

## SOJOURN Symposium

**On *The Divine Eye and the Diaspora: Vietnamese Syncretism Becomes Transpacific Caodaism*. By Janet A. Hoskins. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2015.**

Review essays by Hue-Tam Ho Tai and Justin McDaniel, with a response from Janet A. Hoskins

**Keywords:** Đạo Cao Đài/Caodaism, diaspora studies, Vietnam, syncretism, dialogic ethnography, religious studies, historiography.

### Review Essay I: Hue-Tam Ho Tai

Nearly a century after its founding, Cao Đài or Caodaism deserves to be given the serious scholarly treatment that it receives in this monograph by Janet Hoskins. She writes of it as a religion rather than a sect, much less a “politico-religious sect” — as it used to be labelled — or a Disney-esque spectacle and tourist attraction. *The Divine Eye and the Diaspora* is meticulously researched, richly detailed and engagingly written, making accessible to Angolophone readers the world of Cao Đài believers overseas and in Vietnam. Hoskins’s deeply sympathetic portrayal is especially welcome, given the complexity of Cao Đài religion and the misunderstandings to which its equally complicated history has given rise. For the purpose of this *SOJOURN* Symposium, I will not engage in a full review of the book or indeed of Cao Đài as an historical phenomenon or religious movement. Instead, I will offer a number of comments and raise a few questions as catalysts for further discussion.

As the title of the book under discussion hints, it focuses on two main themes: the history, beliefs and practices of Cao Đài and

diaspora as an important dimension of Cao Đài today. To these themes I would like to add narrative as strategy and product.

Janet Hoskins has written a number of excellent monographs and articles based on her research in Indonesia, including the Benda prize-winning *The Play of Time* (1993). The *Divine Eye and the Diaspora* shares some of the characteristics of her Indonesian work, namely an interest in religious beliefs and practices, in biography and life histories and in material objects that encapsulate lives. I was particularly reminded of her chapter “Who Owns a Life History? Scholars and Family Members in Dialogue”, which appeared in *Southeast Asian Lives* (Waterson 2007). In that chapter, Hoskins described the different sources, both written and oral, that she employed for her doctoral dissertation, the resulting dialogue with the son of the man she profiled — who objected to her portrayal of his father — and his own production of an account of his father’s life to be performed rather than written. That chapter, as well as other works by Hoskins, highlight the dialogic nature of ethnographic research and the construction and reception of the narrative(s) resulting from this research.

The ethnographic process is highly dependent on sources that are rooted in specific times and places as well as in the circumstances in which they are produced and performed. The entry point for the author of the narrative into his or her research is noteworthy. The biographical approach favoured by Hoskins yields fascinating insights into the life stories and in particular into the inner world of her informants, but it also has its limits. As Hoskins notes, “the stories we tell ourselves about our lives are structured by a search for coherence” (Hoskins 2015, p. 143). This observation holds even truer for stories that we tell about ourselves to others, especially those who do not inhabit the same cultural universe. On top of the narratives that informants shared with Hoskins is Hoskins’s own narrative; translation adds another layer of complexity.

Hoskins’s interest in Cao Đài was stimulated by her encounter with Vietnamese people in California. Only later did she travel to Vietnam and meet with Cao Đài believers there. I believe that this is crucial

to understanding the emphasis that Hoskins puts on certain themes in her book. For instance, had Hoskins entered the world of Cao Đài in Vietnam rather than California, would the theme of diaspora have been as important to her study? How much do Cao Đài believers in Vietnam follow what happens in Cao Đài communities overseas? To be sure, as Hoskins notes, the Internet provides unprecedented access to information and facilitates long-distance contact among diverse communities of believers. But, whereas overseas communities must constantly refer to the “mother church”, it is not clear how much the home community is affected by developments overseas. Hoskins’s informants are situated in a particular place and time; all seem highly educated and Westernized. They are good interpreters of Cao Đài to a non-Vietnamese ethnographer and her readers. But are they equally good representatives of ordinary Cao Đài adepts, whether in Vietnam or abroad?

