

**The *Bible of the Great Cycle of Esotericism*:
From the Xiantiandao Tradition to a Cao Đài Scripture in Colonial Vietnam**

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Caodaism or Cao Đài, established in French Indochina in 1926, is now the third largest religion in Vietnam, with growing congregations in diasporic Vietnamese communities around the world. Cao Đài has been the subject of many social and historical studies, focusing on its crucial role in Indochina as a social player and cultural mediator in the process of decolonization.² Academic accounts of Cao Đài usually stress the colonial context of its emergence, in which the clash between modern and traditional culture led to a spiritual crisis conducive to the emergence and rapid growth of a new religion that combines the worship of traditional Eastern divinities and Western saints and literary figures. Scholarship has noted how revelations in the 1920s-50s were often composed in French, and how the original Cao Đài spirit-writing group in 1925 was influenced by French Spiritism, a pseudo-scientific technique for communicating with the souls of the dead, which became popular in France in the second half of the nineteenth century³—a phenomenon that can be compared to the popularity of spiritualism in Shanghai, as discussed in Matthias Schumann’s chapter in this volume.

However, previous scholarship on Cao Đài and on other modern Vietnamese religions such as the Minh 明 religious associations, has largely ignored the links between them and Chinese religious movements.⁴ In this chapter we argue that, comparable to earlier religious movements such as the Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa dealt with in the previous chapter of this volume, Cao Đài and the Minh associations emerged from a distinctly Chinese religious culture, producing salvationist and spirit-writing groups which can clearly be situated within a wave of new religious movements that appeared in early twentieth-century China and have been designated as “redemptive societies” in

¹ The order of authors’ names is alphabetical, and authorship should be considered equal.

² Jayne Susan Werner, *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1981); Jérémy Jammes, *Les Oracles du Cao Đài: Étude d’un mouvement religieux vietnamien et de ses réseaux* (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2014); Janet Hoskins, *The Divine Eye and the Diaspora: Vietnamese Syncretism Becomes Transpacific Caodaism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2015).

³ Jammes, *Les Oracles*, 169-173; Marion Aubrée & Jérémy Jammes, “Développements et mutations du spiritisme kardéciste: Brésil/Viêt Nam,” *Politica Hermetica* 26 (2012): 70-94; Nicole Edelman, *Voyantes, guérisseuses et visionnaires en France, 1785-1914* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995).

⁴ Except the seminal study of Ralph B. Smith, “An Introduction to Caodaism,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 33 (1970): 335–349, and 33 (1971): 573–589.

recent scholarship.⁵ Simultaneously, Caodaism emerged from an occultist colonial culture,⁶ generating a movement and some practices which are clearly linked to French Spiritism, but also to Freemasonry and the Theosophical Society. Western Occultism and Chinese redemptive societies constitute two major waves of religious innovation that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in France and in China. Both contributed to the spawning of subsequent waves of religious innovation in Vietnam. Cao Đài and some of its predecessor Minh spirit-writing groups in Vietnam can be considered to be products of the intersection and conjugation of these two religious currents—Chinese redemptive societies and French Occultism. In the effervescent sociopolitical, cultural, and idiomatic context that characterized Cochinchina under French colonialism, Cao Đài can be seen as a unique circulatory product of the confluence of Chinese, French, and Vietnamese religious responses to modernity, a hybrid expression of spiritual universalism as well as a vehicle for a distinctly Vietnamese religious construction of ethnic and national identity.

In this chapter, we begin by reconstructing the genealogy of the Cao Đài religion, showing how it emerged out of the Xiantiandao matrix of Chinese salvationist movements which had spread from Chinese migrant networks into Sino-Vietnamese and Vietnamese communities. We then outline the history of the emergence and spread of Caodaism in a social milieu of Vietnamese colonial civil servants who circulated in both the Xiantiandao-derived movements and among circles of practitioners of French occultism and spiritism. We show that, within this “occulto-redemptive” landscape of colonial Vietnam, Cao Đài was a key node in both the traditional salvationist milieu and in networks of theological, political, and social innovators.⁷

In the second part of the chapter, we investigate the textual productions of this encounter through the “translingual practices” at play in the production of Cao Đài spirit-medium texts. Lydia Liu defines translingual practice as “the process by which new words, meanings, discourses, and modes of representation arise, circulate, and acquire legitimacy within the host language due to, or in spite of the latter’s contact/collision with the guest language,” in which the “host” and “guest” languages represent that of the colonized and the colonizer, respectively.⁸ We will thus propose a close examination of the translingual practices (translations, rhetorical strategies, naming practices, and legitimizing processes) that led to the production and usage of the *Đạo Thừa Chơn Giáo*, one of the four canonical scriptures of Caodaism, each of which was composed through spirit-writing.⁹ Our analysis will demonstrate that while Caodaism can be linked to Chinese redemptive societies in its genealogy, religious matrix and textual forms, its unique features can be linked to the French colonial context of its appearance, involving specific translingual practices and transnational religious circulations and interpenetrations.

⁵ For a historical discussion of redemptive societies in the context of the political and religious changes of Republican China, see Vincent Goossaert & David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), chapter 4; see also Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), 56-66. For a sociological analysis, see David A. Palmer, “Chinese Redemptive Societies and Salvationist Religion: Historical Phenomenon or Sociological Category?” *Journal of Chinese Ritual, Theatre and Folklore* 172 (2011), p. 21-72, part of a double special issue (nos. 172-173) on redemptive societies.

⁶ For a comprehensive definition of the “occultist” research field, see Jean-Pierre Laurant, *L'Ésotérisme chrétien en France au XIXe siècle* (Lausanne: Éditions l'Âge d'Homme, 1992); Jean-Pierre Brach, Antoine Faivre, Wouter J. Hanegraaff & Roelof van den Broek, eds., *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

⁷ Jammes, *Les Oracles*, 510.

⁸ Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900–1937* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), 26–27.

⁹ For a fuller discussion of the concept of “translingual practice” and its application to Cao Đài texts, see Jeremy Jammes and David A. Palmer, “Occulting the Dao: Daoist Inner Alchemy, French Spiritism and Vietnamese Colonial Modernity in Caodai Translingual Practice,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 77 (2018): 405–428.

THE XIANTIANDAO MATRIX OF THE CAO ĐÀI RELIGION

For the historian Ralf B. Smith,¹⁰ Caodaism finds its roots in “secret societies” (*hội kín* 會觀) inspired by the local lodges of the Chinese Heaven and Earth association (Thiên địa hội 天地會 *tiandihui*). Recent scholarship on Chinese religion, however, has unpacked the category of Chinese “secret societies”¹¹ and identified several widely differing types of groups often lumped together by the Chinese state and European colonial authorities; most important are the sworn brotherhoods such as the Heaven and Earth Society, and the salvationist movements which, by the early twentieth century, had become the matrix for modern redemptive societies.

Many Chinese redemptive societies—notably Tongshanshe 同善社 (the Fellowship United in Goodness) and Yiguandao 一貫道 (Way of Pervasive Unity)—were offshoots of an earlier wave of salvationist movements, the Xiantian dao 先天道 (Way of Anterior Heaven).¹² This matrix appeared in the eighteenth century, expanded into numerous branches in the mid-nineteenth century, and spread to overseas Chinese communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹³ Xiantian dao groups practiced vegetarianism and charity, and their temples provided shelter and a social role for orphans, single women, and the elderly. The other main matrix for the emergence of redemptive societies was spirit-writing groups, also known as “Phoenix Halls” (*luantang* 鸞堂).¹⁴ Spirit-writing revelations often included instructions on Daoist inner alchemy, morality books, and exhortations to practice charity and good deeds. Several redemptive societies, such as the Daoyuan 道院 (Court of the Dao) and Dejiao 德教 (Teachings of Virtue) were established through instructions received from the gods in spirit-writing séances.

Similarly, Xiantian dao halls and spirit-writing groups are the direct root of Cao Đài—more specifically, the Chinese-Vietnamese spirit-writing groups named Minh (*ming* 明) meaning “light.” After the seventeenth century, with the decline of the Chinese Ming dynasty, a large number of small Minh societies started to emerge in Cochinchina, especially around Saigon.¹⁵ The first of the Minh societies were established by Chinese emigrants in Cochinchina for around three or four generations. The other Minh societies were the fruit of later initiatives in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, involving both Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese participants.

At that time, Chinese guilds or native-place associations seemed to effectively control these Minh associations which, until the early twentieth century, limited their activities to the scale of

¹⁰ Smith, “An Introduction to Caodaism.”

¹¹ David Ownby and Mary F. Somers Heidhues, eds., *“Secret Societies” Reconsidered: Perspectives on the Social History of Early Modern South China and Southeast Asia* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993); David A. Palmer, “Tao and Nation: Li Yujie: May Fourth Activist, Daoist Reformer and Redemptive Society Patriarch in Mainland China and Taiwan,” in *Daoism in the 20th Century: Between Eternity and Modernity*, ed. David A. Palmer and Xun Liu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 173–195; David A. Palmer, “Heretical Doctrines, Reactionary Secret Societies, Evil Cults: Labeling Heterodoxy in Twentieth-Century China,” in *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, ed. Mayfair Yang (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 113–134.

¹² For a sociological conceptualization of historical waves of salvationist movements, see David A. Palmer, “Chinese Redemptive Societies and Salvationist Religion: Historical Phenomenon or Sociological Category?,” *Journal of Chinese Ritual, Theatre and Folklore*, no. 172 (2011): 21–72.

¹³ On Xiantian dao, see J. J. M. de Groot, *Sectarianism and Religious Persecution in China* (reprint: Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1973 [1903–1904]), 176–196; Marjorie Topley, “The Great Way of Former Heaven: A Group of Chinese Secret Religious Sects,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 26 (1963): 362–392; Yau Chi On 游子安, “Daomai nanchuan: ershi shiji cong Lingnan dao Yuenan Xiantian dao de chuancheng yu bianqian 道脈南傳：20世紀從嶺南到越南先天道的傳承與變遷,” in *Zongjiao renleixue: diersi 宗教人類學：第二輯*, ed. Jin Ze 金澤 and Chen Jinguo 陳進國 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2010), 232–256.

¹⁴ David K. Jordan & Daniel L. Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Philip Clart, “The Phoenix and the Mother: The Interaction of Spirit-Writing Cults and Popular Sects in Taiwan,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 25 (1997): 1–32.

¹⁵ Ownby & Heidhues, eds., *Secret Societies*.

their respective temples. The latter comprised places where urban, peripheral as well as provincial cults were practiced, acting like autonomous structures and building up their local authority through divination and/or spirit-writing activities. All these religious communities, many of which were driven by philanthropy or literary pursuits, worshiped the deities of the *Tam Giáo* (“Three Doctrines” 三教 *sanjiao*) pantheon, which includes Confucius, Laozi, and Buddha. They were autonomous yet often clandestine, and their esoteric interpretations of old sutras or new oracles were strongly linked to an embryonic Vietnamese nationalism against colonial domination.

The Minh networks largely overlap with those of the Xiantiandao in Vietnam; indeed, during field work in Ho Chi Minh City in 2013 we found, for example, that the Guangnan Fotang 光南佛堂, a Chinese temple which is mentioned in Yau Chi On’s study of Xiantiandao in Vietnam,¹⁶ and which has close ties with the Minh Lý *đạo* (明理道), self-identifies as both Xiantiandao and Minh Sư. The specific geographic and historic mapping of these overlapping networks remains to be done; Yau Chi On has, however, traced the spread of Xiantiandao from Guangdong to Vietnam in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. In 1863, the Xiantiandao lineage of the Hidden Glow (Cangxia 藏霞) first established its Guangdong base, namely the Cangxiadong (藏霞洞 Temple of the Hidden Glow Cavern) in Qingyuan 清遠. The Cangxiadong later became the “ancestral cavern” (祖洞 *zudong*) of other Xiantiandao offshoots in Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Cochinchina. In Saigon, the Cangxia jingshe 藏霞精舍 (the Hidden Glow Abode) is known as the root from which the Xiantiandao movement spread in Vietnam. Established in 1949 and based in Saigon, the Abode supported the maintenance and building of other Xiantiandao halls; more notably, it built a Xiantiandao cemetery and set up a branch in Cambodia. Its founder claimed the Cangxiadong in northern Guangdong as its origin, where the deceased masters of the Abode were worshipped. In addition, the other major Xiantiandao halls—namely Yongdetang 永德堂, Yuegengtang 月庚堂, Yong’antang 永安堂, Anqingtang 安慶堂, Jingshengtang 敬聖堂, Baofutang 寶福堂, Guangnan Fotang 光南佛堂, and Miaonantang 妙南堂, all originated in Guangdong province. And the deities worshipped by the Vietnam halls, such as the Yuncheng qisheng 雲城七聖 (Seven Saints of the Cloud City), are very similar to those worshipped by the Xiantiandao temples in Guangdong province.¹⁷

