



Performing Dualism:
Experiences of
Caodaism

by

Chris Hartney

The following paper was presented by Chris Hartney to the Annual Conference of Australian Association for the Study of Religions (AASR), held at St John's College, University of Queensland, 10-13 July 1997. Besides the key addresses, there were over 50 papers presented by academics, scholars, and researchers from different universities and religious organisations in Australia and overseas. The topics covered different aspects of various religions in the world.

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Note: This paper has been written after a number of formal contacts with the Caodaist Community at Wiley Park (New South Wales, Australia), particularly with the Community Leader Mr Nguyen, Chanh-Giao and after several informal discussions with Dao, Cong-Tam.

Caodaism originated in Viet Nam in the 1920's. Its beginnings were by direct spiritual revelation. Mr Ngô Minh Chiêu, was the first disciple of '*Cao Dai*' - which means 'on high' or 'tall tower' - an epithet which avoids attributing human characteristics to *Duc Cao Dai* - or God the Father. The religion expanded throughout the decade until the 17 October 1926, when the Foundation of the *Cao Dai* Religion was formally announced to the French Governor of Co-chin-china. Today Caodaism reputedly has four to five million adherents, primarily in southern Viet Nam and Cambodia and following the Vietnamese Diaspora to Australia, America, Canada, Japan and Europe... and my home suburb of Bankstown, where, the first purpose-built Australian Caodaist temple is to open soon.

The overall quest of the Caodaists, is summed up in the words of His Holiness The *Ho-Phap* Pham Cong Tac before the 'Great Sacerdotal Assembly' of 1938,

'The Divine Master [Duc Cao Dai] came to gather us together again, to unite us and to encourage us to live in peace like children in one large family. The prediction of His coming in the Christian Gospel is fulfilled. "I have other wandering sheep to bring back to the fold." This means that He has to unify many religions.'

"A 'super-theosophy'..." As Garry Trompf has noted (See G.W.Trompf - address to Fifth Australian Caodaist Conference 1989), one which plans to "...bring harmony to all spiritual beliefs and philosophies." The structure of Caodaism very strongly recognises the distinctions of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism and their influence on this faith. However, Caodaism is more universal than simply an amalgam of these three predominantly Chinese traditions.

Victor L. Oliver in Cao Dai Spiritism 1976:9 "In their pristine form the revelations given by these human messengers [Christ, Buddah etc] were 'truth,' but because of the human frailty of the messengers and their disciples, the messengers were corrupted. The Caodai also believe these messengers were culture-bound, being applicable only to the people of the area in which the founders lived: moreover these were only intended for specific ages. In all, the effect of the revelations given during these two periods gave but a partial picture of Cao Dai's will, therefore, Cao Dai decided to give a third and final amnesty and revelation through His new religion, Caodaism.

Caodaism avoids the failures of past religious leaders because spirits are used to communicate divine truth"

Thus it is a faith which attempts to appropriate the 'other' by means of syncretism and weld that into a new unity. This process of syncretism has to be by dualistic means - of identifying two sometimes disparate or opposing phenomena or principals and, by understanding the differences, weld them into a unity. This theme is best explained by looking at Caodaism's background.

Any history book of Viet Nam, will be in one dimension or another a history of how this country has dealt with foreign influences, invasions and ideas.

After the warring states period (in Chinese History), the Han Dynasty unified China in 111BCE as a result of this, Nam Viet (the ancient Kingdom of Viet Nam) fell under China's control. A millennium later, as the (Chinese) Tang dynasty crumbled the Vietnamese gained independence in 939. Neo Confucianism continued to be a major influence in the process of self-government. The Chinese continued to influence the area and at times tried to regain control of Viet Nam.

Then in 1859, the French began to administer Viet Nam and began to increase the habitable areas of the Mekong delta in the south. It is in this southern part of Vietnam where CaoDaism is most notable.