Hoskins recreates to wonderful effect the cultural milieu of the 1920s, when spiritism was popular in interwar Europe and the Cao Đài founders were attending French or Franco-Annamite schools in which Victor Hugo was on the curriculum. Yet, in the admittedly somewhat skimpy research that I conducted on Cao Đài nearly fifty years ago as an undergraduate, Victor Hugo was deployed more as validation for Cao Đài spiritism than as a major figure in the Cao Đài pantheon. I cannot help but wonder, then, whether his current importance is an effect of the Westernized educations of Hoskins’s informants; their location in the United States and France; and/or their eagerness to find common cultural ground with an American anthropologist.

Hoskins is not the first scholar to point out the quest for equivalence with the West on the part of Vietnamese in the first decades of the twentieth century. In fact, this quest was common in Asia and was a hallmark of the Buddhist revival of the 1930s. One common belief was that Western superiority could be found in the highly organized nature of the Catholic Church. It is no surprise then that Cao Đài sought to build a similar religious structure, whose three parts not only reflected the symbolically charged number “three” but

could also accommodate the different components of the traditional Three Teachings whose dignitaries wore the appropriate colors — red for Confucianism, blue for Taoism and yellow for Buddhism. The elaborate ceremonies conducted in the Tây Ninh Holy See find their echo in the splendid liturgy of Catholicism.

The spread of Cao Đài overseas has made the quest for adaptation to a Western milieu more urgent for its practitioners. At the same time, it is happening in an era of religious pluralism and the worldwide (re)turn to religiosity. This makes it possible for its leading voices to be both committed as scientists and open in their devotion to Cao Đài in a way that would have been surprising fifty years ago, when the belief that modernity would lead to secularism was prevalent. One sees a parallel with Falun Gong, which attracts scores of scientists and engineers at top American universities.

Hoskins correctly identifies two main strands of Caodaism, one that is more contemplative, the esoteric strand; and one that is more invested in institutions, rituals and social engagement, the exoteric strand. The first, associated with Ngô Văn Chiêu, focuses on spiritism and self-cultivation; the second strand is associated with Phạm Công Tắc and the Holy See in Tây Ninh.

One may assume that the practice of Cao Đài in California or France is significantly different from that in Vietnam. Is the centrality of spirit séances in Cao Đài as practised in California and other overseas locations a result of the evolution of this religion over time; of the need to avoid the hostile gaze of the state after 1975, and thus to de-emphasize public performance of elaborate rituals and retreat into the private in Vietnam; or of the personal inclinations of Hoskins's informants and/or of their location outside Vietnam? That location may make it difficult to replicate Cao Đài's elaborate institutional structure and equally elaborate liturgy. Since the economic reforms of the 1990s, the Holy See in Tây Ninh has been renovated, and visitors today can witness the elaborate rituals that have made the Holy See a major tourist attraction.

Hoskins rightly points out that Vietnamese religion is highly syncretic, whether in the amalgamation known as the Three Teachings

(*tam giáo*) or popular religion, some but not all of which is derived from Chinese popular religion. The syncretism of Vietnamese religion is reflected in Cao Đài, which emerged in the area of Vietnam that was not only most subject to French influence but also had historically been a multi-ethnic and multicultural region marked by pronounced Khmer and Chinese influences. The multi-ethnic, multicultural origins of Cao Đài can be seen in the biographies of certain of Hoskins's informants. The syncretic nature of Cao Đài made it possible for it to both absorb these influences and to render their origin invisible. Adding Victor Hugo and other non-traditional figures and symbols was just expanding this historical syncretism.

