

## **Esoteric Current in Cao Đài: Inner Transformation and Millenarian Aspect**

### Introduction

Besides the presentations which have been made during the present conference, the Cao Đài New Religious Movement was presented in the previous years, in two similar conferences, by Chris Hartney and Sergey Blagov. The first one was a kind of introduction to this New Religious Movement and the second was a presentation of its situation after 1975, namely after the unification of Vietnam under the communist government. However, both referred to the so-called "exoteric" ( *phổ độ* ) of the Movement (although Hartney uses the term "esoteric" in reference to the medium communication practice) and particularly to the biggest, in terms of the number of the followers, denomination, namely the Tây Ninh group. Caodaism consists of two currents, which are classified as "exoteric", mentioned above, and the "esoteric" ( *vô vi* ) current.<sup>1</sup> The term "vô vi" ( 無為 无为 *wú wéi* ) is interpreted in many ways that can lead to confusions. I think, on the one hand, it should be thought of as not doing anything more than what is necessary or required. On the other hand, especially in the esoteric context, it should be understood in terms of non-attachment, of not being concerned about the material realm and of emptying the mind.

### Origin and Present Situation

The origins of both currents are related to the personage of Ngô Văn Chiêu, also known as Ngô Minh Chiêu (1878–1932)<sup>2</sup>. His life's ideal, manifested to him by the Highest Spirit - God - Cao Đài, was the inner perfection through self-cultivation, and

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<sup>1</sup> The term "esoteric" is used here referring to spiritual knowledge and spiritual practices, which are secret or semi-secret and initiatory.

<sup>2</sup> He is called the first disciple of Cao Đài. He was the one whom the Supreme Being Cao Đài addressed first during one of the "spirit communication" practices, and he was the one to whom the vision of "Eye" was granted. The "Eye" has become the God's symbol in the Caodaist tradition.

especially through meditation. Thus, when most of Cao Đài followers decided in 1926 to build a religious organization and moved to Tây Ninh, he resisted this idea. According to some sources he opposed God's will by rejecting the proposition to move to Tây Ninh and to become the leader of the movement. However, other sources convey the information about his conviction that it was not yet the right time to spread the Cao Đài teaching, to build an organization. According to him, the focus should be put on self-perfection. He dedicated his life to the self-cultivation practice. Those who wanted to follow his exemplary life became his disciples and then initiated the Chiếu Minh tradition.<sup>3</sup> They formed a group called now *Cao Đài Chiếu Minh Tam Thanh Vô Vi* that was gathering in the first meditation house<sup>4</sup> and 'séance' place,<sup>5</sup> founded by Ngô Văn Chiêu himself. Their practice was directly related to his teachings transmitted orally, since none of them was put in a written form. However, their practice was also based on the messages transmitted during the "spirit communication" readings, which took place in 1936 and 1937.<sup>6</sup> These messages, entitled "Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo [Grand Vehicle of the True Teaching]," were first published in 1937. This publication can be considered as a kind of "holy scripture" of the Chiếu Minh tradition. In this presentation I refer mainly to this tradition.

It is also worth noting that another group also using the name "Cao Đài Chiếu Minh Tam Thanh Vô Vi,"<sup>7</sup> and claiming a direct connection with the Ngô Minh Chiêu teaching, was founded in 1996 by a woman with the psychic abilities of a medium. These two groups follow what can be termed as the "strict observance" of the Cao Đài esoteric current.<sup>8</sup>

The Chiếu Minh followers do not form a kind of religious organization and they have no ranks. Their community can be understood as a kind of "association" governed by a council.<sup>9</sup> However, the council deals only with administrative and disciplinary issues. It should be also noticed that, in this practice, woman and man are

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<sup>3</sup> After the death of Ngô Văn Chiêu, the name Chiếu Minh was given to the graveyard where he had been buried. Then it became a proper name of the group itself.

<sup>4</sup> It is named Thánh Đức Tổ Đình (fontal gathering place), now the sacred place where the founder is venerated. It is located in Cần Thơ.

<sup>5</sup> Đàn ('séance' place), also translated as cenacle.

<sup>6</sup> There are also a few messages from 1945 and 1948.

<sup>7</sup> The Meditation Hall is called Đàn Thông Linh Khiếu and it is located in Cai Lậy.

