

# Ancestral Veneration in Vietnamese Spiritualities

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## ***Introduction***

The religio-spiritual life of the Vietnamese people has been shaped by four world religions: Confucianism (*Khong giao or Nho*), Daoism (*Lao giao or Laõo*), Buddhism (*Phat giao or Thich*), and Christianity/Catholicism. Over the centuries, Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and popular Chinese folk traditions have amalgamated with ancient Vietnamese animism to form what is collectively known as *Tam Giao* (Three Religions—*Nho-Thich-Laõo*), which is sometimes referred to as “Vietnamese Buddhism,” but is more appropriately referred to as “Vietnamese popular religion.” Prior to arrival of Chinese rule and hence the arrival of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, ancestral veneration profoundly influenced the religio-spiritual life of the Vietnamese people. Nonetheless, Confucianism, Daoism, and Chinese Buddhism did influence the ancient Vietnamese ancestral veneration rites that persist in the Vietnamese understanding of death and continue to be materially expressed in death rituals. Therefore, ancestral veneration is deeply embedded in the cultural, religious, and spiritual expressions of various Vietnamese spiritualities.

This article will explore the religious dimensions of ancestral veneration in Vietnamese spiritualities. It will briefly examine the historical tendency toward syncretism in the development of Vietnamese popular religion. Anchored in a discussion of ancestral veneration, it will discuss the multi-layer, multi-dimensional characteristics

of Vietnamese spiritualities. The focus will be on the experiential and material dimensions of ancestral veneration: The role of Buddhism, the role of the temple, and the role of the family in expressing the rituals and rites of ancestral veneration will be fundamental to my examination.

### ***The Making of Vietnamese Popular Religion***

Confucianism was introduced into Vietnam as early as the first century during Chinese rule. Ironically, it was after Vietnam achieved its independence that Chinese influence and Chinese Confucianism became important in Vietnamese life. Because of its favorability for the monarchy, Confucian philosophy was promoted and supported by the Vietnamese government. Under the Early Le Dynasty (980-1009), study of the Confucian classics reached its peak. During the Ly Dynasty (1010-1225), Confucianism was the dominant official ideology. It regulated the examinations for the recruitment of the literati—the mandarin cadres. Confucianism's familial and socio-cultural structure of authority as expressed in the five relationships—ruler-subject, parent-child, husband-wife, older brother-younger brother, and friend-friend—dictates ethico-religio behavior and respect. At the heart of these relationships is the ritual expression of a cardinal virtue, filial piety (*hieu*). These relationships and ethico-religio virtues are also found embedded in rituals of ancestral veneration—which I will discuss below.

Confucians developed the idea that each person possesses both a masculine principle and a feminine principle, hence in each person there is a combination of *duong*-soul (*yang*-soul) and an *am*-soul (*yin*-soul). The *am*-soul is dense and clings to the body, and is believed to remain at the gravesite. The *duong*-soul is less dense, less malevolent, and, therefore, more auspicious and is thus found around the home and the family altar. Daily ritual offerings are performed in the home altar for the *duong*-soul. Special foods are prepared during the fifteenth and sixteenth of each Lunar month, and during *Tet*

*Nguyen Dan* (Vietnamese Lunar New Year) for the *yang*-souls on the ancestral altar. The family altar is the cosmic center, the most honored place in a Vietnamese household, where living relatives of the dead ritually honor and venerate their ancestors. Ritual prayers, offerings, and remembrances made to the ancestral spirits, benefit not only the ancestors, but also their living kin. The influence of Confucian virtues is best exemplified in a traditional Vietnamese proverb: “*Cong Cha nhu nui Thai Son, nghĩa Mẹ như nước trong nguồn chảy ra. Môt long tho Mẹ kính Cha, cho tron chu hieu moi la dao con,*” (The debt we owe our father is as great as Mount Thai Son; the debt we owe our mother is as inexhaustible as water flowing from its source. We must repay their debt in order to fulfill our obligations as children).

