

# Vietnamese Community Memory: Exile, Homesickness and Faith

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*Caelum non animum mutant qui trans mare currunt.*<sup>2</sup>

When we strive for social reflection and change as academics, the historian has his or her uses in unearthing stories that say something particular not only about the plight of individuals, but also communities. Our city has, since the 1970s, collected a significant lore of experiences regarding migration and much of it is community based. Australia, especially during the Whitlam and Fraser governments, made deep connections with the experiences of Lebanese, Sri-Lankan Tamils and Vietnamese as many individuals in these societies fled their homelands because of civil war. They ended up here in our suburbs not as a collection of individuals rescued from the traumatic events of recent times, but as families and communities. The arduousness of their flight and the bittersweet joy of their resettlement outside their homeland became part of our own history. The collective knowledge that was brought here gave us supportive, vibrant sub-communities. It also gave our wider community a storehouse of experiences of migration, one we can always learn from. I argue here that this storehouse of collective knowledge should not be put aside when we consider who we are today as a nation of hosts. Hosts, that is, who are seen to be increasingly reluctant to extend a humanitarian hand to those pleading for our help by making one of the most arduous journeys of

all—to touch on our distant shores.

One striking repository of our previous experience of migration and an example of the process of adaptation into Australian life by new Australians is a small temple on King Georges Road at Wiley Park. It is a building that houses a Vietnamese community I have been studying for over ten years. At first this strange structure seems to challenge everything we know about the bland architectural regularity of the Australian suburbs. Decorated with Buddhas and figures from the Chinese folk-religion canon, framed with towers that make it cathedral-like, but with roofs that return one to the theme of the East-Asian pagoda, with an interior that celebrates the divinity of both Lao Zi and Jesus Christ. All of this is wrapped up in an exterior that hints at what this religion strives to do: bring the faith systems of the East and West together.<sup>3</sup> It is a temple dedicated to the Caodaist faith. Here I would like to ruminate on this extraordinary building and those who built it, not for what it says about this religion (which is Vietnam's third largest) but for what it represents for Sydney: the development of a stark marker of difference in our multicultural fabric, a recreation of a space to ameliorate homesickness by the people who built it, and yet a space that, ironically, is a machine for the Australianisation of both this religion and the community that is housed within it. In this way the temple on King Georges Road is a work of architectural art that helps give a sense of groundedness that much of the art in this exhibition gives to artists who work through not

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2 Horace, *Opera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1901) epistles I. xi. 27 [For those who cross the seas their heavens change but not their minds].

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3 I have placed a full explanation of the features of the building online at the Sydney Centre for Studies in Caodaism website.

only their own traumatic experiences, but also their own connection to themes of Australian-ness. The Caodai Temple is a reflection of exile art in quite another way; it contains within it a community that possess similar harrowing stories of escape from political persecution, war and religious intolerance. This temple is a solid fact that its history is part of Australia's history. I suggest here that being more mindful of the ways in which our nation now owns the history of Vietnamese Australians reflect strongly on how the stories behind the art of the exhibition *Fear + Hope* should be accepted as a part of our history and in this process, we might be more ready to accept the artists as well as their art as an Australian fact.

## Escaping Vietnam

In the first instances, the same motives that forced hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese to flee their country after 1975 were, in the main, the same motives that drove Caodaists from the Indochinese peninsula. The persecution of the religion by the communists was an added 'incentive'.<sup>4</sup> Most male Caodaists were implicated in some way in the war effort, and all were members of a faith that had proved itself a hardy antagonist to the communist cause. Caodaists, especially those from the province of Tay Ninh (to the immediate north-west of Saigon where the religion has its Holy See) were thus "doubly" eligible for "re-education" a euphemism for internment in hard-labour prisons in Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> The desperation of the need to flee can be judged by how willingly people faced the dangers of the open sea, pirates and death, for the chance of a life different to the one that conquest had laid out for them.

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4 Sergei Blagov, *Caodaism: Vietnamese Traditionalism and its Leap into Modernity* (New York: Nova, 2001), pp. 151–175.

5 Holding the rank of Captain in the southern republican army, Nguyen Chanh Giao was interned in such a prison, required to do hard labour during the day and study principles of the revolution by night. He was interned for three years. Field notes, conversation with Nguyen Chanh Giao, 23 August 2002.

With much to encourage their leaving, those who escaped suffered the tragic ramifications of their exit: the leaving of all that was familiar and the need to start again, like a life reincarnated. Under these circumstances, arrival becomes, in part, a myth. For once resettled, homesickness and the need to reclaim the familiar become part of the abiding atmosphere of new life. This would be the case amongst Caodaists where communities almost automatically developed abroad, such as the community that built the Wiley Park temple. The *communitas* and worship as transferred to the new land thus took on extra meaning. Religion, ritual and togetherness not only offered the certainties that they did in Vietnam, but they also marked out spaces and rituals that produced familiarity and community in a society that was strange, new and often incomprehensible. It was a familiarity that assuaged homesickness, provided comfort and certainty and in this manner delicately redefined what it meant to be Australian (and what it meant to be Vietnamese).

## One Story amongst Thousands

As a phenomenon that stretched from 1975 through to the change of atmosphere in Vietnam around the early 1990s when the communist government began to relax their policies with regard to religions,<sup>6</sup> yet nevertheless continues today,<sup>7</sup> the tragedy of the exodus is a common point in the lives of most first-generation Vietnamese-Australians. I provide the following account as typical of the general experience of those members of the community who arrived in the decade after 1975.

