



Yiguandao in Vietnam: a Preliminary Exploration

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Abstract

The article introduces important aspects of the history and contemporary situation of the Taiwanese new religious movement Yiguàndào in Vietnam, where it is called Nhất Quán Đạo. Fieldwork was conducted over four years between 2016 and 2020, chiefly among members of the Fāyī Chóngdé (Phát Nhất Sùng Đức) sub-branch in Hồ Chí Minh City, which is the centre of Nhất Quán Đạo activities. A particular focus is put on the legal and socio-political environment in which Nhất Quán Đạo operates.

Keywords

Fayi Chongde – new religious movement – religion – Taiwan – Vietnam – Yiguandao

1 Introduction

On the motorcycle speedily following our guide – a close personal contact and local member of Nhất Quán Đạo (Yiguàndào 一貫道; literally, Way of Pervading Unity; henceforth: NQĐ) – we drove through the meandering backstreets of Hồ Chí Minh City in early 2016 to reach the *Phật đường* (*fótáng* 佛堂; Buddha hall) we were invited to visit. In Vietnam, the Buddha halls (i.e., Yiguàndào temples

and shrines) are usually located in ordinary residential homes without any sign indicating their purpose as a meeting and worship place.¹ After many efforts, this was our first opportunity to visit the Buddha hall and establish more contacts and trust in our informants in order to explore facets of the history and present-day activities of this new religious movement in Vietnam.

This research is largely based on what could be gleaned from some forty semi-structured guided interviews and numerous personal conversations with as well as participant observation among members of Phát Nhất Sùng Đức (Fāyī Chóngdé 發一崇德; Creating Unity and Venerating Virtue) in Hồ Chí Minh City between early 2016 and early 2020.² Phát Nhất Sùng Đức is currently by far the biggest NQĐ group active in Vietnam, and Hồ Chí Minh City is its chief site of operation.³ To the best of our knowledge, the scholarship on the Vietnamese manifestation of Yiguàndào is hitherto limited to one M.A. thesis, “Nhất Quán Đạo – Hiện tượng tôn giáo mới ở thành phố Hồ Chí Minh” (Nhất Quán Đạo: The Phenomenon of a New Religion in Hồ Chí Minh City) by Phạm Thị Bích Ngọc (Phạm 2013), a single sub-chapter published in the edited volume *Tôn Giáo Mới. Nhận Thức và Thực Tế* (New Religions: Perception and Reality) (Trương et al. 2016), a small section in Yiguàndào historian Lín Wànchuān’s 林萬川 book *Yiguàndào gàiyào* 一貫道概要 (An Outline of Yiguàndào) (Mù Yǔ 2002: 167–169),⁴ and a few paragraphs in a 2016 article on “Religious Conversion of the Ethnic Minorities in the South of Vietnam” (Truong 2016: 36–38). The relevant sub-chapter (Trương et al. 2016: 450–524) is based on Phạm 2013 and a fellow M.A. thesis approved at the Vietnam National University–Hồ Chí Minh City – University of Social Sciences and Humanities (*Đại Học Quốc Gia TP. Hồ Chí Minh – Trường Đại Học Khoa Học Xã Hội và Nhân Văn*).⁵ It very tentatively outlines the history and activities of NQĐ in Taiwan and in Hồ Chí Minh City.

The present article adds to a wave of scholarly studies on the international development and presence of Yiguàndào published in the last some

1 NQĐ has no legal status in Vietnam and it has thus no right to perform any “religious” activities in the public space as will be briefly discussed in the next section.

2 This research was possible thanks to the assistance of NQĐ followers in Hồ Chí Minh City and Phnom Penh. In particular, we would like to express our gratitude to *thầy* (Master) Quách (i.e., Guō diǎnchuānshī 郭點傳師) for all the data he shared with us and for his sympathetic support. Our on-site research was concluded due to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3 Taiwanese Fāyī Chóngdé is a sub-branch of the Fāyī cluster within Yiguàndào and one of the largest and internationally most active Yiguàndào groups overall. It reportedly operates in nearly forty countries (Billioud 2020: 19).

4 We would like to thank Nikolas Broy for the information on Lín Wànchuān (Mù Yǔ 慕禹).

5 Phạm 2013 aside, the sub-chapter draws on the M.A. thesis “Nhất Quán Đạo – Một tôn giáo mới ở Đài Loan” (Yiguàndào: A New Religion in Taiwan) by Lương Gia Toàn (Lương 2014).

twenty-five years.⁶ With activities in more than eighty countries worldwide, Yiguandào is one of the most sizeable East Asian new religious movements today. In the following section, we briefly outline the legal and socio-political environment of NQĐ. In Section 3, we trace the historical development of NQĐ, addressing two accounts regarding the establishment of the first Buddha hall in the country. In Section 4, we look into present-day NQĐ, its mode of reception and instruction, as well as its (temporary) Cambodian rallying point.

2 Some Notes on the Legal and Socio-political Context

A turning point in the history of contemporary Vietnam has been *đổi mới* (renovation), which was officially launched in 1986. The subsequent economic and political reforms triggered comprehensive changes also regarding the socio-cultural environment. In the realm of religion, most strikingly, the authorities' attitude vis-à-vis so-called "superstitions" (*mê tín dị đoan*) of old, which were meant to be removed from public life, became less fierce and occasionally even sympathetic (see Bouquet 2010; Lewis 2013; Jammes and Sorrentino 2015).⁷ The generally positive developments notwithstanding, the approach pursued by the government towards the majority of religious communities, especially new religious movements (*tôn giáo mới*), is still very unfavourable, if not to say repressive.⁸ The present-day political discourse keeps branding a substantial portion of (organised) religion as a potential risk to national/social security.

The latest legal document pertaining to religious management is "Decree No. 162,"⁹ formally issued by the government on December 30, 2017, which

6 A panoply of Chinese-language scholarship aside (a range of which is listed in Broy, Reinke, and Clart 2017: 22), see, for example, the English-language articles on Yiguandào in Austria (Broy 2021; Shen 2021); Canada (Clart 2000); Malaysia (Soo 1997); Singapore (Lim 2012); South Africa (Broy 2019); South Korea (Irons and Lee 2022); Thailand (Lin 2023; 2019); the United Kingdom (Yang 2021); and the United States (Broy 2020). On Yiguandào's transnationalism, see Broy 2022 and Soo 2019.

