

Cochinchina as a Cultural Precondition for the Foundation of Caodaism – Part 2

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ABSTRACT: The paper finds the answer for the question of “Why did Caodaism appear and develop quickly in Cochinchina in the early 20th century rather than any other regions and other periods?” In his opinion, when surveying the birth and growth of Caodaism in Cochinchina, one needs to explore the Cochinchina and its people that created and have fostered Caodaism, an indigenous religion whose ideal of global salvation was declared even in its early beginnings. Preliminarily surveying Cochinchina as a cultural precondition for the foundation of Caodaism, the author examines 05 aspects: The openness of Cochinchinese physical geography; The openness and dynamism of Cochinchinese villages; Multiracial and multi-religious features of Cochinchina; Cochinchinese characteristics; and Spiritual needs of Cochinchinese inhabitants.

V. COCHINCHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

Fertile soil allows seeds to grow better than barren one does. A bonsai could not develop as fully as plants growing in a garden watered and fertilized enough. Usually, a particular species of fruit is the product favoured by a certain habitat. Sơn Nam writes, “*People are flowers of soil. Each habitat brings forth its typical produce. Generally, sour oranges or sweet ones depend on their habitat, which is impossibly converted.*”¹ It is why a well-known speciality is traditionally “labelled” with a geographic name such as Biên Hòa grapefruits, Cái Bè oranges, Cái Mơn durians, Hòa Lộc mangoes, and Lái Thiêu mangosteens, etc.

Similarly, people’s characteristics must be affected by the natural environment where they live.² Thus, a glimpse into Cochinchina’s natural conditions should be

*. Caodaist Reseacher, Hồ Chí Minh City.

¹. [Sơn Nam 1993: 28].

². Kong Ji (483-402 AD), alias Tzu Ssu, a thinker in the Warring States, once states that characteristics of both Southerners and Northerners living in the immense Chinese must be influenced by Southern

essential to understand the characteristics of the Cochinchinese.

1. Cochinchina: Harsh Natural Conditions

Before reclamation, Cochinchina's natural conditions were extremely harsh. Huỳnh Lúa writes, "*The rich and diverse natural environment of Southern Vietnam [Cochinchina] offered pioneers several advantages and simultaneously caused them various difficulties.*"³

Son Nam describes Cochinchina as "*a paradise for tigers, crocodiles, poisonous snakes, and mosquitos spreading malaria. The low-level land was dank and abundant with rivers, arroyos, lakes, and pools. Its swamps were occupied by crowded flocks of storks. The grass which had withered in the dry season sprang up and grew taller than a man when rains came.*"⁴

Generations of migrants unceasingly moved to Cochinchina to reclaim its wilderness and made marshy land cultivable and habitable. This reclamation movement was mobilized by the Nguyễn lords in the 17th century.

During the Southward march, early migrants had to struggle continuously against beasts, crocodiles, snakes, mosquitos, miasma and diseases. Natural conditions of then Cochinchina enriched the Vietnamese language with old folk songs and sayings handed down from pioneers:

- *The buzz of mosquitos is like flute sounds,*
Swimming leeches look like vermicelli.
- *Into devils does grass grow,*
And in the field snakes can crow.
- *Covered with salt water and alkaline soil,*
Here and there rampage crocodiles
and slither cobras.

and Northern physical geography:

"To show forbearance and gentleness in teaching, and not rashly punish wrong-doing: this is the strength of Southerners. (...) Lying on weapons and armours and dying without fear: this is the strength of Northerners." Zhongyong (Doctrine of the Mean), chapter 10.

³. [Thạch Phương 1992: 44].

⁴. [Son Nam 2000: 8-9].

– *One is filled with fear of crocodile bites*

into the legs when rowing,

Of leeches when getting into rivers,

and of ghosts in forests.

– *So strange a land is Đòng Nai*

with its shoaling fish in rivers,

and roaring tigers in forests.

– *Here is a strange land,*

So frightening is the warbling of birds

or the sudden splashing of fish.