In late December 1998, watching the Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race disaster (in which a number of amateur and professional sailors died) in a Caodaist's home became an unexpectedly disturbing experience. My host started shaking

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6 Blagov, *Caodaism* p.159.

7 After a hiatus of many years boats again started arriving off the Australian coast manned by Vietnamese refugees. See 'Vietnamese Boats Arrive' *Sydney Morning Herald* (3 July 2003), p.7.

his head: 'It's a sort of miracle,' he kept repeating as we watched the screen. The footage of wild weather and wrecked boats reminded him of his own disastrous journey. Estimates as to how many died during the escape from Vietnam can only remain speculative. At the time, the relevant government ministers of the United States and Australia suggested that up to 50 percent of people who set out from the shores of Vietnam never touched land again. If we take this as a reasonable estimate, then in the years from 1975 to 1979 somewhere between 100 and 200,000 people perished.<sup>8</sup> These figures become understandable when one considers that the boats used in the exodus were mostly river and coastal fishing boats totally unsuited to the high seas; moreover, few on board could swim. The masters of international commercial vessels, which like all craft, are duty bound to help boats in distress, learned in the early days of the Vietnamese exodus that if they stopped to save refugees, their own docking could be prevented or delayed by months of red tape by governments unwilling to take responsibility for their human cargo.<sup>9</sup> As this was not a commercially viable option, most large vessels learned to refuse help and keep sailing.

As my host that night continued his story, he told of how his boat had been purchased in early 1981. Authorities were told that it was for river transportation, while preparations at a coastal site were made and bribes paid to local officials. On the night that my informant came down to the coast ready to leave, dozens of locals and relatives of officials were present demanding that they also join the boat. Over 189 people packed onto the tiny vessel as it sailed away from the southern coast under the cover of night, setting sail on the 26 June 1981.

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8 Bruce Grant: *The Boat People* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979) p. 80.

9 The case of the *Silbonga* reflects this. Healey Martin, captain of the British container vessel *Silbonga*, stopped to take 1003 refugees off their dilapidated boat. Authorities in Hong Kong delayed his ship's landing by months: Grant, *The Boat People*, p. 23.

On the fourth day at sea the rudder snapped, and not much later, the motor gave way. There was only a blanket for a sail. Although the rudder had been partly fixed, the small boat drifted aimlessly on the tides for most of the journey. One man started attacking his fellow passengers. He declared there was no god and eventually leapt overboard. After days of drifting, a pall of hopelessness engulfed everyone. A fellow female passenger with a small child became obsessed by a premonition; she was sure that if she did not die the boat would never reach safety. My host said, 'I spoke to her. I tried to tell her that God didn't want anyone dead.'<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, despite all the words of comfort he could offer, she refused to change her opinion. After leaving her child with some of the other women, one night when nobody was watching she leapt to her death.

Food became scarce, drinking water supplies ran out and those on board prayed to the skies for rain. Large boats would loom on the horizon '...like *Quan Am* (the bodhisattva of mercy)';<sup>11</sup> but without mercy, they would sail on. Added to the natural dangers of the sea were the predatory dangers of pirates, mainly Thai fishermen.<sup>12</sup> Accounts amongst the Caodaists of Wiley Park have highlighted the brutality and viciousness of these brigands who would go so far as to pull motors apart looking for gold and so disable working boats quite completely. It is however a sign of the destitute nature of some Vietnamese that, as another Sydney Caodaist recounted, when his boat was stopped by pirates the brigands realised, after an extensive search, how absolutely bereft the refugees were. So much so that they took pity on them and handed over fuel and water, and gave them directions.<sup>13</sup>

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10 Field notes, conversation with Dao Cong Tam, Chippendale, 29 December 1998.

11 Field notes, Dao Cong Tam, 1998.

12 For a general overview see Nhat Tien, Duong Phuc, Vu Thanh Thuy: *Pirates on the Gulf of Siam: Report from the Vietnamese Boat People Living in the Refugee Camp in Songkhla-Thailand* (San Diego: Boat People SOS Committee, 1981).

13 Field notes, conversation with Nguyen Van Tu, Wiley Park, 3 August 1998

Perhaps the question of why so many Vietnamese fled their homeland is yet to be adequately documented and real answers may not be found until the archives of the communist government of Vietnam are made fully accessible. Certainly, it was in the government's economic interest to tacitly encourage the exodus. As Kolko has shown, the communists were seriously unprepared for the peace of 1975.<sup>14</sup> Since that day, communist economic policies coupled with famine, corruption, and the economic strain of international sanctions imposed on Vietnam during its invasion and occupation of Cambodia removed any chance of prosperity. These factors have ensured that Vietnam remains one of the poorest nations of Asia.<sup>15</sup>

