

The Change in the Religious Life of Caodaism During the Process of Urbanization in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam Today

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ABSTRACT

Cao Dai is one of the major religions in Vietnam. In the course of urbanization, this religion has undergone fundamental transformations, particularly in large cities such as Ho Chi Minh City. Based on a study of two specific religious temples, Bau Sen Temple and Thai Hoa Temple, this article evaluates the key characteristics of Cao Dai religious practices in the context of current urbanization. It also outlines the extent to which urbanization in Ho Chi Minh City has influenced Cai Dai, focusing on issues related to the organization and management of the temples. The findings reveal that the religious life of Cai Dai in Ho Chi Minh City today is marked by increasing openness and secularization. At the same time, the persistence of traditional religious rituals and the stable number of adherents reflect the enduring sacredness and deep-rooted faith among Cao Dai followers.

INTRODUCTION

Cao Dai religion was formed in the early twentieth century, during a period of significant social upheaval in Vietnam, when the whole nation faced dual forms of feudal and colonial oppression. At the same time, "spiritual voids" appeared within society that traditional religions struggled to fill. Over the years, Cao Dai has secured a place in the spiritual consciousness of the Vietnamese people as an influential endogenous religion, currently ranking fourth in Vietnam in terms of the number of followers, after Buddhism, Catholicism, and Protestantism.

Ho Chi Minh City - one of the localities with a large concentration of Cao Dai followers - has always been known for its high urbanization rate and outstanding economic, cultural, social development, etc. A key issue of concern is how the Cao Dai religion is being affected by the ongoing urbanization process: Are there any notable transformations compared to the past? These are both theoretical and practical questions that merit deeper investigation, especially from the perspective of cultural studies. Within the scope of this paper, based on fieldwork data and other research methods, we offer several points of discussion to contribute to clarifying the current state of Cao Dai religious practices amid urbanization in Ho Chi Minh City.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many scholarly works have delved into the history, development, and doctrinal components of the Cao Dai religion. The socio-historical context surrounding its emergence has been reconstructed in numerous studies, notable among them: *Some Religions in Vietnam* by Nguyễn Thanh Xuân and *History of World and Vietnamese Religions* by Nguyen Phu Loi. These studies generally share the view that Cao Dai emerged as a historical product of early 20th-century Southern Vietnam. They also explore the cultural and ideological foundations for the birth of this religion, particularly the combination of the Ouija board building form of Western Spiritualism (Necromancy) with the Ouija board practice of Five Branches of Minh Dao in Vietnam (formerly known as Dao Minh Su in China). On that basis, two groups of writers of Ngo Van Chieu - Vuong Quang Ky and Pham Cong Tac - Cao Quynh Cu merged on February 12, 1926, to establish Cao Dai religion (Xuan, 2013).

Studies point out the characteristics and distinctive features of Cao Dai across various dimensions such as doctrine, rituals, religious laws, followers, etc. Embracing the idea of harmonizing traditional religions into one religion only, Cao Dai bears the name "The great path of the three universal salvations" and operates under the principle of "Returning to the three teachings" - compassion, justice, and charity (representing the compassion of Buddhism, the justice of Confucianism, and the charity of Taoism). It also promotes the concept of "Five branches in unity", which aims to integrate five major religious traditions: Humanism (founded by Confucius), Shintoism (founded by Jiang Ziya), Saintism (founded by Jesus Christ), Immortalism (founded by Laozi), and Buddhism (founded by Shakyamuni Buddha). While Cao Dai doctrine represents a synthesis of spiritual traditions from ancient to modern times, and from East to

West, the “Three teachings ideology” remains central to its religious teachings (Loi, 2021).

Studies also show that due to its inclusive and universal doctrines, accessible and well-defined religious laws, a rich body of scriptures, and a tightly organized administrative system, the number of Cao Dai followers grew significantly within a short period of time. In Southern Vietnam alone, over 50,000 people embraced the religion in the first month after its founding. By 1975, the religion had around 2,850,000 followers across 34 provinces nationwide. Although the number of followers declined between 1975 and 2005, it has steadily increased again since 2010. Cao Dai has since become one of the four religions with the largest number of followers in Vietnam. According to statistics from the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, as of 2021, there were 1,247,079 registered followers and 1,305 places of worship nationwide (Dai, 2023).