In 1735, Nguyễn Cư Trinh (1716-1767) set foot on Cochinchina after this region had been reclaimed for over a century, but he still sadly jotted down this line:

(Lotus withers in humid air, and broken sonneratiaceae branches fall into mud.)

His other verses:

Thousands of families came to this wilderness,

Where rivers are occupied by crocodiles,

And fields are the home of snakes and tigers.⁵

In the 19th century, after Cochinchina had been reclaimed for 200 years, its natural conditions still frightened French invaders. According to Son Nam, after conquering Cochinchina, French troops were very pessimistic because they found it impossible to settle down. They were fearful of mosquitos, snakes, burning sunlight and thundering rainstorms.⁶

How did such harsh natural conditions affect Cochinchinese characteristics? Huỳnh Lứa answers, “...with its own features, the natural environment of Southern Vietnam [Cochinchina] created profound impact on material and spiritual lives and the formation of local residents’ characteristics.”⁷

⁵. [Phan Quang 1981: 115].

⁶. [Son Nam 1992: 9-10].

⁷. [Thạch Phương 1992: 44].

Generation after generation, the characteristics of the migrants had actively shaped those of the Cochinchinese. These characteristics strongly showed themselves in the second half of the 19th century. According to Hồ Lê, “the Cochinchinese were dynamic, less conservative, and ready to accept the new.”⁸

2. Some General Characteristics of the Cochinchinese

a. *Open-mindedness*

Speaking of the Cochinchinese characteristics, Sơn Nam observes, “The most prominent characteristic of early pioneers is that they loved freedom...”⁹

Thạch Phương writes, “Settling down in a new region, communities of migrants – through their creativity and communication – gradually got a more liberal and active way of thinking. Their sight of reality became broader and was no longer limited by bamboo hedges or dikes.”¹⁰

Đình Văn Hạnh explains, “Living in a vast, newly reclaimed land, pioneers were free from the rat race common to narrow, populous areas. They became more tolerant, broad-minded, and generous. [On their Southward march,] constraint, rigidity, and pettiness were left behind to create a more liberal and unrestrained lifestyle...”¹¹

Nguyễn Văn Xuân asserts, “The biggest benefit the Cochinchinese enjoyed was that the Confucian education they got was less dogmatic than what was taught in Central Vietnam. Moreover, staying far away from the imperial court and living in a vast, fertile delta with large orchards yielding abundant produce of high quality, their emotions could be developed and enriched a lot.”¹²

“... migrants were plain-hearted and it seems that the farther they went Southwards, the simpler they turned out...”¹³

“... the South was not static due to pioneers’ constant mobility. They had to be continuously in search of adventures in order that their lifestyle could be more and more diversifying. It is worth noting that both the Nguyễn lords and their mandarins, born and brought up in the newly reclaimed land full of incessant activities, held

⁸. [Thạch Phương 1992: 108].

⁹. [Sơn Nam 1993: 32].

¹⁰. [Thạch Phương 1992: 251].

¹¹. [Đình Văn Hạnh 1999: 28].

¹². [Nguyễn Văn Xuân 1969: 51].

¹³. [Nguyễn Văn Xuân 1969: 53].

little prejudice.”¹⁴

Possibly due to their openness, the Cochinchinese felt easy about accepting an open religion like Caodaism, whose altar presents a pantheon comprising several founders of other religions.

b. Democracy and equality

Thạch Phương writes, “The farther they moved southwards, the more their feudality faded and therefore replaced by democratic and egalitarian spirits that were realized in their rural community life as well as in their family routines.”¹⁵

Village ties were strengthened by profound sentimental attachment, which is also the deep root of Cochinchinese democracy and equality.¹⁶

It seems that democracy and equality made the Cochinchinese find Caodaism in harmony with their characteristics. Indeed, Caodaist high-ranking dignitaries and ordinary adepts treat each other as brothers or sisters. Even Caodaist deities address their followers as younger brothers or sisters.

c. Hospitality, tolerance, and generosity

Concerning Cochinchinese customs, *Gia Định Thành Thông Chí* (Gazetteer of Gia Định citadel), by an author of the late 18th and early 19th centuries named Trịnh Hoài Đức, reads, “When guests come over, the host offers some betel and areca-nut, then a meal, and gives a warm reception irrespective of their origins or whether they are acquaintances or not...”¹⁷

Up to the present day, a large earthenware jar of fresh water along with a ladle is still seen on the threshold of some Southerners’ houses, fenceless or fenced but negligently closed, for passers-by to quench their thirst in the afternoon heat.