Radio broadcasts on the BBC World Service, Radio Australia and Voice of America made clear the advantages of life in a free and prosperous society. These broadcasts also reported on the number of boat people being accepted into Western nations.<sup>16</sup> So the radio offered two very important hopes. Caodaists had these and two additional reasons for wishing to flee. The first was the problem of religious persecution and the second was the fact that after the religion's own militia was incorporated into the southern republican army, many Caodaists were in some way officially involved in the war effort. Ex-soldiers, particularly officers, were constantly being rounded up for 're-education' by the new government. By the late 1970s it was becoming clear that even 're-education' was no easy path towards integration into the new society; those connected with the old southern war machine were treated as *personae non gratia*. Moreover, their children would find it impossible to access the same vocational opportunities that those Vietnamese more closely connected to the party would take for granted.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, writers

such as Bruce Grant list a number of reasons as to why the exit of such politically and religiously 'suspect' people would be beneficial to the communists. Grant himself tends to believe that amongst the Vietnamese, the exodus was tacitly encouraged by a government that did not want to have to deal with dissidents at such a chaotic time. Certainly, the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam were made to suffer from special policies of relocation; for them, escape was sometimes the only option possible.<sup>18</sup>

Although the boat of my host that night eventually arrived safely on land after ten days at sea, it was to be another twenty months before he made it to Australia. Nevertheless it was an arrival that can be understood as a 'miracle' of sorts.<sup>19</sup> While in camp in the Philippines, together with the help of other Caodaists, Buddhists and Catholics he built a temporary Caodaist temple, completed on 24 December 1981.<sup>20</sup> His photograph album shows a bamboo and driftwood building with many camp inmates lined up proudly in front. On the lower level was an office whilst above was perched a small worshipping space. When people climbed to the second story and bowed to God the whole structure swayed precariously.<sup>21</sup>

## Rediscovering Home

Travelling amongst Caodaist communities in the United States, it is not difficult to find adepts who exited on planes before the cessation of the US stage of the war in 1973 or via helicopter and warship with the last of the Americans in 1975.<sup>22</sup> Some of these adepts had the chance to leave on their own terms and, although

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14 Gabriel Kolko, *Vietnam: Anatomy of a Peace* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

15 Kolko, *Vietnam*, p.87.

16 Grant, *The Boat People*, p.13.

17 Field notes, conversation with Mr Si, Washington D. C., 10 July 1998.

18 Grant, *The Boat People*, *passim*.

19 Conversation with Dao Cong Tam, field notes, Chippendale, 29 December 1998.

20 Field notes, Dao Cong Tam, 1998

21 Field notes, Dao Cong Tam, 1998

22 Field notes 23 July to 3 August 1999, speaking with Caodaists in Washington, Louisiana, Montreal, California and Seattle.

resettlement under any circumstances is a difficult experience, these Caodaists often had the advantage of high English-language skills, and occasionally, Western qualifications, especially those who had travelled overseas as part of the Colombo Plan. The Australian story is quite different. As Nguyen Cam has noted,

...many highly placed and highly educated Vietnamese had received their education in France or the U.S. and therefore most of them and their extended family preferred to settle in these two countries. Canada is also a preferred destination as it enjoys the double advantages of being close to the U.S. and offering the possibility of using the French language. I am afraid that Australia [for resettling] is very much a fourth choice.<sup>23</sup>

For some who escaped, getting settled was a matter of months: for others leaving Vietnam was only the first stage on a long journey of displacement and angst. Some were forced to return to Vietnam and to start all over again.<sup>24</sup> Between 1975 and 1996 Australian Commonwealth figures suggest that approximately 1.2 million Vietnamese and Laotians landed in South-East Asian countries and a million of these were accepted as citizens by other countries with another 500,000 migrating under orderly departure programs during the same period.<sup>25</sup>

Caodaists could claim refugee status on the grounds of political or religious persecution and, at a time when, during the latter half of the 1970s, the Holy See had been closed<sup>26</sup> and up to forty adepts executed, religious grounds made a

good case.<sup>27</sup> Other Caodaists choose to seek asylum in Australia for political reasons; this was certainly the case for those who had served in the army. For example, one Sydney Caodaist was a captain in the southern army attached to the computer department of the prime minister's office in Saigon.<sup>28</sup> When he was captured he was regarded as a particularly high-status prisoner. He was interned in a 're-education camp' for three years and forced to shift lumber and carry out other heavy duties. He regretted that the new authorities in the south chose not to utilise his expertise but to simply lock him up. In the early 1980s he was able to escape. Setting off on 18 June 1981 by boat he landed on a oil rig off the coast of Indonesia and was placed in a refugee camp nearby. His acceptance into Australia was accelerated because of his high-level computer skills.<sup>29</sup>

In the transit camps, interviews would take place between those who had been interned and officials from the various governments offering sanctuary. Perhaps what is most shocking about these accounts is the lack of any real knowledge the Vietnamese had about Australia. Rumours would sweep through camps such as 'The Americans are only taking individuals' or 'Australia is looking for families.'<sup>30</sup> These rumours would play a part in the often arbitrary method by which people were assigned to their future life. Although a number of women also became boat people, I have noted that amongst the Caodaists of Sydney, it was more common for men to escape by boat.<sup>31</sup> Research shows that of eighty people questioned at the temple, sixty-three left by boat and forty-nine of these were men. Once they were established in a new host country they would ask, under family

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23 Nguyen Cam: 'Barriers to Communication Between Vietnamese and Non-Vietnamese' in *Vietnamese Studies in a Multicultural World* ed. Nguyen Xuan Thu (Melbourne: Vietnamese Language and Culture Publications, 1994) p. 69.

24 Interview with Caodaist Adept 29 March 1999.

25 Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs Fact Sheet. 31 October 1996.

