

Article

The Cao Đài Deathscape: Reimagining Death, Funerals and Salvation in Contemporary Vietnam

Jérémy Jammes ^{1,*} and Shao Zhu Shuai ^{2,†}¹ Centre for Advanced Research (CARE), University of Brunei Darussalam, Gadong BE1410, Brunei² Centre for Cultural Anthropology (CANTHEL), Paris Descartes University, 75005 Paris, France; zsshao@pku.edu.cn

* Correspondence: jeremy.jammes@ubd.edu.bn

† Both authors contributed equally to this work.

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Abstract: This article sheds light on the sophisticated funeral process set up by the Cao Đài religion (or Caodaism), combining both a theological and an ethnographical analysis. After introducing how Cao Đài theology represents both the body and the spiritual components of each individual in the specific millenarian conception of existence that characterizes Cao Đài, we trace the ritual process of funerals from the altar and coffin preparation to the collection of prayers and talismanic rituals conveyed to save souls in a Cao Đài manner. Read together, these sources present a genuine project and spirit of reform in the ideas, imaginaries, and practices related to death in Vietnam from the 1920s onwards, crystallizing a specific Cao Đài identity in Vietnamese and also East Asian redemptive societies' deathscapes.

Keywords: Cao Đài (Caodaism); death; funeral; salvation; new religious movement; Vietnam

1. Introduction

Being important social actors and mediators in the process of decolonization¹, believers of the Cao Đài religion (or Cao Đài hereafter) are well-known for having created a strict hierarchical and politico-military organization in Cochinchina (Southern Vietnam), largely in the hands of a group of spirit-mediums and leaders educated at French colonial schools.

In the 1920s, under French colonial rule (Cochinchina), the “Master [living in the] High Tower” (*Thầy Cao Đài*) is held to have introduced himself through spirit-mediumship to Vietnamese civil servants and spiritists and to Chinese–Vietnamese redemptive societies (the Minh 明 *Ming* associations) in Saigon. In November 1926, the Great Way of the Third Period of Universal Salvation (*Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ*; 大道三期普渡 *Dàdào sānqī pǔdù*), soon informally to be called Cao Đài or Caodaism, was officially presented to the colonial authorities. The millenarian and anticolonial words of this Master Cao Đài (a variant and hybrid version of the Chinese Jade Emperor) were to make their way through the urban religious networks and mass-conversion of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, and later through central and southern Vietnam. Automatic writing through the body of a medium enabled

¹ Multiplicity has always characterized Caodaism, especially because of its division into branches after a series of schisms, mostly due to a collection of localized clientelism (patron–client ties and nepotistic relationships), political interests, and strategies of power (Jammes 2014, pp. 143–47). Subsequently, Caodaism as a religion did not have a single impact on the process of decolonization but included people on many contrasted political sides and practices. Regarding the various factions during wartime situation, for instance, see Jammes (2016).

the writing of revelations of nonhuman (deities and dead) messages and teaching, which played a predominant role in Cao Đài, molding the political and spiritual perspectives of the followers.

Following the establishment of the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the south in 1975, Cao Đài temples, schools, and publishing houses were closed. Likewise, collective ceremonies and spirit-medium practices were also largely prohibited. The three million followers, as well as their Holy Sees, oratories, and other Cao Đài temples of meditation, were officially placed under the control of the Communist Fatherland Front (*Mặt trận Tổ quốc Việt Nam*). Nevertheless, the political procedures organized against Cao Đài after 1975 never had as an objective to eradicate the Cao Đài phenomenon from the domestic religious landscape. The Cao Đài faith has always remained alive ever since and has shown even a certain dynamism since the end of the 1990s. The practice of funerals is certainly one of the most ostensible proof of Cao Đài vitality in Vietnam today (for an overview on Cao Đài, see Jammes 2018).

The Minh Sư 明師 (Enlightened Master)—the largest and oldest of the five Minh societies in Vietnam—is actually part of the network of Xiāntiān Dào 先天道 (The Way of Former Heaven; Vn. Tiên Thiên Đạo) spirit-writing groups originating in Guǎngdōng province in China. All the first Cao Đài members were either connected to Minh associations or derived from them. Caodaists adopted the Minh cosmology, theology, and eschatology but adapted it to a complex hierarchy, the decolonization agenda, and the Vietnamese culture. Designated in recent scholarship as “redemptive societies”, these Minh societies represent an example of a modern wave of millenarian religious movements (such as the Chinese Dàoyuàn 道院 and Yiguàn Dào 貫道). These were generally offshoots of the Minh Sư associations, worshipping the spirits of the *tam giáo* (Three Teachings: *sānjiào* 三教) pantheon, which includes Confucius, Lǎozǐ 老子, and the historical Buddha, often with higher levels of Vietnamese participation, and introducing modern innovations.

Being an autochthonous religion, Cao Đài doctrine and political ambitions were first meant to address the Vietnamese people who were assigned the mission of spreading a syncretic, humanistic, and millenarian message all over the world for the acquisition of merits and less heavy punishments at the time of the Last Judgment (*cuộc đại phán xét* or *cuộc Phán Xét Cuối Cùng*) and the End of the World (*tận thế*). This millenarianism follows a three-stage eschatology (*tam kỳ mạt kiếp*; 三期末劫 *Sānqī mòjié*) borrowed from the Chinese Xiāntiān Dào 先天道 tradition (Jammes 2018, p. 575), with the first dispensation associated with Moses and Fúxī 伏羲 (Phục Hy), the second with Buddha Śākyamuni (Thích-ca Mâu-ni), Confucius (Khổng Tử 孔子), Lǎozǐ (Lao Tử 老子), Jesus (Giê-su), and Muḥammad, and the third to be ushered in by the Buddha Maitreya (Đi-lặc, according to Xiāntiān Dào theology), or Master Cao Đài and the supreme female deity, and the Golden Mother of the Jade Pond, Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu (*Yáo chí jīnmǔ* 瑶池金母, according to Cao Đài theology).

Minh spirit-medium groups propagated in Cochinchina the doctrine of the unity of the Three Teachings, millenarian expectations of Maitreya’s arrival, and his ruling over the Assembly of the Dragon Flower (*hội Long Hoa*), which refers to an eponym book. The text *Lónghuájīng* 龍華經 (“Flower of the Dragon Book”; Vn. *Kinh Long Hoa*), dating from the seventeenth century, strongly influenced the vocabulary as well as the mythological and the millenarian themes of Cao Đài, its spirit-writings and its funeral doctrine and practice (as well as of Chinese redemptive societies). Altogether, it allowed the emergence of a proper “Cao Đài deathscape”.

By using the concept of “deathscape”, we invoke “both the places associated with death and for the dead, and how these are imbued with meanings and associations: the site of a funeral, and the places of final disposition and of remembrance, and representations of all these” (Maddrell and Sidaway 2010, p. 4). Following the intuitive and comparative work of Williams and Ladwig (2012, p. 5), we also find it stimulating (and realistic) to include in this term all the “abstract discursive and subjective spaces which death ‘inhabits’: texts, stories, emotions but also rites and social practices”.

In matters of funerals, and in particular of the early twentieth-century Vietnamese ritual space organization or “Vietnamese deathscape”, “it is the prescriptions of the *Tam-Giao* [*Tam Giáo kinh*; 三教經 *Sānjiào jīng*, “Book of the Three Religions”] that are observed” (Dumoutier 1904, p. 2), with the inclusion of “family funeral rituals” (*Thọ Mai Gia Lễ*; 壽梅家禮 *Shòuméi jiālǐ*) and of regulations

promulgated by the Gia Long Emperor Code in 1812 (Lesserteur 1885)². Cao Đài funeral rites significantly take distance from this canonic theological and ritual background by proposing a new set of imaginaries and practices of the passage from life to death, and eventually to salvation.

Our study on the Cao Đài deathscape combines both a theological and an ethnographical analysis³. After having introduced how the Cao Đài theology represents both the body and the spiritual components of each individual in the specific millenarian conception of existence that characterizes Cao Đài, we study the step-by-step process of funerals—from the altar and coffin preparation to the collection of prayers and talismanic rituals conveyed to save souls in a Cao Đài way—offering a genuine project and spirit of reform in the Vietnamese deathscape and in the ideas, imaginaries, and practices related to death in Vietnam from the 1920s onwards.

2. Imagining Death as the Funerals of “Three Bodies” before the End of the World

In theological terms, the Jade Emperor had decided to grant a third and last chance of salvation to humankind, namely, the Great Way of the Third Period of Universal Redemption (*Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ*). Hence, under the alias of “Master Cao Đài” or “Supreme Lord” (*Đức Chí Tôn*), the Jade Emperor came specifically to Vietnam to rehabilitate and cleanse the practice of the Three Teachings in a way that they could better prepare Humanity to this universal competition in the last era of “Great Mercy” (*Đại Ân Xá*; 大恩赦 *Dà ēnshè*), or *Amnistie universelle* (“Universal Amnesty”), as the Francophone Caodaists used to say. In other words, Master Cao Đài ordered the closing of the Underworld (*Địa Ngục*) and, simultaneously, the opening of the “door of Heaven” (*cửa Trời*) for the reception and the salvation (*Cứu rỗi*) of the most perfected souls (*linh hồn*). For those locked in the Underworld, the Cao Đài amnesty provides them the remission of sin accumulated in previous lives (*tha thứ tội lỗi ở các kiếp trước*) to reincarnate and to practice the path of penitence (*tu hành lập công chuộc tội*).

