

# Boat of Wisdom: From a Buddhist Concept and Daoist Legend to the Bát Nhã Boat in Cao Đài Religion

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## Abstract

*Drawing from the Buddhist concept of a vessel of wisdom and the Daoist legend of the Eternal Mother who sent the original numina to the earthly world, Cao Đài followers in Vietnam cleverly created the Bát Nhã Boat (Boat of Wisdom). This boat is used in Cao Đài funerals to transport the coffin of the deceased to the graveyard, symbolically ferrying enlightened souls to the other shore of Nirvana or the Pure Land. The image of the Bát Nhã Boat provides deep insights into Cao Đài traditional funeral ceremonies, their concept of death as a return journey to one's true home, and their unique societal service, offering the Vietnamese public a sense of salvation throughout its approximately 100-year history.*

**Keywords:** Boat, Wisdom, Cao Đài, Enlightenment, Funeral

## INTRODUCTION

The entire complex of the Tay Ninh Cao Đài Holy See, the headquarters of the original and largest group of the Vietnamese syncretic Cao Đài religion, appeared to be a significant work site in Mid-June 2024. The Great Temple, along with other facilities and roads, was being repainted, maintained, and prepared for the grand 100-year anniversary of the Cao Đài religion in Vietnam.

Amid the hustle and bustle of countless voluntary workers cleaning and repainting the walls, digging and asphaltting the roads, or mowing the lawn. and Cao Đài adepts walking in and out of the Great Temple for prayers, with a non-stop flow of vehicles passing by, I noticed a uniquely colorful dragon boat-shaped vehicle carrying a coffin fixed in a small house in the middle of it. The vehicle was followed by an endless line of followers wearing Cao Đài white costumes. The vehicle stopped in front of the Great Temple, allowing the leaders of the parade, who were holding a religious banner and a small altar with a paper tablet, to pray inside the temple. Shortly after that, the dragon boat-shaped vehicle left. Approximately 30 minutes later, another similar dragon boat-shaped vehicle arrived, stopping in front of the Great Temple, and the same routine was repeated. At times, three or four similar vehicles stopped for a while and left. On one morning of Mid-June 2024, I counted approximately 20 such dragon boat-shaped vehicles passing the Great Temple for the same ritual.

I later approached Tan, a ritual assistant at the Great Temple who later became my informant, to ask about the dragon boat-shaped vehicles. Tan explained that those vehicles are called Thuyền Bát Nhã (Boat of Wisdom; 般若船 *bōrě chuán*) in Cao Đài (hereafter referred to as the Bát Nhã Boat), and they transport the coffins of the deceased to the cemetery in funeral ceremonies held by the Caodaists. He added that there are approximately 500 Bát Nhã Boats used by the Cao Đài followers for funeral purposes throughout Vietnam in the present day.

The Bát Nhã Boat in Cao Đài, first constructed in 1935, is made of wood and shaped like a golden dragon, with a high head at the front and a tail at the back. In the middle of the Bát Nhã Boat, a small rectangular house with two layers of roofs is built. Three 'Cổ Pháp' (archaic religious insignia of the three teachings of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism; 古法 *Gǔ fǎ*) are fixed on top of the highest roof. Four figures of phoenixes are placed at the four corners of the highest roof, while the four corners of the second, lower roof feature four figures of dragons. The space between the first roof and the second roof is carved with the eight trigrams (Bát Quái; 八卦 *Bāguà*) of the I Ching (Dịch Kinh; 易經 *Yì jīng*), also known as the Book of Changes.

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**Figure 1.** Different Versions of Bát Nhã Boat in Cao Đài Religion. Courtesy of CaodaïTV.

The small house on the Bát Nhã Boat serves as a space to place the coffin during its journey from the deceased's house to the cemetery. Occasionally, if more than one person passes away in the same village and needs to be transported to the cemetery on the same day, both coffins will be placed on the same Bát Nhã Boat. One coffin is positioned at the front and the other at the back of the small house for balance.

The Chinese couplets carved at the front of this small house read, “All things are said to be impermanent; the physical body, born of the earth, returns to the earth. Over a thousand years, the soul, endowed by heaven, returns to heaven”. The couplets at the back read, “With a physical body comes the experience of the four sufferings - Those without form pass through the three realms after death”.

Traditionally, the Bát Nhã Boat in Cao Đài rests on a two-wheel chassis, balanced and pulled with ropes by Cao Đài voluntary undertakers (Đạo Tỷ; 道齊 Dáo qí). During its journey to the cemetery, the dragon's head and tail of the Bát Nhã Boat rock along the road and the path of the undertakers, giving it life. However, in contemporary Cao Đài practice, aside from the Bát Nhã Boat at the Headquarters of the Tây Ninh Cao Đài Holy See and some temples in the surrounding areas that retain its original design, most Bát Nhã Boats are now constructed on modified trucks driven by a driver. Exceptionally, in the Mekong region of Southern Vietnam, the Bát Nhã Boat is literally a boat that can float and move along small branches of the river to reach cemeteries (Jammes & Shuai, 2020: 19)

The Great Way of the Third Period of Universal Salvation, commonly known as the Cao Đài Religion, with its history of almost 100 years, has undergone critical periods of ups and downs. It was severely suppressed by the French colonizers (Vinh, 1973), politically involved with the Japanese (Van, 1996), marred by internal conflicts (Oliver, 1976: 99), and suffocated by the new Vietnamese government after national reunification in 1975 (Jammes & Shuai, 2020; Blagov, 2016). At times, it seemed this religious organization could not rise again.

Many excellent religious, anthropological and ethnographical studies have examined the history, doctrines, philosophies and relevant socio-cultural and political factors to explain the survival and development of the Cao Đài religion (Blagov, 2016; Hoskins, 2006; Jammes, 2009; Meyers & Van, 2006; Nhan, 1974). However, no one has paid attention to the crucial role of the Bát Nhã Boat in Cao Đài funeral ceremonies. This boat has continually transported the coffins of the deceased to the cemetery, even during the toughest times of suppression. It symbolically represents a vessel of wisdom ferrying pure and enlightened souls across Samsara (the endless cycle of birth, death, and reincarnation) to the shore of Nirvana (the Pure Land). By examining the roles of the Bát Nhã Boat from an anthropological and theological perspective, I aim to highlight key features of a Cao Đài funeral ceremony, the theological concept of the soul after death as well as the practical means of salvation provided by the Vietnamese Cao Đài religion.

## **BÁT NHÃ BOAT IN CAO ĐÀI: BUDDHIST CONCEPT AND DAOIST LEGEND**

In 1935, under the order of the Ho Phap (Head Medium, Protector of Cao Đài Dharma) - the Supreme Leader of the Cao Đài Religion, Mr. Trần Duy Nghĩa (1888-1954), who served as the Juridical Reformer (Khai Pháp) of the Cao Đài Religion, referenced Buddhist concepts of wisdom, the bottomless boat transporting the monk Tang Xuanzang (唐玄奘) and his disciples across the river, and Daoist narratives about the Eternal Mother and Her distress in his explanatory speech on the meaning of the Bát Nhã Boat Drama. This speech was delivered on the occasion of the debut of this drama. Written and performed by the Cao Đài Funeral Committee (Ban Nhà Thuyền), the drama spiritually simulates the journey of transporting enlightened souls across the sea of suffering to reach the other shore of Nirvana or the Pure Land (Nghĩa, 1935: 59-67).