I disagree with Hoskins's characterization of syncretism as seeking "intellectual unity and cohesion by fusing teachings from different times and places that come to coexist in a single locality" (Hoskins 2015, p. 236). Coexistence does not necessarily imply fusion and cohesion; these are more properly the hallmarks of synthesis. The syncretism of Cao Đài, coupled with its co-optation of Western modernity, facilitated its appeal to numerous small sects and thousands of individuals. They could adhere to Cao Đài without abandoning any of their prior beliefs or most of their practices. But it was also this very syncretism that facilitated the subsequent split of Cao Đài into a dozen sects in the early 1930s. While this split certainly reflected personality clashes, it was also the result of the imperfect fusion of disparate elements. It is clear from Hoskins's narrative that Cao Đài remains many things to many different people rather than a single religion with different branches. It may be this characteristic that ensures its longevity in Vietnam and overseas: it is immensely adaptable and welcoming.

Let me now turn to the topic of diaspora. Hoskins does an excellent job in tracing the importance of Cao Đài among Vietnamese who left their country under duress. To that extent Cao Đài is a religion of and in diaspora. But how useful is this concept? Unlike Afro-Brazilian religion, it was not born in and of the diaspora, cut off from its roots both institutionally and theologically. Even in the most difficult circumstances of the two decades after the fall

of Saigon, overseas Caodaists retained links with their homeland and brethren. They had access to their own histories, much of it documented.

What makes Cao Đài diasporic as opposed to transnational or global? Today most Vietnamese migrate of their own free will, for economic opportunities, education<sup>1</sup> or family reasons. Young Vietnamese born in the United States prefer not to call themselves overseas Vietnamese, but hyphenated Americans. These make up the future generation of adepts or potential converts to Cao Đài. Is the diasporic dimension then a short-term feature that will disappear together with the current generation of displaced believers, or will it have a long-term impact on the religion? Like all religions, Cao Đài has evolved since its inception in the 1920s. It will continue to evolve and adapt. It is here to stay.

### Review Essay II: Justin McDaniel

The title for this book is poorly chosen. I expected to be reading a specific study about how Caodaism, a much discussed but little understood new religion from Vietnam, began flourishing in California. I prepared myself for an interesting ethnographic study and nothing more. Instead, I finished this book with an entirely new appreciation for Vietnam's history over the past century. The title should be *The History of Global Caodaism*. Hoskins's book is a tour de force. It is a deep history which incorporates a wide range of primary and secondary sources in Vietnamese, including film and fiction. It is a complex ethnography with photographs, interviews and an intimate portrait of a community that has survived despite emerging from and growing up in one of the most violent places of the twentieth century. It is a well-crafted historiography of the ways in which tourists, scholars, novelists and politicians have depicted — often wrongly — this apparently very odd religion. While I have some problems with the use of the term syncretism and see a missed opportunity to connect this movement to a variety of others in Asia,

this book should be essential reading for students and scholars of modern Vietnam and diaspora studies.

Given my long-term interest in Caodaism and my having visited its major sites in southern Vietnam, I was naturally eager to read this book, but I was pleasantly surprised when I saw how it would appeal to readers far beyond the already intrigued. Hoskins has described Caodaism in its present form at home and abroad and its history better than anyone before. This is a difficult task: despite the small number of its adherents (about four million in total), it has an extremely complex theology, cosmology, ecclesia and ritual calendar. It emerged in an already complex religious context, surrounded by ancestor worshippers, Taoists, numerous Buddhist sects, Catholics, Chinese redemptive societies, spirit mediums, Hindu deities, local heroes, Freemasons and a wide range of Confucian traditions. Hoskins shows in detail how the religion became more complex over time in its symbolism, material culture and influences. “Saints” like Victor Hugo, Muhammad, Rousseau, Dipankara Buddha, Moses, Lao Tzu, Lenin, Jesus Christ, among others, were added to the Jade Emperor, the Immortals and the Queen Mother Goddess. Hoskins is good at guiding readers through this historical growth, and, while the reader might yearn for her to take a break every once in a while to offer a chart of the cosmology and layers of saints, Buddhas, Immortals, “popes” and other administrators, the book reads better as a complex story than as an informational document. Tray table secured; strap yourself in.