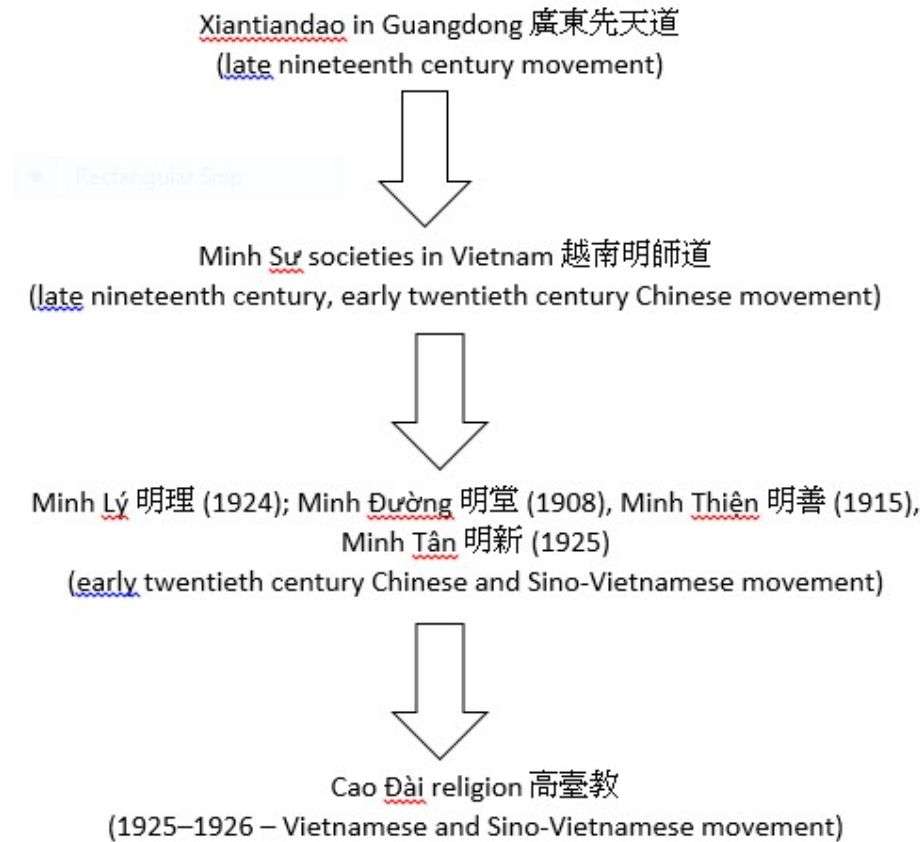
These networks gave birth around the 1850s to local congregations known as the Minh Sư (“Enlightened Master,” 明師 *mingshi*) societies, which continued their links with the Xiantiandao branches in Guangdong and Hong Kong. The Minh Sư religious associations, in turn, spawned a number of Sino-Vietnamese sects, namely Minh Đường (“Enlightened Hall,” 明堂 *Mingtang*, 1908), Minh Thiện (“Enlightened Goodness,” 明善 *Mingshan*, 1915), Minh Lý (“Enlightened Reason,” 明理 *Mingli*, 1924), and Minh Tân (“Enlightened Renewal,” 明新 *Mingxin*, 1925).¹⁸

¹⁶ Yau, “Daomai nanchuan,” 238.

¹⁷ See Yau, “Daomai nanchuan,” 237–238, 239–240, 246–246, 253.

¹⁸ For a more detailed study of the Xiantiandao-derived Minh genealogy and roots of Caodaism, see Huệ Nhân, *Ngũ Chi Đại Đạo (Nam chi Đạo họ Minh)* [The Five branches of the Great Way, named Minh] (Ho Chi Minh City: internal edition of the Cơ Quan Phổ Thông Giáo Lý Đại Đạo, 1999); Jammes, *Les Oracles*, 52–62, 89–92, 163–169; Smith, “An Introduction to Caodaism.”

Table 1: Xiantiandao genealogy of Cao Đài religion



The Cao Đài religion, whose members were mostly Vietnamese, was founded in the years of 1925–1926, as described below; it eventually absorbed the Minh Đường, Minh Thiện, and Minh Tân, and collaborates closely with Minh Lý. Minh Sư federated several temples that would affiliate themselves, after 1926, as Cao Đài oratories or literally “holy houses” (*thánh thất* 聖室 *shengshi*).

THE EMERGENCE OF CAO ĐÀI IN THE COLONIAL CONTEXT

Caodaism emerged in the early 1920s through the spirit-writing activities of Ngô Văn Chiêu 吳文昭 (1878–1932), a Vietnamese civil servant of the French colonial administration in Cochín-China. Following instructions he received from the Chinese deity Guan Gong 關公 at spirit-writing séances held in the Minh-Sư-derived Minh Thiện temple in Thủ Dầu Một, Northern Saigon, in 1902, Ngô Văn Chiêu spent twenty years visiting Daoist and Minh temples, learning spirit-writing, studying commentaries on the *Daodejing* 道德經, and improving his skills in Daoist meditation, talismans, and oracles.¹⁹

In 1920, he was appointed colonial district head of Phú Quốc, a remote island in the Sea of Siam. At the Xiantiandao-affiliated Quan Âm (觀音 Guanyin) Chinese temple, he devoted

¹⁹ Huệ Nhân, *Ngũ Chi*, 22–27.

himself to training youth in mediumship through spirit-writing.²⁰ The Daoist master Tùng Ngạc, a member of the Minh Sư, guided him in his learning of meditation techniques.²¹ In one spirit-writing session, on the Lunar New Year (8 Feb.) of 1921, one deity revealed himself as Master Cao Đài, *Thầy Cao Đài* (傑²²高臺 [*Thầy*] *Gaotai*), “the Master [living on] the Highest Platform,” an abbreviation of *Cao Đài Tiên Ông Đại Bồ Tát Ma Ha Tát* (高臺天皇大菩薩摩訶薩 *gaotai tianhuang dapusa mahasa*), the “Heavenly Emperor of the Supreme Platform and Great Bodhisattva Mahasattva.” This deity also identified himself as the Jade Emperor (Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế 玉皇上帝 *Yuhuang Shangdi*). Ngô Văn Chiêu was given the mission to reveal and propagate a universal “new Dharma” (*tân pháp* 新法 *xinfa*). Ngô began to worship this deity regularly.

Later, on 20 April 1921, as he sat under a willow tree and gazed at the sun shining over the ocean in the coastal village of Dương Đông (“The Sun Rises in the East”), he saw a gigantic left eye floating in the sky above the north star and the moon. Petrified by this vision, he asked it to disappear. It did so, but appeared again at his request. Master Cao Đài instructed Ngô to represent him with the image of this eye. A second, similar vision was received while he meditated at Dinh Cậu (the westernmost temple in Cochinchina based on a small rock in Phú Quốc island). He thus believed to have confirmation that the Left Eye was the “Celestial Eye” (*Thiên Nhãn* 天眼 *tianyan*) and the new icon to worship.

Soon afterwards, the teachings of Master Cao Đài made their way into the urban millenarian networks of the Xiantian dao-affiliated temples in Saigon and its Chinese neighboring city, Chợ Lớn. In 1925, Ngô was posted back to Saigon, where he regularly visited the Minh Sư (明師 *mingshi*) Jade Emperor temple in Đa Kao district,²³ and began to recruit some adepts among Vietnamese colonial administrators. He was contacted by a group of younger Vietnamese civil servants who had been practicing spirit-writing by tipping tables. Revelations were often composed in French and the original spirit-writing group was influenced by Spiritism, which was popular in France in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Between November and December 1925, in a séance, the Golden Mother of the Jasper Pool 瑤池金母 instructed this group to switch from using French spiritist methods (the oui-ja board) to the Chinese technique of “phoenix writing” (*phò loan* 扶鸞 *fuluan*), in which a bird-headed basket is held by one or two mediums to write on a surface.²⁴ The mediumistic use of the “beaked basket” is a set of divinatory practices whereby the visit of a spiritual entity enables the written revelation of messages. The basket, and the prayer spoken in Vietnamese (which summons the spirit of the Cao Đài Master or of the deities of the pantheon to descend into it), were borrowed from the Minh Thiện (明善 *mingshan*) religious association, which had originally borrowed them from Minh Lý đạo (明理道 *minglidao*), itself a new offshoot of the Xiantian dao/Minh Sư tradition.²⁵ Sometimes the Cao Đài séances modified the Chinese technique of phoenix writing to use a Vietnamese alphabetic board and receive messages in Romanized Vietnamese and French. In this case, the technique is clearly inspired by the oui-ja board and inscribes Caodaism into the French spiritist tradition.²⁶

²⁰ Huệ Khải, *Ngô Văn Chiêu: Người môn đệ Cao Đài đầu tiên* [Ngô Văn Chiêu: The first Cao Đài adept] (San Martin (California): Nxb Tam Giáo Đồng Nguyên, 2008), 20.

²¹ Op. cit., 21.

²² The character 傑, pronounced *thầy*, is from the Vietnamese vernacular *chữ nôm* writing system, meaning “teacher, master, father.” There is no equivalent to this character in Chinese.

²³ See a contemporary picture of this Minh Sư in Jeremy Jammes, “Cao Đài Acceptance in Contemporary Vietnam: Tightrope Walking between Past and Future” (*Gis-Reseau-Asie*, 2016).

²⁴ Jordan and Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix*, 36–88. This “automatic writing” is renamed *thư bút* (乩筆 *jibi*), “the brush,” by the Minh and Cao Đài followers.

²⁵ Huệ Nhân, *Ngũ Chi Đại Đạo*, 25.

²⁶ Aubrée & Jammes, “Développements et mutations.”

On Christmas eve of 1925, a mysteriously erudite and philosophical spirit, known to them only by the first three letters of the Romanized Vietnamese alphabet (*quốc ngữ* 國語 *quocny*)—A, Ǻ, Ầ—revealed to the spirit-writing group that he was “Master Cao Đài,” indeed the Jade Emperor, who had previously sent Buddha, Confucius, and Laozi, and was also the father of Jesus. And in the night of December 31, Master Cao Đài instructed the group to seek and meet Ngô Văn Chiêu to learn how to establish a worship to Himself. Ngô had also received instructions from Master Cao Đài to give guidance to this spiritist group. In a new series of joint séances, Master Cao Đài indicated that Ngô should lead a world religion. From then on, the new religion began to spread rapidly in the cities and suburbs of Cochin-China.²⁷

In November of 1926, a huge celebration was held in Tây Ninh city (west of Saigon, close to the Cambodian border), to officially present to the colonial authorities the “Great Way of the Third Cycle of Universal Salvation.” For the occasion were performed a great number of spirit-writing séances in which new disciples were called on by name, and each received a poem relating, often somewhat enigmatically, to his own biography. Thousands of participants received prophetic and apocalyptic visions, convincing them to convert to the so-called Vietnamese-born but universal faith.²⁸

Mediums, businessmen, and landowners at the head of the church’s hierarchy recruited thousands of the colonized peasant population in the space of ten years only. By 1930, “the Great Way” had converted more disciples in the southern colony of Cochin-China than the Catholic Church had in over 300 years of missionary activity.²⁹

Caodaism had appeared in a milieu of spirit-writing groups of scholars, intellectuals, and petty colonial officials who were able to implement this pyramidal structure in only a few months’ time. Caodaism was officially registered (under the redemptive name of *Đạo Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ*, see below) as a religious association with the French colonial authorities in November of 1926. As the first mass conversion movement in French Indochina, born during a period of anti-colonial resistance, Cao Đài established its own army during the Japanese occupation and the ensuing war of independence, and directly governed a large part of Cochin-China and later on of South Vietnam. With its own theology, its own flag, and even its own army,³⁰ Caodaism is a case in point of what Prasenjit Duara has called the “traffic” between the religious and the secular.³¹ The political aims of Caodaism gradually gained substance and momentum to the point where it was ultimately able to offer a genuine project of a religious society, a theocracy that aimed to become the “State religion” (*quốc đạo* 國道 *quodao*) of Vietnam. As such, Caodaism has created a strict hierarchical organization and a unique disciplinary framework in the hands of a group of mediums, hence turning the religion into either a potential rival or an ally of anti-colonial nationalist forces. Such national aspirations were combined with a religious language, Cao Đài prophecies emphasizing that the Vietnamese people were chosen for a special spiritual but universal mission.³²

Cao Đài membership expanded rapidly, as both the economic crisis of 1930–1931 and the foundation of new Cao Đài denominations attracted the peasantry to the religious solidarity

²⁷ Jammes, *Les Oracles*, 94.

²⁸ Jammes *Les Oracles*, 98–100.

²⁹ Jayne S. Werner, “The Cao Dai: The Politics of a Vietnamese Syncretic Religious Movement” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1976), 60.

³⁰ Jeremy Jammes, “Caodaism in Times of War: Spirits of Struggle and Struggle of Spirits,” *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 31 (2016): 247–294; Trần Mỹ Vân, “Japan and Vietnam’s Caodaists, A Wartime Relationship (1939–1945),” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 27 (1996): 179–193.

³¹ Prasenjit Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 195–238.

³² Đức Nguyễn, *Cao Đài Từ Điển, Quyển I, II, III* [Dictionary of Caodaism, vol. I, II, and III] (Ho Chi Minh City: private printing, 2000), “*quốc đạo*” (online version); Jammes, *Les Oracles*, 126–130; Jérémy Jammes, “Đạo Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ (Cao Đài),” in *Handbook of East Asian New Religious Movements*, ed. Lukas Pokorny and Franz Winter (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2018), 569, 571; Janet Hoskins, “God’s Chosen People: Race, Religion, and Anti-Colonial Struggle in French Indochina” (Singapore: ARI Working Paper No. 189, 2012).

structures offered by the new religion. Ngô Văn Chiêu, who enjoyed solitude, was worried by the growing number of followers. As early as May 1927, he decided to withdraw from the world and to follow a path of cultivation based primarily on meditation. A few years before his death, in 1932, he founded his own branch, the Chiếu Minh Tam Thanh Vô Vi (照明三清無為 *zhaoming sanqing wuwe*, “Radiant Light of Non-Interference of the Three Purities”). This denomination was focused on the meditative and divinatory quest for “non-interference” or “non-action” (*vô vi* 無為 *wuwe*), whereas the main branch of Cao Đài, based at the “Holy See” of Tây Ninh, was more focused on social activity and “universal salvation” (*phổ độ* 普度 *pudu*).

