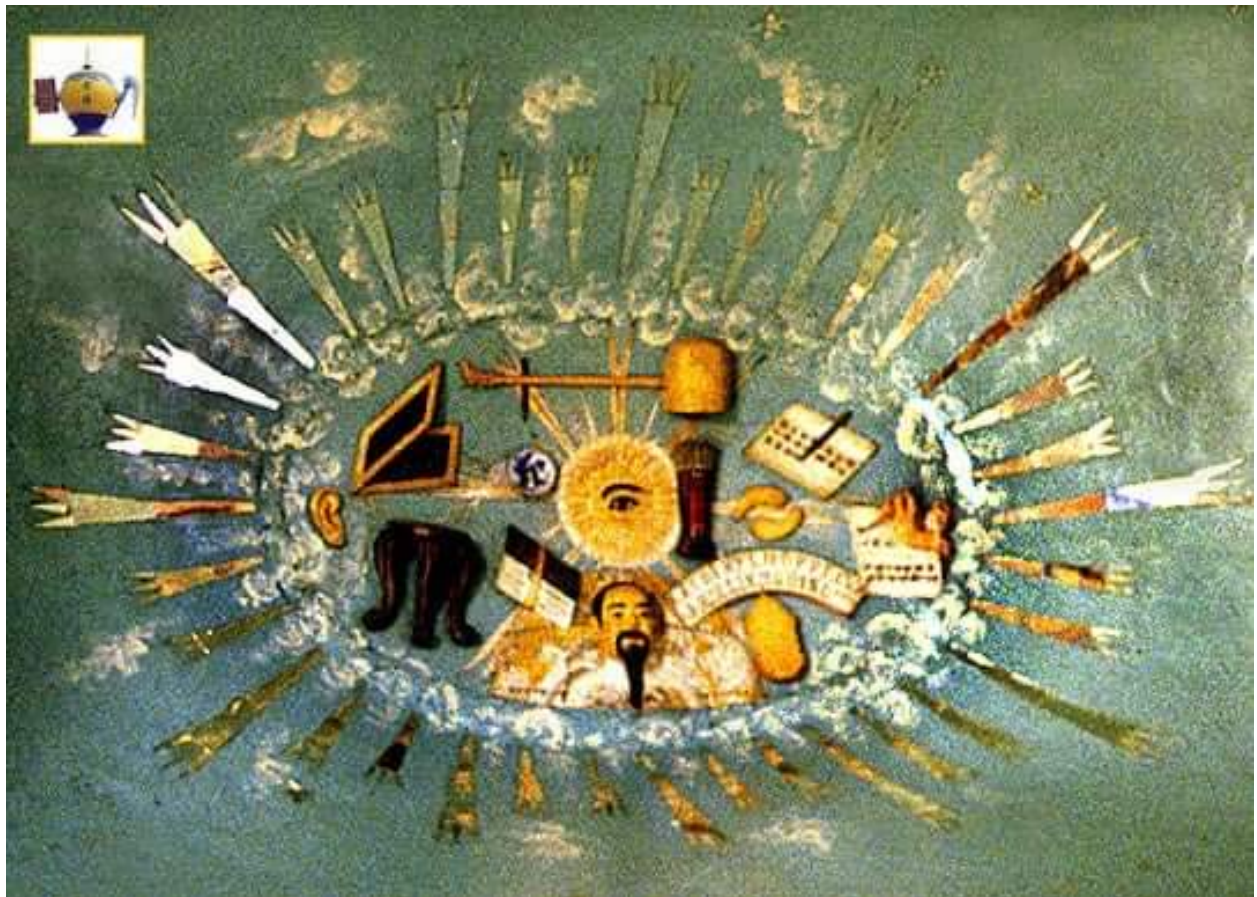


***COLLECTION OF
TÙCHON'S
ARTICLES ON
CAO ĐÀI
PHILOSOPHY
VOLUME III***



Preface

This book collects articles on Cao Đài philosophy by Từ Chơn. These articles have been posted on the author's or friends' websites. These are ideas based on the author's own study and experience and are not intended to be a guide for anyone.

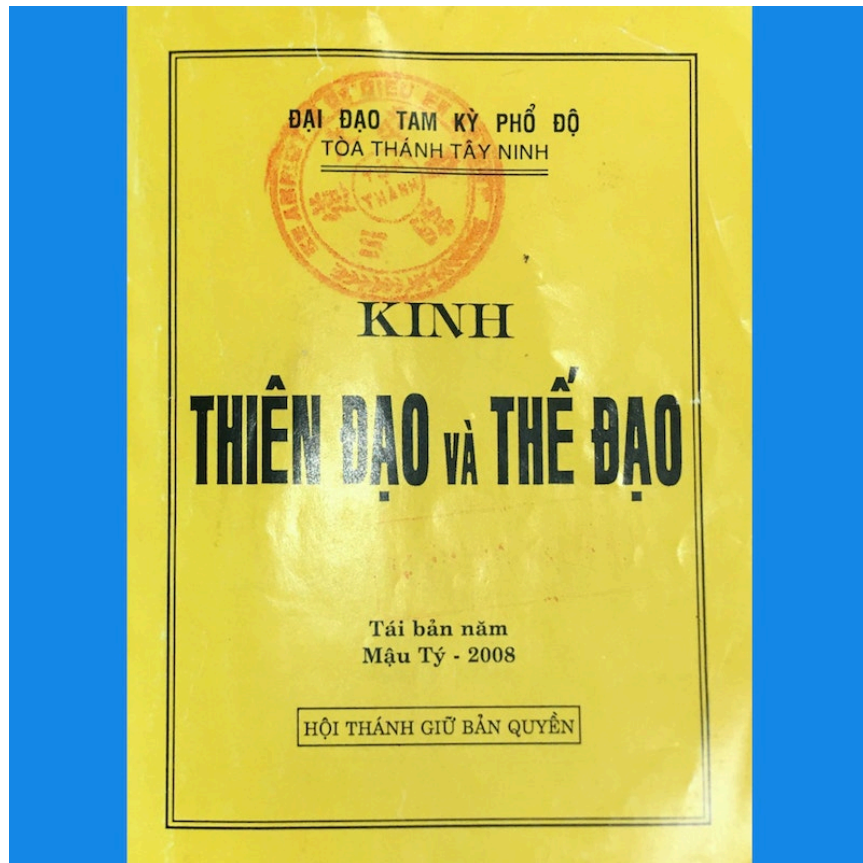
This book is still waiting for the Tây Ninh Sacerdotal Council to approve. This draft is sent to friends for comments. Please do not print, translate and distribute without consulting the author.
Thank you.

Từ Chơn

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**A VITAL FACTOR
TO
SUCCESSFULLY
TRANSLATE
CAO ĐÀI SCRIPTURES**



Từ Chơn

Beginning

Every Cao Đài follower knows that worshipping four times a day means doing the Exoteric Practice through chanting (reading aloud) the scriptures according to the regulations of the Caodaist Sacerdotal Council, preferably with the background of traditional Southern music of Việt Nam. According to my estimates, 90% of believers know the sutras by heart, but the percentage of believers who actually understand them is much lower than that. In short, most of us Caodaists chant the scriptures according to habit and belief in the Sacerdotal Council. Although believers are encouraged to seek the true meaning of the scriptures, this is quite difficult for the following reasons.

First, most of the sutras are expressed by a mixture of Sino-Vietnamese and Vietnamese words, especially the Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế, Thích Giáo, Tiên Giáo và Nho Giáo¹ are completely in Sino-Vietnamese. Maybe the difference between Vietnamese (some people also call pure Vietnamese) and Sino-Vietnamese should be elaborated a bit further here. Vietnamese language is currently written in Latin letters, for example “nhà của tôi” (my house). We Vietnamese immediately understand what it is. On the contrary, in Sino-Vietnamese, Chinese writing is used, but pronounced by Vietnamese sounds. For example, ancient Vietnamese people wrote 夫人 and pronounced it as “phu nhân” while Chinese people also wrote the same way, but pronounced

¹ the Jade Emperor, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism.

it ‘fu rin’. These words are today recorded in Latin letters and used a lot in Vietnam. Some are immediately understandable, but some need to be translated. For example, “Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế” is instantly known as the Supreme King in Heaven, but “diệu diệu” or “nguy nguy” needs to be translated as “rất xa”² and “to lớn”³ for the Vietnamese to understand.



Second, having been translated into Vietnamese, many Sino-Vietnamese words are still incomprehensible because of hidden implications related to Eastern philosophy or ancient stories, usually from China. For example, if “thị không thị sắc” is translated into Vietnamese as “là không là có”, it is still not comprehensible. It must be further explained as an abbreviation

² far away.

³ huge.

for the sentence "Sắc tức thị không, không tức thị sắc...⁴" in the Prajna Heart Sutra of Buddhism and perhaps it is necessary to study more Mahayana Buddhist philosophy.

For another example, 'Tử khí đông lai quảng truyền Đạo Đức' is translated as 'Làn hơi màu tím từ hướng đông bay tới để truyền quyển Đạo Đức Kinh⁵' is still not understandable without telling the story of Mr. Doãn Hĩ. Doãn Hĩ was a fort gatekeeper in China. One day he saw a purple cloud flying from the east. Since he had been warned in a dream, he guessed a saint was about to appear. Then he waited in front of his door. When he saw Lao Tzu, with an extraordinary appearance, riding a green buffalo from the east, he knew that this was the saint, so he knelt on the side of the road earnestly asking for the teachings. Lao Tzu stayed for a night, wrote the Tao Te Ching, gave it to Doãn Hĩ, and then continued on his way. This book was later transmitted and became the basic classic of Taoism.

Therefore, to understand the Cao Đài sutras, especially the ones mentioned above, it is necessary to meet three conditions: knowing Sino-Vietnamese, having studied Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism and remembering some ancient Chinese classics. Some people say that requires a University Degree in Literature, which takes a lot of time, while currently many believers have to earn a living without being qualified to do so. Despite that, they still want to study the teachings to have

⁴ Emptiness is form, form is emptiness.

⁵ The purple vapor flying from the east to spread Tao Te Ching.

something in their mind, waiting for their next life to continue if they do not finish it in this life.

Fortunately, it is so thoughtful of some intellectuals to translate and explain Cao Đài sutras. That precious merit brings great benefits to those who practice Caodaism. I can name a few in chronological order such as Hiền Tài Nguyễn Văn Hồng - Đức Nguyên, Hiền Tài Nguyễn Văn Mới - Từ Huệ, Hiền Tài Quách Văn Hoà - Thiên Vân and a few more authors whose work I have just heard of. Now, thanks to the internet, their books are preserved for future generations to research and develop further. Their works are very trustworthy and can be read on the following website:

<https://www.daotam.info/>

Having read these works, I have the following preliminary comments. First of all, the authors have diligently looked up the dictionary and stated the basic initial meaning to help beginners take the first steps in the practice process. From this basic level, one can easily advance to higher levels of study. All Cao Đài followers now and in the future will be extremely grateful to those Sages.

However, if you read carefully, there is still an issue that is not paid enough attention to. Written in a parallel style, the original Chinese sutra have lost this structure after being converted into Sino-Vietnamese. As a result, when translated into Vietnamese, some of the original main ideas cannot be properly conveyed.

So to understand the root cause, let me first talk about parallel writing style called biên ngẫu (in Sino Vietnamese). Biên is two

horses running side by side. Ngẫu is a couple. This is an ancient style of Chinese writing where pairs of “opposite” sentences are used. It is important to know that "opposite" here does not only mean antonyms, but two "opposite" words, phrases or sentences can also be synonymous or complementary, etc. Mainly, addition to the meaning of each sentence, a third shared meaning arises and that is the author's real main idea. The genre of parallel writing originated from the Yin and Yang philosophy of ancient China and still has a great influence on Chinese and Vietnamese culture.

The origin

Hence, now I would like to invite my fellow believers to analyze a sutra that every follower recites during a worship period to see what happens when the parallel text structure is omitted. Let me suggest the Jade Emperor Sutra. According to the above-mentioned authors, the Jade Emperor Sutra is also called Ngọc Hoàng Thiên Tôn Bửu Cáo⁶ or Ngọc Hoàng Bửu Cáo, by Great Immortal Lữ Đồng Tân (one of the eight Immortals in Chinese legend) through a seance session in China, in the 17th year of the reign of King Đức Tông (Quang Tự) of the Qing Dynasty, on October 3, 1891. Then the sutra was transmitted to Vietnam. However, who transmitted it and why it was used in Cao Đài are not mentioned. Only the original Chinese version is said to be in "*Tứ Thời Nhật Tụng Kinh*"⁷ printed in 1928 by Đầu Sư Thượng Trung Nhật and Ngọc Lịch Nguyệt. It is also seen in "*Đại Đạo*

⁶ Announcement about the Jade Emperor.

⁷ Caodaist Daily Prayers.

Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ Kinh"⁸ by Ms. Đào Sư Lâm Hương Thanh. This original is printed as follows.

玉皇上帝

大羅天帝,
太極聖皇.
化育群生,
統御萬物.

渺渺黃金闕,
巍巍白玉京.

若實若虛,不言而默宣大化.
是空是色,無為而役使群靈.

時乘六龍,遊行不息,
氣分四象,斡旋無邊.

乾健高明,萬類善惡悉見,
玄範廣大,一算禍福立分.
上掌三十六天,三天世界,
下握七十二地,四大部洲.

先天後天,並育大慈父,
今仰古仰,普濟總法宗.

乃日月星辰之君,
為聖神仙佛之主.

湛寂真道,
恢漠尊嚴.

變化無窮,屢傳寶經以覺世.
靈威莫測,常施神教以利生.

⁸ Scriptures of the Third General Salvation Religion.

洪威洪慈,無極無上,
 大聖大願,大造大悲.
 玄穹高上帝,
 玉皇錫福宥罪
 大天尊.

Later, the Cao Đài Tây Ninh Sacerdotal Council had it translated into Sino-Vietnamese and printed in *Kinh Thiên Đạo Thế Đạo*⁹. The original print had many hyphens between two words because Vietnamese then had to be written that way. Up to now (2021), this habit has gradually been lost because it is very time-consuming and the meaning does not change at all. Therefore, today's scriptures no longer have hyphens. The printout now looks like this:

NGỌC HOÀNG THƯỢNG ĐẾ

Đại La Thiên Đế,

Thái Cực Thánh Hoàng.

Hóa dục quần sanh,

Thống ngự vạn vật.

Diệu diệu “Huỳnh Kim Khuyết”,

Nguy nguy “Bạch Ngọc Kinh”.

Nhược thiệt, nhược hư,

Bất ngôn nhi mặc tuyên đại hóa.

Thị không, thị sắc,

Vô vi nhi dịch sử quần linh.

Thời thừa Lục long,

Du hành bất tức,

Khí phân Tứ tượng,

⁹ Cao Đài Scriptures.

Hoát truyền vô biên.
 Càn kiện cao minh,
 Vạn loại thiện ác tất kiến,
 Huyền phạm quảng đại,
 Nhứt toán họa phước lập phân.
 Thượng chương Tam thập lục Thiên,
 Tam Thiên Thế giới.
 Hạ ốc Thất thập nhị Địa,
 Tứ Đại Bộ Châu
 Tiên Thiên Hậu Thiên ,
 Tịnh dục **Đại Từ Phụ**.
 Kim gương, cổ gương,
 Phổ tế Tổng Pháp Tông.
Nãi Nhứt, Nguyệt, Tinh, Thần chi Quân,
Vi Thánh, Thần, Tiên, Phật chi Chủ.
 Trạm tịch chơn Đạo,
 Khôi mịch tôn nghiêm.
 Biến hóa vô cùng,
 Lũ truyền Bửu Kinh dĩ giác thế,
 Linh oai mạc trắc,
 Thường thi Thần giáo dĩ lợi sanh.
 Hồng oai, hồng từ,
 Vô cực, vô thượng.
 Đại Thánh, Đại Nguyên, Đại Tạo, Đại Bi.
Huyền Khung Cao Thượng Đế,
Ngọc Hoàng tích phước hựu tội,
Đại Thiên Tôn.

It has been 96 years since the opening of the Cao Đài religion and a majority of followers only chant this Sino-Vietnamese sutra without knowing its meaning.

Now this is what I can tell in the two prints. First, in the so-called "original Chinese" version, the sentences are written in horizontal lines, from left to right, with dots and commas according to the Latin writing style. According to the translators, this version was in 1891. However, it is documented that at that time the Chinese wrote vertically, from right to left without any dots or commas. The horizontal writing style only appeared after the Chinese Revolution in 1911 when Western culture flooded into China. Therefore, this version cannot be called original, but has actually been converted to a Western style. Although the vertical structure has been lost, it still retains the parallel writing style, that is, the two sentences of each pair are opposite, except for the last three sentences.



& Nam Ai¹⁰. However, this presentation ignores the parallel characteristics presented in the Chinese version.

In sentences that still maintain a parallel presentation, you can see very well-matched pairs of words, phrases or sentences. For example:

Đại La Thiên Đế
Thái Cực Thánh Hoàng

Đại La (large net) is a noun referring to width matches Thái Cực (top notch), which is a noun referring to height. Thiên Đế (King of Heaven) matches Thánh Hoàng (King of the spiritual realm).

Hoá dục quần sanh
Thống ngự vạn vật

Hoá dục (to give birth and nurture) that is a verb matches Thống ngự (to rule over) that is also a verb. Quần sanh (all living things) that is an object noun matches vạn vật (all objects) is also an object noun.

On the contrary, other pairs of sentences have clearly lost this parallel property. For example:

Nhược thiệt nhược hư,
Bất ngôn nhi mặc tuyên đại hoá.

¹⁰ traditional Southern Vietnamese folk music.

Please look at these two sentences. The number of words is not equal, let alone “opposite” each other.

Adjustment

Therefore, to keep the spirit of the parallel text, it is recommended that the above text be revised as follows:

Đại La Thiên Đế.
Thái Cực Thánh Hoàng.

Hoá dục quần sanh.
Thống ngự vạn vật.

Diệu diệu Huỳnh Kim Khuyết.
Nguy nguy Bạch Ngọc Kinh.

Nhược thiệt nhược hư bất ngôn nhi mặc tuyên đại hoá.
Thị không thị sắc vô vi nhi dịch sử quần linh.

Thời thừa lục long du hành bất tức.
Khí phân tứ tượng hoá truyền vô biên.

Càn kiện cao minh vạn loại thiện ác tất kiến.
Huyền phạm quảng đại nhất toán họa phước lập phân.

Thượng chương tam thập lục thiên tam thiên thế giới.
Hạ ốc thất thập nhị địa tứ đại bộ châu.

Tiên thiên hậu thiên tịnh dục Đại Từ Phụ.

Kim ngưỡn cở ngưỡn phở tẻ Tởng Phỏp Tởng.

Nỏi nhựt nguyệt tinh thần chi quân.
Vi Thỏnh Thần Tiên Phật chi chủ.

Trạm tịch chơn đạo.
Khôi mịch tôn nghiêm.

Biến hóa vô cùng lũ truyền bửu kinh dĩ giác thê.
Linh oai mặc trỏc thường thi thần giáo dĩ lợi sanh.

Hồng oai hồng từ vô cực vô thượng.
Đỏi thỏnh đỏi nguyện đỏi tạo đỏi bi.

Huyền khung cao Thượng Đế Ngọc Hoàng.
Tích phước hựu tội Đỏi Thiên Tôn.

In this revised version, with a little knowledge of Sino-Vietnamese you can see the "opposite" characteristic of parallel writing. And another thing, the punctuation must also be changed. There should be no commas in the middle of sentences and there will be a period at the end of each sentence. The ancient Chinese did not need periods or commas because they relied on opposite characters to know when a sentence ended.

Some new points

Now in the Vietnamese translation, in addition to the meaning of the words, the shared meanings of each pair should be paid attention to. If so, many problems that translators previously encountered can be solved in the newly translated version.

For example:

Nhược thiết nhược hư bất ngôn nhi mặc tuyên đại hoá.
Thị không thị sắc vô vi nhi dịch sử quần linh.

In the above couplets, according to the Sino-Vietnamese dictionary, **Bất**: No. **Ngôn**: Speech. **Bất ngôn**: No words. **Nhi**: Well. **Mặc**: Quiet. **Tuyên**: Express it to others. **Đại**: Big. **Hóa**: Change. **Đại hóa**: A great transformation.



Hiền Tài Nguyễn Văn Hồng

Therefore, “Bất ngôn nhi mặc tuyên đại hoá” is often translated as “Not saying anything but quietly revealing the vast change throughout the universe”. (Hiền Tài Nguyễn Văn Hồng - Đức Nguyên). Or “Not saying anything, in the silence, operating,

producing and teaching”. (Hiền Tài Quách Văn Hoà - Thiên Vân).

The problem that emerges here lies in the word "đại hoá". If translated as "big change", there are two problems. Problem one, because the preceding verb is "tuyên" which means to state clearly, so translating it as "stating the great change" is really ambiguous. Then the two sentences will be translated as:

Hoặc có thật hoặc tưởng tượng Ngài không nói gì nhưng nói ra sự biến đổi lớn.

Là không là có Ngài không làm gì nhưng sai khiến tất cả các linh hồn.

Either real or imagined, He said nothing, but stating the great change.

Either empty or form, He does nothing but command all souls.

Problem two, if we rely on the rule of parallel, then mặc tuyên đại hoá (stating the great change) does not match dịch sử quần linh (command all souls).

To solve this problem, I look up the Sino-Vietnamese dictionary. Luckily, thanks to online dictionaries, I can use two or three books at a time. If it were like in the past, I did not know when I would ever finish it. Here is the result. Like every language, a Sino-Vietnamese word also has many meanings and you must rely on the word function or context to understand it. For example, the word 'tuyên' 宣 has a total of 9 meanings and I choose these 3 meanings: spread widely, give king's orders, make clear. The word 'đại' 大 has

14 meanings, among which I choose two closest meanings: large, many. The word 'hoá' 化 has 11 meanings, among which I choose three possible meanings: transform, give birth to all things, and teach.

Now let me apply the rule of parallel writing. Since I know in advance that each phrase must be opposite, I will choose opposite meanings to translate it. The final result is:

Vietnamese

Hoặc có thật hoặc tưởng tượng Ngài không nói gì nhưng ban lệnh tới tất cả mọi vật.

Là không là có Ngài không làm gì nhưng sai khiến tất cả các linh hồn.

English

Either real or imagined, He said nothing but gave command to all living things.

Either empty or form, He does nothing but command all souls.

Now it is better for us to understand that couplet.

So the translation of the entire Jade Emperor Sutra now includes 13 pairs of very well-matched parallel sentences as follows:

NGỌC HOÀNG THƯỢNG ĐẾ

Vua Trời uy quyền rộng khắp.

Vua Trời quyền lực tối cao.

Ngài sinh ra, nuôi dưỡng mọi sinh vật.

Ngài cai trị mọi chủng loài.

Cổng vào Cõi Trời bằng vàng ròng ở rất xa.
Kính Thành bằng ngọc trắng rất lớn lao.

Hoặc có thật hoặc không có thật Ngài không nói gì nhưng ban lệnh cho tất cả mọi vật.

Là không là có Ngài không làm gì nhưng sai khiến tất cả các linh hồn.

Thời gian cưỡi sáu rồng di chuyển không ngừng nghỉ.
Khí chia ra thành bốn phần truyền đi không có giới hạn.

Ngài mạnh mẽ, sáng suốt nhìn thấy mọi hành động thiện ác.
Ngài sâu sắc, rộng rãi dùng một phép tính phân rõ hoạ phúc.

Trên cao Ngài nắm quyền ba mươi sáu tầng trời và ba ngàn thế giới.
Dưới thấp Ngài coi sóc bảy mươi hai quả đất và bốn vùng đất lớn.

Ngài là người cha hiền nuôi dưỡng muôn loài đồng đều cả trước khi lẫn sau khi lập thành trời đất.

Ngài là người đứng đầu mọi tôn giáo cứu giúp tất cả mọi người và được thờ phượng từ xưa đến nay.

Ngài là vua của mặt trời, mặt trăng, các ngôi sao và các thần linh.
Ngài là chủ của Thánh Thần Tiên Phật.

Đạo hết sức sâu xa.
Đạo to lớn đáng kính.

Ngài biến hóa vô cùng, nhiều lần truyền lại kinh sách để cứu đời.
Ngài linh thiêng vô song, thường mở đạo dạy dỗ loài người.