7 A watershed was the Politburo Resolution No. 24-NQ/TW "Enhancing Government Tasks Related to Religions in the New Situation" (*Nghị Quyết Số 24-NQ/TW Tăng cường công tác tôn giáo trong tình hình mới*) of October 16, 1990, through which the Communist Party formally redirected its approach to religion (*tôn giáo*), confirming the significance of beliefs (*tín ngưỡng*) and religion for the populace.

8 Regarding the presence of "new religious phenomena" (*các hiện tượng tôn giáo mới*) in present-day Vietnam, see Nguyễn and Nguyễn 2021.

9 *Nghị Định. Quy định chi tiết một số điều và biện pháp thi hành luật tín ngưỡng, tôn giáo. Số: 162/2017/NĐ-CP* (Regulations Detailing Some Issues and Implementation Measures of the Law on Beliefs and Religion. No. 162/2017/ND-CP). See <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Van-hoa-Xa-hoi/Nghi-dinh-162-2017-ND-CP-huong-dan-Luat-tin-nguon-ton-giao-353702.aspx>. This and all other websites have been last retrieved on October 11, 2023.

took effect from January 1, 2018, replacing the Decree No. 92/2012/ND-CP dated November 8, 2012. It enforces “The Law on Beliefs and Religion. No. 02/2016/QH14” (*Luật tín ngưỡng, tôn giáo. Số: 02/2016/QH14*) sanctioned by the Vietnamese Parliament on November 18, 2016.¹⁰ According to this law, a religious group or community must first apply for a “religious activity registration certificate” (*chứng nhận đăng ký hoạt động tôn giáo đăng ký*). The certificate is granted by the provincial People’s Committee for a community operating in a province and by the Ministry of Home Affairs (*Bộ Nội vụ*) for a group operating on a national scale (cf. Article 22.3 of the Law on Beliefs and Religion). After at least five years of stable and continuous activity, the religious group can apply for official and legal recognition as a religious organisation. During the whole time period, the activities of the group, among others, must not violate “national defence, security, and sovereignty, and order and safety of the social environment” (*quốc phòng, an ninh, chủ quyền quốc gia, trật tự, an toàn xã hội, môi trường*); “harm social morality” and “offend the honour and dignity of others” (*xâm hại đạo đức xã hội ... xúc phạm danh dự, nhân phẩm của người khác*); and should not “prevent implementation of civic rights and duties (*cản trở việc thực hiện quyền và nghĩa vụ công dân*)” (cf. Article 5 of the Law on Beliefs and Religion). This vague wordings as well as other articles of this Law, for example: related to nomination and registration of dignitaries (cf. Article 5, Section 2); the requirement to notify and inform about any religious activities including ceremonies, conferences, publications, educational events, etc. (cf. Article 6); and additionally Article 62 pointing to the demand of “comprehensive/specialist scrutiny of beliefs and religions” (*Thanh tra chuyên ngành về tín ngưỡng, tôn giáo*), render explicit the authorities’ will to have full control over institutionalised religion. Recently, new regulations were also issued regarding the religious activity in cyberspace (cf. Decree No. 14/2022/ND-CP).¹¹

According to our NQĐ informants, in 2008, Phát Nhất Sùng Đức formally contacted the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (*Ban Tôn Giáo Chính Phủ*) in Hà Nội pertaining to the registration of their religious activities. However, they reportedly did not receive any response and thus gave up on this issue. Some ten years later, the group’s leadership decided to hand in an official application for legal status, which was effectively submitted in December 2019 to the Ministry of Home Affairs. However, the group kept a low profile for the followers were afraid that making this public could have a negative impact on

10 See <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Van-hoa-Xa-hoi/Luat-tin-nguong-ton-giao-2016-322934.aspx>.

11 *Nghị định số 14/2022/ND-CP*. See <https://vanban.chinhphu.vn/?pageid=27160&docid=205256>.

the consideration of their application.¹² As of yet, NQĐ has not obtained legal status as a religious organisation in Vietnam. Their 2019 application was either silently rejected or is still under consideration.¹³

Notably, at the regular press conference of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Bộ Ngoại Giao*), on December 15, 2022, deputy spokesperson Phạm Thu Hằng emphasised that Vietnam's consistent policy is to ensure the citizens' human rights and freedom of belief and religion.¹⁴ Presently, there are sixteen "legally recognised religions" and forty-two "religious organisations" (the branches of religions being registered separately).¹⁵ No new group has been included since 2018. Official statements pronounced by government representatives associated with the state security, place NQĐ among religious groups "stained with superstition, contrary to traditional culture, and not permitted by law" (*nhuốm màu mê tín dị đoan, trái với văn hóa truyền thống, không được pháp luật cho phép*) (Lê 2021), belonging to "evil cults' [which] are primitive associations, not qualified to establish a religious organisation" ("*tà đạo*" là những tổ chức sơ khai, không đủ điều kiện để hình thành tổ chức tôn giáo).¹⁶ Similarly, the ANTV – The People's Police Television (*Truyền hình Công an Nhân dân*) – a channel specialised in providing information related to social order and security, warned its viewers to be aware of illegal missionary activities, referring to the case of an "intervention" made by the police in a private home where NQĐ followers gathered in May 2023. The police recommended not to become subject of "illegal preaching" (*truyền đạo trái phép*) which "may even lead to manipulative actions that induce people to participate in activities violating the law" (*thậm chí sẽ dẫn đến hành vi lôi kéo, dụ dỗ người dân tham gia vào các hoạt động vi phạm pháp luật*).¹⁷ On occasion, the Vietnamese press also reports on the "interventions" of government representatives in cases of NQĐ activities. For example, the electronic version of "Reporter" (*Người đưa tin*) reported

12 Personal communication with a Phát Nhất Sùng Đức dignitary, April 2020.

13 According to the 2022 *Report on International Religious Freedom: Vietnam*, religious groups complained that "government agencies sometimes did not respond to registration applications or approval requests for religious activities within the stipulated time period, if at all, and often did not specify reasons for refusals as required by law." See <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/vietnam/>.

14 See <https://btgcp.gov.vn/hoat-dong-quan-he-quoc-te/chinh-sach-nhat-quan-cua-viet-nam-la-bao-dam-quyen-con-nguoi-tu-do-tin-nguong-ton-giao-cua-nguoi-dan-post-wDqGE4NR9l.html>.

15 See General Statistics Office of Vietnam: <https://datacollection.gso.gov.vn/Data/Sites/1/media/huyvq/files/DanhMucTonGiao.pdf>.

16 See <https://sonv.hungyen.gov.vn/portal/Pages/2023-7-28/Cac-hien-tuong-ton-giao-moi-ta-dao-dang-co-xu-huon1qot4.aspx>.

