

# An Analysis of the Meaning Enshrined in the Architecture of the Tay Ninh Holy See of Cao Dai

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JDTREA 2022,2(1): 111-132

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*Journal of Daeseon Thought and the Religions of East Asia* Vol. 2. Issue1 (September 2022): 111–132

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<https://doi.org/10.25050/JDTREA.2022.2.1.111>

**Day of submission:** 2022. 03. 01.

**Completion of review:** 2022. 08. 15.

**Final decision for acceptance:** 2022. 08. 31.

P-ISSN: 2799-3949

E-ISSN: 2799-4252

## Abstract

In the 1920s, a new religion emerged in Tay Ninh Province, Southern Vietnam, under the name Caodaism; also known as the Third Universal Salvation of the Great Dao. It is the result of the typical combination of three main religions (Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism). Different ethnic groups populated Tay Ninh, such as Chinese, Khmer, Cham, and Kinh. Additionally, the core principle of Caodaism is known as The Three Religions Returned to the Origin, and it is also expanded as The Five Branches Reunited. The Five Branches are humankind's five ways of self-cultivation: the Way of Humans, the Way of Deities, the Way of Saints, the Way of Immortals, and the Way of Buddhas.

Although Caodaism was only founded in 1920, this religion is well known domestically and internationally. This is because Caodaism has a distinctive identity; it is a new religion that advocates a syncretistic combination of essential religious teachings that follow the harmonization and reconciliation between the East and West as well as between the past and present. Moreover, the Tay Ninh Holy See is the most important, first, and largest Cao Dai temple in Vietnam. The temple is located in Tay Ninh Province in southwestern Vietnam.

This article aims to introduce the Tay Ninh Holy See as the birthplace of Caodaism and as the largest Cao Dai religious palace, not only in Vietnam but also in other countries that practice Caodaism. A brief overview of Tay Ninh Holy See's origin, history, and planning will be provided. Most importantly, the style of the architecture at the Tay Ninh Holy See will be comprehensively analyzed to shed more light on the meaning of each section and the details of this temple structure.

**Keywords:** Tay Ninh Holy See of Caodaism; Caodaism; the Third Universal Salvation of the Great Dao; The three religions returned to the Origin; The Five Branches Reunited

## Introduction

Caodaism was formally established in 1926 in the South of Vietnam. It is considered one of the indigenous religions founded by Vietnamese people. This religion provides a mixed philosophy that includes three religions (Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism). This combining of religious thought is called “the Three Religions Returning to Their Origin (三教歸源)”, and “the Combination of the Five Branches (五支合一)”. In the Later, the five religions refer to Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, Confucianism, and Geniism. Caodaism is also called “The Great Way of The Third Amnesty Era (Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ, 大道三期普度)”, and this name has several connotations related to Caodaist soteriology. The following description of the eras can be summarized from Caodaist documents:

First revelation period: [before 2500 BCE] During the development of the Universe, Earth, and life, humankind was still under-developed. God revealed Himself to inspire selected religious leaders in different parts of the world to teach humans different ways to survive and develop. He selected religious leaders (prophets/founders) for each religion: Abraham was the founder of Judaism in the Middle East, Dipankara was the founder of proto-Buddhism in India, and Fu-xi (Vn: Phục Hy) was the founder figure of I Ching Thought (易經, Chn: Yi Jing), in China.

Second revelation period: [thousands of years later] When humans established the earliest forms of society, culture, and nationalism, God created Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Christianity, and other religions to bring order out of chaos, and to teach human different concepts of humanity, societies, and different sciences of truth.

Third revelation period: [third amnesty period] In the twentieth century and thereafter, when humans started to recognize the concept of democracy, globalization, worldwide communication, and shared knowledge. God started a new religion calling for religious unification and acceptance. In our modern days; however, people have not always lived in peace and harmony because of the multiplicity of religions. The Caodai religion was announced with the purpose of solving religious conflicts and bringing all religions back to their primordial unity. With that purpose, the Caodai religion emphasizes that all religions are from the same origin: The Supreme Being. Caodai highlights that all religions teach humans the very basic need of love and justice. Caodai stresses that different religions are just different forms of the same truth. Caodai teaches humans to believe in God, believe in humanity, and believe in self, and the key to strengthening that belief is to build up Love, Wisdom, and Inner Strength (Túy 2014).

The history of the Cao Dai religion mentions that the first member of Caodaism was Ngô Văn Chiêu (吳文昭), an official in the French Government at that time. He was influenced by the Minh Sư Đạo (a religion from the Ming Dynasty China that considered itself able to contact God), so he and his friends used a form of planchette writing

known as Cơ Bút (機筆) (Duc 2000) to communicate with invisible beings. When Cơ Bút was used to contact the invisible divine beings. They were taught by Đức<sup>1</sup> Chí Tôn (德志宗, a God of Caodaism) to establish the Cao Dai religion and enshrine the Divine Eye. They went to Tay Ninh to build a church.

Caodaism easily attracted many peasants to follow religious activities through its system of religious philosophy. In addition, the scriptures of Caodaism were written in the form of poems that alternated lines of six and eight syllables (詩六八, thơ lục bát). These poems were easy to read, understand, and learn, and this enabled people to easily become followers. Moreover, Caodaism always adhered to the beliefs and customs of the people, and did not force believers to abandon or restrict activities related to their traditional beliefs or customs. This ensured that people would feel comfortable about joining Caodaism. Therefore, the number of Caodaism followers grew rapidly in the South of Vietnam. In the first year of formation, the number of followers of Cao Dai reached 50,000 (1926). This number continued increasing, and the number of Caodaism followers was about 150,000 in 1928, 350,000 in 1931, about one million people in 1935, and about two million people in 1995. According to the Government's Religious Affairs Commission, by 2015, the number of followers of Cao Dai was 2.7 million. Currently, Caodaism in Vietnam includes Cao Đài Tiên Thiên, Cao Đài Ban Chính Đạo, Cao Đài Minh Chơn đạo, Cao Đài Minh Chơn lý, and the building that will be focused upon in this article is Cao Dai's Tay Ninh Holy See.

