ordered the immortal youth Chieu Văn to incarnate to be your son, with a 40-year lifetime'. When the baby boy was born, there were the characters Chieu Văn Đồng Tể marked on his arm. They only disappeared when he was grown up. Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thập, vol. 2, p. 25.

\textsuperscript{52} Nhật Duật put on fur coat, wore a hat, looking like a Daoist. Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thập, vol. 2, p. 120.
dreaming. It was further elaborated by the senior king into a prediction of his own imminent death.\textsuperscript{53}

These disparate traces of shamanistic beliefs on the part of Trần kings reflect a pattern inconsistent with their politics that dictated which deity should be honoured, and in which local temple beyond the court precinct. This practice was not new. Earlier, the reform of local temples was initiated by the famous general Lý Thường Kiệt (1020-1105) who led the successful battle against the Chinese Sung invasion in 1075. His 'spiritual' campaign in Thanh Hóa,\textsuperscript{54} in the final years of his life, aimed at eradicating the 'impure shrines' (đàn từ) and turning them into temples for the Hán-imported Spirit of Good Fortune (Phúc Thần).\textsuperscript{55} The reformist campaign was continued by the Trần dynasty when a national preceptor, probably an orthodox Zen master, travelled throughout the country banishing local spirits, destroying their 'impure shrines' and converting a number of spirits into benign and beneficial ones (whatever qualities the ruling élite thought that entailed).\textsuperscript{56}

At the same time, this undertaking marked the first divergence of the ruling élite's ideas from the folk/popular view of the supernatural.\textsuperscript{57} Thus a non-Buddhist deity in the village had good reasons to take refuge in the đinh, now that local Buddhist temples would risk being condemned as 'impure'. But the advantage did not last long. In 1231, king Trần Thái Tông's father, Trần Thừa, ordered Buddhist statues to be put in all the địch đinh (literally "service

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\textsuperscript{53} The story recounts how the senior king ostensibly predicted the day of his death, first of the fourth month that year. \textit{Dại Việt...}, p. 41.

\textsuperscript{54} Tạ Chí Đại Trương, \textit{Thần Ngựën...}, p.136. See also Hoàng Xuân Hãn, \textit{Lý Thường Kiệt, Ban Tự Thu Đại Học Vân Hạnh}, Saigon, 1967, p.383.

\textsuperscript{55} He also punished 'those who indulged in ghosts and demons, spirit mediumship, to eliminate odious customs'. See Lý Túc Xuyên. \textit{Việt Điển ...}, p 71.

\textsuperscript{56} Tạ Chí Đại Trương, ibid.

\textsuperscript{57} It was over and above 'the inimical relationship between the heroic spirits, absorbed by in the "imperial" subculture, and the animist spirits worshipped by the villagers', as Wolters observes of the period. W.O. Wolters, \textit{Dai Viet in the Fourteenth...}, p.xxxv.
stations") as these buildings were called.\textsuperscript{58} It is yet to be discovered how assiduously this order was observed.\textsuperscript{59}

TWO VERSIONS OF THE DỊNH'S HISTORIC BIRTH

BOUDAREL'S HYPOTHESIS

It is far from clear when the administrative structure of the village initially merged with the dinh religious practice. If the architectural similarity between Dinh Bạng village temple (built in the eighteenth century) and Minangkabau (Sumatra) long houses suggests an inherent Southeast Asian communal superstructure,\textsuperscript{60} then such structure is believed to have undergone great change by the thirteenth century.

Inspired by an idea put forward in Ngô Tất Tố's writing in the 1930s on northern villages, Boudarel credits Trần Thủ Độ, the Trần dynasty's founder, with extending central control through the first-ever promotion of a 'village officialdom' (xã quan) superimposed on the dinh.\textsuperscript{61} As Ngô Tất Tố writes:

If, during the Lý dynasty, the dinh had become a Buddhist temple and a place to welcome the monarch, it was not yet a place for assembly and feasting. The use of dinh as meeting and eating places was initiated by old Trần Thủ Độ. Although a fisherman's son, he had talents in politics. Because

\textsuperscript{58} Chu Quang Trư mentions the definition in ancient history of dích dình in the thirteenth-century Trần dynasty as 'a place built, according to our old tradition, at many locations with white-washed walls for travellers to rest'. Disregarding this type of building as in any way related to village communal house of today, he maintains that the dình evolved from the miếu by virtue of tutelary spirit instalment. See Chu Quang Trư, 'Chùa và Dình trong Sinh Hoạt Văn Hóa cừu Người Việt', Tạp Chí Đồ Cổ Học, no. 2, 1980, p.53.

\textsuperscript{59} Tạ Chí Đại Tường, Thần Ngữ... , p.137, citing Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư, Trần dynasty era.

\textsuperscript{60} Mentioned by Nguyễn Văn Huyên in his 'Contribution à l'Étude d'un Génie Tutélaire Annamite Lý Phúc Man', BEFEO, vol. 38., 1938, p.45.

\textsuperscript{61} Georges Boudarel, "l'Insertion du Pouvoir." pp. 94-99. Trần Thủ Độ at least once travelled through villages to check registers and accounts, and routinely install a villager to be a funcionary called 'cậu điều', understood by the translator to take charge of arrests and extradition. See Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư, transl. Cao Huy Chu, Đào Duy Anh (ed), vol.2, 2nd printing, Khoa Học xã Hội, Hanoi, 1971, p.36.

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of the crooked way they usurped the throne from the Lý, he knew that the majority of the people did not respect [the Trần]. On the one hand, those who helped them were rewarded by being installed as village tutelary spirits after their deaths, and enjoying perpetual worship. On the other hand, he invented gathering and feasting, ensured that those participants with a mandarin title had high seats, better food morsels, and the right to order around others below them.\(^62\)

The creation of the village officialdom, whose status and function were not well known during the reign of Trần Thái Tông (1225-1258), was noted by the scholar Phan Huy Chú (1782-1840):

The Lê dynasty, upon establishing sovereignty, again appointed village officials (Xã Quan), three officials for [each] large village, two for a medium-sized and one for a small village. [King] Thánh Tông, in the Quang Thuận era [1460-1469], changed the xã Quan [title] to xã Trưởng (village head).\(^63\)

In some way, this reinforces Boudarel's contention that sophisticated dynastic moves to centralise may have been made earlier. As Boudarel argues, it was as if Trần Thủ Độ had steered the villages onto an irreversible course.\(^64\) Accordingly, this superstructure evolved, away from matrifocal traits, over an indeterminably long period. These traits, Boudarel maintains, characterised a mythological background that equated agriculture, sex and the mastery of water and projected a more politically equitable status of women.\(^65\)

Further, stratification of social power ossified over time, producing a dual mentality. One sought expression in furtive and disparate hẻm or peculiar local rituals, which re-asserted local identity. The other mentality belonged to a Confucian autarchy taking root in a Southeast Asian foundation and exploiting the 'prestige economy' of the latter to accumulate material wealth and yield its

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1961, pp.31-32.

\(^{64}\) Boudarel, "L'Insertion...", p.98.

\(^{65}\) Boudarel, "L'Insertion...", pp.116-133.
coercive power. The shift in emphasis and structure were to be dramatically
gathered and acted out with Confucian rituals within the *dinh* enclosure. The
grandiloquence and potlatch-like system had somehow compounded the
impoverishment and brutalisation of the lower classes over seven centuries.
There lies the source of indignation and irony in Ngô Tất Tố's writing about
contemporary northern villages.

However, the lengthy conversion to the male-dominated system means
either implementation was half-heated or hampered by ambivalence, or that
there was considerable resistance to centralisation. On the other hand, to
deduce that the conspicuous consumption structure had been irreversibly set
by Trần Thủ Độ is to assert that contemporary village politics has evolved such
that its corrupt form is merely the outcome of this hegemonic pattern. How
would this village structure, superimposed by the court, once settled into the
new form, be so resilient? What constitute its stability?

However, if we look at what Phan Huy Chú notes:

...in 1658, Lê Thấn Tông...ordered the provinces to select [their own] *xã*
trưởng (village heads), *xã* sư (attorneys), *xã* tu (deputies?), putting students
and scholars in those positions to rectify village affairs and look after
litigation.66

He goes on:

After Vĩnh Lộc era [1735], this practice was abandoned, all village heads
were appointed by villagers, examination procedure was cancelled, the
officialdom ceased to be important.67

What caused this waning in interest in village officialdom as the
eighteenth century approached? To dismiss the effects of changes over three
hundred years (war, Ming occupation, Lê dynasty's Confucian reform, among
others) is as absurd as accepting that the Trần Thủ Độ-inspired political
structure of the village crystallised in a stable *dinh* form. However sound Ngô
Tát Tố's postulation is on the abuse of local status and power, with its tragi-
comic consequences, meeting and feasting would certainly have existed before
the Trần era under diverse forms.

67 *Lịch Triều...*, p.480.
"Corruption" at village level is therefore a perception Ngô Tất Tố has for the change in only one of a number of possible forms of ritual life which preceded it, and which may not be connected to the time of Trần Thủ Độ at all. A Marxist-inclined view such as Boudarel's would similarly tend to regard twentieth-century village scene as the embodiment of moral decay associated with unrealised progress of the Asiatic mode of production. Such an idealist perspective is problematic, for local contestation, again, may not be related to state imposition.

Before exploring the strength and creativity of local practices,⁶⁹ we should consider how this subversion could be convincingly disruptive to the pre-Trần village structure. This is where Tạ Chí Đại Trường’s economy-based view comes in, to argue for the irreversibility of this change by postulating a material cause.

TẠ CHÍ ĐẠI TRƯỞNG’S THEORY

Tạ Chí Đại Trường points out that there is no known evidence of change in the political status of the dinh until the early half of the fifteenth century, when there was probably a proliferation of private temples. The attendant 'public disorder' was sufficiently widespread to provoke the royal ruling of 1474, which confirmed that many dinh temples were set up by private wealthy sponsors in order to 'make merit'. This entailed the donation of private land to the temple, which, apart from the charitable purposes for which the income of this land could contribute, ensured the commemoration of anniversaries after one's death.

Further details of this ruling prompt Đại Trường to deduce that from 1425, by providing the same form of 'merit making' as practised at Buddhist pagodas (chùa), and because of the many dinh dedicated primarily to Buddhist deities, the dinh gained a status equal to that of pagodas. As a result, all the dinh' could be lumped with the Buddhist pagodas in the text of the royal

⁶⁹ as manifest in a variety of expressions of the older earth-mother-fertility matrix, which will be taken up in Chapter Four.
decrees: henceforth, they were collectively referred to as chùa lồng, (literally 'the village pagoda'). The humble resting station was now an independent economic concern and a full-fledged religious establishment. Their function as rest-stations for travellers, to be sure, still continued. Thus Phú Khê village's suspension bridge with a roof cover in Hà Nam province appears to share the same centre line with the đinh nearby, prompting Claey to note, in his 1933 report, that the bridge is remarkable in that it forms together with the đinh a whole complex.\textsuperscript{70}

In 1496, in order to prevent any form of social unrest extending beyond the villages, King Lê Thánh Tông decided to hand the control of the privately-owned đinh to the local village leadership:

I notice there are many people who, having insufficient capital to construct a đinh[?], to pay taxes, undertake to gather money from others to establish their own funds, agree to others proposals under contract, then gradually decrease the amount of offerings or cease offering altogether. From now on, villages must look after the worship at the đinh. ...This is not to be changed.\textsuperscript{71}

According to Đại Trưởng, this decree marked the decisive beginning of the đinh as a political institution. Thus, a 'village parochialism' was unintentionally fostered by this royal decree. Built around the worship of the tutelary spirits, its social organisation was to become, as he maintains, an enduring feature of Vietnamese society, and is still preserved today in the North as an unexpected legacy of historical vicissitude.\textsuperscript{72}

Subsequent uprisings from the villages confirm the definitive effects of this economic independence. In 1516, Trần Cao led an uprising in support of his claim to be a descendant of a Trần king and a reincarnation of the god Indra. His army managed to briefly capture the capital and forced the Lê king

\textsuperscript{69} Tạ Chí Đại Trưởng, Thần Ngữit..., p.163.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., p.179, citing Claey's report in BEFEQ, no. XXXII, 1933, p.490.

\textsuperscript{71} Huỳnh Ngọc Tràng et al., Dinh Nam Bồ..., p.21, quoting R. Deloustal, La Justice dans l'Ancien Annam (Code des Lê), publi'd [year, p.308.

\textsuperscript{72} Tạ Chí Đại Trưởng, Thần Ngữit..., p.164.
to flee South. Trận Cao’s first base was the pagoda of Quỳnh Lâm village, with the temple finances placed at his disposal.

In another incident, the Lê court ordered Cố Khắc Xướng, a resident at a village pagoda who claimed to be a reincarnated prince and who cured sicknesses with burnt rice, to be beaten to death in 1517. Three months after this, another decree for the killing of a Trần Công Vũ of a dinh in the same district was issued. The two had such an influence that three officials were known to have written petitions in their defence to the king. These disparate examples, Đại Trường maintains, illustrate the capacity of village temples either to initiate collective action or to exert influence through the mandarinate that was to become a salient character of the dinh.

ALTERNATIVE ASPECTS

Was the process as simple as Đại Trường’s hypothesis suggests? Of key significance in the structuring of this temple-village nexus (dinh-làng) was the rise of the literati, a feature ignored by Ngô Tất Tố, himself one of the last Confucian scholars. The local intelligentsia, through their theoretical role in guiding the village, were implicitly captured in the power orbit of the centre. The royal decree in 1464 endorsed literati as the court’s proxy arbiters whereby all new local customs and norms were to be vetted by those ‘of learning and elevated standing in the village’. Eventually they forced local customs and norms into conformity with the official values of the central court. However, it is difficult to determine how ‘sinicised’ or Confucianised this pattern was.

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73 Úy Ban Khoa Học Xã Hội, Lịch Sử Việt Nam ..., pp.286-287.
74 Tạ Chí Đại Trường appears to imply this was a dinh. Thần Nguời..., p.171.
75 Ibid., p.164, 171.
76 This point is not lost on Tạ Chí Đại Trường, however. See Thần Nguời..., pp.165-167.
77 Eventually local customs and norms, as Phan Huy Chú recorded, were persuaded to comply with the ethos of central élite.
78 Tạ Chí Đại Trường, Thân Nguời..., p.181.
Firstly, the literati in each village, composed of those who had taken public examinations, formed a clique called Tư Văn ("literary vocation" that includes rites and music). They took charge of định ritual activities, including music and offering formalities. Each position had a functional status appropriate to their ranking in civil examinations. Their opposites number, Tư Vô ("martial vocation"), composed of martial art proponents ranging from military officials to civilian notables, were also prominent. This dualism bespeaks the Yin-Yang symmetry, though not the Confucian 'preference of literate/civil finesse over martiality' (trọng văn khinh võ). It reflects a different emphasis at local level, and may account for differences leading to changes in hagiographies as mentioned below.

There existed at least two more factors contributing to this not so fortuitous literati-Court linkage. On the one hand, the literati's ambition to enter into the civil service through public examinations, which were expanded during the later Lê dynasty (1428-1788), heightened villagers' aspirations for social ascendency. On the other hand, the increasing number of literati residing in the villages, either as continuing contenders for the officialdom or as retired officials, must have given them increasing influence in communal life.

81 According to Lê Quy Đơn, the number of candidates and the frequency of examinations generally increased from 1448. Between 1442 and 1526, there were in total 989 candidates reaching the doctorate level. See Lê Quy Đơn, Kiến Văn Tiêu Lục in 'Lê Quy Đơn Toàn Tập', vol.2, pp.7-85. See also Úy Ban Khoa Học Xã Hội, Lịch Sử Việt Nam, vol.1, pp. 276 & 279.
82 The number of successful candidates far outstripped the available mandarinate positions at all time. The most extreme disparity was during the Lê's reign. As Cooke notes: 'After Thánh Tôn's administrative reform, the entire royal bureaucracy (civil, military and subordinate clerical) comprised 5,370 positions, with only 1,825 graded in the civil mandarinate. Citä Nhân hopefuls at the 1514 metropolitan examination alone - 5,700 "selected men" - could have filled every civil administrative post four times over and still left some unemployed'. Cooke, N., 'Nineteenth-Century Vietnamese Confucianization: Evidence from the Palace Examinations (1463-1883)', Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, vol. 25, no. 2, Sep. 1994, pp. 277-286.
The Confucian conversion of the village was obviously not as smooth and unidirectional as both Tạ Chí Đại Trường and Boudarel assume. This is exemplified by the contestation induced by court’s imposition of official versions over renditions of tutelary spirits’ legends. Often, the national defender motif was grafted onto an older nature-fertility motif. Đặng Văn Lung points out that newer versions of hagiographic reflect a two-way process of court and local appropriation. He summarises three typical stages of change to the hagiographies:

1) The local nature spirit, usually of a river or a mountain frontier/border, was humanised in the form of a national hero through a local variation.

2) Court historians rewrote biographies of spirits, now certified as Tutelary deities, in standardised versions....

3) Subsequent reconstruction of hagiographies by local oral versions incorporated the hero’s post-humous prodigious deeds or related events.84

If centralisation was the court’s objective, the endeavour was far from an impressive success. It was even more attenuated and its images and themes fraught with local appropriation when we consider the birth of a dien in the process of founding new villages following Nam Tiến, or the southward expansion.

83 As Trần Quốc Vương notes on the evolution of the legend of the Genie Giông:
"...a character of folk mythology constructed long before the 14th-15th century (the time of the collections (Việt Điện Ú Linh Tìp) and Wondrous Tales of Linh Nam (Linh Nam Chích Quất), a multidimensional character (a genie of trees, rocks, storms, thunder and lightning, etc.) assembled gradually, until the time of king Lý Thái Tông he became the Soaring-to-Heaven Spirit King (Xưng Thiên Thần Vương) which is the Heavenly King (Thiên Vương) or Indra (Đê Thích), and through the Trần dynasty (in the history Brief Record of An Nam (An Nam Chí Lược)) until the end of the Trần and beginning of the Lê dynasty ...he acquired the comprehensively synthesized figure: a three-year-old boy stretched up to become a giant thanks to [eating] rice, and since the country faced foreign invasion, he went to defeat them on the battlefields and then rose towards heaven." Trần Quốc Vương, "The Legend of Ông Giông from the Text to the Field", paper delivered at the Symposium on Vietnamese History, SEASSI, Cornell University, 19-21 July, 1991, p.6.

84 Đặng Văn Lung, "Triệu Tình Âu Ca...", p.534.
**DỊNH IN A NEW VILLAGE**

From the early eleventh-century to the fifteenth century, extensive new land was opened up. By 1481, there were forty-three settlement outposts, the labour force consisted mainly of soldiers, civil and military prisoners. The village histories along the northern and Thanh Hóa - Nghệ An coastline recorded the establishment of fifteenth-century villages, with many village founders deified as tutelary spirits. As the Nguyễn lords continued the Southward push from the late sixteenth century, the foundation of new settlements was to be epitomised by the erection of *dinh*, whose pantheon characteristically included eminent pioneer leaders. The *dinh* pantheons of the Mekong delta today, continuing this pattern of worship of pioneers' villages, invariably honour founding pioneers among their main venerated Spirits.

After the fifteenth century, central authority declined and the Lê kingdom was a briefly usurped by the Mạc family (1527-1592). This culminated in the conflict between the Trịnh and Nguyễn families who ousted the Mạc to restore the Lê. In 1600, the Nguyễn families' establishment of the Đàng Trong ("Inner Region"), south of Hà Tĩnh province, marked the deepening of divisions. Such continual divisiveness has been attributed to the difference between northern and southern cultural patterns, and at the same time helped to foment local movements in former Đàng Ngoại (North/Outer Region) once the country came under the Nguyễn's control in the nineteenth century.

Đàng Trong also came to form a culturally distinctive region because the Nguyễn and their followers approached their task of establishing a new life in a particular style. The adaptation of Cham deities and appropriation of abandoned Cham temples is but one of many facets of the Vietnamese interaction with other ethnic groups in the South. It is therefore readily

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85 Ứy Ban Khoa Học Xã Hội, Lịch Sử ..., p.263

86 Ibid.


88 Tạ Chi Đài Trường, *Thần Ngờ*, p. 223, referring to old Cham shrines called *bunông* being taken over by Vietnamese in southward migration.
conceivable that the Dàng Trong diình must reflect the construction of this cultural identity. In other words, the layout, operation and conglomerations of meaning continually varied according to local influences. Continued Vietnamese expansion to the Mekong delta until the nineteenth century brought about further modification due to frontier pioneering conditions, multi-ethnic interaction and, eventually, the particular modernity associated with the French presence.

**NAM TIĒN (THE SOUTHWARD ADVANCE)**

The context of migration partially determines the subsequent forms of local adaptation. The majority of Vietnamese migrants to the South were from one of these three backgrounds: (i) impoverished peasants who left their villages in search of a better life; (ii) soldiers of the advance parties, who were encouraged to take along their families to settle in the South; and (iii) Northern prisoners captured during the Trịnh-Nguyễn war and other civilian prisoners, as mentioned above. The literati formed a tiny minority.\(^9\) Practices incorporating an older agrarian, nature-worship pattern, now freed of sinic or élite constraints, and mixed with local ethnic formulations, became norm.

The Tây Sơn brothers’ uprising in 1772 and he almost twenty years of upheaval that followed, culminated in their brief dominant rule over the country. For this time there is some recorded evidence of cultural values and practices different from those which are accepted as the prevalent pattern in the North. A Tây Sơn general in charge of Nghệ An province, for example, contemptuously objected to the public attention granted to xśl tác ceremonial platforms there.\(^9\) This reflected not only the pro-military attitude of Dàng Trong, but also, as Li Tana argues, something quite culturally distinct.\(^9\)

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\(^9\) Úy Ban Khoa Học Xã Hội, Lịch Sử Việt Nam, p.263.


\(^9\) Li Tana, The Inner Region..., see especially p.154.
Consequent to the Tây Sơn-Nguyễn war, followed by resistance to French occupation, many families considered it undesirable to keep genealogical records. This was obviously a justifiable fear that relatives might be harmed if one was suspected by hostile authorities. It turned into the belief that recorded genealogies brought bad fortune, possibly extinction of the lineage. As a result, ancestral worship was modified so that identities were hidden, disguised or otherwise represented in non-literate forms, such as the type of food offerings at death anniversaries. Coupled with this aversion to written documentation, the Vietnamese migrants from Thuận Hóa and Quảng Nam provinces brought with them a preferred mode of artistic communication, i.e. that of gestured or chanted, rather than verbalised expression of content. These factors must have had ramifications for the ritual formats of village communal worship.

GIA-DỊNH CULTURE

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, the wave of Chinese fugitives from the collapse of the Ming dynasty further contributed to acculturation. That is, close interaction and intermarriage accounted for a high degree of Vietnamese adaptation of Chinese cultural patterns in Gia Định, the region from Đồng Nai area southwards. 'Southern sinicisation' could be accounted for in the next set of circumstances: the Chinese emigres whose loyalty to the Nguyễn made them enemies of the Tây Sơn. This, coupled with the King Gia Long's re-unification measures after the fall of the Tây Sơn, makes it easy to understand the prevalent historiographical overestimation of the degree to which Southern acculturation was inflected by Chinese patterns.

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92 Sơn Nam, "Vịc Khẩn Hoàng Vùng Rạch Giá" ’[The Opening Up of Virgin Land in Rạch Gia Area], Tạp San Sử Đồ, no.19-20, 1970, p.179.

93 See Nguyễn Văn Xuân, Khí Những Lưu Đầu Trên Trời Lại’ [When the Emigres Return], Thời Mới, 1969, republ. by Văn Nghệ California 1990. See also Đăng Văn Lung, who argues for the distancing of court elite from the mass to be co-eval with the divorce of court dancing and written literature from the hitherto unified oral tradition. Đăng Văn Lung, 'Triệu Tĩnh Âu Ca…', pp.517-551.

94 See for example, Tạ Chí Đại Trường's discussion in 'Thần, Người..' op. cit. pp.293-300
As mentioned in the previous chapter, by the nineteenth century, the Minh Hùng (Sino-Vietnamese) villages had become, for the Vietnamese, models of southern ‘high living’. It is, perhaps, not surprising that the floor plans of many Southern dinh buildings would be fashioned after the Minh Hùng Gia Thành, a Chinese emigres' temple built in 1832 to honour their settlement’s founders and protectors in Chợ Lớn. As these temples are called either miếu (shrine) or hội quán (association venue), it may not be surprising to find the first southern dinh constructed under Gia Long’s order were miếu - for the assembly of spirits, miếu hội đồng.95

Localisation was a notable feature in both élite and popular culture. Lê Văn Duyệt (d. 1832), an able southern-born general, and for decades the region’s Governor, enjoyed a great measure of popularity, especially with the ethnic Chinese population and overseas merchant groups. A colourful character known for his love of cock fighting, court dancing and the classical theatre (hát bol), he was credited with introduction of at least three dinh formalities which imitated court rituals thus risking accusations of false royal pretence.96

KING TỤ ĐỨC’S MASSIVE CERTIFICATION

As I noted earlier, in 1852, perhaps sensing the impending foreign challenge, king Tụ Đức had 13,069 royal certificates issued, and most of the titles granted to southern dinh’s were without the name of any historical person appended. A number of local divinities such as Thiền Y A Na, the adopted Cham goddess, Nam Hải Đại Vitông, the whale spirit, and Ma Ha Can of Sieng origin (an ethnic minority group) were edified with titles as locally recognised.

95 One in Biên Hòa and one in An Giang province are known to be constructed during Gia Long time. Đại Nam Nhĩ Thống Chí, Lục Tỉnh..., vol.1, p. 40 & vol.2, p. 27.
96 From Sdn Nắm’s talk, Ý Nghĩa Hội Lê Đình... See also Sdn Nam, Đình Miếu và Hội Lê dân Gian..., p.60. King Minh Mạng’s grudge against Lê Văn Duyệt, however, was attributed to the latter’s prestige, and behaviour considered as arrogant by the king, rather than Lê’s indulgence.
Of the more than two thousand certificates sent to the *dinh* in the Mekong delta, most were of two types: those with the title *Đại Cận Thánh Nước* ("Great Heavenly Saintly Lady"); and those entitled *Thánh Hoàng Bồn Cính* ("Local Wall-and-Mon: Spirit"), for female and male spirits respectively.97 The latter group apparently form the majority, although the precise gender ratio is unknown.

These certificates are printed by the woodblock method, a confirmation of their mass-production. However, some evidence suggests that Tự Đức was only implementing King Minh Mạng's policy of national consolidation, motivated by the overgrown power and independence of southern governor Lê Văn Duyệt.98 A few decades later, some certificates were held as symbols of resistance to French domination, and as such were treasured by the villages concerned throughout the colonisation period.99

The fact that royal certificates are still jealously guarded by elderly notables may also indicate that a special local value is attached to them, quite independently of any loyalty to the monarchy. It reflects a differential sense of historicity, as I suggested in Chapter One. Here again, we can surmise that certificates were also an appropriated by the village élite as part of their dominant discourse.

To explore this issue, we need to look at the subordinate deities and in particular those regarded as closer to the lowest social stratum, or to the personal/domestic realm, upon whom royal certificates were not conferred. In

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97 Cadière noted that the word *cần* in *đại Cần* means 'drought' rather than the 'heaven' (as in *cần khôn*. See 'Croyances et Pratiques Religieuses des Vietnamiens', vol.3, E.F.E.O. Paris 1957, p.57.


99 See for example, Sơn Nam, *Đinh Miếu...*, p.85. The case of Nguyễn Trung Trực, executed in 1868 for leading resistance against the French, is illuminating. A Frenchman called Noustour, who was not sympathetic to colonialism, acquired a certificate and established an altar for him in Rạch Giá, then announced that Nguyễn Trung Trực had been installed by king Tự Đức as Tutelary Spirit, despite the fact that the certificate's date of issue was 1852. Huỳnh Ngọc Trang et al., *Đinh Nam Bộ...*, p.59.
this context, I will discuss the southern ông Địa (Earth God) and goddesses in Chapter Five.

FRENCH COLONISATION

French orientalism and administrative reforms caused further transformations to the village status/power structure. In 1904, under the pretext of conserving 'la tradition Annamite', the colonisers of Cochin China ordered the đình's executive structure to be split into two unequal parts. Lê Văn Hào's observation that Southern Vietnamese đình differ from those in the North in their exclusively 'religious' purpose, 100 may be construed as a coincidental regional variation if it were not for this 'formal' separation of the ceremonial function from 'secular' administrative activities following the colonial reform of 1904.

This administrative change, and a further reorganisation order in 1927, meant that notables who took charge of rituals and ceremonies were not permitted to participate in management of any other village affairs reserved for a committee of collaborationist functionaries. The colonial government, by installing this group composed entirely of wealthy land owners, thereby increasingly assumed politico-economic control of the village. 101

Meanwhile, contestation for prestige between village groups through relating supernatural tales, or miraculous events, as well as through fresh modification of ritual items and texts appears to have been commonplace. Looking at đình representations and motifs, we have seen how patterns of ancestral worship, of spirit possession, of domestic, neighbourhood, regional and state territorial cults reflected and appropriated each other's form. Intra-village contestation of social power in the South highlights the distance

100 'Le đình sud-viêt-namien fait office de temple du génie tutélaire sans servir de maison commune, celle-ci existe mais est bâtie à part' (The đình in southern Vietnam functions as temple for the tutelary spirit without serving as the communal house, which exists but is built apart). Lê Văn Hào, 'Introduction à l'Ethnologie...', p.5.

101 See Toan Anh, 'Làng Xóm Miền Nam... ', p.16; Vũ Quốc Thông, Pháp Chế Sự Việt Nam, Tủ Sách Đại Học, Sài Gòn 1966.
between margin and centre. This centre-margin model is also undermined when the court’s prestige was appropriated by villagers as a strategic ploy in disputation over village ritual formalities.\textsuperscript{102}

Cảm Sơn đinh in Cai Lậy (about 100 km southwest of Ho Chi Minh City) is an example.\textsuperscript{103} Having two Buddhist masters of the Lý and Trần eras as tutelary spirits, the villagers elected not to have meat offerings at festivals. In the early years of the nineteenth century, according to local accounts, village notables were divided for the first time over the nature of offerings. The reformist faction wanted to abandon vegetarian offerings, probably out of the desire to be the same as other villages where it was usual to sacrifice pigs. They hired someone to climb up the old tree in the temple yard at night and pretend to be the Spirit, moaning loudly how insipid vegetarian food was. The trick was foiled by the other side, who managed to capture the bogus spirit.

However, in 1845, King Thiệu Trị issued certificates to villages all over the country, including Cảm Sơn. On receiving a number of certificates for unnamed third class Spirits, the reformist group declared that the new guardian spirits would replace the existing Buddhist spirits and accept meat offerings. As pigs were being slaughtered, the opposition organised their own tricks to prove that the spirits did not accept meat. After further disputation, an additional shrine, proposed for Nguyễn Cử Trinh,\textsuperscript{104} was approved in 1852, in order to separate the meat-offering group from the vegetarian one. The latter, however, managed to re-convert all offerings back to non-meat food in 1887, when a famous local monk died and was believed to have taken over the main temple as tutelary spirit.

Such manifestations of local politics give us cause to ponder on the nuances of the adage: 'The king’s rule gives way to village customs' (Phép vua

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\textsuperscript{102} Boudarel recounts a similar, if not more comical, intra-village conflict in 1940 in Trà Cổ, near Mỏng Cái, northern Vietnam, arising from the construction of a second đinh as a result of population growth. Boudarel, "L’Insertion...", pp.136-138.

\textsuperscript{103} This story is from Trương Ngọc Tráng's research, quoted in Huỳnh Ngọc Tráng & Trương Ngọc Tráng, Nghiên Năm Bia Miệng, vol. 1, pp.427-430.

\textsuperscript{104} A famous eighteenth-century mandarin who was connected with the opening up of Cai Lậy areas.
thua lê lang). If the *dinh*'s historic birth can be determined with regard to monarchical initiatives, the vagaries of its subsequent ritual and other transformations tend to suggest less than a smooth evolution. Court penetration which resulted in village power-through-status structure becoming rigid, as Boudarel proposes, and stable social formation based on economic independence according to Tạ Chí Đại Trúc, are two hypotheses at diametrically opposite ends of a materialist perspective. Local play of memory and manipulation of symbolic capital is another factor that contributes to the complex dynamics.

A full history of the *dinh* therefore proves to be elusive if we try to establish a narrative of its evolution. However, if or when such a history is finally written, it will tend to show a continuous appropriation of an unstable, semiotically rich and semantically over-determined matrix of symbols. Amenable to a multitude of various and innovative reconstructions, this play of memory and meaning provides potential for a range of social expressions. These expressions include conflict resolution, negotiation and resistance. Thanks to this complex function, the *dinh* has continued to enjoy popularity beyond the monarchical era.
CHAPTER THREE
PLATFORM FOR THE IMMORTALS:
TWO BUDDHIST TEMPLES IN CÁI KHIÉ

To enter the grounds of a small Buddhist temple is to come into contact with a more intimate world. It is a world of personal concerns for liberation/enlightenment of self and kin, or for solutions to more immediate problems of living. These concerns include beliefs about the fate of the soul beyond death, and its future rebirth or return to the perfect world of the Buddha’s Pure Land. Buddhist temples proffer the tranquillity of a refuge from the mundane world - a refuge which, apart from giving solace, enables one to revitalise and cultivate the skilful means to help others, and to attain wisdom. However, the commonalities of the temples - such as layout of buildings, the ornamental gardens surrounding them, the texts used in cyclic rituals, the bells and wooden drums that punctuate the *sutra* chanting - diminishes more and more as we consider the details of practices and the beliefs of each school or local group.

The two Buddhist temples I examine in this chapter are almost identical in appearance. They are suffused with Daoist flavour, not only because Immortals (*tiên* - lit. ‘mountain spirits’) are among the deities worshipped. Part of their practice consists in trance communications with the nether world. Initiated out of an interest in poetry on the part of local Chinese and Vietnamese literati from nearby areas, the establishment of these temples ensured that this ‘spirit channel’ gradually became available to others outside that group. Their eclectic philosophies and practices, drawn largely from Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism, were brought to the Mekong delta by southern Chinese, possibly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Gradually they became Vietnamized and their configurations were modified. More remarkable, such trance practices have been adopted by well-educated members of a relatively privileged socio-economic group.

If the Mahayanists, exponents of the Greater Vehicle school of Buddhism, may sum up the Bodhisattva ideals as a mind-boggling duty ‘to enlighten all
sentient beings', adepts of the Đàn Tiên ("Platform for the Immortals") temples in Cái Khê have a different objective: In the words of the present director, 'One must become an Immortal before reaching Buddhahood'. While it is not clear how one becomes an Immortal, communication with spirits, with Buddha and with other deities occupied a central position in Đàn Tiên practice. Until at least 1975, the method of communication, which was called "automatic" or "spirit-writing", reportedly gained in popularity in Vietnam at the turn of this century. Spirit-writing seances at Đàn Tiên were attended by, among others, two đôn; ti (mediums) with a dien kỳ ("recorder of ethereal words") to copy down the messages.

The content of these messages included instructions from the Immortals and from Bodhisattvas, determining who was to be appointed to which position, what was to be done about a vast range of mundane and spiritual tasks, from garden maintenance to meditative practices for individual members. In brief, it is not far wrong to say that Đàn Tiên pagoda was spirit-managed. The importance vested in spirit-writing represented a diversion of Đàn Tiên practice from that of the Minh Sở school, whose format it initially adopted, as we shall see later. And because, as Feuchtwang puts it, "the 'intervention of the gods' is at the core of spirit-writing", this trance practice in turn contributed to the founding of Đàn Tiên faith in such a way as to give us a window on southern Vietnamese supernaturalism itself.

In this and the following chapters, I endeavour to examine how the intermingling of private, family, community and wider concerns with the need for transcendental solutions to existential problems offered by Đàn Tiên practice was, and continues to be, the major localised outcome of:

a) a cultural legacy reflecting the Ming emigres' supernatural belief systems and practices in the Mekong delta;

b) its Vietnamisation over time; and by implication

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1 After 1975, the change in government led to an ideological purging of those traditional practices considered to be superstitious. Spirit writing and other trance practices are thereby outlawed by the authorities.


3 Feuchtwang, *The Imperial Metaphor ..., p.141.*
c) the underlying matrix of an older nature goddess-mother mysticism informing so-called popular religious practices.

Our point of departure for this exploration is the temples' rather brief history since the turn of this century.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TEMPLES

The two Buddhist temples, forming the Dàn Tiên ("Immortals' Platform") twin-pagoda compound, are less than one hundred metres apart, situated on the other side of the Cái Khế river, about 1500 metres upstream from Thời Bình đinh. They nestle among houses and stalls of the overgrown Mit Nài market, which follows the road for more than half a kilometre along the right bank. Until the early 1970s, this was a quiet semi-rural area on the city outskirts. Well-fenced and set about fifty metres back from the road, the pagodas retain their look of seclusion. Despite the overcrowding of houses, shacks and stalls typical of Cần Thơ in recent years, the Dàn Tiên temples have not suffered the cramping of the Thời Bình đinh.

Dàn Tiên has been called curiously characterised by some Cần Thơ residents as 'feminine', a reference to the gender ratio of members or the pantheon displayed or both, and by others 'the diamond set's [jewelry owners'] pagoda' (chùa Hột Xoàn). The latter nickname implies that it was the exclusive reserve of wealthy townsfolk. In practice, the bulk of membership was originally restricted to relatives and friends of two families of land owners. Among them were professionals, teachers and public servants, who seem to predominate today.

According to the oral accounts collected in 1971 by two members of the family, the Dàn Tiên temples were established by two groups of the Nguyễn-Phan Thông family, several of whom were land owners and government officials. Quang Xuân, the older temple, was built on stilts within the first decade of this century. Its original founder, Phạm Ngọc Hữu, a retired army officer and interpreter, used to associate with a Chinese Ming emigre Daoist-Buddhist group which met at Nam Nhà Phật Đường (Buddha hall), a Minh St
temple in Binh Thuy. Medical prescriptions and talismans were obtained there from time to time by means of spirit-writing. This was apparently an ancillary activity rather than a formal intra-mural ritual at Minh Su-liked temples.

Ever before the temple was erected, communication with Immortals was no novelty to Quang Xuans founder, because at that time another group was already conducting regular spirit-writing seances in Long Xuyen province (about fifty km upstream from Can Tho). Through his son-in-law, Tu Thi Pho Duc, who was cai tong ("canton chief") at Binh Thuy village, Mr. Ngu also managed to frequent this literary group. Organised mainly as an entertainment for literati, their regular meetings produced poetry, to be enjoyed with 'wine and savoury dried deer meat'.

The most famous Vietnamese member of this group was Duong Ba Trac, a Cuu Nhat laureate whom French authorities had banished from North Vietnam for his participation in the Dong Du ("Eastern Overseas Studies") movement.

Minh Su ("Luminous Master") is the name of a Three-Religion (Tam Giao) group who call themselves Phat Duong Nam Tong ("Buddha Hall of the Southern School"). Their first temple was established in Ha Tien, presumably not long after 1863, when a patriarch called Dong Su came to Vietnam via Thailand. The next temple was established in Qui Nhon by a senior head monk of Truong Dao Tam. By the 1950s, the group claimed thirty-seven major temples in Vietnam. Although no direct link with the Heaven and Earth Society has been established, the Minh Su group came under the same French surveillance as them, along with groups such as the Thinkers and the Amidaists who participated in uprisings. The Minh Su group has been

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5 "Selected Man", holder of an upper-regional degree from civil examinations.

6 'Lich Su Phat Duong' [History of the Buddha Hall], roneo copy held at Minh Su temple in Gia Dinh, Ho Chi Minh City. Photocopy in my possession.

recognised as providing theological and ritual sources for various sects in southern Vietnam, the largest of whom is the Cao Đài.\(^8\)

At these meetings at Nam Nhã Đướng pagoda in Bình Thủy, a Spirit claiming to be Dinh Công Chánh, who was an officiant (Bôn Bái) at the local đình when alive, used to 'descend' to offer moral admonition and poems.\(^9\) A text called Văn Pháp ("Ten Thousand Dharmas") was first employed to invite the immortals to come down to the platform. This text is also said to contain talismanic diagrams (for making amulets), mantras, mudras (meditative hand signs) etc. to which the immortals continued to contribute by spirit-writing. The spirits of the Buddhas reportedly only 'came through' a few ye-78 later.

The local Pháp Sư ("Dharma Master"), in charge of Nam Nhã Đướng pagoda, was called Master Kính, had regular meetings with local notables, mostly Minh Hựơng literati, which were well known around Cán Thơ. Also through his son-in-law, Tù Thiện Phước, Mr. Ngữ came to know about the spiritists of Nam Nhã temple and sought their help when his mother fell ill. The temple's assistance was given 'with a lot of difficult and fussy requirements' on his part. No details of the requirements involved were elaborated, but they were sufficient to provoke in him thoughts of establishing a temple of his own. Sometime between 1900 and 1910, Quang Xuân Pagoda was built in the form of a rectangular house on stilts with timber walls and floor and tiled roof.

Phan Thống Lý, a cross cousin of Mr. Ngữ's wife, native of Thới Bình village and at that time a hưng cai ("head of village council"), was sceptical of the new religious endeavour. He remained away while most members of his own extended family eventually joined the ranks of Quang Xuân visitors. Then his own son fell ill, and conventional remedies were ineffective. A spirit-

\(^8\) CAOM, Box 7F 29. Security report of 1943. See also Ho Tai, Millenarianism..., p.182, and Werner, Cao Đài, the Politics of a Vietnamese Syncretic Religious Movement, Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1976, pp.32-36.

\(^9\) He is honoured as one of the local tutelary spirits, with a portrait still on an altar in Bình Thủy đình pointed out to me on my visit in December 1992. For related oral history, see Huyễn Minh, Cần Thơ Xưa và Nay..., p.145. All other details of the temple history henceforth comes from Thiền Lậu, Lịch Sử của Hải Dàn..., unless otherwise noted.

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written prescription from Quang Xuân temple obtained, without his knowledge, by his wife, was successful and convinced him of the veracity of the new faith. However, as the record says, jealous of the founder of Quang Xuân, huyễn cất Lý had his own pagoda built in 1911. Called Chánh Minh, it was situated only meters from Quang Xuân itself.

According to the family records, the greatest contribution to the development of the two temples, is attributed to the five Nguyễn-Phan brothers. Among them, the achievements of the eldest, Nguyễn Tù Tâm (1866-1940), were considered a particular boon to the development of the Đàn Tiên movement in Cán Thơ. The spirits seemed to greatly favour the knowledge of this learned member, according to the family records:

Having received tuition directly from his father, he [Nguyễn Tù Tâm] was well educated as a Confucian [tiệp nho]. At one stage, he taught Hán studies to dozens of students at his home... When Quang Xuân temple was established, he was warmly invited by the spirit to participate in the new dharma teachings... Thanks to his erudition in Hán language and a perspicacious mind, he was soon credited by the spirits with the title dharma master [pháp sư] of Quang Xuân... he was taught thoroughly the hand signs (để -mudras) and mantras (chữ) necessary for spirit-writing rituals and for meditation. Moreover, he was a successful healer. His reputation spread far and wide.¹⁰

As their public image grew, the secluded temples in Cái Khế came under suspicion of harbouring political activists from the provincial authorities and received a surprise inspection by the colonial police within the first twenty years of operation. The province deputy-chief (phó tham biện) came to Chánh Minh pagoda with troops and police to act on a report accusing the Đàn Tiên group of engaging in Heaven and Earth Society activities.

The Heaven and Earth Society (Thiền Địa Hội), with a new anti-Western agenda, spread in China’s southern provinces, and followed the migration of Chinese merchants to Southeast Asia. In Cochinchina, the French authorities encouraged this migration of Chinese in order to facilitate the rice trade.

¹⁰ From the handwritten biographies of Đàn Tiên predecessors, compiled by Giác Kim & Thiện Luật, Tiêu Sử các Vị Tiên Vàng [Biographies of the Predecessors], c.1970. Photocopy in my possession.
Society members used small country temples and shrines as meeting places. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, when southern military resistance to French occupation was crushed, some Vietnamese anti-colonialists are thought to have gathered under the cover of the Society and adopted their organisational techniques.\textsuperscript{11} The temple history recounts a brush with the provincial authorities probably in 1908:\textsuperscript{12}

One night, as the spirit was giving medical prescriptions and talismans, there were knocking noises. The writing stopped with an order : ‘Chợ chạy’ (‘Do not run away’). The Head of the Platform thought that a buffalo calf that had been improperly tied up by the herder was wandering around hitting the temple’s door causing those knocks. Then there followed shouts : ‘Open up...House inspection.’ It turned out they were police, soldiers and the province’s Deputy Chief Inspector. They [entered to find] about ten men and women in long black dresses, flowers on their hair, in the middle of a ceremony with burning incense sticks...\textsuperscript{13} Mr. L., a retired post-office manager, answered the deputy's questions in French, explaining to him that the gathering was to obtain medicine and talismans to help a sick girl. The young woman patient was then questioned. In the fifth year of primary school, she managed enough rudimentary French to say that she was really sick. Seeing no evidence to justify the allegations, the Deputy Inspector confiscated the books ‘Tựch Đàn’ ("Silent Platform") and ‘Bài Thịnh’ ("Invoking Text"), arrested a few younger men including the principal medium, and detained them in the soldiers outpost...[...] With the help of contacts inside that garrison, they were all released in the morning after their papers were checked.

In 1917, the founder of Cao Đái religion, Ngô Văn Chiểu, then a provincial government functionary at Tấn An (approximately 120 km northeast of Cần Thơ), came to Đàn Tiên and sought the Immortals’ help for his sick


\textsuperscript{12} Sông Nam quotes a newspaper article in 1908 reporting the raid of Nam Thánh temple in Bình Thủy. The search at Đàn Tiên must be during the same period. Sông Nam, Thiên Địa Hội..., p.290.

\textsuperscript{13} The significance of the flowers was explained to me as follows: Immortals in Heaven wear flowers on their heads. If the flower wilts, it would be the sign that the Immortal will soon be reincarnated/exiled to the (lower) world of mortals, until redeemed and returned to paradise. Flowers on the heads therefore indicate that members aspire towards immortality. It was not explained why only women wear flowers.
mother.\textsuperscript{14} At that time, Đàn Tiên spirits were said to have cured many, including those suffering mental illnesses.\textsuperscript{15} Members of Đàn Tiên today believe that on this journey, Ngô Văn Chiều obtained the spirit-writing and ceremonial rituals of Đàn Tiên as a model to set up the Cao Đài sect. They therefore take some pride in claiming that the Cao Đài sect has its origin in Cần Thơ.\textsuperscript{16}

Under the leadership of the second director, Chính Minh temple was rebuilt in mortar and bricks during 1920-21. In 1927, it was renovated and enlarged to cater for a bigger membership. It is thought that the earlier brush with local authorities had caused the temple's name to be changed after the death of the founding director in 1919. On suggestion from spirit-writing, it was renamed Hiệp Minh about the time of rebuilding. To preserve better privacy also, the customary hậu hiệu (rear hall), which accommodates the altars for various goddesses and past Đàn Tiên members, was erected at the front, between the temple and the road, 'so as not to invite public scrutiny and arouse suspicion'.\textsuperscript{17} Hiệp Minh's main hall was further renovated in 1942 with a large donation from a member outside the family.\textsuperscript{18}

The period between 1923 and 1960 was considered, according to Thiên Luật, to be the peak of development. It was at the beginning of this period that two Vietnamese enlightened monks, recognised as Bodhisattvas, entered into the spirit-writing records and gradually took over the main task of instructing. Their spirit-entities were identified as Tự Đạo Hạnh, a twelfth-century Buddhist master, and his younger contemporary Zen master Nguyễn Giác Hải. It is sufficient to note that the above coincidental aspects of growth and Vietnamisation during this period. Increasing visitations by Kwan Yin and the Buddha were recorded next. During this period, instructions on magical charms and mantras decreased in number, but moral injunctions and


\textsuperscript{15} Thiên Luật, Lịch Sử..., p.8.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p.5.

\textsuperscript{17} From interview with the director of Đàn Tiên, Oct. 1992.

\textsuperscript{18} Giác Kim & Thiên Luật, Tưởng Sử các Vị...
encouragement of meditation and self cultivation were more frequently received.

While it is not far fetched to think that Đàn Tiên members had some \(^\prime\)redesigned affinity\(^\prime\) with the two Buddhist masters because of their beliefs in supernatural powers, it is worth noting that, in Thuyết Uyên Tập Anh, a Buddhist text written during the Trần dynasty (1225-1409), Tù Đạo Hạnh is recorded as the third known patriarch in the twelfth generation of the Vinitaruci school. Giác Hài, or Định Giác, according to the same work, was the ninth patriarch in the twelve generations of the Thảo Dưỡng school. In Vietnam, he was lineage head of the second generation, whose precursor was king Lý Thánh Tông (1054-1071). The Chinese master Thảo Dưỡng came to Vietnam via Champa possibly in 1069, being one of the prisoners captured in the Viet-Cham war. He was installed as national preceptor after his talent was made known to the Lý king.

\(^{19}\) Trained in Thiên Phúc pagoda in Sơn Tây province, since his youth, he showed himself to be of extremely generous and patient nature. He passed the examination to select talented monks set by the court. After his father died, he tried to go to India for further training, but had to return after reaching a Vĩnh Xương district of Yunnan. He found a cave in Tự Sơn mountain for a while, before meeting Sùng Phạm who became his teacher. He died in Phật Tích mountain. Trần Văn Giáp, Phật Giáo Việt Nam - Tự Nguyễn Khơi đến Thích Ký XIII (Vietnamese Buddhism, from the Beginning to the 8th Century), Tuệ Sĩ’s translation of Le Bouddhisme en Annam, Bàn Tú Thu Viện Dại Học Văn Hán, Sài Gòn, 1968, p.107.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., p.139. Việt Điển U Lính Tập however records a much involved folkloric version of Đạo Hạnh’s life story, linking him with two other Zen masters: Minh Không, his disciple, and Giác Hài. The legend presents an intertwining of these three lives and Đạo Hạnh’s reincarnation in a saga of family revenge and royal fortune right through to the late 17th-century Lê dynasty. This context may help explain the tandem presence of the two masters at Đàn Tiên. The geography of Đại Nam (Đại Nam Nhât Thống Châu) for the area of Sơn Tây province also has an abridged version of this story, with some added details, attached to Sơn Sơn mountain as popular legend (Túc Biên) and in a supplementary finding (Phú Khóa), the place where Tù Đạo Hạnh is said to have a bell cast for a famous pagoda there, or to have left a footprint on a rock, and chosen as a place to die. Another variation was recorded in the 15th-century Linh Nam Chí Đức Quải, with two separate tales. In one, Đạo Hạnh is linked with Minh Không, while in the other, Giác Hài is said to be a friend of another famous Zen master Dương Không Lộ, with details of more magical exploits that rendered them legends.

Lý Thế Xuyên, Việt Điển U Lính Tập, Appendix by Tam Thanh, pp. 140-147; Đại Nam Nhạt Thống Châu, Tinh Sơn Tây, Tu Trại Nguyễn Tao transl., Tổng Bộ Văn Hóa Xâ Hội
The temple's historical compilation also indicates this was the time when temples modelled after Đàn Tiên were founded, mainly by relatives of members who are not related to the Nguyễn-Phan clan. In 1923, Tam Châu temple was erected in Gò Cống. It was followed by Tỉ Châu, built in Gia Định, north of Saigon, by a brother-in-law of a prominent member, posthumously honoured as predecessor (tiền vãng) of Đàn Tiên. Other offshoots included Huyện Phường in Long Xuyên and Huỳnh Châu in Trảng Bàng of Tây Ninh province. Quang Xuân temple on the other hand was rebuilt about 1930-32. Its ancillary buildings were also placed towards the road frontage. This reversion in the general layout was thought to enhance the privacy aspect valued by the owners, with Daoist symbolism being somehow maintained. A brief survey of the temple plan and decor will show how salient Daoist features were presented.

PLAN AND LAYOUT

As the plans of both temples are nearly identical, it will be sufficient here to describe Hiệp Minh pagoda. Its compound consists of two main halls - the rear hall and the main hall (chánh điện), both with longitudinal axes running parallel to Cái Khế river, i.e. in the north-south direction. Past the gate bearing its name on a wooden plaque stands a tall flag pole, behind which is a white plaster statue of Phật Mẫu ("Mother Buddha", or Kwan Yin). The larger than life-size statue is a fairly recent addition—around 1985. On both sides of the front yard and garden are two rows of rooms: on the left these serve as temple office and accommodation for residents, and on the right is a traditional medicine (thuốc Nam) dispensary adjacent to a tool storage room. At least one of the left-sided rooms served as a retreat for members who from time to time had been instructed to undertake a period of continuous intensive meditation.

Fig. 5. Plan of Hiệp Minh pagoda - not to scale.

**Legend:**

**Bear Hall**
- d1,2,3,4,5: Doors.
- 3: Table for men.
- 4: Table for women.
- 5: Earth Mother Budd.
- 6: Three goddesses.
- 7: Altar for male dead.
- 8: Altar for female dead.

**Outside**
- 1: Flag pole.
- 2: Bonsai mountain and Kwon Yin statue.
- 9: Shrine for Dharma Protector and Roving Messengers.

**Main Hall**
- d1,2,3: Doors.
- 12: Picture of Dharma Protector.
- 10: Marble table for Leading Immortal.
- 11: Miniature mountain and lake.
- P1,2,3,4: Four protectors.
- 41: Stupa.
- 42: Miniature mountain and lake.

**Others**
- 14: Picture of 12 predecessors.
- 15: Ten Infernal Deities.
- 16: Heavenly Messenger.
- 17: Soul-banners.
- 18: Praha Boat model.
- 19: 3-Generation Buddhas.
- 20: Loving Messengers.
- 21: Jade Emperor.
- 22: Brass bell.
- 23: Bell stand for male assistant.
- 24: Liturgy table.
- 25: Rko Off ball.
- 26: Wooden bell.
- 28: Dragon Chariot model.
- 29: Soul-banners.
- 30: 'Patata Mountain'.
- 31: Seat for Dharma Master.
- 32: Medicine Buddha.
- 33: Dai Nam King Buddha.
- 34: Picture of Kwan Yin.
- 35: Quan Cang.
- 36: Picture of Kwan Yin.
- 37: Picture of Immortal.
- 38: Big brass bell.
- 39: Kartigarisha Buddha.
- 40: Predecessors altar.
At the end of this yard is the 'rear temple' (hậu liễu) with an altar for the Chinese-origin Thánh Mẫu Diều Trí ("Holy Mother of The Jasper Pond"), also known as Queen of the Western Heaven, or Earth Mother Buddha. In front of it is another altar for three goddesses: Lady Nữ Ông ("Nữ Kuação"), a Chinese cosmogonic deity contemporaneous with Thần Nông ("Shen Nung"), the agriculture god, Vị tàng Mẫu Trí Ninh ("Mother Queen Maintainer of Security"), and Thánh Mẫu Hữu Lai ("Holy Mother for Posterity"). These three are the guardian goddesses of family well-being. Another informant told me the third goddess is the Queen Mother, the Buddha's mother herself. The northern and southern ends of the hậu liễu are both occupied by altars for deceased members and relatives. The northern altar, i.e. on the right hand side looking from the front entrance, is for female members, and the southern one for male.21 A number of people who were consecrated as tiên vàng ("predecessors") are enshrined in the main hall rather than here.22

Immediately behind the rear hall is a small shrine for the Dharma Protectors (Hộ Pháp) and Roving Messengers (Công Đồng Sư Già), spirits who ward off diseases and accidents to which members may be vulnerable while away from home. From here, looking out to the garden's pleasantly ornamented yard between the two halls, we can see in the middle the "Leading Immortal's courtyard" (sân Tiên Tríêng), a paved area featuring a marble table and two benches on a raised masonry platform. Next to this area is a bonsai mountain and lake arrangement, which functions also as a shrine for the "Mountain Spirit" (Sân Thần) and the "Earth God" (Thổ Địa). A second bonsai configuration is located according symmetrical balance behind the main hall, without any sign of a deity being honoured there.

21 following the rule of positioning males on the left side and females on the right (nam tả nữ hữu) in ritual space. This convention may have Chinese origin, where the left side is considered more noble. See Cadière, Croyances... vol.3, p.114. However, Cadière seems to contradict himself when citing a Vietnamese example about the supernatural bones on the shoulders of tigers: left bones on males and right bones on females. This indicates an equal and opposite relation rather than an unequal one.

22 The Predecessor title is no doubt an equivalent to the đình's tiên hiện and hậu hiện (illustrious preceeding and succeeding founders of villages), as discussed in Chapter One.
Four small shrines near the fence line, marking the four corners of a rectangular area enclosing the main hall, are dedicated to the boundary spirits (tư trấn—four defenders) which protect the building. As the central altar inside the main hall is where the Prior Emperor (Tiên Đế) and the Jade Emperor (Ngọc Đế) are honoured, the positions of the two bonsai mountains and the four outer shrines suggest the mineral schema of cosmic creation in the Principle of Change outlined in the I Ching: T'ai Ch' i ("Primal Beginning") is represented by the central altar, yin and yang polarities (lưỡng nghị) by the bonsai mountains, and four symbols (tư tượng) by the four shrines.

The arrangement inside the main hall further reflects an eclectic amalgamation of Confucianist values, as represented by Quan Đế (Kwan Ti, or Kwan Kung, the Chinese god of war), with Buddhist and Daoist ideals through the variety of other divinities and positioning of altars. Altars are aligned along an east-west axis in three groups:

1. The southern group honours the Buddhas of three generations; Amitabha, the Buddha of the past, Sakyamuni, and Kwan Yin. Unlike most pagodas, Maitreya, the future Buddha, is positioned behind on a higher level. They are flanked by the ten rulers of the infernal realm (thập

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23 It is interesting to note that in the folk legend of Tứ Đạo Hành, there was a spirit who appeared before him at the time he achieved magical power from meditation. The spirit identified himself as Tư Trấn Thiên Vịong or Deva King of Four Defended Directions. See Lý Thế Xuyên, Việt Điển, in Appendix by Tam Thanh, p.142.

As these features were installed at the renovation of the temple in the 1920's, when the spirit of Tứ Đạo Hành had descended through trance writing, it is likely that the four shrines were built according to the instructions of this spirit.


-The names Tiên Đế and Ngọc Đế are intriguingly analogous to those of the goddesses worshipped in the dình: Chúa Tiên (Immortal Queen, being Liễu Hạnh) and Chúa Ngọc (Jade Queen, or Thiên Y A Na of Cham origin), as discussed in Chapter One. This suggests they are female counterparts in an alternate perception. The cosmic creator status of the above female deities, in the vagaries of popular pantheon hierarchy, also suggests a symmetry in the homology { Dàn Tiên : Jade Emperors :: Dình : female gods }, thus implying the female character of Dàn Tiên opposite to dình 's male dominance.
vương), Quan Đế (Kwan Ti, the god of war), and the roving protector spirits (công sử).

2. The central group carries statues of the Immortal and Jade Emperors (Tây Đế Ngọc Đô). In front of it are the liturgical tables, where bronze and wooden bells are located on both sides. The attention given to funerary rituals is highlighted by the display on both sides of this group of ornate salvation icons, such as the two racks holding the soul banners, the ornate wooden models of the salvation boat (thuyền Bát Nhà - prajna boat) and the Jade Emperor’s chariot (long xa - dragon chariot).

3. The northern group is consecrated to the Medicine Buddha (Đức Sư Lưu Ly), Đài Nam Vượng Phật (great king Buddhas of the South, the title reserved for both masters Tự Đạo Hạnh and Nguyễn Giác Hải), with side altars for heavenly messengers (thiên sử) towards the western side, for the predecessors (tiền vương), founding and senior past members and for Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva (Địa Tạng Vượng Bồ Tát, whose vow is to liberate the souls in prisons of the infernal realm), towards the eastern side.

