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Holy Mothers in the Vietnamese Diaspora: Refugees, Community, and Nation

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Abstract: Holy mothers, specifically the Vietnamese-looking Our Lady of Lavang and Caodai Mother Goddess, are the crucibles of faith for many Vietnamese Catholics and Caodaists. Based on ethnographic data collected in California, which has the largest overseas Vietnamese population, I argue that Vietnamese refugees and their US-reared descendants have been able to re-centralize their fragmented communities through the innovative adaptation of holy mother worship. In particular, Vietnamese Catholics in the US have transformed the European image of Our Lady of Lavang into a Vietnamese woman and exported it to the rest of the world. Meanwhile, Vietnamese American Caodaists have revived traditional religious rituals for the Caodai Mother Goddess which were repressed and prohibited for many years under communism in Vietnam. Through their shared devotion to holy mothers, these Vietnamese American faithful have also rebuilt relations with co-ethnic co-religionists living throughout the world. For both the Vietnamese Catholic and Caodai groups, holy mothers have emerged as emblems of their deterritorialized nation in the diaspora.

Keywords: Virgin Mary; Our Lady of Lavang; Mother Goddess; Holy Mother; Catholicism; Caodaism; diaspora; nation; refugee; Vietnamese

1. Introduction

On the eight month of each lunar calendar year, Vietnamese Catholics and Caodaists flock in large numbers to the sacred sites of their holy mothers in Vietnam, the Vietnamese-looking Our Lady of Lavang and the Asian-looking Caodai Mother Goddess, respectively. For nearly a week in the humid summer heat, from early morning until late evening, they pray, chant, and sing in elaborate religious rituals clouded by the smoke and aroma of incense. Their synchronized voices, from time to time punctured by fervent cries of faith, accompany the reverberating sounds of gongs, drums, and bells as they call on the holy mothers. They wave religious relics, such as rosaries and water bottles in order to “capture” blessings either for themselves or loved ones. Even non-followers from local areas and foreign countries have been drawn to these grandiose events, often to assuage their own curiosity or seek their own religious callings. These annual jubilees have become the most popular celebrations in Vietnamese Catholicism and Caodaism, attracting more attendees than any other religious gatherings.

Vietnamese refugees have exported and transplanted devotional practices to holy mothers in the US, which has the largest number of overseas Vietnamese Catholics and Caodaists. Currently, Vietnamese Catholics in Silicon Valley, California are building a \$45 million parish dedicated to “Our Lady of Lavang.” Meanwhile, their co-religionists in Southern California are raising \$25 million to construct a monumental “Our Lady of Lavang Shrine” at Christ Cathedral, the seat of the Diocese of Orange. Similarly, Vietnamese American Caodaists are continually building more shrines devoted to the Caodai Mother Goddess throughout the US.

Thus, while holy mother worship¹ is a significant part of religious and cultural traditions in Vietnamese Catholicism and Caodaism, I argue that it has become a fundamental practice to construct a diasporic community among Vietnamese American believers and their descendants who have been forced to live outside of their ancestral country. In particular, Our Lady of Lavang and the Caodai Mother Goddess have a long history in Vietnam as “mothers of refugees,” the ones to whom Vietnamese followers would call upon for protection from religious persecutions, stability in times of forced displacement and uprootedness, and solace amidst political trials and tribulations that marred Vietnam’s twentieth-century society.

With mass global dispersion after 1975, Vietnamese faithful have sought their holy mothers even more vigorously during their escape journeys from Vietnam, resettlement in their new home, and cross-border reconnection to each other. Based on ethnographic data collected mostly in California (specifically Orange County and San Jose), which has the largest concentration of overseas Vietnamese, I illustrate that both the Vietnamese American Catholic and Caodai communities have utilized holy mothers to re-centralize their religious communities based on a common faith, ethnic culture, and homeland politics. Certainly, there are also variations in religious orientation and narration that Vietnamese believers hold toward their holy mothers. In particular, Vietnamese American Catholics have visually transformed the European image of Our Lady of Lavang into a Vietnamese woman and then exported it to the rest of the world, including Vietnam, Japan, Taiwan, Australia, France, the Netherlands, and Germany. Meanwhile, their co-ethnic American Caodai counterparts have revitalized traditional Mother Goddess practices in order to preserve religious purity outside of the homeland. Nevertheless, despite these differences across faith, I contend that both of these overseas Vietnamese religious groups uphold their holy mothers as emblems of their deterritorialized nation in the diaspora.

Research on refugees and immigrants in the US has discovered that devotional religious practices to female figures often revitalizes and reinforces ethnicity locally and transnationally. In his study, [Tweed \(1997\)](#) found that Marianism, through Our Lady of Exile, plays a crucial role in linking Cuban Catholics in Miami to their homeland. He observes that, through Our Lady of Exile, they create a “trans-temporal” and “trans-locative” space at their church to reinterpret their history of displacement and envision a future in which they would return to their homeland. In doing so, Tweed argues that they transpose the conditions of displacement into survival and aspirations, reinterpreting their experiences of exile as hope and envisioning a future when they would return to Cuba. Other studies of Catholic immigrants in the US have found similar patterns of ethnic orthodoxy at local and global levels ([Castañeda-Liles 2018](#); [Ninh 2017](#); [Horsfall 2000](#); [Duricy 2008](#)).