26 Conversation with, name withheld, Tay Ninh, 22 June 1997.

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27 Blagov, *Caodaism*, pp.151-152.

28 Field notes, conversation with Nguyen Chanh Giao, 23 August 2001.

29 Field notes, Nguyen Chanh Giao, 2001.

30 Field notes, Dao Cong Tam, 1998

31 This was the case with Nguyen Chanh Giao and his family, as it was for Nguyen Thanh Nghiep and his.

reunion programs and other such devices, for their wives and children to join them. While this process was taking place, families could be separated for years. If we add to this the time many men spent in communist re-education camps, some Cao daist families in Sydney had been separated for over ten years.

## Arrival

The entry of Vietnamese refugees played into a very old debate in Australia concerning this nation's homogeneity. As Viviani writes,

The clash in values for Australians involves trying to reconcile three objectives at any one point in time: the need to control who enters Australia, the strongly expressed need to deter people from just turning up by boat on the Australian shoreline and the assessment of our humanitarian obligations, not only in terms of values held by Australians, but in terms of our obligations under international law. It is the political struggle over these three sets of at times conflicting values that explains much of what has happened in Australia's entry policy towards the Indochinese over the last twenty years.<sup>32</sup>

The debate was also influenced by the long history of exclusion that began formally with the introduction of the White Australia Policy, introduced soon after the Australian states federated into nationhood in 1901. This policy was partly driven by deeper anxieties that Australians hold over the vastness of their island nation and its ultimate indefensibility in the face of the peoples of Asia. It was a clearly racist policy and sought to homogenise those peoples apply for entry by means of a language test.<sup>33</sup> It was a policy that attempted to allay Australian fears. It was only officially done away with in

1972 and afterwards a small-scale immigration policy continued to seek, mainly through merit but also occasionally on humanitarian grounds, immigrants to swell the small population of Australia.

Post World War Two policies on immigration and settlement focused on two areas specifically, the first was special labour projects where new arrivals, despite their background, were required to work on developmental projects such as the Snowy River dam scheme.<sup>34</sup> The second area was integration, this included mandatory schooling in English and a focus on 'the Australian way of life.' This policy had changed by the 1970s. The government changed to a focus on assistance and a series of hostels allowed new Australians to live in these halfway houses as they slowly integrated into their new culture if this assistance was required.

The issue over the acceptance of Vietnamese refugees was also affected by Australia's participation in the Vietnamese war until 1972, and by prevailing economic forces. The OPEC oil crisis and other changes to the global demand for primary produce and mineral resources challenged the nation's economy throughout the 1970s and into the early 1980s.<sup>35</sup> The final factor that complicated the debate was that after 1975 some refugee boats made it all the way to the northern shores of the continent. Anxiety builds upon anxiety and we find that although only around 4000 Vietnamese have ever made it to the shores of Australia in the past twenty years, the fear of unannounced arrivals was a potent one.<sup>36</sup> This 'challenge' to national sovereignty, however, was perceived through the media as an invasion of sorts. Of the 151,000 Vietnamese-born Australian nationals in the nation during

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32 Nancy Viviani: *The Indochinese in Australia 1975-1995*, (Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1996). p6.

33 See Myra Willard: *History of the White Australia Policy to 1920*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1967. and *New South Wales Association for Immigration Reform: White Australia – Time for a Change?* (Sydney, n.p., 1963).

34 Lionel Wigmore: *Struggle for the Snowy*, (Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1968).

35 Viviani, *The Indochinese*, p.48: 'It was an unwelcome coincidence, or a failure in public policy, that these two peaks of arrivals [i.e. between 1979–1982 and 1990–1992] should occur when Australia was experiencing the two deepest recessions since the Depression of the 1930s.'

36 Viviani, *The Indochinese*, p.7.

the 1990s,<sup>37</sup> 55,711 arrived between 1975 and 1982, a figure propelled by policies in Vietnam such as the closing down of private business in 1979 and other economic and political factors. By 1982-3 a small core of Caodaists had already appeared in Sydney most of whom had escaped. In the years following 1989, when the Vietnamese government became more active in preventing flight from its shores, new Australians from Vietnam were mainly sourced from family reunion programs, orderly departure programs with fewer resulting from moves to empty the remaining refugee camps in South East Asia.<sup>38</sup>

By dint of the fact that Sydney is Australia's largest metropolis around 55,000 Vietnamese-born Australians chose to settle in New South Wales.<sup>39</sup> In 1996 this was 3.8 percent of the population of the state of New South Wales, few of these would have settled outside the Sydney metropolitan area.<sup>40</sup> Figures show that the Fairfield local government area contains the most significant number of Vietnamese Australians; that is, about 5000.<sup>41</sup> It is little wonder then, as we will see that Caodaists in their quest to find a place of worship attempt to settle their temple in this area in the western Sydney suburbs. During the 1980s and early 1990s real estate in this area was cheap, and Fairfield was not too far away from the Villawood and Cabramatta immigration hostels also in the western suburbs which were the first port of call for many new Australians.

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37 James E. Coughlan: *Vietnamese Immigrants in Australia: A Socio-Economic Profile of the Ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese Communities in Australia a Decade after the Beginning of Their Long Journey*, (Working Paper, Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations, Griffith University, Brisbane, 1991).

38 Viviani, *The Indochinese*, pp.10 and 48.

39 Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs Fact Sheet, January 1997.

