

## An Outline of Vietnamese Taoism

Huệ Khải (Dũ Lan Lê Anh Dũng) <sup>(\*)</sup>

**Abstract:** *Originally, Taoism began in China and it is a philosophical system whose mainly representative were Laozi and Zhuangzi (V-IV B.C); thus, Taoism is also called Laozi-Zhuangzi theory. This paper shows a brief note of Taoism in China first. Then, it introduces some typical expressions of Taoism in Vietnam; for example, Geomancy and prophecy, Secret art of longevity, worshiping national prominent figures and heroes, and some Taoist temples.*

\*\*\*

In China during six or seven centuries before the Common Era, i.e., the Spring - Autumn period, and Warring States period, <sup>(1)</sup> the teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi were merely a kind of philosophy. Taoist philosophers did not advocate mystical things. Facing wars and disorders, they chose a reclusive life to nourish their heavenly trueness. From the first century under the Eastern Han dynasty, Chang Daoling <sup>(2)</sup> transformed the esoteric teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi to a religion called Taoism.

Taoism developed diversely. Taoist priests or magicians <sup>(3)</sup> devoted themselves to talismans and alchemy. They belonged to the sect of immortality, alchemy, and

---

<sup>\*</sup> Researcher, Hồ Chí Minh City.

<sup>(1)</sup> The Spring and Autumn period (770-402 B.C.) was from Pingwang to the end of Wei Liewang of the Zhou dynasty. The Warring States period (401-221 B.C.) was from Anwang of the Zhou dynasty to the Qin Shihuang's unification of China. [Nguyễn Hiến Lê 1992: 25]. This footnote indicates that the above information is from a Nguyễn Hiến Lê's book published in 1992, page 25. For the related source in details, see "Bibliography" at the end of this article.

<sup>(2)</sup> Zhang Daoling, styled Fuhan (Supporting the Han dynasty), was born at mount Tianmu (Heavenly Eyes), Zhejiang, in A.D. 34 or 35, in the reign of Emperor Guangwu (reigned 25-57) of the Han dynasty. He was also revered as Zhang Tianshi (Heavenly Master Zhuang). The title of *Tianshi* was translated by R. H. Mathews as "*Taoist Pope*" (see entry 195h, p. 20) that means "*the head of the Taoist sect*" (see entry 6361a-51, p. 922). See: *Mathews' Chinese-English dictionary*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971.

<sup>(3)</sup> Holmes Welch (1921-1981) in his *Taoism: the Parting of the Ways* (Beacon Press, 1966) called *đạo gia* Taoist philosophers, and *đạo sĩ* Taoist priests.

talismans. The entire Taoist texts are very abundant and complex. They were collected and compiled as Daozang (the Taoist Canon).

King Xuanzong (reigned 712-756) of the Tang dynasty, confident that he was the descendant of Laozi, issued a decree to search for all existing Taoist texts throughout the empire. The collection of these Taoist texts during Kaiyuan era (713-741) of the Tang dynasty was titled *Sandong Qionggang* (Exquisite Compendium of the Three Grottoes) or *Kaiyuan Daozang* (Daozang of the Kaiyuan era) of about three thousand seven hundred volumes which are no longer extant.

Subsequent compilations were attempted on the command of various Song kings. The Daozang during the reign of Emperor Shenzong (reigned 1067-1085) of the Song dynasty was titled *Da Song Tiangong Baozang* (Precious Canon of the Heavenly Palace of the Great Song dynasty) of about four thousand five hundred and sixty-five volumes which are no longer extant. During Zhenghe era (1111-1118) of Emperor Song Huizong (reigned 1100-1126) there was *Zhenghe Wanshou Daozang* (Taoist Canon of the Longevity of the Zhenghe era), which is no longer extant.

Under the Jin dynasty there was *Da Jin Xuanduo Baozang* (Precious Canon of the Mysterious Capital of the Great Jin Dynasty) of about six thousand four hundred volumes, which are no longer extant. *Xuanduo Baozang* (Precious Canon of the Mysterious Capital) was compiled in 1244, including seven thousand volumes which are no longer extant.

The Taoist Canon in Zhengtong era (1436-1449) of Emperor Ming Yingzong called *Zhengtong Daozang* (Taoist Canon of the Zhengtong era) consists of five thousand three hundred and five volumes. A supplement in 1607 comprises of one hundred and eight volumes, called *Xu Daozang* (Supplementary Taoist Canon). These two extant collections include five thousand four hundred and eighty-five volumes in total.<sup>(4)</sup>

Taoist sects are abundant and very complex. Some of them are as follows:

1. The *Zhengyi* sect, also called *Tianshi* (Heavenly Master), from Longhu Shan (Dragon Tiger mountain), Jiangxi Province.