From the ceiling, in between the central and northern group of altars, hang two icons. The first, towards the centre, resembles a spherical lamp shade of approximately sixty cm diameter, called bao cài, or tràng phan.\(^{25}\) It is made of paper with names, dates of birth and death of past members written on its red covering. The second icon towards the northern end, of nearly the same size but more ornate, is an octagonal-sectioned cylindrical cloth sculpture called Phô Đài Sơn ("Potala Mountain", the abode of Kwan Yin). From its base, two five cm-wide cloth strips trail down touching the floor. By this ‘rope’, the soul of the deceased is ritually hauled up to the happy land of the Mother Buddha.

As already mentioned, the polytheistic worship of imported Minh Sư practices and the practice of spirit-writing reinforced each other and

\(^{25}\)While the exact meaning of these two words were not made clear to me, phan refers to the object designed to carry or conduct the soul of a dead person, to facilitate communication with the living through a medium. Phan ké Binh mentions a method of conversing with the dead (phù cánh phan) with the help of a sorcerer and a bamboo rod called the ‘phan branch’. See Phan ké Binh, Việt Nam Phong Tục, p.293.
transmogrified under historical forces. Especially after 1975, southern Vietnam underwent changes that ensured that Đàn Tien's approaches to healing and temple management became the target of government bans. Such challenges do not appear to have greatly affected the core beliefs, however: as we shall see, trance phenomena other than writing, which took place outside ritual cycles, confirmed that 'the supernatural' continued to be alive and well. These phenomena involved visionary experience, healing by using the existing array of talismans, and sometimes direct conversation with a spirit reportedly speaking through a possessed person. In responding to these challenges, the present platform director spontaneously assumed the roles of shaman and healer, deploying his accumulated experience and knowledge to fit the circumstances. While regarded as experimental or casual exercises, these practices nevertheless attest to the general robustness of supernatural beliefs.

FACETS OF PRACTICE

As stated above, changes in Đàn Tiên's practice over the past eighty years can be viewed through the modifications to the initial management structure, in healing norm as well as other ritual items. They did not result in any dilution let alone extinction of beliefs in the supernatural. In what follows, we will look at those activities related to spirit-writing e.g. temple management, oracles and healing instructions, and other activities as well.

MANAGEMENT

Management of each temple was kept separate by a Nguyễn Phan extended family's male lineage. This male control is accentuated by the fact that present ceremonial leadership is consistently male, despite the majority of attending members being female. This should discount any thought that Đàn Tiên temples are 'feminine'. During the first years, overall functioning came under the founder's control, as advised from time to time by spirit-writing. Learned members of the Nguyễn-Phan family were designated, one for each temple, as

26 Judging from the wording in Tiêu sử các Vị Tiên Vương (Biographic Notes of the Predecessors), communication with the spirits possibly continued after 1975. However, I was not able to verify this supposition.
\textit{dharma} masters to undertake teachings and interpretations of trance writings. Unlike Minh Su temples, or temples of most other Buddhist groups, Đàn Tiên has no resident head monk or abbot ordained to administer affairs full-time. Instead management grew in the next stage to a four role structure:

i) \textit{chù dàn} (platform director), or head of temple,

ii) \textit{pháp sư} (dharma master)

iii) \textit{diện ký} (scribe) and

iv) \textit{đồng tu} (mediums).

All these positions were at times augmented by assistants. Thus \textit{chù dàn} had \textit{phó chù dàn} ("platform assistant-director"), a \textit{pháp sư} can be promoted to \textit{Chánh} ("principal") or \textit{Dô} ("grand") \textit{pháp sư}, and scribes and mediums also had assistants.\footnote{Thiên Luật, Lịch Sử...}

By 1919, after the death of the founder and first dharma masters, directorship came under an executive triumvirate composed of the First Power (Nhất Quyền), being the platform director himself, who took charge of petitions to the spirits (sê) and grounds and garden of the temple (thật trừng); the Second Power (Nhị Quyền) of texts and teachings, and the Third Power (Tam Quyền), who looked after finances.

With the death of the first generation \textit{dharma} masters, lectures discontinued, and the position ceased to exist. Possibly for want of a knowledgeable person to fill the role, or because of some other reasons, no successor was designated. Instead the title \textit{Siêm Chù} ("Instruction Director") was conferred on an adept appointed to lead ceremonies, including periodic or funerary rituals such as death anniversaries. At present this role is usually assumed by the platform director himself. Mediums and scribes were chosen and trained according to instructions from spirit-writing. The spirits also instructed particular members on meditative exercises, graded the adepts’ level of attainment in self-cultivation, determined what to do with grounds and building maintenance, and so on.

Following the Communist takeover of the South in 1975, a change in management style followed the abandonment of spirit-writing, which was banned as superstitious. The temple committee now makes decisions by
majority resolution. According to the director, the management committee for Hiệp Minh temple was formed after the last of the Powers passed away. From the family records, this executive died in 1981.28 As for Quang Xuân temple, it is not known whether or when the committee structure was adopted. At present, the two temples are jointly managed by one committee. The change to total earthly power was not greeted without some grumbling from those members who still hesitated to recognise the committee’s authority in all areas. Grading of proficiency level was one example. In this way, Dàn Tiên adherents’ faith in the spirits, as affirmed by trance writing was put to test by political circumstances. To what extent has this faith been affected over the years?

SPIRIT WRITING
The persuasiveness of spirit-writing may be better understood if we examine how it converted members and reinforced their faith. This method was not new to colonial authorities; spiritist interests were well known in France at that time.29 Never theless, it did not fail to account for what the colonialists formulated as Annamite mentality, as an un-named author of a 1930 report on Cao Đài seance summed up with all the confidence of a psycho-cultural expert:

No doubt there is cynical exploitation in all this mechanism, but certainly the unconscious is also involved. The Annamite mentality always excuses the former without understanding much of the latter.30

In the South, both Vietnamese and Chinese literati met periodically to reply, with extemporaneously composed poems, to the verse transcribed from trance writing of a medium. The spirits of the Eight Immortals and past great literary figures such as Li Po (regarded as Immortal himself) must be reverently invoked by means of prayers and ritual. As only Chinese texts of prayers were available, this practice was therefore limited to literati. In 1907, one of those

28 Giác Kim, Tiên Sát các Vị...
29 Werner, Cao Đài...
texts was translated into **quốc ngữ** and published in Saigon, attesting to a rise in popularity. The book’s title indicates that text was published together in one volume with the well known work *Ca Trù Thập cảnh Hà Tiên* ("Odes on Hà Tiên’s Ten Famous Sceneries", allegedly written by members of the Chinese Mạc Cửu family), either to attract poetry lovers or to stress the non-serious nature of this activity. The translator’s remarks in the preface however give us some idea of the spirit-writing scene:

Whenever you students wish to assemble to set up a platform to invite the Immortals, then you will, each arming yourself with a copy of this book, be able to do so, by reading it and following its instructions. Often those who wish to invite the Immortals or the Tutelary Spirits have to go and look for [Confucian] literati in order to get them to come and read [the texts]. Many of these literati are old, they tire easily. Only the most sprightly ones agree to come, others would rather stay home...

The method of inviting the Immortals is as follows:

Prior to the occasion, the head of the platform must be on a vegetarian diet, praying sincerely, then set up a contamination-free platform. He must invite a sorcerer (*pháp sư*) to come, to make amulets and say incantations (*lâm bùa chũ*), and assemble students, about ten persons, or eight would also be sufficient, dressed in clean black turbans and long dresses. [The assembly is to] sit in the platform, and start reading those texts to invite the Immortals. Two young mediums on the other hand sit in the middle holding either the cọ or the pen. The cọ will move spontaneously and trace out words. By those words, the turn of fortune can be made out.

Apparently, there was a way of foolproofing the process which the leader of the platform was privy to try out:

At the first tremors of the cọ, if the platform director has something he wishes for, he must prepare a [written] petition, put it in an envelope

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31 **Trần Chú Thịnh Tiên-Ca Trù Thập Cảnh Hà Tiên**, transl. in quốc ngữ La Thành Dàn, alias Mỗ Tấn, Saigon, Phát Toán, 1907, located in Bibliothèque National de Paris, Fonds Indochinois, Pièce 116a, 80 Ya.

32 *Pháp sư* literally means dharma master.

33 The word cọ means heart, after the fashion of ouija boards which became known in Vietnam with the spread of spiritist literature among the educated class early in the 1800’s. In this method of communication with spirits, a wooden piece in the shape of the heart - called *coeur* in French, is used as implement.

without anyone knowing, then take it to the centre of the platform to pray and burn away. By the [appropriateness of the] answer to the petitioned request that the Immortal, or someone else who comes through makes, he can find out whether the spirit is genuine or fake.\textsuperscript{35}

In northern Vietnam, Đào Duy Anh noted that the popularity of spirit writing, the Thiên Dàn movement as he calls it, was aided by those Vietnamese literati who were looking for a discrete way to spread nationalist messages. At the height of its popularity, colonial authorities ordered covert investigations.\textsuperscript{36} Amazingly, the movement was reported to be a genuine religious activity, for the uncanny revelations of the written responses persuaded those Vietnamese agents of the French sent to investigate.\textsuperscript{37}

Several factors contributed to its persuasiveness, among them the act of writing, the ambience of genuine devotion and the oracular content of the messages. The writing implement was usually held by two male mediums (đồng tử) sitting on both sides of the cọ basket, each with both hands on its rim. This cọ basket is in the form of a simplified phù loan basket used by the Cao Đài sect. It is an alternative form to the peach branch mentioned by De Groot as found in Anuy in the late nineteenth century, and by Đào Duy Anh as found in northern Vietnam. It consists of a straight stick with a short 'beak' at the forked end of its overhanging length, attached to a round, shallow basket.

\textit{n Chữ Thịnh Tiễn,} p.1.

1927 security report from Hải Phong on a private temple of Tôn Giáo (three-religion) cult, converted from a house states that it was bought by three Vietnamese: a Registry clerk, a rich merchant and a doctor, and looked after by 76 year-old Chinese, for 'society members to engage discreetly in "lên dồng" (practice of hypnosis with partial or total insensibility). This was likely a Minh -Sự style automatic writing. \textit{Tôn Giáo, CAOM 7H 59,} circular note no. 110113, 28/10/1927.

\textsuperscript{37} In two occasions, writes Đào Duy Anh, the Vietnamese investigators sent their wives to check out instead, with a written request in a sealed envelope presented to the medium. The poems given by the spirits revealed, through word play, the very names of their respective husbands, whom the medium had no way of knowing. These tests convinced the agents to report to the authorities that the movement was purely religious. Đào Duy Anh, \textit{Nhớ Nghĩ Chiều Hôm - Hội Ký} (Evening Reminiscences-Memoirs), NXB Trẻ, 1989, p.223.
made of woven bamboo, about thirty cm in diameter (see diagrams below).\textsuperscript{38}

Sand was not used at Dàn Tiên to assist deciphering the traces of spirit writing.

Implement in 19th-century Amoy.\textsuperscript{39} Cao Đài’s phù loan.

Dàn Tiên implement

The actual ‘writing’ was reportedly done on the floor of the temple’s main hall, where the ambient space had been ritually purified with perfumed wood smoke and by the platform director’s cleansing ritual at the beginning of


According to Jordan and Overmyer, the earliest recorded use of a basket for implement was in the 1366 work, \textit{Notes Taken During Breaks from Ploughing} by T'ao Tsung-i, which says ‘[people] suspended a winnowing basket (hsuan-chi) and “support the phoenix” (fu-luan) to summon immortals, all of whom are famous men of antiquity’. See Jordan, D.K., and Overmyer, D.L., \textit{The Flying Phoenix - Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan}, Princeton University Press, 1986, p.41. The function of cọ basket, apart from its historical significance of separating the chaff from the grains, is far from clear. Its upside down position can hardly allow it symbolically to ‘catch’ spirits being sorted out.

the ceremony on that day.\footnote{It is a belief shared by the Cao Đài adherents that if the space is not purified, perverted spirits or demons will be able to intrude, and exalted spirits will likely stay away. Interview with Mr. Lê Văn Tái, ex-Cao Đài army officer and son of Lê Văn Trung, the first Cao Đài religious head, Hồ Chí Minh City 24/10/1992.} Silence and stillness were to be maintained by participants. Members of the spirit-writing team were also subject to rules of purification, such as adhering to a vegetarian diet during that period at least.\footnote{Cao Đài procedure also has similar requirements for purity, with a certain area only of the Cao Đài temple reserved for trance writing. The temple of Ngô Văn Chiểu's family in Căn Thơ does not admit visitors who are not vegetarian.} To reduce the noise caused by the pen knocking on the floor, the present director, at one stage, introduced a rubber mat to be placed on a table where the pen moved. The scribe (diễn ký) was to copy the words traced rapidly by the moving pen at the end of the basket. The mediums were to hold the cơ basket in such a way as to keep it balanced but not to resist its movement. If the message or any word was not correctly copied, the spirit would advise on correction so the right version could be finally obtained.

The sessions in Đàn Tiên usually lasted several hours. A senior adept, who claims to have constant back pain, said that he never experienced tiredness or pain during those periods in which he acted as scribe. Other extraordinary events continue to amaze the participants, who claim they are not gullible witnesses of strange phenomena. For example, the ex-principal medium, a medical officer discharged from the colonial army, who does not know any Hán Việt words and cannot write poetry, had poems with learned words produced through his hand motion. Although the texts were in romanised quốc ngữ, composing verses was beyond his own ability. He said that during sessions, with his eyes nearly shut, he felt sleepy, unaware of what he was doing.\footnote{Similar claims can be found in Đạo Duy Anh's memoirs where the author interviewed an ex-spirit writing medium, Mr Nguyễn Ngọc Tinh, who practised in northern Vietnam around the 1910s. The sessions there followed more closely another Chinese practice where a tray of sand was used to record the trace of a stick made from a peach branch called kẽ: Let us consider the case of Mr. Nguyễn Ngọc Tinh who wrote [by means of spirit-writing] the Đạo Nam ("Way of the South") scripture. A Confucian student, Mr. Tinh did not continue his study after failing the first stage of the}
Dàn Tiên's history has many examples of the extraordinary events. These puzzled the sceptics but converted * transformations or reinforced the faith of adherents. To begin with the 1920s temple raid mentioned above, after the nocturnal visit by the Deputy Inspector and his men to Chánh Minh pagoda, it is recorded that:

The arrest caused consternation among members. Some doubt was expressed towards the * oracular effectivity of the spirits. In the next session, the spirit asked members to re-read the poem given in the previous session, and the * master [Pháp Sư] to re-interpret it. The word play [chiết tỷ* breaking a character up into several characters] in the poem in effect now clearly revealed the full name of the denouncer.43

The visit of Ngô Văn Chiêu was also marked by personalised attention given by the spirits. The record recounts:

The prefecture chief * Ngò Minh Chiêu * worked at the [Tấn An] prefect offices. At that time, his mother fell gravely ill. On asking the * ferule (temple divination by random dropping of wooden sticks) to find a healer, he was instructed to go to the southeast. From Hà Tiên [sic] the prefecture chief went to Cần Thơ, and looked up the family heads of Dàn Tiên and asked them to set up the platform to invoke the spirits. Buddha descended on the * pen giving three prescriptions [presumably of either * Bác (Chinese medicine) or * Nam (Vietnamese medicine) ingredients] for his mother, with the proviso that he would be prepared to accept initiation as Buddha’s disciple. Mr. Chiêu agreed.

civil examinations. His knowledge of Hán language was pretty weak. He has not yet read Lào-Tzu’s text. Among modern literary works, he had only read Liang Chiao Chì’s Trung Quốc Hồn (“The Soul of China”). However, only someone well versed in the classics and modern texts could write that scripture. It combines all knowledge and thought of Confucians covering such a wide era and to a standard that is impossible to obtain under Mr. Tinh circumstances. I asked him what he thought about the immortals * and holy sages/saints * , also what was his general internal state while holding the * . He said that the immortals may and may not exist. He did not think they were real but he would not deny their existence altogether. When he was holding the pen, he felt normally awake and fully aware of what was going on around him. However as he listened to the prayers and smelled the perfume of incense and sandal wood burning, he felt heady as if he had drunk a bowl of alcohol. And he sensed there was something pushing his hand over the sand tray. As to what word was written, he was completely unaware.

My translation, from Đào Duy Anh, Nhĩ Nhĩ..., p.207-208.

43 Thień Luật, Lịch Sử của Hải Dàn..., pp.6 & 7.
On his return, he had the medicine prepared. The first lot was extremely bitter, and brought no improvement to his mother. He discovered that he had forgotten Buddha’s instructions. After the second solution was brewed, before offering it to his mother, he took the bowl of herbal decoction outdoors and, holding it up to his forehead, he prayed to the Buddha for his mother’s recovery. This time the solution tasted sweet. After the third lot, she completely recovered. Ngô Minh Chiêu then returned to Cần Thơ to express his gratitude to the Supreme Divinity (đặng Tố Cao) and asked to be initiated as a Buddhist.44

Dàn Tiên records do not mention his visit in 1919, which Gustave Meillon recorded as the second time he went to Cái Khê, his mother’s health again failing. The two messages he received from the Platform that occasion gave him no hope. He turned to a Quan Đế temple in Phú Lăm, Chợ Lớn, where he received one more unequivocal negative answer. His mother died late that year, shortly before Ngô Văn Chiêu found himself in contact with a spirit named Cao Đài Tiên Ông (“Immortal of the Supreme Tower”) for the first time.45

Quang Xuân, the older temple, had some share in the pool of miracle tales. It once had a small fire on the altar, started by fallen embers from incense sticks left burning after the temple was closed for the night. Some pieces of paper caught fire and the wooden altar was partly burned as a result. After the accident, some disciples raised indirect complaints as to the lack of warning from the spirits. In the next session, without being asked, the spirit stated:

‘You reproached me for not warning you about the temple fire? You should re-read the poem you could not understand which I gave you that day’. On re-reading and reflecting on the said poem, everyone realised the meaning and were full of praise [for the spirit].46

Another type of proof of the spirits’ power was the dispensation, on request, of talismans (bùa) against harm and danger to members and their

44 Thiên Luất, Lịch Sử của Hải Dàn..., p.5. The name Ngô Minh Chiêu seems to be used by local recorders. According to Huynh Minh, Minh Chiêu is Ngô Văn Chiêu’s religious name.


46 Thiên Luất, Lịch Sử của Hải Dàn..., p.6.
relatives.\textsuperscript{47} The son of Quang Xuân temple's founder, a land surveyor by profession and of French nationality, was called up to go to the front line in the First World War. On his father's request for help,

\[\text{the spirit of the} \text{ Supreme Master (tôn stū) showed the dharma master} \text{ how to perform magic and to 'blow talismanic charms' (thôí bīa) for several nights.}\text{ Thanks to this [treatment], the surveyor fell ill every time the order for physical examination arrived. He was kept in the home front service.}\text{\textsuperscript{49}}

Help did not come through spirit-writing alone. On another occasion, Quang Xuân temple's founder, himself fell ill and prayed to the spirits of Đàn Tiên. One night in a dream he saw an old man with white hair and beard sent to him with a bowl of medicine, which he was told to drink. He felt better the next morning and eventually recovered. The adepts commented that, like the first case with the son, the Leading Immortal (Tién Trưởng) did come to the rescue of the father.\textsuperscript{50}

Two more cases of protective talismans being given to adepts are recorded. The first adept was a village official who received the advice to keep a paper talisman 'on the body at all times'. The adept survived a knife attack by another official in the same village council. The fact that the blade hit some hard object, probably a wallet, he happened to have in his pocket at the time only enhanced the awe and wonder members held for the spirits' power. The other adept's talisman was given with an admonishment to affirm his strong faith in the spirits through prayer. He escaped unhurt from a bus accident in which several passengers were killed and injured.

\textsuperscript{47} Georges Coulet gives a fairly detailed description of talismans (amulets - bùa) used by Vietnamese in the early twentieth century, especially by secret societies. See Coulet, G., \textit{Les Sociétés Secrètes en Terre d'Annam}. Imprimerie Commerciale C. Ardín, Saigon 1926, pp. 49-73.

\textsuperscript{48} Thôí bīa: blowing the talisman: the executioner of the talisman does after having traced it out, in the direction of the patient or object where the desired effect is to be, blows the air with his mouth as if to shoot the talismanic sign to its 'target'.

\textsuperscript{49} Thien Luut, \textit{Lịch Sử của Hai Dàn...}, p. 6.

\textsuperscript{50} Thien Luut, \textit{Lịch Sử của Hai Dàn...}, p. 6.
However, the spirits' welfare work was not limited to members and their families, and could be as unexpected as it was inscrutable. Another recorded case concerned a problem of inheritance common to families with substantial property.\(^{51}\) The event was memorable not least because it involved the alleged spirit of a famous Nguyễn general:

One day, at a session in Hiệp Minh platform, a tutelary spirit who was an attendant of Immortals and holy spirits, [came and] asked the congregation to undertake a private errand for him: to write a letter to a fifth or sixth-generation grandson of his in Khánh Hậu village of Thổ Thất district, Tấn An province, telling this person to come to Cái Khê and ask the members to invite the spirit of Nguyễn Huỳnh Đức to come back and help the grandson with the family inheritance problems.\(^{52}\) The scribe (who took up this position at Hiệp Minh from 1920) wrote a letter following the name and address given by the spirit. The grandson did turn up at Hiệp Minh temple after receiving the letter and asked for help to invite his paternal ancestor [to the platform]. The inheritance was resolved satisfactorily between him and the spirit.

Today, a poem in Hán characters which mentions Hiệp Minh pagoda, Cái Khê river, Cấn Thọ, and the date [of the above event], can be seen inscribed near the foot of Nguyễn Huỳnh Đức's grave in Tấn An.\(^{53}\)

The skill of the scribe was crucial in interpreting the message, which at times was demanding, but the outcome could be as rewarding as it was humorous. The present director recounts a story following the retreat period of a senior adept. This retreat practice involved a residence period of up to three weeks in one of the rooms at the temple, with food and basic necessities

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\(^{51}\) Inheritance disputes may involve determination of the ancestral worship portion, called phần hương hóa (incense and fire portion), to be given to the new head of the lineage (triazong tổc) for upkeep. Hương hóa usually includes the ancestral hall (nhà thờ) where the main family altar requiring daily ritual is housed as well as attached land.

\(^{52}\) Nguyễn Huỳnh Đức, native of Tấn An, was one the generals closest to Nguyễn Ánh (later Emperor Gia Long), who joined the Nguyễn Army from 1778 to fight the Tây Sơn. He replaced Lê Văn Duyệt in 1813 temporarily as governor of the southern region (Gia Định) until he died in 1819, at the age of 71. He was buried and enshrined in Khánh Hậu village in Tấn An. For further details on Marshal Đức and family, see Hickey, G.C., *Village in Vietnam*, chapter 10.

brought there to enable the member to conduct continuous meditation in isolation:

We received a poem from the Buddha commenting on the result of the exercise. As you know, during the retreat period, one has to abstain from all animal products. The whole poem was full of praise except for the second last verse, which was to the effect that the disciple's practice must not be faulted by any small blemish. I was baffled by this verse which appeared to be a mild reproach, and could not quite understand what it meant. Finally I asked the elder brother whether he indulged in eating an egg, which to me carries a small trace of living things. He admitted to having had a boiled egg brought in for him at one of the meals during retreat.\(^{54}\)

SPIRIT POSSESSION

Dân Tiên members' experiences did not exclude other forms of spirit possession. As some illnesses were the work of malevolent spirits, they were treated with talismans designed to banish perverted spirits (tà) and to exterminate demonic ones (qui). Talismans were obtained through the same medium channel, generally for protection and healing purposes. A considerable repertoire of cures has accumulated since the temples' foundation.

In his capacity as healer, the present director recounted several occasions on which he resorted to talismanic exorcism to help cure skin diseases, swellings and pains that did not have physiological causes, or did not respond to western medicine. Therapy consisted of tracing the form of the demon-chasing talismans in the air a short distance in front of the patient with the tip of a burning incense stick, pointing it towards the affected area.\(^{55}\) This action is called khoán bùa ("intercepting or preventing by talisman").\(^{56}\)

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\(^{54}\) Interview with the current Platform Director on 4 October 1992.


\(^{56}\) Huỳnh Tịnh Paulus Cúa's *Dài Nam Quốc Âm Tự Vị* dictionary defines khoán as 'making a pact with someone, prohibiting, preventing', and làm phép khoán (do khoán magic) as 'to perform magic to prohibit/prevent in ghostly/spirit matters'.

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Those who sought the director's help were not necessarily associated with the pagoda. They came from surrounding areas following word of mouth. A particular type of ailment that afflicted several young women of the area was one of the director's success stories:

I was asked to treat a painful swelling on the breast of girls who, as I discovered later, happened to have bathed at a particular part of the [Cái Khê] river. The doctors gave up on them, but after I traced (khoán) the appropriate talisman to expel ghost-caused ailments, the swelling disappeared. You see, that part of river near the bridge was where a woman drowned not long ago. I do not know why but she bothered only virgin women. She had been seen begging for food from street sellers going over the bridge early in the morning. Once a rice porridge seller refused when asked [by the alleged ghost] for a bowl. Throughout that day, she never made a sale.  

The director's skill in dealing with another type of possession proved that his therapeutic knowledge expands to what could be defined as shamanic. This was instanced by a recent tragic event in his own family. The case involved the alleged ghost of his son, an officer in the South Vietnamese Army, who died of bullet wounds in the final battles of early 1975. His body was found more than three days after his death, at the edge of a water hole. As the director recalls:

I was told he showed signs of having crawled a distance after being wounded, but died before reaching the water. When I got to identify his body, he was swollen up so big that I had to use tie-wire to strap him to a manageable shape for the coffin. I had him transported home on the back of a truck, before I could organise his funeral. Then at a family gathering afterwards, one of his cousins, out of the blue and in front of relatives, started to crawl contortedly on the floor, crying of cold and thirst.  

Upon being informed, the director went and spoke to the hallucinating nephew, reassured the ghost that it did not need to linger in this world, and firmly asked it to leave his cousin in peace and pass on, because all the necessary rituals had been performed. It did.

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57 Interview with the Director, 4/10/92.
58 Ibid.
VIETNAMISATION

As noted above, Dàn Tiên adopted Minh Sư form and practice, yet over the years, several details were changed to suit the demand and needs of the congregation. Apart from the Quốc ngữ writing, its received communication saw changing authorship, which in turn affected the forms of practice.

DEITIES

One of the more prominent contributor-spirits is Tự Đạo Hạnh, the eleventh century Tantric Buddhist monk and court official, who was well known for his magical prowess. The director stated that at least one *mudra* ("hand sign for invocation") for the ritual of inviting the soul of the dead, is given exclusively by this master to Dàn Tiên. The alleged spirit of Tự Đạo Hạnh, in the title of Phật Đại Nam ("Buddha of the Great South"), also instructed the congregation through spirit-writing to use only the Mahakaruna Sutra for the same ceremony. The contribution to changes in practice by a second Vietnamese divinity, Nguyễn Giác Hải, is not known.

To look for reasons supporting the 'choice' of these two Buddhist masters may be a vain effort, except perhaps for the fact that they had something to do with the schools of Buddhism that entered Vietnam through the southern borders. As mentioned previously, Tự Đạo Hạnh is considered to belong to the Vinítaruci school, whose founding patriarch was an Indian immigrant. Giác Hải's school founder was Thảo Dựông, a Chinese master captured among Cham nobles and courtiers following a successful Vietnamese attack led by king Lý Thánh Tôn. This common southern trait may be construed as consistent with another recent claim: before their adoption at Dàn Tiên, some of the *mudras* were said to have been transmitted first to Phi Lai temple in Châu Dốc, one of the bases used by the founder of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hiền group in the nineteenth century. Besides, according to one member, there is a picture of Nguyễn Huệ, the Tây Sơn leader and a Dàng Trong personage par excellence, on an altar in the main hall. Other Dàn Tiên informants insisted it
is Quan Đê’s image. To what extent does this interweaving of Vietnamese motifs and aspirations with a Chinese heterodox Daoist pattern carry over to rituals? As we look next at some forms and meanings in a sample of ritual activities, we may indeed wonder what significance this admixture implies.

RITUALS

The ritual calendar lists three groups of regular dates on which offerings are to be made with corresponding prayers. Again the pattern is similar to that of many Chinese and small Vietnamese temple calendars in the South:

1. Full and new moons, with three great full moons in the first (Upper Period - Thuaggio) seventh (Middle Period - Trung Nguc, also called Vu Lan or All Souls Day) and tenth (Lower period - Hạt Nguc) lunar months.
2. Planet and star cycles
3. Birth and death or ‘soul’ (vía) anniversaries of Buddha, Bodhisattvas, the Jade Emperor, Immortals and other Tutelary Spirits. The irregular ones cover funerary or death anniversaries of members and relatives.

These cycles and contents of rituals are probably not uncommon, especially with heterodox Buddhist temples throughout the country. Dàn Tiên differs in form regarding at least two items: dress and funerary service. Formal dress of the congregation today is off-white, grey or yellow dresses. It is not known when the shift from long black dress took place.

One feature still retained from the earliest days of Dàn Tiên history is that women wear one or several flowers in their hair, towards the back of their head. As for funerary rites, the two most distinctive features of Dàn Tiên appear to be the circum-ambulation and the considerable number of prostrations made during most gatherings (general ritual procedures are noted in Appendix A). The Sutra Leader (Sám Chù) performs ritual offerings of water,

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60 It may be recalled that in the Thiên Địa Hài raid incident, quoted earlier, flowers were observed in the hair of female members.
alcohol and flowers, leads in chanting and other activities, executes mudras, or makes purification and protection signs at the beginning of each ceremony.

According to a description of a fairly detailed procedure by the present Platform Director, the idea is to guide the soul of the deceased to Buddha Land by means of a hooked "soul-banner staff" (cây phan) from which hangs a paper strip bearing the deceased's name and particulars. This staff is the last of a fourteen-member procession. The first thirteen pennants bear the names of thirteen Bodhisattvas, starting with Amitabha and ending with Ksitigarbha. Leading the soul of the deceased to salvation in Potala Mountain (Phổ Đà Sơn) is symbolised by circumambulation in the main chapel of these fourteen members. The Sâm Chỉ, at the head, is followed by twelve other senior adepts, and a relative of the deceased bringing up the rear. The soul-banner paper is later placed on the family altar as part of ancestral cult objects.

The rituals have for Daoist origin the funerary practice De Groot observed in Amoy. The phan staff at Dàn Tiền, unlike the Amoy type shown in de Groot's book, is more ornate with a carved dragon head, and carries a candle holder on its top part. This Dàn Tiền formality, with its strong Daoist flavour, appears to be unique among Buddhist funerary rites in Vietnam. If it is difficult to examine how Sinic forms and patterns, pervasive in heterodox Minh Trị Buddhism, were modified or localised, then perhaps it is easier to turn for salient features of Vietnamisation to the quốc ngữ writing recorded from the seances at Dàn Tiền.

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61 Whereas Chinese Daoist funeral rites involve a different number of soul-banners/streamers (six 'streamers' for the Buddhas in De Groot's work, and only one in the ritual observed by John Lagerwey), the appearance and function of the soul-banners are quite similar. See Lagerwey, J., Taoist Ritual in Chinese Society and History, Macmillan, NY, 1987. The 15th-century Taoist canon Tao Tsang also lists, among ritual objects, four types of spirit pennants or banners carried on bamboo sticks resembling the above-mentioned soul banners. See illustration, copied from Cheng T'ung Tao Tsang (pp. 19b-20a), in Legeza, L., Tao Magic - The Secret Language of Diagrams and Calligraphy, Thames and Hudson, London, 1975, p.127.

WRITINGS

A collection of eleven exercise books, entitled Tiên Dàn Trương Thiên Tập (Immortals Platform Anthology of Poems), contains a varying amount of handwritten quáng ngữ, each from ten to two hundred pages, spanning a period of forty years from 1928. The period between 1941 and 1950 has no record, allegedly due to the absence of participants, who "left home to join the resistance forces in the maquis". The first six books record mostly spirit sayings and verses of deceased relatives, with a sprinkling of poems by Bodhisattvas. They were all handwritten by a past Deputy Director of Platform, who shared this task with others after Book Six. 63

Many poems are of a private nature, communications between generations of a family, sadly recalling past experiences, consoling members about present separation. However, some contain advice and exhortations to posterity on the right way of living, addressed to no one in particular and with strong Confucian emphasis. Not many would be considered of high literary standard. Their content ranges from frustratingly vague and obscure (see Luận Giác Mẹ Văn, Appendix 3B), to the fairly succinct and sometimes profound. Occasionally an ode to the scenic beauty of local areas e.g. one on Cần Thơ (in Book Two, dated July, 1935), typifies those compositions in the traditional seven-syllable form. More common is advice from parents to children, on

63 The contents of the books are organized roughly as follows:
Book One: from 1929 to 1935, mostly messages from dead relatives.
Book Two: from July 1938, selected poems of Tutelary Spirits, Sơn Thần (Mountain Spirit), Ông Địa (Earth God).
Book Three: from 1928 to 1935, messages from Bodhisattvas and dead relatives
Book Four: from 1933 to 1938, same as Book 3 plus herbal medicine prescriptions and instructions for retreat meditation.
Book Five: from December 1938 to 1941, messages from dead relatives.
Book Six: from August 1939, ten pages of poems.
Book Seven: from 20/8/1950 to 22/9/1951, same as Book 3.
Book Ten: 1960 - 1964
Book Eleven: 1964 - 1968
moral or filial, gender-specific behavior. For example, in the same Book Two, a poem in alternate-six-and-eight meter (lyc.bat) verse called Khuyễn Thập Ngoạt Hoài Thai Văn ("Admonishment for the Ten-Month Pregnant Woman Text"), apparently meant for educating the young, insists thus:

...Child, you must be respectfully prompt in your responses
You must behave so as to please your parents
A son must first [learn to] put order in his own home
A daughter must watch her manner and gentle language
A son must excel in studies
A daughter must take care of her reputation
[Must] clean and tidy up in the house
Check on the cow's, dogs and pigs. 64

In the same year, a unique from the Cao Đài Supreme Being, entitled "Advice for Awakening from Delusion" (Khuyễn Cính Mê Văn, Appendix 3B), identifying the same ideals as Dân Tiên's, and other poems of slightly better quality, on the practice of self-cultivation, were included. From the writing dated 5/7/1955 in Book Nine, a 138-verse poem describes the turmoil in Chợ Lớn in graphic detail. Caused by the battle between Bình Xuyên private army and the armed forces under Ngô Đình Diệm, this turmoil serves as a lesson for posterity. It goes beyond the narrow confines of the individual and domestic situation, and is worth a brief examination.

It weaves in a set of ten prayers for salvation, into a list of ten Buddhist and Daoist divinities, and mentions, throughout its introductory part, millenarian beliefs of the "great salvation" (tại độ). The word Hội Long Hoa ("Flower Dragon Assembly"), a familiar term in Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương and Cao

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64 My translation of:

...Con ơi mau ngừng đưa thư
Đường ngôi đi chạy cho vida mẹ cha
Trai đổi tiền tụ kỹ giả
Gái xem tanh nét từ hòa nghệ ngôn
Trai đổi học giả khấm tốn
Gái thòi giữ nét tiếng đồn gần xa
Gái thòi đèn đẹp trong nhà
An nản coi xét vit gà chó heo...
Dài literature, was used, harking back to the ideologies expounded in Fu-Chi writings of nineteenth-century China.\textsuperscript{65}

\textit{The dead in battle during the war are conspicuous,}
\textit{Everywhere life is to be rescued, rebirth to be assisted.}
\textit{In ten directions of the world, the Buddha’s emanation shines}
\textit{In nine directions of heaven and earth dwell the powers of Spirits and Immortals.}

\textit{The source of sentient beings’ heart-minds [however] are in the dark,}
\textit{They can hardly fathom the depths of the oceanic Dharma,}
\textit{The Dragon Assembly will be held in all five continents,}
\textit{Soon the world will turn its full cycle.}
\textit{In the tumultuous sea changes,}
\textit{All sins will be born individually by the grey-haired.}
\textit{The Infernal Realm and the living world are two different regions,}
\textit{[But] they share the myriad calamities and turmoil of misfortune.}\textsuperscript{66}

Yet in the first few lines, it outlines the history of Hiệp Minh pagoda as inaugurated by Đại Nam Bodhisattvas or the spirits of master Tù Đạo Hạnh and Giác Hải, an implicit proclamation of Vietnamization of Đàn Tiên teachings:

\textit{The Buddha’s vows of old are clear,}
\textit{Forty-eight promises he made, to lead the sentient beings,}
\textit{Men and women of good faith cultivate themselves,}
\textit{Each is a potential Buddha, with faith as seen today.}
\textit{Three incense sticks offered in front of the altar,}
\textit{Generously the Great Salvation works far and deep,}
\textit{The ceremonial director took his charge solemnly,}
\textit{In reciting sutras and stanzas, with loving kindness,}
\textit{Praying [for everyone] to reach enlightenment.}
\textit{Escaping the mundane exile, we yearn to return to the Western heaven,}
\textit{The Three Treasures at Hiệp Minh at noon time often,}
\textit{Received requested teachings from the instructions of Three Sages.}\textsuperscript{67}

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\textsuperscript{65} See Jordan, D.K., and Ovemyer, D.L., \textit{The Flying Phoenix}...

\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Sâm Truy Đại Đạt} (sutra of seeking the great salvation), verse 15-26, in Book 9 of Tiền Đàn Trướng Thiên Tịnh, recorded at Hiệp Minh pagoda, 9/7/1955 session, photocopy of poem in my possession.
Dai Nam was the first to render services,
Through rituals he pursued the Great Salvation, discerning all from the tower... 68

The last of the above verses reveals commonality with Cao Dai terminology. While I am unsure whether the three Sages in the third last verse refer to Cao Dai’s Tam Thanh, 69 “the tower” can only be interpreted as defined in Cao Dai literature, a metonymic term for the Supreme Being (Đặng Tới Cao). The divinities mentioned after this passage include Nguyễn Giác Hải, by then firmly installed in Dân Tiên pantheon, in verses with aspirations for national unification and independence:

Seven, we pray to Giác Hải the Compassionate Priest,
The three regions of Vietnam will unite and honour him as teacher.
Why must poor people suffer in a hundred ways.
When the southern region with its six provinces is nothing to scoff at?
The masters now were servants before,
Is it not a funny world when beggars call themselves Sirs?
The sky is round, the moon crescents over the mountain and river,
Keeping each to your own religion, self-cultivating or not, it is up to you,
Eight, we pray to Quan Thánh the powerful divine king.
Most just and most righteous, to protect the people,
Banish all cruelty,
Terminate the war and bring peace to the world. 70

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68 Although Tam Thanh ("Three Enlightened Sages") was copied in the text, I suspect it could also be Tam Thanh ("Three Pure Ones"), a Daoist term designating the three supreme deities of Daoist pantheon, headed by Yuan Shih T’ien Tsun. The other two are the Jade Emperor and Chín Ch’uēh Yu Ch’en T’ien Ts’un ("Celestial Honoured Being of Jade Dawn and The Golden Gate") in one version; or Lao Tsu being one of the two, according to another. Welch, H., Taoism - The Parting of the Way, Beacon Press, Boston, 1966, p.137. In another version still, the Three Pure Ones are three types of Taoist Heavens: Yu Ch’ing ("Jade Pure"), Shang Ch’ing ("Elevated Pure") and T’ai Ch’ing ("Ultimate Pure"). See footnote, Ninji Osuchi, 'The Formation of the Taoist Canon', in Welch, H. and Seidel, A. (eds), Facets of Taoism, Essays in Chinese Religion, Yale University Press, 1979, p.261.

69 Sâm Trung Đại Đã, verse 1-16.

69 Tam Thanh of Cao Dai refer to the three consecrated figures of Nguyễn Bình Khjets, Sun Yat Sen and Victor Hugo.

70 'The war' refers to the battles in the South following the division of the country at the seventeenth parallel in 1954, after French capitulation.
Nine, we pray to the superhuman Venerated Treader of the Way,  
Who will return Vietnam to us before the three [regions?] are connected,  
 Everywhere in Indochina there is expectation,  
 More people are drawn into its affairs but are at a loss.  
 They blame their premature commitment,  
 It is too late for laughing or crying, for peace in the South,  
 Being colonised for over eighty years,  
 Our people suffer unspeakably and have put up with it.  
 Freedom and independence now in our grasp,  
 Vietnam unified, our ancestors and lineages can be restored to former glory.  

Clearly nationalistic yearning was being aired in a wide spectrum of hopes and visions ranging from the personal to the politico-social realms. While it may not be the case that such a composite world view was shared by the majority of the country’s intelligentsia in the 1950s, it reveals nevertheless a notable variation in the complex array of religio-philosophical and socio-political views in southern Vietnam. Spirit writing thus contributes to the colourful formation of identity of a distinct regional group through a special medium in southern discourse.

TRANCE COMMUNICATION AND POPULAR RELIGION

It is easy to regard ritual communication with spirits as escapist. The rather cynical manner in which Nguyễn Hải comments on the origin of Cao Đài religion through a character in his novel Điều Tra về một cái Chết ("Investigation of a Death"), illustrates this attitude. In the verse self-confession of this character, one of the founding members of the sect and highly respected by its leaders, the Cao Đài religion is depicted as a venture upon which he stumbled by chance rather than a deliberate search for meaning from the start:

71 Tôn Hạnh Già, the title of the Monkey Sage in ‘The Journey to the West’, a fourteenth century story by Wu Ch’eng Eng.

72 Sĩ Minh Truy Dại Định, verse 87-108.
thought of taking up self-cultivation just for fun and distraction,  
But it turns out to be such a good experience, [I] might commit myself to  
it forever.\textsuperscript{73}

For some literati at the time, ritual communication provided another  
means of carrying on anti-colonial struggle. Đào Duy Anh\textsuperscript{1} outlines  
how a 'movement' of spirit-writing was popularised by nationalist literati in the  
first quarter of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{74} However, spirit-writing also responded  
to a deeper need. Most of the present Đàn Tiên members are of educated  
background, and many of their children continue to attain qualifications  
beyond secondary school level. Thus for this group, a scientific and rational  
attitude does not seem to conflict with their faith in spirit-writing in particular,  
or trance phenomena in general, just like political awareness on national  
matters does not overrule personal quest for perfectibility.

Here we touch on some commonalities that have too often been ignored  
in studies of cultural identity. Not only does trance writing represents an  
unorthodox way of knowing, it also affirms, through an access to alternate  
states of consciousness, a viewpoint that pervades 'popular religion'. The  
model of self-cultivation in conjunction with healing ability widespread in  
southern Vietnam, as typified by the first dharmma master of Hiệp Minh, is only  
one of many examples representing that viewpoint.

Đàn Tiên case, a combination of 'orthodox' training (e.g. meditation and  
ritual formats) and heterodox excursion into meta-rational mysticism and  
magic obtained from Minh Sư and Vietnamese traditional resources, may not  
be so baffling after all. The Minh Sư school, heterodox by established

\textsuperscript{73} My translation of:  
‘Những tướng tử chọc đã giải buồn,  
Nào ngờ khách quay tính tử liêm.’  
Nguyễn Khải, Điếu Trà về một cái Chế, Tác Phẩm Mới, Hội Nhà Văn Việt Nam, 1986,  
p.13.

\textsuperscript{74} Đào Duy Anh concentrates his observation in North Vietnam. He notes that the  
movement in Thanh Hóa - Nghệ An areas is reportedly similar, with writings before  
the Duy Tân and Động Kính Nghĩa Thực nationalistic movements accomplished in  
Hàn. After the decline of these movements from about 1909, encouraging words of  
Vietnamese Immortals and Holy spirits to evoke patriotism were recorded in demotic  
Nôm. Đào Duy Anh, Nhớ Nghĩ..., pp.186 & 201-205.
definitions of dominant cultural groups, is credited with an important input into that large millenarian sect, the Cao Đài. Minh Trí exponents managed to do this through a complex of Daoist practices of self-cultivation framed in a Buddhist setting, coupled with trance communication which is a strategy shared by a great number of ethnic groups all over the world to access knowledge. Through trance writing, novel reconstructions of social reality could be made by élite groups whose views are marginalised but whose social standing is far from marginal.

In brief, this Chapter has presented the ‘shadowy’ aspect of an outwardly conservative and orthodox practice sanctioned by a town élite group. While this group considers itself confined to a private circle, unlike đình élite, it is marginalised. On closer observation, the practice reflects a pervasive interest in the subconscious or unconscious activities in religion. This interest was initially boosted by adapting a southern Chinese settlers’ practice. Thus through the establishment of Dàn Tiên temples, we can recognise the interconnection between settlement, cultural adaptation, syncretism and ‘the invention of tradition’ as part of identity construction. In the next chapters, we will examine those attributes of this pattern which are key features of trance practices of one of the most marginalised groups in the Mekong delta: the mediums.
CHAPTER FOUR
TRANCE AND SHADOWS - NORTHERN MEDIUMSHIP

Between the đinh's imperially modelled ritual regime and the Dann Tiên style of composite Daoist Buddhism, there exists a variety of trance practice that shares traits with, yet differs from, both of them. Its functional scope is as broad as that of Dann Tiên Buddhism in healing and divination. Its assembly of divinities rivals that of the Daoist-Confucian system in authenticating power and efficacy. It is fair to say that the medium group is the richest in autochthonous Southeast Asian traits, a reason why it is often cited in evocation of a genuine Vietnamese folk culture. Yet, apart from two French studies on northern groups, Durand's *Technique et Panthéon des Médiums Vietnamiens (Gông)*, and Hầu Báong, *un Culte Viêtnamien de Possession Transplanté en France*, by Simon and Simon-Barouh, there has been no ethnographic or historical data of note.

This chapter is an introduction and background to the practice of mediums in the South, to help highlight differences and/or evolution in practice, as well as the way this group expresses self-affirmation in the face of oppression. Unlike the leading roles at the đinh and Dann Tiên temples, the mediums are non-élite and mostly marginalised.

In this cultural ensemble, female mediums form the majority of leading officiants, while men sing invocations and play musical instruments. Music, songs and dance prefigure the process of communication with the supernatural. Like the đinh's belief and ritual system, trance practice facilitates potential cultural transformation. It achieves this through creative appropriation of symbolic resources from a spectrum of traditional possibilities.

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This spectrum ranges from dance and drama to curing or healing forms, which may involve the whole family and the community. At the same time, as shown by studies of medium and shamanic practices in many places the world over, the personal and the social realms overlap in an area where cultural symbols provide avenues for social negotiation and innovation.\(^3\) Again, the healing metaphor leads the way into this realm of bồng vía (vital shadows), đồng cốt (mediums), where supernatural responsiveness is manifest in no uncertain manner.\(^4\)

The history of this ensemble, however, is such that the disparate and indirect evidence leads to different reconstructions by each writer.\(^5\) Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that the practice survives unaided by official supports. As Phan Đăng Nhật asserts:

"is not the resilient survival, the great vitality of this belief system under extremely difficult circumstances (this system has never received any support from the authorities, under any regime, and furthermore never obtained any outside support in material or moral terms such as Catholic Christian or Buddhist religions) a matter of great interest to us?"\(^6\)

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\(^4\) The concept of vía is probably close to that of Japanese *hara*. Cadière points out the relation between vía and Hán Việt words vĩ, uy or cao (air, majesty, imposing manner) and suggests that Vietnamese associate a person's shadow with the vital principles. See Cadière, *Croyances...*, vol.3, pp. 181-195 for an exploration of concepts related to the terms bồng, vía, and cốt.

\(^5\) Depending on the writer's political stance, the term cult (sự thờ cúng, tín ngưỡng) or religion (tôn giáo) is used to refer to this group. Here they are used interchangeably.

\(^6\) Phan Đăng Nhật, 'Những Khía Cạnh Văn Hóa Nghệ Thuật của Hát Văn và Hữu Bông' [The Artistic and Cultural Aspects of Mediumistic Singing and Trance Possession Rituals], in Ngô Đức Thịnh (ed), *Hát Văn*, p.79. The observation is valid, except perhaps for the practice around Huế, under the auspices of Nguyên king Đặng Khánh (1886-1889) and his mother's family.
The mediums, together with Daoist (male) sorcerers, form the older Vietnamese shamanic system in the broader sense of the term shamanism. That system, as Lê Văn Hảo suggests, may date back to the Đông Sơn culture. However, it has seen changes and adaptation with Nam Tiến (southward expansion) probably since the tenth century.

Its 'crowded and confused pantheon', in the words of Ecole Francaise d'Extrême Orient scholars, with deities ranging from Daoist divinities to local and state tutelary spirits, appears to be antecedent to the present-day southern Cao Đài's englobing worship. An early twentieth-century example in the next section illustrates the circumstances in which solution to psycho-sociological problems entailed the initiation/recruitment of a female medium. The example serves not only to indicate why this practice is chiefly the social domain of Vietnamese women, but also why it survived in the past and is re-invigorated today.

Due to its liminal poetic form, the mediums' discourse shows such incompatibility to that of the dominant group as to be seen by the latter as an excursion into harmless nonsense or temporary insanity. Either actively suppressed or conveniently ignored, their singing and dancing are considered at best as peripheral arts. The oppressed groups - women, effeminate men, trans-sexuals and/or homosexuals - thus condemned, can hardly find a space to voice their views in the ordinary language of the everyday world, which is completely monopolised by the literati and power elite. In order to highlight various aspects of this marginalisation, I will examine some features of the deification of Divine Mothers/Queens (Thánh Mẫu, Bà Chúa) and, in the next chapter, the Earth God (dìng Địa) in the South.

TERMINOLOGY

Lê Văn Hảo makes no distinction between two groups of mediums, one worshipping (father) Saint Trần, the other (mother) Saint Lady Liễu. The reason may be that the temples they operate from are all called dào, or phù

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and, if smaller in size, diên. In private homes, the altar-shrine for chú vị (the assembly of spirits) is called ấnh. This simplification, however, leaves out the gender aspects of the practice. Moreover, one of its most striking traits partly results from a long-term 'Chamification' of Vietnam. This is the worship of Po Yan Inu Nagar, or Holy Mother (Thiên Y A Na to the Vietnamese), with all its variance and mutation, adopted besides some other Cham beliefs, as Nam Tiến proceeded further South. It was much deeper and more widespread, as suggested by Tạ Chí Đại Trương and Nguyễn Thế Anh, than the Vietnamese care to admit.  

Exploring the terminology involved in Vietnamese mediumship -- e.g. the words hâu and châu bồng (attending the shadow), lận dồng (mount/possess the medium), ngọi (sit) dồng, bồng rơi (supplicating to spirit)-- Nguyễn Khắc Kham asserts that the word dồng may not only originate from southern China due to cultural and historical reasons alone but also shares with Mon-Khmer, Thai and Malayo-Polynesian common linguistic roots. Thus the Mon word dông means 'to dance under demonic possession', the Pulauan odong means to be possessed attest to this multi-ethnic origin. As Indonesian-attributed

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8 Lễ Văn Hào, 'Introduction...', p.29.

9 See Tạ Chí Đại Trương, 'Một Văn Đề của Sử Học Việt Nam: Vị Trí của Đại Việt, Чиém Thành, Phù Nam trong Lịch Sử Việt Nam [An Issue of Vietnamese Historiography: The Position of Đại Việt, Champa, Funan in Vietnamese history], Tập San Sử Địa, no. 1, 1966, pp. 45-103; and Nguyễn Thế Anh, 'Thiên Y A Nà, ou la Récupération de la Déesse Cam Pồ Nagar par la Monarchie Confucéenne Vietnamienn', in Forest, A. et al. (eds), Cultes Populaires, ..., pp. 73-86.

10 Lễ Văn Hào summarises Quaritch Wales' proposition on Dongsonian origin of the mediums as follows: The figures on the bronze drums are actually shamans because: i) their headgear have feathers, their lances are for hunting the patient's soul, ii) the star at the center is the Polar star instead of the Sun, as in Asian cosmo-mythology, iii) the boats are Indonesian shamanic barges, which replaces the shaman's animals such as deer and hornbill birds, hitherto his travel companions. However, I have not seen corroborating evidence for this thesis. Lễ Văn Hào, 'Introduction...', pp.43-46.

11 Like Phan Kiết Bình, I believe his observations are based on the northern scene. He notes that the mediums for the Chư vị or dông cất practice are looked down on in 'good society', whereas mediums for Holy Saint Trần or thanh dông are widely respected except by followers of the Chư vị cult. And while Saint Trần never punishes anyone who converts to the Chư vị group, it is reported that anyone who left the latter to embrace the cult of Saint Trần will fall seriously ill. See Nguyễn Khắc Kham,
concepts suggest, Nguyên Khắc Kham further proposes that the skeleton (cốt) is the medium for the soul and the 'soul substance' which may be present in a person's shadow. However, these ideas are difficult to sustain, as their conception entails positivist assumptions alien to native worlds.\textsuperscript{12}

Phan Kế Bình in his 1913 work on Vietnamese customs differentiates two types of mediums according to the gender of their spirits. Those called thanh dồng (youthful mediums) associated with the cult of Trần Hưng Đạo, and in the South, of Kwan Kung, thus implying their fourteenth century origin. This group have mortification rituals similar to those performed throughout Asia, such as cheek piercing and fire walking. The second group includes those called dồng cốt (skeleton mediums) who worship chư vị (sundry spirits) headed by female divinities.\textsuperscript{13} The spirits that possess them are not classed in terms of benevolence and malevolence. The mediums' main rituals are prefigured by celebratory and devotional singing and dancing. In this context, the significantly non-violent aspect of the chư vị worship cannot be overlooked.

Trance practices appeared to be widespread enough to make Phan Kế Bình appeal to a sense of national shame, judging from the author's critical tone towards the healing procedure of the Holy Spirit Trần mediumistic

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\textsuperscript{12} Today, the concept of soul or mana as a substance, related to the old ideas of animism, has been deconstructed as Western xericism and paternalism inherent in analysis. See for examples, Needham, R., 'Skulls and Causality', \textit{Man}, 1976, pp. 71-88, Keesing, R. M., 'Rethinking Mana', \textit{Journal of Anthropological Research}, vol.40, no.1, 1984.

\textsuperscript{13} Phan Kế Bình, \textit{Việt Nam Phong Tục} [Vietnamese Customs], compile from Đông Dương Tạp Chí, nos.24-49, 1913-1914, republished by Phong Trào Văn Hóa, Saigon, 1972, pp.295-300. Nguyên Khắc Kham, as noted below, thinks dồng designates both male and female mediums while cốt means specifically female ones in early times, although the term cốt dịch ("male skeleton") was used in 1848. Tavernier's proposed term Bà Cố Thị ("Lady Little Miss/Aunt") as linguistic origin of bà cốt is more likely than the alternative Chinese term cốt dịch dòng nhi (young pure natural person). See Ngô Đức Thịnh (ed), op. cit., p. 28.
group. Phan Kế Bình maintains that trance performance of female mediums was an excuse to brazenly imitate European women’s dancing, as no such custom had previously existed in Vietnam. Whether it was a resurgence of a phenomenon which first took place at the turn of this century resulting from a collapse of Vietnamese morale under French conquest, as Phan Kế Bình implies, or something that has hardly been suppressed except in literature because of perennial official censure, we cannot know.

The prohibition of trance mediumship as a profession has a long history in both China and Vietnam. The sixteenth-century Lê Code and nineteenth-century Gia Long Code have often been quoted as evidence of suppression. Although they specify at length the banning of Daoist and local practices involving trance and magic, no record of actual enforcement on the ground has been noted by researchers. As far as written evidence goes, two examples, reportedly in the eleventh and eighteenth century, are often cited by writers on the subject. Limited as they are, they both indicate a fairly unrestrained mediumship practice at the grassroots level in those times. The unclear protection from fraud offered by the State in practical terms under this pretext may mean that the aim of the above laws were not to eradicate the practices completely. After all, a hegemonic system needs its victims to be actively subjugated as much as it needs its legitimation clearly demonstrated.

For early twentieth-century Vietnam, existential problems must have been exacerbated by an overwhelming external cataclysm, such as the French colonisation. By the 1930s, literary outpourings by groups like Từ Lực Văn

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14 Their healing ritual was said to mirror mandarinal investigation in the secular legal system (interrogation by torture) in order to exorcize the harmful spirit believed to possess the patient - and their self-inflicted wounding in mortification ritual must be a disgusting sight to the author...Phan Kế Bình, op. cit., pp.295-298.

15 The author mentioned houses being burnt down due to the burning of spirit money, street processions with pale looking [male] mediums walking behind a lion dance troupe ‘arrogantly darting all over the street’...

16 Thùy Uyên Tiếp Anh, a fourteenth-century work, mentions a conversation between a Buddhist monk and his master in the Lý era, and Thuyết Kinh Lý Sự by Lê Hữu Trác, relating an encounter with a medium group in 1781.

17 In his study of Northern Thai mediums, Wijeyewardene suggests that their disassociated state has the evolutionary function of coping with physical pains such as
*Doàn* (self-strengthening literary group) are symptomatic of the compound crisis of modernity and colonialism. The realisation of this crisis, by dominant males in Vietnamese society, resulted in women being made the metaphors for loss of national integrity and self-determination, as victims of rape and violence, real and symbolic.\(^{18}\) The meaning of this collective fate, constructed by male writers, hardly found resonance in the mediums' imagery, which may approach but does not focus on the same issues. Nevertheless, as we will see later, a system that claims capability to cater for personal crisis has many ways with imagery and meanings. Let us first consider an example of the generative milieu of this meaning system.

**THE MAKING OF A MEDIUM**

As a young boy, Nguyễn Đăng Thức used to hang around with buffalo herd-boys in his country village in northern Vietnam.\(^{19}\) When they were bored with

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\(^{18}\) Thirty years on, the rape metaphor finds another re-iteration in Hồ Hữu Tưởng's fiction, *Người Mỹ Út Tu* (the Unquiet American), a facetious sequel to Graham Greene's famous novel. Hồ Hữu Tưởng's high humour does not seem intended to mitigate the seriousness of his agonizing over the fate of Vietnam under various foreign occupations. Set in the Buddhist crisis, concurrent with the time of writing, the novel depicts a young woman of mixed race, together with her Vietnamese mother, representing a group who seem to bear the brunt of the projected male anxiety for the collective loss of identity under colonialism and its consequences. That anguish was experienced on the perception that the country has been at all time severely at risk of being driven into prostitution (by the logic of either realpolitik or hard economies) in order to survive. Thus, speculating on the fate of mixed race children, the author metaphorises to the nth degree the fate of Vietnam in a seductive conqueror/conquered ambiguity, with women being the prime signifiers. Hồ Hữu Tưởng, *Người Mỹ Út Tu* (The Unquiet American), published by author, Paris, 1968.

\(^{19}\) This example is extracted from Nguyễn Đăng Thức, *Tư Tưởng Việt Nam: Tư Tưởng Bình Đàn Việt Nam* [Vietnamese Thought- Vietnamese Folk Philosophy], Khai Trí, Saigon, 1964, pp.203-209: Nguyễn Đăng Thức was born 1907, left Vietnam in 1927 to
the usual children's games, they would go to the cemetery to play 'trance medium of the broom'. A piece of cloth was placed over the head of one of the boys chosen to be the medium. A black incense stick was lit and positioned in front of him. The rest of the gang would gather around, some would beat the rhythm stick, some would chant a sort of children' litany to call on 'Old Man Broom' to enter the young medium, who after a while started to sway and draw his body with increasing gusto. 20 Nguyễn Đặng Thúc vividly recalls the occasion:

Eventually he raised his hand to snatch away his head cover cloth. His eyes were now wide open, staring hard but looking lost. Casting his glance about, he suddenly stood up and seized the bundle of leaves which had been prepared for the occasion. Then he started to sweep around the whole cemetery non-stop. Frothing at the mouth, sweating profusely, he kept sweeping away till his face turned pale and blue. He then collapsed next to a heap of buffalo dung, unconscious. The group just got up and went home, leaving him there until a grown-up from the village came to wake him by throwing water on his face. 21

The author goes on to a second anecdote closer to home. In fact, it was something right in his home, and it happened to his mother. When he was nine, living in another district, he recalls being woken up one night to be carried to another room away from his mother's bed. The next morning, he was told his mother was ill. He saw her singing incessantly, with definite rhythm and nuances. Long periods of crying were followed by bursts of laughter. He noticed the great change in her voice. He watched her, normally an extremely gentle person, suddenly start to smash things around her room with extraordinary strength. It took two strong farmers to hold her in order to force some medicine down her throat. As the author recounts:

study in France, Belgium and Switzerland, returned in 1934, taught philosophy, became Dean of Letters of Hanoi University 1953, Dean of Letters of Saigon University 1961-1964, and wrote books on Vietnamese thought and culture. Dates are based on Nguyễn Đặng Thúc’s biographical notes given in ‘Giới thiệu Sự Động Gồm của Giáo Sư Nguyễn Đặng Thúc vào Công Cuộc Giáo Dục’ [Introducing Professor Nguyễn Đặng Thúc’s Contributions to Education], Tự Tưởng, special issue on Grand Opening Day, Văn Hạnh University, Saigon, 1/1/1971.

