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Refugees in the Land of Awes

Vietnamese Arrivals and Departures

Janet Alison Hoskins

Spiritual journeys that take groups of people to new territories, seeking some form of scripture or message, are as familiar in the famous Chinese religious adventure novel *Journey to the West* as they are in the Hollywood fantasy of the *Wizard of Oz*. The theological implications of migration and especially the forced displacement of refugees have rarely been explored, although religion has recently been theorized as providing a “watch and a compass” for migrants who come to “cross and dwell” in new spaces (Tweed 2006). Religious ritual and scripture can serve to provide a narrative that explains the reasons for this displacement. Particular ritual techniques structure and anticipate changes in consciousness. And these changes—expressed in texts or bodily movements—have implications for how these refugee communities can build and sustain themselves. The Vietnamese living overseas provide a particularly compelling example of this process, since from 1975 to 1990 large numbers of them left their homeland as refugees, but an almost equally large number also left as contract workers and students, and the different trajectories of these different groups, one traveling to the capitalist west and the other to the socialist east, provide an especially rich comparative case.

The refugee story is usually told as a story of suffering, displacement, “the loss of the country,” and persecution for those once associated with the Saigon regime, who lost their jobs, their homes, their businesses, and often their freedom by being sent to reeducation camps. The sense of desperation led people to escape in very dangerous boats, where they often drowned, were attacked by pirates, or perished from thirst and starvation. This legacy of “the boat people” is, however, often countered by stories of Vietnamese migrants to Europe—“the truck people” or “the box people”—who also endured dangerous trips through frozen forests

and snowy hills, hidden together in poorly heated and ventilated vans. The tragic deaths of thirty-nine young Vietnamese migrants who suffocated in a truck in Essex, Southeastern England, in October 2019 brought their sufferings into the headlines. In the last leg of a perilous 6,000-mile trek across Asia and into Europe, these young people were among an estimated 18,000 Vietnamese illegal migrants who paid smugglers to sneak them across many different borders in the hopes of finding a better life (Mueller, *New York Times* 2019, Freidingerova 2019). Precarious journeys to a mythical “land of awes” (inspired by visions of the hostland as similar to the legendary Oz) fused the migrant’s travails with an exaggerated sense of hope and possibility.

Vietnam has also been the birthplace of several distinctive indigenous religions, practiced according to a survey by Pew Charitable Trust by about 45 percent of the population. While most people think of Vietnam as a Buddhist country with a Catholic minority, only about 16 percent of the population identifies as Buddhist, with 8 percent identifying as Catholic.¹ Almost all Vietnamese families practice ancestor worship, even those who do not have any formal religious affiliation. In Southern Vietnam, Caodaism is the most popular indigenous religion, with over 1,300 temples and about 12 percent of the population (Hoskins 2015). In Northern Vietnam, spirit mediums who “serve the spirits of the Mother Goddesses of the land” (Đạo Mẫu) perform increasingly public rituals at their homes, temples, and heritage sites, but are officially classified as a form of “intangible cultural heritage” rather than a religion (Nguyen Thi Hien 2016; Fjellstad and Nguyen 2011; Saleminck 2013, 2018). Mother Goddess temples are now transnational, and found in Vietnamese communities in California, Germany, Poland, Russia, and the Czech Republic. A comparison of the varying responses of two “migrating indigenous religions” allows us to focus on the role of narrative in guiding responses to migration.

Both Caodaism and Đạo Mẫu could be seen as having a theological narrative and ritual practice which emphasizes a form of movement: for Caodaism, this is the idea of a sacred journey “to the west,” involving both a search for new doctrines and the biblical notion of exodus (since Caodaism blends Christian elements with an East Asian pantheon). For Đạo Mẫu, this movement takes the form of trance dances, a bodily practice in which “Vietnam comes to dance inside us,” and spirits from the homeland are made present through the experience of spirit possession. Different narratives of departures and arrivals are used by Vietnamese refugees who practice Caodaism (primarily in the United States, Canada, and Australia, but also France) and Vietnamese migrants who practice Đạo Mẫu in the former socialist areas of Russia, the Czech Republic, Poland, and

Eastern Germany. The mobilities of refugees and migrants have also produced different notions of debt, with refugees seeing their perilous boat escapes as linked to a debt to the hostland which gave them “freedom” and refuge, while migrants who were part of state-sponsored labor programs have a debt to the homeland, paid in remittances and patriotic ceremonies at temples in Eastern Europe.