Ngài có uy quyền tột bậc nhưng cũng thương chúng sanh vô cùng.
Ngài có tất cả những đức tính thiêng liêng cao cả.

Ngài là Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế huyền diệu, lớn lao, tối cao.
Ngài là Đại Thiên Tôn luôn ban phước và tha tội cho muôn loài.



The Jade Emperor, painting in Ming Dynasty 16th century.
Wikipedia

English translation

The Jade Emperor

The King of Heaven with widespread authority.
The King of the universe with supreme power.

He gives birth and nourishes all living things.
He reigns over all races.

The Golden Gate to Heaven is so far away.
The White Jade City, where He dwells, is so gigantic.

Either real or unreal, He says no words, but commands everything.
Either nothingness or fullness, He does nothing, but rules all souls.

Time rides six dragons, traveling without stopping.
Qi divides into four phenomena, transmitting endlessly.

Being so strong and brilliant, He distinguishes between good and evil.

Being incisive and generous, He discriminates between disasters and blessings.

Upwards, He governs thirty six heavens and three thousand worlds.
Downwards, He controls seventy two earths and four great lands.

He is a gentle father, equally bringing up all species both before and after the Creation.

He is the founder of all religions, saving everyone and having been worshipped from time immemorial.

He is the King of the sun, moon, stars and gods.
He is the boss of Genii, Saints, Immortals and Buddhas.

The Đạo is very profound.

The Đạo is so great and respectable.

Having innumerable incarnations, He bequeathed humankind divine scriptures for salvation.

Being greatly holy, He founded religions for morality education.

He has supreme authority, but also has a great affection for sentient beings.

He is the great Divine Being, He vows to save all living things, He is the great Creator and He has a great affection for human.

He is Jade Emperor, the Supreme Being. He is the Greatly Venerable Divine Being, who always blesses and forgives all living things.

Chant: “Nam mô Cao Đài Tiên Ông Đại Bồ Tát Ma Ha Tát”.

Conclusion

Of course, this is only a rough translation, meaning a literal translation. The hidden meanings should be further explained to attain the basic meaning. It is only the first step in learning Cao Đài scriptures. Those meanings will continue to haunt those who really want to practice Caodaism. It is indeterminate to tell how far it is from understanding these basic meanings to attaining enlightenment. Sometimes it is just in the blink of an eye, but sometimes it lasts forever. Furthermore, it depends on how much merit you have accomplished.

The reason I find it necessary to suggest this additional detail is because: First, the initial principle of Cao Đài is to trace everything, which means to find out the root of all things, so the

sutras should be thoroughly understood. If being vaguely understood but still chanted, they lead practitioners to nowhere. Second, Cao Đài has now gone abroad. Then foreigners will come to learn what it preaches. Therefore, as a believer, I have to study a lot to understand thoroughly and be ready to explain the doctrine to them. Remember that they are many times as educated as we are, so it is not easy to misinterpret things to them.

Từ Chơn

Sài Gòn 20/11/2021

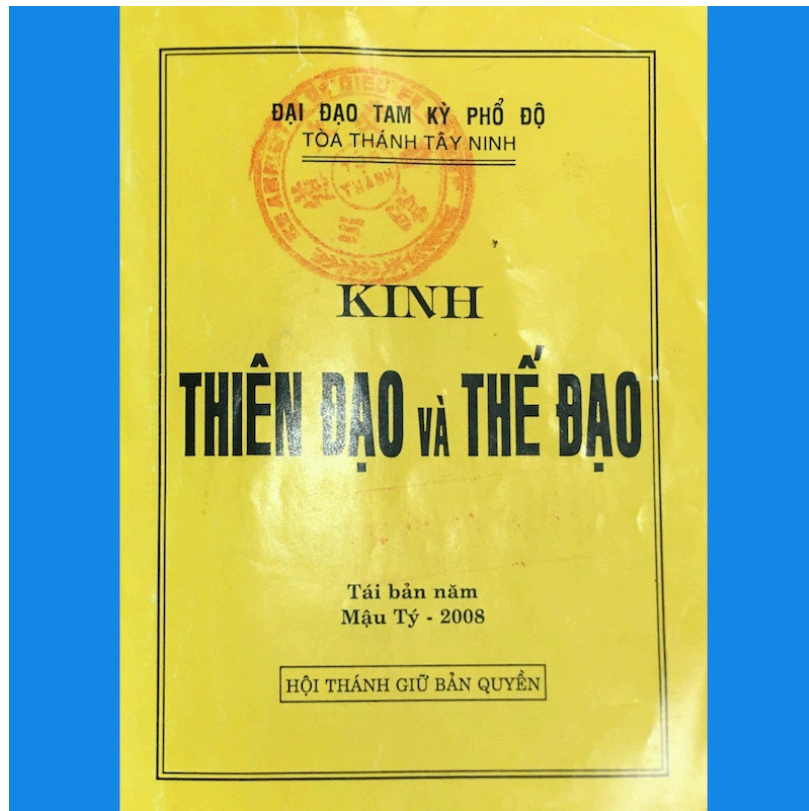
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FURTHER INTERPRETATION ON CAO ĐÀI SUTRA



Từ Chơn

Beginning

In the article "*A Vital Factor To Successfully Translate Cao Đài Scriptures* " I have presented that factor is to respect the parallel literary genre of the original sutra. This means you must pay attention to the opposite nature of the sentences after looking up words in the dictionary. This contrast will give rise to the combined meaning of each pair of sentences. Each sentence cannot be viewed as a separate unit. In addition, Vietnamese and English translations have been attached for reference. However, as previously stated, the rough Vietnamese translation is still very obscure in some points despite relying on the nature of the text. These points require knowledge and thoughts of Eastern philosophy to fully understand. The word "fully" used here is only relative because one has entered a state called "enlightenment" if they "fully understand". Meanwhile, I am only an ordinary believer with limited knowledge. I just want to be a stepping stone for the succeeding generations with the earnest hope that they will continue to develop so that there will be those who can "fully understand" the doctrine. Those people will give the gift of "enlightenment" to humanity in this 68th earth.

In this article, I will talk more about the confusing points in the four Sino-Vietnamese sutras Cao Đài followers recite every day. However, please note that some people still find it difficult to understand after reading my explanation. I sympathize with those people because I also experienced similar feelings when I first studied Cao Đài teachings. To those people, I sincerely advise against further reading of the Sino-Vietnamese Sutra.

Please read the Collection of Divine Messages again and find a way to do meritorious deeds for a while before reading the sutra again. Continue reading the sutra whenever you find it interesting even though you only understand a little,.

The Jade Emperor Sutra

Let me say it again that basically in biên ngẫu writing (biên = two horses in tandem, ngẫu = one pair), each pair of two opposite sentences should always be considered to deduce the meaning. First of all, in the Jade Emperor Sutra, the first couplet that needs further explanation is:

Chinese

若實若虛不言而默宣大化
是空是色無為而役使群靈

Sino-Vietnamese

Nhược thiệt nhược hư bất ngôn nhi mặc tuyên đại hoá.
Thị không thị sắc vô vi nhi dịch sử quần linh.

Vietnamese translation

Hoặc có thật hoặc không có thật Ngài không nói gì nhưng ban lệnh cho tất cả mọi vật.

Là không là có Ngài không làm gì nhưng sai khiến tất cả các linh hồn.

English translation

Sino-Vietnamese

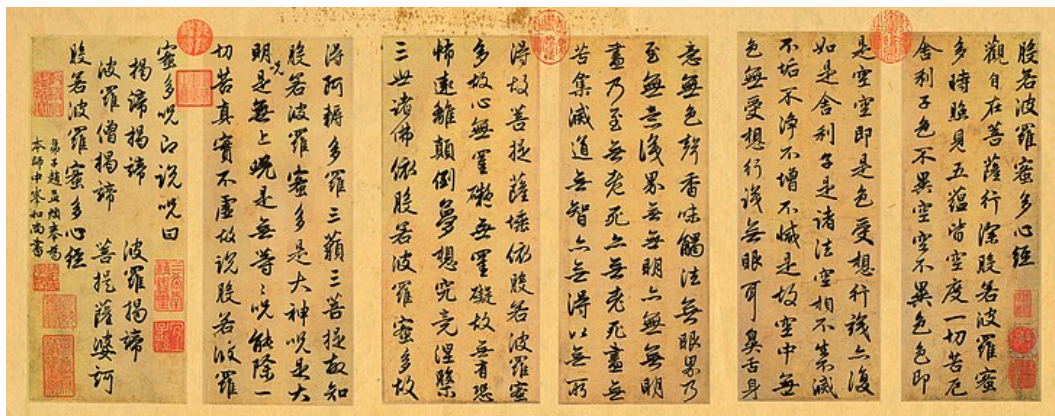
“*Quán Tự Tại Bồ Tát hành thâm Bát nhã Ba la mật đa thời, chiếu kiến ngũ uẩn giai không, độ nhất thiết khổ ách. Xá Lợi Tử, sắc bất dị không, không bất dị sắc, sắc tức thị không, không tức thị sắc, thọ tướng hành thức diệc phục như thị*”.

Vietnamese

“*Ngài Bồ Tát Quán Tự Tại khi đạt được trí huệ thì thấy năm uẩn đều là không, do đó vượt qua mọi đau khổ. Nay Xá Lợi Tử, có chẳng khác gì không, không chẳng khác gì có, có chính là không, không chính là có, thọ tướng hành thức cũng đều như vậy*”

English

“*When Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara deeply practiced Prajnaparamita, he saw the five aggregates were empty, thus overcoming all suffering. Sariputra, form is not different from emptiness, emptiness is not different from form, form is emptiness, emptiness is form, perception, action, and consciousness are all the same.*”



The Heart Sutra in the Song Dynasty

If readers find this passage unintelligible, I completely agree and would like to add "extremely obscure" for us ordinary people. We naturally understand that existence and non-existence are two opposing poles, meaning completely different, now that the sutras suggest those two poles are not different, so everything is turned upside down. We cannot understand that the two states of "having money" and "not having money" are the same. Especially, the word "thi", meaning "to be" is used in the scriptures. The word "is" is even more affirming than the word "like"! Similarly, it is easy to understand and accept two parallel lines never meet (Euclidean geometry). Conversely, we find it difficult to accept two parallel lines meet at infinity (non-Euclidean geometry). Only when the Math teacher explains it do we understand and accept it.

Anyway, let's go back to the two opposite phrases in our sutra. Clearly this implies there are two ways of thinking: one is normal: "*real*" is different from "*not real*" or "*yes*" is different from "*no*". The second is super-thinking according to the Prajnaparamita Sutra: those two opposite things are not different. The latter will give us an insight into the remaining two opposite phrases: "God says nothing but give orders to everything" and "God does nothing but commands all souls". Saying nothing and giving orders, doing nothing and commanding are two opposite behaviors but are suggested to be "not different".

In short, the combined meaning of the above couplet is "*You cannot understand the Jade Emperor by ordinary thinking. To*

understand Him, you should have a superb mind, which the ancients called Prajna". Dear fellow believers, this is just the meaning of the sutra, but the matter of how to gain Prajnaparamita is another big matter. It is usually known that many people have spent their whole lives hoping to achieve it, but still failed. Perhaps someone will ask: "If it's too difficult and can't be done, then why say it?" Yes, it's really difficult, but in this third time of religious salvation, the Supreme Being has promised to "restore the true spirit so that you can attain enlightenment", meaning to return the Prajna Wisdom to us. To enjoy that grace, let's start doing "the three good deeds"¹¹ right now.

The second couple that need an explanation is:

Chinese

時乘六龍遊行不息
氣分四象斡旋無邊

Sino-Vietnamese

Thời thừa lục long du hành bất tức.
Khí phân tứ tượng hoát (oát) truyền vô biên.

Vietnamese

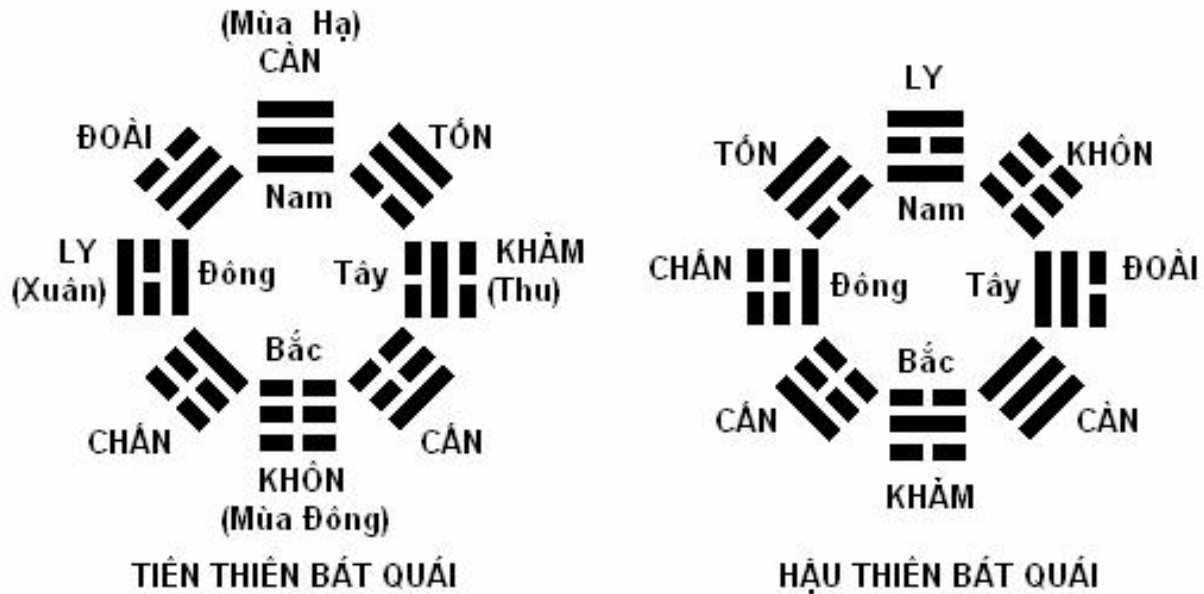
Thời gian cưỡi sáu rồng di chuyển không ngừng nghỉ.
Khí chia ra thành bốn phần truyền đi không có giới hạn.

English

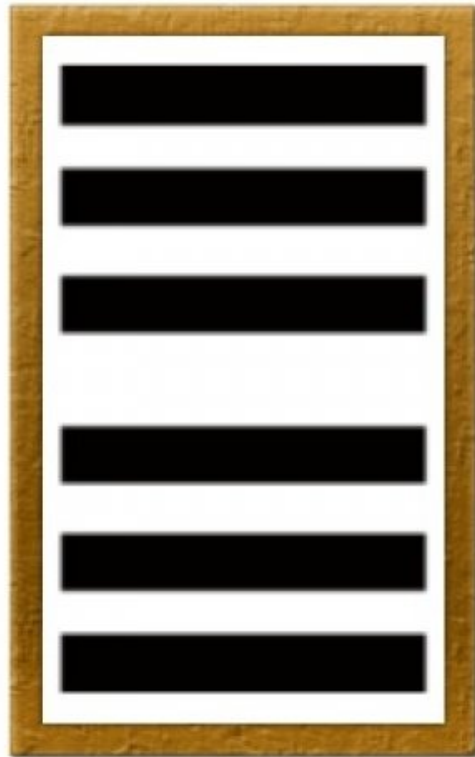
Time rides six dragons, traveling nonstop.

¹¹ Cao Đài followers are encouraged to do the three good deeds: doing meritorious deeds, doing charity work and preaching Caodaism.

Vital energy divides into four phenomena, transmitting endlessly.



This couplet implies an Eastern philosophy not only very famous but also as unintelligible as the Prajna Paramita Sutra mentioned above. That is I Ching or Book of Changes. The phrase "Time rides the Six-Dragon Vehicle" is taken from Confucius's explanation of the Qian hexagram, which consists of 6 consecutive lines in the Eight Diagrams. This hexagram represents Heaven and has the following shape:



乾為天
けんいてん

“Vital energy divides into four phenomena” is an abbreviation of the Yin and Yang principle of creating the universe as follows:

Sino-Vietnamese

Vô Cực sinh Thái Cực

[Thái Cực](#) sinh Lưỡng Nghi

[Lưỡng Nghi](#) sinh Tứ tượng

[Tứ Tượng](#) sinh Bát Quái

Bát Quái sinh vô lượng

English

Infinity gives birth to the supreme ultimate

The supreme ultimate gives birth to Yang and Yin
 Yang and Yin gives birth to Four Symbols
 The Four Symbols gives birth to the Eight Trigrams
 The Eight Trigrams gives birth to everything.

Dear fellow believers, I have absolutely no ambition to explain anything in I Ching and in fact have no ability to do so. I just want to translate the scriptures into Vietnamese for easy understanding. Therefore, the matter of studying more about I Ching will be left to more intelligent people. In short, now I would like to state the combined meaning of this couplet as "The Jade Emperor's principle of creating everything in this universe is described by I Ching". To the fellow believers who want to read more about I Ching, please refer to books by authors Ngô Tất Tố, Nguyễn Hiến Lê, Kim Định, etc. all available at Vietnamese bookstores.

The Buddhist Sutra

In the Buddhist sutras, there are also two couplets that are very difficult to understand. First pair:

Chinese

吐氣成虹 而一柱撐天
 化劍成尺 而三分托地

Sino-Vietnamese

Thở khí thành hồng nhi như trượng (xanh) thiên.

Hóa kiếm thành xích nhi tam phân thác địa.

Vietnamese

Phun hơi thành cầu vồng một trụ chống trời.
Biến gươm thành cây thước ba phân đỡ đất.

English

Spraying steam into a rainbow, a pillar against the sky.
Turning the sword into a three-centimeter ruler that supports the ground.

I have read the two explanations from Hiền Tài Nguyễn Văn Hồng - Đức Nguyên and Hiền Tài - Quách Văn Hoà - Thiên Vân. They are quite similar, so I take the liberty of quoting Hiền Tài Nguyễn Văn Hồng's work for your fellow believers to refer to.

“As for the esoteric practice, these two sutras mean training the Later Heaven to become the Earlier Heaven, that is, training the visible to return to the invisible, that is, returning to nothingness or attaining enlightenment.

** ‘Spraying steam into a rainbow, a pillar against the sky’ implies the LY hexagram of the Later Heaven Bagua turns into the CÀN hexagram of the Earlier Heaven Bagua, which is called filling the LY. The LY hexagram has a broken line in the middle. If the empty space of that broken line is filled, it becomes a solid line. Then the LY hexagram turns into the CÀN hexagram, which symbolizes Heaven.*

** ‘Turning the sword into a three-centimeter ruler that supports the ground’ implies the KHẨM hexagram of the Later Heaven*

Bagua turns into the KHÔN hexagram of the Earlier Heaven Bagua, called abstracting the KHẨM. The KHẨM hexagram has a solid line in the middle. If you cut it into two parts, you get the hexagram KHÔN with three broken lines, which represents Earth. When you have abstracted the KHẨM and filled the LY, then the Later Heaven Bagua becomes the Earlier Heaven Bagua. Consequently, you have attained enlightenment”.

This explanation tells us about the relationship of the two pairs of hexagrams: Ly and Càn, Khảm and Khôn, which are the origin of the two mentioned sutras. However, there are no training instructions on how to "add to the gap of the broken line" or how to "cut it into two pieces". Maybe we have to wait for a "master" who teaches this in detail.

To be honest, I myself do not understand the meaning of these couplets. If any fellow believers want to study more, please read chapter 39 in *Tính Mệnh Khuê Chỉ Toàn Thư* - by Doãn Chân Nhân (translated by Nhân Tử Nguyễn Văn Thọ), Nhân Tử Văn Publishing House, California, USA. Apparently, it is also available in bookstores in Vietnam.



Illustration of abstracting Khảm and filling Ly from:
<https://nhantu.net/TonGiao/TMKC/N39.htm>

The second couplet:

Chinese

功參太極 破一竅之玄關
 性合無為 統三才之秘旨

Sino-Vietnamese

Công tham thái cực phá nhất khiêu chi huyền quan.
 Tánh hiệp vô vi thống tam tài chi bí chỉ.

Vietnamese

Theo lý thái cực để mở một cánh cửa huyền diệu trong cơ thể.
Theo lý vô vi kết hợp ba phần quý báu của cơ thể con người.

English

Following the supreme ultimate theory to open the magical door in the body.

Following the principle of non-action to combine the three precious parts of the human body.

If you want to examine the first sentence, first of all, you need to know more about " *the only mysterious body outlet*" or "*mysterious body outlet*". The ancient Chinese believed in the human body there is a place like an outlet or a door (pass) through the metaphysical realm. By cultivating, one can open (break) this door to communicate with that world. However, the explanations of Taoist monks (Taoists) about this are too complex and difficult to understand. And another thing, Taoism has thousands of sects with different explanations. Obviously, it is like looking for a needle in a haystack to find an official explanation. Regarding Cao Đài, the Sacerdotal Council has no official document to explain this issue. Only Bát Nương Diêu Trì Cung¹² in *Esoteric Practice*¹³ teaches Hiền Tài Nguyễn Văn Mới that it is the Thiên Nhãn¹⁴ (also known as Huệ Nhãn or Huệ Quang Khiếu) located between a human brain and the forehead,

12 the Eighth Lady Buddha in the Jade Pond Palace.

13 <https://www.daotam.info/booksv/BiPhapLuyenDao/biphapluyendao-e.pdf>

14 the Divine Eye.

right between the eyes. This organ is semi-tangible, meaning it is visible on and off. Besides, it cannot be investigated by Western surgery. However, even though *Esoteric Practice* was given to the Cao Đài Sacerdotal Council in Tây Ninh (at that time called the Governing Council), it still has not been censored and released.

Anyway, please return to the above sutra, practitioners should follow the principle of Thái Cực (supreme ultimate) to open this door. The word Thái Cực implies the principle of Yin and Yang in I Ching, according to which Infinity gives birth to Supreme Ultimate, Supreme Ultimate turns into two forms, etc, roughly translated as "nothing" gives birth to "supreme ultimate", "supreme ultimate" turns into "two opposing parts". The ancients indirectly said that this process has only one direction starting from Infinity. So if you go from "two opposing parts" to "supreme ultimate", it is considered "returning to the origin". So, the person who follows "supreme ultimate" tries to make his thinking, which is always based on right or wrong reasoning (two opposing parts), return to a state of no right or wrong anymore (supreme ultimate), then he will be able to open up this door. It is called attaining enlightenment to do so. However, that is just the meaning of the sutra. As for how to return to supreme ultimate, the sutra does not mention it.

Now, please consider the second sentence. Cao Đài followers all know that the three most precious parts of the body (Tam Bửu) are Tinh, Khí, Thần (body, mind, soul). Just like the mysterious body outlet, there are various explanations for Tinh, Khí, Thần depending on each sect of Taoism. In Cao Đài religion, this has

been explained by the Divine Messages and His Holiness Hộ Pháp's sermons completely, so there is no need to repeat them here. The sutra says you must practice so that your "nature" follows the principle of Vô Vi (non-action) if you want to combine these three parts.

The word non-action in this context is an abbreviation of a sentence in chapter 37 of Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching. “*Đạo thường vô vi nhi vô bất vi*”, meaning "The Tao often does nothing, but there is nothing that cannot be done". Although it is difficult to understand this extremely complex concept, perhaps the similarity with the words in the Prajnaparamita Sutra is eminent. It is an attempt to eliminate the distinction between yes and no despite different word usage.

In conclusion, the final meaning of this couplet is "*You should not think based on right-or-wrong to successfully attain enlightenment*". And like other sutras, there are no specific instructions on what to do.

The Taoist Sutra

The first couple of sentences in the Taoist Sutra that need further discussion are:

Chinese

無為居太極之前
有始超群真之上

Sino-Vietnamese

Vô vi cư Thái Cực chi tiền.

Hữu thi siêu quần chơn chi thượng.