In addition to the popularity of the Virgin Mary, studies have also observed intense devotion to female religious figures among Vietnamese American refugees of other faith. Among Buddhists, for instance, [Truitt \(2017\)](#) found that Quán Thá Âm (Guanyin or Kwan Yin) is important in mediating their precarious positionality as refugees living outside of their ancestral home and on the margins of American society. Similarly, within the Vietnamese Mother Goddess tradition, [Fjelstad and Hien \(2011\)](#) found that it has become increasingly more popular as the practice has become more communal. Traditionally, Mother Goddess rituals are clandestine, usually practiced individually or in small groups at private homes. However, in the US context, followers have created a semi-porous community that inspires many young Vietnamese adults to learn and maintain their Vietnamese roots, including traveling to their homeland regularly to authenticate their cultural heritage and faith.

How and why do refugees and immigrants in the US look to holy mothers as a modality to reconnect to co-ethnic co-religionists, locally and globally? Studies have found that religious mother

¹ I use “worship,” “venerate” and “honor” interchangeably in this paper. I am aware that the meanings of these words vary across different religious traditions. For example, Vietnamese Catholics worship only God and venerate or honor other religious figures, including the Virgin Mary. On the other hand, Vietnamese Caodaists worship and venerate both the (male) Supreme Being and the Mother Goddess as complementary spiritual entities.

figures emerge most vividly in contexts of pain, suffering, and mourning associated with displacement, isolation, and migration (Castañeda-Liles 2018; Ninh 2017; Truitt 2017; Fjelstad and Hien 2011). These are individual experiences, but spiritual mothers can conjoin refugees and immigrants across borders by facilitating sympathy, acceptance, and solace. These are “border-less” outreach inflect healing and reconciliation that are particularly unique to voluntary and involuntary migration experiences. In particular, the ethnic underpinnings of religious mother figures, such as imagery and historical roots, can create, re-link, and solidify blood, cultural, and physical bonds among members of a shared ethnicity and faith.

Mother worship, therefore, is less bound to the commands of traditions than the demands of contemporary life experiences and struggles. In front of religious mother figures, both men and women of different Vietnamese ethnic groups² can appeal for blessings, comfort, and guidance. This attraction across gender and ethnicity partly explains why the Mother Goddess tradition has become rapidly popular within the past two decades in Vietnam and the US. Whether the goddess is Liễu Hạnh in Northern Vietnam, Thiên Y A Na or Po Inâ Nâgar of central Vietnam, or the Black Lady or Our Lady of the Realm in Southern Vietnam, she has summoned thousands of pilgrims from all over the world to her sacred homes (Salemink 2015; Noseworthy 2015; Taylor 2004; Fjelstad and Hien 2006; Pham and Eipper 2009; Endres 2011). The transnational sphere created by religious mother worship is a unique and rare intimate point of juncture between Vietnamese followers in the US and co-religionists in other countries, including their homeland. As Salemink (2015) has further elaborated, contemporary Vietnamese Mother Goddess worship enables practitioners to “connect worlds both vertically—the *Yin* and *Yang* worlds—and horizontally—the various lifeworlds lived in various countries in the region and around the globe” (241).

Researchers have maintained that ethnic groups that participate in cross-border involvements motivated by a shared faith could reconstitute themselves into a deterritorialized nation in the diaspora. They have emphasized religion’s transcendental characteristic as being efficacious for creating a collective identity across space and time and elevating that identity to a level of sanctity for communal worship (Baumann 2000; Kokot et al. 2004; Smart 1987; Sökefeld 2004; Vertovec 1999; Vertovec 2000). As practitioners must “do considerable ideological work” (Tölölyan 1996, p. 17) in order to commit themselves to this transnational collectivity, scholars have argued that practitioners intentionally resist being assimilated into their host societies or belonging to any one particular nation, including their homeland. Instead, through the traversal of boundaries, diasporas have created their own alternative transnational community of belonging through their faith. I refer to “refugee” as an inclusive identification and an analytical framework, following the work of Espiritu (2014). As a classification, it refers to individuals who are legally defined as such by resettling governments or international agencies as well as their descendants and those whose forced displacement has not been recognized by political entities. Studies have found that refugees’ experiences and status do not end with resettlement but continue to linger in their lives (Nguyen 2012; Nguyen-Vo 2005; Espiritu 2002). These vestiges are often passed down onto their descendants and shape their worldviews. Moreover, while I recognize that most (but not all) Vietnamese in the US are either legally or voluntarily classified as refugees, I employ refugee as an analytical framework to shine light on the multiplicities and asymmetries of power dynamics inherent in knowledge production about refugees in relation to non-refugees. In doing so, I hope to represent, re-cover, and re-construct “refugee” as a “socio-legal object of knowledge” (Espiritu 2014), rather than as simply dispossessed, traumatized, and helpless victims. In turn, this analytical approach opens up empirical and theoretical spaces for uncovering the “lived religion” (Orsi 2010; Hall 1997) of Vietnamese American Catholic and Caodai refugees.