Cao Dai has also become the subject of interest for many international scholars specializing in religious studies. One notable work is *Religious Resistance: Imperialism and the Militarization of the Cao Dai, 1924–1954* by Joy E. Schaeffer. While also recognizing Cao Dai as a syncretic religion blending Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, ancestor worship, Christianity, and Western spiritual traditions, this study offers an alternative perspective on the religion's origin. The author explores the militarization and politicization of Cao Dai, viewing it as an expression of nationalism and a movement for national salvation under the guise of religion (Schaeffer, 2016).

The Cao Dai Deathscape: Reimagining Death, Funerals, and Salvation in Contemporary Vietnam by Jérémy Jammes and Shao Zhu Shuai delves into the Cao Dai conception of the afterlife and funeral practices from a theological perspective. Cao Dai funerals are conducted based on the belief in the Doctrine of the Three Bodies, which holds that a human being is composed of “three bodies”. Accordingly, the funeral functions as a ritual through which the deceased’s lifetime contributions are affirmed in hopes that their soul will be saved by Cao Dai (Jammes, 2020). This work offers a lens through which to explore the interconnections among Cao Dai doctrines, funeral rites, and religious architecture. In the article *The Chinese Religious Influences on Caodaism: A Critical Analysis*, from a historical and cultural perspective, author Shaikh Farid argues that the formation of Cao Dai was a result of the absorption of Confucianism, Taoism, yin-yang philosophy, and Chinese popular religious movements (Farid, 2011).

In recent years, there have also been studies on the role and contributions of Cao Dai to the socio-cultural life of Southern Vietnam. For the culture and development of the Southern region, Cao Dai in particular, and endogenous religions in general, have played significant historical and social roles: contributing to moral education, fostering community cohesion, and participating in land reclamation and territorial expansion (Duong, 2013). Furthermore, through concrete activities today, Cao Dai also supports and assists disadvantaged groups in society and fulfills the spiritual needs of a group of population.

The topic of urbanization in general, and urbanization in Ho Chi Minh City in particular, also attracts the research attention of many scientific disciplines, many organizations, scholars, managers, etc. The relationship between Cao Dai religion and urbanization in Ho Chi Minh City is probably very modest, if not without notable research. Unlike all the above works, this study does not delve into the origin, doctrinal system, canon law and basic characteristics of Cao Dai religion but contributes to understanding religious activities. Cao Dai religion in Ho Chi Minh City in the context of current urbanization; Analyze the influence of current urbanization in Ho Chi Minh City on Cao Dai religion through two specific cases: Bau Sen Temple and Thai Hoa Temple.

The topic of urbanization in general and urbanization in Ho Chi Minh City in particular, has attracted the attention of many scientific disciplines, organizations, scholars, and policymakers. However, studies on the relationship between Cao Dai and urbanization in Ho Chi Minh City remain quite modest, if not altogether absent. Unlike the aforementioned works, this study does not delve into the origins, doctrines, religious laws, or fundamental characteristics of Cao Dai. Instead, it aims to explore religious practices of Cao Dai in Ho Chi Minh City within the context of ongoing urbanization, and to analyze how urbanization in Ho Chi Minh City currently impacts Cao Dai through two specific case studies: Bau Sen Temple and Thai Hoa Temple.

METHODOLOGY

Over nearly a hundred years of formation and development, Cao Dai has been divided into various sects, among which the Tay Ninh Temple sect is still considered the guardian of the original faith. In addition, Cao Dai has expanded to many countries around the world, forming overseas Cao Dai organizations. Compared to the rest of the country, Ho Chi Minh City is a locality with a high scale and rapid pace of urbanization. Based on the criteria for identifying the urbanization process, (1) the transition from dispersed agricultural activities to concentrated non-agricultural activities, and (2) the dense population concentration in urban areas (Hoa, 2017), Ho Chi Minh City fully and profoundly embodies these characteristics. The process of urbanization in Ho Chi Minh City affects all aspects of socio-spiritual life, including religion.

Cao Dai religion in Ho Chi Minh City has a large number of followers. In 2019, the number of believers was 57,568, belonging to many different sects (Loi, 2021). As for followers of Cao Dai Tay Ninh organization, the whole city had about 25,000 followers belonging to 27 temples (BVH, 2010).