20 Nguyễn Đặng Thúc, Tự Tưởng Việt..., p.203-204, full text of the litany is also quoted.
21 Ibid., p. 204.
Mother’s condition dragged on, she became deranged, stopped eating and I could not come near her. The family was worried and sad. From my father, a Confucian scholar who did not believe in any trance possession business, and from my mother who only performed ceremonies for the ancestors or the Earth spirit at home on certain days of the year, I never heard of temples, shrines or pagodas mentioned before. But eventually my father invited a sorcerer well-known in the area for his charms and talismans. I had no idea how good he was with his magic, I only saw that as soon as the sorcerer stepped inside our house, my mother called him out by his nickname and abused him in a loud voice. Her illness showed no improvement. In desperation, my father, who never set foot in a pagoda or any kind of temple...went to a shrine in the village to request a ritual of initiation for her, and from that moment, my mother gradually returned to her normal self.\(^{22}\)

The end result of this episode was a small shrine (tûnh) for the Five ‘Tiger spirits was set up next to the family ancestral altar, as required by the mother’s initiation. Those who have been initiated into the cult of the mediums are themselves called dông, literally a youth, or bông, shadow, meaning the ‘shadow body’ or ‘vital body’ of the spirit. Years later, returning from France, the twenty-seven-year-old engineer Nguyễn Đăng Thúc still witnessed his mother perform as a medium at the shrine of Lady Liêu Hạnh, a Vietnamese goddess known to be deified since the sixteenth century and worshipped throughout Vietnam.\(^{23}\) He also noticed that his mother, while in trance, took on a "completely different countenance, her manners were high-spirited and virile like a man’s..."

There were other baffling details. His mother became sufficiently hypersensitive, during her disturbed state, to pick up the sorcerer’s nickname from the subdued, whispered discussions between the members of her family. During the illness, his mother’s hair became so tenaciously tangled up that it could not be combed. Once she had been to the shrine and initiated, the hair

\(^{22}\) Ibid., p. 205.

\(^{23}\) A temple dedicated to Lady Liêu Hạnh exists in Cái Răng, 6 km south of the city centre of Càm Thê, according to my informant in 1992. Another well-known temple outside Saigon is Thuỷ Lấm Động in Long Khánh, as indicated by Phạm Ngọc Khưu, Sông Sôn Thánh Mỹ Phật Tổ Chân Kinh và Ngọc Tích Tấm Tha Thánh Mỹ [universal salvation sutra by the holy Mother-goddess of Sông Sôn and hagiographies of the three holy Mothers], Saigon. 1973.
returned easily to its former manageability. He concludes, after a brief excursion into the psychology of yoga and universal shamanism, that in Vietnam, people have lost the original tradition of self-cultivation in order to attain communication with the 'supreme spirit', and without the masters to uphold the spiritual powers, 'disorderly superstition' such as medium practice flourishes. However, such an observation was certainly caught in the narrow modernist framework of assumptions up to the 1950s. Thus it is on this issue of superstition that the conditions for existence of the practice are to be examined.

While not trying to construe a typical case history of the spread of mediumship from the above tale, I wish to highlight a number of specific factors that locate this particular practice within the spectrum of these folk religions: a well-to-do and ostensibly Confucian household embracing a local marginal practice by force of circumstances, which made conspicuous the gender aspect by the partial retreat of male hegemony to accommodate the non-rational, at the same time exposed the complicity of power and rational reason. And this whole process was witnessed by a representative of the younger Westernised elite, during a period of history that saw dramatic changes in the colonial economy, the 1920s boom, followed by the well-known 1930s bust.

As a modern intellectual, Nguyễn Dằng Thúc, trained in Western scientific objectivity, was forced to accept the new space introduced by that psychodrama. Likewise, his father had to acknowledge that the solutions offered to his mother's crisis by a tradition that informs the rationalist Confucian way were ineffective. Perhaps both men could have done so without fully recognising that in the swift changing 1920s, socio-cultural conditions would probably favour a 're-surgence' of this marginal practice.

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24 This phenomenon is remarkable for its similarity to the matted-hair experience of female trance mediums in Sri Lanka observed by Obeyesenkere in the above mentioned work. Hence a similar psychoanalytical and anthropological interpretation can no doubt be derived. As for male cases, Phan Kế Bính mentions in passing in his critique of the male medium practice, that they let their hair become matted together like a crow's nest, 'looking horribly disgusting'. See Phan Kế Bính, *Vietnam Phong Tục...*, p.297.
One thing at least is certain: by installing a new altar in the home, Nguyễn Dăng Thức's mother successfully asserted her own cultural identity, whether or not we are convinced that her personal crisis was symptomatic of a social one as well. This crisis, however, was not new, as the next exploration into the historical background of the recent revival of the medium trance practice indicates.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY EFFERVESCENCE

Associated with sexual wantonness, trance mediumship has always been disparaged by the literati. In 1804, King Gia Long prohibited the practices of sorcerers and mediums. Yet on oral and disparate literary evidence at least, the late nineteenth-century Vietnam saw the rise of trance ritual activities that were coterminous with the increased involvement of women traders. The relative status of the latter was linked with the general decline of male power symbolised by the loss of central monarchical control. It was a crisis of confidence for the literary elite, in the face of Vietnamese dynastic decline which was compounded by French occupation.

The newly favoured participation in ceremonies at various temples for Goddesses such as Liêu Hạnh, Thường Nguyệt, Mẫu Thiều in the North and Chùa Tiên, Chùa Ngọc in the South may have prompted the Buddhist pagodas to set up the extra altars for these deities. A poem by the Confucian literatus Trần Tế Xương (Tử Xương, b. 1870) is, according to Tạ Chí Đại Trường, the only known evidence as social comment. Depicting this release of a libidinal exuberance, Trần Tế Xương, the disappointed scholar and patriot, saw the rising popularity of trance ritual activities as an indulgence of women in a devious release of their sexual frustration:

There is no bigger misery than being tied to a husband,  
You might as well get married to a monk!  
A shaven-headed fellow sits knocking on the wooden bell,

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26 Tạ Chí Đại Trường, Thần, Người..., p.310.
Two round maidens stand dancing with flowers.\textsuperscript{27} 
Gleaming by the candle light, the silhouette of Uncle mounting [the medium].\textsuperscript{28}

Graceful under the altar, [the worshippers'] eyes winking at the senior monk. 

In the dead of the night, the sisters whisper among themselves: 
"There is no happier moment than when the medium is mounted."\textsuperscript{29}

The monk's presence at the altar indicates that the mediums' practice must have spread to Buddhist pagodas during the nineteenth century, as Tạ Chí Đại Trưởng avers.\textsuperscript{30} Their activities reeked of promiscuity and loose morality, but they were not blatant. If any woman could become a medium, then the secret pleasure it afforded could only be whispered among friends in dead-of-the-night. Tù Xướng's other patriotic poems rail against the moral bankruptcy of the country's mandarinate under the onslaught of French colonial power.\textsuperscript{31} For Tù Xướng, the rising socio-economic power of merchant women was a symptom of the decay and dissolution of Confucian hegemony, heralding a breakdown of social order in the second half of the nineteenth century. He trenchantly attacked, in another poem, a merchant woman in town, who became rich by selling both the goods and the pleasures of the flesh. Again, in this and other pieces, he compares the scholars' predicament with that of prostitutes.\textsuperscript{32}

It is clear that, for literati such as Trần Tế Xuống, trance mediumship represented the dire consequences of the lack of discipline and moral fortitude

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\textsuperscript{27} Mediums perform dances holding or balancing flowers as part of induction ritual. The dancer's body is usually plump though not obese, a condition possibly acquired from strenuous training for this type of dance.

\textsuperscript{28} Uncle: Cậu (maternal uncle), a title referring to a male spirit part of the goddess' entourage. When the spirit possesses the medium, it is said to mount the latter as if riding a horse.

\textsuperscript{29} Nguyễn Văn Huyền, Tù Xướng - Tức Phản. Giai Thoại [Tù Xướng. Works and Anecdotes], Hội Văn Nghệ Hà Nam Ninh, 1987, p.117.

\textsuperscript{30} Tạ Chí Đại Trưởng, ibid., p.310.

\textsuperscript{31} See for example 'Hát Tướng' ("Gestural Singing"), 'Phương Nhà'("The Defiled Ones"). Nguyễn Văn Huyền, Tù Xướng..., p. 100 & 101.

\textsuperscript{32} See 'Tết Cô Đâu' ("Tết Wishes to the Prostitute") poem. Nguyễn Văn Huyền, ibid., p.136.
that had ostensibly not been the case in the days of a stronger monarchy. Concordant with this symbolism is the fact that King Đồng Khánh was known to be the first royal devout follower of the mediums' faith.33 Đồng Khánh's status in the colonial political context is one of a marginalised party. Nevertheless, his contribution to the revival of the practice in Huế, as indicated by Trần Văn Toản's study of the Huệ Nam temple for Holy Mother Liêu Hạnh, revived the position of Cham goddess Thiên Y A Na.34

The worship of Thiên Y A Na, or Po Nagar in the South, was to take on different forms, especially with Champa's older temple in Nha Trang serving as the centre of propagation for ritual dance and other formats (to the Mekong delta). Its vitality, as pointed out by Tạ Chí Đại Trường and Nguyễn Thế Anh, was ensured by the endorsement of Nguyễn lords from the early seventeenth century, whose veneration for the Cham local goddess was attributed to their desire to break away from northern mould.35 Tạ Chí Đại Trường goes even further to suggest Nguyễn Hoàng, the first Nguyễn lord, was particularly taken by female divinities.36 And as Li Tana rightly notes, it was impossible since then, for the Nguyễn to stop the migrants, whose backgrounds were themselves diverse, from merging local sets of practices and beliefs onto old ones in a diverse ethnic and cultural environment.37 The complex linkages between migration, adaptation of Cham practice among fishing groups, inter-relations between goddesses, trees and rock worship will be examined later. At this junction, let us look at the social aspects of mediumship as it entered the 1930s.

33 Trần Văn Toản, Le Temple Huệ-Nam à Huế, B.S.E.I., n.s., tome XLIV, no. 3&4, 1969.
34 Thought to be honoured by Vietnamese court during the period of the eleventh-century 'Ly' dynamic religion'. See Tạ Chí Đại Trường, Thần , Người... pp. 114-115, Nguyễn Thế Anh, "Thiên Y A Na..." Trần Văn Toản notes in the above mentioned study that a statue of Thiên Y A Na is placed at the innermost and highest altar in Huệ Nam temple.
35 Nguyễn Thế Anh, 'Thiên Y... ', pp. 83-86,
36 Tạ Chí Đại Trường, Thần , Người... pp. 227.
37 Li Tana, The Inner Region...
MEDIUMSHIP: POWER AND STATUS

Changes brought to shamanic trance speech and ritual action and belief are aimed at bringing about social change or reconciliation. Hát văn ("devotional singing") and hậu bông ("attending the possessing spirits") are the two principal components of the practice of mediums in the North. Singing usually precedes trance possession, which is followed by the granting of talismans and cures. The mediums could be possessed each by a limited number of deities of the Chùa Vị, as shown in both Nhật Lang’s account and Durand’s study of northern practice.30 The rank of the medium is reflected by the position of the spirit in this pantheon. Spirits also manifest their powers through punishment of the irreverent by sickness or death. The same beliefs are, as noted already, still current, at least in southern đình system. However, the form of propitiation is different. Votive objects are usually suspended in the temple above the altar, carried over from the worship of feminine trees, with paper models of hats, shoes etc. hung on the branches, as will be discussed later.

During the 1930s, trance medium practice joined the general effervescence in popular religions all over the country. A colonial police report in 1933 on the cult of Tứ Phủ (Four Palaces or Realms) noted it was particularly favoured by women from a wide range of social background.39 Buddhist pagodas responded to this demand by installing an extra altar for the Sundries Spirits (Chùa Vị), the mediums’ pantheon, next to Buddhhas’. This altar


39 Four realms are: Sky, Earth, Water and Supreme Heaven, a variation of the older Tam Phủ (three palaces: heaven, earth and human), modelled after Daoist cosmology. For a presentation of the pantheon, see for example Simon, P.J. & Simon-Barouh, L., Hậu Bông, un Culte Viêtnamien..., pp.49-57.
became the most attended, the report says.\textsuperscript{40} It is reasonable to deduce, as Tạ Chí Đại Trường suggests, that at least small Buddhist temples in the North had been wanting in public and/or official royal economic support since the late nineteenth century under the Nguyễn.\textsuperscript{41}

A series of reports by Trọng Lang on the practice in and around Hanoi, appeared in the weekly \textit{Phong Hóa} (customs) magazine from November 1935.\textsuperscript{42} The examples in Trọng Lang's articles were drawn from his observation at the private homes turned into chapels (đền - literally pavilion). The author refers mockingly to the hen-pecked husbands of mediums, recognising a blatant reversal of power and status in the family. Docile and forebearng, the husbands recognised their wives' supernatural connection. Their wives status was that of the sublime. Given the contemporariness of Trọng Lang's reportage, it can be surmised that women's involvement in trance practice must still have been high then. In one case at forty km from Hanoi, the author was told:

The Holy Saint spirit is reputed to be extremely powerful (tội linh), and can kill people like [squashing] tiny frogs. Remarkably, among those victims is the medium's husband, the scape goat of the Holy Saint spirit, a "type" of person worth observing.

Before going there, I was told that:"The medium's husband is the most patient man in the world". When she is his "wife", it is not so bad: she only orders him about like a servant, and curses him like a dog. When told to do something, he says "yes madam" but he cannot dilly dally. Abused, he only sighs, as he is always anxious and in fear, convinced that she is a "exalted spirit" and no longer his wife.

When she is the "Holy Saint spirit", it is different: she often punishes him in a weird way due to trivial reasons, like when she was once in trance, he suddenly appeared with a tray serving Chinese tea. In the middle of `rowing the boat' on top of the divan, she stopped the oars and spoke in the tone of savages, ordering the "invisible" soldiers to tie him by the neck under the divan.

\textsuperscript{40} CAOM 7F 59, \textit{Chữ Việt}, note no. 8774, Tonkin, 12/7/1933. "There were hardly any cô Tidy (concubines of Europeans) who did not join".

\textsuperscript{41} Tạ Chí Đại Trường, \textit{Thần, Người...}, p.310.

\textsuperscript{42} The author gives a brief description of the belief, the pantheon, the ceremonial rituals and the participants, citiing de Groot in his speculation on origin. See Trọng Lang, 'Đồng Bống'..., no. 164, 29/12/1935, pp.10-11.
As soon as the lady's order was out, he was like an intelligent dog, slowly lowered himself to the ground, his arms wrapped tightly around the leg of any bed there, and he stayed so regardless of mosquitoes biting him, until the Holy Saint let him go. But once forgiven, if he forgot to thank profusely in respectful utterances, he would get another treatment.

Trọng Lang describes the medium as a skinny woman in her fifties who issued orders to a non-descript and quiet male person, whom she called "little one" (nhỏ). The latter had a 'cold demeanour', moved like 'a stiff block of flesh'. To Trọng Lang's surprise the man turned out to be the medium's husband. The author revealed his disgust in his use of adjectives to describe both the medium and her spouse: she was 'skinny as a dead tree', 'lips puffed up from betel chewing', 'smoky eyes', 'voice rattly gravelly... while her husband's face was 'all wrinkles, heavy like being dragged down'.

Such antagonism, expressed when the bastion of masculinity, and also of a patriarchal order, was symbolically threatened, is easy enough to understand. More remarkable still, Trọng Lang's contemptuous attitude towards the mediums' lifestyle throughout the writing is bolstered by an assumed superiority mortgaged on westernisation. This superiority was deftly expressed through such small items of modern attire as the tie or the cigarette. In one example, a medium married to a Frenchman was reportedly caught by her husband, who returned home unexpectedly one evening, in the middle of a trance ceremony. In front of the cowed male officiants, he strapped her with his tie while shouting expletive reprimands. She ran, in all her colourful goddess' garb, and hid under the bed. In another example, Trọng Lang himself went with his friends to witness a ceremony, known to take place nightly at a private home in Hanoi. Attended by many women retailers, the ambience was described as stuffy, dark, smelling like a marketplace. 'We had to loosen our cravats and refrain from smoking cigarettes', the author recalls.

43 Trọng Lang, op.cit., no.167, p.10. The sight of a husband in subservient position to his wife must not have appealed to most Vietnamese males regardless of their attitude to modernisation.

44 Ibid.

45 Trọng Lang, Phong Họa, no.163, p.10, and no.171, p.30.
In his study of the northern mediums, Maurice Durand quotes extensively from a 1952 novel in the same genre of reportage. Its author, Nhật Lang, satirically describes the beliefs and practice of trance mediumship. Unlike Trọng Lang, who kept a detached distance as a hostile modern/Westernised critic, Nhật Lang's wife was herself a medium making him a captive though unbelieving observer. Again, like the cases of Trọng Lang, male dominance had to retreat to the author's pretended ignoring of and resignation to the fait accompli. He recounts going along with her, who was ostensibly in trance, thus illustrating the language used in dialogues between spirits (through the mediums) and their devotees. Unconvinced as he was of his wife's possession by a powerful spirit, he submitted to her demands to support her religious activity.

Trọng Lang also recorded the recruitment of a pregnant medium who frightened the spectators, among whom was her own husband, when she beat

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46 Nhật Lang, Dòng Đống (Phong sự Tiểu Thuyết)... p. 68. For quotations, see pp.9-19.
47 Sitting on the bed, suddenly my wife started to choke with laughter, her body swayed as if possessed and her mouth mumbled:

- This trooper [devotees are soldiers to the spirit] is impudent! too impudent! A master of the household like that...like that...like that does not have a sincere heart, eh! I...I am very angry, eh!

I pretended to stay by her side to voice my supplication:

- With my deep respect, you [Aunt/Miss] travel on the clouds and winds, you are nine thousand times beautiful, you pass judgements on the world's affairs, I implore you to dictate your order for the benefit of your devotee.
- Ah, now you are taking notice of me! I am very angry! But never mind... never mind, I will turn a blind eye... From now on, when my "padded arm chair" [the medium's body is the spirit's 'chair'] comes to my home, you are not to ridicule...ridicule her anymore, if you disobey me... I will punish...punish [you] severely, eh!

- With my deep respect, you are a personage from Heaven, you pass judgements on the world's affairs, this disciple has never ridiculed anyone!

- Devotee, listen...listen to what I say here! Although you don't criticize by words... criticize... but your heart is not sincere, eh! The children will be healthy, eh! Your trade will flourish, eh!

- With my deep respect, you are the most talented, "we children" love you nine thousand times, cherish you nine thousand times, we are always respectful of you... and only wish... wish you... would accept our devotion.

My wife, under the protection of the Holy Saint's shadow, continued to dictate her orders and pontifications. I very well knew it was a rise to obtain my submission.

Durand, M., Techniques..., p.18.
and punched her own chest and belly vigorously while dancing. Then, in an authoritative voice of the spirit, she ordered the cowed husband to leave the medium-body (ghế đệm- padded armchair) alone.\(^{48}\) However, a great deal is yet to be explained regarding the mediums' behaviour under trance. The humiliated neighbours of one assistant medium, who sometimes rolled off her bed at night without warning, writhed on the floor and beat her chest while moaning unintelligible words, considered that she was being punished by the deities for her past deeds, rather than relating this to other possible ailments.\(^{49}\)

Admittedly, the mediums' other behavioural patterns, such as belching and yawning at the onset of trance, or distorted baby talk-like speech attributed to minor spirits such as Princes and Princesses (Cậu, Cô - Uncle, Aunt), tend to confuse the onlookers in judging whether any moaning was in fact a sign of being disassociated.

**CONTEXTS OF POWER**

Trọng Lang found it hilarious that the medium's dance he witnessed was a simulation of the soldiers' march. The Prince's spirit was said to practice drill marching for his 'soldier'- the medium, who carried on her shoulder a wooden stick in the shape of a rifle, and a child's toy trumpet in the other hand.\(^{50}\) For the insiders, of course, the toy equipment reproduced is emblematic of the instruments of power of the time, deployed in a different meaning context.\(^{51}\) Similar examples could be found in the Pacific islands about the same period.

\(^{48}\) Trọng Lang, *Đồng Bông...*, no. 167, p.10.

\(^{49}\) Ibid. Here again, epileptic condition in some other cultures is considered part of the ability of clairvoyance.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., no. 171, p.30.

\(^{51}\) In another study, by Simon and Simon-Barouh, the practice that was transported to France after 1954 retains the traditional weapons such as swords, bows and arrows, besides the ears, indicating a preference for conservative images. See Simon, P.J. & Simon-Barouh, L., *Hậu Bông *-* Un Culte...*, pp.19-20 and photograph 8.
such as the Maasina (marching) Rule on Malaita of the Solomons Islands, involving trance prophesy.\textsuperscript{52}

If Keesing is right in saying the Maasina Rule has been ill-fitted 'between the pole of millenarianism (the classic cargo cults) and the pole of anticolonial politics', then the Vietnamese mediums' marching dance with wooden rifle can only be misconstrued as an anti-colonial gesture. Especially when a medium's husband was a Frenchman, who may have mistaken his wife's interest for insubordinate behaviour, and reacted in no uncertain manner as Trọng Lang's above account shows, military metaphors suggest a different context.

Indeed, when it came to power of the State, he found that the mediums' spirits acceded to the ruling authorities without challenge. An elderly invocation chanter (châu vân) recalls that spirits at a temple wanted to move to another place because the bugle sound of a nearby barrack disturbed them. Asked why the spirits did not punish the French, the answer was that they were foreigners. Then why the insolent soldiers, who were Vietnamese recruits, were untouched? The chanter then said it was the Spirits' show of deference to the (Vietnamese) national prestige.\textsuperscript{53}

Trọng Lang's despair of the devotees' reasoning in the face of French or State supremacy could have been avoided, if their rationalisation was interpreted differently, in that ruling powers' impact on local society were being dealt with in more subtle ways than overt resistance. This view can be reinforced by the fact that military motifs were not pre-eminent in the ritual dance repertoire. Besides weapons, a number of themes drew upon items such as oars for the boat-rowing, fans, scarfs, cooking. Several other pre-agricultural themes are still maintained today.\textsuperscript{54} Trọng Lang also described briefly a lion


\textsuperscript{53} Trọng Lang, op. cit., no. 167, p.11.

\textsuperscript{54} Lâm Tô Lộc mentions in a 1979 study, 12 types, including the hooked staff, tea harvest, snail picking, silk spinning and snake catching dances still performed by mediums apart from the above-mentioned. See Hoàng Tuấn Phô, \textit{Bà Chửa Liêu}, XB Thanh Hóa, 1990, p.173.
dance item which he thought, contrary to the comments of members of the audience, was pathetic.  

There are at least two issues to be considered here. Firstly, the mediums' simulation of the colonial military image, like the Malaita islanders' construction, and other examples of the vanquished's experience, as Irene Silverblatt observes in the case of Peruvian Indians, form part of their endeavour to grapple with, cope with, challenge, and endure the lived realities of colonisation:

Thus they contested the legitimacy of the present political order (and probably derived the strength to endure it) armed with the remembered morality of their native gods -- even if native gods, by now, could be called Santiago.  

Mimicking, taking on the victor's identity are ways of making new meanings and of empowerment. And if Michael Taussig is right, this embodiment of the mimed image is a complex operation, by which not only we move into the image, but the image also moves into us, and 'the image is more powerful than what it is an image of'. This capturing of the military image, the perceived emblem of colonial power, is, according to Taussig:

the magical usage by the colonised of the mystique of the colonizing State apparatus -- just as we, upon reflection, have to acknowledge the importance to such usage of the magic that in fact exists within the art of modern, secular, statecraft itself.

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55 Ibid., no. 171, p.30. See also Ngô Đức Thịnh, 'Múa trong Hậu Bóng'[Dance in Mediumistic Rituals], in Ngô Đức Thịnh (ed), Hài Vấn ..., pp.111-115.


57 For Taussig, 'the wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power.' Taussig, M., Mimesis and Alterity - a Particular History of the Senses, Routledge, NY, 1993, pp. xiii & 63.

58 Ibid. Irene Silverblatt reiterates this point in noting that "Indianized Santiagos' ambiguous, transforming semblances contributed to these forms of knowledge and understanding by concentrating and condensing the historical experiences of colonization. Intertwining history and remembrances, re-presenting the past, Hispanified mountain gods charged powerful political images in the memories of the
Secondly, the overall emphasis was not on power, but on aesthetic aspects of an agrarian way of life. Trọng Lang admits that he and his companions were frightened at first by the medium’s laugh described as ‘somewhat like a horse neighing’. Then his mirth changed to embarrassment, as the medium went on executing ‘lewd movements’ with a smile.\(^{59}\) On the other hand, the praises voiced by the audience while the dance proceeded, as to how beautiful the dancing was, were just obsequious babbling to Trọng Lang and companions.\(^{60}\) In such a context, the modern observer was completely alienated, and his distrust and hostility served to hide his non-understanding. As alienation-produced anxiety was projected at its most aggressive level to the medium’s environment and ethos, the author’s comments grew acerbic:

They praised that it was beautiful, and everything to do with Cậu [Uncle - a junior spirit possessing the female medium] was beautiful, from the dark shrine where Uncle is worshipped to the medium’s smooth face from close shaving, to her cunning eyes and sharp-lipped mouth.\(^{61}\)

Trance dances with weaving themes continued to be performed at many locations, indicating how daily life activities were to be reproduced as major ritual items. And, as noted above, healing remains one of the chief functions. Trọng Lang had a different interpretation, an explanation based on hypnotism, with which its users ‘took advantage of weak minds and fanaticism to compel people to do extraordinary things and sometimes against their conscience’.\(^{62}\) If,

\(^{59}\) Phan Kê Binh also cannot understand why exalted spirits should, in the impure bodies of mediums, dance to show off in front of young people. See Phan Kê Binh, op. cit., p.300.


\(^{61}\) Trọng Lang, no. 167, p.10.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., no.165, p.14.
for insiders such as one of the male invocation chanters he interviewed, the
perception of the medium’s power was an ambivalence verging on fraudulent
complicity, then it was pretty clear how the author wants us to conclude from
this ‘honest men’s talk’:

The officiant told us: “Surely you are not unfamiliar with divination.
 ‘Divine, you will find bad spirits, just like you will find rubbish as soon as
you sweep the house’. Consulting the shadows of Aunts and Uncles too
is like that... It’s all lies! ...But one day I must come [to work with the
medium as invited], although I know she runs a brisk trade in spirits and
saints. She is like the drum, and I the truncheon. Where there is a drum,
there is a truncheon for beating it. Or she is like a physician, I am like a
pharmacist. Everyone must make a living...”

The case of a local official, who so believed in the Holy Saint Mother
(Liều Hạnh) that he consulted the deity about his administrative decisions, had
Trạng Lang truly baffled. Thus from a professional chanter to a local official,
it was advantageous to believe in the powers of the spirits of this ensemble,
and to acknowledge that those different areas and level of powers and efficacy
were indeed mediated by women in communication with female divinities.
But, what about the male mediums?

According to Trạng Lang, most assistant mediums were male. The
mediums, like many observed in Burma, Thailand and Singapore, were said to
have compatible fates with the ‘damsels’ spirits, and followed them like
married partners. The potential female medium recruits may have had severe
illness or long-term loss of appetites and general depression, or had hot
flushes, experiences of flying or swimming in dreams.

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63 So goes a Vietnamese proverb.

64 To gain her fleeting audience at Phú Đày, the main temple for Liều Hạnh, the
mandarin purified himself with vegetarian diet and body wash before every request
made to the goddess. He also showed deference to his minor wife, who was medium
for one of Liều Hạnh's attendants. Trạng Lang, no.167, p.10.

65 Similar patterns associated with transvestism, homosexuality attached with
mediumistic possession are observed in these places. Examples are found in de La
Perrière, B.B., Les Rituels de Possession en Birmanie: du Culte d’État aux Cérémonies
Privées, Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, Paris, 1989; also Heinze, R.-L., Trance
and Healing...; Wijeyewardene, G., Place and Emotion...

66 Phan Kế Bính, Việt Nam Phong Tục, p.299.
Male mediums in North Vietnam supposedly had heartbreaking experience in love, were described as eccentric, obsequious and emotionally highly strung.\(^{67}\) Their celibacy, according to Trōng Lang's informers, is because they were hermaphroditic, thus were considered 'safe' around women.\(^{68}\) In Durand's study, the recruitment of a twenty-five-year-old male medium, a worker at a photographic studio, is also described. The initiate's recovered trans-sexuality was enabled by the traditional choice of a female deity as his main 'possessor', in this case, Cô Đệ Nhị ("Second Damsel/Aunt"), necessitating the female dress and mannerism in trance.

The male/female binarism can thus be extended in a structural frame, similarly applied to the concept of supernatural responsiveness, that throws light on secular relations through supernatural ones. While deities in the feminine cult are considered, probably by literati like Phan Kế Bính, to be consorts of the Chinese Daoist male divinities, the latter's hierarchy is bypassed in the eyes of the devotees of goddesses.

As Coulet observed, the three worlds represented by Tam Phū in the cult of Liễu Hạnh, that of Sky, Earth and Water - although are regarded to be governed by three kings whose three spouses are goddesses, the followers of this feminine cult prefer to appeal to the goddesses to intercede with their spouses.\(^{69}\) The goddesses are therefore the immediate de facto powers representing the followers' interests and would thus take their wishes to the highest level, ignoring all intermediate echelons of divine powers. As Sangren points out, in terms of the similar position of Kwan Yin and Tsi Wang Mu in China, this function marks the goddesses as subversive in by-passing their mandarinate-like strata of officious gods.\(^{70}\)

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\(^{67}\) Trōng Lang, no. 166, p.10.

\(^{68}\) With their good looks and feminine manners, Trōng lang asserts, some were believed to earn a lot of money from women admirers and to have broken a few homes and families. Trōng Lang, ibid.


I have referred to northern mediumship for lack of literature on the southern cases, assuming the process of conversion to and practices in this religion were similar.\(^1\) The aspects of women's and trans-sexuals' social status, older hát chèo singing, or the southern satirical theatre attached to trance ceremonies — point to a marginal space for the weak to wield their weapons, to subvert and contest the hegemonic values. Thus if the practice attracts members of the oppressed and marginalised groups, then its visibility and survival is proof of an irrepressible socio-cultural necessity. Again, older agrarian and fertility cults together serve as an arena for this contest.

OTHER FERTILITY CULTS

A cultural dilemma between an older or local matrifocal background, with a prevalent shamanic pattern, and a growing centralised polity requiring military power, orderly succession, and strict hierarchy, however, appeared to exist in both Dàng Ngoài and Dàng Trong. The gender differentiation of tree worship is an apt reflection of that tension.

TREES

In a 1909 article, Przyłuski divides consecrated trees into masculine trees, which are usually found in the middle of rice fields, and feminine ones. The worship at the former type is dedicated to the Earth spirit (thọ thàn), who is in charge of that area of land. The trees themselves are the property of the Holy Saint (General) Trân, whose powers were manifest in the blood spilled from the mediums who pierced themselves with metal skewers during the ceremonies. Women did not frequent these sites.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) In both practices, mediums have similar physiological reaction during the onset of trance - yawning and belching - the mode of possession by deities is the same in that a red head cover cloth is used, and the roles if not names of female deities are similar: they guard mountains, flora, water, fire and in the case of Po Nagar, precious metals or stones.

It is not known since when this gender division started. Dinh Tiên Hoàng in the tenth century banned human sacrifice to consecrated trees, when it was routine to sacrifice a Laotian to the tree spirit every year. This killing of a member of a neighbouring ethnic group as ritual sacrifice reminds us of a custom believed to have been practiced by the (mainly patrifocal) Sedang group in Quang Nam hinterland up to recent times. A sixteenth-century work, Ở Châu Căn Lộc ("Recent Compilation of Ở Châu"), mentions an old Cham custom among fishing folk where a girl was sacrificed yearly to a female spirit, thus indicating the historical depth of the ritual. Much closer to the Vietnamese bone is the sacrifice to a Cham female spirit of a young ethnic-minority boy by burning up to early this century, reportedly executed by fishermen off the coast of Khánh Hòa province.

Feminine trees on the other hand are recognised by the votive objects, many of which are found suspended on the branches: paper shoes, cardboard conical hats. Placed at the foot of the tree were flowers, fruits and incense sticks that were brought there by women. Any flower whose scent had been smelled by a man would no longer be offered, as it is said to have lost its soul, like a fruit already eaten. If a large tree growing in one village was reputed to shelter a spirit whose influence spread beyond its boundary, a mêu shrine would be constructed with a cult tablet of the feminine deity. This tablet could then be carried around in periodic festival processions. As the congregation increases, the mêu shrine becomes a đền temple. The male

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74 See Viên Dân Tộc Học, Sổ Tay về các Dân Tộc ở Việt Nam, Khoa Học Xã Hội, Hanoi, 1983.

75 Tạ Chí Đại Trưởng, Thần, Người..., p.193.


77 Przyłuski, M.J., ibid., p.761.

78 And typically, votive objects inside are also hung on the rafters of the shrines.
 mediums' practice associated with this group, according to Przyluski, is 'less bloody'.

But ancient and leafy trees, usually in the *ficus* family, are also the haunts of a type of malicious ghost called *con tinh*. This word, as recorded by Cadière in his studies in Central Vietnam, denotes a spirit of a virgin young woman, who appeared, according to popular belief, to young unmarried men as an attractive white-dressed female with flowing long hair tied with a thin ribbon to the front, and whose feet did not touch the ground. In the South, the usual apparition was a white female shape with long unbound black hair sitting on the lower branch of the haunted tree, mostly a weeping willow tree.

Large snakes nesting inside or under a haunted tree are also believed to be the living form of the *con tinh*, as Cadière found out in Central Vietnam. Myths of snakes as water realm's spirits hold a prominent place in the goddesses worship in northern Vietnam. Wooden statues of great snakes twining around the temple rafters are a common sight. The serpent spirits, *Quan Lên Tuân Tranh*, are said to be Lady Lầu Hạnh's subordinates.

Cadière maintains that all illnesses to Vietnamese have supernatural causes. This may be the belief up to the early twentieth century. However, when the sick young man hallucinated or had dreams or deliria where *con tinh* came to speak through his mouth, or in a wet dream, we could recognise the desire to fulfil sexual need involved. Especially when the same word *tinh* also designates seminal fluid, the libidinal connection is obvious.

A Freudian interpretation, however, may not be adequate. *Tinh* also means essence, while the female deities believed to take shelter in the trees are

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79 Ibid., p.762.

80 Cadière is puzzled as to why the tree should be associated with female spirits, not just for the Vietnamese but many other groups. At the same time he observes the rock worship as in tandem with tree worship with 'a few common characteristics and points of contact'. However, if we suppose the female principle as fundamental to vitality, regenerative recreative power, than it is only a small step to link the symbolism with young women, Mother goddesses, the serpent, hence snakes living in/under the old trees, as obvious natural archetypes. On the relationship between rock, tree and life force, the areca nut, betel leaf brushed in limestone paste can then be seen as a convergent and compact symbolic food... Cadière, L., *Croyances*, vol.2, pp. 45-47 & 71.
Bà Mộc ("Wood Lady") or Bà Hoả ("Fire Lady"), symbolising two transformative principles probably borrowed from the Chinese classic theory of change. We will find these themes and motifs: mother, young woman, snake, tree and rock to be recurrent in Lý and Trần-era myths and popular practices, which will be examined in the next chapter.

King Lý Thành Tông, on his way to battle with Champa in 1069, dreamed of a female deity, a tinh from a tree of Thủy Vân village. On advice of his minister, he conferred her the sinicized title of Lady Hầu Thọ (Hou Tu).\(^{81}\) Once venerated, she was believed to calm the ocean for Vietnamese boats to sail South, and help procure victory over the Cham.\(^{82}\) This was the period of the 'Lý dynastic religion' which saw an extensive court recruitment of divinities from diverse origins. Lý Anh Tông established the Viên Khấu (round mound) ritual platform in 1154, said to be for performing giao (Chinese chiao) ritual.\(^{83}\) The function of giao ceremony is to activate communication between earth and heaven through the mediation of man. It is, however, suspected that the purpose was also for rain making, expelling insect pests. These functions are closely related to those in Earth god cult of peasants.\(^{84}\)

Later, to the 1285 conferred title of Hầu Thọ Thần ủy Kỳ Nguyễn Quân, the title Nguyễn Trung (central origin) was added, following a major military victory in 1289. In 1313, Ưng Thiên Hòa Đức (responsive to Heaven, transforming nurture) was added after a similar occasion.\(^{85}\) In brief Thần Hầu Túc the rice god, replaced by Po Nagar dressed up as Hầu Thọ and worshipped on Xã Dân Thần Túc in Lý times, was thrice promoted over nearly fifty years during Trần times, but still bearing her crop protection role as alluded to by

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\(^{81}\) The spirit appeared in white dress and green trousers, promised to help and gree: the king on his victorious return. Trần Thế Pháp, Việt Điền U Linh Tiếp, op. cit. p.97.


\(^{83}\) Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư, op. cit., p.320.

\(^{84}\) TCDT, Thần Ngựol., p.151.

\(^{85}\) See Việt Điền U Linh Tiếp, ibid, p.98.

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her titles. Examining the semantics of names and titles the Vietnamese kings
gave to Po Nagar, Tạ Chí Đại Trương also suggests that the linga-yoni form has
been alluded to throughout Lý-Trần era, to the bafflement of later historians.
He deduces that Po Inu Nagar’s Hindu symbolism must have been retained by
Vietnamese rulers in the Lý-Trần era.

ROCKS

Starting out in the eleventh century in Vietnam as a Lý 'captured' goddess, as
mentioned above, Thiên Y A Na was found to be an efficacious rain giver. 'Cầu
dào' (request supplication) is short for cầu phong đạo vĩ (praying for wind and
rain), a Hán Vietnamese term for a ritual probably first appropriated to earn
official sanction for local mediumistic practice from the occupying authorities.

In this supplication for clement weather, rock spirits were probably the
earliest known to be addressed.86 Cadière’s study of the worship of rocks, in the
Quảng Trị - Huế area early in this century, instances two rocks representing
powerful spirits that according to legends were carried there from somewhere
else, but their heaviness was such that they could not be lifted again. The
location became the site of their temple.87 It was in this manner the statue of
Lady Chúa Xứ of Châu Dốc was said to locate the temple at the foot of Núi
Sam.88

Rock spirits of lesser stature are also regarded as protector of young
children who are sickly or difficult to raise. As Cadière reports but offers no
explanation:

Whenever a child in the family is found puny, sickly and the parents fear
they could lose him/her, they dedicate the child to the rock. Offerings,

86 Thus Trần Quốc Vũ tượng demonstrates the evolving but inextricable relation between
boundary protection and fertility bestowal of rock spirit in the Thành Giông beliefs
and practice. See Trần Quốc Vũ tượng, The Legend of Ông Giông from the Text to the
Field, paper delivered at the Symposium on Vietnamese History, SEASSI, Cornell
University, 19-21/7/1991.

87 One of these was a former Cham statue. Cadière, L., Croyances..., vol.2, p.77.

88 Louis Malleret suggests the statue is an image of Uma, Vishnu’s consort. Other linga
statues found nearby confirm the Hindu identity of the icon.
fruits, gold paper [spirit money?], incense stick, sometimes a chicken or meat are deposited at the altar of the rock, with a piece of paper on which the child’s and the family’s names, his/her age, hour and date of birth, together with the mention that the child is sold to the rock spirit until the age of twelve, are written.\textsuperscript{89}

Moreover, the gender of the consecrated rocks is generally female, as Sallet observed in Central Vietnam early this century:

One of the first things that strikes the observer is the very small number of the cults of this kind [i.e. Cham statues installed in Vietnamese miếu shrines] focused on a genie or a masculine deity. The cult consists of few Buddhas (Ông Phật), Holy Saints (Ông Thánh), Tutelary Spirits (Ông Thần) [being worshipped]; on the other hand, worship of the feminine divinities is extremely common and often disconcerting; a long list can be given of the ‘Ladies Nursemaid’ (Bà Vụ), ‘Ladies Matron/Midwife’ (Bà Mụ), ‘Ladies Buddha’ (Bà Phật), and, in a more especially marked frequency, of the names ‘Ladies Rock’ (Bà Đá), ‘Ladies Emergent’ (Bà Lợi), ‘Ladies Pearl’ (Bà Ngọc), and ‘Ladies Sun’ (Bà Thái Dương).\textsuperscript{90}

Sallet goes on to remark that most numerous would be Ladies Rock, followed by the Ladies Emergent group. While he is not sure whether the word Lợi refers to the Cham people, he observes that its meaning is associated with the vigour or vitality tied up with old Cham temple areas.\textsuperscript{91} The Lady Pearl is also called Bà Chúa (“Queen”), referring to Thiên Y A Na or the well known Cham goddess Po Inu Nagar. More surprising were the old Cham statues representing male personages and animals such as the linga, a male lion, were honoured under the names of ‘Lady’ or ‘Princess.’\textsuperscript{92}

Rock and goddess worship also plays an important role in the life of fishing villages. Fishermen of Khánh Hòa province also worship rock

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., p.80.

\textsuperscript{90} Sallet, A., ‘Les Souvenirs Chams dans le Folk-Lore et les Croyances Annamites du Quang-Nam’, B.A.V.H., no. 10, 1923, pp. 210-211. As for the word Động also found in another title for sacred rocks, Thạch Cẩm Động, may come from the Cham and ethnic minority word Yaang (Vietnamese: dằng) for ghosts and spirits. Thus Khánh Hòa fishermen propitiate 12 Nhang Động.

\textsuperscript{91} Huỳnh Ngọc Tràng assumes that there were two ethnic groups called Lợi and Lạc before the Cham in central Vietnam. See Huỳnh Ngọc Tràng, Ông Đình, Tin Ngoại giao và Tranh Tượng, T.P. HCM, 1994, p.21.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., p.214.
formations on coastal island, believed to represent goddesses who could help them with good catches. Thus Bà Chúa Đảo Hòn Đất ("Queen of the Đổ Island"), and Bà Lương ("Lady Lương") or Lỗ ("Hole") Lương for a rock proclivity of three metres wide, one metre high and one metre deep. Lương is a 'sanitised' version of 'vagina'. The sexual metaphor employed in their associating the harvest of the sea emphasised with the symbolic act of intercourse: the ritual for requesting good catches was to poke a wooden cudgel carved in the phallic shape about 50 cm long into the hole three times.

The whales, venerated as living tutelary spirits by the Cham, are also worshipped in Vietnamese coastal villages. A famous Cham sorcerer and his wife called Thây Thuần are also posthumously propitiated for good fishing. These instances help give us a general impression of what the Bình Thuận - Khánh Hòa migrants brought to the South. They also point to some depth of adaptation of Cham beliefs and practice in the southward advance. Is it possible then, to plot the changes in mediumistic practices so as to better understand contemporary cultural life in the Mekong delta? We will examine this question more fully in the next chapter.

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94 Ibid., pp.105-107. This was the spirit to whom a boy was burned as sacrificial offering by Vietnamese fishermen as mentioned earlier.

95 Ibid., pp. 73-74.
CHAPTER FIVE
TRANCE AND SHADOWS - SOUTHERN MEDIUMSHIP AND RELATED CULTS

Mr. Ban, the president of the dình management committee of Cái Khê, pays occasional visits to a fortune teller on the other side of Cần Thơ river. The latter, a woman in her fifties, is said to be constantly possessed by the spirit of an infant prodigy. The traffic by small boats ferrying clients to and from this lady’s house, where, assisted by her husband, she runs a consulting service, is fairly busy especially at weekends. Being no regular visitor, Mr. Ban is nevertheless part of this public fascination with the medium’s oracular prowess. He also takes a casual interest in the cult of Bà Chúa Xứ (Lady of the Realm), a goddess of vague Indo-Khmer origin. Towards the late 1980s, on a pilgrimage to the Chúa Xứ temple in Châu Đốc, the seat of a cult closely associated with trance mediumship in the Mekong delta, Mr. Ban witnessed some extraordinary happenings there. The miraculous event was one of the manifestations of the goddess’ linh (supernatural responsiveness).¹ For instance, a lady friend broke out in spontaneous dance at a special site in the mountain.² And a ball of light, said to be the apparition of the Lady of the Realm, flew across the early morning sky in plain view of thousands of pilgrims and a few policemen.

In the South, hát bóng rỗi is the name for hymnal singing and dancing performed as a part of the ceremony honouring the goddesses at their shrines. Its features have undergone such changes over the last

¹ Similar well publicised mysterious apparitions happened in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Sister Chân Không recounts an apparition case in La Vang village of Quảng Trị province, where a silhouette of a woman was held by locals to be Avalokitesvara (Kwan Yin). Then-president Ngô Đình Diệm’s brother, archbishop Ngô Đình Thúc, reportedly ordered a cathedral in La Vang built in honour of that silhouette, which was now taken to be Mother Mary’s. See Chân Không, Learning True Love, Parallax Press, Berkeley, CA, 1993, p.33.

² At the meeting site of mediumistic dancers in the Forbidden Mountain (Núi Cấm), his friend, who danced this way for the first time in her life, reportedly expressed utter surprise and embarrassment over this incident.
decades that this adaptability attracts the attention of observers. Thus, Ngô Đức Thịnh notes the borrowing from southern Cải Lương theatre, northern Quan Họ singing, Cham and Tây Nguyên (southwestern highland) minority group-styled dresses, while Huỳnh Ngọc Tráng remarks that, apart from incorporating Hát Bội (classical theatre), one current invocation formality uses a 1960s top hit song in the South, Lòng Mẹ (mother’s heart), and a hymn for Hồ Chí Minh was heard in 1989 among bồng rô devotional songs around Hồ Chí Minh City. Is such multifaceted hybridisation another clue to the survival of mediumship practice?

This chapter attempts to answer that question by touching on, once more, some issues of gender and suppression. The rationale for this approach arises from the impression that beliefs and meaning reproduction related to the goddesses in the South are distinct and even more pervasive than in the North. We have considered how Đồng Bông trance medium practices survive official suppression through their contribution to healing. By engaging cultural traditional resources, it effects translation of psycho-social meanings into personal symbols. Now, vigorous localisation of the goddesses cult also suggests a variety of forms of resistance against and negotiation with the dominant group(s).

MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT

Localisation, understood as a multilateral accumulative rather than unilateral assimilative process, characterises many supernatural beliefs and practices. It is a dialectical outcome of the tendency to adapt to pre-existing patterns and conversely to keep some definite identity the same time. The evolution of trance possession practice is of this type, especially

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3 Ngô Đức Thịnh, 'Hát Văn Hậu Bông là Hiện Tượng Văn Hóa Đàn Gián Tổng Thể' [Devotional Singing and Medium Seances Are Comprehensive Phenomena in Popular Culture], in Ngô Đức Thịnh (ed.), Hát Văn, op. cit., p.132; Huỳnh Ngọc Tráng, Diễm Xướng Nghĩa Lễ Nam Bồ [forms of folk performative arts in Gia Định - Saigon area], talk given at Youth Cultural Centre, HCM City, 13/9/92.

4 The definition of localisation is borrowed from Cheu Hock Tong's phrasing in his paper on a spirit cult movement in Malaysia in the late 1970s. The development of
under the conditions of migration and settlement. Both the above mentioned authors tend to think that Vietnamese mediumistic practices became localised in three distinctive regions: The Hanoi - northern region, the Huế - Thừa Thiên (central) area, and the Nha Trang - Phan Thiết (lower central) region. The third region has been known to inherit local Cham tradition, from which comes the main source of dancing skills in the Mekong delta. The most obvious adaptation in mediumistic practice in the Mekong delta is in the forms of dance executed during the festival at the shrines for goddesses. Identities of these deities—ranging from Lady Liễu Hạnh to localised Indic-origin Cham Chùa Xú, whose Vietnamese name is Thiên Y A Na (Po Yan Inu Nagar - heavenly queen of the region)—constitute the next set of indicators for localisation.

Up to 1975 at least, before the communist government put a sweeping ban on 'superstitious practices', dancers travelled from one location to another throughout the delta, as revealed by those I met at the Cải Khê đền’s festival discussed in Chapter One. Although some have resumed activities at urban centres such as Ho Chi Minh City and Thủ Đức, many must have retired from the occupation. A distinction should be made between this group and those attending the temples for Lady Liễu Hạnh and her subaltern divinities brought south by northerners in the 1954 migration. These deities continued their northern pattern of patronage. Trần Thị Ngọc Diệp noted about 10 temples dedicated to them in the Saigon Gia Định area. They were private homes

this cult, says Cheu Hock Tong, saw local-born Chinese seek to adapt themselves to the patterns of multi-ethnic cultures while at the same time trying very hard to maintain their ethnic boundaries. See Cheu Hock Tong, 'The Datuk Kong Spirit Cult Movement in Penang: Being and Belonging in Multi-ethnic Malaysia', Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 23, 2, Sept. 1992, pp. 381-404.

5 Some southern dance teachers can trace their lineage back to a Nha Trang school. Huỳnh Ngọc Tràng, Tìm Hiểu Nguyên Gốc và Đặc Điểm của Múa Bồng ở Nam Bộ [Understanding the Origin and Characteristics of Trance Dance in the South], unpublished paper, 1993.

6 Remarks by Cadèère regarding these beliefs in central Vietnam apply to the South as well, as confirmed by Sơn Nam. See Cadèère, Croyances..., p. 38 and Sơn Nam, Dinh Miếu..., pp. 39-40.

The \textit{đồng}'s repertoire of performative rituals, as mentioned above, includes a miming act of rowing a boat while singing in trance. However, in the Mekong delta, its form is 'diluted' into an impromptu act, with a scene of meeting on the water and conversing while waiting for the coming major ritual act, whereas the dance with flowers is retained or rather revived by adapting to Chăm style. Interestingly, the recent revival of religious festivals in the South entails not only that of traditional ritual music, but other ritual performances, too. Among \textit{đinh} formalities in 1992, Trần Văn Khê notes the return of items such as commemoration for the Five Ladies, the mediums evocation, and the dance with a golden tray.\footnote{Trần Văn Khê, "Chung Quanh Phong Trào "Về Nguồn" và Chứng Định Thời Đại" [Around the "Back to the Source" Movement and the Contemporary Malaise], \textit{Đại Mới}, Sept. & Oct., 1992. He also discovered that in the early 1990s, an old friend of his, a traditional musician, who had to work for a Hát Bội company twelve years earlier, could now earn more from \textit{đình} festivals, and could feel confident to pass his skills on to his son.}

These items pertain to the worship of many goddesses, some of whom were brought south by settlers. For example, \textit{Bà Chúa Động} (queen of the grottos) from Bình Thuận was probably worshipped in a coastal location of Trà Vinh called \textit{Ba Động} (the three grottos), the same name given to the sand dunes considered sacred by villagers of Bình Nhân in Bình Thuận province. \textit{Dai Nam Nhât Thống Chí} (geography of Đại Nam), a work completed in 1906 by Nguyễn court officials, mentions this location where a \textit{Bà Chúa Động} was venerated for her magical responsiveness. But if the migration of Thiên Y A Na from lower Central Vietnam did not pass through the Biên Hòa area, as Sơn Nam proposes, then the route taken would have been along the coast into Gò
Công, Mỹ Tho or Rạch Giá to terminate at Phú Quốc island or Châu Đức. As Sơn Nam notes:

In the forest, river mouth, tributaries, estuaries, shrines of the Lady Chúa Xứ ("Queen of The Region"), an alternate form of Thiên Y A Na (Bà Chúa Ngọc - "Pearl Queen"), are often found at the foot of big trees. We also find the dính (palaces) of Chúa tặc of Chúa, dính of Chúa, miếu of Chúa, vò Bà in Núi Cẩm and on Phú Quốc island.9

The fluê court was as distant as the new environment of the delta was dynamic and changeable. Settlement demanded innovation as well as improvisation. Bà Ngũ Hành and bà Thọ with a yellow dress have been found sitting in the middle of four other elements in miếu shrine for female deities throughout the inner Region (Đà Nẵng Trung) since the sixteenth century.10 Popularity of the goddesses proved to be widespread among both popular and elite groups. Thiên Y A Na of Ô Châu, Chúa Ngọc of Thuận Hóa, Chúa Tiên of Nha Trang, bà Đen of Tây Ninh, and bà Chúa Xứ of Châu Đức are honoured in major temples. Thus Trịnh Hoài Đức wrote about the South, then called Gia Định, in the early nineteenth century that:

Gia Định is situated in the bright region (South), it is peopled with many brave, loyal and courageous characters, valuing righteousness over talent. Similarly, among the many women of beauty, some are considered blessed with longevity and wisdom (equaling outstanding men's). They prefer Buddhism, believe in trance medium practice (vịc dòng bồng), revere the female divinities, such as: bà Chúa Ngọc ("Lady Pearl Princess"), bà Chúa Động ("Lady Cave Princess"), (they usually call a highly respected woman bà), bà Hòa Tĩnh ("Lady Fire Spirit"), bà Thủy Long ("Lady Water Dragon"), and cô Hồng, cô Hạnh ("miss/aunt Hồng/Hạnh") etc...11

The most important B: Chúa Xứ temple is in Châu Đức at the foot of Núi Sam, and near the historic Vĩnh Tế canal, joining the Hậu Giang (Posterior Mekong - or Bassac) river with the coast of Hà Tiên. The location may evoke in Sơn Nam that couplet of symbols for the realm -- mountain-river (giang sơn), being a frontier post, as he argues:

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9 The words dính, tặc, vò are variants of miếu, or shrine. Sơn Nam, Dính Miếu..., op. cit., p.39.
11 Quoted in Sơn Nam, Dính Miếu..., op. cit., p.39.
As mountains and hills in the plain are few and far between, the Seven Mountains area is the symbol of the realm (giang Sơn); one large arm of the Mekong, the Rear river (sông Hậu) is not far from the goddess’ shrine... Vĩnh Tế canal and Châu Đốc town are the frontier posts guarding the Mekong delta against Siamese armies’ incursions during Minh Mạng’s reign; the best generals were sent to this area.12

Exploring the dance forms of mediums, Huỳnh Ngọc Trân is able to postulate the changes and adaptations in this art over the history of settlement in the Saigon and Mekong delta areas. These changes enable us to deduce to a certain extent the methods through which the mediums’ practice maintained its existence.

In the late 1890s, trance dancers were well known to include many a trans-sexual. Baurac, a French medical doctor, reported his encounter with wandering homosexual performers and singers in his travels through Mỹ Tho and Gò Công provinces.13 It is known that mediums find recruits among these nomadic performers. As for Cần Thơ province in the 1950s, the sight of professional female mediums who travelled with their husbands by house boats from place to place, and performed physically demanding dances, was fairly familiar.14 The first difference to note is therefore the mobility of the southern mediums.

This is hardly surprising given the openness of the region and the mobility afforded by river transportation evidenced in the lively regional commerce and interflows of cultures. This mobility has aided exchanges and brought about deterritorialization and decentralisation by means of local adaptations, demonstrating the resilience of matrifocal culture which features a distinct mode and style of performing arts that are part of older widespread Southeast Asian patterns. They attest to the indispensable recourse to altered states of consciousness, as observed in many other places throughout the

12 Sên Nam, Dinh Mịch..., p. 40. It should be noted that military posts were placed along important waterways, not near the mountains, indicating the latter’s non-strategic value.


14 I still remember having the mediums’ house-boats pointed out to me when they came to Cái Khclé in the 1950s.
world. More importantly, however, the goddesses' popularity is not unrelated to the another observation: the changing status of southern Vietnamese women from the nineteenth century onwards. These concurrent factors are important considerations in explaining the widespread cult of female divinities in the South.

ETHNICITY AND FERTILITY

Differences in dance forms suggest that mediumistic practices underwent transformation at two points along the southward path: in the Huế-Thừa Thiên area, where the Nguyễn rulers endorsed Po Inu Nagar worship as a gesture of independence from northern cultural hegemony; and in the Nha Trang Phan Thiệt area, where the practice centres around the most sacred of Cham shrines for the goddess. According to Huỳnh Ngọc Tràng, because the performative format of Huế mediums bears both the northern influence of Tam Phủ's chầu văn and the imprint of Cham mediumistic dances, the Mekong delta probably inherited the art directly from Cham exponents in Khánh Hòa, Nha Trang, where the Cham imprint is older and more intensive than in Huế.

Thus the Cham traces in southern religious rituals reveal the central coast origins of Vietnamisation of Cham deities. Vietnamese migrants then brought these along in their move south to Gia Định, via Nha Trang, to join with other medium performative ritual forms possibly already practised there by local Chams. Instead of chầu văn as in the North, the southerners call truy ritual ensemble bồng rối (shadow supplication), as mentioned above. Western Mekong delta mediums are known as travelling performers, while easterners and lower central practitioners are to be closely associated with shrines and

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15 On oral evidence, as mentioned in Chapter One, reported by Huỳnh Ngọc Tràng, the rise in status of southern women is recognised through living memory, and at present attested by the number of shrines for feminine deities, and by the presence of women at dĩnh festivals.

16 Huỳnh Ngọc Tràng, Tìm Hiểu Nguyên Gốc...

17 Sơn Nam, Dĩnh, Mỉu..., p. 39.
temples, with a higher level of skills. Nowadays, according to Huỳnh Ngọc Tráng, the Western Mekong delta groups evolved into itinerant circus dancers without trance performance. However, this trend could easily reverse with the recent upsurge of public interest in traditional festivals.

Cham traits are readily recognised in such dance forms as the balancing of objects such as trays, flowers, bowls, earthen jars, and, more recently, umbrellas, bicycles and stools are included. If these so-called múa đồ chơi (dance with toys) tend to be less ceremonial, then the so-called dâng mâm (tray offering) ritual, involving a variety of goldplated or silver trays on which is placed a votive Cham tower, appears to remain within devotional formalities. The official name of this ritual item, Hiền Vô (offering the lady's den) signifies that the goddess' symbolic abode is being presented. Moreover, offerings being placed on the head is also a Cham feature, as alluded to in a prayer passage for the bathing ritual of Po Inu Nagar's statue:

...I go and bring water to wash the goddess hair,
I go and fetch river water, carry it on my head to offer to the goddess.
I wash her chest with the water, to bathe her
I fetch river water, carrying on my head as I go, carrying on my head as I bring it.
I fetch the water to wash the goddess' feet, the goddess' hands.

This balancing and carrying on the head of votive objects, specifically Cham propitiating forms, has been adopted by Vietnamese dancers. However, as mentioned above, modern additions and improvisations by southerners reflect their constant innovations. Some of the most skillful dances also incorporate Chinese Daoist features. For example, as part of the múa đồ chời (dance with toys) repertoire, the Lục Bình Chướng Bất Tiên ("Display of Eight Immortals on the Vase") dance object consists of a ceramic vase which carries a length of banana trunk. On this trunk are embedded eight bamboo stems with puppets in the form of eight Daoist Immortals suspended at various ends. With the vase balanced on the dancer's head, the Immortal figures move in a

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18 Huỳnh Ngọc Tráng, Tìm Hiểu Nguyên Gốc ....
19 Tìm Hiểu Nguyên Gốc ....
20 Tìm Hiểu Nguyên Gốc ...
shimmering motion while the dance depicts another sinicized feature, that of 
general Kwan Kung in battle. This feature involves the dancer handling a broad 
blade sword at the same time. The Chinese component reveals two 
interconnected aspects of migration expressed in supernatural matters: a) the 
changes involving a sea-goers' culture, and b) the fertility/Earth/mother-
goddess motifs infiltrating the Earth god's symbolism.