17 See <https://antv.gov.vn/phap-luat-3/canh-giac-hoat-dong-truyen-dao-trai-phap-luat-374-DFAB9B.html>. Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vagHxjQoATo>.

in June 2022: “Authorities of Thừa Thiên-Huế province have just found out and prevented the illegal ‘Nhất Quán Đạo’ group activities in the area” (*Cơ quan chức năng tỉnh Thừa Thiên-Huế vừa phát hiện, ngăn chặn 1 nhóm đối tượng tụ tập sinh hoạt “Nhất quán đạo” trái phép trên địa bàn*). The intervention in the private house resulted in the seizure of “all scriptures and documents as well as metal oil lamps, among them one with the character ‘Buddha’ written in Chinese” (*thu giữ toàn bộ kinh sách, tài liệu; đèn dầu bằng kim loại trong đó có 1 cây có biểu tượng chữ “Phật” viết bằng chữ Hán*).¹⁸ Actually, according to law, religious activities at home are legal. They become illegal when they “disturb” the public or, when they extend into the public space, if the religious group carrying out such activities is not formally recognised. That this is so, one can see, for example, by a calm recent report about the visit of functionaries of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs and local authorities to an NQĐ Buddha hall in Tiền Giang province (Nhật 2023). In general, this reflects the oft-times erratic behaviour one observes by the authorities pertaining to religious matters.

Also worth mentioning are especially the views vis-à-vis NQĐ by the (State-supervised) Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam (*Giáo Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam*) since it wields particular (religious) discursive authority in present-day Vietnam. According to the eminent monk Venerable Thích Nhật Từ (b. 1969), deputy director of the Vietnam Buddhist University (*Học Viện Phật Giáo Việt Nam*) in Hồ Chí Minh City, NQĐ is a movement spreading mostly “superstitions” and lacking right faith. Monks and nuns, and all who follow the true Buddhist teaching, should not let NQĐ influence Vietnamese society. He expressed these views on his official YouTube channel in the video series “Questions and Answers: What is Nhất Quán Đạo?” (*Vấn đáp: Nhất Quán Đạo là gì?*).¹⁹ In an article on the popular Vietnamese Buddhist website *Thư Viện Hoa Sen* (Lotus Library), the question whether NQĐ is Buddhist or not is answered by two monks as follows: “Nhất Quán Đạo is an evil sect [*tà phái*] that uses the name of Buddhism [... It] is not orthodox Buddhism and can never be integrated into Buddhism because of its qualities, mode of practice, and especially its purpose are all different from Buddhism” (Thích and Thích 2018).²⁰

Other religious communities commenting on NQĐ – especially those within the *tam giáo* (*sānjiào* 三教; Three Teachings) spectrum – usually do not explicitly distance themselves from, let alone openly polemise against NQĐ. Their

18 See <https://www.nguoiduatin.vn/ngan-chan-nhom-doi-tuong-tu-tap-sinh-hoat-dao-la-trai-phep-a554997.html>.

19 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SpJfPBkUBao>.

20 *Nhất Quán Đạo là một tà phái mượn danh nghĩa Phật giáo [...] không phải là Phật giáo chính thống và vĩnh viễn không thể hòa nhập vào Phật giáo vì tính chất, thứ bậc tu hành, và nhất là mục đích của chúng đều khác với Phật giáo.*

attitude may be described in the words of the late leader of Minh Lý Đạo (The Path of Enlightened Reason/Perception),²¹ Lâm Lý Hùng (1939–2021): “We consider Nhất Quán Đạo followers and believers of other religions as brothers, real and precious Dharma brothers [*Huynh Đệ trong tình Linh Sơn cốt nhục*] because our common goals are universal brotherhood and peace on earth achievable by self-cultivation and liberation.”²² An interesting interreligious episode with an abrupt end involved a 2013 meeting in Tây Ninh city between followers of Cao Đài’s Tây Ninh denomination and representatives of NQĐ. The meeting was supposedly quite amical, yet it was not repeated, since the Cao Đài dignitaries were subsequently “advised” by government officials to cease contacts with NQĐ.²³

3 Nhất Quán Đạo in Vietnam

One day, while skimming the library of Minh Lý Đạo at Tam Tông Miếu (Temple of the Three Teachings), rather unexpectedly we came across a bound collection of twenty-three short texts in typescript relating to NQĐ. The volume – entitled *Tổ thuật Nho Thích Đạo Nhất-Quán Diệu-Pháp Khai Phổ-Độ. Sư chương Lý Khí Tượng Tam-Thiên Đại-Nhậm Bạt Thu-Viên* (see Figure 1)²⁴ – introduces the life and activities of the Yiguandào founders, namely, Lù Zhongyī 路中一 (1849–1925; Lộ Trung Nhất, emically the seventeenth patriarch) and his successors Zhāng Tiānrán 張天然 (1889–1947; Trương Thiên Nhiên) and Sūn Sùzhēn 孫素真 (1895–1975; Tôn Tuệ Minh). They contain some texts of spirit messages along with the explanation of the Chinese characters in a dictionary style as well as in the form of a Chinese-Vietnamese interlinear text. This is followed by the clarification of various doctrinal tenets, such as the idea of *tam tào phổ độ* (*sāncáo pǔdù* 三曹普渡; literally, all-embracing salvation of the Three Realms). Unfortunately, no one in the Minh Lý Đạo community knew about the origins of the texts, their authorship, and how they ended up in the library collection. The abundant use of Sino-Vietnamese expressions and the writing style suggest that at least some of the writings were originally composed before 1975

21 A new religious community founded in 1924 in Sài Gòn with an estimated present-day membership of some one thousand individuals. Their doctrine and life praxis are based on the Three Teachings with a focus on meditation (cf. Jammes 2010).

22 Personal conversation with Lâm Lý Hùng, February 2020.

23 Personal conversation with Hội Thánh Cao Đài Tòa Thánh Tây Ninh officials, May 2015.

24 English title: “The Patriarchs Say: Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism are Consistent, Marvellous Dharma Paves the Way for All-Embracing Salvation. The Masters Add: True Nature, Vital Energy, Essence, the Three Components, Great Gestation Conducting to Full Fruit.”

and then typed again. The texts represent most likely a basic introduction to NQĐ compiled for a Vietnamese audience. Presumably, these texts originated among the *Hoa* (i.e., Chinese-Vietnamese) community that started to settle in Vietnam since the eighteenth century, with larger numbers arriving especially after 1860 and up to the first decades of the twentieth century. Notably, among them were many followers of Xiāntiāndào 先天道 (The Way of Former Heaven; Tiên Thiên Đạo) currents, of which Yīguàndào (along with Cao Đài and Minh Lý Đạo, among others) is a distinct later expression (Billioud 2020: 3–4). Taken from this perspective, a wider doctrinal milieu – also giving rise to Yīguàndào – already took roots in the Vietnamese social space quite early.²⁵ Other than these texts, we could not find any specific traces of NQĐ in Vietnam prior to the late 1980s.