Daoism was also introduced into Vietnam during Chinese rule. By the time Vietnam had gained its independence from Chinese rule, Daoism had become one of the main religions of the Vietnamese people. During the Tran Dynasty (1225-1400), Daoism shifted from philosophical to ritually-mystical, but had been a source of inspiration for poets, writers, and artists throughout Vietnam. The premise of religious Daoism is that life is good and to be enjoyed. The individual self is not set apart from nature but is, like all things, a product of *am/yin* and *duong/yang* as the creative processes of *dao*—the Eternal Way. Daoist priests are masters of spiritual and mystical knowledge; therefore, they are able to control or manipulate the spirit world through religious rituals and communications with gods, ghosts, and ancestors.

The predominant religion of Vietnam is Buddhism. Like Confucianism and Daoism, Buddhism was introduced into Vietnam during Chinese rule. Buddhism became the state religion under the Ly Dynasty. Since the Tran Dynasty, Buddhism has lost its status as a state-sponsored religion, but nevertheless it continues to be the dominant religion in Vietnamese spirituality. Vietnamese Buddhism—a combination of Ch'an (Zen), Pure Land, T'ien-t'ai, and popular Vajrayana—is the main tradition for the

majority of Vietnamese people. It is extremely important, however, to note the influence of other religious traditions and their blending, in practice, with Buddhism.

Christianity has also influenced Vietnamese spirituality. Vietnam has the highest percentage of Catholics (eight to ten percent of the population) in Asia outside of the Philippines. Portuguese, Spanish, and French missionaries introduced Christianity into Vietnam during the second half of the sixteenth century. Around the seventeenth century, Christianity was banned in Vietnam. Despite the proscription, Catholic missionaries continued to evangelize to the Vietnamese people. Under the Nguyen Dynasty (1802-1945), especially under King Minh-Mang (1820-1840), King Thieu Tri (1841-1847), and King Tu Duc (1848-1883), the Christians were persecuted for undermining the Confucian social order. Using the persecution of Christians as a pretext, the French conquered and colonized Vietnam in the second half of the nineteenth century. Under French colonial rule, the Catholics enjoyed the support of state sponsorship and protection. It was during the Ngo Dinh Diem regime that the Catholics filled key positions in the government, military, and local police. Although Vietnamese Christians—mostly Catholics—represent a small percentage of the population, Catholics played an important role in the political life of Vietnam during the past three decades prior to the fall of Saigon in 1975. Paul J. Rutledge notes that it has been estimated that as many as 29 to 40 percent of Vietnamese refugees in America are Roman Catholic. Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Christianity, along with indigenous Vietnamese folk traditions historically interacted in such a way to produce an energetically eclectic syncretistic religious expression among the Vietnamese people. As Georges Condominas notes:

This general tendency toward syncretism made possible a strong implantation of Catholicism...and encouraged Vietnamese, when emigrating in large numbers to foreign countries, to worship local deities until these were assimilated. This

tendency has resulted, likewise, in the rise of new forms of syncretism such as the Hoa-hao or Cao Dai, the first grafted on a Buddhist core, the other on a Taoist one.

Cao Daim is an indigenous Vietnamese new religious sect that was founded to create the ideal religion by fusing the secular and religious philosophies of east and west. It was established on November 18, 1926 based on messages revealed in séances to Master Ngo Van Chieu (1878-1932), an official of the French colonial administration in Phu Quoc Island off the coast of Ha Tien province. Cao Dai can be considered a cornucopia of religions. It includes elements of Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Christianity/Catholicism, Hinduism and Islam—in combination with secular personalities such as saints, (e.g. French poet and writer Victor Hugo, exiled founder of the People's Republic of China Dr. Sun-Yat-sen, WWII British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill, and Vietnamese diviner Trang Trinh). The syncretic nature of Vietnamese popular religion is expressed well in the various religious dimensions of Cao Daim. There is a fundamental similarity in Cao Dai to religious Daoist sectarianism in its spirituality, political overtones, and colorful liturgy. As Robert S. Ellwood notes, “like most Chinese religious movements of recent centuries, it also sought to unify the ‘three faiths,’ and so it incorporated Confucian morality, Buddhist doctrines such as karman [sic] and reincarnation, and Taoist occultism.”