<sup>8</sup> There are a few other groups that combine "exoteric" and "esoteric" practices, as well as combining Ngô Văn Chiêu's teaching with some other concepts and being involved in external activities.

<sup>9</sup> The group based in Cai Lậy is directly lead by the founder.

considered equal;<sup>10</sup> as they say: "God wanted to create a balance; not a difference in positions."

It is very difficult to make an estimation regarding the number of Chiếu Minh groups' members. The data provided by them differ. According to my estimation, there are around one thousand practitioners in both "strict observance" groups. Moreover, there are also members of other denominations<sup>11</sup> dedicated to this esoteric practice.<sup>12</sup> The practitioners follow the precept of not talking about their spiritual pursuit. The ideal is not to be externally different from common people. That is why they do not use any special clothes or other signs indicating their choice.<sup>13</sup> No form of proselytism exists, nor any form of pressure is used. They believe that people who were developed spiritually in the previous reincarnations will find the way to the Chiếu Minh community. God will help the "prepared" individual to get on the Chiếu Minh path.

### The Radical Change of Life

The followers of the Cao Đài esoteric path choose a way of life which is characterized by a radical change and sustained effort in accomplishing "spiritual exercises" ( *công phu*; 功夫 *gōng fu* ): transformative practices that are supposed to lead to gaining compassion, ethical perfection, and achieving a "subtle body" which is called the "second body" ( *nhị xác thân* ), or the "golden body" ( *kim thân* ). A Chiếu Minh saying goes as follows: *tánh mạng song tu*—the perfecting of one's character goes along with the practice of creating the "golden body."

The new life style requires celibacy, eating only vegetarian or vegan food, sleeping in a sitting position, not touching the soil barefoot, avoid too much sweating, not using too cold water for showering.<sup>14</sup> It also requires doing charitable deeds, ethical self-

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<sup>10</sup> For the last few years, a woman has been the head of the council of the Chiếu Minh Tam Thanh group in Cần Thơ.

<sup>11</sup> Like Tây Ninh, Ban Chính Đạo, etc.

<sup>12</sup> In the case of the recently established group, also some Buddhist nuns and monks and Hòa Hảo members follow the meditation practice taught there.

<sup>13</sup> Commonly, women usually follow the general social custom of wearing some jewellery and having light make-up.

<sup>14</sup> Generally, one should avoid any action reducing her or his vital essence. For example, there is no precept of 'do not smoke.' However, they do not smoke because smoking is believed to be a factor

correction, study, prayer, and of course practicing meditation. Such a life style entails changes in the organization of daily life, and it considers mandatory not to have too many daily concerns in order to follow the practice in its fullness. The adherents do not live in seclusion. Most of them stay with their families, whereas others live at the Meditation Hall place. Staying with the family requires having a personal room as a place for meditation and for sleeping.<sup>15</sup> For some of them, the change of life results also in a change of their professional life in order to avoid any limitations in accomplishing the spiritual exercises.

### The Goal and the Praxis

What is the goal of this way of life and the pursuit of spiritual transformation? It brings health enhancement,<sup>16</sup> empowerment of mental abilities,<sup>17</sup> attentiveness, and wisdom. However, the main goal is getting away from the wheel of reincarnations and to return to God, the "Great Light" ( *đại linh quang* ), or to the "Original Nature" ( *bổn tánh* ). The goal can be achieved through meditation techniques based on the concepts of "subtle anatomy and physiology." It should be noted that talking about meditation and meditation techniques, we should not think only about mind-based practices. Meditation includes bodily postures and other elements, like the aforementioned way of sleeping, way of eating, etc. It is a mind-body practice.

The practice itself consists of three levels preceded by a three months and ten days<sup>18</sup> "probation period" in order to recognize their ability to lead fully a celibatarian and vegetarian life, to get to know whether they can go further. The first, basic stage ( *nhứt bộ* ), lasts 3 years and 8 months; the second, medium stage ( *nhị bộ* ), lasts four years; the third stage ( *tam bộ* ) lasts 9 years. The given time period of each level refers to the minimum duration of the praxis. It depends on the practitioner's engagement and on God himself. Those who reached the last level become teachers of others. During the practice, especially at the first and second level, the

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that reduces the fruition of the practice.