The entrance of Cham deities into Vietnam, as discussed earlier, may 
shed more light on the evolution of popular practice in the South. Although 
conquerors of the land of Champa, the Vietnamese were attentive to honouring 
the previous land owners. In the domestic domain, one of the spirits they paid 
respect to was the previous owner, called tiên địa chủ (former land owner). 
The new settlers' ritual of "renting" land from indigenous groups similarly 
invokes an autochthonous deity called Chủ Ngu Man Nương, whose re-enacted 
representation in the first decades of this century was a blackened-skinned 
couple carrying baskets like hill tribe people.

Then the Vietnamese changed the name Man Nương to Ma Nương 
("Ghost Woman"), to conflate the meaning with a ghost of ethnic minority 
origin, and also as thần dâng Thọ (Khmer spirit), who is ritually offered 
grilled river fish cá lóc. Thus, meanings associated with land and terrain 
found their way into the original (northern) worship of Thọ Thần, otherwise 
called Thọ Chủ (land owner), who was first considered as having higher status 
than ông Địa ("grandfather Earth"). By the first decade of this century, Thọ 
Chủ was no longer propitiated communally. His domain was restricted to the 
house, and his name converted to ông Địa.

Cadière suggests the word Ngu Ma comes from Uma, considered by the 
Cham to be a spirit of trees-and-plants. But, as he also points out, based on

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21 Tìm Hiền Nguồn Gốc ...
22 TCDT, Thần Nguồn..., citing Landes and Lê Văn Phát, La Vie Intime d'un Annamite de 
Cochinchine, B.S.E.I., Saigon, 1907. )
23 While Thọ (indigenous) refers to 'uncivilised' groups, in the South the word usually 
means the Khmer people.
24 Lê Văn Phát, La Vie Intime..., p. 33.
the hymn for Po Yan Inu Nagar sung in Nha Trang temple, which claims she created the earth, the eagle wood and rice, Uma is none other than Po Nagar.26 Although Lady Chùa Xữ, a variant of Po Nagar, as we have seen, took the role of the Chinese wall-and-moat type regional tutelary spirits, the contest of influence between this transformed Cham Queen of the realm and Chinese Earth gods, at the expense of the wall-and-moats spirits in the nineteenth century. Such localisation of Chinese influences in the symbols and meaning complexes the frontier South can be seen in the form of a local terrain guardian, ông Địa.

FROM KWAN KUNG TO THE ÔNG ĐỊA CULT

For the Mekong delta, Quan Thánh Đê Quán or Quan Công (Kwan Kung), a highly popular Chinese presence in the trance healing ritual in both northern and southern regions, appeared to have taken the place of general Saint Trần Hưng Đạo.27 The 'body' (xác - medium) for Kwan Kung is male, consistent with the tong ki mediumship tradition found in many Southeast Asian Chinese communities.28

In 1917, a man living in the city of Trà Vinh was said to be so possessed by Kwan Kung to the extent that he could no longer do any work. However, as reported in a newspaper published in Cần Thơ, during every cholera-prone hot rainy season, he was well consulted and renumerated for carrying out fire

26 Cadière, L., Croyances..., p.37

27 Diguet witnessed a Kwan Kung procession in Cao Bằng, bordering northern Vietnam and China, on the 16th day of the first lunar month in 1905, with a mixture of Chinese and Vietnamese celebrating the bi-annual festival. The statues of Kwan Kung and his two companions were carried on litters. The ceremony ended with a game contest of strength for any strong man in the crowd to grasp the ring dâu phó (head of the firecrackers), a luck charm believed to come from the Holy Saint Kwan Kung. However, he gives no indication of the presence of mediums. Diguet, E., Les Annamites : Société - Coutumes - Religions, Augustin Challamel, Paris, 1906, reprinted by AMS, NY, 1975, pp.332-335.

walking. The author of this report presents various logical reasons to severely criticize the belief, however, he acknowledges its widespread popularity and strong support, especially from women.29

Trance possession in general, as occurred with Daoist sorcerers in particular, was targeted for ridicule by An Hà Nhật Báo newspaper in the 1910s in its campaign against superstition. A 1918 letter to the editor from La Nghĩa district, reported a thấy pháp (sorcerer/shaman) who broke his precept of body purification by eating dog’s meat, but cunningly tried to protect his credentials:

...Just recently, a Daoist sorcerer who has been keeping to the usual purified diet (not eating meat/animal products), but abstaining for too long a time perhaps made him crave [for meat]. He therefore got together with his mates in the neighbourhood to catch a dog and kill it for a feast...[Then] he cut a branch of the thorny coral tree, carefully stripping the all thorns (maybe he is afraid of pain) and brought it inside. In front of the altar, his hair unbound, holding the branch in both hands, he beat his back with it, shouting: "[You] ate dog’s meat! You ate dog’s meat! I told you to abstain, told you to abstain. I am the Hầu Tổ [profession patriarch] who comes to your body so far, wanting it to help the world and rescue people. If you keep eating [meat], I will end your life".

His wife, upon seeing this, prostrated many times and implored [with the spirit to let him off]...30

The medium cult of Kwan Kung and his entourage was thriving in areas with high concentrations of Chinese residents. In Tân Châu’s Long Sơn village of Châu Đốc province, Nguyễn Văn Kiểm maintains that the practice enjoyed popular support up to the late 1950s. He describes at length the local village custom every fifteenth or sixteenth day of the first lunar month, the medium...
possessed by a diversity of Chinese deities, were carried on palanquins from one of the temples to the town centre. The author recalls:

One [medium] lay on the bed of spikes, another pierced his cheeks with skewers, another sat on two sword blades put across the seat of an arm chair. Those mediums wore red uniforms, their eyes glazed, from afar they looked like they were dead. ...The residents around Tấn Châu market placed an altar in front of their house as if they are welcoming the kings or mandarins of old. ...As they passed the altars, the mediums stopped and cut their tongues with the swords, blood gushed and the residents solemnly handed them yellow pieces of paper for the "deity" to daub them in blood to make year-round talismans of life protection (some said that flies do not land on the blood of a possessing deity).

After dispensation of talismans, the mediums stopped at the Kwan Kung temple in Tấn Châu market to pass the two tests: "walking on burning coals and bathing in boiling peanut oil" to prove to the people that "The deity really rode them". 

Not only did Kwan Kung protect the region from harmful spirits, but together with Thọ Công or Táo Công (the Kitchen god), Thọ Địa (the Earth god) and Thần Tài (the Fortune god), he joined these three Chinese imports in looking after the well-being of the household. These earth-associated gods were now combined into Ông Địa (lit. "grandfather Earth"), whose personification was enacted at village festivals under a comic guise: a big round beardless face with a broad grin and pronounced dimples, a huge stomach, one hand holding a fan.

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32 Household gods are a complex varying from ten deities: Người phương thần (five direction spirits) and người lòng thần (five ground/earth tiger-and-dragon bodied spirits). The latter five include the well known three mythical kitchen gods: personified as two male (thọ công and thọ địa) and one female (thọ kỳ) related to the feng-shui of the area. See Tean Anh, Tín Ngưỡng Việt Nam, quyen thuong, TP Hồ Chí Minh, 1992, p.115-118, also Diguet, E., Les Annamites..., p.263, for the myth. See Dào Duy Anh, Việt Nam Văn Hóa Sư Cựu, repub. TP Hồ Chí Minh, 1992, p.245 for the Daoist pantheon, and Huỳnh Ngọc Tràng, Ông Địa,..., op. cit., p.28, for a definition of the five tiger-dragon spirits.

33 The fan can be of paper with bamboo ribs or cut out from the base of a large palm frond, widely used in the country. The wind connotations include the image of "coolness in health."
Although Ông Đìa has been associated with rain and crops in central Vietnam, this was subsumed by his later role of domestic guardian. Thus Ông Đìa, Ông Táo (stove), Thổ thần (ground spirit), and thần Tài (wealth) were combined in protecting the home. However, the evolution of Ông Đìa in the South also includes that of trance mediumship, with new forms of singing, dancing and clowning. It is therefore necessary to explore this particular Earth deity, through the changes brought to his iconic features, and the role he plays in the comic theatre of the mediums' ceremony.

Ông Đìa's physical features allude to the combination of several strands of religious beliefs stemming from the complex intermingling of Vietnamese with other ethnic groups in the Mekong delta, in this case, mainly Khmer and Chinese, although his head scarf looks like the type worn by Cham people. Sometimes his statues depict him sitting on a tiger, linking him with the opening up of forested areas in the South, or extending his power to subordinate that of forests and mountains. The southern saying that "the Earth god looks after the house, the (Neak) Ta spirit looks after the fields" (ông Đìa giữ nhà, ông Ta giữ ruộng) indicates the confluence of two traditions when the Vietnamese settlers encountered local Khmer beliefs. The contact with the Khmer Neak Ta also led to round or smooth shaped rocks consecrated as tutelary spirits by the Cambodians, being worshipped in conjunction with the Earth god.

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31 Huỳnh Ngọc Tràng, ibid., p.37.

32 The tiger has been venerated in the South as Sôn Quân Chỉ Thần (tutelary spirit of the king of the mountain). But tigers lived everywhere in the South including wetlands. Controlling tigers was the chief task in opening up new land. Huỳnh Ngọc Tràng, ibid., p.41. See also Sàn Nam, Đất Gia Đình Xứ, TP Hồ Chí Minh, 1984, pp.33-40.

33 Diguet also shows in a photographic illustration how the northern Thổ Công resembles a low echelon mandarin with a white beard, consecrated in thatched shrines in the field, usually next to a big tree, at the two extremities of a village boundary road. Diguet, Les Annamites..., pp.259-262.

34 A southern folk tale also relates how the Neak Ta sued Ông Đìa for usurping his position of guardian spirit of the region. The village tutelary spirit (ông Thần) at a nearby đồng handed down the arbitration decision in favour of ông Đìa guarding the house, while Neak Ta, who likes reaming around on horseback, was to stay in shrines in the paddocks. Nguyễn Hữu Hiếu, 'Ông Tạ Kiến Ông Đìa' (The Neak Ta Suing the
The reduction of Neak Ta’s territory was no doubt the newcomers’ intention, imposing their presence on the Khmer environment. But if iconic forms are anything to go by, the shaping of the Earth god in rudimentary roundish designs out of clay or cement from around the late nineteenth century points to a reverse influence. Furthermore, the roundish shape of the Earth God, suggestive of the Neak Ta rock in the South, is also indicative of a recovered representation of the fertility and earth mother idea joined to a fairly minor territorial guardian role. Especially when this form, nowadays called ông Tà - ông Lục (Neak Ta - Theravadin monk), is followed immediately by the Địa Bà Bồng (Địa - female medium) form, obviously referring to the pronounced female features as Huỳnh Ngọc Tráng describes.48

ĐỊA NÀNG (EARTH GOD AND IMMORTAL MAIDEN)

At any rate, the present form of ông Địa is found in the dance of the unicorn, a Chinese-origin sacred animal symbol with generative earth or ground connotations, or in the humorous one-act play called Địa Nàng (Earth and Maiden - an Immortal), a part of the ritual program honouring the goddesses. This Chinese Daoist-flavoured play Địa Nàng centres around the search for an Immortals’ water well, redolent of other magical wells mentioned in Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái and similar compilations, such as the well Việt Tĩnh in the Hùng Việt mythology.39

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48 Huỳnh Ngọc Tráng, op.cit., p. 38.
39 The story surrounds a meeting between a human and an immortal. The well in the story was said to render pearls clean and shiny. The cluster of symbols in this story has been interpreted as related to wisdom and immortality. Trần Thế Pháp, Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái..., pp.66-69.
Huynh Ngoc Trang calls the play Chup Bong Tuong Hai, meaning a short Hau-Boi style humorous play associated with mediumship. Both characters hold a folding fan in their hands, emphasising the association of Earth and Wind elements. Its humour resides in the diversified manner in which Ong Dia is secularised and humanised. The play is performed in front of the ban Tien (altar for Immortals), with a picture of twelve flowers on a bush, butterflies, dragonflies, the moon and a well nearby, where stands a maid servant (con do) of the Immortal.40

The theme of the comic play centres around the extraction of water from the well to irrigate the plants, as ordered by the Heavenly Mother Queen to the Earth god. It therefore represents a propitiation for good weather and bountiful crops. Wrapped under a yin-yang balance, however, is the potential subversiveness of the Ong Dia - Goddess equation, where his comic act can turn into parody or satire of a living person, a current fad or even of the gods.41

One of the central comic sketches focuses on the Earth god’s labouring during birth. The Chinese influence is pervasive, enfolding not only Mother Earth into Soil (Tho) and Good Fortune (Phuc) or Money (Tu) gods, but also Maitreya, the future Buddha. The patrilineal Chinese model superimposing the Earth god’s symbol in the south, ends up with feminised features suggestive of pregnancy and fecundity, which are usually attributed to the Mother-goddess symbols.42 More interesting is the lampooning of Buddha Maitreya himself, as Huynh Ngoc Trang describes:

Satire in Dia Nang play appears not to have any limit or restraint. The main tendency is to poke fun at anything, avoiding nothing in its way. This phenomenon is extremely contradictory to the supplicating, honouring purposes of the ceremony. Even Maitreya, recognised as the patriarch of all Ong Dia, was made a subject of satire.

Maiden: ...The Holy Lady ordered us to come down here to ask you to fetch some water from the Immortals’ well.
Dia: You don’t go to the pagoda to ask brother Di?

40 Huynh Ngoc Trang, Dia Nang..., op. cit., p.23.
41 Ibid., p.27
42 Ibid., p39.
Maiden: *Di* who?
Día: *Di Lạc* (Mêtreya, also pun for *di lạc*, to get lost).
Maiden: He got lost way out, right down Ông Lành bridge.43

Another variation of the mediums' play is called Trạng Nàng Xướng Huè Viên ("Heavenly Prince and Immortal Maiden Coming down to the Flower Garden"), with a scenario also involving a water well. The theme of fostering element weather for crops and bounty is the same implied in Día Nắng play, but humour is less pervasive. This may reveal the popularity of the character ông Día in the south, as Tạ Chí Đại Trường notes.44 It also indicates the dispossessed status of those persons who perform the satirical acts, taking the opportunity to voice their protest, as Jean Comaroff notes:

...when expressions of dissent are prevented from attaining the level of open discourse, a subtle but systematic breach of authoritative cultural codes might make a statement of protest which, by virtue of being rooted in a shared structural predicament and experience of dispossession, conveys an unambiguous message.45

In his study of this 'multilateral accumulative' process reflected in Ông Día statues in the South, Huỳnh Ngọc Tráng suggests that worship of Ông Día harks back to a long tradition of conflating the Earth as nurturer and as territorial guardian. When the Earth element was regarded as Mother of all lives, the generative characteristics were associated with fertility. Once agriculture and animal husbandry became the main activities of communities, the human genitals were referred to in worship. From here, Mother goddess and Earth spirit worship grew to be equated with territorial cults, with different regions being assigned under their protective powers. Thus mountains, plains, and rivers came to embody different spirits.46

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43 Text: Lạc bây lắc bá xướng cầu ông Lành -Di Lạc or Di Lạc - Maitreya Buddha. Di Lạc, also sound: nearly like *di lạc* which means to get lost. Lạc bây lạc bá also means 'Lạc is confused and wrongheaded in every way'.

44 Thân, Nhất... pp.289-294.


46 Tạ Chí Đại Trường argues that mytho-historic personnages such as Triệu Quang Phúc was probably the spirit of a swamp or lagoon area, while the brothers Trương Hồng
One example where Earth was equated with rock in folklore is to be found in the creation myth of Thần Trụ Trời (sky-propping Spirit), which depicts this cosmogonic Spirit propping up the sky with a pile of rocks and dug-up earth, thanks to which lives could appear in the world. Thus, rocks were eventually equated with mothering or nurturing qualities. The link between rock, mountain and earth is conceivably well founded. The entry of Good Fortune (Phúc Thần) and Soil gods (đất Thần) from China probably precipitated the personification of nature spirits such as Bạch Hạc ("White Crane") river spirit, Phù Đồng, or Man Nương ("Barbarian Woman").

To round up the sketch for the evolution of this Earth god, it is conceivably safe to say that contemporary feminisation indicates the southern growth of an agricultural environment towards urbanisation. Preoccupation with field and fertility is eventually eclipsed by domesticity. On the other hand, as the home is the domain of women, it could be construed as a statement of women's status to have a deity whose icon is placed near or on the ground level, and whose function seems to consist in errands, such as finding lost belongings, requested or ordered by the lady of the house. What should we make of the women who were not confined within the house boundary, or the class of mobile people such as traders? Some observations on the cult of Bà Chúa Xứ should help shed some light on the issue.

BÀ CHÚA XỨ AND SEX CHANGE

Believed to be erected under the auspices of Châu Thị Tế, the wife of governor Nguyễn Văn Thời in the eighteenth century, the temple of Bà Chúa Xứ has long been a major centre for pilgrimage. The other major centre, the temple in Tây Ninh for the Black Lady (Bà Đen) at the foot of Điện Bàn ("Holy Lady's

and Trường Hát were tributaries to the Red River, Tự Chi Đại Trường, Thần Ngốc..., pp.37-61.

47 The Vĩnh Tế canal was finished in 1824. King Minh Mạng honoured Châu Thị Tế's contribution by using her name to name the canal. See Sơn Nam, Đất Giữa Đình Xưa, TP Hồ Chí Minh, 1984, p.61. See also Nguyễn Văn 1能在, Thảo Nguyên Hữu và những cuộc Khai Phức Miền Hậu Giang, Huế, Sen 1972, p.207.
Temple") mountain. Built around 1871, the popularity of the centre declined following the mounting insecurity of the war years after 1945. It is known that mediumistic rituals were performed unrestricted at both temples, as well as at many đinh shrines for the goddesses in southern cities before 1975.

The Bà Chúa Xứ temple in Châu Đốc epitomises a devotional practice popular among small traders, many of whom are women. It is noted for its non-rational characteristics like the custom of borrowing money from the goddess at festival time. The practice of borrowing a small amount of cash from the goddess, to foster good luck in business or finance in general, gained extremely high popularity among pilgrims around 1988. If the pilgrim was rewarded with good fortune, he/she would return the borrowed amount ten times or more to the temple on the following annual festival.

The region bordering Cambodia, ranging from Hà Tiên to Tây Ninh, has witnessed a thriving informal economy not only after 1975, when the newly established government in southern Vietnam endeavoured to reorganise the economy according to the socialist command model. The trafficking of smuggled goods and ancillary economic activities have been fuelled by the important participation of women traders and entrepreneurs. While it is not known how this religious pattern relates to secular economic activities, the 'goddess banking system' is popular in the South with the Chinese groups, who are known to borrow money from the two of their feminine deities, Tiên Hu and Ma Châu. No less relevant is the custom of borrowing money from goddesses in North Vietnam, well known at the Lady Chúa Kho (store princess) temple in Hà Bạc.

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49 The amount of cash returned to this temple was reported to far exceed the capacity of coffers set up at the temple. My 1992 field data.

50 See Trần Hồng Liên, 'Chúa Bà (Chị Lớn)', in Viện Khoa Học xã Hội, Chúa Hòa Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, TP Hồ Chí Minh, 1990, p.64.

51 See Khánh Duyên, Tin Nghiệp Bà Chúa Kho, Sở Văn Hóa Thông Tin và Thể Thao Hà Bạc, 1994. It is reported to be practised in remote areas as well. Prof. Đỗ Thị Đông has shown me photos taken at a small market in the hills north of Hanoi, where a
It is interesting to note that the Chùa Xử statue has been identified by scholars as a form of the male Hindu deity, thus must have been turned into a goddess icon by the Vietnamese since it was found in the eighteenth century. This is the case of feminisation of stone statues evidenced in central Vietnam as mentioned above. I will return to this aspect later.

Another point to consider is that, as noted before, the feminine deities, Tsi Wang Mu or Kwan Yin being popular with Chinese secret societies, usually take a background position behind Kwan Kung, but nevertheless an essential one. It therefore may not be the right question to ask why Ông Địa took on attributes of the goddesses. Rather, we should ask why goddesses' attributes moved 'down' to the household domain, and 'upwardly' to the regional level. Thus, the Earth god in the southern form of a farmer, while invading the Neak Tas territory, took on the roundish shape of the latter, only to promote the worship of female deities.

This feminisation was regional in one direction and in another, down to the domestic realm of the Earth god. By marking the breadth and reach of female deity status, feminisation indicates a wide interest in mother/fecundity symbolism, as well as mobility of traders in a large region. Consequently we may observe how social power, mediated by the supernatural realm, could be asserted in various forms of meaning construction.

EARLIER PRACTICES

One of the prominent myths in Vietnamese folklore is Man Nüông. More than a signpost to the entrance of Buddhism into Vietnam, as Taylor rightly points out, the Man Nüông story brought together a constellation of

non-descript statue without a shrine is propitiated, with money to lend to women traders.

symbolic complexes all under the command of a mother goddess.\textsuperscript{53} Thanks to Man Nụtông’s magical intervention, according \textit{Linh Nam Chích Quải}, Buddhism found a place to land in Vietnam. \textit{Man Nụtông’s} mythical pregnancy, resulting from the Indian tantric Buddhist monk stepping over her, and her inheriting rain making power from the monk, signals such an acceptance. In the later stage of the story, four Buddha statues were said to be made from one bloc of stone or, in another version, a mulberry tree. The making of such icons indicates the popular reception of Buddhism.

According to Đặng Văn Lương, eleventh-century Lý era saw a strong restoration of mythology and arts in the project of national identity formation following ten centuries of Han rule. The legend of Man Nụtông was among the major myths reconstructed. After examining the names, locations of ancient temples and iconography and practices at these temples, he postulates four evolutionary stages of popular sacred symbols to represent cosmogony:

1. Topographic features in sexually-oriented representations,
2. River worship,
3. Snake or dragon worship,\textsuperscript{54}
4. Man Nụtông as Buddha.

Such beliefs were conglomerated in popular practice. Four old Buddhist temples emanating from the \textit{Man Nụtông} myth complex in Bắc Ninh have interconnected festivals suggestive of the bestowing of fertility under a Buddhist sanction. Their reigning deities’ names of the rock spirits’ turned Buddhist \textit{Pháp Vân, Pháp Vũ, Pháp Lợi, Pháp Diên} ("Cloud-", "Rain-", "Thunder- and "Lightning-Dharma") indicate their original function as bringers of rain and clement weather. In a smaller shrine next to the largest of four temples, \textit{Chùa Dâu} (Mulberry pagoda - in Dầu village) which houses \textit{Pháp Vân} (Cloud Dharma) Buddha, a rain-request rock spirit, \textit{Thạch Quang}

\textsuperscript{53} The symbols range from rock, water, tree, river, fabulous beings such as dragons and serpents. Taylor, K.W., \textit{The Birth of Vietnam}, pp.81-82.

\textsuperscript{54} Myths of the Nagar princesses (daughters of kings of giant serpents) have deep Southeast Asian roots, with Chinese and Champa accounts in the seventh century and before. See Keyes, \textit{The Golden Peninsula}, p.66.
("Rock Light"), believed to be the original Mẫu Nương icon, can be found even today.\textsuperscript{55}

Similarly, in another example, the legends and titles attributed to Thánh Gióng show a concatenation of rock, tree and hero motifs. Above all it was a fertility cult which marshalled sexual themes in its symbolism, as Tạ Chí Đại Trưởng and Trần Quốc Vương point out.\textsuperscript{56} The cult’s exuberance was the reason for the super-imposition of Buddhism during the eleventh century. The fertility magic attributed to him was suspended; he was turned into an Earth spirit at a Buddhist temple.

Following independence but before the centralisation of the Lý court, the chùa (pagoda) assumed a key role in socio-cultural life of the region. The birth of the dĩnh (communal house) about four centuries later appeared to be marked by a split of local ritual life into two: one official and one semi-official. In many places, commemorated the birth of hẻm, illicit local customs often with sexuality and fertility connotations, as mentioned in Chapter Two.

So-called deviant practices occupy a hazy backdrop in the overall scene of Vietnamese supernaturalism. Female deities populate this backdrop, with attendant local ritual activities. Since the twelfth century, two main religious groups, Buddhists and Confucians, shared the 'process' of domination by orthodox formulations such as textual authority and intellectual supremacy. They marginalised or suppressed popular local practices deemed deviant, fraudulent or dangerous. Domination here comprises not only a power structure operating concurrently in several social relations amidst cultural reproduction, but also the exclusion of certain groups from the commonly available space of discourse.

The marginalisation of mediums appeared to be part of a broader curtailing of singer-performers' culture in courtly and élite environments dating from the late Trần dynasty. A medium-singer-prostitute nexus was set up in the dominant ideology. The important feature was that this linking-up

\textsuperscript{55} Tạ Chí Đại Trưởng, *Thần Ngoại*, p.07.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, pp. 43-45. Trần Quốc Vương, 'The Legend of Ông Gióng from the Text to the Field', paper delivered at the Symposium on Vietnamese History, SEASSI, Cornell University, 19-21/7/1991.

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homogenised different groups of women. As mentioned earlier, Trần Thế Xương’s tirade against a woman merchant, whose sexual behaviour did not conform to the moral norm, indicated how this nexus could encompass the women traders as well. From an objection to the arts that can both arouse passion and transport the minds out of their current humdrum, suppression spilled to sexual practice. Social control was brought to bear on the ‘weaker sex’ as a whole. Mediumship, on the other hand, embraces those arts and thereby becomes attractive to it female traders, who may recognise themselves as being members of an oppressed group.

The eighteenth-century scholar Lê Quý Đôn lists, among old entertainment forms, the custom of xướng nhi (Hán Việt for "child singer"), whose singing consisted in a performance that mocked parental authority (chẻ grief cha mẹ).\(^57\) Nothing is known about this singing type, but the pre-modern Nôm term con hát ("child singer") used to designate female singers, may have its origins here. Another nhi term was linh nhi (supernaturally responsive child/youth), probably denoting mediums that may have been common in Lý Trần era. The Zen master and royal adviser Tự Đạo Hạnh had friends who were scholars and linh nhi, thus indicating the diversity of courtly life.\(^58\)

Also according to Lê Quý Đôn, the Chèo singers were those who satirised the mandarins.\(^59\) Its insolent forms indicated a critical communication the subjugated class were allowed to direct ritually upward to the ruling one. This is not inconsistent with court restrictions on certain types of singing. Rí Ren singing for example, known since the Lý-Trần era, was banned by Field Marshal Khâ, an official of King Lê Nhân Tông in 1448.

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\(^{58}\) Việt Điển U Linh..., p.140. See also Tự Chế Đại Trưng, Thần Ngưu..., p.123

\(^{59}\) Chèo - rowing, singing from south of Hải Vân Pass seems to have the same texts, according to Tự Chế Đại Trưng. Performed in the ceremonies of welcoming the whale, they apparently originate from the funerary songs for dead whales, suggesting the rowing of boat transporting the souls of the dead in funerary rituals throughout Southeast Asia. Lê Quý Đôn, ibid.
In this performance, it is recorded that men and women 'held flowers, wore flowers, hooking their arms and legs in an ugly looking way'. There were also Trần period songs that no longer existed two centuries later, in Lê Quý Đôn's time, except by name. On the other hand, Chăm singing style, dance and music have left a strong imprint on Vietnamese formats. This can be interpreted as the result of a strong Chăm Việt ethno-cultural confluence, especially under the Nguyễn of Đồng Trực. Phạm Duy points out:

Coming to the period in which the Nguyễn rulers enlarged the country into Chăm land, Vietnamese music was strongly influenced from North to South by the Chăm music, and the plaintive Nam mode became a permanent feature.

One of the earliest known historical sources, Đại Việt Sử Ký (History of Đại Việt), indicates a strong presence of singers in the courts from Early Lê to Trần era (between the tenth and fourteenth century). The fact that singing was given importance at court shows that élite culture was not distant from non-élite arts. The last of the Early Lê kings, Long Định, supported Sung-dynasty actors, singers and clowns for entertainment. The position of Chinese advisers in the court must have gained steady importance, given Long Định's request for Confucian texts apart from Buddhist sutras to be sent from the Sung court. One of the signs of privileging Confucians by repressing Buddhism was his infamous cruel punishment dealt to a monk whose shaved head was used as a chopping bloc to strip sugar canes. Another punishment by drowning of war prisoners, who were forced to curse the king's father while being slowly submerged in water, was, according to Tạ Chí Đại Trường, arguably similar to the custom of children insulting parents found in court and popular entertainment which Lê Quý Đôn refers to.

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60 Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư, q.XI, Lê Era, transl. from 1697 copy, K11X1 Hanoi 1993, p.359. See also Đặng Văn Lùng, 'Triệu Tình Âu Ca...', p.543.
61 Ibid.
In the struggle for influence during the Lý-Trần era, as mentioned in Chapter Two, the balance tilted towards the Buddhists. Confucians prevailed from the time the Pàsterior Lê came to power in 1428, with the Lê Code imitating the Chinese model in banning mediumistic practices. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the Court still valued the service of those connected to trance techniques. This set the pattern for eventual court attitude to things mediumistic throughout history. In 1789, with the South barely under his control, Nguyễn Ánh (later as King Gia Long) banned woman mediums (cô dông) and sorcerers (phù thủy) with the decree:

Sorcerers and mediums are banned. The king thought their perverted religious nature deceives the people, therefore he forbid [their practice]. Those who infringe the ban, if sorcerers, will be caned 100 canes and conscripted to six month corvée. Woman mediums will receive 100 canes and conscripted to polish rice [by pestle and mortar] for six months.\(^{64}\)

The next edict was intriguing:

The king also ordered the four provinces to abolish the positions in the two offices of Pháp Lục (control of magic?) and Dào Sĩ (Daoist specialist), and allow the officers to transferred to the two offices of Xã Sai (residence servants?) and Tưòng thàn lai (aides-de-camp to generals).\(^{65}\)

As the abolition of these two positions is immediately followed by this prohibition clause, it is highly likely that practices in the south showed a pattern quite foreign to the thinking of Nguyễn Ánh and/or his advisers. This administrative pattern could only reflect a local culture closely allied with trance possession and Daoist practices.

It is a pity the Confucian literati who compiled Thực Lực had nothing more to say about those offices. If this selective treatment of Thực Lực historians bespeaks of a political struggle between the literati and the military ruling class in the late eighteenth century, the next royal prohibition shows that Nguyễn Ánh’s policy also reflects a cultural trait foreign to his army officers:

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\(^{65}\) Đại Nam Thực Lực, ibid.
Singers are not allowed to be recorded in soldiers register. The king decreed to his military staff at the provinces thus: "In the court, higher and lower grades are clearly ordered by rule. Today soldiers may be tomorrow's generals if they gain kudos. If singers, being good-for-nothing, are mixed in with the former, is it not like putting rough stones together with gems? From now on, from generals to lieutenants, whoever wishes to keep singers must establish a 'Spring celebration club' register, to be taxed according to military rank, clothing [for singers] are not to be the same as soldiers'. When there is a mission, they must go to war. They can sing when there is not. Anyone who, in the soldiers' register, practices as singer, will, if reported, be caned 100 times, conscripted to corvée in chains for one year, the officer in charge fined 30 quan, and the money rewarded to the denouncer.  

We have no evidence to ascertain whether the practice of keeping singers on soldiers payroll was for more than entertainment. Economy and correct form possibly were not the sole reasons behind the court's effort to stamp out 'deviant practices'. Again not long after assuming the throne in 1802, the founder of the Nguyễn dynasty, King Gia Long, outlawed all popular religious practices considered wasteful of people's money and resources. Yet a few years later, Trịnh Hoài Đức in his Gia Định Thành Thông Chí confirms the southern custom of relying on mediums.

My main point above is to look at the possible association of singers, mediums and the southern male singers kept as subordinate companions to army officers as revealed by a late eighteenth-century royal edict. Two aspects indicated a pattern of oppression of singers, mediums and homosexual groups by central power dating back a long time before the nineteenth century: Firstly, the continued ban of mediumship which has been linked with sorcery since well before that century; and secondly, the target of the royal decree may have been the homosexual relationship between army officers and their singers. Thus, while mediums continue to be supported by the public at large, trance possession practices are counted among the most marginalised if not thoroughly repressed at all times.

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66 Đại Nam Thực Lục, op. cit., pp. 97-98.
SURVIVAL, GENDER CHANGE AND FEMININE ATTRIBUTES

For all the repressive measures in the name of rationalising practices and orthodoxy, the expression of dreams and hopes in ostensibly liminal state does not go away easily. An example of text modification in mediums’ trance singing in recent time illustrates this resilience. In the ceremonial program of southern hát bống rơi in Saigon-Gia Định area, the singing of odes to invite the spirits follows an opening formality which consists of a musical overture. There are male, female deities and the spirits of warriors (chấn sỹ). For a female deity, the text refers to natural elements in its supplicating tone:

*The flute sound wavers*

*The guitar blends with the flute. Do you hear my Lady*

*The high notes of the flute, the low notes that I sing*.

...

*My Lady please listen to my supplication*,

*The tone is soft, rising and falling*...

*O revered Lady!*

*Your favour I await and hope for ...My Lady*

*I wait while playing my flute and singing my guitar*

*The guitar sound blends with the wavering flute notes*

*Raising and lowering my tone, I pray for peace*

...

*The wind blows lightly, the sky is all covered in blue, the wind sings*

*Shaking trees and grass blades so.*

*Listening to the blustering wind, rustling our Lady’s holy spirit to return and bless people with felicity.*

Every verse is sung with ‘padding sounds’ such as ē, ə, ɪ, a... thought to resemble the noise made by belching or yawning, mimicking the well-known physiological signs of a medium coming into trance. If these stylistic adjuncts don’t change over time, evocation texts are found to do so with the socio-political climate of the time, incorporating historical subjects into its discourse. Thus the Chậu Chiến Sỹ (Devotion to the Soldiers) song of 1989 praises Hồ Chí Minh:

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In the past thirty years the Vietnamese people suffered wars

... Today Uncle has won independence for the country,
Temples and shrines everywhere are saved for the worship of our ancestors to continue,
The worship of the mountain above, the worship of the water below, the worship of Buddha, the worship of Heaven,

Today, sparing no trouble I tend the petition to invite [the warriors],
In the past Uncle with your bare hands
Rose up in Revolution, using bamboo spears you succeeded.
Bees share their food from nectar of flowers,
People in the same country must care for each other.60

Let us return to the question as to why the feminine system, despite being oppressed, has never been at risk of extinction. As we have seen, either neglect or occasional support from central power saw to it that the ensemble survives and sometimes thrives. There are reasons to believe therefore that this hesitancy and ambiguity on the part of the dominant groups betray a recognition of the indispensable services only the female deities can give to the whole supernatural framework.

However, as rituals, the medium trances and ancillary rites do not purport to undermine the system at all times. That is why mediums can sing praises to the powers that be. Furthermore, resistance does not come in terms of contestation or confrontation alone. As noted by Davis, those 'who could not participate in public and politicised moments of confrontation, consigned as they were to the private, the domestic, and the particular', are not considered under 'the virile assumptions underlying most writings on resistance'.61

Đức Thánh (Holy Saint) Trần - as general Trần Hưng Đạo has been so honoured posthumously, plays a more diverse cultural role than just protecting the worshippers from evil spirits. In the hegemony of the patriotic discourse, the realm the Vietnamese defended against Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century is translated symbolically into a territory defined by this military-laden,

60 Ibid., p.45.
61 Natalie Davis is quoted by Dirks, N.B., 'Ritual and Resistance, Subversion as Social Fact', in N.B. Dirks, G. Eley, and S. Ormer, (eds), Culture/Power/History..., p.486.
imperial metaphoricity. The establishment and maintenance of its boundaries consists in the acts of excluding 'impurities', a category with attributes marked by the words tà (deviant- wicked) and đâm (sexual licence- impure).

As raised in the Introduction, the setting up of boundaries operates on more than one level of social relations. Older and locally worshipped river spirits were to be subjugated through mythical conflation and authentication of the spirits' power. Thus, in the Trần Hưng Đạo mythology, Phạm Nhan's spirit was made the whipping-boy, representing the messiness or disturbance caused by daughters-in-law's status--as the women from outside of the clan--to be pacified or straightened out in the patrilineal kinship structure. This is how the general’s spirit came to be charged with ensuring the vigour of patrilineage--a vigour maintained through persecution of the 'danger' of the impure outsiders represented by the curing rituals for women's post-partum ailments.

The subjugation of women's reproductivity, a hallmark of the patrilineal system, legitimises male dominance in social relations. If the danger and threat of impurity is necessary for the maintenance of patrilineal order, then it is easy to see, once we translate this pattern of domination to the tension between male-dominated centralist orthodoxy and local popular practices, how the worship of goddesses and ancillary trance mediumship could become inimical to the establishment. Yet, while subverting the dominance, such ritualisation simultaneously limits and contains rebelliousness. This ambiguous relation is one step removed from what Valerio Valeri observes in Huaulu society in New Guinea, where marriage alliance is conceived as a 'transaction among men that has the reproductive powers of women as an instrument and an object', the main factor of inequality between (Huaulu) men and women.70 It reflects closely women's social power, or lack of it.

Thus resistance to oppressive domination from the Lady Liêu Hạnh group, on the other hand, is indicated in the early twentieth-century presence of a Phạm Nhan in Hòn Chênh temple of Huế, among the subaltern spirits, as

noted by Ngô Đức Thịnh. The tale of Confucian-Daoist male sorcerers of the Nội Đức Tràng ("Inner Daoist School"), contesting with Lady Liễu Hạnh in magical powers, as recounted in the eighteenth-century compilation Ô Châu Cần Lực, while reflects the prestige of the latter, shows that this resistance was not solely between margin and centre, for the sorcerers group was not in league with the elite, even though their traditional source is Chinese. These instances therefore are better understood in a context of multi-levelled mediation of socially opposing relations.

The northern Phù Giáp temple's Holy Mother is also said to be the reincarnation of Western Heaven Queen (Hsi Wang Mu), who rules the celestial court, as the name of her court suggests: Cửu Trùng Thánh Mẫu Thiên Đình ("Holy Mother's Nine-Level Celestial Court"). The Cao Đài group honour Hsi Wang Mu (Tây Vị Tông Mẫu) in her other Chinese title Diệu Trị Kim Mẫu ("Golden Mother of the Jasper Pond"). For many worshippers, this name is interchangeable with Kwan Yin in both role and title. Could there be any commonality between the two systems to explain their distinctive peculiarity in the South?

The exterior of Cao Đài temples are said to resemble the architectural form of the Catholic church, while the interior is that of a Chinese royal palace. The appropriation of images of power from the two traditional colonisers of Vietnam could be interpreted as a mimetic act in the context of empowerment discussed in the previous chapter. The other large millenarian group, Tữ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, a Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương's offshoot, meanwhile leaves ambiguous their adaptation of general Kwan Kung worship. Kwan Kung's icon and related texts displayed on their altars were said to mislead the colonial police in their early days, but are left unchanged today. It therefore begs the

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71 Ngô Đức Thịnh (ed.), op. cit., p.131. There are three Phảm assistants to Lady Liễu Hạnh, apart from Thiên Y A Na, in the Huế mediums' pantheon: Phảm Nhan, Phảm Nghinh, Phảm Thạch, as well as seven Holy Saints, at the head of whom is king Gia Long. No background to these Phảm was given, but unless it was coincidental, I believe it is consistent with the nature of mediums' assembly of spirits to restore Phảm Nhan among the divinities.

question as to the secret nature of this Heaven and Earth society format being adopted by the Tứ Ân groups.

Durand typically calls the mediums belief a 'confused polytheism', yet this confusion resides more in his mind than the followers'. Like other system of beliefs, the goddess system tends to be all things for all people. Its universalism is normatively close to the Cao Đài's, which claims total translatability and inclusion of all religious beliefs known to Cao Đài founders. However, Durand notes the recruiting ceremony (initiation) of a new medium has three stages (Lễ Khải - supplicating ceremony, Dỡ Bát Nhang - carrying the bowl of incense ash, and Trịnh Động - presentation to the [head] medium), and so has the trance session (with induction, enactment and distribution of amulets etc... stages). There is no voyage to the nether world like with some shamanic practices.

If the rituals parallel the stage process of hypnotism, hence proving Trọng Lang's point, at least obliquely, they tend to do so according to van Gennep and Victor Turner's three-stage processual structure of rites, with the pronounced feature of disassociation. As for the Cao Đài exponents, while harmonising all systems in their symbolic Eye of gnosia (representing the Supreme Being), automatic writing was used as an act which, performed in disassociation, approached the dreaming of a Dreamtime drawn up in written forms. They also affirmed that these cosmo-morphic forms are literally graphic.

Can we accept that disassociation has an evolutionary function of coping with birth pain, as Wijeyewardene suggests, even when the function of belching and yawning can hardly be explained in the same way? What if the experience of birth pain is understood as a special case of the general process of creation, which takes us right to the valuation of Holy Mother Goddess as being supremely powerful? In this context, we can appreciate the caricature of childbirth performed by the male Earth god, for male pregnancy and labour can only allude to human creativity, as founded in femaleness, reflecting and reflected by life's creativity all around.

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By giving a birth/creation meaning to illness, the medium practice, like other shamanic forms, builds the ethos of creativity/regeneration into the meaning of life changes. Its competence in healing must have earned popular support for it, despite ostensible suppression from the masters of disenchantment. The mediums' message seems to be: Let the Weberian tension between enchantment and disenchantment be left for ever alternating between the thesis and anti-thesis of a perpetually unresolvable dialectics. Rather than seeking to end history by mediating the non-rational and the functional, trance practices aim to resolve the tension by re-enchantment instead.
CHAPTER SIX
SELF-CULTIVATION
AS MODE OF DISCOURSE AND ACTION

The president of the Đình temple management committee of Cái Khê, Mr. Ban, claims he became a disciple to master Nguyễn Minh Trí, the famous founder of the Buddhist Tịnh Độ ("Pure Land" or "Amidaist") school, under unusual circumstances. The discipleship is one among Mr. Ban’s diverse interests in popular cults, which also include beliefs in goddesses, the latter not atypical of the South.¹ Amidaists in particular differ from other sects by their social welfare component, rituals and text selections.² Such involvement usually means a commitment to a lifestyle centred around the pursuit of self-cultivation. While the colloquial idiom ăn chay, niệm Phật ("keeping to a vegetarian diet, reciting prayers to Buddha") describes the minimal form of commitment to this practice, it also encapsulates the chief features of southern self-cultivation. It means abstaining from eating animal products at least for one day per month, and daily recitation of some formulaic prayers (niệm Phật -- "reflecting on Buddha").

The meaning of the word tu has long involved a conflation of the Confucian trajectory of tu thân ("self-correction", "perfectibility"), or tu tâm ("cultivate the heart/mind") with Daoist tu luyện ("training" -- as in various meditative arts including alchemy) and Buddhist tu niệm ("perfecting thought

¹ For more details of Nguyễn Minh Trí, see Appendix J, also Ho Tai, Millenarianism..., pp.88-93. According to Mr. Ban, in a dream, he talked to a man whom he had never seen before and who tried to persuade him to seek self-perfection. Some time later he recognized this man as exactly resembling the person in a portrait on an altar. It turned out to be master Minh Trí. His involvement with this Pure Land sect resulted in his sizeable contribution to the building of Tịnh Độ Cử Sĩ (Pure Land laity) pagoda, a large establishment in present Hồ Bính Street in Cần Thơ City.

² The Pure Land group's belief is characterised by a statement in the Smaller Sukhavati Vyuha Sutra: "[Whoever] shall make mental prayers for the Buddha country of that blessed Amitayus...all these will never return again. ...They will be born in that Buddha country." Oevermeyr, D.L., Folk Buddhist Religion - Dissenting Sects in Traditional China, Harvard University Press, 1976, p.85.
and imagination"), among other approaches to enlightenment. It has been well argued that, while the Confucian approach to self-perfection, being the reserve of the scholarly élite, is divorced from supernaturalism, Daoism and Buddhism lend themselves more readily to popular beliefs in spiritual powers obtainable through self-cultivation. Safeguarding this project is the concept of self-cultivation as antidote to passion. Some of the lines in the famous nineteenth-century Kim Văn Kiều verse story have today become folk proverbs, as they typify the merit of self perfection:

Said the nun: "The Heaven's Way determines good or bad luck, But their root causes come from the human heart. Heaven dispenses, but it also depends on us humans, Self-cultivation is the root of happiness, passion a bind of misfortune."

Admonitions to self-cultivation are well-known through passages in the Confucian classic Ta Hsueh (Viet. Đại Học - the great learning). Ko (to discern) in ko wu (to investigate things) involves initially correction of what is wrong in the mind. As advocated by Wang Yang-ming, this means putting sincerity of the will before the investigation of things. However, since the four areas in learning (self-cultivation, ordering one's home, administering the realm, and pacifying the world-under-heaven) are assumed to be mutually dependent, corrective actions are to be undertaken simultaneously. Thus the monarch/priest performs ceremonies also to rectify order and synchronise disharmonies according to the principle of cosmic sympathy between events, nothing short of magic or supernaturalism. See Chan, W. T., A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy, Princeton University Press, 1963, p.84.

The principle of Ta Hsueh learning was inherent in the assumptions which some Vietnamese intellectuals of the 1920's, such as Trần Hữu Đạo, used in their modernisation discourse. In the latter's essays, Thành Niển Tư Đức [self-cultivation readings for youth], or Hồn Đức Lập [the spirit of independence], for example, the manner in which attributes such as dignity, freedom, independence, hope, self-respect can be seen to be argued from the realm of the individual to the national community and back, reflects the above mentioned simultaneous mutuality. Trần Hữu Đạo, Thành Niển Tư Đức, Tôn Việt Tự Xã, Saigon, 1928; Hồn Đức Lập, Tư Do Tông Thủ, Saigon, 1926. See also Marr. D.G., Vietnamese Tradition..., p.118.


My translation of

Sự rằng:"Phục hạo đạo giải,
Cố nguyên căng ở lòng người mà ra.
Cố giải mà cũng cố ta.
Another precondition is ethical conduct, whereby đồ ("virtue" or "ethical rectitude") is translated in terms of a "moral capital" or "merit" (phước). This moral capital is woven into the working of karmic causality. With beliefs in re-incarnation, accumulated phước will engender a better life for the practitioner in a foreseeable future, if not a better rebirth. On the other hand, the Dàn Tiên group's practice reveals another fundamental aspect of Vietnamese supernaturalism in the activity of self-cultivation (tự, Chinese: lôi -- "to correct, repair, reform, improve"), which is commonly taken to be an inner-directed and socially detached (other-worldly) project.\footnote{Huỳnh Tịnh Cua’s 1896 dictionary, Đại Nam Quốc Âm Từ Vĩ, gives the gloss for tự trị - to avoid the mundane world, to correct one's character, to nurture one's being, to concentrate on religious/ethical affairs (trái, lit. "holding fast") - the same as for tự hành ("self-cultivation practice"); tự tâm dưỡng tâm ("to correct one's character and nurture one's being"). These words are still considered interchangeable.}

As mentioned earlier, although the belief in lôi is individually based, it can be better understood in a systemic way, namely, in a matrix of contrastive social relations. Similarly, ascetic measures, as I will explore in this chapter, underpin the project of perfectibility. They enable the individual to access knowledge and power and influence cultural transformations.

RE-CONTEXTUALISATION

In this attempt to see self-cultivation as one of the contexts to events in contemporary southern Vietnamese history, I will not pretend to offer a new historiographic paradigm. I simply aim to fill a few gaps concerning popular religions in the existing history of the Mekong delta. The following two examples will illustrate this point:

First, writing about opposition to French rule between 1880 and 1940, Ralph Smith has noted an uprising in Sóc Trăng province in 1883, when a Cambodian monk with both Vietnamese and Cambodian followers proclaimed

himself king. Defeated, he disappeared back into the forest and was never heard of again. While acknowledging that this monk had no relationship to anti-French pretenders of the Vietnamese Nguyễn dynasty, and although he admits that "the details of the connection cannot be demonstrated", Smith nevertheless raises the possibility that the uprising was part of concerted anti-French opposition in Cochinchina and Cambodia. This hardly leaves us room for speculation about the monk's personal stakes or motives or the power of his action. Furthermore, Smith cautions that "the relationship between religion and politics in this situation was of considerable complexity, and one not at all familiar to Western minds." If this is the case, do we need a non-Western perspective for a better understanding of the background to this type of event?

Second, in his book The Rational Peasant - The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam, Samuel Popkin criticises romanticised approaches to village life as amounting to nostalgia for an imaginary loss of the peasants' age of innocence. In discussing the millenarian Hòa Hảo sect's success in establishing its base, he asserts that the village's geographical location itself was the crux of their effective work and propaganda.\(^8\) We must wonder what it is that keeps them going now, on the other side of the Pacific Ocean, holding annual general meetings of overseas branches in downtown Houston, Texas or San José, California. Popkin also notes that Huỳnh Phú Sổ, the Hòa Hảo founder, apart from knowing how to organise, could 'mass merchandise' his message, hence his popularity. But there could be doubt as to whether his packaging was any better than the communist-inspired Việt Minh's. What then was the clue to the millenarian local success?

I suggest an answer to both of these issues lies in the content of the Hòa Hảo/Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương message, that is their discourse on self-cultivation. Taken together, questions such as these call for a redefinition of self-cultivation as background to a set of events in contemporary southern Vietnamese history.


This mode of discourse and action, seen as the last resort of the vanquished or a temporary refuge of failed warriors, has not previously possessed great historical relevance. Similarly, in defining the function of self-cultivation, it is facile to say that people pursue religious quests in order to cope with or escape mounting hardship in life. If we were to subscribe to such a 'hydraulic pressure' model, we would not find it easy to perceive how the meaning of this intrapersonal concern is constructed through and depends on the interaction of many levels of 'outer' social circumstances.\textsuperscript{10} To explore the reasons, we may need to recontextualise self-cultivation.

On the other hand, to examine self-cultivation as a social phenomenon appears to be a contradictory undertaking. However, I would submit that \textit{tu} as a practice is situated at the intersection of several dualistic relations, of which the individual is but one factor. As the aims of self-cultivation are quite varied, I would contend that its functions and modes require it to be refracted first of all through the interface between the individual and the collective.

This chapter also views the 1930s as a focusing lens. It may be erroneous to perceive the super-abundance of printed literature of that decade as a sign of great cultural changes. Nevertheless, at least at first reading, it is difficult to deny that elements of a modernised world had intruded into the imaginary landscape of dreams and hallucinations, as shown by the examples below. Yet, to conclude that Westernisation or modernisation affected the way people experienced religion (or specifically, the way they thought about the existence or powers of supernatural entities) is dependent upon demonstrating that

\textsuperscript{10} There is another reason to stress the fuzzy uncertainty in the commonplace division between internal and external categories. In contextualizing \textit{tu}, there is a tendency for sociological explanations of supernaturalism, (of the Durkheimian and Lévi-Straussian strain) to fall into tautology. In those interpretations, too severe a dichotomy between the \textit{individual} and the \textit{social} worlds spawn a double tautology: either through a psychological reduction (e.g. 'that the life of popular religion is a function of the strength of believers' faith') or a formal one ('popular cults change because social relations, which are reproduced through religious rituals, change'). Neither of these statements explain much about supernaturalism. Such pitfalls could be more easily recognized and avoided if the notion of self-cultivation, as circulated in popular culture, is given greater importance than has been the case to date in historical works on southern Vietnam.
changes brought irreversible shifts to the body of popular knowledge. However, at least at grassroots level, such systems of knowledge or belief remain largely unbroken in the face of socio-economic transformations. And I suggest that this continuity can be viewed through the lens of the 1930s, where patterns of popular practice are recognisable from the mid-nineteenth century.

To locate self-cultivation in the Mekong delta, I will mainly focus on practices that, whilst advocating a compassionate way of life, display a mixture of beliefs in supernatural powers as well as apocalyptic salvation particular to the South. This pattern has been neglected in current historiography which focuses heavily on politics. The significance of its discourse has been underestimated and its importance too easily dismissed. I will try, on the other hand, to portray its popular function since the mid-nineteenth century to account for large followings among the millenarian groups and numerous adherents to smaller sects and meditation groups, such as the three-religion system at Đàn Tiên.

THE SOUTHERN BACKGROUND

As is well known, French colonialism was entrenched by the turn of this century, with rapid changes in the southern economy and a desolate realisation by the Vietnamese that "lettered leaders lost the war, farmers their land" (sĩ phu thất trận, nông dân mất ruộng). The 1930s then saw the dire effects of world economic depression and an effervescence of religious interests, especially in urban centres. Although the abundance of printed literature in the 1930s tends to show a burst of diversity in registers of religious discourse, what the changes reflected, as noted earlier, is far from conclusive.

Printed evidence concerning self-cultivation indicates the remarkable space this lay practice occupied in quốc ngữ discourses. The grassroots nature of self-cultivation would have escaped our attention, had it not been for the

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11 With the exception of Huc Tam Ho Tai, who sheds light on millenarianism and other sectarian activities in her work on the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương groups.

12 Sơn Nam, Lịch Sử Khăn Hoang ..., pp. 135-180.
observation of a northerner, Nguyễn Hiền Lê. Educated in both classic and western systems, as a public works officer, he was in a good position to notice and appraise distinctive southern traits on field trips. In his book ("Seven Days in Đồng Tháp Mười"), Nguyễn Hiền Lê registered an amazingly widespread adoption of self-cultivation practice in that countryside in 1937:

Travelling along the canals and tributaries at dusk, one often saw on the banks, small firefly-like spots of red glowing at every few dozen metres; they were the incense sticks lit in front of each house. There were hamlets resounding to the chanting of sutras and wooden bell knocking. There were areas where it was impossible to find meat or fish at the market during the middle and first days of the lunar month. Every family turns vegetarian on such days and some were full-time vegetarian. No such a scene has ever been observed in North Vietnam.14

It is impossible to ascertain the socio-economic characteristics of the practice. Again, if printed quốc ngữ literature in the 1930s is any indication, leading lay figures provided the impetus for tu as a model course of action. Individuals who are labelled Đạo sĩ ("Daoists", "magician"), ông Đạo, ông/bà Thầy ("mister Daoist", "master/lady Teacher") etc, with or without a following, also played an important part in perpetuating this ideal among those who were unconvinced of the value of Westernised education.15

13 Đồng Tháp Mười is called Plain des Joncs by the French, s northeastern area of the Mekong Delta adjoining the Cambodian border.

14 He was then an envoy from the colonial land survey office. Nguyễn Hiền Lê, Bay Ngay Trong Đồng Tháp Mười [Seven Days in Đồng Tháp Mười], Trí Đàng, Sài Gòn 1970, p.147.

15 In more recent times, the rapid growth of Thanh Hải Vô Sự Thuyết (Ching Hai Wu Shang Shih - Supreme Master Blue Ocean) congregations in Taiwan, North America, Australia and Vietnam since 1990 and, before this, the popularity of "Non-Doing Mysticism Teachings" (Pháp Lý Vô Sự Vi Huyễn Bằng Học) which reached the Vietnamese diaspora in several countries in the early 1980’s, attests to the resilience of this popular form of self-cultivation. Thanh Hải is the dharma name of a western-educated Chinese Vietnamese woman who, according to her published biography, became enlightened in Taiwan after a period of searching for truth from teachers in various parts of Asia. Advocating vegetarian diet as precondition for initiates and the study of Kwan Yin Sutra, this group attracts both Vietnamese and Chinese followings, partly thanks to Thanh Hải’s fluency in both languages, but more importantly due to the many trans- personal experiences she is said to have shared with her followers. The Supreme Master Thanh Hải (Ching Hai Wu Shang Shih), The Key of Immediate Enlightenment, The Meditation Association in China, 1991.
As a means of improving one's fate, the appeal of self-cultivation is powerful. Ever since the eleventh-century Lý dynasty, when Buddhism enjoyed the status of a dominant religion, the Buddhist meaning of tu as world renunciation or đi tu ("to leave home to pursue self-cultivation") appears fixed. It involves leaving home and kin, taking the tonsure in order to lead a monastic or reclusive existence. However, the dilemma of being detached from the world and at the same time remaining effectively engaged with it, existed in a rather poignant manner with the monks and monarchs in the Lý and Trần eras, where politics was clearly not divorced from religion. Thus Văn Hạnh, a Zen master, was an able minister, advisor to kings of two dynasties, while the Trần kings who left the throne for monastic seclusion let themselves be persuaded to resume their monarchical duties. Admittedly, Vietnamese monarchs, especially Lý kings, were also partial to the concept of divine kingship, widely held in Southeast Asia under the titles of Devaraja or Buddha-king (vua Phật). Self-cultivation then became part of legitimisation.

This dilemma is circumscribed by a popular solution -- that is to be a householder (cư sĩ) who follows a regime of self-cultivation at home (tu nhà -- as distinct from tu chùa -- joining a monastery) without disrupting other main social duties. By the turn of the century, this pattern of householder practice was sufficiently pronounced to prompt Coulet to classify its practitioners as a third-order group of Buddhists. Lay practices parallel the monastic process.

The Vô Chi school of breath meditation, headed by Lương Sĩ Hâng, who now resides in the U. S., on the other hand, is not so strict about vegetarianism. Lương Sĩ Hâng’s ability to heal by acupuncture and to effect communication with his students ostensibly in altered-states of consciousness is claimed to result from his practice of Vô Chi meditation. Hồ Văn Em, Tâi Tâm Đạo [I Seek the Way], Nhâ In Vô Vi, California, 1983, pp. 11, 109 & 110.

Whatever their finer differences, both these recent examples show an interweaving of beliefs in supernatural phenomena with particular benefits gleaned from meditative exercises. Their discourses also share allusions to world cataclysm and salvation by Buddha or Kwan Yin. In all popular self-cultivation practices however, the process implies time, in linear progression towards enlightenment, a perfectibility that is feasible by systematic training.

16 The first two are monastic and lay groups. Coulet, G., Les Sociétés Secrètes en Terre d’Annam, Imprimerie Commerciale, Saigon 1927, pp.129-123
For instance, the neophyte may, in due course, be initiated by one or more masters residing at temples. As we shall see, initiation can also be obtained through dreams, where the individual has an encounter with a priestly or Buddha figure. It is in this particular lay sense that I wish to examine self-cultivation in the above context of popular religion in the southern Vietnamese past.

BƯU SƠN KỲ HƯƠNG’S EXHORTATION TO SELF-CULTIVATION

By the mid-1850s, millenarian beliefs surfaced in the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương group with the Buddha Master of the Western Peace (Doàn Minh Huyễn), their charismatic founder. In his Sảm Giảng (“Oracle Explained”) text, reputedly written in 1852, the Buddha Master exhorts his followers to self-cultivation as follows:

Anyone who tries to realise one’s own enlightenment,
Will be shown sympathy by Buddha and Immortals, also by Heaven.17
Cultivating one’s heart/mind and nourishing one’s essence, one holds fast to the cardinal rules,
Cultivate yourself according to the Canons issued by the Buddha Hall.18

While it is not clear whether this Buddha Hall refers particularly to Minh Sư temples or is merely a term borrowed from that group (which I will discuss later), Pure Land exhortations were definitely included here:

Cultivate your character and your demeanour/attitude,
Cultivate on the Six Words of Amida, and do not forget it.19

But it is not a commonplace brand of Buddhist self-cultivation, as he suggests:

Occupying a fairy like country on the Bồng mountain,
Keeping to the Way in self-cultivation, not like Zen method.

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17 This reassuring phrase ("you will not be forsaken by the gods") is to be found again and again in later instructions for, and exhortations to, self-cultivation.