In Cao Đài, dying with the left eye open—like the divine eye representing Master Cao Đài on the altar—is a sign of election and salvation⁴, but this phenomenon remains rare and salvation should be guaranteed for all⁵. Accordingly, the core function of Cao Đài funeral rituals (*Tang lễ*) lies in its assistance to the dead soul to prove his/her life efforts in order to gain forgiveness and redemption from Master Cao Đài. In the same vein, an elaborate episcopal body, copied from the Vatican model,

² For the sake of clarity in the chronological reading of the Cao Đài funerals, comparative research hypotheses between pre-Cao Đài funerals (according to Buddhist and Confucian traditions, especially) and Cao Đài funerals are kept in footnotes.

³ For a broad description of the funeral ritual process, see Đức Nguyên (2000, vol. 3, pp. 170–72), based on the document published by the Holy See of Tây Ninh in 1970: “Hạnh Đường Huấn luyện Chức việc Bàn Trì Sự nam nữ”.

⁴ This belief is intensified among the “esoteric” branches, who place an emphasis on personal, spiritual cultivation through Daoist inner alchemy and meditation—, with the aim of refining the *hồn* (魂 *hún*) and *phách* (魄 *pò*) souls on the path to immortality (*tiên* 仙 *xiān*). The *Chiếu Minh* or *Chiếu Minh Tam Thanh Vô Vi* (照明三清無為 *Zhàomíng sānqīng wúwéi*; literally, Radiant Light of Noninterference of the Three Purities), is the leading “esoteric” branch of Caodaism, as the complement of the “exoteric missionizing” run by the Holy See of Tây Ninh (Jammes and Palmer 2018). Dying with the left eye open—which is mostly claimed by *Chiếu Minh* members—can be interpreted as a visual proof to consolidate the spiritual authority of the small, esoteric *Chiếu Minh* branch over the dominant Holy See of Tây Ninh.

⁵ The reaction of the body after death was also in Buddhism subject to many omens, indicating the quality of the transmigration of the soul of the deceased (“if the heat shall persist in the middle of the back, the soul will transmigrate in the body of a beggar”, for example, as noticed by Dumoutier (1904, p. 17), who gives several omens of this type). Similarly, “when the eyes remain open after death, it is a favorable sign: the soul of the deceased will transmigrate in human form, but this second [transmigration] will be crossed by countless misfortunes. If the eyes, first opened, then come to close, the bad omen will disappear, and one will be able to predict a second existence perfectly calm” (ibid).

was set up to convince people of the upcoming End of the World and of the urgency to understand and practice the contents of the Xiāntiān Dào-minded Flower of the Dragon Book⁶.

Inspired by Asian esotericism (both Daoist and Buddhism), but also by Western esotericism or occultism (Spiritism and Theosophical Society)⁷, Caodaists consider a complete human is made of “three bodies” (*tam thể sắc thân*) that refer to different ontological statuses⁸. The “first body” (*Đệ nhất xác thân*) includes all the physical and visible parts of a human body, namely, the head, trunk, arms, and legs. It is also called the “physical body” (*thể sắc*) or the “life soul” (*Sanh hồn*), which is given genetically by parents.

A “second body” (*Đệ nhị xác thân*) is observed occasionally, although certain people have the capacity to see it when it has “detached” from the “first body” and appears as a ghost (*Ma* or *Hồn Ma*). This body mostly remains invisible and is called *Giác hồn* (the “soul of sensation”) or, more often, the “true mind” (*chơn thần*)—this last term has been translated into the “perispirit” by the Francophone Caodaists who invoke here a word borrowed from Spiritism, referring to an abstract, ethereal material or a fluid envelope that connects the first (physical) and third (spiritual) bodies⁹. It is the mediator of the first flesh and blood body and the third divine body. The holy body restrains the first body’s desire and instinct by it. When people are alive, the second body is hauled back by the first body (*Thánh Ngôn Hiệp Tuyển*, vol. 1, 3 January 1926). Only when the flesh perishes, the second body can rise to heaven, following the third divine body. The “true mind” is named “true soul” (*chơn hồn*) after it departs from the first physical body¹⁰.

The third body, also named “spiritual soul” (*Linh hồn*) or “true spirit” (*chơn linh*), is sometimes referred to as the “little spiritual light” (*tiểu linh quang*). This kind of body would be contained in the “true mind”, and is eventually granted by Master Cao Đài to some people. The Jade Emperor is considered as the “great spiritual light” (*Đại linh quang*). Caodaists like here to quote the spirit-message teaching (*Thánh Ngôn Hiệp Tuyển*, vol. 1, 22 July 1929) that “the Master is [in] all children [or disciples], and all children [or disciples] are [in] the Master” (*Thầy là các con, các con là Thầy*), which explains that there is no disconnection between this third body and the “great spirit light”, all human beings hosting the essence of Master Cao Đài.

Among these three “bodies”, the first body is material, the second body is liminal or at the borderline between “physical” and “invisible”, while the third body is completely amorphous. The Cao Đài architecture reproduces this ternary structure in designating three “palaces” (*đài*) in each temple (Jammes 2014, pp. 118–21): the *Cửu Trùng Đài* (“palace of the nine degrees of the episcopal hierarchy”, meaning the place of worshippers), the *Bát Quái Đài* (“palace of the eight trigrams”, meaning the place of the altar), and the *Hiệp Thiên Đài* (“palace of the heavenly alliance”, meaning the place where the mediums stand and practice). Rites and prayers performed during Cao Đài

⁶ Cao Đài comprises professional missionaries (*giáo sĩ*) and an ecclesiastical hierarchy of dignitaries: deacons (*Lễ Sanh*), priests (*Giáo Hữu*), bishops (*Giáo Sư*), archbishops (*Phối Sư*), cardinals (*Đầu Sư*), censor cardinals (*Chương pháp*), a pope (*Giáo Tông*), and subdignitaries (*Ban Trị Sư*).

⁷ We define “occultism” as an institutionalized movement that appeared in the nineteenth century in the West that reinterpreted and recast old religious and esoteric practices and doctrines (e.g., supernatural phenomena, traditional spirit-mediumship activities) through the filters of modern scientific methods and instruments (Jammes and Palmer 2018; Jammes forthcoming).

⁸ The “Law of Three Bodies” (*Luật Tam Thể*) was transmitted postmortem by Cao Quỳnh Cư (1888–1929), a pioneer of Caodaism, during spirit-writing séances run between 1950 and 1952 (Trần Văn Rạng 1972; Nguyễn Văn Hồng 2014).

⁹ Cao Đài doctrine states that the Golden Mother of Jade Pond, also known as the “Mother Goddess” (*Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu* or *Phật mẫu*), created this second body and granted it to all the living creatures on Earth.

¹⁰ The word *thần* (神 *shén*) is a particularly polysemic, ambiguous term in Vietnamese. Although it most often refers to a specific local spirit, a genie, a god or a deity, it can also be used in its combined form of theo- (*thần học*, “theology”, literally the “study of deities”), or in reference to many things “mysterious”, “mystical”, “spiritual”, according to different contexts. Though not perfect, our translation of *chơn thần* by “true mind”—which can be traced from the combined word *tinh thần* (精神 *jīngshén*, “mind”, mentally, spiritual)—has the advantage of guaranteeing a clear distinction between *thần* and *linh hồn* (靈魂 *línghún*), the “soul”.

funerals also give a specific attention to these three bodies, especially the second. Indeed, the “true mind” is seen as the most ‘problematic’ as it can be visualized in the form of a ghost and is called to attend and deliver teaching during spirit-séances¹¹.

The interactional system of the “three bodies” makes human beings complete. Following the death of a human being indicates a timely situation when the physical body no longer functions. After death, it will decay and vanish, but the “true mind” will continue to exist in the form of *Khí* (氣 *qì*). The concept *Khí* is frequently mentioned in Three-Religion traditions and Chinese medicine, translated as “breath”, “weather”, and “energy flow”. In Cao Đài, *Khí* contains the lust or desire of human being, and it is *Khí* that controls a person’s mind and body. It is also seen here as another term for identifying the “second body” of people or perispirit.

In Buddhism, death is conceived as a process of transformation that implies a “karmic causation” (Williams and Ladwig 2012, p. 4), and eventually a reincarnation for the dead who have not reached enlightenment and Nirvana. However, obtaining “good marks” during the judgment of the Souls (*sự thưởng phạt của Linh Hồn*) enables the Cao Đài devotees to free their souls from the cycle of reincarnation by finding a place beside Master Cao Đài and the Golden Mother of the Jade Pond¹².

The millenarian Assembly of the Dragon Flower is explicitly mentioned in the Cao Đài canon, which presents and conceives life as a “grand final competition” (*Đại hội thi tuyển chung kết*)—and death as the result of this competition—the human race subjected to, so that the most virtuous can pass the exam and find salvation. In case of failure, the human “soul” (*linh hồn*, or “third body”) risks falling off one or several levels of karmic rebirth, according to an “evolutionary law” of the spirit (*Luật Tiến hóa*). In contrast, “those deemed unworthy due to their past transgressions would be annihilated and thus lose significantly accumulated karmic achievements, being thus thrown back millions of years in their spiritual evolution” (Pokorny forthcoming).