² There are 54 officially-recognized ethnic groups in Vietnam.

2. Background on Catholicism and Caodaism in Vietnam

2.1. Catholicism

During the 17th century, about a hundred years after the arrival of Portuguese Catholic missionaries, French Catholic missionaries successfully made gradual inroads into Vietnamese society by acculturating Catholicism into the local culture (Dutton 2016; Keith 2006; Phan 1991). However, it was not until the French rule (1887–1954) that Catholicism enjoyed full integration and acceptance into Vietnamese society. The Catholic Church flourished with the land and greater authority bestowed by the French colonial government. It built schools, churches, and medical centers, many of which remain standing today. However, its strength began to deteriorate beginning in 1954, when French colonial rule was replaced by Vietnamese communist control—first in Northern Vietnam and, by 1975, it had expanded to Southern Vietnam (Chu 2008).

Beginning in 1986, following policies of economic liberalization (Đổi Mới), the Vietnamese state slowly laxed its control over religious practices (Fjelstad and Hien 2011; Taylor 2004, 2001) and granted “qualified” religious freedom (Hansen 2009). However, the church property has continued to be confiscated by the Vietnamese government, and discrimination against Catholics has remained rampant (Dang 2008; UCAN The Union of Catholic Asian News). As of 2014, Catholicism is the second largest religion of Vietnam, following behind only Buddhism. It has a following of approximately seven million (8% of Vietnam’s population of 90 million) and, like Caodaism, is heavily concentrated in the Southern region of Vietnam (Home Office 2018).

2.2. Caodaism

Through direct communication with God by the means of séances, Caodaism (Cao Đài)³ was founded in 1926 in Southern Vietnam, when the country was under French colonialism. It is formally known as The Great Faith of the Third Era for Salvation (Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ). The religion encompasses teachings of tolerance that are aimed at creating universal harmony between Western and Eastern philosophies, traditions, and rituals. It believes that religions are different manifestations of the same truth and worships a common Supreme Being, from which all life originated. Through self-cultivation practices, such as meditation and vegetarianism, human beings may return to their roots and become united with the Supreme Being.

Caodaists utilize the Left Eye to represent the Supreme Being and as a symbol of their universal and inclusive faith, as the eye is not distinguishable by gender, race, or ethnicity (Hoskins 2015). Their religious pantheon includes Prophet Mohammed, Jesus Christ, Confucius, Li Bai (Lý Thái Bạch), Buddha, Lao Tzu, and the Bodhisattva Kwan Yin. Other saints include the Chinese revolutionary leader, Sun Yat Sen, the French philosopher, Victor Hugo, the Vietnamese poet, Nguyen Binh Khiem (Nguyễn Bình Khiêm), the English playwright, William Shakespeare, and the Russian political leader, Vladimir Lenin.

Located in a once deserted jungle area of the French-established Cochinchina colony, the Caodai Holy See (Toà Thánh Tây Ninh) is the religion’s headquarters that was built between 1932 and 1953. According to many Caodaists, the Holy See’s eclectic and colorful architecture is a manifestation of the Supreme Being’s culturally multi-faceted and universally encompassing teachings. Its impressive structure and design have been replicated by Caodai temples throughout the world. The Holy See oversees all religious activities within the religion, from text publication to membership registration and religious ordination.

Caodaism flourished in its early years, although the French government kept a watchful eye on the new religion. In the 1940s, nearly 25% of the population in Cochinchina were Caodaists (Hoskins 2012a, 2012b). Furthermore, the religion had attracted many Khmers in neighboring Cambodia. According

³ Caodaism has several sects. This paper focuses on the largest one, which is the Tay Ninh Caodai group.

to French colonial records, the number of Khmer visitors at the Caodai Holy See often outnumbered Vietnamese in the early years of the religion ([Province de Tayninh 1927](#)). Caodaism's global outreach also included building relationships with Oomoto (a Japanese new religious movement that originated from Shinto) and delegation visits to India.

Similar to the experiences of Vietnamese Catholicism, Caodaism was drastically repressed in Vietnam after 1975. Communism from Northern Vietnam took complete control of the Holy See, confiscated all of its properties, and banned nearly all religious activities, including séances, which was Caodaists' fundamental mode of communication with their Supreme Being. The Vietnamese government also combined the Holy See's three administrative branches of "checks and balances" into a state-sanctioned Sacerdotal Council. All seats in the council and other leadership positions must be appointed by, or must have approval from, the government. This "secular" system of appointment replaced séance as the sacred procedure of direct communication with God for spiritual guidance, including leadership ordination. As of 2014, there were approximately 4.4 million Caodai followers (5% of Vietnam's population of 90 million), making Caodaism the largest Vietnamese indigenous religion and the third largest religion in Vietnam, behind only Buddhism and Catholicism. Most of the Caodai followers are concentrated in the Southern region of Vietnam ([Home Office 2018](#)).