The politics of the Cao Đài religion later brought it into tension with the State of South Vietnam. After 1975 and unification under the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, some Cao Đài leaders suffered from repression and Caodaism became a “religion in exile,”³³ formed in overseas communities in the United States, Europe, and Australia (with about 15,000–20,000 adepts abroad). The “Cao Đài religion” was officially legalized in 1997 and is now Vietnam’s third largest organized religion after Buddhism and Catholicism, with at least 3 to 4 million followers among the 94 million Vietnamese (according to the 2009 National census, which typically undercounts the number of adepts in the “atheist” and communist land of Vietnam).³⁴

CAO ĐÀI AS A VIETNAMESE REDEMPTIVE SOCIETY

Caodaism emerged in a Sino-Vietnamese religious milieu in Cochinchina, in which both Xiantian dao offshoots and spirit-writing groups were actively expanding and interlinked. Born out of this religious culture, the core of Cao Đài doctrine is essentially the same as that of the Xiantian dao-influenced redemptive societies: worship of the Golden Mother of the Jasper Pond (Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu 瑤池金母 *Yaochi jinmu*), as the supreme female deity; the universalist syncretism of the Three teachings; and the three-phase eschatology (*Tam kỳ mạt kiếp* 三期末劫 *sanqi mojie*) with the first dispensation associated with Moses and Fu Xi 伏羲, the second associated with Buddha, Confucius, Laozi, Jesus, and Mohammad, and the third to be ushered in by Maitreya (or Master Cao Đài, alias the Jade Emperor, Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế 玉皇上帝 *Yuhuang Shangdi*). Indeed, the full name of the Cao Đài religion—“Great Way of the Third Cycle of Universal Salvation of the Higher Platform” (*Cao Đài Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ* 高臺大道三期普度 *Gaotai dadao sanqi pudu*)—is an explicit reference to the realization of these prophecies.³⁵

Like most Chinese salvationist groups, Caodaism propagated the doctrine of the Unity of the Three Teachings *tam giáo hợp nhất* (三教合一 *sanjiao heyi*) and millenarian expectations of Maitreya’s arrival and of the Dragon Flower Assembly (*Long Hoa Hội* 龍華會 *Longhuahui*) to be ruled by him. However, the traditional notion of the Union of the Three Teachings was modernized and universalized with the aid of a more modern language and by incorporating explicitly Christian figures from the French spiritist pantheon (Jesus, Victor Hugo, Jeanne d’Arc, etc.).³⁶

The Cao Đài religion developed its own scriptures, philosophical systems, liturgies (an intentional assemblage of Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist sources), congregational modes of participation, missionary and conversion strategies, and its own religious administration. Like

³³ Hoskins, *The Divine Eye and the Diaspora*, 212–216.

³⁴ Jammes, *Les Oracles*, 237–238; Jammes, “Cao Đài Acceptance in Contemporary Vietnam.”

³⁵ In this article, we have kept Vietnamese terms but converted them into Chinese characters for the convenience of both Vietnamese and Sinophone readers. Chinese characters are followed by the pinyin romanization for the convenience of non-Sinophone readers. Note that Chinese characters are rarely used in the original Cao Đài sources, and pinyin romanization is never used.

³⁶ Jammes, *Les Oracles*, 197–208, 307–309.

modern Chinese redemptive societies, Cao Đài founded national modern-style organizations that registered with the state as religious, philanthropic, or public interest associations, with a national and centralized head office (the “Holy See” of Tây Ninh near the Cambodian border), overseeing provincial and municipal branches. The Cao Đài religion’s main difference from the Chinese redemptive societies was its organizational style, which drew its inspiration from the Catholic Church, with its own Holy See and cathedrals, and an ecclesiastical hierarchy of deacons, priests, bishops, cardinals (for both men and women), and a pope (restricted to men only). The model of the Catholic church had actually become the new paradigm of “religion” in Cochin-China and Vietnam (as Protestant Christianity had in China),³⁷ rather than the traditional Buddhist, Daoist, or Confucian institutions. At the same time, a series of Vietnamese hierarchical terms were invented in order to depart from the Catholic model and to propose another and properly Vietnamese idiomatic way to arrange this hierarchy, delimiting a specific Cao Đài identity through this invention process.

Emerging out of the theological, political, and sociological framework of Chinese redemptive societies, Cao Đài leaders inscribed their religion into a new civilizational discourse which, in a variety of forms throughout Asia, advocated an Eastern solution to the problems of the modern world. While integrating Christianity, and even evolutionary theories, into its cosmology, Cao Đài religion would eventually adopt forms of organization and social engagement which resembled other modern religious and morality promotion societies around the world. This included hospitals, orphanages, refugee centers, schools, periodicals, libraries, factories and farms for the poor, and, in the contemporary diasporic situation of Caodaism in California, disaster relief and drug rehabilitation projects.³⁸ This social and missionary engagement was motivated by a profoundly religious program of self-cultivation.

The Caodaism of the 1920s shares with the Minh associations the same political, territorial, and nationalist concerns as well as many common religious activities, including spirit-writing. These connections displayed a long-lasting mediumistic production and unveiled a hidden side of Caodaism. Although the Minh associations descend from Chinese late-imperial Xiantian dao traditions, they also represent a specific response to the challenges and opportunities afforded by the collapse of the imperial order and the irruption of modernity in a colonial context. Cao Đài in fact attempted to organize networks of Minh spirit-writing groups, offering them regional and national levels of leadership with a universal and missionary agenda.³⁹ Through spirit-written messages and Vietnamese translations of Minh prayers and texts, Cao Đài thus adopted the cosmology, theology, and eschatology of the Xiantian dao tradition and adapted it to the decolonization agenda and Sino-Vietnamese culture. Since the colonial period, the Minh Lý religious association has occupied a crucial place in Cao Đài activities.

THE MINH LÝ DAO: THE KEY LINK BETWEEN THE XIAN TIANDAO TRADITION AND CAO ĐÀI RELIGION⁴⁰

The founder of Minh Lý, Âu Kiệt Lâm 歐傑林 (1896–1941), was an intellectual of half Chinese, half Vietnamese origin, and thus he belonged to the colonial category of the Sino-Vietnamese *métis*, *minh hương* (明鄉 *mingxiang*).⁴¹ In the period between 1916 and 1926 he became a renowned medium in spirit-writing and demonstrated an ability to transcend cultural barriers. Swiftly bridging

³⁷ Goossaert & Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, 73–79.

³⁸ Jammes, *Les Oracles*, 476–478.

³⁹ Jeremy Jammes, “Divination and Politics in Southern Vietnam: Roots of Caodaism,” *Social Compass* 57 (2010): 357–371; Jammes, *Les Oracles*, 162–169.

⁴⁰ This section is largely derived from Jammes, “Divination and Politics.”

⁴¹ Jammes, *Les Oracles*, 163–164.

the Chinese and the Vietnamese cultures, he was capable of merging the two social and cultural systems by bringing them into contact. His translation of Chinese or *chữ nôm* (字喃 *zinan*—an indigenous Vietnamese writing system that looks like Chinese characters but is pronounced in Vietnamese language) holy texts into modern Vietnamese *quốc ngữ* (國語 *guoyu*) writings provides fine examples of this ability.

The Minh Lý community erected its own temple in 1924 in a suburb of Saigon (Bàn Cờ District). This temple is now well known as the Tam Tông Miếu 三宗廟 *Sanzongmiao*, “the Temple of the Three Doctrines.” Among the main activities of the Minh Lý were therapeutic sessions (acupuncture and “magnetism”), divination and the production of oracles using multiple methods such as astrology, chiromancy, and physiognomy. According to Nguyễn Văn Miết 阮文懺,⁴² a Minh Lý dignitary, Âu Kiệt Lâm carried out in-depth research into magnetism (*nhân điện* 人電 *rendian*, literally “electric energy in the human body”) and constructed a body of knowledge based on French spiritism and Chinese spirit-writing.

In 1926, before Cao Đài had begun to spread among the peasant community and the Vietnamese elite, Lê Văn Trung 黎文忠 (1875–1934), a senior Vietnamese official, was appointed head of Caodaism with the title of Cardinal (Đầu Sư 頭主 *touzhu*, Head-Master) and soon of “interim pope” (*quyền giáo tông* 權教宗 *quan jiaozong*). Lê Văn Trung owed a large part of his legitimacy to a mediumistic message received in September 1925 by the Tam Tông Miếu mediums, to whom he was presented by his maternal cousin Nguyễn Hữu Đắc 阮友得, a former city councilor of Chợ Lớn and translator of French occultist texts.

In order to compose its first corpus of prayers, the Cao Đài clergy headed by Lê Văn Trung and Phạm Công Tắc 范公稷 (1890–1959) turned to the Minh Lý association, which had, at that time, just begun its own project of translating Chinese religious texts into Vietnamese. The majority of Cao Đài prayers are thus sourced from the Minh Lý corpus of prayers, including the Prayer of Opening (*Khai kinh* 開經 *kaijing*), the Prayer of Incense Offering (*Niệm hương* 念香 *nianxiang*), the prayer celebrating the Jade Emperor (*Ngọc Hoàng kinh* 玉皇經 *Yuhuangjing*), the prayers of Repentance (*Sám hối* 懺悔 *chanhui*), of Praise (*Xưng tụng* 頌榮 *songrong*), of the Dead (*Cầu siêu* 求超 *qinshao*), and so on.⁴³ The transmission of scriptures from Minh Lý to Cao Đài was further endorsed by means of spirit-writing orders received at both Minh Lý and the Cao Đài Holy See of Tây Ninh. As such, Minh specialists were regarded as the legitimate elders responsible for training young Cao Đài spirit-writing groups.⁴⁴ Owing to their mediumistic competence, the content of these messages established Minh associations as both the depositories and the guardians of the knowledge of Master Cao Đài.

To explain these borrowings, we should recall that the initial Cao Đài group around Lê Văn Trung and Phạm Công Tắc was oriented towards mass proselytism and sought to gather religious texts in Vietnamese that would not require the learning of Chinese, hence targeting the broadest possible audience and reaching out to the peasant community. And Minh Lý, between January 1924 and November 1925, had already begun the same process of Vietnamization, translating into *quốc ngữ* religious texts previously available in Minh Sư circles only in Chinese characters.

The visibility of the Cao Đài religion, the presence of its dignitaries in the government, and the involvement of some of them in the Sûreté coloniale were all reassuring factors for Minh dignitaries, who felt that they would guarantee the continuity of their religious practices after the

⁴² Nguyễn Văn Miết. *La religion “Minh-Lý”, pagode “aux trois religions”* (Saigon: Tam Tông Miếu internal publication, 1960), 7–10.

⁴³ Jammes, “Divination and Politics,” 361–362; Jammes, *Les Oracles*, 162.

⁴⁴ Phạm Công Tắc, *Le Caodaïsme (La Vérité)*, Phnom Penh, 1937).

1916 suppression of secret society revolts by colonial authorities.⁴⁵ At the same time a cooperative network between Minh and Cao Đài religions was established that would last until the present day.

CAO ĐÀI AND THE OCCULTIST COLONIAL CULTURE

The Cao Đài religion is, in many ways, an ideal-typical redemptive society with its Xiantiandao roots, its salvationist message, its practice of spirit-writing, its expanded syncretic universalism, and its adoption of modern forms of religious organization and philanthropic action. At the same time, it emerged from a distinctly occultist colonial culture, producing a movement and some practices which clearly fall into the same category as Western Esotericism, Spiritism, Freemasonry, and Theosophy. Caodaism brought the Minh groups “out of the shadows and into the clear light of day” (to quote a Franco-Vietnamese newspaper of the time, *Écho Annamite*),⁴⁶ but also fused them with the occultist interests of Vietnamese employees of the French colonial state.

The Western use of these two neologisms—esotericism and occultism—comes from the transformations in the rationalist thought of the Christian West at the end of the nineteenth century. The term “esotericism” was used for the first time by Jacques Matter in his *Critical History of Gnosticism*.⁴⁷ It indicated here a type of timeless spiritual quest according to a set of more or less hidden traditions. In other words, esotericism refers to a secret teaching requiring an initiation; *latu sensu*, it can apply to almost all the divination and religious practices in the world, such as esotericism in Daoism or Buddhism in Asia.⁴⁸

The term “Occultism” indicates a specific movement in the West, characteristic of the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century. A person, a group or an institution can be regarded as “occultist” when they find, under cover of a scientific or scientific discourse, “the lost unity of science and religion: the science of the new times.”⁴⁹ Thus, supernatural phenomena, traditional spirit-mediumship activities, theology, and several bodies of religious knowledge and philosophical ideas, were re-interpreted and recast through the filters of modern scientific methods and instruments. Moreover, French Occultism can be described “as heterodox Christian and universalist, informed by an unconventional reading of the Bible”; their literature borrows “from many other religious and philosophical traditions, and seeks to spread its message to all peoples.”⁵⁰ The *fin-de-siècle* occultist movements include Spiritist groups, the Rosicrucian brotherhood, the Martinists, the Theosophical society, and Perennialist groups around René Guénon and Frithjof Chuon.⁵¹ French occultist networks spread to Cochinchina under the colonial regime, disseminating through books, magazines, and spirit-séances the *mission civilisatrice* of a positivist France.⁵² Among these networks were those that practiced what was known in French as *Spiritisme*. Spiritism arose directly from its first theoretician, the French teacher and medium Hippolyte L. D. Rivail (1804-1869), who had taken the Celtic name of Allan Kardec. His principal works are *The Book of the Spirits* (1857), *The Book of the Mediums* (1861), *The Gospels According to Spiritism* (1864), *Hell and Paradise* (1865), and *Genesis* (1868). The goal of the work of Kardec and his successors was to offer a study of the invisible world, highlighting doctrines of reincarnation

⁴⁵ Jammes, *Les Oracles*, 57.

⁴⁶ Paper published by Nguyễn Phan Long, a reputed political leader (of the so-called Constitutionalist party), Cao Đài follower, and manager of the *Écho Annamite* (see Jammes, *Les Oracles*, 86, 172).

⁴⁷ Jacques Matter, *Histoire critique du gnosticisme* (Paris: F.G. Levrault, 1828), 83.