3.1 *The First Buddha Hall in Vietnam*

According to the standard narrative of the Phát Nhất Sùng Đức followers, NQĐ was introduced to Vietnam almost simultaneously by several Vietnamese individuals at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, who returned as students or workers from Taiwan.²⁶ The first Buddha hall in Vietnam was founded by *thầy* Chu Đức Hùng (Zhū Déxióng 朱德雄; 1950–2016). Although born of Chinese parents in 1950 in Vietnam, during his childhood he had no chance to learn the Chinese language. Later, he learned it autodidactically and, during his first year at the university, he received a scholarship to study agriculture in Taiwan. While in Taiwan, he came into contact with Yīguàndào teachings through the Fāyī Chóngdé branch. He graduated in 1976, and on November 29 of the same year, he was reportedly initiated by the eminent Yīguàndào (female) master and Fāyī Chóngdé founder Elder (qiánrén 前人) Chén Hóngzhēn 陳鴻珍 (1923–2008). In 1989, *thầy* Chu eventually returned to Vietnam. He set up the first Buddha hall in a rented apartment in Hồ Chí Minh City, and immediately started spreading the teachings. A few years later, he purchased a house and established a Buddha hall there. He named it *Hợp Đức Phật Đường* (*Héde fó táng* 合德佛堂; Accruing Virtue Buddha Hall). He also began to translate

25 The scholarship on the Vietnamese Tiên Thiên Đạo is scarce and foremostly presented in relation to Minh Sư (Enlightened Master) – the Vietnamese religious movement most visibly preserving Xiāntiāndào/Tiên Thiên Đạo ideas today (e.g., Ngai 2015: 494–516; Nguyễn 2018). Comprising an estimated 13,000 followers today, Minh Sư is the oldest of the Minh redemptive societies. Being transplanted from China in the mid-nineteenth century it subsequently spawned the other four Minh groups – Minh Lý Đạo, Minh Đường (Temple of Light), Minh Thiện (Enlightened Goodness), and Minh Tân (Enlightened Renewal) (Blagov 2018: 551; Jammes 2010). Additional research exists on the influence of Xiāntiāndào on the teachings of Cao Đài (Jammes and Palmer 2020; on Cao Đài, see Jammes 2014).

26 See also <https://nhatquandaovn.com/gioi-thieu/>.

NQĐ texts into Vietnamese but died prematurely in 2016 during a sojourn in Taiwan. In the Buddha hall founded by him, the *Cảm Ân Đường* (*gǎn'ēn táng* 感恩堂; Gratitude Hall) has been established and dedicated to his memory (see Figure 2). According to our informants, the *Hợp Đức Phật Đường* is the very first Buddha hall opened in Vietnam.²⁷ Over time, Taiwanese Yiguandào masters (some also from different branches) came to Vietnam to engage in proselytising.

3.2 *The Eternal Virtue Buddha Hall*

Growing closer to our informants of the Hồ Chí Minh City Phát Nhất Sùng Đức branch, we were told an alternative story about the first origins of Yiguandào in Vietnam connected to the establishment of *Vĩnh Đức Phật Đường* (*Yǒngdé fótáng* 永德佛堂), one of the Phát Nhất Sùng Đức Buddha halls in Vietnam. As mentioned earlier, among the early Chinese immigrants arriving in Vietnam there were followers of various Xiāntiāndào branches.²⁸ In 1920, a group of immigrants from Guǎngzhōu 廣州 settled down in the present-day area of Hồ Chí Minh City. The group consisted of Xiāntiāndào followers belonging to its current connected to the “element” metal (*jīn* 金).²⁹ In 1965, a family connected to this group constructed a residential building in the present-day district 5 of Hồ Chí Minh City and, on the top of it, built a temple called *Vĩnh Đức Đường* (*Yǒngdé táng* 永德堂; Eternal Virtue Hall; see Figure 3). Queen Mother Goddess (Vương Mẫu Nương Nương; Wángmǔ Niángniáng 王母娘娘) was worshipped at this location. The community gathering there was supposedly rather small and led by female *thầy* Trần Kết Trinh (Chén Jiézhēn 陳結貞). Before 1975, around one hundred people used to participate in the ceremonies and community activities. After the unification of Vietnam in 1975, all activities officially ceased. The temple survived as a Buddhist pagoda registered with the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam. In 2010, the status was withdrawn and now this worshipping place is just considered as private property belonging to the adopted daughter of *thầy* Trần.

27 In contrast, Phạm states that the first Buddha hall was established by an unnamed woman who married a Taiwanese man and moved to Taiwan. After returning to Hồ Chí Minh City, she set up a Buddha hall in district 6 in 1990, from where she enthusiastically spread the teachings among her family and relatives (Phạm 2013: 43; cf. Trương et al. 2016: 452). According to Lín Wānchuān, Hàorán Hàodé 浩然浩德 and Wénhuà 文化 were the first Yiguandào branches to establish Buddha halls in Vietnam in 1988 (Mù Yǔ 2002: 167–169).

28 Ramses Amer indicates that by 1908, 138,284 ethnic Chinese were living in Vietnam. The number reportedly surged to 732,459 in 1951 (2011: 146).

29 After the death of the thirteenth patriarch Yáng Shòuyī 楊守一 (1796–1828; Dương Thủ Nhất), five leaders were appointed in relation to the five “elements” or phases (*ngũ hành*; *wǔxíng* 五行), viz. water, metal, earth, fire, and wood – the Chinese ancient symbols describing dynamic processes and phenomena of existence (Mozina 2019: 35).

By the end of 1980, and due to deteriorating health, *thầy* Trần started through spiritual inspiration looking for a new *thầy* who could continue the service and revive the community. However, all the female names she presented to Queen Mother Goddess were rejected. After some time, the name of a *thầy* unknown to her by the name of Quách was revealed.³⁰ *Thầy* Quách (Guō 郭) is a Taiwanese, now in his seventies, who, before coming to Vietnam, for many years reportedly served as the secretary of Chén Hóngzhēn. Quách came to Vietnam for the first time in 1989. It was allegedly planned as a business trip only in order to find some commerce opportunities. During his stay in Hồ Chí Minh City, he was looking for a vegetarian restaurant and he entered the one run by *thầy* Trần. Subsequently, Quách visited it many times, but while the two knew each other by sight, they had not engaged in conversation. After Quách's return to Taiwan, Trần learned his full name by a mutual acquaintance. She reportedly recognised it as the name earlier revealed to her spiritually while praying to Queen Mother Goddess. She immediately contacted Quách and tried to convince him to come back as soon as possible. Due to many obligations, he could not respond to her request immediately. However, by the end of 1990, Quách returned to Vietnam and began spreading NQĐ teachings joined by Trần and her community. Trần's temple was assigned a new name – *Vĩnh Đức Phật Đường*.