During this Third period of redemption, the Cao Đài religion is depicted as a kind of test run by Master Cao Đài, allowing the obtaining of merits (*một Trường thi công quả*) to eventually become an accomplished being (*đắc đạo*; 得道 *Dédao*). Following the metaphor of the exam, a main examiner (*Chánh Chủ khảo*) is in charge of organizing the selection and deciding who shall become saints, immortals, or Buddhas. Cao Đài scriptures draw attention to that—because the Jade Emperor has endorsed the role of both the (school) Master and the Father (*làm Thầy, làm Cha*) who is training His disciples to pass their final exams—He cannot be the judge and the defendant. For the sake of impartiality at the examination, Buddha Maitreya (*Đức Phật Di-Lạc*) has been appointed by the Jade Emperor to the position of main examiner. To spread the “Great Amnesty” (*Đại Ân Xá*), Cao Đài involved two soteriological pathways for dignitaries and followers. The high dignitary would have a parallel rank in an evolutionary spiritual hierarchy from the deacons (*Lễ Sanh*), equal to Heaven Deities (*Thiên Thần*) and to the pope (*Giáo Tông*), equal to Heaven Immortals (*Thiên Tiên*)¹³. Their spiritual status extends into the world after death and helps them to have privilege in the evaluation.

For Cao Đài devotees, practicing sincerely and doing good deeds would be a precondition for them to attain final salvation. If not, Cao Đài funerals would be suitable for pleading to the Master to forgive His followers. Even if they may still need to eliminate the remaining sin for this life, they would escape from the metempsychosis (*tuyệt luân*) of life and death. Besides, their “perispirit”

¹¹ “Popular Vietnamese religion believes that humans have three superior or rational souls (*hồn*) and inferior or sensitive souls, seven for men and nine for women (*phách* or *vía*) [*Thất phách*]. The latter, deriving from the Yin principle, enter the body at conception and do not survive death; the former, deriving from the Yang principle, enter the body at birth and survive death” (Phan 1996, p. 38).

¹² According to Vietnamese Buddhism, the souls of the most virtuous ones, once arrived in hell, return to transmigration, but into a superior condition, or they can even be freed from transmigrations according to their degree of purity (Dumoutier 1904, pp. 155–58).

¹³ A spirit can be placed in five worlds of different levels, namely, the “way of humans” (*nhơn đạo*), “way of spirits” (*thần đạo*), “way of saints” (*thánh đạo*), “way of immortals” (*tiên Đạo*), and “way of Buddha” (*phật đạo*). Each spirit, saint, or immortal could be divided into three vertical levels: heaven, earth, and human (*cửu phần thân tiên*) (Kiến Tâm 1952).

would continue the practice of Cao Đài in the form of *Khí* until being pure and flawless, after which the “second body” and the “third body” would become one to ascend into the holy or supranatural and immortal world (*Cõi Thiêng liêng Hằng sống*), i.e., the eternal homeland¹⁴.

Once death occurs, only the “true soul” (or “true mind”, the “little spiritual light”) would immediately return to the place where Master Cao Đài is. Before the “second body” ascends to the eternal homeland, it is conceived as an entity that remains a while in a Cao Đài temple to continue performing the worship, persisting in some habits of life. Therefore, the “second bodies” of the dead or “ghosts” (*ma*) are seen as haunting temples, and our fieldworks in Cao Đài have been made of a plethora of “ghost stories”. As former practitioners who committed themselves to the worship of Master Cao Đài, dead souls are often not seen as bad and hungry ghosts, as the popular beliefs claim. Consequently, in all temples, a special room or “guest hall” (*khách đình*) is dedicated to the hosting of the “second body” of the dead, while urns (*bình di cốt*) with ashes of the “first body’s” dead are stored in another room.

During the Sino-Vietnamese Ghost Festival of 15 July 1932 (lunar month), organized at the Holy See of Tây Ninh, the Chief of the Mediums, Phạm Công Tắc, explained that during this Third and last Period of Redemption, Master Cao Đài “comes down to the Guest Hall to save His children and show His endless love” (quoted by Huỳnh Thế Nguyên and Nguyễn Lê Thủy 2016). This preaching was highly conversionist, promising the salvation of their ancestors’ souls to people who would convert and respect Confucian filial piety.

3. Cao Đài Funeral Service in Action

The whole process of Cao Đài funeral rituals (see Table 1) is sophisticated and supported by a fixed compendium of texts, chants, music, dance, costumes, and practices that create and express the outlines of a proper “Cao Đài funeral tradition”¹⁵. The process can be summarized into three stages, i.e., (1) emergency hospice care before death, (2) funerals per se (within 3 days from death day to burial), and (3) periodic mourning rituals¹⁶. Among them, the Ritual of Praying for Redemption (*Lễ cầu siêu*) and demonifuge (or talismanic) ritual (*Hành pháp đô hồn*)¹⁷ are the most dramatic and grandest sequences of Cao Đài funeral rituals. The last mourning rituals—*Tiểu tường* (a ritual held 281 days after death) and *Đại tường* (a ritual held 381 days after death)—end funeral rituals and the scope of this article.

¹⁴ Also named by Caodaists as *Cõi Hư linh* (the “Ethereal world”), *Cực Lạc Niết bàn* (“the Nirvana”), *Cõi thăng* (“the Paradise”), in opposition to *Cõi đọa* (“the Hell”). In his forthcoming paper, Lukas Pokorny (forthcoming) theorizes that Cao Đài espouses the “vision of a dual millennium”, before and after death, “namely that of ab ovo salvational perfection on the one hand, and post hoc salvational perfection (or salvational gradualism) on the other”.

¹⁵ Although few divergences may appear between the various Cao Đài branches, our article refers to the funeral orthopraxy we observed in the two main (demographically speaking) “Holy Sees” of Tây Ninh and Bến Tre.

¹⁶ This section is based on some training documents for Cao Đài apprentice priests or deacons (*Lễ Sanh*) printed by Tây Ninh Holy See in 2011, but also on participant-observation during our fieldworks. The authors have attended about 20 funerals (with 2 cases of “bad dead”, such as painful skin cancer and the murder of a woman by the use of acid thrown at her face). In contrast to Buddhist funerals, the case of “bad death” does not impact the Cao Đài funeral ritual process, which might know slight variations according to the identity of the dead (high dignitary, ordinary believer, or not-Caodaist).

¹⁷ It consists in rituals held to expel demons.

Table 1. Standard funeral ritual process.

Sequences	Ritual Process	Translation
Emergency hospice care (or “extreme unction”)	<i>Cầu hồn khi hấp hối</i>	To pray for the soul at someone’s last gasp
The first day after death	<i>Cầu hồn khi đã chết rồi</i>	To pray for the soul when someone is died
	<i>Thượng số Tân cố</i>	To inform respectfully Master Cao Đài of the death
	<i>Tẩn liệm</i> (<i>Nhập mạch</i>)	To put into the coffin (by funeral company)
	<i>Tẩm phủ quan / Đốt đèn trên và dưới quan tài.</i>	To cover the coffin with fabric / Light lamps above and on both sides of the coffin (by funeral company)
	<i>Thiết lập bàn vong, khay vong, linh vị</i>	To set up offering table to handhold altar and spirit tablet
	<i>Cáo Tì Tổ / Thành phục</i>	To inform ancestors of the death / To invite relatives to wear funeral costumes
	<i>Cúng vong triều tịch</i>	To serve food to the dead spirit in the morning and at night
The second day night after death	<i>Tế điện: Chánh tế và Phụ tế</i>	To sacrifice to the dead by family members and Cao Đài community members
	<i>Lễ cầu siêu</i>	The ritual of praying for redemption
	<i>Lễ chào hẫu tại Khách đình (phẩm Lễ Sanh)</i>	The ritual of the <i>Bát Nhã</i> boat drama (when the dead is ranked as deacon (<i>lễ sanh</i>) or higher level)
The third day (morning) after death	<i>Hành pháp độ hồn: phép xác, đoạn căn, độ thăng</i>	To write a talisman to transport the dead soul: body purification, secular root cutting, redemption acquiring
	<i>Lễ động quan / Khiển điện</i>	The ritual of moving the coffin / Leaving the shrine
	<i>Đưa linh cữu đến Nghĩa địa</i>	To move the coffin to the cemetery (with the <i>Bát Nhã</i> boat)
	<i>Diếu văn / Cảm tạ / Hạ huyệt</i>	To make a memorial speech / To kneel down for gratitude / Burial
	<i>Tuần cửu</i>	The ritual held every 9 days for 9 times
Periodic rituals after burial (mourning rituals)	<i>Tiểu tường</i>	The ritual held 281 days after death
	<i>Đại tường</i>	The ritual held 381 days after death

When a Cao Đài devotee (or even a non- Cao Đài relative of an adept) is seriously ill, and about to pass away (*lâm chung*), representatives of the temple (one priest or/and student-priests and some assistants) this devotee belongs to are often called to come to the patient’s home and perform the *Cầu giải bệnh* ritual, “to pray for the recovery of the patient”. Additionally, the Cao Đài funerals would begin from the moment of near-death—meaning, for instance, someone sick enough to suggest the imminent last breath of the patient.

In Cao Đài, a single prayer is required to accompany the soul at someone’s last “gasp” (*Cầu hồn khi hấp hối*), whereas early twentieth-century Vietnamese knew an extensive repertoire of “extreme-unction” rituals (Dumoutier 1904, pp. 7–16), but also of agony prayers, amulets “for all kinds of death, for the beheaded, for the victim of lightning, the tiger or the serpent” (Dumoutier 1904, p. 5). Cao Đài offers both a reform and a simplification (and empowerment or symbolic maximization at the same time) of these funeral rituals, prayers, and amulet practice¹⁸.