⁴⁸ Benoytosh Bathacharya, *An Introduction to Buddhist Esotericism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932); Paul Lévy, *Buddhism: A “Mystery Religion”?* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968 [1957]).

⁴⁹ Laurant, *L'Ésotérisme chrétien*, 21.

⁵⁰ David A. Harvey, “Beyond Enlightenment: Occultism, Politics, and Culture in France from the Old Regime to the Fin-de-Siècle,” *The Historian* 65 (2003): 667.

⁵¹ Laurant, *L'Ésotérisme chrétien*; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Brach, Faivre, Hanegraaff & van den Broek eds., *Dictionary of Gnosis*.

⁵² Harvey, “Beyond Enlightenment,” 668.

and a rational communication with the dead, re-defined as the “non-incarnated souls.” Kardec’s work also expresses a social project, wishing to build a spiritist pedagogy for a reformed new social order. Spiritism proposed a reform of Catholicism and used modern techniques (telegraph, photography, radiography, X-ray, etc.) as vehicles for a new hope in the afterlife. As with Caodaism sixty years later, Spiritism is presented by its founder as the third revelation of God on Earth, after Moses and Jesus Christ.⁵³ The third period opened by spiritism is described by Kardec himself as an “alliance between science and religion,”⁵⁴ a union of both a material and a “spiritual science,”⁵⁵ a period dedicated to the “Instructions from Spirits.”⁵⁶

In the years 1920–1930, in Cochinchina, spiritist brochures, books, and circles, as well as all of Kardec’s doctrines and spiritist-mediumship techniques, were made available to French-speaking Vietnamese people. The presence of famous French practitioners of Spiritism in Saigon and their close relationship with Caodaism were noticed in many sources. Spiritism is translated into Vietnamese as *thần linh học* (神靈學 *shenlingxue*), “study of the spirits” or *thông linh học* (通靈學 *tonglingxue*), “study of communications with spirits.” The doctrine of Kardec is thus designated in Vietnamese as a discipline that would give access to knowledge by the means of a communication established with the spiritual entities. The first Caodaists actually practiced the “turning tables” of French-derived Spiritism, which they conceived as more “rational” and “scientific” than the traditional Vietnamese spirit-possession practices (*lên đồng* 登童 *dengtong*).

The Cochinchinese amateurs of French Spiritism also showed themselves to be captivated by the spiritist method of the turning tables (*xây bàn* or *xoay bàn* 旋板 *xuanban*), literally “to turn the table,” which consists in decoding the sounds of the spirits, in particular by swings of the table (one leg of the table being shorter than the others) or by “raps” of the table (literally *gõ* 鼓 *gu*). These two methods use the letters of the alphabet to reconstitute the messages, bringing both questions and answers. Vietnamese Spiritists adapted this Western alphabetical process by replacing it with the Romanized modern alphabet of the Vietnamese language (the *quốc ngữ*). The non-incarnated spirits are thus invited to express themselves by “rapping” the table on specific letters to spell words, sentences, and doctrine.

In the global market of Eastern spiritualities and cultural goods in the first part of the twentieth century, the theosophical literature occupies a unique but dynamic position.⁵⁷ Founded in New York in 1875, the Theosophical Society seeks to understand the mysteries of universal sacred books by filtering them through a syncretic approach and at the same time a Christian and Buddhist conceptualization. This movement played a political role in India, participating in the training of its religious and political elites during the struggle for independence, after the First World War. Their members became famous through their activist contribution to the rebirth of Buddhism in Ceylon, their traditionalism in India (supporting the Sanskrit language and the Buddhist schools), and their sense of social reform (fighting for an improvement in women’s social conditions, of pariahs and prisoners, etc.). For these reasons, the theosophical credo—“There is no religion greater than Truth”—attracted some French, Vietnamese, but also Indian, British, American, New Zealander, and Australian political or religious personalities.

The 1920s marked the beginning of the Theosophical Society’s establishment in Cochinchina:⁵⁸ the *Thông thiên học* (通天學 *tongtianxue*), literally, “studies of communications with the

⁵³ Allan Kardec, *Genesis: the Miracles and the Predictions According to Spiritism* (Boston: Colby & Rich, 1883 [1868 in French]), 44–45.

⁵⁴ Allan Kardec, *The Gospel According to Spiritism. Contains Explanations of the Moral Maxims of Christ in Accordance with Spiritism and Their Application in Various Circumstances in Life* (London: The Headquarters Publishing Co LTD, 1987 [1864 in French]), 26.

⁵⁵ Kardec, *Genesis*, 114.

⁵⁶ Kardec, *The Gospel According to Spiritism*, 27.

⁵⁷ Roland Lardinois, *L’Invention de l’Inde: Entre ésotérisme et science* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2007), 127.

⁵⁸ A forthcoming paper focuses specifically on the settlement in Cochinchina of the Theosophical Society: Jeremy Jammes, “Theosophy in the Vietnamese Religious Landscape: A Circulatory History of a Western Esoteric Movement

heavens”), aimed to revitalize and rationalize Buddhist theology and practices (especially its millenarian, meditative, and philanthropic traditions). The prolific productions of its Vietnamese actors—made largely of translations and commentaries of the verbose founders of Theosophical Society such as Blavatsky, Leadbeater, and Besant—were rationalist insertions into the dialogue between Eastern and Western civilizations and those between religions and science. This theosophical enterprise to build up an “edifying science” or a “savant religiosity”⁵⁹ was perfectly integrated into the intellectual fabric of its time, and exerted influence on the production of Cao Đài texts, which emerged at the same time among the cosmopolitan milieu of Cochinchina. Caodaism found many areas of agreement with the Theosophical society, as both shared a similar millenarian vision, within a familiar Christian and Buddhist theology, as well as a common religious and comparative literature. It is not surprising that many Caodaists attended theosophical circles until their prohibition in 1975; at the same time, many theosophists came to preach in Cao Đài temples. Moreover, the numerous connections and overlaps between the Theosophical Society, Caodaism, and the reformed lay Buddhist movements in the 1930s-50s in Cochinchina remain relatively uncharted terrain for future studies.

We can also note in passing the presence of Vietnamese freemasons in the Cao Đài leadership, such as Nguyễn Hữu Đức 阮友得 (1897–1974), who translated Pourvoirville’s *La Voie Rationnelle* (The Rational Way) as *Đạo Giáo* (道教 *daojiao*, literally the “Religion of the Dao” or “Daoism”) in 1935.⁶⁰ However, the Cao Đài literature does prefer to remind us that Nguyễn Hữu Đức is the cousin of the Cao Đài pope, Lê Văn Trung, and the one who introduced the latter to the Minh Lý temple where he converted to Caodaism. Among other vocal Cao Đài freemasons, we can also mention the names of Cao Triều Phát 高朝发—leader of Minh Chơn Đạo branch (Dao of the Enlightened Truth 明真道 *mingzhen dao*) and a Việt Minh military commander—, of Nguyễn Văn Ca 阮文歌—Pope of the Minh Chơn Lý branch (the Reason of the Enlightened Truth 明真理 *mingzhen li*)—, and of Cao Sĩ Tấn 高仕晋—a doctor and spirit medium at Cầu Kho temple, Saigon.⁶¹

The Cao Đài and Minh libraries we visited during our different field trips (2000–2013) contained large collections of occultist literature in French, especially of the spiritist and theosophical varieties, published between 1910s–1930s. In the library of the Minh Lý’s main temple in Ho Chi Minh City,⁶² for instance, few new titles have been placed on its dusty shelves since the 1930s; it contains a comprehensive collection of French esoteric and occultist texts, as well as a rich trove of Chinese scriptures, morality books, and spirit-writing texts, a large proportion of which were printed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by a Xiantian dao temple, the Chaoyuandong 朝元洞, located at Luofushan 羅浮山 in Guangdong, founded in 1873 and venerated as “ancestral court” of the Dongchu branch 東初派 of Xiantian dao, that spread to various parts of Southeast Asia.⁶³ We found a similar collection of Chinese texts (but no French or Vietnamese ones) at a decrepit Minh Sư/Xiantian dao temple in Saigon, the afore-mentioned Quang Nam Phật Đường (光南佛堂 *Guangnan Fotang*), established in 1920. These collections are evidence of the Xiantian dao-Minh networks and of the rapid

in South Vietnam,” in *Theosophy Across Boundaries*, ed. Hans Martin Krämer and Julian Strube (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, forthcoming).

⁵⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Choses dites* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1987), 110.

⁶⁰ Jammes, *Les Oracles*, 482.

⁶¹ See Jammes, *Les Oracles*, 167–168, citing Jacques Daloz, *Francs-maçons d’Indochine (1868-1975)* (Paris: Éditions Maçonniques de France, 2002), 10.

⁶² Jammes, *Les Oracles*, 468–474; Jammes, “Divination and Politics,” 365–366.

⁶³ Wei Dingming 危丁明, *Shumin de yongheng: Xiantian dao ji qi zai Gang’ao ji Dongnanya diqu de fazhan* 庶民的永恆：先天道及其在港澳及東南亞地區的發展 (Taipei: Boyang wenhua, 2015), 487.

development of the printing business during the late imperial period throughout the Chinese overseas communities.⁶⁴

On the other hand, the library of a major Cao Đài research institute in Ho Chi Minh City, the “Centre for the Diffusion of the Doctrine of the Great Way” (Cơ Quan Phổ Thông Giáo Lý Đại Đạo 機關普通教理大道 *jiguan putong jiaoli dadao*), a Minh-Tân-derived temple established in 1965,⁶⁵ in addition to its substantial collection of holdings in Vietnamese, contains much the same collection of French Esoteric and occultist titles as the Minh Lý Dao, but no Chinese texts. The distinctions and overlaps between these libraries are traces of the translingual textual circulation of religious ideas in the colonial and post-colonial era: from the purely Chinese corpus of a Minh Sư temple founded in 1920, to the Chinese, French, and Vietnamese resources of the Minh Lý Dao founded in 1924, to the exclusively French and Vietnamese holdings of the Cao Đài library established in 1965.

THE *ĐẠI THỪA CHƠN GIÁO* (大乘真教): THE CAO ĐÀI CONTEXT OF AN ESOTERIC TEXTUAL PRODUCTION

In the following section, we examine the idiomatic “traffic” of “translingual practices” generated in these already trans-national, trans-ethnic, trans-generational, and trans-temple networks through a study of the production and translation of the core esoteric scripture of Caodaism, the *Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo* (大乘真教 *Dacheng zhenjiao*), “The True Teachings of the Great Vehicle,” hereafter referred to as *DTCG*.

The *Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo* is one of the four canonical scriptures of Caodaism, each of which was composed through spirit-writing. Three of the scriptures focus on the religious life and community organization of the followers. They were compiled at the Holy See of Tây Ninh between 1926 and 1927, based on a preliminary selection of spirit-writing texts. They are the *Thánh Ngôn Hiệp Tuyển* (聖言集全 *shengyan jiquan*, “Compilation of Holy Words”) translated into French by Caodaists as *Les Saintes Paroles* (“The Holy Words”) or *Recueil des saints messages spirites* (“Compilation of Holy Writings of the Spirits”); the *Pháp Chánh Truyền* (法正傳 *fazhengchuan*, “the Orthodox Dharma,” translated by francophone Caodaists as *Constitution Religieuse*, “Religious Constitution”); and the *Tân Luật* (新律 *xinlü*, “New Code”), which deals with conversion rituals (*cầu đạo* 求道 *qiudao*, literally, “to seek the Way”) and other administrative topics. The fourth canonical text, the *DTCG*, deals primarily with esoteric practices.

The *DTCG* is not structured as a coherent and organized dogmatic treatise, but rather as a collection of moral guidance and teachings proclaimed by “instructors of the invisible.” The *DTCG* presents itself as an archetype of the omniscient knowledge transmitted by the spirits. The Daoist notion of self-cultivation (*tu luyện* 修煉 *xiulian*) through techniques of the body and meditation is one of the core themes of the book. The messages of the spirits elaborate on the tradition of the three teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism (*Tam Giáo* 三教 *sanjiao*), while claiming that they have lost their power in this era of the third kalpa. These doctrinal elements directly echo the millenarian themes of the Chinese salvationist tradition and especially the contents of the seventeenth-century *kinh Long Hoa* (龍華經 *Longhuajing*, “The Book of the Dragon Flower”). According to this tradition, the human race is subject to a final competition or “Dragon Flower Assembly” (*hội Long Hoa* 龍華會 *longhua hui*), in which only the most virtuous

⁶⁴ Yau Chi On, “The Xiantian dao and Publishing in the Guangzhou-Hong Kong Area from the Late Qing to the 1930s: The Case of the Morality Book Publisher Wenzazi,” in *Religious Publishing and Print Culture in Modern China (1800–2012)*, ed. Philip Clart and Gregory Adam Scott (Boston, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 187.

⁶⁵ Jammes, *Les Oracles*, 260–262.

will pass the exam, attain salvation, and eventually find a place beside the Golden Mother of the Jade Pond—and the Jade Emperor in the Cao Đài context.⁶⁶

The revelation of the teachings in the *DTCCG* had been announced during a séance in 1932, organized by the Chiếu Minh branch, following the death of Ngô Văn Chiêu, its founder. The author of the *DTCCG* preface, Trần Văn Quế (陳文桂) assisted Liên Hoa, the medium at the séances who had been trained by Ngô Văn Chiêu himself, in reading the spirit messages. A mathematics teacher at the Lycée Pétrus-Ký elite high school, Trần Văn Quế (1902–1980) joined Cao Đài in 1929 and immediately got involved in the struggle against schisms in the movement, considering unity as crucial to counter colonial power.⁶⁷

We have noted above that the Chiếu Minh denomination was described by the Tây Ninh Holy See as the “esoteric” branch of Caodaism, which practices “heart-to-heart transmission through non-interference” (*nội giáo vô vi tâm truyền* 內教無為心傳 *nejiao wuwei xinchuan*). This branch was considered as the trustee of the “secret law of esoteric exercises” (*tâm pháp bí truyền luyện đạo* 心法密傳煉道 *xinfa michuan liandao*) which should not be transmitted outside of the small circle of initiates. The latter would be released from the law of karma and would attain to high positions in the afterlife after this intense “effort” (*công phu* 功夫 *gongfu*).