40 Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs Fact Sheet, January 1997.

41 James E. Coughlan, *The Spatial Distribution and Concentration of Australia's Three Indochinese-Born Communities, 1976-86* (Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations, *Australia-Asia Papers*, no. 44, 1989) pp. 15-18.

As housing could be easily found in the nearby town of Cabramatta (still within the Fairfield area) this has become today the most readily recognised 'Vietnamese' area; Bankstown a south-western suburb has also become a major suburb for Vietnamese, as has Marrickville<sup>42</sup> (inner south west). Certainly, in the case of Bankstown, the older shopping district (near the railway station) had been deserted, with the social and commercial life of the area shifting to the vast shopping complex constructed on the north side of the train station. The empty shops and deserted former main street to the south was revived by the establishment of a Vietnamese shopping precinct that, along with Cabramatta, has become one of the two commercial and communal hearts of Vietnamese-Australian social activity in Sydney. These areas became even more attractive as fellow nationalists moved in and the various sub-communities of the Vietnamese in Australia began to develop. At this time, the sort of familiarity that a Vietnamese sub-community could offer was vitally important, not only for comfort, but also as an aid to greater socialisation within the Australian community.

For most of those who landed at Sydney airport there was little in the way of welcome. Occasionally the St Vincent de Paul Society, a Catholic charity organisation, would bring clothes down to the plane, and hand out pocket money, and there was some help from the Australia-Indochina Association, but settling amidst the economic down-turn of the late seventies and early eighties proved a difficult task.<sup>43</sup> Added to these troubles were the institutional stupidities of Australian business. David Landa, former Chief Magistrate of the Local Court of NSW, was at the time both a solicitor and President of the Australia-Indochina Association. He tells of how he approached a number of banking companies, imploring

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42 This suburb has a reputation amongst Vietnamese Australians as being more dominated by Northern Vietnamese.

43 Field notes, interview with David Landa, Local Magistrates Court, Sydney, 27 May 1998

them to hire Vietnamese staff. 'The branch that employed one Vietnamese person', he stressed, 'would have developed immediate links with the community and increased its customer base significantly, but in those years no one would listen to these sorts of arguments.'<sup>44</sup>

Finding work was a constant source of worry.<sup>45</sup> Highly qualified teachers, nurses and high-ranking military personnel, reborn into a humble new life as unqualified process workers, would walk the industrial areas of Western Sydney seeking any sort of manual labour. New Vietnamese Australians developed an almost instant reputation for diligence and hard work, but often this made them hated by less recent Australians. However for most new arrivals, finding work and building a new life was part of the therapy that soothed the tragedy of defeat and the sheer terror of escape. The other factor was togetherness or *communitas*. In terms of dealing with the immediate past, the early years of arrival were spent talking about the war, talking about the old Vietnam, discussing Vietnam under the new regime and assessing the possibility for change. This 'talking-out' of events was also a serious part of the healing process. Establishing the Association of the Vietnamese in Australia also helped in settling its members, providing welfare, comfort and further opportunities for togetherness. Within this large and diverse community were the various religious groups also offering an ever-deeper sense of comfort.

With numerous protestant movements breaking up the non-Catholic Christian population of New South Wales, Catholicism had, by the 1990s, become the most significant single religious organization in Australia. It was backed by a century and a half of Irish-Australian activity and a smaller and newer Italian-Australian presence. There was already a substantial infrastructure of churches, schools, universities, charity bodies

and other services on the ground to help those Vietnamese who were Catholic.<sup>46</sup> Buddhist Vietnamese had to work a little harder to establish temples, often needing to put up a good show against local councils and residents often concerned about having this religion of peace and enlightenment in their neighbourhood.<sup>47</sup> Australian Vietnamese Buddhists were greatly aided by local Buddhists and the presence of a number of highly respected monks who were able to migrate to Australia and serve as anchors for the growing congregations.<sup>48</sup> The Theosophical Society in Sydney had fostered Buddhism's growth in Australia from before World War I and from 1951, Buddhist organisations had been established.<sup>49</sup> Decades

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46 Many of whom had fled the north after the division of the nation in 1954, and then found they needed to flee communism a second time. Parishes such as St Brendan's in Bankstown found themselves revitalised in the wake of Vietnamese immigration during the 1980s.

47 One bizarre example of such a battle was the attempt to erect a building by Buddhists in Blackheath to the west of Sydney in 1974. The local council stopped the application on noise pollution grounds. Given that what was proposed was a meditation retreat, we can see a level of absurdity sneaking into public debate. It is a demonstration, we might say, of the 'thinking of the times'. However, things have failed to improve. An application to erect a temple in Melbourne on the site of a disused industrial waste dump in a non-residential area was vigorously opposed by the council and local residents.

Author: So they would rather have industrial waste than the Buddha?

Thich Phuoc Tan: (laughing) Yes! (Field notes, conversation with Thich Phuoc Tan, 13 January 2002).

For further examples see also my 'Performing Multiculturalism: Three South Asian Communities in Sydney' in *South Asians in the Diaspora: History and Religious Traditions* (Pratap Kumar, ed. Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2004) pp. 433–453..

48 For example Thich Bao Lac, who was studying in Japan when Saigon fell, was able to come to Australia in the late 1970s and establish [Phap Bao] pagoda in Edensor Road Bonnyrigg. Field notes, conversation with Thich Bao Lac, Bonnyrigg, 17 February 2002.

