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Strange Company

Victor Hugo, the Saigon Flag, and Santa Claus on Vietnamese Altars

Vietnamese popular religion is inclusive and syncretistic and can incorporate a number of external elements into its expanding pantheon. This article explores the image of Victor Hugo in a mural in Caodai temples, the Saigon flag on ancestral altars, and a Santa Claus doll on "Way of the Mother Goddesses" (Đạo Mẫu) home temple altars. Each of these elements is recast onto a Vietnamese religious canvas and given new meaning in its new context, in ways that signal the process of decolonization, a lost country now perceived as an ancestor, and the "American spirit of children" who may offer blessings of prosperity. Just as each image models a religious aspiration, so it also mirrors an experience of loss and disconnection. The home altar is itself the canvas of syncretism, where different historical influences are put on display, and through this display brought into relationships with each other.

Keywords: Caodaism—spirit mediums—Vietnamese religions—flag symbolism—French colonialism

Asian Ethnology Volume 82, Number 1 · 2023, 99–119
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The visual displays of Vietnamese popular religion are colorful, diverse, and idiosyncratic, and its many temples and shrines include a wide range of spirits, gods, and divine presences. Stuffed snakes coil along the ceiling of altars to the Mother Goddess, while painted tigers with bared teeth lurk in the shadows at the floor. Neon lights are used to enhance the halos of tutelary deities at Taoist shrines, and bright five-colored flags are unfurled along the rooftops to announce a coming festival. Each of these objects serves as a vehicle to make visible spirit entities and forces, from the spirits of the natural landscape to the legacy of imperial rulers.

Although Vietnam is usually perceived as a Buddhist country with a Catholic minority, ancestor worship is the real shared spiritual foundation, and an estimated 45 percent of the Vietnamese people practice folk religion, a mixture of indigenous and external traditions that is inclusive and syncretistic (Hackett et al., 2014). These traditions can incorporate a number of new elements into their expanding and eclectic pantheons. This article explores three such incorporated images—Victor Hugo, the Saigon flag, and Santa Claus—that may appear incongruous in the Vietnamese setting, but which serve to illustrate the elasticity of display (Swancutt 2023) and the creative responsiveness of Vietnamese communities in constructing new meanings for a nineteenth-century author whose works were important in the process of decolonization, a flag now commemorated as a lost family member or ancestor, and the American cult of childhood as perceived by immigrant parents.

Ancestor worship is practiced at home by almost all Vietnamese families, even those who do not have a formal religious affiliation (who make up 29 percent of the population of the Marxist atheist state). About 16 percent of Vietnamese people identify as Buddhist, and 8 percent as Catholic (ibid., 2010; Hoskins and Ninh 2017). The folk religions practiced include Caodaism, the largest formally recognized "indigenous religion," practiced almost exclusively in the former South Vietnam, where it was once followed by one out of four people (Popkin 1979; Werner 1981) and is now followed by about 12 percent of the regional population (Hoskins 2015). They also include the "Way of the Mother Goddesses" (Đạo Mẫu), a spirit possession practice that was recognized in 2016 as an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO and has been allowed to flourish as a series of ritual performances honoring spirits of nature and Vietnam's imperial past (Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2016; Salemink 2015; Fjelstad and Nguyễn 2011). Mother Goddess rituals are shamanistic, and their spirit mediums bear strong similarities to the Korean *mansin* (discussed in Kwon and Park 2023;

Kendall and Ariati 2023), while Caodaism is a new syncretistic religion born in the early twentieth century in the midst of the nationalist struggle for self-determination.

Caodaism is an "Asian fusion" faith that sought to bring the gods of Europe and the gods of Asia together in a conversation to heal the wounds of colonialism and establish a basis for mutual respect and dialogue. Officially called Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ or "The Great Way of the Third Age of Redemption," Caodaism combines millenarian teachings with the "three great traditions" of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism and elements of Roman Catholicism in its elaborate hierarchy of titles and ranks (which include a pope, female and male cardinals, and bishops). Established in 1926, its earliest members came from the urban educated elite in Saigon, most of them disenfranchised native intellectuals who were frustrated that their study in French-language schools did not qualify them to do more than serve as clerks for colonial offices. In just a few years, Caodaism grew dramatically to become the largest mass movement in the French colony of Cochinchina, with 20–25 percent of the people of South Vietnam converting to this new faith in the period from 1930 to 1975 (Werner 1981).

Caodaism spread out to the countryside and established a large peasant following but was led by civil servants, landowners, businesspeople, and journalists. Its pantheon is made up of all of the spiritual figures who have provided messages in spirit séances to guide the new religion, including messages from the Jade Emperor (also known as "Cao Đài," the highest power), the female Boddhisattva Quan Âm, the Taoist Queen of the Heavens, Lao Tzu, and Vietnamese military heroes like Trần Hưng Đạo. Based on East Asian traditions of spirit writing but also inspired by French Spiritists like Alain Kardec, Caodai theology is an intricate dance between an affirmation of the thousand-year-old tradition of Asian sages and an openness to also listening to figures like Jesus Christ (who announces that he is the son of the Jade Emperor), Sun-Yat Sen (who affirms the rights of Asian peoples to be sovereign in their own countries), and even French figures like Victor Hugo and Jeanne d'Arc. The central emblem of Caodaism is the "divine eye," which is always the left eye, pictured as it appeared in the heavens in a vision seen by the first disciple of this new faith in 1921 (Hoskins 2015, xi, 29–44).

Display is defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary* as "to arrange something or a collection of things so that it can be seen by the public" (*Cambridge Dictionary* n.d.). In the act of displaying something, a connection is established between that thing and the context in which it is being shown. To display something on an altar is to sacralize that thing and then use it to communicate a religious message in relation to the other objects on an altar. To place Victor Hugo beside Sun Yat-Sen and Trạng Trình is to highlight his role in inspiring young Vietnamese nationalists to fight for independence from the French. To place the Saigon flag on an ancestral altar is to venerate the memory of this once-independent state and recognize that it no longer exists. To place Santa Claus beside the child spirits of Cậu Bé and Cậu Bơ is to recognize the placement of Vietnamese children in American commercial spaces, to see their connection to grandfatherly figures, and to acknowledge their aspirations for gifts and material success.