Caodaism: Cosmopolitan Syncretism and Anti-Colonial Resistance

Caodaism (also called Đạo Cao Đài)² is a new religious movement formed by a group of colonized intellectuals in 1926 when Saigon was the capital of the French colony of Cochinchina, the most thoroughly colonized and modernized part of French Indochina. Its new vision of the world has usually been interpreted as a response to the great dislocations of colonial conquest, what one its most prominent leaders called the “bouleversement total,” or complete reversal of traditional values and meanings (Hoskins 2015). At a series of séances conducted initially to seek literary inspiration and guidance, three young men who worked in the colonial tax office made contact with a powerful spirit who eventually revealed that he was the Jade Emperor, come to found a new religion in Vietnam, using the new name Cao Đài (“the highest tower,” a term also used to designate Jehovah, and so one that establishes Jesus as the son of the Jade Emperor).

The revelation that the Jade Emperor was the same figure as the Christian Jehovah allowed the traditional Vietnamese fusion of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism to be resynthesized as a masculine monotheism which could absorb Christianity, Judaism, and Islam into its more encompassing East Asian pantheon. The personal contact with a fatherly, affectionate divinity was continued through séance transmissions of scripture, and what came to be called the Religious Constitution and New Religious Laws of Caodaism. Formed by a committee of prominent citizens rather than any single human founder, Caodaism gathered several million followers in its first decades and aspired to be both the “national religion” of Vietnam and a global faith of unity which could bring about religious reconciliation in other countries as well.

The pantheon represented on the pediment suspended from the ceiling of the Great Temple in Tây Ninh has five levels (Figure 5.1), which are the five levels of spiritual attainment outlined in Caodai religious doctrine. At the top is Buddha, who has attained enlightenment and become fused with divinity, and he stands

Figure 5.1 The Caodai pantheon represents five levels of spiritual attainment, represented by Buddha (fusion with the divine), Confucius (the way of sages) and Lao Tzu (the way of the immortals), Jesus (the way of saints), and Khương Tử Nha (the veneration of local spirits). Photograph on the California temple in Garden Grove; photo by Janet Alison Hoskins.

for the “way of Buddhism” or *Đạo Phật*. On his right side stands Confucius and on his left Lao Tzu. Confucius stands for the “way of the sages,” or *Đạo Nhon*, often called Confucianism, and Lao Tzu stands for the “way of the Immortals,” or *Đạo Tiên*, often translated as Taoism. At the next level, we find the Tang dynasty poet Li Bai (*Lý Thái Bạch* in Vietnamese), who is the “invisible Pope” of Caodaism and its master of ceremonies, flanked by the female Bodhisattva *Quan Âm* and the East Asian God of War *Quan Công*. They are also all part of the “way of the immortals.” Below them is Jesus Christ, who stands for the “way of the saints,” or *Đạo Thanh*, and this level includes not only Christian saints but also Jewish and Muslim figures, and Vietnamese military heroes like the thirteenth-century *Trần Hưng Đạo*. Below him is the figure of an old man called *Khương Tử Nha*, who is associated with the veneration of local spirits called *Đạo Thần*.

The divinities who can come down in Caodai séances, however, are much more numerous than these eight figures, who become nine when we add the overarching figure of *Cao Đài*, the Jade Emperor himself (depicted by the

naturalistic Left Eye at the top). In fact, many of the most common conversation partners of Caodai séances are deceased Caodai leaders, especially the Interim Pope Lê Văn Trung (1870–1934) and the Head Spirit Medium or Hộ Pháp Phạm Công Tắc (1890–1957). They come down in séances to advise religious leaders on administrative decisions, and to help them move forward under difficult situations. The spirit writing received in formal séances is an “elevated discourse” which is distinguished by its high literary quality and beautiful verse.

A number of Christian themes were reinterpreted in the context of colonial resistance: The Vietnamese were seen as “God’s chosen people” because they were a virtuous and hard-working people but had had to bear the brutal European colonial yoke more directly than any other people in the East Asian civilizational sphere (Hoskins 2012). Christ was a prophet who fought for the independence of his people against an imperial power based in Rome, but since he died young and tragically, he never acquired the full wisdom of the much older Asian sages. His “way of the saints” sits one level below the “way of the Taoist immortals,” which itself is also placed below the “way of Buddhist enlightenment.”³ Elements of Catholic religious rankings—a pope, both female and male cardinals, bishops, and archbishops, a “Vatican” sacred city—were fused with titles earlier used in Confucian rituals to erect an elaborate new administrative hierarchy. Caodaists asked the secular French state to show the same respect for their sacred city in Tây Ninh as they did for the Catholic Vatican in Rome.