---

<sup>(4)</sup> According to [Liu Ts'un-yan 1973: 104], at first the Taoist Canon was of 5,305 volumes, contained in 480 boxes, compiled at the beginning of the Ming dynasty [A.D. 1368], and finished in 1445. A supplement in 1607 was of one hundred eighty volumes, called *Xu Daozang* (*Supplementary Taoist Canon*).

2. The *Maoshan* sect, with two styles of practice: (a) meditation based on the *Huangting Jing* (Yellow Court Canon); and (b) martial art based on the *Qimen Dunjia*.

3. The *Taiji* sect from Mount Wudang in Hubei, with two styles of practice: (a) martial art for exorcising evil spirits; (b) meditation (interior alchemy) as taught by Zhang Sanfeng.

4. The *Quanzhen* sect, influencing laymen who practise Taoist meditation (interior alchemy) at home.

5. The *Lushan* sect whose adherents wrap a red cloth around the head, blow on a buffalo horn, and ring a bell during their liturgy.<sup>(5)</sup>

It seems that when being brought to Vietnam about the 2nd century Taoism had religious features, because after the death of Emperor Lingdi of the Han dynasty in 189, China was in disorder, a great deal of Chinese refugees fled the empire and came to settle in Jiaozhou (Northern Vietnam today). Among them were many Taoists who practiced abstinence from cereal and methods of immortality.<sup>(6)</sup>

The Chinese mandarins ruling Jiaozhou almost enjoyed magical practice. According to *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* (Complete History of Great Việt), vol. 3, *Thái Thú* (Prefect) Shi Xie (137-226) of Jiaozhou died of sickness. Three days later, a Chinese Taoist named Dongfeng came and gave medicine to revive him.<sup>(7)</sup> This book also says *Thứ Sử* (Governor) Zhang Jin who arrived in Jiaozhou in 201 often wore a red turban and read Taoist texts.<sup>(8)</sup>

In 865, under the Tang dynasty (618-907), Gao Pian intruded into Vietnam to suppress the Vietnamese's resistance. As a noted magician and geomancer, he tried his best to destroy dragon veins and Vietnam's sacred places so that Vietnam would

<sup>(5)</sup> [Michael Saso 1973: 403-416].

<sup>(6)</sup> *Buddhist Tripitaka*, N<sup>o</sup>52, *History*, section IV, *Hongmingji*, vol. I, reads: 是時靈帝崩後, 天下擾亂, 獨交州差安. 北方異人咸來在焉, 多為神仙辟穀長生之術. (Then after the death of Emperor Han Lingdi, the empire was in disorder; only Jiaozhou was relatively calm. Unusual people from the North came to live there. Many of them were Taoists practicing abstinence from cereal and immortality.) See [Nguyễn Đăng Thục: 1971a: 114].

<sup>(7)</sup> [Ngô Sĩ Liên 1974: 246].

<sup>(8)</sup> [Ngô Sĩ Liên 1974: 244].

no longer have talents or heroes and Vietnam would be under the yoke of Chinese domination forever.

Being both religious and philosophical, and infused with Vietnam's traditional cult of deities (worshipping national prominent figures and heroes), Vietnamese Taoism is therefore quite complex with various tendencies.

### 1. SOME TYPICAL TENDENCIES OF VIETNAMESE TAOISM

#### *a. Magic practice and violence*

Talismans have affected the social activities for many centuries. For example, the tiger is considered to be able to ward off evil spirits; thus, a tiger talisman can be posted on the front door to protect the family. This talisman is named *bùa trừ tà trị bệnh, trấn trạch bình an* (talisman for healing the sick, warding off evil spirits, and protecting the house).

Vietnamese Taoism could attract peasants into secret societies for their mutual help against local tyrants or for political purposes.

In the reign of King Trần Phế Đế (reigned 1377-1388), Nguyễn Bô with Taoist name Đường Lang Tử Y (a purple-dress native of Đường Lang) proclaimed himself emperor in Bắc Giang area in 1379.<sup>(9)</sup>

Under the Hồ dynasty (1400-1407), Trần Đức Huy who used magical power to attract many people<sup>(10)</sup> was suppressed by Hồ Quý Ly in 1403.

During the French colonial rule, there was a resistance of Taoist Trần Cao Vân (1866-1916), whose real name was Trần Công Thọ, styled Hồng Việt, a native of Tư Phú village, Đa Hòa town, Điện Bàn district, Quảng Nam province.