### **Buddhist Concept of Wisdom**

In Buddhism, wisdom (Sanskrit: *prajñā*; 智慧 *Zhìhuì*) refers to a deep comprehension of the true essence of reality (Zang, 2002: 1). Wisdom is a fundamental element of the Buddhist path to enlightenment. The metaphor of the Boat of Wisdom illustrates the essential role of *prajna* (wisdom) in this journey. It symbolizes the concept that wisdom acts as a vessel, transporting those who have attained mental purity and perfection across the ocean of samsara—the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth—toward the shore of Nirvana or the Pure Land. In Mahayana Buddhism, Bodhisattvas—enlightened beings who opt to stay in samsara to assist other sentient beings—can be compared to skilled boatmen who help others navigate the sea of suffering.

Wisdom in Buddhism is reflected in the personal comprehension of the Four Noble Truths, as well as insights into impermanence, suffering, non-self, right view, and right intention. This wisdom goes beyond mere intellectual grasp; it encompasses experiential knowledge gained through meditation and ethical living. Hence, Buddhist practitioners are encouraged to study, meditate, and adhere to the Buddha's teachings. This disciplined practice ultimately leads to liberation (Nirvana), the supreme objective in Buddhism, where one is released from the continuous cycle of birth, death, and reincarnation (samsara).

In an episode from the classic Chinese novel "Journey to the West" (西遊記, *Xīyóu jì*) by Wu Cheng'en (吳承恩), a Welcoming Daoist (接引道人 *Jiēyǐn Dàorén*) takes the form of a ferryman with an empty boat to help the monk Tang Xuanzang (唐玄奘) and his disciples cross a river. Despite its frail and bottomless nature, the boat, representing the Boat of Wisdom, safely carries them over the turbulent waters, symbolizing the spiritual guidance and support provided by enlightened beings on their path to enlightenment (En, 2012: 353).

### **Daoist Legend of Original Numina**

In Daoism, followers of the 'Great Way of Former Heaven' (先天大道 *Xiantian Da Dao*), which later branched into various redemptive sects, believed that the 'Unborn Venerable Mother' (無生老母 *Wusheng Laomu*) was the progenitor of all life on Earth (Clart, 1997; Naquin, 1994; Ownby, 2017). Since the first century B.C., this "Unborn Venerable Mother", also known as "Eternal Venerable Mother", had been recognized as Xi Wang Mu (西王母 – Mother Ruler of the West), who had become associated with millennial expectations. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the "Unborn Venerable Mother" has been called by different names, including "Golden

Mother of the Jade Pond” (瑤池金母 Yáochí jīn mǔ), “Empress Mother Ruler” (王母娘娘 Wángmǔniángniáng), and “Venerable Sagely Mother” (老聖母 Lǎo shèngmǔ).

The narrative of the 'Eternal Venerable Mother' appears in the writings of various redemptive sects that emerged from the 'Great Way of Former Heaven' (Xiantian Da Dao). In these texts, the Eternal Mother is depicted as the embodiment of the Dao (道), a cosmic mother responsible for giving birth to all existence in the universe (Clart, 1997: 9). Humanity which sprang forth from the Eternal Mother in the form of 100 myriad “original numina” (原靈 Yuán líng), was sent to Earth by boat (Nghĩa, 1935: 61). However, these original numina, ever since populating the world, became confused by desires and the mundane world’s material splendor, forgetting their original nature, divine origin and getting lost in the world of dust.

The Unborn Mother, saddened by the loss of her children in the mundane world, endeavored to communicate with them in different ways, urging them to return to the Pure Land and not focus solely on the materialistic world. To guide Her children to the Pure Land, the Eternal Mother sent Buddhas to this world to preach and save these original numina. For instance, in the first amnesty period (Nhứt Kỳ Phổ Độ; 第一期普渡 Dì yī qī pǔ dù), Dipankara Buddha appeared, and in the second amnesty period (Nhị Kỳ Phổ Độ; 第二期普渡 Dì èr qī pǔ dù), this mission continued with Sakyanami Buddha. However, after these two amnesty periods, there were still 92 myriad original numina missing (Clart, 1997: 9).

It is believed that the world has now entered its third and ultimate phase, during which it is anticipated to conclude with a cosmic cataclysm resulting in its demise. Therefore, it has become urgent to save the remaining 92 myriad. The Eternal Mother has dispatched the Maitreya Buddha and other divine deities to bring Her children back by boat called Bát Nhã (wisdom). On this regard, only those original numina who have attained wisdom, purity and perfection of mind can reunite with the Eternal Mother in a final judgement called the Assembly of the Dragon Flower (Hội Long Hoa; 龍華會 Lónghuá huì).

### **The Bát Nhã Boat in Cao Đài**

The practice of spirit writing became increasingly popular in Vietnam in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century among Chinese immigrants who were loyal to the Ming Dynasty and were fleeing from the Qing Dynasty’s pursuit. This practice was mostly an individual or internal activity within secret Chinese societies (Phong, 2018: 102). By the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, spirit writing reached its peak as more people became interested in spiritism, in both Western spiritism and Chinese forms (Hong, 2017: 47).

In the 1920s, a supreme deity is believed to have revealed himself through spirit mediumship to several Vietnamese civil servants working for the French government in Saigon and to the spiritists of the Chinese-Vietnamese Minh (明 Míng) societies. This deity took the name Cao Đài (High Tower) and asked those to whom he revealed himself to call him Thầy (Master). The Master Cao Đài, a hybrid version of the Chinese Daoist deity Jade Emperor, taught them about the Way (道 Dào) and the third amnesty period.

As a result of this revelation, a syncretic hierarchical religion, fully named the “Great Way of the Third Period of Universal Salvation” (大道三期普渡 Dàdào sān qī pǔdù) and informally called the Cao Đài Religion, came into existence in Southern Vietnam. The doctrine and philosophy of the Cao Đài Religion incorporate elements from the three Great Teachings of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism (Gobron, 1949; Hickey, 1964). It is believed that the Cao Đài Religion is significantly influenced by the doctrine of the unity of the Three Teachings propagated by the Minh (明 Míng) societies, resulting in the worship of the spirits of the Three Teachings (Tam giáo; 三教 Sān jiào).

Among these Minh (明 Míng) societies, the Minh Sư (Enlightened Master) society, a variant of the Chinese 'Great Way of Former Heaven' (先天大道 Xiantian Da Dao) in Southeast Asia, was the largest and had the most influence on the Cao Đài Religion (Oliver, 1976; Phong, 2010). Most of the first Cao Đài spirit mediums, leaders and followers were partly or wholly involved with these Minh (明 Míng) societies. The Cao daists

borrowed the spirit writing instrument (Ngọc Cờ) from the Minh Lý (Enlightened Reason), a sub-society of the Minh Sư. They also received the Heavenly Scripture (Kinh Thiên Đạo; 天道經 Tiāndào jīng) from them and used it in their official worshipping rituals.