## The Architecture of Caodaism's Holy See

Tay Ninh Holy See is located in Tay Ninh province, in the south of Vietnam, approximately 100 km to the northwest of Ho Chi Minh City, and 8 km from Mount Ba Den. The interior of the church has an area of 100 acres, surrounded by 4,000m of brick-walled fences. There are 12 entrances built in Tam Quan style (3-gate style), decorated with lotuses and the Tú Linh (四靈), four animals with supernatural powers, namely, the dragon (龍, long), the East Asian 'unicorn' (麟, lân), turtle (龜, quy), and phoenix (鳳, phụng). The main gate is taller and wider than the other gates, and is decorated with the paintings of the two dragons fighting for a pearl, lotus flowers, and the three ancient dharmas: the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋, Xuân Thu), begging bowl (鉢盂, Bát Vu), and feather duster (拂塵, Phất Trần).

The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is the name of a Confucian book that posited a theory of Righteousness, Consistency, Concentration, and Great Spirit in order to live in harmony. The begging bowl is a container for food used by Buddhist monastics when collecting alms. The feather duster is tool used by the Daoist deity, Taishang Laojun (太上老君, Vn: Thái Thượng Lão Quân), the apotheosized version of Laozi, to eliminate the dust of the mundane world the covers the human spirit.

Prayer to God the Mother:

Urging all human races to unite behind one religion,  
God the Mother intends to bring back their conscience.

Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism

Unite to teach the true religion.

(Hiệp vạn chủng nhứt môn đồng mạch,

Qui thiên lương quyết sách vạn trù.

Xuân Thu, Phát Chủ, Bát Vu,

Hiệp qui Tam giáo hữu cầu Chí Chơn.)

Cao Dai directed these three ancient symbols to emphasize the unity of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism in the Great Religion on the main gate. There is a straight path that leads the east to the temple from the main gate which is inscribed with a couple of statements on the principles of Cao Dai:

CAO THƯỢNG CHÍ TÔN ĐẠI ĐẠO HÒA BÌNH DÂN CHỦ MỤC  
ĐÀI TIỀN SÙNG BÁT TAM KỶ CỘNG HƯỞNG TỰ DO QUYỀN.

This can be roughly translated as:

THE GREAT WAY OF THE SUPREME BEING - PEACE AND HARMONY- DEMOCRACY  
THE THIRD AMNESTY ERA - FREEDOM AND LIBERTY - HUMANITY

高上至尊大道和平民主目

臺前崇拜三期共享自由權.

*Explanation:* This religion is above all and opens a great, harmonious, and equal path towards democracy. The couplet praises the worship of Cao Dai during the third era of amnesty as a time to enjoy freedom.

From the main gate to the Holy Temple, there are three stupas containing the body of the Đức Hộ Pháp, in the middle, and Buddhism's Highest Paradise (上品, Thượng Phẩm) and Upper Life (上生, Thượng sanh) on each side. The Towers were sculpted with many subtle patterns and shapes of the Bagua (八卦, *Vn*: bát quái).

Crossing the towers, we can see the Great Terrace of Universal Fraternity (大同社, Đại Đồng Xã) yard with the statue of Prince Siddhartha riding a horse to find truth, followed by Channa, his servant. Next is the tower named Nine Heavens (九重天, Cửu Trùng Thiên). The trigrams with 9 steps are painted in yellow, blue, and red colors. Nearby is an ancient Bodhi Tree cultivated by Thera Narada with seedlings from Bodhidharma (1953). In Bodhgaya, Prince Siddhartha became the Enlightened Śākyamuni Buddha.



Figure 1: A tomb comprised of three stupas, the middle of which enshrines the remains of Đức Hộ Pháp and the other two signify Buddhism's Highest Paradise and Upper Life.

The two sides of the Great Terrace of Universal Fraternity have two paths leading to the Temple. A few meters away from the Bodhi Tree, there is a banner (same as flag) with a height of 18m, a length of 12m (its leaf roll), and a width of 1.2m. The banner is embroidered the two dragons flanking the sun. The body of flat has three yellow, green, and red stripes. In the middle of the green area, there are the Divine Eye (天眼 Thiên nhãn) and Three Ancient Dharmas and the six Chinese characters: 大道三期普度 (Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ The Great Way of The Third Amnesty Era).

The brick yard behind the banner and the Bodhi Tree is called the Great Terrace of Universal Fraternity. The name shows the spirit of humanity and the spirit of co-existence as the means to live peacefully.

### *Size of the Tay Ninh Holy See*

Based on its designation, the platform is 1.8 m high, 27m wide, and 135m long. Hiệp Thiên Đài (協天臺, The Communion Tower) is 27 m long, with a bell tower, and a floor that is 36 m high. Cửu Trùng Đài (九重臺, The Nine Level Tower) is 81m long, with a round tower in the middle called Nghinh Phong Đài (迎封臺, Dome of Canonization) that is 25 m high. Bát Quái Đài (八卦臺, The Octagonal Tower) is a 27m long, 30m high tower. In reality, because believers were poor at the time of establishment, the church faced financial difficulties that hampered it being built as it was designed (Nguyễn 2021). Consequently, the size of church was reduced. Its actual measurements are 22m wide and 97.5 m long. Specifically, Hiệp Thiên Đài is 13.5m long, Cửu Trùng Đài is 63m long, and Bát Quái Đài is 21m long.

## General Description of the Tay Ninh Holy See

Overall, the shape of Cao Dai's Tay Ninh Holy See appears similar to Long Mã Bái Su (龍馬拜師, the mythical dragon horse bowing to the master). The mythical dragon horse is the legendary spirit that carried Hà Đồ (河圖, the river map) on its leg, which further alludes to Fuxi's drawing of the Eight Trigrams of Prior Heaven (八卦先天圖, Bát Quái Tiên Thiên). Traditionally, Fuxi is considered the originator of the I Ching, and this work is attributed to his reading of the Yellow River Map. According to this tradition, Fuxi had the arrangement of the trigrams of the I Ching revealed to him in the markings on the back of a mythical dragon horse (sometimes said instead to be a tortoise) that emerged from the Luo River. This arrangement precedes the compilation of the I Ching during the Zhou dynasty. This discovery is said to have been the origin of calligraphy. Fuxi is also credited with the invention of the musical instrument known as the Guqin, though this is sometimes instead credited to either Shennong or the Yellow Emperor.