In the South, Thiên Địa Hội (Tiandihui, Heaven-Earth Society) was a secret society attracting thousands of people. In March 1913, Phan Phát Sanh or Phan Xích Long (1893-1916) proclaimed himself emperor and revolted against the French. With talismans, swords, sabers, spears, and sticks, the partisans moved forward regardless of the enemy's firearms.<sup>(11)</sup>

---

<sup>(9)</sup> [Nguyễn Tự, 1962: 113].

<sup>(10)</sup> [Nguyễn Đông Chi, 1942: 419].

<sup>(11)</sup> [Phạm Văn Sơn, 1963: 459-460].

Such resistance movements took place throughout the country, for example, those of Mạc Đình Phúc in the North, Võ Trứ in the Central, and Nguyễn Hữu Trí in the South, etc.

*b. Geomancy and prophecy*

In Vietnam the populace are very fond of geomancy (or feng-shui) and prophecy.

Under the Hồ dynasty (1400-1407), in Tân Hưng area, An Phủ Sứ (Pacification Commissioner) Trần Quốc Kiệt wrote *Hình Thế Địa Mạch Ca* (Land Condition and Soil Veins in Verse).<sup>(12)</sup>

Under the Mạc dynasty (1527-1592), Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (1491-1585) with his Taoist name of Bạch Vân Cư Sĩ (White Cloud Hermit), popularly called Trạng Trình, was very well-known for his prophecy.

During the period of Lê kings and Trịnh lords (1545-1787), Nguyễn Đức Huyền, a native of Tả Ao village, Nghệ An province, was very well-known for geomancy.

Under the Tây Sơn dynasty (1778-1802), Nguyễn Thiếp (or La Sơn Phu Tử, 1723-1804) in La Sơn district, Hà Đông province, was also a very famous geomancer.

Eminent monks also used prophecy. In Cổ Pháp village, Bắc Ninh province, Vinītaruci sect had lots of celebrities such as monk Định Không (in the 8th century, of the 8th generation); monk La Quý An (852-936, of the 10th generation), monk Vạn Hạnh (?-1018, of the 12th generation), etc.

*c. Secret art of longevity*

King Trần Dụ Tông (reigned 1341-1369) practiced secret art of longevity from a Taoist priest named Huyền Vân at mount Niết (mount Phụng Hoàng) in Chí Linh district, Hải Dương province.

Under the Hồ dynasty (1400-1407), a person named Trần Tu of Cổ Định village, Nông Cống district, Thanh Hóa province, lived in seclusion on mount Nưa (Na Sơn) and attained immortality.

---

<sup>(12)</sup> [Nguyễn Đồng Chi, 1942: 420].

During the period of Lê kings and Trịnh lords (1545-1787) there was a successful longevity practitioner named Phạm Viên in Đông Thành district.

Under the reign of King Lê Hiến Tông (1740-1786), Nguyễn Hoàn (1713-1791), a native of Lan Khê village, Nông Cống district, Thanh Hóa province, was *Thượng Thư Bộ Lại* (Imperial Secretary of Personnel Ministry). According to the section *Tiên Khảo Đạo Tu Lục* (Records of Ancestors' Longevity Practice) in the genealogy of his clan, he started longevity practice in 1745, and often read *Daodejing* (The Way and its Power); set up a meditation room at home (1752); started worshipping the Five-Mountain Gods (1760); built a twelve-storey tower to practice the yin-yang vital forces, etc. Due to crazy passion, he finally went astray to evil ways.<sup>(13)</sup>

*d. Enjoying tranquility and leisure*

Strongly influenced by Laozi's and Zhuangzi's philosophy of nonaction and tranquility, Vietnamese Confucian scholars tended to live in reclusion, love the nature, and enjoy their leisure with drinking liquor, playing chess, playing string-musical instrument, reciting poems, writing calligraphy, and working on paintings, etc. This tendency is suitable for those who fail in society or are fed up with the bustling secular life. Thus, former Vietnamese Confucian scholars were prepared to be engaged in society or to retreat from it. Having found favourable opportunities to exert their talents, they took part in social and political affairs. Otherwise, getting into disadvantageous situations, being fed up with bureaucratic life, or ageing, they retreated and led a secluded life in rural areas or remote places.