The Caodaists are believed to have adopted the explanation of the cosmology, theology and eschatology of the “Great Way of Former Heaven” (Xiantian Da Dao), propagated by the Minh societies, but adapted it to a more practical level in the broader Vietnamese socio-cultural and political setting. The Cao Đài doctrines also propagate the three amnesty periods of the Supreme Being, advise humanity to renounce materialistic lifestyles, and encourage spiritual cultivation and the accumulation of virtues and merits to attend the Assembly of the Dragon Flower (Hội Long Hoa; 龍華會 Lónghuá huì), where Maitreya Buddha is believed to be the chief judge or examiner. Caodaists believe that the Vietnamese people were assigned a special mission by the Supreme Being to spread a humanistic and millenarian message to the world and to assist the original numina (yuanling) to return to their primordial position in Heaven (Thánh Ngôn Hiệp Tuyển, 1972: 79-80).

The Caodaists have adopted the Buddhist concept of wisdom, believing that those who attain perfection of mind, understand the impermanence of everything in life, cultivate enlightenment, and accumulate virtues can return to the Pure Land, also known as the Realm of Eternal Life (Cõi Thiêng Liêng Hằng Sống) in Cao Đài Religion. They have also embraced the Daoist narrative that the original numina (yuanling) were sent to Earth by the Eternal Mother.

According to the explanatory speech by Mr. Trần Duy Nghĩa, who served as the Juridical Reformer (Khai Pháp) of the Cao Đài Religion, if the original numina (yuanling) arrived on Earth by boat, then on their return journeys to reunite with the Eternal Mother in the Pure Land, they will also be transported by a boat - not an ordinary one, but a boat of wisdom.

The Caodaists have taken a more practical approach in making the Buddhist concept of wisdom and the Daoist story of a boat transporting the original numina uniquely visible through the form of a dragon-shaped boat, commonly called Thuyền Bát Nhã (Bát Nhã Boat or Boat of Wisdom). This Bát Nhã boat spiritually symbolizes a vessel transporting enlightened souls across the samsara to reach the Realm of Eternal Life.

## **FUNERAL RITES IN CAO ĐÀI: PREPARING SOULS FOR THEIR RETURN JOURNEY**

The term 'death' has several Vietnamese equivalents: chết, mất, qua đời, quá cố, mãn phần, or the euphemistic term ‘đi’ (meaning 'left' or 'gone'). While the general public views 'death' as an end or a 'leaving' of someone, the Caodaists use another term, 'quy vị' (literally translated as 'returning to position' or 'returning home'), to refer to death as a return.

For Vietnamese, arranging a proper funeral for a loved one is one of the most important things a member of the family can do. In reality, a culturally proper funeral is more than an empty gesture to the dead; it helps the living to grieve and go on with life....Death rituals also serve as tools for humankind to transform death from a defeat of life to a stepping stone to another, perhaps better, place, and thus create a continuity beyond death itself (Son & Nha, 2019: 24).

Syncretized with Vietnamese folk beliefs and practices, as well as the three teachings of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, the Cao Đài religion has developed its distinct funeral ritual ceremony. They have restructured Buddhist-Daoist concepts, doctrines, rituals, and symbols, while also incorporating local folk beliefs and practices into their funeral rituals. This makes Cao Đài funeral rituals a unique performance aimed at preparing for the return journeys of the deceased. In these funeral rituals, the Bát Nhã Boat plays a crucial role.

According to the theological doctrine of the Cao Đài religion, in this third and final period of universal salvation, the Master Cao Đài has ordered the closing of the Underworld (Đóng Địa Ngục) and the opening of the Heavenly Gate (Mở Tầng Thiêng) to welcome the enlightened souls back.

Caodaists believe in the existence of the ‘spirit’ (chơn linh, linh hồn) and the ‘soul’ (hồn, chơn hồn), but interpret them differently from the common spirit-body dualism. According to their beliefs, a perfect human should possess “three forms of bodies” (Tam Thể Xác Thân) (Hồng, 2003: 57). The first form is the physical body, which is visible and tangible. The second body, invisible and given by the Eternal Mother, is called the “Soul” (hồn), “soul of sensation” (Giác hồn) or “true mind” (Chơn hồn). This second body (the soul) is connected to an individual’s physical body through the “Mind” (memory, wisdom and emotions), forming a foundation for the third body called the ‘True Spirit’ (Chơn Linh). Therefore, the ‘True Spirit’ (Chơn Linh) of an individual, believed to be given by the Supreme Being, consists of that individual’s outlook, mind and soul.

Caodaists believe that after an individual passes away, their physical body will decay and become soil, while their spirit and soul will return to Heaven. The spirit reunites with the Supreme Being because it is believed to be the “Little Spiritual Light” (Tiểu Linh Quang) derived from the “Great Spiritual Light” (Đại Linh Quang) of the Supreme Being. The soul, on the other hand, will return home to the Eternal Mother.

However, since the souls are significantly impacted by an individual’s emotions, sensations and desires in the mundane world, they are more likely to forget the essence of their nature and their true home. Therefore, Caodaists believe the funeral rituals, through a lengthy and complex process of rites and scripture chanting, will help the souls realize the nature of everything and sever secular ties to return to their true home.