At a time when anti-colonial activism was growing, Caodaism emerged as religious organization that sought to create a spiritual sense of the nation to support struggles for political independence and decolonization. One of its first goals was to give the Vietnamese people a new sense of purpose under divine leadership and to unify the disparate elements of Vietnamese daily devotionism—saint worship, veneration of local spirits and ancestors, Buddhist and Taoist forms of meditation—into a syncretistic whole.

Caodaists accept the religious adventure novel *Journey to the West* (*Tây Du Ký* in Vietnamese) as part of their scriptures, since it deals with the relationship of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Familiar to the younger generation through Chinese kung fu films, this classic text was a frequent point of reference for the Caodai leader Phạm Công Tắc, who compared himself both to Tripitaka (Tâm Tạng, the Buddhist monk who journeys to India seeking scriptures) and to the Monkey Saint (Tể Thiên Đại Thánh). There are even spirit messages in the unofficial canon of Caodai said to come directly from the Monkey Saint. The journey of Vietnamese refugees “to the west,” while often compared to a biblical exodus, is also sometimes also seen as a Buddhist journey seeking new

teachings, or new skills in science and industry, which can later be brought back to the homeland.

While embracing this Chinese literary tradition, Caodaism infused it with elements of Vietnamese history and a specifically anti-colonial message, prophesying that the “third age of universal redemption” would come at the same time as the collapse of the great European colonial empires in Asia. A new set of scriptures were revealed through spirit writing with a phoenix-headed basket, held by spirit mediums who received, transcribed, and interpreted these new messages as the basis of a new theology of unity. The elitist, literary, and cosmopolitan aspirations of Caodaism contrast strongly with the spirit possession religion of Đạo Mẫu (“the way of the Mother Goddess”), which developed in Northern Vietnam and is closer to shamanism in most of its manifestations.

Đạo Mẫu Spirit Possession: Spirits of Nature and the Imperial Past

The mediums of Đạo Mẫu are primarily female, and include many street peddlers, businesswomen who sell snacks, clothing, or trinkets on the streets of the city, but aspire to expand to become small-scale entrepreneurs. In the past, many were not even literate since their bodies shake with the power of imperial family members without speech. Sitting in front of a mirror placed in front of an ancestral altar, their heads are draped with a red veil while sacred music is played, and they make a hand gesture to signal the spirit coming to possess them so their assistants can dress them in the appropriate costume and the singers can accompany their dances with verses praising the right spirit (Figure 5.2). Beginning with the highest-ranking lords and alternating male and female spirits, they are possessed by roughly a dozen warriors, scholar-officials, ladies of the court, spoiled princes, and highland princesses, until finally they finish with the spirit of a playful, often naughty young boy.

The pantheon of thirty-odd spirits all come from imperial times, including members of the Trần dynasty and the thirteenth-century military hero Trần Hưng Đạo, who kept the Mongols from invading Vietnam. Most are unspecified figures from Vietnamese history who are known mainly through the order in which they are incarnated (“fourth mandarin,” “fifth prince,” “sixth princess”) and a series of personality traits—wisdom, opium addiction, flirtatiousness—which link them to those mediums who have a “spirit root” that calls them to “serve” these particular entities. The trance dancers of Đạo Mẫu say that

Figure 5.2 Đạo Mẫu spirit medium standing in front of a mirror awaiting spirit possession, in Huntington Beach, California; photo by Janet Alison Hoskins.

“Vietnam dances within them,” and that they feel empowered and energized by feeling these great spirits of the past descend into their bodies and move with grace, skill, and precision in stylized dances (Hoskins 2014b).⁴

While Caodai literary spirit mediums seek wisdom and advice from their interlocutors, the trance dancers expect to get help with concrete personal problems—illness, financial issues, and the loss of love or good fortune. Caodaists note that the spirits who come down to Đạo Mẫu spirit mediums are largely inarticulate: “They dance and sway but they cannot speak, or else they simply yell and simper, without any clear message that can be understood.” It is the experience of being possessed and energized by these powerful spirits that the followers of the Mother Goddess seek, rather than teachings or moral guidance.