The story continues that within the first five days after the Tết 1991 (the New Lunar Calendar Year celebrations), around five hundred *cầu đạo* (*qiúdào* 求道) initiations (*điểm đạo*; *diǎndào* 點道) performed by *thầy* Quách alone qua *điểm truyền sư* were conducted.³¹ Ultimately, the *Vĩnh Đức Đường* community was successfully revived becoming the NQĐ *Vĩnh Đức Phật Đường*. Moreover, *thầy* Quách, while having a vegetarian meal with some disciples at the time, received a spirit message from Tể Công (Jìgōng 濟公)³² addressed to *thầy* Trần. According to *thầy* Quách's testimony: first, he started to feel warmth in his body, then a sensation of light, while a relaxing energy was running through his body. He moved away from the dining table and sat down at another table, picked up a pen and started (spirit) writing. He was not aware of the content of his calligraphy until he finished and looked at the characters he had written down. The message was to confirm that the blessing of the gods and spirits remains on the community of this lineage, that it is a right time for the Buddha's blessing, and that a community of people living morally is itself a holy blessing. According to

30 Personal communication with master Trần's daughter in December 2019.

31 At the initiation ceremony, the adept ritually "requests the *dào*" (*qiúdào*). The *điểm truyền sư* (*diǎnchuánshī* 點傳師; transmitting master) is a master who received the Mandate of Heaven (*thiên mệnh*; *tiānmìng* 天命) to continue the assignment of *dào* transmission.

32 A Chinese Chán 禪 monk (1130–1209) worshipped by Yigüandào followers. For his role in the movement and identification as Zhāng Tiānrán, see Billioud 2020: 106–113.

thầy Quách, an impressive number of over 10,000 initiations have taken place in *Vĩnh Đức Phật Đường* up until 2019,³³ a number probably well overstated. By the beginning of 2020, the Buddha hall comprised some 300 active practitioners (see Figure 4). Notably, in this community, the number of women greatly exceeds the number of male practitioners with a ratio of up to eighty per cent versus twenty per cent (the average ratio among other NQĐ groups is an estimated sixty versus forty per cent), so the members jokingly say that the group has a very strong *âm* (*yīn* 陰) tendency.

4 Nhất Quán Đạo in Contemporary Vietnam

Historically, Vietnam was always profoundly influenced by Chinese culture. On the Vietnamese part it embraces both affinity and resentment, as the famous Vietnamese writer Hữu Ngọc (b. 1918) noticed: “Rejection and attraction characterize this ambiguous relationship, even in the present time” (2012: 521). We frequently noticed this ambiguity in our interviews and conversations, especially with NQĐ prospects. One encounter we had might indeed serve as a representative case. A Vietnamese student who had for some time joined the group eventually decided to leave despite his continued interest for NQĐ teachings. Asking him why he had withdrawn, he said that the Vietnamese had been fighting for their national identity and freedom for two millennia, so he simply did not want to be “sinicised” yet again.³⁴ This prejudice might very well feed into the public image of NQĐ and explain the authorities’ largely negative stance towards it. But then again, the vast majority of practitioners are *Kinh* (i.e., ethnic Vietnamese) and not *Hoa*.

4.1 Presence of Nhất Quán Đạo in Vietnam

In terms of “initiations,” taking into consideration the whole country, the number of *Đạo Thân* (*dàoqīn* 道親; literally, relatives in the *dào*; i.e., NQĐ followers) seems quite significant in comparison to other new religious movements. We estimate several thousand practitioners in Hồ Chí Minh City and perhaps around 25,000 committed members in the whole country by 2020. Most of them live in the cities, although the teachings also spread in the countryside. For 2012, “over 5000 followers and over 150 groups [i.e., Buddha halls] in the south-eastern cities and provinces” are indicated in an article referring to an interview with NQĐ leaders (Truong 2016: 36). In contrast, the numbers we

33 Personal interview with *thầy* Quách, December 2019. He frequently travels to other Buddha halls in the country to conduct initiations there.

34 Personal interview, November 2019.

received from NQĐ leaders are – as is commonly the case (cf. Billioud 2020: 20) – overinflated, giving several hundred thousand followers. The yearly increase of initiates in Hồ Chí Minh City and surrounding provinces alone is allegedly some 20,000 individuals. The claimed number of Buddha halls scattered across the country is likewise inordinate with a few thousand. Obviously, NQĐ members are not allowed to establish formal public Buddha halls (*Phật đường công cộng; gōnggòng fótáng* 公共佛堂), instead maintaining household/family Buddha halls (*Phật đường gia đình; jiātíng fótáng* 家庭佛堂), with a share of them however being open to the public.

Notably, around eighty to ninety per cent of initiations seem to have taken place within the Phát Nhất Sùng Đức branch. Based on the data provided by our informants, out of all those having received initiation, reportedly one third commit to Buddha hall activities in the longer term, a number much likely overstated if compared to estimates of other countries (Billioud 2020: 68–69).

Besides those belonging to the Phát Nhất Sùng Đức (Fāyī Chóngdé) sub-branch, the remaining twenty to ten per cent of NQĐ practitioners seem to (chiefly) belong to Fāyī Déhuà 發一德化 (Phát Nhất Đức Hoá) and Fāyī Cífǎ 發一慈法 (Phát Nhất Từ Pháp). However, Trương et al. (2016: 452) provide (Vietnamese) names of other NQĐ groups apparently present in Hồ Chí Minh City (by 2013). These are Fāyī Língyīn 發一靈隱 (Phát Nhất Linh Ẩn), Fāyī Bǎoguāng 發一寶光 (Phát Nhất Bảo Quang), and Fāyī Xīngyì 發一興毅 (Phát Nhất Hưng Nghị).³⁵ The latter two names are most likely erroneous, referring instead to one (or more) of the several Bǎoguāng groups in existence – such as Bǎoguāng Jiàndé 寶光建德 (Bảo Quang Kiến Đức), Bǎoguāng Chóngzhèng 寶光崇正 (Bảo Quang Sùng Chính), Bǎoguāng Yùshān 寶光玉山 (Bảo Quang Ngọc Sơn), as well as Xīngyì 興毅 (Hưng Nghị). Yet, our contacts have not heard that any of these branches were actually operating in Vietnam at the time. This is not surprising given the compartmentalised structure of Yīguàndào as a whole, with each branch operating independently (cf. Clart 2000: 133–134).