3. The Religious Significance of Holy Mothers

3.1. *Our Lady of Lavang*

According to an oral tradition, in Lavang⁴ in 1798, the Virgin Mary appeared several times to a group of Vietnamese Catholics who were fleeing from anti-Catholic persecutions. She comforted them and said, "My children, have faith and be brave. I have heard your prayers. From now on, I will grant the wishes of all who come to me" ([Tran 2009](#)). Since then, Catholics and non-Catholics alike have sought refuge at the site of the apparition. Although the Vatican has not verified the historical accuracy of the apparition, Catholics and non-Catholics alike have continued to seek the Virgin Mary's blessings at the site of her apparition. Except for a short hiatus due to war and violence during the 1970s, congresses have been held every two years to commemorate her apparition.

In 1901, when Vietnam was under French colonialism and Catholicism was much more tolerated, the first Our Lady of Lavang church was built and completed on the site where she had appeared. At his historic event, the local sitting bishop also placed a French-modeled statue of Our Lady of Victories (Notre-Dame des Victoires) to represent Our Lady of Lavang in the new church.

For nearly than a century, this statue of a Western-looking Virgin Mary was associated with Our Lady of Lavang. However, in 1998, upon the commemoration of two hundred years after the first apparition of Our Lady of Lavang was reported, Vietnamese Catholics replaced this Western image with a Vietnamese version created by Vietnamese American sculptor, Nhan Van, who also made the first Vietnamese image of the Virgin Mary outside of Vietnam ([Ninh 2017](#)). Portrayed as a Vietnamese woman, Our Lady of Lavang is dressed in a white traditional costume (áo dài) under a blue decorative cloak, adorned by a Vietnamese golden headdress, and holding a statue of baby Jesus on her left arm. For the first time in history, a Vietnamese Marian icon of the Catholic faith was officially introduced to the global community and, during the same year, Pope John Paul II proclaimed Our Lady of Lavang as the patroness of the Catholic Church of Vietnam.

3.2. *Caodai Mother Goddess*

The name Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu (Golden Mother of the Jade Pond), the Mother Goddess in Caodaism, is synonymous with Tây Vương Mẫu (Queen Mother of the West), a spiritual mother in Taoism who lives in a celestial garden that grows peaches of immortality. Diêu Trì or Dao Trì in Chinese refers to her spiritual

⁴ Lavang is approximately 60 km north of Hue (the former capital of Vietnam) in central Vietnam.

residence. *Kim* means “gold” or “imperial.” *Mẫu* is “mother” in Chinese and Vietnamese. Her other names include Buddha Mother (Phật Mẫu), Holy Mother (Đức Mẹ), Immortal Empress Mother (Bà Chúa Tiên), Birth Mother (Me Sanh), and Immortal-Fairy-Saint Mother (Tiên Thiên Thánh Mẫu).

The Caodai Mother Goddess bestows one of the most important theological teachings of Caodaism, religious universalism, the idea that everyone is equal to each other as children of the supreme Caodai God. As reflected by a comment made by Pham Cong Tac (Phạm Công Tắc, one of the three co-founders of Caodaism) on 10 January 1947, “... Inside the Mother Goddess temple, everyone has equal ranking, even if that person is the Pope or the Defender of the Religion, and therefore must leave their uniform outside. One may rule the outside world but cannot do so with mother as everyone is her children” (Phạm 1947). Since then, Caodai dignitaries have not worn their distinctive colorful uniforms while worshipping the Mother Goddess. As with other Caodai followers, they wear a simple white Vietnamese traditional attire (áo dài).

This emphasis on equality has been important in building bridges across social differences and strata. This has been exemplified by Caodaism’s conscious efforts to open up opportunities and encourage female involvement in its ecclesiastical leadership. Caodai females can reach the rank of Cardinal (Đầu Sư), the third highest position a living Caodaist can obtain.

Likewise, within the theology of religious universalism, the Mother Goddess holds equivalent and complementary status to the Caodai God or Supreme Being, whose energy is *yang* (*duong*), while hers is *yin* (*âm*). Caodaists have informed me that while all living and nonliving things originated from the Caodai God, the Mother Goddess created all things by unifying the *yin* (*âm*) and *yang* (*duong*) energy. As the creator and preserver of life, Caodaists believe that the Mother Goddess could protect them from secular materialistic seductions and return them to the right path of spiritual cultivation and unification with the Supreme Being.

In 1928, two years after Caodaism was declared a religion, the first Mother Goddess temple in Vietnam was built in My Tho (Mỹ Thọ), approximately 135 km from the Holy See (Bui 1986). In 1951, the first original model of the Mother Goddess was created and displayed in the Temple of Gratitude at the Caodai Holy See (Figure 1). Up to this day, there have been no other statues of the Mother Goddess allowed to be displayed outside of the Caodai Holy See. Although the Temple of Gratitude is only a temporary sanctuary for the Mother Goddess, Pham Cong Tac (Phạm Công Tắc)’s 1951 decree stated that only buildings within the Holy See compound can serve as the official Mother Goddess “temple” (đền) while other worshipping centres are simply “shrines” (điện). These shrines can only represent the Mother Goddess through four classical Chinese characters, 瑶池金母 (Golden Mother of the Jade Pond or Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu) and are not permitted to hold the annual Mother Goddess Festival.