Vietnamese

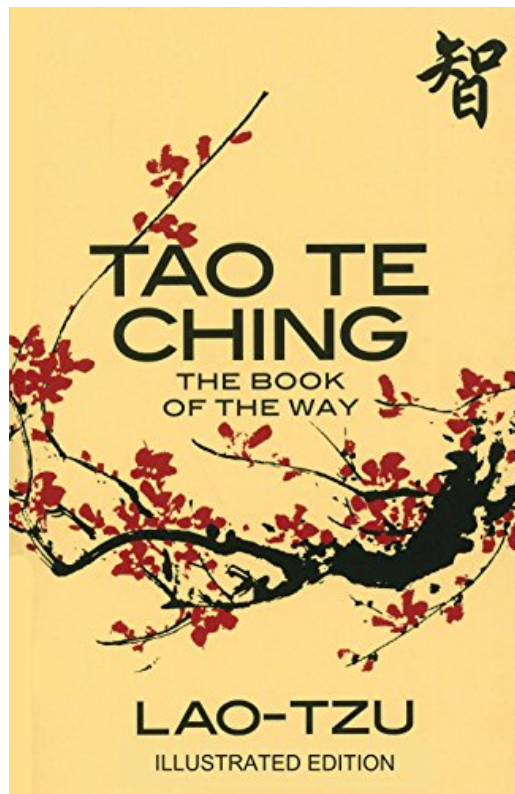
Trước khi có trời đất Ngài ở trước ngôi Thái Cực.

Sau khi có trời đất Ngài cao hơn các bậc đắc đạo.

English

Before heaven and earth existed, He was before the Supreme Ultimate throne.

After heaven and earth existed, He was higher than the enlightened ones.



[Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu, available on Amazon](#)

These two verses reiterate the principle of Yin and Yang that creates the universe above with an emphasis upon the Earlier and Later Heavens. We know that traditional Chinese philosophy is based on the theory of Yin and Yang. The pair of opposites "vô vi" and "hữu thi" follows this rule. Vô Vi here does not mean "*not doing*" as in the Tao Te Ching, but indicates the period when heaven and earth were not established yet. The reason we know this is because this phrase is opposite to "hữu thi", that is the material world. So if there is "*before heaven and earth*", there must be "*after heaven and earth*". Thus, the combined meaning of the couplet is "*The Yin and Yang principle covers everything, including religion practice*".

Now the second couplet:

Chinese

道高一氣妙化三清
德煥虛靈法超群聖

Sino-Vietnamese

Đạo cao nhưt khí diệu hóa Tam Thanh.
Đức hoán hư linh pháp siêu quần Thánh.

Vietnamese

Đạo làm cho một Khí biến thành Tam Thanh.
Đức soi sáng cõi trời bằng lời dạy đạo vượt qua các vị Thánh.

English

Đạo makes vital energy transform into Three Thanh.
 Đức illuminates the heavens with religious teachings surpassing
 the Saints.

First of all, the two words at the beginning of the sentences "Đạo" and "Đức" refer to the Tao Te Ching, the scripture said to be written by Lao Tzu and officially used in Taoism. Let me put it briefly here, this sutra has two parts: The Upper Sutra discusses the word Đạo. Lao Tzu said that the Đạo is the origin of all things, as in chapter 42: The Đạo gives birth to one, one gives birth to two, two gives birth to three, three gives birth to all things. Number 3 here is both the source of everything in the universe and the three leading Immortals of Taoism: Ngọc Thanh Nguyên Thủy Thiên Tôn, Thượng Thanh Linh Bảo Thiên Tôn, and Thái Thanh Đạo Đức Thiên Tôn.¹⁵

The Lower Sutra discusses the word Đức. Lao Tzu said that Đức is the specific manifestation of Đạo in each thing. In short, the synthesis of these two sutras is "*Summary of the main idea of the Tao Te Ching*". Currently, Vietnamese translations of the Tao Te Ching by such prestigious authors as Nguyễn Hiến Lê, Nguyễn Duy Cần and Nhưộng Tống are available in bookstores in Vietnam. However, my personal experience shows that it is not an easy task to read this book.

The Confucian Sutra

¹⁵ The Primeval Lord of Heaven, The Heavenly Lord of Spiritual Treasures and The Heavenly Lord of Dao and its Virtue.

Luckily, the Confucian Sutra does not contain metaphors that need further discussion. Many readers believe that our Vietnamese translation is sufficient to understand this sutra.

Conclusion

Perhaps at this point, I think we have temporarily completed the part of "*understanding what the sutras say*". Now there will be many opinions arising here. For example, do you still need to "*chant*" the sutra if you understand the words of it? To answer this question, I would like to quote the answer of Great Master Huệ Nãng (Hui Neng) to his disciple, monk Pháp Đạt.

Master Hui Neng, according to legend, was the Sixth Patriarch of Chinese Zen Buddhism. Pháp Đạt was greatly proud of himself for having recited the Lotus Sutra 3,000 times. However, he could not answer a single question when the Sixth Patriarch asked the meaning of the sutra. After listening to the Sixth Patriarch's explanation, he suddenly understood it and was extremely happy.

The Sixth Patriarch added, "*If you think it is good to recite the sutra many times without understanding it, it is like a long-haired buffalo regretting its beautiful tail.*"

Pháp Đạt asked, "*Sir, does that mean you only need to understand the meaning, no need to recite the sutra?*"

The Sixth Patriarch, "*The Sutras do not hinder your thinking. Whether it is stupid or bright; good or bad is up to you. If you chant with your mouth and think correctly, then you will master*

the sutra. If you chant with your mouth and think wrongly, the sutra will boss you."

In our opinion, just as the Sixth Patriarch taught, you should chant the sutras along with correct thought, not count the number of times you recite and think you are superior to the person who recites it a few times. This is similar to His Holiness Hộ Pháp's question to Giáo Thiện Võ Văn Đợi, "*Do you have enough 3,000 merits?*" Then some believers counted to see if they had done 3,000 days of meritorious service! Alas! They do not understand that number represents a philosophical concept, not a mathematical number!

For Cao Đài followers, chanting sutras is doing the Exoteric Practice. Therefore, if you chant them without understanding what the sutras say, how can you think correctly? In Cao Đài terms, if the Exoteric Practice is not right, how does the Esoteric Practice work ?

Từ Chơn

Sài Gòn 16/12/2021

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A QUESTION THAT REMAINS UNANSWERED



Từ Chon

A sermon

In his sermon on the Sacred Path of Eternal Life at the Holy Temple on the night of December 8, Year of the Mouse (January 6, 1949), His Holiness Hộ Pháp said:

[...Like I said, the highly educated but amoral spirits refused to admit their sins in the debate in Cung Hiệp Thiên Hành Hóa¹⁶. They reasoned, "Only a few powerful noble spirits with enough effective methods dare to deal with the *Four Noble Truths* (i.e. the four sufferings of life: birth, old age, sickness and death) to establish their positions. Most other spirits cannot be determined enough to escape those sufferings. They look for ways to eliminate suffering in vain. Since they are so miserable, they want to find a little bit of happiness to partly relieve their suffering. Unfortunately, they unintentionally commit more crime while looking for little happiness in the midst of misery. That's the problem. They commit crimes just because they want to find happiness, so why accuse them?".

I also take this opportunity to invite you, both Cao Đài Dignitaries and followers, with your great intelligence to figure out how the Perfect Divine Beings answer them in Cung Hiệp Thiên Hành Hóa...]

Then he added:

[...Every time I preach, I leave a blank space for all of you Supreme Being's children to ponder and then add to it for a more profound meaning. I try my best to give everyone the key to hold in their hands, so I can guide them all to success in the Supreme Being's religion...]

¹⁶ the Heavenly Educational Alliance Palace.

Before discussing the open question in this sermon, I think it is necessary to introduce a few concepts for ease of understanding.

- The Sacred Path of Eternal Life - It is often believed that your soul will return to heaven after you die if you do not commit any crimes in your life. On the contrary, you will be punished to hell. Cao Đài calls heaven the eternal spiritual realm. His Holiness Hộ Pháp was allowed to export his spirit (soul, astral body, dharma body) to heaven while still being alive, then His Holiness recounted what he had witnessed in thirty five sermons in Tây Ninh Holy Temple. He said it was a description of the Sacred Path of Eternal Life.
- The thiết chiến - Thiết = tongue; Chiến = argument; Thiết chiến = arguing with reasons.
- Cung Hiệp Thiên Hành Hoá - Cung = large building. Hiệp Thiên = union with Heaven. Hành Hóa = teaching sb to become a good person. This is a place in the spiritual realm, functioning like a court on earth, where Tam Trấn Oai Nghiêm¹⁷ (Great Immortal Lý Thái Bạch, Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, and Quan Thánh Đế Quân¹⁸) reside. In addition, Perfect Divine Beings, who are highly moral beings, defend soul sinners like lawyers in our world. In this earthly world, you can attain the status of a Genii, Saint, Immortal, Buddha or something, but you must have a completely virtuous life if you want to be a Perfect Divine Being.

17 the Three Venerable Governors.

18 Holy Emperor Lord Guan.

- When opening the Cao Đài religion, the Supreme Being established Hiệp Thiên Đài as a model for the Hiệp Thiên Hành Hóa Palace in heaven.

To return to the issue, His Holiness Hộ Pháp said that lots of extremely intelligent and highly educated people in the world do not believe religions. They often promote atheism, meaning they affirm that there is no heaven, hell, or afterlife. Therefore, being alive, they choose what benefits themselves without fear of breaking the five precepts. Since they are not afraid of the law of cause and effect, they all commit crimes. Nevertheless, they deny their guilt when they go to the heavenly Three Religion Court. They come up with many, sometimes very weird, arguments to defend themselves. The Perfect Divine Beings will explain it to them so that in the end they will condemn themselves.



The statue of the God of Justice

The open question

In the sermon excerpt mentioned above, there are two important things that must be pondered thoroughly.

First, His Holiness Hộ Pháp said he tries to give the "key" to each believer "*Every time I preach, I leave a blank space for you to ponder...*" and then "*...add to it for a more profound meaning*". In short, he does not affirm that his teachings are postulates or default concepts which are not allowed to say the contrary. Furthermore, listeners need to think carefully and then add a supplement. That is the key to practice Caodaism.

Second, the question of those atheist intellectuals. They say that only a few noble spiritual beings, i.e. Saints or Patriarchs, have enough spiritual strength to overcome the four sufferings of the world. Most other people, including themselves, cannot do so because they are mentally weak. They just look for some small joys to ease their suffering. Unfortunately, life is extremely harsh, so sometimes they unintentionally commit crimes to save their lives! Then it is life that is to blame. Why condemn themselves? This is an open question that His Holiness Hộ Pháp invited Cao Đài dignitaries and followers to answer on behalf of the Perfect Divine Beings at the Cung Hiệp Thiên Hành Hóa.



Learning about that

Now let me discuss the first point. Obviously, His Holiness Hộ Pháp calls on Caodaists to listen to his teachings in a much more active way. After listening, you need to think twice and add to it for a more profound meaning. In fact, in the 20s, His Holiness was ahead of his time by promoting the way of learning Western countries are pursuing today. In ancient Vietnam, you only had to memorize the Four Books and the Five Classics and consider the ideas inside to be absolutely correct. Today, students in advanced European and American countries have to not only memorize but also analyze. That means you must ask what it is, who introduces it, for what purpose it is created, whether it can be implemented, etc when encountering a concept? Then you have to seek documents and evidence to answer. Once you have clearly known it, you can draw a conclusion about whether it is applicable to life. Reality has shown that Western learning methods bring outstanding success.

His Holiness Hộ Pháp wants Cao Đài followers to study Caodaism according to that method. However, this is a very high requirement for most followers not only during the opening period but even today. Many people will say what His Holiness said is the golden rule, we followers can only listen and that's it. As for the supplement, it's beyond our ability!

It is indeed difficult to think and supplement His Holiness's teachings. The first thing to do is to be knowledgeable about religions, i.e. reading and understanding lots of religious scriptures. Unfortunately, most Cao Đài believers today do not

fully understand the Cao Đài daily sutras, let alone other scriptures!!!



Vạn Pháp Cung, one of the three Cao Đài Meditation Houses

There must be a reason why His Holiness requires that. First, most of our followers are not knowledgeable even about Cao Đài, so the very basic things are often misunderstood. For example, having read the following Divine Message, several believers affirm that Cao Đài forbids esoteric practice. *"There are many of you who mistakenly think everything will have to be abandoned after joining Cao Đài. As a result, day and night they dream of a very low thing, which is to retreat for the esoteric practice. Listen! You can never succeed and achieve what you expect if you don't have enough merits or fulfill all your personal responsibilities. If you want to attain enlightenment, the only thing to do is to save all sentient beings"* (March 5, 1927).

If the context is closely examined, it is enough merit that is an essential prerequisite for possible attainment of enlightenment. Thus, do not just read the last sentence and quickly conclude that Caodaism prohibits esoteric practice!!! If you read more of His Holiness Hộ Pháp's sermons, you would not dare to conclude like that because His Holiness said, *"We attain enlightenment because we have three interconnected parts. Don't think we can't achieve it. As long as we can walk, we can keep going. Everywhere there is a way. However, if we want to achieve enlightenment, we must do the esoteric practice. At the beginning of Cao Đài, we must do the exoteric practice, but later we should achieve the true Dharma. If not, it will be like a person wearing pants without a shirt"* (February 1/ Year of the Pig - 1947).

So in this matter, it is most accurate to say that Caodaism encourages meritorious work rather than esoteric practice. This is also practical compared to the fact that the number of Holy Temple is unlimited while there are only three Meditation



Houses for the entire religion (Trí Giác Cung, Vạn Pháp Cung and Trí Huệ Cung).

Another example, many believers explain the arrangement of the five incense sticks on the altar as "The Five Elements, The Five Qi, The Five Perfumes, The Five Aggregates, The Five Constants, etc". Funnily enough, all the popular Sino-Vietnamese related to the number five are merged here. Nonetheless, they certainly would not dare to combine so many haphazard things if they read the Sermon of His Holiness Hộ Pháp on August 1, Year of the Pig - 1947: *"As for the five incense sticks, I saw various explanations by Confucianists. OK, they can freely explain the meaning as they like, but I myself clearly understand that it is the Five Qi. The Supreme Being uses the Five Qi to transform into the Five Elements (Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth), which move the entire universe"*.

Through the above two examples, most of believers' misunderstandings are obviously due to a lack of reading Divine Messages. On the contrary, other followers read from too many sources, including unofficial ones, so they misunderstand. For example, there is a quote: *"Practice the Tinh to transform into the Khí, practice the Khí to transform into the Thần, practice the Thần to return to the Hư, practice the Hư to return to the Vô"*. Honestly speaking, the part *"Practice the Hư to return to the Vô"* is not found in any official Divine Messages. Moreover, the above quote breaks the principle of Training the Three Treasures because that means training four parts (four treasures) and not three parts (three treasures).

Not to mention at the end, the word Hu and Vô are synonymous, so practicing Hu to return to Vô, (meaning emptiness returns to emptiness) is completely obscure. If it is unintelligible, how can followers practice? When I expressed doubt like that, they explained: *“What gods say is right. It goes without saying. We don't understand because we are mortals, so don't wonder”*. This advice sounds extremely contrary to His Holiness Hộ Pháp's view of "pondering to understand" and "adding more."



Monk Như Nhãn, one of the first Cao Đài disciples

"Gaining understanding" is already tough; "adding more" is even more strenuous. If you are not knowledgeable about Cao

Đài and other religions, this "adding more" part can sometimes be very terrible. Take the following excerpt: "*Như Nhãn*¹⁹, *I do not want to speak to you in Chinese because from now on I consider Vietnamese the main language to establish my religion. I am forced to elaborate upon that*". (September 5, 1926 - Gò Kén).

Can we add something like this: "*Inferring from the above quote, Vietnamese will later become the international language for the whole 68th earth*²⁰. *Anyone who wants to understand Cao Đài religion must learn Vietnamese*"? Sadly, such opinion means we are jumping from (The Supreme Being officially used Vietnamese to establish religion) to (Vietnamese is the international language). Actually, the Supreme Being did not say that. It is just our inference. Such a statement needs to be verified by a reputable Language Research Institute.

If it cannot be proven, then modern logic calls it the sliding fallacy, which is an inference about the future without basis. As for the fact that Vietnamese is a must for religious studies, in the multicultural and multilingual environment of the modern world, such a view hardly sustains. Let's try asking others whether it is necessary to learn Latin and Sanskrit to understand Christianity and Buddhism? Obviously not.

Furthermore, in addition to Vietnamese explanations in the Divine Messages and scriptures, Cao Đài philosophy is also

¹⁹ One of the first Cao Đài disciples.

²⁰ Caodaism calls our planet the 68th earth among 72 earths of the universe.

symbolized by the symbols at the Holy Temple. These symbols can be understood without speaking Vietnamese well. This is consistent with today's information perspective that people can transmit information not only by speech and writing but also by images, signs, sounds, gestures, etc.

Thus, in order to "adding more", one must both study Caodaism thoroughly and learn how to reason so as not to fall into fallacies like the newly discussed example. To learn more, please refer to the following article.

<https://www.daotam.info/booksv/TuChon/hanhtrangrabienlon.pdf>



Now let's move on to the second point, which is His Holiness Hộ Pháp's open question left in the first part. I would like to add

that in the journey returning to Cung Hiệp Thiên Hành Hoá (from sermons 13 to 18 CTLHS), His Holiness listed five arguments atheist intellectuals raised to deny their sins. He also told how the Perfect Divine Beings answered the first four arguments. To the fifth argument, he encouraged dignitaries and believers to answer.

Thus, what is His hidden meaning? Actually, His Holiness wants us to practice universal salvation. To do so, we have to study Caodaism first. As discussed, to answer those atheists we have to study carefully and reason well, not talk nonsense.

Answering the open question

Now I take the liberty of giving my own answer, hoping that each reader will also have a better, more profound answer of his own. Since the question contains a philosophical issue, I cannot answer it immediately unless I have already achieved enlightenment. Thinking carefully, I myself am just an ordinary believer who is studying Cao Đài philosophy, so I prepare the following three steps in advance.

Step one: considering qualification

First of all, the questioners must be highly qualified, for example, with a PhD in modern times. Through personal experience, they have very broad knowledge compared to ordinary people, of course excluding the case of buying a license. If they have written a thesis on Caodaism, I'm afraid they know Caodaism better than our high-ranking dignitaries. Therefore, the answer must be of a suitable level, avoiding fallacies as discussed above. Second, they are atheists, meaning

they reject all religious philosophies. So it is certainly fruitless to tell them Cao Đài philosophy "embraces all religions"! Be careful! You may not be able to answer such questions from them as, "*On what basis do you say there are only 3,072 stars?*" Or "*How much is 3,000 merits?*" For them, you should use arguments and evidence that are widely recognized, so hopefully they will listen to. Despite that, it is not certain that they will accept.



A demonstration of atheists

Step two: considering situation

These people committed crimes in their lives on earth because His Holiness Hộ Pháp said they denied their sins at the Three Religion Court. Now we have to think about how the Perfect Divine Beings respond. It is worth noting that even Genii, Saints, Immortals or Buddhas, who want to work at Cung Hiệp

Thiên Hành Hoá, have to achieve a degree of Perfection. The Perfect Divine Beings are those who have not committed any sins in their lives. Such Divine Beings have the rights to answer the atheists. Since your persuasion will lead to nowhere if you make the same mistakes as the atheist intellectuals. Remember that we are speaking on behalf of those Perfect Divine Beings.

Step three: considering purpose

At this point, perhaps somebody may think: It's too troublesome! If they commit a crime, they should be beaten or tortured by demons, then forced to reincarnate as an animal or something. That's it. This is a folk argument from thousands of years ago, which is easy to understand and implement, but in the current era it does not work. It will be said that the spiritual world is no different from the earthly world! Then, sooner or later, there will be corruption and bribery. As a result, there is no need to practice religion diligently. As humans, you just try to make money, sculpt beautiful Buddha statues, make many offerings to pagodas, hire a few hundred monks to chant sutras, so your souls will have no fear of punishment after death. Who knows, maybe you can even buy a higher position in heaven! So it is not necessary to join a religion or study religious philosophy anymore. Isn't it right, dear readers?

Contrary to that ancient concept, the situation His Holiness Hộ Pháp raises here is a very typical philosophical metaphor of Cao Đài. After death, spirits (souls) will return to the Eternal Divine Realm. When they arrive at Cung Hiệp Thiên Hành Hoá, they will determine for themselves whether they are guilty or not. There is no one to act as a mandarin, judging the accused like a court on Earth. The Perfect Divine Beings are there to help the

spirits understand the heaven law and judge their sins correctly because they often choose very severe punishments for themselves. In the case we are discussing, the Perfect Divine Beings must help atheist intellectuals admit their sins. So the answer must be gently worded and reasonable enough for them to accept. It is absolutely impossible to impose, threaten or just one-sidedly refute their arguments without anything to prove.



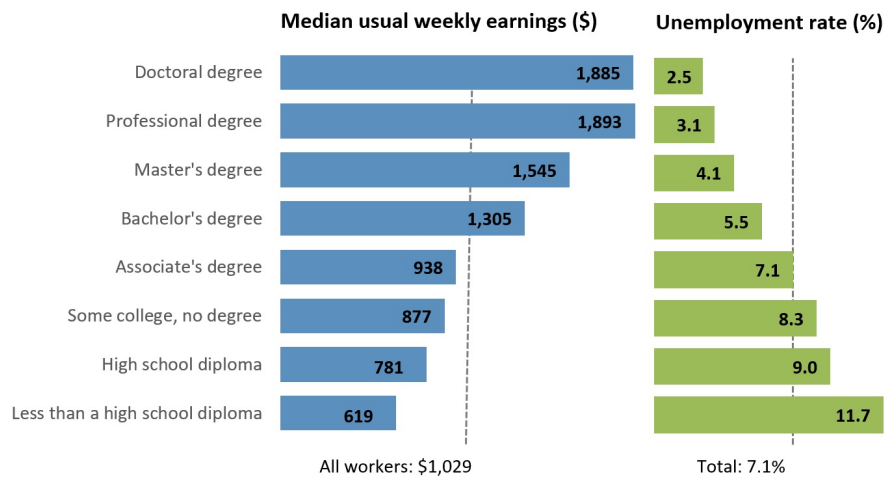
An atheist

Step four: answering the question

Based on the points clarified above and my own limited qualifications, I take the liberty of giving the following answer: Dear intellectuals, I am afraid the view that only a few superior beings dare to confront and overcome birth, old age, illness, and death is unreasonable. No matter who you are, you have the same mortal body in this world. Whether you dare or not, you

have to endure the same physical suffering. Consequently, it is preposterous to argue that I committed the crime because I was weak and could not bear the suffering. Even worldly laws do not accept this argument. A person who is so hungry that he has to rob others will still be punished more or less depending on the circumstances.

Earnings and unemployment rates by educational attainment, 2020



Note: Data are for persons age 25 and over. Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

In addition, according to 2020 data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, college graduates are more likely to find jobs and have higher salaries. Therefore, your life is certainly not that bad unless you commit serious crimes. With such a life, you absolutely have the right to choose between doing good things and doing bad things. If you commit a crime, it is an intentional crime. Even earthly law always condemns attempted murder more seriously than manslaughter.

However, there are still other ways to help sinners on the Eternal Sacred Path. If they sincerely admit their sins and make up for what they have done, they can still continue to rise to higher

positions, even surpassing the Supreme Being as promised by Himself.



Philosophy

For us Cao Đài followers, we need a thorough insight into the philosophy hidden in this story. Cao Đài predecessors often called it Bí Pháp²¹, in the sense that the content lies within the form. In particular, only Cao Đài teachings mentions the educated spirits' argument to deny their guilt after death.

²¹ Esotericism or Secret Dharma.

Additionally, it is unknown whether these debates are over or not. It is prominent that the debates only occur at Cung Hiệp Thiên Hành Hoá, the residence of Tam Trấn Oai Nghiêm, not other palaces on the Sacred Path of Eternal Life. The Hiệp Thiên Đài organization of Cao Đài is a symbolic model for this palace. Only when we return to Bạch Ngọc Kinh, the capital of the universe where the Supreme Being resides, will there be no more debate. There the spirits communicate by thought, not language. Why?

Dear readers, because in the Hiệp Thiên Hành Hoá palace, there is still a distinction between God and Man, so it is necessary to "unite". If you want to unite, you have to calculate accordingly, so you need a language. Language creates debate and debate never ends. This has been proven by several meetings campaigning to unify Cao Đài sects, which led to no desired results despite the Cao Đài predecessors' all sincerity. On the contrary, in Bạch Ngọc Kinh, God and Man are one (I am you, you are Me), so there are no more arguments. Therefore, there is no need for language, just thoughts. Buddhism calls it "non-verbal" realm.

In short, if you want to enter the Bạch Ngọc Kinh, stop arguing. This is extremely difficult because we humans are used to reasoning in everyday life and all decisions are based on reason. Second, when we say "no" to reason, we fall into our own confusing dualistic system. Since the word "no" lies on an invisible foundation that has existed for thousands of years, which is "yes".