As a researcher, I was repeatedly told that going to ceremonies would make me more beautiful and youthful, and would enhance my chances to snare a new husband or reconcile with an older one. Since mediums are usually most attracted to spirits of the opposite sex, the experience of performing offers a form of physical excitement and tension release which is in many cases a substitute for experiences of intimacy not shared with human partners. Having a “spirit husband” or “spirit wife” may even preclude marriage, or offer consolation for a marriage which has gone bad. Female spirit mediums are notoriously flashy, flirtatious, and bossy, while male spirit mediums enjoy dressing as women so much that many of them are perceived as transgender (Norton 2003; Endres 2008). In the dark days of Marxist authoritarian rule (1975–95), these colorful and highly commercial displays were severely repressed by the government, but today these ceremonies are held quite openly.

Vietnamese folklorists and anthropologists (Ngô Đức Thịnh 2010; Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2002; Phạm Quỳnh Phương 2009) have struggled to raise the status of what used to be called “the Four Palaces cult” to that of a “religion” (*đạo*) on a par with Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism (*đạo Phật, đạo Nho, đạo Lão*), so that it could be “accepted as equal to other imported religions and given legitimacy” (Phuong 2009: 181). In 2004, when a new government ordinance concerning religion was released recognizing the worship of Vietnamese saints, heroes, and ancestors as “patriotic,” their victory was celebrated. It reversed an earlier 1975 ordinance (“Instruction on the Implementation of New Ways of Life in Weddings, Funerals, Death Anniversaries and Festivals”), which explicitly forbade “the consulting of fortune-tellers, the reading of horoscopes, the practice of physiognomy, the conjuring up of a dead person’s soul, spirit possession, the casting of lots, the production of amulets, the worshipping of ghosts, the burning of incense, the buying and selling of joss-paper objects, and the use of magic to cure diseases” (Dror 2005: 172). I have witnessed all of these practices in temples in California, as well as in Vietnam, but several California Đạo Mẫu followers I spoke with could not believe that all of these practices were once again “legal.”

The frankly sexual, acquisitive, and athletic displays of Đạo Mẫu evoke a distant past to recharge the present with possibility: People serve the spirits to find favor with them and gain the supernatural resources to become more successful in their daily lives. Their nostalgic evocation of the splendor of the imperial court fills them with the power to entice new lovers, pull in new clients or buyers, and rise out of money troubles. Worldly accomplishments are seen as indexes of a harmonious relationship established with potent spirits, who will

continue to bestow gifts of good fortune as long as they are propitiated with annual or semiannual ceremonies on their feast days.

Differences and Tensions between These Two Indigenous Religions

Caodaists describe the spirits incarnated by the predominantly female Đạo Mẫu mediums as “low ranking spirits,” which they also consider more dangerous and volatile. Getting spiritual advice from a Taoist philosopher or a great literary figure is seen as appropriate for elite practitioners, and these spirits do not need to be flattered, placated, and “rewarded” with lavish sacrificial meals like the more capricious spirits summoned in Đạo Mẫu rituals. The two pantheons do occasionally overlap, however, but only at their borders: The spirit of Vietnam’s most famous national hero, Trần Hưng Đạo, is summoned by both groups. But Trần Hưng Đạo sits at the top of the Đạo Mẫu pantheon and can be summoned only on his feast day, which comes shortly after the beginning of the new lunar year. He sits at the third level of the Caodai pantheon, among the “saints and heroes” (which include Jesus Christ), but below both the immortal philosophers like Confucius and Lao Tzu and the Buddha, who have attained enlightenment.

Early Caodaists did not want to be associated with this tradition. In 1926, in the midst of the great excitement generated by the “Opening up of the Way” at Gò Kén pagoda, two people had spontaneously fallen into trance, possessed by the spirits of Quan Âm and the Monkey King from *Journey to the West*. This was seen as inappropriate to the solemn ceremonial character of the occasion, and the two were quickly controlled and led away. In conversations in California, the Caodai historian Đỗ Vạn Lý (Hoskins 2011) speculated to me: “I think the French were behind all this monkey business. They wanted to be able to dismiss Caodaism as some form of shamanism or popular superstition. They did not want to take our movement seriously, so they probably got their own agents to misbehave in that way.” While I do not necessarily share his proclivity for conspiracy theories in understanding this outbreak of uncontrolled religious inspiration, I find the logic of this argument fascinating. It goes to the heart of division between a literary, elite tradition of spirit writing and a more popular, theatrical one of trance and dancing while possessed.