¹⁸ In the course of this simplification, many spirit-medium messages and their exegesis encourage Cao Đài devotees to eliminate what might be considered as superstitious (*mê tín dị đoan*) or that which would cause too much expense for the faithful. The *New Canonical Codes* ban meat offerings and the use of votive papers (*nộm hình*), a religious habit still strongly present in Vietnamese Buddhism and Mother Goddess worship,

3.1. The Procession and Preparation of the Coffin

When a death is officially declared, an obituary is hung up on the front door of the mourning hall, e.g., mostly a place in the house that would enable the representatives of a temple to set up an altar and to prepare the coffin. In the case the house of the dead is part of the neighborhood of a Cao Đài temple, and within walking distance of it, all the members of this temple leave the temple and start a procession to the deceased's house. It is important to do the chanting properly.

Throughout the funeral ritual (three days and the mourning rituals), a female group (*Đồng nhi*) is in charge of chanting scriptures. They are selected not according to their age (from teenagers to seniors), but rather to the emotional vibration of their voice. In particular, they have to perform the salvation ritual called *cầu siêu*, consisting of emotionally chanting prayers slowly, a special pronunciation method called *Bài thài*. *Bài thài* is a unique and slow declaiming technique. While chanting, all the vowels are as prolonged as possible while all the consonants are omitted or swallowed, giving the impression of performing a collective and emotional “whimper”. One of these devotees, selected for her chanting skills and trained to improve it (Tây Ninh branch), explains that “*Bài Thài* is like a mother getting her little baby to sleep. The dead should be comforted without any disturbance by monsters and ghosts”¹⁹. Not every female Caodaist is capable of *Bài Thài*, and it requires special training for 2–3 months to manage the basic skill and the two types of rhythms, namely, *Nam Xuân* (for dignitaries only) and *Nam Ai*. *Nam Xuân* is a little bit faster and less plaintive than *Nam Ai*, in as much as the dignitaries are considered to have a better chance of returning to the eternal land.

A Cao Đài missionary told us that “a complete ritual shall include both *Lễ* [rites] and *Nhạc* [music]. All the regulations and rules are *Lễ*, while the music serves to harmonize the regulations”²⁰. Some temples are well-known to host skilled singers and musicians, with the consequence of being more often contacted for funerals than other temples, and, subsequently, to get more donations. Logically, the “holy See” of each branch attracts these most skilled singers²¹.

In a funeral procession, a banner, a flag and a memorial tablet always appear ahead of the procession (and of the coffin afterwards). The banner (*phướn*) is hung with the name of the religion written in Vietnamese (*Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ*) or in Chinese (大道三期普渡; see Figure 1)²². Someone holds a memorial tablet of the dead (*Linh vị*) and, eventually, a representation (photography or drawing) of the dead's face. Apart from being an indicator of the dead person's hierarchical position, the flag also serves as a guide for mourners on the way to the cemetery and, symbolically, on the path of the deceased's soul to the eternal land. Walking between 10 and 20 minutes (depending on the distance between the temple and the house with the cadaver), the banner, songs and the picture are supposed to announce publicly the death of someone in the neighborhood, attracting the attention of the people in the street.

Cao Đài prayers are meaningful to the public as they are all composed in Vietnamese, like the Catholics and Protestants (and not in transliterated Pali or Sino-Vietnamese, as for the Buddhists),

for instance. Simplification and normalization at the same time of rituals and talismans both call for homogeneity among Cao Đài branches.

¹⁹ Interview with Chi Hoa, at Huỳnh Đức temple, District 3, Hochiminh City on 18 April 2018.

²⁰ Interview with Trung Minh, at Cơ Quan Phổ Thông Giáo Lý on 20 April 2018.

²¹ In the branch of Ban Chính Đạo (the first Cao Đài community today, demographically speaking), the two prestigious temples are the Holy See of Bến Tre and the Bình Hòa temple in Bình Thạnh district (northern Hochiminh City).

²² In Vietnamese Buddhist funerals, the *phướn* traditionally carry a protective mantra (*dhāraṇī*) in Chinese characters in the center: “they are finished in the lower part by pendants of three colors, four in number for purely votive *phướn*, and only three in mortuary circumstances. The four pendants are in memory of the four Spirits who guard the world” (Dumoutier 1904, p. 44). In Caodaism, the words *Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ* seem to play a similar demon-expelling power.

chanted by 30–50 Caodaists in religious clothes²³ who walk solemnly and slowly in the (sometimes crowded) streets.



Figure 1. On the third morning, on the way to the cemetery, Tây Ninh, 2 July 2018 (© Shao Zhu Shuai).

The obituary is nowadays written in black font on a white paper, in which the name, age, and birthday of the dead, as well as the schedule of three important rituals are informed: the Placement of the body in a coffin (held on the first day), the Praying for redemption (*lễ cầu siêu*, held at night of the second day)²⁴, and the Moving of the coffin to the cemetery or the funeral incinerator (held in the morning of the third day). A lay funeral company, with at least 5–6 men wearing the uniform of their company, or Cao Đài volunteers assist in the rituals in furnishing the coffin and guaranteeing the hygienic treatment of the body and the carrying (*đồ tùy*) of the coffin.

The preparation of the coffin requires specific attention. It is placed in the central area of a house (or apartment), being covered by a large embroidered fabric (*tấm phủ quan*)—in black for ordinary adepts, in red, blue, yellow, or white for clergy, depending on their titles and functions in the Cao Đài hierarchy. On the fabric is embroidered a Divine Eye, which functions like a visual talisman (*bùa*), protecting the “three bodies” of the dead (on this topic and, more generally, on the ritual process, prayers, and symbolic meaning of Cao Đài funerals, see Quách Văn Hoà n.d.).

When the body is placed in the coffin (*nhập quan*), flowers, wine, and tea are offered to the corpse (and, respectively, to its “three bodies”), which is wrapped with layers of cloth (*Tiểu liệm*), hermetically sealed and placed in a coffin (*quan tài*, “small shroud”), and then covered and hermetically nailed (*Đại liệm*, “great shroud”).

In front of the coffin, the relatives set up an altar for displaying the sacrificial offerings (*bàn vong*) around the memorial tablet (*Linh vị*) and, eventually, an image of the deceased’s face (see Figure 2). On the left side of the table, the colorful embroidery flag is drawn. Here, the memorial tablet symbolizes the dead person him/herself. It is a vertically-laid paper, on the front of which relevant civil and religious information of the dead is listed, such as age, birthday, birthplace, civil name, religious position if a member of the Cao Đài clergy, time of death, place of death, as well as information regarding the dead person’s official conversion to Cao Đài (the year and the name of the temple s/he converted at). On the back of the tablet are listed the detailed dates of the further

²³ From the deacon’s rank upwards, the hierarchy of the men is divided into three branches, symbolically called “branch of Confucianism” (*phái Ngọc*, costume in red), “Buddhism” (*phái Thái* in yellow), and “Daoism” (*phái Thượng* in blue).

²⁴ Although sharing a similar name with Buddhist ritual, the Cao Đài Praying for Redemption has its own characteristics. It especially not only aims to help the spirit of the dead to move gently into higher states of improvement, but the ritual also requires relatives, community members, and professional mourners to ask for a “Great Mercy, which could ensure an end of the cycle of rebirth”. Purposely following Confucian family ritual tradition, the Scripture of Worldly Way (*Kinh Thế Đạo*) is a collection of kinship-driven mourning prayers, to be recited, namely, by a son who worships his parents (*con tế cha / mẹ*), by younger siblings who worship elder brothers or sisters (*anh em tế anh*), by a wife who worships her husband, or by a husband who worships his wife (*vợ tế chồng* or *chồng tế vợ*).

mourning rituals (to better remember them). Relatives are allowed to kneel (*quỳ lạy*) and pray once before the coffin while the choir is singing the Sutra of the Shroud Sutra (*Kinh Tẩn Liệt*).



Figure 2. The altar, memorial tablet and picture of the dead in front of the coffin, managed by Bình Hòa temple, Bến Tre branch, Hochiminh City, February 2001 (© J  r  my Jammes).

The offering table for the dead (*Linh s  ng—Linh t  a*) is different from that for Master Cao Đ  i (in temples and houses), even if the Cao Đ  i altar remains the referential one in terms of symbolic interpretation of its arrangement (see Figures 3–5).

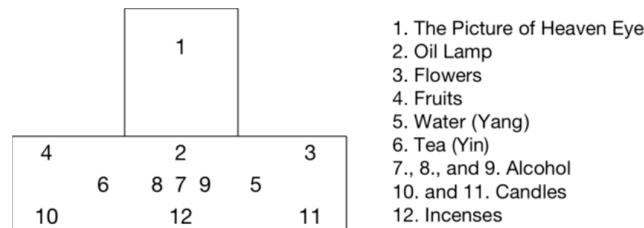


Figure 3. Ritual arrangement of the offering table for Master Cao Đ  i (*B  n Th  r Th  y*).

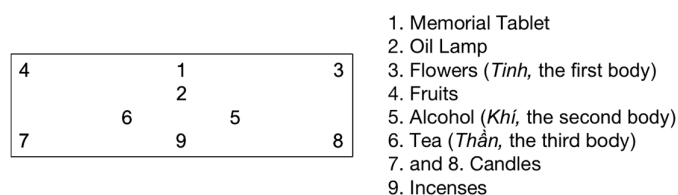


Figure 4. Ritual arrangement of the offering table for the dead (*B  n Vong*).