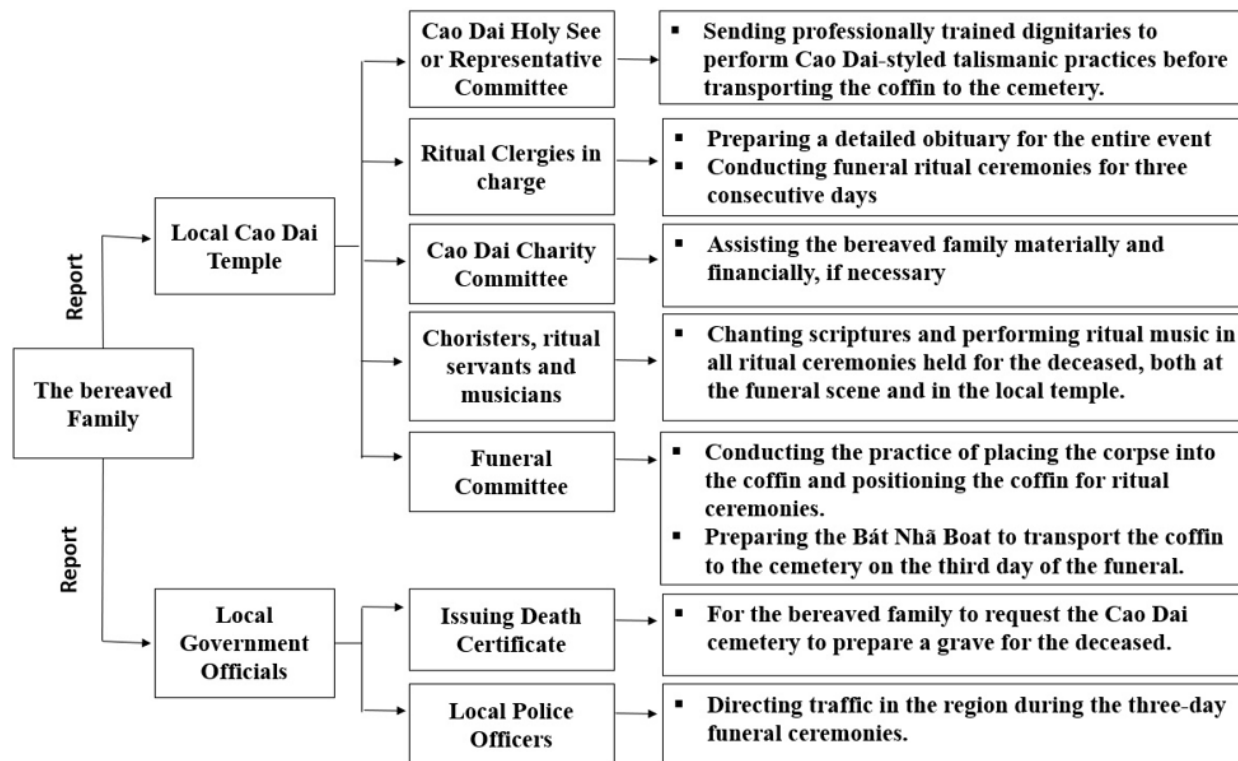
When a Cao Đài follower becomes seriously ill or is about to pass away, their family invites representatives from the local Cao Đài Temple, including at least three ritual clergies, choristers, and fellow Cao Đài neighbors, to their home. They perform a ritual over three consecutive days to pray for the patient's recovery (Cầu giải bệnh). If the patient recovers, the ritual concludes. However, if the patient passes away either during the ritual or afterward, a funeral ceremony begins.

Chanting scriptures or reciting Buddha’s name at the moment when someone is taking their last breath is a common practice in contemporary Vietnam, especially in Buddhist communities. However, this practice occurs in private homes among family members. In contrast, Caodaists have elevated this practice to a more formal ritual involving representatives from local Cao Đài Temples, demonstrating greater attention to the deceased in their final moments on Earth.

An ordinary Cao Đài funeral ritual tradition is characterized by a symphony of scripture chanting and rites. This includes dressing the deceased and placing the corpse in the coffin, spiritually reporting to the Master Cao Đài and the ancestors, and conducting sacrifices to the deceased by family members. Then, there is a collective chanting of scriptures for the redemption of the deceased’s souls (Lễ cầu siêu), performing talismanic practices to purify the corpse and sever secular ties, and transporting the coffin to the cemetery on the Bát Nhã Boat. Throughout these activities, Cao Đài funeral ritual music and performances play a crucial role, showcasing harmonious cooperation among local ritual clergies, choristers (Đống Nhi), ritual servants (Lễ Sĩ), undertakers (Đạo Tỳ), family members, fellow Cao Đài followers, and even local government officials.

The entire procedure of a Cao Đài funeral ritual ceremony can be summarized into three periods: (1) the near-death period; (2) the funeral period, which lasts for three consecutive days from the date of death to the burial date; and (3) the mourning period, which lasts for 581 days after death. A dignitary from the Cao Đài Holy See explained that even if the deceased is not a Cao Đài follower, but the bereaved family requests a Cao Đài-styled funeral ceremony, the local Cao Đài Temple is willing to assist. However, the procedure will be relatively simpler compared to that for a deceased Cao Đài follower.





**Figure 2.** Emergency Preparations for a Cao Đài Funeral.

During the three-day funeral, the first day is the busiest, involving detailed preparations that often include emergency calls and contacts with ritual clergy, servants, choristers, the charity committee, and local government officials (see Figure 2). This first day is highlighted by the ritual of placing the corpse into the coffin, following strict guidance from the Tay Ninh Cao Đài Holy See and conducted by Cao Đài professionally trained funeral undertakers (Đạo Tỳ). Then, the coffin is positioned to the left of the house if the deceased is a woman, and to the right if the deceased is a man. The coffin is then covered with a fabric embroidered with the Divine Eye (Tấm Phủ Quan), above which a wooden frame for nine candles is placed. The nine candles above the coffin and another one beneath it are lit during the three-day funeral ritual ceremony. Additional tables for temporary altars and religious banners are placed at the funeral site for subsequent religious rites.

**Summary of a Cao Dai Funeral Ritual Ceremony**

Periods	Key Ritual Ceremonies
<b>Near-death</b>	Rituals for the recovery from illness and for the soul of the dying individual
<b>Funeral</b>	Chanting scripture upon an individual's passing
	Ritual to inform Master Cao Dai of the death
	Ritual to place the deceased's corpse into the coffin
	Positioning the coffin and arranging temporary funeral altars
	Offering food and fruit to the deceased's soul (Triêu at 9 a.m.; Tịch at 2 p.m.)
	Offering ceremony, ritual sacrifice and chanting scripture for the redemption of the soul.
<b>Mourning</b>	Talismanic practice to sever secular ties or roots, promoting the soul's salvation
	Moving the coffin to the cemetery on the Bát Nhã Boat
	A 'Tuần cửu' is held every nine days after death; nine times in 81 days, at local temples
→ <b>First day</b>	
→ <b>Second day</b>	
→ <b>Third day</b>	
→ <b>Nine periodic rituals</b>	
→ <b>First anniversary of death</b>	On the 281 <sup>st</sup> day after death, at local temples and at home
→ <b>Second anniversary of death</b>	On the 581 <sup>st</sup> day after death, at local temples and at home

**Figure 3.** Summary of a Cao Đài Funeral Ritual Ceremony

An Archbishop responsible for Cao Đài rites explained that, in traditional Vietnamese funerals, the corpse used to be covered with layers of white cloth and then tied into nine segments. According to him, this practice is believed to make it harder for the soul of the deceased to leave because the nine tied sections pull the soul back. Therefore, in Cao Đài funeral tradition, the corpse is covered with white cloth and placed into the coffin, which is lined with tea and rice husks, without any ties.

The second day of a Cao Đài funeral is marked by a ritual to pray for the redemption of the deceased's soul. This ritual lasts approximately three hours and is divided into three smaller ceremonies. It commences with the 'Đặng diện' ritual (literally translated as 'offering ceremony'), where incense, tea and wine are offered to the soul of the deceased at the funeral altar. The 'Đặng diện' ritual exemplifies harmonious cooperation, among the choristers chanting scriptures, the musicians playing Cao Đài funeral music and the ritual servants who carry offerings to a kneeling representative of the bereaved family for presentation before the altar. As the primarily female choristers chant funeral scriptures in a slow, lingering voice called 'Thài', the ritual servants execute stylized steps following the pattern symbolizing the word 'heart' (chữ tâm), synchronized with the ritual music.