Figure 1. Statue of the Caodai Mother Goddess and nine Immortal Maidens at the main altar in the Caodai Holy See’s Temple of Gratitude (Báo Ân Từ) (Tay Ninh, Vietnam).

4. Vietnamese Holy Mothers and Community Centralization in the Diaspora

4.1. Context

As of 2016, there were more than 2 million Vietnamese Americans (U.S. Census Bureau 2016), most of whom had arrived in the US as refugees after the fall of South Vietnam to communism in 1975 or were US-born descendants of these Vietnamese refugees. They were forced to flee their homeland for fear of political, religious, and economic persecutions.

Since their arrival, religion has constituted a visible presence within both the domestic and community lives of ethnic Vietnamese. In his 1980 survey, Rutledge (1985) has found that more than two-thirds of 200 Vietnamese refugees in Oklahoma City regarded religion as “extremely important” or “very important.” Religion has been one of the most important avenues for ethnic Vietnamese to cope with the challenges of migration and adaptation, particularly by creating liaisons and sharing resources with their ethnic faithful (Bankston and Zhou 1996; Burwell et al. 1986; Camda and Phaobtong 1992; Dorais 2001, 2005; Dunning 1982, 1989; Fjeldstad 1995; Hoang 2006; Hoskins 2006; Huynh 2000; Lewis et al. 1988; Nguyen 2001; Phan 2003; Phan 2006).

At home, Vietnamese practitioners across different religious traditions have often set up altars devoted to gods, spirits, and ancestors (Huynh 2000; Peché 2012; Phan 2005). In the community, ethnic Vietnamese have regularly gathered to celebrate their religion and preserve their ethnic heritage, such as teaching Vietnamese language classes and celebrating cultural festivals (Bankston and Zhou 1996; Dorais 2005; Hoang 2006; Phan 2003). Since the late 1990s, after the US lifted its trade embargo against Vietnam, many of them have rebuilt ties with co-religionists in the homeland.

Compared with the percentage of Catholics in Vietnam (approximately 7%), Catholics make up approximately 30% percentage of the Vietnamese population in the United States (Pew Forum on Research and Public Life 2012). The overrepresentation in the overseas Vietnamese population may be due to the fact that many had to flee Vietnam because of persecutions against their faith. Moreover, a number of Vietnamese refugees converted to Catholicism during the processes of flight and resettlement, especially those resettled by Catholic relief agencies (Hoskins 2006).

The largest number of Caodaists re-settled in Southern California but they were dispersed throughout the region. In 1979, through informal ties, word-of-mouth, and newspaper advertisements, a group of about five to six Vietnamese Caodaists became re-connected to each other. Gradually, religious life and activities attracted an increasing number of Caodaists throughout Southern California. Currently, there are about 50 Caodai temples outside Vietnam, nine of which are in California. According to email exchanges with Kham V. Pham, the highest-ranking religious leader of the Diocese of California, there are approximately 1350 Caodaists in the US, more than 90% of whom belong to the Tay Ninh Caodai sect.

As refugees fleeing communism within the context of the Cold War, Vietnamese were welcomed by US policies that, partly due to American military involvement in Vietnam, embodied ideals of moral responsibility, duty, and “multiculturalism.” Their arrival even propelled the rewriting of the Refugee Act of 1980 that paved the way to open doors to more refugees, including the “boat people” and those who had served time in re-education camps in Vietnam.

For many Vietnamese Americans Catholics and Caodaists, faith in their Asian-looking holy mothers played a powerful role in their experiences as refugees and ethnic minorities in the US. Although both Our Lady of Lavang and the Caodai Mother Goddess have historically been very important to Vietnamese followers in Vietnam, these holy mothers have become even more important to them as a result of being forcibly uprooted from their homeland and having to navigate the strange land of their new home in the US.

As I illustrate in the next sections, Our Lady of Lavang and the Caodai Mother Goddess have been instrumental in re-connecting them to each other and rebuilding their collectivity as a global community. At least once a year, Vietnamese refugees and their descendants from different parts of the US travel long distances in order to congregate and celebrate their holy mothers. These connections

have extended across cities, states, countries, and oceans, mending the wounds of separation, isolation, and marginalization caused by religious persecutions in Vietnam and forced assimilation in the U.S.

4.2. *Our Lady of Lavang*

Since her “ethnic” visual transformation, Vietnamese Catholics in the United States have increasingly integrated Our Lady of Lavang into their religious practices and beliefs. Historically, for example, Vietnamese Catholic martyrs have often been represented in paintings with an adult Jesus in the center. However, as the Vietnamese-looking Our Lady of Lavang became popular, she and the baby Jesus “displaced” the adult Jesus as the central figure in many of these religious art works. These types of reinterpretations can be found at many important Vietnamese Catholic sites in the US, including the Vietnamese Marian pilgrimage center in Carthage, Missouri, which attracts approximately seventy thousand visitors each year.