According to its believers, the spirit of Cao Dai appeared in the form of a raven in November 1926 and traced cryptic messages in the sand:

I am the [S]upreme Sovereign; the oldest of the Buddhas, it is I; I am also

Sakyamuni; I am Jesus Christ; I now take the name of Cao Dai to teach a new

religion.

The central moral philosophy of Cao Dai focuses on the individual's duty to self, family, community, society, and humanity—much like Confucianism and the belief that spirits reflect the indigenous, animistic dimension of Vietnamese spirituality. At the center of a Cao Dai temple is the “Heavenly Eye” or “All Seeing Eye of God” representing the omnipresence of Cao Dai. According to Ellwood:

Reliable information on Cao Dai in Vietnam since 1975 is scanty. Reportedly it has been severely repressed by the government, with a high proportion of its churches confiscated and its clergy arrested or laicized; the Holy See is apparently virtually inactive. On the other hand, by 1985 approximately twenty Cao Dai worship centers had sprung up around the world in Vietnamese refugee communities.

For example, there are Cao Dai temples in Redlands and San Jose, California and in Dallas, Texas.

The other major indigenous Vietnamese religion is Hoa Hao, a reform Vietnamese Buddhist sect of the Theravada tradition that was founded in 1930 in the village of near That Son mountain range of An Giang Province. The head of this new sect, Master Huynh Phu So, was born in 1919 at Hoa Hao village, the only child of a well-educated family. Vietnamese Hoa Hao Buddhism has two to 2.5 million adherents in the western part of South Vietnam.

Traàn Vaên Thao and Rev. John Traàn Coâng Nghò—summarized Vietnamese popular religion by stating:

If the young of the cities have broken with the traditions of the past and are open to the influences of Western thought, which is more or less colored by individualism, the older people, on the other hand, especially in the provincial bourgeois have not been able to free themselves completely from the combined influences of [several religions: Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Christianity and Vietnamese folk and indigenous beliefs].

Further if Confucianism inculcated the Vietnamese with the notion of the primacy of duty...Christianity brought the notions of love, charity and the equality of all [humans] in the eyes of God; whereas Buddhism had already taught goodness to all [creatures], as well as detachment from material things.

Because of the coexistence of these...[great religious traditions]...the Vietnamese mind is not disposed to [accommodate] itself to the rigidity of a monolithic dogma. The subtlety and tolerance which this people manifests at all times could only be compatible with diversity.... Mostly, however, the existence of this mosaic of religions is a living tribute to the tolerance and generous spirit of the Vietnamese people.

Thus, the central feature of Vietnamese religion is its openness to all forms of spirituality and its profuse diversity, which has resulted from its inclusivity. The single thread that weaves the various sacred dimensions together is ancestral veneration. This is the religious milieu that the Vietnamese refugees brought with them to America as they fled war-torn Vietnam.

### ***Vietnamese Buddhist Temples in the U.S.***

The temple in Vietnam, as well as in the United States, is not only a place to carry out spiritual work but where traditional and cultural values are preserved. Cuong Tu Nguyen and A.W. Barber note that:

[a] temple also assumes an important social role: it is the place where traditional and cultural values are preserved, where Vietnamese children come not just for Dharma but to learn something about customs and habits of their ancestral homeland. Some temples give Vietnamese language lessons on weekends.

The role of the temple in transmitting traditional Vietnamese culture to young Vietnamese-Americans is best illustrated by what Mykim, a young Vietnamese refugee says:

Before I started coming to the temple...I hardly spoke Vietnamese. I learned how to read and write and all the traditions and customs. I learned these things at the temple. I didn't know how important it is. I have friends who are 'Americanized' and they don't know about the fun holidays. I tell them, why don't you come to

the temple. [sic]

In the U.S. only a few days are commemorated, primarily the important ones such as *Tet* (Vietnamese Lunar New Year) and the Full Moon of the First Month. In the temple, devotees pray for their living family members or for the good rebirth and health of a deceased family member, based on the transfer of merit.