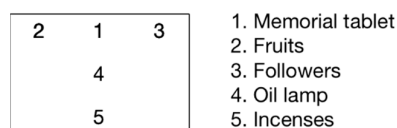


Figure 5. Ritual arrangement of the portable memorial altar of the dead (*Khai Vong*).

On the altar, a small card (*Th  n ch  u*) is displayed where the name of the deceased, his/her date of birth, and religious position are indicated. Below the Divine Eye of Master Cao Đ  i is an oil lamp called *Th  i C  c đ  ng*, the lamp of the universal monad or lamp of the First Principle (*Th  i c  c*, 太極

Tàijī). This object and its symbol follow a terminology borrowed from Daoism²⁵. Our interlocutors consider that such light exists abstractly within each human being.

The offering tablet for Master Cao Đài (see Figure 3) follows the shape of the Chinese character 主 (*Zhǔ*, Vn. *Chủ*) which means “lord” or “owner” (Nguyễn Văn Hồng 2004). The same character appears distinctly in pre-Caodaist funeral rituals at the time of burial, symbolizing the completeness of the ritual in the spirit of filial piety²⁶. The three offerings of flowers, fruits, and tea accept various interpretations, referring to the “three bodies” of the dead but also to the concept of *tam bửu* or “three jewels” which, in Buddhism, would be the Buddha (*Phật*), the Dharma (*Pháp*), and the Sangha (*Tăng*). These three objects thus placed on the altar are also said to designate the Daoist triad at the source of all beings, offering a visual allusion to the Daoist inner alchemy and its process of nurturing and transforming the triad of *tinh* (精 *jīng*), *khí* (氣 *qì*), and *thần* (神 *shén*). By its evaporation, the *tinh* (“first body”), the *khí* (“second body” or true mind), the *thần* (“third body” or true spirit) would be an objective to be achieved to become an “accomplished being” (*đắc đạo*). Through these offerings, and the multilevel correspondences they activate symbolically (see Table 2), the devotee would suggest the presence and unity of these “three jewels” (*tinh khí thần hiệp nhất*) on the altar and in every human being, and, of course, this symbolic explanation is meaningful in the treatment of the dead “three bodies”.

Table 2. The symbolic and structural equivalences of the Three-Body theological conception in Cao Đài.

Realms	The First Body	The Second Body	The Third Body
Creation	Parents	Golden Mother of the Jasper Pool	Supreme Master Cao Đài
Life	Flesh (<i>Phạm Thân</i> 凡身)	True mind (<i>Chơn Thần</i> 真神)	True spirit (<i>Chơn Linh</i> 真靈)
Death	Corpse	True soul (<i>Chơn Hồn</i> 真魂)	True spirit (<i>Chơn Linh</i> 真靈)
Altar’s offerings	Flower	Fruit	Tea
Hierarchy/ Architecture of temples	<i>Cửu Trùng Đài</i> (“palace of the nine degrees of the episcopal hierarchy”)	<i>Hiệp Thiên Đài</i> (“palace of the heavenly alliance”)	<i>Bát Quái Đài</i> (“palace of the eight trigrams”)
Buddhist (Three Jewels)	Sangha (<i>Tăng</i> 僧)	Dharma (<i>Pháp</i> 法)	Buddha (<i>Phật</i> 佛)
Daoist (Inner alchemy)	Essence (<i>Tinh</i> 精)	Energy Flow (<i>Khí</i> 氣)	Spirit (<i>Thần</i> 神)

To the left of the Divine Eye, a vase of flowers is placed, and on its right, a plate of fruits. In front of the altar, in the middle, a perfume burner invariably contains five sticks of incense which symbolizes the five elements (*ngũ hành*)²⁷, and extensively to the “five degrees of initiation” through which an accomplished adept is supposed to go through during his/her life (Jammes 2014, pp. 431–35). However, for the dead, only three sticks are used, referring to the three bodies and to the Daoist triad.

²⁵ The “great soul” (*đại hồn*, 大魂 *dàhún*) of the Jade Emperor residing on the High Tower (*cao đài*, 高台 *gāotái*) would be the essence, the vitality, and the guardian of this light.

²⁶ According to Dumoutier (1904, p. 78), when the coffin is about to touch the ground, the tablet held by the eldest son must be completed by the most literate son of the family: “The last character of this inscription, which was written in advance, and which is the character *chủ* 主 [*Zhǔ*] (master), was intentionally left incomplete, since it lacks a kind of comma at the top; as such, [the character] 王 [Ch. *wáng*, Vn. *vuông*], means “lord” or “king”. The literate parent, with a brush stroke, completes the character, and it is at this precise moment that the soul of the deceased comes to animate the tablet”.

²⁷ Water, fire, wood, earth, and metal (*Thủy, Hỏa, Mộc, Thổ, and Kim*).

However, on the offering table for the dead, there is no water, which represents the *duang* (or *yang* 陽) principle in Cao Đài. The reason behind this is that the dead is considered as an *âm* (or *yin* 陰) principle, the hidden, the invisible, the ether, while *duang* is seen as the characteristic of living beings, a visible and material entity. Another difference with the Cao Đài altar is the presence of a piece of black and white cloth affixed to the offering table, on which one can read four Chinese characters 喪致其哀 (*Sàng zhì qí āi*, Vn. *Tang trí kỳ ai*). This phrase originated from one of the Confucian classic works, i.e., the *Classic of Filial Piety*, and literally means that one should present grief while mourning his parents²⁸.

Finally, the *New Canonical Codes* (*Tân Luật*) of Cao Đài specifically prohibits meat offerings and the use of votive papers (*nộm hình*) during any rituals, including funerals. This religious habit is still strongly active in Buddhism and Mother Goddess worship, as an example. Such papers shall assure the deceased a comfortable material condition in the hereafter by addressing him/her with a paper of wealth, which the offering by fire is supposed to transform into reality. In the millenarian scenario of Cao Đài, this liturgy is no longer necessary. Any materials are redundant in the eternal homeland. Cao Đài exegetes insist that the use of the votive papers would cause too much expense for the faithful too. They sometimes add that the abandonment of votive papers in the Cao Đài worship is justified as a means of presenting their religion with a more “rational” version of indigenous religious tradition and the worship of idols (Jammes 2014, p. 107).

3.2. The Offerings

Once the dead body is well placed in the coffin, the ritual starts by “Informing the ancestors of the death” (*Cáo tử tổ*) and praying for Ancestors (*Cầu Tổ Phụ Đã Qui Liâu*) and then for Dead Suffering Release (*Kinh Cứu Khổ*), three times. Additionally, accompanied by musicians (*Ban Âm Nhạc*), food is offered to the dead twice a day, in the morning and at night (*Cúng triều Tịch*), accompanied by the chanting of the Scripture of the Secular Way (*Kinh Thế Đạo*).

On the night of the second day, the rituals of Ascending to the Hall (*lễ dâng điện*) and of Praying for Redemption (*lễ cầu siêu*) start around 7:00 p.m. and last for three hours, during which both music and chanting are performed. These two rituals are specific to Cao Đài rituals in Vietnam.

During this ritual, two worshipping tables were set. The inside table (*nội nghì*) is placed near the coffin, while the other outside table (*ngoại nghì*) is placed in an area a little far away. The outside table serves as a starting point to six “ritual men” (*Lễ sĩ*) in charge of offering sacrifice to the deity and the dead in a typical Cao Đài and “ceremonial manner” (*Điện lễ*). Two of them use very delicate containers to prepare the offerings—incense, flowers, wine, and tea, successively. In the course of moving, the other four draw on the floor, with the movement of their legs²⁹, the shape of the Chinese character “heart” or “consciousness” (*tâm*; 心 *xīn*; see Figure 6), which is a Buddhist concept par excellence. Apart from the unique leg movements, their hands that hold the offerings are raised high, which makes their whole faces covered by loose sleeves, whereby only the flaming candles can be seen. The dance-like process of *lễ sĩ*, transmitting the offerings, is called “ascending to the hall to present gifts” (*dâng điện hiến lễ*).

²⁸ The *Classic of Filial Piety* (also known by its Chinese name as the *Xiào jīng* (孝经), by Zēng zǐ (曾子, 505–436 B.C.E).

²⁹ Following the slow rhythm of the *Đạo Ngũ Cung* repertoire (Đức Nguyên 2000, vol. 3, p. 33), they first squat with one leg, then raise the leg to the knee position. After that, they lay down the leg as if drawing a semi-circle.



Figure 6. Second-day funeral ritual, the dance-like offering (in red), Tây Ninh, 2 July 2018 (© Shao Zhu Shuai).

When it comes to the offerings (incenses, liquor, and tea), the four *lễ sĩ* create different movement shapes, such as straight line, square, circle, and symmetric cross. This dance-like talisman is called “Revolving the Eight Trigrams” (*xoay bát quái*; 轉八卦 *zhuǎnbāguà*), which represents the cosmology of Cao Đài and a powerful (Daoist-driven) protection against bad spirits potentially present during funerals.