49 See Paul Croucher: *A History of Buddhism in Australia 1848-1988*, (Kensington, University of New South Wales Press, 1989).

44 Field notes, David Landa, 1998.

45 In 1990 the national rate of unemployment within the Vietnamese community was 37.9 percent, from Vo Minh Cuong: *No Jobs Available* (Unpublished master's thesis, University of New South Wales, 1995) p.18.



later, members of these organisations were able to help newly-arrived Vietnamese Buddhists in their settlement. Members of these bodies were also able to help with negotiations with councils and other government bodies when temples needed building. Buddhism is currently one of Australia's fastest growing faiths though its numbers are not much over 1 percent of the population at this stage.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, Buddhism is entering the national consciousness in a strong way.

I note these fact because unlike Buddhists and Catholics, the Caodaists had literally nothing; no infrastructure and no recognition. They had landed in a country that was in total ignorance of their faith. It is surprising, but also understandable, that very few priests or high dignitaries of the religion ever chose to leave Vietnam.<sup>51</sup> We know that there were rules requiring residence in Tay Ninh for dignitaries of the rank Giao Su and upwards.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, one divine message that says 'Tay Ninh is everything,'<sup>53</sup> underpinning the idea that the Holy See is a divinely chosen as the portal between this world and heaven, means that the Holy See is the seat of divine communications; a place where a heightened religiosity brings the words of heaven to the pens of many. Certainly, staying close to the 'holy land' of Tay Ninh would have been a significant incentive to remain behind for those holding religious office.

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50 In the 2001 Census 357,814 Buddhists lived in Australia out of a total population of about 20 million. 'In New South Wales, Buddhists live mainly in the Fairfield, Bankstown and Canterbury areas.' [www.immi.gov.au/multicultural/australian/multikit/religion.pdf](http://www.immi.gov.au/multicultural/australian/multikit/religion.pdf)

51 One adept in Sydney tells the story of how a close relative was originally asked to organise a vessel for the evacuation of priests, bishops and other dignitaries. The Bao Dao was secretly guiding plans at the time. For some unknown reason the plan was scrapped. Field notes conversation with Dao Cong Tam, field notes Wiley Park, 22 September 2002.

52 Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do, Divine Messages, message from February, 1927, 78.

53 For a discussion of the religion and its séances see The Sydney Centre for Studies in Religion online or listen to my interview with Noel Debien of The Good Life radio program archived at [www.abc.net.au](http://www.abc.net.au).

And, even if they did escape, members of the Caodaist hierarchy outside Vietnam would have no authority to act on behalf of a religion for its true administration had been suspended. There is however a divine message that seems to see all this, and in fact an encouragement to leave,

From this time forward, your country  
will not be thrice divided.

I hereby unite all of you, my children,  
into one family.

Both South and North will go abroad,  
Holding Me in their hearts as the one  
Truth.<sup>54</sup>

## The Kernel of the Sydney Community

The formation of the Sydney Caodaist Community began at the start of the lunar New Year or Tet in 1983. By then the suburb of Cabramatta had become the most significant focal point for Vietnamese activities in Sydney. It was here on the 13 February 1983 at a New Year celebration that Nguyen Chanh Giao spotted a woman dressed in the distinctive white ao-dai of Caodaist worshippers. He approached Nguyen Thi Mau and asked her about her faith. She was indeed a Caodaist and her and her family of three daughters, granddaughters and a son-in-law would become a strong foundation for the group of believers. Nguyen Chanh Giao himself had recently arrived in Sydney. Soon after New Year he was joined by his son Nguyen Duc Nhan who arrived with his uncle, that is, Nguyen Chanh Giao's younger brother, Nguyen Thanh Nghiep. All three shared a house at 132 Campbell Street, St Peters. This was a rented premises, a three-bedroom suburban home that would become the centre for Caodaist activities in Sydney over the next decade. In fact the house became a transit zone between those who had just arrived and those who had saved enough to put deposits on their own homes. In addition to the Nguyens Bui Dong Phuong and his family also stayed in the house and all helped maintain

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54 Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do, Divine Messages, message from 25/26 Oct 1926, 45.

the small altar situated in the lounge room. Nguyen Van Ban and Nguyen Quan Lu together with those mentioned above would be present at the commissioning of the first Caodaist altar in Sydney on 27 February 1983.<sup>55</sup>

Dao Cong Tam, like many other Sydney Caodaists, had grown up in the environs of the Holy See, arrived in Australia in March 1983. A former teacher of mathematics, he escaped Vietnam after having promised his father to 'spread the Way' wherever he chanced to settle. He left Tay Ninh with a bag full of religious texts which were, unfortunately, stolen soon after he arrived in the Philippines. He had come to Australia with the original intention of settling in Brisbane, a city where he knew some Caodaists to be living. After travelling to Brisbane and being disappointed at the direction Caodaism seemed to be taking there, he returned to Sydney, and through various friends was put in contact with the Nguyens' at St Peters.<sup>56</sup> In August, he moved into the house in Campbell Street with the Nguyens. Though many families would move in and out, using this temple house as a base before settling, Dao Cong Tam, unmarried at the time, remained at the house as a voluntary agent of the faith until 1992 when the altar would be transferred to the new, partly constructed temple in Wiley Park.<sup>57</sup>

