

HOI VAN HOA

CAO DAI

Another group intent on reuniting the religion is the Hoi Van Hoa Cao Dai (The Caodai Cultural Association). This group of teachers, private businessmen, and students who are either Caodai followers from the various sects or people interested in Caodaism, was officially organized in October 1968. Their original purpose for getting together on an unofficial basis was to share ideas and concerns for Caodaism, and to get to know fellow believers. At the first meeting, Professor Tran Van Que and Nguyen Dang Thue joined others at the Tam Tong Mieu pagoda, the central headquarters of the Minh Ly organization in Saigon. The participants expressed a desire to organize formally their group which was largely student-oriented.

Actually, Hoi Van Hoa Cao Dai was the brainchild of a former Caodai medium, Tran Thai Chan, a member of the Danang sect. He not only gave the initial stimulus to organize, but he was elected chairman of the Association at their second official meeting in December 1968. On this occasion thirty people were present and twelve were elected to serve on the executive board. These twelve persons represented four different Caodai sects, Ben Tre, Tay Ninh, Chieu Minh, and Danang.

The constitution of the Association states the major purpose of the organization: "To study and propagate the various aspects of Caodai culture throughout the world" (Constitution of the Caodai Cultural Association 1969: 1). To do this the leadership formulated a plan involving the following emphases:

I. To develop an understanding of the foundation of Caodai culture in such areas as philosophy, doctrine, literature, and fine arts;

II. To elucidate the goals and policies of Caodaism so that the sacrifices and hardships suffered by the founders of the religion will not be nullified and worthless;

III. To give united aid in the establishment of a foundation for Caodai culture, so that future generations will have the benefits of the truth.

The Caodai Cultural Association plans to fulfill the above-mentioned objectives by using various methods:

1. Assembling Caodai intellectuals, representing various sciences and from all the Caodai sects and organizations, to mutually enter into sympathetic dialogue concerning the implications of Caodai cultural values;

2. Planning regular discussions in a popular vein on religious and cultural topics;

3. Studying the varieties of Caodai philosophy and religious experience expressed by representative Caodai scholars and clergy;

4. Studying the foundational elements of Caodai religion with an impartial and scientific methodology;

5. Offering Caodai youth a cultural foundation for a progressive movement;

6. Cooperating with and relating to representatives of religious organizations, both national and international;

7. Aiding in establishing various types of cultural agencies, schools, libraries, publication centers, and so forth;

8. Providing financial help for impoverished Caodai students; and

9. Establishing a fund to assist the Caodai Cultural Association's activities (*Ibid.* 1969: 2).

In private correspondence with me, the chairman of the Hoi Van Hoa Cao Dal stated that Caodai young people believe the division of Caodaism into sectarian groups was necessary for the protection of the religion against the attacks of the colonialists and the communists. Further, such division was prophesied by Cao Dai before the events began to unfold (Seance message, February 20, 1926). Individuals among the earlier Caodai leaders, however, took advantage of the times to create schism and disunity, which has threatened the religion to the present day (Letter from Tran Thai Chan, February 28, 1971).

The membership of the Caodai Cultural Association believes the narrow, closed-door perspectives of the Caodai sects severely limits the effectiveness of the propagation and understanding of the Caodai message. Therefore, it is necessary to activate the entire religion through a program of mutual cooperation, discussion, and ritual participation, leading to eventual unification.

The leaders of this Association have recognized that their task is a difficult one. Already they have had problems because the older leaders of the sects have been unable to understand the mood of the younger Caodai disciples (*Ibid.* 1971: 6). The chairman of the Association identified this "mood" as a reaction against the spirit of division within the religion. The young people "Stand outside the schism of the past" (*Ibid.* 1971: 6).

The Association believes that they follow in a line of other movements which have attempted to unify the religion but that their perspective is significantly different from the others.

First, they have identified what they consider to be the major reasons why the other movements failed: (1) the movements may have been organized at an inopportune time; (2) the activities may have been centered around seance pronouncements rather than having known individuals identified with the program and activities; (3) the seance messages of previous movements for unification were not accepted by other Caodaists; (4) previous leaders of other movements were sometimes led astray into political activities and considerations, thus alienating other Caodaists; and (5) Tay Ninh and Ben Tre, the two major Caodai groups, were cold and indifferent to these movements, giving the unifying movements no support whatsoever. Second, officially, they have not broached the subject of unification with the various sects. They have requested and obtained official recognition of their association from all major Caodai sects and organizations, and have had selected representatives of these sects appointed to officially maintain relations with them. The Association believes that as they grow stronger, pursue their goals of enlarging their membership among all Caodaists, and become known through their publications, lectures, and discussions on Caodaism, the time will come when unification will automatically occur, just as a body of water flows naturally to its own level (*Ibid.* 1971: 6). They feel that the older leaders who remain in positions of authority in the various sects will be forced to recognize the strength of their young members, and reject isolationist or separatist policies which have maintained schismatic tendencies within Caodaism.

Tran Thai Chan is the present chairman and the initiator of the Caodai Cultural Association. He maintains relationships with other Caodai sects and organizations through his own members who belong to these groups, and through key contacts with their official representatives. He has written authoritatively on early Caodai history under the pen name, "Dong Tan." As a result of his research activities, he was able to contact and achieve official recognition from the Tay Ninh leadership. Since he was a medium for the Danang sect he is best known in Central Vietnam.

This personal activity by the chairman of the Caodai Cultural Association has given them an unassuming but recognized position with Caodaism. On the other hand, the Association is not well-known among the Caodai sects at the grass roots level, other than in the Danang organization. Most of Chan's supporters are young people, university students who at the present time have only a small degree of influence. Because of the separationist policies of the major Caodai sects, the leadership and clergy know very little about other organizations. On several occasions I noticed there were no representative selections, books or pamphlets, from other Caodai sects in the rooms or among the personal effects of various Caodai officials. The Caodai Cultural Association has attempted to develop their program so that it involves key personnel within the sects and, through these people, they hope to make the organizations aware of their activities. Their goal is "acceptance" and "influence." At the present time they have acceptance but little influence.

Since the 1930's various Caodai sects, organizations and associations have been involved in attempts to reunify Caodaism. Through 1971, for one reason or another, all these attempts have failed. These attempts indicate that some Caodaists have been and are concerned about the evident disunity. On the other hand, Caodaism has been successful both in winning converts and establishing itself as a modern, indigenous religion of Vietnam, capable of affecting the religious, social, military, and political institutions. This success has blunted the call for reunification by the Caodai groups mentioned in this chapter.