Son Nam explains, “Always feeling lonely in the middle of nowhere, migrants turned out very hospitable. (...) When meeting fellow-countrymen, migrants willingly gave them a warm welcome in exchange for information about their native villages. Were they strangers, the host would listen to their recounting stories he had not ever heard about before.”¹⁸

Thạch Phương writes, “Moreover, provided with all the advantages of living in

¹⁴. [Nguyễn Văn Xuân 1969: 53].

¹⁵. [Thạch Phương 1992: 68].

¹⁶. [Nguyễn Phương Thảo 1994: 11-12, 14].

¹⁷. [Đình Văn Hạnh 1999: 307].

¹⁸. [Son Nam 1993: 33].

the new boundless land, early pioneers were free from the rat race often found in narrow, crowded areas. Natural conditions allowed them to become more generous and open-minded.”¹⁹

To sum up, despite harsh natural conditions, the Cochinchinese favoured by abundant resources became more hospitable and free from meanness. Thanks to this characteristic, within a few years of the foundation of Caodaism, lots of its temples were quickly set up in Cochinchina by voluntary followers most of whom were not rich. Many temples were humble houses dedicated to the newly-founded Church by their enthusiastic owners.

d. Benevolence, righteousness honouring and wealth disdaining

Some authors observe that the openness of Cochinchinese villages makes the Cochinchinese lack traditional ties with community commonly found in Tonkinese villages.²⁰

Nguyễn Phương Thảo asserts that Cochinchinese villages were set up by pioneers, who did not discriminate newcomers as Tonkinese villagers did.²¹ Unfamiliar with such discrimination, villagers were ready to leave for a new place when they found the old one materially or spiritually unfit to live in.²²

“In such a common situation, the tie between villagers was neither their kinship nor a long-lasting neighbourliness. Sharing the same plight, quitting their native villages to live in strange areas without close relatives, the migrants only clung to friendly, affectionate connections with one another.”²³

“They integrated themselves into communities where righteousness bound them together for life.”²⁴

As migrants from all walks of life made a living in vast and remote areas full of fatal dangers, they could not survive without righteousness, generosity, and benevolence.²⁵ Cochinchinese folk verses read as follows:

Gathering in Hué are the nobility,

¹⁹. [Thạch Phương 1992: 68].

²⁰. [Cần Thơ 1997: 7].

²¹. [Nguyễn Phương Thảo: 1994: 11].

²². [Nguyễn Phương Thảo: 1994: 13].

²³. [Nguyễn Phương Thảo: 1994: 11-12].

²⁴. [Nguyễn Phương Thảo: 1994: 14].

²⁵. [Cần Thơ 1997: 7-8].

*While galloping to Đồng Nai are migrants.
 The peaceful river has become muddy,
 Like difficulties of those
 Whose home villages are miles distant.
 Here you come, here you stay,
 Until the seeds you've sown,
 Sprout from the land of our own.*²⁶

e. Indomitability

Of different origins, customs, occupations, social status, races, and religions,²⁷ Southward migrants who quitted their native villages to reclaim the virgin land of Cochinchina featured, strongly and commonly, courage and indomitability.