The display of Victor Hugo, the Saigon flag, and Santa Claus on home altars enables each of these figures to become a model for the various personalities and

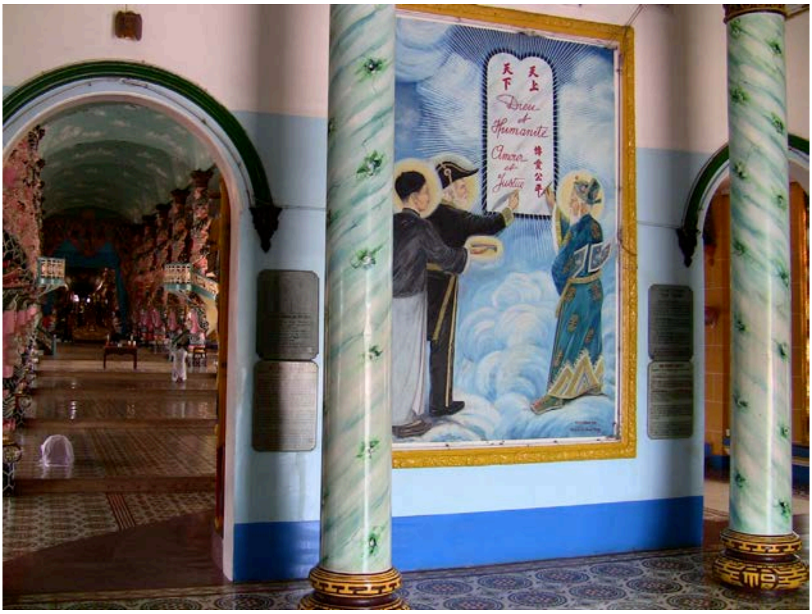

Figure 1. Victor Hugo mural at the entrance to the Great Temple of Caodaism in Tây Ninh. From left to right: Sun Yat-Sen, Victor Hugo, and Trạng Trình. Photograph by Janet Alison Hoskins.

attributes to which many Vietnamese aspire. This is especially true in the moving displays of Vietnamese rituals, where spirit mediums use a mirror to see themselves transformed into the possessing spirit (Hoskins 2014). However, these figures do not tend to appear in secular contexts like museums, where "traditional altars" are displayed to wider publics, and any images of gods or ancestors would most certainly be de-sacralized or de-animated for visitors. In contrast, Vietnamese home altars are canvases of syncretic elements that encourage personalized modes of spirituality and sometimes also the production of altogether new models. What I show in this article, then, is that Vietnamese put model figures on their home altars to enable a direct experience of mimesis—models that may ultimately hold up a mirror to their experiences of loss and displacement.

Victor Hugo on display

Victor Hugo is pictured in a mural at the entrance to the Great Temple in Tây Ninh (described as the "Vatican in Vietnam") standing beside Sun Yat-Sen and the Vietnamese poet and prophet Trạng Trình,[1] each of them signing in his own way a contract between divinity and humanity (figure 1). Hugo is dressed in the long robes of the Alliance Francaise and holds a plume, Sun-Yat Sen is dressed as a Chinese twentieth-century gentleman and holds an ink block, and Trạng Trình wears an imperial costume and writes with a brush. The words "God, Humanity, Love, and Justice" are written in French, Vietnamese, and Chinese characters on a large placard against a celestial background of white clouds. This famous mural is titled "The Three Saints," and copies of it are found at the entrance to each of the over 1,300 smaller Tây Ninh Caodai temples in Vietnam and the roughly one hundred overseas Tây Ninh

Caodai temples in the United States, Canada, and Australia. Caodaists often say that these three saints show three sources of twentieth-century Vietnamese culture—Chinese politics, French humanism, and Vietnamese literature—but the figure of Victor Hugo has provoked much more controversy and attention than the other two.

All three figures were honored for announcing the coming Caodaism in various ways: Sun Yat-Sen predicted that all Asian peoples would rise up against their European colonial masters, Trạng Trình said the Chinese-dominated Viet people would have their own country, and Hugo predicted the emergence of a new religion, combining the wisdom of East and West, that would be announced in spirit séances. This prediction was posthumously published in 1923, almost thirty years after his death in 1885, in the transcripts of séances held in 1854, when Hugo was living in exile on the island of Jersey (Hugo 1923; Chambers 2008). The séance transcripts were widely read and reviewed in Vietnamese newspapers, fascinated by Hugo's idea that communications with spirits could found a new and more encompassing spirituality, incorporating Asian ideas of vegetarianism and reincarnation to show the fundamental unity of global human faith. Hugo himself was attracted to Asian art and literature, decorated one room in his Paris home with Chinoiserie, and strongly criticized the British burning of the Beijing Summer Palace (Trần 1996; Do 2017).

The first Caodai spirit messages did not include any non-Asian figures. But in 1927, when the main Caodai medium was himself exiled to Cambodia as punishment for "politically charged" activities, the spirit of Victor Hugo appeared using a Vietnamese name and announced that he recognized Trần Quang Vinh, a young participant in the séances, as his spiritual son. Three years later, the Protectorate of Cambodia sent Trần Quang Vinh to Paris to help organize the Exposition Coloniale in Vincennes, and séances revealed that this was a way for God or the Jade Emperor to globalize the faith and lobby for religious freedom in Vietnam.

For a generation of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian students who studied under French professors, reading the works of Victor Hugo had exposed them to his campaign against the death penalty, his deep sympathy for the oppressed (*Les Misèrables*), and his respect for Asian civilizations. It was Hugo's great enemy Napoléon III (who Hugo famously called "Napoléon le Petit") who conquered French Indochina, only finishing in 1890, after Hugo's death, so they imagined that Hugo would also criticize the French colonial project.

In 1931, the spirit of Victor Hugo announced to his disciples that "France needs to learn some lessons," because "the colonial government is crushed under the iron rule of the Catholic Church" and had started to prosecute the followers of this new religion. Hugo was a "trans-colonial" spiritual figure, since he spoke in French to followers in both Vietnam and Cambodia, and he also emerged as a critic of French colonial policy; the Vietnamese "spiritual sons" of this great French literary figure were the true champions of his prophetic ideas of humanism and emancipation, while French people living in Indochina were criticized for their hypocrisy.