Our Lady of Lavang’s popularity in the US is also represented by the growing number of parishes named after her. When the local bishop gave them permission to have a church with a Vietnamese name in 2001, Vietnamese Catholics in Orange County chose to name the church after Our Lady of Lavang. The decision was nearly unanimous and was much anticipated by the community that has played a central role in globalizing the representation of Our Lady of Lavang as a Vietnamese woman.

Currently, Vietnamese Catholics in San Jose, California are planning to construct a \$45 million parish church named after Our Lady of Lavang. Similar to the case of the Our Lady of Lavang Catholic Church in Orange County, the naming of the church after Our Lady of Lavang was welcomed unanimously by local Vietnamese Catholics. They had wanted to have a church with a Vietnamese name since as early as the late 1970s. After their original church named St. Patricks Proto-Cathedral was heavily damaged by fire, they immediately mobilized to raise the funds for the construction project. The new Our Lady of Lavang church is scheduled to be completed between 2020 and 2021.

Beyond her visual image as a Vietnamese woman, Our Lady of Lavang is important to many overseas Vietnamese because she represents their history of coerced displacement and global dispersion. This is clearly evidenced by the integration of the symbolically significant stars in her representations. In 2002, at the twenty-sixth Marian Convention, the original Vietnamese-looking Our Lady of Lavang in Vietnam was replaced. The newer version depicts Our Lady of Lavang’s headdress decorated with twelve stars (Figure 2). Vietnamese Catholics in Vietnam and abroad have interpreted these stars to represent the ones that Vietnamese boat refugees used to guide themselves to their new homes. In the Chapel of Our Lady of Lavang at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., which was completed in 2005, the stars are decorated throughout the sanctuary as sacred reminders of the Vietnamese people’s global dispersion (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Faithful flock to the Vietnamese-looking statue of Our Lady of Lavang in Lavang (approximately 60 km north of Hue, the former capital of Vietnam, central Vietnam).

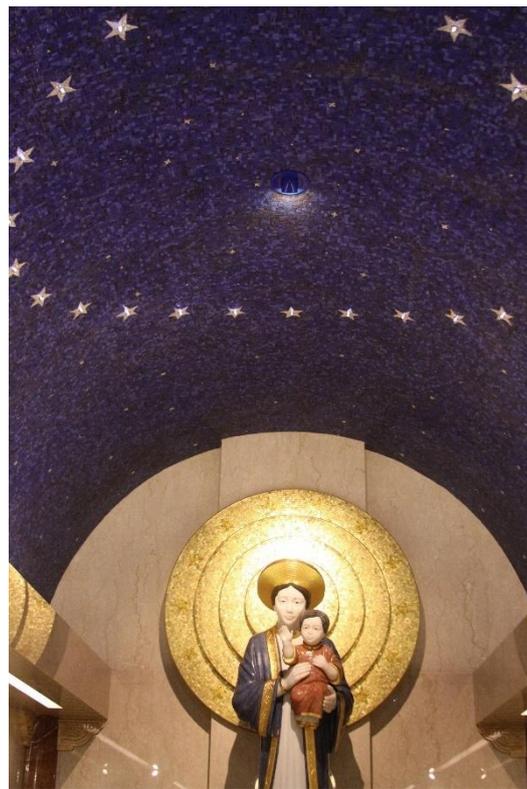


Figure 3. The Our Lady of Lavang National Shrine, decorated with stars representing the global dispersion of Vietnamese Catholics (the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington, D.C.).

Despite their geographical separation from each other, the Vietnamese-looking Our Lady of Lavang represents and facilitates the diasporic reconnection between Vietnamese Catholics around the world, including those in Vietnam. Today, statues of Our Lady of Lavang have become a popular diplomatic gift from one Vietnamese Catholic community to another in a different country, as I have observed in Taiwan, Japan, Belgium, Holland, and France. In 2002, when Pope John Paul II blessed six statues of Our Lady of Lavang in Rome, he asked Vietnamese American Catholics in Orange County to distribute them to representatives from different continents. The global reconnection was also exemplified when, in 2010, a stone engraved with *Cộng Đồng Hải Ngoại* (Overseas Diocese) was placed at the Our Lady of Lavang pilgrimage center during the opening ceremony of the Holy Year. It recognizes overseas Vietnamese Catholics as the twenty-seventh diocese of the Catholic Church in Vietnam. The stone was later buried to symbolize the significance of overseas Vietnamese Catholics as a foundation of the Vietnamese Catholic Church in Vietnam and beyond.

As I have illustrated, the Vietnamese-looking Our Lady of Lavang has been instrumental in reconnecting Vietnamese American Catholics to each other and with co-ethnic co-religionists across borders. They “Vietnamized” her image, exported it to co-ethnic co-religionists in Vietnam to become validated and authenticated, and then re-exported it to other countries. While Our Lady of Lavang represents an ethnically and culturally specific form of Marianism similar to other “ethnic” versions, as has been studied by Robert Orsi (2010) and Thomas Tweed (1997), she is also unique in that she does not simply reflect her followers’ relations with their host societies and homeland. Our Lady of Lavang also embodies the home—a de-territorialized and imagined space of belonging—that her followers have sought, yearned for, and created in a religious space that is distinctive from both their host societies and homeland.