The small group, the most active being the Nguyen brothers, Dao Cong Tam and Ngo Minh Chi, started placing notices in shops, libraries and hostels around Sydney and in a short time a group of around thirty Vietnamese Australians began coming to the St Peters house for regular worship. After four months of searching for further co-religionists, on 24 July 1983 the altar at St Peters was rededicated and expanded and a committee meeting constituted the first official Caodaist organization in Australia. The house

then became the official worshipping place and office of the Caodaist Community of Australia. The small size of the group meant that the sectarian divisions of Caodaism, which grew to be extensive in Vietnam,<sup>58</sup> were easily ignored in the new setting. The group that formed in Sydney was intended to exist as a Caodaist Association open to all Caodaists regardless of what sect of the faith they had hitherto been associated. As the community continued to grow over the next decade, this ideal would prove a hard standard to maintain.

In the years following the establishment of the altar, the Sydney Caodaists continued seeking out their co-religionists and slowly building the community. SBS radio broadcasts and community newspapers<sup>59</sup> often proved the best mediums for transmitting news of Caodaist activities. Slowly, and often with the aid of Caodaists in Sydney, Caodaist communities were established in many state capitals. For example in 1984 both Nguyen Chanh Giao and Dao Cong Tam went to Perth to help establish an altar in that city. This took place on 4 June 1984. Subsequently, the Caodaist Association of Western Australia was established. Caodaists in Melbourne officially installed an altar and incorporated themselves as a society on 10 September 1984.<sup>60</sup> It was not long before these state associations federated into the Caodaist Association of Australia. The most radical aspect of this move was that the new group would be welcoming of all Caodaists despite their sect affiliations back in Vietnam. This new national grouping would be supported by a series of national conventions in which Sydney Caodaists would play a major role.<sup>61</sup>

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55 Minutes of the Caodaist Association of New South Wales, 27 and 28 February 1983.

56 In fact Nguyen Chanh Giao and Nguyen Thanh Nghiep had heard of Dao Cong Tam's arrival and went looking for him at his hostel at Kensington while he was away. Field notes, Dao Cong Tam, 1998

57 Field notes, Dao Cong Tam, 1998.

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58 Victor Oliver: *Caodai Spiritism*, (Leiden, Brill, 1975) p.85 ff.

59 Since the mid-1980s there have been at least three daily newspapers produced in Vietnamese in the Sydney area.

60 As a result the Sydney-based 'Caodaist Association of Australia' was renamed 'The Caodaist Association of New South Wales'.

61 They were: Melbourne 1984, Sydney 1985, Perth 1986, Melbourne 1987, Sydney 1989 and Perth 1991.

One of the more successful conventions was the fifth held at the Women's College at the University of Sydney on 28 December 1989. This conference did much to introduce Caodaism to the Australian scholarly community. Professors Eric J. Sharpe and Garry W. Trompf of the Department of Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney both accepted invitations to speak.

From these basic beginnings and unceasing activity, the Caodaists of Sydney continued to develop. As the premier city of Australia, Sydney attracts significant numbers of settlers. A large Vietnamese gathering also meant a larger than usual contingent of Caodaists. Thus Sydney became the largest and most active group in Australia. In fact, the Caodaist community that grew from those thirty-odd core worshippers of 1984 would go on to become the most active groups of all the newly relocated Caodaist communities and the first to complete a purpose-built Caodaist temple outside Asia.<sup>62</sup> The story of the temple's construction is similarly important. Although the Caodaists had built up the confidence to start dealing with government agencies and various community groups selling land, many years would pass before the land was purchased in Wiley Park and building started and I have covered this elsewhere.<sup>63</sup>

### Towards a More Familiar Space

Throughout the 1980s the house at Campbell Street was the main focus of Caodaist activity and worship and yet it remained a rented domestic dwelling. In the mid 1980s adepts

such as Nguyen Chanh Giao and Nguyen Thanh Nghiep had succeeded in bringing their wives and children to Australia and had moved out of the house leaving the bedroom free for other new arrivals. During the mid 1980s the congregation continued to swell. Discussion naturally turned towards establishing a place that was more permanent than the rented establishment at St Peters.

In Vietnam, the development of a Caodaist temple would have been handled more systematically. For a temple to be built under the aegis of the Tay Ninh branch, a temple-less community must be able to affirm that it has 500 adepts or more willing to support presently, and in the future, the demands of the upkeep of a temple. After an initial application is made to Tay Ninh to this effect, members of the hierarchy travel to the area concerned and check that these claims are indeed true. Once approval is granted specialised craftsmen are assigned to the planning and construction of the building. Until Caodaists in a particular area can build a temple they use spaces called *van phongs*, that is, rented homes or offices. Nevertheless, there is always a propensity for communities to want a temple. Oliver writes:

It is essential for congregations to build quickly a temple because twice a month, at least, adepts are required to go to the nearest temple for worship. All followers are required to worship at least once a day before an altar dedicated to Cao Dai. This may be fulfilled by establishing an altar (*thuong tuong*) in the home for daily worship. The bi-monthly services are a means of unifying the local congregation. Where congregations have no temple, they must journey (within reason) to the nearest village with a Caodai temple for these bi-monthly rituals.<sup>64</sup>

Of course in a continent free from a single Caodaist temple, this last option could not be considered. As the 1990s approached, however, Caodaists in Sydney were feeling more secure about their future. Many were starting to pay

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62 A splendid Caodaist temple in Montreal opened earlier than the one in Sydney, in 1993. This was not purpose-built but, remarkably, fashioned into a temple from what was once a Jewish synagogue. The United States companion to the Sydney Temple is being constructed in Louisiana; other building-specific temples are also currently under construction in California and Texas. Within Asia Caodaist temples have appeared as far afield as Cambodia and Japan.