Interestingly, based on our informants' data and similarly to the situation in Thailand (Lin 2023), it seems that up to eighty to ninety per cent of those initiated to NQĐ (*Đạo Thân*) are *Kinh* and only some ten to twenty per cent are *Hoa*.³⁶ As mentioned above, around sixty per cent of the followers are female. Based on our participant observation, the average age of practitioners might be in their early forties. Additionally, it is mostly women who decide to live in

35 Phạm (2013: 44) indicates only two groups: Phát Nhất Linh Ẩn and Phát Nhất Hưng Nghị.

36 Even if this ratio might not be correct overall, at least our fieldwork confirmed a significantly larger representation – indeed probably up to eighty per cent – of *Kinh* among NQĐ members. In the same vein, Phạm (2013: 115) noted an impressive surge of *Kinh* vis-à-vis *Hoa* practitioners from 2010 to 2013, arriving at a ninety to ten ratio among youth members of one Buddha hall she conducted her fieldwork at.

celibacy, committing their entire lives to spreading the *dào*, spiritual practices, and service for the community.³⁷ In line with standard Yīguàndào proselytising strategies, contact with NQĐ is usually established within personal networks through marital relations, personal introduction by relatives, friends, and co-workers. Concerning occupational backgrounds, most of the followers we met across the years were labour workers, farmers, or involved in running small businesses.³⁸ In *Vĩnh Đức Phật Đường*, only around two per cent of the adepts have a higher education, which is not in line with Fāyī Chóngdè's reputation as having a larger share of educated members.³⁹

One of the significant aspects of the NQĐ communities' presence in Vietnamese society is their engagement in charity activities. In most cases, NQĐ welfare consists of food or money donations for specified purposes – this involves, for example, support for poor war veterans and victims of natural disasters. Such activities, however, must be carried out only in collaboration with the local authorities, who are responsible for directing the donations to the target clientele, for otherwise no such actions will be permitted. Our NQĐ contacts stressed their suspicion that portions of the donations often “disappear” – particularly if money is involved. According to the NQĐ welfare organisers we talked to, this is actually considered in their donation planning.⁴⁰ Notably, charity activities must not be managed under the NQĐ name. Because of that, *Vĩnh Đức Phật Đường*, for example, launched a charity organisation – *Hội Nhân Ái Sùng Đức* (Sùng Đức Fraternity of Compassion). Whereas donations are also made out of local practitioners' pockets, the larger portion indirectly comes from Taiwan.

4.2 Reception

NQĐ attracts followers for a range of individual reasons. Notably, what has been stressed by our interlocutors was the (politically harmless) Taiwanese origins of Yīguàndào. In other words, members ordinarily did not associate NQĐ with the People's Republic of China. As mentioned above, if contention arose, it was connected to the supposed broader Chinese and thus “foreign” cultural dimension at play.

From a systematic perspective, we may extract three interrelated larger categories that make NQĐ attractive according to members:

37 In *Vĩnh Đức Phật Đường* and related Buddha halls we visited, this is recommended only to those who are at least forty years old.

38 This is confirmed by the aforementioned government report on NQĐ members in Tiền Giang province, which states that the majority of NQĐ followers comprise farmers, workers, and some traders (Nhật 2023).

39 Personal interview with *thầy* Quách, January 2020.

40 Personal conversation, June 2018.

- (1) Frequently, our interlocutors highlighted the social and emotional benefits of being a *Đạo Thân*. As one adept had it: “I can count on the help of others if I am in trouble, and I can be useful for the community as well.”⁴¹ A female adherent told us that NQĐ virtually replaces her family: “In my big family I am treated by my mother-in-law as a labourer but here I have found what being in a family really means.”⁴² Often, practitioners stressed the role of the *thầy*, whose charisma and benevolence would be what intimately holds the community together: “I am grateful that I can talk to the *thầy* openly, who really cares for each individual and the community.”⁴³ In this respect, a number of respondents mentioned that, according to their previous experiences, such close ties with and openness of the *thầy* are not to be found in Buddhist pagodas, let alone Christian congregations. Indeed, the majority of NQĐ members we encountered over the years hailed from a Buddhist background.
- (2) Next come moral and soteriological benefits. “I appreciate the teachings, it is a doctrine for life, which is giving me a moral compass,”⁴⁴ is what we were told in one form or another by many of our interlocutors. Frequently, members pointed out a decisive personal transformation, like one of our contacts who stated that “the practice really changed my personality – now I am a better human being, no longer hot-tempered, selfish, and greedy.”⁴⁵ Occasionally, the practitioners particularly emphasise the salvific power of NQĐ practice, as is exemplified by one of our contacts: “I feel more confident about my life and not fear death – I now know that I will be saved because my name is written on the ‘heavenly scroll.’”⁴⁶ Many recall their initiation ceremony as an especially awe-inspiring experience when the “three treasures” (*Tam Bửu; sānbảo* 三寶) were bestowed upon them – that is, the “*dào* was transmitted” (*truyền đạo; chuán dào* 傳道) by the Unborn Venerable Mother (*Vô Sinh Lão Mẫu; Wúshēng Lǎo Mǔ* 無生老母) – that is: (1) the opening of one’s *huyền quan* (*xuánquān* 玄關; mysterious pathway); (2) the transmission of the *khẩu quyết* (*kǒujié* 口訣), a *mantra* consisting of five secret words (also called

41 “Em cảm thấy có chỗ nương tựa mỗi khi gặp khó khăn và bản thân trở nên có ích cho cộng đồng.”

42 “Trong nhà của mẹ chồng, chị bị đối xử như người làm nhưng ở đây chị cảm thấy giống như một gia đình.”

43 “Em thấy rất biết ơn khi có thể nói chuyện thoải mái cùng thầy.”

44 “Chị rất xem trọng bài giảng vì nó dạy về cách sống đạo đức, là kim chỉ nam trong cuộc sống.”

45 “Học đạo thật sự làm em thay đổi nhiều, bây giờ em biết kiên nhẫn, không còn nóng tánh nữa, cũng bớt ích kỷ và tham lam.”