A “minor offering” (*Phụ tế*) follows for the nonrelatives of the dead, such as colleagues, students, neighbors, and friends. This offering is the preamble of one of the most important rituals of the funerals, the Requiem, or the so-called “Ritual of Praying for Redemption” of the dead (*lễ cầu siêu*), performed by all the relatives in front of the offerings table³⁰. Two scriptures are chanted: the “Scripture of praying for redemption” (*Kinh Cầu Siêu*), chanted once, to pray to Master Cao Đài, the Golden Mother of the Jasper Pool and other deities to eliminate the crimes and sins of the dead during his/her life and to help him/her to acquire redemption, and conversely, the “Scripture when someone has already passed away” (*Kinh Khi Đã Chết Rồi*), chanted three times, which asks for redemption not for the dead, but rather for wandering (non-) Caodaists souls or ghosts living in adjacent areas of the temple.

The people participating in redemption prayers are normally outnumbered compared to other sequences in the funeral, including irrelevant relatives or friends of the dead, but anyone keen to increase his/her efforts and merits³¹ by facilitating the redemption of ghosts in the area. This ritual is therefore opportune to whet a neighborhood’s curiosity, especially the non-Caodaist ones, and eventually to incite theological explanation and further conversion.

Finally, the *Kinh Cầu Siêu* is chanted repeatedly three times at an accelerated pace, ending by calling the name of Master Cao Đài three times. The scripture is said to be chanted faster and faster in order to urge the dead soul to leave and to cut his/her attachment to or affection for the secular world.

³⁰ In the context of the Amnesty (*Đại Ân Xá*) or universal salute granted by Master Cao Đài, the Holy See of Tây Ninh organizes three times a year (the 16th day of three lunar months, after the full moon, e.g., in January, July, and October) a so-called “Requiem Ceremony” (*Cầu siêu hội*), aiming to pray for the salvation of all spirits (*vong linh*), whether they have a religion or not and whether they have economic means or not to offer decent funerals.

³¹ *Công phu* 功夫, *Công quả* 功果, and *Công trình* 功程.

4. Talismanic Writing and a *Bát Nhã* Boat for a Universal Salvation

4.1. The Cao Đài “Sacraments”

As we mentioned before, the second body (*chơn thân*) is depicted as connecting the physical body with the soul. If the physical body were to be polluted, the “true mind” would also become impure. Once polluted, the “true mind” will become heavy and not able to ascend together with the soul during funerals. As it appears in the Scripture of Easing Grievance (*Kinh Giải Oan*), “the polluted ‘true mind’ is heavy, and the weak physical body is not easy to gain enlightenment”. Owing to this, in the third period of redemption Cao Đài is said to open, Master Cao Đài shows mercy and teaches His “highest disciples” (a male member of the clergy, a *chức sắc*, deacon or upward)³² an esoteric talismanic writing ritual or “sacraments” (*Hành pháp*; 行法 *xíngfǎ*).

Traditional Buddhist funeral rites flourished with highly codified rites that bring together geomantic knowledge, talismanic gestures (*quyết*), and protective amulets against “evil spirits” who can “oppose free passage” in the Hereafter (Dumoutier 1904, p. 10). The same author defines *quyết* as “mystical gestures, buckets of consecration, symbolic figures; it is a silent hieratic language, figured with hands and fingers, and the initiation of which is strictly kept secret by the Tonkin monks” (Dumoutier 1904: p. 11, note 1). During the funeral, the same author provides many examples of amulets (*cái bùa*) to place in the coffin (amulets of the Five Cardinal Points, of Zenith), in the clothes of the dead, near the head, on the face (the characters sun and moon, 明, “light”; Ch. *míng*, Vn. *minh*), on the eyes, the ears, the forehead, in the nostrils, in the mouth, on the chest, on the navel, in both hands, on the right foot, and on the left foot of the dead. The four walls and the cover of the coffin are symbolically protected by five different amulets (Dumoutier 1904, pp. 22–44, 38–39). Aesthetically speaking, these amulets entwined Chinese characters with drawings of the human body and words in Sanskrit, “but of which neither the bonzes nor the sorcerers understand the meaning” (Dumoutier 1904, p. 22).

In Cao Đài, the practice of *quyết* and *cái bùa* remains, but it is limited to few “seals of consecration”, thereby giving them more power and more authority to the dignitary who performs this “sacrament”.

In the morning of the third day, the so-called ritual “to transport the spirit of the dead” (*Hành Phép độ hồn*) includes three steps and kinds of talismanic performance from the dignitary, namely, “body purification” (*phép sắc*), secular “root cutting” (*đoạn căn*), and “redemption acquiring” (*độ Thằng*)³³.

The “charm to cut the root” (*Phép Đoạn căn*) aims to cut the “Seven Points of the Vital Fluid” (*Thất khiêu Sanh quang*), in other words, the invisible and revengeful “ropes” (*sợi dây*) of karma (*oan nghiệp*), which would be linked to the feet of the dead and which would not allow his/her spiritual components to leave the material body and to be fully released. In front of an altar of Master Cao Đài, the dignitary prepares a bowl, a branch of willow, a pair of scissors, and nine sticks of incense on a plate, then places everything on the divine altar.

At the core of this ritual is the symbolic production of the “Mahāsattva water” (*Ma Ha thủy*) or the “practice of *Cam lồ* water” (*Luyện Cam lồ thủy*), which would help in purifying the body and making the “true mind” light again. This holy water is also required for the blessing of altars, the converted, and sick people. The name of this water explicitly refers to representations of Bodhisattva Quan Âm (Guānyīn 觀音), who holds in her left hand *Cam lồ* water (or *Cam lộ* 甘露 *Gānlù* “dew

³² In Caodaism, the practice of a sacrament is granted to dignitaries only, and especially to those who take the oath to keep secret about their esoteric knowledge (*Phép Bí tịch*), who follow a total vegetarian diet, and who have a pure mind and unshakable faith in Master Cao Đài and Mother Buddha.

³³ On this ritual, our analysis is based on ethnographic surveys, interviews with Đức Nguyễn (Holy See of Tây Ninh) and some religious leaders (Holy See of Bến Tre, Cơ Quan Phổ Thông Giáo Lý) between 2000 and 2011, Cao Đài writings (Bishop Thượng Sáng Thanh 1972; Đức Nguyễn 2000, vol. 3, pp. 192–96), as well as a video posted on YouTube (Phước Dương 2017).

nectar”) and in her right hand a branch of willow to spread this blessed water on beings. The dignitary’s performance reproduces this mythical scene³⁴.

In front of the altar, the dignitary puts incense smoke on his hands and face while reciting the prayer “*Vạn trước tiêu tan, sanh khí phục hồi*” (“Ten thousand of turpitudes dissipated, the breath of life thrives again”). Then he draws the zodiacal character *Đinh* 丁 (Ch. *Dīng*) with his left foot, keeping his foot in this position during the entire ritual in front of the altar³⁵. Both hands take the water from the altar and pour it into a cup while reciting the phrase “The Power of *Cam Lỗ* water cancels life before karma, ends injustice, cuts ties, ends the fall” (see Figure 7). Once the sentence has been recited, the dignitary takes the cup of water with his left hand (yang) and raises it to the level of his eyes. Then the dignitary “fixes the Divine left Eye” (*định thần ngó ngay Thiên Nhân*), moving, in an esoteric way, the fingers of his right hand to draw the divine eye into the cup. This gesture is called the “seal of the Protector of Dharma” (*bất ấn Hộ Pháp*)³⁶.



Figure 7. Talismanic writing for preparing the *Cam Lỗ* water, and the seal of the Protector of Dharma, performed by a priest of Tây Ninh branch; funeral of Mrs Lê Thị Lực, 12 July 2017 (Phước Dương 2017).

For obtaining it, he has to draw the gaze of the Divine or Heavenly Eye’s (*Thiên Nhân*) pupil of Master Cao Đài in the cup with his own eyes and to write the same Chinese character three times (presumably that of Heaven *Thiên* 天 *Tiān*)³⁷ with his right middle finger while internally reciting “*Nam mô Cao Đài Tiên Ông*” (“In the name of the immortal Cao Đài...”). He ends his talismanic writing by drawing three infinitesimal circles around these characters (*vẽ 3 vòng vô vi*), while reciting “*Đại Bồ Tát Ma Ha Tát*” (“... great Bodhisattva”). Once the drawing is finished, the palm of his right hand covers the cup, and the dignitary closes his eyes “to transfer [the presence of] the spirit to the surface of the water” (*truyền thần xuống mặt nước*) and “to penetrate [into it] its spiritual force (*trụ thần vào đó*)”. When he sees the Divine Eye drop to the surface of the water, he should immediately remove his hand. The *Cam lồ* water is prepared and ready to be used.

³⁴ Dumoutier (1904, p. 16) describes the making of such a water called Buddha water *Đại Bi* (*Dàbēi* 大悲, “Great Compassion”, *adhimātra-kāruṇika*), referring to a female Brahma and an avatar of Quan Âm in Vietnam. To obtain this water, the monk had to macerate five different perfumes (cinnamon, star anise, incense, eagle wood, sandalwood), and to invoke the Genie of the Big Dipper constellation. This holy water aims to wash away the impurities of souls and to prepare them to enjoy the happiness of the other world.

³⁵ We can make the hypothesis that since this term means “population”, it might represent the worship of the descendants to the deceased.

³⁶ It consists of pointing the two fingers of the right hand (index and ring fingers) towards the divine eye while the middle finger is folded at the base of the thumb. With a sudden gesture, the middle finger stands up and clicks the thumb above the cup.