The data used in this study was collected from two Cao Dai Temples in Ho Chi Minh City: Bau Sen Temple (independent - not affiliated with the Tay Ninh Cao Dai Temple), located at 59/9 Tran Phu Street, Ward 4, District 5, Ho Chi Minh City; and Thai Hoa Temple (affiliated with the Tay Ninh Cao Dai Temple), located at 75 Co Bac Street, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City.

In this study, we employ a qualitative case study approach with a purposive convenience sampling technique. The specific methods used include: secondary data analysis and synthesis; in-depth interviews; and participant observation at the selected research sites. Interview subjects: the management boards of the Cao Dai temples. Observation subjects: physical facilities, ritual organization, and religious practices of followers at the temples.

Rationale for selecting the two temples as case studies:

1. Different sects: Cao Dai comprises various sects, and the number of sects may vary depending on the classification. In this article, we selected two temples: one affiliated with an independent Caodai sect and the other with an orthodox sect in order to examine differences in organizational structure and religious practices.
2. Different residential areas within Ho Chi Minh City: The city currently consists of 16 districts, 5 rural districts, and 1 city under its jurisdiction. We chose one temple located in District 5 (non-central area) and another in District 1 (central area) to compare how Cao Dai religious activities are organized in both central and peripheral urban settings.

The research process can be described as follows: Step 1: Analyze and systematize secondary sources to conduct a literature review. Step 2: Conduct participant observations and in-depth interviews at the two selected Caodai temples. Step 3: Summarize the religious practice characteristics of each case study, and from that, discuss the extent to which urbanization in Ho Chi Minh City has influenced Cao Dai.

RESEARCH RESULT

Analysis of the Characteristics of the Two Temples

Case study 1: Bau Sen Temple

As an independent religious organization, Bau Sen Temple does not belong to any sect of Cao Dai religion in Vietnam today. It is worth noting that this temple has no dignitaries and only operates for the purpose of maintaining Cao Dai religion. According to interview data, the followers here practice the religion not to attain enlightenment, but to uphold and maintain the faith. This stems from their absolute belief in the Supreme Being and the conviction that all their actions are witnessed by the Divine Eye. Such a belief fosters a strong sense of self-awareness among practitioners, compelling them to cultivate personal morality and conduct themselves with sincerity and kindness in all interpersonal relationships.

Regarding worship rituals, Bau Sen temple still complies with the general regulations of the religion. Apart from the major religious festivals and commemorative days (ngày vía), daily worship is conducted four times a day - at 6 a.m., 12 p.m., 6 p.m., and 12 a.m. - as well as on the 1st and 15th days of the lunar month. Despite being a small, independently operated temple, the worship space is presented in a solemn and well-maintained manner. It features a Nine Mystic Seven Patriarchs altar dedicated to the twelve founders of the Cao Dai religion and the predecessors who helped establish and manage the temple. At the center of the main sanctuary stands the Divine Eye altar, flanked by altars to the Buddha and Guan Gong (Quan Đẽ).

The followers participating in activities at Bau Sen Temple are primarily local residents living in the immediate vicinity of the temple. According to interview data, all households in the area surrounding the temple follow Cao Dai religion, with most being multi-generational Cao Dai families. They live and work near the temple and voluntarily offer their assistance whenever religious activities are held. The temple is regarded as a shared spiritual home, and the collective contributions of each devotee are highly valued by the community.

In terms of administration, the Bau Sen Temple still relies entirely on manual methods, with no integration of computers into management activities; record-keeping is primarily done by hand. Nevertheless, both interviews with the temple's caretaker and direct observations indicate no signs of religious disengagement. Devotees continue to participate regularly, voluntarily, and actively in religious practices. With the belief that all religions aim to guide people toward doing good, the Temple also places importance on religious harmony and fostering connections not only among its followers but also with non-believers in the local community. Notably, in addition to major Cao Dai religious holidays, the temple organizes a large-scale Christmas celebration on December 25 each year, attracting a wide range of community participants.