Trần Thị Thu Lương and Võ Thành Phương assert, “Basically, Cochinchinese residents were migrants from all walks of life. Like their parents and relatives, suffering lots of troubles and risks, they became unsubmitive and unrestrained.”²⁸

Thạch Phương writes, “Unyielding to violence, they were ready to liberate the oppressed and rescue the endangered. Their principle was to observe righteousness to show their bravery. Thus they dared clear away the unfair, protect the weak, defend the helpless, and support the down and out.”²⁹

According to Huỳnh Lứa, “reclaiming a new region full of difficulties and dangers, Cochinchinese pioneers steeled themselves to be brave, persistent against hardship and natural obstacles, and resistant to unjust violence.”³⁰

Gia Định thành thông chí (Gazetteer of Gia Định citadel) by Trịnh Hoài Đức describes Cochinchinese men and women as those of “unsubmitive spirit, fidelity, bravery, righteousness, and contempt for money”.³¹

Nguyễn Văn Xuân, a scholar born and brought up in central Vietnam, writes

²⁶. [Sơn Nam 2000: 7]. N.B. – Huế was the imperial city of the Nguyễn dynasty; Đồng Nai, the reclaimed land.

²⁷. [Đình Văn Hạnh 1999: 27].

²⁸. [Trần Thị Thu Lương 1991: 108].

²⁹. [Thạch Phương 1992: 68].

³⁰. [Thạch Phương 1992: 37-38].

³¹. [Thạch Phương 1992: 68].

about Cochinchinese characteristics as follows, “Despite the education directly got from the French, Cochinchinese men driving the latest modelled cars still wore big chignons (...); Confucius and Mencius sayings on human duties were frequently and fluently cited by men and women in their daily talks. (...) Such behaviour went along with their patriotism. For instance, when consulting Nguyễn Thành Tiểu La in Thăng Bình prefecture about a plan for restoring national independence, Phan Bội Châu was advised to recruit his human resource in Cochinchina (...). Returning from France, Phan Chu Trinh first set foot in Saigon before heading for his home province in central Vietnam. (...) However, he breathed his last in Saigon, failing to see his native village again. His funeral, held by the Cochinchinese, might be the biggest one never seen before...”³²

Perhaps the above-mentioned Cochinchinese characteristics helped a newly founded religion like Caodaism develop rapidly. Although French colonialists regarded this belief as *une société secrète* (sic) and any meeting comprising over 20 people required an official permit, the Cochinchinese bravely attended Caodaist spirits-evoking séances and rituals en masse.

Many people fervently donated their land and houses to building Caodaist temples. And as a result, within a few years after its birth, Caodaism had temples and followers all over Cochinchina.

Kept at the National Archives Centre 2, records under the French Governors of Cochinchina provide proofs of how unsubmissive and indomitable the Cochinchinese were, and how they honoured righteousness and disdained money.

For example, submitting the Declaration of Caodai foundation dated 7 October 1926 to Le Fol, Acting Governor of Cochinchina, Lê Văn Trung on behalf of his fellow followers, politely and proudly wrote:

“On behalf of the majority of the Vietnamese (...), we who signed hereunder are honoured to declare that we will diffuse this sacred teaching to the whole humanity.

“... those who signed hereunder ask you to receive our declaration officially.”³³

Đình Văn Hạnh asserts that Cochinchinese people’s characteristics “help them

³². [Nguyễn Văn Xuân 1969: 58-59].

³³. “Au nom de très nombreux Annamites (...), les soussignés ont l’honneur de venir respectueusement vous déclarer qu’ils vont propager à l’humanité entière cette Sainte Doctrine.

“... les soussignés vous prient de recevoir officiellement leur déclaration.” [Lê Anh Dũng 1996: 169, 172].

and other ethnic groups engage in acculturation and impact one another.”³⁴

To sum up, the Cochinchinese characteristics are open-minded, liberal, democratic, egalitarian, hospitable and indomitable. These features “*did not just come into being overnight, but took shape after centuries of forging the pioneers throughout their reclamation.*”³⁵ These characteristics might be regarded as one favourable precondition for the birth of Caodaism in Cochinchina.

VI. SPIRITUAL NEEDS OF THE COCHINCHINESE

Influenced by the Three Teachings (Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism), according to Son Nam, Cochinchinese residents “have built up a spiritual life that is quite warm, egalitarian and based on the brotherhood and loyalty to one another in times of trouble. Actually, the Three Teachings have crystallized into the Cochinchinese lifestyle.”³⁶

His opinion is quite right. However, through the analysis of the setting of Cochinchina in its early days of reclamation, the impact of the Three Teachings was widespread but unnoticeable. In fact, the Three Teachings were not leading the migrant spiritual life in Cochinchina on the whole.