The notion of “exotericism” (*ngoại giáo công truyền* 外教公傳 *wajiao gongchuan*), on the other hand, is often used by Caodaists to refer to the ideas and actions of the Tây Ninh Holy See. From the 1920s until today, the Tây Ninh Holy See instrumentalizes the original schismatic division by according to itself the monopoly of proselytism and social action, and by presenting itself as the sole possessor of the Dharma for the new kalpa (*thế pháp* 劫法 *jiefa*), while it recognizes Ngô Văn Chiêu’s dissident branch as a method of individual self-cultivation.

The production of the *DTCCG* by the Chiếu Minh aimed, on the other hand, to reinforce its authority in matters of esoteric cultivation. When, on 19 November 1936, Trần Văn Quế wrote the text which would become the preface to the 1950 *DTCCG*, he was positioning himself directly in reaction to the Tây Ninh Holy See, whose leader, the prolific medium Phạm Công Tắc, had been publishing esoteric teachings, undermining the complementarity between the “esoteric” and “exoteric” branches of the Cao Đài religion.⁶⁸ Phạm Công Tắc played the role of medium during séances at which messages were specifically received, in French, from Lenin (25 February 1934), Joan of Arc (24 February 1933), Jean de la Fontaine (14 March 1933), Shakespeare (29 December 1935), and recurrently Victor Hugo (between 1927 and 1959).⁶⁹ These messages engaged Caodaism in the political discourses of the time through the medium of these European figures.

In 1946, Phạm Công Tắc had returned to Cochinchina after having been jailed for five years in Madagascar by the French authorities. The French forced him to support them and to join the war against the Communists. Seeking to unite the masses of believers who were dispersed in different branches, and having gained an intense meditation experience during his exile, he began to compete directly with the Chiếu Minh branch on the terrain of its own specialty: esoteric meditation. He eventually managed to convince the members of the Minh Thiện redemptive society to join his meditation centers, in which the spirits would be able to teach “the spiritual and secret exercises” (*bí pháp luyện đạo* 密法煉道 *mifa liandao*).⁷⁰ His meditation practice inspired his

⁶⁶ Đức Nguyên, *Cao Đài Từ Điển*, “Tiến hóa”; Jammes, *Les Oracles*, 109–113. According to the theological perspective, but also to the believer, there is a debate whether the highest deity would be the Jade Emperor, the Golden Mother, or both (following the Daoist dyad or yin/yang dynamics).

⁶⁷ For more details on the production of these texts in the context of sectarian rivalries between Cao Đài branches, see Jammes & Palmer, “Occulting the Dao”; on the commitment of Trần Văn Quế for the union of the Cao Đài branches, see Jammes, “Caodaism in Times of War,” 274–279.

⁶⁸ Jammes, “Divination and Politics,” 362–374.

⁶⁹ Jammes, *Les Oracles*, 529–539.

⁷⁰ Đức Nguyên, *Cao Đài Từ Điển*, “Trí huệ cung.”

homilies, written between 1946 and 1959 in Vietnamese prose, and compiled into eight published volumes.⁷¹ His spirit-writing sessions had at the same time generated an original esoteric body of knowledge, directly produced in French, that was politically engaged and legitimated the power of this medium and the orthodoxy claims of the Tây Ninh Holy See.

The publication of the *DTCG* in 1950, in response to these initiatives, aimed to consolidate the authority of the Chiếu Minh denomination in esoteric matters. In the *DTCG*, the Chiếu Minh branch is thus described as the guardian of the “Great Dao of the Highest Platform” (*Cao Đài Đại Đạo* 高臺大道 *Gaotai dadao*) while the branch of the Tây Ninh Holy See, under the name of the “Great Way of the Third Cycle of Universal Salvation” formed the “Cao Đài religion” (*Cao Đài Tôn Giáo* 高臺宗教 *Gaotai zongjiao*) focused on evangelizing the masses (*Ơ Phổ hóa* 幾普化 *jípública*).⁷²

A TRANSLINGUAL STUDY OF THE *DTCG*

The *DTCG* is a collection of 51 spirit-writing messages attributed mostly to the Jade Emperor, Li Bai 李白, Guan Gong 關公, Laozi, and so on, revealed in Vietnamese at the end of 1936; to these texts were added 22-odd messages produced by the divinized spirits of former Chiếu Minh disciples (two in 1926, two in 1934, two in 1935, five in 1937, one in 1938, two in 1939, two in 1941, two in 1945, one in 1948, two in 1949, one in 1950). It is symptomatic of the spirit-writing origin of this volume and of its supposed role in the self-cultivation of the followers that the last pages (530–531) list the divine titles of Chiếu Minh members who passed away—the so-called “pioneers” (*tiên phong*, 先鋒 *xianfeng*), translated as “angels” (*les anges*), and “the elected men and women” (*les élus* and *les élues*).

The collection was compiled as a 538-page volume in thematic (and not chronological) order with a print run of “2,000 copies, not for sale” in 1950, in a bilingual, Vietnamese-French version.⁷³ It was printed by a company run by Nguyễn Văn Huấn 阮文訓, a famous and active member of the Theosophical Society.⁷⁴

The book contains both the original Vietnamese text and a French translation heavily laden with the idioms of French Occultism, itself based on a reappropriation and reinterpretation of the symbols and tropes of Roman Catholicism. The 1950 edition carries the French title of *La Bible du Grand Cycle de l'Ésotérisme*—“The Bible of the Great Cycle of Esotericism;” the Vietnamese preface refers to it as “a manual of the pill of immortality” (*kinh sách luận về Đôn-Kinh* 經書論於丹經 *jingshu lunyu danjing*).⁷⁵ These two designations reveal the two distinct idioms in which the teachings are presented in the book: as a Daoist manual of immortality in the Vietnamese version, and as an “Esoteric Bible” in the French version.

The publisher of the *DTCG*, Nguyễn Văn Huấn, was possibly involved at least in the proofreading process, imprinting his theosophical and occultist influence on some terms and concepts. However, the inner cover pages (pages 2–3) of the *DTCG* state that the translation was carried out by “a group of disciples of the Chiếu Minh Cenacle.” The production and the

⁷¹ See the publications of Phạm Công Tắc in our bibliography.

⁷² Phái Chiếu-Minh, *Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo – Le Grand Cycle de l'Ésotérisme*. “Cao Đài Đại Đạo” [Great Way of Cao Đài or Caodaism] Series (Saigon: Nguyễn-Văn-Huấn Printing House, 1950), 6–7.

⁷³ The 1950 edition (“Nguyễn Văn Huấn Printing house”) is mentioned as the “second edition;” we have not been able to locate earlier edition(s) of this text and assume the “first edition” was circulated internally.

⁷⁴ A lay Buddhist, art professor, and publisher, Nguyễn Văn Huấn was the first secretary of the Theosophical branch for “Việt Nam” in 1949. See Jammes, “Theosophying.” On the community of Cao Đài exegetes, journalists, and publishers, see Jeremy Jammes, “Printing Cosmopolitanism, Challenging Orthodoxies: Cao Đài Journals in Twentieth Vietnam,” *Vienna Journal of East Asian Studies* 10 (2018): 175–209.

⁷⁵ Phái Chiếu-Minh, *Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo*, 8–9.

publication of this book are the work of a milieu of Cao Đài editors and exegetists who were very experienced in Vietnamese-French translation. We can speculate with a reasonable degree of confidence that the following Caodaists actively participated in this translation: Trần Văn Quế (signatory of the preface), Nguyễn Hữu Đắc⁷⁶ (1897–1974, signatory of a note at the beginning of the book), and probably Phan Trường Mạnh 潘長孟 (1895–1967), prolific author and chief editor of the bilingual *Revue caodaïque/Cao Đài Giáo Lý* (高臺教理 *Gaotai jiaoli*, “the Doctrine of Cao Đài”, publishing in 1930–1933 and 1947–1949), which makes ample reference to the spirit-writing production of the Chiếu Minh denomination. This “Cao daic Journal” actively participated in “Vietnamizing” the knowledge emanating from spirit-writing séances. It was run and hosted by the “Cao daic Institute. Psychological, philosophical, metaphysical studies” (“*Institut Caodaïque. Études psychologiques, philosophiques, métaphysiques*”). This institute (*Học viện Cao Đài 學院高臺 xueyuan gaotai*) aimed to bring studies on Caodaism to the status of a true theological discipline.

In our study, we have employed the following method to compare the meanings of the original Vietnamese and French versions of the text. We selected a number of stanzas from the two sections of the *DTCCG*, which are representative of some of the core concepts of the text and exemplify the passage from a Chinese religious lexicon to French occultist and Catholic ones. The 1950 edition of the *DTCCG* is a bilingual version, with the Vietnamese original on each left-hand page and the French translation on the facing page. For the purposes of the present English-language publication, we translated the French version of the selected passages into English. We also compared the original French translation from the 1950 version with a new, slightly revised French translation published by a Cao Đài group in 2013—the first revised French version to have been published since the 1950 edition.⁷⁷ The 2013 edition, in an obvious effort to adapt to a different cultural and religious context, has watered down the occultist and Catholic flavor of the 1950 version, sometimes instead using terms with more connotations of “New Age” spirituality.

The first English translation of the *DTCCG* was published in 2015.⁷⁸ To our knowledge no Chinese translation has ever been attempted or published. It is interesting to note, however, that these recent translations, especially the English one, have largely removed the theosophical and spiritist language of the 1950 edition. Here, the translator attempted to tailor “Cao Đài” as a scientific and religious doctrine, which becomes “a profoundly mystic science”⁷⁹ driven by spirit-mediumship. This English translation departs substantially from the 1950 and 2013 French versions. Although there are still some clear references to Western occultist terms (spiritism, the Spirit of Truth, the disincarnated) or concepts (evolutionism, dematerialization...), they occur much less than in the French versions; the translator(s) tried to stay close to the literal meaning while maintaining a more generic tenor, in which both the specific spiritist and Daoist/Chinese salvationist flavours are attenuated. Interestingly, the 2015 English translation lists several Vietnamese-English, French-English and English-English dictionaries in a bibliography, but no Chinese dictionary was consulted by its translator(s).⁸⁰ In the section below, while we quote the 2015 English translation for reference and comparison, our focus is on the 1950 bilingual Vietnamese-French edition.

⁷⁶ Nguyễn Hữu Đắc was a follower of the Minh Lý Dao and the maternal cousin of Lê Văn Trung, the pope of Caodaism.

⁷⁷ Cao Đài Đại Đạo Cénacle Ésotérique de Chiếu Minh, *Le véritable enseignement du grand cycle caodaïste (Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo)*, translated into French from Vietnamese by Quách Hiệp Long (Hanoi: NXB Tôn Giáo, 2013). This revised version was published by the “Centre for Diffusing the Doctrine of the Great Way” (Cơ Quan Phổ Thông Giáo Lý Đại Đạo), a Cao Đài ecumenical and missionary group founded in 1965 by Trần Văn Quế, a member of both Minh Lý and Cao Đài who, fifteen years earlier, had written the foreword of the *DTCCG*.

⁷⁸ Cao Đài Đại Đạo “Chiếu Minh” Séance, *The Grand Cycle of Esoteric Teaching* (San Jose, CA: Cao-Dai Temple Overseas, 2015).

⁷⁹ Cao Đài Đại Đạo “Chiếu Minh” Séance, *The Grand Cycle of Esoteric Teaching*, 113.

⁸⁰ Cao Đài Đại Đạo “Chiếu Minh” Séance, *The Grand Cycle of Esoteric Teaching*, 223.

We thus laid the different versions side by side: (1) the original Vietnamese; (2) the 1950 French translation;⁸¹ (3) our English literal translation of the 1950 French version; and (4) the 2013 French translation (5) the 2015 English translation. We then proceeded to “convert” the Vietnamese version into Chinese characters. We started with the hypothesis that the classical, religious, and poetic idiom of the *DTCG* could be converted into Chinese characters on a word-by-word basis (rather than translating the meaning of full verses into modern Chinese), for the following reasons: (1) the basic structure and pattern of the verses appears to be very similar to typical Chinese spirit-writing texts; indeed, the *DTCG* was revealed through spirit-writing techniques in basic continuity with Chinese methods, and in the tradition of the Xiantian dao branches within which the early founders and leaders of Cao Đài religion were active; (2) the text was produced at a time when the *quốc ngữ*—the modern romanization/ alphabet system for Vietnamese—had only begun to be the dominant writing system, while the traditional writing system based on Chinese characters, formally abolished only in 1918 together with the Confucian mandarin exams, retained a residual influence; (3) the Vietnamese language has many similarities with some Southern Chinese dialects such as Cantonese. Methodologically, then, we treated the Vietnamese text as if it were the romanization of a Chinese dialect, which could be converted into Chinese characters.

Converting the Vietnamese into Chinese characters was not an easy task—similar to the Chinese *hanyu pinyin* romanization system, romanized Vietnamese contains a large number of homophones and there were often several plausible possibilities of equivalents in Chinese characters. Chinese characters were chosen based on the meaning and pronunciation of individual Vietnamese words (often similar to Cantonese or many other Chinese dialects demonstrating relatively systematic variations in pronunciation compared with Mandarin), placed in the context of the overall meaning of the verse and bearing in mind the use of specialized religious terminologies. We were unable to convert into Chinese about 15% of the selected Vietnamese verses, either because the meanings were too obscure, or because the terms were too purely or locally Vietnamese, without any equivalent Chinese characters with similar sound and meaning. In such cases, as in the first verse cited below, it is possible to convert the words into the *chữ nôm* logographic script of the Vietnamese language, derived from Chinese characters and used in vernacular texts prior to the introduction of modern Vietnamese romanization.