46 “Bây giờ bà có lòng tin vào cuộc sống, không còn sợ chết nữa vì sẽ được phù hộ, tên của bà đã được ghi vào sổ ở trên trời.”

by members the “heavenly password”; *mật mã thiên đường*); and (3) the presentation of a secret *mudra* (*hợp đồng*; *hétóng* 合同) (cf. Clart 2018: 440; see also Jordan and Overmyer 1986: 226–236). Our interlocutors vividly remembered the symbolic activities accompanying this ceremony (in Chinese with Vietnamese translation) – the burning of one’s name written on a paper called *long thiên biểu* (*lóngtiān biǎo* 龍天表; heavenly dragon chart), which symbolises the erasing of the name from the *sổ sanh tử* (*shēngsǐ bù* 生死簿; life-death register) and simultaneously inscribing it onto the *thiên bảng lục* (*tiānbǎng lù* 天榜錄; heavenly scroll of records). This was usually understood by the practitioners as an assurance of “salvation,” transcending the wheel of reincarnation.⁴⁷ In fact, followers are taught by the *thầy* that the condition of remaining on the *thiên bảng lục* is leading a “moral life,” that is, self-cultivation, the aim of which is the eradication of this-worldly desires and attachments. And whereas the initiation is a necessary condition for “salvation,” it is deemed insufficient by itself. However, this idea of “assured salvation” abides in the minds of many followers and is also emphasised by grassroots members when introducing the NQĐ teaching to others. A virtue held by many members (in particular those who are parents) to be especially fostered and amplified through NQĐ doctrine and praxis is “filiality” (*hiếu*; *xiào* 孝).⁴⁸ A few practitioners even underlined that the focus on filiality is NQĐ’s most powerful message: “I am happy about the teaching, and I think it is especially important for the young generation, so I spread the information about it to all people I know.”⁴⁹ What is more, repeatedly, usually during joint meals, our contacts argued that NQĐ’s emphasis on vegetarianism is much appreciated as a spiritual practice in its own right, for it carries into effect traditional Vietnamese mores.

- (3) A third category marks educational and economic benefits. We were explicitly told that indeed Taiwanese entrepreneurs residing in Vietnam would often look for responsible employees particularly in the NQĐ Buddha halls. One respondent thus stated: “Thanks to the community, I have found a suitable job.”⁵⁰ Another one disclosed: “I want to invite

47 This is also noted in Trương et al. 2016: 468. See also Phạm 2013: 139.

48 Related teaching sessions we attended commonly draw on the *Tâm Kinh* (*Xīnjīng* 心經; Heart Sūtra) and the seminal Fāyī Chóngdé text *Bách Hiếu Kinh* (*Bǎixiàojīng* 百孝經; Classic of the Hundred Occurrences of Filiality) in eighty-four verses penned by Senior Elder Bái Shuǐ 白水 (Bạch Thủy; 1903–1995; i.e., Hán Yǔlín 韓雨霖), the founder of the Fāyī branch.

49 “Cô thích học đạo, và nghĩ nó rất quan trọng đối với mấy bạn trẻ; cô sẽ chia sẻ về đạo cho bất kỳ người nào mình biết.”

50 “Nhờ mọi người giới thiệu nên anh đã tìm được công việc phù hợp.”

others to join us, especially young people, because they not only receive the good teachings, but they also receive material gifts as appreciation for their study efforts.”⁵¹ Given that the Buddha hall is regularly the venue for gratis Chinese language instruction, one parent explained with a view to such NQĐ’s apparent benefits: “My daughters are very happy having free Chinese classes.”⁵² In this respect, many younger followers we talked to indicated that their engagement with NQĐ might also open opportunities to relocate to Taiwan for further educational/occupational reasons.

A crucial aspect of Yiguandào practice is spirit writing (*fújī* 扶乩 or *fúluán* 扶鸞; i.e., *phò loan*). However, whereas in Vietnam the practice of spirit writing/communication – traditionally called *đàn cầu tiên* (colloquially often abbreviated to *đàn tiên* or *cầu tiên*; in Cao Đài the related practice is called *cơ bút* and *giáng bút*) – has a long history across a range of religions (Do 2013), according to our informants it is not yet a part of the NQĐ cultus. The reason being not necessarily that spirit writing communication is still prohibited by law since 1976 – which essentially applies to the public realm – but that there are, as of yet, no sufficiently gifted or trained mediums among NQĐ ranks. Several times already, Vietnamese individuals who initially seemed to have predispositions to contact spirits were sent for mediumistic training to Taiwan. We were told that so far (at least with respect to Phát Nhất Sùng Đức) none of them has been able to meet the “mandatory requirements,” for they were deemed to be eventually not sufficiently receptive to the spirits, and that this was a sign that the Vietnamese have not yet received the spiritual ability for such a position.

4.3 Modes of Instruction

To enable a better understanding of the NQĐ teachings, various types of *Pháp hội* (*fǎhuì* 法會; Dharma gathering) are frequently organised (usually weekly in the venues we visited) depending on age and profession but also religious engagement/knowledge. That is, classes are divided with respect to the time, level, and engagement in spiritual practices and – in the cases we have seen – usually arranged through personal invitation. At the larger Buddha halls, often lectures are given in Chinese by the masters in residence or visitors coming from Taiwan, requiring translators to be present. This role is normally fulfilled by the *Hoa* followers. As a case in point, *Vĩnh Đức Phật Đường’s* thầy Quách, his more than thirty years living in Vietnam notwithstanding, keeps doing all his lectures in Mandarin. We frequently observed that while the translators tried their best, it seemed they did not always fully understand the topic of the

51 “Chị muốn mời những người khác tham dự vào đạo, nhất là mấy bạn trẻ, vì tụi nó không chỉ được dạy về đạo lý mà còn được nhận quà khi cố gắng học tập.”