Case study 2: Thai Hoa Temple

Under the management of the Cao Dai Church of Tay Ninh Temple, all activities of the Thai Hoa Temple are deeply imbued with the original Cao Dai religion of Tay Ninh. In addition, there is a shrine to the Buddha. This is also the only temple in District 1, Ho Chi Minh City, representing the Cao Dai Temple and Tay Ninh Temple. All worship rituals at the Thai Hoa Temple strictly adhere to the traditional practices of Cao Dai, following a highly systematic and orderly format. Notably, the temple houses a rich collection of original scriptures. Each altar, whether dedicated to the Holy Mother or the Divine Eye, employs distinct sets of scriptures for the daily four ceremonial or for special religious observances.

At the altar of the Divine Eye, commonly recited scriptures include: Four-Time Incense Offering, Jade Emperor Sutra, Buddhist Heart Sutra, Taoist Heart Sutra, Sage Heart Sutra, and Five Vows Sutra. Meanwhile, at the Holy Mother's altar, scriptures such as the True Sutra of the Holy Mother and *Four-Time Incense Offering* are recited, accompanied by tea offerings at 6 a.m. and 6 p.m., and wine offerings at 12 p.m. and 12 a.m.

The followers practicing at Thai Hoa Temple are somewhat more diverse than those practicing at Bau Sen Temple. While some reside in the vicinity of District 1, others travel from various districts across Ho Chi Minh City, and even from different provinces. This diversity reflects the influence and organizational capacity of the Tay Ninh Temple in uniting its followers, especially when compared to independently operating sects. Management activities at Thai Hoa Temple are carried out using manual methods combined with automation methods. For example, records of followers are handwritten and also stored digitally using computers. Furthermore, each Cao Dai Temple in Ho Chi Minh City affiliated with the Tay Ninh Temple maintains a social media page to connect followers. These pages are primarily managed by young Cao Dai followers. Although they have not been in operation for long, they have effectively served the purpose of providing information and fostering connections among followers both near and far.

The number of people proselytizing has increased steadily, with an average of several dozen people joining each year. Interview data indicates that cases of religious conversion away from Cao Dai are rare and primarily due to personal reasons or external influence from other organizations. Moreover, the temple is not permitted to independently engage in proselytizing activities; instead, the Tay Ninh Temple assumes responsibility for missionary work. Temples under its authority typically assist in these activities twice a year on a scheduled basis. In terms of social engagement, the Temple does not frequently participate in inter-organizational exchanges due to limited personnel. However, charitable activities are conducted regularly - for instance, distributing gifts to the poor during the seventh lunar month, offering scholarships to underprivileged students, and planning to support children who lost their parents to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Temple's management emphasizes that these are not religious obligations but rather contributions to the community, reflecting the spirit of a religion intertwined with everyday life.

Religious practices of the original Tay Ninh branch of Cao Dai in Ho Chi Minh City continue to follow the directives of the Temple, with only a few minor changes over time. For instance, the traditional title of "Kham Chau Dao" for provincial leaders has been replaced with "Head of the Representative Board". Additionally, while the fundamental elements of worship remain largely consistent, the liturgical texts used by independent Cao Dai temples differ in various ways from those affiliated with the Tay Ninh Temple. From a doctrinal perspective, the Tay Ninh Cao Dai branch adheres strictly to the New Canonical Law, believed to be divinely revealed by the Supreme Being. This law governs all religious rituals, organizational structures, and activities within the faith, and is meant to be preserved for 700,000 years. As such, the Tay Ninh denomination demonstrates a highly structured organization and a remarkably enduring doctrinal and legal system compared to more autonomous sects.

DISCUSSION

To identify the transformations of Cao Dai during the process of urbanization in Ho Chi Minh City today, two comparative approaches are essential: (1) comparing the current state of Cao Dai with its past forms; and (2) comparing Cao Dai with other religions within the same socio-urban context.

Compared to the past, Cao Dai today, in the context of urbanization, has undergone significant changes. This is an inevitable transformation, as religion is a historical phenomenon that evolves alongside societal changes. Previously, in the unique context of the past, Cao Dai in Ho Chi Minh City mainly attracted intellectuals and civil servants of the French colonial regime, with the majority of its followers residing in urban areas. It was not a religion of farmers or rural communities. Today, with the strong urbanization process, the demographic structure of Ho Chi Minh City has diversified, leading to a more varied group of followers, particularly with a significant increase in urban working-class participation. The proportion of female followers has also grown compared to before. Data collected from Thai Hoa Temple reveals that out of 565 followers, 221 are women, representing a wide range of social classes.