The outcome of this process fully confirmed our hypothesis—the Chinese text of the *DTCG* reads in style and content like a rather typical Chinese scripture produced through spirit-writing. It is particularly resonant with texts associated with Chinese redemptive societies of the early twentieth century, with an emphasis on both personal spiritual cultivation through Daoist inner alchemy and Confucian morality, and on universal salvation in the context of the sectarian eschatology of the three kalpas. Apart from a few syntactical structures distinct from standard Chinese, there is little in the text to indicate its Vietnamese provenance, and even few specific indications of a “uniquely” Cao Đài revelation. A reader familiar with Chinese spirit-writing texts and unaware that the text had been revealed in Vietnamese, could be forgiven, without studying the *DTCG* in depth, for assuming that our Chinese version was simply another of the myriads of texts produced by the thousands of spirit-writing altars in China and diasporic Chinese communities in the late imperial or modern era.⁸²

An example of the stylistic similarity between the *DTCG* and Chinese spirit-writing texts is the literary practice, common in Chinese poetry and spirit-writing texts, in which the first word of each horizontal verse can be read vertically as a meaningful phrase. In the first stanza, for example, the three first Vietnamese words *ĐÔNG ĐÌNH HO* can be converted, based on the

⁸¹ Quotations from the text are references according to the date of production, i.e., year/month/day (in the text, the year is according to the Gregorian calendar and the month and day are according to the lunar calendar).

⁸² Indeed, we showed the text to some Chinese readers unaware of its origin, and their reaction was the same: they saw our Chinese version of the *DTCG* text as a collection of Chinese poems.

sound and meaning in the context of the verses, into the Chinese characters 洞頂蝴 (*dong ding hu*).⁸³ These characters, in turn, are homophones of the characters 洞庭湖 (*dong ting hu*)—Dongting Lake, which has strong associations with the famous Chinese Tang Dynasty poet Lý Thái Bạch (Li Taibai 李太白), who is here referenced as the deity who authored this revelation, and who is venerated by Caodaists as the (spiritual) pope (*giáo tông* 教宗 *jiaozong*) of their religion.

[Original Vietnamese version]

ĐỘNG lòng thương xót buổi đời nguy,
ĐÌNH hội Phật Tiên đã mấy kỳ,
HO điệp mê mang chưa tỉnh thức,
ĐẠI TIÊN TRƯỞNG giáng hoát vô-vi.⁸⁴

[Conversion into Chinese characters]

洞悉傷悴暇代危⁸⁵
頂[庭]會佛仙達每期
蝴[湖]蝶迷夢未顛醒
大仙將降活無為

[English translation of the Chinese version]:

My heart is pained by the calamities of this era
Buddhas and Immortals arrive for the assembly at each cycle
[The people are] Not yet awakened from their butterfly dream
The Great Immortal will come down, moving in non-action

[French version in the 1950 edition]:

*Les malheurs de ce monde m'ont profondément ému.
Des Anges et des Bouddha se sont manifestés à maintes reprises pour son salut.
Mais, ballucinés par le Rêve des Papillons, ses hôtes ne veulent pas se réveiller...
Je viens en Esprit leur ouvrir la Bible Caodaïque de la Délivrance.*

[English literal translation of the 1950 French version]:

*The calamities of this world have profoundly moved me.
Angels and Buddhas have manifested themselves on numerous instances for its salvation.
But, hallucinated by the Dream of the Butterflies, its hosts do not want to awaken...
I come in the Spirit to open for them the Caodaic Bible of Deliverance.*

[English translation published in 2015]:

*Touched by miseries of this world,
Divine Beings manifest many times to save it.
Yet humans are still deeply wallowing in reveries,
The GREAT IMMORTAL descends to teach them Self-Deliverance.*

The meter and structure of ĐTCG's verses reads like a typical Chinese spirit-writing text. What makes the ĐTCG distinctive is the fact that it was revealed in romanized Vietnamese, *not* in

⁸³ Phái Chiếu-Minh, *Đạo Thừa Chơn Giáo*, 16 (message of September 24th, 1936).

⁸⁴ Boldface in this and in the following extracts follows the original text.

⁸⁵ This verse includes *chữ nôm* characters (underlined) for vernacular terms that do not have equivalents in Chinese characters.

Chinese characters—allowing it to cast a veil over the Chinese origin and content of its teachings, a veil that has become thicker with each generation of Vietnamese becoming increasingly ignorant of Chinese writing and civilization. Lacking the Chinese linguistic knowledge and Daoist terminology, a reader would find parts of the text to be simply incomprehensible.

The “occultation” of the Chinese religious roots of the *DTCG* was carried a stage further by the French edition, which overlaid an interpretation—onto the entire text—based on the categories of European esoteric and occultist re-appropriations of Catholic, Buddhist, and Daoist words and concepts. Since many of the early Cao Đài leaders and believers were educated in French colonial schools, they were often more literate in French than in Chinese or even Vietnamese, and used the French version as a key to understanding the obscure Vietnamese original with its stylistic roots in classical Chinese poetry. The bilingual edition of the *DTCG* was certainly published with this first purpose in mind. Moreover, the French edition helped to legitimize and convert the *DTCG* into both the language of modern rationality (through the idiom of Occultism) and the language of religious hegemony (through the idiom of Catholicism re-mixed by Occultism). But this “occultization” process of conversion and transformation, nearly completely “occulted” or eclipsed the Chinese and, especially, the Daoist roots of the text. This linguistic overlay is evidenced in the French title of the *DTCG*—*La Bible du Grand Cycle de l'Ésotérisme* (“The Bible of the Great Cycle of Esotericism”), which shifts the terminology from the generic Chinese Buddhist connotation of the original title, “The True Teachings of the Great Realization” or “The True Teachings of the Great Vehicle [Mahayana]” to an explicit combination of Biblical and esoteric references.

An archetypal example of the conversion of Daoist concepts into Christian terms with an explicit reference to Master Cao Đài that is absent in the original text is the fourth verse of the stanza revealed on 24 September 1936 and cited above. In the Vietnamese original, the line “*Đài-Tiên-Trưởng giáng hoá vô-vi*,” converted word-by-word into Chinese characters, becomes 大仙將降活無為 (*daxian jiangluo huowuwei*), which may be rendered into English as “The Great Immortal shall come down, moving in non-action”—a rather generic expression of the process of spirit-writing by Daoist immortals in Chinese religion (the poet Li Taibai in this text). But in the French version—*Je viens en Esprit leur ouvrir la Bible Caodaïque de la Délivrance* (“I come in the Spirit to open for them the Caodaic Bible of Deliverance”)—the Daoist terminology of the original is replaced by Christian tropes (“I come in the Spirit”, the “Bible of Deliverance”) in the name of Cao Đài.

Indeed, much of the original version of the *DTCG* can be read in the original like a relatively typical Chinese spirit-writing text, with the recurrent themes of a syncretic view of self-cultivation referring to the Three Teachings of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, associated with specific techniques of Daoist inner alchemy, and a message of universal salvation in the eschatological framework of the three kalpas of the Chinese salvationist (sectarian) tradition. The term “Cao Đài” rarely appears in the original; but is inserted repeatedly throughout the French translation, together with Christian and occultist terms. The French-mediated translingual practice of Cao Đài religion would appear to play an important role in articulating a Cao Đài identity that is distinct from Chinese popular religion and spirit-writing—the Vietnamese original version of the scripture containing little to distinguish it from the broader genre of Chinese spirit-writing.

It is interesting to note that in the new 2013 French translation of the scripture, the Christian terminology is removed from the translation of the afore-mentioned verse, which becomes: “The superior Spirit of the Great Immortal Li Taibai manifests itself and opens the era of Spirituality” (*L'Esprit supérieur du Grand Immortel Li T'ai Pe se manifeste et ouvre l'ère de la Spiritualité*), perhaps indicating an alignment with a more “New Age” discourse of “spirituality,” all the while explicitly naming the “Great Immortal” as Li Taibai.⁸⁶ And the 2015 English version is rather generic: “The GREAT IMMORTAL descends to teach them Self-Deliverance.”⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Cao Đài Đại Đạo Cénacle Ésotérique, *Le véritable enseignement du grand cycle caodaïste (Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo)*, 17.

⁸⁷ Cao Đài Đại Đạo “Chiếu Minh” Séance, *The Grand Cycle of Esoteric Teaching*, 11.

In the next stanza, we find what again reads as a relatively generic spirit-writing text, with the exception of a specific reference to the “South”—which can, in the context of this scriptural production, be interpreted as either Vietnam, being located to the South of China, or as South Vietnam—given that the Cao Đài religion appeared in the Mekong delta and has been associated with South Vietnamese religious culture and identity. In the French translation, several of the implicit nuances of the stanza are rendered into explicit interpretations, again using Chinese sectarian, Christian, and occultist references. The reference to the third cycle of salvation, a mainstay of Chinese sectarian eschatology, is interpolated into the first line; the “Great Virtue” is named as the “Comforter,” which is understood by Christians as referring to the Holy Spirit.⁸⁸ The Vietnamese sentence “educate the souls” (*giáo dục hồn dân*, 教德魂人 *jiao de hun ren*), largely influenced by a Chinese conception of cultivation, was translated into French with a Christian-driven formula, “Angelic education.”

In the third verse, the vaguely Daoist notion of the “return to one’s spiritual nature” (*chuyển qui linh tánh* 轉歸靈性 *zhuangui lingxing*) is translated into strongly dualistic Biblical imagery as “fishing out the divine soul entangled in the flesh,” while the generic “true transmission of Dao,” *Chơn truyền đạo* (真傳道 *zhenchuan dao*), is rendered as “Caodaic esotericism.” The Cao Đài practice of spirit-writing, “holding the divining stylus”, *thừa cơ mật nhiệm* (乘乩密驗 *chengji miyan*) is rendered as “by means of psychography” with its Western spiritist and modernist connotations of a “writing of the psyche” or “photography of the soul.”

[Original Vietnamese version]:

ĐẠI đức Nam Phương hóa Đạo Huỳnh,
THỪA cơ mật nhiệm thức tâm linh,
CHƠN truyền đạo chuyển qui linh tánh,
GIÁO dục hồn dân trí huệ minh.

[Conversion into Chinese characters]:

大德南方化道黃
 乘乩密驗篤心靈
 真傳道轉歸靈性
 教德魂人智慧明

[English translation of the Chinese version]:

The Great Virtue generates an emperor of Dao in the South.
 Holding the divining stylus to secretly activate the souls.
 The true transmission of Dao returns to the spiritual nature.
 Educate the souls and people to understand the wisdom.

[French version in the 1950 edition]:

Le consolateur prêche le 3^e Salut Universel au Viet-Nam.
Au moyen de la psychographie, Il réveille les âmes dévoyées.
L'Ésotérisme Caodaïque repêche l'Âme Divine enlisée dans la chair.
Cette Éducation Angélique rallume la flamme Sacrée des cœurs humains.

[English literal translation of the 1950 French version]:

The comforter preaches the 3rd Universal Salvation in Vietnam.

⁸⁸ See John 14:16, John 14:26, John 15:26.

By means of psychography, He awakens the lost souls.

Caodaic Esotericism *fishes out the Divine Soul entangled in the flesh.*

This Angelic Education re-ignites the Sacred flame of the human hearts.

[English translation published in 2015]:

GOD preaches the Sainly Doctrine in Vietnam;

HE reveals the mystic science to wake human spirits,

HE shows them the method to return to their spiritual nature,

And teaches them the doctrine to cultivate their mind.

A few lines down, Chinese salvationist apocalyptic themes are again translated into Christian terms: the “True Dao” (*Chơn Đạo*, 正道 *zhengdao*) becomes “the Gospel of the Spirit of Truth”; the “end of the kalpa” (*mạt kiếp* 末劫 *mojie*) becomes “the prophesied end times”; the “Dragon Flower Assembly” (*bội Long Hoa*, 龍華會 *Longhuahui*) becomes the “coming judgment of God.” It seems that the main inspiration in the translation came from the spiritist reform of Catholicism. Indeed, by mentioning the role of the “Spirit of Truth” announced to “the Incarnates,” we have a clear-cut reference to one of the key concepts of Kardec’s spiritist doctrine. In his *Book of the Spirits* (*Le Livre des Esprits* in its 1857 original French version), Kardec referred to “The Spirit of Truth” as a group of spirits who taught the new doctrine during spiritist séances in the 1850s. In volume II of *The Book of the Spirits*, Kardec dedicated chapter 2 to the “Incarnation of Spirits” and explained why spirits “incarnate” in material bodies, justifying later the necessary “disincarnation” process taught by the spiritist doctrine itself.

[Original Vietnamese version]:

Minh Chơn-Đạo thời kỳ mạt-kiếp,

Thức tỉnh đời cho kịp Long-Hoa,

[Conversion into Chinese characters]:

明正道吹起末劫

學省俗至及龍華

[English translation of the Chinese version]:

Enlightening the True Dao at the end of the kalpa

Awakening from the profane world will allow one to reach the Dragon Flower Assembly.

[French version in the 1950 edition]:

L'Évangile de l'Esprit de Vérité s'ouvre aux derniers temps prédits

Pour annoncer aux Incarnés le prochain Jugement de Dieu.

[English literal translation of the 1950 French version]:

The Gospel of the Spirit of Truth is opened in the prophesied end times

To announce to the Incarnates the coming Judgment of God.

[English translation published in 2015]:

The Spirit of Truth is elucidated in this late Era of Destruction,

To warn the incarnate of the upcoming Judgment.