Good God and Evil God - symbols of duality

Summary

Dear readers, I dare not have the illusion that my answer above will end the debate with atheist intellectuals. The world of logic is endless so debates, which is its own endemic nature, will continuously arise and disappear. Just like your thoughts always appear, dance and disappear. Ancient Chinese monks likened it to "the monkey mind". If there is an argument, there will be an opposite one and vice versa. Just try listening to yourself when you are criticized and you will find yourself quickly finding all sorts of reasons to defend yourself.

There will be people who may say, *“Then don't visit Cung Hiệp Thiên Hành Hoá, but go straight to Bạch Ngọc Kinh, can't we?”* Dear fellow believers, whether you can reach that place or not

depends on your thorough understanding of the shortcut the ancients left behind thousands of years ago. That is, "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form," "Non-action" and "Doctrine of the Mean".

Từ Chơn

Sài Gòn 15/1/2022

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WHAT BEHIND THE NUMBERS OF CAO ĐÀI



Từ Chơn

Beginning

Today there is no way to imagine a world without numbers. From housewives in a supermarket to scientists with super brains, everyone needs numbers of all kinds. From natural numbers, positive numbers, negative numbers, rational numbers, irrational numbers, prime numbers, real numbers, complex numbers, etc. All along with the calculations that humans have developed up to now have created the civilization of this planet. Even monks or believers need numbers to calculate their practice process, either counting to know how many times they have recited the sutra or calculating how many more levels they will have to achieve before having enough religious power to preach or bless others.

In Cao Đài alone, numbers also play a very important role. Most of the controversies among dignitaries and believers are mainly about numbers, such as how many sects there are, how many Giáo Tông²² there are, how much water offerings are poured, how many Sacerdotal Councils there are, etc. Perhaps it is necessary to hold a very objective public dialogue on this issue to somewhat cool down the conflicts which Cao Đài philosophy itself calls on humanity to avoid.

Origin

²² the highest leader of Cao Đài.

The commonly seen numbers are not a human invention, but naturally originate from need. Cavemen needed numbers to count whether enough family members returned after a day of gathering. Then the tribes needed numbers to exchange food and utensils. Just like that, the numbers have evolved until today, along with separate algorithms for each type. Numbers themselves in nature are not in conflict with anything or anyone, but they are the source when associated with a certain concept. For example, 1 + chicken and 1 + tomato will give rise to comparison. Depending on the circumstances, one chicken will be worth more or less than one tomato.



Destructive war in Ukraine

When spiritual life is more developed, more complex comparisons are made, for example, my religion has more Buddhas than yours or Vietnamese is better than other languages. Comparison creates disagreement, of course.

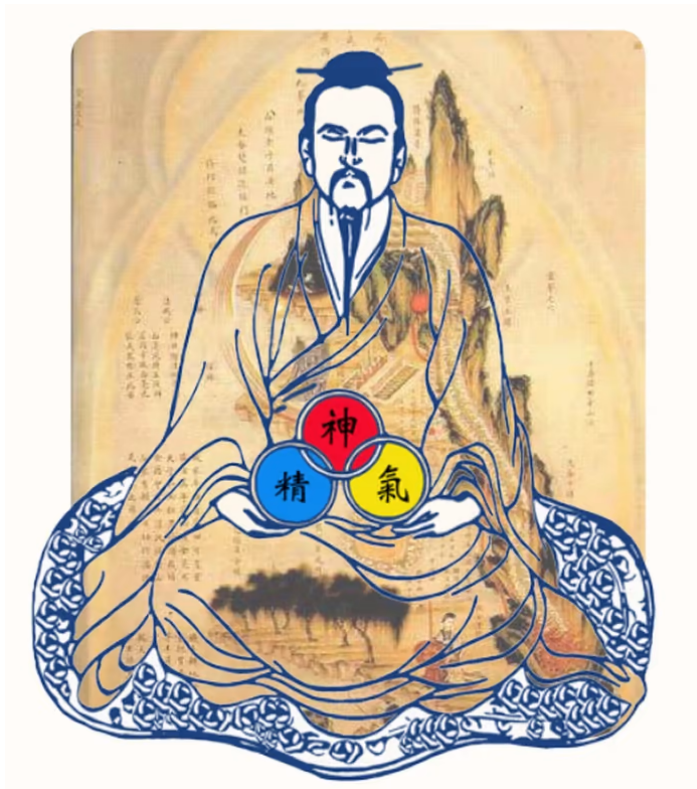
According to common experience, once conflicts have begun, they only increase in intensity, never decrease. As a result, two world wars occurred. Everyone knows it's a pity, but humanity's superior minds have yet to come up with a way to reduce the intensity of all conflicts. Therefore, they started World War III in Ukraine while waiting for humanity to learn mercy!!!

What about us Cao Đài followers? If you are healthy and lucky enough and have a better life outside a war zone, have food and shelter, and sincerely want to study Caodaism so that in your next incarnation you will not have to return to this Earth 68 at least and will be "enlightened right in this life" at most, then you have to close your eyes, ignoring all external circumstances and focusing on yourself. God has taught "*I am you, you are Me*" or "*God is man, man is God*". Consequently, only you yourself are important because you have to deeply understand the term "is" between "man" and "God". No guru or any religion can show you how to do. They only help a little and you yourself have to deal with your own pain, joy, and naive understanding.

To prepare ourselves to face our own thoughts, let's check together the luggage that the Cao Đài Divine Messages have given us. Cao Đài philosophy gathers many numbers, so let's first determine what the numbers mean before moving on. According to today's scholars, the numbers can have the following meanings:

- 1.** Meaning of measurement. This is the fundamental purpose of numbers which affects us every day. For example, chanting your prayers four times a day (4), offering your three treasures to God

(3), achieving one level every five years (5), etc. If there is someone who cannot count or counts differently than everyone else, I am afraid that person will not be able to live in a normal society. Of course, this does not include the case of deliberately counting differently because today's society quite admires eccentric creations. The stranger the name, the more absurd the speech, the more Sino-Vietnamese words you use, the more you are considered a "unique hero" and the more supporters you have. In Cao Đài, there are also similar cases: some people say that Esoteric Practice is "*Practice the Tinh to transform into the Khí, practice the Khí to transform into the Thần, practice the Thần to return to the Hư, practice the Hư to return to the Vô*". That means the number 3 (three treasures) was deliberately counted as number 4 (four treasures)!

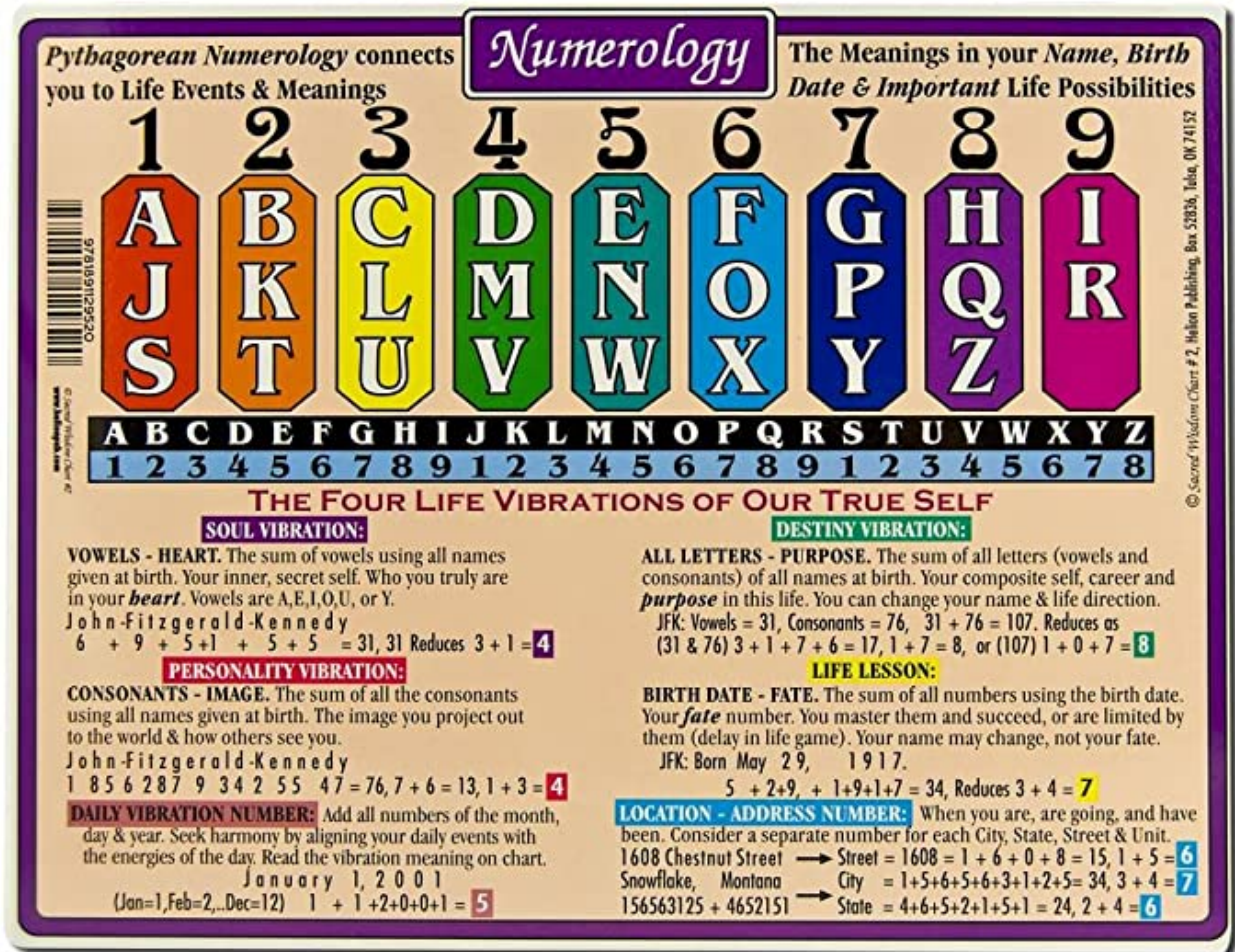


Three treasures

2. Cultural significance. Depending on ethnicity, numbers can have other meanings instead of counting. Culturally related meanings can have origins so long ago that no one knows where they were from and why they are used. They are just used out of habit without any questions. For example, in America, the number 13 is considered bad, so rooms are numbered 11, 12, 12 A, 14... In Vietnam, people avoid starting work on the 5th day of the lunar month because they believe it is an unfortunate day. Also, when Vietnamese people wish each other "*one hundred years of happiness*", one hundred years means a lifetime, not having to count 100 years. Similarly, Cao Đài scriptures often mention "*ten thousand spirits*". Although ten thousand = 10,000, in literature ten thousand represents a number so huge that it cannot be counted. Therefore, ten thousand spirits are “all spirits”, not “10,000 spirits”.

3. Spiritual meaning. Numbers can also be related to astrology, fortune telling, or even religious philosophy. Today, people call the science of studying those numbers Numerology. Please note that these numbers have religious significance, not create miracles! Of course, like religion, numerology is not fully recognized by the scientific community and is called pseudoscience. The great civilizations of humanity all have their own numerology systems. Typical ones are the Arabic, Chinese and Indian systems. These systems are all different, sometimes so contradictory that they cannot be used interchangeably. I would like to give an example of numerology in Cao Đài. We followers are taught that the number twelve is the personal number of the Supreme Being. So that's all we know. If you

wonder why it is not eleven or thirteen or try to prove whether it is right, there is no completely acceptable answer. To understand numerology, you need to have Prajna wisdom instead of ordinary human logic.



A European numerology chart

Maybe we do not have time to read all the number systems in the world in a short life. Therefore, in this article I take the liberty of only examine a few cases of using numerology of Cao Dài, which is based on Eastern philosophy, mainly from China and India, to expand personal understanding for possible attainment of enlightenment.

I think it is important for us to distinguish when to treat a number as a count, when to understand it as just a cultural metaphor and when to treat it as numerology. A thorough insight into the issue will reduce the time we waste on unnecessary disagreements among Cao Đài followers.

Some examples

Án tam tài tượng ngũ khí

An example of Cao Đài numerology where followers often get entangled in disputes is the statement of “*Án tam tài tượng ngũ khí*”. This verse explains how Cao Đài believers place incense sticks on the altar. Although the Sacerdotal Council has had detailed instructions, perhaps they are not convincing enough to eliminate disagreements among believers here and there.

First, let's examine the literal meaning of each word in the sentence. *Án* = follow. *Tam tài* = three most noble statuses in the universe (Heaven, Earth, Man), according to the concept of ancient Chinese. *Tượng* = act like. *Ngũ khí* = five types of vital energy of the universe, also according to the concept of ancient Chinese. As a result, “*án tam tài tượng ngũ khí*” means following the three most noble statuses in the universe and acting like five types of vital energy of the universe.

The practical part is simply placing five incense sticks in two rows. The first three sticks are horizontal to the altar and the second row is two alternating in front. Nonetheless, it is really

complicated to explain the significance. There is little controversy about the three statuses, but most disagreements focus on the five vital energies.



Chinese emperor Fuxi, wearing a traditional costume, holding the yin yang symbol, 19th century

Number three and five definitely belong to Chinese numerology, originating from the Chinese Yin-Yang theory, dating back to the time of Emperor Fu Xi, a mythical king born nearly 2,900 years

before Jesus. This theory affects many areas of Chinese life. The Vietnamese, who were colonized by China for more than a thousand years, had to learn Chinese writing, so they also learned similar thoughts. As a result, everything is deliberately divided into three or five categories to match the sacred number. Therefore, number three and five are heard everywhere despite their unknown reasons. We can briefly list, just number five, as follows.

- Ancient Chinese philosophy has the Five Elements of matter including Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, Earth.
- Buddhist philosophy has the Five Aggregates (form, feeling, perception, actions and consciousness), the Five Fragrances (precepts, concentration, wisdom, liberation and liberated knowledge) and the Five Precepts.
- Confucian philosophy has the Five Virtues (five good qualities of a gentleman: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faith).
- Classical Chinese medicine has the Five Human Organs (heart, liver, spleen, lungs and kidneys).
- Chinese physiognomy (looking at a person's shape and then guessing their life) has Five Đoản (five short parts), Five Trường (five long parts), etc.
- Macrobiotics include Five Spices (onions, Chinese chives, small leeks, garlic and chives), Five Grains (rice, millet, kumquat, pulse and soybeans).
- etc.

Since there are so many numbers five in various fields, Cao Đài followers attach what they glean from reading somewhere to the

arrangement of the five incense sticks on the altar. Then, they feel insecure with others' explanation even though the Cao Đài Divine Messages clearly writes the term "khí" or vital energy after number five. A person says that arrangement represents the Five Elements, another person the Five Fragrances and others the Five Aggregates. Some people claim that those five incense sticks are all of the above explanations to avoid controversy. Obviously, the conflict in this matter comes from those who are confused because of the complicated way of using numbers in the sense of numerology.



His Holiness Hộ Pháp

Therefore, it is not surprising that His Holiness Hộ Pháp affirmed the following to put an end to these arguments: *“As for the five incense sticks, I saw various explanations by*

Confucianists. OK, they can freely explain the meaning as they like, but I myself clearly understand that it is the Five Vital Energies. The Supreme Being uses the Five Vital Energies to transform into the Five Elements (Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth), which move the entire universe". (Hộ Pháp'Sermons, 1-8, Year of the Pig, 1947, Volume I).

For that reason, His Holiness Hộ Pháp affirmed that five incense sticks represent five types of energy, which will be transformed into five types of matter of the universe. This is the principle of structure and operation of the universe according to the ancient Chinese. It is not simple to understand this 5,000-year-old principle. For today's youth, such ideas are almost completely inferior to Western opinions and we may have to wait for the explanations of the Thần Thông Nhơn (Magical Race), who will appear after Judgement Day²³. The least we can do now is to basically know the issue to avoid internal controversy.

Number 3,000 and Giáo Thiện Võ Văn Đợi

The following story shows that using numbers to count will lead you into a dead end. Every believer knows the very interesting story of Giáo Thiện Võ Văn Đợi. He happened to have the opportunity to follow His Holiness Hộ Pháp to Bà Đen mountain while His Holiness was looking for a good site for the Vạn Pháp Cung Tĩnh Thất (Meditation House). Legend has it that His Holiness told him to wait outside the Gạo cave. After a while, he was so curious that he secretly followed. On the way, he encountered the Mountain God (a pair of white tigers) blocking

²³ His Holiness Hộ Pháp said the Magical Race would appear after Judgement Day.

his way. Too scared, he had to stop and wait until His Holiness came out. It is unclear whether he saw anything else or not, but after that he seriously requested to return the Giáo Thiện title to Phước Thiện²⁴. He wanted to stop doing meritorious deeds to switch to Esoteric Practice (i.e. training the three treasures). However, the Sacerdotal Council issued a response not allowing it.



After that, he spontaneously gathered a group of followers, built a small temple in Bà Đen mountain and organized Esoteric Practice according to his own opinion. I would like to remind you that His Holiness had previously planned to build the Vạn

²⁴ The Caodaist Charity.

Pháp Cung, but later the situation changed unfavorably, so the plan was not completed. Hence, the facility of Mr. Đợi was not officially built by the Sacerdotal Council. The temple as we see it now (year 2022), which is also named Vạn Pháp Cung, is not clear whose management it is under. In the past, His Holiness called Mr. Đợi and his friends the Group of Mountainous Monks and implied that they were on the wrong path.

According to the senior followers in Phạm Môn, Giáo Thiện Võ Văn Đợi still loved and respected His Holiness. He often had his friends bring home-grown fruits to His Holiness. Every time that happened, His Holiness sent back a message, "*Đợi, have you had enough three thousand merits yet?*". This number has caused a stir among believers and perhaps up to now there has been no official answer from the Sacerdotal Council that satisfies everyone.

There are a few anonymous dignitaries who claim that it is three thousand days of meritorious service. It is a little more than eight years, and they themselves automatically round it up to ten years. They are confident that after ten years' service at a Cao Đài Temple, they have completed the Nhơn Đạo (worldly path), then they can practice the Thiên Đạo (heavenly path), which means Esoteric Practice. In other words, they consider the number three thousand as a counting number, automatically adding the word "day" to make it easier to count. Of course, everyone has the right to think like that, but my personal opinion is as follows.

First of all, His Holiness Hô Pháp actually used the number three thousand in a numerological sense, meaning it is related to religious philosophy, not as a count. We can see this number appearing several times in Cao Đài Divine Messages, for example three thousand worlds and three thousand disciples. In reality, merit is a very complex activity that cannot be quantified by counting. Sometimes an hour of meritorious service is more valuable than working all day long. Just like reciting sutras, the Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng immediately understood the entire Heart Sutra though he overheard only one verse. Conversely, we ordinary believers would hardly understand a single verse of it although we chant all our lives!



Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng

His Holiness's question is similar to that in Chinese Zen Buddhism. The Zen master will assign the student a koan (topic to think about) depending on his ability. Each student finds their own answer and presents it to the teacher individually. Through this answer, the teacher will certify whether the student has "achieved enlightenment" or not. Let me recall a famous

example from Buddhism. During a sermon, Shakyamuni Buddha held up a flower without saying a word. All the disciples were stunned and confused except Mahākassapa, who smiled gently. Buddha Shakyamuni immediately certified (confirmed) that Mahākassapa had "achieved enlightenment". From this story, it is often said that Buddha imparted the "mind seal". Mind = thoughts. Seal = seal of proof. That is, teaching and confirming attainment of enlightenment with thoughts, not words. This is also the basic principle of Chinese Zen Buddhism.

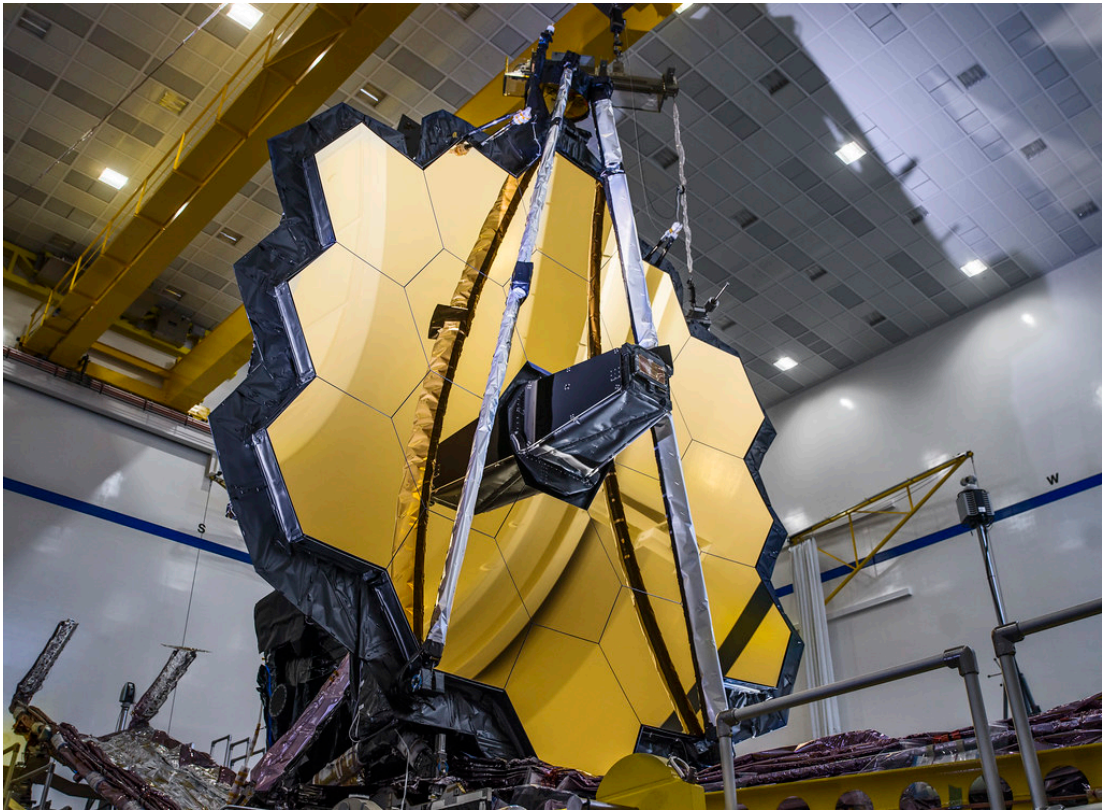
Second, His Holiness sent a private message to Giáo Thiện Võ Văn Đợi, not to all followers. As mentioned, the certification only happens between a teacher and a student. The others have nothing to do with it. In my humble opinion, the number three thousand here is the koan that His Holiness assigned to Giáo Thiện Võ Văn Đợi. Based on the reaction or answer, His Holiness would "certify" whether Giáo Thiện Võ Văn Đợi had attained enlightenment or not. However, only His Holiness and Mr Đợi himself knew the result. Other disciples like us do not understand anything. Just like the story of Shakyamuni Buddha and Mahākassapa.

In short, do not associate the number three thousand with many things and then argue with other believers because that is a koan reserved only for Giáo Thiện Võ Văn Đợi.

Number 3,072 on the Universe Sphere

In the seance on the night of June 17, 1926, the Supreme Being taught: "...I say: *Thirty-six Heavens and Four Great Lands are*

in the air. Seventy-two Earths and Three Thousand Worlds are all stars (planets). So the total number of stars is 3072, which should be all drawn on the sphere...” TNHT volume 1. In this divine passage there are many numbers such as 4, 36, 72, 3000 and 3072.



The James Webb telescope

It is said that at Temple X, a foreign guest told the administrator, “*According to NASA (US Aeronautics and Space Administration), the sun is only one of about 200 billion stars in the Milky Way. That's up to now. I don't know how many more stars there will be in the future when there are better devices. So is Cao Đài's number 3072 too small?*”

Let me add some details here. NASA has sent American astronauts to the moon and owns the world's two largest Hubble and James Webb telescopes in space. These two telescopes help scientists see far into the universe and thanks to computers, they can count the above number of 200 billion. On the contrary, Cao Đài followers only know the number of stars through divine messages. The foreign guest asked the question very politely, but clearly meant that the number 3072 was not true to reality. This is a very common question of non-Caodaists and even Caodaists. If there is not an intelligent answer, Cao Đài will be thought poorly of.