When Vietnamese refugees first came to the U.S. in 1975, they brought with them the first Vietnamese Buddhist community. By 1995 there were 160 Vietnamese Buddhist temples and centers in North America. While in Vietnam there were monks and nuns in permanent residence, not all temples in the U.S. have a permanent resident religious figure. In the U.S. the economic necessity for a monk to work outside the temple has altered the relationship between the laity and monks, and this in turn has modified the function of the temple in the U.S. Smaller temples function mainly in the performance of rituals, especially funerals, while the larger temples may function as cultural centers and language schools.

According to Nguyen and Barber, most Vietnamese Buddhist “temples have been built mainly because certain Buddhist congregations felt the need for a place of focus in order to continue to live as Buddhist.” The transplanted congregation would invite a monk to come and build a temple; otherwise they would build the temple and then recruit a monk. Vietnamese people will visit a temple only when an occasion arises. The temple is considered the primary place for performing rituals—especially funerals, which are important rites of passage in ancestral veneration.

### ***Dying, Death, and Funerary Rituals***

At the time of death, a member of the family will consult with a monk to perform Buddhist rituals. Traditionally, it is preferable to die at home, so the body can remain in

the home for one day to be bathed by family members. The eldest child (preferably a son) will record the last words of the deceased and provide a new name for that person, as it is considered bad fortune to continue using the same name. After death, the dying person's name is no longer used, because it is believed that using the dead person's name would call forth her/his presence. At death, the soul of the dead is believed to be confused and lost, and if her/his name is used the soul will gravitate toward familiarity and will not be able to detach itself from its living kin. According to ritual prescription, the son will assume the major responsibility. He will wear special clothing and fast from certain types of food and behavior if the deceased is his father, mother, or elder sibling. An elder, for example, a mother or father, cannot offer incense or other offerings to a deceased child because of Confucian protocol. Only younger members of the family are required to honor and offer sacrifice to the deceased sibling spirits.

Most Vietnamese Buddhists prefer cremation and, if possible, will store the ashes in a temple beneath a photograph of the deceased. Many Vietnamese Buddhist families will also place a picture of the deceased along with candles, flowers, incense, and food offerings at the family altar. Family members will go the temple on the eve of the forty-ninth day after a loved one has died. It is believed that after this amount of time, the spirit is about to be reborn—or is reborn. On this day, family members will pray for peace and the well-being of loved ones who are still alive. They may also transfer merit (*hoi huong*) they earn by performing a rite dedicated to their loved ones or by chanting Buddhist *sūtras* while directing their thoughts to the ancestral spirits. “Praying for rebirth, or *cau sieu*, is a ritual that a person or a family performs to pray for a deceased member in the family so that he or she might gain a better rebirth or if possible a rebirth in Amitābha’s Pure Land.” The family will return to the temple for a service when one hundred days have passed after death. After this, they will return to the temple for these services only once a year. These are the general rites and rituals observed and performed by

Vietnamese people—but particular details may vary from family to family. Unfortunately—some older Vietnamese-Americans find the prospect of death stressful because they feel that their spirits and their memories will not be given the proper veneration by their younger Americanized children after they die.

### ***Rituals of Ancestral Veneration***

Every year various dishes must be prepared and displayed before the altar of each ancestor's death anniversary (*ngay gio*). On the eve of an anniversary, various dishes are placed on the altar to celebrate what is known as the primary anniversary to honor the memory of the dead and to invite the spirit to a feast. On the day of anniversary the proper members of the family will take three sticks of incense, hold them up to the forehead, and say the pseudonym to invite the ancestral spirit to receive the offerings and feast. At the same time, they will pray to the ancestors for protection, health, wealth, and familial peace.

Meat offerings made to the ancestors must be cooked. A pot of cooked rice with a spatula and the ancestor's favorite dishes are prepared and served with chopsticks. Bowls of rice, plates of fruits, flowers, wine, tea, and so on, are presented on the ancestral altar in the home. Burnt incense carries these offerings to the other realm for the deceased to partake of, but the living family members consume them as soon as the rituals are completed. Accompanying these offerings is an array of silver and gold spirit money that is transferred to the ancestors in the form of smoke. Adapting to contemporary culture, foods like soda and chips can also be used, with the stipulation that the food must be fresh when it is presented as an offering. Candles and incense are necessary items in the offering ritual because they transfer the essence of the offerings into the spirit world for the ancestral spirits' enjoyment.