Hoskins has a keen ethnographic eye. She has crafted a multisited ethnography by tracing the community of Caodaist faithful not only across many places in Vietnam, but also in California and on the Internet — a “site” that has become in many ways more important than brick and mortar temples. Hoskins guides us from Caodaism’s origins in Tây Ninh and Saigon in the 1920s, through the community’s and its own army’s growth in the 1940s and 1950s, through its struggles during wartime, under communist rule, during the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, and in poor immigrant and refugee neighbourhoods in Garden Grove in California, New Orleans,

Paris and Sydney. Alongside this history she shows how Graham Greene, Virginia Thompson, Paul Mus, Francis Fitzgerald and others depicted Caodaism.

Hoskins's book works very well as both history and ethnography. However, scholars in the field of religious studies might be a bit underwhelmed by one of her two main arguments. Her study of Caodaism in the context of diaspora studies is thorough without being heavy-handed. She clearly has a sophisticated way of understanding the diaspora communities, and draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Lorand Matory, Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, and others, especially in Chapter Seven. She also adds to the field of diaspora studies by describing a community that is a minority, not only in Vietnam but also among Vietnamese immigrant communities. They are twice homeless in a way. However, she never depicts the Cao Đài community as one made up of hapless victims. Many mediums, administrators, ritualists and practitioners are creative survivors. I also found Hoskins's argument that "Caodaism represented a conversion to a kind of modernity, an exercise of individual choice based on reason, careful deliberation, and historical consciousness" (Hoskins 2015, p. 5) convincing. She shows that this was not a "motley set of indigenous practices and superstitions" (*ibid.*), but an ambitious attempt to create an ecclesia and headquarters equal to that of the Vatican, informed by an advanced knowledge of Buddhist and Taoist cosmologies, as well as French Enlightenment thought. However, her functionalist argument that Cao Đài syncretism was a "defensive tactic" is undeveloped (*ibid.*, p. 7).

Hoskins seeks to historicize Cao Đài syncretism, and her evidence supports this historicization. However, she is clearly only reading the history of the term syncretism through the field of anthropology. She seems uninterested in the large body of scholarship on the study of syncretism in the field of religious studies. Even in her single paragraph referring to the study of comparative religion and syncretism, she cites primarily cultural anthropologists, not scholars of religion in Southeast Asia or of religious studies more broadly. In the field of religious studies, sophisticated criticisms of the use



of the term syncretism and advanced work in studies of hybridity, repertoires and complex adaptive systems are many, but Hoskins does not engage with them. This failure seems odd, as her argument about syncretism is one of her two main arguments and as the term appears in the subtitle of the book. One area in which theories of syncretism have flourished is in the study of early Christianity and Second Temple Judaism. The work of Annette Reed and Andrew Jacobs is especially illuminating.<sup>2</sup> These scholars approach syncretism as a process, a conversation and a mutual construction more than as a borrowing or selected appropriation of traits. A comprehensive overview of the history of the term syncretism appears in Leopold and Jensen (2005). Connolly (2005) is also helpful. One of the best examples of the study of a complex historical syncretism in the study of religion is in Standaert (2008). More recently theories of hybridity have come into vogue in the study of religion. There are two major current theories of hybridity, each rooted in the study of literature rather than religion. The first, attributed to Bakhtin, sees a hybrid as a “single utterance” (Bakhtin 1981, esp. Chapter Three) that is produced from the mixing of two or more disparate utterances. The hybrid text speaks in one voice without obviously revealing its hybrid nature. The second theory of hybridity is attributed to Homi Bhabha, who, in his groundbreaking *The Location of Culture* (1991), sees hybridity as a conscious tactic used by colonial subjects when they write from an “interstitial space”. They create a single text which combines local knowledge and a mixture of terms, structures and tropes of the colonizer. Both Bakhtin and Bhabha see hybridity as a positive quality, in contrast to the negative product emerging from purer originals. Both approaches to hybridity are lacking because both reduce the agent, the agent’s expressions and works of art or literature to unified products of diverse influences or parts of victim–victimizer relationships.<sup>3</sup> Morgan (2007) is also a good source, drawing on the study of literature and religion.