³⁷ The *Thiên* character is part of one of the five most important amulets for funeral rites, with the amulets of the sun, moon, stars, light, water, wood, metal, and air (Dumoutier 1904, p. 27).

During the funeral, the dignitary must then create the “precious talisman that cuts the roots” (*Bửu pháp Đoạn căn*) on the coffin. With his right hand, he holds nine lighted incense sticks while his left hand takes a pair of scissors in an esoteric way: the thumb and middle finger are in the scissors’ rings. The pair of scissors is in a vertical position with the index finger placed on the pivot of the scissors, which is half-open. The three fingers thus erected would symbolize either Buddha, Dharma and Sangha (*Phật, Pháp, Tăng*), the three Buddhist Jewels, or the Daoist triad of *trình, khí, and thần*. The dignitary’s left foot returns to the zodiacal position *Đinh* (丁). The pivot of the scissors, the dignitary’s eyes, and the divine eye (altar) are aligned on the same axis. With concentration, the dignitary then writes a secret Chinese character. The nine sticks of incense point in the direction of the eyelid of the Divine Eye. The pair of scissors is now charged with talismanic power.

Thus equipped, the dignitary moves in front of the coffin, and with his eye, draws a secret Chinese character right on the deceased’s head. Then he begins the recitation of the Redemption Prayer (*kinh Cầu Siêu*) “to bless the corpse” (*Hành phép xác*; Figures 8 and 9). At this moment, the dignitary grabs with his left hand the cup of *Cam lồ* water, takes a branch of willow with his right hand (producing a symbolic seal named *Hộ Pháp*) and draws the character Heaven (*Thiên*) three times in the air. At this point, the dignitary must “no longer see the coffin, but only [mentally] visualize the entire dead body” (Đức Nguyễn 2000, vol. 3, p. 195). The branch is soaked by the dignitary in the cup of holy water, sprinkling the body of the dead in twelve points (three times on the four sides of the coffin). The dignitary can then begin the talismanic ritual of “Cutting the [seven] roots [or earthly ties]” (*Hành phép Đoạn căn*).



Figure 8. The talismanic ritual of *Hành phép xác* performed in the deceased’s house by a priest of Tây Ninh branch; funeral of Mrs Lê Thị Lụa, 12 July 2017 (Phước Dương 2017).



Figure 9. The talismanic ritual of *Hành phép xác* performed at the crematorium by the priest of Bình Hòa temple, Bến Tre branch, Hochiminh City, March 2001 (© Jérémy Jammes).

He moves towards the head of the coffin while reciting the Redemption Prayer (*Câu Siêu*) for the second time. The pair of scissors in one hand, he raises it above the coffin (see Figure 10). One more time, the dignitary has to internally visualize the entire body of the deceased within the coffin. While moving, his right hand keeps an esoteric position (seal known as *Hộ Pháp*). Then he cuts, with his pair of scissors (in his left hand), the seven karmic (invisible) strings: (1) on the head at the level of the fontanel (*nê huồn cung*), (2) at the forehead, (3) at the neck, (4) at the heart, (5) at the left hip, (6) at the lower abdomen, and (7) at the coccyx. While cutting, he should only think about cutting, not about the pair of scissors; otherwise, the ritual will fail. After the cut, he returns to his original position, in front of the coffin, giving the pair of scissors to his assistant, and continues to sing with the choir.



Figure 10. Talismanic writing for *Hành phép Đoạn căn*, and the seal of the Protector of Dharma, performed by a priest of Tây Ninh branch; funeral of Mrs Lê Thị Lục, 12 July 2017 (Phước Dương 2017).

The last ritual around the coffin, that which “confers the mystery of deliverance” or “of ascension” (*Hành pháp Độ thăng*) is supposed to help a soul to be saved (*siêu thăng*, according to a Buddhist expression) and to join the eternal homeland (see Figure 11).

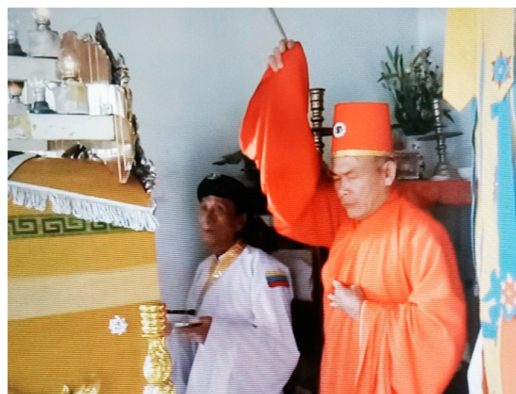


Figure 11. Talismanic writing for *Hành pháp Độ thắng*, performed by a priest of Tây Ninh branch; funeral of Mrs Lê Thị Lực, 12 July 2017 (Phước Dương 2017).

This ritual takes place only at the level of the head of the deceased, e.g., at the top of the coffin³⁸. It begins with the third recitation of the requiem. The dignitary's left hand is held against his chest by making the seal of the Protector of Dharma (*Hộ Pháp*) while the right hand holds the nine sticks of incense ("nine", the highest odd or *yang* number, is the number of Master Cao Đài), the fire just at the level with the head of the deceased. A talisman is drawn with the incense sticks. In a focused and respectful manner, the dignitary calls the name of the deceased to himself, invoking his/her "pure spirit" (*chơn thân*) so that this spirit might rest on the smoke of the nine incense sticks and rise into heaven. To fully accomplish the ascent of the *chơn thân*, the dignitary has to mimic the spiritual ascension by raising his right arm holding the sticks; he then gives them to his assistant (Đức Nguyễn 2000, vol. 1, pp. 96–99).

Once this esoteric ritual (*Hành Pháp độ hồn*) is finished, a relative of the deceased holds the spirit tablet and bids farewell to Master Cao Đài and ancestors and then sets off for a cemetery or crematorium.

4.2. A Bát Nhã Boat for Saving Cao Đài Dead Souls

Moving the coffin to the cemetery is also a part of the funeral service provided by the temple. The hearse transporting the coffin is called "Prajñā boat" (*Thuyền Bát Nhã*; 般若船 *Bồ Đề Chuán*; see Figures 12 and 13)³⁹. The *Bát Nhã* boat or "boat of wisdom" (*thuyền Trí huệ*)⁴⁰ is found in Buddhist funerals, whereby the tablet of the dead is placed on a cart represented in the shape of a dragon and mounted by eight air spirits (*kim cương*). Its role is to lead the soul of the deceased to Meru Mount. The funeral ritual is thus considered as a passage to another shore, during which the soul of the deceased must "cross the ocean of birth and death, that is to say, the *Sinh từ Đại Hải*, as human existence is considered an incessant metempsychosis, the Sansara [Saṃsāra]" (Dumoutier 1904, p. 72 plate 17 and p. 81 note 1). Ideally, this boat brings pure and perfected souls (*chơn hồn đắc đạo*) to the so-called realm of Nirvana of the Pure Land (*cõi Cực Lạc Niết Bàn*) to further become "enlightened" (Buddha). The practice of this carriage no longer exists in Vietnamese Buddhism while it continues through the Cao Đài funeral ritual, having borrowed the Buddhist iconology while reinterpreting and adapting its meaning to Cao Đài millenarian theology.

³⁸ Only dignitaries who are promoted to the rank of saint (*Thánh*), that is to say, priests to the archbishops (*Giáo Hữu* to *Chánh Phôi Sư*), are authorized to practise this rite at the Holy See of Tây Ninh. Dignitaries of Genie rank (*Thần vị*), like deacons, can only exercise the rite of blessing the corpse and cutting the karmic thread.

³⁹ At the end of the second day following death, after the prayer for redemption, a so-called drama of the *Bát Nhã* boat may occur for a deceased who held the rank of Deacon (*lễ sanh*) or higher. It can also be played for bringing fortune to a newly-built house (only for the members of Tây Ninh branch).

⁴⁰ It is said in Buddhism "Bát nhã ba la mật" (般若 波羅蜜 *Prajñāpāramitā*, which means "*Bát nhã* is wisdom".

In times of the Cao Đài Great Amnesty (*Đại Ân Xá*), the possibility of “escaping the cycle of reincarnation” (*thoát khỏi luân hồi*) and of redemption is open to Humanity. In Cao Đài, Buddha Maitreya is in charge of conducting the *Bát Nhã* boat⁴¹. This boat brings souls either to the shore of reincarnation (*bờ luân hồi*) or to that of the “liberation of perfect men” (*bờ đắc đạo giải thoát*), which gives access to the eternal native land (*Cõi Thiêng liêng Hằng sống*) where the Master resides. The decision of the “shore” where the soul will “berth” will depend on the Flower of the Dragon Assembly and its court’s decision. In borrowing from the Buddhist funeral iconology and material culture, Cao Đài has restructured it through its millenarian myth of the Dragon Flower⁴².



Figure 12. On the morning of the third day, on the way to the cemetery, Tây Ninh, 2 July 2018 (© Shao Zhu Shuai).



Figure 13. On the way to the cemetery, with the coffin placed in the *Bát Nhã* boat, behind the procession, Tây Ninh, 2 July 2018 (© Shao Zhu Shuai).