52 “Con gái cô rất vui vì được học tiếng Trung.”

lecture and the examples given, which were usually specifically geared towards Chinese/Taiwanese frames of reference.⁵³ The problems many translators faced were connected to the specific contents and corresponding specialised vocabulary, but also distinct idioms. For example, during one of the lectures, the guest teacher was presenting the life and achievements of the Senior Elder Báishuǐ and, at some point, speaking in Mandarin, she used the term *lìhài* 勵害 – colloquially meaning “extraordinarily skilful” – describing his accomplishments. The translator rendered it using the Sino-Vietnamese term *lợi hại* which is ordinarily used in modern Vietnam to describe somebody who is so professional, so dangerously skilful that one should be afraid of him. Similar problems appear when looking at the Vietnamese booklets introducing NQĐ tenets. Again, the translations employ a panoply of Sino-Vietnamese expressions which are not in frequent use anymore and not understood by the “average” Vietnamese, let alone less educated practitioners, bearing in mind that the vast majority of adherents has only elementary or secondary education. As one practitioner put it evoking the filiality aspect: “I do not understand much [from the teaching], but I think it is good for young people.”⁵⁴

4.4 *The Buddha Hall in Phnom Penh*

This Buddha hall, called *Lidé fótáng* 立德佛堂 (*Lập Đức Phật Đường*; Establishing Virtue Buddha Hall; see Figure 5), was solemnly opened in 2016. Although it is located in Cambodia’s capital, according to our informants, its role for NQĐ activities in Vietnam up until the COVID-19 outbreak was vital. We follow here *thầy* Lâm’s own account shared with us during our visit at his Buddha hall in 2017. In 2002, Taiwanese Yiguandào master Lín 林 (Lâm) came to Vietnam with the intent to conduct missionary work. However, meeting several obstacles, such as being followed and repeatedly investigated by the Vietnamese police, he eventually decided to move to Cambodia in 2006. Upon his departure he promised his disciples to create a place which could host groups of Vietnamese who wanted to freely participate in courses and camps organised. He found a land for sale in the suburbs of Phnom Penh and started collecting money to purchase it. One day, he unexpectedly received a phone call from one of his former disciples in Taiwan, who offered his master a significant amount of money. He claimed that a dream message informed and prompted him to contribute to the project. This donation enabled Lín to buy the land. But he was still lacking funds for construction works. Then in a dream, the Buddha supposedly instructed him to just start building. So he did and, miraculously, more

53 If at all, members of the *Hoa* minority are proficient in Cantonese and only rarely in Mandarin.

54 “Thiệt ra cô không hiểu nhiều lắm nhưng nghĩ nó có ích cho tụi nhỏ.”

donations from other students and various people followed, which resulted in the construction of the present edifice. Up until the COVID-19 pandemic, this *fótáng* served both Cambodian and Vietnamese practitioners alike.⁵⁵ That is, since no NQĐ meetings or any other organised events can take place in the Vietnamese public sphere, for many years it represented an important site for Vietnamese practitioners and various Buddha hall managers, the *Đàn Chủ* (*tánzhǔ* 壇主; altar masters).

5 Concluding Remarks

Like in other countries of the wider region (e.g., Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore), Yīguàndào in Vietnam is growing rapidly despite external (legal and societal) pressures and proselytising limitations. Practitioners highlighted that membership brought them social stability, vested them with a sound moral compass, and instilled salvational assurance, but also keeps contributing to their economic well-being. NQĐ was often seen by our interlocutors as an expression of the *tam giáo* cosmos and thus essentially not alien to their religious sensitivity. The intricacies of the doctrinal dimension remained mostly incomprehensible, which many deemed ultimately irrelevant, for what connected them to the group was foremostly the experiential and socio-educational elements and not any distinct perspectives vis-à-vis transcendence. NQĐ practice and learning were often considered as a routine to establish and subsequently maintain a stable way of life at a time of rising economic hardships and moral decline. Yīguàndào came to Vietnam to stay. Despite its current lack of legal recognition (which might change quickly, especially if the group's welfare activities keep rising), NQĐ will become an increasingly visible and influential actor in Vietnam's religious landscape. The present article is but a preliminary study, for the phenomenon of Yīguàndào (also in Vietnam) is so many-faceted indeed that we could only scratch the surface.

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55 When activities were resumed at the conclusion of COVID-19 restrictions, the *fótáng*'s target clientele shifted to the local Cambodian community.

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Appendix

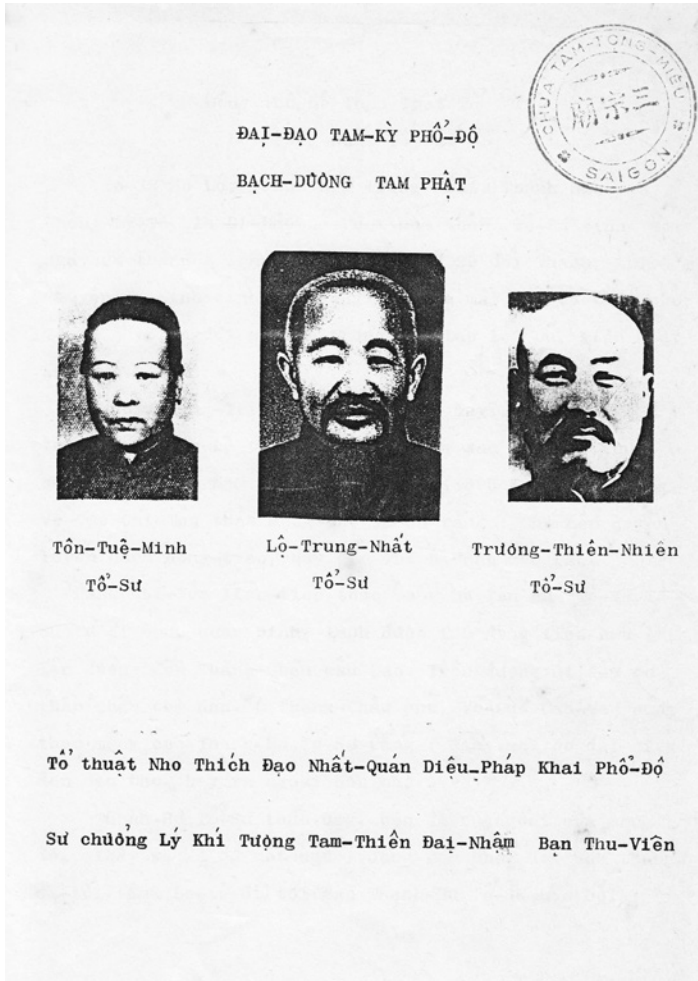


FIGURE 1 Cover page of the *Tổ thuật Nho Thích Đạo Nhất-Quán* [...]



FIGURE 2
Altar in the Gratitude Hall dedicated to thầy Chu at *Hợp Đức Phật Đường* (Accruing Virtue Buddha Hall)



FIGURE 3
The building with the *Vĩnh Đức Phật Đường* (Eternal Virtue Buddha Hall) on the top (indicated by the arrow)



FIGURE 4 A praying ceremony for (close) ancestors to aid in their liberation/rebirth (*cầu siêu*) taking place at *Vĩnh Đức Phật Đường*



FIGURE 5 *Lide fótang* (Establishing Virtue Buddha Hall) in Phnom Penh