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JDTREA
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Aims and Scope

The *Journal of Daesoon Thought and the Religions of East Asia (JDTREA)* is the official English language journal of the Daesoon Academy of Sciences, and thus far, it is the only peer-reviewed, English language journal dedicated to not only research on the contemporary relevance of East Asia Religions, but also to research on the relatively new fields of East Asian New Religious Movements (EANRMs) and Daesoon Thought. Although there is a reasonable level of worldwide familiarity with the major religious traditions of East Asia, misunderstandings are still common, and novel research on these movements remains highly beneficial. As for EANRMs and Daesoon Thought, both are profoundly under-researched outside of East Asia. As a remedy to this, the Daesoon Academy of Science (DAOS), aims to publish *JDTREA* twice a year and hold conferences on East Asian religions and Daesoon Thought such as the World SangSaeng Forum and the *JDTREA* Conference. Daesoon Thought refers to a grouping of native Korean religious concepts best characterized by the Resolution of Grievances for Mutual Beneficence (*Haewon Sangsaeng*) and the Grateful Reciprocation of Favors for Mutual Beneficence (*Boeun Sangsaeng*); two concepts that can be traced back to the religious figure, Kang Jeungsan. The editorial board of *JDTREA* consists of active scholars from over a dozen countries including Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, China, France, Japan, Korea, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Spain, Taiwan, the UK, and the USA. *JDTREA* is published to promote global studies on East Asia religion and Daesoon Thought by encouraging wide-ranging research on these topics. The scope of *JDTREA* includes the following:

- Interpretation and analysis of religious phenomena in all fields of the humanities and social sciences
- Comparative research on the above in relation to another religion, philosophy, ideology, etc.
- Critical reviews of academic trends, mainly in the arts and humanities, that relate to East Asian religions and/or Daesoon Thought
- New interpretations of and approaches to East Asian religions and/or Daesoon Thought

The types of publications featured in *JDTREA* will include original articles, research notes, and book reviews. Other types of contributions are negotiable but subject to the approval of the editorial board. All unsolicited articles will be subject to peer review, and commissioned articles are reviewed by the Editorial Board.

About the Journal

JDTREA debuted on September 30th, 2021 with volume 1, issue 1. The journal is set to be published twice annually and special editions may also be published in the future. The number of copies printed will be 500 per publication. The full texts will be freely available at www.jdre.org. No publishing costs will be incurred by authors who submit to the journal.

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

Carole M. CUSACK
The University of Sydney

JDTREA

This issue completes four volumes of *Journal of Daesoon Thought and the Religions of East Asia*. It may be that we can now cease saying *JDTREA* is a "new journal" and settle into the rhythm of being an (albeit recently) established academic publication. Since the first issue was published in September 2021 authors from Australia, Taiwan, Italy, Sweden, France, Canada, Vietnam, the United States of America, Korea, England, Hong Kong, China, Poland, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Bangladesh have published their research articles in *JDTREA*; this is already a significant global presence, and our book reviewers include scholars from Japan. It is estimated there are between 193 (according to the United Nations) and 237 (according to Central Intelligence Agency, US) countries in the contemporary world. To date, JDTREA has secured contributors from seventeen countries. The future looks bright; we are hopeful that the journal will prove attractive to scholars from many other nations and locations in the future.

This issue contains five articles. The first is by Dinh Hong Hai and is titled "Maitreya Symbol in the New Religious Movements of East Asia: A Comparative Study of Long Hoa Di Lac in Vietnam and Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea." This research argues that while Christian missionaries brought the Christian idea of the eschatological saviour Jesus who will return to judge and rule the perfected world, Asia already had Maitreya, the future Buddha, a figure with a dual nature (being both Bodhisattva and Buddha), who has proved very attractive in certain East Asian new religious movements (NRMs). The case studies are Daesoon Jinrihoe, a well-established Korean NRM, and Long Hoa Di Lac, a small Vietnamese movement that is still marginal and not fully established as a religion.

The next article is by Nguyen Trung Hieu, "Religious Belief in the Jade Emperor among the Vietnamese in the Seven Mountains Region, An Giang Province, Vietnam." This attractively illustrated research considers a specific region where devotion to the Jade Emperor, who rules a court in Heaven that is directly comparable to the courts of the historic Chinese Emperors on Earth, is particularly strong. Other deities venerated in An Giang Province include the Earth Mother, Guan Yin, the Nine Mysterious Guardians, and Master Hô ̃(a local deity). The author supplies fascinating details regarding the cultic activities which take place at these temples, and also the cultural transformation of the Jade Emperor, from being the highest god of Chinese religion to being regarded as the "Father of the Local People" in southwestern Vietnam, near the Mekong Delta.

The third contribution is by Jakir Hossan, Md Jashim Uddin Bhuiyan and Bai Xinfa, and is titled "The Mutual Contribution of the Manipuri Religion and Their Traditional Handicrafts in Bangladesh." This study considers the Manipuri people of Bangladesh (who are divided into Muslim, Hindu, and adherents of traditional Manipuri religion) and the particular weaving and dressmaking traditions that they preserve in their

minority communities. Differences in the motifs ornamenting certain clothing styles are noted, and the importance of retaining these manufacturing practices due to the requirement that traditional hand-crafted items be worn in important religious ceremonies is emphasised.

Trinh Ngoc Linh's "Cosmology in Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism: New Religious Ontology or Age-old Literary Motifs Applied in New Religions?" is an analysis of how special narratives attach themselves to the founders of new religions. These "mythical" stories are constituted of folkloric motifs and references to classical or traditional literatures of the new religious movement founder's home country and culture. Three Western theorists, Eric Hobsbawm (the invention of tradition), Maurice Halbwachs (collective memory) and James Grayson (folklore and motif analysis), are used to create the methodological framework that the author applies to the founders of Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ (better known as Caodaism) and Daesoon Jinrihoe. Miss Trinh is a doctoral candidate at Ho Chi Minh National University, and it is very pleasing to see such good work from the emerging generation of women scholars of Asian religions.

The final contribution is by Nguyen Ngoc Tho and Nguyen Tan Quoc and is "The Custom of Cúng Việc Lề in Southern Vietnam: A Newly-Invented Tradition of Filial Piety Ethics?" This article continues the strong presence of Vietnamese scholars and emphasis on Vietnamese new religious phenomena in this journal issue. The authors use Eric Hobsbawm and Maurice Halbwachs, too, and their subject matter connects with that of the Jade Emperor study, in that the *cúng việc lề* custom they detail is a Vietnamese adaptation of traditional ancestor veneration (such as found in China, and other cultures with a strong Confucian heritage).

The journal issue is completed by three reviews supplied by the Review Editor, Professor Holly Folk (Western Washington University). My ongoing gratitude is due to Bae Kyuhan, Lee Gyungwon, Jason Greenberger, and Choi Wonhyuk from Daejin University, as our working relationship in producing the journal has deepened and become stronger over the last four years. I am also thankful to the authors and referees who made this issue happen. It must be noted that this is the first issue of *JDTREA* that features only Asian authors of the research articles. I began with an expressed desire that we seek to attract scholars from new and as yet unrepresented regions to publish with *JDTREA*. That is not incompatible with feelings of pleasure and pride about the ways we have showcased the scholarship of Asian colleagues.

Carole M. Cusack
Editor of *JDTREA*
The University of Sydney

RESEARCH ARTICLES

- Maitreya Symbol in the New Religious Movements of East Asia: A Comparative Study of Long Hoa Di Lac in Vietnam and Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea
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Maitreya Symbol in the New Religious Movements of East Asia: A Comparative Study of Long Hoa Di Lac in Vietnam and Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea

DINH Hong Hai

Dinh Hong Hai earned two bachelor's degrees, one from Hanoi University of Industrial Fine Arts in 1996 and the other from Vietnam National University, Hanoi in 1998. After being educated in the M.Phil program at the University of Delhi (India) in 2006, Hai attended Harvard University from 2008 to 2010 and then defended his Ph.D. dissertation at the Graduate School of Social Sciences, VASS, in 2011. He now serves as a faculty member at Vietnam National University-Hanoi City, and deputy general secretary of the Asian Semiotics International Association (ASIA)

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Original Articles

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Abstract

While most relevant to the role of the Buddhist Messiah, the symbol of Maitreya goes beyond the boundaries of Buddhism. It has become a central symbol in many religious movements of East Asia that have emerged over the past century. One of these movements, called Long Hoa Di Lặc (龍華彌勒), was born in Vietnam in the late 19th century. Although Long Hoa Di Lặc still exists today, it was not able to become a religion like Cao Đài or Hòa Hảo in Vietnam. Similarly, a religious movement related to the Maitreya symbol called Daesoon Jinrihoe (大巡眞理會) in Korea, has developed into a new religion that has contributed significantly to the spiritual life of people in Korea and beyond. Throughout the observation of the movements above, this article will delve deeper into Daesoon Thought and its academic contribution in Korea, compare it with Long Hoa Di Lặc in Vietnam, and shed light on the role of the intellectual class in the new religious movements (NRMs) of East Asia.

Keywords: Maitreya Symbol; New Religious Movements (NRMs); Long Hoa Di Lặc (LHDL); *Daesoon Jinrihoe*

Introduction

The religious landscape of East Asia is characterized by a rich tapestry of traditions, beliefs, and practices that have evolved over centuries of cultural exchange and interaction. It always plays a vital role in shaping individual and collective identities, values, and communities across the region. When integrated with Western civilization, many religious movements in East Asia encompass a wide range of folk and regional religions and Christianity forming many new religious movements related to the Messiah. These religious movements have shaped East Asia's spiritual, cultural, and social landscapes, influencing everything from art and architecture to governance and social norms. Unlike China, the birthplace of Confucianism and Taoism, Korea and Vietnam are countries that inherited many of Chinese civilization's achievements as part of the Sinosphere but both countries also showed dynamism in the process of acculturation, creation, and building their own identites. The Maitreya symbol is one of the clearest examples of this process with the creation of unique identities in each country.

Maitreya (彌勒菩薩, Mireuk Bosal) is one of the most important symbols in East Asian religions involving Messianic notions other than the Messiah in Christianity which was imported from Western culture. It appears not only in Buddhism as the Future Buddha or Bodhisattva in Tusita Heaven but also in new religious movements with different practice methods and different ways of connecting to other religions. Long Hoa Di Lặc (龍華彌勒) in Vietnam (hereafter as LHDL) and Daesoon Jinrihoe (大巡眞理會) in Korea are two main movements that are relevant to the Buddhist Messiah. But the development of these sects goes in different ways and achievements: Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea was "was one of the most successful movements in terms of its size and social impact" (Kim 2020, 2) meanwhile LHDL is still working towards survival in Vietnam at present.

In fact, new religious movements in East Asia encompass a diverse range of beliefs and practices. They often incorporate elements of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, as well as indigenous folk traditions. Throughout history, almost all temples, shrines, and communal rituals were integral to Chinese, Japanese, Korean, or Vietnamese folk religions, which played a significant role in the lives of many people in the Sinosphere. Under new circumstances, East Asia has seen the emergence of various new religious movements in modern times, often blending elements of traditional beliefs with modern ideologies, charismatic leadership, or foreign influences and especially, systems of Western thought. This is the reason why Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein claimed that "… most young religions are thus received with a mixture of distance and mistrust by outsiders, and conversely, adherents of most young religions view majority society as misguided or corrupt" (Hammer and Rothstein 2012, 4). However, what is not seen as "misguided or corrupt" in the eschatological thought of NRMs or millennialism is the Buddhist Messiah Maitreya's appearance in Buddhism.

Buddhism has been a dominant religious force in Asia for over two millennia. It

encompasses various schools and traditions, including Mahayana, Theravada, and Vajrayana. Each school has its own doctrines, practices, and rituals. Buddhism has had a profound influence on the cultures, arts, and philosophies of East Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Taiwan. Together with Avalokitesvara, the Maitreya symbol appears in Early Buddhism as one of the attendants of Buddha (Figure 1). "Maitreya is the bodhisattva anticipated by all Buddhist traditions to become the next Buddha of this world, Jambudvpa. Currently dwelling in the Tusita heaven, Maitreya awaits rebirth at that time in the distant future when Shakyamuni Buddha's dispensation will have been completely forgotten" (Buswell 2004, 7). It is his positions both as a bodhisattva and as the Future Buddha that makes the role of Maitreya so important. One of the most important roles he fulfills is that of being the Buddhist Messiah. In this role, the Buddhist Messiah has been influenced beyond the framework of Buddhism to create new forms of religious movements, of which Long Hoa Di Lặc in Vietnam and Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea are the most vivid examples.

A question that needs to be asked is why do non-Buddhists in Vietnam and Korea easily accept a Buddhist symbol like Maitreya? Alan Sponberg had an impressive idea that Maitreya "become a hope for the future, a time when all human beings could once again enjoy the spiritual and physical environment most favorable to enlightenment and the release from worldly suffering" (Sponberg and Hardacre 1988, 2). This is a key point for many practical Buddhist sects in the past as well as new religious movements at present. In East Asia, various new religious movements have emerged in the Sinosphere, often blending Eastern and Western spiritual elements. These movements, at first, focus on self-improvement, healing, meditation, or only charismatic leadership, then development to become new religions or religious sects. For example, Falun Gong, a spiritual practice incorporating qigong exercises and moral teachings, went on to become a global movement in a hundred countries.

In Vietnam, after a long time practicing folk beliefs and several Asian religions such as Buddhism and Daoism, the Vietnamese adopted Western Christianity as one of the "new" religions in the sixteenth century. With the significant changes in political economy, society and culture in modernity, many new religious trends were born, helping to form two new religions in Vietnam, Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo. At the same time, many new and prominent trends, such as Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa (meaning Four Debts of Gratitude), Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương (meaning Strange Fragrance from the Precious Mountain), and LHDL contributed to the development of NRMs. However, only Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo have survived and developed into new religions. In contrast, Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, after 147 years, has only about 15,000 followers living in the provinces of An Giang and Đồng Tháp, Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu, Long An, Sóc Trăng, Vĩnh Long, Tiền Giang, and Bến Tre (Duong 2010). Even at present, LHDL struggles to avoid being wiped out.

In Korea, many NRMs appeared over centuries: "Notwithstanding their different Christian and non-Christian backgrounds, most Korean new religions share some common features, including messianism, millenarianism, and proposals for social reform

[...]. In 1987 Yoon Yee Heum estimated the number to be between 150 and 200 while Kim Hong Cheol referred to over 500 new religions in 1998" (Introvigne 2021, 13). Daesoon Jinrihoe was founded in 1969 and is today the largest new religion in South Korea. "When ideas and practices contributed by Maitreyan millenarianism, geomantic prophecies, and Catholicism intermingled with various more traditional religious beliefs and practices, new threads in Korea's popular religious culture began to form" (Ro 2002, 38).

The Concept of Maitreya in Buddhism

Unlike Gautama Buddha, who was a historical figure, Maitreya's birth is associated with the formation of Mahayana and the Five Dharmas of Maitreyanatha, "these significant treatises attributed to Asanga (無著) were written under the pseudonym Maitreyanatha" (Dinh 2024). According to Jonathan Gold, "Asanga is the monk who meditated in solitude for twelve years until he was able to meet with and receive teachings directly from the future Buddha, Maitreya. Asaṅga thereby became the preeminent expounder of the Yogācāra synthesis of 'Great Vehicle' (Mahāyāna) Buddhism, writing some texts himself, and transmitting the so-called 'Five Treatises' revealed by Maitreya" (Gold 2022).

According to this doctrine, Maitreya is a compassionate person who will be a Bodhisattva. He is the last Buddha who will appear on earth and is currently abiding in Tusita. This is common information in one of the three key sutras about Maitreya Buddha in the Mahayana scriptures. The content of the sutra mainly describes the circumstances when Maitreya Buddha was born, the world was peaceful and prosperous, and preaching in the Dragon Flower Association to save sentient beings. Among the sutras about Maitreya's next life, this sutra has been considered the most valuable.

> In the future when the Holy King Zhenjiu turns the wheel, Maitreya was born in Tushita World. After attaining enlightenment, he taught and transformed 84,000 people including his parents and relatives, and together with Sakyamuni Buddha in this life, he taught the three-vehicle teaching to all sentient beings. In addition, during the time of the past Buddhas, Kassapa was good at practicing the Brahma lineage and the Twelve-headed Buddha lineage, so he was able to help Maitreya to persuade everyone. This sutra's address to the public is Ananda, which is a major feature of this sutra; in other sutras, the address to the public is mostly Shariputra (Fo Guang Ta-tz'u-tien 1988).

In China, the notion of Maitreya appeared during the Jin Dynasty (266–420). At the beginning of the Tang Dynasty, under the development of high-ranking monks and the support of Empress Wu Zetian, the folk concept that "Maitreya Buddha appeared" circulated widely and developed. Maitreya is often depicted as a Buddha-to-be who resides in the Tusita Heaven, awaiting the right time to descend to Earth and become the

next Buddha. In Mahayana texts, his qualities and teachings are extensively discussed, emphasizing compassion, wisdom, and the eventual attainment of Buddhahood. In East Asian cultures, including China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, folk beliefs and syncretic religious movements often incorporate elements of Maitreya worship. This can range from temples dedicated specifically to Maitreya to folk rituals and festivals celebrating his anticipated arrival. As Ho Wai Kam mentioned in his research, Maitreya was a sacred figure who captured the imagination of the Chinese. He is the Buddhist Messiah or Future Buddha, destined to succeed the Shakyamuni Buddha (Ho 1960, 185).

In the context of Buddhism, there is a considerable difference between Maitreya Buddha and other symbols. While the roles of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Arhats are clearly divided at different levels, Maitreya is both a Buddha and a Bodhisattva. As the Future Buddha, Maitreya holds a significant position in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist movements. The symbol of Maitreya appears in various religious movements across East Asia because Maitreya is believed to be a bodhisattva who will appear on Earth in the future, achieving enlightenment and bringing about a new era of spiritual awakening, the new Millenium.

Based on the idea of Millennium, "devotees sought to secure rebirth in Tusita, first to benefit from Maitreya's teaching there, and later to join him during his tenure as the next Buddha. Although eventually eclipsed in East Asia by the more popular Amitabha cult, anticipation of Maitreya's golden age continued to erupt periodically in millenarian movements that were intensely devotional and occasionally political as well" (Buswell 2004, 508). Beyond the scope of Buddhism, Maitreya in the role of Buddhist Messiah helped form many new religions as well as NRMs in East Asia. With that in mind, did NRMs adopt the Maitreya symbol from Buddhism or was Maitreya in the role of Buddhist Messiah an inspiration for NRMs? To answer the above question, this study focuses on the role of the Millenium of NRMs in East Asia.

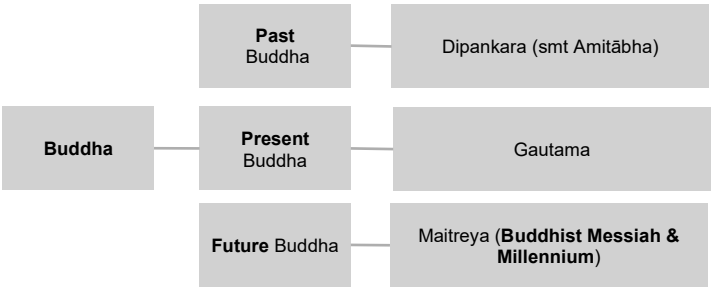


Figure 1. The Appearance of Buddhist Messiah emanating from Buddha

Millennium, Chakravartin, Zhuǎnlún Shèngwáng, and the Role of Messiah in East Asian NRMs

The word "millennium" comes from the Latin word "mille," which means "thousand,"

and "annus," which means "year". "In popular and academic use, the term 'millenarianism' is often synonymous with the related terms 'millennialism', 'chiliasm' and 'millenarism'. These words refer to an end-times Golden Age of peace, on earth, for a long period, sometimes referred to as the 'millennium'" (CenSAMM 2021). In the Christian world, it refers to the thousand-year period mentioned in *Revelation* 20:4 that begins after the Second Coming of Jesus:

> I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years (*Revelation* 20:4).

Many Christians eagerly anticipate this time, as it will be the first time since the resurrection that humans will be able to spend directly in the physical presence of Jesus. The Millennium influenced not only Christianity in medieval times but also many other religions because of

> apocalypticism, eschatological (end-time) views and movements that focus on cryptic revelations about a sudden, dramatic, and cataclysmic intervention of God in history; the judgment of all men; the salvation of the faithful elect; and the eventual rule of the elect with God in a renewed heaven and earth. Arising in Zoroastrianism, an Iranian religion founded by the 6th-century-BC prophet Zoroaster, apocalypticism was developed more fully in Judaic, Christian, and Islāmic eschatological speculation and movements… The key determinant of millennialism's impact on society is timing. As long as the day of redemption is yet to come, millennial hopes console the suffering and inspire patience and political quiescence (Landes 2024).

In Asia, this concept is most clearly concretized with the cases of Chakravartin in India and Zhuǎnlún Shèngwáng (転輪王/転輪聖王, the Wheel-Turning Holy King) in China. Chakravartin (or Cakravartin) is an ideal (or idealized) universal ruler, in the history, religion, and mythologies of India. The concept is present in Indian subcontinent cultural traditions, narrative myths, and lore (Gopal 1990, 81). One of the most well-known vestiges of Chakravartin is Vishnu in the form of Chakra which was held as "the ideal of worship for Kings desirous of obtaining Universal Sovereignty" (Begley 1973, 48). But the most famous embodiment of Chakravartin in Indian medieval times was King Ashoka. In Buddhist chronicles, the Buddha supposedly told the boy that he would indeed become a Chakravartin emperor in the next life due to his act of generosity in offering sand, and the boy in the next life was born as Ashoka (Ikeda 1977, 41). Thus, a Chakravartin is the secular counterpart of a Buddha that applies to temporal and spiritual kingship and leadership that turns the wheel of dharma.

The most prominent Wheel-Turning Kings in China were Wu Zetian (also known as Empress Wu) and Zhu Yuanzhang. Wu Zetian (624–705) ruled the Tang Dynasty from 665 to 690 and called herself the reincarnation of Buddha Maitreya. In 690, she abolished the Tang Dynasty and founded the Later Zhou Dynasty (周) as the Holy Spirit Emperor (聖神皇帝). Wu Zetian was the lone ruling-Empress in Chinese history. After ascending the throne, she called Luoyang the "Holy City" and ruled China from 690 to 705. Quite a long time after Wu Zetian, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398) launched an uprising to overthrow the Yuan dynasty with the slogan "Buddha Maitreya was born and a new king appeared in the world." In the end, Zhu Yuanzhang brought the uprising to success, founding the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). The special thing is that both Wu Zetian and Zhu Yuanzhang claim to be Maitreya in the world to get the throne.

At the end of the medieval period, the Asian millennial tradition was faced with a new wave of Western religion: Christianity. When Asian and European civilizations mixed together during this time, it created major conflicts and changes. Conflicts over ideology, politics, technology, and so on mostly end in victory for Western civilization because of its scientific superiority. Meanwhile, harmonization, whether voluntary or mandatory, has contributed to the Westernization process of countries in East Asia such as China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. One of the most important cultural harmony processes that needs to be recognized is religious harmony, and NRMs are one of the clearest manifestations.

When Western missionaries arrived in East Asia during the later medieval period, they encountered strong resistance from endogenous Asian religions such as Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucian ideology that worshiped the King-Master-Father (君師父) with a respectfulness derived from the Chinese Confucian concepts of sān gāng wǔ cháng (三綱五常). However, with individual efforts and the persuasive power of superior reason in Western religious thought, they have established an increasingly greater influence in these countries with the great contribution of Matteo Ricci, Francisco de Pina, Alexandre de Rhodes and so on.

Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) was an Italian Jesuit missionary as well as a Roman Catholic bishop. He was the first European to absorb Chinese culture and was also a pioneer in the exchange of knowledge between China and Europe, creating a cultural bridge between these two major cultural centers. Ricci was instrumental in bringing Christianity to China and then Korea and establishing the Christian faith among the indigenous people. Also, during this period, missionaries Francisco de Pina (1585–1625) and Alexandre de Rhodes (1591–1660) came to Vietnam and were instrumental in "Romanizing" the Vietnamese language with a largely borrowed alphabet. The integration of Christianity with local culture has helped them successfully explain what God is and who Jesus is to non-Christian followers. "This is a rare phenomenon in Asian countries influenced by Chinese politics and culture and imbued with Confucianism" (Pham 2024).

This was a turning point in religious life in Asia when people learned about

Christianity and the role of Jesus in Western religious life and culture. To help non-Christians understand God, Ricci went from the concept of a ruler in a "celestial empire" called *tiānzhǔ* (天主) and took a Chinese name for a religion connected to Christianity (what Chinese never knew before) *tiānzhǔjiào* (天主教) associated with the image of Jesus Christ. In the same way, the early missionaries adopted the Korean term Hanaism "which designated the supreme heavenly ruler in Korea's traditional shamanistic pantheon, as a name for the Christian God. They insisted that Hanaism whom Koreans revered as the Supreme God of Heaven for thousands of years was the same God in the Bible" (Han 1995, 186). Similarly, the Cao Đài religion in Vietnam has affirmed that God is the most sacred and supreme being:

> Back in the chaotic time of the world's creation, the Creator [một Đấng Tạo Hóa] was born from the breath of the Nothingness [nhứt Khí Hư Vô]. The Easterner calls Him the Jade Emperor [玉皇上帝], the Westerner calls Him DIEU [GOD], the Celestial Lord [Đức Chúa Trời], the Annamese [người An Nam] calls Him the Celestial Grandfather [Ông Trời]; He is the Being [Đấng] who created Heaven and Earth and countless living creatures (Jammes and Trương 2023, 272–73).

How do people connect the thousands of years of indigenous beliefs and Buddhism in East Asia with the Supreme Being in modern life as Western ideas? The answer comes from NRM followers adopting the Millenium and the Maitreya symbol from Buddhism as a starting point to resolve East-West cultural differences. Thus, the idea of Maitreya Buddha has become a universal idea throughout the world with the Millennium. Many social and educational organizations outside of Buddhism have also used the title Maitreya in their organizations, most recently L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986), founder of the Church of Scientology (USA). It looks similar to Korean Tajong-gyo, a modern Korean millenarian sect that originated in the late 19th century that connects the Lord, the Light, or the Progenitor of Heaven. "The union and harmony of the Heavenly Trinity with the Trinity of humanity, adherents believe, will renew humanity and reform society. The trichotomy of man, his universe, and its pursuit of ultimate harmony in terms of yin-yang theory was derived mainly from Neo-Confucianism" (Britannica 2024).

It can be said that the Millennium was the aspiration of people worldwide in Christianity and other religions connected Chakravartin, then Zhuǎnlún Shèngwáng, as a Wheel-Turning King with Jesus Christ to make a great change of religions in East Asia. The notion of Jesus Christ as a supreme god standing for the Jade Emperor (玉皇, Yuhuang) or Shangdi (上帝, such as 姜聖上帝 in Daesoon Jinrihoe)[1] in East Asia is an extremely harmonious way to connect religions from the West to Asian religious life. Maitreya, in the role of Messiah, inspired NRMs with teachings characteristic of monotheistic religions: the Millenium of all followers. The Messiah symbol in monotheistic religions based on local polytheistic beliefs not only helps believers easily imagine a "Supreme God" at the human level but also makes monotheistic doctrines easier to follow, more understandable, and more consistent. The Maitreya symbol in the

teachings of Long Hoa Di Lặc and Daesoon Jinrihoe are the most vivid examples that we want to introduce below.

Long Hoa Di Lặc in Vietnam and Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea

Long Hoa Di Lặc in Vietnam

LHDL in Vietnam has been influenced by Chinese culture together with the Earth God and the God of Wealth. "During the Ming and Qing dynasties, popular religious movements emerged in China in great numbers; in particular groups proclaiming 'the unity of the Three Teachings' (三教合一), 'the final kalpa of the Three Ages' (三期末劫), and 'the three Dragon Flower Assemblies' (龍華三會) often found themselves in a precarious situation, being subject to persecution by the authorities" (Clart et.al. 2020, 227). These religious practices not only exist in NRMs related to Buddhism such as LHDL or Hoa Hảo but also strongly influence some religions with complex doctrines such as Cao Đài. "Cao Đài propagated the doctrine of the Unity of the Three Teachings, millenarian expectations of Maitreya's arrival, and the theological content of the Book of the Dragon Flower (龍華經, Lónghuá jīng *ch*.; 經龍華, Kinh Long Hoa *vn*)." (Jammes and Trương 2023, 260).

LHDL is based on the notion of Long Hoa (Nagapushpa in Sanskrit or Dragon Flower in English) which appeared in the doctrines that mentioned Maitreya in Tusita heaven. After enlightenment, he organized Dragon Flower Assemblies (Pháp hội Long Hoa) to teach Buddhist Dharma to people. LHDL is one of the NRMs which appeared in the south of Vietnam over a century ago, including Cao Đài, Phật giáo Hòa Hảo, Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Tịnh Độ Cư Sĩ Phật Hội Việt Nam, Minh Lý Đạo, Phật Giáo Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn. What is special is that the above NRMs all take the views of eschatology and Millennialism combined with the Buddhist Messiah Maitreya symbol as the foundation. Because it "signals and awakens people that the Dharma-ending period is about to end to enter the Millenium that is when Maitreya was born and established the Long Hoa association" (Son 1997, 31–33).

Thus, LHDL formation occurred in a similar way as the formation of Millennium, Chakravartin, Zhuǎnlún Shèngwáng, and the Messiah in East Asia. The main difference between LHDL and the above religions is its lack of doctrine as Nguyễn Thế Anh mentioned. "Most of the time this doctrine remained no more than the undeveloped core of a religion which sought individual and familial happiness, for Maitreya symbolized the aspirations of Vietnamese Buddhists for salvation and rebirth in his Pure Land. But it could also coexist with an ideological commitment to the appearance of a descendant of a discarded dynasty, who supposedly manifested himself suddenly in order to overthrow the corrupt established order" (Nguyễn 2002, 229). Thus, from the concept of "salvation" through the symbols of the Savior and Supreme God, religions such as Cao Đài or Hòa Hảo have perfected doctrines and new teachings while LHDL is

still just a "superficial" NRM until today.

It is easy to see that religious trends related to Maitreya all try to explain the appearance of the Messiah in the Millennium Era through indoctrination,[2] what Lukas Pokorny called *The Millenarian Myth Ethnocentrized.* This "enables us to refine the overall analytical framework used in the study of millenarianism, comprehending the full range of possible configurations through which the myth of the millennium may find expression" (Jorgensen 2018, 342). Meanwhile, LHDL developed and withered through many stages, showing the "uncertainty" in practicing without doctrine. Therefore, in the current period, Long Hoa Maitreya is being "misunderstood" as a "new religious phenomenon" of the 21st century, for example, some high-ranking Vietnamese management agencies mentioned.[3] This is closely related to religious teachings as well as the academic contributions of religious specialists. This is the reason why LHDL did not receive the support of the Vietnamese state. This is completely different from what is happening in Korea with Daesoon Jinrihoe being the most successful trend.

Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea

Daesoon Jinrihoe is a religious movement in South Korea that emerged in the late 20th century. It is one of the largest NRMs in the country, with a significant following and a complex set of beliefs rooted in Korean shamanism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, among other influences. Daesoon Jinrihoe was founded by Park Wudang (1917–1996), also known as Park Han-gyeong. He is considered a spiritual leader and visionary who built upon the teachings of Kang Jeungsan (Kang Il-Sun), a significant figure in Korean NRMs. The movement was officially established in 1969. Park Wudang's leadership and the subsequent organization of the movement have helped it grow substantially over the years.

The teachings of Daesoon Jinrihoe focus on the idea of the "Great Transformation" (Daesoon), a period of cosmic change leading to a new era of peace and harmony. Followers believe in the divine status of Kang Jeungsan, who is seen as a god who descended to Earth to set the world on a path towards this Great Transformation. Emphasis is on ethical and moral living, with a focus on virtues such as sincerity, respect, and propriety:

> In Daesoon Thought, The Supreme God, Sangje, saw major disorganization leading to extreme violence and doom and decided to incarnate on earth under the human form of Kang Jeungsan (1871–1909). Then the living God taught the solution to human suffering through the revelations he sent in 1917 to Jo Cheol-Je, or Jo Jeongsan (1895–1958) and the revelations were passed on to Dojeon Park Wudang who in 1969 founded Daesoon Thought... These figures are unique in that their followers actually claim their Messiah is a man, or a woman, with a Korean passport (Rigal-Cellard 2022, 61).

According to Bae Kyuhan, currently Daesoon Jinrihoe has about one million followers, primarily in Korea, with significant religious infrastructure. Efforts to promote Daesoon Thought include founding Daejin University and the Daesoon Academy of Sciences, publishing research, and hosting international forums. Key concepts include the belief in the Supreme God taking human form and visiting the realms of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity to create the era of civilization and super civilization with these standards and distinctions, that have constructed the logical basis, or theoretical basis, for defining the situation of the times leading to the 'future of humans and the world'.

The characteristics of the era of 'super civilization', which consistently inferred and viewed humans and the world through Haewon Coexistence Ideas:

> First, this is the 'era of humanity' where respect for people is maximized.
> Second, it is the 'Fantasy Age' in which the civilizations of heaven, earth and the three worlds are integrated and become ultra-advanced through human reform and the creation of the world.
> Third, it is a permanent 'peace era' in which all relationships between humans and the world (nature) are resolved and coexisted (Bae 2018, 55).

Thanks to these academic studies, we know that Daesoon is the main idea not only to connect Heaven, Earth, and Humanity but also to connect Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. This is similar to the way Matteo Ricci connected Christianity with East Asian religion and beliefs. Daesoon Jinrihoe practices include prayer, ritual offerings, and participation in community events designed to cultivate spiritual growth and communal harmony. The movement has established numerous temples and training centers across South Korea, where followers can participate in rituals, receive teachings, and engage in communal activities. The organization places a strong emphasis on community service and social welfare, aligning with its ethical teachings. By now, Daesoon Jinrihoe has grown to become one of the largest new religious movements in South Korea. The movement has also established educational institutions to promote its teachings and provide education based on its principles.

As with many new religious movements, Daesoon Jinrihoe has faced criticism and controversy, but in reality, Daesoon Jinrihoe is a significant and influential religious movement within South Korea's diverse spiritual landscape. Its unique blend of traditional Korean beliefs with new religious ideas has attracted a substantial following and continues to impact Korean society both spiritually and culturally. Daesoon Thought, rooted in the teachings of Daesoon Jinrihoe, presents a unique philosophical and religious framework that has garnered significant interest in academic circles in Korea.

Central to Daesoon Thought is the concept of the Great Transformation, which envisions a forthcoming era of universal harmony and peace. This transformation is believed to be guided by divine intervention and moral rectitude. Daesoon Jinrihoe followers venerate Kang Jeungsan as a divine figure who initiated this transformative process. His teachings emphasize the rectification of human hearts and societal ills. The

movement stresses the importance of ethical living, incorporating values such as sincerity, respect, and propriety. This aligns with traditional Korean virtues and Confucian ethics. There is a strong emphasis on the interconnectedness of all beings and the universe, reflecting influences from Daoism and Buddhism, especially, the figure of Maitreya.

The Appearance of Maitreya in Daesoon Thought



Figure 2. A statue of Maitreya Buddha was symbolically erected at Geumgangsan Toseong Training Temple Complex (Source: http://eng.daesoon.org/app/en/temples/building2)

Inspired by Sangje's declaration, "I am precisely Maitreya," a statue of Maitreya Buddha was symbolically erected at Geumgangsan Toseong Training Temple Complex. In Buddhism, Maitreya is considered to be a buddha who will descend to this world in the future to deliver sentient beings from suffering. This icon was constructed as a granite statue depicting a standing Maitreya Buddha. The statue is 18 meters high and depicts Maitreya wearing a heavenly crown upon his head (Figure 2). "The meaning of this charismatic philosophy in doctrine/beliefs is demonstrated in the view that the god of Daesoon himself (like the Son of God in Christianity) was present in the world and directly involved in the restoration process of the corrupted universe (三界, Samgye, 삼계 kr.) as the superintendent of the universe" (Kim 2020, 5). Disciples continue the continuation of the Maitreya belief through successive generations as Lee Byung-Wook mentioned below.

> In the Silla era, the people accepted Maitreya about Hwarang (花郎). In the Unified Silla era, Beopsang jong (法相宗) accepted Maitreya devotion positively and the typical person was Jinpyo (眞表). In the Goryeo era, Beopsang jong was devoted to Maitreya, on the other hand, Maitreya devotion changed popular devotion. In the Joseon era, Maitreya's devotion changed the popular devotion more and more. In this background, Kang Jeungsan accepted the idea of Maitreya

> Buddha. Kang Jeungsan insisted that he existed to give Heaven's decree to Choe Jeu (崔濟愚) of Donghak and to combine Jesus with Christianity. Daesoon thought to have a common point in the idea of Maitreya Buddha and the interpenetration (unity) of the three teachings" (Lee 2015, 157).

Besides helping maintain the faith of believers, the leading disciples directly or indirectly help family members of spiritual leaders continue their positions. According to Massimo Introvigne, "The other leading disciple of Kang Jeungsan, Kim Hyeong-Ryeol, first promoted Kang's widow, Jeong, as the master's successor, then went on to establish a branch known as Maitreya Buddhism, which in turn went through several schisms. All these branches are called "Jeungsan Branches" by Korean scholars, due to their association with the belief that, after his death, Jeungsan spiritually resided in the Maitreya Buddha statue in the Geumsansa Temple at Moak Mountain" (Introvigne 2021, 4). That follows the confirmation of Robert Flaherty, "millennialism in the Korean context has not been primarily a reflection of Christian eschatology" (Flaherty 2011, 327). It can be seen that Maitreya's appearance in Daesoon Thought serves as a symbol throughout Korean culture. This symbol represents the highest role of a Supreme God covering many different religions such as Confucianism and Daoism that exist in the religious life of people.

That shows that the Korean notion of Sangje in Confucianism has been combined with the teachings in Daoism to complete a symbol that is characteristic of Buddhism, which is Maitreya. This was mentioned by Bernadette Rigal-Cellard: "the Buddhist elements crop up as well in Daesoon Jinrihoe as was just exemplified by the presence of Buddha in the sanctuary of Yeoju temple. The major evidence, though, is that Sangje/Kang announced that he was Mireuk, the Korean term for Maitreya the Buddha of the future, hence emphasizing his messianic role more forcefully" and she pointed out that "Sangje[is] a Confucian God between Daoism and Maitreyaism" (Rigal-Cellard 2022, 72). Thus, the formation and development of the Maitreya symbol in Daesoon Thought is a process of "doctrinalization" of religions outside Korea into a separate doctrine, suitable for Korean culture. That also confirms the role of Korean academia in the process of Koreanization to become a new religion.

Daesoon Thought and the Involvement of Academia in NRMs

In recent times, Korean scholars have shown a growing interest in Daesoon Thought. They have examined its philosophical, theological, and sociological dimensions. Many studies on this topic have been published in academic journals, theses, and dissertations, contributing to our understanding of its teachings and societal impact. Research on Daesoon Jinrihoe often takes an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from fields such as religious studies, sociology, anthropology, and Korean studies. Additionally, centers have been established to support scholarly research and facilitate academic discussions. Regular academic conferences and symposia are conducted to explore various aspects of

Daesoon Thought, bringing together scholars, practitioners, and students from both Korea and around the world. These events create a collaborative environment for the exchange of ideas.

Some universities and research institutions in Korea have established centers dedicated to the study of new religious movements, such as Daejin University and Daesoon Academy of Sciences (DAOS). These centers facilitate scholarly research and provide a platform for international academic discourse. Numerous books and academic articles have been published on Daesoon Jinrihoe, covering its history, teachings, rituals, and social implications. Journals like the *Journal of Daesoon Thought and the Religions of East Asia (JDTREA), Journal of East Asian Religions and Cultures (JEARC),* and *Journal of the Daesoon Academy of Sciences (JDAOS)* serve as valuable resources for both scholars and the general public. Some academic journals in Korea focus on the study of religion and new religious movements, featuring articles on Daesoon Thought, which helps disseminate research findings to a wider audience.

Moreover, courses on new religious movements and Korean religious traditions often include sections on Daesoon Jinrihoe, enabling students to gain a comprehensive understanding of Korea's diverse religious landscape. By integrating Daesoon Thought into religious studies curricula, academic institutions contribute to the preservation and dissemination of this religious philosophy. It can be said that the role of academia in Korea is pivotal in the study and understanding of Daesoon Thought. Through research, publications, conferences, and education, scholars and institutions help to illuminate the complexities of this movement and its place within the broader context of Korean and global religious traditions. This academic engagement not only enriches the field of religious studies but also fosters a greater appreciation of Korea's spiritual heritage.

Along with academic contributions, Daesoon Jinrihoe also carries out many social, educational, medical, and relief activities with Three Major Societal Works: Charity Aid, Social Welfare, and Education more actively and systematically from 1972. Daesoon Jinrihoe pledges to devote 70% of its financial resources to social work. Even critics believe that it does keep this pledge (Jorgensen 2018, 377), which explains the good reputation the religion has acquired among South Koreans in general, including those who are far away from its theology and worldview. By 2014, yearly expenses for Daesoon Jinrihoe's social work had reached the impressive figure of $680 million (AADDJ 2017, 73). This social activity includes what Daesoon Jinrihoe calls the "Three Major Works," education, social welfare, and charity aid (Soryte 2022, 91). In comparison with Long Hoa Di Lac, Daesoon Jinrihoe works as a denomination, with a positive relationship with society partly due to many welfare projects based on its good strategy and organization. We can see the differences between Daesoon Jinrihoe and Long Hoa Di Lặc as below.

Table 1. A comparison between Long Hoa Di Lặc and Daesoon Thought

		Long Hoa Di Lặc	Daesoon Jinrihoe
1	Religious source(s)	Vietnamese folk belief and Buddhism	Korean Shamanism, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Christianity (西學, Seohak)
2	Doctrine	Long Hoa book	Daesoon Thought
3	Leader(s)	Unclear	Kang Jeungsan, Jo Jeongsan, Park Wudang
4	Practice circumstance	Difficult	Freedom
5	Financial support	Unclear	Clear
6	Political support	Weak	Strong
7	Academic institutions	No	DAOS, Daejin Univ.,etc.
8	Social environment	Colonial and Communist society	Civil society

Conclusion

Maitreya is one of the key symbols connecting traditional thought with modern thought to create the NRMs of East Asia, of which Long Hoa Di Lac and Daesoon Jinrihoe are typical examples. From a Buddhist symbol, Maitreya has become the Messiah in many NRMs in East Asia, especially Korea and Vietnam. The more connected the world becomes, the more traditional religions change, which has led to enormous changes in East Asian religious life over the past century. Maitreya is not only the savior of Buddhism but also plays the role of connecting many other religions as well as NRMs in the role of Messiah.

Comparative research of LHDL in Vietnam and Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea shows us the enormous difference in the process of perceiving religious ideology. One side has too little contribution from academia and the other side has much attention from academia. Therefore, the awareness of followers of these two movements is extremely different even though both are based on Messiah notions. Daesoon Jinrihoe is the ideology of harmonizing the Three Realms that unify faith from major religions, and Daesoon Thought takes Maitreya as a symbol of harmony between ideologically different religions through the revelation of Kang Jeungsan to harmonize Korean people together. This is a very reasonable combination of Daesoon Thought with faith in Daesoon Jinrihoe. Therefore, this movement is not only the largest NRM in Korea but also crosses national borders to reach many followers around the world.

The more chaotic society is, the greater the belief in the Messiah, but to understand the status of the Messiah, an understanding of Millenarianism and the role of academia is extremely important. This is clearly shown through Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea. It can be said that the contribution of academia is extremely important in maintaining the faith of believers, especially those who are educated or belong to the upper class in society. Through academic activities, scientists not only evaluate the role of NRMs but also deeply

explain related religious phenomena. Comparative research of LHDL in Vietnam and Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea shows us the enormous difference in the process of perceiving religious ideology between the two movements.

Daesoon Jinrihoe is the ideology of harmonizing the Three Realms (Heaven, Earth, and Humanity) that unify faith from major religions. Daesoon thought takes Maitreya as a symbol of harmony between ideologically different religions by the revelation of Kang Jeungsan to harmonize Korean people together. This is a very reasonable combination of Daesoon Thought with faith in Daesoon Jinrihoe to reach many followers around the world. As Han Bong-Hee concluded: "Throughout Korean history, the Maitreya faith has shown a great ability to adapt to changing social needs and aspirations, by developing appropriate ideas and images of Maitreya within its developments. Through the process of adopting appropriate Maitreya's image to changing needs in changing times, the vitality of the Korean Maitreya faith, and that of Korean Buddhism, has been maintained among the Korean people as a whole" (Han 1995, 214).

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Notes

[1] Daesoon Thought gives the full name as Gucheon Eungwon Nwehseong Bohwa Cheonjon Kangseong Sangje (九天應元雷聲普化天尊姜聖上帝, 구천응원뇌성보화 천존강성상제 *kr.*), the Supreme God of the Ninth Heaven, Celestial Worthy of Universal Creation through His Thunderbolt, the Originator with Whom All Beings Resonate.

[2] The act or process of forcing somebody to accept a particular belief (Crowther 1995, 607).

[3] According to this page, LHDL was "made by Dao Thi Minh, a farmer, with low education level (2/10), in Soc Son district, Hanoi city self-established". "In 1986, the simultaneous appearance of LHDL, Uncle Ho religion (Ba Cam religion), Reasonable religion, Uncle Ho religion (Vietnamese Spiritual Club) in the Northern Delta provinces, Vang Chu religion in the Mong and Dao communities in the Northern mountainous provinces, opening the birth and development of a new religious phenomenon in Vietnam". See: https://daibieunhandan.vn/van-hoa/nguon-goc-da-dang-bieu-hien-phuc-tap-i304276/.

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Religious Belief in the Jade Emperor among the Vietnamese in the Seven Mountains Region, An Giang Province, Vietnam

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Abstract

Belief in the Jade Emperor is prevalent in the southwestern region of Vietnam, primarily within the Vietnamese and Chinese communities there. Through years of research in the southwestern region, a distinct pattern has been noticed: the worship of the Jade Emperor is less prominent in the delta areas compared to the mountainous regions. As one moves towards the mountains, particularly exemplified by the Seven Mountains in An Giang Province, the worship of the Jade Emperor becomes more prevalent. With larger temple complexes, the local populace holds a deeper faith in the Jade Emperor than in coexisting Buddhist temples from the Mahayana tradition. In this article, the worship of the Jade Emperor in the Seven Mountains region, An Giang Province is examined by highlighting prominent temple complexes revered by both locals and tourists. These include the Jade Emperor temples on Cấm Mountain (An Hảo Commune, Tịnh Biên District, An Giang Province) and on Tô Mountain (Núi Tô Commune, Tri Tôn District, An Giang Province).

Keywords: Seven Mountains Region; Jade Emperor; Worship; Southwestern Vietnam; An Giang Province

Introduction

The Seven Mountains area of An Giang Province encompasses two districts, Tịnh Biên and Tri Tôn. According to statistics, the entire Seven Mountains region comprises around 37 major and minor peaks, among which seven mountains play a significant role in the spiritual life of the people of An Giang Province and the southwestern region of Vietnam. Therefore, locals collectively refer to this region as "Bảy Núi" , derived from the names of these seven mountains: Cấm Mountain (Thiên Cấm sơn/ 天禁山), Dài Năm Giếng Mountain (Ngũ Hồ sơn/ 五湖山), Tô Mountain (Cô Tô/ 孤苏山), Dai Mountain (Ngoạ Long sơn/ 臥龍山), Tượng Mountain (象山), Két Mountain (Anh Vũ sơn/ 鸚鵡山), and Nước Mountain (Thuỷ Đài sơn/水檯山).

Through surveys in the Seven Mountains Region, Cấm Mountain stands out as the location with the highest number of Jade Emperor temples. According to locals, these temples have existed for two generations (grandparents and parents) and have been passed down to the third generation. Some of the temples have a history of nearly 30 years. Initially, these temples existed only in the minds of the people, with simple worship places consisting of incense burners and Han script names such as "Ngọc Hoàng" (玉皇) or "Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế" (玉皇上帝), without any statues. However, with the development of spiritual life and the widespread availability of worship statues, locals began placing Jade Emperor statues on altars and expanding temple complexes. This has attracted many visitors and worshippers.

The largest Jade Emperor temple on Cấm Mountain is located at Bồ Hong Temple, which is the highest point on the mountain (716 meters above sea level). This area features rugged terrain, with a plain below and several small mountains. At Bồ Hong Temple, mist and clouds often envelop the area, creating a mystical and eerie atmosphere, especially during sunrise or sunset. Today, BồBồ Hong Temple is inhabited by a significant population, and additional new temples have been established, making the area less desolate and mysterious but still a sacred destination in people's hearts.



Figure 1. The Jade Emperor Shrine at Bồ Hong peak, Cấm Mountain, where locals perform the ritual of xin lộc (seeking blessings) from the Supreme Jade Emperor. (Photograph by Author)

At Bồ Hong Temple, on the highest rock platform, locals have erected a shrine with a Jade Emperor statue standing approximately one meter tall, adorned with a golden dragon head crown and colorful silk robes; these robes and crowns are regularly replaced. In front of the statue is a spacious courtyard used for worship and offerings to the Jade Emperor. The worship style at Bồ Hong Temple differs from other temples in the same Cấm Mountain area, such as Cây Quế Temple, Huỳnh Long Temple, and Tứ Vị Thiên Vương Temple. These places not only worship the Jade Emperor but also incorporate worship of other deities such as Earth Mother, Southern Deity, and Northern Deity. In contrast, Bồ Hong Temple exclusively focuses on the Jade Emperor.

Bồ Hong Temple is a renowned pilgrimage site on Cấm Mountain; therefore, the Jade Emperor temple attracts many visitors for worship and offerings. Alongside regular offerings such as incense, flowers, fruits, and water placed on the altar and prayers according to individual spiritual needs, many groups, individuals, and families offer vegetarian meals to the Jade Emperor. Locals prepare vegetarian dishes such as sour soup, watermelon, fried tofu, pickled vegetables, and filtered water for the offering. After two or three rounds of prayers and prostrations, the locals present the offering meal, gather around, and enjoy the "blessings" of the Jade Emperor; worshippers must finish all the food and drinks provided. People pray to the Jade Emperor for the well-being, happiness, health recovery, and smoothness in work for themselves and their families. Particularly, we heard locals referring to the Jade Emperor as "Father" and addressing themselves as "children" in a reverent and earnest manner during their prayers.

The number of visitors to the Jade Emperor temple at Bồ Hong Temple is significant. Among them, the majority are followers of indigenous religions such as Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương (寶山奇香), Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa (四恩孝義), Hoa Hao Buddhism (和好佛教; Phật giáo Hòa Hảo), and Buddhist devotees. Many of these visitors are residents from the provinces in Central Vietnam who come to visit and pray.



Figure 2. Worshippers in prayer at the Shrine of the Supreme Jade Emperor, Cây Quế Temple, Cấm Mountain (Photograph by Author).

About 4 kilometers away from Bồ Hong Temple is Cây Quế Temple. The

mountainous road to Cây Quế Temple is treacherous, with steep, winding, narrow, and rugged sections along the mountain slopes. Many legends are associated with Cây Quế Temple, depicting it as a place of hermitage for ascetics and giant snakes. Cây Quế Temple boasts picturesque scenery, with rice fields and surrounding forests below. In the mornings and evenings, the temple is often shrouded in mist and clouds, resembling a scene from paradise.

The ruggedness, mystique, tranquility, and space of Cây Quế Temple have turned it into a gathering point for various shades of beliefs, and explaining the religious system and worship practices found here can only be explored through the psychological and cognitive aspects of the people of the Seven Mountains region. This is because the unique worship at Cây Quế Temple has disrupted the traditional Triple/ Three Religion (or Tam Giáo in Vietnamese text) structure in Vietnam: Buddhism—Confucianism—Taoism.

The Cây Quế Temple, with its spacious surroundings, is where locals have established four shrines: one for worshiping the Jade Emperor, one for the Three Lifetimes of the Buddhas of the Ten Directions , one for worshipping the Divine Consort Kim Mẫu, and one for venerating guardian spirits and ancestors. These shrines cover a wide area, with the main shrine being approximately 40 square meters and accommodating up to 50 worshippers. At the highest point of the Cây Quế Temple lies the shrine dedicated to the Jade Emperor. To reach this shrine, worshippers must navigate through a narrow path resembling a heavenly gate.

Worship practices at the Cây Quế Temple differ from those at the Bô Ồng Temple. Here, the focus is on the central shrine dedicated to the Jade Emperor, featuring a large statue with familiar motifs such as a dragon-shaped crown, a golden velvet robe, and the emperor's seated posture holding a precious seal. Flanking the Jade Emperor are two tall statues: one representing the Northern Emperor and the other representing the Heavenly Grandfather. The attire of these deities and the Jade Emperor may vary, as worshippers often donate different colored robes and crowns to them.

On the altar, worshippers and visitors place bells, candlesticks, flower vases, fruits, and cakes, with a large incense burner placed in front of it. The spacious courtyard in front of the Jade Emperor shrine serves as a gathering place for worshippers to perform rituals and offer items to the Jade Emperor. Similarly to worship at the Bô Ồng Temple, worshippers pray for family prosperity, good health, and the end of illnesses during their offerings. During our visit to the Cây Quế Temple on July 13, 2022, we observed two groups of pilgrims, totaling around 50 people from various provinces such as An Giang, Cà Mau, and Tiền Giang (Vietnam), praying and referring to the Jade Emperor as "Father" and themselves as "children": "We pray that Father blesses us (our names, hometowns, dates of birth, ages...) with good health, family safety, business prosperity, and the end of illnesses...". Special prayer sessions, including meditation and Buddhist chants lasting 60 minutes, are also conducted. These prayers and Buddhist chants are derived from the Hoa Hao Buddhist tradition.

In Vồ Đầu (Vồ Đầu is a proper noun, meaning a protruding rock formation, regarded by locals as the first head), there is also a shrine dedicated to the Jade Emperor. The natural environment in Vồ Đầu is desolate and eerie, shrouded in mist and clouds in the morning and evening, making it even more tranquil, mysterious, and ideal for spiritual practice by adepts. On the rocky platform in Vồ Đầu, locals have established shrines for the Jade Emperor and the Earth Mother. The shrine is elevated, with a spacious canopy. Beneath the shrine, locals have set up multiple altars for various deities and spirits such as Quan Yin, the Nine Mysterious Guardians (Cửu huyền thất tổ in Vietnamese text/ 九玄七租 in Chinese text), and Master Hô (a local deity). At the center of the shrine is the statue of the Jade Emperor, and next to it is the shrine for the Earth Mother, with a depiction of "Mother" with a round face, black hair, wearing a magnificent golden crown, seated cross-legged with her right hand resting on a pillow and her left hand holding the GuanYin seal. Locals here also refer to them as "Father Sky—Mother Earth" or "Heavenly Emperor—Earthly Empress." Surrounding the shrine and on each altar are offerings, bells, and various religious symbols.



Figure 3**.** Devotees gathered before the Shrine of the Heavenly Emperor and Earthly Empress (*Thiên Hoàng và Địa Mẫu*, "Father and Mother") at Vồ Đầu, Cấm Mountain (Photograph by Author).

The shrines dedicated to the Jade Emperor and the Earth Mother (Heavenly Emperor—Earthly Empress) at Vồ Đầu are important spiritual tourism destinations similar to other Jade Emperor shrines in the Forbidden Mountain. Locals and tourists flock here, especially during festivals and holidays. The most significant number of visitors are still followers of indigenous religions and those who have ancestral altars (believing they have ancestral spirits). Apart from practicing rituals, they also come here to connect with their ancestral roots. The offerings presented to the Jade Emperor typically include vegetarian items such as fruits, vegetarian rice, pastries, and water. After offering, locals gather to consume all the offerings, believing that it helps rid their bodies of lingering illnesses.

Another significant location on Cấm Mountain where people worship the Jade Emperor is the Four Heavenly Kings Temple. This temple, situated at a lower elevation,

nestled against the mountainside, lies along the community's main thoroughfare. The Four Heavenly Kings Temple is a natural cave, about 2.5 meters deep, 3 meters tall, and approximately 4 meters wide. About 40 years ago, this cave served as a dwelling for local residents. During that time, the locals established an altar dedicated to the Four Heavenly Kings, including the Southern King, Western King, Northern King, and Eastern King. Although referred to as the Four Heavenly Kings Temple, the central figure worshipped here is the Jade Emperor, depicted sitting on a golden throne, wearing a dragon-patterned crown made of gold, and adorned in yellow velvet attire. A notable feature is the unique fusion of beliefs, as the worship of the Jade Emperor here is accompanied by the presence of the Bodhisattva Quan Yin and the Three Buddhas positioned behind the Jade Emperor. The altar is modestly adorned with incense and floral offerings. Visitors come here to practice rituals, make offerings, respectfully address the Jade Emperor as "Father," and regard themselves as "children," much like in other temples.



Figure 4. Entrance and altar view of the Shrine of the Jade Emperor on Tô Mountain, Tri Tôn District, An Giang Province (Photograph by Auhor).

To the right of the Jade Emperor's altar lies a smaller altar dedicated to the Four Heavenly Kings, featuring four small bronze statues, four incense burners, and twelve cups of water. Through the distinctive worship practices at this temple, one can observe the profound cultural integration of the local mountainous community. At times, folk beliefs in the Jade Emperor seem to overshadow the traditional religious practices of families.

In addition to these grand temples dedicated to the Jade Emperor, there are also smaller worship sites scattered throughout Cấm Mountain, such as the Huy Long Temple, Vo Ba Temple (a rocky hillside where the local Mother Goddess is worshipped), Vo Ong Buom Temple, Ong Voi Temple, among others.

Worship of the Jade Emperor on Tô Mountain

In Tri Ton district, An Giang province, there are many places dedicated to worshipping the Jade Emperor, among which the most prominent is the Jade Emperor Temple on Tô Mountain (also known as Cô Tô Mountain), located in Núi Tô commune, Tri Tôn district. The Jade Emperor Temple on Tô Mountain is constructed on a large scale, grand and majestic, resembling a "palace of the immortals" nestled amidst the slopes of Cô Tô Mountain. It is a popular destination for many tourists both from within and outside An Giang province. Besides the Jade Emperor Temple, there are also Tô Sơn Pagoda and the shrine of the Queen Mother of the West (Tây Vương Mẫu in Vietnamese text/ 西王母 in Chinese text).

The cult and temple of the Jade Emperor on Tô Mountain have emerged over the past 35 years. Perhaps influenced by the natural landscape of the mountains, as well as the impact of legends and religious beliefs, the worship of the Jade Emperor has become prevalent here.

Compared to many other places in the Seven Mountains region, the Jade Emperor Temple in Núi Tô commune, Tri Tôn district, has the largest scale. Although it is named the Jade Emperor Temple, it has become a complex of worship for various deities, from the first steps leading up to the central shrine of the Jade Emperor. The Jade Emperor Temple stands about 300 meters high, nestled on the slopes of Cô Tô Mountain, with numerous terraces and altars dedicated to various deities. The highest deity worshiped here is the Jade Emperor. Other deities worshiped include the Celestial Hand, Mountain God, Mother Goddess, Earth God, Fallen Heroes, Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva, the Nine Mysterious Myriads of Beings (Cửu huyền trăm họ in Vietnamese text/ 九玄百姓 in Chinese text),[1] Lost Souls in the Mountain, and the spirits of deceased children, each placed at different rock nooks and altars as individual "realms". At the highest point, on the mountain ridge, is the place designated for the Jade Emperor's residence, overseeing and ruling over all the deities of heaven and earth. The central worship area of the Jade Emperor Temple spans about 150m^2 and houses various deities according to the concept of "attendants" to the Jade Emperor.

In the central worship area stands a statue of the Jade Emperor facing west towards the plains, depicted as "a man sitting cross-legged on a dragon seat, with a dignified appearance, with a calm and sacred face, wearing a hat adorned with precious golden jewels, and draped in a yellow silk robe" (Đinh 2015, 238). The worship characteristics here are significantly different from those in the Cấm Mountains. While in the Cấm Mountains, the worship of the Jade Emperor is often associated with Guanyin Bodhisattva, Mother Goddess, the Purple Star Astrology (紫微斗數, *Zi Wei Dou Shu* in Chinese text), and The Supreme Venerable Sovereign (Thái Thượng Lão Quân in Vietnamese text/ 太上老君- Taishang Laojun in Chinese text), or solely with the Jade Emperor, here the Jade Emperor is worshiped alongside two familiar and traditional figures: Southern Deity (Nam Tào in Vietnamese text/ 南曹 in Chinese text) and

Northern Deity (Bắc Đẩu in Vietnamese text/ 北斗 in Chinese text). To the right of the Jade Emperor is Southern Deity, depicted in red, holding a brush in his right hand and a scroll in his left, symbolizing the god of creation. To the left is Northern Deity, depicted in green, holding a seal box. The Jade Emperor, Southern Deity, and Northern Deity are worshiped in a high temple, the central sanctuary of the temple.

The Image of the Jade Emperor and the Characteristics of Jade Emperor Worship among the Vietnamese in the Seven Mountains Region

Ngọc Hoàng (Jade Emperor) is a manifestation of the deity in Vietnamese folk belief —the heavenly god. The designation of the heavenly god as Ngọc Hoàng originates from the myths and beliefs of the Chinese people, specifically influenced by Daoism.