After the 'Đặng diện' ritual comes the 'Tế Lễ' ritual (literally translated as 'Ritual Sacrifice'). This ritual is held for the bereaved family members and fellow Cao Đài followers to pay tribute to the deceased. The scripture chanted in this ritual is called 'Secular Scripture' (Kinh Thế Đạo), which centers on the relationships between parents and children, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, or friends, depending on who the deceased is. The scripture's lyrics and rhythm resemble Vietnamese traditional lullabies, making the attendees more emotional.

The most remarkable session of the funeral ceremony on the second day is the ritual to pray for the redemption of the soul of the deceased (Lễ Cầu siêu). Except for the bereaved family members kneeling in front of the funeral altar placed before the coffin, all other fellow Cao Đài followers and friends will stand, separated by



gender, symbolizing the Yang-Yin principle of the I Ching (Book of Changes). The scripture requests the divinities to forgive the soul for all wrong-doings or sins committed during its time on Earth and calls for the soul to renounce all secular ties and return to its true home.

The third day of a Cao Đài funeral concludes with a talismanic practice performed by a professionally trained Cao Đài dignitary and the transportation of the coffin to the cemetery on the Bát Nhã Boat. This ritual begins when the Cao Đài clergy, choristers, and fellow Cao Đài followers collectively chant the scripture to pray for the redemption of the soul, similar to what they do on the second day of the funeral. During this time, a professionally trained dignitary from the Cao Đài Holy See or the Cao Đài Provincial Representative Committee performs the talismanic practice for the soul of the deceased. To begin, the dignitary prays to Master Cao Đài and pours tea and fresh water, which have been offered to Master Cao Đài on the altar, into a cup, aiming to symbolically produce the 'Mahasattva water' (Ma Ha Thủy). The dignitary then uses a brush to spread this 'Mahasattva water' around the coffin, symbolically purifying the body of the deceased. After that, the dignitary uses a secretly trained technique of walking around the coffin and symbolically cutting the 'secular ties or roots' of the deceased (đoạn căn). Then, using three incense sticks, the dignitary performs the 'promoting the soul's salvation' ritual in front of the coffin, symbolically sending the soul to Heaven.

At this moment, the soul of the deceased is believed to have gained enlightenment and can return to its true home with the assistance of the Bát Nhã Boat. The Cao Đài funeral undertakers will perform the 'moving-the-coffin ritual' (Lễ di quan) before placing the coffin on the Bát Nhã Boat and heading to the cemetery. Traditionally, if the deceased is buried in the main cemetery of Cao Đài called Thái Bình Cực Lạc (Supreme Peace and Ultimate Bliss) in Tay Ninh province, the Bát Nhã Boat will be directed to pass the Holy See for the soul to perform a symbolic ritual in front of Master Cao Đài and the Eternal Mother worshipped within the complex of the Tay Ninh Cao Đài Holy See. After this brief ritual, the Bát Nhã Boat heads to the cemetery for the burial ceremony, marking the end of the second phase of the funeral and the beginning of the mourning period.

The mourning period of a Cao Đài funeral lasts for a total of 581 days after death, marked by three stages. The first stage is called "Tuần cửu" (periodic rituals), primarily held at local Cao Đài Temples. There are nine "Tuần cửu", each held every nine days after death, lasting a total of 81 days. During the ninth "Tuần cửu", the soul of the deceased is believed to reach the Realm of Creation and Nurture (Tọa Hóa Thiên), reigned by the Eternal Mother.

Following this, the bereaved family waits another 200 days to hold a ritual called "Lễ Tiểu Tường" (first anniversary of death on 281st day after death; 小祥 xiǎo xiáng). On this day, the soul is believed to have reached the Realm of Nothingness, reigned by Dipankara Buddha (Nhiên Đẳng Cổ Phật).

The final major ritual of a Cao Đài funeral is marked with the second anniversary of death (Lễ Đại Tường; 大祥 dà xiáng) on the 581st day after death. After this second anniversary, the soul is believed to have reached the Realm of Cosmic Chaos (Hỗn Nguơn Thiên), reigned by Maitreya Buddha, to attend the Assembly of the Dragon Flower (Hội Long Hoa). Following this Assembly, it is determined if the soul has attained the ranks of Buddha or not.

According to the deputy chief of the Bát Nhã Boat Drama performance team, the Bát Nhã Boat drama is performed by the Funeral Committee of the Cao Đài Holy See when a dignitary of the rank of Priest or higher passes away, or during the grand inauguration of Cao Đài Temples that worship Master Cao Đài or the Eternal Mother. Additionally, an annual performance of the Bát Nhã Boat drama takes place on the 16th of January according to the lunar calendar, during a mass redemptive ceremony (Cầu siêu hội).

The deputy chief added that there are two forms of the Bát Nhã Drama performance: the 'Serving Performance' (Chèo hầu) and the 'Seeing-off performance' (Chèo đưa). The 'Serving Performance', which still remains today, takes place at the Guest Hall (Khách Đình; 客停 kè tíng), the Eternal Mother Temple or at local Cao Đài temples. In contrast, the 'Seeing-off performance' took place on the real Bát Nhã Boat as it transported the

coffin of a deceased dignitary to the cemetery. However, this form of performance ceased after the national reunification in 1975.

The performing style of this drama is a mixture of the Vietnamese traditional art forms *Tuồng* (classical Vietnamese opera) and *Bả Trạo* (traditional “grasping the paddle” singing) originating from Vietnamese coastal villages. Accordingly, the actors employ highly stylized performance skills and symbolism to clearly describe the characters they portray. Their faces are also painted in a way that allows the audience to easily identify the personalities of the characters. Additionally, the characters of the Bát Nhã Boat Drama are more likely replicas of the *Bả Trạo* folk art and festival ritual, which include the three main characters such as *Tổng Lái* (Captain), *Tổng Mũi* (Pilot), *Tổng Thương* (Purser) and *Bả Trạo* (Boat Rowers). However, the Bát Nhã Boat Drama has added an additional character called *Tổng Khẩu* who represents human beings or the souls, and has been elevated to have a more spiritual mission.



**Picture 4.** Theatric performance of the Bát Nhã Boat.

In the middle hall of the Eternal Mother Temple, a temporary stage with a high table was set up opposite the main altar worshipping the Eternal Mother, symbolizing the cabin of the captain of the Bát Nhã boat (*Tổng Lái*). A plastic carpet is placed in front of the table, which symbolized the board of the boat.

The theatric drama of the Bát Nhã Boat centers on four major characters and a crew of twelve rowers, performing the symbolic journey of the Bát Nhã Boat as it transports enlightened souls across of the sea of suffering to the shore of Nirvana or the Pure Land, commonly known as the Realm of Eternal Life (*Cõi Thiêng Liêng Hằng Sống*) in Cao Đài terminology.