Nguyễn Phi Khanh (1355-1428) of the Trần dynasty said:

*A hundred years of floating life is just a dream,*

*Enjoying half-day leisure, I would be also like an immortal.*<sup>(14)</sup>

Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (1491-1585) of the Mạc dynasty said:

*A day free from all secular affairs,*

*A day do I become immortal.*<sup>(15)</sup>

<sup>(13)</sup> [Hoàng Xuân Hãn, 1952: 93-95]; [Trần Văn Giáp, 1984: 107].

<sup>(14)</sup> 百年浮世人皆夢, / 半日偷閒我亦仙.

<sup>(15)</sup> [Viện Văn Học, 1978: 423].

Or:

*Sipping liquor at the foot of a tree,*

*As a dream do I take social affairs.*

Under the Lê-Mạc dynasties (1533-1592), Nguyễn Hăng, a native of Xuân Lũng village, Lâm Thao prefecture, Sơn Tây town, after having passed the *Hương Cống* exam, did not want to be a court official but lived in seclusion in Đại Đồng village, Yên Bình district, Tuyên Quang province. His literary name was *Nại Hiên* (Eaves of Patience). Under the Later Lê dynasty he was bestowed the title of *Thảo Mao Dật Sĩ* (Thatched-Cottage Hermit). His works in verse such as *Đại Đồng Phong Cảnh Phú* (On the Landscape of Đại Đồng), *Tam Ngung Động Phú* (On Tam Ngung Grotto), *Tịch Cư Ninh Thể Phú* (On Good Health in Seclusion), etc. exalt the pleasure of mountain seclusion.<sup>(16)</sup>

Under Tây Sơn dynasty, Phan Huy Ích (1750-1822), a native of Nghệ An province, Taoist name Bảo Chân Đạo Nhân (Preserving Trueness Taoist), built a house named Bảo Chân Quán (Preserving Trueness Temple) in Thăng Long (Hà Nội today) in 1796. On the purpose of this temple, he wrote that he had set it up for him to while away the time sipping tea in the balcony, angling at the river, playing the string musical instrument, drinking liquor, or reciting poems as he pleased.<sup>(17)</sup>

Under the Nguyễn dynasty, Nguyễn Công Trứ (1778-1858), a native of Uy Viễn village, Nghi Xuân district, Hà Tĩnh province, was a unique Confucian scholar. He proudly wrote:

*Knowing how to be content, at once comes contentment.*

*Waiting for contentment, when could it be found?*

*Knowing how to relish leisure, at once it occurs.*

*Waiting for it, when will it come?*

*Enjoying music, chess, poems, drinking in nature,*

*how many could ever lead such a life to transcend the secular world?*

<sup>(16)</sup> [Dương Quảng Hàm, 1968b: 297].

<sup>(17)</sup> [Ngô Thì Nhậm, 1978: 33].

The tendency of enjoying tranquility and leisure can be shown in the pleasure of playing bonsai and artificial mountains. Man can either plant a small rough tree with intentionally twisted branches and trimmed foliage, or display a small mountain made of rocks in a low basin with shallow water. Added to the setting are some tiny plants, a bridge, a fishing boat, one or two little ceramic statuettes of a woodman, an angler, two partners playing chess, etc. Such a setting is a miniature of the real immense nature.

Playing bonsai and artificial mountains has been regarded as an elegant hobby helping nourish and improve human nature and sentiment. This hobby is rated as highly as the pleasure of playing string musical instrument, playing chess, reciting poems, and drawing.

## **2. TAOISM INFUSED WITH VIETNAMESE CULT OF DEITIES (WORSHIPPING NATIONAL PROMINENT FIGURES AND HEROES)**

Vietnamese people have a strong, long-standing belief in the eternity of the souls of national prominent figures and heroes. Having devoted their whole lives to the nation and people, they become patron deities and continue rendering services from the afterlife. It is the simplicity of Vietnamese cult of deities, which is also the patriotic tradition and veneration of the Vietnamese towards the nation's heroes and elites. Vietnamese cult of deities is characterized by the village communal house (*đình làng*), the worship of village tutelary god (*thành hoàng*), temples (*miếu*) or mausoleums (*lăng*) of deceased noted generals and court officials.

Taoism as well as Buddhism was thoroughly mingled with Vietnam's age-old beliefs. When Vietnam lost its sovereignty, it was the cult of deities that nourished the awareness of the nation and stimulated the people's patriotism in order to found revolt movements to oust foreign invaders from the country.

Vietnamese cult of deities also reflects the patriotism of the Vietnamese. Throughout our long history of both protecting the nation and trying to build it, the Vietnamese fought bravely against enemies not only with weapons and other visible means but also with an invisible power, i.e., our strong belief in the sacred vital force of the nation. We believe that many generations of deceased heroes stand in the same front with the nation's righteous cause to protect Vietnam's independence,



unification, and permanence. Thus, Vietnamese cult of deities also enriches the Chinese Taoist pantheon.