On May 22, 1937, a new Caodai temple was consecrated in Phnom Penh, with a huge portrait of Victor Hugo displayed near the altar, and Trần Quang Vinh announced that they chose to inaugurate the temple "on the 52nd anniversary of the disincarnation of this great Frenchman" (Bernardini 1974; Hoskins 2015, 110). Noting that Hugo was now recognized as the "spiritual head of the overseas Cao Dai mission," he explicitly traced its lineage back to the spirit séances Hugo conducted on the island of Jersey in 1854. He praised "that fraternity of men, that friendship of races" that had provided the impetus for "a powerful doctrinal synthesis linking the gods of Asia and the gods of Europe" and brought Caodaists "closer to that French soul with which we believe ourselves to have many secret and mysterious affinities" (Gobron 1948, 95).

Caodaists continued to seek support from French colonial figures like Free Masons and scholars of Asian culture and received a more sympathetic treatment from the French government after the 1937 victory of the leftist Popular Front in Paris, but as World War II drew closer these alliances were weakened. In 1940, six of the most important Tây Ninh Caodai leaders were arrested and sent to French prison camps on Madagascar and the Comoros Islands on charges that they had predicted a Japanese victory. In their absence, Trần Quang Vinh took refuge in Cambodia until the temple in Phnom Penh was seized by the French and desecrated. Pushed into the hands of the Japanese, Vinh formed a Caodai militia that worked in the shipyards of Saigon and helped the Japanese to overthrow the French in March 1945. They were promised that a Vietnamese prince who had lived in Japan for decades trying to lead a revolution from a distance would be returned to them, but he never came (Hoskins 2012a, 2015).

When Japan was defeated in August 1945, violence broke out between nationalist and revolutionary forces. The Caodai militia became a defensive force, fighting against the communists and coming to control more territory in southern Vietnam than any other group. When the French tried to return to retake their colony in 1946, they needed indigenous allies and so courted the Caodaists and recruited them to participate in a "peaceful process of decolonization." Vinh negotiated for the return of the exiled Caodai leaders, who accepted the temporary "necessity" of the French presence while the region was pacified and prepared for a transition to a sovereign Vietnam within the framework of a "French Union" modeled on the British Commonwealth (Hoskins 2012b).

The Tây Ninh mural of Victor Hugo, Sun-Yat Sen, and Trạng Trình was finished on August 11, 1948, as Caodaists were turning away from their earlier collaborations with communist revolutionaries to a new collaboration with French forces. A year after it was installed in the Great Temple in Tay Ninh (and later copied in over 1,300 other temples), the Supreme leader Phạm Công Tắc celebrated Victor Hugo's 65th death anniversary on May 22, 1949, by giving a sermon that explained Hugo was a reincarnation of the Vietnamese poet Nguyễn Du (1765–1820)—the most famous of all Vietnamese poets, the author of the national epic *The Tale of Kieu*. By emphasizing the fact that Hugo was preceded by a Vietnamese literary giant, the French writer was "indigenized," and Nguyễn Du himself was made more "cosmopolitan," since his own genius was plotted on a map with French coordinates (Hoskins 2015, 114; Do 2017, 126). This twist came at a political moment when efforts to renew the bonds between the French and the Vietnamese and heal the wounds of colonialism had largely been abandoned, ceding to the post–World War II realization of the inevitability of decolonization.

The ambiguity of this image—Hugo as one of the founding saints of a new faith—has stirred up some controversy about whether Hugo was in fact "worshipped" by the Vietnamese or deified. First, I want to establish that neither of these is true: his role, like that of Sun Yat-Sen and Trạng Trình, was more that of John the Baptist, who announced the coming of a new religious era. But Hugo's spirit did contribute a number of prayers to the Caodai liturgy, and he was treated as an important spiritual advisor. Second, I want to argue that his legacy needs to be interpreted in relation to the actions of the Vietnamese religious leaders designated as his spiritual sons, who have served as translators, ambassadors, and negotiators with both the French and the Communist regime.

This controversy resonates with anthropological debates about the "deification" of Captain Cook (Sahlins 1987, 1996; Obeyesekere 1992) and Hernando Cortes (Todorov 1987), in which "natives" were said to have attributed supernatural powers to important Europeans. Postcolonial critics have argued that Cook and Cortes were mythologized by westerners but not by colonized subjects. In trying to speak for the oppressed and arm them with scholarly ammunition in their struggles, these writers may have flattened out some of the nuances of non-Western spirituality and the complex exchanges of ideas during the colonial period. While Hugo's position in the Caodai pantheon has no doubt been exaggerated by European commentators (including Graham Greene in his famous novel *The Quiet American*),[2] it remains significant, but less because of Hugo himself (now referred to by a Vietnamese name and absorbed into the spiritual lineage of a Vietnamese poet) than because of his spiritual sons: Vietnamese Caodaists who came to play significant roles in the decolonization process in Indochina. They include the already mentioned Trần Quang Vinh, the young Caodaist missionary sent to Paris in 1931, who was identified in a séance as his spiritual son and eventually became the defense minister of the transitional government of South Vietnam (1947–49), and his own son Trần Quang Cảnh, a Vietnamese American who later became the first overseas Vietnamese member of the Sacerdotal Council, identified as his spiritual grandson (Hoskins 2015, 97–99, 117–19, 247–48, 254; Jammes 2014).

Victor Hugo's writings were important to Caodaists in the 1930s both because they valorized spiritism (since Hugo also participated in spiritist séances) and because they advocated for the oppressed. The French author was placed in a "historically salient cultural model in which a political leader who performs tremendous 'meritorious works' (*công đức*) for the Vietnamese people and nation becomes, after death, a protective tutelary deity whose powers can be drawn upon for assistance by the living" (Malarney 1996, 121). In this sense, he was offered the same status as the one assumed by the spirit of Hồ Chí Minh after his own death in 1969, since Hồ Chí Minh became the focus of a popular religious cult of healing in the twenty-first century (Hoang 2016; Ngo 2019). Hugo's human legacy, and the sense of mission communicated to his disciples and interlocutors, was why he remained important in Caodaism long after his death. He is still considered important by twenty-first-century Caodaists, especially those in the diaspora, because he was appointed the spiritual head of the overseas mission.

Because Hugo's representation in the mural is seen as incongruous by many visitors (although they do not question the presence of Sun Yat-Sen, another non-Vietnamese figure), explanations of why he is there have fueled totally false stories about other non-Asian figures. While it is true that in the 1930s Caodaists received spirit messages from Jeanne d'Arc (supporting the self-determination of peoples and resisting occupying armies) and a few other French literary and political figures in the 1930s, these did not continue after the beginning of World War II and the accelerating process of decolonization.