19 The six words are 'Nam Mô A Di Đà Phật' (Nammu Amida Buddha).
He elaborates on the difference thus:

*Both cultivating your self and keeping in filial piety,*  
*Cultivate yourself with care, try to fulfill your duties towards parents and king.*

This apparently was not a practice demanding one to leave kin and home, he further states:

*Cultivate your humanity and your virtue whole-heartedly,*  
*Cultivate your body as gem and brocade, do not let it get muddied,*  
*Cultivate your effort to maintain shrines and village temples,*  
*Cultivate your talent in generosity, avoid all wrong doings,*  
*Cultivating yourself, you pray for longevity of saintly sages,*  
*So people and sentient beings are at peace, free from cold and hunger,*  
*Cultivate yourself, you pray for the thousand seas and mountains,*  
*To bestowed prosperity and peace to all nations,*  
*Early in the morning and at night you prostrate to the Buddha and recite sutras,*  
*You prostrate to the Master for re-incarnating and reviving the wonderful way.*

This method consists in addressing both the issues of accruing merit (*phước*) for future life and of acquiring intuitive knowledge (*lập*). The former was encapsulated in the model of *Tuận An Hì Thọ Nghĩa* (the Four Indebtedness), while the latter as *Thiền Tịnh Song Tu* (self-cultivation in tandem, by Zen meditation and Pure Land praying).

The ultimate objective of self-cultivation was a total transformation, to which the Buddha of Western Peace alluded as follows:

*It is strongly advised thus to turn from mean to kindly behaviour,*  
*To cultivate the Three Jewels, to study them well,*  
*A snake has the capacity to become a dragon through self-cultivation,*  
*Being human, why should one not consider that as within one’s reach?*

Implied in the above premise is the notion of perfectibility being something practically attainable. It is as if this form of popular Buddhism

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22 Nguyễn Văn Hậu, ibid., p.118.
gave an affirmative reply to Nietzsche's taunting question: "If there were
gods, how could I endure not to be a god!"23

The Potato Selling monk was also known for his poems admonishing
people to devote themselves to self-cultivation. Believed to be an, albeit
elusive, re-incarnation of the Buddha Master of the Western Peace, he
travelled around the Châu Dốc and Seven Mountains areas in the first decade
of this century. His announcement of the coming of the Lower Era,
culminating in a cataclysmic end of the existing world, was deemed to
heighten the urgency to self-cultivate:

_The Lower Era is hanging like a thread,
Why do you hanker after the world instead of cultivating yourselves?_

_This world is like the chess game at a check mate,
I advise people of all ages to beware and to cultivate themselves.
When all things are considered many times over,
The working of Heaven is certainly clear, a citizens._24

There was good reason for him to lead an elusive life, as such propaganda
was nothing if not subversive. With his credentials as a healer and man of
letters, there was no cause to dismiss his sayings.25 This meta-rational
dimension to self-cultivation, based on its promise of salvation, works through
the idea of redemption in cycles. Within one and/or across many lives, the ebb
and flow of fortune succeed one another: paradise preceded by the fall from

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25 The word vải refers to a chest covering piece of cloth he wore. Võ Tòng Kim & Đào Hùng, _Dự Phất Thầy Tịnh An_, Saigon 1953, p.128. His verse similarly conflates Confucian ideals and Buddhist commitment, summed up by the same four indebtednesses:

_Praying to Buddha, one must be sincere,_
_One's body results from father's favour and mother's fostering, one must take good care of it._

_Praying to Buddha, one must honour the four indebtednesses,_
_Depts to your home and country must be settled._

Đạt Sĩ & Nguyễn Văn Hầu, _Thất Sơn Mẫu Nhiệm_ (the wonderous Seven Mountains), Từ Tâm 1972, p.103.
perfection, and ascension to paradise through effort and diligence in self-perfection. This personal scale could then be magnified to the cosmological dimension. Thus self-perfection and world salvation meet in the belief of millenarian return of Maitreya, a deity associated with Chinese and mainland Southeast Asian peasant movements.

MINH SƯ THREE RELIGION

Maitreya was not the only deity involved in millenarian groups in the South. As noted in Chapter Three, one of the earliest Chinese imported systems, commonly known as the Minh Sư school, had great influence on the South’s popular religion, with its temples called “Buddha Halls” (Phật Đài) instead of pagoda (lư). In his study of secret societies in 1926, Georges Coulet claimed that Buddha Halls were widespread in the South, following the development of Đạo Lành (“Religion of the Good”) into the ‘Buddha Hall religion’ (đạo Phật Đài). As Đạo Lành had much to do with Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, it is not far fetched to see the influence of Minh Sư on the latter. The year 1926 was also the birth year of Cao Đài, the next religion with a large following. Its origin was also marked by Minh Sư involvement.

Minh Sư, as already noted in last chapter, is a three-religion practice with Buddhist-accentuated texts and rituals, believed to come from the White Lotus tradition dated since the fourth-century Han era. According to a 1933 Saigon police intelligence report, for one location at least, initiation to the school involved a vow to secrecy of the teachings before instructions were given. The

26 Coulet, Les Sociétés..., ibid.
27 Ho Tai, H.T., Millenarianism..., p.44.
28 Meillon, ‘Le Caodaïsme’..., p.156.
29 Several of the first Cao Đài founders were members of tu tiền sects called Minh (“light”) sects and most of the early dignitaries probably had their first experience with chư tiền [inviting Immortals] under Minh sect auspices... Some of the early Cao Đài dignitaries in charge of establishing the rites at the Holy See were altar masters (pháp sư) from the Minh sects. One of these dignitaries, Lê Văn Lộc, one of the first three Cardinals (Đầu Sư) at the Holy See, was a pháp sư in the Minh Sư, and a Taoist master of considerable repute. Werner, Peasant Politics..., p.8.

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teacher, ranked as Ông Lão ("Senior Elder") in the hierarchy, would exhort neophytes to maintain righteousness in body and mind, so that his/her being and energies could be integrated. Then a diagram - of unspecified source - of the body called the rectified schema (Minh Dương Đạo) with circulation channels was shown to guide the exercises.30

The first Minh Sư temple was built in 1863 in Hà Tiên, the province first settled and developed by Ming émigrés in the seventeenth century. A temple in Cù Mông mountain in Qui Nhơn was next established. Not long after 1890, Minh Sư practice came to Bình Thủy, in Cần Thơ province, through the work of two adepts from a temple in Da Kao, Saigon, who set up Nam Nhã Buddha Hall. Minh Sư group’s association with the Đồng Du ("Eastern Overseas Studies") and Duy Tân ("Reformation") movements was fostered in an environment of the White Lotus millenarian beliefs that the group sustained.31

Generic beliefs in the coming of Maitreya, for example, in the form of the ascent of an 'Luminous King/Lord' (Minh Vọng), were held by groups such as Thiên Địa Hối - the Triad or "Heaven and Earth Society" - one of the White Lotus’ offshoots.32 The Heaven and Earth Society has had considerable influence on southern Vietnamese such as Phan Xích Long group of the uprisings in 1913 and 1916, and the Thinkers (đạo Tư tưởng) in 1938. These two instances highlight the major role of Daoist magic, with noticeable Cham,

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30 Tu Tiên/Minh Sư, CAOM, 7H 59, Note no. 14945 by informant 'Bonzé', Saigon, 10/5/1933.

31 In Cần Thơ, the support was noted by material contribution of the resident monk Nguyễn Giác Nguyễn and his brother-in-law Nguyễn Đoàn Cung, who owned large tracts of agricultural land and saw mills. Bảo Tàng Hậu Giang, Di Tích Lịch Sử, Chùa Nam Nhã - Phường An Thới, TP Cần Thơ, Sở Văn Hóa Thông Tin Bảo Tàng Hậu Giang, 1991. Ronée printed sheets.

32 Nineteenth-century White Lotus sect incorporated the female God Vũ Sheng Lào Mu in their scriptures. This development marks the importance of Eternal Mother in three-religion popular Buddhist-Daoist pantheon. It is not difficult to ascertain how the worship of the Queen Mother of the West developed in southern Vietnam, if we take into account the popularity of Chinese stories. On the White Lotus tradition, see Overmeyer, D. L., Folk Buddhist Religion, Harvard University Press, 1976, chapter 5. See also Cahill, S.E., Transcendence and Divine Passion, The Queen Mother of the West in Medieval China, Stanford University Press, 1993.
Khmer and Siamese inputs, in providing believers with assurance of physical invulnerability, to which I return later.

Although authors such as Coulet thought that Minh Sư formation straddled temple organisation and secret society, it was sufficiently complex to lend flexibility to diverse Vietnamese lay or householder adaptations and to assume politics. Our next account of a retired businessman would demonstrate this observation, and will reflect another set of Buddhist Chinese patterns which were incorporated into southern lay practice in the 1930s: the Pure Land influence.

COMMITMENT.

By 1933, Nguyễn Kim Muôn was the abbot of a pagoda in Gia Định called Vô Vĩ Long Vân Tự ("Non-Doing Dragon Cloud Pagoda"). This establishment appeared economically self-sufficient, with followers of both sexes but under male control. Telling of the past circumstances under which he had converted to the Pure Land method, Nguyễn Kim Muôn's story could be read as a series of signs, ominous and fateful encounters that mark the subtly compelling attraction of self-cultivation:

Ten years ago [1922], feeling depressed about my business losses, I went on a tour around the world. While in India, I found two statues of Maitreya Buddha and had them brought back home. Then impulsively I had an altar set up, a monk invited to come and perform the proper ceremony to open their sight and paint their eyes and all.34

33 Between 1928 and 1935, Nguyễn Kim Muôn published 38 titles, 3 of which are translations, the rest of the works consist of essays on Buddhism and manuals for self-cultivation, varying from 10 to 100 pages each. According to a pamphlet published by the pagoda, probably written by himself, among the managing committee of six men including Nguyễn Kim Muôn as head, there were one ex-city councillor, three clerks and one Frenchman with the title of honorary abbot (hư tụng hạm). Male resident members looked after the growing of vegetables while female ones took care of commercial food production. The temple was reported to be in a chain of 6 spreading from the province of Hà Tiên. Dạ Phật Thiện Cả, CAOM 7F 59, note No. 619, Phnom Penh 21/6/1933.

34 Nguyễn Kim Muôn, Thọ Trời Tu Phật [Propitiate Heaven, Cultivate the Buddhist Way], Đức Lụa Phương, Saigon, 1932, p.44. Thus revealing at the same time the vast
His sudden interest in worshipping the Future Buddha, though pretty casual, surprised his family, as did his abrupt decision, about one month later, to give the statues to a visitor and put away the altar. Then his turn for surprise came with a strange dream that very night:

I dreamt I saw a gigantic frog (Lêch Bồ -- Lady Frog) sitting in the middle of my house, its body filling up the whole room, its huge red mouth agape, and loudly praying 'Nammo Amida Buddha'. I felt compelled to pray along with it, waking up the whole house and they came to rouse me from my sleep. I awoke, still mouthing the prayer. Although I did not know whether this was a good or bad omen, I just vowed that from then on, I would not eat frog's meat.  

However, he broke that vow a few months later at a French dinner party a failure to which he attributed a subsequent series of misfortunes in his life. Within a year, his debauchery, manifested in alcohol, women, gambling and opium-smoking saw him in debt, his family unhappy, his health failing and his job at risk. He then tried to resort to magic, figuring in his customary logic of business investment return, as he wrote:

My downheartedness led me to thinking up schemes. I went to a good fortune teller who was versed in Malay magic, trying to find a way to put a charm on someone in order to get a few thousand đồng from an outlay of twenty, thirty [paid to the diviner]. Isn’t it terrible? The diviner settled for thirty đồng, then cast an oracle. The oracular response was as follows: "The deities said that this person was formerly a disciple of Chuẩn Đề Bodhisattva [Candí, an emanation of Kwan Yin]. On an outing to collect flowers, he [she] dropped and lost them and returned crying. Because of that, s/he has suffered banishment for three incarnations [down on Earth] already, but has not been at all diligent in self-cultivation so far. Not only unrepenting in this life, s/he also wanted to rob others. it is amazing s/he is not heedful of the punishment meted out to her/him right in front of her/his eyes. If s/he does not redeem her/himself and embark on self-cultivation, the fate of an impermanent existence will be hard to avoid".

I had a fright on hearing this. The diviner also terminated his session and advised me to go home and practise self-cultivation instead.

material fortune he must have amassed, the author may subtly compare himself to prince Siddharta leaving the palace to search for truth.

35 Nguyễn Kim Muôn, Thời Trời ..., p.44.
36 Ibid., p.45
The role of the fortune teller cum magician highlights the amalgamation of popular Buddhism with Daoist belief systems familiar to Nguyễn Kim Muôn's cultural background. The revelation of one's possible original identity or former existence, such as an Immortal exiled to earthly life was typically a mythical claim to a privileged fate. Such a claim had persuasive power to effect radical changes. It shows how supernatural beliefs, though ingrained in notions of fate and chance, also help the believer to temporalize, in Heidegger's sense of the act of defining one's being-in-the-world in an authentic manner. Consequently, Nguyễn Kim Muôn achieved what Heidegger also calls an anticipatory resoluteness. Through this resoluteness, a commitment to what had hitherto never been desired or attempted, such as permanent vegetarian diet, became quite realisable.

To return to Kim Muôn's account, another surprise meeting with a school friend launched him into a comprehensive regime of Pure Land self-cultivation, after five weeks of which he had a dream where he saw Kwan Kung instructing him to learn to recite a Buddhist mantra. Shortly after, he had another elaborate dream of travelling in Kwan Yin's paradise, with features taken out of the Journey to the West (Hiśi Yu Kī), and scenic components described with modern referents:

The following 15th day of the 12th lunar month, I dreamed that I crossed the South [China] Sea, to Potala Mountain, tall and lush green with vegetation. In the middle of the immense ocean, appeared the Lady Buddha [Guan Yin] who stood dressed in white, her halo shining bright, and told me to take a bath in the sea. After I bathed, she pointed to a small boat rowed from afar by a young Chinese woman towards me.

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38 Hoffman, *Doubt, Time*...ibid.

39 ...I saw in my sleep His Royal Highness Kwan Ti [Kwan Kung] descending to my home fully clad in his awesome military armour. Sitting down on the middle lounge chair, he called for me and instructed thus: "You must recite D.B. [Đại Bĩ chư-Mahakaruna mantra ?] often, to expel evil spirits, rescue the dead from infernal realms, eliminate impurities and heal sicknesses. Try to learn it by heart". Nguyễn Kim Muôn, *Thờ Trời*..., p. 46.
Looking in, I saw the boat had no bottom. Then a rainbow appeared bridging across the ocean, narrow like a railway track. The Buddha pointed it out to me and said: "This bridge was crossed by Tripitaka on his way to fetch the Sutras and the Great Sage [Monkey] crossed and recrossed a few times". Then she brought me home.\(^\text{40}\)

If on the former occasion, the deified Western Han general of martial and righteous qualities, a central figure in popular Chinese Daoist pantheon, did not appear at all incongruous to the dreamer to be advising on Buddhist Scriptures, then on the latter occasion, it was not inconsistent to find scenes of Hsi Yu Ki in his dreamscape, for by 1920 the printed quốc ngữ translation of this and several other Chinese tales such as San Kuo had further promoted their already popular status in the southern Vietnamese folk repertoire.\(^\text{41}\)

As we have already seen, in addition to lucky encounters and myths, dreams played an important part in constructing meaning and direction for an authentic present and future.\(^\text{42}\) All those happenings, which turned his life upside down, were now given meaning by previously not-so-well-read signs. What determines the discovery or possibility of improvement in one's lot was also known as duyên (karmic connection, Chinese yuán) -- predestined affinity -- 'that linked lives once lived with lives yet to come'.\(^\text{43}\) It is thus by duyên that one met one's teacher, or one's future betrothed... The dialectics of acquiring knowledge-power plays on the mythical-vs-historical issue of temporal

\(^{40}\) Nguyễn Kim Muôn, Thơ Trôi..., p. 46.

\(^{41}\) As Sơn Nam remarks: "In Cochinchina then [in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century], as rice exports greatly increased, the government encouraged the opening up of more land for cultivation. Transport was also developed, especially the waterways. Small-holders, village councillors or public servants could more than afford to purchase books. In common parlance, this was the period of 'Thơ, Tưởng, Truyện, Tích' (verse, plays, stories, epics). To serve this large readership, the publishers had series of works printed...Truyện means Chinese stories, translated and printed in thin volumes." Sơn Nam, Cả Tình của Miền Nam [The Southern Character], republ. Văn Hóa, Hồ Chí Minh City 1992, pp.140-141.

\(^{42}\) I use 'authentic' in a sense of agency nearer to its radical which evokes 'author', to argue for an 'authority' inherent in, or regained by, the self.

\(^{43}\) Elvin, M., 'The Mountains of Felicity', an "Intervention" delivered at the Conference on Freedom in Asia, ANU, July, 1994. The concept of duyên engages the idea of re-incarnation and cyclic or millenarian time, while self-cultivation implies a progression, linear historical time.
dimensions, highlighting the debatable differences between rationalist and 'folk' perceptions of the past. The interplay, in popular culture, is about setting side by side these opposing terms, or in Gilles Deleuze's redefinition of the Baroque, about folding them along lines which are themselves folds and curvatures in one and the same body.⁴⁴

In brief, it was not only the impact of Nguyễn Kim Muôn's experiences that was impressive but the various ways in which they came about. The 'simple twists of fate' that are semantic markers in a narrative of self-discovery were recognised as omens. In the process of self-cultivation the individual gains opportunities to tackle the dilemma of social detachment and engagement by virtue of an appropriate habitus; to use Pierre Bourdieu's term, in the double appeal to individual effort and to supernatural intercession.⁴⁵

These appeals are not mutually exclusive but, as already suggested,

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⁴⁴ 'The Baroque refers not to an essence but an operative function, to a trait... A flexible or an elastic body still has parts that form a fold, such that they are not separated into parts of parts but are rather divided to infinity in smaller and smaller folds that retain a certain cohesion'. Deleuze, G., The Fold, foreword and translation by Tom Conley, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp. 3-6. I choose to invoke Deleuze here only in reference to his non-Hegelian approach to define matter, space and bodies which enjoins through folding rather than opposition by the usual Cartesian divide of line and point - hard/dense and porous/flexible matter, inert and organic bodies. I suggest we could generalise in similar terms of points and lines of beliefs, hard or porous faces to a unity or tradition in our thinking about popular religion.

⁴⁵ Hab. designates what has been practised as norm, but which can modify with contingencies thrown up through interacting with the environment. According to Bourdieu: 'The habitus, the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations, produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle, while adjusting to the demands inscribed as objective potentialities in the situation, as defined as the cognitive and motivating structures making up the habitus'. Bourdieu, P., Outline of a Theory of Practice, Cambridge University Press, 1977, p.78. 'Early experiences produce the structure of the habitus "which becomes in turn the basis of perception and appreciation of all subsequent experiences"... Experience must be evaluated and in the process involves dispositions which engender aspirations and practices objectively compatible with those objective requirements." Miller, D. and Branson, J., 'Pierre Bourdieu : Culture and Praxis', in D. J. Austin-Broos (ed), Creating Culture, Allen and Unwin, 1987, pp.216-218.
Fig. 7, Meditation diagram.

in Nguyễn Kim Muốn, Pháp Công Phưu [Method of Meditation],
Imprimerie Đức Lữ Phượng, Saigon, 1933, p.11.
form parts of a plane folded along the same pleat. The ideal of self-cultivation
eendeavour, considered as part of the local habitus, provided the potentiality for
an alternative mode of discourse and social action.46 In the case of Nguyễn
Kim Muôn, it enabled him to boast:

At present, my family (wife and children) are all following the Pure Land
method. An elder sister [of mine] has also been initiated. As for me,
thanks to my effort in self-cultivation, (full-time vegetarian regime and
fasting after midday), I feel fortunate to have found this method of Vô Vô
[vô vôi -- non-doing]... hoping one day I will be able to help those of the
same purpose to escape the dusty world.47

Nguyễn Kim Muôn also listed examples of people's visions, during the
course of self-cultivation, both in dream and in wakeful consciousness, of
Maitreya, Kwan Yin, Kwan Kung, of brilliant light, of the Western Paradise
(Cực Lạc -- Land of Perfect Peace) and even the black-faced Kitiên God:

Miss Hai, a daughter of Mr. Hồ Quang Ngọc the schoolteacher in Tân An,
just over thirty years of age this year... was meditating one day with an
incense stick, above which appeared the golden body of Amida Buddha,
then a lotus seat also appeared. This was real, not dreamed up. ...

Mme. Sùu in Trà Vinh... sometimes during her daily prayers, a halo
appears, and when she goes to sleep, there is light at the spot in bed
where she lies, that is because she is very devoted to the Way.

One case of visual experience in wakeful consciousness is described at
length, indicating the great importance of supernatural responsiveness:

Two tenant farmers working for the village head Nguyễn Xuân Long, a lay
religious in Thành Phú, Bến Tre province. -- both of them followed Cao
Đài but changed over to Pure Land ( as a lot of people in Thành Phú who
were Cao Đài adherents tend to obtain Pure Land method to practice at
home ). One of them went on a retreat for seven days, and while praying,
a big centipede fell on him and wrapped itself around his neck. He stayed
motionless and unperturbed, in a short moment it disappeared. The
following day the oil lamp on the altar glowed bright, lit up the whole
ashram, then the golden body of Amida Buddha appeared in the middle

46 As further noted by Miller and Branson, 'habitus, a concept which emerges from
Bourdieu's attempt to understand the mechanisms by which ...behaviour "is
oriented in its course" towards the formation and transformation of social structure',
...is "the strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and
ever-changing situations." Miller, D. and Branson, J., ibid.


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of the altar. It is said that the lamp now glows brightly every time the daily ritual is conducted. Even outside... we witness this.

The meditative state, having been proven to help overcome fear or avert danger, provided more dramatic proof of supernatural responsiveness in the vision of deities appearing for the benefit of the practitioner:

The most strange and miraculous of all happenings was this, ever since he read the Pure Land text, he took up the Chưan Dẻ Bất Quái (Candi Pakua- a Kwan Yin alternate form) method, he had a meditation room built on a high loft, a glass cubicle made, into which he went and sat to practise (huyễn). After three days, he saw Kwan Yin and Kwan Kung descend in their clear golden bodies at the hour of the Rat (between eleven p.m. and one a.m.) when he was still awake meditating.

Terrified, he ran out of the ashram and past several hamlets. It was not until four a.m. he was found under a Buddha altar of another Pure Land lay practitioner, having somehow gotten past locked doors. ...He babbled on about the beautiful sceneries in Paradise. ...By noon, he shouted: "There, the Amida Buddha descending", pointing to the altar lamp which at that instant flared up brightly. ...Then he came to, said he was chased and captured by the Buddha, taken to the Western Paradise and instructed that he must strive to work on self-cultivation (tu nệ mình) and drop his interest in the Pakua Candi, as his sins were too numerous to allow him to practise the method. ...He is now twenty-six years old, has left home to practice, being full-time vegetarian and abstaining from sex, in an ashram built in the middle of the fields). This happened last month in Thạnh Phú, and is well known to everyone there.

But if existential conditions undergo changes, surely Time must now be experienced differently. Again we can emulate Deleuze making use of Leibniz's definition of the Baroque fold line: for the case of popular culture, it must be possible to fold linear historical time and cyclic chiliasmatic mode, or Nietzschean eternal return, into a 'metaphoric pleat' in the body of beliefs. This body, maligned by a rationalist judgement, as syncratic; or eclectic, terms whose meanings need constant review, can now be contemplated as similar to the Baroque era's embraced folds, curvature and inflection, the space of drapes and chords to metaphrase the world of matter and soul.49

48 Chưan Dẻ or Candi is the alternate form of Kwan Yin with a thousand arms. Pakua or the eight trigrams are symbols of transformation processes in the I Ching.

49 Deleuze, The Fold, p.6.
Perhaps we can benefit more from a Baroque revisioning, especially in accounting for the large followings that millenarian groups continue to attract, as well as the linkage between lay and centralised religious institutions, the meditation, self-cultivation groups and associations, and the vicissitudes of revolution and modernity. By the time Huỳnh Phú Sổ came along in 1939 to claim continuation of the work of the Buddha Master, whose reincarnated soul-consciousness he was said to embody, the *tu hiền* method had undergone no perceptible change. In 1990, a Hòa Hảo adherent recalled his paternal grandmother practising the *Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương* faith in his childhood, giving a picture of the popularly accepted minimum:

I do not know when my grandmother joined the religion of *Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương*. From the day I could think, I remember seeing a red cloth framed in a large glass frame, displayed on the uppermost level right at the back of the Buddha altar. On both sides there were two small pictures in glass frames with the Buddha on the right hand side and Kwan Yin on the left. On the second level, there was a brass bell and a dark wooden bell. Also on this level were an incense burner, a flower vase, a glass of rain water and a plate of fruits. The lowest level was where books of sutras and oracles were placed. Facing this Buddha altar, in the front yard, was a "Heaven altar" (bàn Thống Thiên),50 with fruits, an incense vase and a glass of rain water. My father and my uncle [his elder brother] joined Hòa Hảo Buddhism on the day it was founded [in July 1939?], but I cannot see any difference between *Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương* and Hòa Hảo Buddhism.51

By contrast, the two trance dancers I met at Thời Bình dinh boasted of possessing an elaborate altar with 'numerous deities' on it, at the same time indicating that they adhered to Tứ Ân Mê Tông beliefs. This tolerance in interpretation *Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương* beliefs may not translate closely in terms of its practice, which consists of strict regularity in performing daily rituals, minimal as they may be, as Vĩnh Liễm describes:

My grandmother was not a full time vegetarian, but only took meatless meals on four days of the month: the fifteenth, sixteenth, thirtieth and

50 A chest-high altar consisting of a tray supported by a column. For a description of the original Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương required arrangement of altars, see Ho Tai, *Millenarianism...*, pp.33-34.

the first days of the lunar months without fail. Her diet was very simple: rice with boiled vegetable and soya sauce. Every morning my grandma got up at about five a.m., washed and dressed herself in a brown long tunic (áo dài), then did her offering of incense and prostrations in front of the [indoor] altar. This ritual took about thirty minutes. She then went out to the Heaven altar for another thirty-minute ritual. In the evening about eight p.m., her rituals were the same. On rainy days, she did them inside. She never missed a day, except when she was unwell or had to be away on a trip.

Vinh Liêm asserts the unchanging face of practice which identifies the sect. This publication also challenges previous perceptions that the group is conservative and country-based. The thriving Hòa Hảo re-organisation among the Vietnamese diaspora and recent increasing support of overseas Vietnamese intellectuals, marks a clear shift from its southern rural ethos in more ways than one. However, if there was continuity in millenarian themes, it would be in the idea of invulnerability linked indirectly with immortality and eternal recurrence.

INVULNERABILITY, TRAINING AND MAGIC.

By the 1920s, interest in Buddhism became conspicuous, with appeals for self-cultivation appearing in popular literature. The failure of resistance to French colonisation, according to most historians, accounts for the upsurge in Buddhist study in urban centres. This was also a time for shoring up cultural positions within the debate on modernisation and struggle for independence. The same period saw a proliferation of secret societies, inspired most likely by those from Chinese migrant or itinerant merchant backgrounds, apparently filling the vacuum left by the Vietnamese monarchy and scholars in their resistance against French domination. The uprisings of the Phan Xích Long group in 1913 and 1916, involving contingents of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương adherents from the provinces and the Chu Lôn-Gia Định areas, revealed Daoist beliefs, stemming from cultivation of internal energy (ch'i kung), to render the body

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52 Chesneaux, *Secret Societies in China...*, p.129.
unharmed by blows and cuts, coupled with Vietnamese adaptation of Khmer magic of invulnerability.

In 1907, a poem by Y-Tực-Tư in popular *lục bát* (six-eight meter) verse in *Lục Tỉnh Tần Văn*, a southern newspaper, advised people to take up self-cultivation, carried with it the message of modernisation:

*From now on, I'll take the tonsure and leave for self-cultivation,*

*Reciting Peace scriptures at the Renovation pagoda,*

*Praying and vowing diligently day and night,*

*Wishing that the country will be served and people will benefit [from my work].*

However, if this was a patriotic subterfuge, as Sơn Nam argues, then its message is rather garbled. The author made use of the *di tu* format (joining the pagoda, taking the tonsure, praying with incense and prostrating to Buddha etc.) to bring up a nationalist content, such as naming the Buddha *Phật tổ Hòn Đất*, thus giving the Buddha title to the mythical ancestor of the Vietnamese. At the same time, and perhaps appropriately, he appealed to the popular *ông Giêl* (grandfather/mister Heaven) to protect his compatriots. Did religion and politics manage to separate at all in southern discourse?

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53 My translation of:

*Từ rày cải tổ di tu,*

*Trưng kinh An Thái ở chữa Minh Tân.*

*Nghỉ đêm khẩn với chuyền cấn,*

*Cầu cho là quốc lợi dân mọi là.*


54 The *Lục Tỉnh Tần Văn* newspaper was, in Sơn Nam's opinion, a platform for Gilbert Trần Chính Chiêu in his modernisation (*Mình Tân*) campaign. See Sơn Nam, *Miền Nam Dậu Thế Kỳ 20...*, pp.105-154.

55 Sơn Nam, *Miền Nam Dậu Thế Kỳ 20...* The claim by Đạo Trịnh Nhật that the poem was written by Nguyễn Quyền, the founder of Dòng Kinh Nghĩa Thục school in Hà Nội, is born out at least by the term *ông Giêl*, a northern Vietnamese title for Heaven, used instead of the southern *ông Trời*.  

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CLASH OF CULTURES

As Coulet pointed out, the Daoist sorcerer (thây pháp) was someone who claimed to have had religious training and to be adept with the use of powerful magical tools. Most secret societies had a ‘sorcerer’ attached to the leadership if he did not take the helm himself.56 I will return to these figures in subsequent chapters. For the moment, it is sufficient to take note of the intertwining of supernatural powers and human agency within conflicting beliefs which emerged in the face of Western colonialisation and technological domination. This clash was detectable in popular literature. In a condemnatory vè ballad, whose author took the government side (the only publishable position) in reacting to the execution of the rebels in 1916:57

Because they listen to their friends,
They have to suffer thus,
The magic charms compelled them,
To duplicity and high treason,
Deluded by the charms,
Insensitive from drinking them.
They were swayed by their comrades,
To do the wrong things.

The magic potion accounts for the rebels’ mistake to yield to peer pressure. Thus the condemnation, albeit awkwardly, did not deny the power of magic to charm, delude and render those rebels insensitive. Two years later, in a song written by a school teacher, Huỳnh Văn Ngã, such belief in charms was unequivocally rejected. While it unstintingly attacked wasting money in Buddhist vegetarian food offering to hungry ghosts etc, the poem’s main thrust

56 Coulet, Sociétés..., pp. 31-35. The author[s] of Dịa Chí Văn Hóa Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh maintain, unconvincingly, that there were no Daoist magicians in the ranks of southern Vietnamese secret societies. See Trần Văn Giàu (ed), Địa Chí Văn Hóa Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh - tập I, Lịch Sử, TP Hồ Chí Minh, 1967, p.268.

57 This was the second execution following an initial one of 38 fighters from the 172 captured. D.T.B., D.T.S. (ed), Võ 13 Người Bij Xã Bắn tại Đông Tập Tròn Sài Gòn, (Mười Ba Người Bij Xã Bắn Ngày 16 Mârs 1916) (Chanting Verse about 13 People Executed by Shooting at the Military Field of Saigon (the thirteen people shot on 16 March 1916)), Imprimerie de l’Union, Saigon, 1916, p.1. Located in Fonds Indochinois, (B* P. Ya 180), BNP.
was a call to people to awaken to the 'light of civilisation'. It must have sold well, for a second edition was issued in 1928. By contrast, the versified 'Story of Hâu Sử' published back in 1913, contains three-religion motifs and divinities, with a moral message advising people to practice self-cultivation in order to avoid going to the infernal realms after death, giving due respect to ghosts and other powerful spirits. Was this notion of the invisible worlds swept away by forces underpinning disparagement, such as that of Huỳnh Văn Ngà?

The 1938-1942 uprising of the Thinkers (Đạo Tự do) group, in Tần Châu (Châu Đốc province), shows that twenty-two years after the Phan Xích Long events, the belief in invulnerability still had a powerful hold on people's imagination. The magic of invulnerability, which can be acquired with little time and effort, enables an ordinary person, even a ruffian, to possess power that extends posthumously. Buddhist temples, including Cambodian ones, were also associated with the arts of self-defence and practices to render oneself literally invulnerable. This was called gòng, the technique/magic with an indirect influence from Chinese Ch'i Kung and Daoist use of amulets in the cluster of beliefs about immortality. This type of self-cultivation practice was reported by the French police as one of the many southern religious movements in the 1920s.

The construction of knowledge, upheld by Daoist and Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương followers at least, reflected a much widespread system of beliefs in knowledge-power throughout Southeast Asia. In his paper on invulnerability

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58 Huỳnh văn Ngà, Bài Ca Kiệm Thọ|Song of Modern Time|, 2è ed., Saigon 1918, p.11. [Fonds Ind. 8° Ya 342].

59 Hậu Sử, the orphan hero, followed an ancient model. Thanks to his chaste life devoted to self-cultivation in a Buddhist temple, he went to blissful Heaven on the back of a crane, joining the Immortals. Chuyện Hậu Sử, từ 'Hậu Sử Tín Thọ'|Story of Hậu Sử, from New Version of Hậu Sử|, Mmc. Huỳnh Kim Danh, Saigon, 1913.

60 For details of Đạo Tự do group, see for example Ho Tai's Millenarianism..., pp. 93-94.

61 CAOM. 7H 59, Note no. 1494s, Saigon 10/5/1933 by Informant 'Bonze'. Also 7F 29, Note of the Directeur des Affaires Politiques, 1934.
in Thailand, Andrew Turton shows comparable notions being linked with the perfectibility modelled by Buddhist monks:

If the *perfectibility* (or, less grandly, the achievability and improvement) of powers... is one key notion, its accompanying trope is concentration. This idea comprises a range of metaphors or conditions including mental focus, the idea of combination of power, durability, and hardness (e.g. impenetrability of the body, impregnability, imperviousness etc.); all are counter-entropic notions which fly in the face of, on the one hand, the inevitability of individual physical death, and on the other, the Buddhist philosophical axiom of impermanence of all things.\(^\text{62}\)

Leaders of peasant uprisings, when claimed to be the re-incarnations of Bodhisattvas, were also attributed with invulnerability. Their immortality was affirmed by legends of surviving physical annihilation, and of their return to this world in another personality. Ileto’s study of the Filipino legends of the immortal liberator attests to the similar existence of this belief system in nearby regions of Southeast Asia.\(^\text{63}\) As for the technique of acquiring invulnerability itself, extant sources, if any, are yet to be found in southern Vietnam. A *how to* book published in 1928 by Võ Ôn, a northern enthusiast, confirms that Southeast Asian-type invulnerability was preferred over Chinese *ch’i kung*, for which training is extended.\(^\text{64}\)

Self-cultivation in this context therefore reveals multi-faceted relations between culture, history and local knowledge. For those undergoing disciplined training, this knowledge-power is believed to be accessible,

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\(^\text{64}\) Võ Ôn, *Gông Trạ-Kha, Vài Môn Thuộc Bi Truyện, các Miếng Võ Cẩn Thích cho Dân Bà* (Trạ Kha art of invulnerability, a few secret remedies, some self-defence techniques for women), Võ Văn Chung, Hanoi, 1928. According to Võ Ôn, there are three methods of rendering oneself unharmed by sharp weapons. In one method, Khmer monks can transmit the magic, burying gold or silver needles in the receiver’s body. Cham masters, in another, use tiger teeth or elephant bones, while the Siamese method involves medicinal leaves. By keeping to the precepts set out by them and, for a price, anyone can obtain the magic. Khmer amulets, in the forms of diagrams drawn on cloth or paper, or statues made of bones or teeth to be held in one’s mouth in the moment of danger, are widely known until today.
regardless of the user's ethics. For those messianic reincarnations, it is innate, readily discoverable. Underpinning paradoxical popular notions of training, or progressive perfectibility and immanent, immediate knowledge-power on the part of the enlightened ones, is the interplay of linear historical time and the eternal return of the Messiah.

The tales surrounding Huỳnh Phú Sĩ's demise, still circulated by Hòa Hảo followers today, show how this cluster of ideas concerning supernatural powers persists. The Viet Minh militiamen responsible for his execution made sure that parts of his body were buried at locations far apart from each other, suggests that even these opponents of the Hòa Hảo faith believed that his sundered body was capable of reunification and reanimation. This is not unlike the Buddha's former life related in the Diamond Sutra. The easily-acquired magic of physical invulnerability is the embodiment of diamond-like consciousness, as Turton points out.

The diamond-cutter mind, prajña, according to the Middle Way (Madhyamika) theoreticians, is the precondition of experiencing achrony, or Time exploded, and therefore devoidness (sunyata). This third notion goes beyond the duality of impermanence and immortality. As Turton remarks, it appears to fly in the face of Buddhist philosophical axioms. It also explains why there is a Zen component in Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương teachings, again not considered as incompatible to the other two.

Alternative to Turton’s paradox of the 'bad death' was the cultivation to obtain immortality (tu Tiên), sought by the lettered élite. This period was also marked by the rise in popularity of the Cao Đài faith in the countryside.

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65 Ho Tai, Milenarianism..., p.144. See also Popkin, The Rational Peasant ..., p.213.

66 It has also been said that the Mahayana Buddhist path is a Way out of (profane) time, to participate in Great Time (the source of myth) and No Time (Nirvana). Brun, V., Past and Future: Traditional Concepts of Time in Thailand, paper presented at Nordic Conference on Southeast Asian Studies, Lammi, Finland, 30/9-2/10/1988.

67 Turton, 'Invulnerability and Local Knowledge', p.169.

68 The paradox is that possessors of power die young; but notoriously bad persons of invulnerability, by dying violent deaths, achieve immortality. Turton, ibid., pp.172-173.
THE BEGINNING OF THE CAO ĐÀI

The rise of self-perfection to obtain immortality (tự tiến) was reported by the French police as a Daoist movement in the 1930s. This period was marked by the rise in popularity of the Cao Đài faith in the southern countryside. Its attraction was a complex of healing and soteriological promises obtained by communication with spirits through automatic writing. Its founder, Ngô Văn Chiều, then a district chief (đốc phủ) in the colonial government, had his first communication with a female Immortal through spirit-writing in 1920, while posted to the town of Hà Tiên, as mentioned in Chapter Three.

Spiritist communication was not strange to Ngô Văn Chiều the functionary who, in 1902, first participated in a séance at a Daoist temple in Thu Đậu Mốt. Since then he had delved into Daoist literature such as Lao-tzu's Tao Teh Ching, and spirit writing of Quan Thánh Đế Quân's (Kwan Kung) teachings. As mentioned in Chapter Three, his effort to seek help from the spirits to cure his mother's illness also took him to various Buddhist/Daoist temples.

Transferred to the island of Phú Quốc in 1921, he was instructed by an Immortal, through spirit-writing, to abandon his study of Minh Thánh Kinh ("Sutra of the Luminous Sage") and start a three-year long vegetarian diet. After more than one month of self-cultivation under the tutelage of this Immortal, Ngô Văn Chiều experienced a divine vision of the great eye, which was to become the symbol of Cao Đài or the Supreme Being. His interest in self-cultivation intensified in the following three years in Phú Quốc, reportedly encouraged by the instructions received through spirit writing.

On Christmas Eve of 1925, under the aegis of Lê Văn Trung, then installed as Cao Đài leader, self-cultivation stamped itself as one of the priorities in Cao

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69 CAOM 7H 59, Note no. 1494s, Saigon 10/5/1933 by informant 'Bonze'. Also 7F 29, Note of the Directeur des Affaires Politiques, 1934.

70 Đỗ Văn Lý, Tìm Hiểu Đạo Cao Đài [Understanding the Cao Đài Religion], Cao Đài Giáo Viết Nơm Hải Ngoại, California, 1989, pp.47-55. See also Gustave Meillon, Le Caodoisme..., pp.174-181.

71 Đỗ Văn Lý, ibid.
Dài practice, judging by the tone of a spirit-written message as signed by the Jade Emperor/Supreme Being:

*Over all life forms, I hold the control,*
*Those who are keen on self-cultivation will benefit from Heaven’s favours,*
The wonder of the Way spreads all over the mundane world,
*Over thousands of years and myriad of things I keep watch.*

In a message five months later, the Cao Đài (Supreme Being) announced that Buddhism will be practised differently, by miracle work (*huyền diệu*) instead, and warned believers of Purgatory:

Formerly I descended to establish Buddhism. After nearly six thousand years, the true Buddhist teaching becomes almost distorted. I often heard people say Buddha speaks no word. Now I will only use miraculous happening to teach the Way, and not descending any more, in order to reform Buddhism.

It is like this, from now on those who don’t practice self-cultivation will go to interminable hell after death, and will not be able to say that "Buddhism has no teachings", thereby denying their sins. I say unto you: If you don’t cultivate yourselves in this coming Third Era of Salvation, there is no hope of ascending [to paradise].

Then he proceeded to instruct some changes to formalities:

In the middle of the pagoda, near the two altars for Kwan Yin and Kwan Kung, install a statue of MINE [Jade Emperor/Cao Đài’s spirit] in the middle. The statue of Kwan Yin is to MY right, Kwan Kung to MY left; the assembly of Immortals, Sages and Buddhas is to be on the next lower level. The pagoda is to be named Ngoc Hoàng Tự ("Jade Emperor pagoda").

In the message of July 1926, vegetarianism was stressed, to help harmonise the three elemental components (*tinh-khí-thần*, lit. seminal fluid, breath/prana, aura/spirit) of a spiritualised mystic body (*sắc huyền điều thiêng liêng*) called the 'Peri spiritual Body'. The aim was to be able to detach this body which is lighter than air, from the corporal one in order to unite with the Anterior Heaven atmosphere (*khí Tiên Thiên*) steeped in 'illuminating

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72 My translation. Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phật Dõ, Thành Ngôn Hiệp Tuyền (collection of selected sayings by Holy Sages), Imprimerie Tam-Thành, Dakao-Saigon, 1928, p.7.

73 Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phật Dõ, Thành Ngôn..., p.18.

74 Ibid., p.19.
electricity' (diễn quang). This 'electricity' has often been mentioned in popular meditation and/or trance communication literature. The successor to Tịnh Độ Cử Sĩ (Pure Land Laicism/Householder Cultivation) founder Nguyễn Minh Trí, Reverend Sơn Kim, was known to possess healing diễn, which is believed to transform ordinary rain water into medicine. I will return to this form of power in the later part of this chapter.

TỊNH DỘ (PURE LAND) LAICISM

In his 1929 appeal to readers to take up self-cultivation, our ex-accountant Nguyễn Kim Muốn argues that conventional monastic Buddhism is too demanding, therefore prone to hypocrisy, while Cao Đài priests tend to confuse and exploit. His solution was a) to worship Heaven (ông Trời) as it is the custom; and b) to take up Pure Land (Tịnh Độ) householders' Buddhism. His proposal reflects a widespread popular interest in self-cultivation at home (tu niệm ở nhà or tu tại gia), together with frequenting a pagoda (đi chùa). Like Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương and Đạo Lành earlier, which featured lay/householder practice, the 1920s also saw the growth of Tịnh Độ Cử Sĩ, founded by Nguyễn Minh Trí (d.1958), which peaked around 1928.

One of the most distinct marks of his advocated practice is the six-direction prostration in a framework of twin cultivation -- of merit and of

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75 Ibid., p.26. Possibly lightning was used as metaphor, before electric power lines widened the meaning.

76 Nguyễn Kim Muốn, Thờ Trời..., p.86.

77 Ibid.

78 Ho Tai, Millenarianism..., p.88. According to his biography, a 72-page typed monograph held by members of the headquarters temple Hướng Gia Tiếp, in Giã Định, Ho Chi Minh City, his birth year was 1886, not 1885 as stated in Ho Tai's Millenarianism..., Lược Sử Đức Tông Sư Minh Trí, Giáo Chủ Tịnh Độ Cử Sĩ Phát Hại Việt Nam [Outline Biography of His Holiness Founding Master Minh Trí, Prelate of Amidaist Buddhist Association of Vietnam], ?c.1959, typed roneo copy in my possession.
intuitive knowledge (*Phúc Huê Song Tự*). He was however able to proselytise by initially providing a variety of services, as he reportedly said:

I had to find many ways to convert people: collecting herbal medicine, tattening medicinal plants, study medicine, do business, read palms, render service and care for people with sincerity to win their hearts and minds. Only through their sympathy could I guide them on the good and wholesome way. If you sit in one place and work as a physician, people will come to you when they are sick, but once well again, who will remember you?  

Nguyễn Minh Trí himself did not shave his head but dressed like a peasant, highlighting the lay aspect of Tịnh Độ self-cultivation. As he explained:

For the purpose of engaging in the worldly way of man (*nhập thế nhân đạo*), I could devote myself to travelling and trading here and there to bring the light of humanism (*nhân đạo*) to every family. As for the Buddhist way, I racked my brain, because everyone thinks that he himself, his own family, wife and children are real and permanent; hardly anyone is aware that one is living in impermanency so as to seek the way of truth.

The result was, as mentioned above, a method that combines world- engaging way of humanity and the Buddhist way of world detachment, perfected in conjunction with the practice of six-direction prostration. The poor and the less educated must have found his method readily understandable. But it would be difficult to fully appreciate the extent of Tịnh Độ Cự Sĩ's popularity if we overlook the supernatural component of Nguyễn Minh Trí's welfare work. His biography contains several tales of miraculous healing and magic deeds he performed.

Another form of Pure Land combined meditative practice with spiritism and fasting technique. This school was initiated by a Catholic turned Amidaist, Lê Thành Thánh, who resigned from his public service post to embark on self-

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79 *Lục Sư...*, pp. 16 & 62.
81 Ibid., p.13.
82 Ibid., pp. 28 & 47 for example. In both cases, plain drinking water was used to cure serious illness. *Lục Sư Điệp Tông Sư...* lists at least eight memorable supernatural deeds of Nguyễn Minh Trí's.
cultivation in the late 1920s. According to Huỳnh Minh, Lê Thành Thành, well known to the circles of self-cultivation practitioners in southern Vietnam, discovered a method called Vô Ý (fearlessness), which involves fasting for 63 days, taking only water to survive.

In 1949, Lê Thành Thành accepted the invitation by the Cao Đài Supreme Being conveyed through spirit writing at the branch of Bến Tre province, to join their group called Tiệc Thiên Đại Đạo (the great way of Former Heaven). The same year saw a public demonstration of his method by a female disciple. Before his death in 1963, which he foresaw, he fasted for 63 days and spelled out messages from Buddha, Christ and Lao-Tzu in an altered state of consciousness.

This lay emphasis was not restricted to the Amida cult, nor was it new, if we think about the traditional patronage by a majority of women of any big and small mixed Buddhist and Daoist-like temples throughout the country. There must also have been a sufficient upsurge of attendance as to prompt one thousand copies of a twelve-page manual to be published in 1929, by Đại Khánh pagoda of Gò Công, a town fifty km southeast of Saigon.

The owner of this pagoda, Trần Quang Văn, who meant this manual to be distributed free, consistent with the precept of giving/generosity, was responding to a widened public need and to his own civic sense:

I observe at present there are many people wishing to commit themselves to seeking the Way, to be diligent about self-cultivation, no matter how much it requires of their effort and expenses. Therefore some are frequenting pagodas to pray for Buddha to rescue them, others stay at home to recite sutras and do prostrations. Everyone hopes for one thing: that is to be rescued (đở) by Buddha eventually, but many know little how to do it correctly.

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83 The term Former Heaven was used in China at least since the early part of this century by offshoots of the White Lotus Society, referring to one of the groups that continued the Eternal Mother cult. I Kuan Đạo (Nhất Quán Đạo) is another of these groups which pervaded popular Buddhist and Tịnh Đồ groups in southern Vietnam. See Overmeyer, Folk Buddhist Religion, pp.105-106.

I also notice that temples in provinces such as Vĩnh Long, Sa Đéc, Châu Đốc, Cần Thơ etc., on the three main full moons are attended by great crowds.  

He went on to praise the orderly and quiet behaviour of the public at Buddhist temples in these other provinces, then proposed the "dos and don'ts" for self-cultivators of his home town, no doubt drawing again on his observation of local conditions:

First, when going to the main hall [of the pagoda], do not wear clogs or shoes, making noises that are unseemly, furthermore, our footwear is not clean...; secondly the pantaloons need to be tied up tightly to prevent polluting gases leaking out thus creating an offence to Heaven and Buddha, bringing punishment to oneself in future; thirdly one must keep quiet...; fourthly do not take betel nut making smacking noises and spitting carelessly, the mouth must be washed and teeth brushed beforehand, in order that your prayers be effective; fifthly, toddlers who have to be carried should not be taken to temples, lest the infants urinate or defecate thus polluting [the sacred place].

It is apparent that many of the patrons to this temple were women of a socio-cultural background with which the author would have been familiar but could not identify himself. Their behaviour indicated an attitude towards a pattern of temple going and socialising which probably was pre-1929 in Gò Công city. The scene of relaxed chatting mothers, with yet-to-be toilet trained children in the main temple hall, must have undergone a change in the South. These un-urbane visitors therefore needed to be told to quickly adjust to the 'modern' standard of pious behaviour, ostensibly set by worshippers in other Mekong delta towns.

At any rate, after such admonishing in the introductory part, Trần Quang Vân listed the protocol of honouring and offering incense, alcohol, fruit and flowers to Amida (Amitabha) Buddha, Amitayus (Vô Lượng Thọ Pháp - the Buddha of Boundless Age) and all other Buddhas. The praise verses also mention deities of the White Lotus School, Kwan Kung, king Gia Long, Đạo Hạnh (Vietnamese master Tự Đạo Hạnh?), which resembles those in Đan

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85 Kinh Chí Cách Tu Niệm ở Nhà và Cách Đi Cống Chơi của Chùa Đạt Khánh (Gocong) [Sutra of the Method of Householder Self-Cultivation and the Way to Attend Pagodas(Go Công), Đức Lưu Phượng Printer, Saigon 1929, p.1.

86 Kinh Chí Cách..., ibid., p.2.
Tiến's ritual format described in Chapter Three. The section ends with a suggestion to use white (grape) wine for offering, which, being an imported product, could not have been cheap, with no reason given.

Next, there is a poem to offer alcohol for Buddhas, Immortals, Holy Sages and Tutelary spirits together with prayers and mantras, which were to be said while handling a rosary. Kwan Yin prayers were then followed by those to the Ten Lords of Infernal Realms, with the Sutra of Repentance ending the session. On the whole, it is difficult to ascertain whether the patrons were ignorant of all formality as the author implies, or that they had different ideas of how to perform rituals themselves. It is useful to note that the pantheon mentioned in the manual must have been commonly accepted at a large number of Buddhist temples then. That pantheon has been shared by many Southerners till today with ethnic Chinese groups, especially in those temples erected by private individuals with similar beliefs in the three-religion 'syncretism'.

URBAN WOMEN AND SELF-CULTIVATION

The same year (1929) saw another thin manual Tu-Than (self-cultivation/perfection) with a subtitle: 'Etude sur le Naturalisme - Khái Cấu Về Càng Thưồng, Đạo Đức' (study on normal and ethical behaviour) by a collective authorship: 'a Group of Women: some are forsaken by their husbands, some widows, some have no homes, some had bad luck in business, some lost opportunity in their study'. ...Aimed at 'married and unmarried ladies, for their idle moments', the booklet also targets educated members of this disenfranchised section of women in the 1920's, as indicated by the use of a few French words to elucidate meaning, and of examples of typical behaviour.87 Its ideological locus thus conjoins the bourgeois/proletariat,

87 A proficiency in French was believed attainable from year five in the 1930's. Only a tiny number in the whole country (465) reached the schooling level of year ten by 1939. Marr, D. G., Vietnamese Tradition..., p.38. As female students were proportionately much less numerous still, the ironic position of the Vietnamese 'educated modern women', with little job/career opportunity and likewise in marriage, cannot be sufficiently appreciated.
modern-scientific/traditional dichotomised components, showing fluid skill in cultural adaptation.

The language reveals an assumed belief in Ông Trời (Heaven/The Providence), advocating consultation with one's own conscience (huống tâm-lit. innocent mind-heart), and ascetism (hành xác - lit. physical torment) in self-cultivation:

Tu-Thần is like this: Everyday you think of Heaven and Buddha then you won't do wrong. Ask your conscience every day if the thing to want to do is right or wrong; do not be selfish at others expense... Self-cultivators need to torture their body, suffer hardship... practice little sleep... look for rustic living, taking pleasure in nature...88

If we have a conscience, the manual argues, we are human, and if desire compels us to do wrong, then it is the work of demons and ghosts (ma quỷ; denoted in French as 'les mauvais esprits').89 French words may also be used rhetorically to augment the writer's authority through this show of status/educational credentials. More revealing is the ridiculing of well-to-do and/or vain urban dwellers and their traditional practice of obtaining merit for future life:

Why call i: self-cultivation if each shopping for vegetarian meals costs two to three đồng a day; it would better to go to a restaurant. Why call it self-cultivation if you still wear open-necked suits, jewellery hanging heavy on the body...ironed tunic, collar bleached so smooth that it shines, so stiff it pokes into and hurts your chin... shoes worth twenty or thirty đồng, making your feet heavy and sore. Why call it self-cultivation if you bought automobiles to move around noisily and run over people...if you cook vegetarian dishes in the forms of prawns and fish, is it not to mock Heaven and Buddha? Why call it self-cultivation if you lend money on interest worth five or seven times the capital, then throw charity vegetarian feasts spilling food on the ground so that people step on it, is it not wasting Heaven's and Buddha's wealth? Why call it self-cultivation if, after cheating on work, afraid of bad karma (tội), you buy caged birds to liberate.90

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88 Trần Thị Tám, compiler, Từ Thần, Tam Thanh printer, Dacao-Saigon 1929, pp.4-5.
89 Ibid., p.21.
90 Trần Thị Tám, op. cit., p.5. [...] denotes my omission of text.
Not only fundamentalism was exerting its pull here, a sense of urgency seemed to come through also. Under the recognition that the working of Buddhist law of causality is verifiably visible, was an implicit realisation about a fast changing world:

Thus if we know that karma revolves, [that is] if we owe something, we must pay for it, especially these days, the debt is repaid in one lifetime, then we should repent and cultivate ourselves.\(^91\)

The effectiveness of conventional popular self-cultivation practice was questioned, the difference with di tu (leaving home) having been drawn:

Those who leave home for self-cultivation are rid of marital duties, fed up with worldly affairs, not wanting to have anything to do with mundane things, therefore they join a pagoda to take care of sutras and to teach the [young] monks in order to pass the time. ...Whereas today, the old and the young, men and women take up self-cultivation, vegetarianism, but is it effective at all? Are they sure their soul/spirit [linh hồn] will go to Bồng Lai (island of the Immortals) or Immortals' Paradise?\(^92\)

The compiler sums up by advocating the position of fulfilling the lot that one was given till one dies, rather than dying due to another karma, i.e. through creating a different course of action. She therefore regards tu thàn as a rearguard action to prevent future misfortune:

One thing it (Tu Thận) can do is merely that future perils and pay-back consequences will be avoided.\(^93\)

Merely? This conservatism ignores the possibility that the self-cultivation trajectory constitutes a new karma in itself, or a radically new direction in life, termed nghiệp tu (self-cultivation karma) in common Buddhist writings. Here the pragmatic solution of some southern wealthy women who feared the worst consequence of their “passion”, i.e. to lose their socio-economic status, becomes clear:

The poor torture their body for most of the time so they can forget their passion, but the rich do it with plenty of food and clothes, especially sleeping on warm mattresses, living in large houses with ornate gardens

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\(^91\) Ibid., p.7.
\(^92\) Ibid., p.8.
\(^93\) Ibid., p.16.
and scenic views, empty and quiet chambers, these are the causes for much passion.

Nowadays spirits and demons get inside you causing many sins. ...Those who devote themselves to the Way, forgo riches and seek poverty are actually fed up with life, not that they are stupid.

...If the reader thinks the compiler is incorrect, then why have there been cases where a big mandarin’s wife had an affair with a servant, a capitalist’s wife went with a poor fellow or a Hát Bộ actor...so that families were broken up, and often mental asylums were filled up?²⁹⁴

What the women had better watch out for were the công tử (sons of wealthy families - or playboys):

Men nowadays, for every one hundred of them there are 99 so-called công tử. What is a công tử? In Chinese it is cíng chài, or a gutless effigy, dressed up to be a toy, the French call it "poupée" (doll). Some people call that kind male tarts... [they] trick trusting girls to ruin their virginity and grab any mere ounce of her gold and run away to sell it, or split up married couples.

The solution, as suggested, is not different from the traditional appeal to form a sangha, or community of practitioners i.e. calling for women ‘to practice self-cultivation together in a neighbourhood network’ so that the spirit can be cleansed [of passionate desires] and that the body can avoid defilement in this fiercely competitive world²⁹⁵. The final pages of the booklet deal with practical methods of offering at the altars, including a call against the burning of spirit money. The use of electric lights to substitute for candles was regarded as a sign of hypocrisy, because ‘their brightness only hides a lack of devotion’. Finally a prayer to the ten Infernal Lords with the word hối long huê (Dragon Flower festival) mentioned, was offered under the heading Kinh Kệ (Sutra).

The manual ends with advice to use the six-word prayer (Nam Mô A Di Đà Phật) in case of danger, attesting to the Pure Land tradition. This tradition in itself stresses a form of practice at home which was shown in a 1935

publication by Tam Bao pagoda in Rac Gi province. As the author of this 300-copy edition summarises,

Anyone who wishes to study the way and practise self-cultivation, must learn first the five precepts, and ten good acts, then learn the whole Amida sutra and the way to pray to Buddha daily as shown below, also each practitioner who has taken the refuges must have a Buddha icon in the middle of the house to worship, so that each time you pray you could do it in front of the altar.

Also you must obtain a long tunic to put on each time you pray.

If self-cultivation in Pure Land style was appropriated by that particular group of women to guard themselves against catastrophes in personal relationship, the next examples denote changes in personal ideology including that of a woman religious, Tran Thach Hoa.

DI TU AND IDEOLOGY.

The 1930s saw, amidst the material hardship of economic depression, radical decisions taken by intellectuals in shifting their ideological positions regarding colonialism and revolution. One of the most famous cases must be that of Nguyen An Ninh (1900-1943). A French-trained lawyer who effectively promoted Vietnamese nationalist cause through the printed media, Nguyen An Ninh was several times jailed by the colonial authorities and to finally die in prison. In the late 1920s, he went back to his home village 'to shave his head, to chant Buddhist sutras and beat the wooden bell', with his friend and fellow-revolutionary Phan Van Huan following suit in support.

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96 This pagoda is believed to be constructed during king Gia Long's reign, 1802-1819. It has, according to Georges Coulet, a three-metre high Buddha statue. Coulet, G., _Cultes et Religions..._, pp. 34-35.

97 Chua Tam Bao, Rac Gi, _Niem Phat Quy Tac_, Imprimerie Viet-Nam, Saigon 1935, pp. 4-5.

98 Viet Thu, Le van Thuy, _Hoi Kin Nguyen An Ninh_, Chet Lon, Me Linh, 1961, pp.49-52. See also Phuong Lan Bui Thuy My, _Nhau, Che Mot Tu Thu Thau_ 1906-1945, Khai Tri Saigon, 1974, p.229. It is interesting to note that, according to Le Van Thuy, Nguyen An Ninh put a picture of Kwan Kung on the altar, indicating the popularity of this Chinese deity by the 1930's and the widespread Minh Huong input into southern culture.
Although historians have so far regarded Ninh's Buddhist option to be expedient -- to avoid colonial police's surveillance, there is reasonable ground in thinking that he took recourse to the tradition of self-cultivation because it was a genuine social alternative. Here something needs to be said to distinguish the concept of liberation in non-Western context and that of the nationalist struggle for freedom in the colonial context. For Nguyễn An Ninh, assuming a privileged position of having both options seems to be the case, even though his mainly rationalist outlook would cause some unsettling ambiguity.\textsuperscript{99} Leaving aside the probable despair he faced when all his nationalist activities had so far been thwarted by the colonial authorities, the Buddhist quest for spiritual liberation, given his predicament, must have appeared not that far apart from the modern western quest for freedom and dignity.