The first among the ideas of Chinese influence, writes Neil L. Jamieson, in Understanding Vietnam is the idea of *âm* and *đương* or yin and yang. (Jamieson 1993:12-15) A dualistic system which stresses balance between two forces. Jameison spends several pages listing dichotomies that spring from this central dualism. Ultimately, he writes,

Finding a proper balance between yin (âm) and yang (đương), between duty and feeling, made the construction of a proper life a form of art, entailing conflict and judgement. (Jameison 1993:15)

And part of a proper life for the nation was the reconciliation of influences both internal and external, so that a proper balance was achieved. During the 1930's - the time that

Caodaism was building itself, many debates were 'expressed in terms of 'the old' versus 'the new' (Jameison, 1993:1). Systems of mediation and balance between old and new, external and internal, would always need to be found. Caodaism serves Vietnam at a religious, social, political and even occasionally military level as one of those systems. It incorporates the old mix of Chinese and early Vietnamese religions, as well as, via French colonial influence, being inclusive of the Abrahamic monotheisms. I might also add that in the dualism of life and death, Caodaism is able to bridge this abyss. In the aftermath of World War One, as Trompf writes, *'so many senseless deaths in the trenches led thousands of Europeans to find solace in gatherings to contact', 'those on the other side'*. (see Trompf 'Introduction to the English edition of The Constitution of Caodaism') Victor L. Oliver notes, through corbeille à bec (automatic writing) and the ouidja board, Descartes, Joan of Arc, Victor Hugo, Pasteur, Shakespeare and Lenin, as well as major figures in Viet Nam's history have been contacted, as well as many former deceased leaders of Caodaism. (see Oliver 1976:10). In death, these figures watch over and help advise the Holy See and aid in directing the community. The séance has played a significant role in the formation and development of Caodaism.

Currently, Caodaism operates in a number of modest spaces around Australia, usually in converted dwellings. This was the case with Caodaist community in Sydney, where from July 1983 until recently, a house in St Peters was used by the community. However, after much lobbying from the community, land was purchased from the Roads and Traffic Authority at Wiley Park. Building work has been carried out on this site from December 1991, and Australia's first Cao-Dai Temple will soon open.

The Temple itself is a tribute to the hard work of the community attached to it. All of the work on the temple has been completed from donations of money and labour. Already the community talks of the opening with great enthusiasm. And when it does open, the Wiley Park Temple will serve as the foremost display of Cao Dai's place in Australian society.

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Walking along King George's Road, Wiley Park, a South Western suburb of Sydney, is a fibro and brick experience. And then you come across the Cao-Dai Temple. The act of looking at the temple, for a religions scholar, is vertiginous. Buddhist statuary set into alcoves, two great pagoda-like towers, Chinese eaves and architraves, and at the centre of it all, what seems a great Masonic Eye - similar to that which stares out at us from the U.S. one dollar bill. I had heard of Caodaism before, but the sight of this building concretised that knowledge in a time and a space, and gave me an anchor point to which I could attach new knowledge - ultimately 'building' this paper.

A Caodaist (Dao, Cong Tam) working on campus (Sydney University), made contact with the community easier and I found myself invited to this year's New Year celebrations.

The temple space itself is on the upper level of the building. The downstairs area includes the kitchen, washrooms and ancestor shrine. Đào Công Tâm led me to the front of the building and up the main staircase. Watching over these stairs is a pictorial representation of the signatories of the Third Alliance between God and mankind. The first alliance being in the time of Moses, the second in the time of Christ. Sun Yat-Sen, a Chinese Christian and founder of the Chinese Republic, Victor Hugo, the French poet/ novelist, and Trang-Trinh the 16th Century Vietnamese poet are portrayed. These three figures have revealed themselves as guardians of the faith. And each figure is highly symbolic. Firstly of the religious, creative and political processes their lives encapsulate. Secondly, of the cultures they represent. The accompanying explanatory sign hung nearby explains...

Sun Yat-Sen is shown holding an inkstone (symbol of Chinese civilisation allied to Christian Civilisation giving birth to CaoDai doctrine.) Victor Hugo and Trang Trinh are writing the words 'God and Humanity (Caodaism) [and] 'Love and Justice' [which represents] law and the rule of doctrine. The first in French the second in Chinese [characters].