A little further down,⁸⁹ the *DTCG* does mention Cao Đài explicitly, referring not to the Master here but rather to a specific “set of teachings,” *Cao Đài giáo* (高臺教 *Gaotai jiao*). The original verses use a generally Buddhist imagery to speak of guiding sentient beings to deliverance through self-cultivation, although the term “Second Person,” *Ngôi Hai* (位二 *wei er*) can refer, in Vietnamese Catholicism, to the Son, i.e., to the second person of the Holy Trinity. In the French version, this incarnation-related and messianic theme is expanded to convert the stanza into a fully Christian eschatological structure, speaking of the “lambs,” the “manger,” the “children of God,” and the “Darkness of Satan” (albeit with the “Three Nirvanas” thrown in, which do not appear in the original version). The mention in French of “the Era of Incarnation” sets up again a spiritist framework of understanding and translation. The extensive use of Christian terminology has to be comprehended within this spiritist perspective.

[Original Vietnamese version]:

CAO-ĐÀI-GIÁO lưu hành phổ tế,
 Pháp chánh truyền cứu thế thoát nhân,
 Bốn phương phát triển tinh thần,
 Gội nhuần vô lộ hồng ân **CAO-ĐÀI**.
 Gần tận thế **NGÔI-HAI** ra mặt,
 Đặt toan phương diu dắt chúng-sanh,
 Chỉ tường cội phước nguồn lành,
 Giác mê tỉnh ngộ tu hành siêu thăng.
 Cuộc tang thương dữ dẫn trước đó,

[Conversion into Chinese characters]:

高臺教流行普渡
 《法正傳》救世脫人
 四方發展省清
 溉濕霧露鴻恩高臺
 近旦夕位二出面
 當痛方調度眾生
 指通概福慷恩
 覺夢醒悟自行超升

[English translation of the Chinese version]:

The Cao Đài teachings spread universal salvation far and wide
 The Orthodox Transmission of the Dharma saves the world and delivers humanity
 In the four directions, consciousness shall develop
 Moistened by the blessed mist and dew of the grace of [Master] Cao Đài
 Approaching the Last Day [End of the World], the **Second Person [the Son]** appears
 And suffers in order to guide all sentient beings
 Points through the root of abundant blessings
 To be awakened and enlightened, and to rise to salvation through one’s own cultivation

[French version in the 1950 edition]:

[B] Le CAODAISME *prêche le Salut Universel*
Cette Doctrine Unique enseigne: « Sauvez-vous vous-mêmes en sauvant les autres »
Des 4 points du globe, les consciences se raniment

⁸⁹ Phái Chiếu-Minh, *Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo*, 18.

*Sous le souffle du Saint-Esprit qui se répand du CAO-DAI
Aux termes de l'Ère de l'Incarnation, DIEU LE FILS se révèle à nouveau
Pour ramener ses brebis au Bercaïl d'En-Haut.
Son Évangile montre les 3 Nirvana
D'où les Enfants de Dieu partaient pour y revenir.
Les Ténèbres de Satan dissipés, la Voie de Dieu réapparaît.*

[English literal translation of the 1950 French version]:

[C] CAODAISM preaches Universal Salvation
The Unique Doctrine teaches: “Save yourself by saving others.”
From the 4 points of the globe, conscious souls are coming back to life
Through the breath of the Holy Spirit that spreads from the **CAO-DAI**
At the term of the Era of Incarnation, **GOD THE SON** reveals himself again.
To bring his lambs to the Manger Above.
His Gospel shows the 3 Nirvanas
From which the Children of God left and now return.
The Darkness of Satan dissipated, the Way of God re-appears.

[English translation published in 2015]:

CAODAISM promulgates the new doctrine,
The true method of self-deliverance to liberate mankind;
It revives this spirit throughout the world,
So that everyone receives the great favor of CAO-ĐÀI,
Near the end of the Cosmic Cycle, GOD THE SON reveals Himself,
To lead humans back to their original nature;
He points out their Saintly Origin,
Waking them from illusion, focusing them on self-attainment.

Much of the second part of the *DTCG* is devoted to the esoteric spiritual practice of Caodaism, describing a nine-stage method that is titled in French as the “nine initiations of Caodaic esotericism.”⁹⁰ Converted to Chinese characters, the original text of the name of the method, “Tam Thừa Cửu Chuyển” (三乘九轉 *sancheng jiuzhuan*), “three vehicles in nine cycles,” evokes the terminology of Daoist inner alchemy; following the conventions of Daoist studies, it might be also rendered in English as the “Three Vehicles of Nine Reversions,”⁹¹ or as “Ninefold transformation”⁹² or as “Nine reversals”.

Indeed, the description of the method over the following sections clearly refers to inner alchemical practices. But the “pre-natal realm” or *tiên thiên* (先天 *xiantian*, also often translated by scholars as “anterior heaven”), a core concept in Daoist cosmology and alchemical practice, is translated as “Occult life” (i.e., the hidden life which requires an initiation); while the process of alchemical refinement of the *hồn* (魂 *hun*) and *phách* (魄 *po*) souls on the path of immortality (*tiên thân* 仙 *xian*), is rendered as “Cleans[ing] the soul and the body of the Elect who aspire to the Bliss of the Angels.” In the 2013 revision, those terms are replaced by the more New-Age theosophical connotations of “creating the astral body.”⁹³ Indeed the founders of the Theosophical Society

⁹⁰ Phái Chiếu-Minh, *Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo*, 384 (message of August 19th, 1936).

⁹¹ Louis Komjathy, *The Way of Complete Perfection: A Quanzhen Daoist Anthology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 309.

⁹² Kristofer Schipper and Franciscus Verellen, eds., *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 399.

⁹³ Cao Đài Đại Đạo Cénacle Ésotérique, *Le véritable enseignement du grand cycle caodaïste (Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo)*, 299.

extensively based their argumentation on the existence and definition of this astral body, especially the 1902 book *Man Visible and Invisible* by Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854–1934).

[Original Vietnamese version]:

Đại thừa Đạo chánh Tiên-Thiên,
Luyện hồn chế phách đấng Tiên hửởng nhàn.
Trong cửu chuyển phải tàng tâm-pháp,
Phải y hành cho hạp phép tu,

[Conversion into Chinese characters]:

大乘道長先天
練魂制魄登仙享閒
純九轉恰藏心法
恰依行才合法修

[English translation of the Chinese version]:

The Way of the Great Vehicle is eternally located in the Pre-Natal realm
Refine the heavenly (*bun*) souls and control the earthly (*po*) souls, ascend to the bliss of the Immortals
In the nine pure cycles are stored the method of the inner heart
You must follow the right rules and train with the right principles

[French version from the 1950 edition]:

Le Grand Cycle de l'Ésotérisme révèle la Vie Occulte,
Assainit l'âme et le corps des Élus qui aspirent à la Félicité des Anges.
Au cours des 9 spires d'évolution, pénétrez-vous des Lois Occultes
Selon lesquelles vous pratiquez vos Exercices Spirituels.

[English literal translation of the 1950 French version]:

The Great Cycle of Esotericism reveals the Occult Life,
Cleanses the soul and the body of the Elect who aspire to the Bliss of the Angels.
During the 9 stages of evolution, immerse yourself in the Occult Laws
According to which you practice your Spiritual Exercises.

[English translation published in 2015]:

The Grand Cycle of Esotericism reveals the Way of the Pre-Genesis,
To forge the soul and create the double-body for the spiritual ascension.
You should know the method of heart in the Nine Initiations,
And scrupulously exercise them in accord with the rules of self-perfection.

Further down,⁹⁴ we find a typical piece of advice on nurturing the triad of *timh* (精 *jing*), *khí* (氣 *qi*), and *thần* (神 *shen*) in Daoist inner alchemy—three terms usually translated in English-language scholarship as Essence, Qi (or vital breath), and Spirit; these, here, are rendered as “sperm,” “breath,” and “the Holy Spirit.” The Chinese terms are impossible to translate adequately—*jing*, *qi*, and *shen* each referring to different forms of vital energy, *jing* being the most “material” and *shen* the most “spiritual,” externally associated respectively with sperm, breath, and the mind, but internally the object of subtle circulations and transformations within the body, each being transformed into the other through alchemical meditation aiming to refine the *jing* into *qi*,

⁹⁴ Phái Chiếu-Minh, *Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo*, 386 (message of August 19th, 1936).

the *qi* into *shen*, and the *shen* back into the void *xuwu* 虛無 (*hư vô* in Vietnamese). Given the impossibility to fully render the terms into European languages—and the opacity of the terms to anyone not familiar with inner alchemy—it is interesting that the Cao Đài translators chose two terms that reflect an extreme dualism of body and spirit, rendering *jing* into its most materialized expression as “sperm” and *shen* into a Christian term associated with the absolutely transcendental God, as the “Holy Spirit.” (the 2015 version translates *jing* and *shen* as “quintessence” and “spirit” respectively, a choice of terms that most scholars would probably find appropriate).

[Original Vietnamese version]:

Nhứt là dưỡng khí, tồn tinh,
Tinh khô, khí tận, thần linh chẳng còn.

[Conversion into Chinese characters]:

一來養氣存精
精枯、氣竭，神靈將乾

[English translation of the Chinese version]:

Most important is to nurture the *Qi* and preserve the Essence
When the Essence is dried and the *Qi* is exhausted, the Spirit will disappear

[French version from the 1950 edition]:

Ménagez d'abord le Souffle de vie et économisez le Sperme.
Quand le Sperme s'épuise et le Souffle se gaspille, le Saint-Esprit disparaîtra...

[English literal translation of the 1950 French version]:

First nourish the Breath of life and conserve your Sperm.
When the Sperm is drained and the Breath is wasted, the Holy Spirit will disappear...

[English translation published in 2015]:

Especially you should nurture Energy and conserve Quintessence,
If you expend Quintessence and exhaust Energy, the Spirit no longer exists.

The dualistic framework appears again a few verses below on the first reversal, in which the “communication between *shen* (spirit) and *qi* (vital breath)” (*thần khí giao thông* 神氣交通 *shenqi jiaotong*) is rendered as “union of the Soul and Body,” and the “elimination of worries and malice” (*Diệt trừ phiền não lòng không* 滅除煩惱心空 *miechu fannao xinkong*) is translated as their “dematerialization.” This Chinese conception of the body is fully “Caodaized” in the French translation, as the Daoist alchemical process is here said to be conducted “according to the Caodaic Code,” a specification that is absent in the original.

[Original Vietnamese version]:

Sơ Nhứt Chuyển lo tròn luyện kỹ,
Xây đắp nền thần khí giao thông,
Diệt trừ phiền não lòng không,
Thất tình lục dục tận vong đơn thành.

[Conversion into Chinese characters]:

初一轉耐圓煉意
升台基神氣交通

撇除煩惱心罣
七情六慾殆忘丹成

[English translation of the Chinese version]:

In the first cycle, remember to wholeheartedly train with intention.
Raise the foundation for the communication between *qi* and spirit.
Eliminate all worries and malice.
Extinguish the emotions and desires to form the elixir [of immortality].

[French version from the 1950 edition]:

A la 1^{ère} spire d'évolution (1^{ère} INITIATION) forgez et trempez vaillamment vos 3 âmes.
Bâissez les assises du Temple où l'Âme et le Corps s'unissent selon le Code Caodaïque.
Dématérialisez-les des soucis et des chagrins.
La pilule d'immortalité se forme dès que les instincts et les passions se taisent.

[English literal translation of the 1950 French version]:

At the 1st stage of evolution (1st INITIATION) valiantly forge and soak your 3 souls.
Build the foundations of the Temple where the Soul and the Body are united according to the Caodaic Code.
Dematerialize them of anxieties and worries.
The pill of immortality is formed as soon as the instincts and passions are quieted.

[English translation published in 2015]:

In the FIRST INITIATION you should accomplish self-perfection,
To build the foundation for Energy-Spirit alliance,
Also to abolish all grieves (*si*) and maintain the emptiness of heart,
Once the seven emotions and six passions are shut, serenity emerges.

A few verses down, “Caodaic consciousness” is interpolated into the text where the original *Tâm Đạo* (“The Dao of the Heart” 心道 *xindao*) makes no mention of Cao Đài and carries a generic coloration; and the “sublime *qi*,” *khi hào nhiên* (氣浩然 *qi haoran*) which evokes the Confucian philosopher Mencius and the poet Su Dongpo 蘇東坡,⁹⁵ is rendered with the yogic and Sanskrit term of “prana” (the vital principle).

The last verse of this stanza expresses the essence of Daoist inner alchemical practice: the harmonization of *tánh* (性 *xing*) and *mạng* (命 *ming*)—terms that are also very difficult to translate but generally refer to one’s spiritual nature or essence (*xing*) and to the life of the body (*ming*)—each of which is the subject of training regimens in Daoism; the relationship between the two of them has been the subject of protracted debates in Daoist discourse over the centuries, with a general consensus, however, that *both* the practice of techniques of the body (*ming*) and the pursuit of spiritual purity (*xing*) are essential and should be harmonized.⁹⁶ The second part of the last verse refers to the metaphors of lead and mercury in inner alchemy, which are respectively associated with water and fire, denoting energies within the body whose circulation must be inverted and

⁹⁵ See the *Mencius: Gongsunhou* I: 2 孟子:公孫丑上: “I am good at nourishing my sublime *qi*” 我善養吾浩然之氣。 And in the melody “Prelude to the Water: In the Happy Pavilion” 水調歌頭: 快哉亭作, included in *The Poems of Dongpo* 東坡樂府 (edited in the Yuan Dynasty), verse 34, the poet Su Dongpo 蘇東坡 wrote, “A little bit of sublime *qi* senses a thousand miles of blissful wind. 一點浩然氣, 千里快哉風” (<https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=616023>).