Indeed, Vietnamese deities are worshipped besides the Chinese Taoist pantheon. For example, *Thông Thánh Quán* (Communication with Saints Temple) in Bạch Hạc (Việt Trì, seventy-five kilometres north-west of Hà Nội) is dedicated to the river god of Tam Giang as the local tutelary god. Other Taoist temples are dedicated to the tutelary god of mount Tản Viên (or mount Ba Vì in Sơn Tây province), the god of Tô Lịch river, etc. Since the Trần dynasty (1225-1400), Hưng Đạo Vương Trần Quốc Tuấn (1228?-1300) has been worshipped in Vạn Kiếp, Chí Linh, and then in many areas. Under the Later Lê dynasty (1428-1788), the temple dedicated to Princess Liễu Hạnh was set up. Other goddesses are also worshipped throughout the country.

### 3. SOME NOTED TAOIST TEMPLES

a. Thông Thánh Quán (Saint Communication Temple) in Bạch Hạc (Việt Trì) was probably built between 650-655, no longer extant since the 14th century.<sup>(18)</sup>

b. Thái Thanh Cung (Great Purity Palace) was built within Thăng Long citadel, on the left. On the right was Vạn Tuế pagoda. King Lý Thái Tổ (reigned 1009-1028) had the Taoist palace and the Buddhist pagoda built as soon as he had moved the capital from Hoa Lư (Ninh Bình province) to Thăng Long (Hà Nội today).<sup>(19)</sup>

c. Trấn Vũ Quán (Trấn Vũ Temple) was also built just after King Lý Thái Tổ had moved the capital to Thăng Long (1010), now located at the corner of Quan Thánh street and Thanh Niên street in Ba Đình ward, Hà Nội. The temple is also called Chân Vũ Temple, where the god named Xuantian Zhenwu Dadi is worshipped in order to protect the north side of Thăng Long citadel. Under King Lê Hy Tông's reign (1676-1704), a 3.96-meter high and 4-tonne bronze statue of Zhenwu God was cast. A 1.2-meter high stone platform supporting the statue was built in 1893.<sup>(20)</sup>

d. Ngọc Thanh Quán (Jade Purity Temple) was on mount Đại Lai in Thanh Hóa province. In 1398, plotting to exterminate the Trần dynasty, Hồ Quý Ly (1336-

<sup>(18)</sup> [Ủy Ban Khoa Học Xã Hội Việt Nam, 1971a: 127].

<sup>(19)</sup> [Lê Quý Đôn, 1977: 387].

<sup>(20)</sup> [Ủy Ban Khoa Học Xã Hội Việt Nam, 1978: 53].

1407) compelled King Trần Thuận Tông (reigned 1388-1398) to abdicate and then forced him to live at this temple as a Taoist priest.

e. Nghinh Tiên Quán (Welcome Temple for Fairies) or *Vọng Tiên Quán* (Fairy-to-Expect Temple)

While going for a walk by the lakeside of Hồ Tây, King Lê Thánh Tông (reigned 1460-1497) met a beautiful girl who skillfully exchanged extempore poems with him. Therefore, he invited her to the imperial palace on his carriage. At Đại Hưng gate (the southern gate of Hà Nội today) she ascended into heaven and disappeared. The King had a belvedere built there, called *Vọng Tiên Lâu* (Fairy-to-Expect Belvedere), which later became *Nghinh Tiên Quán* or *Vọng Tiên Quán*, in Hàng Bông street, Hà Nội today.<sup>(21)</sup>

f. Tiên Tích Tự (Immortal Vestige Temple): While taking walk by the lakeside of Kim Âu, south of Thăng Long citadel (the Hà Nội railway station today), King Lê Hiến Tông (reigned 1740-1786) met two fairies. He, then, had the temple built there.<sup>(22)</sup>

g. Đền Ngọc Sơn (Jade Mountain Temple) is on an islet on the northern part of Hoàn Kiếm (Returning Sword) lake. At first, Guansheng Dijun (the God of War) was worshipped here. After its restoration, it became a Buddhist pagoda, called Ngọc Sơn pagoda. In 1841, it became a temple dedicated to Wenchang Dijun (the God of Literature). Later, Lữ Tổ (Patriarch Lu) and Hưng Đạo Vương Trần Quốc Tuấn (a Vietnamese hero, 1228?-1300) have been also worshipped here.<sup>(23)</sup>

h. Bảo Chân Quán (Preserving Trueness Temple) built in Thăng Long citadel in 1796 by Phan Huy Ích (1750-1822).