Both Caodai literary séances and Đạo Mẫu trance dances have been described as “revivals of tradition,” but the ways in which they have reappeared in the world of the twenty-first century are very different. Caodaists worship the Supreme

Being under the sign of the Left Eye, anatomically closer to the heart and thus tied to a vision filtered through the lens of morality, ethics, and introspection. They oppose their “Asian” perspective to the “Western” perspective of the right eye, featured on the US one-dollar bill and associated with visions of domination, industrial power, and conquest. Their literary interlocutors look down at the world from the “White Cloud Lodge” of the Asian sages and share their insights only with those people who have enough elite culture to appreciate their verses.

Đạo Mẫu dancers see their own faces turning into the faces of the royal figures they incarnate at ceremonies, and while they are usually unable to speak during their trances, their bodies respond to the music and the words of the praise songs to trace beautiful gestures in front of an appreciative human audience. They get immediate benefits from their participation in these performances, being “ennobled” themselves by performing skillfully as noble personages. Their bodies are the instruments that they use to serve the spirits and to reap the rewards of this devotion. The world of the here and now, of sensory delights and invigorating energy, is where they seek their fulfillment.

The Different Geographies of Caodaism and Đạo Mẫu in the Diaspora

Diasporic Đạo Mẫu temples are scattered, episodic, and animated by charismatic mediums who draw their followers from all Vietnamese who identify with ancestor worship practices in a livelier performative format. Diasporic Caodaism is led by several rival mission organizations, riven by political differences about whether to realign themselves with religious leaders “contaminated by communists” in the homeland. Both are part of remittance networks to rebuild temples in Vietnam, and both now feature transnational leaders who move between diasporic locations and Vietnamese cities where the resurgence of popular religion has become increasingly evident. The spirit mediums of Đạo Mẫu dance out a vision of the power of the past in bodily movement, while Caodai dignitaries and disciples chant scriptures and seek new séance messages from a phoenix bird whose beak traces teachings about the new millennium.

There are over a hundred Caodai temples in the United States, Canada, and Australia, which have the largest Vietnamese refugee populations, but only a few in Europe, since Caodaism is associated with southern refugees rather than northern migrants. The Église Caodai was founded in 1983 in the Parisian suburb of Alfortville and has held worship services continuously for almost

Figure 5.3 Đạo Mẫu Temple in Erfurt, Eastern Germany, with Mother Goddess altars, the yin/yang symbol, and the celestial snake spirit worshipped on both sides of Buddhist figures; photo by Janet Alison Hoskins.

forty years (Hoskins 2015: 138; Jammes 2014: 326–9). There was also a smaller temple in Vitry-sur-Seine that held spiritist séances in the 1990s, studied by the French anthropologist Jérémy Jammes (Jammes 2014: 29–31). The Vietnamese population in France is politically diverse, including some very anti-communist refugees, some strong supporters of the Hanoi government, and many others who are relatively secular and neutral. There are spirit mediums in the Paris region who practice a form of Đạo Mẫu, and there is also a Đạo Mẫu temple in Southern France near Nice, but nothing as well organized and ritually dense as Đạo Mẫu temples in Erfurt, Germany, Warsaw, Poland, or Moscow, Russia (Figure 5.3).

Indigenous Religions and the State: Persecution and Efforts at Normalization

Both of these practices have suffered from government censure: Caodaism had a history of political engagement which included both fighting against the French

(as allies of the Japanese) and later collaborating with them for a “nonviolent process of decolonization,” modeled on Gandhi’s ideas of protest (Hoskins 2015: 67–96). While Caodaists tried to present their religion as neutral, arguing that they aspired to “peaceful co-existence” with northern Marxists, they were considered “reactionary and counter revolutionary” by the Vietnamese government after 1975, so religious activities were almost completely suppressed (Hoskins 2015: 172–85; Blagov 2001). Most Caodai temples were effectively closed down from 1975 to 1995, but in the Renovation era, they were reopened and renovated (usually with funding from overseas Vietnamese), and are now filled with worshippers. While the elaborate administrative hierarchy of Caodai dignitaries survived a quarter century of state repression, literary spirit séances are still forbidden in today’s Vietnam.