⁹⁶ For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Fabrizio Pregadio, “Destiny, Vital Force, or Existence? On the Meanings of Ming 命 in Daoist Internal Alchemy and its Relation to Xing 性 or Human Nature,” *Daoism: Religion, History and Society* 6 (2014): 157–218.

conjoined to form the elixir. This complex Daoist cosmology of the body is here rendered in terms of “sublime *qi*” being described as the “Holy Spirit” acting as the “hyphen” linking the “Spirit of Light” and the “Spirit of Darkness.” While the translation does convey the sense of conjoining dual opposites, the notions of “Spirit of Light” and “Spirit of Darkness” have rather different, spiritist-driven connotations.

[Original Vietnamese version]:

Tâm Đạo phát thanh-thanh tịnh-tịnh,
Dưỡng Thánh-thai chơn bĩnh Đạo Huyền,
Ngày đêm cướp khí hạo nhiên,
Hiệp hòa tánh mạng, hống diên giao đầu.

[Conversion into Chinese characters]:

心道合神神靜靜
養聖胎貞秉道玄
日夜豁氣浩然
協和性命、汞鉛交投

[English translation of the Chinese version]:

The Dao of the Heart becomes calm and pure
Nurture the Holy Foetus and hold to the mystery of Dao
Day and night, expand the sublime *qi*
Harmonize spiritual nature and bodily life, inducing the intercourse of Mercury and Lead.

[French version from the 1950 edition]:

La CONSCIENCE CAODAIQUE s'épanouit dans le calme et la pureté.
Nourrissez le SAINT-FŒTUS selon les règles strictes de l'Ésotérisme du Maître.
Nuit et jour, captez vaillamment le PRANA.
Qui est le Saint-Esprit ou Trait d'Union entre l'Esprit de Lumière et l'Esprit des Ténèbres symbolisés par le HG et le PB.

[English literal translation of the 1950 French version]:

The CAODAIC CONSCIOUSNESS expands in stillness and purity.
Nourish the HOLY FŒTUS according to the Master's strict rules of Esotericism.
Night and Day, valiantly capture the PRANA.
That is the Holy Spirit or Hyphen between the Spirit of Light and the Spirit of Darkness symbolised by HG and PB.

[English translation published in 2015]:

Develop the Conscience of DAO in serenity and quietude,
Nurture the Saintly Fetus in accord with the mystic laws;
Day and night, capture the primordial energy of life,
To harmonize soul and body, to unite mercury and lead.

A few lines further—“*Âm dương thăng giáng điều hòa*” (陰陽升降調和 *yinyang shengjiang tiaohé*), literally “Yin and Yang rise and fall in coordination”—we find an intriguing translation of the yin-yang dyad—*âm* (陰 *yīn*) and *dương* (陽 *yáng*) as the “Spiritual and the Temporal,” which “rise and descend according to the rhythm of Providence,” providing a strong Kardec-inflected Catholic flavor to what, in Chinese, is an ordinary statement on the basic cosmological operation of yin and yang cycles.

[Original Vietnamese version]:

Âm dương thăng giáng điều hòa,
Huân chưng đằm ấm tam hoa kết huôn.

[Conversion into Chinese characters]:

陰陽升降調和
熏蒸潭温三華結還

[English translation of the Chinese version]:

Yin and Yang rise and fall in coordination
Steam and distil the three essences [essence, *qi*, and spirit] back to the origin

[French version from the 1950 edition]:

Le Spirituel et le Temporel montent et descendent selon le rythme de la Providence.
Le Syncretisme des Fluides amène l'Harmonie des 3 Âmes.

[English literal translation of the 1950 French version]:

The Spiritual and the Temporal rise and descend according to the rhythm of Providence.
The Syncretism of the Fluids brings about the Harmony of the 3 Souls.

[English translation published in 2015]:

The Yin and Yang concertedly rise and fall,
And the Three Treasures rhythmically harmonize and sublime.

Next we find another pair of verses that express, in typical inner-alchemical terms, some basic processes of alchemical cultivation. While “Opening the nine orifices” (*khai cửu khiểu*, 開九竅 *kai jiu qiao*) is open to different interpretations,⁹⁷ the *DTCG* translates them as the “nine chakras,” drawing on Western esoteric interpretations of Indian tantra. Indeed, the Theosophical Society published extensively on these terms and this literature circulated in Cochinchina. The book *The Chakras* (1927) of Charles W. Leadbeater, one of the founders of the Theosophical Society, notably included a series of colored drawings, which contributed to the popularization of his interpretation in Cochinchina.⁹⁸ This theosophical literature was stored and explored in the Minh Lý and Đài libraries, but also in various bookshops in Ho Chi Minh City that we visited during our fieldwork (2000-2013).

The second verse refers to the operation of the Five Elements or Five Phases (*ngũ hành* 五行 *wuxing*: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water) and to the circulation, in inner alchemy, of the yang and yin forces of Heaven and Earth, *Càn-Khôn* (the *qian* 乾 and *kun* 坤 trigrams). The translator(s) of the *DTCG* here interpreted the *wuxing* as the “five senses” and once again used the “union of the spiritual and the temporal” to render the circulation and rotation of *qian* and *kun*.

[Original Vietnamese version]:

Khai cửu khiểu kim-đơn phanh-luyện,
Vận ngũ hành lưu chuyển Càn-Khôn,

⁹⁷ For example, the “Wonderful Instructions on the Golden Elixir of the Nine Cycles,” 大洞煉真寶經九還金丹妙訣, a Tang-dynasty text preserved in the Daoist Canon (no. 891), links the “nine orifices” to “nine stars.” See Schipper and Verellen, eds., *The Taoist Canon*, 383–384.

⁹⁸ In the year of his death (1934), the Cochinchina-branch of the Theosophical Society, based in Saigon, was named after him. See Jammes, “Theosophy.”

[Conversion into Chinese characters]:

開九竅金丹返煉
運五行流轉乾坤

[English translation of the Chinese version]:

Open the nine orifices for the reverse refinement of the golden elixir
Operate the Five Phases to rotate the Heaven and Earth [Qian and Kun]

[French version from the 1950 edition]:

En ouvrant les 9 CHAKRAS (sens spirituels) la pilule d'immortalité se chauffe et se forge.
En convergeant les 5 sens, le Spirituel et le Temporel s'unissent intimement.

[English literal translation of the 1950 French version]:

By opening the 9 CHAKRAS (spiritual sense organs) the pill of immortality heats up and is forged.
By converging the 5 senses, the Spiritual and the Temporal conjoin intimately.

[English translation published in 2015]:

Activate the nine corporal energy centers to elaborate the golden pill,
Operate the Five Elements to circulate the micro-cosmos

The stanza below⁹⁹ describes the inner-chemical process of reversing the aging process to preserve the body, cultivating the birth of an immortal spirit-embryo within one's abdomen. This process is largely occulted in the *DTCG* translation, which speaks of "purifying and lightening the Superior Self."

[Original Vietnamese version]:

Gom vào tư tưởng trong ngoài,
Luyện phan trong sạch Thánh-Thai nhẹ nhàng.

[Conversion into Chinese characters]:

歸化思想內外
煉反存身聖胎輕閒

[English translation of the Chinese version]:

Collect your thoughts from the inner and outer realities.
Practice to revert and preserve the body and the Holy Foetus will become ethereal.

[French version from the 1950 edition]:

Concentrant le Mental et le Causal, l'initié sélectionne ses pensées.
Il les analyse et les synthétise en vue de purifier et d'alléger le Moi Supérieur.

[English literal translation of the 1950 French version]:

Concentrating the Mental and the Causal, the initiate selects his thoughts.
He analyzes and synthesizes them in order to purify and to lighten the Superior Self.

[English translation published in 2015]:

⁹⁹ Phái Chiếu-Minh, *Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo*, 388 (message of August 19th, 1936).

Converge all inside and outside thoughts,
Forge and purify them so that the Sainly Fetus becomes lighter.

And in the following verse, opening the “seventh initiation,”¹⁰⁰ the alchemical refinement of the “true spirit” is rendered in both theosophical terms, by a Hindu and cosmic representation of the fluid as *prana*, and Biblical terms (“enthrones the Holy Spirit on the Throne of Glory”).

[Original Vietnamese version]:

Thất Chuyển pháp hạo nhiên chi khí,
Luyện Chơn-Thần qui vị hưởng an.

[Conversion into Chinese characters]:

七轉法浩然之氣
煉真神歸位享安

[English translation of the Chinese version]:

The seventh cycle is the method of the Majestic Spirit.
Refine the True Spirit and return to the position of peace.

[French version from the 1950 edition]:

À la 7^e INITIATION, l'initié condense le fluide cosmique ou le Prana.
Et intronise le Saint-Esprit sur son Trône de Gloire.

[English literal translation of the 1950 French version]:

At the 7th INITIATION, the initiate condenses the cosmic fluid or Prana.
And enthrones the Holy Spirit on its Throne of Glory.

[English translation published in 2015]:

The SEVENTH INITIATION is the method for the energy of life,
To forge your true spirit into its original state.

CONCLUSION

Scholarship on Caodaism has only begun to explore the key role of Western Occultism and Chinese redemptive societies as contexts for Cao Đài history and identity. In this chapter, we have begun to trace how Minh Lý and Cao Đài appeared as redemptive societies at the point of convergence of the Chinese Xiantian dao salvationist tradition and French Occultism.

In our research, we have found that the core cosmology and practices of all the Minh and Cao Đài religious groups can be clearly identified as related to the Chinese spirit-writing tradition, and especially to the salvationist eschatology and practices of the Xiantian dao tradition—with a core Daoist cosmology and inner alchemical meditation techniques, vegetarianism, the basic Xiantian dao pantheon, and three-stage millenarianism. As for French Spiritism, it seems to have played a role both as an initial trigger before a switch to the Chinese-style “flying phoenix,” and later as a “modernist” discursive and interpretive device. It was used to reformulate and explain the teachings and practices in a more legitimate, scientific and Christian-sounding language, and, through the translation process, to obscure the traces of Caodaism’s Chinese genealogy.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Phái Chiếu-Minh, *Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo*, 388 (message of August 19th, 1936).

¹⁰¹ For a further discussion of these issues, see Jammes & Palmer, “Occulting the Dao.”

But Vietnamese redemptive societies are not a simple combination or synthesis of the Chinese and European traditions. The structural position of both elements is not identical. Both movements—Occultism and redemptive societies—bear the imprint of the socio-cultural conditions and concerns of their period and their place of origin. Reconsidering Caodaism within the context of European occultist culture and Chinese redemptive societies brings into focus the specific features of this religious movement at a crucial moment in Vietnamese history, without getting locked into old scholarly categorizations (“secret societies,” “folk religious cults,” “sectarian rebels,” “new religious movements,”...) which have obscured the academic understanding of Caodaism until now. These semantic shifts allow us to focus on the intrinsic characteristics of Caodaism and move away from these categories.

In this chapter, we have engaged in an exercise of *reverse translation*, converting sections of the core Cao Đài esoteric scripture into Chinese characters. This has revealed that the original Cao Đài *text* was little different from typical Chinese spirit-writing productions. But the French colonial and Vietnamese nation-building *context* of Cao Đài’s emergence was quite different from that of redemptive societies in China, and this led to significantly different results in terms of its textual production in the Vietnamese and French languages—a process that was shaped by, and shaped in turn, the religious identity construction and institution building of Cao Đài religion.

If spiritist literature was widespread in Cochin-China, it seems to not have been institutionalized but rather followed the model of recreational circles. On the other hand, the Theosophical Society created an organizational, publishing and translating infrastructure “that was perfectly integrated into the intellectual fabric of its time.”¹⁰² The Vietnamese Theosophical Society’s production—books, brochures, magazines, visuals, neologisms, and “foreignisms”—was supportive of the Cao Đài publication and translation agenda.

The Kardec-ish (spiritist) and Leadbeater-ish (theosophical) style of the Cao Đài translation certainly implies an intentional transformation of the text by the translators, a repackaging of Vietnamese and Chinese indigenous religious cosmologies and practices into equivalents or alternatives to Christian churches (through the occultist lens). Within the Vietnamese cultural contextualization of Chinese sacred texts occurring in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Cochin-China (as discussed in chapter 6 of this volume about the Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa movement and its production of new and hybrid Buddhist texts), it appears as if the Cao Đài translators deliberately downplayed the Chinese-ness of the spirit-writing text, opting for a French translation that could serve their agenda of universalising the Cao Đài scriptural corpus and of offering an Asian (Vietnamese) counterpart to Western knowledge.

We see here the limit of a structural logic which suggests a dual and complementary alternative and opposition between the Self and the Other (Vietnam/China or Vietnam/France). On the contrary, it would be fruitful to approach the *DTCG* production as a sort of paradoxal logic that interpenetrates the ambivalences of each categories of thinking, manages in a constructive and creative way the theological contradictions and, ultimately, re-evaluates the forms of classification, the symbolic forms, the categories and universes of meaning.¹⁰³ In the colonial context, this *bricolage* or creolization makes possible and viable what the French anthropologist Roger Bastide, in his studies of syncretism, called “the cohabitation [and] the alternation, among an individual or a sociological group, of some logics and categories of thinking that are themselves incompatible and irreducible.”¹⁰⁴

This article opens questions for further research on the significance of European occultist culture and Chinese redemptive societies in the social, political, and intellectual history of modern and contemporary Vietnam. In the context of the intersection of these two waves, Caodaism

¹⁰² See the conclusion in Jammes, “Theosophying.”

¹⁰³ See Roger Bastide, *Le prochain et le lointain* (Paris: Cujas, 1970), 137; Bastide, “Le principe de coupure et le comportement afro-brésilien,” *Anais do XXXI Congresso Internacional de Americanistas (São Paulo, 1954)* 1 (1955): 493–503.

¹⁰⁴ André Mary, *Les Anthropologues et la religion* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010), 129.

provides an excellent case to understand religious innovation at the interface between Chinese religious culture, indigenous identity, and Western influences in a non-Chinese and colonial context.

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