#### 4. THƯỢNG SƯ NỘI ĐẠO (SUPREME MASTER'S INNER WAY)

It was a great Taoist school of ancient Vietnam. Under the Later Lê dynasty, Trần Toàn was a native of Yên Đông village, Quảng Xương district, Tĩnh Gia prefecture, Thanh Hóa province. When the throne of the Later Lê dynasty was usurped from 1527 to 1592 by Mạc Đăng Dung, Trần Toàn retreated from officialdom and returned to his native village practicing immortalism.

<sup>(21)</sup> [Phạm Văn Diêu, 1960: 331].

<sup>(22)</sup> [Hoàng Trọng Miên, 1973: 417].

<sup>(23)</sup> [Ủy Ban Khoa Học Xã Hội Việt Nam, 1978: 68].

Attaining Dao, he was bestowed the title of *Thượng sư* (Supreme Master) by God. He was responsible to ward off evil spirits in Hoan (Thanh Hóa province) and Ái (Nghệ An province).

In Từ Minh village, Hoàng Hóa district, Thanh Hóa province, Supreme Master establish a Taoist school named *Nội Đạo Trường* (Inner Way School) by King Lê Thần Tông (reigned 1619-1643; 1649-1662). After his decease, the king bestowed him the posthumous title of *Phục Ma Thượng Đẳng Phúc Thần* (the Supreme Tutelary Deity Subduing Evil Spirits) and built a temple dedicated to him.

Supreme Master's three sons were Nhật Quang, Nguyệt Quang, and Ngọc Quang. Having mastered the dharma taught by their father, they all were very famous and exalted as *Tam Thánh Nội Đạo* (the Three Saints of Inner Way School). After Supreme Master's decease, Ngọc Quang took over the Inner Way School.

Thanks to the imperial court's recognition, the Inner Way School had great prestige and authority. Its branches were established in such many places as Từ Quang village (former Từ Minh village, Hoàng Hóa district) and Yên Đông village (Quảng Xương district), both of Thanh Hóa province; in Nghệ An province; in Huệ Lai county of Hưng Yên province; in Nhật Tảo district of Hải Dương province; in Giảng Võ village nearby Hà Nội, etc.

The Inner Way School worshipped many Vietnamese deities such as Princess Liễu Hạnh, Hưng Đạo Vương Trần Quốc Tuấn, Phù Đổng Thiên Vương (Celestial King of Phù Đổng), God of mount Tân Viên, Bạch Mã God...<sup>(24)</sup>

## 5. EXAMINATION ON TAOIST LEARNING

The imperial court organized two Three-Teaching Examinations, one under King Lý Cao Tông's reign (1195) and the other under King Trần Thái Tông's (1247).

On Taoist learning examination, Nguyễn Đông Chi (1915-1984) collected the questions of an exam and the related answers.<sup>(25)</sup> Reading this paper may help understand Taoist learning in ancient Vietnam. The paper reads:

(1) What is dharma-gate?

<sup>(24)</sup> [Hoàng Trọng Miên, 1973: 436-440].

<sup>(25)</sup> [Nguyễn Đông Chi, 1942: 193-201].

*All methods return to their origin, which is constant. Myriad of saints and thousands of gods gather in one gate. So it is called dharma-gate.*

(2) What is talismanic water?

*The blend of yin force and yang force is sacred. Great pity water which is sprinkled to scare ghosts is called talismanic water.*

(3) Who created dharma-gate?

*Dharma-gate was created by Taishang Laojun, who is venerated as Saint.*

(4) Who invented sorcery?

*Talismanic water was invented by Zhenwu, who is venerated as Master.*

(5) What is meant by Four Saints, Four Corners, Four Verticals, and Four Cords?

*Thiên Bồng, Thiên Du, Bảo Đức, Hắc Sát are called Four Saints.*

*Qian (Heaven, West), Kun (Earth, East), Xun (Wind, Northwest), Gen (Mountain, Northeast) are called Four Corners.*

*Thiên Hoa, Địa Hoa, Lão Hạc, Đông Trạ are called Four Verticals.*

*Rat, Horse, Rabbit, and Rooster are called Four Cords.*

(6) What is meant by Three Realms, Three Purities, Three Grottoes, and Three Offices?