As discussed above, the questioner considered the number 3072 as a counting one while it is a numerological number in Cao Đài philosophy. All the numbers listed in the sacred passage above have metaphors from Cao Đài philosophy. They are not counted like in nature or according to Western science. This number should be “*watched through the Divine Eye*”, also called Prajna Eye or Prajna. Cao Đài teaches that there is only one Divine Eye (specifically the left one). Number one here is also numerological. You cannot close the right eye to see with the left eye, then asserting for yourself that you have attained enlightenment!

Number one is a metaphor for the state of going beyond dualistic logic (right and wrong, good and evil, good and bad, etc) which ancient religious practitioners also called the state of achieving the one or non-dual dharma. This state will be achieved through a process of religious practice that will take a

long or short time depending on the good or bad things you have done in previous lives and this life. As a result, in the case of the foreign guest mentioned above, the explanation should be his number is a counting number, and our number is a numerological number. In other words, scientists will count numbers physically, while Cao Đai practitioners will understand numbers spiritually.



Li Bai, the Spiritual Giáo Tông of Cao Đai

A paradox

The above examples are quite simple, but what is about to be said is even paradoxical. First, the divine message says, "*In the third salvation, opening the Cao Đai religion, God choose one Buddha, three Immortals, thirty-six Saints, seventy-two Sages and three thousand Disciples*". At first glance, these numbers are quite consistent with the number of Cao Đai dignitaries: 1 Giáo

Tông, 3 Chương Pháp, 3 Đầu Sư, 36 Phối Sư, 72 Giáo Sư, 3,000 Giáo Hữu. Immediately, there is a very optimistic inference that dignitaries from the Giáo Hữu and above are Immortals while lower levels such as Lễ Sanh, Chánh Trị Sự, Phó Trị Sự and Thông Sự are mortals!

However, according to common sense, that opinion is not good at all. Thus, are the three Immortals three Chương Pháp or three Đầu Sư? Why in this list is the word Thần (Genii) replaced by the word Hiền (Sages) while divine messages still say that the heavenly titles are Genie, Saint, Immortal, and Buddha? As for the title Đồ Đệ (Disciple), is it a new title in Heaven? Why are dignitaries below the rank of Giáo Hữu not included in this system?

Back in the description of the universe above, these numerological numbers have already appeared, such as Thirty-six Heavens, Seventy-two Earths and Three Thousand Worlds. The difference between the two systems is the four Great Lands (4) and the three Immortals (3). If Cao Đài scriptures are examined thoroughly, there will be more confusing paradoxical points. Another example is the following comparison table of Cao Đài.

Thiên Tiên - Giáo Tông
 Nhơn Tiên - Chương Pháp
 Địa Tiên - Đầu Sư
 Thiên Thánh - Phối Sư
 Nhơn Thánh - Giáo Sư
 Địa Thánh - Giáo Hữu

Thiên Thần - Lễ Sanh

Nhơn Thần - Chánh Trị Sự, Phó Trị Sự, Thông Sự

Địa Thần - Đạo Hữu



Lễ Sanh Cao Đài

If this table is compared with the divine message mentioned above, a new complicated matrix will come to light. In this table, Giáo Tông is only equivalent to Thiên Tiên, so there is no Buddha rank. Each title is divided into three levels: Heaven, Earth, and Human and these levels of title have never been seen in any religions in Vietnam before. Those of the Lễ Sanh and below are considered Genie and even ordinary believers attain the Earth Genie level. In this table there are no Hiền (Sages) and Đồ Đệ (Disciples). Thus, how many positions are there in Heaven and what positions can Cao Đài dignitaries achieve? Obviously, the comparative method does not provide the ultimate answer!

In short, all of the above questions cannot be answered by counting numbers or reasoning in the usual way because that will drag believers into confusion. According to the teachings of the Supreme Being, Cao Đài religion has already presented the "precious dharmas". What followers should do is to find them out and practice. Those precious dharmas are the numerological numbers or paradoxes in Cao Đài philosophy. They are all like the koan of Zen Buddhism, which are not for practitioners to argue, but to make breakthroughs by concentrating and thinking at a high level. Understanding the true meaning hidden in the numerological numbers is to achieve the state of Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi (Sanskrit) or A nậu đa la tam miệu tam bồ đề (Sino-Vietnamese), also known by countless names such as Prajnaparamita, Divine Eye, Wisdom Eye, Wisdom, Achieving the One, etc. Or more simply: attaining enlightenment.

Conclusion

This fellow believer frankly told me not to dig too deep because the Holy Spirit's words are never wrong. Just keep chanting prayers, worshipping 4 times daily and doing charity work. Every 5 years, request for a promotion. If there are no obstacles, at the end of life you will attain the title Đầu Su. According to the comparison table, you will be in the Earth Immortal category. This is easier and more secure. If you dig deep into the teachings, you may misunderstand the Canonical Codes due to your inferior mortal mind. That is a sin! This argument is very similar to what the Pure Land Sect of Buddhism says. This sect advocates that you only need to recite Amitabha Buddha's name

many times. Then after death, you will be reborn in the Pure Land, a more beautiful realm than this world.

On the contrary, I personally like to think like this. Being called a Địa Tiên (Earth Immortal) without understanding the philosophy will not benefit myself at all. My opinion is in contrast to that of the fellow believer. I do not call it "*digging deeply*" but "*sincerely studying the doctrine*". If there is still something incomprehensible, I look it up further or ask someone more knowledgeable. It is, in my opinion, never late to learn. If you thoroughly study the doctrine, you will spontaneously know how to practice it. It is like Zen Buddhism, which advocates using one's own thoughts (mind) to learn until you attain enlightenment.

In ancient China, it was usually said, “South Hui Neng, North Shenxiu” meaning that in the south Great Master Hui Neng taught meditation and in the north Great Master Shenxiu taught Pure Land Dharma. Since Great Master Hui Neng was given the Buddha’s robe and bowl to become the 6th Zen Patriarch, it is often said that meditation is the true Dharma of Buddhism. I think the issue is not who is right or wrong, but which is the practitioner’s popular method and whether he is patient enough to practice it successfully. Any method will lead to the goal of attaining enlightenment, when all questions, including the numbers in Cao Đài philosophy, will be answered by yourself once and for all.

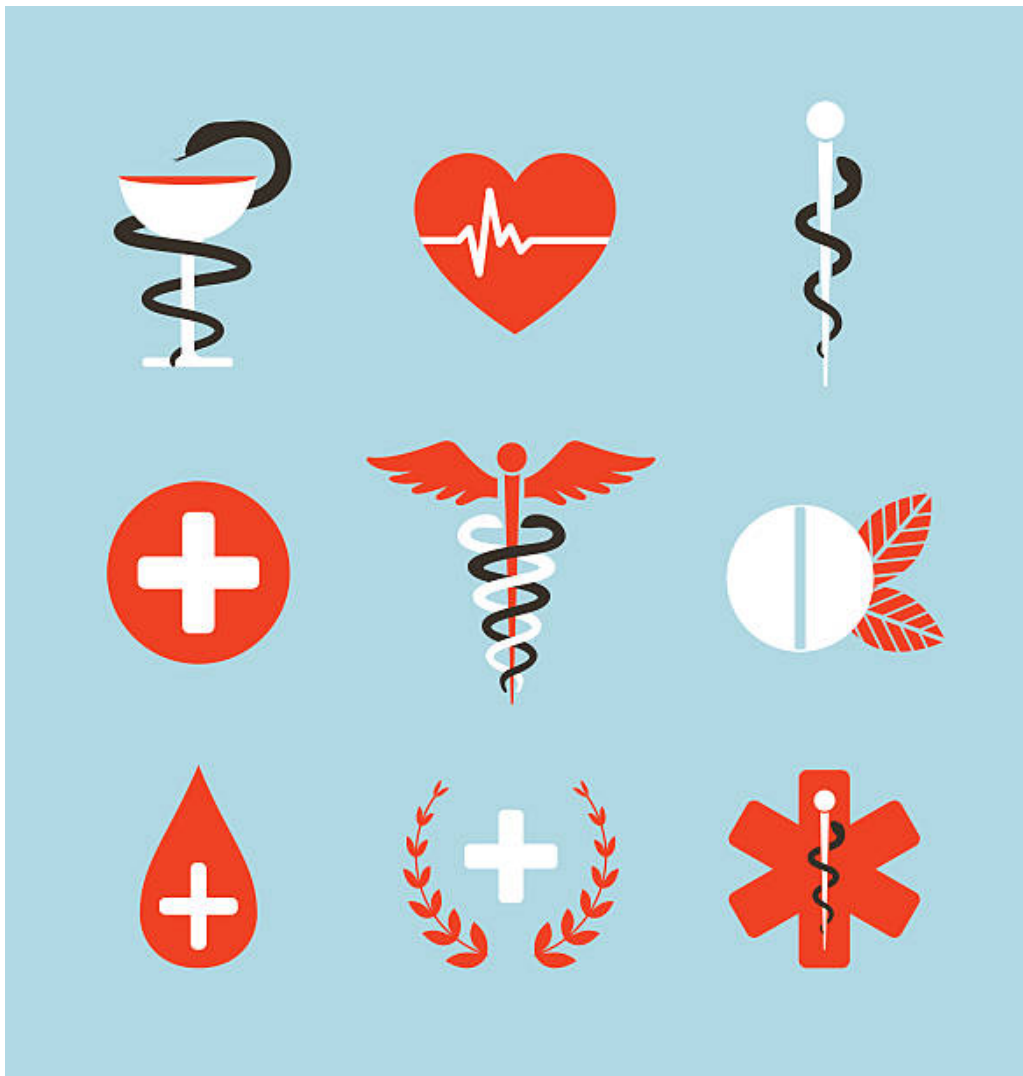
Từ Chơn

Sài Gòn 17/3/2022

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WHERE
ESOTERIC PRACTICE
AND
MEDICINE COINCIDE



TỪ CHƠN

Start

Some fellow believers choose the third path

Currently, there are quite a few Cao Đài followers who choose the third path, which is tu chơn (true cultivation), also known as practicing the three treasures or Esoteric Practice. They choose to do so for some possibly personal reason, but they have a clear path anyway. Unfortunately, the Cao Đài Esoteric Practice is still a controversial issue among believers owing to a lack of Cao Đài scriptures for the practice part or the incomprehensible Sino-Vietnamese instructions.

According to my humble estimates, perhaps in a few generations there will be enough Thập Nhị Bảo Quân (Twelve Cao Đài Academicians). Then, the Academicians will review all established scriptures on Esoteric Practice based on modern science then advise the Sacerdotal Council on a feasible program so that lots of believers can participate. Thus, the goal of Caodaist community to save all humanity (showing the precious practice to save all souls) will be achieved. Currently, anyone who has chosen this method of practice should strenuously do a study on Caodaist Esoteric Practice. Even if you cannot successfully perform it, your experience may pave the way for future generations! That is also considered another way of meritorious service.

In the immediate future, among meritorious work, charity work and preaching, do whatever you like because in the initial stage

of Esoteric Practice you still need enough merit. Even if it is not convenient to do anything, performing vegetarianism or worshipping at home is still fine enough.



This Caodaist sister told me, *“I am married and live in my husband's family, who practice a different religion. Without the Caodaist Altar, how can I chant the prayers?”* My sister, you are unfortunately in trouble! It's okay, maybe the story of His Holiness Hộ Pháp and some dignitaries being exiled to Madagascar by the French can give you more courage. In prison, there certainly was no altar, but they still maintained a filial piety towards the Supreme Being and the Buddha Mother. Sĩ Tải Đỗ Quang Hiến even attained Saint status. Consequently, in your situation, you can still recite the prayers in your mind without decreasing the power of belief.

Rare and unintelligible documentation

As mentioned, the scriptures on Esoteric Practice are still definitely scarce, especially in the practice and verification part. According to Cao Đài Canonical Codes, Hiệp Thiên Đài is mainly responsible for organizing the implementation, but history has shown that it was impossible. His Holiness Thượng Phẩm, who was mainly responsible for the Tịnh Thất (Meditation Houses), passed away untimely. As for His Holiness Hộ Pháp, he once said that he had to take care of other people's work, which meant he was busy with the work of the Cửu Trùng Đài²⁵. Therefore, the implementation of the Esoteric Practice is still unfinished and the following generations have a task to complete. That is also where the children of the Supreme Being can gain enough merits for themselves.

So first, please take a quick look at the currently available documents:

1. Some information about Esoteric Practice, which is scattered in the Collection of Divine Messages, volumes 1&2 - Censored by the Sacerdotal Council and published before 1975.
2. *Esoteric Practice* - His Holiness Hộ Pháp's Sermons - Collected by the Holy See Stenography Team - censored and published by the Sacerdotal Council before 1975.
3. *How To Train Yourself* - Đức Hộ Pháp - released in 1947.
4. *12 Physical Exercises* - Đức Hộ Pháp - released in 1947.

²⁵ The Executive Body of Caodaism.

5. *The Law of Three Treasures* - His Holiness Thượng Phẩm - 1950 - Collection of Divine Messages of His Holiness Thượng Phẩm. Not yet censored or published.

6. *Esoteric Practice* - Bát Nương Diêu Trì Cung - Automatic writing done by Hiền Tài Nguyễn Văn Mới (Từ Huệ) - 1979 - Given to The Management Council - Hội Đồng Chưởng Quản - Not yet censored or published.



A ceremony in Tây Ninh Holy Temple

The above are documents originating from the Tây Ninh Holy See. As for documents from other sects, I am not qualified enough to mention and discuss. Particularly, in *Esoteric Practice* by Bát Nương Diêu Trì Cung, the regulations of Meditation Houses, the practice program, and other important rituals are mentioned.

All can be downloaded from here:

<https://www.daotam.info>

Prophecy or coincidence

Divine Messages

I believe that the current events in the world today also make some Cao Đài believers more interested in tu chon (Esoteric Practice or Meditation). First, the Covid epidemic has killed six million people around the world and it is still unknown when it will stop. When the epidemic is at its peak, it is extremely dangerous to gather at a Thánh Thất (Holy Temple) to perform rituals because of the increasing risk of infections and governmental bans. At that time, cultivating at home is the most suitable.

Believers with foresight are starting to get used to cultivating at home because on February 19, 2022, Bill Gates said that the world may encounter another epidemic related to the Coronavirus although the Covid-19 epidemic has subsided. If so, it will be very difficult to gather at the Holy Temple for rituals.

Additionally, the war in Ukraine has caused so much suffering with absolutely no signs of cooling down. Terribly, no one knows if it will spread to the whole world. Not to mention the fiery conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Taiwan that can easily explode at any time. At times when human life is just like a speck of dust in a tornado, the urgency of religious

practice becomes what humanity turn into. Perhaps until now, what were quoted from the Divine Messages can be fully understandable: “...*Pity for humanity! What suffering they have to endure! Since they are too cruel, they deserve what is coming to them. Out of love for human beings, I have participated a ten-day meeting in the Bạch Ngọc Kinh²⁶ to defend them, but it is not easy to change the laws of Heaven. The annihilation is about to come. After self-massacre, they will be killed by various epidemics....*”. His Holiness Li Giáo Tông - TNHT January 14/ Year of the Cat. Thus, the Long Hoa Hội²⁷ can be summed up by the sentence “...*The annihilation is about to come. After self-massacre, they will be killed by various epidemics*”.

The word Khí behind Hộ Pháp

Besides the divine messages, there is another factor that leads us closer to the prophecy about the Dragon Flower Judgment Day. That is the word "Khí" behind the statue of Hộ Pháp in the Holy See and the Holy Temples. All Cao Đài followers are taught to turn around and bow to the statue of Hộ Pháp after the ceremony in front of the altar. Nonetheless, most of them focus on the statue rather than the word "Khí" behind.

Due to lots of followers' questions, His Holiness Hộ Pháp issued a document dated April 1, 1953 explaining that the movement was not for him or those in the Hiệp Thiên Đài, but for the word “Khí”. Therefore, now it is the time for us to learn about this

²⁶ the White Jade Capital, the capital of the universe.

²⁷ Dragon Flower Judgement Day.

more than ever because the statues of Hộ Pháp, Thượng Sanh and Thượng Phẩm implies the Cao Đài Esoteric Practice.



The word Khí after the statue of Hộ Pháp

To begin with, the drawing is not the word Khí written in Chinese characters. Some people explain it is a form of talisman writing while others say it is a cursive Chinese character, that is, a shortened form of writing for quickness. Like most Cao Đài followers, I have not studied Chinese or Sino-Vietnamese, so I can only search through the dictionaries. The way to do it is as follows: if you know the Vietnamese pronunciation of the Chinese word "qi" as “khí”, you can look up the Sino-Vietnamese dictionary for the meaning.

According to the Sino-Vietnamese Dictionary, there are fourteen Chinese characters that the Vietnamese pronounce as "khí" despite different writing and meanings. Note that all of them are not the same as the drawing behind the Hộ Pháp's statue. Therefore, we have to check to see which words our predecessors used. Especially in Chinese, each word has several different meanings. In Cao Đài philosophy, the word Khí is used in lots of very different contexts, for example chơn khí, điển khí, khí tiên thiên, khí hậu thiên, khí sanh quang, khí hạo nhiên, hồn ngươn (nguyên) khí, khí nguyên tử, âm khí, dương khí, ngươn (nguyên) khí, thoại khí, etc. And the explanations about these types of khí contain a lot of unintelligible Sino-Vietnamese. This is also a cultural obstacle for today's youth, who use Vietnamese differently from a century ago, so it was extremely difficult for themselves to learn.

However, the word khí may be a little comprehensible thanks to this passage in His Holiness Hộ Pháp's document dated April 1, 1953: "... *Saluting the word Khí means greeting the entire Tam-Quy Thường Bộ Pháp Giới, i.e. greeting our lives, not just to Hộ Pháp and the Thập-Nhị Thời-Quân*²⁸". In this passage there is the phrase "*greeting our lives*" which is easy to understand for our current generation. In conclusion, "khí" is something that is closely related to "human life", and we humans will die without it.

²⁸ Twelve Zodiac Lord.

Therefore, from the fourteen “Khí” in the dictionary mentioned above, this word 氣 sounds reasonable because it has several meanings related to life. As mentioned, it is not the same as the drawing behind the Hộ Pháp statue. It has twelve meanings, the most common of which are: gas, breath, air, spirit, smell, energy, destiny, anger.... So the two meanings that most related to human life are “breath” and “air”. From there, we temporarily conclude that the gesture of bowing down to the word “khí” behind His Holiness Hộ Pháp remind humans to respect "breath" and "air". Why are we followers taught that?

Chemical weapons

Needless to say, everyone knows a person’s life can last for a few days without food, but it definitely ends after five minutes without "breath" or "air". Scarily, our civilization is now creating air pollution, a danger to life. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), both outdoor and indoor air pollution causes about seven million deaths annually globally. Air pollution is increasingly showing signs of seriousness when there are companies bottling refined air for sale.



Canadian company Vitality Air sells canned air in China

It seemed like a joke, but the company quickly sold more than 200,000 bottles (according to The Guardian newspaper on January 21, 2018). Now there are forecasts that in the future canned air will be the best-selling product. In reality, in the household appliance section of any supermarkets, all kinds of air purifiers are lined up there! It is even boldly predicted that sooner or later countries will fight each other to gain... air!

Even worse, belligerent people have created chemical weapons to attack the respiratory system to kill a lot of people at once. These weapons have been and are being used. Even in the current Russia-Ukraine war, it seems like they are about to use it again.

All of these dangers have been encapsulated by Cao Đài in the word "khí" to warn humanity. I wonder if today humanity has paid any attention?

Covid-19

In addition, there is another scary disaster that makes "Khí" become an even more top issue. That is the current Covid-19 pandemic. A virus that has never caused an epidemic has emerged from Wuhan, China, causing the largest epidemic ever. Corona virus specifically attacks the human respiratory system. People who are seriously infected have to use ventilators to save their lives. As of 2022, the epidemic has claimed six million lives worldwide. Humanity witnessed scenes similar to medieval epidemics. Corpses had to be buried collectively or left on the

street because no one dared to come near for fear of infection. As for crematoriums, they strained to deal with the corpses in several countries. Not only that, the world economy has been severely damaged and will be difficult to recover in a short time.

So far, the medical systems of the countries that once prided themselves on being modern on the planet have not been able to stop the pandemic. One worrying thing is that the virus can change into other strains very quickly and no one knows what bad things the new strains can cause. Isn't the word "Khí" also somewhat of a prophecy for this pandemic?



People are enjoying canned air

Intersection

Practice the tinh to transform into the khí

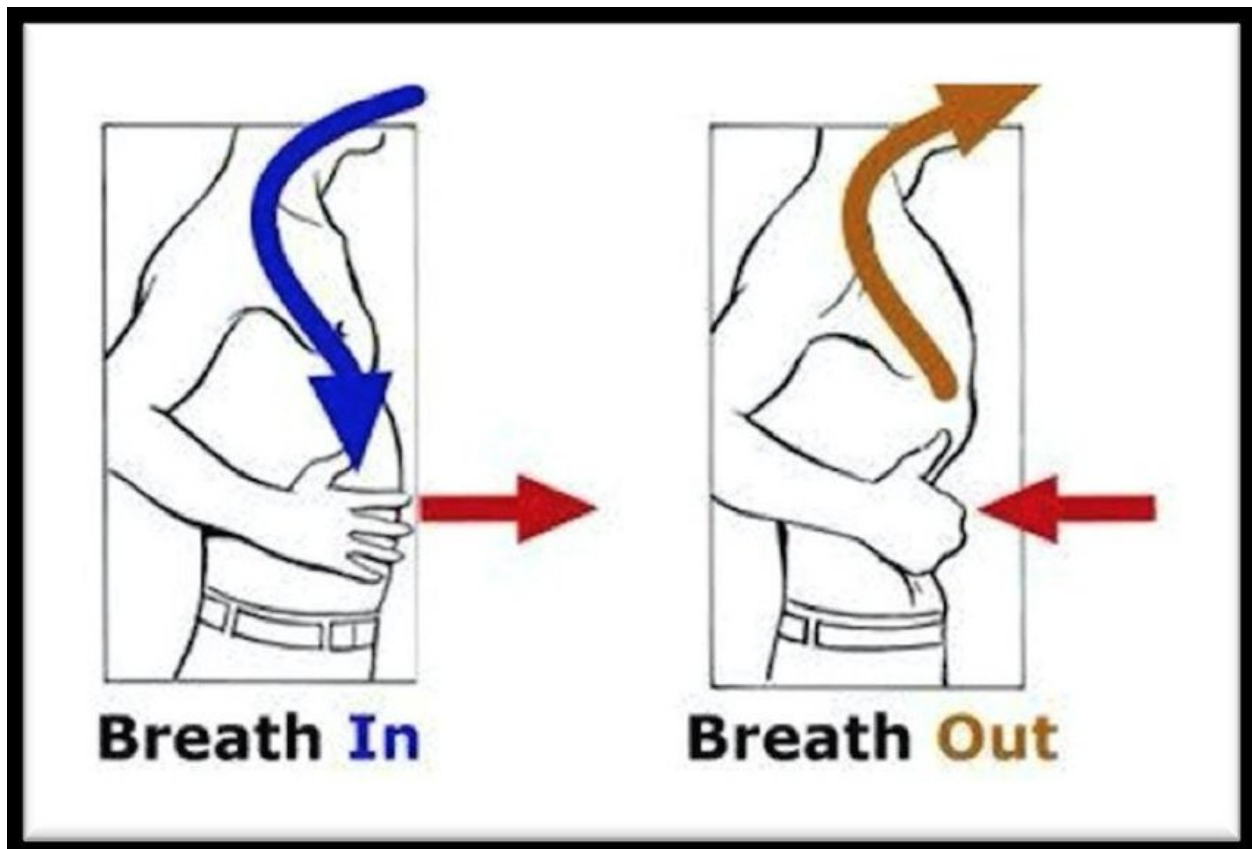
Whether Cao Đài followers choose the first path (doing meritorious deeds), the second path (doing charity work) or the third path (esoteric practice), they all know the saying: *"Practice the Tinh to transform into the Khí, practice the Khí to transform into the Thần, practice the Thần to return to the Hư"*. Nevertheless, the practice described in Cao Đài scriptures is quite mysterious and difficult to understand.