At the point where this representation is hung - the stairs divide into two. It is here that the dualistic layout of the temple starts to become evident. As Oliver notes, *'The Yin and Yang duality occurs in other aspects of Caodaism. For Example, Caodai architecture emphasises it.' The temples are built so that male and female enter on opposite sides...* (Oliver 1976:16) From the division of the stairs at the front, right through to the altar, the architecture stresses this division. Two doors, two distinct sets of kneeling pads, two candles on the altar.

The temple is not only divided left and right, but front and back. The western end of the temple houses the *Hô Pháp's* Altar. The *Hô Pháp* being head of the *Hiep-Thien-Dai/* Legislative Body of the Hierarchy and His Holiness Pham Cong Tac, a former holder of this office, is much revered as a guardian of this space. This altar is watched over by a beautifully stylised Chinese character 'Ch'i' /'Khi' (meaning breath/essence). In Taoist cosmology Ch'i is related strongly to the creative and sustaining essence of the universe and the primal, universal mother. So this altar has connotations of femaleness.

However it is the altar at the Eastern end, the altar of God the Father which is the focal point during worship. The altar is flanked by representations of the 8 Chinese Immortals. The eight are represented on both the yin, or right side, and the yang, or left, again emphasising the split of this space. The Immortals watch over the religion and the community. Đào, Công Tâm explained the altar to me quoting from chapter 42 of the Tao Te Ching.

"The way begets one...' (Ch'i - and indeed there is only one representation of the Eye of *Duc Cao Dai* (God). '...one begets two...' (which are Yin and Yang - the two candles) '...two begets three...' , '...three begets the myriad creatures."

Creatures in this instance are represented by the five sticks of incense. These five sticks not only represent the five material elements of Chinese cosmology, but also the five levels of consciousness one can attain in Caodaism.

Five incense sticks representing the five elements which are: metal (*kim*); wood [plant] (*moc*); water (*thuy*); fire (*hoa*); earth (*tho*). And these also represent the five different levels of attainment: Purity; Meditation; Wisdom; Superior Knowledge; Karmic Liberation.

Here on the altar there are myriad sign systems at work. What interests me most is that the altar has a symmetry to it except for the Divine Eye (*Thien Nhan*), and the Eternal Light (*Den Thai Cuc*) which burns from a lamp suspended in front of the Eye. According to the Cao-Dai Internet page, this Eternal Light symbolises the 'universal monad' (the great unity). And this is what I want to draw your attention to.

It is the bivalence of this space. It is divided from the contract over the stairs right through to the uniting eye of *Duc Cao Dai* (God). Yet this Eye itself represents a symbol into the Otherworld, peering, as it does into our mortal world. An aperture gazing out. It is a spiritual Foucaultian panopticon, looking down on the community and literally watching over them, not only in the temple, but at home. The arrangement of this altar is replicated as the domestic altar in every community member's house.

The main ritual I have witnessed at the temple, only served to reinforce these themes.

The first part of the New Year's service, is silent meditation accompanied by music. I was led out of the temple space during this time. Perhaps because *Đào Công Tâm* thought there was nothing observable in this part of the worship. From downstairs, however, I could hear a drum beating with a slow rhythm and over the period of an hour the rhythm increased, other instruments joining in and building to a very multi-layered and strong sound. Once this first half was completed, *Đào Công Tâm* and I returned for the second half when the 'offerings' stage of the 'service' began. I was standing in the chorale placed above the Ch'i / *Khi* altar.

When I entered the two candles on the altar were lit - the Cao-Dai Internet page explains that the left, yang, or positive candle is always lit first. The female and male sides of the community bow to each other and three times to the altar and then knelt and prayers were offered. An aisle was formed between the men and women and down this aisle the offerings were carried. Slowly, and with a very ceremonial and highly skilled march, younger men, in ceremonial robes similar to that of Confucian ceremonial dress, brought offerings from the Ch'i/ *Khi* altar (*Ho-Phap's* Altar) forward to Mr Nguyễn, Chánh Giáo who knelt foremost in the congregation. Just behind and to the right of Mr Nguyễn, Chánh Giáo,

was the head female of the community, who placed offerings on the yin side of the altar, while, in turn Mr Nguyễn, Chánh Giáo placed other offerings - this again stressed the duality of the space in performance, Mr Nguyễn, Chánh Giáo's forwardness suggesting the dominance of the male, and the yang.