*Three Realms include Desire Realm, Form Realm, and Formless Realm.*

*Three Purities include Jade Purity, Supreme Purity, and Great Purity.*

*Three Grottoes include Authenticity Grotto, Mystery Grotto, and Exquisite Grotto.*

*Three Offices include Thunderbolt, Sacred Treasure, and Great Mystery.*

(7) When were Plague, Locust, Epidemic, and Pestilence born?

*Huangdi (Yellow Emperor)'s four useless sons were Plague, Locust, Epidemic, Pestilence, born in the time of Zhuanxu.*

(8) How many children do Xun, Li, Kun, Dui have?

*Xun (Wind) gives birth to four children, say East, West, South, and North.*

*Li (Fire) gives birth to nine children, from First White, Second Black to Eighth White, Ninth Purple.*

*Kun (Earth) gives birth to six children, say Six vital forces of Great Yin.*

*Dui (Lake) gives birth to seven children, say Seven-Star Big Dipper.*

*In all, Xun, Li, Kun, Dui have twenty-six children.*

(9) What is meant by “Practice is up to the number of three thousand, time has forty thousand years”?

*The celestial number is one thousand; the terrestrial number is one thousand, the human number is one thousand. Thus, it is said that practice is up to the number of three thousand.*

*The period from Thái Dịch (Taiyi) to Thái Sơ (Taichu) covers ten thousand years. That from Thái Sơ to Thái Thủy (Taishi) covers ten thousand years. That from Thái Thủy to Thái Tổ (Taisu) covers ten thousand years. That from Thái Tổ to Thái Cực (Taiji) covers ten thousand years. Thus, time covers forty thousand years.*

(10) Whose high Dao can subdue dragons and tigers and whose thick virtue can scare demons and spirits?

*Dao is too high to be surpassed. Both dragons (yang essence) and tigers (yin essence) are subdued by high Dao. Virtue is too thick to be surpassed. Both demons (dispersed vital force) and spirits (concentrated vital force) are scared by thick virtue. It is Master Phổ Am whose high Dao can subdue dragons and tigers and whose thick virtue can scare demons and spirits.*

(11) What talismans are used and what incantations are read to capture and tie up evil spirits and demons?

*If the seance is held solemnly, if the seats are arranged in an orderly way, if myriad of saints arrive when the Three Realms are thought of, and if myriad of gods gather after the drum is beaten three times, the sorcerer should summon generals and then send them. While thinking of the heavenly net, he secretly uses talismans, holds mudras, and writes some Chinese characters. Four characters Sheng (saints) are written over five characters Gui (demons). The character (...) <sup>(26)</sup> is combined*

---

<sup>(26)</sup> There is a missing word here, which might be the character *Shen* 神 (spirit, god).

*with myriad of souls. Sacred talismans of White Snake and One Leg are used. Incantations of Taishang and Qitian are read.*

(12) What way should be used so that the world and its people can enter the spring terrace and enjoy longevity?

*First of all, if our minds are rectified, evil powers cannot disturb us. First of all, if our bodies are rectified, evil forces cannot intrude into us. Then, use rectified mind to grant favors upon the people. Then, use rectified body to help everyone.*

The above paper reveals that the core of Taoist learning in ancient time was emphasized at Taoist religion rather than Taoist philosophy.

## **6. IMMORTAL INVOCATION**

Invocation of immortals (*cầu tiên*) is a means of communication between visible humans and invisible powers. The participants usually have various purposes, for example, exchanging extempore poems with divine spirits, asking for holy medicine, seeking foretelling about their future or political affairs, etc.

Generally, the merciful being meets such secular needs in order to nourish their faith and gradually leads them to the way of self-cultivation under deities' direct guidance.

When Vietnam was under the French colonial rule, there were many places of immortal invocations called *thiện đàn* (good seances) in Nghệ An province.

In northern Vietnam there was an evoking séance named Hưng Thiện (Flourish Good), where *Kinh Đạo Nam* (The Book of the Vietnam's Dao or Way, two volumes) were bestowed through spiritual writing in September and October 1923. The full text in the Nôm script was put into Vietnamese by Nguyễn Thị Thanh Xuân and then published in 2007 (one volume).

At the beginning of the 20th century, various places and seances in southern Vietnam were closely related to the early beginning of Caodaism. To name a few: the séances at Miếu Nổi (Bình Lợi, Gò Vấp district), at the temple of Ngọc Hoàng (Jade Emperor or Yuhuang, Đa Kao, District 1), at Minh Thiện (Thanh An pagoda, Thủ Dầu Một, Bình Dương province), at Hiệp Minh (Cái Khế, Cần Thơ), on mount Thạch Động (Hà Tiên province), at the pagoda of Quan Âm (Guanyin, on mount Dương

Đông, Phú Quốc island), on Hàng Dừa street (Arras street, Sài Gòn, i.e., present Cống Quỳnh street, District 1).