> According to the folk belief of the Chinese people, the Jade Emperor (玉皇上帝), the Great Jade Emperor (玉皇大帝), or the Jade Emperor (玉帝) is the supreme ruler of the sky, the master of the Celestial Palace. The Jade Emperor is also known by various other titles such as God, Heavenly God, Great Primordial Father, Creator, Lord of Heaven..., This Creator founded the vast universe and all beings, is the source of religions, is the supreme and omnipotent being, ruling over gods and saints..., The Jade Emperor is the king of the Celestial Palace, governing the entire sky, earth, sea, and the underworld. The Jade Emperor leads all immortals with supreme authority, possessing natural powers such as clouds, rain, thunder, firewater..., The Jade Emperor has the power to command the gods to fulfill his intentions, usually for benevolent purposes. The Jade Emperor also judges and rewards or punishes the celestial beings (Đinh 2015, 233–234).

According to author Đức Nguyên Nguyễn Văn Hồng, the Jade Emperor is the supreme being of the universe in the worldview of religions and folk beliefs. The Jade Emperor is also known as the Great Heavenly Deity or the Holy Supreme Emperor. This deity creates and nurtures all beings. From the Supreme Polarity, Two Modes (lưỡng nghi in Vietnamese text/ 兩儀 in Chinese text) are formed, generating the Four Images (四象, sixiang *ch.*; tứ tượng *vn.*), and transforming into the Eight Trigrams, thus forming the vast universe and all beings. Above, he governs 36 heavens and 3000 worlds. Below, he governs 72 Spheres and the Four Great Continents. This is the Great Primordial Father. He is the king of the sun, moon, stars, and time. He is the ruler of gods, saints, immortals, and Buddhas. He is the Supreme Emperor of the Jade Frame. He is the Great Heavenly Sovereign (Đức Nguyên 2003, 865–868).

In Daoist thought in China, the figure of the Jade Emperor is also very complex. Each scripture tells a different story about this deity. And in Daoism, this deity is not the highest god. For example, in the Taoist scriptures, the story of the Great Jade Emperor is recounted: It is said that in the country of Guangning Diaoluo, the king did not have

a successor. One day, the queen dreamed that The Supreme Venerable Sovereign bestowed upon her a child. Afterwards, she became pregnant and gave birth to a prince. The prince succeeded the throne and ruled the country with a compassionate heart. Seeing the suffering of the people, he abdicated and went into the mountains to cultivate. After 3,200 lifetimes of cultivation, he attained Buddhahood and was called the Pure King of Tranquility (Thanh Tĩnh Giác Vương Như Lai in Vietnamese text). The Buddhas enlightened him to the Great Path, and after thousands of lifetimes of cultivation, he officially became the Great Jade Emperor. This deity is extremely wise and omnipotent. He traveled far and wide to preach the pure Dao for liberation. The Jade Emperor is the highest deity governing heaven and earth. According to Taoist history, the Great Jade Emperor, or the Jade Emperor Supreme Being, also known as the Incomparable Chief Celestial Officer, the Miraculous Lord of Natural Phenomena (Vietnamese text: Haọ Thiên Kim Khuyêt́ Vô Lương̣ Chi T́ôn Tư Ṇhiên Diêụ Hưũ Di La Chi Ćhân Ngoc̣ Hoaǹg Đai. Đê,́ coǹ goi. la ̀Haọ Thiên Kim Ngoc̣ Hoaǹg Đai. Đê)́, is also known as the Jade Emperor. His birthday is on the 9th day of the 1st lunar month. The Jade Emperor wears a hat with 12 jade pieces hanging down in front, holding a jade tablet, and sitting on a dragon chair, having a Golden Boy (Kim đồng in Vietnamese text; 金童 in Chinese text) and a Jade Maiden (Ngọc nữ in Vietnamese text; 玉女 in Chinese text) attending to him in both sides. In the Daoist pantheon, although the Great Jade Emperor does not hold as high a position as the Three Pure Ones (who are the Jade Pure One, the Supreme Pure One, and the Daoist Pure One), in this belief, he holds the highest position. According to legend, on the 25th day of the 12th lunar month is the day the Jade Emperor goes on inspection tours. The Jade Emperor will personally inspect the lower realms, judge good and evil, and reward and punish accordingly. On the night of the 24th, Daoist temples conduct ceremonies to welcome the Jade Emperor with utmost solemnity and reverence. On the 25th, people establish Daoist altars to receive blessings (Trương 2012, 126).

The worship of the Jade Emperor is a deeply ingrained aspect of folk beliefs in Vietnamese culture. Different regions have their own distinct forms of worship, shaped by religious influences, which consequently define the role and significance of the Jade Emperor. While worship of the Jade Emperor, also known as the Heavenly Emperor, is widespread in southern Vietnam and across the country, the specific imagery associated with this deity in Daoist practices is relatively limited. However, in mountainous regions, the worship of the Jade Emperor tends to be more elaborate and grandiose. The rituals and customs related to Jade Emperor worship vary significantly from place to place, evident in the ceremonial practices, the pantheon of deities revered, and the overall ambiance surrounding the temple.

The characteristic of worshipping the Jade Emperor in the Seven Mountains region is the harmonious blending of various cultural streams, sometimes "without principles". This means that worship practices may inherit from prototypes or integrate multiple deities within the same temple without following any specific pattern, primarily guided by faith, which can fill the spiritual void of individuals. For instance, despite all being

devoted to the Jade Emperor, there are distinct differences in various locations: at Bồ Hong temple, only the Jade Emperor is worshipped individually, while at Vồ Đầu temple, worship is combined with Earth Mother and Buddha; at Cây Quế temple, there's also the presence of the Great Emperor of the Earth and Supreme Old Lord; at Tứ vị Thiên Vương temple, it encompasses Guan Yin, the Three Buddhas, and more. In Tô Mountain, worship of the Jade Emperor follows traditional Chinese and Vietnamese customs like Southern Deity, and Northern Deity, but also incorporates Earth Mother, Maitreya Buddha, and Mountain Deities. From these worship characteristics, it can be affirmed that the syncretic spiritual consciousness of the people in the southwestern region of Vietnam, particularly in An Giang Province, is deeply rooted in whichever deity can protect them, and the more deities worshipped, the more protective power they receive, without a clear separation between deities or a fixed model in the worship of the Jade Emperor.

The beliefs and worship characteristics of the Jade Emperor in the Seven Mountains region (An Giang Province) with its polytheistic nature are partly influenced by:

> folk tales, historical novels, Chinese history, which carry the semblance of Daoist fairy tales spread quite popularly in the South of Vietnam from the late 19th century to the present. Therefore, the people or adherents of indigenous religions in the South have sought the ideal world view, living environment in a 'Celestial realm', and that 'shadow' is projected from the Daoist world view in fairy tales, fairy tales of China, for people to 'hide' their souls in it. That 'illusory' world is like a redemption for personal and community life; and faith sometimes causes 'hallucinations', leading to perseverance on the path of cultivation to take care of the future (Nguyễn 2019, 109).

The supreme deity, the Jade Emperor, profoundly influences the spiritual life of the people in the southwestern region of Vietnam, particularly in the Seven Mountains, An Giang Province, also due to the influence of religious thought. The people in An Giang Province, Vietnam, are mainly followers of indigenous religions such as Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Hoà Hảo Buddhism, and Tứ Ân Đạo Phật. These religions have an open-minded approach to receiving and integrating deities, among which the figure of the Jade Emperor is crucial in the consciousness of the believers. From this consciousness, along with the influence of natural landscapes into the perception of the world view and spiritual beliefs of humans, it leads to a high level of devotion to the Jade Emperor. The Seven Mountains region is a land of rugged mountains, covered by a system of overlapping forests, where many legends about mysticism, deities, ghosts, and Daoists ascending to immortality, the 'Elysium' with a peaceful life source, Long Hoa Association, are hidden. In summary, the majestic and mysterious mountain scenery, the "gold and jade temples"[2] have deeply hidden in people's minds the appearance of a 'supreme deity', the Jade Emperor, reigning. The image of this divine being, the sacred 'imaginary' space, appears frequently in the oral traditions of indigenous religions such

as Bưu Sơn Ky ̀Hương, Tư ́Ân Hiêú Nghiã, Hoà Hảo Buddhism. From many such influences, the image of the Jade Emperor has been brought closer to the image in religion, so the people in this area establish more temples dedicated to worshipping the Jade Emperor. (Dật and Nguyễn 1955, 232; Nguyễn 2019, 60)

'Localization' of Beliefs and the Transformation of the Function of the Jade Emperor

The Jade Emperor: The Supreme Deity in the Daoism of Chinese Culture Becoming the "Father" of the Local People

The Jade Emperor is worshipped in the Seven Mountains region of An Giang Province, with a history spanning hundreds of years. This practice is closely linked to the process of land reclamation and village founding by the Vietnamese people in the Southwest of Vietnam since the 13th century. This belief system flourished most strongly from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-20th century, in association with the emergence of various indigenous religions in Southern Vietnam, such as Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Cao Đài, Phật giáo Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn, Phật giáo Hòa Hảo, and Tứ Ân Đạo Phật. These religions frequently mention the figure of the Jade Emperor and believe that the Seven Mountains region, specifically the summit of Cấm Mountain, is the dwelling place of the Jade Emperor. It is said to be the site where the Jade Emperor will establish the *Upper Epoch*[3] (new world), ushering in a new world where humanity will live in happiness and peace amidst a setting of "golden palaces and jade halls." This renewal is believed to occur as the cycle of the *Lower Epoch* (current world) approaches its end. This worldview led to the widespread veneration of the Jade Emperor in the Seven Mountains. Over time, the Jade Emperor, originally a deity from Daoist Chinese culture, was "localized" by the Vietnamese people in the Mekong Delta, becoming a local deity of the community, a powerful god capable of determining the fate of individuals in both their present and future lives. In the indigenous religions of the Mekong Delta, the Jade Emperor frequently appears as a central figure, and worshippers strive to attain the "golden palace" of the Jade Emperor in their spiritual practice.

In addition to the worldview of the indigenous religions, another significant factor contributing to the strong development of the Jade Emperor worship is the concept of "yin" and "yang," which is deeply embedded in the rice-based agricultural culture of the Vietnamese people, with a history of thousands of years. Rice agriculture has greatly influenced the cultural mindset of the Vietnamese people.

> The primary concern of agricultural people is the reproduction of crops and humans, always hoping for abundant harvests and large families [...]. The reproduction of humans depends on two factors: father and mother, male and female. As for the reproduction of crops, it depends on the earth and the sky—two

> elements: the earth gives birth, and the sky nurtures. This means that these two forms of reproduction share the same essence: the earth is equated with the mother, while the sky is equated with the father. The union of the two pairs – 'mother-father' and 'earth-sky' – is the initial generalization leading to the philosophy of 'yin' and 'yang.' While 'yin' and 'yang' may seem abstract and vague today, in ancient times, they had very specific meanings. Their original meaning was none other than 'mother-father-earth-sky' (Trần 1996, 111-112).

Based on the traditional cultural understanding of "yin" and "yang" in relation to the creation of all things and human existence, the people of the Mekong Delta "localized" the Jade Emperor into the figure of the "father-sky." Due to this transformation, many temples dedicated to the Jade Emperor in the Seven Mountains also enshrine Địa Mẫu, symbolizing the "mother-earth." This demonstrates the deep-seated concept of "father" and "mother," which continues the cultural tradition rooted in the ancient rice farming civilization. The localization process from the Jade Emperor to the "father-sky" was quite brief due to the strong similarities between Vietnamese cultural traditions and Daoist beliefs. As a result of this close relationship between the two figures, the prayers of the local people before the Jade Emperor are no longer directed toward the supreme deity of Daoism but are "localized" into personal supplications to the "father" who is closely linked to individual and community life: "I pray that 'father' blesses me and my family with peace and prosperity in our work" (Nguyễn 2024, fieldwork materials). Similarly, people refer to Địa Mẫu (Tây Vương mẫu/ 西王母/ Queen Mother of the West) as "mother" with earnest, intimate prayers: "I pray, mother, to bless me." Most people who visit the temples dedicated to the Jade Emperor and Địa Mẫu in the Seven Mountains region of An Giang Province share a common sentiment and use the terms "father-child" and "mother-child" in their expressions of devotion.

Based on this, it can be demonstrated that the Vietnamese understanding of the creation of all things and natural phenomena, rooted in the rice-based agricultural culture, has given rise to the imagery of the "father" (sky) and the "mother" (earth). This concept has been consistently present throughout Vietnamese cultural traditions. Later, when encountering similar figures of the Jade Emperor and Địa Mẫu (the Earth Mother) in the Daoist pantheon that was transmitted from China to Vietnam, the people of the Mekong Delta (Southern Vietnam) "localized" these figures into the representations of "father" (sky) and "mother" (earth).

In addition to the traditional cultural understanding, the worldview of indigenous religions in the Mekong Delta also features the Jade Emperor as a deity with the power to bring happiness or punish humans through the event of "the end of the world." The site where the "end of the world" and the "annihilation" of humanity will occur, thereby creating the new world of the "palace of gold and jade," is believed to be in the Seven Mountains, with the center being Cấm Mountain:

When Mount Cấm turns into a hall,
Peace shall reign for one and all.

Chừng nào núi Cấm hóa lầu
Thì là bá tánh đâu đâu thái bình
(prophecy from the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion).

Based on the two factors—the "rice-based agricultural culture" and the understanding of "father" (sky) and "mother" (earth) as creators of all things, humans, and the world, as well as the worldview present in the indigenous religions—the widespread belief in the worship of the Jade Emperor in the Seven Mountains region of An Giang Province has been formed. Along with the Jade Emperor, the belief in Địa Mẫu also appeared frequently, either worshipped alongside the Jade Emperor or in separate temples. These two figures of worship have become a cultural hallmark of the Seven Mountains region of An Giang Province.

The Transformation of the Jade Emperor's Function

The Jade Emperor is the supreme deity in the Daoist worldview, the creator of the universe and humanity; the one who governs and determines the existence and development of all things and beings; and the ruler of the celestial and earthly pantheons, among other domains. For the people of the Mekong Delta (Southern Vietnam), especially the followers of indigenous religions such as Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, and Phật giáo Hòa Hảo, the Jade Emperor is regarded as the "father," the deity who determines human destiny. The function of the "father" (sky)—the Jade Emperor—is not seen as an abstract power, but one that actively helps people in all aspects of life, with the power to heal and bless individuals. On the other hand, some people believe that the "father" figure of the Jade Emperor has "entered" their bodies, and they "pass on" the powers of the "father" to others. Although this belief may seem somewhat delusional and superstitious, it reflects a deep spiritual conviction. One can refer to several notable examples of the transformation of the Jade Emperor's function in the spiritual life of the people in the Mekong Delta when they visit the Jade Emperor in the Seven Mountains.

The Jade Emperor's Healing Function:

Illness is an inevitable part of human life. When people fall ill, they typically resort to two forms of treatment: one through medicine (material treatment), and the other through spiritual means (faith-based healing). For the Vietnamese, the latter method is widespread, showing that belief and religion serve as the final recourse for people in times of illness, as Lenin once wrote: "Fear created the gods" (cited in Nguyễn 2008, 14). Author Nguyễn Đức Lữ suggests that "beliefs and religions also alleviate the fear of

illness and death. The common desire of humans is to prolong life, whether in this life or the next. People do not want to end their existence with physical death; how many are brave enough to face death and turn to dust?" (Nguyễn 2008, 15). Depending on the severity of the illness, the form of spiritual treatment may vary. Many people in the Mekong Delta, when visiting the Jade Emperor's temple in the Seven Mountains, bring with them various ailments. They pray to the Jade Emperor, asking the "father" to help heal their illnesses. Prayers for healing are very common, and even those who are not ill will pray for good health and the removal of sickness. The practice of spiritual healing is deeply reflected in the prayers, such as: "I (name, age, address, etc.) pray to father for my illness to be cured. I vow to visit the mountain every year to pay respects to father and mother (Địa Mẫu)." After making the prayer, the devotee performs the act of bowing. Many people also touch the Jade Emperor's statue and then rub their hands over their bodies, believing this act will transfer the healing power.

In addition to the prayers, the belief in healing through the "father" is also expressed through offerings. When visiting the Jade Emperor's temple, people often offer vegetarian food; after the ritual, they consume the offerings. They believe that eating the offerings will bring strength and health, curing any illness. If the offerings include water, they will drink it, again with the belief that it will restore their health and eliminate diseases.



Figure 5. Faith-based healing ritual using the "fire-breathing method" at the Jade Emperor Shrine on Cấm Mountain (Photograph by Author).

Another method of healing based on spiritual belief and the image of the Jade Emperor is the phenomenon of "spirit possession." Although this phenomenon is not aligned with the cultural traditions of the people in the Mekong Delta and is criticized by the community as superstition, it still has a significant impact on the community's psychology and the cultural space in the Seven Mountains region of An Giang Province. These individuals exhibit "abnormal" behaviors and psychological states, attracting the attention and respect of a small number of people. When they visit the temples in the

Seven Mountains, they claim to possess powers and strengths granted by the deities of the mountains and the "father" (the Jade Emperor). The manifestations of these powers include unusual actions that draw attention, such as speaking in "divine language," dancing, crying, and so on. They claim to have the ability to heal others, discuss events from their "previous lives," or predict future occurrences. However, their behaviors, healing methods, and prophecies are only believed and accepted by a small group of people; the majority remain skeptical and disagree, viewing these activities as superstitions that negatively affect human life.

The Jade Emperor as a God of Blessings

In the view of the majority of people in the Mekong Delta, the Jade Emperor (father) is believed to function as a god of blessings, bringing peace, happiness, success in work, and prosperity to individuals and the community. This belief is reflected in the prayers and actions of people in front of the Jade Emperor's statue. According to fieldwork conducted by the author of this article in November 2024, many people pray by offering money, highlighting the Jade Emperor's role as a deity who bestows wealth. Many people place money, in denominations of 200,000 or 500,000 VND[4], on a tray. A woman who is believed to have the ability to "communicate" with the gods leads the ritual. The woman raises the tray with money above her head and recites the prayer: "Today, on this day... month... year..., we come to offer our respects to Father. We present gold and silver, hoping that Father will witness and bless us so that we can have smooth business dealings and wealth." After the prayer is completed, those attending the ritual kneel or bow respectfully and then retrieve the money they had placed on the tray, believing that the Jade Emperor will bring wealth, peace, and good fortune into their lives.

From these beliefs and practices, it is evident that the supreme deity of Daoism in Chinese culture has been "localized" by the people of the Mekong Delta into the figure of the "father." This process of localization is based on two cultural foundations: first, it stems from the Vietnamese agricultural worldview linked to rice farming; and second, it has been influenced by the cosmology of indigenous religions that arose in the Mekong Delta (Southern Vietnam). These two factors have created the widespread belief in the worship of the Jade Emperor in the Seven Mountains region of An Giang Province. The Jade Emperor, originally the supreme deity in the Daoist worldview of Chinese culture with the power to govern the universe and all things, has had his role and function transformed into that of a "father" figure—close, personal, and spiritually comforting in times of change in human life.

Conclusion

The worship of the Jade Emperor in the Seven Mountains region (An Giang Province) has developed significantly in recent decades. Previously, many families in the region only established small shrines, sometimes without placing any image, only worshipping

through Chinese characters. However, nowadays, worship is primarily conducted with images, and the scale of worship has been increasing. The number of people practicing this belief is also growing, and during this process, there are some practices that verge on superstition, such as fortune-telling, divination, and other rituals.

In addition to the Jade Emperor temples that we have surveyed, there are many other temples and shrines in the Seven Mountains region that we will continue to study in the future. The question arises: Why are there so many Jade Emperor temples in the Seven Mountains region? Initially, it can be assumed that the "Father - Heaven, Mother - Earth" consciousness in the Vietnamese cultural foundation, along with various other influences like religion, natural landscapes, etc., are the origins that make the worship of the Jade Emperor play a significant role in the lives of the people in the Seven Mountains region, especially in An Giang Province.

The Jade Emperor temples have become important spiritual tourism destinations, contributing to the development of tourism in the Seven Mountains region, An Giang Province. In many years of fieldwork at the Jade Emperor temples and various other temples and shrines in the region, we have observed that the Jade Emperor temples attract more pilgrims than other temples in the same area.

The localization of beliefs is the process of transforming the roles and functions of deities from other ethnic and national cultures into deities of the local community, aligning them with the spiritual life of the people in that region. The Jade Emperor has been "localized" by the people of the Mekong Delta, with his functions being adapted to meet the spiritual needs of the community, reflecting the cultural similarities between Vietnam and China. In the future, the Jade Emperor may acquire additional functions based on the psychological changes of the people, who rely on deities as their spiritual support.

In addition to the development of worship of the Jade Emperor and pure religious practices, in some temples, there are occurrences of superstition such as pilgrims claiming to be "possessed" or engaging in practices like exorcism to cure illnesses, which can affect the spiritual atmosphere and people's health. Therefore, there is a need for management measures at the Jade Emperor temples specifically and at many other folk belief worship sites in the Seven Mountains, An Giang Province, in general.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Notes

[1] "Cửu huyền trăm họ" is a familiar term used by the people of the Mekong Delta region to refer to the ancestors of their family and community. Although it means "a hundred families" (百姓), it is not entirely distant, but rather reflects a "bloodline" connection across many generations. The ancestors of

one person might have been the ancestors of another family in a past life, and vice versa. Therefore, despite being "a hundred families," they are still part of the same "lineage," inseparable from one another. Revering and worshipping the "hundred families" is equivalent to worshipping the ancestors of one's own family. In this multi-dimensional and "cyclical" relationship, each person finds spiritual support in the ancestors of others, even if they do not know each other.

[2] The concept of the Seven Mountains being the site of "golden palaces and jade halls" mainly originates from the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religious tradition and, to a certain extent, from the Daoist belief in imm ortals introduced by Chinese migrants to Southern Vietnam (Nam Bộ) since the second half of the 17th century. According to this belief system, the Seven Mountains region—particularly Cấm Mountain—is a sacred land where, in the future, "golden palaces and jade halls" will appear. These structures are belie ved to be built of dazzling and magnificent treasures. Within them, people will live in prosperity and a bundance—free from death, illness, and suffering—an ideal realm known as the "celestial paradise." To attain this celestial realm and dwell in the "golden palaces and jade halls," individuals must engage in s piritual cultivation and refrain from committing evil deeds. Those who act immorally will be condemn ed and face eternal punishment, losing both body and soul. The vision of the "golden palaces and jade halls" in Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương belief has significantly influenced other indigenous religions such as Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa and Hoa Hao Buddhism. Accordingly, followers of these religions consider Cấm Mount ain a "heavenly realm" inhabited and governed by divine beings, who await the day when the "golden palaces and jade halls" are revealed. From the mid-19th century to the first half of the 20th century, man y followers of these religious traditions came to Cấm Mountain to practice asceticism and spread their faith. The image of Cấm Mountain is widely referenced in religious scriptures of these traditions—espe cially in Hoa Hao Buddhism. Under the strong influence of religious ideologies, Cấm Mountain has be come a spiritual axis for religious followers in Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, and Hoa Hao Buddhism. However, in some cases, excessive belief may lead to superstition (Dật and Nguyễn 1955; Nguyễn 2019).

[3] The doctrine of the "End of the Dharma" or "End Times" in indigenous religions of Southern Vietnam is closely associated with the concept of the Three Epochs (*Tam Ngươn*). According to these religions, the Three Epochs consist of three periods: *Thượng Ngươn* (the Upper Epoch), *Trung Ngươn* (the Middle Epoch), and *Hạ Ngươn* (the Lower Epoch). The conclusion of these three periods signifies the destruction of humanity and the establishment of a new era (the return to the Upper Epoch). The origins of the doctrine of the End of the Dharma (*Mạt pháp*) or End Times in indigenous religions stem from the division of time in Buddhism. Buddhism categorizes time into three periods: True Dharma (*Chánh pháp*), Semblance Dharma (*Tượng pháp*), and Degenerate Dharma (*Mạt pháp*). The True Dharma period is believed to be the time when Gautama Buddha was alive and teaching. During this period, his disciples were highly diligent, practiced according to the Buddha's teachings, and many attained enlightenment and Buddhahood. This era lasted for approximately 500 years after the Buddha's passing into Nirvana. The Semblance Dharma period followed the True Dharma period and lasted for about 1,000 years. During this time, successive generations of patriarchs preserved and propagated the Dharma by transmitting robes and bowls. Many practitioners achieved spiritual accomplishments, though fewer than during the True Dharma period. The Degenerate Dharma period began after the 1,000 years of the Semblance Dharma. It is described as a time of decline in the Dharma, where practitioners lost true faith, became divided, and pursued personal gain and power. Society became fractured, human life was marked by violence and suffering, and people abandoned the Buddha's teachings. As a result, very few could achieve enlightenment during this period. This era is believed to last around 10,000 years. Within the Degenerate Dharma period (*Hạ Ngươn*), it is prophesied that Maitreya Buddha (*Đức Phật Di Lặc*) will appear to re-establish the Upper Epoch, ushering in a renewed age of peace and prosperity.

[4] Approximately $8 to $20 USD

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Mutual Contribution of Manipuri Religion and their Traditional Handicrafts in Bangladesh

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Abstract

One unique thing about the Manipuri ethnic group in the Indian subcontinent is their wide range of religious beliefs and their ways of praying. The Manipuri's syncretized religion made them unique from other ethnic tribes in Bangladesh. They have their language, history, ancestry, culture, and practices. They mostly follow the ancient religion of Sanatana, and many of them also follow their indigenous faith, called Sanamahism. Hinduism spread in the eighteenth century, and was syncretized with Manipuri religion. However, some Manipuri people are devotees of Islam. Different religious beliefs urge them to observe different formalities. Manipuri traditional handicrafts are ancient and play an integral role in their culture. Manipuri traditional handicraft production provides an extra means of financial support and feature prominently in their religious celebrations. This study shows the mutual contribution between the Manipuri religion and their present-day home, Bangladesh. It shows how the different religious beliefs of the Manipuri community shaped their handicraft production. In the same way, it further shows how the observation of religious formalities is dependent on their traditional handicrafts.

Keywords: Mutual contribution; Manipuri; Manipuri religion; Hinduisation; Manipuri handicrafts

Introduction

The Bangladeshi Manipuri ethnic minority migrated from Manipur state, India. Manipuri refers to the indigenous population residing in the Manipur region of Assam, India. The information available about the Manipuri settlement does not fully support the claim that the Manipuris began to migrate to Bangladesh during the Manipur-Burma War in 1765. It is possible that they started settling there in the early eighteenth century. In 1765, Myanmar's leader fought with Vagya Chandra Joy Singh, the king of Manipur. After being vanquished, King Vagya Chandra fled to Kachar, Assam, and Tripura, and many of his followers migrated to Bangladesh. A. K. Sheram says that Manipuri people came to Bangladesh from Assam, Kachar, Tripura, and Manipur later. He divided the movement of Manipuris to Bangladesh into three times: a) the Ancient Period, which was before the Manipur-Burma War; b) the Interim Period, which was during the War; and c) the Following Period, which was afterwards (Sheram 1996).

Historians suggest that Manipuris migrated to Bangladesh in the eighteenth century, likely during the 1755 Burmese war, as per the Tripura census. The Manipuris first reached Bangladesh and Srihatta (now Sylhet) around 1714 (Sheram 1996). Other historical evidence suggests the Meiteis settled in Sylhet during Manipur ruler Pamheiba (Garivnawaz)'s reign from 1709 to 1748 (Sanajaoba 2005). However, some literature contradicts the claim that Manipuris migrated to Bangladesh during the 1765 Manipur-Burma conflict or in the early eighteenth century. The number of Manipuris is uncertain due to data availability and reliability. In Bangladesh, 30,618 persons are Manipuris (Ahmmed and Singh 2007). Manipuris live in Sylhet city and its adjacent areas. Some settled in Netrokona's Durgapur, and Commilla's Kashba (Satter 1971). A part of Dhaka city is still named Manipuri Para. They are rarely found there, though relics evidence their previous settlement. Moulvibazar district has the most Manipuri residents in Sylhet division.

Md Faisal Ahmmed and Laksmikanta Singh studied the concentration of the Manipuri population in Bangladesh (Ahmmed and Singh 2007).

Table 1. Manipuri Inhabited Areas in Bangladesh

Districts	Area	Residing villages
Sylhet	Sylhet Sadar	1. Amborkhana 2. Nayabaza 3. Shibgonj 4. Goaipara 5. Kewapara 6. Sagordighirpar 7. Baghbari 8. Lala dighirpar 9. Lamabazar 10. Doxingach 11. Brojonath tila
Moulvibazar	Kulaura	1. Photiguli 2. Goalbari 3. Naldhari 4. Boroitoli
	Srimongal	1. Ramnagar 2. Khaspur 3. Balishira
	Borolekha	1.Gournagar 2. Puthadhor 3. Chotodhamai 4. Patharia 5. Gourangabil
	Kamalgonj	1. Madhobpur 2. Chaiciri 3. Homerjan 4. Majhergaon 5. Shangaon 6. Haqtiarkhola 7. Sripur 8. Bhandarigaon 9. Chitlia 10. Noyapattan 11. Ganganagar 12. Bhanubil 13. Katabil 14. Konagaon 15. Tatyeygaon 16. Mongolpur
Habigonj		1. Gaborkhula 2. Abadgaon 3. Shibnagar 4. Dudhpatil
Sunamgonj		1. Nayapara 2. Lakhat 3. Ratanpur

Mohammed Shamim Khan (2008) provided a narrative about the Manipuri religion, its origins, and its current beliefs, while Haobam Bidyarani Devi (2018) provided a similar account of the Manipuri Pangal community. E. Nilkanta Singha (2020) discussed socio-cultural changes in Manipur, India, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ningthoukhongjam Khelpriya Devi (2020) incorporated this seventeenth century history. Yumnam Rosy (2020) draws upon the history of Manipur, India, and found no evidence linking the ethnicity, religious beliefs, and handicrafts of the Manipuri people. Several initiatives were undertaken for Manipuri handicrafts study both in India and Bangladesh. Besides, participant observation among Manipuri people in Bangladesh is rarely undertaken.

This study will contribute to specifying the interrelation between Manipuri religious beliefs and their crafts. Thus, craft buyers will be able to differentiate between Manipuri's original and introduced products. This study also sheds light on the parallel origins and remarkable journeys of religious beliefs and crafts. It will help them rethink craft development as they are not willing to consider their crafts as a career pathway.

The methodology and rationale of this study are mainly analytical and empirical. Both primary and secondary sources were consulted to prepare this article. The secondary data consists of published and unpublished books and journals. Primary data was collected by the method of participant observation of Manipuri people in Bangladesh. Multi-sited visits were made for data collection. Participants include weaving women, community leaders, entrepreneurs, and businessmen distributing and retailing Manipuri handicrafts. Multi-sited visits were held at different Manipuri inhabited areas in Moulvibazar district, Sylhet city, and Dhaka, Bangladesh. As multi-sited ethnographers' research topics are not limited to specific locations or people, and often involve interviews, text analysis, internet, photography, and video rather than participant observation, ritual initiation, and apprenticeship this is a flexible research strategy (Robben and Sluka 2007, 334).

Late twentieth century global anthropological history emphasizes travel, communication, and commerce, making it perfect for multi-sited fieldwork (Wolf 1982). However, anthropologists like Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Margaret Mead were unaware of the connections between people and their environment through trade, travel, and power. They were more interested in local than trans-local cultures and connections (Robben and Sluka 2007).