In the 1950s, American journalists started to write stories about Caodaism, and supposedly credible entities like *Time Magazine* claimed that Winston Churchill and Charlie Chaplin were also "saints" in the Caodai pantheon (*Time* 1956a, 1956b, 1957). I can only imagine that these stories came from language-based misunderstandings when the journalists interviewed Caodaists, since both Churchill and Chaplin were alive at the time (and lived for many more decades), and only deceased persons can become saints or communicate with the living through séances (Hoskins 2015, 245). Nevertheless, these early and erroneous articles helped create a mythology that exaggerated Caodaism's "outrageous syncretism" (ibid., 4) and has meant that I have been contacted by many other journalists asking where they can find murals or altars with Churchill and Chaplin on them. This is, perhaps, one of the dangers of display: one image displayed that attracts attention can conjure up a series of other similar images that may not even exist.

The Saigon flag on display

A different set of complex political circumstances led to the incorporation of the Saigon flag, representing the now defunct Republic of South Vietnam, into ancestral altars for a large number of people in the Vietnamese diaspora. The diaspora itself can be divided into communities that identify as "Little Saigons," made up overwhelmingly of refugees from the former southern Vietnam and found in the United States, Canada, and Australia, and those that identify as "Little Hanois," made up of northern contract workers and students in the former socialist world of Russia, East Germany, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic (Hoskins and Nguyen 2020). Two countries, France and Germany, have mixed populations, with southern refugees being more numerous in France and northern workers more numerous in Germany. The Little Saigons include about three million people, roughly two-thirds of them in the United States, while the other 1.5 million people live in Little Hanois or the mixed countries of France and Germany. There are also Vietnamese communities in Cambodia, China, and Taiwan that are not as clearly demarcated by Cold War polarities.

The veneration of the flag of the former Saigon government has become part of familial worship at ancestral altars in the homes of former refugees in the United States, Canada, and Australia: a small yellow striped Saigon flag (*cờ vàng*) is placed just beside the images of Buddha, the Virgin Mary, or the Caodai emblem of the "left eye of God." This flag symbolically represents the vanished regime as a sort of ancestor: an important part of family history, and a now-deceased but still influential and possibly benevolent spiritual authority. People that I interviewed about this custom described it as "showing respect" or "keeping alive the memory of their homeland," but it does so in a depoliticized context, since the flag is commemorated as heritage.

The red Hanoi flag, in contrast, is never placed on ancestral altars (even by those very loyal to the regime) precisely because its government is still very much alive.

The Saigon flag has been renamed the "Freedom and Heritage Flag" in many Vietnamese American communities, where it is often found flying in front of Buddhist temples, Caodai temples, Vietnamese Catholic Centers, and cultural and historical centers (figure 2). It is also unfurled over cemeteries in the cities of Westminster and Garden Grove (both identified as Little Saigon), where many veterans of the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam are buried, and at monuments to all those who died in the war opposing communist rule. Shopping centers have long served as symbols of ethnic communities in American cities, and accordingly many Vietnamese American activists have asked to have "their flag" fly at supermarkets, restaurants, and mini-malls where many Vietnamese are customers. It has been adopted by cities like Garden Grove, California and Falls Church, Virginia as the "official flag of the Vietnamese community" and recognized as such by the states of California and Ohio.

More recently, many people were surprised to see the Saigon flag flown on January 7, 2021, when pro-Trump protesters stormed the Capitol to try to stop the certification of the election of Joe Biden as president. Writing in the *Washington Post*, the novelist and cultural critic Viet Thanh Nguyen explained, "In America, white nationalists and Vietnamese nationalists share a common condition: a radicalized nostalgia for a lost country and a lost cause" (Nguyen 2021). He continued by providing this historical context:

> For decades, many in the community harbored the belief that they would one day return to Vietnam to topple the communist regime, first through military struggle and then, as the veterans aged, through political struggle. The Vietnamese communist regime took that threat seriously. In the years after its triumph, the regime imprisoned tens of thousands of its former enemies, from generals and judges to enlisted men and priests. Unknown numbers died in the regime's reeducation camps. Hundreds of thousands fled persecution by boat, and many lost their lives

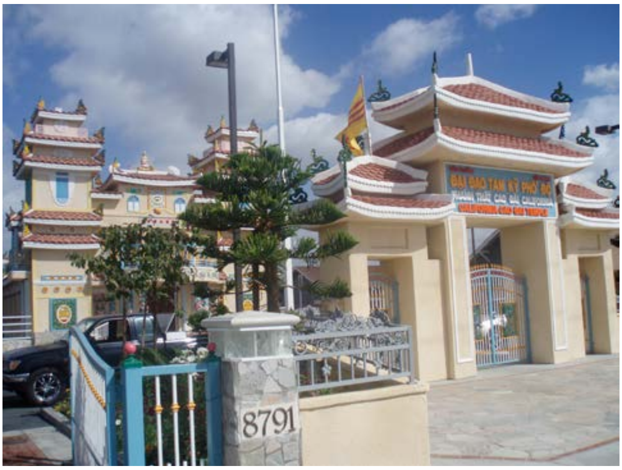

Figure 2. The Saigon flag flying in front of the California Caodai Temple in Garden Grove, California. Photograph by Janet Alison Hoskins.

> at sea. The regime effectively destroyed any possibility of resistance, suppressed the public memory of South Vietnam, destroyed its monuments and silenced most of its opposition. Dissidents still exist today, but they are imprisoned quickly and harshly. (ibid.)

The brandishing of the Saigon flag at the Capitol insurrection, paired often with the Confederate flag, would seem to show a denial of history and a refusal to accept a defeat that happened decades or even a over a century earlier. I argue, however, that the placement of a small flag on a family ancestral altar is quite different from marching with the same flag in Washington, DC. While the political protesters show a "radicalized nostalgia," those who place a miniature flag as a sacred object on their ancestral altars are recognizing that South Vietnam exists no more and are venerating it as a part of their shared history but not their present political reality.