Another aspect worth considering is the fact that Ninh himself became, during this period, deified by the poor. His portrait was installed on country home altars, and people prostrated at his feet, which allegedly caused disappointment or dismay in him.\textsuperscript{100} Whatever pain and sadness Nguyễn An Ninh and Phan Văn Hùng experienced could be interpreted further. It may not have been a mere disappointment with the peasants' conservatism and ignorance. It may have been utter frustration at not knowing the means to transform fervent beliefs in supernatural powers into revolutionary ones.

To be counted among the spirits indicates that one has spiritual power (linh thiêng). This will not quite make sense unless we return to our definition of linh as a mediating attribute in popular religion. Being well educated in the western system, able to hold his own against the French on the intellectual field, Nguyễn An Ninh also proved capable, in those people's eyes at least, of mastering the depths of local tradition. Such ability to mediate two or more


\textsuperscript{100} Việt Tha Lê Văn Thứ, *Hội Khưu*, pp. 51-52. See also Ho Tai, *Millenarianism*, p. 83.
spheres of power and influence, thereby proving to possess transactional
efficacy, was equated with having linh, thus worthy of reverence. Here again,
nationalism was merged with religiosity in this schema of popular beliefs. Not
until Huynh Phu So in the late 1930s, and probably Ho Chi Minh in the late
1940s, do we see such popular synthesis of both aspects in one person, and the
resulting charisma and honorification heaped upon leadership figures.

For a few well-known intellectuals of the 1930s, changing political
outlook, hence personal life-direction, could happen in more ways than one.
The monk Thien Chieu's slightly ambivalent conversion to revolutionary
Marxism from Buddhism also betokens the pervasiveness of the religious
trajectory, in which rational action does not oppose or exclude the quest for
inner tranquillity and detachment. In memoirs of his journalistic years, Ho
Huu Tung maintained that Thien Chieu finally embraced Marxism because
he could not resolve the sociological issues in the Buddhist solution to the
world's problems.

As for the Trotskyist/Marxist Ho Huu Tung himself, towards the late
1960s, he converted to his father's Bao Son Ky Huong faith, thus coming
around to the position he knew since childhood. It is well to believe that Ho
Huu Tung understood the dilemma of tranquillity and social activism better
than Thien Chieu and Nguyen An Ninh. The latter two left Buddhism on the
accusation that it was bogged down by quietism, hence submission to colonial
violence. It may also be well to think, with the background of Taoist notion
of non-doing (vo vi, in Chinese wu wei), central to meditative exercises in self-
cultivation, that the Buddhist notion of sunya (emptiness or devoidness) is

101 McHale, Imagining..., footnote on p.25.
102 Ho Huu Tung, Ai Nham Lam Bo, Tri Dang, ?1967, p.75, reprinted Dong Nam A,
Paris, 1984. If the word 'religion' can be applied to Confucianism, then the case of
Tran Huu Dinh in the 1920's is another approach to a dialectical materialist position
from the Ta Hsueh self-cultivation formula. Thus a certain ambivalence also, between
the logical universality (that equates the micro- and the macrosocial dimensions)
and the magic of sympathy (that works on both individuals and nations), is detectable
in Tran Huu Dinh's reasoning. See Marr. D.G., Vietnamese Tradition..., pp.118-120.
103 See Ho Tai, Millenarianism..., op. cit., preface p.lx.
understood by the unsophisticated public in some other depth of discerning
the activism-vs-vô vi concept.¹⁰⁴

By the 1940s, there were examples of a definite switch to a conviction in
pursuing self-cultivation, and its perceived success. Two instances are worth
examining here, in contrast with one example in the North, where an
intellectualised version of self-cultivation was proposed in 1944 by Trần Đình
Phúc. Trần separates self-cultivation from religious and political activities,
asserting that its purpose is solely social reform.¹⁰⁵ Self-cultivation (tu thân)
to this northern author, goes with proselytising (truyền bá) as essential in
rescuing humanity. Claiming a scientific ethos for his quasi-Darwinian
arguments, Trần Đình Phúc also has a youth education agenda which he
outlined in the section 'Practical Method'.¹⁰⁶ For the South, after Trần Hữu
Dực’s publications in the 1920s, Confucian Tà Hsueli’s demarcation between
self, home, polity and the world seemed to fade back into the indiscriminate
link between religion and politics. Nor was there any modernising effort to
reform self-cultivation, if the following two examples are any indication.

The first was the 'Coconut Monk' Nguyễn Thành Nam, a chemical
engineer trained in France, who took up the rigours of Dhuta ascetism (hành
Đâu Đa - Pali: Dhudanga).¹⁰⁷ After visiting the Seven Mountains of Châu Đốc

¹⁰⁴ Nguyễn Văn Trần was surprised that the Daoist Nguyễn Ngọc Diện, an uneducated
peasant, could quote the Tao Teh King line: "The Dao that can be named is not the
real Dao". Nguyễn Văn Trần, Chế Đễm..., p. 311. It is difficult to estimate how
pervasive the Diamond-Heart Sutra’s concepts of Being/Form and Devoidance are at
the grassroot level. In a booklet on Non-Doing Meditation Method, Lục Tạng Sĩ Hạng
refers to the common fear of the Diamond Sutra teaching: 'Some people are very
frightened every time the Diamond (Kim Can) is mentioned. Kim Can terror! (the
word 'sutra' - kinh - is homonyms to 'terror'). Lục Tạng Sĩ Hạng, Văn Tự Vô Vi, Vô Vi

¹⁰⁵ Trần Đình Phúc, Tu Thân - Tìm Hạnh Phúc Theo Phương Pháp Khóa Học [Self-
Cultivation, the Quest of Happiness According to Scientific Method], Đời Mới, Hanoi,
1944.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p.117

¹⁰⁷ Born into a well-to-do family, Nguyễn Thành Nam went to France between 1928 and
1935, where he studied chemistry in Rouen in his final three years. Married in 1937,
and believed to have been influenced by his wife, a devout Buddhist, he eventually
took an interest in self-cultivation. One day, he left both his wife and child to go on a
and touring Hà Tiên, he had an ashram built in 1943 on his return to his home village of Phước Thành in Mỹ Tho. Here, in a period of feeling disturbed, he spoke in trance of the Dragon Flower Assembly, the descent of Buddhas and Immortals in the Upper Era following a final reckoning. His crisis manifested itself in weird behaviour which included speaking in Chinese and announcing prophecy in a style not unlike the oracles of the Buddha of Western Peace. However, he persisted with the hardship of Dhuta discipline. Recognising in him a high level of enlightenment, people began to come to offer food and ask him for teachings.

Counted among his notorious achievements was the fact that he lived only on fruits and coconut milk from 1943, hence the nickname 'Coconut Monk'. Other achievements were his 14 metre-high pole-like Bát Quái (Chinese pakua - eight trigrams) tower where he prayed for national independence and peace, and his three-storey Prajna Boat, a Buddhist symbol of salvation through insightful knowledge, which survives now as a tourist curiosity in Bến Tre province. The traditional quest for self-perfection was, for the Coconut Monk, and our next example, an effective and satisfying solution to their crises. These crises turned out to be intimately connected with what they perceived as current national crisis as well.

The ex-Việt Minh leader Trần Thạch Hoa, who left the communist movement to found Hông Môn sect in 1954, came from a poor family in Bến Tre. She joined the Việt Minh resistance forces and became leader of the Patriotic Women's Association of Eastern Nam Bộ during 1945-1946. Disagreement with the resistance leadership led to her resignation in 1949, and to her despair on the point of suicide in 1950. However, she experienced a


radical realisation and chose a small house in the slum of Gia Định to practise self-cultivation and to delve into automatic writing.

She was next seen to live solely on vegetables, eating once daily, never to set foot outside for six months. People started to crowd to her place in 1952 for spirit-written advice and teachings. By 1954, a sizeable following was formed around Trần Thạch Hoa, who now called herself Hồng Tìm Trác Lâm Nutzung (Lady Great Heart-Mind of the Bamboo Grove), and the Hồng Môn (Great Gate) sect was born.¹¹⁰ A great part of the Hồng Môn founder's credentials is related to her ability to write or speak as if a deity, directly to her audience. She was said to possess diên (divine ether/electricity), through which a person is in touch with the divine or becomes a conducting medium for the words or effects of the divinities. Interest in so-called spiritism -- trance writing, speech, dance -- are closely associated with self-cultivation in popular religion.

PERFECTIBILITY AND DIЄN -- THE DIVINE ETHER

Diên is the intermediary between individual effort (in self perfection) and divine intervention, otherwise believed to be the power acquired from previous incarnations through self-cultivation. This state of grace is believed to be attained with or without self-cultivation. As Vương Ṭĩm, a Họa Hảo proponent, outlines in his discussion on diên, in trance or altered state of consciousness, and for other cases in ordinary daily consciousness, some people can act and speak with knowledge and skill beyond their usual capacity.¹¹¹ This observation concurs with the vernacular conception of the experience.¹¹² Cao Đài discourse on diên quang referred to above, probably picked up the term diên from purely oral colloquial idioms.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., pp.16-22.


¹¹² This concept of diên was still quite current during my field work in 1992.
This 'electricity' is equated with power-knowledge, enabling the possessor of diền, perceived as simply a conductor (hence the electric metaphor), to heal the sick and to be aware of things beyond the ordinary senses and intellect. Such state of grace is believed to be attained with or without self-cultivation. Therefore, not unlike invulnerability, diền operates in the overlap between the individual's effort in self-perfection and the divine gift, otherwise believed to be acquired from previous lifetimes of self-cultivation.

Diền can be also clear (thanh), wholesome (lành), or contaminated (trục), depending on whether the spirit entity is divine or demonic. Wholesome diền, however, is believed to facilitate insightful knowledge (huệ) if one engages in self-cultivation.113 For the Cao Đài, mediums chosen to write spirit messages were expected to follow a strict regime of keeping the body pure to attract pure diền. The place for automatic writing was to be on higher level than the surroundings, either inside their temple or outside. There is no indication that mediums who became bodies for various deities underwent formal training.114

Like the mediums, messianic figures are also said to have diền and therefore knowledge and power without undergoing any training or apprenticeship. In a double appeal to one's individual effort and supernatural intercession, both of which not being mutually exclusive but, as suggested above, parts of a plane folded along the same pleat, self-cultivation provides a ground of potentiality that felicitates an alternative mode of discourse and social action.

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113 ibid., p.177.
114 This strict regime of clean living harks back to Chinese cult of goddesses such as Hsi Wang Mu (mother queen of western heaven). The owner-founder of Diệu Tri Kim Mẫu (golden mother of the jade pond, another title of Hsi Wang Mu) temple in Vinh Long recounted to me how, in the 1940s, the goddess appeared to her in a diminutive form of a young girl, and urged her to take up vegetarianism and self-cultivation, and have a temple built if she wanted to recover permanently from her long illness. After thrice refusing to comply, and falling sick again, she managed to organise the construction. From then on, she has had occasional communication with the goddess through her dreams, especially in emergencies or crises. Field notes, Dec. 1992.
Parallel with the intellectual re-evaluations of Vietnamese tradition since the 1920s, popular southern practice of self-cultivation retains the propensity to be relatively immune to modernisation. As a trajectory that ostensibly reconciles existential conflicts within self and society, self-cultivation proves to be more than an escape from overwhelming circumstances, or a private refuge that escapes scrutiny by a historiography of great events. In this spectrum of agency, going from self perfection, to healing and to world pacification, the role of the knowledge-procuer and world-saviour is exemplified by the southern Đạo Sĩ or 'Daoists from the mountain', whose training in perfectibility and lifestyle will be explored in the next chapter.
CHAPTER SEVEN
DAOISTS FROM THE MOUNTAIN -
SKETCHES FOR PORTRAITURE

In his May 1887 telegram to Saigon headquarters, the French commander of the Châu Đốc area reported at the beginning of a two-week operation, that traces of the insurgents -- flags, swords, machetes and certificates allegedly belonging to the Đạo Lành group, were discovered in the pagoda (a Buddhist temple) of An Định village at Núi Tượng (Mount Elephant) of Châu Đốc province.1 Đạo Lành ("the Wholesome, Harmless Way") is another name for the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion. By 1887, the group had been hunted as rebels and scoundrels for at least seventeen years.2

In the same telegram to the colonel in charge of the troops in Saigon, the commander wanted to solve once and for all this insurgency problem: He proposed to burn down the 500-house, 1200-inhabitant village, including its pagoda.3 After some further exchange of messages, on 21st May 1887, a decision came from the top -- the Governor himself agreed to let the local commander act as he saw fit, with a more humane caveat:

...Will grant you... all freedom to act in An Định but would like, before destruction of village, that inhabitants who were not compromised, be dispersed to their districts of origin, allowed to take with them livestock, furniture, utensils, food supplies and provisions that belong to them. For compromised inhabitants, their furniture, food supplies and

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1 An Định, CAOM Fonds Amiraux, 11935. Sơn Nam notes from E.17, Châu Đốc, Dossier Divers (1889-1912) in the Vietnamese National Archives that this operation lasted from 13th to 29th May 1887. See Sơn Nam, Cái Tính Của Miền Nam [The Southern Character], reprinted Văn Hóa, 1992, p.83.

In his 1895 dictionary Đại Nam Quốc Âm ..., Huỳnh Tịnh Cửu glosses Đạo Lành as 'a branch of Buddhism, teaching to do good, but was turned into a gang/ political party (phe dâng)', besides the literal meaning (good religion, teaching to do good).

2 It was led by Nâm Thiệp, who claimed to be a re-incarnation of the founder, and Trần Văn Thanh, a disciple of the latter. Ho Tai notes that the colonial authorities were aware of the Đạo Lành group since 1867. The earliest known intelligence report was dated 1870. See Ho Tai, H.T., Millenarianism, pp. 44-47.

3 Commandant, Cercle Chaudoc en expédition, à Colonel Commandant Supérieur des Troupes, Saigon. CAOM, Fonds des Amiraux, 11935.
provisions must be surrendered and distributed to the most needy before the huts are burnt. The pagoda must not be destroyed before all ornaments or objects which may be of historic or antique interest have been evacuated.  

So, the burning of property and dispersing of inhabitants went ahead. An Dinh village, however, had been destroyed two years before, as a result of the 1885 uprising of Si Votha on the other side of the border which took place in order to claim the Cambodian throne. What typified French perception in such raids was their mistaken identification of the biggest of the seditious traces: the pagoda itself. For the marine officer, insurrectionists as social deviants probably evoked, more than anything else, the imaginary spectre of pestilence in the Bubonic Plague. Thus, putting flame to the thatch of the rebels' habitat, prototyping anti-guerrilla warfare of the next century, had a ring of purgatory cleansing. From a greater distance, the mention of a pagoda triggered in the Admiral-Governor a condescending attentiveness to "history" and "antiquity", the type of historical consciousness identified by Said as a trait of nineteenth-century orientalism.

It was no problem traditionally for the authorities to identify Daoists mainly as rebel ring leaders or potential trouble makers. It was just as easy for the French to go along with such type-casting. The Daoists' image suffers also through negative caricatures by most scholars and non-specialist observers alike. No matter how diverse the occupations and interests professed by those classed in this category, this spectrum of individuals has been gathered in one single category, painted under the broad brush of gian dao sī (fraudulent Daoists, or charlatans).  

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4 Télégramme Officiel, Gouverneur à M. de Champeaux, administrateur principal, en mission à Chaudoer, 21 Mai 1887, CAOM, Fonds des Amiraux, 11935.
5 Ho Tai, Millenarianism..., p.57. Hà Tấn Đàn maintains that after the destruction of 1885, three pagodas and An Dinh's own dinh temple were rebuilt in thatch. Hà Tấn Đàn, Hẹ Phật Thị An Hiểu Nghĩa (Four-Indebtedness Sect), Phật Giáo Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, 1974, p.56.
6 According to Võng Kim and Đào Hünt, the term gian dao sī was believed to be heard in the South for the first time in relation to the Lâm Sâm rebellion in Trà Vinh province in 1841, when a few Buddhist monks were involved. Võng Kim and Đào Hünt, Đức Phật Tháp Thái An [Buddha Master of Western Peace], Saigon, 1963, p.26.
Since magic had allegedly always been the basis of their activities, this convenient rubric also framed the perception at various levels of colonial authorities. However, the issue is far from simple. The emergence of 'fraudulent Daoists' was inextricably tied up with a more comprehensive cultural matrix that produced and reproduced meanings and practices. The burnt pagoda therefore was recognisable as more central to the French, and not as one of many expressions of this matrix.

**TYPOLOGY**

Coulet defines the role of the 'sorcerers' in a close relationship between magic and the activities of the secret societies in Vietnam. He divides sorcerers into

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Under French rule, this type-casting was no doubt perpetuated by Vietnamese collaborators.

7 In the South, the term *thạ́y phâp* is used instead of *phù thạ́y*. In Georges Coulet's *Sociétés Secrètes en Terre d'Annam*, many of the sources were colonial government dossiers gathered after the attack on Saigon Grand Prison in 1916. Coulet quotes Masseron's French-Annamite dictionary with these terms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vietnamese</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thạ́y bôi</td>
<td>Diviner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thạ́y phâp, Phâp Sùt</td>
<td>Magician, Prophet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thạ́y ngâi</td>
<td>Sorcerer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And from Génibrel's Annamite-French dictionary:

- Thạ́y bôi = fortune teller, diviner
- Thạ́y ngâi = magician
- Thạ́y phâp = magician, diviner, sorcerer
- Phâp Sùt = overall master, director; with
- Thạ́y phû thạ́y = sorcerer, magician
- Tiến tri = visionary, prophet

Dismissing these confused translations, Coulet settles for:

*Thạ́y bôi*: as geomancer, i.e. someone who works on the spirit of the land and whose function as searcher of proper terrain for building a house or a tomb is one of the originalities of Vietnamese civilisation.

*Thạ́y ngâi*: is a sort of medium who could deliver a possessed person but whose function approaches that of a physician rather than a sorcerer-magician; while

*Phâp Sùt*: is a honorific term, with *Sùt* meaning master, designating those called *thạ́y phâp*, master of the Dharma, in a reverent manner when they are aged and apparently possessing great knowledge.

*Thạ́y phû thạ́y* are those specialised in the creation, use and sale of the amulets or talismans; while the equivalent word *thạ́y phâp* indicates a more general nature of operation not specified by these sorcerer-magicians. But Coulet points out rightly that
four types: thầy bói (diviner), thầy ngã (herbal magician), pháp sư (dharma master/magician), and thầy phù thây/ thầy pháp (sorcery master), thereby listing th: Daoists' three principal fields of skills and knowledge: interpreting signs and portents, healing, and other magic techniques. He further maintains that in all secret societies, if there was not a sorcerer, who appeared to be either the founder and chief or the co-director, there was always a key member who at least practised magic without being a sorcerer by profession.

In the Mekong delta, ông đạo (mister Daoist), or ông/bà thầy (master, teacher) refer to those men and women who possess knowledge and skills in healing, martial arts, divination, production and use of talismans, and in techniques of manipulating unseen forces and influences.

Dao Sĩ, on the other hand, is a Hán Việt word with its equivalents phượng sĩ (magical art proponent) or phù thây (literally water-magician), whose distant agrarian origin referred to the mediumistic practice of calling in the rains in China. Their specialty in magic or occult sciences (phượng thuật- including geomancy and divination) entitle them to be addressed by the honorific referent thầy (master). Since its entry into Vietnam, Daoism has been localised. The late eighteenth-century Inner Daoist School (Nơi Đạo

in southern Vietnam (Cochinchina), thầy pháp is used rather than thầy phù thây. He incorrectly translates the word tri (know) in tiện tri as 'to see' (voir), rendering tiện tri as foreseer, but recognises it translates conveniently into 'prophet'. Coulet, G., Sociétés Secrètes en Terre d'Annam, Imprimerie Commerciale, Saigon 1926, pp.26-33.

But no female counterpart is known to exist as bà đạo (lady Daoist).

Huyễn Tỉnh Cửa gave three glosses to Dao Sĩ: a hermit, a Daoist self-cultivator, a sorcerer/magician (kể ô án, kể tu tiện, thầy pháp).

The Chinese word for medium combines the characters water, rain and three mouth's, thus depicting an oracle specialised in rain making. Phan Kế Bình gives as the main power of the sorcerers (phù thậy) the 'powers to train spirit soldiers and generals, by frequenting cemeteries at night, burning incense sticks and praying, to make those spirits obey them'. To this repertoire of techniques, the use of amulets and magic medicinal plants (việt ngã) was added. Phan Kế Bình, Việt Nam Phong Tục, p.293.

The term of address Thầy in the Buddhist context is similar to Lama in Tibetan. As third person referent, thầy chúa (pagoda master) denotes the orthodox monastic monk, and differs from thầy rịn for instance, meaning a specialist in curing snake bites, or thầy giáo, schoolteacher.

While recognising the "protean wealth of meaning" attached to the term Taoism or Daoism as pointed out by Ho Tai, I submit it pays to keep in mind the hybrid mixture of this set of beliefs with Buddhism. Ho Tai, Millenarianism..., p.35.
Tràng), whose teachings contain a popular Daoist-Buddhist admixture, epitomised this acculturation of Daoism. They are generally known as pursuers of the Immortals way (tu tiên).

The Daoists referred to in this chapter do not belong neatly to the above categories. Huỳnh Tĩnh Cửa’s definitions identify the members of those đạo mainly as practitioners of various branches of Buddhism in the late nineteenth-century South. 13 The Daoists were both monks and magicians. Since they include a considerable variety of members of an intelligentsia, in a richer sense than defined by Redfield, as flexible as possible a category is required. 14 Their reputation and the followers’ belief in them contribute to a shared constellation of cultural motifs and meanings. These are readily detected in folk tales from the South. The Daoists’ perceived common traits will emerge when we examine these tales later.

Regardless of their contents, popular values and aspiration must account for the wide currency of these stories. The salvation terminology in the Daoists’ teachings, for instance, advocates courses of action ranging from ascetism to world rescue. This continuum is informed by a type of self-cultivation. As

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13 Among the southern đạo family, are counted three branches of Buddhism: đạo lành, đạo thầy giải (who teach through giving medicine), đạo phát dưỡng (who specialise in vegetarianism and charitable work). The other compound words, apart from đạo sĩ, include: đạo luân hối (which teaches about causality, [that is], if one leads an evil life, after death one will go to HELL), đạo ngợi, southern variation of đạo nghĩa, (concerning the humanistic way), đạo tiên (worship of spirits and Immortals, also a form of Taoism), đạo tự nhiên (the ordinary way, known to everyone since birth, [such as] not to do to others what one does not wish on oneself. Literally ‘the natural way’). Huỳnh Tĩnh Cửa, Đại Nam Quốc Âm..., p.273.

14 Geertz applies the term to the Prijadj group in Java. He quotes Redfield who bases his definition on Childe, who in turn separates craftsmanship and literacy, highlighting the “scholastic attitude” of literati who became custodians and interpreters of sacred books; and Toynbee’s notion of those literate persons who form the intelligentsia, mediating between “the society out of which they arose and some other alien civilisation which impinges upon it.” These people “have learnt the tricks of the intrusive civilisation’s trade so far as necessary to enable their own community, through their agency, just to hold its own in a social environment in which life is... coming to be lived more and more in the style imposed by the intrusive civilisation...” Geertz, C., The Religion of Java, The University of Chicago Press, 1960, p.235. Southern Daoists, as members of a pioneer intelligentsia belong to a civilisation that imposes upon a few other local ethnic patterns, at the same time subject to modern Western forces of change.
discussed in the previous chapter, it alludes to a matrix of potentiality and agency which does not segregate religion and politics, myth and history. It conflates and/or enfolds images of the individual and the social body.

Elements of recorded oral hagio/biographies of a number of Daoists below display a spectrum of interests and memorable deeds attributed to them.\textsuperscript{15} The southern landscape also plays an important part. The symbolic image of the mountain, delineating a horizon of possibilities, serves as background to a general portraiture. From these sketches, it may be possible to better contextualise themes and features of the Daoist phenomenon.

UNCOMMON LIVES

1. THE HEALERS OF CÂN THƠ

Daoists came into political focus when the local hierarchy felt threatened enough to use sub-provincial authorities to curb or break them. Condemnation by the lettered élite as to sorcerors delving in charlatanism therefore was not only proof of the latter's prestige and/or social power. It also points to a contested dominance firstly of the Confucian literati, then the modern educated class, who were to become interpreters, public servants, collaborator officials and who would then participate in the production of police reports and dossiers that Coulet consulted.\textsuperscript{16}

Under persecution, Daoists' main alibi was their interest in self-cultivation. They could also be denounced by their relatives or followers who happened to harbour personal grudges. The French colonial police's jaundiced

\textsuperscript{15} That the 'đông dao phenomenon' continues to occupy a notable place in southern mythology of today attests to problems in current political history written with insufficient consideration for issues of local meaning construction and cultural reproduction. In this sense, to say that failed resistance fighters against French rule opted for the Daoist way of life, to hide away or to live out their own hitherto suppressed tendency is no less misinformed than to say religion is mere escape and subterfuge for other intentions.

\textsuperscript{16} On the other hand, Coulet's own orientalist attitude resulted in his regarding 'magic' as something the 'yellow race' was disposed to in their obscure hearts. Coulet, G., op. cit., p.86.
view of Daoists as potential trouble makers sometimes did not predominate in such a way as to exclude null hypotheses. An example from the provincial administrator’s reports may illustrate the problems of evidence.

1A. ÔNG DẠO DAY FROM CÁI CỒN, 1878.

The report to the Governor of Cochinchina by the province chief Nicolai reveals that on 8th May 1878, Nicolai went to the temple concerned to find Dạo Day, where he was being held after the dốc phủ (district mandarin in colonial administration) had had him arrested without resistance the previous evening. Nicolai came upon a group of people with peaceful and very submissive bearing. Dạo Day told Nicolai he was prepared to follow him but not without protesting his innocence. The latter summarised in his report the presentation of the defendant:

For a long time I have been accused of making troubles; for this matter, the old government had already put me in prison for four months as a preventive measure; I am a father of four; I am rich or rather I own the richest pagoda in the six [southern] provinces; I have gathered within this sacred enclosure a few individuals of my age, trying to enjoy a peaceful life in the heart of this solitude; I am the founder of this pagoda; I only take care of religious ceremonies; I have founded a hospice where elderly and infirm people can find a secure refuge; people accuse me of political undertakings because I do good, I help the unfortunate who have come to take refuge around this pagoda; you only need to see the works, the roads, the bridges, the beautification and richness of my pagoda to be convinced that I cannot be a trouble maker, much less a chief of rebellion. If I had thought of inciting the people of

17 Cận Thơ had been set up as a province by the French colonial government only for two years. See Sơn Nam, Lịch Sử Khăn Hoàng Miền Nam [History of the Opening Up of the South], Đại Nam edition, Glendale, California 1989, p.270.
18 CAOM Fonds des Amiraux, 11934. The probable reason for the investigation was that Dạo Day, as was mentioned in a telegram on 4th May 1878 from the provincial bureau of Vinh Long to the Governor in Saigon, was reportedly connected with Dạo Ngoan. The latter was arrested when another Daoist strongly suspected of Dạo Lành activities could not be found. A typical example of the wanton exercise of power by Vietnamese collaborators?
Cái Côn and Mai Can to revolt, I would not have made myself prisoner to your phù Tường coming here with three unarmed people to arrest me amidst my men. At my age, I would never compromise my life and the fortune of my children; I no doubt have enemies like everyone else, those who are jealous of my influence and hope to make of that my crime. I wish to have for justification my past records and in one month you will see what those accusations said against the people of Mâi Đăm[?] will have been reduced to.²⁰

Nicolai offered his assessment to the Admiral-Governor in conclusion as follows:

I was able to assure myself of the peaceful and tranquil attitude of the individuals who came to visit Đạo Day, who goes by the simple name Đạo or the Religious to all of them. I have arrested him with the greatest of regards. He is now at the phù’s home waiting for the advice coming to you from Mytho that would allow you to make a decision on your part...²⁰

These observations resonate well with those made about Đoàn Minh Huyễn’s jailers and the then governor in 1850.²¹ Both men came across as non-aggressive, non-militant and commanding considerable respect, as well as jealousy, in the local community for their civic contributions.

1B. MASTER TRUNG

If anything, the respect the province chief showed for Đạo Day above could be related to Nicolai’s encounter with another Daoist in Cân Thọ at the time. Nguyễn Văn Trung, known as ông thầy (revered master) Trung, went to the Black Lady mountain (núi Bà Đen) in Tây Ninh for self-cultivation. He communicated with a white tiger there, and received training after a fortuitous meeting with a Chinese teacher. On returning three years later to his native town, then the new seat of Cân Thọ province, he was not more than 24 years of age.

²⁰ CAOM, Fonds des Amiraux, 11934.
²¹ CAOM, Ibid. Italics mine.
²¹ Ho Tai, Millenarianism., p.11.
He performed many cures, especially for mental illnesses, and many feats of magic. Nicolai’s wife was reported to have been cured of a neurotic symptom by Nguyễn Văn Trung. One of his disciples, also his son-in-law, Nguyễn Văn Nga, left a legendary tale of talismanic prowess as well. The story is related to the preparation for building the township dinh in Căn Thơ. He reportedly used bùa, probably Lộ Ban (Lu Pan) talisman, to move a fallen banyan tree while a team of workmen could not. In general, the medicine men and women were referred to as thầy (master). The title ông đào indicated that a supernatural level of expertise has been reached, such as Nguyễn Văn Nga’s use of talismanic operations to shift great weights. The example in the next section illustrates further the localized nature of the contribution and leadership pursued by Daoists in setting up a new village.

2. THE BARE-TORSO DAOIST - TƯ ÂN SECT MOVED EAST OF THE DELTA

Social welfare and settlement leadership were distinguished services achieved by Ông Dào Trần (trần: bare torso), whose real name was Lê Văn Mụ (1886-

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22 According to Huỳnh Minh, the elderly town citizens of the 1960s could recount the tale of his famous cure for Nicolai’s wife, whose strange symptom was to wash and rub her face until it was red raw, using as many as fifty basinsfuls of water every morning. After many doctors tried their hands without success, Nicolai went along with the suggestion to invite Nguyễn Văn Trung. In the presence of the surprised province chief, the Daoist asked for another basin of water, and admonished the patient to use it to wash her face for the last time. She followed his instruction and was cured of the complaint. Huỳnh Minh, Cận Thớt Xưa và Nay..., p.176.

23 Lu Pan talismans are written on a piece of paper then pasted on or stuck in a gap or nook of the structural frame of the house, usually performed by master builders/carpenters. The placing of the talisman constitutes the casting of a spell, ôm, to produce a certain effect to the householders or particular householders. Some Lu Pan masters in the Mekong delta left legends in contemporary folklore. Ông Thất Đức (mister craftsman Đức) of Sa Đéc was one. His power was reputed to put fear in the hearts of those who were thought to show disrespect towards him. Sometimes he was responsible for pranks played without malice. Huỳnh Minh, Sa Đéc Xưa Và Nay, published by the author, 1970, pp. 131-139. Another example of the carpenters’ use of this type of magic and the limits of its efficacy can be read in Dào Văn Hiến’s Tên An Ngày Xưa, Phù Quốc Vụ Khanh Độc Trách Văn Hóa, Sài Gon, 1972. pp. 97-99.

24 Huỳnh Minh, Cận Thớt..., p.178.
He was born in a peasant family in Hà Tiên province. The name Đạo Trần came from a regard for his fishing and farming lifestyle, as he was often seen without a shirt on his back, labouring in the field or on ocean beaches. Like other peasant youths, he would not have known much besides rice farming had he not met up with his teacher, an adept in Tư An Hiếu Nghĩa. One day he beat his left foot until it became swollen and he was unable to walk. However, when his foot recovered, a mark in the form of the I-Ching's eight trigrams was left visible on the sole. He never took a bath from the time of his 'ordination' till 1928.

Married and widowed with two children, he joined his extended family to move to Vũng Vàng in Bà Rịa province. On the way, they stopped in Long Xuyên to have the boat repaired. People heard of his arrival and came to be cured of their illnesses. His remedies consisted of dried flowers with three incense sticks broken in five parts. His reputation as a healer and the number of those seeking to become disciples rose. The family proceeded to Vũng Vàng eventually to set up a salt producing concern as their main livelihood. The Daoist and his younger brother used to transport salt by boat to sell in the Mekong delta or trade for goods. He named their boat Săm -- oracles.

Fluent in Khmer, he also took salt to trade as far as Pnom Penh. At every stop, the Daoist distributed talismans and remedies, and preached the 'human way of living' (đạo làm người). In 1898, the French imposed heavy taxes on salt operations. On top of this, the crowd who gathered at his village for healing caused the colonial authorities to classify him as a 'fraudulent Daoist'...

25 Huỳnh Ngọc Tráng & Trương Ngọc Trưởng, Nghiên Nắm Bia Miếng [A Thousand Years on the Stele of People's Mouths], vol.2, TP Hồ Chí Minh, p. 403. Nguyễn Văn Trần states, in his historical fiction, that from Chợ Dêm, a market area of Tân An province, he heard that the Daoist's real name was Lê Hoàng Mịch. See Nguyễn Văn Trần, Chợ Dêm Quê Tôi [Chợ Dêm My Home Town], Văn Nghệ, TP Hồ Chí Minh, 1995, p.304.

26 After a period of training, his teacher entrusted him to go to the eastern region of Nam Bộ to proselytise. It was believed that since receiving the transmission of knowledge, he manifested unusual powers such as floating in the river for two or three days without any ill effect. A similar ability was also exhibited by the Floating Daoist (Đạo Nổi) in Cambodia (see Appendix 6).
(gián đạo sĩ). To avoid harassment by the authorities, he moved to Long Sơn village on the island of Núi Núa off the coast of Bà Rịa.  

In 1900, he left Núi Núa to move to Bà Trau area where he applied to the local authorities to clear land and establish a new hamlet called Long Sơn Hới. For communal entertainment in the hamlet, he organised reading sessions of Chinese stories even though he forbade Hát Bội classical theatre, which bases its scripts on those very stories. The stories were chanted rather than read monotonously. He stopped the reading at passages where he wanted to explain or give philosophical or moral interpretations to the audience.

Until 1904, the hamlet dwellers were mostly members of his family. When cyclone and flood destroyed many parts of the South, he gathered others from the western region of the delta and helped them resettle. Thanks to a considerable store of supplies he managed to amass with the earnings from the salt trade, he was able to assist the cyclone victims build new homes and to lend them capital and stock to further opening up new land.

The next 1930s' case relates how Daoists who were addressed as Thầy, and were thus recognised as persons with local resources, came to grips with the modern nationalistic movement in the anti-colonial struggle.

3. A VILLAGE “MAN OF PROWESS” AND A NATIONALISTIC MOVEMENT

In 1930, Nguyễn Thị Lệ, one of the first women members of the southern Communist Youth Movement, in her first mission in the countryside, had the task of converting a local literatus to the communist view. The literatus concerned was a villager of Ba Dừa area in Mỹ Tho province. Describing a man in his early fifties, ‘learned in Hán literature, knowledgeable in current affairs’,

27 However, Nguyễn Văn Trần maintains that Đạo Trần left for Núi Núa after robbing a village official of tax money collected for the province’s coffers. At this stage, he was also known around Chị Đêm as the Gardenia Daoist (ông Đôn Lữ), as he used gardenia flowers and rain water only in treating illnesses. Nguyễn Văn Trần, Chị Đêm..., pp. 304-305.

28 This form of reading was widespread in the South, which I still witnessed in my neighbourhood of Căn Thơ in the 1950s. Nguyễn Văn Trần recalls that he heard the voice of a young girl chanting the Chinese stories when he visited the Daoist’s village at Núi Núa. See Chị Đêm..., p. 308.
Nguyễn Thị Lựu recalls in her memoirs, "a proponent of the martial arts, he has taught peasants in the area how to fight... often helping those poorer citizens to resist village councillors' oppressive treatment... His prestige was growing day by day, and those who sought to become his students counted by the hundreds."²⁹

The Old Man of Ba Đuá, as he was called, eventually formed an association whose members, upon joining, swore mutual assistance in life and death. After the Old Man explained the right moral way, they drank their drops of blood, obtained by pricking their fingers, mixed together in a cup of alcohol. They all called him Master (Ông Thầy). His teachings had no specific Buddhist tenor, while they were inspired by Confucian morality. Although no practice of magic was involved, the Old Man of Ba Đuá belongs to the pool of local men of prowess counted among Daoists.

Identifying him as a local talent with patriotic bearing but lacking in direction, the Communist Provincial Committee decided to pull him into their orbit through the mediation of Nguyễn Thị Lựu. The Master eventually proved to be a difficult case because of his strong mindedness and particular fondness shown to her. However, once his peasant following was incorporated into the Communist-inspired Farmers' Association, the Old Man of Ba Đuá reportedly became an effective contributor to the Việt Minh movement.³⁰

The nationalistic discourse and activities could also be formulated in a different mode, such as through a kind of Buddhist socialism. I refer to the Tịnh Độ Cự Sĩ (Householders' Pure Land) group, which have managed till today to keep themselves relatively free from conflict perceived as arising out of State intervention and surveillance.

4. NGUYỄN MINH TRÍ'S HOUSEHOLDER PURE-LAND BUDHIST ASSOCIATION

While the Bare Torso Daoist looms large in the local settlement history of coastal and island Bà Rịa, Pure Land Buddhist-Daoist Nguyễn Minh Trí

²⁹ Nguyễn Thị Lựu, recorded by Hân Song Thanh, Tình Yêu và Ảnh Lửa [Love and the Flaming Glow], Văn Nghệ Thanh Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1985, pp. 103-104.
³⁰ Nguyễn Thị Lựu, op. cit., p. 104.
(Appendix 6), considered by the French intelligence to be one of the most influential figure in the South, established a strong following and a wide network of temples all over the Mekong Delta on a socio-religious foundation. Huỳnh Minh notes that he instigated communal building of bridges and roads in Sa Đéc province between 1926 and 1929.\(^{31}\)

From 1920, he reportedly teamed up with Nhan Văn Đồng to recruit followers of the Amida sect.\(^{32}\) To allay suspicion by the colonial police for seditious activities and avoid harassment, Nguyễn Minh Trí eventually obtained permission from the colonial authorities in 1934 to establish at Hùng Long pagoda in Chợ Lớn, the Pure Land Householders Buddhist Study Association (Tịnh Độ Cư Sĩ Phát Hội Việt Nam).\(^{33}\) Since then, Tịnh Độ temples have sprung up in both urban and rural centres in the Mekong delta, each with a traditional medicine (thuốc Nam) dispensary, probably adopted from Minh Sở halls format.

Daoists did not usually give complex teachings. For some of them, healing sickness remains the groundwork and mainstay of practice. For others, it was their competence in persuading fellow villagers of their simple worldview.

5. ĐÔ THUẦN HÀU AND DAOIST-ZEN MEDITATION

Born in 1887 in An Thới village of Sa Đéc province, and the only son of the canton deputy head, Đô Thuần Hàu was the founder of the Zen Non-Doing Mysticism Studies (Thiên Vô Vi Huyền Bì Học) group.

It is not known how he received his education, but the (anonymous) biographer noted that:

...he had to learn many skills to make a living and feed his family, such as: practising northern medicine, southern medicine, making Lô Ban

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\(^{32}\) Ho Tai, H.T., *Millenarianism*... pp. 89-93.

\(^{33}\) Huỳnh Minh, ibid., p. 168. The Association still exists today. His chief disciple Sơn Kim (ông Thầy Nước Lạnh, the rain water healer) was famous for treating the sick with rain water alone for many years in Gia Định. He died in Nov. 1993.
talismans, telling fortunes, working in metal plating, cloth dyeing, as a painter etc. In order to save some money so he could get married and have a family, he had to teach Vietnamese and French to some children in the village.\textsuperscript{34}

His search, at the age of fifty-five, for a teacher to show the Way (đạo) was prompted by many disappointments and difficulties encountered in life. It took him

...to many a mountain and hill over seven years. He met many who trained themselves to become Earthly Immortals (tu Địa Tiễn) and who possessed magical powers, but none of them convinced him to follow suit, except a Zen master called Cao Minh. Drawing on the sixteen dharma methods from old Chinese texts such as Tinh Mạng Khuê Chi (Study Guide for Body and Mind), Thanh Tịnh Kinh (Sutra of Peace and Clarity) etc...\textsuperscript{35}

Still not satisfied with this teaching, he returned home and did his own research into the 'dharma of Vô Vị (non-action method). Upon succeeding in mastering this method of meditation, he made a point of teaching it to others so that they would obtain the same fruit of enlightenment as he did. This was, he maintained, 'the proof of true Dharma'.\textsuperscript{36}

Thiên Vô Vị, Huyền Bồ Hóc meditation school became widespread among the Vietnamese diaspora in the 1980s. The practice has been made popular by Mr. Lương Sĩ Hàng,\textsuperscript{37} Đồ Thuần Hậu's chief disciple, who has been living in the
U.S. since 1978. His teacher's life story is another example of the southern literati turned đạo sĩ at the turn of the century.

Again, we recognise in Đỗ Thuần Hậu the model of an enterprising young man who had received an education with both old and new learning, and who enlarged his repertoire of skills in order to survive in a time of great change. Ultimately, success in survival was to be superseded by a personal quest for knowledge.

The verification of his new knowledge included various mental experiences resulting from the technique of 'detachment of the soul' (phép xuất hồn) which led to 'astral travels', and access to 'pure ethereal charge' (diền thanh) for healing purposes. These objectives overlap with those recorded in the teachings of Nguyễn Minh Trí, mentioned above in Chapter Six. He has, in his autobiography, many accounts of these travels in the meditative state, serving as a guide for practitioners.38

6. DISPARATE SKETCHES :

6A. THE CRAZY DAOIST OF KIÊN PHONG PROVINCE

Believed to have worked his miracles about 1912, a Daoist in Kiên Phong was called Mr. Crazy Man (ông Khùng) because of the way he behaved generally. According to Lê Hưởng:

Like someone who lost his mind, wandering from one village to the next, he used to pick up rubbish such as the leftover skins of jack fruits, bananas, or sour sops, pineapple cores to put in a reed bag he carried on his back. He did not annoy anyone, nor did he talk. Walking in silence, he ate what was given him, and slept under verandahs, in market halls, temples or shrines if he was not invited to someone's home to perform healing.39

38 Đỗ Thuần Hậu, Phép Xuất Hồn (The Method of Soul Travel), Đại Nam, California, 1994, pp.9-35.
The Crazy Daoist’s method of healing was as intriguing as his behaviour. He often was present at the homes of the critically ill without being invited. After taking one look at the sick person, he either ran away or smiled and stayed to heal the patient. Those he ran away from would eventually die. Those he chose to stay with would be cured.

If the Crazy Daoist did not reveal his background, the next example, ông Đạo Gò Môi (the Termite Hill Daoist), came to fame through an uneducated and poor family. Both men showed talents not gained through any known written texts. Especially with the latter, healing power and prestige allegedly were attributed to his own efforts at self-cultivation.

6B. THE TERMITE HILL DAOIST FROM TÂN CHÂU (1871-1954).\(^4\)

Born Phạm Văn Năng, this famous healer was the son of a metal worker. He was poor, not educated and had to work as a buffalo herder until he was twenty, when he moved with his family to settle in Tôn Lệ Sâp in Cambodia. However, a few months after he was like 'a man possessed', and could not function normally. He left home and finally was found meditating on an termite hill in the bush of Kandal province, about 41 km from Phnom Penh. Hence the name Termite Hill Daoist (Ông Đạo Gò Môi).

The Cambodians could not persuade him to take shelter in an ashram they built for him. His reputation rose when there was a plague. He could heal both Cambodians and Vietnamese victims with water and flowers. He began to attract disciples from those whose illnesses he cured and their relatives.

Funds were raised and a temple for him was eventually constructed in Cái O, five kilometres away from where he lived. He agreed to move here, but, predicting violence by Cambodians against Vietnamese in 1945, he left this temple in a boat to settle back in his native village. A pagoda named Phước An

Thiên was constructed there to house him. He continued to produce medicine and attract a large following.

By the time he died, the Termite Hill Daoist had about two thousand followers. Although there was no evident connection, his group is believed to be a branch of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương sect, with their similar icons and pattern of rituals: the use of outdoor altars, red cloth and rain water offerings. However, his teachings did not come to any Scripture or verse as with the Buddha Master of Western Peace, although he was believed to be the reincarnation of Nguyễn Văn Thành, an outstanding disciple of the Buddha of Western Peace. He also kept a pet monkey which, he maintained, was the reincarnation of another disciple of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương founder.

6C. THE MYSTERIOUS HEALER OF NỮI SAM.⁴¹

In 1933, at the foot of núi Sam in Bên Đá (stony landing) area, cholera was rife, and there were many deaths. According to local legend, an extraordinary man appeared in the midst of a population in grief. He had a bom bè hair down to his nape at the back,⁴² wore a felt hat, a black flannel coat and pair of [black] silk pants, 'frog mouth' shoes (like scuffs), and walked around the hamlets all day looking in each house. If there was a sick person inside, he came right in without waiting to be invited. No one knew who he was to invite anyway. He would ask the head of the household the name and age of the sick person, then perform some [astrological] calculations on his fingers. If he said the case was terminal, then there was no hope. On the other hand, if he nodded his head, he would proceed to light three incense sticks and mumble:

'I know you lot! Don't you harm innocent people. If you are good, follow me back to the mountain. I am Tú Lập Đại Đạo (Asura? the great Daoist) of núi Cấm (Forbidden Mountain). I tell you to leave this house, or else don't blame [your fate].'


⁴² Bom bè hair style is like a "Bob cut", with level hair line at front and back.
He would then throw the incense sticks on the ground, bid good-bye and leave. The sick person recovered immediately. The family would run after him to invite him back for meals or payments, but he would flatly refuse.

He left Bến Đá after a major treatment where the patient died as he predicted, and he disappeared, taking many plague spirits with him back to the mountain for a final banishment.

THE IMAGINED HORIZON

Thất Sơn (the Seven Mountains) area, notwithstanding its frontier settlement image, still captures the imagination of many in the southern countryside today. It is unremarkable to hear rumours about the coming great explosion in the mountains marking the end of the Lower Era, or about hidden bunkers under the base from where future leaders will emerge. The leaders referred to here are members of a spectrum of persons of prowess, to paraphrase Wolter's term. They were first and foremost, thanks to self-cultivation, exemplars in the art of transcending life conflicts and suffering.

It is easier to dismiss these stories and legends than to ask why they continue to be generated with components re-ordered or transformed along passages of their transmission. From the region's oral history, the details featured in these components are worth a closer reading. The chances of enhancing our grasp of the historical setting of the South are far from negligible.

Legends of encounters with spirits, extraordinary personages and monsters or wild beasts, however, are not restricted to the Seven Mountains in Châu Đốc province alone. Hà Tiên province to the southwest with its caves, such as the famous Thạch Đồng, where Ngô Văn Chiều first received communication from an Immortal, and the Bà Den (Black Lady) mountain of

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44 Meillon, Le Caodisme, p.176.
Tây Ninh province to the northwest, are also rich with special locations associated with magical powers.\(^{45}\) Mention should be made of another important peak in Cambodia’s Kampot province: mount Tà Lớn or Bokor of the Elephant Chain, which was a training ground of considerable reputation.\(^{46}\) If caves and mountains about the border frontier region form a limiting horizon to inhabitants of the plain of the delta, they beckon those in search of particular means of empowerment.

To the latter, the mountains stand in their imagining as the embodiment of a supra-mundane source that replenishes the storehouse of power-knowledge. More than being the sole repository of special wild herbs and medicinal plants, animal and other products whose putatively powerful applications were the fare of magicians or men of knowledge, the mountains’ forbidding heights offer reclusive shelter to healers and meditators for ascetic living and training, in other words, the ultimate environment for self-cultivation.\(^{47}\) Thus, in order to contextualise the image of the Daoists, we must

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\(^{45}\) The present abbot of Long Khánh pagoda in Trà Vinh province, Reverend Thích Hoàng Không is known to have had a rip van Winkle like experience in Bà Den mountain as a child. The teller of this anecdote, Rev. Thích Trí Quang also says his own father met a Daoist who ‘materialised’ out of the rock wall of one of the caves there, in plain daylight. After advising Thích Trí Quang’s father against leaving home for self-cultivation, the Daoist disappeared. Interview 4/12/1992.

\(^{46}\) Not to be confused with Tà Lớn Mountain in Thất Sơn area, according to Nguyễn Văn Hậu, on the bend of mount Núi Đài towards Núi Tơ, near Tâm Ngân canal. See Nguyễn Văn Hậu, Thất Sơn Mẫu Nhậm [The Miraculous Seven Mountains]. Từ Tâm, Sài Gòn, 1972, p.87.

\(^{47}\) If this imagery has a multitude of origins, then the Chinese motif must count as an ancient one among them. Chinese Confucian texts such as the Nei P’ien of Ko Hung (Pao-p’u tsu), ca. 300 A.D., advise on journeys to the mountain for ‘all those cultivating the divine process or preparing medicines, as well as those fleeing political disorders or living as hermits’. It maintains that ‘all mountains, whether large or small, contain gods and powers, and the strength of those divinities is directly proportional to the size of the mountain. To enter the mountains without the proper recipe is to be certain of anxiety and harm. In some cases, people fall ill, are wounded, or become stricken with fear. In other cases, lights and shadows are seen, strange sounds are heard. Lack of the proper recipe can make a large tree fall for no apparent reason, striking and killing people. It can confuse such travellers and drive them madly on. Lack of preparation may cause you to meet with tigers, wolves, or poisonous insects that will harm you. Mountains are not to be entered lightly.’ Ware, J. R., transl. and ed., *Alchemy, Medicine and Religion in China of A.D. 320*, The M.I.T. Press, 1966, pp. 279-280.
also consider how they appropriate the symbolism of the mountain in their
discourse and practice.

A JOURNEY IN 1938.

The following example came out of a request I made to my own maternal
grandfather. This story concerns a period of his life which centred around a
cathartic journey to the Forbidden Mountain (mũi Cảm) of Thát Sơn.48 While
not claiming typicality, it points nevertheless to a trajectory ever since the first
southern villages were founded. This was the kind of venture taken by
southerners who turned healers, educators and/or community resource
persons. Given his circumstances, my grandfather's journey retraced at least
some main outlines of that pursuit of perfectibility, for in my eyes, he was
himself a southern đạo sĩ.

Educated in learning, my grandfather did not succeed either as a rice
farmer or a small trader. After several fruitless attempts at other means to
support a large family, he was forced to join the colonial police (lính mà tô) around 1927. The new job helped his family survive relatively well, especially
during the world economic crisis, when there was much hardship all over the
country in the 1930s. However, the end of a decade in the service saw him
stricken by an unknown illness. His legs were paralysed, with knees swollen,
and he also suffered from a year-round head pain. Both western and Chinese
medicines not being able to do much for him, he was reduced to skin and
bones and expected death.

In 1938, he decided to go to Thát Sơn mountains as the last resort for a
cure. With the plea that he would rather die "trying to rise up", he obtained
reluctant approval from his wife. At that stage, he had two students/disciples to

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It would be interesting to determine whether this knowledge, claimed to date from
before the time of Ko Hung's teacher, was transmitted to Vietnam and if so, how.
48 In 1974, shortly before he died at the age of 84, I asked him to tell about his life,
especially the part where he went to the mountains to learn magic, among other things.
He wrote the story, which was read into a tape recorder by my father. All quotations in
this section are my translation of transcripts excerpts from the tape which is in my
possession.
escort him there while they hoped to continue their studies under him. After a slow trip from Cần Thơ by boat and on foot, they arrived at the top of Forbidden Mountain to rest at a shrine of the Assembly of Spirits (miệu chữ vi). An elderly man turned up and asked about their reason for being there. He was Trần Quang Nghĩa, a lettered ex-senior-adviser (Kế Hiện) of a village near Châu Đốc, now living in retreat not far from the shrine. He left the world below the mountain over twenty years previously, having been, as he admitted, disillusioned by too much injustice and disorder.

On hearing their situation, the ex-Kế Hiền offered to help, by calling on his own students the next day to build a shelter. A group of at least fifteen people, half of whom were women, turned up. My grandfather referred to the latter as nuns (ni cô - bikkhunis), as he described:

The men came with spades and axes while the seven or eight ni cô carried grappling hooks and sickles. The men chopped down trees to make poles, rafters and purlins while the nuns cut tranh grass to weave into roofing. They went home for lunch and came back to resume work in the afternoon. The small ashram was finished by 6 p.m., complete with altar and beds made entirely of woven lụ và and mĩa bamboos, the types that grew in the mountain. Walls, partitions, windows and doors were also made with them.

Not only having had an ashram built for my grandfather and the students, the ex-councillor also offered them a seven-công (approximately 1600 square metres) garden plot nearby, which he said could not be looked after as his main plot was far from there. He insisted that the newcomers should take over so the Cambodians would not come around to rob or steal. My grandfather could not help reflecting on his good fortune:

I came up here with my bare hands, thus was grateful for his help, from rice to bowls, pots and water jars. From then on, we settled down

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49 Chút Vi, according to Phan Kế Bình, designates mainly Daoist divinities of Vietnamese origin such as Liễu Hạnh, Trương Ngân (upland forests), the Princes (hoàng tử), the noble sons (cậu) or daughters (cô), and of Chinese origin such as Cửu Thiên Huyễn Nữ (Mysterious Lady of the Nine Heavens). They form the pantheon for the mediums. See Chapter Four.

50 Scientific name for tranh grass is imperata cylindrica.

51 The term ni cô possibly implies they had taken the tonsure.
peacefully. In about twenty days, my health improved, I could walk a little. I got the students to look for Southern [traditional Vietnamese] medicine plants and leaves only to use [for remedies]. Gradually I could venture into the forest to pick the [roots of] various ngãi plants to bring back and teach my students magic talismans and incantations according to the books I had with me.  

With some knowledge handed down from family predecessors, he practised healing, the use of talismans and divination:

...While in the mountain, I also trained [myself] in Lô Ban [Lu Pan] talismans for about one month. It was not very effective because my study was superficial. This type of talisman could cure illnesses or be used in casting spells (đêm dố) on houses, in banishing many types of bad ghosts and spirits.  

...Soon after my return, I used talismans fairly successfully to heal a number of sicknesses due to spirits (bình tời) in the Bằng Tằng, Ô Môn areas. I also managed to cure a young woman while in the mountain. She was a rich man's daughter who became mad and violent. The Kê Hiền could not help her [in his capacity]. I tried by consulting the Oracle [of the I Ching] to divine the cause of her illness and treated her according to the teachings and advice in the Book, with good results.

His teaching schedule soon changed, as he himself sought another teacher of magic and medicine, this time, of Thai background:

Three or four months went by, then we heard that near where an areca palm tree grew, whose nuts you could chew with betel leaves, there was a Siamese pagoda. Our ashram was separated from this pagoda by about five kilometres of winding track. A Siamese [Buddhist] monk lived there by himself. He was over eighty years old, but still fit enough to go up the mountain to look for medicinal plants. He walked up and down the mountain like a young man. He was self-sufficient in food by growing potatoes and sweet corn. Although a Siamese, he spoke very fluent Vietnamese for he had been living and practising meditation there for

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52 Ngãi refers to two main groups of plants (1) ngãi cứu (rescue) - *Artemesia vulgaris*, and (2) ngãi tím (violet) - *Cucumis Zedoaria* plus a few other *cucumis* species, in the turmeric family, known for both magic and medicinal properties.

53 See footnote 23 above for Lu Pan magic.
decades. The Cambodians were afraid of him because he knew all Khmer drugs and magic. Anyone suffering from Khmer 'black magic' who sought his help would be cured. He was thus famous for his knowledge of charms, talismans, drugs, spells, medicine and *Tom* magic. *Tom* was a method of drawing (and placing) talismans around a plot of land or a house. It would prevent anyone with dishonest intentions from getting out once s/he managed to get inside.

The Siamese monk's formidable reputation was matched, to a certain extent, by his generosity in transmitting his knowledge of magic: He was prepared to teach, free of charge, anyone who would like to learn from him, but up to six months only. The learner had to be content with all s/he could absorb during that period and was not allowed to stay on any longer. My grandfather was accepted by the monk and studied with him for three months before receiving news from Căn Thơ of his mother falling ill. He cut short his stay and left for home. There were no more opportunities for him to go back to Núi Cấm, because the Second World War broke out in the following year, and general unrest afterwards prevented travel to the mountains.

While diverted to many other occupations to survive, on his return he continued to practise what he has learned until his last years:

To sum up... thanks to the Việt Books of Divination passed down from the Patron Founder through to our ancestors, I could read, study and practise from them. It was this divining method that allowed me to predict, when you were about to leave for Australia to study, that you would complete your course, get married and settle there, but your parents did not believe it would be true then. After many years changing my occupation and abode, I returned from the mountain only to switch my career again. I learned how to manage a theatre troupe, and established a *hít bợ* (*classical* theatre) company and spent nearly three years performing around the countryside. Then I changed to selling fruits by boat to survive day by day. I made trips from Sóc Trăng, Bạc Liêu to Cà Mau and returned a few years later to

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54 A version of the Book of Change - *I Ching*.
55 From my memory, this was one of the occasions where his prediction turned out to be entirely correct.
join your family to evacuate from the war and have stayed with you until now.

While it is not possible to say how many of those communities of the type set up by ex-village notable Trần Quang Nghĩa were in the Seven Mountains, the hagiography of Đoàn Minh Huyễn the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương founder, for instance, shows that the kind of settlement which centred around a religious leader did not only take root in the reclusive heights of the mountains. However, the presence among leading members of those who had their ‘mountain experience’ as a cultural credential, real or imputed, must have been commonplace.

Among this group were literati turned Daoists like my grandfather, for whom material survival demanded they take up all the trades or skills they could muster. At the same time, they tried to fulfil the role of an educator, and maybe also an artist.\(^{36}\) Their lifestyle was half reclusive or monastic, and was based on self-cultivation. It was also half practical or secular as, from the turn of the century, they exchanged produce with the lowland peoples. Unfortunately, this picture does not tell us much about the presence of women as ‘nuns’ in the above mountain community. Apart from practising meditation, these women may also receive training in traditional medicine, and possibly martial arts.\(^ {37}\)

It is therefore more accurate to regard Daoists as members of a ‘southern frontier intelligentsia’, again in a broader sense of the word intelligentsia, with the exception that they can’t be said to have been, as Arnold Toynbee observes, ‘born to be unhappy’, even if they were at the margin of two (or more) worlds. In the strong cultural presence of Chinese settlers around Hà Tiên and the

\(^{36}\) My grandfather could play several traditional musical instruments. This multifarious vocation was certainly enhanced by high mobility availed by the riverine networks of delta country. The preponderance of waterways readily magnified efficacy in accessing resources, and therefore increased the prestige of the Daoists, whose mobility was always a problem for control and surveillance by the colonial authorities.

\(^{37}\) It is said that Ngô Lợi was once rescued by a woman disciple in a French raid. This disciple who was reputed to be highly skilled in martial arts, jumped onto a platform, lifted her teacher bodily, jumped off and disappeared with him. Another story refers to a number of female disciples competing with men in learning Buddhist sutras under Ngô Lợi. lã Tấn Dân, Hệ PháI Tự Án Hiếu: Nghĩa..., pp. 52-53 and 110-112.
Cambodian population from Châu Đốc to Cà Mau, it is easy to understand how the formation of a distinct identity with the Daoists could be an complex interplay of similarities and differences. Marginality and, in most cases, remoteness from provincial centres under French rule facilitated the eccentric but not so unhappy emergence of Daoists, millenarian and otherwise. By examining their modes of action and discourse in the next chapter, we may obtain a better picture of this southern intelligentsia.
CHAPTER EIGHT
DAOISTS FROM THE MOUNTAIN - AGENCY

In this chapter, I base my discussion on several points made by Coulet, Huế Tam Ho Tai, Tạ Chí Đại Trường and others, and suggest a particular view on this group of Daoists, to whom supernaturalism owes some of its vital continuity and southern cultural identity much of its distinctiveness. In this spectrum of practitioners of self-cultivation, many cases, such as that which puzzled Ralph Smith (Chapter Six), come under neither the anti-French, nationalist ethos nor are completely overtaken by the bizarre. They simply call for a different explanation.