Memorial services are often held in the U.S. for family members and relatives who died in Vietnam during the war. This is possible because the spirit of the deceased always remains a part of the family and accompanies it in immigrating to the U.S. Rick Fields and Don Farber recorded such a ceremony with a photograph of a young Vietnamese woman in a Vietnamese Buddhist temple in Los Angeles. The caption reads:

This young woman's boyfriend was a pilot in the South Vietnamese air force and was shot down during the war. She wailed in sorrow during a memorial service that took place not long after the refugees first arrived in the United States.

### ***Concluding Remarks From a Personal Perspective***

When my brother died, I inherited many spiritual responsibilities in my family. I consulted with Buddhist monks and invited a group of them to our home to perform a merit transfer ceremony in his bedroom—the room that he died in. My parents, sisters, and my nieces and nephews all donated food and living supplies to the monks and their temple, and had the merit from the ritual transferred to him so that his soul may have peace and be led to Amitābha's Pure Land where he would be able to have a better rebirth. During the funeral we offered a doll-sized paper house with two servants, a sports car, clothes, spirit money, and Marlboro cigarettes to his spirit. The monk instructed me not to cry, and warned that if I did cry not to let my tears fall on my brother or into his casket because his confused spirit would stay with me and not want to move on to the other realm. My father placed a CD-player/radio in his casket so my brother would be able to listen to music—something he enjoyed in life. My mother placed his necklace and wristwatch on him because they were special to him. In addition, the traditional food offerings, my second sister brought him a large bowl of *pho* (traditional beef noodle

soup) and a *che ba mau* (combination beans with coconut milk) because they were his favorite in life, and remain so.

On the eve of his first anniversary and during his birthday I visited his grave at Rose Hill Cemetery in Los Angeles with *pho*, *che ba mau*, a pack of Marlboros, and spirit money. I lit three sticks of incense and a couple of cigarettes for him and cleaned his grave. Later, I went home and burned the spirit money in the backyard. My seven-year old nephew watched me and asked me what I was doing. He wanted to burn some spirit money also. My nephew asked me what it means. How will big uncle get this? I explained that the smoke will carry it to him. He considered what I said. He smiled and asked if he could put his toy into the fire as a gift for big uncle. In that moment, my nephew and I shared in the memory of my brother, his uncle. I teach my nephew to preserve the ritual to show respect and filial piety to our ancestors in an expression of family unity. I should note that the ritual is an expression of a spiritual belief that the world of the living and the world of the dead are not dichotomies, but rather, a shift of being, and a new becoming.

#### Endnotes

I wish to express my appreciation to Mark Sherwood Quady, for kindly reading earlier drafts of this article and for providing encouraging comments.

See Alan B. Henkin and Liem Thanh Nguyen's *Between Two Cultures: The Vietnamese in America*, (Saratoga: Century Twenty One Publishing, 1981) pp., 8-15; Ann Caddell Crawford's *Customs and Culture of Vietnam* (Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Co.: 1966) pp. 65-90; Alexandra Bandon's *Vietnamese Americans* (New York: New Discovery Books, 1994) pp. 86-90; and Hien Duc Do's *The Vietnamese Americans* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999) pp. 6-10.

Georges Condominas "Vietnamese Religion," translated from French by Maria Pilar Luna-Magannon, in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade ed., (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987) p. 257.

About 1000 years of Chinese rule over the Red River Delta (all of Vietnam at the time), marked by tenacious Vietnamese resistance and repeated rebellions, ended in 938 C.E. when Ngo Quyen vanquished the Chinese armies at the Bach Dang River.

Condominas, p. 258.