<sup>15</sup> In the case of married couples, if only one partner wants to practice the Chiếu Minh meditation then the other one must agree. Without the consent of the spouse the entrant is not allowed to commence with the full practice.

<sup>16</sup> The practitioners point out their health improvement after some time of practicing meditation.

<sup>17</sup> They also acknowledge the possibility of the human spirit to travel to other places, as well as the possibility of receiving spirit messages mentally or of contacting with spirits.

<sup>18</sup> It is one hundred days according to the Lunar Calendar.

practitioner has a one-on-one teacher. The teaching takes place only face to face taking in consideration the psycho-physical and spiritual conditions of the adept. The meditation is practiced four times a day<sup>19</sup> and lasts at least one hour and ten minutes.

It is difficult to say exactly what type or form of meditation is used by the Chiếu Minh practitioners, due to their reluctance to talk about it. According to the available knowledge, it can be called, on the one hand, "apophatic", non-conceptual; as quiet sitting emphasizing emptiness and stillness. However, at the beginning of the meditation praxis the adepts should focus on "good thoughts" and avoid "bad thoughts"; on the "right thinking" in the moral/ethical sense, in order to correct their characters. Then the adepts learn the right way of breathing and also follow the practice of stopping their mind from wandering in order to achieve the state of the "right mind-heart", that is, breath and mind should become one.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, Chiếu Minh meditation can be called an "internal alchemy."<sup>21</sup> Human beings have, what is called, "Three Treasures": *tin* ( 精 *jīng*; vital essence, sperm; mixture of 'yin' and 'yang' ); *khí* ( 气 氣 *qì*; subtle, vital breath; subtle energetic presence [in the body and in the universe] as well as emotions ); and *thần* ( 神 *shén*; spirit; the God's element, the divine spark [ *tiểu linh quang* ]; conscience). The meditation practice is an alchemical process,<sup>22</sup> which consists of transforming *tin* into *khí* and then into *thần*, resulting in creating the "second body" ("golden body"), which is a subtle cover surrounding the physical body (it can be also understood as a 'subtle body'). After death, the spirit enters this 'subtle body' and through it, as an immortal spirit, escapes the reincarnation chain, thus being able to reach the realm of immortals. Going to the heavenly, spiritual realm is also called "return to God."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Around midnight; 6:00 am; noon; and 6:00 pm.

<sup>20</sup> When asked, the Chiếu Minh practitioners admit that their practice of stopping the mind's wandering is very similar to the Zen technique.

<sup>21</sup> The Chiếu Minh practice seems to be based on or related to Daoist meditations methods: 內丹術 內丹術 *nèidān shù* ('internal alchemy method'), and 內業 *nèi yè* ('inward training'). It requires further research.

<sup>22</sup> The metaphor of "immortal embryo" / "sacred fetus" ( *thánh thai* ) is also used. It refers to the understanding of the meditation praxis as a reversal of the human reproductive activity, as a transformation of the generative, sexual energy into spiritual energy. On the physiological level, it means for men to keep the semen and for women to stop their menstrual cycle.

<sup>23</sup> It should be noticed that the "return to God" is not understood as "being one with God." It is the return to the realm where God dwells, to the "White Jade Palace" ( *Bạch ngọc kinh* ).

## Millenarian Aspect

The Chiếu Minh tradition follows the Buddhist idea of "Dragon-Flower Festival" ( *Hội long hoa* ), which is understood as a festival of all spirits. But those who did not practice self-perfection, who did not achieve immortality, will not be qualified to participate. Those, however, who are "chosen" will take part in the creation process of the 'new world.' However, this does not have to be understood exclusively as a destruction of the 'old world.' The 'new world' may also be conceived of as a "replacement" of 'bad,' 'not spiritually developed' mortals. When the "Dragon-Flower Festival" will take place depends on human beings. The practitioners are convinced that it will happen soon due to the worsening of humans and the growing accumulation of "negativities" in this present world. The present world should be transformed following the personal inner transformation.

## Short Conclusion

The research on the esoteric current in the Cao Đài New Religious Movement and its praxis is still in its very early stage. Exploration of its origins and its various aspects require further research. It is worth noting that, in spite of the radical requirements needed to follow the Chiếu Minh meditation practice, a growing interest in it can be observed beyond the Cao Đài followers. Additionally, the average age of practitioners is lowering, which is especially noticeable in the new, recently founded group.

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