I will first examine the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương group, then move to other individuals with or without followings. The relevant features are inter-related, in no particular order of importance, as follows:

1) Mythologizing, healing and temple founding,
2) The teachings of millenarian Daoists,
3) Cultural borrowings in the South,
4) The representations of kingship and divinity.

The emblematic deeds included in this list were markers on the Daoists' path to self-perfection. The Daoists' mountain journeys underpinned these features. They gave a special flavour to cultural transformation in the South, especially during the early decades of this century. Legendary journeys to the mountains represented a special kind of pilgrimage in which the high wilderness served as a locus for the verification of potency, or for recharging mystical power. Today, much of what southerners, especially those of country background, still refer to as the wonders of the Seven Mountains, is associated with these pilgrimages.

A recent popular example are the four trips made by Huỳnh Phú Sổ between the late 1930s and 1940. During these journeys, he allegedly talked to tigers, performed healing on local inhabitants including Cambodians, gave

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religious instructions and visited shrines and temples.¹ Let us first examine some of the markers along the Daoists’ path which consist in mythologising, healing and temple building as elements of historical agency.

**MYTH BUILDING AND TEMPLE CONSTRUCTION**

The Daoists' self-cultivation project follows a recognisable pattern. The concatenation of idioms: 'self-cultivation' (tu thân), 'curing illness' (chữa bệnh), 'saving the world' (cứu đô), encapsulates the Daoists’ trajectory.² Starting with an existential crisis, such as a life-threatening illness, the individual resolves to radically change their lifestyle in pursuit of enlightenment.³ As one learns to take care of one’s own health, the ability to heal others develops in a comprehensive process of acquiring power-knowledge. This, in the vernacular, is the course of 'curing the sick and eliminating the demonic spirits' (chữa bệnh trị tà).

The next module of action, which may be concurrent with healing, is the dissemination of knowledge. Its consequence is the gathering of disciples and followers to further the aim of benefiting the world (cứu nhân độ thế-'rescue people, liberate the world').⁴ It should be noted that in the healers' discourse, idioms for curing illness and world salvation refer to each other as mutual symbols.⁵

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¹ The first of these trips (đexpérience sờ) was to Tà Lơn Mountain (Beokor, in Kampot, Cambodia) with his father; the second was with Ông Đạo Nâm in 1939 to Núi Tơ and Núi Cẩm mountains. The third with five disciples to the latter two mountains and Núi Kêt. The fourth was in 1940 to Tà Lơn Mountain in Kampot with one disciple, Nguyễn Văn Hậu, Thất Sơn ..., pp. 220-232.

² The word đô in Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương context means 'the world', rather than 'human life', as in one of their late nineteenth-century messages: "Vịc đdoi dâ đênh!" (The time to save the world has arrived). See Sơn Nam, Cả Tính cía Miền Nam, p.50.

³ This is also interpreted in Confucianism since pre-Han time as rectifying oneself (tu thân), in order to align oneself with the working of Heaven, harmonising and re-harmonising the three—Heaven, Earth and Man, as discussed in the previous chapter.

⁴ If chữa bệnh trị tà is Daoist in conception, cửa nhân độ thế has Buddhist origin in the term độ (to effect salvation, as in phó độ, in Chinese pu tu, universal soul salvation).

⁵ The world salvation theme intrudes also in sorcerers’ incantations. In one of them (chứ sinh có hòn), terms of salvation and rescue are found in sentences such as: "Following the Immortals words instructing followers of the faith, to rescue the
In different ways, the Daoists’ claims to mystic authority sometimes culminated in a kingship, which underscored the qualifying claims of invulnerability and other magical powers. From a position of leadership or prominence, a claim of kingship may or may not ensue in the context of world salvation, but it should be regarded as the last link in an exemplary chain. With the possibility of re-incarnation, this circular chain is closed and perpetuated.

As a set of elaborations on the traditional image of the ‘world rescuer’, folk tales contribute to the social reproduction of values for material survival and spiritual growth. Markers in these tales include signs of special physical or extrasensory prowess in the Daoist’s youth, often following an extraordinary crisis. Others include serious or unknown illness, or being unconscious for several days, or having revivified after being found dead. Thus the biographies contain certain stages in their narrative:

1. Unusual signs at birth, or showing outstanding abilities, manifest talents during childhood or adolescent years, or crises in adult life, such as illness, loss of consciousness etc, and cathartic revelations upon recovery. The life crisis may also be followed by the meeting with a teacher, hence,

2. Becoming a healer: training in meditation and other skills, attendant travels to the mountain,

3. Healing and helping others, including teaching, proselytizing, thus gathering a following.

multitude of people in confusion, to help the common people in the time of turmoil” (Phương tiến ngôn sắc giáo chỉ truyền, tức licer thượng con bài login); or and “Homeless souls of the land of Chin and country of Sê [China], souls of Khmer, Mô, Mang, Lao, souls of Annam, China, died while trading on foreign land. Once r’c”d they have become demons and lonely ghosts. Their poverty and hunger touch our compassion. The master will see to it that the people will be rescued and the world saved (Nơi có hồn dạt Tấn nước Sê, nơi có hồn Mên Mô Mang Lào, nơi có hồn An Nam Trung Quốc, thường mất từ nước người mà thoát. Thức hóa ra ngạ tử có hồn, thấy động lòng dạt rạch mà thoát, thoát thấy lưu cứu dân đạo thể”. CAOM, 7F 69, Cochinchine, 1926-1927. See Appendix I for full texts.

6 Phật Trùm, initially known as Tà Paul, was an ‘ambodian who reportedly died of cholera but revived the next day to speak only in Vietnamese, claiming to be Buddha Acolyte reincarnated. Ho Tai, Millenarianism…, p. 41; also Nguyễn Văn Hầu, Thất Sơn Mẫu Nhiệm, pp. 88-95.
4. Proofs of having attained powers: knowledge, including divination, communication with wild animals, ability to dematerialize oneself.

5. Prescience about one’s own death, unusual signs surrounding death.

The oral accounts are replete with anecdotes of miraculous healing. Some of the Daoists wrote poems as teachings, warning of millennial outcomes. Healing the sick, especially in plague epidemics, and founding temples, appear to be the hallmarks of their memorable deeds and accomplishments. For some, their wives played an important supportive role.7

Oral biographies of the Buddha Master of Western Peace and his illustrious disciples, purative reincarnations, and enlightened Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương followers in his lineage share a number of common attributes and achievements which could be grouped in decreasing frequency as follows:8

7 In one case, however, excessive wealth amassed by the Daoist’s wife from temple work created so much friction that it eventually forced the master to choose between his family and disciples. True to expected standards of a pedagogical behaviour, the master fled with his disciples. See the story of Đạo Xuyên in Nguyễn Văn Thân, Thuận Sơn ..., pp. 136-142.

8 Listed in Thuận Sơn Mẫu Niệm (the Wondrous Seven Mountains) as followers and/or successors of the Buddha of Western Peace are:

1/ Phật Trùm (7–1875)
2/ Đức Bồ Tát Ngô Lợi (?–1909)
3/ Sĩ Văn Bàn Khoai (The Potato-Selling Monk) (early 20th c.)
4/ Nguyễn Đa (late 19th c.)
5/ Trần Văn Thành (?–1873)
6/ Tăng Chù Bái Thiền Sư (mid 19th c.)
7/ Bửu Văn Tây (1802–1890)
8/ Nguyễn Văn Xuyến (1834–1914)
9/ Đặng Văn Ngọc (Đạo Ngọc) (1820–1890)
10/ Phạm Thái Chung (Đạo Lập) (19th c.)
11/ Hải Lành (Đạo Lành) (mid 19th c.)
12/ Trần Văn Nhìu (1847–1914)
13/ Nguyễn Văn Thới (1866–1927)
14/ Huỳnh Pháp Sở (1918–1947)
Performed healing with talisman or medicine ........................................ 12
Made journey(s) to the mountains ....................................................... 10
Could predict or had unusual own death ............................................. 9
Received disciples ............................................................................... 8
Founded temples ............................................................................... 7
Showed signs of prowess in youth ..................................................... 6
Left poems ......................................................................................... 6
Communicated with wild animals ....................................................... 4
Founded settlements ......................................................................... 3
Assisted greatly by wife(ves) ............................................................... 3
Fought in anti-colonial battles ............................................................ 3

HEALING

As members of the local corpus of those with inherited knowledge and skills, the Daoists' social responsibility was expressed primarily through curing and rescuing people from harm. Their reputation was mostly built on legends of curing. Đoàn Minh Huyễn used ashes from incense and paper talismans for cures. When they ran out, he used the flowers displayed on the altar and the stubs of burnt incense sticks placed in a bowl of water. He then sprayed the patient with the water. The verses recording his way of dispensing magical cures show an extraordinary method:

Yellow paper was cut into finger-sized strips,

*Side in prayers to Buddha,* he handed them behind his back.\(^9\)

It is possible that the more unusual the method, the more widespread the healer's reputation. And it is also possible that many of those seeking to become disciples were ex-patients and/or their relatives.\(^10\)

Doàn Minh Huyền's cure always included a religious admonition after the patients received the remedy, thus initiating a discourse on self-cultivation as a poem attributed to him states:

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\(^10\) In 1927, a security police report on the sect of Nôm Ông noted the same pattern of curing and recruiting followers. CAOM, NF, 7F 69.
Advising the old and young,
To keep on praying to Buddha for a long time to come.
Maintain generosity, sincerity, righteousness and compassion,
Honour your parents and worship above all Heaven and Buddha
Everyone must mark his words

That by praying to Buddha whole-heartedly, Heaven and Buddha will assist you.  

It is easy to understand then, why followers gathered spontaneously under these circumstances. Miraculous cures and healing continue to be the mainstay of the conversion process even in recent time. Nguyễn Minh Tri’s hagiography records several of his miraculous deeds and healing. The work of Reverend Sơn Kim mentioned above, his chief disciple who used rain water to cure illnesses, continues to be praised and remembered by followers.  

Tạ Chí Đại Trường maintains that in the South, because the linguistic meanings of talismans were either distorted or lost, magicians came to monopolise the field of healing. This may or may not be the case, but in the absence of other evidence, it is difficult to argue that patients were more vulnerable to Daoists’ whims simply because talismans captured by the colonial police contained illegible character-like diagrams.  

The famous cures, such as the case of Thầy Trung in Cần Thơ, are said to have involved no graphics. As the local legend has it, in the 1870s, Master Trung cured the wife of the French province chief Nicolai of a neurotic condition. Magical healing in this case resembles something like a single-session hypnotherapy, and possibly one with the use of quasi-verbal communication, if Nicolai’s wife was not Vietnamese.  

As Tạ Chí Đại Trường also maintains, the belief of followers often played a dominant role in sustaining the Daoists’ practice. The Bare Torso Daoists only had to say cryptically:  

*Birds are flying back to the mountain at dusk,* 
*Sisters, you’d better prepare you... let’s to cook rice.*

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11 Vượng Kim & Dao Hùng, ibid.  
12 Rev. Sơn Kim’s ability to cure with water, according to my informant, had not become any less effective up to the time of his death in 1993.  
for the followers to buy up and bring hundreds of giạ (bushels) of rice to store away at the Daoist's settlement on Núi Nú island. The important issue was, therefore, not so much one of whether or not talismanic graphics were intelligible or legible to the patient or anyone else, in order that they obtained a desirable outcome.

NEW TEMPLES, NEW SETTLEMENTS

Elite characterisations of Daoists change with time. Among Vietnamese authors, scholar Nguyễn Hiền Lê and historian Nguyễn Văn Hậu stand at opposite ends. About three decades separates the two authors, during which the Daoists' image evolved from one of deceit to one of charisma, insofar as the latter can readily be framed in a patriotic discourse. Those whom Nguyễn Hiền Lê observed in Đồng Tháp Mười area in the 1930s were said to be ignorant and crazy characters, who seduced people with their weird behaviour and words. Individual periods of adulation, as he notes, lasted only about six months, but the on-going mythologising about Daoist life and the social presence nevertheless amazed him. With Nguyễn Văn Hậu, Daoists in general, and Bưu Sơn Kỳ Hương Daoists in particular, were moral and religious leaders, whose

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15 Tạ Chí Đại Trường, Thần, Ngôn... p.339, quoting Nguyễn Văn Trân in the latter’s Chế Đinh Quê Tố.
16 Tạ Chí Đại Trường’s statement that “the contribution of followers towards the miracle-worker image appeared greater than what the Daoists themselves did to create that image”... is more interesting for what it implies: either reality is in the fickle minds of the beholders, or Daoists were mere expressions of a pervasive system of beliefs; or the social context was such that it set in sharp relief an image of Daoists which could be puzzling to the Daoists themselves.
17 Nguyễn Hiền Lê had no sympathy for what he regards as magic associated with Daoism. In his memoirs, he admits: ‘At the time of graduation [1934], I knew nothing about religion. I borrowed their [the local intellectuals in the South] books to find out. I admired the monk Thiền Chiếu for his clear reasoning: hated the book Đạo Giáo (Daoism). I can’t remember who wrote it, which discusses only about black magic (tơ thò) instead of explaining about philosophy.’ Nguyễn Hiền Lê, Hội Kì Nguyễn Hiền Lê (Memoirs of Nguyễn Hiền Lê), Văn Học, 1993, p.1.82.
18 For Nguyễn Văn Hậu’s view, see for example, Nguyễn Văn Hậu, Nghiên cứu về Giao Hòa Hảo [Perceptions on Hòa Hảo Buddhism], Hướng Sơn, 1988, p.12.
19 See Nguyễn Hiền Lê, Ngày Nay trong Đồng Tháp Mười, p..
supernatural prowess served the community's interests and the nation's welfare.

In healing or in community welfare work, both Daoists and believers embodied the particular responses to change which were appropriate to their cultural milieux and understandings. Beliefs in supernatural power inevitably contributed to these responses. The Daoists' social standing may not have been consistently reflected in the position they occupied within the secret societies they joined. Nevertheless, according to Coulet, in the process of founding a secret society, the position of a special 'holy man' was determined by a hierarchy which included an entourage of devotees. Among the first circle of those who joined the Phan Xich Long uprising in 1912, the Daoist was situated between the leader and an echelon of dignitaries—such as the village physicians, hútông chủ ("village head"), hútông sư ("village teacher"), hútông trưởng ("village elder").

Early Seven-Mountain Daoists were mainly land owners and village notables, originally pioneer settlers. The economy of the settlements was dictated by the environment. Pursuing their respective religious lifestyles at higher altitudes were the gardeners and horticulturalists, while down in the delta plain, most people were rice growers. There were not many small communities like these in frontier areas, as Ho Tei points out. The 'ricefield' and 'timber' settlements (trại rừng, trại gõ) initiated by the Buddha Master of Western Peace in the early 1850s were among the earliest known examples. In his work on the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương group, Nguyễn Văn Hậu gives informative sketches of the Seven-Mountain Daoists numbering about fifteen renowned Daoists, starting from the appearance of Đoàn Minh Huyền in the 1840s and ending with Huỳnh Phụ Sô's disappearance 1947.

20 Coulet refers to Daisis in this description as sorcerers. Coulet, Sociétés..., pp.32-36.
21 Ho Tai, Millenarianism..., pp. 10-12. Although the majority of peasants were said to be illiterate, it does not quite follow as Ho Tai maintains, that for lack of administrative mechanism, village social collectivity was amorphous. If that was the case, how do we explain the wide acceptance of such Confucian-orientated ideas as the Four Indebtednesses, linking family to communal and state hierarchies?
22 See Đạt Sĩ and Nguyễn, Văn Hữu, Thời Sơ..., p.75.
23 A respected historian, Nguyễn Văn Hữu was also leading intellectual and spokesperson for the Hòa Hảo movement. In the early 1970's, he was central to the establishment of a Hòa Hảo university in the South.
The role of teacher cum community leader put the Buddha Master of Western Peace's chief disciples at the helm of some settlement villages, once a following had gathered. Thus having once received training with a master, Daoists demonstrated supernatural ability, including invisibility and transformation into or communication with wild animals. Of those with exceptional military prowess, Trần Văn Thánh and Nguyễn Văn Da (Ông Cự Da) were the only two well-known apostles who led battles against French occupation forces to restore incumbent royalty's integrity. Other uprisings had more to do with proclamations of a divine kingship than patriotic struggle for the honour of Nguyễn kings.

Beside the physical threat posed by wild beasts, brigands and hostile Cambodians, Daoists' skills were sought for coping with unseen forces. The next likely development was the construction of temples in their honour or under their instigation, depending on the size and wealth of their following. Đồn Minh Huyễn is remembered for founding agrarian settlements and Buddhist temples attached to them. The Tự An Hiếu Nghĩa's founder, Ngô Lợi, had sixteen temples built during his fourteen years of proselytizing, starting from 1877. 24 The establishment of so many temples under his instigation also attested to his geomantic expertise. This skill is raised to the level of magic, when Ngô Lợi is said to have located buried Ming Chinese talismans in the form of stone tablets, which are supposed to have adverse influence on the well-being of other ethnic groups in the region. 25

Depending on the abilities of the religious leader, the thatched ashram may grow into a large and ornate temple, as with the case of Cao Văn Long or Bây Do's community at Núi Cấm, which Coulet reconstructed from police files after the 1916 uprising. This impressive pagoda, built on a narrow plateau, upon which numerous fruit trees were planted, housed Bây Do's family of four daughters and one son, their spouses and his grandchildren. 26 They did not take meat, fish or fermented foods. And since rice could not be grown at this altitude, they had to descend the mountain to obtain rice carried by porters.

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24 Hà Tâm Đận, Hề Phất..., pp. 21 & 114-117.
25 Hà Tâm Đận, Hề Phất..., pp.84-88.
26 Coulet, G., Sociétés..., p.91.
from the nearest river landing. This was paid with Bây Do’s earnings from practising medicine, since no offerings were received by the temple. Visiting friends also gave him money. Coulet voiced the police doubt about his cash flow:

He claimed to have inherited 900 piastres from his father to build the temple in 1904 and finished it in 1906. He also claimed to have made money from selling bananas (off his orchard). The temple was impressive in its size and ornamentation.

French authorities thus questioned the value accumulated in the pagoda and its decor, suspecting money had been raised in huge amounts by some other means. These ‘other means’ must have included contributions made by people all over the delta, persuaded by his religious proselytising. Had he not been arrested and imprisoned so soon, claims Ho Tai, Bây Do would have become as influential as the Buddha Master of Western Peace. What about the less celebrated Daoists, with smaller followings? Let us consider as prominent examples the first Daoists of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương ‘lineage’.

27 What Coulet fails to recognize is that Ngô Lê, like the Buddha Master of Western Peace before him, were not monks ordained by any central orthodox hierarchy to a pagoda. They would only shave their heads by choice, being ‘householders’ (cư sĩ), whose position is in between laity and clergy, neither other-worldly nor completely of this world, as the dichotomy of these terms suggests.

28 French reports, according to Coulet, revealed that Bây Do’s temple was built at about 800m altitude in Núi Cấm, in inaccessible country, completely hidden in mountain forest. ‘And you arrive suddenly upon the pagoda, which is all red, on pilons and hugged by a belt of dense banana orchard...It appears enormous, impenetrable... You must go round the side to get to the entry door, made of solid panels supported by robust girders... First, the dark sanctuary as if padded, where gleams the building on thirty two altars embellished by red velvet. In the middle, an enormous cement Buddha four metres tall and two metres wide. Imagine what powerful fanaticism helped to carry the necessary materials through all kinds of difficulty along this mountain way. To one side, there was an equally enormous bell and no one knows how it got there... Behind the sanctuary were vast outbuildings around an internal courtyard open to the sky. On the right is a cluster of roomettes, each has a camp bed on which books with characters and prayer books were lying about. On the left, a kitchen, its store rooms, a laundry, and food yard. In the centre around the courtyard, a free space for big campbeds that could sleep five hundred people...and many hundred who could stay here easily for many days.’ Coulet, G., Sociétés... , pp.185-186.
As can be seen from the table above (page 271), only three of fifteen Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương followers took to fighting against the French, equalling in number those who founded settlements, or who had substantial support from their wives. For a group considered active in politicizing southern peasants, this picture reflects little anti-colonial armed struggle. Nor is there a great emphasis on Daoists as founders of new settlements. Thus, at least to hagiographers, leadership of armed insurgency or in pioneer settlement work were not significant. As Daoists attracted followings by virtue of their personality and bearing, or wealth and knowledge, their derived prestige challenged the influence of dominant groups - be it royal or colonial or within the local hierarchy. Under any regime, Daoists were obvious targets for harassment without engaging in any overt political activities.

No less obvious was the villages’ need for protection from bandits and wild animals, especially tigers. The abundance of tiger stories in southern folklore reflects a wilderness environment and this attendant need. Nevertheless, the power of the holy men was supposedly superior to mere martial art skills, as tigers were believed to be tamed, or induced to take up self-cultivation (côp tu) in the vicinity of an enlightened self-cultivator. One of Doàn Minh Huyền’s chief disciples, Tăng Chử, was known to have communicated with and treated a wounded tiger. Another, Nguyễn Văn Xuyên, used to ride on tigers and panthers while moving about on the mountain, while Bùi Văn Tây was known to have control over a dangerous crocodile. 

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29 As maintained, for example, by Sâm Nam in Cái Tính của Miền Nam, pp. 33-63.
30 As Tạ Chí Đại Trượng recognises, also from a French report, a large number of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương adherents joined the Phan Xích Long uprisings in 1913-1916 as a protest against the colonial government’s army draft. Tạ Chí Đại Trượng, Thần, Người..., pp.335-336.
31 See Huỳnh Ngọc Tráng & Trưởng Ngọc Trưởng, Nghĩn Năm..., vol.1, especially pp.235-237.
32 Nguyễn Văn Hậu, Thái Sơn..., p.135.
Invulnerability was related to martial arts training as mentioned in Chapter Six, making it open to suspicion of rebellion from the authorities. Coulet classes activities such as 'boxing' or martial arts training at non-orthodox temples as 'revolutionary', i.e. seditious.\textsuperscript{33} This reflects a French refusal to interpret martial arts in terms of anything other than anti-colonial aggression, thus ignoring the spiritual underpinnings of these disciplines.

The Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hựu Daoists of the late nineteenth century were, first and foremost, teacher-healers who gained community credibility through their knowledge and supernatural power in curing sicknesses. Instead of opposing the existing political system, we find an emphasis placed on supernatural prowess and achievements in community welfare enterprises as sources of prestige and influence. Belief in the supernatural powers of Daoists, however, remained central to the gathering of followers and devotees, and no doubt endowed the millenarian message with authority.

TEACHINGS AND THE MILLENNARIAN MESSAGE

The name Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hựu mixed Zen with local mysticism. In Đoàn Minh Huyễn's minimal idolatry, a piece of red cloth, similar to the material used by trance mediums, replaced the statues.\textsuperscript{31} This mixture is not totally arbitrary, but exemplifies localisation. As noted in Chapter Six, Đoàn Minh Huyễn's basic teachings have been maintained throughout the years, but their details varied

\textsuperscript{33} Coulet, \textit{Sociétés Secrètes...}, pp.94-95. Martial arts, like other bodies of knowledge, were transmitted through ostensible lineages of masters, with their mode of honoring founder's spirits similar to ancestral worship. Invulnerability have common religious roots with trance and ecstatic experiences in many other parts of the world is all the more striking, for example, considering the events in Paris, following the death of Abbé François de Pâris recorded in the 1730s. Evidence of immunity to pain and physical blows as well as other forms of beating which occurred in the 'convulsionary movement' is surprisingly resonant. The production of inspired discourse on theological and millenarian literature which ensued also marked a significant resemblance between the treatment that French Jansenist Catholics then received from the controlling Roman Catholic Church, and that of the Vietnamese Daoists from central authorities. Kreiser, B. R., \textit{Miracles, Convulsions, and Ecclesiastical Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century Paris}, Princeton University Press, 1978, p.260-275.

\textsuperscript{34} The Tây Sơn also used the colour red to indicate the Western regional origin of many of their followers. See Li Yana, \textit{The Inner Region...}, p.168.
according to the background of the prophets who re-iterated them. Elements of this millenarian discourse may, on the other hand, be used by a solitary Daoist anywhere to reap some material or other gains offered by followers. The Floating Daoist in Cambodia reportedly accepted and sold clothes, given to him by rich devotees, and used the money for gambling.\(^{35}\)

Đoàn Minh Huyễn himself did not appear to proffer any particular orthodox brand of Buddhism. Forced by local authorities to be ordained as a resident monk at a pagoda of Lâm Tế school,\(^{36}\) his resistance was shown in his insistence on retaining his beard upon taking the tonsure.\(^{37}\) To Tạ Chí Đại Trương, the intellectual foundation of Daoists was a highly syncretic Buddhism, while their means of practice/action were those of the sorcerers (thầy pháp). This Buddhism consisted in an inclusion of the cult of the Jade Emperor, the Luminous King (Minh Hoàng). He further adds:

And this is no tranquil Buddhism whose followers quietly and patiently search for liberation, but a popular Buddhism with a collective consciousness riddled by anguish and uncertainty. Even though it blazes new trails of hope, its projected future appears beyond reach.\(^{38}\)

This background gave rise to miscellaneous types and varying quality of Daoists, leading to satirised names such as the Jumping Daoist (Đạo Nhảy) case. A tolerant attitude, Tạ Chí Đại Trương thinks, also allowed people to accept all degrees of eccentricity. However, to say religion is riddled with anguish and anxiety is nothing new. It is more relevant to ask why, in an environment of uncertainty and threats (from disease, famine and unrest), it behooved the Daoists to add on further threats in their proselytising.

The common topic of the Low/Third Era (Hạ Ngụyên), with its warning of catastrophe, calls on myths of eternal return which exist throughout Southeast

\(^{35}\) Called the Floating Daoist because he could sit in lotus posture in water and float up to his abdomen. He instructed followers to prostrate in front of the altar about half an hour before lunch, predicted that when that day comes, there will be three thunder claps, the Mekong river will turn into a sea, and there will be a huge boat called Lady/Grandmother Boat (Tầu Bà) with its bow in Phnom Penh and its stern in Vĩnh Long. Lê Huong, Việt Kiều ở Kampuchia, Trí Đặng, Saigon, 1971, p. 143.

\(^{36}\) Lâm Tế is a lineage claimed to belong to the southern Chinese Chian Buddhism.

\(^{37}\) Ho Tai, Millenarianism..., p.11.

\(^{38}\) Italics mine. As Đại Trương puts it, Phật Giáo quan chủng sỏi động, dạy xao xuyến lo âu, sợ hãi. Tạ Chí Đại Trương, Thần, Người..., p. 340. Italics mine.
Asia and the Pacific. On the surface, millenarian prophecies sound contradictory to the call for self-cultivation. The inevitability of great cyclic recurrence was at variance with the potentials offered by self-cultivation to change or to fulfill personal fate. Its origin may be traced from the birthplace of these prophesies, i.e. the Cambodian border, where Khmer myths of the apocalypse were first known. The earliest-known propagator was Phật Trüm, formerly Tà Paul, a Cambodian. His verse has a similar ring to Khmer folk tales circulated in the South about the world’s cycle of destruction by the god Têvoda and regeneration:

There are innumerable deaths,
Poisonous insects, wild animals come out to harm humans,
On the one hand, bandits come to cause havoc,
On the other, spirits appear to harm people.

The next prophet of doom was the Potato-Selling Monk, whose zone of operation was also the Cambodian border. There were usually only four features in the description of the end of the world:

(i) a great thunderclap,
(ii) a huge flood and fire
(iii) the appearance of monstrous beasts, and
(iv) a gigantic boat to rescue the virtuous.

These teachings, according to Tã Chí Đại Trường, were a radical departure in content from the Buddha Master of Western Peace, but seemed to be absorbed by followers. Later the Buddha Master was made the author of these prophecies, a belief reinforced by Huỳnh Phú SŐ. This is also the reason Ho Tai attributes the a lack of coherence to the doctrinal body of this religion. From a rationalistic perspective, it may be a matter to decry. But to

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39 Tã Chí Đại Trường, Thần, Ngữ,..., pp. 341-342.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 By the 1930s, disparate and solitary Daoists consistently propounded these main features as teachings. See Lê Huệong, Việt Kiều..., p.144.
43 By pointing out that 'the lack of congruity of the doctrine allowed various leaders to emphasize disparate aspects of its teachings to suit the needs of the moment', Ho Tai unintentionally defines an important characteristic of popular religion. Ho Tai, Millenarianism..., p.33.
offer only functionalist explanations of the teachings is to give insufficient weight to enfoldment and hybridisation as operative characteristics.

The repeated metaphors, if taken as a play on cosmogonic images, offer openings to better interpretations of the Daoists' description of cataclysm. As if, for the Daoists, truly creative action in a renewed world would involve dangerous encounters signified by wild beasts, flood, explosion... in a gigantic dimension. Further, the risk and undertaking of this enterprise, in which the Daoists engage as world rescuers, should be understood also in a literal sense. Accordingly, not unlike some images evoked in the Christian Old Testament, the birth of the new could be recognised as a site of monstrosity, and creative action calamitous. Thus, for instance, the Coconut Monk actually had a large boat built and called it Prajna Vessel (Thuyền Bát Nhã), to prepare for the big flood. While language, as outdated convention, must be exploded by silence to communicate the idea of renewal, the new speech was necessarily cryptic. Thus some Daoists utterances would have been glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, and led to the charge of madness.

Tạ Chí Đại Trường also thinks that the Big Boat theme has a cargo cult format, identified as far back in Southeast Asia as the bronze drums of Đồng Sơn, and as distant as the Melanesian islands. However, not only the Coconut monk of the 1950s but Daoists right from the nineteenth century referred to the flood-rescue boat as 'Prajna Vessel', symbolising a Buddhist theme of salvation and liberation. A cargo cult stress on material plenty would contradict the prophet's call for frugality and ascetism to prepare for this final emancipation.

The coming world, according to these teachings, will be ruled by z. reincarnation of Maitreya, or Ngọc Phật (the Jade Buddha - counterpart of the Jade Emperor?). It is not clear whether this idea came to Vietnam straight from the Ming émigrés or via mainland Lao and Thai routes. However, the claim of an emerging Minh Vương (Luminous King, in Chinese Ming Wang), which will

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41 Tạ Chí Đại Trường, Thần, Ngữ... , p.342
be discussed later, has a Triad Society root which dates back to eighteenth-century millenarianism in China.45

As an envoy from the colonial land survey office in the mid-1930s, Nguyễn Hiền Lễ travelled through Đồng Tháp Mười (called Plaine des Jones by the French), a northeastern area of the Mekong Delta adjoining the Cambodian border. He is often quoted for the passage below, concerning Daoists all over the South with preposterous practices who managed to attract small or large followings. This type of event, he observed, was to proliferate along with prospering temples and practices of major religious groups at the time. Unsparing in condemnation, he noted the recurrent but short-lived phenomenon of Daoists:

It is impossible to list all the crazy behaviour patterns of that mob of Daoists. Most of them were uneducated. Although uneducated and stupid, they were believed and admired only because they knew how to speak so vaguely and ambiguously that they could be understood in whichever way the people wanted. Their followers counted in the hundreds, sometimes in the thousands, supplying them with sumptuous goods and luxury -- expensive clothes, gourmet food, cash, automobile transport, treating the idols like royalty after bringing them home to stay, taking down notes of anything they said as if these were gospels; their grimace would reduce the family to dread and supplication; their smile would make the host couple as happy as receiving Heaven's grand fortune.

The authorities knew what they were up to, but turned a blind eye because they thought these Daoists did not disturb law and order, thus they left the people to their superstition, for the more superstitious the people were, the easier it would be to govern. Furthermore, they did not wish to create more work for themselves.

Each Daoist' good time usually lasted about six months, at the most one or two years, then suddenly they were not heard of again; where they went, whether still alive or dead, no one could say or would tell if they knew. Not long after, another Daoist appeared, also to last for another short period.46

46 Nguyễn Hiền Lễ, Bảy Ngày Trong Đồng Tháp Mười [Seven Days in Đồng Tháp Mười], Trí Dàng, Saigon 1970, pp. 147-150.
This report was written by a person educated in both western and classic Confucian systems whose socio-economic status scarcely allowed him to penetrate the milieu germaine to such phenomena. Thus charlatanism is not condemned outright by the same author, judging by his ironic and not altogether unambiguous conclusion on the subject:

All this shows how strong the southerners' religious belief was, but it would not be entirely correct to say they were not realistic. If they lacked a sense of reality, how could they produce such characters who so cleverly exploited the people's superstition?47

In other words, the author asks if the Daoists and the peasantry shared the same cultural background, how could the latter be easily seduced by the former? How indeed, were it not for some needs not readily identifiable even to a person with a fine sensitivity like Nguyễn Hiện Lập.

Tạ Chí Đại Trương suggests that the more bizarre the Daoists' behaviour was, the simpler their teachings.48 This may be true to some extent. Eccentric behaviour traits of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hựng Daoists are only mentioned obliquely in oral tales, while their proselytising is emphasized. However, it is not clear if this is a distinction reserved for these Daoists alone.49 If there existed a split between contemporary millenarian teachings and those of the first decades of the century, then it can be said to be recognisable between Hào Háo's and the Four Indebtednesses (Tứ Án Hiếu Nghĩa) groups'.

DISSEMINATION OF THE FOUR INDEBTEDNESSES

The principle of the Four Indebtednesses (Tứ Án Hiếu Nghĩa) was, according to Tạ Chí Đại Trương, a nationalistic design motivated chiefly by French presence. Added to this design was the complex rivalry between the Saigon-
Chợ Lớn centre and the Seven Mountains intelligentsia. Although patriotism is only referred to in one of the four pledges, popular mountain resistance represented a rustic response to modernisation. Such response was no doubt intensified by the spectre of oppression under colonial rule. The loss of self-determination must have been equated with a loss of identity. The expressions mặt nước (the country is lost), không có vua (there is no king), which appeared early in the twentieth century, must have resonated with other grievances to give the portent of cataclysm an overall congruity.

On the other hand, Daoist discourse culminated in investiture for a divine kingship. Conceived in this popular Buddhist framework, it was an act of restoration of a former identity. This theme will be explored later. By the 1940s, this discourse may have been only made out to be nationalistic in the contested arena of independence dominated by the French, the Việt Minh and other political groups. And after 1947, the Hôa Hào’s anti-communist tenor also suggests a different nationalistic register. It appears, therefore, that the meaning of the four pledges was constructed or adopted as a principal ethos responding to the most pressing issue of the time.

Daoists’ cultural reproduction, however, hardly reflected the stubborn conservatism attributed to them by Ho Tai. Until printing at the turn of this century made possible wider dissemination, the common modes of propagation consisted in the chanting of poems at gatherings and the passing on of hand-copied versions of the masters’ teachings. An example, cited by Nguyễn Long Thành Nam, of the Hôa Hào followers in the late 1930s illustrates this mode of dissemination:

It was not possible to obtain French permission to print and publish Pope Huỳnh’s works. That is why each time he finished a piece, right at his home, a number of adherents would read and commit to memory through a recitatory tone like poetry chanting, though with less flourish. In a few days, followers would pass it on orally to one another and many could copy it down in long hand or could get a literate person to do this for them.

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50 Ibid., p.330. Tất Chí Đại Trưởng cites the chiding line in Nguyễn Liên Phong’s verse history of Gia Định published not long after in Saigon, as quoted by Sơn Nam: Thầy với Thất Sơn đều trùng sắc (Monks and nuns of the Seven Mountains have all died).
51 Which refer to, besides the national realm, ancestors and parents, the Buddhist Three Jewels, and humankind.
Once the work was on paper, its dissemination process sped up and in a simple way. A certain adherent well known for 'good handwriting' would be chosen to copy. The person selected considered it an honour to voluntarily produce 100 or 500 copies. He purchased a students' copybook and rewrote word by word, page by page till the number he had offered to copy was reached.\textsuperscript{52}

This was a far cry from the later output aided by printing. By 1968, Nguyễn Văn Hậu estimates the five printed volumes of Huỳnh Phú Sổ's verse and prose teachings ran into at least 800,000 copies each.\textsuperscript{53} As shown above, there were more Daoists who left poems for people to remember than those who led the desperate anti-colonial military battles. Even so, both these achievements were overshadowed by their fame for miracle work in healing. It is therefore not sufficient to utilise the material and method of propagation in order to speculate on the mind set of the millenarians.

\textbf{MIND SET AND MILLENNARIANISM}

The world view of those who were convinced of the power of amulets, more as faithful custodians of a traditional system of knowledge and beliefs than as part of a strategy, must be considered to be at the heart of the failure of the Phan Xích Long-type uprisings.\textsuperscript{54} It was not a strategic error in the face of the obvious lack of guns and bullets, nor one for failing to design an alternative plan if the apocalypse did not wipe out the evil doers.\textsuperscript{55} The simple reason is that any doubt about the efficacy of amulets and the finality of the apocalypse would negate the very beliefs in the first place, and severely limit the size of the following.\textsuperscript{56} All rationalistic assumptions that amulets were psychological

\textsuperscript{52} Nguyễn Long Thành Nam, \textit{Phật Giáo Hào Hòa Trong Đời Lịch Sử Đàn Tộc} (Hoa Hào Buddhism in National History), Tập San Đức Tử Bì, California, 1991, p. 181.


\textsuperscript{54} For details of the uprisings, see for example Hô Tái, \textit{Millenarianism}, pp.69-75.

\textsuperscript{55} Trần Văn Giàu's argument is in the affirmative. See Trần Văn Giàu, \textit{Sự Phát Triển Của Tư Tưởng ở Việt Nam, Từ Thế Kỷ 19 Đến Cách Mạng Tháng Tám} (The Development of Philosophical Thought in Vietnam, from the 19th Century to the August Revolution), vol. 1, TP Hô Chí Minh, 1993, p.563.

\textsuperscript{56} It might be argued that amulets for preventing sickness, for instance, are believed to be relatively more effective than those warranting invulnerability, because people differentiate the power of a lead bullet from that of demonic spirits. However, we
props, or that millenarians overlooked preparing themselves in case the prophesy did not come true, betray either a defective grasp of the mechanism involved, or outright cynicism on the part of the critic.

It may be true that after 1860, central monarchical power was too weak, or completely supplanted by colonials and collaborators in the Mekong delta, to cause the millenarians to fill the royal vacuum as Keyes points out for the Thai case. As well, the effects of politico-economic factors in the genesis of millenarian movements should not be discounted. However, the negative terms which Ishii uses for the *phu mi bun* uprising of 1902 in Northeastern Thailand such as *isolation, backwardness, mal-integrated, politically passive and inarticulate* do not apply well to Vietnamese southern villages and their inhabitants. To regard the millenarian movement in negative terms like these is to deny ingenuity in people's response to a new and fast changing environment. This ingenuity is evidenced in adaptations or borrowings from at least three ethnic groups, and a pervasive older Southeast Asian substratum.

Another aspect of eccentricity, bizarre ness and even madness of the Daoists often overlooked is that beliefs in talismanic magic have been implicitly separated from the bizarre behaviour and speech of the Daoists. From the Daoists perspective, as indicated in the above-mentioned interpretation of apocalyptic prophecy, one can no more justify this differentiation between the magical and the absurd than one can ignore the completely new predicament of southern settlers. Faced with natural disasters on top of the strangeness of the delta environment, it is not difficult to imagine the urgency with which settlers would call on resources for novel responses. I contend therefore that an important factor was the strangeness of the environment to Vietnamese settlers, who were mostly poor peasants. It may be

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58 Ishii, Y., 'A Note on Buddhist Millenarian Revolts in Northeastern Siam', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol.6, no.2, Sept. 1975, pp.121-126. Again, if this is like what Ishii meant as "essentially a prepolitical phenomenon", or more precisely, not a state-focused one, then many Daoists were Vietnamese counterparts of Thai millenarian Holy Men.
conceivable that for them, the presence of the French was also part of this total strangeness. The oppressive authorities at all levels and harsh living conditions served as apt signals to the coming of world cataclysm, albeit readily appropriated by a patriotic discourse.

CULTURAL BORROWING

Intertwoven in the millenarian ideal was an appropriation of three-religion patterns adapted to local needs. At each evolutionary stage of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương movement, there were traces of borrowed cultural forms marking the close interaction between Vietnamese and other ethnic groups -- Chinese, Khmer or Siamese, and Cham. The early years of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương were notable with Cambodians and Khmer-speakers present among leading Daoists. The first successor of the founder, known as the Candle Daoist (ông Đạo Đên) by the way he used bee's wax candles, proclaimed to be Phát Trịn (Buddha Acolyte) upon his recovery from cholera. Two Cambodian leaders captured by Trần Văn Thành in a battle with their group and later released, took tonsure and were called Phát Vải and Phát brutôm (Limestone and Butterfly Buddhas) by Vietnamese. 59

Tạ Chí Đại Trưởng, ignoring the power difference established by capture and release, suggests that it was a sign of an egalitarian relationship between the Viet and Khmer religious. This egalitarianism, he avers, transcended ethnic discrimination unavoidable in the secular sphere. 60 However, if such religious geniality existed between the Vietnamese and Khmer groups, it should not be surprising to observe a shared conception of the inextricable link between spiritual power and leadership mandate, as will be examined later. 61 As we

59 Dật Sĩ and Nguyễn Văn Hậu, Thời Sơn..., p.114.
60 No such alliance can be found in the environment where French authorities used Cambodians to denounce Vietnamese insurgents (and conversely, using Vietnamese clerks to administer Cambodians and Lao Lians). See Sơn Nam, Lịch Sử Khân Hoảng Miền Nam..., pp. 210-211.
61 This needs to be said in conjunction with many other local interactive exchanges where violent conflict ensued, related to the Vietnamese territorial expansion into Cambodia, mostly with the involvement of Vietnamese, Khmer and Siamese armies.
have seen with localisation, such as the worship of ông Tà and ông Địa in Chapter Five, Vietnamese settlers, maintained an upper hand.

Another cultural borrowing worth noting was the form of towers of the Bàu Sơn Kỳ Hương temple built by the Đạo Trần (Bare Torso Daoist) group which has been observed to resemble Islamic minarets seen either in southern Cham or Malay temples. More recent 'reading towers' (tòa đọc giảng) of the Hồng Hào are thought to take after a minaret form, although not standing as tall. The use of a piece of rectangular red cloth called tran dịu (vermilion display), and tablets with writing on them, in place of statues and paintings, also resembles Islamic patterns.

The name Bàu Sơn Kỳ Hương (“Strange Perfume from the Precious Mountain”) on the other hand, contains word motifs designating name types for various regional lodges of the Chinese White Lotus secret society, a mid-Sung precursor of the Triad. In this nomenclature, lodge names have four motifs: Mountain (Chinese shan, in Hán Việt Sơn), Hall/Lodge (tang, or Hán Việt Đạo), River/Water (shui, or Thủy) and Perfume (hsiang, or Hương). The coining of the two words, Sơn and Hương in the Vietnamese name of the Seven Mountains millenarian groups suggests borrowing. As Chesneaux further remarks:

The mountain theme, Taoist in origin, recurred frequently in the rituals and nomenclature of the secret societies, even if its value was often no more than symbolic, because many of them could not possibly have set

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63 By 1968, according to Nguyễn Văn Hậu, 388 were built. By 1973, the number rose to 452. See Nguyễn Văn Hậu, Nhịn Thục..., p.225, and Ho Tai, Millenarianism..., Appendix D.
64 From field observation of Phan Lạc Tuyện, in ‘Ảnh hưởng của Môi Sở Đạo Giáo trong Nông Dân Vùng Đồng bằng Sông Cửu Long’ [Influence of a Number of Religions Among Peasants in the Mekong Delta], Tạp Chí Khoa Học Xã Hội, 3rd Year, no. 9, Ho Chi Minh City, 1991, p.57.
65 See Chesneaux, J., Secret Societies in China, Heinemann Education Books, London, 1971, p.31. Another origin of the name came from the belief that the prophesy attributed to Laureate Nguyễn Bình Khảim (Trang Trinh) referred to Núi Cầm as "precious mountain" ("In the Precious Mountain, the son of Heaven will appear"), and this was taken up by the Buddha Master in naming his religion. However, this theory leaves aside the word Perfume.
themselves up far from the plains. A Triad leader was a *shan-chu*, a 'master of the mountain', and... the Red Beards of Manchuria referred to their organisation as 'the mountain'.

Tạ Chí Đại Trưởng points out, not without a touch of sarcasm, that the Ming emigrés' endeavour to 'subvert the Ch'ing and restore the Ming' was curiously kept alive for hundreds of years by members of the Triad secret society or their variants. And civil wars in Vietnam since the sixteenth century involved these groups. A great number of Ming Chinese civilians were massacred in 1782 by the Tây Sơn. As a result they must have continued their activities either with the confused objectives of a frustrated dream, or with this nationalistic slogan as an expedient subterfuge. Inter-group conflict and banditry were not uncommon.

The Daoists' affiliation with secret societies such as the Chinese Triad, where Vietnamese groups were found adopting techniques and methods from them, did not mean they shared every value and practice. A flag in the 1913 uprising of Phan Xích Long's Heaven and Earth society had 'Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hựong' in Chinese characters written on it, while Coulet believed most Vietnamese participants were members of the movement. Lay Buddhist groups, with their vegetarianism and simplified rituals are well-known targets for the authorities' suspicion and surveillance, if not harsh suppression. Their worship of goddesses however was shared by the Minh Sở group. Although Coulet did not recognise that keeping hair long was not restricted to Minh Sở group alone, he rightly identifies the strong influence of this Phật Dưỡng group over Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hựong practice.

Tạ Chí Đại Trưởng suspects also that among the founder's chief disciples, an elderly character bore the name Tù Lão (elder caretaker) which resembles the title for senior adepts of Minh Sở groups. Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hựong's link with Minh Sở group was much sounder and more diverse than the tenuous

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69 Ibid., pp.120-126. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Coulet maintains that Đạo Phật Dưỡng, or the Minh Sở school evolved from Đạo Lành of the late 1860s.
resemblance in names suggests. On the other hand, Vietnamisation was evidenced in the translated term tâm ưu (the seal of the mind-heart -- of teachings, in Zen Buddhism, to be passed from master to disciple) into lòng phái (heart edict). However, for Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương adherents, this 'heart edict' functions as a protective talisman.

More remarkable were the Chinese quasi-historical novels or stories that exerted influence on the Daoists' minds. In the 1930s, mimesis of Chinese forms came from motifs in stories, many of which were translated into quốc ngữ. They enjoyed a wide readership as a main form of entertainment. Heroes in these stories captured the imagination of many, including a few Daoists. The Bare Torso Daoist, in the 1930s, had his temple fortified by logs arranged like one of the stories described. Chinese story reading was encouraged by him as a main form of entertainment and moral instruction. The Daoist Nguyễn Ngọc Diện, an ex-Cao Đài follower, had a small hut built in 1937 on top of a tall tower in Rạch Chùn near Chợ Dêm for a retreat (tích cổ). Before this ritual period, he went on a rice-free vegetarian diet to meditate on 'the peasants' suffering. As Nguyễn Văn Trần recalls:

Over the altar in the tower hut hung darkly a red cloth, and three Heavenly jade bowls placed there containing water, rice and salt respectively. Each night he climbed up to perform the offering ritual for the stars, just like Chief Marshal Từ Nhật (Jiang Ji Ya of the Zhou dynasty) was known to do. And he also proclaimed himself to be Chief Marshal Nguyễn Ngọc Diện.

He stayed in retreat for one hundred days, then embarked on his patriotic activities in a one-man campaign of protest against French rule. If Nguyễn

70 Sơn Nam suspects the word is variation of Hông phái, referring to the Hong Society, another name for Thiên Địa Hội. Sơn Nam, Thiên Địa hội..., p.74.
71 Vư tong Kim states that lòng phái is a piece of yellow paper, on which the words 'Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương' are written in red ink. The receiver of a lòng phái usually sews it onto a bag to wear on the body for protection against illness and evil spirits. Vư tong Kim, Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, pp.22-23.
74 Nguyễn Văn Trần, Chợ Dêm..., pp.311-312.
Ngọc Diên identified himself as a general in the mould of ancient Zhou legend, then ông Đạo Trần (the Bare Torso Laoist), regarded by some as a living Buddha, must also have imagined that his own cave-like temple was fortified after the fashion of Ma Thiên Lành in the story of San Kuo:

On the hillside, there was a settlement with ridge poles pointing downhill. Logs were piled around this settlement higher than a person’s head, with a gap in the middle for the entrance into the temple.75

The examples where fictionalized Chinese imagery was appropriated to add character to an altogether idiosyncratic pattern of behaviour and living. The epitome of this appropriation was the declaration of divine kingship. As will be examined, this royal proclamation evoked the Negara or Southeast Asian devaraja model discussed by Clifford Geertz, in which:

...sovereignty, like divinity, was both one and many... each [monarch] represented, in the declamation of his cult, as the core and pivot of the universe, yet each quite aware that he was emphatically not alone in such representation. ...Kings were all Incomparable, but some were more Incomparable than others, and it was the dimensions of their cult that made the difference.76

I suggest that within our reading of these differences are included the slight variations assigned to icons amid symbolic meanings. Let us consider first the change in referential terms as part and parcel of the emergence of divine kingship.

METONYMIC KINGSHIPS

DAOISTS AND ELITISM

To mention kingship is to suggest a parallel hierarchy of nobility. In effect, there were Daoists to whom the referential term ông Đạo did not apply. Within the Tứ Ân group, a few close disciples of Nam Thiép bore the titles of ông Trò (mister student) or ông Gánh (mister porter/in-charge), hinting at

75 Ibid., p. 307.
76 Geertz, C., Negara, The Theatre-State ..., pp. 124-125. It is therefore not quite the same as the Chinese Emperor (Huang Tì) model.
functions in the organization. While these titles did not indicate social elitism, others did. One the Buddha of Western Peace’s disciples, Trần Văn Thành, was an example. He was referred to by a highly deferential term (Đức Cố Quân - His Holiness Cố Quân). His son Trần Văn Nhu, also a disciple, was addressed as câu Hai Nhu (eldest maternal uncle/young master Nhu), while his close comrade-in-arms was a man referred to as câu Hai Gò Sác. Tạ Chí Đại Trường notes that such use of terms indicated that they were distinguished socially from those of the ordinary peasant background shared by most Daoists.

This distinction did not seem to account for wealth alone. The Đạo Day of Cần Thơ was wealthy enough to invite false accusations, but was not called by titles other than ông Đạo. A close friend of Đạo Trần’s (the Bare Torso Daoist) who temporarily took over the running of Bà Trau hamlet after the latter’s death, was called câu Hai Vâm Công (eldest uncle of Công Estuary). This Daoist is said to have received classical education (literature and medicine) from a Tứ Ân Daoist teacher, and had gone to Tà Lơn (Bokor) Mountain in Cambodia for self-cultivation.

Another Daoist from Bokor Mountain, Lê Thái Sanh, whose learned poems on meditation still circulated in the late 1960s, was known as Câu Năm Sanh (Fifth Uncle Sanh), or Thầy (Master) Năm Sanh. However, the reason suggested by Tạ Chí Đại Trường that their material and intellectual wealth were behind the different title, is to be accepted with some caveat. Spirits who are said to be of young prodigious children, either male or female, who allegedly died only to return to possess mediums and dispense oracles are also referred to as Câu (Master, for son of distinguished family, young prince) or Cô (Miss, young princess) respectively. The deferential titles ascribed to these

77 Hà Tấn Dân, Hề Phật Tự Ân..., pp.117-121.
78 Tạ Chí Đại Trường, Tự, Ngữ ..., p.335.
79 Huỳnh Ngọc Tráng & Trương Ngọc Trưởng, Ngôn Nắm..., pp.411-412.
80 The poem collection is believed to be written before the second World War, but this cannot be confirmed. See sample in Appendix 7. Copy of poems in my possession.
81 The medium is called xắc cưu/cô - the body of uncle/aunt or master/miss ...In 1992, I met a middle-aged lady on one of the islands of Cần Thơ river, being the body for a Câu Năm, believed to be spirit of a 5-year-old boy.
Daoists, hinting at nobility of sorts, therefore reflected a public regard which distanced them from the peasants.

If terms that were used to refer to Huỳnh Phú Sổ were any indication, then the title ông Đạo was followed by others as the Daoist’s status rose in the followers’ esteem. The Hào Hảo leader was first called Đạo Xén in his early days as a healer, then Đạo Khùng as preacher, then referred to as Cậu Tú (Fourth mater: J Uncle, Young Master) or Thầy Tú (Master Tú) as a political leader in 1945 by those who knew him, post-humously as Đức Thầy (His Holiness Master), and since the 1960’s, Đức Huỳnh Thù Lành (His Holiness the Leader), or Đức Huỳnh Giáo Chủ (His Holiness Prelate Huỳnh) as political and religious leader respectively.

Thus, it is not easy to ascertain whether it was a socio-economic distinction foisted on and/or deliberately maintained by those Daoists, as Tạ Chí Đại Trưởng implies, coupled with a scholastic or intellectual achievement, or again a putative sign of possessing supernatural powers which were at times blurred with the above attributes.

In southern lore, however, there existed gestures of kingship proclamation in their idiosyncratic styles which alluded to another blurring of attributes -- that between divinity and leadership. If Trần Văn Thành was considered a wise and (supernaturally) powerful figure, his objective in fighting the French was clear: to restore the sovereignty of the Huế-based monarchy, for it was known that he received a decree from King Hảm Nghi. Earlier, with Năm Thiệp, the distinction between the Master and Monarch was blurred.

In 1878, when the French had not yet invaded Annam and Tonkin, there was a proclamation for the arrival of a ‘luminous king’ (Minh Hoàng) who came down from the sky to chase the French away, as Hồ Tài noted. Generals were appointed, directives issued and amulets distributed by Năm

1 Hai Hoành maintains that the title Ông Đạo was dropped as soon as a following was formed. See Hai Hoành, Nam Kỳ Lục Tỉnh, t.3, Văn Hóa, 1993, p. 174.
2 The early titles were noted by French reports, the third and fourth by Nguyễn Hiền Lệ in his memoirs of the 1940’s-- Hồi Ký Nguyễn Hiền Lệ, Văn Học, 1993, the last ones as found in the collected oracular literature Sơn Giang Thị Văn Tấn Bồ, 1970, and in Duốc Tù Bi magazine, an official Hào Hảo publication from California.
Thiệp among over two hundred leaders attending the 6 February secret meeting in Mỹ Tho. Although no clear indication was made as to who the Emperor of Light was, this ambiguity did not detract from the divine aspect to which attention was purported to be drawn.

By the 1910s, the word Minh came to be associated with the Chinese Ming dynasty, but more pronouncedly, the Vietnamese King Minh Mạng, whose mother and wife came from the South. Thus ran the legend of a girl in Gia Định to whom Minh Mạng pledged to be rejoined in his next incarnation. In another legend, from the other side of the Cambodian border in 1920-21, of a Daoist-inspired anti-French uprising from Bokor mountain, the band of disciples were given Minh Mạng coins to hold between their teeth to give them protection against bullets. In 1939, a Daoist in Mỹ Tho claimed he was Minh Mạng re-incarnated and invulnerable. Let us consider next the act of enthronement itself, by various individual Daoists, taking the meaning of divine kingship to its most grandiloquent form.

ENTHRONEMENT

When Daoists made the gesture of coronation, kingship was symbolically equated with holiness or spiritual power. And this royal installation finds its physical seat at local temples. If it is understood that altars are also called thrones, with mortuary tablets usually carved in the form of a seat, then enthronement (lên ngôi) and mounting the altar are synonymous in the imperial metaphor partaken by both kings and tutelary spirits.

85 Sơn Nam recorded the participants as thấy vài, which can mean either monks and nuns, or healers, with a slightly different spelling thấy gái, another term for Daoists. See Sơn Nam, Cái Tích của Miên Nam, Văn Hóa, 1992, p.61.

86 Phan Xích Long, leader of the 1913 uprising, claimed to be not only a descendent of King Hạm Nghi, but at times the founder of the Ming dynasty. Ho Tai, Millenarianism... p. 69.

87 The origin of the Chinese chair, however, was attributed to the Buddhist teaching platform. See Fitzgerald, C. P., Barbarian Beds, the Origin of the Chair in China, A.N.U., Canberra, 1965, pp.58-59.
The Buddha Master of Western Peace, according to oral records, began his career with a claim to spiritual supremacy in the village of Kiến Thành, by installing himself on the altar of the resident tutelary spirit:

One morning [in 1849], at the village dinh of Kiến Thành, ...arriving to offer incense at the main altar, the caretaker saw a person sitting majestically on the tutelary spirit's throne. Scared out of his wits, he ran out yelling. The person lounging on the altar called him back. ...Approaching cautiously, the caretaker asked [who he was] and the person replied: "I am the Buddha Master, coming down into the world to rescue people!"

This extravagant behaviour was eventually tolerated, partly thanks to the caretaker's quick-mindedness in challenging the Buddha Master to help the cholera victims at the time, which he responded to with success. Others who roughly followed this pattern of conduct to invade Tây Ninh's Cao Đài temples in 1936, however, were not so fortunate:

One afternoon, after the midday ritual at the Main Temple, all senior adepts, functionaries, ... mediums went to retire. Only the temple guard stayed to watch. ...Suddenly, brother Nghĩa [the guard] heard a big noise in the temple hall. Hurriedly coming there, brother Nghĩa saw a group numbering about ten persons dressed in brown, with shaved heads, hands holding Bodhi rosary beads, who were pushing the statues of Buddhas, Immortals and Holy Sages off their thrones. Astounded, brother Nghĩa ... cried for help. As members arrived, they found all seven altar thrones ... were occupied by these people. ... At the same time, it was reported that two female gián dạo sĩ (bogus Daoists) went upstairs in the Goddess Temple [at a short distance away], pushed the statue of the Lady down, then proclaimed themselves Ladies Buddha Kwan Yin incarnate.

Following some struggle, when the rosary beads did not prove to possess the terrible power claimed by their owners, the 'deviant Daoists' (tả dạo), as this group was also called, were physically expelled. They were left to withdraw sheepishly to their hamlet. As Cao Đài members tidied up the temples, they collected a big bowl of loose Bodhi beads.

The Cao Đài temple was targeted possibly also because its rich and comprehensive palatial representation were thought superior to all others. The name Cao Đài itself connotes the Heavenly throne where the Supreme Divinity

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88 Đạt Sĩ and Nguyễn Văn Hậu, Thái Sơn..., p.68.
reigns. This symbolic conflation or enfoldment of divinity and royalty was sufficiently powerful to spawn shifts in meaning to the tower platform (literal gloss for Cao Đài) such as used in 1937 by Nguyễn Ngọc Diển, and about twenty years later, by the Coconut Monk.

FROM THRONE TO TOWER PLATFORM

Nguyễn Ngọc Diển had a tower built with a small hut on top, and then proclaimed himself to be the son of the Jade Emperor. He then proposed a wager to the provincial administrator of Chợ Lớn on his invulnerability, for the return of Vietnam’s independence.\(^{50}\) Fortunately, the province chief did not take up the bet, but had him committed to a mental hospital instead.\(^{91}\)

In 1938, another remarkable platform tower was set up in Tây Ninh by a group of ‘deviant’ Daoists from the above mentioned hamlet at the foot of Núi Bà Đen (the Black Lady mountain), to welcome the arrival of an Emperor (Đế Việt Nam). According to an eye witness account, the event attending its erection was publicised in advance and attended by about a hundred of these Daoists, who also used the tower to practise flying.\(^{92}\) Late that night, all the Daoists were rounded up and arrested by the colonial police, who also burnt down the tower, haycarts and the rows of huts set up for the ceremony. These Daoists ceased to be seen in Tây Ninh thereafter.\(^{93}\)

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\(^{50}\) For more details, see Ho Tai, *Millenarianism...*, pp.167-108.

\(^{91}\) According to Nguyễn Văn Trân, he asked the French to shoot him on the tower. If he was still alive, they must return Vietnam’s independence. This was probably in the 1930s. See *Chế Đệ...*, pp.310-315.