According to an explanatory speech by Mr. Trần Duy Nghĩa, who served as the Juridical Reformer (*Khai Pháp*) of the Cao Đài Religion, the four major characters of the Bát Nhã Boat drama include *Tổng Lái* (Captain), who wears a striped facial make-up and looks majestic; *Tổng Mũi* (Pilot), who wears pinkish facial make-up and looks elegant; *Tổng Thương* (Purser), who wears red facial make-up and looks anxious; and *Tổng Khẩu* (human beings or their souls), who looks innocent and witty.

The drama performance officially starts when the *Tổng Lái* (Captain) walks onto the temporary stage symbolizing the Bát Nhã Boat like a commander-in-chief and stylishly sings ‘Following the Buddha’s command – Descending to the human world – Navigating the Bát Nhã Boat – Seeking the original numina (yuanling) to save all’.

The *Tổng Lái* (Captain) symbolically refers to as the miraculous power of Buddha, while the Pilot (*Tổng Mũi*), who guides and shows directions for the Boat, represents the power of Dharma. The *Tổng Thương* (Purser),

who takes care of affairs on the boat, symbolizes the power of Sangha. A crew of twelve rowers (Bá Trạo), responsible for rowing the boat under the guidance of the Pilot, represent the twelve zodiac signs: Rat, Buffalo (Ox in Chinese zodiac), Tiger, Cat (Rabbit in Chinese zodiac), Dragon, Snake, Horse, Goat, Monkey, Rooster, Dog and Pig. Additionally, the *Tổng Khậu* (human beings) symbolizes innocent souls who still sink in the sea of suffering due to secular desires and are significantly influenced by their seven emotions and six senses.

The *Bát Nhã Boat* drama is based on the philosophy that Maitreya Buddha, under the command of the Eternal Mother, sends the *Bát Nhã Boat* to save original numina (yuanling) in this third universal salvation. When an individual passes away, the *Bát Nhã Boat*, symbolizing the miraculous power of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, transports their soul on a return journey to the Realm of Eternal Life.

On the stage, the *Tổng Lái* (Captian), committed to his spiritual duty on the *Bát Nhã Boat*, repeatedly encouraged the *Tổng Mũi* (Pilot) and the *Tổng Thương* (Purser) to wholeheartedly fulfill their roles of navigating the *Bát Nhã Boat* through different realms, calling for enlightened souls to get on board and return to the Pure Land. Similarly, the *Tổng Mũi* (Pilot) urged the twelve boat rowers to paddle smoothly while the *Tổng Thương* (Purser) anxiously took care of the onboard affairs, ensuring the *Bát Nhã Boat* safely reached the other shore of Nirvana.

Accompanied by a symphony of musical instruments and drums, the actors excellently portrayed their characters with stylized movements and singing techniques. The Deputy Chief of the *Bát Nhã Boat* Drama performance team stated that the actors must practice for years and pass an examination held by the Holy See to perform. He added that the most challenging part of performing the *Bát Nhã Boat* Drama is to convey the identity and personality of each character while successfully transferring the meaning of the *Bát Nhã Boat* run by the Cao Đài Religion. Therefore, he admitted that recruiting young volunteers to train and substitute the older generation of actors is a real challenge. This is because, he explained, only those actors who possess a great desire for Cao Đài's unique performing art and an immense willingness to serve the ultimate goal of salvation, as taught by Master Cao Đài, can perform soulfully and captivantly.

Approximately 100 audiences attending the drama performance that I witnessed, and hardly anyone left before the 3-hour-long performance concluded. Although the performance ended, the four singing sentences in the drama still lingered in my mind: 'The river of life is a tumultuous sea of suffering - Worldly travelers struggle, adrift in its currents - Yet, there is a celestial boat ready to pull them out - Carrying them to the other shore, escaping the illusions of life'.

### **JOURNEY TO THE CEMETERY: DEATH AS A RETURN**

My informant, Tan, took me to a local Cao Đài Funeral Committee approximately 3 km away from the Tay Ninh Cao Dai Holy See to observe how the *Bát Nhã Boat* was operated to transport the coffin of a deceased Cao Đài follower to the cemetery. Traditionally, a Cao Đài funeral ceremony lasts for three days following the passing of the deceased. The detailed funeral schedule had been sent to the funeral committee by the local Cao Đài temple three days earlier, so all the undertakers (Đạo Tỳ) of the funeral committee had been informed and summoned to carry out their duty on that day.

At around 6:30 that morning, more than 30 undertakers, wearing black uniforms, were ready for their duty. Tan reminded me of the crew of twelve boat rowers in the *Bát Nhã Boat* Drama, who were believed by Cao Đài followers to be the disciples of the Maitreya Buddha. He explained that the Maitreya Buddha is the owner of the *Bát Nhã Boat* and that those operating the boat are considered disciples of the Maitreya Buddha. The twelve boat rowers assist the Captain, the Pilot, and the Purser in paddling the *Bát Nhã Boat* to the other shore of Nirvana. Therefore, according to Tan, these undertakers, who were about to transport the coffin of a deceased Cao Đài follower to the cemetery—symbolizing transporting the soul of the deceased to the shore of Nirvana—were also considered disciples of the Maitreya Buddha. He emphasized that the Cao Đài religion's *Bát Nhã Boat* retains its full spiritual meaning only when operated by Cao Đài-approved undertakers. Otherwise, the *Bát Nhã Boat* is merely a funeral vehicle.

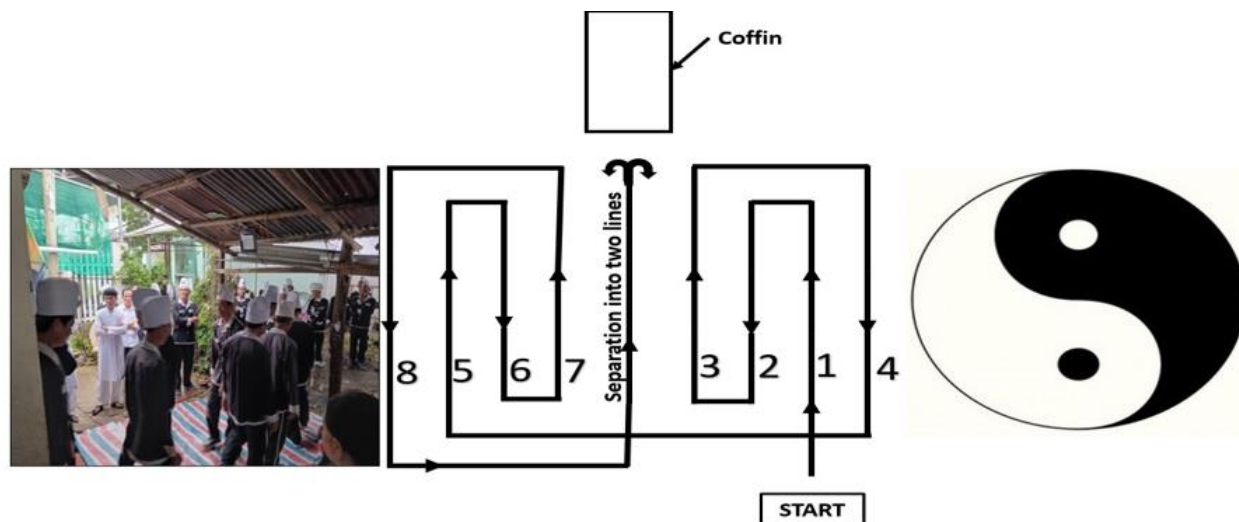
Tan further explained that these undertakers are all volunteers from the local community who have vowed to serve the Cao Đài religion. Each Cao Đài local temple has its own funeral committee with its own voluntary undertakers. The undertakers must have official approval from the Cao Đài Holy See and undergo special training before they can serve.