When thought of like this, the dragon horse's head is looking due west. Two bell-towers were built like two sharp horns. Located between the two bell-towers, the building with the ground floor called, 'Tịnh Tâm Đài' (淨心臺, Palace of pure heart), looks like the Dragon Horse's mouth.

The second floor, Phi Tưởng Đài (飛想臺, Palace of Thoughts in Flight Platform or Thông Thiên Đài, 通天臺, Palace of Direct Access to the Highest Authority), is like the forehead and the two doors are like the Dragon Horse's eyes. The middle point is The Divine Eye. Above this, there is a statue of the Maitreya sitting on a tiger's back and a lotus.

The Dragon Horse's Tail is the Bát Quái Đài, leading to the East. The body of Dragon Horse is located in the middle of the Temple (the Cửu Trùng Đài, Octagonal Divine Palace) and is divided into nine sections gradually rising from the front to the back. This middle structure connects Hiệp Thiên Đài and Bát Quái Đài.

### I. The Front of the Holy See

Overall, the Holy See looks magnificent as it has an impressive length of 97.5 meters and width of 22 meters. The main gate is in the west with the bell-tower called Bạch Ngọc Chung Đài (白玉鐘臺, The Tower of the White Jade Bell) on the left, with the other tower called Lôi Âm Cổ Đài (雷音鼓臺, The Tower of the Drum of Thunder) on the right. Both towers are 27m high, having 6 floors of differing heights, with short roofs that divide the floors.

The ground floor (first floor) of the two towers has two large rectangular frames with two Chinese characters: Cao (高, High) on the right tower and Đài (臺, Throne) on the left. Above this frame, there are four circular boxes with Chinese characters that identify each tower by name, Bạch ngọc chung đài (白玉鐘臺) and Lôi âm cổ đài (雷音鼓臺) respectively.

The second floor of the bell is covered with the statue of Đức Quyền Giáo Tông (德權教宗 The Acting Pope), wearing the religious uniform of the Church while standing on a globe and holding a celestial book (天書, Thiên Thư) in his right hand. On the second floor of the right tower, we can see the statue of Đầu Sư Hương Thanh (頭師香青, the Female Cardinal Hương Thanh) in uniform, standing on a globe, and holding a branch of a tree in her right hand and a flower basket in her left hand. These are two great dignitaries who contributed to publicizing the religion as well as building the Holy See.

The third floor has a lower ceiling smaller height, meanwhile the fourth floor has the highest ceiling. There is a large drum called Lô Âm Cổ Đài and a big bell called Bạch Ngọc Chung Đài on the fourth floor.

On the top of the bell, under the lightning rod, there is a statue of a wine gourd. This image represents the law of the Li Tiezhuo (李鐵拐, *Vn*: Thiết Quả Lý), the past life of the Acting Pope.

On the top of the right tower, there is a picture of a blue flower basket symbolizing Longnü (龍女 *Vn*: Long Nữ) (an attendant of the Bodhisattva, 觀世音菩薩 Avalokiteśvara - *Vn*: Quan Thế Âm Bồ Tát). This character was originally the spirit of the Female Cardinal Hương Thanh.

Right at the main door, there are four pillars in the front and each side has two parallel columns: a red dragon and a lotus flower, with highly detailed carvings, and vibrant colors. The statues display the words Hội Long Hoa (The Universal Judgement; also known as the Dragon Flower Assembly- 會龍花) (Hoskins 2010).

The Universal (General) Judgement is a judgement scene after humanity's movement of learning and evolution. This will be held by the Maitreya. Those who pass the judgement via merit examination may become Gods, Saints, Immortals, or Buddha. Those who do not have enough merit for those positions will survive to become Thượng Ngươn Thánh Đức (上元聖德), minor saints in the era of the recurrence of the first cycle (out of the cyclical rotation of the first, middle, and last cycles). And those who do not pass then will have to wait for the beasts to evolve to become newcomers to coexist at the start of a new cycle. That waiting period can last for millions of years. Before the opening of the Universal Judgement, there will be a final judgment. After that intense upheaval, the Earth will return to tranquility.

In order to enter the Holy Temple, one must climb over Five Steps. The Five Steps represent the Five Great Paths and the five evolutionary steps of humanity: Man, God, Holy, Immortal, Buddha. After walking these steps, we can see the Balance of Righteousness as judgement is conferred upon various entities such as each person and each nation.

On the right is the statue of the Good Genius (善神, Thiện Thần) who is clad in armor and a Golden Helmet (金盔, kim khôi). He holds a large sword and has a gentle



expression on his face that symbolizes goodness (a righteous mind). On the left is the statue of the Evil Genius (惡神, Ác Thần) who is also dressed in armor but has a fierce expression. In one hand, he holds a hammer, and in the other hand, he holds a jade seal symbolizing wickedness.

Above the four pillars of the dragon, there is a semicircle built in a half-moon shape, named Lao Động Đài (勞動臺, the Palace of Labor), with an image of the traditional eight professions in society: Officials, Farmers, Laborers, Merchants, Fishermen, Firewood Gatherers, Ploughers, and Scholars (仕農工商漁樵耕讀, Sĩ, Nông, Công, Thương, Ngũ, Tiều, Canh, & Độc). This conveys the meaning that whatever one is and wherever one goes, all return to the Church to be blessed.

The religious flag is hung in the middle of the balcony. The Cao Dai flag has three colors: yellow at the top, blue in the middle, and red at the bottom. The yellow part is embroidered with six words in Chinese characters that identify the full name of the Cao Dai order: ĐẠI ĐẠO TAM KỶ PHỔ ĐỘ (大道三期普度). The blue part is embroidered with the Divine Eye and the three ancient dharmas. The bottom is red which represents Confucianism whereas the previous colors, yellow and blue, correspond to Buddhism and Daoism respectively.

In the middle of two bell-towers, there is a statue of the Divine Eye, symbolizing the almighty, eternal God. The two sides of the Divine Eye have two sentences in Chinese characters.