On the one hand, the flying of the Saigon flag at Vietnamese houses of worship, at commercial centers, and (in miniature form) on home altars is a way to create an alternative space in which to collectively commemorate the losing side of a civil war. On the other hand, the fact that this is only possible in exile (and not in Vietnam itself) means that the flag itself is sacralized in a very different way from most national flags. It is in fact illegal to bring the Saigon flag into the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and anyone who tries to unfurl or display it could be immediately arrested and expelled from the country. It is not even possible to display a distant photograph of the Saigon flag in Vietnam, so images of diasporic temples and pagodas are also banned if they include this flag (Hoskins 2017, 2021).

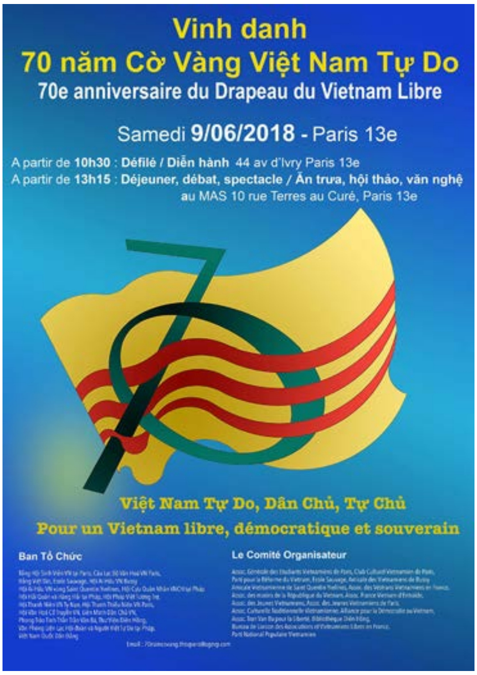
Vinh danh
70 năm Cờ Vàng Việt Nam Tự Do
70e anniversaire du Drapeau du Vietnam Libre
Samedi 9/06/2018 - Paris 13e
A partir de 10h30 : Défilé / Diễn hành 44 av d'Ivry Paris 13e
A partir de 13h15 : Déjeuner, débat, spectacle / Ăn trưa, hội thảo, văn nghệ
au MAS 10 rue Terres au Curé, Paris 13e
Việt Nam Tự Do, Dân Chủ, Tự Chủ
Pour un Vietnam libre, démocratique et souverain
Ban Tổ Chức
Le Comité Organisateur

Figure 3. The sanctification of the Saigon flag poster in France. Image downloaded from "70ème anniversaire du Drapeau du Vietnam Libre," Association des Jeunes Vietnamiens de Paris, May 28, 2018. https://www.httn-paris.com/2018/05/70eme-anniversaire-du-drapeau-du-vietnam-libre/

The overseas Vietnamese community that has ceremonialized the worship of the Saigon flag to the highest degree is the refugee community in Paris. In 2008, members of the anticommunist student group AEGVP (Association Générale des Etudiants Vietnamiens de Paris or Tổng Hội Sinh Viên Việt Nam tại Paris) decided to quite consciously reinvent a tradition by sanctifying the Saigon flag (figure 3). The association was founded in 1964 at the Hiền Lương restaurant on the rue de Broca in Paris's fifth arrondissement ("Latin quarter") to support the Saigon government. Several hundred of its members returned to Vietnam in 1972–73 to work to help the current regime, even though their French nationality protected them from the draft. Its

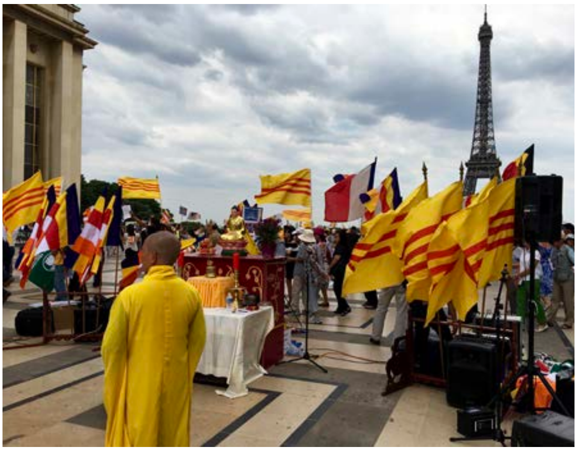

Figure 4. The yellow Saigon flag is flown alongside the Buddhist flag, a Buddhist altar, and the French flag at a protest at the Parvis des Droits de l'Homme (Human Rights Square) in Paris, in front of the Eiffel tower in June 2018. Photograph by Janet Alison Hoskins.

former president in 1972, Trần Văn Bá, returned to Vietnam after the fall of Saigon and was executed for plotting against the government (Nguyen Ngoc Chau 2016).

The yellow striped flag was created by the emperor Thành Thái in 1890, at the same time that he encouraged celebrations of the Hùng Vuong dynasty (the legendary founders of the Vietnamese imperial state). It was adopted by former emperor Bảo Đại in 1948 for a supposedly "sovereign" Vietnamese state within a proposed French Union, and it is this date that was commemorated in the ceremonies held in 2008 and 2018 to celebrate a Vietnam that would be "free, democratic, and sovereign." On June 9, 2018, the seventieth anniversary of this "sanctification" of the flag was celebrated by parading a giant yellow striped flag through the thirteenth arrondissement, Paris's "Asian quarter," starting at a popular Vietnamese market (Tang Frères) and proceeding to a rally to protest the communist government's abuse of human rights. Two weeks later, Buddhist monks in the now-outlawed Unified Buddhist Church led a large demonstration at the Human Rights Square in front of the Eiffel Tower, waving the Buddhist flag, the French flag, and dozens of yellow flags to challenge the legitimacy of the present Vietnamese government and protest new laws on internet censorship and leasing new economic zones to China (figure 4).