The local Cao Đài Funeral Committee where I came to observe has three Bát Nhã Boats. One is a traditional boat that rests on a two-wheel chassis and is pulled by ropes, while the other two are more modern and constructed on modified trucks driven by a driver. When I arrived, the deputy funeral committee leader was double-checking the physical condition of the Bát Nhã Boats as a routine before departure. He started the engine to ensure the truck was working properly. Then, he lit three sticks of incense, placed each stick in a little metal pipe in front of each Bát Nhã Boat, and silently prayed for the safety of the journey.

That morning, the newest Bát Nhã Boat, constructed on a modified truck, was chosen to transport the coffin of the deceased to the cemetery. The deputy leader explained that the traditional Bát Nhã Boat would be used if specifically requested by the family of the deceased. Otherwise, the modern ones on modified trucks would be used to reduce the need for human power. Before departure, the committee leader checked the attendance of the summoned undertakers and briefed them about the itinerary the Bát Nhã Boat would take. During this brief meeting, twelve undertakers were randomly chosen to carry the coffin from inside the house to the Bát Nhã Boat and to place the coffin in the grave. The rest also came along as assistants. Then, the entire committee prayed for a safe journey before a Cao Đài altar in the back hall (Hậu Điện) and headed to the funeral scene at the deceased's private home in the same village.

When the Bát Nhã Boat arrived at the funeral scene, the ritual to inform the ancestors of the moving of the coffin to the cemetery was being conducted by local Cao Đài clergy and a scripture-chanting team (choristers) inside the house. The deceased was a 35-year-old married woman who had died of a severe lung disease. After a short second ritual to offer food to the deceased, all the attendants, including the undertakers, stood up, separating males on the right and females on the left, to collectively chant scriptures to pray for the redemption of the deceased's soul. During this time, a professionally trained dignitary from the Cao Đài Holy See performed talismanic practices for the soul of the deceased with "Mahasattva Water" (Ma Ha Thủy), which was a mixture of tea and fresh water from the altar, and symbolically cut the 'secular ties or roots' (đoạn căn). After this ritual, the soul of the deceased was believed to be purified, to have gained enlightenment, and to be able to board the Bát Nhã Boat to return to its true home in the Realm of Eternal Life.

Then, the team of twelve funeral undertakers, led by the team leader, performed the 'moving-the-coffin ritual' (Lễ di quan) before carrying it to the Bát Nhã Boat. These twelve undertakers walked in circles in front of the coffin, symbolizing the form of the Daoist eight trigrams (Bát Quái; 八卦 Bāguà). Finally, the team separated into two lines of six undertakers to carry the coffin to the Bát Nhã Boat parked 50 meters away on the main road.



Picture 5. The moving-the-coffin ritual.

After securing the coffin in the small house in the middle of the Bát Nhã Boat, the entire parade headed to the cemetery. According to the regulated order of the Cao Đài funeral parade, the holders of the Banner of Cao Dai Religion (大道三期普度) lead the parade, followed by the holder of the religious “上生” flag for leading the soul, then the funeral altar of the deceased, two lines of choristers, the Bát Nhã Boat carrying the coffin, the bereaved family, female attendants, and finally male attendants. However, my observation of all Cao Đài funeral parades in contemporary Cao Đài modernization has shown that this regulation is not strictly followed when attendants travel by vans, trucks, and cars.

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#### Order of the Cao Đài Funeral Parade

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1. **Holders of the Banner of Cao Đài Religion (大道三期普度)**
  2. **Holder of the ‘上生’ Flag leading the soul (the ‘上品’ Flag is used for the Cao Đài dignitaries of the rank of Priest or higher)**
  3. **Holder of the funeral altar of the deceased**
  4. **Two lines of choristers (men on the left; women on the right)**
  5. **The Bát Nhã Boat carrying the coffin**
  6. **The bereaved family**
  7. **Accompany (Women)**
  8. **Accompany (Men)**
- 

Figure 6. The Order of the Cao Đài Funeral Parade.

During the Bát Nhã Boat’s journey from the deceased’s home to the cemetery, the choristers continuously chant the ‘Prayer for escorting the coffin’ (Kinh Khi Đưa Linh Cử). The Prayer includes four sentences which spiritually remind the deceased’ soul of their true home in Heavens: “Hail to the Profound Mysteries of the Three Teachings - The Perfect Bát Nhã Boat guides the departed to salvation ... The door to the Pure Land widely opens - Escorting the soul back to its ancient home”.

To Cao Đài followers, ‘death’ is not considered the end of existence, but the beginning of a journey home, where they can meet their true Eternal Mother and true Father (Master Cao Đài) (Jammes & Shuai, 2020: 21). This philosophy is clearly explained by the couplets in front of the Bát Nhã Boat: the physical flesh, born of the earth, needs to return to the earth, while the soul, endowed by Heaven, returns to Heaven. Therefore, Cao Đài funeral ceremonies are not characterized by sadness and sorrow. Instead, they are designed to assist the souls of the deceased in smoothly returning to their true home.

Regarding burial locations, the deputy leader of the funeral committee explained that both Cao Đài and non-Cao Đài followers living within 40 square kilometers of the Tây Ninh Cao Đài Holy See are entitled to be buried in the Cao Đài-owned cemetery called Thái Bình Cực Lạc (Supreme Peace and Ultimate Bliss), which is located 4 km northeast of the Holy See. Those people living in other districts or communities are buried in local cemeteries or Cao Đài-run cemeteries granted by local governments for burial purposes.

The deputy leader added that the image of the Bát Nhã Boat on the road, apart from literally transporting a deceased follower to the cemetery and symbolically transporting enlightened souls to the shore of Nirvana, conveys another crucial notion. The Third Amnesty of God (Cao Đài Religion) is regarded as the “Boat of Salvation” (Thuyền Cứu Khổ; 救苦船) which rescues or delivers human beings from sufferings.

Historically, the Cao Đài religion, which came into existence in 1926, met the spiritual demands of the Vietnamese general public, leading to a sharp increase in followers to hundreds of thousands within its first few years (Gobron, 1949; Blagov, 2016). Although some scholars have associated the Cao Đài religion with a political movement due to its involvement in Vietnamese nationalism during the 1930s-50s (Jammes, 2016; Schaeffer, n.d; Van, 1996), its role in the nationalist movement was indisputable. The leaders of the Cao Đài religion supported the National Restoration Movement (Việt Nam Quang Phục Hội), which provided spiritual inspiration for nationalists in the realms of patriotism, restoration of lost traditions, and construction of a harmonious community. Additionally, the emergence of the Cao Đài army helped balance the powers of different political forces in Southern Vietnam. More importantly, the Cao Đài army protected their temples and communities, ensuring their safety during wartime.