4.3. The Caodai Mother Goddess

In the US, the Mother Goddess has emerged as a locus for tracing the centralization of the Caodai community. They have institutionalized their community around the Mother Goddess in order to assert the significance of the Caodai Holy See before its takeover by the Vietnamese communist government in 1975. They have maintained devotion to the Mother Goddess since the 1990s, after nearly two decades in which the practice was in hiatus due to religious repression and before it regained popularity in Vietnam.

In the early 1990s, Vietnamese American Caodaists constructed the first altar for the Mother Goddess in Southern California at the “Lampson Temple.” Although space in the temple was crowded because it was modeled from a garage attached to a small home, these Caodaists initiated the revival of Mother Goddess rituals in the US. The altar shared the same space as another one for the Caodai God, although, normally, these altars should be in separate rooms or buildings.

Their temple practices were simple, mostly consisting of chanting. Rituals and prayers were not accompanied by traditional music, a fundamental tool for inviting the Mother Goddess and her thirteen female companions to descend to the place of worship. Because they did not have enough members who could play various traditional instruments and properly form an orchestra, they could not organize a grand Annual Mother Goddess Festival.

The second Mother Goddess shrine built in Southern California was completed on 3 July 1999 under the leadership of the Caodai Religious Province of California.⁵ This shrine was larger than the first one at the Caodai Lampson Temple. It was able to comfortably accommodate more than 200 people. It was located inside a Christian Church that was purchased as the new administrative headquarters for the Caodai Religious Province of California. Because the location was on Chestnut Street in Westminster, home of the largest “Little Saigon” Vietnamese ethnic enclave outside of Vietnam, it became popularly known as the “Chestnut Temple. With the new Mother Goddess shrine located in a larger building, Vietnamese American Caodaists have been able to worship the Mother Goddess in a space appropriately separated from the Caodai God. The altar is in the center of the room (Figure 4). Standing in the center of the altar is a plaque decorated with three vertical lines in classical Chinese characters. From left to right, the first line reads 九位仙娘 (Nine Immortal Maidens), followed by 瑶池金母 (Golden Mother of the Jade Pond or Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu), and lastly, 白云洞诸圣 (Sages of the White Cloud or Bạch Vân Động Chư Thánh). Normally, surrounding the altar are religious offerings, such as a vase with flowers, a cup of wine, a plate of fresh fruits, and an incense stick holder. In front and facing the altar is an open space of worship with rows of white pillows neatly arranged on the floor.

⁵ On 13 June 1992, Vietnamese American Caodaists officially declared the establishment of the “Religious Province of California” (Châu Đạo California) at the Vietnamese Convention Center in Westminster City. Under the leadership of a former dignitary who was ordained by the pre-1975 Caodai Holy See, Thuong Mang Thanh, the religious province functioned as the umbrella organization and representative of all other denominational Tay Ninh Caodai religious centers in California. At the time of its establishment, member temples included one Caodai God temple in Westminster, another one in Sacramento, and a Mother Goddess shrine and Caodai God temple in San Jose. It was the highest and largest Caodai organization outside of Vietnam.

The Religious Province of California quickly became the public face of the Caodai community, representing it at events such as neighborhood parades and city council meetings. It mediated connections and exchanges among Caodaists dispersed throughout the world, as exemplified through its regular publication of the Qui Nguyen magazine, maintenance of a popular website, and the distribution of CDs on community activities. The religious province also organized and hosted a number of important national and international events, including meetings among overseas Caodai dignitaries and summer youth retreats.



Figure 4. The Mother Goddess altar at the Caodai Chestnut Temple (Westminster, California).

During weekdays at six in the evening and at noon on the Sundays closest to the 15th and 30th of each lunar month, Caodaists regularly congregate at the Chestnut Temple for prayers. The ceremonies for the Mother Goddess and the Caodai God are held at the same time. Usually, in Vietnam, the prayers occur at different times—at noon for the Caodai God and six in the evening for the Mother Goddess—so that practitioners can participate in both rituals. However, according to my informants, most Vietnamese American Caodaists can only devote half of their Sundays to temple activities and some must rely on other people’s assistance for transportation to the temple. With the concurrent services, female Caodaists, more so than their male counterparts, tend to participate in rituals for the Mother Goddess.

As a part of its pursuit for religious purity, the Vietnamese American Caodai community has also been keen on reviving the annual ceremony for the Mother Goddess, which was prohibited in 1975 and only allowed to resume in 1998 by the Vietnamese communist government. They initially faced the challenge of not having enough members who could play traditional instruments and collectively form an orchestra. Once this problem was resolved as the community expanded and attracted more followers, Vietnamese American Caodaists immediately revived religious rituals for the Mother Goddess. However, because only the Caodai Holy See is allowed to organize the Annual Mother Goddess Festival according to religious doctrines, they decided to initiate a new tradition as an offshoot. They called their celebration the “Observation of the Annual Mother Goddess Festival” (Lễ Tưởng Niệm Hội Yến Diêu Trì), and it is held on the 15th of the 8th month of each lunar calendar year.