There are controversies about whether to interpret the display of the flag of a now-defunct country as a form of ethnic solidarity (like the flag of Armenia displayed in Los Angeles demonstrations about the Armenian genocide), long-distance nationalism (like the Palestinian flag, which is still tied to an aspiring nation), or a history of exclusion and even racialization. Writing about Vietnamese Buddhist communities in the Gulf South, Allison Truitt argues that the display of the Saigon flag at Buddhist temples marks not only the "ethnic" experience of refugee displacement but also that of racialization and marginalization within the host country:

> As a symbol, the flag also exposes how Vietnamese Buddhism cannot be explained by the category of ethnicity but should instead be framed in terms of racialization. The categories of race and ethnicity are used interchangeably to designate Asian Americans, but these categories mark different orders in American political life. By

> designating people's investment in the life of these temples as merely "ethnic," we misrecognize other dynamics at play. These dynamics like hoisting the Freedom and Heritage Flag mark race insofar as this term encodes histories of subjugation, including "legacies of conquest, enslavement, and non-national status that disturb the national peace, whose narrative must thus be silenced within public culture, or hived off from the national story into separate worlds of their own" (Singh 2004, 42–43). Within these temples, people invoke legacies otherwise silenced in public culture, reframing these narratives within a Buddhist idiom and helping residents navigate their historical experiences, present marginalization, and uncertain futures through their spiritual commitments. Displaying the flag is not merely nostalgic but is a ritual activity that alerts us to the fact that while most Americans assume the Cold War ended in 1989, it is not over for many Vietnamese.
>
> (Truitt 2021, 14)

Does flying the flag of a defeated nation mean that Vietnam's long civil war is "over" or that it is "not over"? Calling this flag a "heritage flag" recognizes the fact that it no longer represents a citizenship, but the question of representing the "Vietnamese community" remains a contentious one (Hoskins and Nguyen 2020).

In 2015, at my own campus of the University of Southern California (USC), a Vietnamese American protester climbed up the top of the international studies building and removed the Hanoi flag from where it was flying, replacing it with the Saigon flag. University administrators would not allow it to be replaced, since the logic of displaying flags at that center was that they represented the over one hundred nationalities of the foreign students studying at USC, which have for decades included Vietnamese nationals. With my colleague Viet Thanh Nguyen, we tried to make this protest into a teaching opportunity, and we invited representatives of both the Vietnamese Student Association (made up of Vietnamese Americans who were US nationals) and the Vietnamese International Student Association (made up of Vietnamese nationals) to meet together to discuss this issue. This proved the beginning of a few collaborative social events, mainly built around eating Vietnamese food, which were also efforts at reconciliation between the descendants of those who fought the long civil war. One characteristic of these events was that they would not be promoted with either the Saigon or Hanoi flag.[3]

Santa Claus on display

Images of Santa Claus are found all over commercial shopping centers and public spaces in the season before Christmas, both in Saigon and in California, but it was surprising to me to see one on a Vietnamese altar to the spirit of the youngest prince. The company that surrounds Santa Claus are other toys presented as offerings to the young playful boy spirits: a miniature BMW car, Asian pears, a lemon, an apple, a battery-operated locomotive, a toy horse, a baby god riding a fish, a tiny Christmas tree, and a pack of Marlboro cigarettes. The cigarettes are used by the spirit mediums possessed by the boy spirit, who often perform a pantomime routine of a naughty little boy who sneaks cigarettes from his father and tries to light two or three of them at the same time. The offerings made to this spirit and then distributed by him are usually candy, small fruits, and the cigarettes—now partially smoked and filled with the breath of the spirit himself.

Followers of Đạo Mẫu, or the "Way of the Mother Goddesses," are not identified with either the decolonial politics of Caodaism or the Cold War conflicts that separate the flags of Hanoi and Saigon. In contrast, Đạo Mẫu is a shamanistic practice in which spirit mediums are possessed by spirits of the imperial past and pray to goddesses of the heavens, earth, and waters. Although the exact sequence of spirits who come down can be different for each ceremony, it always starts with high-ranking generals and mandarins, then goes to ladies of the court, then royal princes and princesses, until the final spirits incarnated, who are playful children. The child spirits dance shaking a rattle, miming tantrums interspersed with pratfalls, and often playfully toss candy or crisp dollar bills out to the audience.

It is a modern version of spirit medium rituals long practiced in rural northern Vietnam that had been condemned as superstitious during the revolutionary struggle. In the early 1990s, a number of Communist party leaders began to promote the idea of reviving cultural activities to foster traditional values, allowing practices once considered "superstition" to become "folk culture." Scholars associated with Ngó Đức Thịnh's Folklore Institute began to document the songs and dances of what was then known as the Four Palaces cult. By highlighting the kinship between these practices and shamanism in other societies, these scholars were able to allow Đạo Mẫu to be reclassified as an indigenous cultural heritage and a "living museum" of Vietnamese culture. In the new market economy of the twenty-first century, these practices also became more attractive, because they were said to promote health, confidence, and entrepreneurial success (Phạm Quynh Phuong 2009; Endres 2011).

In California mediumship communities (*công đồng lên đồng*), serving the spirits is seen as a practice that affirms a transnational Vietnamese identity without "playing the games of the government," since stories of government suppression of the practice are often told. At the same time, members of this community travel back to Vietnam often to buy ritual paraphernalia (costumes, statues, altar decorations) and participate in rituals at particularly potent temples. Their transnational travels implicitly affirm the idea that Vietnamese people are empowered by mythic figures from their past and can use these figures to both understand and model their own behavior. In Clifford Geertz's (1973, 93) famous formulation, the spirits are both "models of" and "models for" human personalities.

The spirit medium does not travel up to heaven to witness the world of these celestial beings like the shaman does. Instead, she invites them into her own body, and this has become a practice where women mediums are the majority, with many male mediums who present as transgendered. She allows them a place within her where they breathe through her breath and shake with the same rhythms as her stomping feet. It is the body, not the sky that is the ground of spirit mediumship.

Mimesis has been discussed by Michael Taussig as the capacity "to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other. The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power" (Taussig 1993, xiii). For migrants who are far from their homeland, it is a way of taking spirits indigenous to Vietnam and inviting them into their bodies and their consciousness, so that these spirits come to share their experiences, and to offer their own thoughts about how to interpret them. Much as Laurel Kendall and Ni Wayan Pasek Ariati (2023) observe for the Korean *mansin* shaman, the reflection that the spirit medium sees is both her and not her: it uses the landscape of her own features to highlight a different personality, a new set of gestures and facial expressions that interpret her physical form from a new perspective. In the mirror, she sees a moving display of her own identity struggles.

Spirit possession is an experience of fluidity in identity, of being drawn into moving as another being would move and feeling as another being might feel. Recent theorists (Levitt 2007) have argued that second-generation migrants are often working with multiple identities at the same time, a process that promotes flexibility and may have many advantages but which can also prove confusing. The appeal of spirit possession is that it offers an immediate, intense experience of "being Vietnamese," which can serve as an anchor for an identity that seems in danger of becoming unmoored.