Other approaches to syncretism coming out of political science and advanced mathematics are also helpful in the study of complex adaptive systems. Much of this work on complex adaptive systems

first came out of early developments of the interdependent Erdős-Rényi networks and the Sznajd Model. These attempts to map highly complex social interactions and decision-making have influenced everything from polymer studies and percolation theories to the prediction of voting patterns. A study of complex adaptive systems sees agents as part of heterogeneous, dynamic, flexible, process-oriented and ever-changing synchronic and diachronic networks.

Approaches like these would have added some nuance to Hoskins's book and offered new questions in the study of Caodaism. To her credit, Hoskins does draw on Bhabha's work on colonial appropriation in Chapter Seven, but not on hybridity. Here, I believe — especially when she writes, "This is why I feel it is appropriate to describe Caodaism as first a religion of decolonialization" (Hoskins 2015, p. 222) — she missed an opportunity to connect Caodaism to broader syncretic historical moments in other places that were in the process of decolonization or anti-imperial struggle in Southeast Asia, and even in more distant places like East Africa and Korea, at the same time.

Hoskins not only misses an opportunity to speak to a broader audience interested in religion in Asia or global Christianity but she also misses an opportunity to place Caodaism in the context of nineteenth-century spiritualist movements in Russia, France, the United States and India. We learn little about the networks of innovative religious missionaries and intellectuals in East, South and Southeast Asia well-studied by Anne Hansen, Richard Jaffe and Anne Blackburn and newer work by Alicia Turner, Erik Braun, Shawn McHale and Laurence Cox. Nor do we learn about other ecumenical and hybrid religions in Asia, like those started or inspired by Cha Gyeong-seok, Lek Wiriyaphan, Bunluea Surirat, Bahà'u'llàh, Naoria Phullo and others. We learn a great deal about Caodaism in its own context, but not about the wider regional context in which other "syncretic" religions were emerging.

These are relatively minor criticisms, and they really amount to an argument for Hoskins to add more to an already lengthy study. Instead of arguing against what she did not do then, let us celebrate

what she did. She is less concerned with the historical or current debates on syncretism and instead seeks to study Caodaism in its historical context to see how its syncretic mix was a form of historical contingency, opportunity and creativity. That goal is fine, and she accomplishes it very well. What she has done is impressive, and I believe that this book will be seen as the most important scholarly study on Caodaism for many years to come.

### Author's Response: Janet A. Hoskins

It is wonderful to read these generous assessments of my book from two such distinguished scholars, one of Vietnamese history and another of Southeast Asian religion. Caodaism is a fascinating new religion which, however, has been much maligned and misunderstood since its birth in 1926, and so I am glad to see that both scholars favour including it in the category of "religion" and seeking to understand not just its politics but also its doctrines, practices and contemporary challenges.

Hue-Tam Ho Tai begins with a consideration of the dialogic nature of ethnographic research, which I explored in earlier work on Indonesia (Hoskins 1998 and 2007) and which remains an important theme in this study. She notes that my main informants "seem highly educated and Westernized". This is true of the diasporic leaders I followed, but it was also true of the founding leaders of Caodaism. While I would agree that a study of the millions of devout rural practitioners would look quite different, the men and women who determined the course that this new religion would take were all educated and to some extent bicultural. The "paired biographies" that I document show the transmission of religious inspiration from members of the founding generation to diasporic leaders, and the extent to which Cao Đài doctrine and practices emerged from the tensions involved in this "divided consciousness".