Note that throughout this paper I have preferred to use the term “veneration” and not “worship” in my discussion of “ancestral veneration.” I consciously did this because “worship” connotes a Christian-centric bias, as well as a tone of judgment. “Veneration” is a better, more respectful way of illustrating the rituals and beliefs in ancestral veneration. It is a sign of love and commitment on the part of the living to remember and care for the spirits of the dead. Family and life transcend the here-and-now and connect the living with the other realm. Family relationships and bonds continue but the nature of the relationship shifts. Ancestral veneration is a display of love and commitment—something the term “worship” does not reflect.

See Nguyen Van Thai and Nguyen Van Mu'ng's *A Short History of Viet-Nam* (Published for the Vietnamese-American Association by The Times Publishing Company, 1958) pp. 65-69. See also Bandon, p. 89.

See also <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Den/5908/religion/religioninvn.html> for more information.

Condominas, p. 258; and Nguyen and Nguyen, pp. 70-89.

Ibid., p. 258.

*Duong/yang* is commonly associated with: the sun, positive energy, heaven, day, male, dryness, transcendence, discipline, life; while *am/yin* is commonly associated with: the moon, negative energy, earth, night, female, cold, immediacy, spontaneity, and death. *Am/yin* and *duong/yang* each seem to have a separate existence, at the same time they are harmoniously interfused with one another.

Hien, pp. 9-10.

See Nguyen and Nguyen, pp. 90-103.

Ibid., pp. 70-89.

See Cuong Tu Nguyen and A.W. Barber, “Vietnamese Buddhism in North America: Tradition and Acculturation,” in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, edited by Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) p. 134.

Note that Catholicism and Buddhism have fused interestingly in Vietnamese popular religion. Although a Vietnamese family may consider itself Catholic, their veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary may be conflated with the veneration of Quan-Am Bodhisattva (a.k.a. Guan Yin also spelled Kuan Yin).

Condominas, p. 257.

Paul James Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) p. 49.

See Nguyen and Nguyen, pp. 225-231.

Crawford, pp. 88-89; and Hien, p. 8.

Condominas, p. 257.

See also <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Den/5908/religion/religioninvn.html>

Rutledge, p. 49.

Condominas, p. 260.

See Robert S. Ellwood, "Cao Dai" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade, ed., (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987) p. 72. In addition see Crawford, pp. 70-73; see also Hien, p. 9. Note that there are various dates offered as the beginnings of Caodai, they range from 1921-1926.

See <http://caodai.org/> for more information.

Ellwood, p. 72.

Ibid.

Ibid.

See <http://vietcatholic.net/culture/religions.htm> for more information.

Crawford, p. 72 and Hien, p. 9.

Ellwood, p. 73.

There are two Caodai Temples in California, one in Redlands and one in San Jose. There's also one in Dallas, Texas, and Sydney Australia.

See <http://www.vietgate.net/community/religious/> for links to their sites.

Crawford, p. 80.

See <http://vietcatholic.net/culture/religions.htm> for more information.

Ibid.

See *Taking Refuge in L.A.: Life in a Vietnamese Buddhist Temple*, Photographs by Don Farber, Text by Rick Fields, and Introduction by Thich Nhat Hanh (Aperture Foundation Inc.: 1987) p. 80.

See also Rutledge, pp. 50-54. Here he discusses the role of religious buildings and services in a refugee community in Port Arthur, Texas, and notes that they play an important role in assisting refugees in resettlement, in addition to functioning as a cultural community center. He also documents the attempt of the refugee community to grant a public holiday for the celebration of *Tet*, since it has strong religious significance to many of the Vietnamese, both Buddhists and Catholics.

Nguyen and Barber, pp. 136-137.

Ibid, p. 131.

Ibid., 136.

Ibid, p. 140.

Ibid, pp. 137-138.

Farber and Fields, p. 62.

Note also that similar rituals and services are held for the deceased in a Vietnamese Catholic household. For Catholic families, religious medallions, rosary beads, or other spiritual objects such as figure of saint are held close to the dying patient, and are placed in the casket as well. Family members may start to pray for the patient. Someone will find a priest to start the religious rituals. Keep in mind that there tend to be flavors of Buddhism and traditional Vietnamese religio-spiritual practices and beliefs even in a Catholic household.