1. Confucianism

In Son Nam’s opinion, Cochinchina was a new land where “Confucius was not well-known; if any, this sage was not much respected.”³⁷ However, Confucianism still “permeated slightly among the common people”.³⁸ Its impact on Cochinchinese lifestyles and their way of thinking was not so strong as that on Tonkinese and Annamese (i.e. Northern and central Vietnam) because indomitable migrants tended to demolish every binding form of old social conventions and practices.

2. Buddhism

The profound Buddhist teaching began to decline more and more from the 15th to the early 20th century. Settling in a newly reclaimed land full of hardship, lacking

³⁴. [Đinh Văn Hạnh 1999: 29].

³⁵. [Thạch Phương 1992: 68].

³⁶. [Son Nam 1971: VI].

³⁷. [Son Nam 2000: 58].

³⁸. [Son Nam 2000: 60].

genuine religious guidance, rebellious souls were apt to cast off their poor remaining knowledge of Buddhism on the Southward march. Đinh Văn Hạnh observes, “Buddhism, therefore, was short of suitable circumstances to permeate through the spiritual life of most peasants.”³⁹

Son Nam outlines a Buddhist setting in the new land as follows, “Buddhism should be suitable for illiterate people. Thus, its essence was blended with folk beliefs and Taoist spells and mantras⁴⁰; “... Taoist gods like Local Princess, Guanyu (War Lord) were worshipped in pagodas⁴¹; “Formerly, pagodas did not strictly belong to a particular school⁴²; “Pagodas in a newly reclaimed land generally did not attach importance to training qualified monks but focussed on rituals in order to spread ethical concepts, karmic retributions, Nirvana, Western Buddhaland, and hell. Rituals should fit folks as much as possible.”⁴³

In his stories such as *Hương rừng Cà Mau* (The scent of Cà Mau forests), *Vạch một chân trời* (Opening a new horizon), *Hai cõi U Minh* (The two worlds of U Minh, i.e. Upper and Lower U Minh in Cà Mau province), Son Nam vividly portrays harsh and risky life of migrants in Cochinchina: they had to eat everything they got, even snakes or turtles, and fight against boas, boars, tigers, and crocodiles, etc. By a fire to ward off mosquitoes, a bottle of rice alcohol was the simplest way to help migrants forget their sorrow and solitude in the middle of nowhere. In such a situation, how could pioneers observe some Buddhist precepts (not to kill, not to eat meat, not to drink liquor)?

3. Taoism

Like Confucian metaphysics and Buddhist mahayana, Taoist philosophy of nonaction (wuwei) and tranquility was too profound to fit migrants’ souls in early times of Cochinchinese reclamation. Cochinchina became a fertile ground for variations of folk Taoism. According to Son Nam, “the masses did not use the exact term of Taoism or distinguish between Taoist sects. Immortality cult was the common name instead.”⁴⁴

Folk Taoism could attract peasants and assemble forces to fight against foreign

³⁹. [Đinh Văn Hạnh 1999: 34-35].

⁴⁰. [Son Nam 2000: 70].

⁴¹. [Son Nam 2000: 66].

⁴². [Son Nam 2000: 71].

⁴³. [Son Nam 2000: 66].

⁴⁴. [Son Nam 2000: 60-61].

invaders, cruel landlords and village tyrants. Chinese immigrants brought with them the tendency to set up secret societies in order to protect their colonies or engage in political activities. Heaven-Earth Society was an example.

In the late 19th century, folk Taoism and its variations became the mainstream of fervent spiritual activities in Cochinchina and had close connection with patriotic movements against the French colonialism.