For younger migrants born in Vietnam but growing up in California, these spirited encounters are appealing because they involve drama, bodily movement, and altered states of consciousness. For some of their parents, dabbling in this kind of activity is suspect; it can be dangerous and, if mismanaged, can threaten one's wellbeing. They are aware that these practices were condemned as superstitious and backward by the Hanoi government, although for anti-Hanoi refugees this official condemnation can be part of their appeal, since the rituals are associated with struggles for individual freedom. Younger, inexperienced mediums often crave an intense, uncontrolled form of possession trance, which older mediums may see as exaggerated and inappropriate (Fjelstad and Nguyen 2011, 125–28). For the ritual masters, learning to practice spirit possession is learning to control yourself, to enter into each incarnation with skill and deliberation, and to recognize that the spirits are best served with dignity and decorum, not flailing limbs and rolling eyes.

Vietnamese spirit possession ceremonies appear more like lively folkdance sequences than like the violent, spasmodic movements associated with Afro-American diasporic spirit possession ceremonies like Vodou (McCarthy Brown 1991). They emphasize a stage of self-recognition and self-control, since they involve dressing carefully in front of a mirror, providing a moment of self-contemplation and self-recognition as part of the process of becoming a "servant of the gods" (*lam tôi ngài*) (Hoskins 2014). The medium is not simply lost in an involuntary series of movements but comes to see herself moving under the influence of spirits that she considers her masters, teachers, and "lords" (*ngài*). Even the youngest and most impish of the spirits, the "Youngest Prince" Cậu Bé, is seen as a child in heaven and a spiritual master to his youthful devotees on earth.

I first saw Santa Claus on a Đạo Mẫu altar in Garden Grove, California (figure 5), at the home of an older Vietnamese woman who had married an American G.I. and come to the United States in 1974. Her ancestors had migrated from northern Vietnam to Saigon in the 1930s, and she had been initiated into the practice as a young girl. Her granddaughter, in turn, had been pledged to the spirits at the age of twelve as part of the process of healing her from a serious illness and was now, at thirty-one years old, holding her own ceremonies. I asked the grandmother what it meant to have Santa Claus on her altar, and she told me:

> He is the American spirit of children. They pray to him for gifts, but also to help them to understand their parents and grandparents. In Vietnam, we pray to the Kitchen God at Tết, and he reports about our family to those above. In America, our children pray to Santa Claus, but he also works with Cẫu Bé, the child spirit, to help the generations understand each other.

The Kitchen God (Ông Táo) or Mandarin Táo (Táo Quan) is a kindly older man who lives in the hearth and is seen as the advocate of the Vietnamese family with the gods, and an emissary who travels between heaven and earth. Since he is also depicted as a grandfather (Ông), and he shares Santa Claus's affinity for chimneys, he plays a similar role in the familial piety of Vietnamese New Year (Tết) traditions. The Kitchen God is depicted wearing a long robe and shorts, and he oversees the cleaning of the house in preparation for a prosperous new year on the lunar calendar. He supposedly prepares a report about the family to be taken up to the Jade Emperor in the heavens. Through his intercessions, children are given "*lì-cì*" red envelopes with money in them to wish them good fortune in the new year. The temple owner's explicit association of the Kitchen God with Santa Claus suggests that she sees them as parallel figures, each operating over a specific local area.

While Cậu Bé is a bit of a prankster and a trickster, he is also a sacred intermediary who can help to resolve generational conflict. He wears white pants with a green vest and often dances with a bow and arrow or a hobby horse's reins. He is more approachable than the great generals, mandarins, or ladies of the court, and he is the only spirit in the Đạo Mẫu pantheon who occasionally speaks in English—since

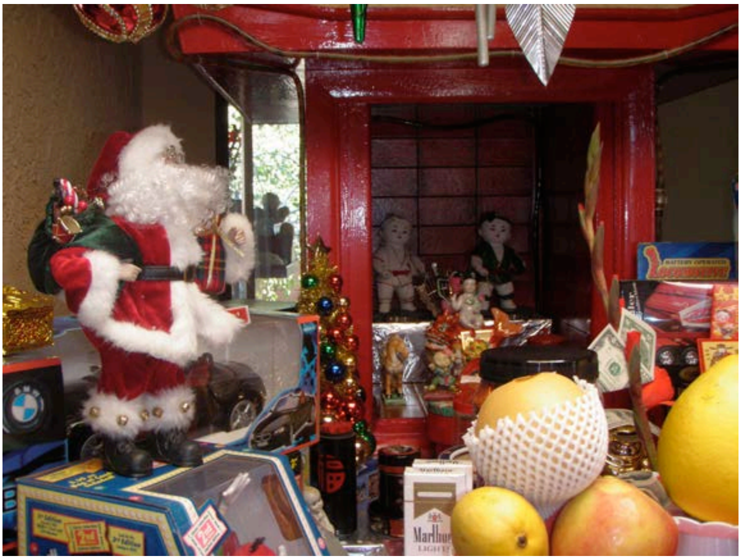

Figure 5. Santa Claus on the Đạo Mẫu altar in Garden Grove, California. Santa Claus appears on the altar dedicated to the two youngest child princes, Cậu Bé and Cậu Bơ. Photograph by Janet Alison Hoskins.

in immigrant families, the children often speak in English, even in answering their parents who speak Vietnamese.

The collaboration of the grandfatherly Kitchen God and the playful child spirit Cậu Bé is a reflection of the situation in many immigrant households, where the parents work multiple jobs, so the children are cared for by grandparents who may not share their language. If Santa Claus sometimes takes on the same position as the Kitchen God, he does so as an indulgent gift-giving spirit who can offer company and consolation to lonely children. His presence on the altar shows a way in which California spirit mediums are incorporating new elements that they see as making their traditional heritage more open to local influences.

Home altars as the canvas of syncretism: Idiosyncratic elements and their contextualization

Syncretism has been characteristic of Vietnamese religious life for centuries, but it has often been depicted negatively, as a bug that corrupts certain religions with folk elements. Rather than being the contamination of "true faiths" with "folk traditions," syncretism should be recognized as the very engine that creates new religions. All religions are the result of a syncretic process that takes an existing formation and transforms it into something new. Vietnamese home altars are always idiosyncratic, since they commemorate specific ancestors, usually grandparents, and place them beside icons of spiritual power. There are rules about what should and should not be placed on an altar, and how other votive objects (candles, incense burners, containers for fruit and flowers) should be arranged. Each particular arrangement makes visible a cosmology, as it is sorted into various levels, associated with levels of spiritual attainment. Santa Claus is placed below the child spirit Cậu Bé, for example, and Victor Hugo is never placed at the same level as images of Buddha, Quan Âm, or the Divine Eye. While the boundaries of what counts as a spiritual guide may be porous, the hierarchy of the highest deities is not open to negotiation. New elements are integrated in at the lower levels, where their power is seen as added to the more encompassing entities at the top.