This *Bát Nhã* boat is made of wood, in the shape of a golden dragon; in the middle of it, a golden house is built to place the coffin in during its transport to a cemetery. In the case of the Cao Đài temple of Sađec, in the middle of the Mekong delta, the *Bát Nhã* boat is really a boat that floats and circulates on the branches of the river to reach the cemetery. Elsewhere, it is mostly a small truck that has been turned into a boat on wheels. At the Holy See of Tây Ninh, the *Bát Nhã* boat rests on a 2-wheel chassis,

⁴¹ About the Cao Đài conception of the *Bát Nhã* boat, see Trần Duy Nghĩa ([1935] 2000).

⁴² Cao Đài has also borrowed from the Buddhist terminology the term, *Tiếp Dẫn Đạo Nhơn* (接引道人 *Jiē yǐn dào rén*, “The One who leads to the Way of Man”), which serves in Buddhism to name the *Bát Nhã* boatman; it designates now the hierarchical position of “instructor” in Cao Đài (endorsed in the 1930s by Gabriel Gobron, a French spiritist).

held and pulled by ropes, aiming to give life to the “dragon” by the rocking of both the dragon’s head and tail. Normally, each Cao Đài temple is supposed to have a *Bát Nhã* boat.

Once at the cemetery or the crematorium, a last memorial speech (*Điếu văn*) is said by the elder of the family, and all the relatives kneel at the coffin for gratitude (*cảm tạ*). The religious cemetery of Thái Bình is an area of 50 hectares in the Holy See of Tây Ninh, formerly used to bury the corpses of both dignitaries and followers. This land is called “the Pure Land of Thái Bình” (*Cực Lạc Thái Bình*), located near the Cầm Giang river. This river is often compared to the Ganges by the Chief of Mediums, Phạm Hộ Pháp, with the supernatural particularity being at the heart of the “[talismanic] seal of the Six Dragons” (*Lục long phò ấn*), that is to say at the presence of “six underground water circuits” (Đức Nguyên 2000, vol. 1, pp. 163–64).

If cemeteries and crematoria are most common, the case of the mummification of the body of Phạm Công Tắc (the chief of the Mediums) in 1959, in Cambodia, remains unique among the Cao Đài deathscape. It actually respects his last wish, e.g., to bring his remains back to the Holy See of Tây Ninh only when Vietnam is united in a spirit of peace and neutrality. In November–December 2006, his body was finally brought back to Vietnam, burnt, and the ashes put into a “stupa of the souvenir” (*tháp kỷ niệm*)⁴³.

4.3. A Cao Đài Mourning

The mourning ritual (*Cư tang*) can begin. Cao Đài has turned the long-lasting mourning system into periodic rituals, which could be further classified into three stages: every nine days during 81 days (stage of the “nine weeks”, *tuần cửu*); the 281st day (stage of the “small wall”, *Tiểu tường*)⁴⁴; the 381st day (stage of the “great wall”, *Đại tường*)⁴⁵. This last ritual aims to bring the soul (*chơn hồn*) to the 12th Heaven (*Trời thứ 12*), which is the so-called Hồn Nguơn Thiên, where Buddha Maitreya resides, the “chief of the Dragon Flower Assembly” (*Giáo chủ Hội Long Hoa*)⁴⁶.

In the East Asian cultural context, the usage of the color white is reserved for funeral clothes as a sign of loss and mourning. However, the ordinary tunic of Cao Đài devotees is also white. The vision of their tunic never fails to astonish the non-Caodaist Vietnamese, as white is always forbidden on a festive occasion. The Cao Đài usage of the color white on all occasions accepts many interpretations: the search for purity by the adepts, for instance, but it can also be understood through the spirit-medium ritualized relationship that Caodaists are said to maintain with the dead, as well as through the millenarian reference that it arouses life on Earth, being presented as a period of preparation for the end of the world, eminent and inevitable.

⁴³ At the Holy See of Tây Ninh, only 24 dignitaries had the privilege of such a building: the (interim) Pope Lê Văn Trung, the top-three leaders of spirit-medium activity (Phạm Hộ Pháp, Cao Thượng Phẩm, and Cao Thượng Sanh), the 12 spirit-mediums, the three male Cardinals (*Đầu Sư*), the two female Cardinals (*Nữ Đầu Sư* Hương Hiếu and Hương Lự), the three male Archbishops (*Chưởng Pháp*) (Đức Nguyên 2000, vol. 3, pp. 134–35). However, in the esoteric Chiếu Minh branch, highly selective in initiation and in training, based on meditation and ascetism, all its dead are disposed in stupa at the cemetery (*nghĩa địa*) in downtown Cần Thơ.

⁴⁴ That is 200 days after 9 weeks of having mourned every 9 days, following the expression “week of nine nine” (*Tuần Cửu Cửu*). The reference number of mourning days in Buddhism is “7”.

⁴⁵ Meaning 300 days after *Tiểu tường*, or 581 days after death. According to Confucianism, *Tiểu tường* is the first anniversary of the death, happening one year later. The *Đại tường* is the second anniversary of death, exactly two years after death.

⁴⁶ The 12 times of periodic mourning rituals (executed after burial) symbolically refer to but also depart from a traditional Vietnamese view of afterlife, as it was depicted in detail by Dumoutier (1904, pp. 155–203), of an underground prison run by the 10 Kings of Hell (*Thập Điện Diêm Vương*). The Cao Đài ritual performs the successive 12 passages from the corpse to Heaven (dominated by the Maitreya Bodhisattva); nine female immortals or fairies—subordinated to the Golden Mother of the Jasper Pool—assist the dead’s *chơn hồn* along their journey, and their mercy challenges the Confucian hierarchy lead by a King of Hell (Shao Zhu Shuai forthcoming). This journey is known in Cao Đài theology as the “Celestial mechanism of transformation” (*Thiên cơ chuyển hóa*).

According to the relationship with the dead person, the relatives wear different mourning garments (*Tang phục*), following the Confucian “Five-Garment” regulation (*ngũ phục*)⁴⁷.

5. Conclusions: Death as Return Passage to the Master

In Vietnamese, *chết* directly refers to “death”. A more euphemistic word is *đi*, which literally means “gone”. However, in a Cao Đài funeral, death is referred to as “*quy vị*” (literally meaning “back in position”, especially for someone who is high clergy). At one’s last moments, people would surround him/her, praying for “return to homeland and leave out mortal dreams”. In the scriptures of praying for the spirit at one’s last gasp and the scriptures of praying for the spirit when someone has died, the concept of “returning to the homeland” appears frequently in reference to the original place of residence of human ancestors, but also to the “tower” (*đài*) where the Jade Emperor (Master Cao Đài) is living. The myth of Dragon and Follower names it the original home (*Chân không giả hương*) in the world of true emptiness (Naquin 1976; Overmyer 1976).

This emotional imagination of returning home dilutes the fear of “death”. “Death”, as a necessary means of returning home and coming back to the Mother, shall not be coupled with weeping. Additionally, since Caodaists do not regard death as the end of existence, Cao Đài funerals are not ceremonies made of sadness and sorrow. Tears are not encouraged in Cao Đài funerals. When Caodaists are asked whether crying would be forbidden in the funeral, they answer “it’s not forbidden, but unnecessary”, potentially inciting the dead souls to be reluctant to leave.

The longing for “returning home” simultaneously means the abandonment of the present world. For Caodaists, “homeland” is the true “home”, while the present world they live in is “elsewhere”. This hope for return indicates that there is always tension in the real world, in which appropriate religious and moral practices would lead to redemption (Goossaert and Palmer 2011).

The funeral rituals implemented by Cao Đài show, with evidence, the emergence of a new theological paradigm—under the millenarian and universal redemptive theme inspired by the “Book of the Dragon Flower”. Simultaneously, the originality and the agenda of these funerals can be understood in competition with former Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian funeral rituals: Cao Đài funerals demonstrate the ritual and doctrinal restructurings of Buddhist–Daoist talismanic writing and symbols, Confucian remembrance commemoration, the Buddhist figures of Maitreya, and the Buddhist iconology of the *Bát Nhã* boat. This ritualistic contribution is yet limited in number, and it experiences significant changes both in their theological content and in their performance. They obviously confer an omnipotent power to a single deity, Master Cao Đài, also known as the Jade Emperor, the supreme deity of the Daoists, the keeper of the register of human births and destinies, the gatekeeper of geomantic knowledge, who resides in the constellation of the Big Dipper (*Bắc Đẩu* 北斗 *Bối dẩu*)⁴⁸.

Also, Cao Đài funeral rituals allow adepts to visualize complex theological elements of the Cao Đài deathscape: the use of a pair of scissors to cut the ties of karma, the myth of the Dragon Flower and the dragon-shaped *Bát Nhã* boat, for example. The visual correspondence can be observed with the case of Cao Đài architecture and costumes (for example, division into three “bodies” of each temple, use of three colors to indicate the role of Cao Đài for harmonizing Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism). The spirit of religious reform that has animated Cao Đài has thus largely chosen to make their differences ostensible (visible and audible, with specific chanting) through a large number of rituals (including funerals), but also to visualize and perform their new theology to make it accessible to a greater number of people for the sake of conversion and an affirmation of a specific identity in Vietnamese and also East Asian redemptive societies’ deathscapes.

⁴⁷ According to the records in the *Family Rites* (*Thọ Mai Gia lễ*), the mourning period applicable to mourners wearing *Trảm thôi* is 29 months (Hồ Sĩ Tân 2009). In modern Vietnam, the Five-Garment system has been simplified.

⁴⁸ The “beaked basket” instrument, used by Cao Đài spirit-mediums to communicate with deities and the dead for receiving their teachings, takes the form of the Big Dipper.

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