4. Catholicism

According to Huỳnh Lứa, “a group of Vietnamese migrants, most of whom were Catholics, fled from religious persecution and settled down in Cái Mơn and Cái Nhum in the early 19th century. Later, some of them went to Sóc Sãi, Ba Vác, Pang Tra Thom and Mỏ Cày after local Khmers had left these places.”⁴⁵

Cái Mơn used to be of Vĩnh Long province; today it is in Vĩnh Thành commune, Chợ Lách district, Bến Tre province. According to another source, Catholicism has been in Cái Nhum (Long Thới commune today, Chợ Lách district, Bến Tre province) since 1731 (www.bentre.gov.vn).

According to Hall, in Hòn Đất (Hà Tiên province) in the second half of the 18th century, there was a small Catholic bamboo chapel for some forty seminarists from Vietnam, China, and Siam (Thailand). Pierre Joseph Georges Pigneau, a French priest, came there in 1765.⁴⁶

Son Nam adds that many Catholics escaping from persecution came to Hậu Giang area and settled in Cái Đồi and Cù Lao Giêng (1778), Bò Ót (1779), and Nãng Gù (1854).⁴⁷

Cù Lao Giêng is an islet in the middle of the Tiền river, of Tấn Mỹ commune, Chợ Mới district, An Giang province. There the French built a church used as a Catholic seminary until 1946, and a convent also used as an orphanage and old-age home operated by nuns of the Providence order.

According to a report dated 14 December 1934 sent to the Governor General of Indochina by Cochinchinese Governor Pagès, Catholicism was introduced to Vietnam in 1596 by Portuguese Dominican missionaries, who were followed by French Jesuits. In 1924, there were about 80,000 Catholics in Cochinchina, 156

⁴⁵. [Huỳnh Lứa 1987: 53].

⁴⁶. [Hall 1997: 630].

⁴⁷. [Son Nam 1959: 59].

parishes, 38 French missionaries, and 28 Vietnamese priests.⁴⁸

However, as remarked by Trần Thị Thu Lương and Võ Thành Phương, “despite the fact that numerous Catholic communities existed in Vietnam in the 19th century, and that a number of Catholics fled to the Mekong Delta due to the Nguyễn dynasty’s prohibition against Catholicism, the influence of this religion was not strong enough.”⁴⁹

Đình Văn Hạnh estimates, “Throughout a long period of time, inhabitants of the South [Cochinchina] had been affected by neither governing ideology nor leading religion. Instead, they were influenced simultaneously by various religions and thoughts, new and old.”⁵⁰

As emphasized by Đình Văn Hạnh, migrants and pioneers were in great need of religions and spiritual life; nevertheless, due to various reasons, available religions and ideologies at that time failed to meet their need.⁵¹

5. Ideological Gap

Đình Văn Hạnh’s above-mentioned opinion is shared by other authors. Sơn Nam writes, “Generally speaking, under the French colonialists’ dominant rule, Southern [Cochinchinese] inhabitants adapted themselves to the situation and old ideologies had lost their vitality.”⁵²

On the expression of the Cochinchinese’s spiritual need in the late 19th century, some authors merely regard it as “*a psychological gap*” urging them to look for a new religion.⁵³ Nevertheless, Jayne Susan Werner exactly names it an ideological gap in Cochinchina before the 20th century: “There had been a decline of Buddhism and Confucianism, leaving a cultural vacuum propitious to the creation of new doctrines aimed at the renewal of Vietnamese culture.”⁵⁴

That gap resulted from the fact that Cochinchina had been conquered and turned into a French colony. Werner writes, “... the decline of Confucianism and Buddhism following the French conquest. Learned Buddhist and Taoist practitioners were

⁴⁸. [Werner 1976: 5], footnote 5.

⁴⁹. [Trần Thị Thu Lương 1991: 42].

⁵⁰. [Đình Văn Hạnh 1999: 37].

⁵¹. [Đình Văn Hạnh 1999: 37-38].

⁵². [Sơn Nam 2000: 58].

⁵³. [Nguyễn Phương Thảo 1994: 28].