While early twentieth-century Vietnamese intellectuals struggled with their love of French literature and their simultaneous hatred of

French domination, the twenty-first-century Caodaists whom I met in California had a similarly ambivalent relationship to American values and imperial policies. Is Victor Hugo “deployed more as validation for Cao Đài syncretism than as a major figure in the Cao Đài pantheon”? Once again, it depends on whom you ask. As noted in the book, Victor Hugo is a significant figure only for the Tây Ninh “mother church” in Vietnam, and not the many smaller branches where the Sino-Vietnamese tradition is more influential. But surely it is important that Caodaism’s greatest military leader, Trần Quang Vinh, and his son Trần Quang Cảnh, the first American citizen to be part of the official Tây Ninh hierarchy, identify as Hugo’s “spiritual son” and “spiritual grandson”? After the French defeat in 1954, Victor Hugo’s spirit remained relatively silent for several decades, but he has reclaimed his place as the “head of the overseas mission” for Caodaists outside of Vietnam in the twenty-first century.

The centrality of spirit séances was characteristic of Caodaism from its earliest days. Today, the fact that this is highlighted more in the diaspora than in Vietnam is not so much a result of the challenges of staging the “elaborate liturgy” overseas but much more a result of the fact that literary spirit séances are banned in Vietnam. While many Caodaists in Vietnam may seem to “acquiesce” to this prohibition (so as not to seem to defy the state openly), it was very clear to me during my research that they saw the return of spirit séances as the ultimate goal of normalization of relations with the state. A religion founded on the principle that its leaders could converse directly with the Jade Emperor is not likely to consent to the permanent silencing of the spirit pen.

Both McDaniel and Tai engage with controversies over the use of the term syncretism, which is central to the book’s analysis. Tai sees syncretism more as “coexisting traditions” than synthesis. This “peaceful coexistence” was characteristic of what I call the “implicit syncretism” of the thousand-year-old “triple religion” (*tam giáo*) in Vietnam, but Cao Đài’s more explicit form of syncretism was innovative in that it made religious mixing something conscious and

the subject of reflection. By re-conceptualizing the triple religion in a clearer hierarchical structure with five levels of spiritual attainment, Caodaists managed to be both “welcoming” and “adaptive” at the same time that they tried to assure that their own dignitaries would maintain some control over the new religious field. Each leader developed his or her own “idiosyncratic”, particular brews of religious inspirations whose lines of transmission I charted from guru to disciple, from father to son, and from grandparent to grandchild.

McDaniel also has some problems with the term syncretism, and sees a missed opportunity to connect this movement to others in Asia, especially as documented by scholars of religion. This would, of course, have required a much longer book, with extensive comparative discussions. But I am inspired by the questions that he asks and will try to engage with several of them now. The Leopold and Jensen reader (2005) and a number of the other works that McDaniel cites engage primarily with theories of Hellenism, and not with very different ways in which Asian traditions have defined or obscured the boundaries around their practices. The kinds of historical evidence that we have from the Hellenistic period are vastly different from the evidence that we can find from the early twentieth century. In looking at Caodaism as a “religion of decolonization”, I think it is vastly more useful to consider the hierarchical re-ordering of religious figures — with Jesus Christ relegated to the third level, below those assigned to Buddhism and Taoism — than to use the currently fashionable but frustratingly vague term “hybrid”. I do make a number of references to other nineteenth-century spiritist movements (Hoskins 2015, pp. 34–37) and to historical studies of related syncretistic movements in early twentieth-century China, like the “New Religion to Save the World” established in 1919, and the now Taiwan-based religions of Daoyuan and Yiguandao. Since Caodaism shares a lineage with Chinese redemptive societies, the different pathways of these movements seemed especially relevant.