Fortunately, thanks to *Bí Pháp Luyện Đạo* by Bát Nương Diêu Trì Cung (automatic writing done by Hiền Tài Nguyễn Văn Mới - Từ Huệ), it is learnt that breath is related to the word "khí". Fellow practitioners, please read the following excerpt: *"During a hundred days of practice, you have to do fifteen-minute abdominal breathing regularly. Breathe in through your nose and the breath reaches the lungs, but the chest does not bulge. Just think that breath goes down to the đờn điền²⁹, then the abdomen bulges. When you exhale, the breath comes out of your lungs. This time don't think your breath comes out of the đờn điền, but the stomach falls flat. Breathing like this is called abdominal breathing or qigong."*

In the Tam Bửu practice of Bát Nương Diêu Trì Cung, abdominal breathing plays an extremely important role,

²⁹ an imaginary spot about 3cm below the navel. This is considered the center of energy of a person.

accounting for 50% of the practice time. And this is also the easiest-to-understand and easiest-to-follow guide among existing Cao Đài scriptures. Bát Nương Diêu Trì Cung says that this breathing method has existed in China since ancient times. It is now re-applied in the Cao Đài Esoteric Practice. In the next part, readers will see how modern medicine meets the Cao Đài Esoteric Practice.



Abdominal breathing - Harvard Medical School, 2018

Abdominal breathing

Esoteric Practice was written by Hiền Tài Nguyễn Văn Mới - Từ Huệ in 1979 by means of automatic writing. At that time there was almost no communication from Vietnam to abroad.

Therefore, it cannot be concluded that Hiền Tài Nguyễn Văn Mới copied the idea from any foreign magazines. Furthermore, Zen at that time was not as developed in the West as it is now. Luckily, the situation is now much more civilized. In addition, humanity has the Internet, which is a great tool for communication and learning. From there we have the opportunity to learn the good things of the civilized world. For example, please read this excerpt from the website of Harvard Medical University (Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA) posted on March 10, 2016, which means 37 years after the book *Esoteric Practice*.

It is beneficial for everyone to know how to breathe using the diaphragm. This way of breathing is also called abdominal breathing or belly breathing. This is a way to help inhaled O₂ replace the CO₂ that needs to be eliminated completely. In addition, abdominal breathing reduces heart rate so it can regulate blood pressure. Another benefit is that abdominal breathing helps patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

Here's how to do:

- Lie on your back on a flat surface or bed with your knees bent. You can lie on a pillow or prop your feet up if that's more comfortable.
- Place one hand on your chest, the other on your stomach.
- Inhale slowly through your nose, directing the air deep into your abdomen. Try to make the hand placed on the chest not move, but the hand under the abdomen is raised.

- Squeeze your stomach in as you exhale through your mouth. The hand on the abdomen must lower to the starting position.

Obviously, the instructions for deep breathing from Harvard Medical School are 99.99% similar to those of Bát Nương Diêu Trì Cung. In particular, both also use the word "belly breathing".

Covid-19

Abdominal breathing also plays an important part in the recovery of Covid-19 patients. Please read an excerpt from the prestigious Johns Hopkins University of Medicine (Baltimore, Maryland, USA).

Coronavirus attacks the lungs and respiratory system, sometimes causing severe damage. Covid-19 often causes pneumonia and even acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), causing severe lung damage. It is possible to recover lung function, but requires proper treatment and breathing exercises for many months after recovery.



Physiotherapist Peiting Lien

Johns Hopkins University of Medicine physical therapist Peiting Lien says recovery can be done with breathing exercises. Deep breathing helps restore diaphragm function and increase lung capacity. The goal to achieve is to breathe deeply during all activities, not just when resting.

This breathing method also reduces the patient's anxiety and stress when experiencing serious symptoms that require hospitalization. In addition, deep breathing also helps them sleep better.

Deep breathing is good for everyone, especially playing a very important role in the recovery process for Covid-19 patients. You can practice at home during quarantine and easily practice regularly every day afterward.

Ms. Peiting Lien calls it deep breathing, but she uses the words diaphragmatic breathing or belly breathing while teaching breathing exercises. The only slight difference from Harvard Medical School's instructions is that both inhalation and exhalation are through the nose.

Conclusion

Correct application

As mentioned above, two prestigious American Medical Universities, Harvard and Johns Hopkins, both recognize abdominal breathing as the correct treatment method for the above mentioned cases. Remember being recognized by these two institutions means abdominal breathing has undergone rigorous controlled experiments. Western scientists do not easily believe a Chinese treatment that is thousands of years old!

This is also something that Cao Đài followers need to learn. Cao Đài's Esoteric Practice also requires practice, close examination and accurate evaluation by medical and theological experts before public application. Some people say the Esoteric Practice is literally translated as "secret dharma or secret method", so it cannot be revealed! No, it is not that simple! It should be based on non-dualism, which is hardly mastered today, to understand the word "secret dharma". The word "secret dharma" must always run parallel to the word "public dharma" to create a shared meaning according to the Yin and Yang principle. They cannot be separated with independent meanings. Think about it, if the practice must be kept secret, then the principle of universal salvation (helping everyone understand God's teachings) of the Cao Đài religion no longer has any practical meaning.

Please allow me to note, dear fellow believers, that abdominal breathing and the meaning of the word "khí" are only a small part of Cao Đài's Esoteric Practice. Anyway, Western medicine gives us more confidence in the implementation of Cao Đài Esoteric Practice. Actually, lots of believers are afraid of having mental illness if they practice the wrong way. Especially, some local reputable "master" says Cao Đài prohibits Esoteric Practice, western music and electric incense sticks! In fact, there is no divine messages that prohibit such things!!! It's very sad to have funnily conservative views in the new millennium!

In the world history, "conservatism" has obviously made the East quite far behind the West. For example, the theory of Yin Yang (Yin Yang) has been known to Eastern people for more

than five thousand years, but it has been only applied to fortune-telling, setting house directions, determining departure dates, exorcising demons, determining marriage age, etc. On the contrary, the West calls it dualism and applies it to electrical circuits (the principle of Yin and Yang) to give birth to the glorious computing age today.

Now, Cao Đài followers are taught "I am you, you are myself" (God is man, man is God). Therefore, the fact that "Yin is different from Yang" in the old time now becomes "Yin is Yang". Unfortunately, that principle is only chanted in daily Cao Đài ceremonies. On the contrary, Westerners have learned to apply it to quantum computing through the concept of superpositions, so they are about to enter a new era. Once again the East hobbles behind the West. That is why effective vaccines and drugs are all made by Western scientists in the Covid-19 epidemic. Apparently, the idea that Vietnamese people will one day "rule" the world seems to be an absolute impossible dream.

Từ Chơn

Sài Gòn 2 April 2022

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GIÁO TÔNG

Li Bai

The image of logic



TỪ CHƠN

Beginning

The sacred scriptures of Cao Đài say that the Great Immortal Lý Thái Bạch, the Quán Thế Âm³⁰ and the Quan Thánh Đế Quân³¹ hold very special positions in Heaven, which are Tam Trấn Oai Nghiê³², presiding over the Toà Tam Giáo³³ at Cung Hiệp Thiên Hành Hoá. Before discussing the main point, please allow me to explain more about the titles just mentioned.

- Hiệp Thiên = coordination with Heaven. Hành Hoá = teaching. It is a department in Heaven with the same function as Hiệp Thiên Đài of the Cao Đài religion, that is, exercising the judgment of the court.
- Trấn = keep peace, suppress rebellion. Oai Nghiê = strict authority. These divine beings represent the three religions (Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism) and have the responsibility of suppressing those who disrupt the order of the universe.
- Toà Tam Giáo = The Court established at Cung Hiệp Thiên Hành Hoá on behalf of the Three Religions (Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism). After a person dies, the body will remain in the world, decomposing itself to transform into other matter while the soul (including the peri-spirit and soul)

30 Guan Yin or Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.

31 Guan Yu or Holy Emperor Lord Guan.

32 the Three Venerable Governors.

33 Three Religion Court.

will go to the Court of the Three Religions to wait for a verdict on whether he/she has committed a crime. Of course, criminals will be punished, and good persons will be rewarded.



The statue of **Đầu Sư Thượng Trung Nhựt**

To know more about the power of the Three Religion Court, please read what God taught **Đầu Sư Thượng Trung Nhựt** and **Đầu Sư Ngọc Lịch Nguyệt** as follows: *"Trung and Lịch, you two must conduct a solemn funeral for Trương. I am afraid that there is no way to instantly take Trương into the Thirty-Six Heavens. I have to leave him in the Đông Đại Bộ Châu³⁴ to wait for the verdict of the Three Religion Court"* December 11, 1926 - *Caodaist History II* - Trần Văn Rạng.

³⁴ the Eastern Great Land.

Let me explain this a little more. Cao Đài scriptures say that our universe goes from low to high as follows: 72 earths (our earth number is 68), to the Four Great Continents, to the Three Thousand Worlds and the highest level is Thirty Six Heavens. After death, our souls will be promoted more or less depending on the merit we have created in the world. If you have no merit or commit a crime, your rank will be reduced.

Looking back at ourselves, we are on Earth 68, near the bottom of the list, which means we have not had much merit in our previous lives. Additionally, in the sermon at the Holy Temple on the night of January 16, 1949, His Holiness Hộ Pháp said that no one has ever known the entire universe of the Supreme Being, that is, no one has reached the last level of the 36 heavens.

The holy message quoted above makes it easy for us to see that God still has to wait for the Three Religion Court's verdict first without favoring Thượng Chương Pháp Nguyễn Văn Trương by taking Trương from Earth 68 straight to the 36 heavens despite his great merit of opening Cao Đài. That is enough to know how important the Three Religion Court is! The activities of this agency are described quite fully in the thirty five sermons on the Sacred Path of Eternal Life by His Holiness Hộ Pháp Phạm Công Tắc (recorded by the Holy See Stenography Team, released by the Sacerdotal Council).

In this article, I only discuss the First Venerable Governor Lý Thái Bạch with the concurrent position of Giáo Tông Tam Kỳ

Phổ Độ³⁵. Through the above explanation, it can be seen that the position of Giáo Tông of the Cao Đài religion is extremely important during the Third Amnesty, to the point that the Supreme Being had to appoint the First Venerable Governor to hold it concurrently. I would like to emphasize that this is the Divine Being, who has the right to suppress all crimes in this universe, not just within the scope of Cao Đài with a few million followers in the small country of Vietnam. If we understand this and can imagine how big the universe is, then ordinary people with little talent like us would probably not dare to dream of holding the position of Cao Đài Giáo Tông.



The largest statue of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva in Vietnam

³⁵ the top leader of Caodaism.

Origin

Lý Bạch 李白, also known as Thái Bạch 太白 (701-762), was a great poet. The Tang Dynasty in China is considered the heyday of poetry thanks to the two greatest poets in Chinese literary history: poets Lý Bạch (Li Bai) and Đỗ Phủ (Tu Fu). Lý Bạch is not only a great poet of China, but his name extends beyond the borders to a lot of other countries. A proof is that nowadays, if Li Bai or Li Po is typed into the search box on Google, up to 377 million results or more will be seen. Therefore, in this article, I would like to discuss only his work as the Giáo Tông³⁶ of Cao Đài, skipping over his biography because there are full details already on the Internet.

According to Cao Đài divine messages, he was the First Venerable Governor and appointed concurrently to the Cao Đài Giáo Tông on October 29, 1926, after Mr. Ngô Văn Chiêu refused to accept this position. As a result, the first Giáo Tông of the Cao Đài religion was a Divine Being, managing the religion through divine messages, not a person on earth. On November 22, 1930, through a divine message, His Holiness Lý Giáo Tông issued the second Decree, bestowing the authority of the Giáo Tông on Earth 68 to Đầu Sư Thượng Trung Nhật. Therefore, Mr. Lê Văn Trung is only the Acting Giáo Tông, temporarily dealing with the religious matter. Therefore, unlike what other Cao Đài Sects say, there are only two official Cao Đài Giáo Tông.

³⁶ the top Leader of Caodaism.

After the Acting Giáo Tông Lê Văn Trung passed away, the situation was extremely chaotic. Previously, a number of dignitaries (anonymously mentioned) had split off to form sects. Then they wanted to return to overthrow the Sacerdotal Council, take over the Giáo Tông position and occupy the Holy See.



Therefore, on November 8, 1935, the Sacerdotal Council and all believers gathered and unanimously requested His Holiness Hộ Pháp Phạm Công Tắc to take charge of the entire religion to deal with this. After that, His Holiness Lý Giáo Tông also announced that he handed over the management of Cửu Trùng Đài to His Holiness Hộ Pháp. However, in reality His Holiness Lý Giáo Tông still led the entire religion because His Holiness Hộ Pháp always consulted His Holiness Lý Giáo Tông via séances before making an important decision.

His Holiness Lý Giáo Tông managed the religion through seances from the beginning until 1975. His last divine message

was on December 17, 1975 at the Tây Ninh Holy See, according to documents by Hiền Tài Nguyễn Văn Hồng - Đức Nguyên. At that time, he still claimed the name “Lý Bạch, The First Venerable Governor cum Giáo Tông Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ”. Then, there was a governmental ban on Ouija boards. Since then, there has been no more information about His Holiness's divine messages. However, considering the religious situation, it is clear that until 2022, His Holiness is still the current Giáo Tông, so all believers must still follow the two Tịch Đạo (Cao daist line) as Thanh (male) and Hương (female). In addition, when souls go to the Three Religion Court in Heaven, His Holiness is still in charge of The First Venerable Governor.



Statue of Guan Yu in China

Caodaist Law

His Holiness's merits in Cao Đài are very great, spanning many fields.

Admitting new believers

Right from the beginning, when seven pairs of mediums were assigned by the Supreme Being to hold seances to admit new followers in the southern provinces, His Holiness Lý Giáo Tông regularly gave divine messages. Usually, His Holiness gave applicants a quatrain with very profound meanings. At the end of the poem there will be the word "admitted" if accepted and "failed" if rejected. Note that the number of people receiving the word "failed" is also quite large. Especially, those who were impolite, such as drinkers or troublemakers, were scolded and even kicked out of the seance. For example, the following two poems dated January 17, 1927:

You are too selfish to have any affection for anyone.
 You always look down on everyone.
 You don't respect anyone, even God.
 You always blame destiny and times.
 (Failed)

Only when you are close to kind people do you learn to be
 gentle,
 You have to be close to the Immortal to know what Immortal is.
 Laugh...
 ...Often Immortals are said to live in the mountains.
 Surprisingly, you are right in front of the Immortals' door.
 (Admitted)

I remember that before 1975, an author, whose book and pen name I forgot, went to the homes of the people receiving the word "failed" to see if there would be any consequences later.

According to this author, shortly after that most of them had accidents, got sick or fell into poverty.



Two mediums are holding the sacred pen

Instructing Caodaist activities

In *Collection of Divine Messages*, His Holiness's detailed instructions on from where to buy land to the dimensions to follow in building the Holy See are recorded. He Himself even drew the design of the Holy See through the sacred pen. Every believer knows His famous saying: "*I myself have to draw it*". In short, His Holiness actually ran the entire activities of Cao Đài.

The facilities and ways of operating that we see today are all the result of His instructions. In my opinion, a human mind cannot design such a complex institution on its own.

Drafting important laws

Most prominently during his reign as Giáo Tông, He drafted important laws of Cao Đài, whose impact would last for seven hundred thousand years (700,000 years). Typically, The Eight Cao Đài Decrees (November 22, 1930) are very important because they are irrefutable evidence of a very chaotic period. Especially the 8th Decree strongly affirms that the Cao Đài sects are "bàng môn tả đạo³⁷". Bàng & Tả = wrong; Môn & đạo = faction, sect or group! It was this decree that caused the sects to lose their legitimacy, so they had to retreat to the southern provinces, not daring to claim the Holy Temple anymore. Up to now, whether accepted or opposed, this decree cannot be reversed. Even more heartbreaking, after nearly 100 years of development, the current status of Cao Đài both at home and abroad is still the same. Looking further, humanity is now also a projection of this phenomenon. Pessimistically, people cannot help thinking there may be no way for humans to live peacefully with each other. Obviously, it is instinctive for people to struggle for the highest position such as Patriarch (priests) or King of the World (ordinary people). As a consequence, a massacre to end this civilization is inevitable, isn't it? Is that the Long Hoa Judgement Day?

Promotion and punishment

³⁷ heresy or evil cults.

In his position as Giáo Tông, His Holiness demonstrated his authority over the entire religion very frankly, without respect for any high-ranking dignitary. For minor faults, violators were forced to kneel for some time and for more serious violations, their promotion were discarded. Every believers know the funny story His Holiness Hộ Pháp told in his sermon at Báo Ân Từ on September 15, Year of the Dog (1946). Around 1927, there was a divine ban on practicing Ouija Board, but some dignitaries still violated it because they were addicted to listening to divine teachings. As a result, those who broke the law, including His Holiness Acting Giáo Tông, His Holiness Hộ Pháp and Phối Sư Bính, were punished by His Holiness Lý Giáo Tông. As for all believers, He promulgated the Penal Code (1930), clearly stating 10 crimes and punishments in the religion.



Caodaist Dignitaries in three branches Thái, Ngọc and Thượng

Regarding promotion, up to 1975, any positions had to be approved by His Holiness. Dignitaries were still elected according to the Canonical Codes and then presented to His Holiness for approval. It is most important to be "ordained" by Him, meaning the new dignitaries will be assigned to one of the three branches: Thái (Buddhism), Thượng (Taoism) or Ngọc (Confucianism). Since the Ouija board practice was banned in 1975, new dignitaries have had to draw lots to know which branch they belong to.

Philosophy and prophecy

According to the teachings of His Holiness Hộ Pháp, there is nothing outside of the book of Heaven and Exoteric Practice contains Esoteric Practice. So what does the above discussion imply? In my opinion, there are two fields that stand out.

Philosophy

Philosophically, Cao Đài still upholds Justice and Love in the 3rd Covenant between God and Man. However, it is extremely difficult to enforce these two terms at the same time because justice is more about reason, whereas love is more about emotion. If justice is achieved, the law must be strictly obeyed, which means that reason must be stronger than love. If love is respected, the rules must be applied flexibly, which means reason must give way. If a suitable solution cannot be found out, only one of those two terms is enforced.

The story His Holiness Hộ Pháp told at the Holy Temple on the night of August 18, Year of the Buffalo (1949) on the occasion

of His Holiness Li Bai's Birthday Celebration proves this. When the sects caused chaos, His Holiness Li Bai asked His Holiness Hộ Pháp to sign the Eight Cao Đài Decrees to expel those schismatic followers. Nonetheless, the Supreme Being told Hộ Pháp not to sign because, after all, they are also fellow believers. The Supreme Being is the image of love and His Holiness Li Bai is the image of reason. This made His Holiness Hộ Pháp hesitate for a while, not knowing what to decide.

Each of us must have experienced the same situation at least once in our lives. We had to struggle with reason and love in every decision and it is an art to find a "middle ground" in order to achieve both. Sometimes it takes Prajna to find a good solution. Finally, history recorded that His Holiness Hộ Pháp agreed to sign the Eight Cao Đài Decrees, calling the sects "the heretics". So His Holiness Li Bai taught us an important thing, which is we should let reason overcome love in emergency situations, but that will leave a lasting emotional wound.

Prophecy

His Holiness Li Bai had a very popular prophecy: *"I think, needless to say, although the small country of Việt Nam has earned the name of the Holy Land, I still begged in vain for a reduction in punishment of the City of Saigon, Chợ Lớn, Gia Định, Huế, Hải Phòng, Hà Nội, etc. That's really catastrophic!"* According to His Holiness Hộ Pháp, this prophecy has already come true.

Another indirect prophecy is that His Holiness Lý Giáo Tông collaborated with His Holiness Hộ Pháp in supplementing the

Canonical Codes with the titles of Chánh Trị Sự, Phó Trị Sự and Thông Sự (also known as the Sacerdotal Council Junior). Of course, those additional positions were not added to the already established Cao Đài hierarchy for fun. Today, the effect of the Sacerdotal Council Junior is revealed. The believers who live far away from Tây Ninh can still perform all rituals thanks to the Sacerdotal Council Junior operating at the grassroots level without contacting the Central Sacerdotal Council. As a result, the religion will develop without depending on any form of centralization.



A Visit to Paradise, a book by His Holiness Hộ Pháp

Finally, His Holiness's title of Nhứt Trấn Oai Nghiêm has indirectly prophesied that the upheaval of the Long Hoa

Judgement would be extremely fierce, to the point that strong measures would be needed to restore stability on Earth 68 in particular and the universe in general. This was prophesied through the oracle of Venerable Trạng Trình Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “*Only a tenth of humanity survives to enjoy the real peace*”. If you read *Thiên Thai Kiến Diện* by His Holiness Hộ Pháp, you will understand that the Covid-19 epidemic and the current war in Ukraine are only a small part of the Long Hoa Judgement Day.

Thiên Thai Kiến Diện can be read here:

<https://www.daotam.info/booksv/TuChon/thienthaikiendien2018.pdf>

Conclusion

Atheists always ask why Lý Giáo Tông does not punish the unperturbed violators if he is really sacred. I would like to answer that, first, the divine punishments are usually inconspicuous for us mortals to witness. Maybe the violator will be punished some time later, even in the next life. Second, miracles can only be witnessed by those who have a sacred mission or who practice religion very sincerely. Atheists and curious people cannot see anything. A current example is that the Virgin Mary appeared to talk to visionaries in Medjugorje, a small village in the province of Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina (former Yugoslavia). Right now, a video of the visionary Mirjana talking to the Virgin Mary can be watched on YouTube. Even though there are lots of lookers-on around her, no one see anything. Only Mirjana sees and hear the words of the Virgin

Mary. After the conversation, she tells everyone about it. Please click on the following link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RYzg_eaWTjU

Or

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RYzg_eaWTjU)

[v=RYzg_eaWTjU&list=RDCMUCiTqwwgP8xFicbBjuuISy3A
&start_radio=1&rv=RYzg_eaWTjU&t=153](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RYzg_eaWTjU&list=RDCMUCiTqwwgP8xFicbBjuuISy3A&start_radio=1&rv=RYzg_eaWTjU&t=153)



Mirjana is talking to the Virgin Mary

Finally, on August 1, 1931, His Holiness Lý Giáo Tông taught *Đầu Sư Thượng Trung Nhật*, "*Buddy, you have taken on the heavy responsibility of educating, so you should teach sentient beings how to distinguish between right and wrong and attempt to save them. The demonic and ghostly tricks are mine to*

differentiate between true and false to give good persons dignity and respect." In conclusion, the scandalous things Cao Đài followers see today are "His Holiness Lý Giáo Tông's plan". So you believers, think carefully before acting or you will fall into the trap. What we Cao Đài followers need is to pay back our debt from previous incarnations and then proceed to study Caodaism and attain enlightenment if we have enough merit to return to the eternal life. Any actions that do not meet these requirements should be avoided. Let me remind you of an example of practice. For thousands of years in Asia, only the small monk at Điện Bà Mountain has attained enlightenment. The job he did throughout his entire life was to carry water up the mountain for visitors to drink. He did not have any position and no one knew his name. Only thanks to the divine messages do we know that he attained enlightenment. In addition, please be careful to avoid the mistakes that our predecessors made: forming cults because of disagreements! Don't wait until you go to the Three Religion Court to find out in your next life you will have to go to Earth 68 again just because you accidentally said just one joke to ease your anger!

Từ Chơn

Sài Gòn 23/2/2022

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EVIL GOD

THE TRUE PHENOMENON



Từ Chơn

Witness

When I was about 14 years old, I witnessed something very interesting and unforgettable. At that time, I was in my father's hometown of Tây Ninh. Near my house, there was a Taekwondo martial arts school led by a South Korean instructor, whose name is Ann. He was a South Korean Army Sergeant, who was sent to the southern provinces to teach Taekwondo martial arts under a program to popularize Korean culture in Vietnam.

I remember that he only spoke some Vietnamese like "very well" and "not very well" and according to the interpreter, he could only speak, not write Korean. In South Korea, he went up the mountain to study martial arts when he was so young. When he was 18 years old, he came down and joined the army. Even though he was illiterate, he had a Third Degree Black Belt, so the army awarded him the rank of Sergeant to be an instructor.

During my childhood, I was very skinny and weak, so I was often bullied by bigger classmates. Sometimes I was too afraid to go to school. On this occasion, my father sent me there to learn martial arts, hoping to cure my shyness. In the martial arts arena, there were mostly adults except a few of us kids. Usually, instructor Ann seemed to like to joke around with us, but with the adult students, he was very strict.