Gupta and Ferguson (1992) questioned the belief that place, location, culture, society, and collective identity are all part of a complex, raising questions about cultural differentiation. Post the collapse of the Berlin Wall, globalization accelerated, making these issues relevant. Gupta and Ferguson argue borders symbolize globalization more than stable governments and communities (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). David B. Edwards (1994) disagreed with the question of how to maintain trans-local qualities and mutually reinforcing effects of different field sites, and how to honour his in-person

experiences and the intuitive links between them (Robben and Sluka 2007, 333). The challenge of ethnographic fieldwork is how to properly account for all the links that spread out around the world from research sites that were once easier to define. Frequently, sited ethnography is presented as the best way to do this (Robben and Sluka 2007, 332).

Ulf Hannerz points out that this research perspective would better be labelled trans-local than multi-sited because it is not the different localities themselves but their interconnections that matter the most (Robben and Sluka 2007, 333; Hannerz 2003, 201-216). Frequently sited research, though new, has great potential for ethnography and can help us learn more about new areas of anthropology. Here ethnographers do not have to stay at a research site for a whole year. Instead, they can mix week-long or month-long visits to specific places with things like telephone calls, observations in public places, a thorough search of websites and news groups, trips with research participants, and so on (Robben and Sluka 2007, 335).

The result of this study is discussed in three segments. First, the historical evolution of the Manipuri religion. Second, the impact of religion on Manipuri traditional handicrafts (MTH) production. Lastly, the dependence of Manipuri religion on their traditional handicrafts.

The Evolution of the Manipuri Religion

The growth and development of the Manipuri religion in the sub-continent can be discussed considering some basic issues. These major issues are: 1) the adoption of the Manipuri ancient religion; 2) the chronological development of the Manipuri religion; 3) the king's contribution to the furtherance of Manipuri religion; and 4) Sanskritization and the modern form of Manipuri religion. The growth and development of Hinduism in Manipur was a long continuous process. Before the adoption of Hinduism, the Meiteis were the dominant community of Manipur state, and followed their traditional religion. Accordingly, they maintained unique traditional customs, institutions, scripts, culture and religious beliefs and practices (Devi 2020).

Major changes happened in the Manipuri socio-cultural structure because of external forces (Singha 2020). Among those external forces, Hinduisation is responsible for drastic changes in Manipuri socio-cultural structure. This Hinduisation is a strong social influence on Manipuri society. Casteless Manipuris were assimilated and merged into the Hindu society and thus they assigned a social order and eventually were entitled to equal status in the region (Sudhir 2012, 68).

Historically the Manipuri king's conversion to a new religion affected the Manipuri religion and its socio-cultural structures. Chronologically, Manipuri people first came into contact with Hinduism in the form of Vishnu worship in the middle of the 15th century CE, i.e. during the reign of King Kyamba, and secondly, the development of the Nimandi and Ramanandi cult in the eighteenth century CE. The third stage is the

introduction of the Goudiya cult during the reign of King Bheigyachandra, and the fourth and final stage was the development of the religious authoritative power of Brahma Sabha in the 19th century CE (Singh 2012, 55–56).

During the reign of King Kyamba in the fifteenth century many Brahmins migrated to Manipur for the very purpose of preaching the Hindu religion. It was especially through the cultural project of the Brahmins that the whole myth of the Meiteis was re-narrated with elements from Hindu mythology. It began with the renaming of the state from 'Kangleipak' to 'Manipur', relating Manipur to the Mahabharata, ruled by Babrubahana, son of Arjuna, the great Pandava hero (Sudhir 2012, 81). All the Meitei kings were also given Hindu names and declared to be Kshatriyas (Kabui 1991, 257; Singh 1965).

King Kyamba introduced Vishnu worship after receiving a small image of Vishnu as a gift from King Chaopha Khekhomba of Pong, and after that, built a Vishnu temple at Vishnupur, India in which the image of Vishnu was installed. Thus, the reign of King Kyamba (1467–1508 CE), witnessed not only the immigration of Brahmins to Manipur but also the beginning of Vishnu worship among the people of Manipur (Singh 1965, 83–84). The worship of Vishnu received special patronage from the King, but it was confined only to the royal family members (Kabui 1991, 236).

It was due to the influence of Brahmins that the construction of icons of Hindu gods and goddesses started gradually which caused the growth and development of temples in the valley of Manipur (Sanajaoba 2005, 453). With time, they began to settle in the Manipur valley under royal patronage and then carried on their proselytizing activities. Thereafter, they played a very significant role in the socio-religious life of the people of the valley which paved the way for the rise and growth of Hinduism in Manipur (Singh 2012, 62–63). The popularity of the Hindu religion among the Manipuri people was widely spread when it was adopted as a state religion of Manipur in eighteenth century CE (Shakespear 1913, 409–455).

There are many important sources, like epigraphic evidence, history of numismatics, and so on, that have already established the facts of the adoption of the Hindu religion by Manipuri people towards the beginning of the eighteenth century C.E. (Sanajaoba 2005, 159). In the early eighteenth century, the social and cultural life of the Manipuri people changed dramatically for the very reason of Hinduisation. During the monarchical government, they showed their superiority in all aspects of the socio-cultural domain of the hill tracks of Manipur, India (Sanajaoba 2005, 145).

However, this spiritual transformation affected their whole social and cultural lifestyle. Whatever the customs, the rites and ceremonies as well as the festivals observed by the Meitei community in Manipur are actually in conformity with the Hindu ideals and practices during the reign of Garibniwaz (Singh 1980, 126). As noted earlier, the process of socio-religious and cultural integration of Manipur, India, began during the reign of Garibniwaz, but was consolidated by his grandson, Bheigyachandra. He especially took various steps to the popularization of Hinduism in Manipur by constructing temples and carving images of the gods and goddesses (Kabui 1991, 275). He installed the image of

Shri Govindaji (Singh 1993, 58). However, one important fact during the reign of Bheigyachandra was that there occurred the emergence of a new syncretic religion, and a new dance form, "Ras dance", was introduced (Singh 2012, 56).

The reign of Manipuri king Charairongba marked a drastic socio-cultural and political transformation in the history of Manipur. King Charairongba's reign was very significant as his conversion to Hinduism as well as his great patronage of the new religion had produced a great positive impact for the consolidation of Hindu colonialism in Manipur (Paratt 2013, 135). The development of Hinduism reached greater heights during the reign of King Pamheiba known by his Hindu name Garibniwaz (Moirangthem 1996, 119). When Garibniwaz ascended to the throne of Manipur in 1709 CE, the history of Hinduism in Manipur took a new form (Singh 2012, 37). He not only accepted Hinduism as the state religion but also imposed it on all his subjects and it marked the opening of a new era in the socio-religious spheres of Manipur (Moirangthem 1996, 120). Therefore, the reign of Garibniwaz was crucial, a transitional period in the religious history of Manipur. We must note that at first his religious policy formed a death blow to the traditional religious practices, and secondly, it laid the basic foundation for complete transformation of the social-cultural life of the Manipuri people under the influence of Hindu way of life (Singh 2012, 61). When Hinduism became the state religion, the traditional socio-cultural and religious system of Manipur was integrated with the Hindu traditions (Bareh 2001, 99).

Manipuri people have worshipped gods and goddesses through dance and music since the earliest times. Therefore, dance is a part and parcel of the cultural life of the people of Manipur (Singh 2012, 99). Manipur has made a significant contribution to the evolution of Hindu culture in India through her dance and music. Hence, as a result, cultural forms and figures in Meitei society were reconstructed and retransformed many times through various measures taken by the king and religious authority to survive and sustain the power and authority of the king in different historical periods. The major impact of the Hinduisation process in Manipur was on the socio-cultural identity of the Meitei community. With the emergence of Hinduism in Manipur, the process of Sanskritisation was begun and it resulted in the renunciation of the traditional religion of Meities (Devi 2020, 146). Besides the growth and development of Hinduisation, Sanskritization took place under the guidance of Manipur rulers, India (Singh 1980, 149).

Traditionally, the Meiteis were divided into seven clans known as the salais. Under these clan oligarchies there existed a feudal social system, having two social classes, namely the royal aristocracy and the commoners, including the slaves. Surprisingly after Hinduisation, all the Meitei people were classed as Kshatriyas and accordingly so-called seven salais were also assigned with the Hindu gotras (Sudhir 2012, 81). The Brahmin priests used these gotra names during the life cycle rituals connected with birth, death, and marriage ceremonies. They played an important role in the socio-cultural and religious life of the Meitei society. Hinduism changed the traditional Meitei custom considerably. As a result of mass conversion into Hinduism, their indigenous ancestral

deities were also identified with Hindu deities. For instance, the Meitei god Nongpok Ningthou was identical with Lord Shiva, Soraren, king of heaven with Indra, Wangbaren, the water god with Varuna, the goddess Panthoibi with Parvati or Durga and the god Pakhangba was identical with Lord Vishnu.

In addition to this, most of the traditional Meitei festivals were given Hindu names or modified with Hindu forms. For example, in the traditional festivals of Meiteis: Waira Tenkap became Kirtan of Lord Rama; Kongba Leithong Phatpa became Vishnu Sankranti; Ahong Khongching became Ratha-Yatra; and Heikru Hidongba became Jal-Yatra (Sudhir 2012, 81). Kwak Tanba was then substituted by Dusserah as well as Chanou Hui Chintu was replaced by Govardhan Puja (Singh 2012, 77). In this way, the pre-Hindu festivals were thoroughly Sanskritised and modified to bring them within the Hindu fold. Apart from these, the Hinduised Meitei started to celebrate many Hindu religious festivals, like Holi, Janmasthami, Durga Puja, Ratha Yatra, Shivaratri, Saraswati Puja, Diwali, and so on.

Other changes brought by Hinduism were on the rites and ritual ceremonies associated with various stages of life were modified and expanded by addition of Hindu elements. According to the chronicles and other ancient Manipuri texts, prior to the Hinduisation in Manipur, there were four methods of disposal of the dead, namely Nungshitki Potloi (left in air), Ishingi Potloi (immersed in water), Leibakki Potloi (interred in earth), and Meigi Potloi (cremation) (Sudhir 2012, 37–38). All these methods were based on the nature of death. But the system of cremation was allowed after Hinduisation. Due to the acceptance of the Hinduisation process, the role and function of the traditional Maiba and Maibi (priests and priestesses) were also replaced by the Brahmins (Singh 2012, 50–51). Hinduism also has a considerable effect upon the rites of the passage of the Meitei. Due to the cultural contact with mainland India, various other changes also appeared in the Meitei culture, as the Meiteis began to regular pilgrimages in the Hindu holy places. The practice of merging the forehead bones/ funeral ash of the cremated person in the river Ganga was also followed (Kabui 1991, 258). So, pilgrimages to the holy places of Hinduism are still practiced in Meitei society, in syncretism with Meitei indigenous religion with its gods, goddesses, legends, tradition, myths, rituals, beliefs, practices, rites, and ceremonies.

The Brahmanical faith and Vaishnava Hinduism constitute the essence of present-day Hinduism in Manipur (Singh 2012, 71). As a prospective measure of the Hinduisation process, idol worship became very popular in Manipur. Many temples sprang up and the most famous is the palace temple dedicated to Shri Govindaji. The temple of Shri Govindaji is the institution par excellence connected with the cultural life of people of Manipur valley (Sharma 2009, 24). The development of Hinduism in Manipur resulted in great literary progress which had witnessed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries CE. The Bengali script was adopted in place of the archaic Meitei script. The local writers were also attracted towards producing those kinds of literature which mainly focused on Hindu religion and culture. The primary objective behind such activities was to create awareness among the Manipuri people about Hindu culture and

consciousness for preserving and promoting Hinduism (Singh 2012, 81–83). Manipuri literature proved to be a convincing force for the propagation and popularization of the Hindu religion and culture among the masses. It may be mentioned here that through the process of Sanskritisation, the devotional songs were sung in archaic Bengali and Sanskrit. The social outlook of the Meiteis also underwent tremendous changes due to the influences of Bengali language and literature (Lal 1990, 101). As a result, the people started not only to adopt Hindu names (especially Sanskrit and Bengali) but also used it in the names of localities, hills, rivers, and so on (Kabui 1991, 277).

Moreover, they liked to use Bengali cloths, such as dhotis and kurtas, and even the royalty had almost adopted the Bengali style with minimum ritualistic dresses and costumes (Singha 2020, 76). It thus, indicates that the Meiteis were not only the followers of Hindu culture but also the preservers of Sanskrit and Bengali culture. So, the major changes in socio-cultural and religious spheres which were specially made by the king and religious authorities during the period of Hinduisation were parts of such a project. Undeniably, the whole of Meitei society was gradually transformed into a Hindu culture. Thus, the growth and development of Hinduism in Manipur valley marked the synthesis of the old and new elements and caused a syncretized form of Hinduism to develop, which is still practised in the valley of Manipur. Later, Bangladeshi Manipuri people experienced the same trend.

The Impact of Religion on MTH Production

The Manipuri handicrafts production process has a deep relationship with sacredness. Manipuri women, after waking in the morning, do cleaning-related duties and only then take a bath for their physical purity. They then do household duties like cooking and other daily work. They usually do not enter the kitchen before taking a bath. They do not touch their weaving tools before taking a bath. This work routine continues all through the year.

Many Manipuri products (except some made for marketing) are made of joined pieces. The excepted products are Sharees and Scarves. Manipuri traditional dresses like Fanek, and Fidup bedding clothes, are made of several joint parts. Though the joining of several parts together looks improper, this is the unique process they follow. There are some reasons behind it. For example, they weave pieces of intended clothes at different times. When they get free time, they weave a small portion of the weaving. Thus, the time of weaving depends on how much free time they gain after completing their household duties. One Manipuri weaver was asked if any cloth had different parts, and then its look became odd. She thereafter added that "we emphasise tradition rather than outer looking beauty of the product."

Muslim Manipuri (Pangal) weavers cannot weave "Wangkei Fidup" (a blouse worn by women) properly. Muslim weavers have their distinct design, which has a religious impact on their products. They also produce designs from the imagination like weavers

of other religions. Here, weavers from Hinduism and any other religions also have a religious impact on their design of products. But Muslim weavers use designs based on their religious beliefs which are absent in the case of other religions.

Manipuri handicrafts contain Moirang (a triangle-shaped temple design) which is a must for some dresses like Fanek, Phidup, and Sharee. If anyone does not find Moirang in Manipuri products, they can easily regard that product as a copied product made by another community or from another locality. Moirang means "temple" of the Meithei religion whether large or small. There are other additional designs that they follow in the middle border of their product. That is "Leikup" and "Leijao". Leikup indicates a small flower and leaf of a tree and Leijao indicates a flower or leaf that is larger in size. The specific mood of the weavers determines the design of clothes. The design indicates here the design of the inside (body of the cloth) design of the clothes. Mainly border designs are focused on "Moirang". Moirang never changes, though the designs of Moirang can vary from cloth to cloth.

Manipuri textile weaving has been linked to social and ritual events since ancient times. Manipuri textile weaving has had a significant impact on the social and economic aspects of the Manipuri people's lives over the years. The inhabitants of this region view the practice of the profession not as an obligation but as a revered obligation. In the Meitei community, the act of weaving textiles is seen as a representation of the cosmic process. In the dance of creation, the male and female messengers of God (Maiba and Maibi) evoke the sound of spinning and weaving. To state this simply, creation is a splendid process of intricately merging to form a cosmic entity. In the traditional belief system of the Meitei, the God of Handicrafts (Leismbi) is highly important as they are said to have given the Meitei people the techniques of textile weaving and the secrets of dance creation. Nonetheless, this is an alternate stance within the Meitei religious system. According to this, humanity acquired the art of textile weaving not by divine intervention, but through initiative in learning from nature. Humans witnessed arachnids intricately constructing their silk traps on the shrubs and bushes and actively engaged with this task. Notable kings known for their support for craft manufacturing during their reign were "Jabista Nongda Laivel Pakhangba" (thought to have governed from 34 CE to 153 CE) and King Loyamba.

An intricate design is named Akoybi (circular) since the pattern is round, with each circle linking the next, and each circle is divided into patterns with significant motifs and names. A romantic narrative links it to the fabled serpent Pakhamba, who was killed by the goddess's husband and later tried to atone for it by replicating its scaly patterns through textile design. Inspiration from the motif can be less romantic and more inventive. However, this simple description scarcely conveys the Akoybi's complexity. Bangladeshi Manipuri handlooms rarely have Akoybi designs. Instead, Indian Manipuri weavers follow the Akoybi pattern.

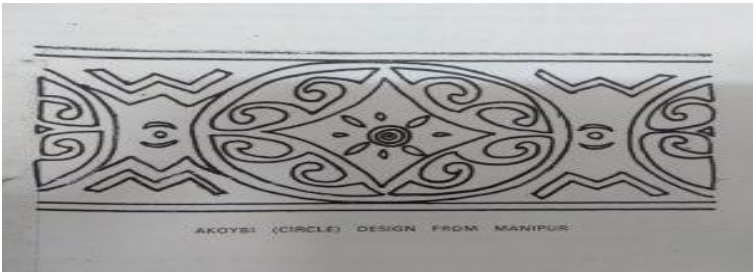


Figure 1. Pattern of Akoybi Design

Likewise, religious belief has an impact on motif design. Temples of the Meitei, Bishnupriya, and Pangals have an important focus on Manipuri handicrafts. Weavers designed Moirang fabrics as images of their religious temple. Bishnupriya and Meitei Manipuri have temples as the main place for worship. The Manipuri Muslim Pangals often draw Moirang, thinking it is the symbol for the mosque. Temples and mosques have similar shapes when drawn in handicrafts. Some Muslim Pangals use variations that are more obviously Islamic in design.

Manipuri people, as a religious obligation, have a pit loom in every family home. They produce Sharees, mosquito nets, handkerchiefs, and woollen scarves. Weavers collect raw materials for the pit loom by themselves. Now, modern spinning mills provide yarn for pit loom production. Now, every district of Bangladesh has a power loom combined with a pit loom. Whereas Indian Manipur has developed rapidly, Bangladeshi Manipuri still use traditional pit looms. Manipuri women believe that traditional looms are more suited to them than modern looms. Every weaver has a loom of varying sizes. The researcher found a few families who no longer produce handicrafts requiring large looms, but they have kept their old looms in their homes. Some families have restructured the walls of their houses but have kept monuments of their old waist loom. This fact shows their deep interaction with handicrafts and with related traditions.

Manipuri people live together communally. A Manipuri community is made up of a few families, and many communities live together to make up Manipuri culture. Their way of living in a community is not always based on the old model; instead, the democratic process drives them. They do not have autocratic or hereditary leaders like some other Bangladeshi groups do. Rather, every Manipuri village has a Mandapa, which is a hall or pavilion used for public ceremonies, usually in the style of Hindu temples. For Manipuri, this is a public area. This temple is an idol designed for making handicrafts.

Bangladeshi Manipuri people brought with them ancestral "Lockei-Sagei-Shinglup" from India, based on an ancient social system, way of life, housing patterns, food habits, clothing, social customs and religion. Manipuri Meithei or Manipuri Vishnupriya did not lose their spiritual relationship with their ancient religion. They survive in Bangladesh depending on their belief and feeling of "mother—mother tongue—motherland." They

never speak the Bengali language among themselves; if anyone cannot speak Meitei or Manipuri that person is not regarded as Bangladeshi nor Manipuri, but rather in the middle of the two. This Manipuri sense of identity derives from ideology and ideology comes from parents, family, society, and surroundings. One educated Manipuri boy said, "We are Manipuri, and we have limitations such as we have three classes or groups, having different religions and each group has different traditions. But we can't go beyond our Manipuri ethnic identity". A Manipuri girl's manufacturing skill starts from her mother or another woman relative of the family. Womenfolk teach their girls as a mandate of serving tradition as religion.

One can easily differentiate between Manipuri products (mainly Sharee) and other products, because Manipuri products have special skills and features. Every Manipuri Sharee has Moirang at its border. The inner body may have different types of designs. Sharees woven on power looms do not contain Moirang, and the inner part of Sharee and other long dresses do not contain natural designs like trees, leaves, and other natural elements. Therefore, in terms of MTH, there must be visible religious temple design "Moirang." Thus, religious belief is the core of MTH weaving.

There are differences between authentic Manipuri cotton and copied cotton imported from other parts of Bangladesh. Firstly, samples are made with the design of the English letter "H" or "M," and these types of products give no impression of the religion while weaving. Copied clothed sheets are made to a fixed design and shape, and are commercially on a large scale. On the other hand, traditional Manipuri cotton is made as a part of recreation and as a mandate of tradition and religion. According to the view of a Manipuri undergraduate college student, "We weave, knit, and process the preparatory task of our product as a recreation. Bangladeshi girls use the internet, mobile games, and watch movies, and in that free time, we produce handicrafts."

The Dependence of the Manipuri Religion on MTH

Many Manipuris now follow the Chaitanya faith of Sanatana Dharma, a form of Vaishnava Hinduism. But before they converted to Sanatana Dharma in the 1800s, the Manipuri people followed the Apokpa religion. They did not completely abandon their religious views, though. Their rites and rituals are a mix of old and new ideas. Manipuris celebrate religious events like Rathayatra, Rasa Purnima, and Jhulanjatra with great pomp and ceremony. They also celebrate events from their culture, like Laiharaoba and Sajibu Chairaoba, and worship home gods like Sanamahi, Pakangba, and Leimaren (Mohammed Shamim Khan 2008).

The Manipuri religion, also known as Apokpa or Sanamahi, is an ancient religion that infuses life of the Manipuri people as narrated in Indian and British literature. The religion's core is the importance of natural phenomena and the worship of various forces as deities. Manipuri dances, songs, music, and martial arts evolved from appeasing the gods. The religion has religious literature and sacred texts, called "Puya," containing

philosophical discussions about the universe, life, the soul, nature, and death. The supreme man, Atyyakuru Shidaba, is considered the origin of the universe. Manipuris also worship Paramanari, the supreme woman, mother of the universe. The dharma of Manipuri society combines religion, life, science, art, and morality.

Responses from key informants were used to develop a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and social significance of MTH; these aspects are connected to the Manipuri religious observations as well. Certain items are customary attire, while others serve ceremonial functions, and are only utilized on specific occasions. Handicrafts help people to make a living. But few of the Manipuri families adopt weaving handicrafts only for revenue. They mainly focus on MTH to continue their established culture. Handicrafts are an important element of observing religious obligations. According to the primary sources, there are approximately seven different types of handicrafts process that are produced in the area under investigation. Weaving, knitting, stitching, and dyeing are some of the arts in this category. Beading is traditionally done by Manipuri women, but now most is done by business owners. These days, the community of Manipuri only has a few members who are skilled at carving and pottery. MTH are largely influenced by culture, which is what determines responsibilities within a household and a society.

Three groups of Manipuri have positive interactions among them, and they believe in unity. They become a common unit while observing common festivals like "Raash" and the "Puja" festivals though some of them (Pangals) do not conform to these festivals principally. Having some differences in belief they become united during these festivals. No one can differentiate them in respect of Meitei, Bishnupriya and Muslim Pangals while interacting with Bangladeshi people. It was noted by key informants that culture also plays a role in the development of skills. These skills are typically formed through children's hobbies and household activities, which are typically passed down through the female line. Handicraft items are mostly utilized in cultural events such as traditional weddings, religious rites (Raas Leela dance), and other birth and death ceremonies, which are still spiritually vital in the Manipuri community according to key informants.

Manipuri women are involved in the production of a variety of items, including Furit, Fanek, and Fidup. Manipuri women adorn themselves with Furit as a shirt for the upper body, while they wear Fanek to cover the lower half of their body. Additionally, they wear Fidup on the upper side of the Furit. Manipuri women skillfully craft a variety of items using traditional Manipuri clothes and coordinating colors with Sharee. These include Innafi, which is worn to wrap the upper part of the body (wrapping the upper part of the Muslim women is a mandate under Islamic Shariah law).

When asked about the motivations behind people's participation in handicrafts, industry experts typically cited cultural and historical factors as the most compelling justifications. The habits and traditions of the Manipuri people are the inspiration for many of the handicrafts that Manipuri women manufacture. They maintain their traditional practices and cultural identity. In the past, people would wear hand-made

clothes. They use this as a source of inspiration for clothing designs for both men and women.

The primary data revealed that women manufacture MTH for their personal use. They dress in traditional attire during the festival. They do not part with their traditional ceremonies even for the most solemn of ceremonies, from birth to death. Typically, they divide these into two separate parts, such as a Fanek and a Fidup. Festival season is the busiest period of the year for the sale of handicrafts. Informants suggested that the handicrafts play in uplifting and conserving the culture of the Manipuri people is a significant one. Women manufacture handicrafts for the sole purpose of keeping their traditions and culture alive. Clothes woven in the Manipuri houses are the thread that binds one Manipuri individual from birth to death. In addition to that, the clothes they wear daily are hand-made by them. The worth of MTH can be classified into two categories: the first is cultural or social value, and the second is economic value.

According to them, the quality of Manipuri products is contingent upon the quality of the raw ingredients. However, the issue lies in the fact that brokers typically provide low standard raw materials at a reduced cost, which helps the weavers. Occasionally, suppliers disperse assortments of blended raw materials for spinning. Consequently, the overall quality of the woven product diminishes. Raw materials and handicrafts are brought from the Indian Manipuri region for specific purposes, such as marriage ceremonies of aristocratic Manipuri individuals and other festival events that involve dances.

Some of their traditional products are specially made for daily and occasional purposes. Manipuri people use a clothing sheet on the floor on which they sit and eat rice. This is called Chak Cha Fida which indicates some joint words. Chak means rice, Cha means to eat, and Fida means seat. Besides, they knit and weave blankets for the winter and summer seasons. Bedding of their tradition is called Tolayfi which is used as their bed sheet. A special kind of bedding is used to keep the dead body of a Manipuri Muslim in the grave. Thus, a Manipuri is connected with MTH from birth to death.

Manipuri Culture and MTH

The Manipuri people live through dance and singing. Dance (Jagoi) is the most important part of Manipuri culture. In this dance, the body moves to make either a circle or an ellipse. Rasa dance is the core of Manipuri dance culture. Manipuri dances are of two main types: folk and Shastriya (classical) dance. The folk dances of Manipur are Laiharaoba, Khamba-Thoibi, Meibi Jagoi, and Leisham Jagoi. The formal dances are Rasa, Gostha Leela, Udukhol, and Mridanga. Manipuri dance is known for its *lashya* (gentleness), devotion, and compassion. The feelings of life have no limits. Thyang-Ta, Mridonga Nritya, and some forms of Shri Krishna Nartan remind this. For every occasion of dance, they wear traditional dresses. Even every distinct dance has a dress. Thus, dance and MTH go in a single line.

The marriage system of Manipuri is founded upon distinctive norms and practices and categorized into three segments. Before the wedding (Hinaba), the boy's parents visit the girl's parents. After calculating the horoscopes, a mutually agreed-upon day for the meeting is scheduled. During the upcoming meeting, known as Yathang Thanaga, the girl's parents provide their consent. Following that, the subsequent phase is known as 'Waroipot puba', during which the groom's relatives present food, and the agreement is ultimately formalized. The engagement is announced among friends and relatives, a tradition known as "Heijapot." Subsequently, friends and relatives from the boy's family visit the girl's parents, bearing food, fruits, and gifts. The Brahmin arranges the marriage. The men attire themselves in dhoti and kurta, complemented by a shawl draped around their shoulders. The women, on the other hand, wear pink Fanek and white Chader. The seating arrangement is organized in a circular formation around a Tulsi plant. The bridal gown is distinctive. The bride is required to wear the Rash Lila skirt. The attire of the groom consists of a white dhoti, kurta, and turban. The Kirtans and Shahnai music play as the bride and groom circumambulate the Tulsi plant seven times. The bride gracefully executes the choreographed movements in synch with the melodic Shahnai music. She portrays the character of a gopi. MTH wearing is mandatory in all stages of a marriage. Meitei marriages have numerous commendable aspects. The guests are presented with Dakshina (gift). The dowry is not obligatory but rather discretionary. The girl's parents supply her with important things, including kitchenware, sewing machines, equipment, and clothing. Traditionally, the bride's parents gift weaving tools with other gifts. Manipuri are engaged with handicrafts for wearing, gift making, and decoration, during the marriage.

At different times, different cultures have influenced the women of Manipur, who seem to have more freedom and visibility than women in other parts of the country. If Manipuri women visit their relatives, they usually prepare woven gifts for their relatives. In response, they are also offered woven gifts by relatives. These rules are their tradition is maintained except for some accidental reason. If this tradition is broken by any party, it is regarded as an insult to those to whom it accrues. In the premarital setting, the guardian of the bridegroom traditionally asked about the bride's weaving skill, which was a mandatory quality for Manipuri brides.

Manipuri Dance Culture, Festivals and MTH

Manipuri traditional dances are organized by the Meithei Manipuri and Bishnupriya communities. Both communities have distinct features in their dancing. Sword dances and weapon dances developed by the Meithei Manipuri, who were familiar with martial arts due to their propensity for war. Thus, Meithei Manipuri dances have variations not seen in Bishnupriya dances. Both communities wear Manipuri traditional dancing clothes.

Manipuri traditional dances became popular because of poet Rabindranath Tagore's

initiatives to promote Manipuri traditional dances. A myth in the matter of the relationship between the origin of MTH weaving and traditional Manipuri dances is popular in the Manipuri community. Manipuri weavers weave their handicrafts, falling into line with dancing steps. Key respondents informed the researcher that Manipuri traditional dance is part of Manipuri rituals. The origin of Manipuri traditional dance is based on a myth. Ancient Manipur (India) King Bhagya Chandra dreamed that he was organising a dance program. For this very reason, the Manipuri traditional "Raash" dance starts with the name of this king. After all, whatever the inspiration for Manipuri dance, it is quite dependent on MTH. Wearing crafts is a precondition for dancing.

The principle for observing festivals in Bangladesh is: "everyone belongs to his or her religion, nevertheless festivals belong to all." For this national principle of religion and festival observation, all communities including Hindu-Muslim-Buddhist-Christian observe Manipuri's common festivals harmoniously. Manipuri festival customs also offer the freedom of people of all ethnic groups and regions, and customs have the social function of uniting people and strengthening unity among three Manipuri communities. Every time a festival activity is held in the village, most of the villagers actively return to the village to participate. Some Manipuri who have migrated elsewhere are unable to return to the village, and they can only participate in the festival activities by sharing money. At present, activities are held in the villages and Moulvibazar and Sylhet cities.

MTH have a deep relation with their festivals. Festivals observed by the Muslim community and other common festivals of the Hindu religion have a precondition of wearing MTH. A major part of their festivals includes traditional dancing, and dancers collect dancing dresses from India at high prices. Common festivals are a great opportunity for Manipuri weavers to display and sell MTH to the Manipuri community as well as to the Bangladeshi Muslim community coming to enjoy the festivals. Raash festival is a popular festival for all Bangladeshi communities. The lower part of Manipuri traditional dress is called Fanek in the Meitei language. Mainly Meithei Manipuri people call it Fanek. Bishnupriya Manipuri people call it Anggaluri. But the upper part of their dress is commonly called Innafi. Innafi has two types, one is for daily usage and the other is for marriage purposes. Manipuri women wear Innafi instead of blouse which other Bangladeshi women wear. Innafi is worn on festival occasions and marriage ceremonies.