To address the question of sex - it is plain to see in the rituals of Caodaism that the yang is always represented as active and therefore ultimately dominant. However, just because Caodaism recognises a difference between male and female, this does not automatically mean that the female must be dominated at every turn by the male. Females are welcomed into the hierarchy of the church to the level of the office of Cardinal (*Dau-Su*). The Pope (*Giao-Tong*) must be male. Apart from this, the status of women in the Community can be judged from the following quote found on page 120 of the Religious Constitution of Caodaism

"The dignitaries whether masculine or feminine who are on the same level have the same powers... Equality is for all, but powers [of the different office bearers] differ according to the dignitaries of the Sacerdotal Council"

At the New Year's ceremony. The offerings were placed amidst great solemnity, prayers, musical accompaniment and hymn singing.

As this was a New Year's celebration, a division in time was being addressed by these rituals. In traditional Chinese cosmology, the year always begins as Yang. As it proceeds it becomes more Yang. The peak of 'yangness' is the ninth day of the ninth month. The Chinese wet season then sets in and the year proceeds as yin until the twenty-fourth of the twelfth month. From the twenty-fourth until the eve of the last day of the old year, the gods and spirits return to heaven to report to The Imperial August Jade Emperor. These spirits - household and village and greater - return for the New Year.

In similar fashion, the Cao-Dai ceremony was called, '*Nguon Dan*' New Year (Return of the spirits)'. So this ritual was marking a return of the spiritual element. It is part of a chronological and religious liminal period stretching from the twenty-fourth day of the last month through to the first of the first which marks the old year off from the new. From the twenty-fourth of the twelfth to the first of the first the temple is not used as the spirits attend the Council of God. Thus this ritual was marking the division between the old and the new, the turning of the cosmos from yin back to yang, and the returning of the spirits. So even here, this ritual concerns itself with the mediation between two. Firstly between the community and *Duc Cao Dai* (God), then between yin and yang, and also between the old year and all the past can symbolise, and the New Year and all of its possible potential.

No clearer was this distinction when the community filed outside and breaking the solemnity of the ritual, with great joviality greeted each other with the phrase, '*Chuc Mung Nam Moi*' - Happy New Year.

Personal outward show in performance is also a device of bridging and understanding. On my last visit to the temple Mr Nguyễn, Chanh Giáo related the story of how he had attended a function of the broader Vietnamese Community. He wore, his Caodaist regulation clothing - white pants and robe (*áo dài*) and distinctive black hat (khan dông). This display of difference encouraged David Landa of the then premier's office to ask Mr Nguyễn, Chánh Giáo about his dress, himself and Caodaism. This meeting led to Mr Landa helping to organise an application for land for the Cao-Dai Temple.

A great deal of work then ensued. The Caodaists had to reluctantly enter the many varied processes of state and government bureaucracy as they applied for land, and then once having acquired that land, going to council in order to have their planning applications approved. This included addressing Canterbury council, explaining Caodaism to the Councillors. This application involved complications and the community eventually went to the Federal Electorate Office to ask for help. There they approached Michael Hatton, Now the Federal Member for Blaxland. Mr Hatton has a very high opinion of the community based on those people from the community who he has met, of one applicant he said,

The gentleman was a very quiet, but personable, caring individual, who expressed probably the reservation of a lot of the Vietnamese people in Australia because of the experiences in their homeland. He was wary of authority and authority figures, of coming to an electorate office. Of being in a position where he had to approach a member of parliament's office for assistance. But there was no other recourse, because of the situation they were in.

I have spoken to a number of persons in the Bankstown community, including, Catholic and Buddhist Vietnamese and people living in the street directly behind the temple, all of whom have had some contact with the Caodaists, all of them mention without prompting, the seeming gentleness and friendliness of the community members. This might seem circumstantial evidence, but it does highlight the way in which Caodaists 'seem' in the larger community.