HIỆP NHẬP CAO ĐÀI BÁ TÁNH THẬP PHƯƠNG QUI CHÁNH QUẢ  
 THIÊN KHAI HUỖNH ĐẠO NGŨ CHI TAM GIÁO HỘI LONG HOA  
 協入高臺百姓十方歸正果  
 天開黃道五枝三教會龍花

Meaning:

Participating in Cao Dai, all people worship the right religion.  
 God opens a great religion, and all religions unite in Long Hoa  
 (Universal Judgement).

Above these two sentences, there are two Chinese characters: to the right is Nhân (仁, benevolence), and to the left is Nghĩa (義, righteousness). Together that are a key Cao Dai concept that promotes the following:

NHƠN BỐ TỬ PHƯƠNG ĐẠI ĐẠO DĨ NHƠN HÙNG XÃ TẮC,  
 NGHĨA BAN VẠN ĐẠI TAM KỶ TRỌNG NGHĨA CHẤN SƠN HÀ.  
 仁布四方大道以仁興社稷  
 義頒萬代三期重義振山河

### Meaning:

A benevolent heart spreads all over the four directions,  
the Cao Dai religion is heart-warming and flourishes throughout the country.

For the eternal meaning, Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ considers it important to make the country more prosperous. On the two words Benevolence and Righteousness (仁義, Nhân Nghĩa), there is a row of Chinese characters and a row of Vietnamese words, are all written: Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ.

Above all this, right in the middle of these words, Three Ancient Dharmas are depicted: a begging bowl representing Buddhism, a feather duster representing Daoism, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* representing Confucianism.

The inside of the second floor of Hiệp Thiên Đài is Tiều Diêu Điện (逍遙殿, the Palace of Wandering). Here, the dignitary Đại Thiên Phong (大天封, The Great Dignity) attempted to connect to God by using automatic writing.

On the roof of the Tiều Diêu Điện, there is a statue of Maitreya sitting on the back of a tiger to celebrate the Year of the Tiger, the year that Caodaism was founded. The Chinese characters commonly used for Maitreya's name (彌勒, Vn: Di lặc) are meant to transliterate (approximate the phonics) the name such that it begins with an M sound<sup>2</sup> and has a L or R sound in the second syllable. Less commonly, his name was also translated for its meaning as Từ Thị (慈氏, 'of the compassionate lineage'), and this is also related to the word, Từ Ái (慈愛), from the Sanskrit word *maitrī*, meaning to 'affectionately love.' In Buddhist scriptures, it is said that Maitreya teaches the dharma in a heavenly realm and will someday incarnate as the future Buddha. Some traditions hold that he has had several incarnations to assist in the development of Buddhism, such as incarnating as the East Asian Yogācāra (唯識宗, Duy Thức Tông or 唯心宗, Duy Tâm Tông) at the beginning of the fourth century. Chinese paintings of Maitreya often depict him as round, happy, and fat and surrounded by children. These are images of the Monk Budai (布袋和尚, Bồ Đại Hòa Thượng), an incarnation of Maitreya in the 10th century. Paintings in North India and Tibet often draw him with his hand turning the dharma wheel, meaning that when he appears in the world, he will turn the wheel of dharma again to save all sentient beings. On the other hand, according to the Caodaism, the Supreme God (德志尊, Đức Chí Tôn) established the Cao Dai religion and will bring all people to the Universal Judgement where Maitreya-Buddha will act as the chief judge and instruct people on Hòa Đồng (living in harmony), Bác ái (博愛, Universal fraternity), and how to live as Thượng Ngươn Thánh Đức, those who live with all others in great mutualistic tolerance.

Going up five steps, we will enter into Tịnh Tâm Palace, a place for dignitaries and followers to calm down and develop a spirit of purity before entering to observe the ceremony. The mural depicting the Tam Thánh (三聖, The Three Saints) can also be

viewed here. Tam Thánh are the three Saints in Bạch Vân Đông (白雲洞, The White Lodge). The three figures are as follows:

Đức Thanh Sơn Chơn Nhơn (德青山真人), during his incarnation wherein he was born in Vietnam, he was the historical figure Trạng Trình Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (狀程阮秉謙). In Caodaism's depiction of him in the wall mural, he wrote eight Chinese characters as follows:

THIÊN THƯỢNG, THIÊN HẠ - BÁC ÁI, CÔNG BÌNH  
天上, 天下 - 博愛, 公平

The next saint is Đức Nguyệt Tâm Chơn Nhơn (德月心真人), who incarnated in France as the great writer Victor Hugo. In the mural, he is shown holding a quill and writing the French words that correspond to the previously written Chinese verse:

DIEU et HUMANITÉ – AMOUR et JUSTICE  
GOD and People - LOVE and JUSTICE

Đức Trung Sơn Chơn Nhân (德中山真人), in his past life in China, was the revolutionary, Sun Yat Sen (孫逸仙) who initially founded a democracy for China. He used the ink of radiance, symbolizing the harmony between Eastern and Western culture based on the ancient philosophy of Confucianism (Hartney 2015).

These three Saints signed on behalf of the gods a peace agreement between God and humanity. This treaty is quite simple and only contains only four characters or three words in French:

BÁC ÁI – CÔNG BÌNH  
博愛 – 公平  
AMOUR et JUSTICE

*Love and Justice*, are two qualities God requires people to embody in order to be blessed. If someone does not embody them and acts contrary to them, they will be punished without any recourse. Those who aim to the agreement, must find ways to serve the people while helping and supporting the poor. This treaty is believed by Caodaists to have been signed from the day God opened Caodaism to extend Great Amnesty to various types of people. The brief Introduction to Cao Dai's Three-Saints is known as a symbol for building a bridge to harmonize the Eastern and Western philosophies.

From the Tịnh Tâm Palace, there is the path leading to the floor of Hiệp Thiên Đài, where the altars of the Hiệp Thiên Đài dignitaries are placed. In front of the altars, there is a place where people celebrate the ceremony. From Hiệp Thiên Đài, there are two

pathways leading to a bell and a drum floor. Each floor has a large window to allow the bell and drum to reverberate loudly in the air.