The Bangladeshi Manipuri community's major festivals are the Raash festival, and other Puja festivals with the Hindu community, Yaoshang (Durga Puja), Kang Festival, Sangai Festival, Ningol Chakouba, Eid Ul Fitre, Eid Ul Azha. Lai Haraoba. Besides the above-mentioned festivals, Indian Manipuri people along with other Naga Kuki observe Christmas, Cheiraoba Festival, Heirku Hindongba, Kut Festival, Manipur Chumpha Festival, Lui Ngai Ni, and Gang Ngai festivals.

Raas Leela is the main religious festival of the Manipuri community. This Raas Leela is in the full moon of November or December. The Manipuri Raas Utsav has been celebrated for 178 years in Shibbazar (Joramandap) of Madhabpur in Kamalganj of Moulvibazar district in Bangladesh and for 35 years in Tetaigaon of Adampur. Raash

festival has two episodes, "Rakhal Raas" during the day and "Maharaas" at night. At the beginning of Rakhal Raash, the tearful lamentations of the mothers are embodied in song coins to allow the boys Krishna, Balarama, and Sakha to go for grazing. Then Krishna's various deeds of herding cattle in Vrindavan as a shepherd in his childhood are presented. Maha Raash Leela shows a relationship between living things that is both worldly and transcendental. Maha Raash begins at night. It is a philosophy of spiritualism and materialism that is served with dance and songs as Radha Krishna's love story is told. Visitors from all districts irrespective of religion come to Moulvibazar, Madhapur, and Sylhet city during the Raash festival and watch Manipuri traditional dances. Visitors buy MTH and stay where rash festivals are arranged. Raash festival is also a significant event for the Manipuri weavers to sell handicrafts. During the traditional dance dancers wear MTH. Thus, Raash festival is the largest festival for Manipuri and the largest platform for Manipuri weavers to display connection with handicrafts.

The Yaoshang Festival of Manipur, also known as Holi, is significant in northeastern India and Bangladesh, lasting five days on the full moon day of Phalguna month. People participate in singing, dancing, and spraying dyes on each other. Children receive money from families to plan events in their neighbourhoods. Thabal Chongba is a popular dance. Yaoshang is similar to the Durga Puja in Bengal, Diwali in north India, and Bihu in Assam. During this festival, traditional dress is an important part.

Every year, the Kang Festival, also known as the Rath Yatra, takes place in villages where men are mostly in Manipuri and different spots in Moulvibazar. Manipuri people who live in the city of Sylhet also celebrate this holiday. This 10-day-long festival is one of the most important festivals in the Manipuri community. The singing of Kirtan Khubakisei (religious songs) by the people in the procession is one of the best parts of the festival. Rath Yatra is a happy festival that starts on the second day of the fourth lunar month on the Manipuri calendar. This month falls in late May or early June and lasts for ten days. Manipuri traditional dress is an unavoidable part of the festival.

Lai Haraoba is a popular festival in Manipur, India, where people worship local gods and goddesses, including their ancestors. The festival, known as "festivity of gods," includes folk dances, plays, and Thoibi and Khamba. Since 2022, the festival has been organized by Bangladeshi Meitei Manipuri. The festival brings shamans and shamanesses from Manipur to the village. Without Manipuri traditional dress it is impossible to observe Lai Haraoba.

The Manipur Sangai Festival, held annually in November, showcases the state's unique art and culture through dance, music, sports, and local food and crafts. The festival features performances of dances like Kabui Naga Dance, Raas Leela Dance, Bamboo Dance, and Khamba Thoibi Dance. The Ningol Chakouba festival, held in Hiyangei, India, features special foods like Pan Thongba, Chagempomba, Champhut, and Iromba. Manipuri women wear and exchange gifts made from traditional dresses during this festival (Paratt 2013).

Manipuri Muslims celebrate Eid al-Fitr (Festival of Breaking the Fast) during the

month of Ramadan and Eid al-Adha (Feast of Sacrifice) on the 10th day of Dhul Hijjah. Muslims exchange traditional Manipuri dresses as gifts and visit family and friends. The Cheiraoba Festival, also known as the Spring Festival, is a popular event in Manipur, held on the first day of Sajibu month (March-April). It involves traditional attire, family visits, gift exchange, local cuisine, and prayers to the goddess Sanamahi.

Manipuri people wear Manipuri traditional dresses in all the above-mentioned festivals. Festivals include dancing, dressing, decoration, procession, and visiting relatives. Thus, MTH is a must for observation of these festivals. MTH is a pre-condition during Manipuri festivals. Except for the above-mentioned festivals, there are a few Puja festivals that Hindu religious people and Manipuri Hindu people concurrently observe. Manipuri people also wear their handicrafts during these festivals. Most respondents (86.66%) stated that they engage in handicrafts due to their affinity for the activity and as a means of preserving their cultural heritage. Meanwhile, 73.33% of respondents stated that they engage in handicrafts for personal use as well. 40% of respondents stated that they engage in handicraft production as a means of generating revenue.

MTH weaving and other skill work is a holy duty to Manipuri womenfolk. Women abstain from weaving during their menstruation period and the fixed period of 40 days after giving birth to a child. A woman interviewee added to the researcher that "we do not even touch the machinery and other related materials of weaving after waking up from bed unless we wash our hands". Manipuri people use and utilize their woven clothes in festivals starting from birth to the death of a Manipuri member. They have some formalities after a Manipuri dies. They use their traditional clothes to observe formalities. There are two major formalities in the case of death of a Manipuri: one starts after four days; and the other starts after 13 days past the death. They use Manipuri cotton on these traditional occasions. One woman added that "when Manipuri child is born that child is for the first-time child wrapped with Manipuri traditional dresses in arms." They wear special Manipuri traditional clothes to decorate the wedding chamber for the wedding night.

Manipuri Muslim Pangals usually produce their prayer mats. Pangals have a deep relationship with their handicrafts. They weave some special bedding-type clothes with the intention that they will use these clothes when Manipuri Muslims die. They keep dead bodies on their traditional bedding purposively made for this purpose. They use their traditional bedding while they keep dead bodies in graves. They weave other bedding clothes which they used in the time of Manipuri Muslim marriage. Muslim bridegrooms along with their friends and relatives usually eat food sitting on their traditional bedding clothes. Meithei and Bishnupriya Manipuri families do not follow this culture.

Newly married couples wear traditional dress. All Manipuri communities use their traditional special and colorful clothes to decorate the wedding night stage. These decorative traditional clothes are highly designed and colorful. All Manipuri families cannot own these clothes. They usually borrow from others. This culture of wearing

traditional clothes is a part and parcel of the Manipuri marriage and they regard it as a religious duty to observe. The Manipuri community traditionally had a variety of dates and rituals. All three classes of the Manipuri community harmoniously observe their common festivals. Though Pangals are Muslim they also take part in common festivals. The Muslim community never worship Hindu gods as it is opposed to Islam, but they take an active part in preparation and observation. In terms of clothes, no outsider can differentiate between the three Manipuri groups during festivals. Here traditional clothing makes them unique and united.

Conclusion

Manipuri culture is carried and continued by women. Women significantly contribute to culture. Women execute their holy duty in Manipuri traditional dance, festivals, weaving, and daily traditional usages. Manipuri women carry their handicraft tradition, and this happens here as a religious mandate. They think weaving skills are an inherent feature of Manipuri women. The community considers any Manipuri woman who lacks the handicrafts skills as worthless. The elder generation is uncertain about the sustainability of this handicraft tradition beyond a certain period. In response to this question, Manipuri young girls, both uneducated and educated, replied that they would teach the weaving technique to the next generation. They believe that the next generation will automatically acquire this skill through observation, like theirs. It is said that Manipuri girls have the ability to master any skill they see. They believe that "as a Manipuri girl, it is a matter of shame and insulting if we cannot make our handicrafts." As a result, girls learn their weaving and knitting skills through observation, without any training. They hold the belief that the weaving industry has limited potential and have no desire to pursue a career in Manipuri weaving. They consider it to be their religious duty.

In terms of indigeneity, there is controversy among Manipuri subgroups. Meitei and Bishnupriya make claims and counterclaims about design, skill and originality of their handicrafts. Meithei and Bishnupriya have unique religions, but their languages have differences. Pangal Muslim Manipuri and Meitei people in Bangladesh share a common language, with religious disparity yet intimacy in social communication. Their different religions motivate all subgroups to produce handicrafts, which are the prerequisite for attending all three communities' religious and traditional ceremonies.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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Questionnaire:

Cultural Data (Informant): Experts in Manipuri Handicrafts

1. List the handicraft activities through which Manipuri people are engaged in.
2. What are the main economic and social factors influencing the choices of the different Handicrafts activities?
3. How can the choices be improved if there are any limitations?
4. What are these products used for?
5. How has the craft contributed to women's realization of self-worth?
6. In your experience, what do you consider to be the main challenges facing handicraft business?
7. Is there any kind of support that is being provided to producers in order to cope with the challenges?
8. Where do these women obtain their raw material?
9. Do they experience any challenges in accessing the resources?
10. What are the challenges that they have encounter?
11. What do you consider to be the main drive that sustains the market of craft products and why?
12. Please describe how you and other stakeholders promote handicraft

Manipuri people involved in handicraft activities

Bibliographic Information

1. Household Code
2. Age at last birthday : Below 20 , 20-29 , 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, Above 60
3. Marital status: Single, Married, Cohabit, Divorced , Widowed, Separated
4. Educational details: No formal schooling, Some primary education, Primary education, completed Some Secondary school, Secondary school, completedHigh school, High school completed, Tertiary education
5. Are you employed? : Yes, No
   If yes, please state the type of your contract : Working full-time, Working part-time, Unemployed
6. Is this household?: Male headed, Female headed de jura(mandead/left), Female headed de facto (man works away from home for most of the year without making regular decisions, Yourself
7. How many people live in this household? 1-6, 7-12, Above 13
8. How many income contributors in this household?
9. Who are the income contributors?
10. What are the sources of income in this household?: Craft products, Remittances, Farming (crop and livestock sales), Selling fruits and vegetables, Old age pension, Selling scones, Other, Selling traditional beer, Wage employment

Handicraft Production

11. Do you like handicraft? Yes, No
12. Why did you decide to participate in handicraft production?
13. At what time do you do handicraft?: Morning, Afternoon, Night, At convenience Fulltime
14. Who taught you the handicraft skill?: Mother, Grandmother, Friend, College/school, Observation, Other
15. How long have you practiced handicraft?
    Less than 5, 6–10, 11–20, Over 20
16. What handicraft activities do you do?: Weaving, Pottery, Carving, Beading, Sewing, Dying, Other
17. Why did you decide to concentrate on this handicraft activity?
18. What are the general challenges in your activity?
19. What resources do you use in your activity? Raw, material
20. Where do you obtain your raw material?
21. How do you harvest your natural raw material?
22. Who harvests your raw material?: Myself, My husband, My children, Other
23. At what time of the year do you harvest your raw material?
24. How do you process your raw material?
25. Where do you store your raw material?

Contribution Of Handicrafts to Household Income

26. What products do you sell and how much do they cost?: Product, Cost
27. What is the best for business?: Pension day, Festive season, Month ends, Other(specify)
28. Where do you sell your handicraft?: Home, Local market, Along the road, Town
29. How much do you make from selling crafts?: Taka0-100, Taka101-R200, Taka 200-500, Taka 500-1000, Taka1000-3000
30. What is the money used for per month?: Burial, Give to dependents, Clothing, Health, Communication/cellphones, Paying loans, Education, Savings, Food, Transport, Other
31. Who decide on the use of the money you make from your handicraft trade?: Myself, Husband, Myself and husband, Myself, husband and children,
32. What are the livelihood activities you participate in?: Brewing beer, Farming, Full time employed, Hawker, Domestic worker, Baking and selling scones, Nothing, Other
33. Which strategy do you consider your primary source of income?: Brewing beer, Farming, Full time employed, Hawker, Domestic worker, Baking and selling scones, Nothing, Other
34. Are there any reasons for not participating in the other livelihood strategies?
35. Where do you get help when there are pressing needs in your family?: Church, Relatives, NGOs, Other—specify

Cosmology in Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism: New Religious Ontology or Age-old Literary Motifs Applied in New Religions?

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Abstract

This study explores the formation of mythical narratives surrounding the lives of the religious founders of Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism. It provides a detailed analysis of the miraculous elements, or in other words, the hagiographies, of figures such as Kang, Jo, and Park (from Daesoon Jinrihoe), as well as the founders of Caodaism. From a cultural anthropological perspective, this study employs the theories of collective memory and invented tradition to demonstrate that the success of these two major religions in East Asia lies in their effective use of familiar folkloric and classical literary motifs within East Asian culture. On this basis, they have successfully constructed collective memories. In other words, the founders of Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism have created traditions through the use of classical East Asian motifs, thereby building a familiar memory space where individuals can reflect upon their own origins. Practically, this study contributes to further exploration of the symbols and mythical stories associated with the two new religions of Vietnam and Korea. Theoretically, it proposes the usefulness and feasibility of cultural studies, particularly cultural anthropology, as an approach to studying new religious movements, at least within the context of East Asia.

Keywords: cultural anthropology; Daesoon Jinrihoe; Caodaism; Vietnamese folk motifs; Korean folk motifs

Introduction

New religious movements in East Asia, in this case, Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism, are often studied and evaluated from political and social perspectives due to historical and geopolitical contexts. It is clear that any religious phenomenon cannot easily escape these influences. Historical, political, cultural, and social changes serve as anchors that help researchers position their subjects and offer opportunities to explore them from multiple angles, laying the foundation for applying theoretical frameworks that can further shape our understanding of new religious movements in East Asia (in this case, Daesoon Jinrihoe in the Korean context and Caodaism in the Vietnamese context). This study does not deviate from this aspiration. However, it is also hoped that these geopolitical anchors will not become a hindrance and that researchers will instead be able to continue expanding their observations and passion for new religious movements in East Asia. In other words, novel forms of research should be pursued to transcend the obvious conclusions that are typically derived from past research based heavily upon the political-historical context.

In this spirit and building on the work of previous studies, outsiders—those not well-versed in the field of religious studies—seek to answer very fundamental questions for any type of subject or phenomenon: why and how? Specifically, why and how have Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism attracted such a significant following within their communities? In this study, the undeniable answer that their appeal is largely due to the irresistible charisma of religious leaders and their organizational management skills (Baker 2020, xiii)[1] is temporarily set aside. Instead, from a cultural studies perspective, an alternative hypothesis can be posited that both Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism have successfully established a collective memory within their religious communities—a space where every individual feels a sense of familiarity and a strong feeling of belonging. In this space, individuals recognize their origins and identify with the movement. This collective memory has allowed Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism to cultivate a substantial number of faithful followers. The next question, then, is how was this collective memory created, and what elements contributed to making so many individuals feel a deep sense of belonging and commitment to these movements?

To answer this question in detail, which is also the main task of this study, two important theories: the theory of "invented tradition" proposed by Eric Hobsbawm and the theory of "collective memory" proposed by Maurice Halbwachs are employed to explain how Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism created and established traditions within their new religions. The preliminary answer is that both Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism have successfully utilized familiar classical folkloric motifs to construct their cosmologies and create hagiographies with mystical and mysterious qualities surrounding their religious founders and leaders. These motifs allow individuals to experience a sense of familiarity while also feeling the freshness of a future that promises hope and brightness in the earthly realm. These traditional motifs, on one hand, stem from the local color of

the region where they originated—closely tied to geography—and on the other hand, carry a national or ethnic hue that connects to historical destiny.

Regarding the scope of the study, this research examines the origins and structure of cosmology and the life stories of the religious founders of Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism. These topics align with the concepts of cosmology and hagiography in Western theological traditions.

In the field of religious studies, cosmology and hagiography are related but distinct areas of research. Cosmology focuses on views regarding the origin, structure, and purpose of the universe from a theological perspective. It often relates to creation myths, concepts of heaven and hell, and the ways in which the universe operates under divine control or presence. For example, in Christianity, the Book of Genesis describes how God created the world in six days. Hagiography is the genre of literature that records the life, miracles, and virtues of saints, those considered moral exemplars or canonized in religious traditions. Notable examples include the lives of Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Teresa of Avila in Catholicism. While cosmology does not include hagiography, there are instances where the two intersect. For example, some relics or stories of saints may serve to explain part of a religion's cosmology, particularly when they involve miracles or divine intervention in the world. However, as previously mentioned, both terms are closely tied to Western theological traditions. The decision to separate cosmology and hagiography in this study is somewhat reluctant, but it is also difficult to disregard these terms. Therefore, in the title of this study, the term "cosmology" has been chosen, and within the context of this research, it is meant to encompass the lives of the founders and leaders of Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism.

In the first section of this study, the term "motif" is defined and how it is understood within this study is explained—emphasizing that, in this study, "motif" is considered a vocabulary item within traditional cultural heritage, rather than an object of focus for any particular scientific discipline. Next, representative motifs within the cultures of Vietnam and Korea—the home countries of Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism, respectively will be examined. In the third section, the appearance of miraculous motifs in official religious texts will be compared. The presence or absence of specific motifs is significant and plays an important role in attracting followers. Finally, in Section 4, some differences in the application of motifs in the religious texts of Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism will be compared and analyzed.

Regarding sources, in addition to essential religious texts, the book *Myths and Legends from Korea: An Annotated Compendium of Ancient and Modern Materials* (2000) by James H. Grayson will be used as a primary resource for discussions related to Korean folk motifs.

Finally, although this study focuses on the two religions Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism, it is not strictly a comparative study, even though comparative analysis is present throughout. The research methods applied in this study include participant observation, documentary research and synthesis, and logical analysis and synthesis.

In this study, two key theories: Eric Hobsbawm's theory of invented tradition (1983) and Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory (1992) are applied to provide the theoretical foundation for examining the formation and development of new religions like Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism, as well as how they apply classical literary motifs in their religious systems.

From a theoretical perspective, Hobsbawm's concept of invented tradition refers to the creation of new traditions during periods of social change. When old traditions become ineffective or are abandoned, or when certain groups attempt to break away from the past, new traditions are "invented" to link to history while also creating continuity and stability in society. These traditions are not a natural continuation of the past but are a creative process that uses classical materials to build new values to meet the needs of modern society (Hobsbawm 1983, 6). Therefore, the application of classical literary motifs in new religions like Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism can be understood as part of this process, where new religions attempt to establish a modern religious foundation by "inventing" traditions tied to old values.

Moreover, Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory shows that memory is not just an individual recollection but is heavily influenced by social frameworks and relationships between individuals in a community. Halbwachs argues that collective memory is formed through interactions among individuals in a group, aimed at protecting and maintaining connections between generations within a community (Halbwachs 1992, 48). In the context of studying new religions, the concept of collective memory can explain how followers of Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism have created new traditions, not merely as nostalgic recollections of the past but as a process of constructing a new "memory" within their communities—one that is social, political, and cultural. These religions may be restructuring their own history and cultural memory by applying classical motifs, not only to preserve cultural continuity but also to establish a foundation for new beliefs and value systems.

Thus, in the study of cosmology in Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism, both theories will be applied to analyze the development of these religions. Are these movements simply applying classical literary motifs, or is this part of a religious creation process in a changing society? These questions will help clarify how new religions build and maintain connections between the past and present while forming entirely new religious structures that still retain the imprint of traditional cultural values.

Understanding Motif, Motif in Folklore, and its Role in Constructing Collective Memory

> A motif, in its broadest sense, is a conventional, artistic symbol of a plot, typically repeated to record impressions of reality that are particularly strong, important, and reiterated many times. It is the simplest narrative unit, represented through

> images, and can also be considered an elementary, generalized pattern characterized by uniformity and similarity (Grayson 2000, 9).

In the field of folklore, Stith Thompson proposed the understanding that "A motif is the smallest element in a tale having a power to persist in tradition. In order to have this power, it must have something unusual and striking about it" (Thomson, 1977, 415). Stith Thompson also created a toolkit to help researchers identify, compare, and classify similar elements in folk tales from different cultures, called *The Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*. This tool, along with the *Aarne—Thompson—Uther Index* (ATU), has become a primary tool for studying folklore in general and motifs in particular.

James Grayson argued that the term "motif" is somewhat cumbersome and suggested the term "*narrative motif*" as a more suitable expression to reflect the common understanding of the term "motif." A concise and clearer definition would be: "Narrative motifs may be gods, spirits, heroes, ordinary people, animals, or even inanimate objects" (Grayson 2000, 9).

Grayson also emphasized that oral folklore is a crucial resource for studying the ideas, beliefs, and symbols of both ancient and contemporary peoples. Through the stories they tell and repeat, listeners acquire ideas, concepts, and beliefs that reflect and create a unique spirit and morality characteristic of the society of that time (Grayson 2000, 4). While a symbol may appear once in literature to signify an idea or emotion, a motif is an element or idea that recurs throughout the work. Motifs have a close relationship with themes but play a supportive role rather than being the theme itself. It is in this repetition that the power and impact of the motif are realized. In fact, a motif can be expressed through a set of related symbols.

It is evident that the professional handling of motifs is not the central focus of this section. Instead, focus will be directed at the role and value of folklore in general, and motifs specifically. William R. Bascom, in *The Four Functions of Folklore,* outlines four functions that any folk tale can serve for its audience, at least one of the following (Bascom 1954, 333–335)

> 1.To entertain the listener by providing a means of escape from the oppressive conditions of a specific culture or time period through imagination.
> 2.To confirm the values of the listener's culture, as well as its rituals and institutions.
> 3.To educate the listener—offering knowledge related to a specific topic, or providing an explanation of linguistic or causal aspects of something within the listener's culture or the surrounding physical universe.
> 4.To teach the listener how to maintain adherence to established behavioral models and ideals within the community.

In fact, folk materials enable appear to enable quick recognition and connection for wide audiences across various religious and cultural backgrounds. This is because all

ancient cultures across the world have had these ideas, which have emerged in one form or another. Folk materials and motifs not only help preserve history but also promote the maintenance of cultural values across generations. Through oral transmission and the spreading of cultural forms, these values live on in the community, passed down from one generation to the next. Folk tales help people better understand the past, while also binding them to the values of the present and future. Folk materials further strengthen national pride, as seen in stories about dragons in Vietnam or Dangun in Korea, creating a shared memory of the sacred and powerful origins of the nation. These motifs not only connect the past with the present but also foster unity, instilling a shared sense that each person carries a part of the nation's history within them.

Folk materials include legends, myths, folk songs, proverbs, folk tales, and other forms of oral art. These materials are a means for people in the community to construct an image of national identity and transmit cultural, historical, and ethical values across generations. They not only preserve history and tradition but also serve as a bridge between the past and the present, linking generations within the community. In both Vietnamese and Korean cultures, these elements play a crucial role in embedding shared national values, helping to connect the past with the present, and fostering unity between generations, thereby building a durable collective memory that connects people. However, these shared values are not the only expectations that the leaders of Caodaism and Daesoon Jinrihoe have.

At the same time, the religious leaders of Caodaism and Daesoon Jinrihoe must address both the survival of the nation in the face of colonialism and the preservation of their religious community's identity. Therefore, the stories told about the gods, religious leaders, and their cosmology must, on one hand, address the expectations for the historical prospects the nation and people face at the time, which this article temporarily calls the "national destiny." On the other hand, these stories must demonstrate superiority, resolve, and create a religious tradition that satisfies the expectations of religious group identity in constructing a distinct religious identity for their community (compared to other religious groups). In other words, this is both a specific need and a general need.

For the Daesoon Jinrihoe religious community—a community with no recorded ethnic divisions and stability in social position (i.e., the common people)—the need for religious group identity is almost a subset of the first need, which is the need for national destiny. This is quite similar to what happened with the Caodaism religion due to geopolitical influences in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, unlike Daesoon Jinrihoe, which has ethnic homogeneity, Caodaism was established in a new land, literally, with a mix of ethnicities from the immigrant groups to southern Vietnam. The three main ethnic groups are Kinh (Vietnamese), Hoa (Chinese), and Khmer. These three ethnic groups, though different, shared the same fate—they were immigrants who left their homeland to settle in a new region. This shared experience not only bonded them in the turbulent historical context but also united them in their precarious social,

political, and cultural status. Therefore, one of the essential tasks and needs for the Caodaism community, besides the need for national destiny and religious group identity, is the need to establish their position—or more precisely, their political legitimacy, social legitimacy, and cultural legitimacy. Of these three forms of legitimacy, the need to build political legitimacy for their religious community is perhaps the most evident. In the following sections, this article will clarify these points further.

The Magical Motifs in the Lifecycle of Religious Founders

Caodaism, fully named Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ (大道三期普度), was established in 1926 in Long Trung Hamlet, Long Thành Commune, Hoà Thành District, Tây Ninh Province, founded and developed primarily by officials, capitalists, landowners, and intellectuals, with its main development in the southern provinces and cities of Vietnam.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the philosophy of the Three Teachings (Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism) in Vietnam was on the decline, but the activities of the Minh Dao Five Branches group (Minh Sư, Minh Lý, Minh Đường, Minh Tân, Minh Thiện) flourished, contributing to the revival of the Three Teachings. At the same time, the Western Spiritualism movement gained momentum in Southern Vietnam with practices such as "spirit tables" similar to the Vietnamese tradition of spirit summoning and the "spirit writing" practice of the Minh Dao Five Branches group, leading to the "spirit writing" movement. In these spirit gatherings, two main groups formed Caodaism. The first group, led by Ngô Văn Chiêu, conducted spirit writings at temples, pagodas, and Buddhist halls following the traditional spirit writing practices of the Minh Dao Five Branches group. The second group, including Cao Quỳnh Cư, Cao Hoài Sang, and Phạm Công Tắc (the Cao - Phạm group), organized spirit table practices in the Western Spiritualism style. In 1926, the two spirit writing groups united to form Caodaism, with Ngô Văn Chiêu being appointed as the first Giáo Tông (Supreme Pope) of Caodaism.

In Vietnamese folklore, there is a recurring motif in which supernatural elements appear suddenly before the protagonist takes any action. This motif is reflected in Caodaism through the active role of divine forces, particularly "The Eye"(Thiên Nhãn), which manifested as a divine revelation, while the founder, Ngô Minh Chiêu, remained passive.

The key events in the founding of Caodaism lacked a proactive approach. One evening in 1921, while walking along the seashore in deep contemplation, he suddenly witnessed a distant vision of a serene and magnificent celestial realm—a pure and sacred paradise.

In the same year, 1921 (Canh Thân), as he sat in silent meditation at home, a radiant Eye suddenly appeared before him, shining with countless beams of light from afar. It moved closer and closer, until it gradually faded away. This detail is in stark contrast to the events surrounding Daesoon Jinri. The proactive nature of this religious spirit is clearly shown when the deity worshipped in Daesoon Jinrihoe, Sangje, only appears in response to a prayer: "Heaven and Earth in their current crisis can be repaired only by

Sangje."

When the path of Heavenly Dao (天道, 천도 *kr.*) and ethical norms finally collapsed, the chaotic situation was described as people losing their human values, and society became degenerate due to self-indulgence and lack of morality (Kim 2020, 73). Nature was devastated, with no hope remaining. Humans then challenged the powers of the gods. Their growing arrogance damaged the inherent goodness present in human minds. The new religion of Korea explains this spiritual condition by stating "the source of the Dao had been cut off". At this time, all the sages, deities, buddhas, and bodhisattvas from ancient times gathered together to seek a solution. However, the efforts of all the sages and deities were deemed futile, leading to a prayer to the supreme deity of the ninth heaven, with the words: "Heaven and Earth in their current crisis can be repaired only by Sangje". In response, Sangje descended to Cheongye Tower and carefully inspected the three realms: heaven, earth, and humanity. He then entered the icon of the "Golden Maitreya Buddha" at Geumsan Temple on Moak Mountain (母岳山, 모악산 *kr.*), where he remained for thirty years.

Nevertheless, in both cases, the role of magical elements plays a similar and relatively significant part in highlighting the key moment—the most important detail being the selection by supernatural entities and forces.

For Caodaism, "After Đức Ngô Minh Chiêu saw that Eye, during a religious gathering, the Old Immortal clearly declared his title as Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế (玉皇上帝, The Jade Emperor), also known as Cao Đài Tiên Ông Đại Bồ Tát Ma-ha-tát (高臺仙翁大菩薩摩訶薩), who descended to the world to expand the Great Dao of the Third Period [Tam Kỳ] and instructed him to draw a Holy Eye [also known as the Heavenly Eye], just as he had seen it, to be worshiped as a symbol of the new religion, the New True Religion. (Hội Thánh Truyền Giáo Cao Đài 1956) Thus, Đức Ngô Minh Chiêu became the first disciple of the Jade Emperor; he received the mission to spread this new religion on Earth.

While Caodaism did not include any further magical elements in its religious founding narrative, Daesoon Jinrihoe introduced a particularly striking motif: the petrifaction[2] scene—or more precisely, the "dwelling within the stone icon"—a motif common in cultures both Eastern and Western.

As mentioned earlier, in response to the world-saving prayer of deities and buddhas from various eras, Sangje descended to the Cheongye Tower in the region of Great Law in the West and carefully examined the three realms—heaven, earth, and humanity. Afterward, he resided within the statue[3] of the "Golden Maitreya Buddha" at Geumsan Temple on Moak Mountain where he remained for thirty years (Kim 2020, 71)

Stone is a fundamental feature of mountains (stone mountains), and mountains are considered sacred places, the spiritual connection between heaven and earth. Thus, stone can be a medium for conveying human desires to supernatural forces. Humans have used stone in magical practices to achieve goals such as good harvests, favorable weather, healthy crops, and prosperous families (Phan 2011, 11). Meanwhile, the motif

of dwelling within the stone icon in Korea symbolizes the accumulation of energy, a form of metamorphosis and rebirth. This motif reminds contemporary observers of a famous character in the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng'en, namely, the character Sun Wukong, the Great Sage Equal to Heaven. The novel describes Wukong as having been born from a stone on the East Sea, the Flower-Fruit Mountain. This stone absorbed the essence of the universe and the spiritual energy of heaven and earth. The sense of being born from stone, or transforming into stone to be reborn, always conveys an awareness of boundless power and the mystical mysteries hidden within for the listener.