63 Christopher Hartney, 'Open Temple, Open Eyes: Viewing Caodaism', *Australian Religious Studies Review*, vol. 16, no. 1, Autumn 2003, pp. 37–48

64. Oliver, *Caodai Spiritism*, p. 61.

off their houses, their children were getting older and there was more time for the religious aspects of life. In the first instance some in the community suggested that the property at 132 Campbell Street be purchased. They argued that if a temple needed to be built, even if it was not to be on the Campbell Street site, the property would act as an asset for the financing of other building work. What upset these plans was the rumour that the house was part of a government road extension. The Caodaist Association archives show that the community was in correspondence with the Department of Main Roads on this issue.<sup>65</sup> The reply was disappointing. Dated August 1986, a departmental letter explained that no date for development on the site had been set, however reclamation of the property and roadwork on the site would commence '...in five to ten years.'<sup>66</sup>

Nevertheless some members of the community continued to talk of buying the St Peter's house.<sup>67</sup> Not only did it serve as a place of worship, but it also acted as a half-way house and sometimes a permanent residence for Caodaists. Even if the road development did go through, Nguyen Thanh Nghiep explained the site could still be used for many years and the compensation paid by the Government if the land was reclaimed could go to purchasing a new site. 'This is very different from Vietnam', said Dao Cong Tam. 'If the Government wants to put a road through in Vietnam—tough luck—move on!'<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusions

Once the exodus from Vietnam post-1975 had demonstrated that the Vietnamese refugee

issue was a serious one, nations such as Australia began accepting new citizens from Vietnam at a time when our economy was generally depressed. Struggling to get work and learn English was, of course, amongst the main priorities for those who had arrived. Villawood, in its mode as an unfenced hostel, was a vital starting point for many Vietnamese Australians, but I hope this paper has shown that community is perhaps the most vitally important issue in the process of resettlement. Vietnamese arrivals were eager to meet with those compatriots who had arrived before them. This is perhaps the most inhumane aspect of our current immigration system. Detention removes people from community, increases homesickness, prevents *communitas*, increases confusion and denies collective religious worship. The house at St Peters that Caodaists initially used as a dwelling became a meeting place and also an integration halfway house for those who came after the initial adepts. This demonstrates why, despite the plans of the Department of Main Roads to demolish the house, Caodaists still spoke of purchasing it. Moreover, from their base in the rented house in St Peters the small Caodaist community was attempting to establish some sort of presence against the backdrop of the Vietnamese community in Australia and multicultural Sydney. By all means possible, contacts with the Vietnamese in Australia (including old national celebrations such as Tet), Australian and overseas multicultural radio, local Vietnamese newspapers and radio, and by using contacts in immigration hostels, the first adepts to land in Australia were able to start their small community. After a period of establishment and work, that community developed enough confidence to start seeking for a more permanent place. Firstly this was expressed in the urge to buy the house at St Peters, but then continued on to the exploration of many other possibilities. Finally through accidental contacts rather than precise and fair governmental systems, the community were granted the privilege of being able to purchase excess state government land

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65 Temple documents from 1983 to the present are stored in a series of unmarked folders at the Wiley Park temple in chronological order. Reference to these archives will be listed thus: Temple Archives, followed by the date of the correspondence (rather than, unless indicated, the date the correspondence was received).

66 Temple Archives, 12 August 1986.

67 Field notes, Dao Cong Tam, 1998

68 Field notes, Dao Cong Tam, 1998

for their temple.<sup>69</sup> In all these processes, the focus seems to be on re-affirming Vietnamese culture, but it is not. The sub-community of Cao daists helped its members make themselves more, not less Australian, as the community helped its members become more functional in our society.

The line between what people take to be 'Australian,' and that which is not, is being constantly negotiated in and around the neighbourhoods of Sydney, and the appearance

of a temple so starkly new to the Australian scene is something that can create fear because at first glance it seems so other. The Cao daist temple of New South Wales, in this instance, again shows how the Australian community accepts, sometimes with ease, occasionally with resistance, a completely new and unknown phenomenon. More to the point, the history of the development of this building and its community highlights the adjustments and sacrifices made by a small group of people as they settle into Australian society and work together to become Australian. The building itself is a beautiful demonstration of a Vietnamese 'homespace' through its art and decoration. Within its doors lay a story of assimilation, however, on that we should keep in mind as we continue to address our policies and attitudes towards new and potentially new Australians.

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69 The Lord Murugan Temple, a Siva Manram near Parramatta in Sydney is built on an impressive piece of excess land which is sited between two main road developments. On asking how this land was acquired I was informed that a number of Hindu community members worked for the Roads and Traffic Authority—certainly a much sounder connection than that available to the Cao daists. See Hartney, 'Performing Multiculturalism: South Asian Communities in Sydney' p. 440.



The Cao dai Temple of NSW 118 King Georges Road Wiley Park. (Photo: Mr Dao Cong Tam)