## II. Inside the Church

### *Hiệp Thiên Đài* (協天臺, Palace of meeting between God and Mankind)

There are two doors going into the Temple from Tịnh Tâm Palace. The inner room is divided into three spaces. In the middle is the main hall, the right side is for the male sorcerer to worship, the left is for the female followers.

Behind the statues of Tam Thánh, we can see:

The statue of Đức Hộ Pháp Phạm Công Tắc (德護法范公稷, The Maintainer of the Rules and Laws) is in the middle of two senior dignitaries of the Caodaist Judicial Body. Đức Hộ Pháp wears a robe, stands on a lotus, a seven-headed snake is under his legs, and he holds a Kim Tiên (金鞭, Golden whip) in his right hand.

The statue of Đức Thượng Phẩm Cao Quỳnh Cư (德上品高瓊居) appears on the right side of Đức Hộ Pháp. He stands on the lotus in front of the Identification Banner of the Thượng Phẩm (幡上品, Phướn Thượng Phẩm), wears a robe, in his right hand he holds the Dragon-Beard Fan (龍須扇, Long Tu Phiến) with a Feather-Duster of Sanctification (拂塵, phật chủ) on its end, and in his left hand he holds a string of beads called Mercy (慈悲, Từ Bi). The statue of Đức Thượng Sanh Cao Hoài Sang (德上生高懷創) is placed on the left of Đức Hộ Pháp. He stands on the lotus in front of the the Identification Banner of the Thượng Sanh (幡上生, Phướn Thượng Sanh). He wears a uniform, and in his right hand he holds a Feather-Duster of Sanctification. In his left hand he holds a string of beads called Mercy, and he has Thử Hùng Kiếm (雌雄劍, a pair of swords) on his back.

Đức Hộ Pháp stands on a lotus flower with two snake heads wrapped around the lotus below his feet. One head has the Chinese character “Nộ” (怒, Anger) and the other has “Ai” (哀, Sorrow). Two other heads, lower and near the base of the raised platform that the lotus is on top of have the characters “Ố” (惡, Hate) and “Dục” (欲, Desire). Altogether, those four heads symbolize the four negative emotions that must be controlled. There are also the snake’s heads that rise upward and indicate the positive emotion that should be fostered: “Hi” (喜, Pleasure), “Ái” (愛, Love), and “Lạc” (樂, Joy) (Nguyễn 2021). The snake's main head wraps under the statue of Đức Hộ Pháp, the middle of snake wraps under Đức Thượng Phẩm, and the snake’s tail wraps around the pedestal underneath Đức Thượng Sanh.

Đức Hộ Pháp Phạm Công Tắc is the head of the Dharma. Đức Thượng Phẩm Cao Quỳnh Cư is the head of matters in the Dao realm such as assisting spirits in attaining heavenly promotion. Đức Thượng Sanh Cao Hoài Sang is the head of matters in the worldly realm, and helps living beings during their earthly existence.

On the wall behind the statue of Đức Hộ Pháp, there was a somewhat abstract rendering of the Chinese character “KHÍ” (Vapor, breath, internal energy, qi 氣) with the meaning of “THỜ KHÍ SANH QUANG” (祭氣生光, the wielding of qi produce luminosity). KHÍ is held to be the origin of the Dharma that creates all things. All Dharma (natural laws and phenomena) that monitors the universe originated from KHÍ. Wooden plaques on each side of the word KHÍ deliver the following verses:

PHẠM GIÁO TÙYNGƯỜN, CỨU THẾ ĐỘ NHƠN HÀNH CHÁNH PHÁP.  
MÔN QUYỀN ĐỊNH HỘI, TRỪ TÀ DIỆT MỊ HỘ CHƠN TRUYỀN.  
梵教隨緣, 救世度人行正法  
門權定會, 除邪滅魅護真傳

### Meaning

The Buddha taught that us to save the lives of people and to perform  
the righteous dharma.

The power of the Dao eradicates all forms of misconduct and protects  
authentic dharma-transmissions.

Hiệp Thiên Đài is the authority with the aims to communicate with and help people connect to God. Hiệp Thiên Đài is a Dharma agency and a bridge between the world (Cửu Trùng Đài) and God, Holy Entities, Immortals (transcendents)<sup>3</sup>, and the Buddha (Bát Quái Đài).

### *The Nine Level Tower (Cửu Trùng Đài)*

Inside the Temple, there are 28 dragon columns that symbolize the 28 stars (servants of God) of Bạch Ngọc Kinh (白玉京, the White Jade Palace) who worship God. The dragon columns are painted blue, red, and white to symbolize the three periods of universal salvation. The first period, Thanh Dương Đại Hội (青陽大會, the Great Assembly of Blue Yang), was held to judge the virtue and merit of the spiritual practices of human beings. This assembly was chaired by Dipamkara Buddha (燃燈佛, Nhiên Đăng Phật).

The second period, Hồng Dương Đại Hội (紅陽大會, the Great Assembly of Red Yang), was chaired by Amitābha Buddha. The third period, Bạch Dương Đại Hội (白陽大會, the Great Assembly of White Yang), will be managed by the Maitreya.

Therefore, the white dragons under Càn Khôn (乾坤, Heaven and Earth) allude to the time of Bạch Dương, and the golden dragon pillar (黃龍, Huỳnh Long) symbolizes the Buddhas who will attend The Universal Judgement.

Cửu Trùng Đài is in the middle area that connects to Hiệp Thiên Đài and Bát Quái Đài. Cửu Trùng Đài has nine steps each of which is seven meters in length, and each gap between the steps is 18cm. Each step is separated by two blue dragon columns. In total, there are 18 columns that stand in parallel rows.

Nine steps of Cửu Trùng Đài correspond to the following nine hierarchical positions: believers (信徒, Tín-Đồ), minor dignitaries (職事, Chức Sắc), religious village administrators (通事, Thông-Sự), student-priests (禮生, Lễ-Sanh), Priests (教友, Giáo-hữu), Bishops (教師, Giáo-Sư), Cardinals (頭師, Đầu-Sư), Legalist Cardinals (掌法, Chuồng-Pháp), and the Pope (教宗, Giáo-Tông).