Since 1954 in the North and 1975 in the South, Đạo Mẫu had been condemned as a “superstitious practice,” both wasteful and delusional (Fjelstad and Nguyễn 2011; Norton 2009; Endres 2011). However, the lively dance performances dedicated to the Mother Goddesses have been resurrected as folklore. On December 1, 2016, Đạo Mẫu ceremonies were officially recognized by UNESCO as an “intangible heritage” of Vietnamese culture. This recognition was a victory of sorts for the Vietnamese anthropologists and folklorists who have championed this ritual practice and wanted to retrieve it from the wastebasket of “superstition” where it had been cast (Ngô Đức Thịnh 2010; Fjelstad and Nguyễn 2006, 2011; Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2015; 2016; Pham Quynh Phuong 2009). But there are also dangers to this kind of official recognition, as Oscar Salemink has noted (2018). When a practice is officially “heritagized,” it no longer remains the property of the local people who turned to spirit mediums to seek healing, better business, and a more harmonious family life and becomes subject to government regulation as a “spectacle of the past,” with outside experts testifying to its value as a part of traditional culture. There are now many state-sanctioned performances of rituals devoted to the Mother Goddess, newly valorized as part of the “indigenous foundations” of Vietnamese culture.

Vietnamese contract workers and students from Northern Vietnam, who settled in the former socialist nations of East Germany, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Russia, now participate in the revival of popular religion which swept through Vietnam in the early twenty-first century. These communities are very concerned to maintain a good relationship with the Hanoi government, because they continue to travel there and send remittances to family members in Vietnam. The wealthier ones often also invest in restaurants, resorts, factories and businesses in their homeland, and perform “rituals of patriotism” like

celebrating Ho Chi Minh's birthday and Vietnam's national day. The colorful pageantry of *Đạo Mẫu*, once seen as wasteful and superstitious, is now welcomed into some of these rituals of patriotism. The commemoration of the Hùng Kings (the legendary first kings of Vietnam) is a ritual of patriotism which draws on the same imperial costumes and finery as *Đạo Mẫu* performances (Dror 2016). Since 1994, this has been developed into a national holiday in Vietnam (Jellema 2007), and since 2010 it has also been commemorated, with the support of the Vietnamese embassy, by Vietnamese communities in the former socialist world. In Russia, Poland, Germany, and the Czech Republic, the embassy also organizes Tết Festivals to celebrate the lunar new year—although in Warsaw there are also dissident pro-democracy Vietnamese groups which sponsor a separate Tết Festival in the style of the anti-communist communities of “Little Saigon” (Szymanska-Matusiewicz 2015: 58–61).

The internally divided Vietnamese communities of France and Germany also have separate Tết Festivals in different parts of Paris and Berlin, and there are even competing Buddhist festivals like Buddha's birthday and the Hungry Ghost Festival (Vu Lan) which are held in in refugee-associated pagodas (whose members identify as part of a “stateless diaspora”) or in government-affiliated pagodas (whose members identify as a “state-linked diaspora”). Two rival Vietnamese Buddhist associations—one linked to the official government Buddhist sangha (Phật Giáo Việt Nam), whose slogan is “religion, nation, socialism,” and the other linked to the dissident United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (Giáo Hội Việt Nam Thống Nhất)—have separate monks, nuns, and pagodas, although their congregations are sometimes mixed.

Religious traditions such as ancestor worship, Buddhism, and the imperial legacies of *Đạo Mẫu* are seen as a shared patrimony, but in practice the performance of these rituals is polarized. The rituals of migrant associations in Eastern Europe remain tied to the Vietnamese state, while those of refugee associations in France and Germany remain opposed to it. As Grazyna Szymanska-Matusiewicz has argued in a study of Vietnamese migrant associations in Poland,

as long as Vietnamese migrants in Poland perpetuate the model of an “enclave economy,” the Vietnamese state—through its official institutions such as the embassy and unofficial zones of influence such as migrant organizations—will continue to shape the politics and the political orientation of the migrant associations, even as these diasporic institutions attempt to secure more autonomy for carving out new space for Vietnamese civil society abroad. (2019: 69)

Consequences for the Future: Debts to the Hostland versus Debts to the Homeland

Vietnamese refugees left their homeland to travel to *Nước Mỹ*, which literally means “the beautiful country,” and for many of them, it may have seemed a fabled land like Vulture Peak in India or the Emerald City of Oz. While not literally in search of magic gifts or sacred scriptures, they did hope to achieve a dream of freedom or a better life. That dream often proved elusive, and “the gift of freedom” came to seem illusory, something that required years of paying back a debt to the hostland and sacrificing a new generation that would grow up without understanding the culture of their parents (M. Nguyen 2012).