Altar design is often featured in museum displays to illustrate the complex cosmologies of other peoples. The American Museum of Natural History, for example, featured a Mother Goddess altar in its 2003–04 exhibit on "Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind, and Spirit" (Nguyen and Kendall 2003), and later a similar altar was featured at the Women's Museum of Vietnam, Hanoi, in 2012. While the museum tried to collect objects with a high aesthetic quality of craftsmanship, the basic design was copied from popular practice, and similar altars are found in many people's homes. Since Caodaism and Mother Goddess Worship are considered "indigenous religions," there was concern that these altars should be recognized by their worshippers and would not violate the unwritten grammar of how objects should be arranged.

The Metropolitan Museum in New York displays the ancestral altar of the mother of a ruler of the Benin kingdom, the Art Institute of Chicago has a Nigerian Kalabari Ancestral Altar, and the Fowler Museum of Cultural History had an elaborate display of several different altars in its 1995 exhibit on the "Sacred Arts of Haitian

Vodou." Objects presented for display are often de-sacralized or de-animated first, if they are presented to a wider audience that cannot be expected to exhibit the same ritual protocols of bowing, placing offerings, and speaking respectfully to the objects. Laurel Kendall (2021, 170) and Nguyễn Văn Huy and Phạm Lan Hương (2008) describe the case of the One-Eyed God statue from Họa Village, removed from display at an ancestral lineage house or *đình* after a quarrel, where rumors persisted that it might have been filled with ancestral ashes. Only photographic documentation of the de-animation process allowed it to be exhibited in the museum context of the Vietnamese Museum of Ethnology, once it was established that it had been cleansed of materials tying it to a specific family.

People compose their home altars as personalized expressions of filial piety and as belonging to Vietnamese tradition. While the arrangement on an altar is displayed to others, it is usually a select group of descendants and close friends who will be invited into the private space of their home. Display in the much more public, secular space of a museum involves a new set of rules and protocols and is usually accompanied by text assuring its educational value to a much wider audience. The tradition of home altars has created a canvas for people to personalize their spirituality, allowing the incremental process of implicit syncretism to gradually form new configurations. Explicit syncretism, like the spirit messages of the 1920s that brought Caodaism into being, is a more dramatic and disruptive restaging of the gods (Hoskins 2015). The inclusion of Victor Hugo (for his spiritual grandchildren), Santa Claus, and the Saigon flag are idiosyncratic incursions that show the personal histories of the families who honor their ancestors in their homes.

Conclusions: Display and what it represents

The worlds that are made of assembling a particular pantheon of gods, demons, and spiritual advisors are different in each case examined here. Caodaism presents itself as a cosmopolitan syncretism, which is open to illustrious French literary figures as well as Vietnamese and Chinese ones. Victor Hugo takes his place as the reincarnation of a famous Vietnamese poet, so his veneration is located within a transnational recognition of parity of literary accomplishment. In a somewhat similar fashion, Santa Claus comes into a Vietnamese Đạo Mẫu altar because he has a kinship with the beloved Kitchen God and can seem to play a similar role in reconciling the generations in immigrant households. The Saigon flag has often appeared in heavily politicized and divisive contexts, but on a family's ancestral altar it commemorates an experience of displacement and loss that unites the members of a family rather than separating them.

The "strange company" that we see in these various forms of display show how new connections are fused by juxtaposition. Even in the relatively private setting of a home altar or home temple, there must be logic behind the choice of figures shown. Vietnamese spirit mediums' use of a mirror, where they can see themselves transformed into the possessing spirit, allows them to reflect on the differences between their mundane selves and their ritual identities. Each of the spirits who might come to possess them is also depicted as a small statue or figurine on the altars that they worship, so they can model their trance performances on a visual image.

The mirroring or mimesis that is part of each possession experience is associated with taking on the characteristics of a spirit entity, who can then help to transform the daily life of the spirit medium even after the trance is over. It is itself a moving form of display, which shows to the audience many personalities modeled on Vietnamese tradition. One spirit medium even told me explicitly that it was "Vietnam which was dancing inside my body" (Hoskins 2014, 76). Although Caodaists would not put it quite that way, since their form of séance does not include dancing but only the transmission of messages, they also argue that "Victor Hugo can speak to us from above and guide our efforts in the New World" (Hoskins 2015, 124–25). Figures depicted on an altar or a mural become models for personalities and attributes that we may all aspire to, and in the ritual context these possible models can be turned into direct experiences of mimesis.

Just as the American flag on a Korean shaman's shrine can be more about the memory of shamanism in a situation of cultural pluralism (see Kwon and Park 2023), so also the Saigon flag on an ancestral altar in a diasporic community in California can be more about a shared history of suffering than contemporary anticommunism. People can push back at the definitional borders of their own experience and tear open new possibilities of connection and meaning. Each of these spirits models a religious aspiration, which is displayed and activated in a ritual context. But it also holds up a mirror to the experience of loss and displacement. This is what these three examples of innovative displays and incorporations can teach us.

Author

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Notes

1. Trạng Trình, also known as Nguyễn Bỉnh Khiêm (1491–1585), is a sixteenth-century writer sometimes called the "Nostradamus of Vietnam," who published a series of poems predicting the emergence of an independent Vietnam.

2. A more detailed analysis of Greene's statements about Caodaism and their implications can be found in Hoskins (2015, 2, 8–9, 114–17, 136, 249).

3. This is also the solution proposed by the nuns who run one of the largest Vietnamese Buddhist pagodas in Germany, the Linh Thứ‘u Pagoda in Spandau (near Berlin). While the pagoda was initially founded by refugees, it now serves a mixed community that includes more descendants of workers sent to East Germany, so the decision was taken to ban the display of any national flags—including the Saigon flag and the Hanoi flag—to emphasize the pagoda as a place of reconciliation and peace (see Hoskins and Nguyen 2020).

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