The ceiling is painted in blue to symbolize a blue sky with white clouds and hundreds of stars. In the middle, there are six dragons (two yellow, two blue, and two red), surrounded by blue paint. This image is taken from a verse in the Ngọc Hoàng Kinh (玉皇經, Jade Emperor Scripture): Thời thừa lục long (時乘六龍), du hành bất tức (遊行不息). Meaning: God often dwells on six dragons and traveling around the universe continually without rest. The six dragons are also associated with Yang and Heaven. This symbolizes Daoism ability to unlimitedly spread around the world.

The priests often worship in the middle of the temple. The laity separate into male and female groups and kneel on separate sides. Two sides with flat ceilings feature paintings of the four animals with supernatural powers: the Dragon, the East Asian 'Unicorn,' the Turtle, and the Phoenix. These symbols match the dragons in the colonnade.

From the platform of Bát Quái Đài counting downwards, the sixth step is the place for lay believers. At this level, there are two lecture halls, one for males and one for female followers on separate sides. The sides are structured by a dragon column with six legs holding up the lecture halls. Lay believer are considered to be individuals who have overcome the temptations of the senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mental phenomena - 色, 聲, 香, 味, 觸, 法) and understand clearly all of the teachings related to the performance of universal tasks.

Both sides of the Temple are painted with lotus flowers in a rectangular frame, there is a triangular frame painted with the Divine Eye in the middle. This frame has many mystical meanings:

- The Divine Eye symbolizes Thái cực (太極, Supreme Polarity; Tai Ji).
- The triangle symbolizes Tam Giáo Đồng Nguyên (三教同原, the three religions originated from the same source).
- The lotus flowers that appear above and below symbolize the Yin and Yang (陰陽, Yin: Âm Dương) as lưỡng nghi (兩儀, the two opposing principles of nature).
- The four lotus fruits on both sides symbolize the Tứ tượng (四象, four divisions of the sky into groups of seven mansions).
- The eight lotus leaves symbolize the Eight Trigrams.
- Twelve branches of the lotuses symbolize the Thập nhị Khai Thiên (十二開天, twelve openings heaven).

The lotus symbolizes human life and also the life of the Great Universe. Occult philosophy teaches that the elements of the lives of both humans and universe are similar and are to be developed in the same direction. By way of analogy, lotus roots sink in mud which is comparable to material life. The body of the lotus come up through the water, and this is like the sensuality of life. Lastly, the flower floats on top of the water and opens toward the sky. This is comparable to the spirituality of life.

The contiguous part of Bát Quái Đài has seven gold-painted thrones placed in the following order:

- The first throne: Giáo Tông painted with a dragon.
- The second throne: Chưởng Pháp with a phoenix.
- The third throne: Đầu Sư with a unicorn.

Seven thrones are blocked by a highly flexible gold-plated dragon vase. Two sides of the throne were designed to feature two rows of Lỗ bộ Bửu Pháp (鹵簿寶法, imperial regalia and dharmic treasures) of Bát Tiên (八仙, the Eight Immortals).

### ***The Octagonal Tower (Bát Quái Đài)***

The Bát Quái (八卦, Chn: bagua) are eight trigrams that can be combined to represent all things through combination of yin and yang. This is a simple symbolic system meant to represent all phenomena in the universe, nature, and human life via sixty-four (8x8) dual hexagrams made from combinations of trigrams. Building a Bát Quái space to worship God emphasizes the meaning of God as the Creator who utilized cosmic wisdom during Creation.

Bát Quái Đài has 12 steps, each with a height of 10cm and each containing eight edges. These are stacked to form a pyramidal shape. The twelve steps represent the twelve heavens. According to the Cao Dai doctrine, God is the Thập Nhị Khai Thiên (the One who opened Heaven into twelve; twelve being a number that demarcates Heaven). The first step is 2.4m above the ground and the top step is 3.6m above the ground (it increases in multiples of twelve).

The level adjacent to the Cửu Trùng Đài is called the Cung Đạo (宮道 - The Seance<sup>4</sup> Spot). The roof of Cung Đạo decorated with a sky and a white ovular clouds surrounded by twelve long auric rays that alternate with twenty-four short auric rays. Inside, there is a picture of the Divine Eye, a male statue symbolizing humanity, and the Đại Ngọc Cơ & Tiểu Ngọc Cơ (大玉機 小玉機, The Great Apparatus and the Small Apparatus)<sup>5</sup> with the letters from the latin alphabet, a three-legged table, and a sortilege tube. All of the aforementioned are the means of enabling communication between the humans and divine entities in the invisible realm. In the beginning, it is held that God used these means to teach new doctrines.

Aside from the above pictures, there is a book, and a black board showing the three lines written in Chữ Nôm (𣪠喃, a combination of Chinese characters and native

Vietnamese characters that appear similar to Chinese but are used to represent native Vietnamese words). Those three lines are as follows:

Muôn kiếp có ta nắm chủ quyền  
Vui lòng tu niệm hưởng ân Thiên  
Đạo mầu rưới khắp...  
萬劫有些握主權  
樂心修念得享恩天  
道牟灑處...

We have sovereignty over time.  
Please meditate to be blessed by Heaven.  
Our religion will become ubiquitous.

There is also a stack of papers written in the Chữ Nôm:

Viết thử Thiên Thơ với nét trần  
Hầu sau bền giữ nghiệp Hồng Quân  
Chuyển luân thế sự...  
寫些天書眾涅槃  
侯婁紆佇業鴻君  
轉輪世事...

Writing Heaven's Notice with the pen of life.  
Keeping strongly Hong Quan (a deified version of Lao Zi)<sup>6</sup>  
To turn the wheel of dharma even in mundane matters...

A hand holding a brush is coming out from a cloud :

Ký thành một cuốn gọi Thiên-thơ.  
Khai Đạo muôn năm trước định giờ,  
Mau bước phải gìn...  
記成又卷噲天書  
開道開年前定時  
毛腳沛塵

Writing a book called *Thiên thơ* (Heaven's Notice).  
Opening a new religion  
for the preservation of the Dao...