When I speak of “refugees in the land of awes,” I am referring to the mystified, sanctified idea of a land of refuge and freedom that was almost inevitably disappointing. Refugees are often told they “should be grateful for having been saved,” and the rescue missions sent to collect orphans or boat people are cited as proof that the American war was justified because so many people fled after the Fall of Saigon. Ignoring the role of military intervention in making these populations vulnerable, this creates a “we-win-even-when-we lose” narrative in which capitalism lost the war but “wins the peace” and sacrifices on the losing side find validation (Espiritu 2014).

Mimi Nguyen argues that the gift of freedom—first through war, and second through refuge—precludes the subjects of freedom from escaping those colonial histories that deemed them “unfree.” To receive the gift of freedom then is to be indebted to empire, perhaps without end. “As a process that does not have as its end completion, but instead continually stages postponement or deferral, the gift of freedom is a thing, force, gaze and event that refers both to the wars that promised it and those that must follow after” (M. Nguyen 2012: 188). She explains how this gift feeds a never-ending sense of debt:

Debt points toward a different social order, keeping us in contact with alternate collectivities of others who bear that trace of human freedom that fall apart, or seizes hold, in its giving. Put another way, we may join an audience of all those who have heard this song of freedom and empire before, and therein lie other passages to an unknowable future. (2012: 189)

Within Caodaism, discourses about coming to a “land of religious freedom” are re-inscribed in prophecies of the global expansion of the religion after 1975.

Unlike most immigrants, refugees have gone through a process of extrusion from a place of origin, have usually renounced their citizenship of birth, and

come to see their new homeland as their “only future.” For Vietnamese, this was particularly true in the period 1975–95, before relations between the United States and Vietnam were restored. In the twenty-first century, a great many former refugees have returned to visit Vietnam, and many have invested in family businesses there and even applied for dual citizenship. So what was once seen as a one-way journey is no longer unidirectional and absolute.⁵

The new phenomenon of “refugees writing back” is characteristic of the second and the 1.5 generation, who now offer a critical perspective on earlier narratives that saw them as pathetic victims, without agency, dependent upon the mercy of foreign states. The biting sarcasm of Viet Thanh Nguyen’s novel *The Sympathizer*, the trenchant criticism of Yen Le Espiritu’s *Body Counts*, and the ironic distance of Mimi Nguyen’s *The Gift of Freedom* all testify to the ways in which former refugees have come to reclaim their own dignity and decisiveness. Viet Thanh Nguyen has proposed describing what used to be called “the boat people” as “oceanic refugees,” noting that even the founding fathers of the United States traveled to the continent by boat (V. T. Nguyen 2017). Another Vietnamese American scholar has described the process of adjusting to a new way of life in Little Saigon as “becoming Refugee American” (P. T. Nguyen 2017).

How do the different orientations of Caodaists and Đạo Mẫu followers situate them for the future? Both groups seem likely to grow as more Vietnamese travel overseas, establish businesses in other countries, and seek international training. Caodaism during the colonial era was identified to some extent as a “religion of the educated,” led by former land-holding families in the Mekong Delta and Tây Ninh. Although many of these families suffered tremendous losses after 1975 and endured dangerous escapes sometimes following years of incarceration, they now have international networks which make them likely to receive remittances from North America, Australia, or Europe. They can also use these family and religion-based networks to send children overseas for training or university educations, and they are well placed to draw on external resources to rebuild family businesses.

Đạo Mẫu followers are stereotyped as small-scale entrepreneurs, vendors, and traders, and many people in these categories traveled as workers to Eastern Europe in the 1980s as part of efforts within the “socialist world” to help Vietnam recover from the war. Now these ritual practices have resurfaced in Vietnamese enclaves in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Russia, as well as the reunited nation of Germany. Small Buddhist prayer houses and temples in Prague, the Czech Republic, deliberately recreate the atmosphere of a Vietnamese village, featuring a small bamboo altar “like the ones used by naïve peasants” (*bàn thờ nhà quê*).

Evocations of the homeland (*quê hương*) are tied to performances of folk songs and traditional dances, rather than the more Westernized love ballads so popular in “Little Saigons” (Hoskins and Nguyen 2020).