In the community of academics surrounding the School of Studies in Religion, and at the Religious Radio department of the ABC, where I have some dealings, everyone knows of Đào Công Tâm, at Fisher Library (Sydney University). Thus Đào, Công Tâm has done a good job in networking around campus and having it be known that he is a very approachable man and willing to speak on matters pertaining to Caodaism.

In 1989 the fifth Australian Caodaist Convention, was held at the Women's College, University of Sydney. Professors Garry Trompf and Eric Sharpe both addressed this

conference. Photos of them addressing the conference and transcripts of their speeches are now included on the Cao-Dai web site, and the professor's words preface the recently translated 'Religious Constitution of Caodaism.' Through ventures such as these, the Caodaists are asking the scholarly community to understand them, and through us, the wider community.

Though the story of Nguyễn, Chánh Giáo and David Landa could relate to any religion with specific dress codes, this small event encapsulates what I have been attempting to say about the work of Caodaism. Caodaism is a very complex religion, and I am still on the journey of understanding it. However, I do know that the most obvious theme of Caodaist performance is its dualism. I recognise that as a life-time Australian, I represent a difference by my very presence in the community and at their ceremonies as an observer. Because of this, themes of dualism and relating to the other can not be but foremost in my mind. But I also wanted to explain to you very simply, a way in which this religion could be seen, and what Caodaism says about who we are as scholars and Australians. Looking at the Caodaist performances and how they 'Perform Dualism' as I believe they do, allows me to stress the following points.

Firstly Caodaism is a product of two thousand years of dealing with external influences and syncretising those aspects of phenomena most contemporaneously useful from Chinese and latterly Western influences.

Secondly, that this dualistic and syncretic processes is embodied not only in the history of Caodaism, but in its outward performances of architecture, the Internet, its texts, its rituals, and the behaviour of community members.

Thirdly, this mechanism will ensure Caodaism a confident place in our society. As symbolised by the Cao-Dai Temple in Wiley Park, a building which represents this community's otherness, and simultaneously their ability and willingness to integrate external influences.

By way of comparison, when talking of Caodaism, Michael Hatton was very prompt in stressing his own family's experiences, over generations as Irish-Catholic in a very Anglo-Masonic Australian society. He hoped Australia would never revert to such a segregated situation. And I recall my experiences with the Russian Orthodox Community in Bankstown. Russians who came out to Australia post-perestroika, declared Orthodoxy here a museum piece of the fifties (which it was). The society in which Caodaism is finding its place, was not so long ago divided into, not a dualistic and syncretic culture, but parallel streams of culture. Streams which had run side-by-side from the beginnings of white history.

The yin/ yang balance, the dualistic machinery of Caodaism - the ability to encapsulate and perform dualism - that is, syncretise divergent ideals, is part of the very nature of Vietnamese history. And an integral part of Caodaism. The temple's very obvious place in Wiley Park, and the community's obvious place within ours helps define our differences. However, the dualistic machinery of Caodaism means that Caodaists are interested in having the wider Australian community interested in their message. We should be ready to meet their invitation, by getting to understand them. And it is our responsibility as scholars to be foremost in that process.

I end on this point. Asked about the place of Caodaism in the Bankstown community, and Australia, Michael Hatton averred,

As an amalgam of many faiths, Caodaism is no threat to any other religion nor to any community in Australia. And it's an expression of our tolerance and sense that we should be able to welcome a community like the Caodaists who practise what they preach - who are very open. As they are welcoming, we too should welcome them. For they will help constitute part of the richer palate of this new country we've been creating.

Author's note: This paper was designed to introduce Caodaism to the Australian Scholarly Community. Thus I have kept it basic, and perhaps it remains a little rough. Tâm has expressed his eagerness to include these words on the Internet. I welcome this move as a chance to communicate with others interested in understanding Caodaism. As I have no permanent e-mail address at the moment, please feel free to contact me care of,

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