The front and upper sides of the Cung Đạo have an M-shaped diaphragm casting, statues of the Masters of Tam Giáo, Tam Trấn (三鎮, The Three Governors), and the Ngũ Chi Đại Đạo (五支大道, five religious branches of the Great Way). The top row has the three Patriarchs: Lao Zi, Śākyamuni Buddha, and Confucius.



The middle row is the Tam Trấn: Avalokiteśvara, Li Bai (李太白, Vn: Lý Thái Bạch), Guan Yu (關聖帝君, Vn: Quan Thánh Đế Quân). These three masters represent the three types of Bi (悲, compassion), Trí (智, wisdom), Dũng (勇, Courage) of Tam Giáo. The bottom row includes Jésus Christ and Jiang Ziya (薑尚子牙, Vn: Khương Thượng Tử Nha).

The placing of these masters does not indicate a hierarchy. From Śākyamuni upwards, the representatives of the Five Great Paths are: Buddhism (Śākyamuni), Daoism (Li Bai), Catholicism (Jesus Christ), Geniism (Jiang Ziya), the Religion of Sages (Giáo Tông-Caodaism's Pope) (Hoskins 2010).

The left diaphragm worships Bát Tiên. The diaphragm on the right of the church worships Thất Thánh (七聖, Seven Saints).

The back part of the Bát Quái Đài enshrines Quả Càn Khôn (果乾坤, The Celestial Sphere), in the east of the Temple. On the Celestial Sphere are two hexagrams from the Yi Jing (易經<sup>7</sup> – Vn: Kinh Dịch, *The Book of Changes*), symbolizing Heaven and Earth. The Celestial Sphere symbolizes the universe of Ngọc Hoàng (玉皇, The Jade Emperor, God).

The Celestial Sphere is a blue structure with a diameter of 3.3m and features 3,072 stars that symbolize the Tam Thiên Thế giới (三千世界, Three thousand worlds) and the Thất Thập Nhị Địa (七十二地, The seventy-two Earths). In this cosmology, the Earth that humanity currently resides on is the 68th Earth. The Divine Eye was painted on the Bắc Đẩu (北鬥, the polar star) Constellation. The lamp is placed at the heart of the globe symbolizing the crown of the Taiji (太極, Vn: Thái Cực, Yin and Yang).

In front of the Celestial Sphere is the altar where 12 objects are placed:

- The Divine Eye.
- One Thái Cực Đăng (太極燈, The Monad lamp) (the lamp always burns, symbolizing the cosmic soul).
- Two lights on each side that symbolize Yin and Yang (negative - positive).
- One flower vase (symbolizing TINH - 精 - Essence) and one fruit plate.
- three glasses of wine (symbolizing KHÍ - 氣 - Vitality).
- One cup of tea (symbolizing THẦN - 神 - Spirit) and one cup of cold water (Yin and Yang water).
- One incense burner.

During worshiping, five incense sticks are burned and put into two rows: the inside row contains three sticks, as does the outside two. The five incense sticks symbolize the movement of the five phases to allow the universe to be conditioned and flourish. During cultivation practice, cultivators must go through five stages of practice: Giới (戒, the Observance of Prohibitions), Định (定, Meditative Contemplation), Huệ (慧, Wisdom), Tri kiến (知見, Seeing and Knowing) and Giải thoát (解脫, Extrinsication).

TINH, KHÍ, THẦN are the three treasures for humankind:

- TINH is the body birthed to us by our parents. As such, it also called the first body.
- KHÍ is our mind, and is also known as the second body or the spiritual body.

This body is given by the Buddha-Mother.

- THẦN is a sacred element that is undeniable. It is also known as the third body, and it is given by the Supreme God, ĐỨC CHÍ TÔN. Thanks to the Chơn Linh (真靈, The Soul), humans are wiser and more knowledgeable than all other beings.

In the same way that God has the three treasures of NHẬT (日, the sun), NGUYỆT (月, moon), and TINH (星, stars) and land has the three treasures of THỦY (水, Water), HỎA (火, Fire), and PHONG (風, Wind), humans have TINH, KHÍ, and THẦN (精, 氣, 神).

There are four designated times for daily worship:

TÝ (子, The Hours of the Rat), NGỌ (午, The Hours of the Horse), MỆO (卯, The Hours of the Cat; elsewhere in East Asia, this is known as the Hours of the Rabbit), DẬU (酉, The Hours of the Rooster). At these times, believers will wear long white robes, while dignitaries have uniforms that comply with the provisions of the PHÁP CHÁNH TRUYỀN (法正傳, The religious constitutional laws of Caodaism).

The wine offering ceremony must start at TÝ (at 12 PM) because that is believed to be the time when the atmosphere of the Heaven and Earth is prosperous and when peoples' minds are clear. The Tea offering ceremony must be at MỆO (6 AM) and DẬU (6 PM) because that is held to be the time of prosperity. During those hours, the spirit of worshippers is said to be easy to keep calm. Under the Celestial Sphere are the grouping of gods mentioned previously in the sub-section **Palace of Nine Divine Planes** in Section B. Below the Celestial Sphere, there is a cellar containing the ashes of the great dignitaries.

### III. Outside of the Temple

Each side of the Holy See has six doors. The steps up to those doors were built like stairs with the statue of KIM MAO HẦU (金毛獅, The holy yellow lion) on two sides. The roof of the Cửu Trùng Đài has red tiles where Nghinh Phong Đài is located. Cửu Trùng Đài was built to a height 17m. The lower part is a square, and the upper part is a dome reminiscent of Islamic architecture (Hoskins 2010). The Dragon-Horse statue is placed on a globe, and that image depicts Hà Đổ coming to the West and turning to the East. This is because Asia was the birth place of many religions. As it is said, “Đạo phát ư Đông, di ư Tây, phản hồi ư Đông” (道出於東, 移於西, 返回於東, New religion comes from the East, moves to the West, and then returns back to the East).

The eaves of Cửu Trùng Đài are decorated with vines of grapes. On those vines, the pictures of double birds flying on the sea at dawn are painted. Jesus once preached: “I am the vine; you are the branches (*John 15*).” He gives life and fertility to us. Grape vines and the fruit they bear symbolize the Chơn Thân (真身, The real body). Grape juice symbolizes the Spirit, and the wine represents the Soul.