⁵⁴. [Werner 1981: 56].

practically nonexistent in the south in the 1920s. Confucianism had lost its force as a political and social doctrine, although it continued to have some appeal as the basis for family morality in the 1920s and 1930s.”⁵⁵

6. The Birth of Caodaism met Cochinchinese People’s Spiritual Need

Pointing out the ideological gap in Cochinchina in the early 20th century, Werner explains why Caodaism strongly appealed to Cochinchinese inhabitants: “Indeed, the Cao Dai cult can be seen in part as an attempt to revitalize the Buddhist faith – traditional religious leaders such as ‘Buddhist’ monks, Taoist priests, and Minh sect practitioners flocked to Caodaism when it was first founded. Cao Dai organizers also used Buddhist pagodas for their services throughout Cochinchina, before their own temples were built, and some of the bonzes who headed these pagodas converted to Caodaism. In areas swept by Caodaism, pagoda congregations were known to switch en masse to the sect.”⁵⁶

In short, in the new land of Cochinchina – despite the presence of local ethnic groups’ indigenous beliefs, of old-age religions brought southwards by migrants, and of Catholicism introduced by Europeans – the Cochinchinese’s soul was occupied by a void due to a spiritual need unsatisfied.

The Cochinchinese in the early 20th century really needed another expression of spirituality, newer but not completely strange, which they did not feel allergic to or unfit for. To fill that ideological gap, the Cochinchinese could find many values in Caodaism, new but familiar, mysterious but friendly, simple but well-organized in a colorful form.

That is why the Cochinchinese followed Caodaism en masse as soon as it came into being although its founders were not professionally trained missionaries. Indeed, most of the earliest Caodaist apostles were from many social strata, of different educational backgrounds, and they had never taken any seminary courses before their fervent missionary work.

VII. CONCLUSION

The above overview certainly cannot describe all relations between natural, social

⁵⁵. [Werner 1981: 13].

⁵⁶. [Werner 1981: 13].

factors in Cochinchina and the birth of Caodaism in the region. The main points of this thin monograph can be summed up as follows:

- Cochinchina was a new, open and dynamic region where Western and Eastern cultures, and where different ethnic groups, religions and beliefs converged.
- Living in a multi-cultural environment, the Cochinchinese developed their own characteristics which were equalitarian, democratic, open-minded, and keen to accept the new.
- Cochinchina and its people were, therefore, ready to absorb and support the new, especially when the new was not only familiar to their mentality but also able to fill their ideological gap in the early 20th century.

Founded in Cochinchina in such a historical, natural and social context, Caodaism soon attracted the Cochinchinese en masse within a short period of only a few years.

It is worth noting that the Cochinchinese's zeal for a new religion like Caodaism possibly reflected their subconscious desire to escape from traditional moulds of old-age cultural mainstreams to find a new horizon. Caodaism, however, did not encourage its followers to cast off tradition in exchange for modernity.

In other words, Caodaism provides a renovation based on sieved traditional values:

*It's Me [God] who came to Vietnam,
On this soil,
To sow the seed of Caodaism,
Water and fertilize the existing Three Teachings tree,
And better its foliage,
To help Man harmonize with the Tao.⁵⁷*

As a young religion founded on the soil with long-established ones which deeply impacted the Vietnamese historically, culturally, and psychologically, Caodaism developed its own approach by basing the modern on the tradition and Vietnamizing foreign cultures to make them suitable for Vietnamese mentality:

Embracing, profound and comprehensive,

⁵⁷. [TGST 1966-67: 34].

*The teaching of Caodaism with its new thoughts,
Has gone into the ancient religious legacy,
Given its sound foundation.*⁵⁸

To turn Cochinchina into a fertile region like present-day southern Vietnam, it took some 300 years for generations of pioneers who had to fight unceasingly against wild beasts and harsh natural conditions to survive and develop the new land for their posterities to enjoy fresh water, sweet fruits, and immense rice fields.

Of those 300 historical years, Caodaism covers less than one third. Innumerable hardships and perilousness suffered by Caodaist founders are possibly not much different from those endured by generations of pioneers in Cochinchina. They all yearned to open a bright horizon for their descendants.

To some extent, surveying Cochinchina helps to understand better the beginnings of Caodaism, a belief imbued so much with the national spirit.

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