These “transported peasants” were also skilled in transnational trade and commerce because of their experiences in sending goods back to Vietnam. In Prague, a Czech anthropologist explained that “it was the Vietnamese transnational traders who taught the Polish people how to be capitalists.” Shortages of clothing, household goods, and fresh foods during the transitional years when former socialist nations opened up to market forces created an opening for Vietnamese traders to use their networks to get wholesale goods and sell them, first on the streets and later in ramshackle settlements along the German border. Forced to become street vendors because the factories where they once worked had been closed, they became an important part of an underground economy focused on cigarettes, liquor, and other sometimes semi-legal commodities.⁶ The uncertain world of petty commerce has an elective affinity (in Max Weber’s sense) for people who worship the capricious pantheon of Đạo Mẫu spirits who may bestow gifts of prosperity, so it is not surprising that such practices came to find a new home in the ethnic enclaves grouped around wholesale markets in cities like Berlin, Warsaw and Prague (Hüwelmeier 2015, 2017a, 2017b).

The “Little Hanois” of Central and Eastern Europe are now characterized by prominent merchants from Northern Vietnam who may seek out the advice of a spirit medium, fortune-teller, or psychic when they want to make an important business decision. These ritual practices have opened up new gulfs between the forms of Buddhism favored by former socialist workers and those favored by refugees from the South. Critical former refugees in Berlin describe the rise of these ritual practices as showing “the communist fondness for magic,” asserting that Marxist materialism manifests itself in religious practices such as praying to win the lottery, to lure clients from rival vendors, and to make their businesses more prosperous. These were contrasted with more contemplative practices of meditation, scripture study, and social work associated with Buddhist centers in Hue and Ho Chi Minh City. As a former southern refugee woman interviewed in Berlin said: “I see religion as the center of morality, the moral way of life, not a place where you seek material benefits or you become rich.” Many practices at the temples in Eastern Berlin she described as “silly superstitions” (*ngu ngốc mê tín dị đoan*), which she condemned from the perspective of elite forms of religious practice like Zen Buddhism and Caodaism.

The former socialist countries of Europe also hosted students and intellectuals who were sent to East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Russia to go to

universities. Leading the “privileged yet precarious” life of nomadic scholars (Bayly 2007: 13), they were educated in Russian, German or Polish, and often stayed on after they graduated, working first as managers for groups of contract workers and later in professions like currency transfer. While most of them described themselves as secular revolutionaries in the 1980s and 1990s, many later helped to establish cultural performances of patriotism which featured Đạo Mẫu music and dancing in the twenty-first century. For refugees in the United States, Canada, and Australia, Vietnamese temples were often the first locations for cultural gatherings in the 1980s. For migrant workers in Eastern Europe, they did not come to play that role until about two decades later, in the 2000s.

Both communities have a mixture of intellectuals and workers, ritual devotionalists, and secularists, but they are distinguished by their differing relationship to the Vietnamese state. While Vietnam now has a market economy, it is an economy still heavily controlled by the state, and so any overseas Vietnamese person who wants to continue to travel to the homeland and invest in business there has to be aware of which “cultural celebrations” are sanctioned by the Vietnamese government and which ones are affiliated with dissident groups. Caodaism had a history of opposing the Communist Party, and while it tries to present itself as neutral, it is still in the process of “normalizing” within Vietnam, and Caodai temples do not participate in state-sponsored cultural festivals. Đạo Mẫu, on the other hand, has become an important part of public celebrations in Vietnam, so it is now welcomed into state-sponsored performances, and its spirit mediums (like the one who runs a large temple in Erfurt, Germany) proudly fly the flag of Hanoi near the image of the Buddha (Figure 5.4).

In countries like Germany, many of the most assertive Vietnamese capitalists are former communists from the North, who now own successful businesses which cater to the migrant community. Southern refugees (many of them educated professionals) are more integrated into German society, but choose to participate in Vietnamese festivals and religious holidays because they fear that their children will lose knowledge of their own language and culture.⁷ Refugee organizations like “Thank You Germany”⁸ reenact the idea of the “debt of freedom,”⁹ while the livelier folk performances of the homeland associations (*hội đồng hương*) made up of former workers show the idea of a “debt to the homeland,” also always present in religious charities and social services directed to send assistance back to their region of origin. While I had initially expected to see pagodas and temples as offering a terrain for reconciliation between former Cold War enemies, my recent fieldwork did not find much evidence for this reconciliation. Instead, I saw the “land of awes” now settled by Vietnamese

Figure 5.4 The spirit medium prays besides celebrations of Buddha's birthday, the Hanoi flag, and Đạo Mẫu offerings in Erfurt; photo by Janet Alison Hoskins.

refugees and workers as far from a magical land where all wishes were granted but rather a terrain still deeply divided in religious and political terms.

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