At the beginning of the 20th century, Caodaism was founded in Vietnam. It is easy to realize that the new religion has a close relation with the age-old Taoism. Caodaists worship Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế (Yuhuang Shangdi, Jade Emperor) or Cao Đài Tiên Ông (Gaotai Xianweng, Caodai the Immortal), Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu (Yaochi Jinmou, Golden Mother), Thái Thượng Lão Quân (Taishang Laojun), etc. These deities have been worshipped by Taoists for centuries.

The Caodaists regard themselves as followers of Immortalism or as immortality practitioners. Spiritual writing (*cơ bút*) is another similarity between the age-old Taoism and Caodaism. In addition, the Caodai teaching in verse is a typical feature of Laozi's and Zhuangzi's culture.

It is noticeable that the Founder of Caodaism calls Himself an Immortal (*Tiên Ông*). Thus, is it possible to regard Caodaism to some extent as the Vietnamization as well as the modernization of the old-age Taoism?

## Reference

---

[Dương Quảng Hàm, 1968b]. *Việt Nam Văn Học Sử Yếu*. Sài Gòn: Nxb. Trung Tâm Học Liệu.

[Hoàng Trọng Miên, 1973]. *Việt Nam Văn Học Toàn Thư*. Quyển Thượng: *Thần Thoại, Cổ Tích*. Sài Gòn: Nxb. Tiếng Phương Đông.

[Hoàng Xuân Hãn, 1952]. *La Sơn Phu Tử*. Paris: Nxb. Minh Tân.

[Lê Quý Đôn, 1977]. *Toàn Tập*. Tập II: *Kiến Văn Tiểu Lục*. Hà Nội: Nxb. Khoa Học Xã Hội.

[Liu Tsun-yan, 1973]. "The Compilation and Historical Value of the *Tao-tsang*," *Essays on the Sources for Chinese History*. Editors: Donald Leslie, Colin Mackerras, Wang Gungwu. Canberra: Australian National University Press.

[Michael Saso, 1973]. *Towards a Methodology in the Study of Religious Taoism*, in lại trên tạp chí Phương Đông, số 24 (tháng 6-1973), tr. 403-416.

[Ngô Sĩ Liên, 1974]. *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư*. Tập I. Tạ Quang Phát dịch. Sài Gòn: Bộ Văn Hóa Giáo Dục và Thanh Niên xuất bản.

[Ngô Thì Nhậm, 1978]. *Thơ Văn Ngô Thì Nhậm*. Tập I. Hà Nội: Nxb. Khoa Học Xã Hội.

[Nguyễn Đăng Thục, 1971a]. “*Lý Hoặc Luận*,” *Tư Tưởng*, số 2, năm thứ Tư. Sài Gòn: Viện Đại Học Vạn Hạnh xb, tháng 4.

[Nguyễn Đồng Chi, 1942]. *Việt Nam Cổ Văn Học Sử*. Hà Nội: Nxb. Hàn Thuyên.

[Nguyễn Hiến Lê, 1992]. *Khổng Tử*. Hà Nội: Nxb. Văn Hóa.

[Nguyễn Tự, 1962-1963]. *Tân Biên Truyền Kỳ Mạn Lục*. Quyển 1-2. Bùi Xuân Trang dịch. Sài Gòn: Bộ Quốc Gia Giáo Dục xuất bản.

[Phạm Văn Diêu, 1960]. *Văn Học Việt Nam*. Quyển I. Sài Gòn: Nxb. Tân Việt.

[Phạm Văn Sơn, 1963]. *Việt Sử Tân Biên*. Quyển V. Sài Gòn.

[Trần Văn Giáp, 1984]. *Tìm Hiểu Kho Sách Hán-Nôm*. Tập I. Hà Nội: Nxb. Văn Hóa.

[Ủy Ban Khoa Học Xã Hội Việt Nam, 1971a]. *Lịch Sử Việt Nam*. Tập I. Hà Nội: Nxb. Khoa Học Xã Hội.

[Ủy Ban Khoa Học Xã Hội Việt Nam, 1971b-1978]. *Tuyển Tập Văn Bia Hà Nội*. Tập I, II. Hà Nội: Nxb. Khoa Học Xã Hội.

[Viện Văn Học, 1977-1989-1978]. *Thơ Văn Lý-Trần*. Tập I, II, III. Hà Nội: Nxb. Khoa Học Xã Hội.