The importance of the diaspora is also re-examined by both reviewers. McDaniel suggests that the book should instead be titled *The History of Global Caodaism*. While I wish that such a

history did exist, my own goals were more humble and narrowly ethnographic. More than a decade of conversations with California Caodaists provided the “lived religion” dimension of the study and anchored it in a smaller community. The members of this community have global connections and histories, but they also interact with one another in local contexts. The study of Caodaism provides a wonderful opportunity to interview people who helped to craft a syncretistic religion, who participated in decisions about how to present it to a New World audience, and who are in the process of sorting out its various meanings. The materiality of religion also has to be rethought, in discussions of which architectural elements are “essential” to the design of Cao Đài temples and which can be sacrificed on the altar of Orange County building codes (mandating, for example, that all buildings in residential areas should be a shade of beige). This means that my study has much more in common with branches of religious studies that include ethnography and material religion, and much less with the distinguished but quite different tradition of historical and textual study. As such, it has a closer kinship with McDaniel’s own admirable study *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magic Monk* (2011), which re-interprets Thai Buddhism from the vantage point of a small temple on the periphery of Bangkok.

These methods do, as I acknowledge, privilege a “diasporic perspective” on Caodaism. But this perspective was suggested in the foundational era of the 1920s: even before Cao Đài followers left Vietnam, they were responding to what they called the “loss of their country” — meaning a loss of sovereignty to the French. This “diaspora before diaspora” (Hoskins 2015, pp. 227–29) meant that Caodaism emerged from a sense of dispossession, which was already strong in the early twentieth century and only intensified among refugees who fled overseas after 1975. While comparing the colonial crisis that gave birth to the new religion in the 1920s to the refugee crisis which forced it to find its footing again after 1975, I found many common elements. The long period of repression of Caodaism in Vietnam from 1975 to 1995 also meant that the sources of innovation — spirit séances and political activism —

were suppressed in communist Vietnam, and they have still not been restored in the normalizations of Đổi Mới reforms.

While Caodaism did not come into being in overseas communities, it acquired many of its current characteristics in contexts outside of Vietnam. The first of these was no doubt the appearance of the spirit of Victor Hugo in a spirit séance conducted in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in 1927. Two young civil servants who worked for the French colonial bureaucracy received these messages and later went on to become the prominent leaders Phạm Công Tắc and Trần Quang Vinh. As a “transcolony saint and spiritual advisor” for Vietnamese intellectuals educated in French, Victor Hugo offered a message that criticized French colonial policies as not being true to the humanitarian ideals of the French Republic. In the 1930s, when Hugo was appointed the spiritual head of the overseas mission, the apparatus for a planned global expansion was already set in place.

Does this make Caodaism more “diasporic” than transnational or global? It is certainly all of these, but at the present time its international membership is largely diasporic Vietnamese; it has only a few non-Vietnamese members. Early Caodaists were connected to Francophone networks of Kardecian Spiritists, and these networks remain influential in Brazil, Puerto Rico and some other parts of Latin America — although there has been no direct contact between them and Caodaism since the 1920s and 1930s. Ties to other “new religions” in Japan and Taiwan were reactivated in 2013, as international travel for religious leaders once again became possible. The other syncretistic movements that McDaniel mentions in Korea and Thailand stimulate my desire to do further research on this captivating topic. Caodaism was infused with new life when it faced the challenge of diasporic dispersal, and so I doubt that this aspect of the religion will disappear as it continues to evolve in a globalized world.

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#### SUGGESTED CITATION STYLE

Tai, Hue-Tam Ho, Justin McDaniel, and Janet A. Hoskins. "SOJOURN Symposium on Janet A. Hoskins's *The Divine Eye and the Diaspora: Vietnamese Syncretism Becomes Transpacific Caodaism*". *SOJOURN* 31, no. 3 (2016): 922-38.

#### NOTES

1. Vietnam ranks ninth among countries sending students to the United States.
2. See, particularly, Reed (2008), Jacobs (2004 and 2012).
3. I offer some other approaches to the study of syncretism in religious studies and Southeast Asian studies in McDaniel (2011).

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