The motif of dwelling within the stone icon is a familiar one, but the difference in Daesoon Jinrihoe lies in the subsequent developments, which are what make it particularly noteworthy. Typically, there would need to be an event or significant occurrence to conclude the process of dwelling within the stone icon. However, this is not what happened in the case of Daesoon Jinrihoe. The process simply ended after thirty years without any external influence or turning point. In other words, it was a process of self-cultivation and refinement. At this point, it may be difficult to imagine for those accustomed to Western culture, but for true East Asian inhabitants, it is easier to picture the image of sages or hermits who have cultivated themselves over decades. This naturally leads us to the famous concept of Self-Cultivation in Neo-Confucianism. This process of cultivation is also visually represented. (See Figure 1)



Figure 1. Kang Performing Self-Cultivation
(Source: AADDJ, 2018, p.44)

This concept further proves the place of Daesoon Jinrihoe's cosmology, as this religion promises that humans will gradually transcend the need for external divine intervention. Not only does it agree with Buddhism and Confucianism that humans can

become like gods through their own efforts, but it also teaches that when the era of endless conflict ends, humans will attain divine qualities, reducing their dependence on deities. This concept is linked to the ethical belief that a wise person can become a god in Confucianism. Symbolically, Maitreya (Buddha of the Future) in Buddhism is often seen as the Buddha of hope, compassion, and salvation, and the belief that Sangje's presence was manifested within this icon could be a promising representation of a commitment to the days to come. This manifestation does not involve sudden excitement but is reasonable and highly compatible with Korean and East Asian cultural traditions.

In Vietnam, the motif of petrification holds a significant influence throughout various regions and among the different ethnic communities. However, the most famous example is "Hòn Vọng Phu," or the Stone Waiting for the Husband to Return. The story of a woman transforming into stone while waiting for her husband, emphasizing her loyalty and unwavering love, is widely known within the Kinh community (the dominant ethnic group in Vietnam). Other ethnic minorities in Vietnam also have variations of the petrification story. Overall, the motifs of petrification in Vietnam revolve around three main meanings: curse and punishment, eternity and immortality (as in the case of the "Hòn Vọng Phu" story mentioned), and the idea of immortality, as stone is considered an indestructible material over long periods of time. Lastly, petrification is often seen as a symbol of pain and separation. However, most petrification motifs in Vietnam focus more on human emotions rather than divine intervention or supernatural forces.

That said, this motif does not appear in the records of Caodaism, despite the religious prospects of using petrification motifs being entirely plausible in Vietnam. To answer this question, we need to return to the Southern region of Vietnam, where Caodaism was founded and developed—an area that is geographically unfamiliar with rocky terrains. In other words, the Caodaism community, although Vietnamese, is not accustomed to rocky landscapes, making the concept of stone almost foreign.

Each religion interprets mystical elements in its own way. In contrast to Caodaism's tendency to exercise restraint in the use of supernatural elements, Daesoon Jinrihoe strongly emphasizes divine intervention, miraculous birth narratives, and omens to reinforce the legitimacy of its spiritual leaders.

The use of mystical elements continues in the prophetic dream of the mother of a woman with the surname Kwon, who married into the Kang family in Jeolla province. One day, Kang's mother dreamt that the northern and southern skies split apart, and a huge ball of fire enveloped her body, illuminating the entire world She then felt as though she was pregnant. After thirteen months of pregnancy, on 19 September 1871, the deity Sangje descended to earth in human form (Kim 2020, 74–75).

Such details are somewhat linked to the motif of the miraculous birth stories in various cultures, such as the story of Queen Maya dreaming of a white elephant with gleaming tusks entering her side, after which she gave birth to Prince Siddhārtha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism. Similarly, in the Han Wu historical records, Empress

Wang was pregnant for three years. When Emperor Jing was about to pass away, the empress dreamt of a divine being giving her the sun and saying, "Eat it." She then gave birth to the little prince Liu Zhi (劉彘), who later became Emperor Wu of Han.

And when Kang was born, two celestial maidens descended to the delivery room, which was filled with a sweet fragrance and mystical energy, as auspicious signs signaling the arrival of a deity on earth. The entire house was enveloped by a radiant energy that reached up to the sky (Kim 2020, 75).

This motif continued to be applied to Jo Jeongsan, the second leader of Daesoon Jinrihoe. It is said that a woman from the Min family in Yeoheung became pregnant after a brilliant light from the sky shone down upon her, and she gave birth to a boy. On 4 December 1895, during the Eulmi year, this boy grew up to become Doju, the founder of Mugeukdo, the predecessor of Daesoon Jinrihoe, who would inherit the task of reorganizing the universe by Sangje (Kim 2020, 97). However, in the case of the third leader, Park Wudang (朴牛堂, 1917–1996, 박우당 *kr.*), this motif was not used. According to our understanding, the reason no miraculous motif was applied is because there was a direct transfer of leadership between Jo and Park, witnessed by a large number of followers and supported by Jo's solid will. Therefore, no additional supernatural elements were needed to legitimize this succession.

Meanwhile, in Caodaism, miraculous elements are not entirely absent but manifest in a distinct form compared to other religious traditions. Unlike Daesoon Jinrihoe, which incorporates motifs such as miraculous birth narratives, Caodaism does not emphasize supernatural origins in the biographical accounts of its founders. This distinction can be attributed to the backgrounds of Caodaism's founders, most of whom were intellectuals with a Western education.

Ngô Văn Chiêu (1878–1932) and Lê Văn Trung (1876–1934), both key figures in the formation and development of Caodaism, came from intellectual backgrounds and were well-versed in both Eastern traditions and Western scientific knowledge. Ngô Văn Chiêu, the only son of a declining noble family in Huế, graduated from Chasseloup Laubat School and worked as a civil servant at the Southern Ministry of the Interior. He was known for his integrity, calm demeanor, and noble character. Lê Văn Trung, from a well-established family in Chợ Lớn, also graduated from Chasseloup Laubat School and served as a secretary at the Southern Governor's Office before becoming an elected representative at the Southern Administrative Council. Their exposure to rationalist and scientific perspectives likely influenced their approach to religious philosophy, leading to a more structured and systematic framework in the development of Caodaism.

However, it would be misleading to suggest that Caodaism lacks supernatural elements altogether. The religion's foundational doctrine, encapsulated in its full name *Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ* (The Great Way of the Third Universal Salvation), explicitly asserts that its establishment represents the third major divine intervention in human history. This concept of divine intervention aligns with spirit writing (*cầu cơ, giáng bút*)—a fundamental practice within Caodaism—where communication with deities,

deceased cultural heroes, and even God was conducted through séances. From its early years, Caodaism recorded hundreds of such instances, reinforcing the presence of mystical and supernatural dimensions within the religion.

Contemporary studies in Vietnam have widely acknowledged that in the context of war, poverty, and colonial oppression, the people of Southern Vietnam (*Nam Kỳ*) were naturally inclined toward beliefs in supernatural forces such as luck, misfortune, divine intervention, and ancestral spirits. Given this cultural backdrop, it is unsurprising that Caodaism, emerging in this environment, integrates significant mystical elements. The critical distinction, however, lies in how these elements manifest. Unlike many other religious traditions where miraculous narratives often center on the founders themselves, the supernatural in Caodaism primarily emerges through divine communication rather than hagiographical accounts of its leaders' early lives.

Thus, rather than an outright absence of miraculous motifs, Caodaism presents a unique approach—one that does not emphasize supernatural origins of its founders but instead places miracles within the framework of divine revelation and spiritual guidance. This nuance is crucial in understanding the role of supernatural elements in Caodaism and how they differentiate it from other religious movements.

Motif of Sacred Beasts

The folk motifs of Vietnam and Korea share two common threads. The first thread is humanity, as the ancient consciousness of all the peoples of the world is fundamentally the same. The second thread is the civilization of *Huaxia* (華夏), as both Vietnam and Korea share the achievements of Chinese civilization, including philosophy, language, cultural institutions, education, state models, and, naturally, cultural symbols. Therefore, it is not surprising that there are similarities in folk cultural motifs.

Both Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism utilize motifs of sacred beasts. In the process of integrating, exchanging, and adapting to the local cultures of Vietnam and Korea, these motifs have undergone certain modifications. However, fundamentally, the symbolic meanings of these sacred beasts have not undergone significant changes.

Throughout their process of integration, exchange, interaction, and transformation with the indigenous cultures of Vietnam and Korea, the *Four Holy Beasts* and *The Four Symbols* have undergone certain changes. However, fundamentally, the symbolic meanings of these sacred beasts have not undergone significant alterations.

The Four Beasts and the Four Symbols, during their introduction, exchange, and adaptation with the native cultures of Vietnam and Korea, have undergone certain changes. However, fundamentally, the symbolic fields of these sacred beasts have not changed drastically.

In Vietnamese culture, the Four Holy Beasts (四靈, Tứ Linh)[4] include: the Dragon, the Unicorn, the Turtle, and the Phoenix. The most revered of these sacred beasts in Vietnam is "Tứ Linh," which includes the dragon (rồng), the unicorn (kỳ lân), the turtle

(rùa), and the phoenix (chim phượng).[5] According to ancient beliefs, animals in nature were divided into five categories: terrestrial animals (with humans at the top), feathered animals (with the phoenix at the top), horned animals (with the unicorn at the top), scaled animals (with the dragon at the top), and shelled animals (with the turtle at the top). Therefore, the four sacred beasts—the dragon, the unicorn, the turtle, and the phoenix—were revered as noble creatures and became symbols, themes for sculpture, decoration, and worship in the architecture, art, culture, and religious practices of many East Asian cultures, including Vietnam. From the mid-15th century, along with the traditional creative processes of the emperors and the Confucian intellectual class, the Vietnamese people began to refer to themselves as "Children of the Dragon, Descendants of the Fairy." This phrase originates from the myth of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ, who gave birth to a hundred eggs, which hatched into a hundred children, with fifty following the father to the sea and fifty following the mother to the mountains. The eldest son stayed in Phong Châu to become the king, founding the Đại Việt state and adopting the era name Hùng Vương. Since then, the Vietnamese people have always taken pride in their Dragon-Fairy ancestry. As a sacred symbol tied to the "Children of the Dragon, Descendants of the Fairy," the Dragon in Vietnam, like its general East Asian significance, is considered noble and associated with royal lineage, as well as being a symbol of clear origin and ancestry.

Similarly, the second sacred beast is the Phoenix. The phoenix is revered as the king of birds and is born from the sun and fire. The male is called "phượng (鳳)," symbolizing prosperity, and the female is called "hoàng (凰)," symbolizing the queen, often appearing alongside the dragon, which represents the king. According to researcher Trần Đức Anh Sơn, because it is a compassionate and life-giving bird, the phoenix is also the sacred bird of Buddhism. Many Buddhist architectural and decorative works feature the phoenix (Trần Đức Anh Sơn). In Vietnamese culture, the phoenix is often seen as a symbol of rebirth, prosperity, and wealth. It is also a symbol of female power, as the phoenix is often used to represent queens or goddesses in mythical stories.

In addition to the sacred beasts, the lotus flower is also a symbol of the Vietnamese people and represents the essence of their character. The lotus in Vietnamese culture is a symbol of purity and refinement: It grows from the mud without being polluted, symbolizing purity, overcoming difficulties and challenges, and attaining enlightenment. The lotus also symbolizes lofty ideals, as seen in literary works where the lotus is often an image of beauty, nobility, and grace.

To emphasize the symbolic meanings of these motifs, and the leaders of Caodaism's selection in building their religion, it will now be shown these relate to other popular and familiar symbolic motifs in Vietnam: the bamboo tree, the banyan tree-well, and the buffalo.

If the lotus symbolizes purity and nobility, bamboo serves as a symbol of resilience and perseverance. Bamboo is a familiar image in Vietnamese rural villages, closely tied to the daily lives of rural people. It is not only an essential tool but also a symbol of

unyielding strength and endurance. Bamboo frequently appears in Vietnamese literature, especially in folk tales, as a representation of loyalty and spiritual strength.

Next is the symbol of the buffalo. The buffalo is a familiar image in rural Vietnam, particularly within agricultural societies. It became a national symbol during the 22nd SEA Games, which Vietnam hosted, representing labor, diligence, and patience. The buffalo also plays a significant role in festivals, such as the Plowing Festival, which honors the hard work of farmers.

Finally, there is the motif of the banyan tree and the village well. This symbol represents communal connection. The banyan tree and the well are iconic images in Vietnamese rural life, reflecting the spirit of neighborly love, solidarity, and shared community values. These elements often appear in folk songs and fairy tales, symbolizing the bond between humans, nature, and one another.

The selected motifs illustrate a distinct difference in the systems of symbolic motifs often used alongside each other. One layer of motifs represents royalty, power, and the elite, emphasizing individual strength and excellence—such as the dragon (*Long*), the phoenix (鳳凰, *Phượng Hoàng*), and the lotus (*Hoa Sen*). In contrast, another group, including bamboo, the banyan tree, the village well, and the buffalo, embodies attributes (such as bamboo, banyan tree, and well) and virtues (like the buffalo) associated with the working class, collective strength, and ordinary people.

When exploring the motifs used to construct the cosmology of Caodaism, it becomes evident that the leadership of this religion predominantly favored motifs associated with the semantic field of power, nobility, the elite, and the glorification of individual beauty and strength, rather than the alternative group of symbols.

When exploring the motifs used to construct the cosmology of Caodaism, it becomes evident that the leadership of this religion predominantly favored motifs associated with power, nobility, and the elite. However, rather than solely serving as a means to assert political legitimacy, these motifs may have played a crucial role in shaping a collective memory among the religious community.

By incorporating these motifs, Caodaism created a spiritual and cultural framework that resonated deeply with the Southern Vietnamese population at the time. In a rapidly changing socio-political landscape, these symbols provided a sense of continuity, linking the followers to historical and cultural traditions that evoked familiarity and belonging. This aligns with Maurice Halbwachs' model of collective memory, in which shared recollections—especially those embedded in religious narratives—help sustain community identity and cohesion.

Dragons, phoenixes, and lotuses are motifs extensively utilized in the Holy See of Caodaism. The selection of symbolic motifs by Caodaism—Dragon, Phoenix, and Lotus—is an intentional and deliberate choice, reflecting the aspirations of its founding religious groups to assert their social status and political legitimacy. This is why they chose symbols associated with nobility, power, and authority rather than folk images deeply rooted in labor and ordinary life. This decision highlights the historical lack of social

standing among these migrant groups and their desire to construct a religious and social identity with an aristocratic and legitimate character in the emerging society.

To illustrate this, one must look back to the past of southern Vietnam, where migrants established settlements during the period of territorial expansion. For various reasons, different ethnic groups found themselves settling and cultivating the southern lands. According to Ngô Đức Thịnh, the Khmer people had been present in the Mekong Delta since the 13th century, following the fall of the Angkor Empire, which predates the arrival of the Vietnamese by two to three centuries (Ngô 1993, 285). Trần Quốc Vượng notes that Vietnamese settlement in the Mekong Delta began in the sixteenth century, involving a diverse range of social classes. Some were prisoners, others were impoverished wanderers seeking refuge, and many were soldiers and officials dispatched to protect the newly acquired territories (Trần 2005, 269). Nguyễn Đức Toàn (2015) observes that, beginning in the eventeenth century, migrants from northern Vietnam—mainly poor farmers and artisans—moved south due to wars and oppressive feudal systems. Among them were also educated individuals and intellectuals discontent with the regime (Nguyễn 2015, 20–21). Similarly, the Chinese community also migrated to this region for various reasons, including their resistance to the Qing dynasty during the Ming-Qing transition. Phạm Bích Hợp (2007) argues that the Chinese played a crucial role in reclaiming and developing the Mekong Delta. A notable example is Mạc Cửu, who led 400 Chinese settlers to Hà Tiên in 1678 to reclaim the land. By the late 19th century, the Chinese continued migrating to this region, organizing themselves into "*bang*"[6] (associations /幫), each led by "*bang trưởng*" (a head of the association/幫長) (Phạm 2007, 56–57).

Motifs such as the Dragon, Phoenix, and Lotus are deeply tied to symbols of supreme power, regality, and legitimacy. In the religious framework of Caodaism, these images not only represent strength but also serve as emblems of the elite class, nobility, and authority. These motifs carry immense cultural significance, connecting to the exalted values of East Asian traditions, symbolizing rulers, monarchs, and dynasties. The selection of images like the Dragon, Phoenix, and Lotus is not merely an adoption of traditional cultural symbols but can be viewed as a deliberate choice, reflecting a subconscious desire of migrant groups to address their historical lack of social status.

During the process of migration and settlement in the South, many of these groups, particularly those from lower classes or those exiled, faced tremendous hardships, scarcity, and an almost complete absence of clear social standing. Consequently, when creating a new religion, they were inclined to select symbols that conveyed their aspirations to assert a higher social status. These aristocratic motifs served as a way to redefine their perceived roles in society, legitimizing and granting political and social authority to the new religion they were building, effectively ending their identity as marginalized outsiders.

In contrast, what unfolds in Daesoon Jinrihoe is almost the opposite; the absence of motifs associated with royalty, nobility, and the intellectual elite is a notable

characteristic of this religion.

Firstly, instead of the Four Holy Beasts (Tứ Linh) as seen in Caodaism, Daesoon Jinrihoe tends to emphasize the Four Auspicious Beasts (四象, *Four Auspicious Beasts* Tứ Tượng *vn.*). *Dongcheongyong* (東靑龍, Blue Dragon of the East, 동청룡 ***kr.***), *Seobaeko* (西白虎, White Tiger of the West, 서백호 ***kr.***), *Namjujak* (南朱雀, Red Phoenix of the South, 남주작 ***kr.***), and *Bukhyeonmu* (北玄武, Black Tortoise-Serpent of the North, 북현무 ***kr.***). The Four Auspicious Beasts in the context of Daesoon Jinrihoe strongly reflect a sense of sacred protection for the nation, emphasizing themes of nationalism and sovereignty.

The Blue Dragon symbolizes the East, the origin of life, and Is associated with the Wood element in the Five Elements theory (*obaeng,* 五行). With its blue body representing spring, the Blue Dragon conveys a powerful will to live and the ability to control wind and rain. This motif appears in mural paintings of the Goguryeo and Goryeo dynasties, not only reflecting cultural traditions but also asserting national sovereignty as the guardian deity of the East. The Blue Dragon was also depicted on the ceilings of royal gates during the Joseon dynasty, emphasizing the connection between spiritual beliefs and the sacred protection of the nation.

The White Tiger represents the West, the Metal element, and autumn. With its powerful form, the White Tiger symbolizes protection and righteousness. The image of the White Tiger is vividly portrayed in the art of the Goguryeo and Goryeo dynasties, often appearing alongside other deities as a symbol of national defense. This reflects respect for natural strength and the spirit of resilience, highlighting a strong sense of sovereignty and national pride. In geomantic theories (*pungsu,* 風水), the White Tiger is a symbol of the mountain ranges protecting the country, tied to the belief in the nation's enduring stability. The Red Phoenix symbolizes the South, the Fire element, and summer. Depicted as a phoenix with outstretched wings, the Red Phoenix embodies rebirth, light, and justice. In Daesoon Jinrihoe, the Red Phoenix not only represents protective strength from the South but also signifies judgment and the balance of cosmic forces. This image appears in ancient architectural structures, including the southern gates of the Gyeongbokgung Palace, affirming the link between spiritual beliefs and national sovereignty. The Black Tortoise-Serpent represents the North, the Water element, and winter. Featuring a tortoise entwined with a serpent, the Black Tortoise-Serpent symbolizes the harmony between Yin and Yang, connecting beginnings and endings. In Daesoon Jinrihoe, the Black Tortoise-Serpent not only protects the North but also represents enduring strength and permanence. This motif is present in the tombs of the Goguryeo and Goryeo kings, symbolizing the eternal protection of rulers and the nation. It underscores the Black Tortoise-Serpent's role as a guardian deity representing sovereignty and national longevity (Kim 2020, 186–190).

The Four Auspicious Beasts do more than protect the cardinal directions; they also symbolize balance and harmony among the elements, reflecting a desire to safeguard and maintain the nation's prosperity. This highlights Daesoon Jinrihoe's close ties to folk

culture and nationalist philosophy, while also affirming the role of religion in preserving and protecting the nation's cultural heritage.

As mentioned earlier, the absence of motifs related to royalty, nobility, and the intellectual elite is a defining characteristic of this religion. Or more precisely, Daesoon Jinrihoe emphasizes popular, grassroots culture. This is evident in the humble and relatable imagery, such as the act of making rice cakes (***tteok***, 떡 ***kr***.), a traditional Korean food that serves as a near-symbolic representation of the relationship between Daesoon Jinrihoe's leaders and its followers.

Rather than emphasizing hierarchical authority based on aristocratic or scholarly status, Daesoon Jinrihoe conceptualizes spiritual leadership through the doctrine of the "Truth of the Two Mountains." This is reflected in the symbolic connection between Jeungsan (甑山, "Steamer Mountain") and Jeongsan (鼎山, "Cauldron Mountain"), where: The steamer (siru, 甑) represents Jeungsan, identified with Sangje, the Supreme Dao. The cauldron (sot, 鼎) represents Jeongsan, revered as Doju, the Lord of the Dao (The Fountainhead of Our Order and the Dao of the Two Mountains, Museum of Daesoon Jinrihoe, n.d.). These two foundational figures form the spiritual framework of Daesoon Jinrihoe, reinforcing its emphasis on accessibility and grassroots cultural values, distinguishing it from religious traditions that prioritize hierarchical or aristocratic symbolism.

This spirit of simplicity, accessibility, and focus on the common people is further reflected in some branch temples of Daesoon Jinrihoe (as illustrated in the example below at the Maitreya Buddha Hall of Geumsan Temple). Here, leadership is conceptualized through a threefold model inspired by the tteok-making process: The siru (甑, steamer, 시루 kr., or jeung in Sino-Korean, 증 kr.) symbolizes their deity (Kang). The sot (鼎, cauldron, 솥 kr., or 96eong in Sino-Korean, 정 kr.) represents the founder (Jo). The fire represents the motivator (Park) (Kim 2020, 72). Although the orthodoxy of Daesoon Jinrihoe's doctrine regarding this interpretation remains questionable, its core emphasis on mass appeal and connection to the common people remains evident (See Figure 3: "Siru and the Sot at the Maitreya Buddha Hall of Geumsan Temple").



Figure 2. Siru and the Sot (Source: AADDJ, p. 72)



Figure 3. Siru and the Sot at the Maitreya Buddha Hall
of Geumsan Temple (Source: Museum of Daesoon Jinrihoe, 2024)

The populist and grassroots nature of Daesoon Jinrihoe is also reflected in *Simudo* (尋牛圖, The Ten Ox-Seeking Pictures, 심우도 ***kr***.) (Kim 2020, 214–220). This serves as a quintessential example of close ties to folk culture through simple, relatable symbols that bear no traces of royal, aristocratic, or intellectual elite motifs. The central figures in these paintings are not kings, officials, or scholars but a young boy (disciple) and a white ox—symbols that are simple and familiar to the everyday lives of common people.

The boy's journey to find the white ox is a metaphor for the process of spiritual cultivation leading to enlightenment, but instead of using distant and grandiose imagery of nobility, it is intimately tied to natural symbols and daily life.

In *Simudo*, the white ox (白牛, 흰소 ***kr***.) symbolizes the "Daesoon Truth" (大巡眞理, 대순진리 ***kr***.) (Hwang 2009, 88–89), the ultimate truth that anyone can pursue, regardless of their social status. This symbol starkly contrasts with the high-status imagery commonly associated with royal religions, such as lotus thrones or dragons and phoenixes. The young boy (少年, 소년 ***kr***.) represents the believer or disciple, emphasizing that anyone, regardless of humble origins or low status, can attain enlightenment if they persevere on their spiritual path.

Each stage of the boy's journey is depicted through familiar natural imagery, fostering accessibility and practicality. During *Simsim-I* (深深有悟, deep contemplation leading to enlightenment, 심심유오 ***kr***.), the boy sits under a pine tree, pondering philosophical questions such as: "What is life?" and "Where do I come from?" (AADDJ 2016, 59). The rustic springtime setting highlights the beginning of the spiritual journey, grounded in introspection and connection with nature.

During *Bongdeuk-singyo* (奉得神敎, seeking and following heavenly teachings, 봉득신교 ***kr***.), the boy finds ox tracks, symbolizing spiritual guidance provided by deities or ancestors. These tracks serve as guiding signs for the believer. In *Myeoni-suji* (勉而修之, diligently practicing the Way and overcoming hardships, 면이수지 ***kr***.), the boy faces storms, steep cliffs, and other unavoidable challenges, symbolizing the trials and obstacles encountered on the path of spiritual cultivation. Every image, from

footprints, streams, and pine trees to lightning and storms, is drawn from nature and real-life experiences, making the teachings of Daesoon Jinrihoe more relatable to the common people. Through the boy's journey, Daesoon Jinrihoe emphasizes the philosophy that anyone, regardless of status, can achieve enlightenment through effort. In the stage of *Seongji-Useong* (誠之又誠, continuing endless dedication to the Way, 성지우성 ***kr***.), the focus is on abandoning old habits and thoughts to fully internalize the teachings of Daesoon Jinrihoe. After overcoming steep valleys, the boy finally finds the white ox and begins the journey of unity with it (AADDJ 2016). The stage of *Dotong-jingyeong* (道通眞境, perfect harmony with the Way, 도통진경 ***kr***.) portrays the boy riding the white ox and playing a flute, reaching the state of "The Way is the self, and the self is the Way" (道卽我 我卽道, 도즉아 아즉도 ***kr***.). This philosophy emphasizes the will and power of the individual in the process of cultivation—a message with profound resonance and persuasive appeal for the common people, who often had limited access to elite knowledge.

Finally, in the last stage, *Doji-tongmyeong* (道之通明, the enlightened world of the Way, 도지통명 ***kr***.), the ideal world is depicted as a paradise on earth, featuring flowers of immortality, celestial maidens playing music, and soaring cranes (Kim 2020, 219). This is not an image of a grand palace or the abode of supreme deities, but a serene and harmonious natural landscape. This image clearly reflects Daesoon J Jinrihoe's vision of an ideal world where all people, regardless of their origins or status, can live in harmony with the Dao and with nature.

The absence of symbols associated with royalty, aristocracy, or Intellectual elites, along with the use of simple images such as the boy and the white ox, has created a religion that feels closely connected to everyday life. While the *Sibwudo* (十牛圖, Ten Ox-Herding Pictures, 십우도 ***kr***.) in Buddhism or the *Parudo* (八牛圖, Eight Ox-Herding Pictures, 팔우도 ***kr***.) in Taoism often carry profound philosophical and cosmological meanings, Simudo focuses on more relatable and easily understood symbols. The number of paintings in Simudo is reduced to six instead of ten (in Buddhism) or eight (in Taoism). This reflects the compactness, visual clarity, and emphasis on practical personal cultivation. Daesoon Jinrihoe's *Simudo* is a clear testament to their populist and grassroots philosophy.

Conclusion

From a cultural anthropological perspective, the success of both Caodaism and Daesoon Jinrihoe lies in their ability to effectively identify the target and scope of the cultural realm—the collective memory region. Based on this, they have creatively adapted traditional elements to form new religions that both satisfy the specific needs of their communities at the time and respond to the broader demands of the historical period of colonization and Westernization. Although both Caodaism and Daesoon Jinrihoe religions use traditional cultural motifs to construct their religious cosmologies, they

reflect two very different trends. Caodaism tends to create an elitist religion, combining symbols used by the royal court and major religions to assert a high, upper-class position in society. While it is undeniable that there are exceptions where certain symbols used in Daesoon Jinrihoe's sacred spaces have connections to the royal court and state-sponsored religions during Korea's dynastic period (for example, Dancheong (丹靑, 단청 *kr.*) paint), the overall religious aesthetic of Daesoon Jinrihoe moves in a different direction.

In contrast, Daesoon Jinrihoe focuses on building a cosmology that is accessible and close to the everyday lives of the common people, emphasizing popularization and practicality in the spiritual journey. This difference reflects the distinct ways in which each community expresses its cosmology and ontology within their historical and social context.

In Caodaism, deities such as Buddha, Jesus, Avalokiteśvara, and various historical figures are venerated, but they are not perceived as omnipotent, eternal, or supernatural beings. Rather, they are regarded as enlightened guides and spiritual mentors who serve as exemplars of moral and ethical conduct. Worship of these figures is not aimed at seeking miracles or divine intervention, but rather to draw inspiration for personal cultivation and virtuous living. This reflects a measured approach to the use of miraculous elements, focusing instead on personal spiritual refinement. Motifs like the bamboo, the banyan tree, and the ox are closely linked to the values of working-class labor and the diligence of the peasant class. These symbols not only represent collective strength but also embody the virtues of hard work, perseverance, and resilience of the poor and lower classes in society. From this perspective, the choice of noble symbols in Caodaism, such as the Dragon, Phoenix, and Lotus, further demonstrates a desire to break free from the image of the common people, aspiring instead to establish a religious and social identity associated with nobility and elevated status. This reflects the reality that these groups may have lacked recognition and social status in the old world, but they sought to create a new legitimacy for themselves in a society of pioneers, and the chosen religious symbols served as the means to achieve this.

While the Caodaism community is vulnerable due to its historical identity, the Daesoon Jinrihoe community, as reflected in its philosophy, demonstrates a more stable historical position; however, it is still sensitive and reactive to foreign cultures. As a result, Daesoon Jinrihoe tends to return to traditional motifs, symbols, and, most importantly, embraces a populist, folk-oriented approach in its philosophical and cosmological outlook. The Daesoon Jinrihoe follows a path of what Vietnamese scholars would refer to as strong popularization (大衆化, đại chúng hóa *vn.*) and folkification (平民化, bình dân hóa *vn.*). The cosmology of Daesoon Jinrihoe is built from familiar, simple, and accessible motifs for the common people. Natural symbols such as the white ox, pine tree, and images of rural life not only reflect the spirit of spiritual cultivation but also emphasize the simplicity and ordinariness of daily life. This religion places emphasis on personal practice, perseverance in the journey of self-realization, with a philosophy that

anyone, regardless of humble origins or low status, can attain enlightenment. It is a cosmology that is closely tied to reality, practical, easy to understand, and free from class distinctions.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Notes

[1] Donald L. Baker, "Preface" in David Kim (2020).

[2] Petrifaction, also known as petrification, refers to the process of transforming people into solid stone—a prevalent theme in folklore, mythology, and even modern literature

[3] The original statue, built in 764, was destroyed in a fire in 1597. The second version, which existed during the lifetime of Kang Jeungsan, was erected in 1627 but was also lost to fire in 1934. The current version, built in 1938, remains standing today. See: https://webzine.daesoon.org/board/index.asp?webzine=329&menu_no=5460&bno=10101&page=1

[4] In the scope of this study, we will temporarily interpret the dragon and phoenix due to the limitations of space.

[5] The Holy Beasts are most commonly referenced by their native Vietnamese or combined native and Sino-Vietnamese names such as indicated in the list above. As Sino-Vietnamese (Chinese characters) they can appear as long (龍), lân (麟), quy (龜), and phượng (鳳).

[6] "Bang" (幫) and "bang trưởng" (幫長) are Sino-Vietnamese terms of Chinese origin, referring to self-organized associations of Chinese migrants in Vietnam. These groups were typically formed based on geographic or occupational commonalities, with the "bang trưởng" serving as the leader responsible for managing and overseeing each association.

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The Custom of Cúng Việc Lề in Southern Vietnam: A Newly-Invented Tradition of Filial Piety Ethics?