Although you did not know he had a three-dash black belt, in real life you would not dare to touch him because he was as big as a European or American. Every time he performed martial arts, he often had a freestyle fight with three students. His

strength was obviously shown when three people attacked by kicking him. He only used one hand to push aside and all three rolled around on the field. Once, seeing a student failed to break the three planks with his kick, he went down to the yard to try kicking them himself. His kick broke three pieces of the board and the four people holding the board were all thrown away and fell sprawling. In addition, he could use his forehead to break five bricks or use his thumb to break three bricks. Before, I had never seen anyone do so. According to my imagination, a person would definitely be injured, or might lose his life if hit by him.



A class of Taekwondo

One day, during a break, teacher Ann went out for some refreshments. I overheard two classmates talking. One said, pointing at another person walking 200 yards away:

- I begged Thúc to go home. He was about to fall into a trance. One more moment and he would have beaten teacher Ann.
- Why don't you just watch and see who would win. Not sure who wins who.

Having said this, the two suddenly stopped because someone walking in the distance turned around. When he approached, I saw that it was Mr. Thúc. Surprisingly, his face was red as if he was drunk and his eyes seemed to bulge. He spoke to his two friends in a very strange voice.

- What are you guys talking about me? Okay, I forgive you.

Then he walked back. I listened, but understood nothing! Mr. Thúc was a learner, not to mention the fact that he was very skinny because he was a vegetarian, plus he was short, probably standing at teacher Ann's shoulder, and wants to... beat the teacher, a big, third-degree Taekwondo master. Yet the guys still said "*I don't know who wins who*"! Also, how could Thúc hear what we were saying while he was 200 yards away? And then his trance-like appearance! When I asked the reason, the two men, with very serious faces, let out a short sentence:

- Thúc can do võ thần (spirit martial arts).

From then on, I kept following them, asking questions so they told me everything. The origin of the Spirit Martial Arts is unknown, but practitioners only need to recite a spell to fall into a trance immediately. This means a dead person has entered and controlled the body. This explains Mr. Thúc's red face. When you are possessed, you can have professional boxing skills as if you have been practicing martial arts for about 10 years or more. I heard that some people can still give boxing demonstrations on

Mai Hoa Thung. In Chinese martial arts, doing boxing on Mai Hoa Thung, that is, stepping on rows of stakes driven into the ground in a certain shape, usually Bagua Image, is the most difficult. Whoever can do that is a "superior martial artist".



A martial arts student dances on Mai Hoa Thung.

There are various spirit martial arts schools. Some boxers call themselves Tề Thiên³⁸ and dance Hầu Quyên³⁹ (monkey martial arts), others call themselves Quan Công⁴⁰, holding a fifty-six

³⁸ Monkey King or Sun Wu Kong, the hero in the Chinese novel Journey to the West.

³⁹ monkey martial arts.

⁴⁰ Guan Yu, an ancient general in China.

kilogram large sword and dance rapidly, etc. even though they have never practiced martial arts for a single day before. Nevertheless, when they woke up, they could not remember what they had done. Even collisions while fighting with others, if any, will leave painful bruises on the body as usual. Some guys said they witnessed Mr. Thúc kicking the jackfruit tree at the base, breaking a piece, and then when he woke up, his foot was so swollen that he had to take medicine and apply herbal oil for a whole week.

Especially, people with spirit martial arts will automatically react and respond without having to recite any spells if attacked suddenly. This is the point where the two guys said "*Thúc almost hit teacher Ann*". Usually, when we practiced martial arts, teacher Ann went to each students to fix their movements, but his way of doing things seemed quite strong. Perhaps that was why Mr. Thúc automatically responded to defend himself. Surely everyone wonders why Mr. Thúc learned Taekwondo while he had spirit martial arts? Well, most of the guys in the martial arts school were Nghĩa Quân⁴¹, who were encouraged to learn for good health and sportsmanship. Anyone who joined the school would receive certain benefits, so all single young men tried it.

Having heard the story, I was very interested. I asked Mr. Thúc what to do if I wanted to learn. He said, "*It's easy. Just come to my house, offer a bunch of bananas to my ancestors' altar and I'll pass on the spell to you. That's it, but after that you have to*

41 local soldiers.

become a permanent vegan or you'll be tortured by Evil God". I thought that was good because I have already had vegetarian food for 10 days a month with my family. That was not a very strict requirement to meet, so I promised to come to his house the next day. However, after that I got stuck studying for my school exams, so I could not go to his house until the following week. Unfortunately, when I got to his house, the door was locked. The neighbors said he had gone to the hospital in Saigon.



A Taekwondo fight

Nearly a month later, I saw him again. He looked very haggard and pale, but he enthusiastically told me to come if I still wanted

to learn spirit martial arts. Then I asked why he went to the hospital. He said he requested to quit practicing spirit martial arts, but the Gods refused and tortured him. In hospital, they could not find out what was wrong with him, so he was released. I asked why he did not come to his master for help. He said there was no master. He had just learned the spell through a friend without knowing what to do if he wanted to quit. Hearing this, I was so scared that I woke up immediately. My dream of learning spirit martial arts also disappeared. I intended to learn just for fun, but it turned out that there was no way out! Some time later the Taekwondo class disbanded and until now I have not seen Mr. Thúc again.

I thought that was the only case of that kind of martial arts, but later I discovered another very close to me. That was my uncle's son-in-law. He also lived in Tây Ninh and secretly learned spirit martial arts. Back then, when I discovered that, he laughed and said just for self-protection. Later he moved to Bà Rịa, so I never saw him again. When I was forty years old, I met him again, but my uncle whispered to me that he had been mentally ill. He still lived normally like everyone else, but he would fill any piece of paper he came across with weird writing.

My uncle showed me a few papers. Honestly, I did not know what that writing was. All important documents in the house, such as household registration and medical records, had to be hidden otherwise he would write all over them. Thus, family members had to go to the commune headquarters to do paperwork, which was very conveniently laborious. If asked, he answered that writing was very important then smiled. And that

continued until he died. I did not dare to tell my uncle, but only implicitly understood that perhaps it was the result of that kind of martial arts.



A Vietnamese medium

Similarities

Later in life, I myself had the opportunity to witness lots of strange and inexplicable things though most of them later turned out to be a scam. For example, a man pretended to be a psychic and predicted what lottery ticket would win or even cured illnesses. Of course, a few believers tried to buy similar lottery tickets and lost, not to mention having to offer a fair amount of money to the psychic. As for the cured patients, some got well

and others did not. However, there is something "magical or miraculous", which even happened to one of my relatives.

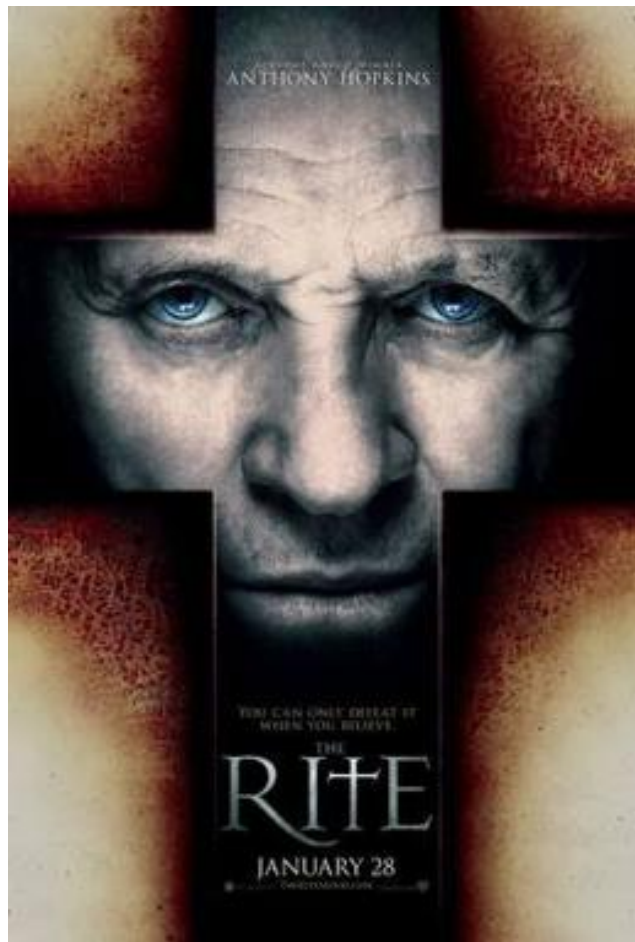
For example, my aunt lived near Long Hoa market, Tây Ninh. Her family was so poor that her husband had to work as a hired laborer to survive. She was illiterate, but one day she suddenly called everyone together and said in a weird voice that she would examine and cure patients. Then every day, at the scheduled time, she examined the sick and prescribed medicine in French. Her handwriting was very beautiful and surprisingly the pharmacists said the name of the medicine and the dosage were completely accurate. At the end of the hour, she woke up without knowing what she had done. This case is now called demonic possession. That is she was controlled by the soul of a dead Doctor.

No one followed to see if her patients got well, but the rumor spread far and wide. People came to her house to wait for medical examination, gathering into a squat market. It was even published in the newspaper, so many people from other provinces came for treatment. The crowd caused such a parking problem in front of her house that the commune government had to send soldiers to keep order.

The sick left money or gifts to show gratitude, but she only took fruits instead. Her husband thought differently. He bought some common Western medicine and put it in a basket. If the prescription she gave contained that medicine, the patient would often buy it from him to appreciate the family. He only dared to take a little profit. The incident lasted for several months. Then

one day, she suddenly stopped without saying anything in advance. Even if asked, she did not know why. The market in front of her house gradually dissolved and she continued to live as poor and desolate as before.

There are many more stories, and I think fellow believers, especially those who have been in the military or worked in hospitals, will have a thousand times more interesting stories. I will only tell a few typical ones to introduce the topic of this article.



Advertisement for the movie The Rite

Answer

Later, I read more books and newspapers and learn that there are many similar stories not only in Vietnam and other Eastern countries, but also in Western Europe. For example, the story of Doctor Faustus selling his soul to the devil to gain more knowledge and become rich. The Doctor received what he wanted, but had to pay the price of tragic death in the end. The story was written into a very good play in 1592. Or most recently, in 2011, the very popular horror film *The Rite* (Exorcism), starring Anthony Hopkins, based on a true story in the Roman Catholic Church. The film tells the story of a monk who does not believe in exorcisms performed by priests because he believes that "evil possession" is a mental illness that needs medical treatment, not religious rituals. After witnessing both very unbelievable and very horrifying things, he volunteered to become a priest specializing in exorcisms. This movie can now be purchased on disc or downloaded from YouTube.

Now thanks to searching on the Internet, I know the ritual of exorcism (or exorcism), meaning to expel an evil spirit from entering a human, has long been practiced in most religions such as Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Taoism, etc.



A scene in *The Exorcist*

Thinking

In the Cao Đài religion, many legends are told about dignitaries chasing away demons and curing madness, but not any official documents of the Sacerdotal Council mentioning this issue have been seen. Nonetheless, in the *Di Lạc Chơn Kinh*⁴², it is said that

42 Maitreya True Sutra.

the Phi Tướng Diệu Thiên⁴³ has the Trục Tà Tinh Phật⁴⁴. Additionally, a popular highlight in Cao Đài philosophy says the Demon Lord, also known as the Demon King, Satan or Lucifer, is currently titled the Đại Tiên Kim Quang Sứ⁴⁵, whose power nearly equals to that of the Supreme Being. He leads a force of demons (those, who violated Heaven's Law, are punished as demons) or ghosts (souls who follow the Demon Lord). They are allowed to borrow the names of the Supreme Being and all other divine beings to challenge everyone, especially dignitaries and monks. Whoever passes will be promoted to a higher position in the eternal spiritual realm after death. On the contrary, you will be punished depending on the severity if you cannot overcome it. An alive person will get sick or have an accident and a dead one will have to be reincarnated to atone for his sins.

This is a very new concept compared to that of other previous religions, which say gods are opposed to demons and true gods always beat evil spirits and protect people. Now the righteous allow the evil to borrow its name. As a result, that is scary!

Since ancient times, it has been relatively easy to distinguish between true gods and evil gods. As in the story Phong Thần

43 Wonderful Heaven of Non-Perception.

44 Exorcist Buddha.

45 Great Immortal of Golden Light.

Diễn Nghĩa⁴⁶, gods are described as having beautiful shapes while demons are strange and hideous. Almost from the outside, one can guess 99.99% correctly. Besides, divine beings teach, save and bless people. Demons, on the contrary, cause illness and harm people. The distinction between good and evil is very clear so that people can know and follow the right way.



Now, however, according to Cao Đai, evil spirits and demons are the judges of an important competition: the Dragon and Flower Judgement Day. More importantly, it is almost impossible to know who the evil gods are because they are allowed to borrow the names of the gods and of course can perform similar miracles. Like in the present society, people will claim their name along with a very high position, even the Supreme Being, to deceive you. Sometimes evil spirits silently penetrate into your thoughts, so you think it is your own

⁴⁶ the Investiture of the Gods, a 16th Chinese novel.

opinions! In general, their advice sounds reasonable in line with the moral spirit and your religious doctrine. In fact, in the end it will lead you into unsolved trouble. Usually, they give you whatever you like to challenge you, such as a dream religious title or a large sum of money, etc. They even show a few miracles to win your heart! Those supernatural phenomena were called deceitful miracles by His Holiness Hộ Pháp in his speech on February 9, 1949 at the Holy Temple. However, we ordinary people cannot know what deceitful miracles are.

It is easiest to fall into the evil gods' trap when a quarrel over religious issues is instigated. Even within the Cao Đài community, after 96 years, our fellow believers still have the same arguments as on the first day of the religion, such as where to put the fruit plate, where to kneel, how many inches of water to pour, whether to leave the dead body facing in or out, how to write the words in line with the Dharma, etc! Sadly for those fellow believers, since they are unable to understand the philosophy and scriptures, "Dharma" for them is just a bunch of nonsense. Usually, they consider arguing about where to put the fruit plate more important than correcting their own aggressiveness and willingness to criticize others.

There are people who worship four times a day and learn all the holy words by heart, but they are ready to sweet-talk, scold, sue, and physically attack others as soon as they feel dissatisfied. There will be people who say: *“But I am right and that person is wrong, so I have to protect the truth”*. Doesn't it very reasonable to quarrel?

In some Cao Đài parishes, lots of lawsuits have been brought to the government and courts for settlement simply because of

disagreements. In his speech on July 27, 1932, His Holiness Hộ Pháp said a group of Cao Đài followers, who separated themselves into sects, brought Him to the French court to destroy the Sacerdotal Council, but failed! In the trial, they were actual enemies, no longer fellow believers, so they accused Him of all sorts of crimes. To the point that He would have been beheaded had it been in the king's time. And the story of His Holiness being criticized is not just once if we take the trouble to read Cao Đài history! Yet today, there are still many people who are looking for ways to sue their fellow believers and really want their brothers to lose their heads!



The statue of Evil God in Tây Ninh Holy Temple

In short, evil spirits in the Third Salvation are still harmful to people, but it is much more difficult to detect and avoid their subtle instigation. Righteousness lends its name to evil, that is, right and wrong are now too confused to be distinguished.

Conclusion

Everyone will probably wonder, “*What should I do now because right and wrong can no longer be distinguished?*”. Cao Đài scriptures say that in this third period of salvation, there is only one type of "weapon" to help our believers defend themselves. That is morality. The first step is to keep all human morality according to the principles of Confucianism. I think, there is no need to discuss anything too far, just this much: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trust. Morality will be the sign for gods to protect yourselves and for evil gods to give up challenging. It is also known that, in the Sacred Path of Eternal Life, His Holiness Hộ Pháp says a soul is admitted to the Cung Hiệp Thiên Hành Hoá based on the qualification of morality perfection, not on the status of God, Saint, Immortal, or Buddha.

Some people may say, “*I also want to be a gentle person, but all around me are fierce people, so what can I do?*” In fact, if you truly want to be a gentle person, even if you are right, you still have to avoid, endure and lose to cruel people. You should even endure humiliation. Who knows, maybe they are the harsh judges of the Dragon and Flower Judgement Day!!! Always remember, you lose in this world, but gain in the eternal spiritual world. If you want to win over others in this world regardless of losing your share in the spiritual world, that is also your right!

Từ Chơn
22/12/2021

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Quo Vadis, Domine?



Từ Chon

Introduction

On the occasion of the upcoming Christmas, I would like to introduce to Cao Đài followers a very interesting legend of Christianity. Through the slogan "*Unite the five religions*", we often call Christianity the Thánh Đạo⁴⁷. Actually, there are many sects, but in Vietnam the most common are Catholicism (under the authority of the Church of Rome) and Protestantism (establishing its own church). They have some differences, but the main point is all believers respect the Bible (New Testament). The New Testament tells the life story of Jesus and the Apostles while the Old Testament tells the story of Moses and the history of the Jewish people before Jesus was born.

The narrative

More than 2,000 years ago, the Roman Empire, presently Italy, was very successful. They had the most powerful army in the world and ruled over the entire Mediterranean region, Western Europe, Asia, North Africa and many parts of Northern and Eastern Europe. At that time, Israel was a small country ruled by the Romans. The Old Testament also reveals the Jewish people had formerly been slaves to the Egyptians. That is, just like the Vietnamese people, who were dominated by the Chinese for thousands of years, the Jews were also oppressed by stronger peoples.

⁴⁷ The Religion of Saint.

The Jewish people worked very hard, but had to pay heavy taxes to support the Roman ruling apparatus. Only those who worked for Rome could live happily with all kinds of grace. The Jews hated the Romans very much, but all their resistance was always brutally suppressed. In the movie Ben-Hur, when only one Roman was beaten, twenty random Jews in a market were arrested and killed on the spot. Therefore, when Pontius Pilate, a Roman official, saw many people following Jesus, he ordered that Jesus be killed by crucifixion partly because he was afraid that Jesus would lead the people to rebel against Rome.



Drawing of Saint Peter holding the key to heaven.

After Jesus returned to Heaven, His disciples (the Holy Apostles) had to leave the Jewish country because they were harshly persecuted by the Romans. Some returned to normal life, but several continued to preach in other countries. Saint Peter (also known as Peter, Pierre, Pietro, Pedro, Piotr in other countries), who was the closest disciple of Jesus, came to Rome to preach. This was a rare act of courage to evangelize right in the capital of the hostile country, which has murdered his teacher and still hunted down all remaining followers.

The Romans had a tradition of always promoting the use of force to win and then take over other people's wealth to live in luxury and enjoy pleasure. To achieve that goal, they do not hesitate to massacre people, especially the ruled. Even their sports, such as chariot racing or gladiatorial combat are extremely deadly. These games are portrayed quite faithfully today through famous movies like Ben-Hur or Gladiator.

Therefore, they considered Christianity to be pagan and believers to be crazy because Jesus preached that we humans had to love our enemies! This is contrary to their aggressive preferences. For them, enemies had to be killed without forgiveness or pity at all. In addition, Jesus also taught to worship only God, but the Romans worshiped many Gods. This difference in beliefs deepened the hatred of the Romans, especially the officials.

At first, St. Peter's stealthy preaching in Rome was hindered only a little, but gradually Roman officials began to feel uncomfortable when lots of people believed in it. When

Emperor Nero, a famous bloodthirsty dictator, sat on the throne, he banned and killed all those who followed Christianity. This is the most terrible persecution in the history of the Church. Believers were captured and killed in arenas if they refused to renounce their religion. Of course, Saint Peter, the head of the Church at that time, became a leading criminal.

The believers thought the situation was too dangerous, so they arranged for Saint Peter to sneak out of Rome for temporary refuge. However, one morning, while He was on the run, he met Jesus carrying the cross going in the opposite direction, that is, going into Rome. He asked, "*Quo vadis, Domine?*" Latin for, "*Sir, where are you going?*" Jesus replied, "*If you abandon the Christians, I will go to Rome to be crucified again.*" Then Jesus disappeared. Currently, in Italy, right where Jesus talked to Saint Peter, a church named Quo Vadis was built.

The answer changed Saint Peter's mind and he finally gave up the idea of running away and returned to the parishioners. Of course, he was later captured by the Romans and crucified on a cross along with many other believers. According to legend, he asked to bury the cross upside down because he felt unworthy to be a disciple of Jesus. His burial place is on Vatican Hill, today the Basilica of Saint Peter of the Roman Church. Thus, the capital of the country that persecuted Christianity 2,000 years ago is where the Holy See of Catholicism is located today.



Panorama of the Cathedral and St. Peter's Square

The seal

In 1893, when Polish writer Henryk Sienkiewicz visited Quo Vadis church in Rome, he had the idea of writing a novel. That is the book *Quo Vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero*. The book was later translated into fifty languages and earned Henryk Sienkiewicz the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1905. Fellow believers who want to read it should know that the book is available at Fahasa Vietnamese bookstore.

The plot tells a dreamlike love story between a Christian girl and a Roman aristocrat in the context of Emperor Nero's most brutal persecution of Christians. The story has been filmed many times, including a very popular Hollywood movie in 1951. Now it can be easily watched on YouTube.



A poster of the movie Quo Vadis

The lesson

Anyway, what lessons can Cao Đài practitioners learn through the story of Quo Vadis?

Lesson one, religions teach people to do good things and everyone wants good things, but people do not always accept religions, especially those who prefer power and hate. Unfortunately, the number of such people in humanity is very large. Therefore, it is often the most difficult to start a religion whose founders have to pay with the blood of believers because they often teach the opposite of what rulers want. Christianity is a typical example. From the time Jesus was crucified until Emperor Constantine I declared an end to religious persecution and returned property to the Church, it took three hundred and thirteen years. It means that one human life is impervious to changing times.

Lesson two, as seen above, Jesus began preaching in Israel, but Christianity developed abroad, especially in Rome, and finally, the Holy See was located in the capital of Rome. Similarly, Buddhism started in Nepal, but developed well in Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, etc. Will Cao Đài, which started in Tây Ninh, Vietnam, develop well in America as prophesied?

Lesson three, the reaction of religious leaders when being oppressed is a good example for all followers. In the story of Quo Vadis, while Saint Peter was escaping, Jesus appeared and told him to stay with parishioners. This is truly something

beyond what we ordinary people think. If we were Jesus, perhaps we would encourage Saint Peter to continue hiding because, as the saying goes, "*Don't trouble trouble till trouble troubles you*". Avoiding is to preserve strength and Saint Peter should be protected because he is automatically considered the first Pope. He will return to strengthen the Church after Roman officials ease their repression. Yet, the Lord advised the opposite and obviously after that Saint Peter was arrested and killed.

According to the Bible, Saint Peter had been advised to give up fighting in a former situation. When Jesus was betrayed by Judas, who squealed on the Lord, Saint Peter reacted violently by pulling out his sword and slashing one of the soldiers. Jesus, however, stopped him, saying, "*Put your sword back in its sheath; whoever uses the sword will be killed by the sword*". Jesus then allowed himself to be captured and finally crucified at Calvary (Golgotha).



In the Cao Đài religion, the Supreme Being also advised quite similarly in the Divine Messages of the Year of the Cat - 1927 (Đạo Sử I - Mrs. Đầu Sư Hương Hiếu): *"...Take care to protect yourself. I leave this one word to ease your anxiety. Even if there were someone who has the power to destroy the Universe, he can never prevent my religion spreading. If whoever forces you to close the temple, just obey. Wait until my children come to open the door..."*

Such teachings are commonly considered passive and negative and even cowardly. Somebody may ask how Cao Đài religion can develop if we believers endure forever. The argument sounds quite rational, but let's think about it. Jesus is a religious leader, so He definitely has a vision with the Divine Eye, which we ordinary people do not have, in addition to human intelligence like us. In other words, He can see things hundreds, even thousands of years before us. So His advice is not arbitrary because it affects people's lives, especially in the case of Saint Peter.

As for the Supreme Being's divine message, His Holiness is the Lord of this universe, so it is certainly not said for fun. As we can see now, with just a few viruses, the whole earth has been shaken, so it is so simple for His Holiness to wipe out humanity. Thus, the Supreme Being's advice is for you to think about and then train yourself to become more gentle and virtuous. I hope that one day, I will be lucky enough to receive the "enlightenment" reward from the Supreme Being. So, do not worry that Cao Đài will not develop because God said no one

could stop His religion, but that you have not had enough merit to return to Heaven.



Church of Domine Quo Vadis, Rome

Ultimately, the point is we believers have the right to choose our future. You can either try to gain enough merit to return to the spiritual realm of eternal life though you have to live in poverty or live like the Romans for this incarnation only.