Through the Observation of the Annual Mother Goddess Festival, Vietnamese American Caodaists have struggled to preserve religious purity as it were before Caodai religious life was repressed in 1975 under communism. As in Vietnam, they have embraced the Mother Goddess ceremony as the most important annual religious holiday even though attendance is not compulsory. Vietnamese American Caodai leaders put strong emphasis on rituals for the Mother Goddess festival, replicating

and reciting specific details as noted in Caodai religious books printed before 1975. As an informant explained to me, everything from the flower arrangements to the footsteps and hand gestures of ritual performers have to be carefully presented with precise accuracy to reflect the “beauty of the Caodai Mother Goddess.”

This quest for purity has been more vigilant since Vietnamese Caodaists’ arrival in the US, with the trauma of displacement being further compounded by the experiences of ethnic and religious marginalization. These Vietnamese Caodaists have transformed their refugee status into a privileged position in which they have been chosen by God to protect Caodaiism from the impurity of communism in Vietnam. Although they could not organize the Annual Mother Goddess Festival, an event which can only be hosted by the Caodai Holy See, this new tradition of “observation” of the celebration reflects Vietnamese American Caodaists’ efforts to protect their religion from communist infiltration and disruptions due to forced exodus.

5. Conclusions

Holy mothers, specifically the Vietnamese-looking Our Lady of Lavang and Caodai Mother Goddess, are the crucibles of faith for many Vietnamese Catholics and Caodaists. Following the fall of Saigon to communism in 1975, Vietnamese Catholic and Caodai refugees were forced to flee their homeland and became dispersed throughout the world. They carried their holy mothers with them on their journeys of escape and transplanted their faith on new soils.

Based on ethnographic data collected in California, which has the largest overseas Vietnamese population, I argue that Vietnamese refugees and their US-reared descendants have been able to re-centralize their fragmented communities by innovatively adapting their holy mother worship. In particular, Vietnamese Americans Catholics have transformed the image of Our Lady of Lavang into a Vietnamese woman and globalized this image to other parts of the world. Meanwhile, their co-ethnic Caodaist counterparts have revived traditional religious rituals for the Caodai Mother Goddess which were repressed and prohibited for many years by the Vietnamese communist government. Through their shared devotion to holy mothers, these Vietnamese American faithful have also rebuilt relations with co-ethnic co-religionists living throughout the world. For both the Vietnamese American Catholic and Caodai groups, holy mothers have emerged as emblems of their deterritorialized nation in the diaspora.

The nation is a ghostly matter for Vietnamese (Kwon 2008; Tai 2001). This is particularly so for Vietnamese Catholics and Caodaists who were forced to flee Vietnam as religious and political refugees (Nguyen 2018; Huynh and Nguyen 2009). They cannot claim Vietnam, nor the US, as home; both are sites of mourning and trauma that continue to haunt them and their descendants (Nguyen-Vo 2005).

Vietnam is the gravesite of their dead country (the Republic of South Vietnam), one that they have not and cannot properly bury or forget. For both Vietnamese Catholics and Caodaists, South Vietnam under the Republic of South Vietnam government was a national haven where their religious practices flourished and were protected from communism. More than 70% of Catholics from Northern Vietnam fled to the south in 1954 to escape communism (Hansen 2009). Meanwhile, the number of Caodaists surged as the religion worked toward harmonizing Western and Eastern religious teachings for a modern society (Hoskins 2012a, 2012b, 2015). The “death” of the Republic of South Vietnam and their inability to properly mourn for it due to the ensuing religious persecutions under communism has created a near-apocalyptic moment that continues to haunt them. As refugees in the US, many Vietnamese Catholics and Caodaists have not been able to return to present-day Vietnam to reclaim the ghostly remnants of their past and to commemorate their dead nation.

Meanwhile, the US has not fully integrated Vietnamese Catholics and Caodaists as citizens. Even though religious diversity and freedom is a fundamental right in American society, religion has become the proxy through which Vietnamese refugees are marginalized to the fringes of society as ethnic racial minorities (Ninh 2017). As Catholics, they have been racialized in American society as ethnically unrepresentative of Catholicism or not being “truly Catholic” because they are Asians

practicing a “Western” religion. Meanwhile, their co-ethnic Caodai counterparts have been racialized as the only ones who could be “truly Caodaists” because their Vietnamese ethnicity is conflated with the religion. These processes of racialization have essentialized ethnicity and religion for the Vietnamese faithful, misconstruing the fundamental religious tenet and historical legacy of universalism in Catholicism and Caodaism which both welcome followers across different ethnic backgrounds. From this positionality of “in-between-ness, in-both-ness, and in-beyond-ness” in relation to Vietnam and the US (Fernandez 2003, p. 265), Vietnamese American Catholics and Caodaists have evoked holy mothers to re-imagine their nation. Neither the country of resettlement or the homeland constitutes their sole place of belonging. Instead, it is from this point of the plurality of vision, seeing these worlds as occurring together “contrapuntally” (Said 1984, p. 172), that they have re-envisioned their nation of belonging in contemporary global society.

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