\(^{92}\) A placard was placed at gate Number 1 of the same Cao Đài temple with a written message announcing the arrival of an Emperor (Đế Việt Nam on 14th January 1938. About one hundred Daoists of both sexes gathered at the air field on the said day to celebrate the imperial appearance. A 40-thú tóc (feet) high wooden platform had been erected there, and there were two rows of three-storied houses, five to six each side of the tower, men on the left side and women on the right. At the foot of the tower, cartloads of hay were lined up to allow for flying exercises. Each Daoist was equipped with a pair of wings made of wooden frame and thin paper, ‘as big as a large tray’ (about 1m in diameter). While no emperor appeared, the flyers leapt and ended up unharmed in the haystack. Huỳnh Minh, *Tây Ninh...*, pp.173-4.

\(^{93}\) Ibid., p.174.
UPRISINGS, DIVINE KINGSHIP AND PATRIOTISM

The year 1938 also saw the emergence of another band of Daoists whose leader proclaimed to be a King Minh Hoàng Quốc: the Đạo Tuttoong (thinkers) group, whose total following then reportedly numbered over ten thousand. If the Tây Ninh flyers were unsure of their aeronautical power, the Thinkers group were adamant in their beliefs about invulnerability, and with fatal consequences.94 Given the speed of communication by the turn of this century in the South, the failed invulnerability of participants in the uprisings of Phan Xích Long groups in 1913 and 1916 must have been well known by 1939, when the Thinker Daoist himself publicly defied French bullets. Not long before that first and final test of their power, he and a band of his adepts offered to fight in the Second World War for France, knowing full well about modern warfare:

The District Chief was amazed at his assurance [as he stated] :"Cannons and big guns of the Germans can do no harm to the hard-as-metal bodies of mine and my followers". As if this was not enough, he challenged any unbeliever to try on his disciples at the Tân Châu sports field.95

Obviously to the armed members of secret societies and Thinkers group, the magic of invulnerability was their foremost weapon, not a desperate substitute. Their emergence under a sacred king must be understood to be linked with the claim of invulnerability. The main reason, in all probability, why the Thinker Daoist proposed to the district chief of Tân Châu to volunteer to fight in France, apart from an egotistical desire to be world famous, therefore was that the group’s trajectory was related more to supernatural elitism than to patriotism.96

Why did the beliefs persist? To rationalize them away like Trần Văn Giàu does, by saying talismans were used by secret societies' insurgents to psychologically redress the imbalance in weapons created by the modern guns, is to court pious condescension towards these groups in a dominant

94 Nguyễn Văn Kiềm, Tân Châu..., pp.176-186.
95 Nguyễn Văn Kiềm thinks it was a unique opportunity for the Daoist to show his loyalty to the Mother Country (France). Nguyễn Văn Kiềm, ibid., p.176.
96 Nguyễn Văn Kiềm, ibid.
nationalistic discourse.\textsuperscript{97} To be magically invulnerable attests to the authenticity of kingship, and conversely, the power serves as a passport for royalty to attain the realm of the sacred. It was invulnerability linked with the immortality of the prophet-leader vested in Huỳnh Phú Sơ that led to the belief of his return after his assassination in 1947, as mentioned in Chapter Six. And it was the demeanour of a divine king that Nguyễn Hiền Lê detected with him in the villa which served as headquarters for his political party in 1945:

And one afternoon, I followed [my cousin] Việt Châu to his place... Thầy Tự sat on a divan in the middle of the [ante-] room, we sat in chairs beside a table in front. ...He calmly and warmly exchanged polite enquiries with me, informed me of current affairs, then asked Việt Châu to show me the upstairs room where he obtained overseas news with a radio. I noticed there were only a few disciples in the house moving silently about to do small chores on his bidding. It was very quiet. ...The villa had the appearance of an ashram, not the headquarters for a revolutionary party.\textsuperscript{98}

If a southern peasant prostrated at the feet of Nguyễn An Ninh earlier, it was to this sacredness that he paid his respects. These diverse acts instanced the conception of social power in the matrix from which patriotism took its orientation. That matrix contextualized individualistic pursuits that are unique in their eccentric and bizarre responses to socio-political conditions. The above-mentioned 'Chief Marshal' Nguyên Ngọc Diệm was a relevant case: He travelled the delta provinces carrying a red wooden box, into which he asked poor peasants to drop their personal tax cards, so that he could officiate a collective burning of these symbols of slavish existence. Many responded to this rebellious appeal, as far away as Bạc Liêu and Cà Mau. He only avoided long-term imprisonment due to the French verdict of madness. On his prediction before he died that he would come back to life, many people from several villages came on the designated day to exhume his corpse. Ordered by the district mandarin, local authorities hurriedly came with soldiers to ensure his grave was never again to be touched.\textsuperscript{99}

\textsuperscript{97} Trần Văn Giàu, \textit{Sự Phát Triển...}, p.563.
\textsuperscript{98} Nguyễn Hiền Lê, \textit{Hồi Ký...}, p.243.
The conflation of the word Minh and the name of King Minh Mạng also took part in a mythologizing of kingship. And not without good reasons, as Ming Mạng was arguably the most powerful Nguyễn king, and may also have represented anti-French sentiment. In 1939, at the village of Dậu Đêm in Cai Lậy district of Mỹ Tho province, a Daoist named Mai Văn Hướng claimed he was a re-incarnation of King Minh Mạng, with a sizable following, and possessing the power of invulnerability. He was also called the Candle Daoist (Ông Đào Đèn), apparently because of the same method of treating illness with soot from candles, and of course, talismanic magic. Meanwhile another Daoist further in the upper reaches of Väm Cò river in the plain of Dông Tháp Mười, claimed that his daughter's newly-born son was a Minh Mạng reincarnation. People in surrounding areas flocked to pay tributes of food and money. A miniature capital and court was set up by the bank of Väm Cò river, with walls and moats, and an army of followers to defend it. A raid by the French ensued, scattered his army and forced the Daoist to flee. His daughter and her small son reportedly were arrested and died in prison.

All this symbolic play on the meaning of spiritual kingship shows how new construction of imaginary frameworks for deployment of knowledge-power made real use of traditional sources and resources. Its extravagance marks the vital and varied search and experimentation in the South which responded to the challenges of a fast changing world. In highlighting the idiosyncratic nature of the Daoists' paths, I contend that they left imprints in southern cultural forms far more expansive than hitherto envisaged. This impact on culture is attributed to their role in perpetuating the above twofold notions: of self-cultivation and healing/rescuing, of royalty and power, of perfectibility and social action. It is no surprise that the image of the Daoists in modern or western/ized literature is found captivated by those magico-mythical components of these notions. Especially during the struggle between the traditional and the revolutionary worldviews of the 1930s, works such as

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100 Hán Hoành, Nam Kỳ Lục Tỉnh..., p.176. Patients were given a candle to take home to light and inhale its fumes.
101 Ibid., pp.176-177
the play Đạo Sĩ written for children by Khải Hùng appropriated the Daoists’ image, considered defunct in children’s practical consciousness at the time.\footnote{Khải Hùng was a leading light of the famous Tư Lực Văn đoàn (Self Strengthening Writers) group.}

DEMISE OF THE IMAGE?

Reflecting a popular image of Daoists, Khải Hùng’s play Đạo Sĩ, though a minor work, is nevertheless an intriguing example.\footnote{Khải Hùng, Đạo Sĩ, Đài Nay, Hanoi, 1944.} In this fable, the Daoist is identified as a nine-tailed fox transformed by self-cultivation. This mythically constructed character is taken from a sinicised Buddhist adaptation of popular daoist imaginary characters recorded in the 15th-century Linh Nam Chích Quôì.\footnote{See the story of Hồ Tĩnh (fox spirit), tale no.3, in Trần Thọ Pháp, Linh Nam Chích Quôì (strange tales of Linh Nam), transl. Lê Hữu Ngọc, Khải Trí, Saigon, 1951, p.47.} The story of the play, however, as the author maintains, was adapted from a legend in Buddhist scriptures. As Khải Hùng summarises:

A Daoist went to the mountain and obtained powerful magic from long self-cultivation. One day he had a weird idea: to stop the rain for eight years by incanting a mantra (magic formula). The Heavenly Emperor (Trời) was frightened and had to send the Buddha to Earth in the guise of a beautiful woman to undo the evil magic of the Daoist. As expected, the Daoist fell for the feminine charm and readily lost his magical power. From then on, that region resumed its regular rainfall.

Whatever the origin of the tale, its scenario implies that Daoists no longer exist in the children’s real world. It does not take much to extrapolate this as the reiterated rhetorical absence of the King in adult Vietnamese reality in the 1930s, when the Chinese kingship model, defined by Tung Chung-shu, no longer applied:

Thus the king is but the executor of Heaven. He regulates its seasons and brings them to completion. He patterns his actions on its commands and causes the people to follow them.\footnote{Tung Chung-shu in his Luxuriant Dew from the Spring and Autumn Annals (Ch’un-ch’ü fan-lu) as quoted by Paul Rule in ‘Traditional Kingship in China’, in I.W. Mabbett (ed), Patterns of Kingship and Authority in Traditional Asia, Croom Helm, London, 1985, p.50.}
If this was the position of some Vietnamese intellectuals, in the hope for a dawning republic, then it was fraught with ambiguity. Especially with regards to an absent divine king whose vacated space was filled by a ruling power devoid of mandate and scruple, the symbolism is too close to the contemporary bone. Assuming the Daoist stands for colonial power, or technocracy, what kind of power is the charm of Buddhism? Moreover, in his foreword, the author introduces a modern twist:

Perhaps you [young readers] will agree with the writer: in hoping that there will be no more powerful Daoists. The more numerous they are, the more deeply they delve into cultivating magical powers in order to take the place of the Creator (Tạo Hóa), the more perilous our world will be. The day they become as powerful as the Creator will be the day this world is destroyed: Because the Creator is basically good, whereas they are fundamentally evil.\(^{106}\)

The debunking of 'black magic' was absorbed by a new Vietnamese metaphor in a general social critique. The double-entendre here is that the Daoists of old, in their megalomaniac pursuit, are identical to modern magicians, who could they be scientists, technocrats and/or politicians. What Khái Hùng envisaged as excesses of tradition and a misplaced sense of control can be read as a defense, construed as timeless, of logos (the Buddha as Heavenly Emperor’s chief minister/magician), in the original Greek meaning of the word, and Beauty (logos in disguise) as the ultimate magical power. If it only suggests a fortuitous intervention of mythical Beauty, it also underscores a rational suppression or neutralization of unreason or madness in debates on the relationship between truth, power and knowledge.

The Daoist as a social agent is definitely considered passé by modern intelligentsia. Whether the role is really extinct or survives under different guises, our view had better not be restricted to nationalistic frameworks which have so far gone unchallenged. To register disappointment, like many historians, in the Daoists’ inability to orchestrate their struggle, or unify the country and expel colonials is tantamount to belittling a cosmology that cannot fit well into the image of a nation. On the other hand, we are left with

\(^{106}\) Khái Hùng, ibid., p.3.
speculation as to what intuition they offered.\footnote{In C.S. Pierce's definition, intuition refers to 'unconditioned premisses', thus not built on already existing concepts. See for example Rochberg-Halton, E., Meaning and Modernity, Social Theory in the Pragmatic Attitude, The University of Chicago Press, 1986, p.73.} If the consequences of cultivation were about change of self definition and thereby redefining identities and differences between self and society, as was already discussed, and if the need to state one's existential position cannot be fulfilled by current religions and philosophies, then Daoists among others will be around much longer.\footnote{In the 1960’s, Hickey notes two householders Buddhists, the Bearded Daoist (ông Đạo Ba Râu), aged seventy, and the other 52 years, in Khánh Hâu village. At least the former, ông Đạo Ba Râu, fits in the category of Daoists in this chapter. There was also a Thầy Pháp, a farmer working part-time as sorcerer, and a healer, both are described as specialists in their skills, but not as ông Đạo. Hickey, G. C., Village in Vietnam, pp.64-66 & 79-80.}

Woven to the symbolism of the mountain, this perceived intransient Daoist imagery is underpinned by production ethos in the positivist sense. As Baudrillard points out, from the Latin root producere, where production means showing forward, in all grandiloquence and theatrics. By so doing, this imagery evokes, if only dialectically, the other important aspect of eccentricity and madness of seduction, 'that which is everywhere and is opposed to production'\footnote{Baudrillard, Forget Foucault, p.21.} -- in the sense of the word seduce meaning 'leading astray' or presenting other ways. This aspect has been ignored in descriptions of supernatural practices.

'Wayward practices' involve excursions into the realm beyond and betwixt symbols, exploring otherness in this transitive/trance state. They have since long been marginalized and belittled. We cannot really fathom the depth of public acceptance for this wayward, mad behaviour unless we appreciate the Daoists trajectory in parallel or complementary to that of the poetics of mediums and trance dancers. Both of these paths exhibit properties that are mobile, fluid, resilient -- like reflections and shadows off the river waves.
CONCLUSION

This study has shown that an overview of Vietnamese supernaturalism in the Mekong delta is attained through an examination of four different realms. From this perspective, two common important themes can be discerned, whereby we can come to comprehend a fundamental component of popular response to the challenges of a transforming society. The four realms, which overlap in message contents but remain distinct in expression and format, are:

1. The village communal house, or *dinh*, where local participants emulate the court élite in Daoist-Confucian formats;
2. The Chinese Buddhist-Daoist private temple, or chūa, where a three-religion pattern adapted from Chinese émigrés has been practised and modified to suit historical and social circumstances;
3. The mediums' practice, which evolved with the southward advance (*Nam Tién*), through interaction with various ethnic groups and with a new environment;
4. The practice of self-cultivation which serves as a matrix of potentials for personal empowerment and social changes. Among the outstanding proponents of this practice were the Daoists, who contributed to the colourful deployment of resources of a great section of Mekong delta population.

These four realms are permeated with 1.x-o major southern Vietnamese concerns: an abiding interest in alternate states of consciousness, and the way in which people appropriate meanings and rituals to effectively resist, negotiate or assert social power as part of the protean art of daily survival.

ALTERNATE STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

For the *dinh*, events surrounding tales of supernatural power (*linh*), (Chapters One and Two), show how beliefs in the connection between dreaming, trance states and everyday existence continue to enjoy popular adherence. Spirit-writing, at the private pagoda Dàn Tiên (Chapter Three), demonstrates that
taking recourse to alternate states of consciousness was not restricted to the less educated section of southerners, and cannot be simplistically attributed to ignorance or marginality.

The worship of goddesses and of a female god (Chapters Four and Five), further revealed that old fertility and matrifocal emblems and themes evoked trance possession. While these themes relate to agrarian life, trance mediumship also provides healing and solace for marginalized groups. Self-cultivation, by contrast, relied less on divine intervention by appealing to individual will and effort. Nevertheless, at the turn of this century, some popular schools of self-cultivation delved into dream life and other trance phenomena. These include supernatural events involving epiphanic experiences as markers of progressive stages along the individual path of self-perfection (Chapter Six).

The belief in invulnerability is another facet of self-cultivation not unrelated to alternate states of consciousness. Invulnerability forms part of popular understandings of power and cosmology in the South. Those who were called ông dạo (Chapters Seven and Eight) constituted a distinct group with their idiosyncratic and innovative appeal for a better world through self-cultivation. This brings us to the second theme of commonality.

SOCIAL NEGOTIATION AND RESISTANCE

If dinh practice displays a hegemonic male and monarchical ethos in the propitiation of tutelary spirits, it also continues to facilitate negotiation and readjustment between different social groups. Tales related to the supernatural powers of the spirits, despite being less credible to educated groups, continue to legitimate the status-power of, at least, those who have an interest in maintaining 'local tradition'.

Changes in ritual forms, whether the discontinuation of an item or the rewriting of a text, inevitably reflected changing social relations, which lead to an assertion of certain identities and a reshuffling of status within the village hierarchy or between it and regional/state power groups. Even within constant
forms, we still find space for the articulation of protest. The evolution of the
dinh suggests that its birth was but another stage in the evolution of local and
localised patterns and norms appropriated by diverse social groups.

Similarly, spirit-writing in the Daoist-Buddhist practice at Đàn Tiến
pagoda is an instance of local expressions on particular philosophical, social
and political views. Trance possession in mediumistic practice provides further
examples in which rituals enable negotiation and contestation through healing
and through performative art forms. The decision to embark on self-
cultivation, considered as part of a healing process, initiates the development
stages of a social engagement, or means of affecting the person’s social
environment.

Daoists from the mountain (đạo sĩ, or dìng đạo) embodied the path of
self-cultivation which began with a cathartic personal event. Their prestige was
aided by popular belief in the powers evinced by sacred mountains. The
Daoists’ innovative approaches to healing and magic also partook of the
promotion of millenarian thought. Their concern for individual well-being
ostensibly overlaps or intertwines with communal and national aspirations.
From a solitary and self-defined identity, to a leadership role which challenged
existing authorities, the Daoists’ contribution to southern history is definitively
manifest.

VIEW OF THE PAST

Supernaturalism may therefore be seen as a storehouse, from which various
means are tried out in response to historical and environmental challenges.
The vitality of supernaturalism in Vietnam is one of the cultural givens. The
selective and circumstantial appropriation of the past indicates that ‘animism’,
ancestral worship or belief in magic do not simply pertain to a substratum of
popular imagination. Rather, these modules of ritual or assemblies of meaning
are immanent. They combine and enfold, ideas, forms and practices within
and across ethnic boundaries.
I have addressed these issues in what might be regarded as unorthodox ways - by establishing, in a sense, an investigation aimed at revealing the richness, subtlety and much of cultural data that has been ignored in favour of a predominantly (Western) empiricist and rationalist discourse of Vietnamese popular religion. My central premise has been the need to take seriously the beliefs, practices and statements of southern proponents and practitioners of supernaturalism. Hence my relatively stronger focus on such sources as oral histories, popular literature, and trance writings.

My aim has not been one of translating the practitioners' culturo-logical interpretations of history into dominant Western intellectual frameworks. It is their logic I sought, with the intention of explaining their history in their own, rather than functionalist, terms. Thus, for example, I distinguish Daoist supernaturalism in the 1930s from interpretations which characterise the phenomenon as an anticolonialist discourse. Political imperatives and ramifications there may have been, but these do not, and cannot, explain or encompass southern supernaturalist belief-as-knowledge or practices.

I see history as a pool of experiences and meanings, always available for the purposes of identification and the establishment of identity, for the appropriation of the means to resist, negotiate or challenge as well as to dominate. By apprehending something of the central beliefs of people in the past, this study affirms a conviction that a history of supernatural beliefs and practices, per se, will complement the historiography of national consolidation, of local resistance to and exploitation by the centre. At the same time, by focusing on the above-mentioned aspects of Vietnamese realities, it will avoid being subordinated to the formal articulation of state power. Especially in the context of the southward migration since the seventeenth century, the more we recognise that ethnic interaction does not always result in conflict, that supernatural practices undergo diverse changes which result from innovative responses to local challenges, and that the personal dimension, as far as crisis resolution and agency are concerned, is not as divorced from the communal and national dimension as has been imagined, the more our understanding of history will be enriched.
APPENDIX A
Translation of Certificate from King Tự Đức for the Tutelary Spirit of Thỏi Bình dính:

"The Tutelary Spirit, who has previously been granted the title of Generous, Righteous, Greatly Beneficial Spirit, has long been serving the country, protecting the people and manifesting supernatural responsiveness. I whose virtue is lacking, but having received the great mandate, always think of the laudable service the Spirit has rendered, therefore decree that the title: 'Generous, Righteous, Greatly Beneficial, Continually Strengthening' be granted to the Spirit. I also decree that the village of Thỏi Bình in Phong Phú district to continue honouring the Spirit like before. And the Spirit to be responsible for the protection of my people. With respect,

The Fifth Year of Tự Đức Reign, the eleventh month, twenty-ninth day,
(Seal: Precious Imperial Decree)."
APPENDIX B

I. Procedure for routine service on the 1st and 15th days of the lunar month at Đàn Tiên temples:

1. Three rounds of brass bell by sutra leader for assembly. The main chapel’s ambient air being purified with sandalwood fume.

2. Members kneel in rows behind the Sâm Chù (sutra leader, henceforth SL), who faces the Buddhas’ altar. The two front rows are occupied by senior adepts.

3. SL makes 3 prostrations at each two ends of hall.

4. SL cleanses the air with branch swish or gardinia flower-

5. Praying with incense: to Buddha and Bodhisattvas,

6. Chanting Heart-oriented Sutra (Quy Tâm Sâm). This is a special formality to Đàn Tiên. Prostrations are made in the directions of the four Protectors (Tứ Trấn).

7. Offering of water.

8. Opening of the big bell, by an dept of third grade or higher.

9. Big bell sounded, followed by wooden bell

10. Reciting three times the ten Mahakaruna Sutra mantras (Đại Bi Thập Chữ)

11. Praising (tần) the incense holder.

12. Opening the sutras (khai kinh)

13. Chanting of sutras, including the Red (Great?) Names Sutra, Salvation (Ullambana) Sutra, Amitabha Sutra, Heart (Paramitährdaya) Sutra.

14. Three prostrations. Or for the 1st and 15th days of the lunar months:

15. Welcoming prostration; brass bell ringing.

16. Sutra leader naming each Buddha/Bodhisattva on the 9 altars to be saluted with prostrations

17. Chanting sutras

18. Chanting mantras sending off the Buddhas/Bodhisattva

19. Prostrations three times in each of two opposite directions (to higher and lower divinities with altars along the North-South axis of temple).

II. For funerary services at the 21st and 49th days after death:

For items 1 to 11: As above
1. Three rounds of brass bell by sutra leader for assembly. The main chapel's ambient air being purified with sandalwood fume.

2. Members kneel in rows behind the Sâm Chù (sutra leader, henceforth SL), who faces the Buddhas' altar. The two front rows are occupied by senior adepts.

3. SL makes 3 prostrations at each two ends of hall.

4. SL cleanses the air with branch swish or gardinia flower.

5. Praying with incense: to Buddha and Bodhisattvas,

6. Chanting Heart-oriented Sutra (Quy Tâm Sâm). This is a special formality to Dàn Tiên. Prostrations are made in the directions of the four Protectors (Tử Trần).

7. Offering of water.

8. Opening of the big bell, by an adept of third grade or higher.

9. Big bell sounded, followed by wooden bell

10. Reciting three times the ten Mahakaruna Sutra mantras (Đại Bi Thập Chữ)

11. Praising (tăn) the incense holder.

12. SL writing on the phan paper, symbolically with a pen, tracing in the air over the paper, while the congregation recite the Sutra of the Medicine Buddha.

13. Sutra Platform Procession (đi kinh dàn, or diến dàn): 13 adepts of third grade (tam điều) upwards, with the sâm chù at the head, leading the deceased's relative in walking meditation, repeating the mantra of Great Compassion (Mahakaruna) and the Ten (common) mantras. The circumambulation makes three rounds clockwise in the main chapel.

14. Opening the sutras (khai kinh): Upon returning to initial position, the sutra leader reads the second petition.

15. Chanting of sutras, including the Great (Red?) Names Sutra, Salvation (Ullambana) Sutra, Amitabha Sutra, Heart (Paramitahridaya) Sutra.

16. Three prostrations.

17. Procession resumed at the passage of praying to Tứ Thanh (Four Sages) in the Heart Sutra. The Amitabha mantra is then to be recited 108 times during this walk.

18. Return to initial position for chanting the Ten Direction Sutra, Origination (turning about of consciousness) Sutra and taking Refuges.

III. For other days of the series of funeral services, there is no sutra procession. If Kwan Yin is prayed for, the "Sutra of the Universal Door" (Phổ Môn) replaces the "Four Sages" (Tứ Thịnh) prayers.

Thus for the items 1 to 12, and 15 onward: as above.

For items 13 and 14:

13. Recite the Ten Mahakaruna mantras
14. Sutra Platform procession, etc.
APPENDIX C

Poems From Spirit-Writing in TIỂN DÂN TRƯỜNG THIÊN TẬP


Liễu Thái buồn tả thái dương văn
Ngạc tràn nghiêm thần tình đường năn
Quốc đô tông làm tướng nhạc danh
Hà văn thực nguyệt trạm họ tảng
Lý Huyễn hào lữ cố thành mang
Trường lê thu tân cỏ thoát thành
Chút mộng hình tiên đọc thành
Người la đạo ỷ nguyệt đồng thành

Cầu trời nam thực may giảng
Rạng thành trần thế người lăng đường suông
Bồn bể luận sắc tổ tướng
Đối Trần làm Hội bồn phương an nhân
Phú Lai có tích Huyễn Trang
Tiền sa xưởng thể tâm đăng quay lên
Nhăr Châu tiên pháp xuống lên
Mận cẩn trao lại đủ bền tu thân
Dôn nay cho nổi không thân
Để đây trước mặt người lăng chẳng ra
Người hiện có tục bước qua
Vượt vọng biển khó đăng mũi đi lên
Bỏ con het thi giấy bến
Đặng cho cha mẹ kéo lên thúy này
Bồn bể lừa khởi bùa vây
Mẫu chuẩn lệ bước có ngày khôi tay
Ăm ыта đường rẽ lan lũi
Người lơn có ắc ngời đại chen chút
Giữ người rằng đẹp sau lòng
Sọn xuchs đem xét bồi đến âm công
Kẻ hiện người trĩ phải phỏng
Giữ xem cầm gạo để xưng qua sông
Âi hạ song bỏ chớp chẳng
Thẳng bước chút lũi phải phỏng trước sau
Dường ngày dương thẳng gần trau
Dằng khi vượt bước khối ao lên bến
Rồng dương mặc sức sơn sọ
Kẻ câu không lòng bạt thô chẳng nghĩa
Quỳnh trống rutow cắm đầy và
Rước người không bồng bồחר thi bể chẳng lỡ

311
Trường sao châm chấn dạy họ
Dịch khả không lỡ tiếng đế thành thạo
Đàn cầm chẳng nhạc trời cao
Cô giáo nghe đăng đền trao ta cầm
Bông gió xem xét châm chấn
Ngồi cùng giảng đạo còn nữa trong
Trên lâu mốt cửa chạc hồng
Rụng người ban ngọc núi tổng hoàng sau
Tam quan quấn đành ngồi trao
Huyền cổ nhiên bảo lâu lâu chối giảng
Tam môn căn bè nguyên căn
Hơn đồn luyện đăng thiết hàng viễn mình
Hư gươm mai bên trái tình
Mình châu ứng hiện văn hình trạng tình
Truyền trao ngữ đăng quang mình
Buồn ra kếp giảiหวã tình nhở to
Lật phần mâu nhiên đảy đó
Thành kính chằng đếm người mồ sao ra
Sôm khuya xem xét trong nhà
Nhăn lòng đế từ trở già nghiêm suy
Đối cään nghĩa lý nhiên kỳ
Vừng hông ta bước liên tri ta chẳng.

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LUẬN KHUYẾN CÁNH MỄ VĂN - Cựu Phạm Cao Đài cho ("Essay Advising on Awakening from Delusion" - given by the Cao Đài Supreme Being),
Book One.

Phột Tiền trôi Đất nơi nơi
Biển sông gành nửa chối nơi thế gian
Cây rừng cầm thụ cũ vàng
Đường xê cánh cúc mới ah thú đỡ này
Khỏa mạnh lũ tước tạo đấy
Ao hồ bạo giếng nhiều ngày tốt xinh
Đá/u chớp sáng thanh mình
Mấy có rằng tiệt thái bình đôi xữa
Ngày nay ta phải lộc lự
Lành nên lời đổi lòng som tru đam về
Bô ai thoát khỏi sống mê
Ăi hứa vụt đăng gán kẹ Phột tiên
Nưng trang như sỉ thoát hiện
Tình say thực đây vụt mình sống qua
Từ xưa làm duy đâu xa
Bô, chúng xem xét thể hóa an thân
Mười năm hướng hóa hòa an cho cần
Một tay nho đăng xác thân siêu phẩm
Về đến mươi tháng phải cam
Quan an sư phụ tự tam trọn nghĩ
Phật tiên phẩm tự khắc chi
Mây ai tự tận vây mà nên tiên
Vững theo Phật tổ giáo truyền
Thâm câu xem xét mới thiện nhân thân
Nhân nghe hết thấy quan dân
Mây lời khuyên hệ phạm trần tử bi
Ta nay lòng cùng thuong vi
Một tướng xuống thể một khi tổ bay
Bộ ai hiện triệt thông hay
Hỏi tấm hồi ngược trở quay quê xưa
Khuyên ai giữ đa sơ mầu truva
Lời rứt thần nời ta van thuong thằng

Nước trong một cuộc thể máy rồng
Mùon thủ kinh cùng nhiễm máy không
Trái lại đường xua cắt tạo hóa
Cặp ghenh vàng nước gian ba dồng
Khô lòng trưởng đoàn thứ một môi
Tóm lại đường nuôi ca ở lòng
Thương gián hai nơi đều dùng thằng
Bất trong nữa chắc chẳng hề trông

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'SÁM TRUY ĐẠI ĐỌ' ("Sutra of Great Salvation"), Book Eight.

1 Phật xua lời thế tổ tương
bồn tâm nguyện hướng dân đường chung sanh
thiện nam tự như tự lành
mỗi người thế Phật lòng thành ngày nay
5 ba hướng trước ổn lẽ bày
khoảng hòng đại độ rồng ngày cao thơm
trorang nghĩ sẵn chủ gánh tàng
tùng kinh kẻ niệm tự tâm trọn bè
nguồn vọng nên đạo bồ độ
10 khỏi vọng đa lạc câu và Tây Phương
Hợp Minh Tam Bảo ngộ thương
Tam thằng sắc linh chủ trượng sanh câu
Đai nam phong sự khỏi đâu
lê truy đại độ chiếu thu cảnh đại
15 Chiến tranh tự nạn bình hải
vang sanh cùng kinh độ lại số phần
muội phương Phật chiếu phẩm trần
chín phương trời đất Thánh Thần anh linh
nguồn tâm tịch một chúng sinh
20 huyện biên Pháp liên trì hành đầu đầu
Loĩnh Hoà hội khắp năm châu
chuyên luận thế giải dấu đầu chương lâu
người nhận trong cuộc biên đầu
bao nhiêu tôi lội bắc đầu lành riêng
25 câu tuyên dương thế khác miếng
muôn phần thematic đặc diện tài nạn
muôn sâu gian đẽ bạo tàn
phát tan bộ cói-gay dân chiến tranh
giết người hâm hiu chẳng lành
30 thấy trời cũng khắp bài gánh độc ngang
đời đầu cứ nát nhà tan
xốn: Cảnh thành phố chẳng an khắp cùng
quyết tranh lấy tiên anh hùng
đặng vua thua giấc mộng cùng thứ phú
35 âm sét gây ngàn sanh thù
thấu tài bất cực nữa mãi trở
của người đọt chê chẳng thời
r cela lòng đa vô bể thêm thương
tiếng khúc thiên hóa nhiều nhặt
40 cảm ngần thuộc ương tuyệt đường sanh nhiều
đân làm bất bất giảm hoài
kể trôi than khổ khó nada khó trông
phi cắt tại nan chấp chòng
đại hang ăn nứt con bông lo đầu
45 hoa giao lão cuốn hoàn câu
nghe gian sâm nò tiên sâu biên cường
thấy đối tì hi phi thương
thực dân sâm đủc tham cường đối di
oan hồn uong tự ai bi
50 không nơi nương đứa đó quí hàng ngày
thiên ma định đầu thẩm thay
tron phieu phách lạc bình lấy thiệt nhiều
ông nhà ngọc trực trên chiến
giải dân quản linh mạng liều làm thương
55 đa đang chiến tranh xướng tang
con dân gánh chịu phải mang khó biện
nghe kinh tổ thành Phật Tiên
tròn luôn nghiệp trường cần kiến nọ đối
phương chăm đường cả thành thất
60 lòng thành sám chủ nước lối nguyên ra
Một câu Đức Phật Di Đa
do đạt tiếp dân lành xa côi trần
hào quang phong trước thị ảnh
lương diuyên đất sách chẳng ngăn ngại chi
65 Hai nguyên Thích ca mâu nỉ
dở về Cúc Lạc qui y hành tự
chẳng rõ mình bách Bồn Sự
siêu phàm nghiệp thành an cực chỉ thành
Ba cầu Sự Tổ Tam Thanh
70 diệu thấu đẹp hết chiến tranh phức hồi
người mủ cảm lạy đau rôi
mình mong biên khó luận hội phân động
mỗi hay sắc sức thì không
Chẳng dồn chập sắc mà không cùng đường
75 Bồn nguyên Lào Tổ Hồng quân
thời bình đam mê rằng vung trăng thành
vật người đông sông hòa thành
khuyên đừng làm hại sát sanh tâm tượng
Nam cầu Đại Thánh Tạng vững vàng
80 siêu người bác độ quê hương đất về
cùng người bình thọ tự tế bồ
thần hồn độ hệt Jê huệ Tuyết Phương
Sau nguyên Chân Đề, Pháp Vụng
thần thông chuyển động chiến tranh tượng đẹp tan
85 mồ rộng quặc thế dàn an
tầm thấy chỉ giáo Niết bàn vô dữ
Bầy cầu Giác Hải Đạo Tù
ba kỳ hô hối lại tôn sự để huề
dấn ngheo phải chịu trăm bồ
90 miếng Nam sau tính ai chế đạt nỗi
trước làm ta sau làm thấy
buồn cutter the sự án may xung ông
Trời tròn nguyên khuyết non sông
Đạo nào giữ đổi tu không tại mình
95 Tam nguyên Quan Thanh Đề linh
Chỉ cống chỉ chánh độ lành the gian
Giải trừ tất cải bạo tăng
dục còn khiếu là dỗ an dân lành
Chân cầu Nhận Định Tôn Hạnh
100 Việt Nam trái lại mới thành tam thông
Đồng đường khắp chốn mặt trông
kéo người vào cuộc cho dòng ngộ ngàn
lở và lở tối thơ than
lời cười lỡ khắc lỡ an Nam kỳ
105 độ họ tam chúc năm truy
quốc dân lần lộc xác chịu nhân mà
trừ do đắc lấp lấy ta
Việt Nam thống nhất ông chưa mỗi gióng
một nguyên Phước Đức Hồ Thân
110 Thê âm Nam Hải bộc chuyển Tư Hằng
Việt ngán phiền loạn tai nận
Sambil thành Tãy công tiêu tan can của nhà
Phù Xuân Tân Thuận đồng quân
long trở tiếng sông bốc phÈ bả tro
115 Ông Lành Câu Mơi Câu Kho
Chữ Y Xóm Cửi terug to ghe chìm
dương mÈ sống Lè quang Liêm
hoanh hành dàn lòa cháy tiêu tổ người
kể bình người chết thấy chuta
120 hài hằng nước mắt như mưa thâu trời
Nam bố nội loạn các nơi
lỗi dụng dân phải xây đói Thần cộng
Thây như lạch nước lòng sông
nou không lạch nước nào thông thằng dòng
125 qui y phải rã tâm lòng
cô Thây đại dân thoát vòng tử sanh
Nhận nhieu làm lơi tu hành
mò chủng đồ lưng cho rành học thường
hoặc là sẽ sột nơi lòng
130 trong lúc tương niệm chất lòng tương xa
tâm viên y mạ tài bá
Cuối nạn lạy Phật thư tha chấn chô
ban ơn tiêu tổ lòng lẹ
chù tâm sâm tưởng mong nhì ơn dư
135 nhiều ngày trong thằng tự u
lời vàng tiêng ngọc Tôn sét dùng hòa
thường khuyên trái gai tre gẫy
tượng kinh niệm Phật sãm ca can lê. 
Dạo Thích hủ-vi? (Tứ Đại)

Kìa lang kia chẳng xét vụ thời
Lắm say, mửa rồi tới bời.
Bi thương chưa gặp người đi đoàn
Ich chỉ thấy lực trại dưng?
Khốn bạc vàng muốn ngăn trời sông.
Thất là uông cộng
Thật có ích chỉ đâu nà?
Tội tội thay
Biết hội ai cho tương bổn mặt
Kẹo xọn xắn lòng.
Như dao cắm tâm can.
Tồn hào câu...muốn
Lo lắng làm bổn chốn
Đời ba lang,难忘 bảy tông
Xüm nhau mà lấp chứa miếu
Quanh năm quí kể
Hướng đăng chời loka
Bơi có đ输 trong nhà
Cưa cải muốn toàn
Mãidem xài cho bổ di
Giâu có để làm chi-
Muốn tôn hào xuất đời ba chục
Cừng Phát cho nhiều
Cho khởi đơ trăm lan
Nhê xuta lúc nhà Lương
Võ Ðế làm tài lương
Cừng vị lòng mê Phát Tổ
Nên nuôi nhà nghiêng ngủa.-
Bình nghịch đã lấy phù
Nhất Lai đâu mất
Không ai khuôn phó?
Cam thân đã cể đở
Vi Phát lấp chút
Nên nơi thân giằng san;
Hơi người đồng bằng-
Chở người mê kéo nhau thúc đẩy
Quết sách mấy mưa
Theo ngọn được vấn mánh.

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APPENDIX E

A Poem Attributed to the Buddha Master of the Western Peace.


Làm người tự giác tự mình,
Phật Tiên mến tường Thiên Đình cùng thượng
Tu tâm tu tâm giữ thường,
Tu trong kinh giáo Phật Dương truyền ra.
Tu tính tu hành нет na,
Tu câu Lục Tự Di Đà dùng quên.
Tu hành hiểu nghĩa đôi bền,
Tu cang tu ki găng bền hiểu trung.
Tu nhơn tu đức để lòng,
Tu trau véc ngọc làm bìn dùng mạng.
Tu công đê dự mỗi dàng,
Tu tài bố thì việc gian thì dùng.
Tu câu thành thơ thiên xuân,
Đành khoản cất phụ khỏi oan cơ hạn.
Tu câu vạn hài thiên san,
Hà thành hung vọng vững bang thái bình.
Thưa hồn là Phật đức kinh,
Lạy Thầy đức hòa tại sanh dạo mâu.
APPENDIX F
Source: Lê Thái Sanh (Cậu Năm), Kinh Vô Vi Nhớ, c. 1940, handwritten and typed copies from private collection, 1974.

Tu hành là quí nhất trong đời
Tu trọng vô vi mới thành thật,
Tu giác giác thừa dường bất chước
Ngã thân thân dỗ chờ nghề kãi
Tây phương trước mặt không xa xác,
Trời Phát trên tâm khỏi thành mới
Nhất nhiễu huyền quang thông vận pháp
Hội quang phân chiếu bể trò đất!

Trò đất, học đạo phải quang minh,
Phát Phát ma ma cùng tài minh,
Ma ấy thing âm và sắc tượng,
Phát là chánh tánh lại vô hình.
Giác quan chẳng mặt phán duyên giác,
Sanh sầu thì ra cùng chúng sanh.
Nhất niệm bất sanh toàn thể hiền,
Lực căn tái dòng xuống Diễm đình.

TU CỦA MINH

1. Hoàng thiên bất phủ đạo tâm chơn,
Học Phát can go, dạ chế sơn,
Chỉ nguyên xả than đến quí nghịếp,
Đọc tâm nuôi niêm tránh công căn.
Nơi câu giáo pháp, câu tâm Phát,
Chỉ cậy tiền thân, cậy tâm chơn.
Ngự giới tâm quí là đồ giác,
Minh tâm kiến tận miện là hết.

2. Hòn ở không, an của chúng sanh,
Minh tu hây tụ đồ thân minh,
Trời không ở, chúng xin thơ phương,
Phát chẳng kêu ngưới, biết thành kinh.
Người đủ ám thăng lên Xa Lợi
Ta trở thần khu hiệp chơn linh.
Theo phương y lạy và trông cây,
Tứ đại thân sau sở chút sinh.

3. Sinh lên xop xuống gân không bền,
Tu đường chân thần đạo mạt nên,
Sống vòng phán mạng ham huyền huyền,
Thức rôi trở độc nhịp đến đen.
Ai ních, ly sự thì đi xuống,
Kẻ biết an thanh được bước lên.
Tu Phát tu Trời реш ộ gân bên,
Tận là Trời Phát ở gân bền.

4. Đơn đạo bền đối gị một bền,
Tu là cu hỏi Hiệp chúng bền
Cân tâm tĩnh duồng ba ngôi bau,
Đồng cua trau đối một chủ Quan.
Thiết động thi phi sanh như khác,
Khâu khai thần khi chuy như nên,
Nhơn thanh bất đố, hà thần đố?
Thoát khỏi luôn hè, hết xuống lên.
5. Lên chọn Đại La phải dài hùng,  
Kéo dem chữ thì distra kẹ chung,  
Đất tiêu rưng đồng tâm không rưng,  
Trở cỏ lung lay, tâm chẳng rung.  
Ngày rộng thân quang trôi sau giấc,  
Đến sợi đốn hư rừng nầm củng.  
Pháp Luan Thường chuyễn an căn gừng,  
Phếp niệm sanh theo chớ cuôi cùng.

6. Cùng nhau nay đã phát mình rồi  
Giữ chặt đội mũ chờ hóa mội  
Phạm tận chung vở, chơn tận hiện,  
Nhớn tâm trừ xuất, Đạo tâm trừ.  
Thánh Tiên Phát Thánh tình chung một,  
Ngọc hạ âm dương lý phi đâu.  
Đạo ca truyền bày nhờ khảo khuấy,  
Hoằng mang lợt cháo mừng luôn mỗi.

7. Nội chia là tên Khi với Thần,  
Khi Thần biết hiệp hòa Kim Thần,  
Thần là chơn Hồng, hóa hai tâm,  
Khi ấy kỳ Diên, hiệp nữ can.  
Hai tâm mơ màng, tái yêu yêu,  
Nự can ức mạch, mặt tranh tranh.  
Thần người yêu lý là tài mặt,  
Tái mặt chửa gom, đạo chưa gian.

8. Gần đạo xa đại là tự nhiên,  
Tu hành phải thư chở thấm hay yên.  
Đôi mẻ vật chất cạn đơ khó,  
Đạo thực tình thần phần bốn nguyên.  
Đội ủ cung Càn sanh có cội,  
Đạo về ngồi Khẩn hóa Tiên Thiền.  
Ai mà thoát khỏi vòng luân chuyển,  
Mỗi nơi tu hành chứng Phát Tiễn.

9. Tiên Phát xua kia voc cùng phán,  
Phạm mà chẳng niệm thời mé mang  
Côi tranh lòng xơn tâm thanh tĩnh,  
Cảnh tục chẳng rạng tỉnh định nam.  
Ngày đạo nhà người không sợ đói,  
Đệm về bốn thảch chẳng cần am.  
Chính trang hai lọ, mé và giấc,  
Kia hỡi ai mé có biết nhầm?

10. Nhắm nghe nhắm nội mỗi tu chơn,  
Đạo ca chính trong một chuẩn Huấn,  
Xây trò đâu xa cùng bốn thành,  
Đạo đâu rồi trở lại nguồn còn.  
Mế mang lúc np, báo nhiêu đại  
Tình nợ ngày nay làm lúc hồn.  
Kết cự tiến hung và hữu kết,  
Hoằng thiên bất phủ đạo tam nhơn.
APPENDIX G

Source: AN HÀ NHẬT BÁO (Le Courier de l'Ouest) 13/12/1917, p. 9.

‘DAO HÒA PHÓ THANG’ (Anonymous)


Mà cũng may ! Có khi len như vậy rồi bớt ơn dịch. Lại tại này : Bij mỗi lần len thì dột thang vớt pháo nhiều quả. Trong Thương pháo có điểm sành là vị gặt té vì chỉ trong sành ra thôi khi. Vậy khi nào có thời khí dột pháo trong nhà mình thì tôi làm. Và lại dột thang cháy rầm rầm không chết bớt té vì sao ?

...Và lại Quang Công hỏi sành tiện hay ghét người khác xù, nếu lớn qua đẩy thì làm hại cho Annam...
APPENDIX H

AUTOBIOGRAPHIC NOTES

Mr. Phùng Ngọc Chân (1891-1975)

Transcript from a 1975 taped record.

Trước kia ông vốn là một nhỏ sỉ bán hàng, làm ăn không hợp thời, làm ruộng thì không trồng mùa, đi buôn lén thì lở lớn, đi buôn nhỏ thì lở nhỏ. Ông phải nuôi mẹ và hai người em, vợ yêu con thơ làm không đủ nuôi gia đình. Ông mới bận tinh cũng bà Cốc, bà cũng bằng lòng cho ông đi kiếm sò khắc làm ăn, chỗ ở vện làm không đủ sống. Vấn bất đắc, từng qua nên ông xin đi lĩnh Mạch Mả.


Cuộc hành trình di núi Cấm ở Thất Sơn, 1938.

Ông kéo hai người đề từ, Truyện và Thăng, đón ghe. Ngày 20 tháng tư năm ấy khởi hành, ghé Trà Nóc thắm và giải từ bà Đì Sấu, nghĩa đầy một đêm vì gặp đâm nhà của vợ Xã Tân chết thịnh lĩnh. 6 giờ sáng khối đi, ngày đi đệm nghỉ. Đi hết hai ngày mới đến Tri Tôn, Xã Tôn, vùng Bây Núi của tỉnh Châu Đốc. Ông giỏi thích ghe đầu trong ben Xã Tón cho một người bạn họa xua, nhà ở gần đó. Sáng ngày 24 bắt đầu đi lên núi Cấm. Một đề từ gần do, còn tốt đưa có nên lên đó. Đi từ cắm, đủ được một cặp thì nghỉ một hồi, đi luôn liên tiếp không tiên vi ông bải xỉi như một xác chết, đi một chút phải nghỉ. Đi như vậy từ 6 giờ sáng đến 4 giờ chiều mới lên đến chót núi, ở lại diễn thể chú vị, không quên thuộc với ai hết.

Ông mời năm nghỉ tại diên, sai hai đưa đề từ kiếm củi và nấu nấu câu cơm. Khích do có một ông già xác trên 70 tuổi đến hỏi ông từ đâu đến, có việc gì? Ông bèn trả lời: “Chúng tôi từ Cần Thơ lên đây kiếm chỗ tu hành, đi đến đây đã tới, xin ở tạm nơi đây để sáng mai đi kiếm chỗ cắt cỏ. Ông làm ơn chỉ dắm chỗ nào trông chia cho chúng tôi một kinh omu.ones để cắt cỏ ở thời”.

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Ông ấy bên trái lộ: "Được, ông đọc lòng ông, tôi sẵn lòng giúp cho".
"Xin lỗi ông cho tôi biết qui danh?", ông Ngoại mỉm hỏi tên ông.
Ông trả lời:
- Xưa tôi ở Ba Rằng, Hồng Ngự, cùng là nho sỉ, giáo sư Trần Quang Nghĩa. Ngươi trong lòng bấu tôi làm chức Kế Hiến Cố Văn, nhưng đem thấy thế sự bất công, nên tôi chán nản kiêm nội thành vận ăn dặm, tu tâm dưỡng tánh. Tôi len ủi nửa năm trên 20 năm rồi. Nay tôi thấy thấy trò ông có ông giống mồ đào, tôi sẵn lòng giúp cho".

Ngày hôm sau, ông tập họp dạo hưu, nam nữ được muốn làm người, sang sớm đã đến ngay, kẻ len, người bả, còn bấy đây tâm ni có thi cấu liêm, lợi hại. Dàn ông thì lo đôn cọc, kêu, cay, đe dọa ọc, còn ni có thi cắt tranh, bèn liễp đề lạy. Tru trì vợ xét án cạnh, cắt: "hi, núc lại làm. Đến 6 giờ hoàn thành cái cọc, có chỉ thứ, guồng ngẫu toán bằng lờ đờ, cay nứa, một thứ tre Trên nái. Vạch, phèn, cựa nùi cỏ bàng nó.

Hoàn thành xong cái có cọc để ủi, ông hồi tiến nhân công và cái nèn ông tinh bao nhiêu để trả. Ông Kế Hiền nói:


Ông Ngoại lên với hai bàn tay không, nhờ ông giúp cho đến giao, chính bát, tình, khp, đều là của ông cho. Từ đó thây trả ở yên ổn. Được đâu lời 20 ngày thì ông bớt nhiều, ông khi sự đi được. Ông chỉ sai kiểm thuộc Nam, là cây uông. Lănransition ông đi ướt cùng kiểm các sự ngại về dạy học trò học búa, học chủ theo sách đẽ theo.

Ở được 3 hay 4 tháng, nghe rằng bên chỗ nái có một cây câu để ăn trái, có một cái chỗ nhớa Xiem, từ đó quay chân đường quanh có lời 5 cây sơ. Tài chiều có một ông thảy Xiem ở tự một mình. Ông này tuổi hơn 80, nhưng mạnh khỏe còn đi lên nái tìm kiếm thuộc. Ông len và xương nái như người trái trạng. Ông tự tụ bàng cách trồng khoai trồng bắp. Tuy người Xiem nhưng ông nói tiếng Việt rất nhanh, vì ông ở tại đây tu rất lâu không biết mọi chuyện năm nái. Người Mien rất sợ ông vì ngái búa của Thổ ông đến biết hết.
Ai có biết biết ngài của Thô ốm đến ông trị đâu mạnh, nên ông rất nổi tiếng về baka ngài, thứ, thuốc, tom.

Pháp tom là pháp về baka tom bao xung quanh một miếng vuơn hay một cái nhà làm cho kế già tế vô được mà ra không được. Ai muốn học baka ngài và to của thấy, ông sần lông ngày hết, đây thì công trong sau thương thôi. Nếu biết thì nhớ, không biết thì chịu, không cho ở thêm. Ông Ngoài nghe tiếng ông bênh lăn qua đó hô gió.

Ô học được 3 tháng thì được tin người nhà nhận lên cho hay mẹ, là bà Cốc của con, dâu. Nghe tin mẹ dâu nên ông nhổ thụòng mẹ, nóng nảy vẻ và trở về học nữa chừng vậy. Từ đó, biết bao nhiêu thì làm bày nhiều, nên thiếu sốt nhiều. Ông Ngoài biết cách dụng ngài thụòng ngài ghet, còn tôi thì cha học được. Chỉ học được 4 chữ baka phó thông rô vì nhà lấy đó mà làm tôi ngày này, hết còn rất lên núi nưa, bởi năm sau, thế chiến thứ nhất 1939 khối sỹ, từ đó loạn lạc mãi, khổ to hành ở núi được.

...Lúc ở núi ông có luyện baka Lô Bang trong một tháng, không được tình nghiêm nhiều. Baka này trái, chỉ hay ông thì nhà cười, trừ ta mà nhiều loại. Từ khi ở núi trở về nhà thăm mẹ thì bà Cốc con vui mừng, bà cho biết việc nhổ thụòng nên phát dâu cho không đau chỉ nằng.

Hỏi mọi về ông dùng baka trị được nhiều bệnh ở vùng Bằng Tăng, Ông Môn có phần tinh nghiêm. Cũng như lúc còn ở trên núi ông có tri một có già nhà giàu bị bệnh điên trở nên dị dắn mà ông Kê Hiến trị không hết. Được vậy là nhiều ông bị thấy tại sao bị bệnh nên trị theo quẻ đay có kết quả tốt dep.

Không ai như con đã lớn khó và biết rõ, ông như các sách bối quê Việt của tổ truyền ông đã lại nên ông đọc, khảo cứu thực hành theo đó. Chinh như quẻ này ông tiến dần lúc con sắp lên đường du học bên Úc, rằng con sắp thành tài có về bên ấy mà Ba Mẹ con không tin.

Sau bao nhiêu năm lần lơi thấy đời nghĩ, trên núi về ông gặp lúc kính tế không hoảng khắp trên thế giới, ông cùng đời nghĩ nữa, học làm baka gánh, lập gánh hát bò, hát dạo trong vuồn suốt gần ba năm. Sau qua nghĩ thêm ghe bán trải cây đồ nhút từ Sóc Trăng Bạc Liêu đến Cà Mau, rồi trở về vài năm sau đi tận cực với các con cho tới bây giờ đó.
1. Chú Thịnh Tổ ("Invoking the Founding Master (Thái Thu tượng Lão Quân).")


2. Chú Thịnh Cô Hồn ("Invoking Lonely Ghosts"), handcopied from same file:

"Sắc cặp triều cỏ hồn đăng chưng, Ngô phong thinh dịa sát tự phương,
Bình những bình tự tài chấn trương, tương những tương tôn mình vi nước,
Kẻ uc số bức tĩnh tự ấy Bình những bình hùng hổ trao nha, Cỏ hồn bình lão úu hằng hà. Chốn ma quí tự nam vò sở.
Phung chi Quan Âm Phát Tố, luận cỏ hồn nga tự u bình kẻ làm chấn qua thạch liều mình, Người uc số bức mình tự ấy Kế phong ba tâm thần bị hài
APPENDIX J

ONG DAO THU


Although not much is known about this Daoist in the late nineteenth century, Nguyễn Phúc Thu was sadly remembered as a patriot. Classed as gian dao sỉ, he is believed to have employed talismans and charms in his healing work. He managed to gather some following for a large scale anti-French struggle. Captured by French troops in a raid of Châu Đức about 1895, he was executed by decapitation and his head was displayed in public.

ONG DAO TRAN ("The Bare-Torso Daoist").

Married and widowed with two children, he joined his extended family to move to Vũng Vàng in Bà Rịa province. On the way, they stopped in Long Xuyên to have the boat repaired. People heard of his arrival, came to be cured of their illnesses. His remedies consisted of dried plums with three incense sticks broken in five parts. His reputation as a healer and the number of those seeking to become disciples rose. The family proceeded to Vũng Vàng eventually to set up a salt producing concern as their main livelihood. The Daoist and his younger brother used to transport salt by boat to sell in the Mekong delta or trade for goods. He named their boat Sâm - "Oracles".

Fluent in Khmer, he also took salt to trade as far as Phnom Penh. At every stop, the Daoist distributed talismans and remedies, and preached the 'human way of living' (đạo làm người). In 1898, the colonial government imposed heavy taxes on salt operations. On top of this, the crowd who came for healing caused
the colonial authorities to classify him as 'fraudulent Daoist' (*gián đạo sĩ*), in other words, a potential trouble maker.

These were the two reasons that led to him to decide to move to Long Sơn village on the island of Núi Núa of Bà Rịa province to avoid colonial harassment. At this stage, he was also known around Chợ Dèm as the Gardenia Daoist (*ông Dao Lài*), as he used gardenia flowers and rain water only in curing illnesses.

In 1900, he left Núi Núa to move to Bà Trau area, applied to the local authorities to clear land and establish a new hamlet called Long Sơn Hiệp. Words spread far and wide, the Bare-Torso Daoist was considered as someone with a mandate from above (*Trời Phật*) to rescue people from suffering. Many, even those who were well established from all places in the South, including Chợ Dèm, sold up and came to join him.

The total area of land opened up amounted to over fifty *mậu* (about 50 acres). When land clearing was well under way, he began to found his religious institutions. Buildings such as Heavenly Tower (*Lâu Trời*), to be followed by the "Immortals Tower", the "Buddha Tower", the "Holy Sage House", the "Long House" and a rain water cistern called "Five Lakes" (*Ngũ Hồ*), to supply the hamlet, were constructed.

He also had a canal eight metres wide, three metres deep and 400m long excavated, joining Cà Dài canal to the Long House. In 1928, he had a meeting hall and a school built, hired an extra teacher besides the government-appointed one to provide free education for the children there. The following year, he had a three-compartment market place constructed: one for groceries, one for fruit and vegetable, and one for maritime produce. The sellers did not have to pay any fees, and this custom lasted until 1964.

He also had guest houses built for 'people' (*bá tánh* - the hundred beings) to stay temporarily, co-ordinated a communal effort to built dikes to keep salt water away from the fields of Bà Cúc area, had a rice mill installed and electricity connected for lighting of the whole settlement. These achievements earned him respect and gratitude from local residents. He was therefore honoured posthumously as founder of the Bà Trau region.
earned him respect and gratitude from local residents. He was therefore honoured posthumously as founder of the Bà Trau region.

However, his prestige did not endear him with those villagers of neighbouring hamlets. In 1920, an anonymous letter denouncing him as fraudulent Daoist (giản đạo sĩ) with practice of magic and intent to gather around him seditious elements. Summoned to appear before the Bà Rịa province chief, he was later released from lack of evidence.

In a robbery which took place in 1931, the hamlet lost a considerable amount of valuables, and a woman disciple was accused of being accessory. The Daoist ordered his followers that they made neither investigation nor retribution. He also refused to take up the provincial authorities' request to identify the robbers, who allegedly tried to kill him in their raid and were later captured. He explained that such a bad karma was due him and was to be endured in silence. Today, his male followers on Núi Núa island and elsewhere still do not cut hair and beard, and keep full-time vegetarian diet.

NGUYỄN MINH TRÍ and the 'Householder Pure-Land Buddhist Association'.

Source: Lịch Sử Đức Tông Sư Minh Trí, Giáo Chùa Tổ Huệ Cụt Sĩ Phật Hội Việt Nam (1886-1958), 72-page typed monograph held by members of Hưng Gia Tư, Gia Định, HCM City, c.1959, copy in my possession.

Master Minh Trí was born in 1886 with two unusual signs: being delivered inside the birth sack which was covered by another white one, and having a nearly four-centimetre high bump on his forehead. He was adopted by his paternal aunt as his parents were fearful he would not be easy to raise. As a teenager, he proved to be able to foretell the future.
On turning 19 years of age, on his aunt's urging, he reluctantly got married. Some time later, upon seeing Kwan Yin in his dream for three nights consecutively, he decided to leave his home in Sa Đéc province on the search for a way to self-perfection.

Two years tramping through the mountains did not bring results, as the biography records his dissatisfaction when:

he only found those who cultivated themselves passively in the pursuit of peace and illumination for themselves, and those who followed the heterodox ways with beliefs in supernatural power, magic technique and medicine.¹

Continuing on searching in the hills, he reached Tà Lớn (Bokor) mountain in Kampot province of Cambodia. After one and a half years living there, he met a Siamese daoist, whose discourse on Mahayana Buddhism struck a right chord with him. Thanks to his knowledge of the [latter's] language, he found he shared with the Siamese daoist the same ideal of Tathagatha Buddha.²

After withdrawing into a cave and remaining silent for 21 days, he felt he reached his aim. However, he considered his enlightenment was not of the same category as the Buddha's at the end of a 49-day meditation, as he explained:

To that aim, he decided on a course of practical application:

...I had to find many means: pick medicinal plants, taste and try them out, study medicine, become a trader, a palm reader, to please and serve people to maintain a sympathetic bond. Only when they are sympathetic to you can you guide them on the good path. Otherwise if you sit still when you play physician, people will only seek you when they are ill, who will remember the physician when they are well?³

This statement encapsulates his method of proselytising and socio-religious practice.

¹ Luận Sử Đức Tông Sư..., p.9.
² Ibid., p10.
³ Ibid., pp.11-14.
TWO DAOISTS OF LONG XUYÊN -


Only known by nickname as Mười Phê, this daoist usually placed a mirror in front of him whenever he was meditating, hence the name Mirror Daoist. His first ashram was established in the Forbidden Mountain. He then moved to Chợ Mới in Long Xuyên province. Sometime he stayed in Chợ Thù, where he had an ornate Prajna Boat (Thuyền Bất Nhờ) of seven-ton capacity built. His followers believed he will rescue his disciples on the day of the apocalypse. He was shot dead by French troops in the Seven Mountains in 1945 and was brought back to be buried in Long Xuyên by followers.

II. ƠNG DẠO CÂY (1912?-1966)


His real name was Nguyễn Văn Cây. He came from Bình Hào village of Long Xuyên. He contracted a strange disease in his childhood whereby every Winter, the skin below his knees showed ring-shaped marks like fish scales. They only disappeared in the beginning of next Autumn. His followers believed they are dragon's scales and a sign of possessing a great destiny.

He was about 1m45 tall and wore his hair long. An ashram was constructed in the village, allowing him to distribute talismans and southern (traditional Vietnamese) medicine prescriptions to the sick. His main ingredient was sawn bits of the
yellow gǎo tree, charcoaled and ground to powder. His following was large, although the exact number is not known. He died in 1966 at the age of 54, in Binh Hòa village.

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4 The Gǎo tree belongs to the coffee family, scientific name *Sarcocephallus cordatus*, has a well known anti-fever property
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