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Original Articles

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Abstract

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many Vietnamese people from the Ngũ Quảng Region (the present-day Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị, Huế, Đà Nẵng, Quảng Nam, and Quảng Ngãi in the Central region) migrated and settled in today's southern Vietnam, bringing with them many Confucian values related to family and clan organization, especially the concept of filial piety and ancestor worship. Due to the particularity of the immigration situation and living environment in the new frontiers, the ancestor worship, which had been full of Confucian flavor, gradually changed in the direction of "reorganization" and became a simple yet meaningful collective ritual dedicated to early ancestors during the immigration periods.

This article uses Eric Hobsbawm's (1983) "the invention of tradition" theory, Maurice Halbwachs's (1980) collective memory theory, and Fredrik Barth's (1969) rational choice theory to analyze and synthesize ethnographic field data sources on *cúng việc lề* (routine clan-ancestor anniversary) mainly collected in Long An Province (a province in the Mekong Delta) to demonstrate that the tradition of ancestor worship in southern Vietnam is not only considered a way to give thanks and commemorate the dead, but also, in the special context of immigration, a form of reconstructed Confucian ritual that consolidates family lineage and empowers the living culturally.

Keywords: Southern Vietnam; immigration; cúng việc lề (routine clan-ancestor anniversary);Confucianism; filial piety

Introduction

On the wild bank of the Vàm Cỏ Đông River,[1] the Lê family spread an old and rough woven mat and put simple food and cooked wild vegetables on old plates and bowls as offerings to the early ancestors on the ground. An incense burner, a glass of white wine and a cup of green tea are solemnly placed at the north end - the direction from which their early ancestors once migrated to this land from the central and northern regions. An old man wearing a robe and turban solemnly lit three incense sticks and recited prayers. They worship the family's early common ancestors, those who left their homes in central Vietnam to migrate south and found villages in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in a collective ritual known as "*cúng việc lề* (routine clan-ancestor anniversary)". This begs the question: what specifically is *cúng việc lề*?

The author, Phan Thị Yến Tuyết, described "*cúng việc lề* (also called *cúng vật lề*/routine-object sacrifice, *cúng lề*/routine sacrifice) as a traditional sacrificial ritual formed by the Vietnamese people during their 'marching to the South' movement and found village in the southern region, and has become a custom: (Phan 1991, 7). This kind of custom is not available in North and Central Vietnam.

The term "*lề* (routine)" has been explained by Huỳnh Tịnh Của (1974) in *Quốc Âm Tự Vị* (*Vietnamese Dictionary*) as an "old habit" or "old custom" of certain places or certain communities. Accordingly, *cúng việc lề* is a special custom in southern Vietnam to commemorate and thank the early immigrant ancestors who left their homelands in the north and central Vietnam to settle and establish villages in southern Vietnam in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The purpose of holding this custom is to recall life during the pioneering period, remember and pay gratitude to the ancestors in the original place, identify the family tree, and tighten the relationship with relatives in the new homeland. Unlike traditional clan anniversaries that are common in Vietnamese culture, *cúng việc lề* organizers do not invite people outside the clan to participate; the descendants of the clan remember their clan annual *cúng việc lề* services and respectfully return to attend. In 2014, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism decided to recognize this sacrificial custom as a national intangible culture, naming it "*cúng việc lề*", and considered it a custom unique to the Mekong Delta region. The Vietnamese people are originally a nation that respected Confucian ethics and principles; they have strong ancestral traditions and solemn ancestor remembrance. Why do Long An people worship their ancestors in such a place with desolate scenery and food that in most other sacrificial rites would be considered too poor to be offered?

There are quite a few systematic research projects or articles that delve into the *cúng việc lề* rituals. Short essays include Phan Thị Yến Tuyết's (1991) "Tín ngưỡng cúng Việc lề- một tâm thức về cội nguồn của cư dân Việt khẩn hoang tại Nam Bộ" (Cúng việc lề - the sense of seeking the roots of the Vietnamese people to found the southern land), Sơn Nam's (2004) "Cúng việc lề ở Nam Bộ", Nguyễn Hữu Hiếu's (2004) "Cúng việc lề - Một tín ngưỡng mang đậm dấu ấn thời khai hoang của lưu dân ở Nam Bộ" (Cúng

việc lề: A belief with the imprint of the southern Vietnamese immigration period), and Nguyễn Trung Hiếu and Mai Thị Thu's (2023) "Tục cúng việc lề của người Việt huyện Thại Sơn tỉnh An Giang" (The cúng việc lề custom of Vietnamese people in Thoại Sơn District, An Giang Province). These are the four main resources. However, the general descriptions and preliminary generalization of these articles cannot satisfy readers, because *cúng việc lề* worship is a special custom that needs to be decoded and learned from many different perspectives such as history, culture, psychology, anthropology, and so on.

In addition, Chapter Two ("Belief and Religion") of the book *Địa chí Long An* (*Long An Provincial Geography*) briefly mentioned that *cúng việc lề* is a traditional custom in some special Long An clans. They hold this event on a designated day to honor their ancestors in the early periods and strengthen clan ties in their new homelands (Thạch and Lưu eds. 1989). Besides, the provincial intangible cultural heritage survey carried out by the Long An Provincial Museum in 2006 gave a preliminary and comprehensive understanding of Long An's customs and beliefs, among which, *cúng việc lề* custom is described in statistical detail for the first time. One of the authors of this article participated in the Museum project in 2005; therefore, having survey information from 2005 helps compare with field survey data from 2022 to 2023 onward, allowing us to contextualize the overall changes in *cúng việc lề* custom (if any).

Our study found that ritual worship is truly popular in the Đồng Nai–Vàm Cỏ rivers system (north of the Mekong River Basin), even though some cases are found in the southern part of the Mekong River (Nguyễn and Mai 2023). The Đồng Nai–Vàm Cỏ river basin is the area where Vietnamese first moved south, opened lands, and established villages during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the special background of early immigration and village establishment gave rise to *cúng việc lề* sacrificial rituals. Long An province (the Vàm Cỏ Rivers subsystem) can be considered the heartland of the *cúng việc lề* custom in the region. The area south of the Mekong River was expanded by the Mạc family from Hà Tiên (Li 1998; Cooke and Li 2004; Chen 2008; Ang 2019) and was later consolidated by Vietnamese families from north of the Mekong River; by this time, the family clan system and institutions in the area had stabilized, the *cúng việc lề* custom may have existed, but is not prevalent south of the Mekong River.

Together with Đồng Nai and Gia Định (the present-day Ho Chi Minh City), the Vàm Cỏ Rivers area of Long An Province was settled early by Vietnamese immigrants in the late seventeenth century. Following the orders of the Nguyễn Lord, Marquis Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh went south to formalize the territory of present-day southern Vietnam and named it the Đồng Nai—Gia Định Region in 1698. By 1832, King Minh Mạng established Tân An central village at the heart of the Vàm Cỏ Rivers area. In 1867, the French colonialists divided the land of Long An into two counties (Tân An and Phước Lộc) and a part merged into the neighbouring Chợ Lớn province. Starting from 1 January 1900, Long An was redivided into Tân An Province and Chợ Lớn Province. Until July 1957, Long An Province was established on the basis of Tân An Province and parts of Chợ Lớn

Province, which remains stable to this day. Long An was also the birthplace or revolutionary activity area of early meritorious officials (such as Mai Công Hương, Nguyễn Huỳnh Đức, Mai Tự Thừa in the eighteenth and early 19th centuries) and patriotic heroes participating in all major anti-French struggles of the late 19th and early 20th centuries such as Nguyễn Trung Trực, Nguyễn Văn Tiến, Nguyễn Văn Quá, Đỗ Tường Phong, Đỗ Tường Tự, (local anti-French heroes), Phan Phát Sanh (a member of the local *Tiandihui* Secret Society), Trần Chánh Chiếu and Bùi Chi Nhuận in the Đông Du Movement,[2] and so on. The people of Long An adopted the spirit of "sinh vi tướng, tử vi thần (living as a general and dying as a god)" to treat these officials and heroes specially; therefore, in many *cúng việc lề* sacrifices, people particularly praise their merits.

This research applies Eric Hobsbawm's (1983) "the invention of tradition" theory, Maurice Halbwachs's (1980) collective memory theory and Fredrik Barth's (1969) rational choice theory to study the origin, characteristics and nature of *cúng việc lề* sacrificial custom and to argue that whether or not the Vietnamese people are influenced by Confucianism, the tradition of ancestor worship has been motivated by care and gratitude for the deceased rather than as a ritual form that specially conferred cultural authority and prestige for the living. The data for this study mainly come from two sources: 1) the work analysis and evaluation results of the Long An Provincial Museum project on *cúng việc lề* custom in 2005; and 2) the ethnographic field survey data in the Vàm Cỏ Rivers area in 2022 and 2023.

Cúng việc lề as a Special Version of Ancestral Worship Unique to the Southern Vietnamese People

Traditional Vietnamese Ancestral Worship

Before the seventeenth century, Vietnamese mainly lived in the Red River Delta and north of the central region. Vietnam's traditional ancestor worship beliefs were formed in prehistoric times and were institutionalized (or formalized) under the influence of Confucianism, especially during the Lê Dynasty in the 15th century and beyond. This belief has both spiritual value (praying for the incarnation of deceased ancestors and seeking for ancestral protection), cultural and social value ("drinking water to remember the source (*uống nước nhớ nguồn*)," passing on the family line, educating filial piety and other ethics) (Trần, 2001).

Traditional Vietnamese and today's North Vietnamese place great emphasis on family clan traditions and relationships (in addition to cultural traditions and relationships between village families). Some villages were formed based on an extended family clan, for example, Lê Xá Village was composed of all members of the Lê family, and Chử Xá Village was composed of members of the Chử family. Some villages were made up of inter-family clan connections. The two elements of family clan tradition and village

cohesion are closely intertwined, making each village a kingdom with its own system of village customs (Trần 2001). As a result, the Vietnamese have established a complete family clan system (ancestral shrine, clan principle, clan genealogy, clan death anniversary ceremonies) and attach great importance to ritual forms, clan hierarchy, ritual systems and male authority (see Buttinger 1972, 15, 22; Kim Định 1973, 172).

The Vietnamese ancestor worship was first founded on the foundation of 1) memory, respect and gratitude to ancestors,[3] and 2) the concept of soul and body;[4] accordingly, the soul lives on after death and can occasionally visit descendants of the family. Ancestor worship at this time only reflected the original concept of filial piety and had not yet been institutionalized by mainstream ideology.

Entering the period of Chinese occupation (1st century CE to 10th century CE) and the period of independent monarchies (10th century CE to 1945 CE), the Vietnamese accepted certain ideas of the Three Teachings from China, among which Confucianism had the most profound influence on the local ancestor worship (Nguyen 2016). The imperial families, with strong support from central and local Confucian scholars, formalized customs and rituals in what James Watson (1985) called "standardization" or "orthopraxy" (see Pham 2009; Nguyễn 2019). However, Vietnamese Confucianism (based mainly on Neo-Confucianism) is considered moderate and open; under any circumstance, Confucianism and Taoism have had to adapt to Buddhism (Duong 2004 300; Phan 2000, 80–87; Woodside 2002, 117, 127, 131; Vo and Nguyen 2020, 59–83). Therefore, although the veneer of Vietnamese ancestor worship has been branded with new values, the concepts of respect and gratitude for ancestors remain the main pillars of this belief.

The custom of ancestor worship has been institutionalized and ritualized, and has become a family rites[5] category or a formal behavioral norm in the family, with etiquette principles and regulations, as well as the form of sacrifice and ceremony. Generally speaking, annual sacrificial activities are held every year for the first to third generation ancestors, while ancestors of the fourth generation and earlier are collectively known as *Cửu huyền thất tổ* and are worshiped at the ancestral shrine. The ancestral hall has a hierarchical system, including the main line (the oldest male family) and the clan branches. The collective death anniversary of the main clan is held earliest and on the largest scale. Every branch and every family has a responsibility to fully participate and contribute in order. Subsequently, each sub-clan takes turns to hold sub-clan death anniversary ceremonies. The family sets up a clan tablet system and attaches it to the family clan tradition and honor.

Therefore, clan rituals are also an opportunity to show off family clan prestige and honor. The Vietnamese courts used standardized customs and rituals to civilize minority areas and new frontiers, including today's southern Vietnam (Ang 2019). However, this "civilization policy" did not take effect until the social and political system of this new frontier gradually stabilized at the end of the eighteenth century. *Cúng việc lề* sacrificial custom was established in southern Vietnam before the end of the eighteenth century

and was only practiced among early immigrant families in the Đồng Nai—Vàm Cỏ subregion.

Cúng việc lề as a Special Version of the Ancestral Beliefs of the Southern Vietnamese

The southern Vietnamese people, including the Long An Vietnamese, are descendants of "Nam tiến (Marching to the South)" immigrants from different times. The process of marching south is divided into two steps, that is, the first step is to march from the north to the central region, and the second step is to march from the central region to the south. In 1600, Nguyễn Hoàng, a bureaucrat of the Lê Dynasty, and his people went to the Thuận Quảng region (present-day Huế-Đà Nẵng), established the Kingdom of Đàng Trong (early Cochinchina) and deepened Vietnamese ties with the larger world of Southeast Asia which "enabled him to establish a new vision of being Vietnamese distinguished by the relative freedom from the Vietnamese past and the authority justified by appeals to that past" (Taylor 1993, 64). C. P. Fitzgerald stated that "they [the southern Vietnamese] became less amenable to the distant central government, more independent in their thinking and way of life" (1972, 29). Jeffrey Richey downgraded the importance of Confucian values in the southern Vietnamese tradition while elevating the role of Buddhism and folk cultural institutions (Richey 2013, 68). Ancestor worship has thus given rise to many new forms appropriate to immigrant backgrounds, including *cúng việc lề*.

The Nguyễn Lords (1600–1789) and, later, the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802–1945), promoted Confucian orthodoxy but mainly "used it as means of territorializing and civilizing the new lands" (Nguyen and Nguyen 2020, 87). As Confucianism declined and popular Buddhism became more pronounced, Vietnamese immigrants to the Southern from the Huế-Quảng Nam region fell into a state of cultural and ideological ambiguity. Immigrants from the Red River Delta (North Vietnam) to the Huế-Quảng Nam region (northern part of the Central) had been organized mainly in families/village collectives, while immigrants from the Huế-Quảng Nam region to the south were mainly of small-family size; therefore, the traditional clan culture and closed rural culture have largely collapsed, paving the way to the emergence and the rise of "newly-invented traditions."[6]

In southern Vietnam, the customs, rituals, and Confucian value systems related to family and clan traditions do not have suitable conditions to be maintained and developed like in the Red River Delta or the Huế-Quảng Nam region. Families in southern Vietnam still retain the custom of annual ancestor worship, but it is held separately within each nuclear family. Ancestors who died within three generations are worshiped, but there are no clear systems and regulations within the family clan. Many families do not build a common ancestral hall or record family trees, except those who migrated in the 20th century. The person responsible for organizing the death anniversary ceremony is the youngest son of the family, unlike the tradition in the north and the

central region where it is the eldest son who must perform this task. Before the clan memorial day, family members take turns inviting relatives, neighbors, friends, and colleagues to the party after the ceremony; this makes the family ancestors' memorial days both a family atmosphere and a spirit of neighborhood unity. Has the Confucian tradition within the framework of traditional Vietnamese families and clans really entered a state of deconstruction in the South?

As mentioned above, the land in the northeastern part of southern Vietnam (Đồng Nai—Gia Định—Định Tường) was first reclaimed, and the main population was immigrants from the Huế-Quảng Nam region (see also Lê, 2022). Both Trịnh Hoài Đức (2005) in *Gia Định Thành Thông Chí* (*Gazetteer of Gia Định Citadel,* c. 1818) and members of the Nguyễn Dynasty History Compilation Bureau in *Đại Nam Nhất Thống Chí* (*Veritable Records of the Great South*) all wrote that the residents in this area "each family has its own customs," except the *cúng việc lề* custom in large family clans. It is worth noting that after the eighteenth century, families who later immigrated to the south did not hold this sacrificial ceremony [*cúng việc lề*], perhaps because the economy, culture, and society were stable at this time, and the national administrative structure was stable, collective family clan so death anniversaries gradually transformed into individual death anniversaries of ordinary families. Why did early immigrant families start holding *cúng việc lề* sacrificial ceremonies?

Before Vietnamese exploration (around the mid-seventeenth century), much of what is now southern Vietnam was barren or flooded, except for the indigenous settlements in the upper reaches of the Đồng Nai River and the Saigon River area, as well as the Khmer villages on higher terrain such as the coastal sand dunes or the Seven Hills of the Lower Mekong Delta. Zhou Daguan (周達觀, *vn.* Châu Đạt Quan) in *Zhenla Fengtuji* (真臘風土記, *A Record of the Kingdom of Chenla*, written in the 13th century) wrote that much of the lower Mekong delta was filled with wild animals, such as crocodiles, tigers, monkeys and buffalo. Around 1620s, the first group of Vietnamese immigrants came south to the Đồng Nai River, only twenty years after occupying the port of Hội An (from the Chăm people) in the central region. Some families set out from the Đồng Nai River Basin to explore the Saigon River and Vàm Cỏ Rivers (north of the Mekong River). The harshness of nature (floods, wild animals, epidemics, starvation) and social challenges (attacks, looting) claimed many lives. Due to high mobility and poor living conditions, people could only bury the dead roughly and continue to make a living; after a while, people of later generations no longer knew on what day their ancestors had died or where they [the ancestors] had been buried.

However, the mentality of respecting and being grateful to ancestors and the concept that the dead must be sacrificed to in order to avoid becoming wild ghosts became the eternal motivation in the hearts of Vietnamese immigrants at that time. Members of the same lineage began performing collective *cúng việc lề* rituals on wild riverbanks or on land where their early ancestors had embarked from immigrant ships/sampans. Some families set up sacrificial boats full of sacrifices and push them off the banks of the Vàm

Cỏ Rivers to feed the wandering souls who died during the migration process. They worshiped their ancestors who had lived in the central region or who had died on their way south. Every family has its own *cúng việc lề* rules, which are known only to lineage members in the appropriate space and time. According to our investigation records, the Lê family of Tầm Vu Town in Long An Province is an ancient family, and it has been eleven generations since their ancestors moved south. The details of the *cúng việc lề* custom as well as its characteristics and significance will be analyzed in detail in the following sections.

Basic Features of *Cúng việc lề*

Various forms but consistent in meaning

As mentioned above, the Long An Vàm Cỏ Rivers basin is the area with the densest *cúng việc lề* customs in southern Vietnam. We investigated and learned about the *cúng việc lề* sacrificial customs of 16 of the most typical families in the area. Preliminary results show that this custom in Long An have various forms and specifications, but its characteristics and significance are very consistent.

Regarding the date of the *cúng việc lề* sacrifice, we found that each family has its own choice, which is passed down and preserved from generation to generation. *Cúng việc lề* days can be the death anniversary of the "original ancestors" many generations ago (when they were still in the Central regions, the death anniversary day of the earliest ancestor moving south, the memorial day of a meritorious ancestor, the day to worship the land god, or the day to pray for the whole family (*cầu an*). Generally speaking, each family clan will choose a fixed day, and clan members at different times will automatically remember and participate in it as part of their duties.

The Ngô family in Kiến Tường Town chose 25 January (the death anniversary of the wife of the first-generation ancestor, Mr Võ Tự Phụng)[7] to be the day of *cúng việc* lề. The Lê family of Đức Tân Commune in Tân Trụ District chose a day of the land god worship, 18 March. The Nguyễn family in Đức Hòa Thượng Commune, Đức Hòa District chose 16 February, the family's Prayer Day, as the day of *cúng việc lề*. The Nguyễn family in Thạnh Đức Commune, Bến Lức District makes a living as fishermen, so they designated 10 March as the *cúng việc lề* day[8]. The Lê family in Thanh Phú Commune, Bến Lức District chooses the death anniversary day of a meritorious ancestor, Mr Lê Văn Hy,[9] General-in-Chief of Trường Sa Maritime Legion of the Nguyễn Dynasty.[10] Some families choose the day of graveyard decoration of December 25 as the *cúng việc lề* day, such as the Hồ and the Nguyễn families in Long Sơn Commune, Cần Đước District; the Phạm and the Nguyễn in Phước Lại Commune, Cần Giuộc District; the Biện Hữu in Mỹ Lộc Commune, Cần Giuộc District; the Nguyễn and the Đặng in Lợi Bình Nhơn Commune, Tân An City; the Đoàn in Mỹ Thạnh Commune, Thủ Thừa District; the Lê in Bình Thạnh Commune, Thủ Thừa District, and so on. The Nguyễn in

Quarter 4, Thạnh Hóa Town They choose the last day of the old year, 30 December, which is also the day that welcomes deceased ancestors home for the lunar New Year festival, as the *cúng việc lề* day. Many others take the day of sending-off deceased ancestors during the lunar New Year, 3, 4, or 5 January, to be the day of *cúng việc lề*. Especially, the Nguyễn in Vĩnh Hưng Township and another Nguyễn family in Vĩnh Thạnh Commune, Vĩnh Hưng District (the annually flooding area) choose 5 July, the peak of the annual flood, to hold the *cúng việc lề* ceremony to facilitate the use of various fish caught in the flood to make sacrifices.

Regarding the space of the *cúng việc lề* ceremony, the authors of this research found that many families choose to hold *cúng việc lề* sacrifices in the side of rivers, canals or on wasteland beside village roads, while other families decide to hold the ceremony in family ancestral halls. None of them place offerings on the altar or table; instead, they spread a mat on the ground, place the offerings and a small boat that sails north.[11] Especially the ceremony held in the wild recreates the scene of the ancestors who came here to reclaim land and build villages in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Therefore, the space in which the ceremony is held recalls historical and cultural memories associated with the period of marching to the South in pre-modern Vietnamese history. The film *Mùa len trâu* ("Buffalo Boy") directed by Nguyễn Võ Nguyên Minh (2005),[12] although some details are a bit exaggerated, uses film art techniques to reflect the heroism of the southern reclamation and settlement period.

Regarding sacrificial offerings, there is a unifying principle among families. All food, cooked or raw, must be as simple as possible, especially if it is close to the food of the early days of immigration. All offerings are regular, mandatory, and cannot be changed over time. During our observations in 2004–2005 and 2022–2023, we found that every family would cook *cháo ám*, wild-frilled snakeheaded fish (*cá lóc nướng trui*) and a variety of wild vegetables to venerate their ancestors. *Cháo ám* is cooked by brown rice with a half-processed raw fish (leaving the fish whole, without cutting off the fins), reflecting the difficult lives of early immigrants who didn't even have kitchen utensils to cook. Usually, three pieces of snakehead fish are grilled whole without cutting them, spread on a banana leaf or lotus leaf on a mat, and served with raw salt. Vegetables, both cooked and raw, are picked from accessible wasteland. Mung bean sticky rice is cooked in whole bean shells and served with a few cubes of solid brown sugar on the side. Fish, shrimp, crab, banana, taro, and wild vegetables were available in Long An could be easily acquired in the early time. It is exactly the case of cultural reproduction as described by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1977). When asked why the families had to cook with specific ingredients instead of others, they explained it was because of their ancestors' tastes and dietary preferences. Food containers such as bowls and plates are made from plants grown in homes' yards (Nguyễn and Nguyễn 2010; Nguyễn 2011). The people of Long An have two sentences that describe the hard and miserable life of the early residents:

> "Cháo ám đựng miểng vùa, tổ tiên khai đường hậu thế;
> Rơm đồng trui cá lóc, cháu con cảm đức tiền nhân" (the author collected in 2004).
> (Translation: Cháo ám is served in a coconut shell; early ancestors opened up land and villages for future generations;
> Snakehead fish is grilled on the rice-straw fire; descendants solemnly express their respect and gratitude to their ancestors).

Depending on the background and family life, many families must prepare some special items as offerings. The Lê family in Đức Tân Commune (Tân Trụ District) served the shrimp salad of twelve "bowls" made by banana tree trunk bark. The Trần family in Bình Tịnh Commune (Tân Trụ District) needs to prepare 100 bánh tét[13] and 100 bánh ít,[14] each one as small as the big toe. The Lê family in Khánh Hậu Ward of Tân An City prepare rice cake and some cubes of solid brown sugar. The Phạm in Tân An city downtown prepare a dish of summer roll, 5 spare heads, a dish of three classic sacrifice food (*bộ tam sên*).[15] The Võ family in Kiến Tường Town need to make a dish of 'elephant skin salad', now replaced by pork skin salad, with an elephant-shape pork skin laid on top. The Võ family also places a piece of opium on the offering plate to remind and teach all members to stay away from the drug (because there was once an addict in the family). Both the Phạm family in Tân An and the Võ family in Kiến Tường Town made a living by hunting (in the Đồng Tháp Mười flooded lowlands) in the early days. The Lê family in Thanh Phú Commune (Bến Lức District) serves a plate of raw meat to worship the tiger—'the lord of the forest' (because someone in the family was killed by a tiger)—and constructs a straw human statue with five coconut leaves and five arrows on it, forming the sacred five elements structure to 'destroy' and sweep ghosts away. The Nguyễn family in Đức Hòa Thượng Commune (Đức Hòa District) serves additionally a wild-grilled snake, while the Huỳnh family in Bình Tâm Commune (Tân An City) prepares a bowl of water (for the washing of ancestors) and a mirror covered by a piece of red cloth (as mentioned in a Vietnamese proverb "*nhiễu điều phủ lấy giá gương* (the red cloth fully covers the mirror)", signifying the family clan consolidation. The Đỗ family in Dương Xuân Hội Commune (Châu Thành District), serves three wild-grilled shrimp on a dish of salad made from wild plants. The Lê family in Đức Tân Commune (Tân Trụ District) serves a tray of candy (made by burnt sticky rice mixed with brown sugar) on wild plants.

The common feature of *cúng việc lề* sacrificial rituals in Long An is that the ritual performers strive to reproduce the hard life of their ancestors and their journey south to the wilderness. Nowadays, although conditions have improved, many clans and families still spread mats on the ground to prepare for sacrifices. Bowls and plates must be simple (made of clay or wood). The food offerings are sometimes placed on lotus leaves, banana leaves or anthurium leaves, and the chopsticks are made of wild branches. According to regulations, during sacrifices, family members are not allowed to place sacrifices on the altar, nor are they allowed to use luxurious bowls and chopsticks.

There are no written rules for sacrificial rituals; however, some basic principles are applied. The head of the family clan, or the celebrant, dressed in neat robes, presides over the ceremony, pours wine and water, burns incense and prays. Each family's vows are different; the general idea is to remember the great achievements of our ancestors who went through all kinds of hardships to come to this new land and create careers for later generations. The celebrant bows (kowtows) four times, and then each member of the family similarly bows four times in order of family rank. During the ceremony, the Võ family in Kiến Tường Town arranged for men to stand on one side and women to kneel on the ground on the other side. Members of the Đỗ family in Châu Thành District stood on either side of the celebrant with their arms folded in order of family rank, while the celebrant knelt in front of their ancestors and read the eulogy. Members of the executive committee of Tân Xuân commune (Tầm Vu Town, Châu Thành District) perform a bowing ceremony after the prayer ceremony for family descendants. Two anti-French heroic ancestors of the Đỗ family (Đỗ Tường Tự and Đỗ Tường Phong) are worshipped in Tân Xuân Communal House because of their sacrifice in the war against France at the end of the 19th century.

After the incense is all burnt out, the celebrant burns votive paper money as well as paper gold and silver ingots, sprinkles rice and salt, and finally performs a banana raft rafting ceremony on the river to send of the ancestors back to their place. Some families beat gongs and drums or play ritual music during the ceremony (such as the Lê in Bến Lức District, the Võ in Kiến Tường Town, the Đinh in Châu Thành District, the Đặng in Cần Đước District, and so on). What follows is a 'communitas'[16] meal enjoyed by the whole family, along with stories of the adventures and achievements of their early ancestors. *Cúng việc lề* custom thus conveys the generosity, chivalry and humanistic life spirit of generations of the Vàm Cỏ residents.

The Hybridity of *Cúng Việc Lề* Customs

There are two elements to the *Cúng việc về* customs that enable them to easily absorb affiliated beliefs/rituals and easily adopted by other spiritual institutions, especially Lunar New Year rituals and popular religions, namely, dealing with the souls/the deceased, and ritual-oriented nature.

Firstly, *cúng việc lề* sometime is attached to the collective death anniversaries (*giỗ hội*, or *hiệp kỵ*) of big family clans in Long An. Like most families in northern Vietnam, some prominent families in Long An also established ancestral halls. They believe that the *cúng việc lề* ceremony is a collective family anniversary for all deceased ancestors of the family clan and is usually held in the family's ancestral hall instead of choosing a wild venue. Although ancestors of more than four generations (*Cửu huyền thất tổ*, aforementioned) are enshrined in the ancestral hall, each member family still holds death anniversaries every year to commemorate the direct ancestors of the first to third generations. Arguably, these families' *cúng việc lề* custom reflects a mixture of both

northern Vietnamese traditions and local "newly invented traditions." In contrast to the northern tradition, this collective family ritual is performed in the form of a *cúng việc lề* sacrificial ceremony, rather than a Confucianized and well-organized ancestor worship ceremony.

Some families have clear clarification on *cúng việc lề* rituals and formal death anniversary ceremonies; however, these two rituals are closely related to each other. The Lê family in Thanh Phú Commune (Bến Lức District), the Phạm family in Phước Tuy Commune (Cần Đước District), the Đặng family in Long Trạch (Cần Đước District), and the Nguyễn family in Thạnh Đức Commune (Bến Lức District) first hold a *cúng việc lề* ceremony outdoors and then hold a formal sacrificial ceremony in the main ancestral hall.

Secondly, *cúng việc lề* is sometimes amplified and/or extended to perform additional rituals to honor land gods and wandering spirits, or family prayer rituals. The *cúng việc lề* sacrificial rituals of some family clans are mixed with rituals of sacrificing hero-ancestors. As aforementioned, local heroes such as Nguyễn Huỳnh Đức, Nguyễn Văn Tiến, Nguyễn Văn Quá, Đỗ Tường Phong, Đỗ Tường Tự, Mai Tự Thừa, and others are worshipped and honored in related families' *cúng việc lề* rituals; some other unrelated family clans also honor local heroes in the ceremony. The Đỗ family in Châu Thành District in their annual *cúng việc lề* ceremony recalled the merits of two hero-ancestors as follows:

> ...The country was invaded by the enemy [French], and they felt insecure; like heroes, they swore to worship Thủ Khoa Huân[17] as their general They recruited brave soldiers, gathered agricultural products, sold land, and stood up to follow General Thủ khoa Huân against the French. Messrs. Đỗ Tường Phong and Đỗ Tường Tự used the Bình Cách area and the Long Trì - Bình Dương corridor (Mỹ Tho) as a base of resistance... (collected in 2005).

Although not related by blood, the Nguyễn family of Thạnh Đức Commune (Bến Lức District) has a large part of the memorial eulogy in memory of the hero Nguyễn Trung Trực:

> Dear the village guardian god, heroic god, and ancestors, today is March 10, we hold this sacricial ceremony to dedicate General Nguyễn and his soldiers. We pray that our Nguyễn family will be safe, strong, free from illness, and overcome all disasters... (collected in 2022).