Another notable point is that, due to the changing historical circumstances, Cao Dai has developed into a unified, peaceful country with reforms and international integration. In this environment, every citizen has the right to religious freedom, leading to a more diverse group of followers and a mechanical increase in the number of followers. Over the past five years, Thai Hoa Temple has seen an increase of approximately 43 new members, with no one leaving. Religious resources have also increased, and worship facilities and practices have received more attention, becoming more solid and spacious compared to before. Social activities have been strengthened, further connecting religion with daily life. The spirit of mutual assistance and love between followers and between Cao Dai followers and the local community, including those who do not follow Cao Dai, has become stronger, especially for those in difficult circumstances. This is a manifestation of the trend of secularization within the Cao Dai religion in the current context.

When comparing Cao Dai to other religions, it has a high degree of openness. Research indicates that the leadership of the Temples consists of families who have followed Cao Dai for three to four generations and dedicate their entire efforts to maintaining religious practices. However, within Cao Dai, it is possible to see the phenomenon of one family practicing multiple religions, such as Cao Dai, Buddhism, and Christianity. This difference between Cao Dai and other religions can be explained by the openness, tolerance, and cultural harmony in the Southeast region, where Cao Dai originated.

Through research and investigation, we have also observed another interesting point: Cao Dai followers do not visit the Temple as frequently as followers of other religions. According to interview data, followers mainly gather on religious holidays and special occasions, while on regular days, only a few come to the Temple, and they do so primarily during the four ritual times. This contrasts with Buddhist temples or Christian churches, which are usually open every day and have a consistent number of worshippers attending. This can be easily explained by comparing the over 2000-year history of Buddhism with the nearly 100-year history of Cao Dai, highlighting the difference in the number of followers and the historical depth of their respective doctrines and religious laws.

The initial survey results also indicate that regarding modernization, the Temples have undergone some changes compared to the past, but there has yet to be a strong and systematic application of information technology in managing followers and organizing Temple operations. The use of technology is still in its early stages. Compared to other religions, such as Catholicism, Protestantism, and Buddhism, the modernization process of these religions is clearly much more advanced. Additionally, it can be observed that the workforce responsible for modernization and communication processes at the Temple is quite limited. This also helps explain why, in the current context, Cao Dai demonstrates more stability than development. We believe that in the future, Cao Dai will further strengthen this process to adapt to the changes of the times, especially the rapid development of information technology today.

Regarding religious conversion, although the number of followers has not increased dramatically as in the early years of the establishment of the religion, the interview data still shows an increase in the number of Cao Dai followers each year in Ho Chi Minh City. The conversion of followers from other religions to Cao Dai or vice versa is hardly noticeable. The increase in the number of Cao Dai followers has yet to provide enough basis to confirm a significant religious conversion. The variations of Cao Dai occurring in independent sects have had little impact on the traditional faith and the achievements of the Cao Dai community in Ho Chi Minh City.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Urbanization has impacted this religion; however, it has not fundamentally changed its nature or altered the role, function, and sacredness of Cao Dai for its followers. Through the analysis of two case studies - Bau Sen and Thai Hoa Temples - the research highlights the current characteristics of Cao Dai in Ho Chi Minh City and outlines the changes brought about by urbanization. Maintaining openness and secularity remains essential for Cao Dai to become more integrated into social life. Specifically, engaging in exchange activities, mutual support, and volunteer work can help spread the religion's humanistic value, which is an overarching mission shared by all religions worldwide. In addition, it is necessary to promote the digitization of administrative operations by training personnel capable of implementing such tasks. The study presents viewpoints based on case study analysis, focusing on in-depth interviews with temple administrators and participant observation at these temples. However, it has not

yet included interviews with followers, nor has it explored temples from other sects, focusing solely on independent temples and those under the Tay Ninh Temple.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

It is suggested that expanding the scope of this topic through further research would provide a more comprehensive view of Cao Dai in Ho Chi Minh City. If this religion wants to maintain and strengthen the faith of its followers, it needs to make changes that are appropriate to the requirements of the times, such as promoting the application of modern technology in managing followers and organizing activities, cooperating with groups and social organizations to implement community-based programs, and educating followers to become cross-cultural citizens capable of deep international integration.

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