Từ Chơn

Sài Gòn 10/12/2021

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GENIE BRANCH IN CAO ĐÀI



Jiang Ziya, the top leader of Genie Branch

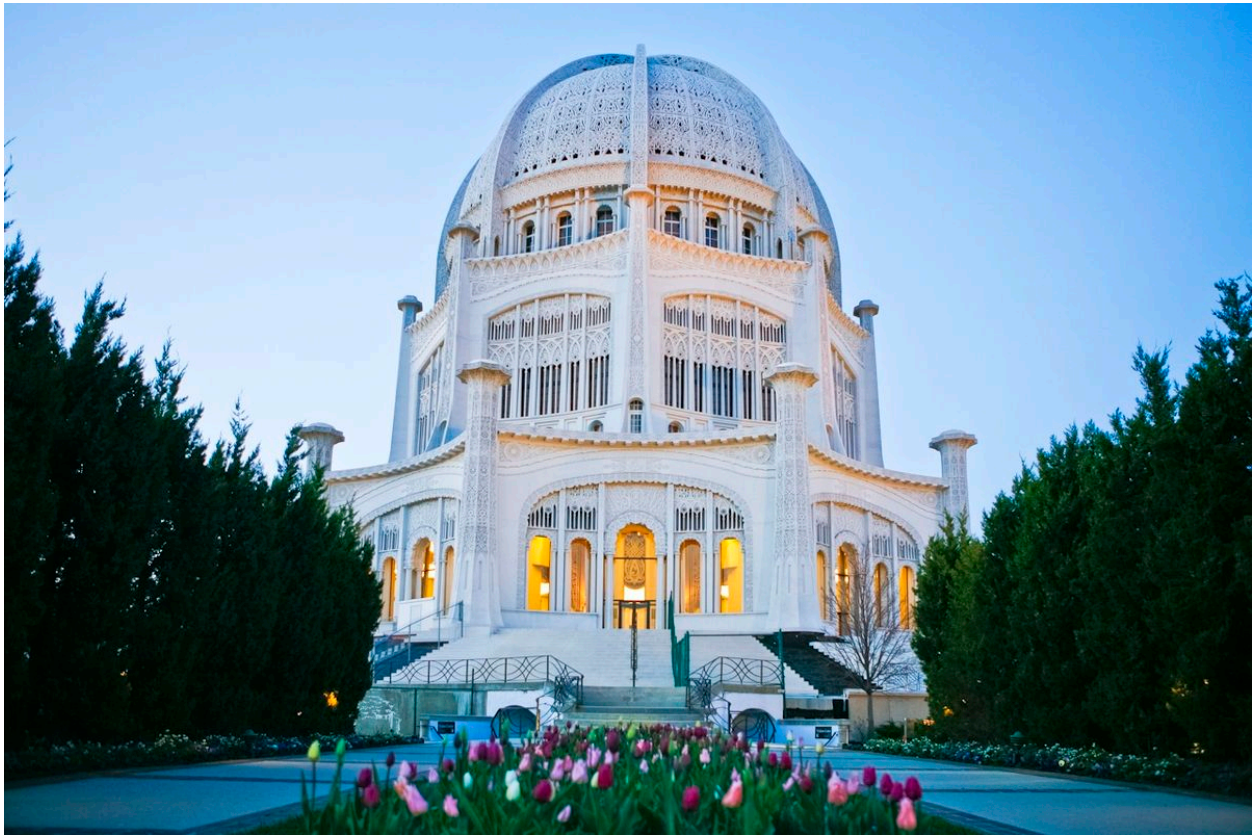
TỪ CHƠN

Beginning

My fourth brother once raised a question: *"What is unique about our Cao Đài teachings when compared with other religions?"* I think this is the most fundamental question of my brothers, in particular, and of Cao Đài followers, in general. Answering this question not only affirms the uniqueness, which is the root for a religion to develop, but also unlocks the metaphysical apparatus that people still call the "soul" of a human being.

In my opinion, to have a thorough answer, perhaps we believers have to re-study the slogan *"Three Religions return to the origin, Five Branches become one"*. The Three Religions (Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism) and the Five Branches (Human Branch, Genie Branch, Saint Branch, Immortal Branch and Buddha Branch) are the existing religions in the world, so only *"returning to the origin"* and *"become one"* are relatively new. The reason why they are not *"absolutely new"* is because the Baha'i Faith, since 1844, has promoted the principle: *"All religions have a common origin, God"*. The Cao Đài religion, with similar principle, was not officially inaugurated until 1926. As a result, it can be said that Caodaism and Baha'i express the same philosophy by two different methods.

Re-reading the principle mentioned above, we see that the Three Religions and the Five Branches are the first pair of a parallel phrases, return to the origin and become one are the second pair. In this essay, I would like to discuss the first pair. This is where a very difficult to explain problem that is also a characteristic of Cao Đài arises: the Genie Branch.



Baha'i House of Worship (Wilmette, Illinois, USA)

Two ways to understand

According to Cao Đài's principles, a believer's mission is to "save all living beings", not a particular group of people, a nation or only humanity. In general, he has to preserve not only life on this earth (Cao Đài calls it Earth 68) but also the entire universe. So how should the classification of religions in the slogan above be understood?

To date, Cao Đài followers have understood it in two common ways. Of course, that means there are various ways depending

on the individual, but the important thing is there is no absolutely right way. The first way follows the long-standing principle of writing parallel sentences of Chinese and Vietnamese. Since most ancient Chinese poets carry a heavy emphasis on the concept of "*the goal of literature is to convey religious teachings*", traditional philosophies such as Two Forms, Four Symbols, Five Elements, etc. are always present in poetic literature. In addition to the content promoting Righteousness over Evil (Yang and Yin), the literary form is also expressed through many poetic genres, the most popular of which are Câu Đối (couplets). Couplets are the genre that most clearly expresses the philosophy of Yin and Yang. Most readers see this as a wordplay, a hobby of poets, but in reality, this "wordplay" contains much deeper meanings.

Usually, people think "Đối" (opposite) means to resist or fight against. From there, writing couplets means pairing antonyms, for example, Enemy versus Friend, Love versus Hate, Male versus Female, etc. Nevertheless, if it were that simple, all the aspects of the extremely complex relationship of Yin and Yang would not be seen. If you read all the parallel sentences, you will see that the relationship that the ancients called "opposite" has other meanings than "fighting". Therefore, Professor Phạm Công Thiện (of Vạn Hạnh University before 1975) used the phrase "mutual Yin and Yang", not "opposing Yin and Yang".

For example, the couplet:

Vietnamese

*“Cao thượng Chí Tôn đại đạo hoà bình dân chủ mục,
Đài tiền sùng bái tam kỳ cộng hưởng tự do quyền”*

English

“Noble Supreme Being, the Great Religion, peace, democracy.
Worshipped Tower, Third Salvation, together enjoy, freedom”



Three Religions and Five Branches in Cao Đài

Noble Supreme Being and Worshipped Tower are not opposites at all. In fact, these two phrases combine to create new meanings. The same goes for the Great Religion and the Third

Salvation or peace and enjoy. Only democracy and freedom, two political concepts pursued by contemporary peoples are presented side by side. In short, parallel words not only have opposite meanings, but can also have equivalent, parallel, supportive, supplementary, explanatory meanings. Their ultimate goal is to present the official meaning of the entire couplet. Therefore, each parallel sentence cannot be understood separately, but readers must follow the principle of "one is two, two is one" of the ancients, that is, combining both sentences to see the final meaning.

In addition to the above way, there is a second way of understanding based on classification. This method is influenced by the numbers in the above slogan. Normally, when numbers are count numbers, they default to classification. However, there are some confusing things in this classification if compared with the methods of Western academia today. According to the slogan, religions are classified twice: the first time is three religions (Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism) and the second time is five religious branches (Human Branch, Genie Branch, Saint Branch, Immortal Branch and Buddha Branch). Why should it be classified two different times? And based on what criteria to classify?

It can be understood that, for the first time, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism are classified based on both ancient and contemporary Chinese society because it has a large population, with up to 1,444,883,150 people compared to 7.86 billion people in the world (2021 data), not to mention neighboring countries, such as India, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Thailand and

Myanmar, which are also deeply influenced by the philosophical systems of these religions. For the second time, taking into account the whole world, Saint Branch and Genie Branch are included. This is also a special characteristic of Cao Đài that will be presented in the following sections.



The tallest Buddhist statue in the world (from 1993-2002) in Ibaraki Prefecture, Japan.

Cao Đài's special method of classification

According to the sermon on the Five Branches by His Holiness Hộ Pháp Phạm Công Tắc (November 28, 1938 and December 15 Year of the Dragon - 1952), Cao Đài's classification is based on the philosophical systems. Religions that have a common or quite similar philosophy will be merged into a Branch. Please read the following excerpt:

- *Buddha Branch includes Brahmanism, Sakyamuni and Pythagoreans.*
- *Immortal Branch includes Lao Tzu, Yang Zhu, Mo Tzu, Vạn Pháp, Bàn Môn, Magician, Sorcerer, Bồng, Chàng, Mediums, etc.*
- *Saint Branch includes Christianity, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Mahometanism.*
- *Genie Branch includes Chinese Feng Shui, Greek Mythology and Egyptian Mythology.*
- *Human Branch includes Socrate, Ésope (Aesop), Platon, etc. in Greek and Confucius, Mencius, Nhị Trình Giáo, etc. and Hón Phong, Đường Thi, Tấn Tục in ancient China. (TĐ ĐHP- Ban Túc Ký TTTN).*

However, such a classification causes two problems. The first is the heads of each Branch. According to the Five Branch Statues on the altar of Cao Đài, Shakyamuni is the head of Buddha Branch, Lao Tzu (represented by Li Bai) is the head of Immortal Branch, Jesus Christ is the head of Saint Branch, Jiang Ziya is the head of Genie Branch and Giáo Tông Cao Đài (plus three Chưởng Pháp and three Đầu Sư) are the leaders of Human Branch. The confusing thing is Jiang Ziya. All of the people

listed above are Patriarchs or religious founders, but Jiang Ziya is a politician and a general, whose fields are not promoted by Cao Đai.



Jiang Ziya, Wikipedia 2024

Regarding politics, in the Divine Message at the home of Mr. Hồ Quang Châu and Ms. Phan Thị Lân on September 15, Year of the Tiger, the Supreme Being said:

“ ...

Trung, ignore them. They doubted that you take care of national affairs. I forced myself to do so because you seriously begged me. You know, politics and religion never really get on. A word is enough to the wise”.

As for military, the Holy Order Nationalizing the Cao Đài Army No. 704/VPHP signed on May 2, 1955 (QĐCD - Tỉnh Tâm) of His Holiness Hộ Pháp proves that the Cao Đài religion does not enthusiastically support the military.

The second confusing thing is the sacred title of those who successfully practice a religion in these groups. Those who successfully practice Buddha Branch are called Buddhas, Immortal Branch are called Immortals, Saint Branch are called Saints, Genie Branch are called Genie and Human Branch are called Sage. This classification implies a hierarchy, in which the lowest level is Sage and the highest level is Buddha. However, what standards are those ranks based on? Since Cao Đài says all religions are one, such rankings will create a deeply incomprehensible divide.

Overview of Genie Branch in the world

Today's Western academic community, when discussing Genie Branch, immediately associates it with the term Polytheisms, meaning religions that worship many Gods or Genies. In this article I will use the term Genie to avoid misunderstandings. According to research, humanity began worshiping Genies in

ancient times in Egypt, Greece, Rome, China and many other places around the world. Today most of these religions are just legends. However, some are still active such as Chinese Folk Religions, Japanese Shintoism (Shinto), some branches of Hinduism, traditional religions in Africa or South America, etc.



A Japanese Shinto shrine in Japan

People often worship many different Genies, including Goddesses, Evil Genies and Wicked Genies. It is thought that Genies either bring spiritual or material benefits or cause fear and even death like Wicked Genies. The commonly worshiped Genies are:

- Genie of Creation.
- Genie of Culture.
- Death.

- Genie of Rebirth.
- Cupid.
- Mother Goddess.
- Genies of Politics (often Dead Kings or Generals)
- Angel.
- Fire Genie.
- Genie of Rain.
- Genie of Thunder.
- Etc.



Indian Polytheism

Sacrifice rituals depend on each tribe or country. Rituals range from communal dancing and singing to killing an animal. As in Vietnam, people worship Thành Hoàng (the Genie who takes

care of the village) by holding operas and offering roasted pigs. Even in the old days, the Aztecs in South America offered human sacrifices. Luckily, such terrible things occur no more. A noteworthy point is that there are no official scriptures passed down to the disciples, but only mantras transmitted orally between the Priests. Since there are no scriptures, the philosophy is expressed according to the active priest. For example, in Mexico, the Mayan priests will talk about the universe like this, but in Australia, the aboriginal priests will have different explanation. Thousands of other Genie branches around the world have other views as well.

Genie Branch in Cao Đài

According to the sacred teachings of Caodaism, Jiang Ziya was chosen to lead Genie Branch on Earth 68. He is not a religious leader but a half-historical, half-mythical figure in ancient China.

Historically, Jiang Ziya helped found the Zhou Dynasty in the 12th century BC and later became the King of Qi. He is famous for the story Thái Công Đắc Ngư (Angler Lã Vọng). As the story goes, at the age of 60, he was still jobless and had to live in poverty. He often fished with a straight hook in the Wei River. One day he met King Wen, who asked him why. He answered he did not need fish, but a good leader. King Wen found it strange and asked more about how to rule a country and realized that Jiang Ziya was a military and political genius. King Wen honored him as a military advisor and invited him to help fight against the King of the Shang Dynasty, who had a reputation for

being very foolish and cruel to the people. After King Wen's death, he continued to help his son, King Wu, overthrow the Shang Dynasty and establish the Zhou dynasty. King Wu then made him the King of Qi. From then on he ruled the state of Qi until his death.



A poster of the movie Fengshen Bang

In terms of mythology, he is famous through the book *Fengshen Bang* (*The Investiture of the Gods*) by Xu Zhonglin (some say by Lu Xixing) in the 16th century. Why did He become a character in the novel? Ancient Chinese writers often took the stories of real people and added mythological characters to them to metaphorize a certain philosophy. For example, in *Journey to the West*, monk Xuanzang actually went to the West (India) to bring Buddhist scriptures back to translate into Chinese, but accompanying characters such as Sun Wukong, Sha Wujing, Zhu Wuneng, and the demons that harassed them along the way were imaginary. The story's purpose is to incorporate Buddhist philosophy into the content so that not only monks but also ordinary people can learn Mahayana Buddhist philosophy.

Similarly, the *Fengshen Bang* combines real historical characters (King Zhou of Shang, Daji, Jiang Ziya, etc.), with fictional characters (Huang Feihu, Shen Gongbao, etc.) including the Legendary Gods (Jinzha, Nezha, Muzha, etc.) to create a myth that to this day still attracts scores of readers in Southeast Asia. There are currently plenty of very popular Hong Kong or Taiwanese Feng Shui movies, even on YouTube.

The story goes that the Shang Dynasty had three sects that developed very strongly together: Chan Taoism Sect, Jie Taoism Sect and Taoism. The leaders of the three sects are the Yuanshi Tianzun, the Tongtian Jiaozhu and Lao Tzu. Since their disciples violated Heaven's laws, the Jade Emperor ordered Chan Taoism Sect and Jie Taoism Sect to bring 365 offending disciples to earth for punishment. Most of the disciples were assigned the task of either helping the Shang Dynasty or helping the Zhou

Dynasty, which meant confronting each other in battle. Whoever completed the task and still kept himself from violating Heaven's law will be made a Genie when he dies.



A portrait of King Wen made in the Ming dynasty.

Twelve disciples of Yuanshi Tianzun, including Jiang Ziya, had to descend to support the Zhou dynasty to overthrow the cruel Shang Dynasty. Other divine beings in Heaven were also ordered to descend to earth to help them. Jiang Ziya alone was assigned the task of establishing the Investiture of the Gods.

After King Zhou was overthrown, Jiang Ziya would confer Godhood on the disciples based on their contributions.

Paradox and metaphor

As mentioned above, the concept of Genie Branch in Cao Đai religion leads to some paradoxes that practitioners need to understand thoroughly. Tackling these paradoxes is to answer what Zen Buddhism calls a koan.

Paradox one. Ancient Greece also had the Iliad and Odyssey, recounting the Gods fighting alongside humans. In Rome, India, Peru, etc. there are similar legends. So, why is Jiang Ziya, a Chinese person, is chosen to represent this religious group while the Genie Branch exists all over the world? Is this because of bias in favor of yellow-skinned people in general and Vietnamese people in particular, as some people think? Thus, it is somewhat paradoxical compared to the principle of "all religions are one" of Cao Đai.

In actual fact, it is not because of bias, but due to the Vietnamese society before 1926 when the Cao Đai religion had not yet opened. At that time, the Vietnamese education system was still very backward, so the number of literate people was not as high as now. The Vietnamese did not used to have their own writing, so they had to learn Sino-Vietnamese, which means writing Chinese characters and pronoun them in the Vietnamese way. For example, both Chinese and Vietnamese write 陛下, but the Vietnamese pronoun it as "bệ hạ" (correctly pronounced in Chinese as "bi xa"). The books Vietnamese studied were all

Chinese, such as the Four Books and the Five Classics. For entertainment, they mainly read Chinese stories. Therefore, it is probably harder for Vietnamese people to perceive Zeus, Hera, and Athena of Western mythology than Erlang Shen, Jinzha, Nezha, Muzha of Chinese mythology. As a result, the goal of easy dissemination in Vietnamese society at that time was one of the reasons that Jiang Ziya along with the book *Fengshen Bang* was chosen as the face of Genie Branch in Cao Đài.



Erlang Shen, Wikipedia 2024

Paradox two. The Patriarchs of the Five Branches all have a clear system of religious philosophy left behind through the scriptures. Until now, whether they can be practiced or not, humans have not finished learning these philosophies. As for Jiang Ziya, he left behind a book, *Six Secret Teachings*, which teaches how to fight and rule, not how to practice a religion because he was a politician and military man. However, Cao Đai philosophy does not encourage military actions, as explained above.

This problem can be solved as follows. Most myths from the East to the West tell stories about war heroes because, perhaps, in ancient times, the level of conflict resolution among ethnic groups was only that high, meaning they only knew how to use muscle power to win. However, the stories overall highlight two things. Firstly, in the confrontation between Good and Evil, Good will ultimately win. Secondly, the supernatural world is real and still parallels the mortal world in every daily action. These two things are ideas that combine idealism and materialism today, worthy of being models for the whole world.

In particular, *Fengshen Bang* clearly states one thing: whether you fight for the righteous side or the unjust side, you will still be awarded the title of Genie (Gods) if you maintain the good qualities of a hero. This is clearly stated through the conflict between Chan Taoism Sect and Jie Taoism Sect. Due to disagreement on how to work, Chan Taoism Sect sent disciples help King Wen, which was considered righteous side, while Jie Taoism Sect helped King Zhou, which was unjust one. However, disciples of both sects were still awarded Godhood depending

on their merits, not just those in the righteous sects were granted Godhood and those in the evil sects were not. Even the villain Shen Gongbao, a disciple of Chan Taoism Sect but helping King Zhou, was a man with sinister plans, but was appointed as a Genie who governed two hot and cold streams of water in Eastern Sea.



Cầu Kho Temple, a Cao Đài Sect

In Cao Đài religion, there is a similar story. His Holiness Hộ Pháp, in the *Sacred Path of Eternal Life*, said that Mr Vương Quan Kỳ separated to form a sect and no longer obeyed the Tây Ninh Sacerdotal Council during his lifetime. According to the Eighth Cao Đài Decree, sects are considered heresy, so he should have fell from the Naihe Bridge. Nevertheless, he still safely crossed it. His Holiness Hộ Pháp said even though Mr. Vương Quan Kỳ followed a sect, he still practiced in the true sense, so he would still be recognized in Heaven.

Anyway, the philosophy worth learning here is that the ideas, doctrines, and methods in this world are not important. It is morality that is eternally respected in Heaven. Right or wrong in

the world cannot be determined by mortal knowledge. Right sect or wrong sect is not important, but how to practice religion ethically is important. Social reality shows that one person's righteousness is another person's evil and vice versa. Tangible phenomena in the world will be influenced by the times and eliminated after a certain period of time. This is in accordance with Cao Đài's divine message "*...the tangible can be destroyed, but the spiritual cannot ...*" August 4, 1926 TNHT QI. That philosophy is the characteristic of Cao Đài.

Paradox three. According to His Holiness Hộ Pháp in his speech on March 5, 1928, "*For the nguyên nhân⁴⁸, the Five Branches are like a five-step ladder, allowing us to climb to an equal position with our Master, that is, Buddha*". It is clear that His Holiness Hộ Pháp recognizes the hierarchy for Caodaist practitioners to follow. Specifically, from low to high, they are Sage, Genie, Saint, Immortal, and Buddha. Nevertheless, in the series of sermons on the Sacred Path of Eternal Life, He declared that there is no hierarchy at all for spirits (souls) in Heaven.

From His teachings, rank is only for mortals. Humans live by measuring and counting, so ranks have to be listed for them to understand. If it is said that "practicing religion" does not "achieve anything", then they cannot understand! Saying that is like telling the story of a black hole in the universe to a farmer. It is like the story of an overseas Vietnamese in the US eating

48 Cao Đài classifies humanity into three sections: nguyên nhân (people with original souls from God), hoá nhân (people with evolving souls) and quỷ nhân (people working for Satan)

phở and then throwing a bone to the dog. He was immediately sued by the dog's owner and had to be fined for giving their dog unhygienic food! Poor him! He does not understand that the habits in his home country are not suitable in other countries. Another example, numerous Asians burn joss paper, paper houses and paper cars, thinking their relatives in the Underworld will receive those things to use! They naively ignore the fundamental thing that the two worlds must be different both physically and mentally. In our world realm, it is nice to own a car, but in the Underworld, there is no way to travel by road!



Joss paper is burnt

So the levels of Genie, Saint, Immortal, and Buddha are just the finger pointing to the moon. Please look at the moon to see what it is, do not scrutinize the finger to see if it is beautiful or ugly.

As in the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, when monk Huiming chased the Sixth Patriarch to take his robe and bowl. The Sixth Patriarch left his bowl and robe on the rock and avoided him. Huiming saw the robe and bowl, but he could not lift them off the rock. Hopelessly, he knelt down, bowed and said, "*I came for the Dharma, not for the robe*". Then the Sixth Patriarch came out and preached the Dharma to him. Only when one no longer cares about the rank can he completely understand the teachings.

Conclusion

It is usually thought that the biggest impression about the Genie Branch in Cao Đài, is the novel *Fengshen Yanyi*. This is quite strange because the other four branches (Buddha, Immortal, Saint, Human) all left humanity several great scriptures, such as the Buddhist scriptures, the Holy Bible, the Four Books, the Five Classics, which teach people how to do good things and avoid evil practices. As for *Fengshen Yanyi*, it is a story about fighting to win status. Is it a prophecy for the Dragon and Flower Judgement Day of Earth 68 or even for Vietnam? Surely all Cao Đài followers know the holy saying "*Don't think Fengshen Yanyi imaginary ...*".

I think that is very likely the case because hatred, violence, war, tyrants, justice, and injustice exist everywhere today. Even though weapons now quickly kill more people, the origins of conflicts are still as old as in the *Fengshen Yanyi*. Even in the young Cao Đài religion, whose number of followers is not much compared to other religions, it is also divided into "Chan Taoism

Sect” and “Jie Taoism Sect” so that believers attack each other like enemies. Everyone always says they are right, but refuses to recognize that what is right today may be wrong tomorrow. If we believers keep doing that, it is unknown how long it will take to make peace even though every believer learns by heart the Holy Words and Scriptures and always teaches others to love and help each other! I also heard a rather funny story that at Holy Temple X, the facility is very spacious for about a hundred believers. However, they are divided into four conflicting factions, so only about a dozen of them come to monthly ceremonies. Perhaps we should re-read *Fengshen Yanyi* to reflect more on our behaviors?

Từ Chon

Sài Gòn, 15 September 2021

Fengshen Yanyi can be read or downloaded here:

<https://www.sachhayonline.com/tua-sach/phong-than-dien-nghia>

<https://peterpotter90.wordpress.com/2019/07/15/cac-nhan-vat-trong-phong-than/>