The Lê family in Thanh Phú Commune (Bến Lức District) is expected to prepare a wood and paper warship with "cannons" and statues of soldiers on it to represent the heroic deeds of General-in-Chief, Mr Lê Văn Hy, and his Trường Sa Maritime Legion during the early Nguyễn Dynasty (the early 19th century). The boat is taken to the riverway intersection for "launching" after the main ceremony on land.

Thirdly, many families attach a ghost-feeding ritual to a *cúng việc lề* ceremony. Indeed, people today do not know when and where their ancestors died during the process of marching to the South, and they may think that some of ancestors are now hungry ghosts. Therefore, during the *cúng việc lề* ceremony, the celebrant often invites wandering spirits and unworshipped warriors to participate. In the *cúng việc lề* ritual of the Nguyễn family in Thạnh Đức Commune (Bến Lức District), a part of the eulogy is read:

> We pay tribute to the fallen soldiers on both sides, the unjust dead, and the unworshipped warriors of the Nguyễn family's past generals. We pray that you will protect and bless us from generation to generation... (collected in 2004).

Apparently, during the Marching to the South movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, accidental deaths became common, and the lines between ancestors and ghosts became rather blurred.

Fourthly, *cúng việc lề* is also an opportunity to pay homage to the land gods and goddesses (Thổ địa, Ngung Man Nương, and so on), early landowners, and the agricultural god (Thần nông). This is a belief originating from the custom of "repaying gratitude to the landowners" of Vietnamese residents in the Huế-Quảng Nam region. According to local spiritual beliefs, the land these families live on once had owners; they worshiped land gods and early landowners, meaning they bought, leased, or temporarily borrowed the land so that their families could live in peace and make a good living. A passage in the eulogy towards the land god of the Nguyễn family in Thạnh Đức Commune (Bến Lức District) describes and follows:

> Dear the God of the Land, the God of the River, and the early landowner couple, we pray that our family will always be free from disasters and illnesses from the beginning of the year to the end of the year... (collected in 2023)

Food offered to the land god can be either meat or vegetarian, such as boiled chicken, pig head and pig tail,[18] boiled pork, rice, soup, glutinous rice, sweet soup, and so on. Last but not least, many families include the family prayer ritual in a *cúng việc lề* ceremony. In addition to expressing respect and gratitude to the ancestors, the whole family also performs a collective prayer ceremony at the end of the entire process. The celebrant reads prayers and eulogies while all members bow their heads:

> ... Ancestors, grandparents, generals and soldiers of the Nguyễn family in all generations! We honestly pay homage to all of you and wish you protect and bless all members of the clan. Please protect us from all kinds of illness and disasters... (Oral eulogy of the Nguyễn family in Thạnh Đức Commune (Bến Lức District, collected in 2022).

Table 1: Comparison of ancestor worship customs among people in northern and southern Vietnam (especially Long An Province) (Source: authors, 2025)

Family level	Northern Vietnam	Southern Vietnam
Nuclear family	N/A	Each nuclear family worships its direct ancestors for three generations. An annual death anniversary is held for each deceased ancestor. Early immigrant clans/lineages hold the cúng việc lề ceremonies
Family clan/lineage	Collective clan/lineage ancestral anniversary held at the ancestral halls	Families arriving later mainly practice the above-mentioned nuclear family ancestor worship and regularly hold death anniversaries for each deceased ancestor within three generations. Ancestors from the fourth generation and older are classified as the so-called "*Cửu huyền thất tổ*" and are usually worshiped in the personal family of the youngest male in the family. Some families established ancestral halls to worship their common *Cửu huyền thất tổ* ancestors.

The Mentality of "Filial Piety" Found in *Cúng Việc Lề* Customs

A Ritual-based Family Clan Identification and Consolidation

The ancients once said "there is no ritual/etiquette, there will be no ethics (*đạo đức nhân nghĩa, phi lễ bất thành*)." Rituals (and customs) have been chosen as a way of conveying family and social morals that family heads and local elites hope to popularize in the community. Ngô Đức Thịnh (2001, 7) once stated that: "Ritual is the environment of religious faith, which contains the lofty and sacred beautiful values that human beings need to pursue: truth, goodness and beauty."

Firstly, this was the result of rational choices made by early immigrant families in the lands they explored early on, namely, Đồng Nai—Gia Định—Định Tường, including Long An province. In order to adapt to the new environment, early immigrant families actively changed their traditions and behaviors, including ancestor worship and the birth of *cúng việc lề* ceremony. Therefore, "*cúng việc lề*" is a newly invented ritual form that is the result of interpreting family traditions and fulfilling filial ethics according to specific circumstances in Long An (and Southern Vietnam in general).

Cúng việc lề expresses sacred affection for the place of birth, immigrant relatives and the early memories of ancestors. Through the cúng việc lề ceremony, respect and gratitude to ancestors and filial piety are at the core of the ceremony. In addition, family solidarity and hierarchy are tightened. In the eulogy read at the *cúng việc lề* ceremony, the Đỗ family in Dương Xuân Hội Commune (Châu Thành District), recalled the merits and achievements of their ancestors, as follows: The Đỗ family in Dương Xuân Hội Commune (Châu Thành District) recalls merits and achievements of early ancestor in a paragraph of eulogy read at the *cúng việc lề* ceremony as follows:

> "…Back then, when this land was still in the forest, our ancestors worked hard to cut down trees and grass and establish public farms in Tân Xuân Village. During the day, they took food and water, waded in the mud [to cultivate and catch fish], and didn't care about being bitten by wild leech; at night, they returned to the makeshift house with mud walls and ate simple dinner. Our ancestors were not afraid of hardships and difficulties; they withstood wind, rain and dew, worked under the sun, moon and stars to build the future. By the grace of God, the living career was opened and generations of us can enjoy it today. What respect and admiration! What respect and admiration! …" (collected in Dương Xuân Hội Commune in 2005).

Each family has specific rituals, sacrifices and its own style, but the most common is the representation of memories of the reclamation period. Borrowing the concept from Halbwachs, *cúng việc lề* ceremony is also an excellent custom to preserve the historical and cultural memory of the early Long An residents (Halbwachs 1980).

Secondly, the style of *cúng việc lề* ceremony and the details of the sacrifices become intangible signs that identify the family clan, since only clan members know the rules and necessary sacrifices. The above-mentioned Võ family clan in Kiến Tường Town helps clan members recognize their ancestors by offering "elephant skin salad" which reminds present and future generations of their ancestors' hunting traditions during the land opening period. In fact, most of the Vietnamese who went south in the mid-seventeenth century were exiles, wanted criminals, deserters and anti-royal elements. They had no choice but to flee south. To survive without being arrested, many of them had to change their names.

The early immigrant family "invented" *cúng việc lề* ceremony with specific sacrificial items to allow members of the same clan to recognize their roots, participate in clan's collective activities and consolidate clan relationships in this new land. Many Vietnamese families in the South did not keep family trees. In fact, they "did not dare keep genealogical records" to avoid being caught and killed by officials and soldiers under royal orders. The ceremony also expressed the nostalgia of the early refugees who were hunted by the imperial court for their original homeland, as well as their desire to return home to visit their ancestral graves and relatives. Therefore, the performance of sacrifices in rituals is a sign of recognition, consolidation, preservation and inheritance of the collective family.

Furthermore, the *cúng việc lề* ceremony can be considered a "secret language"[19] or "secret sign" used to identify families after the diaspora; so, it functions as to preserve and protect family lineage and blood line. The Phan family in Châu Thành District tells a story about a member who lost contact with the entire family for a long time. In 2002, this man finally found his roots by identifying the sacrificial offerings among the Phan family's *cúng việc lề* sacrifices. Lê Đại Anh Kiệt (2022) calls this ceremony as a "living genealogical record". If members of the same family clan had to change their surname, they could use this "sacred sign" to avoid intermarrying with each other or getting

involved in conflicts.

Historical and Socio-Cultural Significance

From a historical perspective, the *cúng việc lề* custom reflects part of the history of generations of Vietnamese immigrants exploring Long An and the southern lands, directly reflecting the history of Vietnam's development and territorial expansion during the pre-colonial period. It reflects the process of southern Vietnamese residents gathering different classes of people in new lands over centuries, the process of overcoming harsh natural conditions, and the process of building material and spiritual life. It also demonstrates the bravery, tenacity and endurance of the early South Vietnamese immigrants, and jointly composes a part of national cultural history with high scientific and practical significance.

From a spiritual perspective, *cúng việc lề* itself and the rituals in it (i.e., ancestor sacrifice and ghost feeding rituals) were once condemned as "superstitious" during the period of high development of post-war socialism (Endres 2002, 303–322; Phạm 2009, 8, 14, 149); but now from an interdisciplinary perspective, they are re-evaluated as "*thuần phong mỹ tục* (beautiful customs and worthy traditions)" which carry family and social morals that are not easily conveyed in textbooks or any secular practice. Since 2005, this custom has been officially recognized as a national cultural heritage and protected. Only by understanding that a community began to open up wasteland, faces hardships and dangers such as wilderness, chaotic living environment, epidemics, disasters, poverty alleviation, etc. can we truly understand and sympathize with them. Apart from rational choice, cúng việc lề customs and their associated activities were the only ways to sustain life in the newly opened lands.

A De-Confucianization Form of Family Tradition in Southern Vietnam?

Vietnam is a country influenced by Confucianism but not entirely Confucian. The impact of Confucianism on Vietnamese culture and life is really not that great compared to China or Korea (see Wolters 1988, 6; Woodside 2002, 116–143; McHale 2004). Within Vietnam, the Confucian imprint of the South further fades (see further Richey 2013, 68–9). As aforementioned, the early immigrants who went south were mainly exiles, wanted criminals, deserters and anti-royal elements. They "escaped" from the strict Confucian framework in which they were "trapped" (see Nguyen and Nguyen 2020, 79–112). In *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* (*Complete Annals of Đại Việt*, started by Ngô Sĩ Liên in the 15th century, continued by many other writers, and officially published in 1675), state historians Ngô Sĩ Liên seriously criticized Nguyễn Hoàng—the first Nguyễn lord to leave northern Vietnam during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to found Đàng Trong (Kingdom of Cochinchina, present-day Central Vietnam) and expand into the Mekong Delta, for being unfilial because he dared to abandon the ancestral graves and family

trees in his hometown. However, Keith Taylor (1993, 64) argued that Nguyễn Hoàng and his people "rejected" the task of being "a good traditional Vietnamese" to shape "another kind of "good Vietnamese" in the Central and then the South.

When evaluating the nature of southern Vietnamese culture, Cao Tự Thanh (1996, 147) concluded that in the South, so-called "Confucianism" is not like actual state Confucianism.[20] Many Confucian schools and Confucius temples were built in southern Vietnam during the Nguyễn Lord period and later (such as Hà Tiên Confucius Temple, Trấn Biên Confucius Temple, Vĩnh Long Confucius Temple, Châu Đốc Confucius Temple, and so on); however, pre-modern Vietnamese Confucian education in the south was different from that in the north, and it appeared to be more practical, more open-ended and situation-based. Under any circumstances, this South Vietnamese characteristic openness and flexibility cannot change or destroy Confucianism; rather, they are establishing or shaping another kind of Confucianism that is more easily accepted and practiced in real life. In daily life today, South Vietnamese might tell anyone that they do not like and do not want Confucian principles (because it narrows and frames their ideology and creativity); however, every family, regardless of social status, integrate Confucian ethical thoughts into family traditions and vividly reflect them in family rituals.

The South Vietnamese do not convey Confucian ethics and morals in textbooks but absorb them into customs and rituals related to their lives. The openness and flexibility of their minds allow them to shape or "invent" a variety of new practices to ensure social order and way of life. *Cúng việc lề* was "invented" in such a mentality.

In the early stages of the territory expansion and community construction process in southern Vietnam during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (when customs and culture had not yet been institutionalized and normalized), the use of rituals to preserve memories and satisfy spiritual, moral, and social needs was not a deconstruction of traditional Confucianism, but an attempt to make Confucian ethics more adaptable to the new living environment.

Conclusion

Cúng việc lề in Long An province and in the entire South Vietnam is a beautiful custom that combines spirituality and family ethics, ritualized as a status symbol that strengthens family bonds and recalls the history of the immigration period. The *cúng việc lề* custom is not a de-Confucian form, but a ritualized form of cultural heritage, a tradition and a layer of historical memory that is rather obscure in today's textbooks.

As conveyed in the Confucian saying "there is no ritual/etiquette, there will be no ethics (道德仁義，非禮不成; in Vietnamese: *đạo đức nhân nghĩa, phi lễ bất thành*)", early Vietnamese immigrants in southern Vietnam learned to open up and reorganize their traditions and ideologies to fit the specific context of the newly-opened lands, paving the way for the cultivation of Vietnamese culture in the new frontier. In this

process, respect and gratitude to the ancestors who made great sacrifices in the process of land opening and village construction have become the magical glue for the formation and stable development of family clan culture in the region.

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Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Notes

[1] The Vàm Cỏ river system, including the Vàm Cỏ Tây (Western Vàm Cỏ) and the Vàm Cỏ Đông (Eastern Vàm Cỏ) Rivers, originate from two different sources but merges into one in lower Long An territory. Then, the Vàm Cỏ and Đồng Nai rivers merge into one at the mouth of Soài Rạp.

[2] The early 20th elite ideological movement led by Phan Bội Châu (1867–1940), which aimed to send elites to Tokyo to learn Japan's experience in liberating and developing the country.

[3] There is a famous Vietnamese proverb that is reminiscent of the tradition of ancestor worship: "Uống nước nhớ nguồn (when drinking water, remember the source)" (Endres 2002, 314).

[4] These are similar to Chinese beliefs studied by David Jordan (1972), Arthur Wolf (1974, 131-182) and Robert Weller (1987), the Vietnamese believe that without annual sacrifices, deceased ancestors will become ghosts and will not be reincarnated.

[5] Gia lễ/家禮.

[6] The concept suggested by Eric Hobsbawm (1983).

[7] All cúng việc lề sacrificial rituals are based on the lunar calendar.

[8] In our interviews in 2005 and 2022, many family members verbally stated that this day was the day when the hero Nguyễn Trung Trực bid farewell to his family and led his army to fight against the French in the mid-19th century.

[9] Years of birth and death are unknown.

[10] In Vietnamese: *Tổng đốc Thủy đạo Trường Sa*, written on the tablet in the main hall of the Lê family ancestral hall.

[11] The north is the direction from which ancestors came during the early waves of immigration in the 17th and 18th centuries.

[12] This film could be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdPOj4AFKHc.

[13] Bánh tét is a special southern Vietnamese and ethnic Khmer rice cake made with beans, ripe bananas or pork in the center (of the cake), wrapped in banana leaves in cylindrical circle shape and cooked for several hours. Bánh tét can be used for many days, convenient for those who travel or work long hours in the rice fields.

[14] Bánh ít is made from rice flour, contains mung beans, is wrapped in banana leave and has a cylindrical shape with a triangular base and a pointed top.

[15] Three traditional Vietnamese traditional sacrificial foods include a piece of cooked pork, three to five

cooked shrimps and a boiled duck egg.

[16] Victor Turner's (1969) concept.

[17] 1830–1875, an anti-French hero in Southern Vietnam.

[18] Pig head and pig tail are used as offerings, symbolizing good luck from head to toe, from the beginning until the ending.

[19] See further Sơn Nam (2004) and Lê Đại Anh Kiệt (2022).

[20] The Vietnamese translation is "Không Nho mà không Nho, không Nho mà là Nho" (Chinese translation: 儒而不儒，不儒而儒).

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BOOK REVIEWS

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- Wei Wu, *Esoteric Buddhism in China: Engaging Japanese and Tibetan Traditions*
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Tzu Chi, a new Buddhist Movement founded in 1968 in Taiwan and best known for its many charitable programs, originated as a group of women gathered around the nun Cheng Yen (b.1937). The efforts of the women around Cheng Yen, who provided free medical services to their neighbors, grew steadily following the founding of a free clinic in 1972. The group had a real breakout moment in 1986 when they opened up a hospital in Hualien City, on Taiwan's east coast. Tzu Chi, most clearly embodied in the Buddhist Tzu Chi Charity Foundation, has experienced spectacular growth from the 1990s to the present as it expanded beyond Taiwan and established itself in Southeast Asia (especially Singapore and Malaysia), Indonesia, the Philippines and the United States. Though still largely unknown in America, Tzu Chi has centers in every major urban area and has taken its place alongside all the better-known early responders to major disasters such as the hurricanes that reek significant damage across the American south.

The spectacular rise of Tzu Chi has prompted a number of scholarly responses, many describing and evaluating the various parts of its multi-faceted charitable operation that now includes (to name a few) a recycling program, a television station in Taiwan, an extensive medical program, and its more notable work in disaster relief. Behind this massive and sophisticated charitable effort is a Buddhist core, Tzu Chi being a major exponent of humanistic Buddhism, a 19th-century Buddhist reformation movement that has challenged Buddhists to engage the modern world in all of its hurts and needs. Tzu Chi emerged from the complex student-teacher relationship between Cheng Yen and her mentor Yin Shun (1906–2005), the innovative Buddhist master who pioneered Humanistic Buddhist thought in Taiwan.

In *The Rise of Tzu Chi*, Professor Lee tackles one of the most intriguing questions that scholars have about the organization—what is the secret of its success amid the literally hundreds of new religions that have emerged since World War II? Only a few dozen of these new religions have been able to expand beyond their homelands and become impactful in anything like the way that Tzu Chi has. Most of the new religions that have assumed a presence on the international stage have made their presence felt solely in the religious sphere (such as the parallel Taiwanese Buddhist group Fo Guang Shan), and many at the price of constant largely negative controversy (such as the Unification Movement of Sun Myung Moon and the Church of Scientology).

Professor Lee movingly introduces readers to Tzu Chi by an account of its work in Indonesia after the 2005 tsunami and earthquake, and follows with a narrative of the life of Cheng Yen, the founding and early growth of the movement, and a somewhat detailed survey of its spectrum of charitable work. Even those who are already aware of Tzu Chi and know of its founder and her work will learn many new facts and gain a fresh perspective on the organization, from Lee's encounter with the movement and deep dive into the wealth of records chronicling its activities over the years. *The Rise of Tzu Chi* is possibly the best narrative of the movement's history to date.

However, scholars of religious movements will be hooked by the discussion of the "whys" behind the movement's success over the last half century. Lee focuses on two factors, the first being the charisma assigned to their founder: Cheng Yen is a text-book example of a successful charismatic leader. But as one uncovers the various layers of Cheng Yen's life, the reader discovers the complexity of the phenomenon of charisma—a trait that does not describe the founder/leader of a new religion so much as the relationship between a leader and followers and a leader's ability to empower the followers to action.

Lee's discussion of charisma carries all the complexity that new religions scholars have found in examining the many different movements of the post-WWII era, but the main contribution comes in his diverting the reader's attention from the leader to the organization that s/he has built. In the case of Tzu Chi, Cheng Yen has allowed the development of a complex diverse organization that now extends far beyond her knowledge and expertise, not to mention her ability to control. To explain this monumental achievement, Lee turns to an organizational theory proposed by fellow sociologist Marshall Ganz, who in his theory of strategic capacity offers a way to understand the balance successful movements have as they move between the unitive center provided by the charismatic leader and the often-radical diversity and the autonomy of leaders found in successful movements. Lee calls upon those of us who study movements to look more at the organizational structure and its adaptability in multiple situations relative to our attempts to understand the leader's career.

Lee's study thus accomplishes two tasks, either of them worthy on its own. First, it provides a noteworthy survey of Tzu Chi's origin and rise to prominence, a historical account that equals any that have preceeded it. Second, it provides students of new religions with a set of ideas to consider as we approach the objects of our study and calls attention to some important factors to which we much pay attention. Highly recommended.

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Wei Wu, *Esoteric Buddhism in China: Engaging Japanese and Tibetan Traditions, 1912–1949*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2024, 312 pp. ISBN: 978-0-2312-0068-4, $35.00 (pbk)

Alexander Howard ATKINS
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Professor Wei Wu's excellent first work, *Esoteric Buddhism in China: Engaging Japanese and Tibetan Traditions, 1912–1949,* is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature on modern Chinese Buddhism. Tracing the re-importation of esoteric Buddhism into China, Wu argues that transnational movements of religious traditions are not simple transplants but "an ongoing process between various agent groups, their practices, and theories… being constantly reinterpreted in the specific circumstances" (28). Wu claims that few scholars have explored this modern importation of esoteric Buddhism through the interplay of doctrine, ritual, and institutions (2). Wu demonstrates how to dialectically approach the dual process of importing and legitimizing esoteric Buddhism in the face of a new modernizing Chinese state, religion versus superstition debates, and state-borderlands interactions allowing broader implications for the study of modern transnational religion.

Wu opens by asserting the need for Ann Swidler's repertoire theory, defining culture as a toolkit "that people use in a varied configuration to construct their interpretations," in this case, to understand the agents importing new religious ideas (4). Using this theory, Wu frames the importation of esoteric Buddhism into China as providing a new lens to understand Buddhist modernism while also highlighting the agents choosing from their repertoire of Buddhist, cultural, and individual tools rather than simply following modernist trends in religion (7). Chapter One "Chinese Buddhism in Transition" provides an overview of the cultural, political, and religious transitions during the Qing-Republican period, focusing on Yang Wenhui (杨文会) and Taixu's (太虚) circle and the ideal of the eight Tang dynasty Buddhist sects (31), and the early 1910s-1920s importation of Japanese and Tibetan Buddhism into China (34). Chapter Two "The Lamas and the Rituals" asserts that public esoteric rituals "became an arena for contesting esoteric Buddhism" (51) by lamas (白普仁 Bai Puren and 班禅额尔德尼 the Panchen Lama, Banchan Eerdeni), patrons, secular intellectual skeptics (69), and government anti-superstition campaign agents (62) to contest esoteric Buddhism's role in a new China in the process of nation-building, religious reform, and modernization. Wu illustrates a range of Buddhists' responses to modernity, many of which, unlike David McMahan's theory of Buddhist Modernism, chose not to demythologize, instead seeking to prove esoteric Buddhism's value (55-

56). Wu reveals a contradiction during the Nanjing decade (1927–1937) anti-superstition campaigns, even as Han esoteric Buddhists were forced to legitimize their rituals and praxis in the face of state suppression (20, 55–56), Nanjing strategically conferred state titles to high-level Tibetan and Mongolian lamas, using the very traditions they condemned to consolidate control over the borderlands (63). Chapter Three "Esoteric Buddhism for Laypeople" explores the mutually beneficial lama-patron relationship (79, 93), lamas' place within lay Buddhist societies, the formation of esoteric Buddhist societies (王弘愿 Wang Hongyuan's Chinese Esoteric Buddhism Revival Society, 震旦密教重兴会 Zhendan Mijiao Chongxinghui) (77), the social mobility esoteric teachings offered women (申書文 Shen Shuwen and 方于 Fang Yu) (85), and the lay spiritual practice of translation seen in the early Chinese versions of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (西藏度亡经, Xizang Duwangjing) (88).

Chapter Four "Debates on Esoteric Buddhism" discusses the 1920s-1930s esoteric Buddhism debates from Taixu, Chisong (持松), and Dayong's (大勇) group and layman Wang Hongyuan as they question the validity of Japanese and Tibetan esoteric Buddhism (101, 114), their doctrines and doctrinal classification (panjiao 判教) (97-98), the existence of lay teachers (105), and esoteric/exoteric distinctions (96), emphasizing the active process of interpretation, and the former group's shift towards Tibetan esoteric Buddhism. Chapter Five "The Path to Enlightenment" uses Taixu and Dayong's group's interest in Tsongkhapa's (宗喀巴, Zongkaba) Lamrim (Stages of the Path, 道次第 Daocidi) to show early Chinese fascination with the newfound scholarly richness of the Tibetan Buddhist commentary tradition (124), follows their translation, and highlights Nenghai's (能海) Lamrim pedagogy seeking to welcome all Chinese Buddhists (127). Wu presents the importation of esoteric Buddhism as a dialectical process of translation and interpretation. Chapter Six "Tibetan Buddhism Among Han Chinese" uses Nenghai's early life and career as a case study. Wu explores Tibetan esoteric Buddhism's early importation in China tracing early Tibet travel group (留藏学法团, Liuzang Xuefatuan) activities (153), encounters with Lamrim (155), attempts at building esoteric centers on Wutaishan (五台山) (156), then finally, the formation of Nenghai's lineage at Jincisi (近慈寺) in Sichuan (162). Wu argues that Nenghai stands out by maintaining Chinese Vinaya (174) and appealing to other Chinese sensibilities via teaching ethics and exoteric Buddhism as fundamental while making esoteric praxis available for everyone (166–7). Wu concludes that this history of esoteric Buddhism importation presents a slice of modern Chinese Buddhist history and a broader narrative of the human quest for knowledge during increased cross-cultural communications.

I am disappointed that this work is framed as focusing on Japanese and Tibetan esoteric Buddhism in China but instead follows the academic trend of concentrating more on the former. Additionally, with the use of Chinese, English, Mongolian, and Tibetan names, the translation and transliteration inconsistencies make it difficult to follow. Wu prioritizes providing Chinese (187) and Tibetan (201) terms over Japanese,

providing no Japanese appendix and occasionally only providing an English title for Japanese primary sources (99). Place names are inconsistent with some literal or abnormal translations such as Compassionate Cause Temple (慈因寺) (39) and Mount Kōya for Kōyasan (高野山) (31). Chinese terms for 'esoteric' (mijiao 密教) are used inconsistently with nine different terms throughout the text without explanation. There are minor naming and factual errors, such as romanizing the Kōyasan chief priest's name Kanayama Bokushō (金山穆韶) as 'Kaneyama' and stating that Li Yizhen (黎乙真) traveled to Kōyasan to receive ācārya (阿阇梨 asheli, 阿闍梨 ajari) from Shingi Shingon Buzan sect's (Shingi Shingonshū Buzanha 新義真言宗豊山派) past chief priest Gonda Raifu (權田雷斧), whereas Shingi Shingon's head temple, Negoroji (根来寺), is in Iwade, Wakeyama (84). Some of these issues may be caused by prioritizing Chinese sources. These minor errors might cause misunderstandings that someone outside the immediate field may not be able to discern.

Overall, this publication is a great accomplishment for Wu. As a researcher of the importation of Japanese esoteric Buddhism into China during the Republican period, I am excited by the addition of Wu's work to this small but expanding body of literature. This important work enriches the field of modern Chinese Buddhist studies as well as broader East Asian and transnational religions.

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Glen L. Thompson, *Jingjiao: The Earliest Christian Church in China*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2024, 269 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8028-8352-0, US$36.64. (pbk)

Carole M. Cusack
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This well-written and admirably clear book is a history of what formerly was called "Nestorian Christianity" in China. In 1623, a monument dated 781 was uncovered in Xi'an. It provided reliable evidence for the "Luminous Religion" (*Jingjiao*), a form of Christianity spread by Syriac tradition evangelists from 635 CE onwards. Thompson is published by Eerdmans, an evangelical press, and the provision of a lengthier history for the Christian faith in China, as an inspiration to contemporary Chinese Christians is one of his aims. He discusses the Syriac church's move east through Persia, noting fifth century theological arguments about the nature of Jesus (two separate natures or Diophysites or Nestorians, one nature or Monophysites or Miaphysites, and the orthodox position that Christ's two natures were distinct yet united, or hypostatic union) which affected the Mesopotamian and Persian churches. This region was the source of missions along the Silk Road; in the sixth century the church struggled as it separated from the Christian West. However, the mission to China was bearing fruit.

Chapter 2, "The Stele from Chang'an," and Chapter 4, "New Evidence Emerges," are the core of the book. The stele proved authentic and in the early twentieth century explorer Sir Aurel Stein (1962-1943) and his French rival, Sinologist Paul Pelliot (1878-1945) acquired many texts from the Dunhuang Mogao Caves, now a World Heritage site (p. 85). These texts were eagerly received by scholars and seemingly gave rise to several forgeries. Thompson guides the reader expertly through the texts, providing titles and summarised contents. Chapter 3, "The Jingjiao is Planted and Grows" and Chapter 4, "The Teachings of the Jingjiao" discuss respectively early relations between Christians and the Tang Dynasty – with a lengthy sketch of the outstanding missionary bishop, Alopen, whose arrival "at Chang'an in 635 is one of the very few secure dates we have in Jingjiao history" (p. 56) – and the ways the Christians framed their (quite alien) doctrines in order to convert the Chinese. There is considerable attention paid to language and the precise terms used to designate key concepts like sin, grace, and messiah, and Thompson acknowledges that the missionaries encoded doctrines "in a culturally meaningful way for their Chinese hearers…[using] the highly ambiguous forms of literary classical Chinese…[leaving] modern readers with many difficult passages to decipher" (p. 133).

Chapter 6, "The Jingjiao Under the Tang," explains how early success under the

Emperors Taizong and Gaozong Christianity prospered and spread; however, the formidable Empress Wu Zetian (who had long been regent) ascended the throne in 690 and reigned for fifteen years, declaring herself to be Maitreya, the Future Buddha. The Luminous Teaching began to decline, though the powerful official Yisi, who served under Emperors Suzong, Daizong and Dezong (reigned collectively 756-805 CE) "is praised for repairing old churches and building new ones" (p. 135). Thompson analyses what is known of the institutional structure of the Jingjiao and concludes that it closely resembles the Church of the East, its mother church. There is substantial information about named church officials in the first 150 years, and there are hints as to how far it spread, for example, the mention of a church or monastery in Luoyang in 745 CE. The Jingjiao declined from 842 when Emperor Wuzong set about laicising Buddhist monasteries and convents, and Christian institutions were deemed to be analogous and were similarly attacked. Chapter 7, "The Yelikewenjiao Revival Under the Yuan," considers the impact of the rise of the Mongol khanate under the charismatic leader Genghis Khan (1162–1227), and the cultural adaptation of the Mongols to China under Kublai Khan (1215–1294), who established the Yuan dynasty in 1271 and moved the court to Dadu (modern Beijing). In Chinese texts from the Yuan, Christians were called Yelikewenjiao, a new term, and "in 1289 a single government office was established to oversee the Yelikewen across China" (p. 173).

In the later Middle Ages, Catholic clergy visited the court of the great Khan, and Chinese monks went west to contact the mother church in Persia and beyond. The rise to power of Timur (1336-1405), self-styled restorer of the Mongol Empire who conquered Iran, besieged Moscow, and invaded India, spelled the end of the Jingjiao. Thompson's "Epilogue: So What?" asks questions about the new genealogy the discovery of the Jingjiao provides for modern Chinese (Catholic and Protestant) Christians, the ability of Christianity to become truly Chinese and at what cost, and the value of shedding light on this nearly-forgotten part of history. *Jingjiao: The Earliest Christian Church in China* is a wonderful book that unfolds like a thriller in parts, makes more familiar an ancient church (the Church of the East) that itself is scarcely known to modern Protestant and Catholic Christians, and will genuinely appeal to a broad range of non-specialists. It deserves a wide readership and certainly should be in every academic institutional library the world over

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