The roof of Bát Quái Đài is 30m high with yellow tiles, and has a statue of Tam Thế Phật (三世佛, The Trinity of Brahmanism but as Buddhas) built atop it. Brahma

Buddha looks to the West, stands on the back of a Swan, has one hand pressed, and his left hand holds a precious pearl. Chrisna Buddha (Krishna), an incarnation of Vishnu Buddha, faces south, stands on flood dragon (蛟龍, giao long), has a hand on one hip, and hold a sword in the other. Buddha Civa (Siva) looks to the North, stands on a seven-headed snake, and plays a flute.

The Trinity of Brahmanism symbolizes three aspects of God: creation, preservation, and destruction. This can also be seen as the universe's circulatory wheel. According to Caodaism, humankind is in the era of Hạ Ngươn Tam Chuyển (下元三轉, The Last Cycle of the Third Manvantara), the time of the Dharma. Caodaism was founded with the aim of enlightening people, opening an era of harmony, and creating synergies and universal fraternity (大同, Đại đồng). The Church considers it as Thượng Ngươn Thánh Đức, a return to the lives of great holiness. Behind the Holy See, there are rows of houses harmoniously arranged in the figuration of the Chinese character for mountain, "SON" (山).

### **Other Architectural Works in the Inner Quarter of Cao Dai's Holy See**

In the inner quarter of Cao Đài Tây Ninh, there are many other architectural works such as Hạnh Đường (行堂, School for Training Dignitaries, where the meetings and openings of the monastic training courses are held), the Giáo Tông Đường (教宗堂, The Office of the Pope), Hộ Pháp Đường (護法堂, The Office of Hộ Pháp), Nữ Đầu Sư Đường (女頭師堂, The Office of the Female Cardinal), the working house of agency of Hiệp Thiên Đài (The Communion Tower), Cửu Trùng Đài, All Souls House (萬靈, Vạn Linh), the North Division (北宗, Bắc Tông), The Central Division (中宗, Trung Tông), Cambodian Hall (秦人, Tân Nhơn), hospitals, schools, guest houses, Prajna house (般若, Bát Nhã), and workshop rooms. The Temple of Buddha Mother, the worshipping place of the Mother of humankind and Bá Huê Viên (百花園, The hundred flowers garden) on the opposite side of the Temple are especially spectacular. The Temple of Buddha Mother is the place where the Holy Mother Goddess Grand Festival (會宴瑤池宮, Hội Yến Diêu Trì Cung) is held on the eighth month of the lunar month. The primitive forest called "Nature Forest" is nearly a hundred years old and was created to feature architecture that maintains harmony with the natural landscape.

### **The Historical and Cultural Value of Cao Dai's Holy See**

Henri Regnault, at a conference on Spiritology in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1948 said: "In Cao Dai religion, art plays a very important position. The architecture inside and outside the Holy Temple has an artistic beauty that deserves special attention." Indeed, the Cao Dai church has a style of architecture that combines European and

Asian features. With two bell-towers as high as the Holy See of Rome in the Vatican, but the Temple also has a slightly curved roof known as “trùng thiêm điệp ốc” (重簷疊屋 or 重梁重簷), the double-roof common in East Asia. In the middle of the façade and on the roof, there is a statue of Maitreya sitting on a lotus. This shows that the Cao Dai philosophy has its roots in ancient Buddhism and now serves as a universal duty in the era of Hạ Nguyên (下元, The Last Cycle). The dragon and lotus columns at the main gate are meant to inform visitors that the Universal Judgement (會龍花, Hội Long Hoa) will be held by Maitreya in Vietnam someday in the future.

On the top of Nghinh Phong Đài, we can see a curved arch that can be also seen in the architecture of Indian and Middle Eastern churches. Although combining different European and Asian architectural forms, the Holy Temple still highlights Vietnamese culture with lotus images and the four animals with supernatural powers (Dragon, East Asian ‘unicorn’, Turtle, and Phoenix). When visitors enter the Temple of Saints, their first impression is that of a harmonious and beautiful setting that highlights both architecture and the site’s surrounding nature.

This architectural work has the marks of physical science and religious philosophy hidden inside, including both harmonious beauty and sustainable structure. Though built in the 1930s and 1940s of the twentieth century, the builders using bamboo concrete, knew how to use fake concrete roof with three-story curved roof. The compartments have dragon images that create a serene appearance.

The columns are covered with dragon and lotus shapes, making the structure varied. Wind and light are easy to go through to ensure the coolness, not worrying about humidity.

## Conclusion

As a parting thought, at the time when this auspicious land was identified (the land is classified as ‘six dragons supporting a seal’ Lục long phò ấn - 六龍扶印), there were no machines and no architects or construction engineers. Despite these deficits, a group of poor, uneducated, but faithful builders completed an architectural masterpiece that contains many mysteries. Their claim was that their success was due to guidance from spiritual forces. This is yet another reason why the Tay Ninh Holy See is treasured as a wonder and source of global cultural heritage.

## Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> ‘Đức (德)’ here is an honorific prefix in Vietnamese that is somewhat comparable to the honorific suffixes ‘sama’ in Japanese or ‘nim’ in Korean. This honorific use of Đức will also occur elsewhere throughout this article such as the cases of Đức Quyền Giáo Tông (德權教宗, The Acting Pope) and Đức Hộ Pháp (德護法, The Maintainer of the Rules and Laws).
- <sup>2</sup> The Vietnamese pronunciation of 彌 as Di (D having a Z sound in the North and Y sound in the South) is an exception. For instance, both Korean and Japanese pronounce 彌 as Mi.
- <sup>3</sup> 仙 Tiên, Daoist immortals. In older Caodaist (and other) translations this term will appear as ‘fairies’, but this term has fallen out of favor in recent decades.
- <sup>4</sup> Seances were banned by the Communist government in 1975, and that ban is still in effect.
- <sup>5</sup> These are the writing implements for automatic writing and receiving spiritist messages.
- <sup>6</sup> This would usually be written as 鴻鈞 rather than 鴻君 as appears in the poem.
- <sup>7</sup> Usually this would appear as 經易 but here it honors Vietnamese word order.

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