Furthermore, the Protector of Cao Đài Dharma (Hộ Pháp) established the Cao Đài Works of Charity (Phước Thiện) in 1938, which has been operated by Cao Đài followers in parallel with the Cao Đài executive management, from the central Cao Đài Holy See to local communities. With abundant financial supplies from agricultural and industrial products, as well as other business activities, the Cao Đài religion has become a reliable place of refuge for the elderly, orphans, and victims of stray bullets. Unemployed individuals could find jobs in Cao Đài-run farms or factories, and residents in Cao Đài army-controlled regions were safe from attacks by other political armed forces (Fall, 1955: 235).

When a person in the community passes away, Cao Đài members gather to carry out funeral ceremonies. A key feature of these ceremonies is the Bát Nhã Boat, which conveys various spiritual and practical meanings. Thus, Cao Đài has become both a spiritual and material protector of the Vietnamese people (Perrin, 2011: 121) and has successfully brought them a sense of salvation (Van, 1996: 181). This sense of salvation, symbolized by the image of the Bát Nhã Boat in Cao Đài funeral ceremonies, continued during the two decades between 1975 and 1997 after national reunification when nearly all religious activities were restricted and strictly controlled by the new government. During the pandemic from 2020 to 2022, the Cao Đài religion and its Bát Nhã Boats once again demonstrated their significant societal contributions and commitment to its ultimate goal of salvation. Despite strict social distancing measures, local Cao Đài temples became essential suppliers of food and necessities. The Bát Nhã Boat was granted special licenses to participate in funeral ceremonies, providing a crucial service during a critical time (Anh, 2021).





**Figure 7.** The Bát Nhã Boat on the way toward the cemetery.

Lewis (2016: 215) claimed that householders desire basic human blessings in this life and seek similar spiritual goals. In this regard, the Cao Đài religion has successfully fulfilled its ultimate goal by using the Bát Nhã Boat to remind its followers of the importance of spiritual cultivation and societal service.

The Bát Nhã Boat, which was transporting the coffin of a deceased 35-year-old Cao Đài female follower, was directed to pass by the Cao Đài Eternal Mother Temple and the Cao Đài Holy See for additional symbolic rituals for the soul of the deceased. At each place, the tablet of the deceased was carried into the temples for a brief bow, seeking blessings from Master Cao Đài and the Eternal Mother. Then, the Bát Nhã Boat headed to the main cemetery, Thái Bình Cực Lạc.

Upon arriving at the graveyard, the funeral undertakers unloaded the coffin from the Bát Nhã Boat and carried it to the grave under the guidance of the team leader. Before lowering the coffin into the grave, the deceased's family members knelt in front of the coffin for another round of scripture chanting, praying for the soul to reach home safely. After lowering the coffin and ensuring it was balanced, the Bát Nhã Boat's funeral undertakers withdrew, allowing another team to cover the grave for the later construction of the tomb. Returning to the Funeral Committee and carefully parking the Bát Nhã Boat, the entire team of undertakers dismissed, went home to resume their daily activities, and waited for their next mission.

## CONCLUSION

The Bát Nhã Boat in Cao Đài religion continues its mission of transporting the deceased to their final destination, where their physical bodies return to earth, while their souls embark on a new journey toward their true home in Heaven. Although the design of the Bát Nhã Boat has been modernized and the order of the funeral parade has seen minor changes, its spiritual significance as a vessel of salvation remains unchanged. This unique symbol reveals the detailed funeral rites and theological concepts of the soul's journey after death in the Cao Đài faith. Through the Bát Nhã Boat, the Cao Đài religion reminds its followers of the Third Amnesty of God, a means of liberating humanity from the cycle of life and death. However, to achieve this, followers must attain enlightenment by reaching a state of selflessness, renouncing materialistic life, and severing secular ties to return to the Realm of Eternal Life. The complex and well-organized funeral rituals conducted by Cao Đài are designed to prepare souls for this journey home, where the Eternal Mother and Master Cao Đài await. Just as the original numina were sent to the earthly world by boat, their return journey is also guided by the Bát Nhã Boat, also known as the Boat of Wisdom. Furthermore, the dedication of Cao Đài clergy to societal service through Cao Đài funerals, the promotion of Vietnamese performing arts via the Bát Nhã Boat Drama, and the continued operation of the Bát Nhã Boat underscore the enduring growth of this syncretic Cao Đài religion through challenging times in Vietnam.



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## APPENDIX

**Table 1.** Standard Cao Đài Funeral Ritual Procedure

Time Sequence	Sequence of Ritual Ceremonies	English Translation	Additional Explanation
Near-death period	Lễ cầu giải bệnh, cầu hồn khi hấp hối.	Local Cao Đài clergy and choristers chant scriptures, either praying for the recovery of the patient or for the soul at the moment of death.	This ritual usually takes place at the private home of the dying individual, upon invitation from the bereaved family.
	Sau khi chính thức quy vị. <b>Ngày 1:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Báo cáo chính quyền địa phương và Thánh thất gần nhất để chuẩn bị tang lễ.</li> <li>▪ Tụng kinh khi đã chết rồi</li> <li>▪ Thượng Sớ Tản Cố (tại Thánh thất địa phương hoặc Tòa Thánh)</li> <li>▪ Lễ Tẩn Liệm do Đạo Tỳ thực hiện.</li> </ul>	After death is announced. <b>Day 1:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Reporting to the local government and local Cao Đài Temple for funeral preparation and procedures.</li> <li>▪ Chanting scripture to pray for the soul after an individual has passed away.</li> <li>▪ Ritual to inform the Master Cao Đài of the death (in the local Cao Đài Temple or the Holy See)</li> <li>▪ Ritual to place the corpse of the deceased into the coffin, conducted by Cao Đài professionally trained undertakers called Đạo Tỳ.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ This usually involves a marathon-like sequence with several people responsible for organizing the funeral ceremony. Neighbors also provide great help in these situations.</li> <li>▪ If the individual passes away during the ritual of praying for the soul at the moment at death, the clergy and choristers continue chanting scripture for him after his death.</li> <li>▪ In this ritual, a “Death Notice Paper” containing the personal information of the deceased and his “Certificate of Cao Đài Membership” are burned in front of the altar of Master Cao Đài.</li> <li>▪ In regions where there are no Cao Đài undertakers, funeral service companies can perform the task under the guidance of Cao Đài clergy.</li> </ul>
Three-day funeral ritual ceremonies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Lập chương trình tang lễ và các bàn nghi án, bài vị</li> <li>▪ Lễ Cáo Từ Tổ, Thành Phục, Cúng Vong, Phát Tang</li> <li>▪ Các buổi cúng tứ thời vẫn thực hiện bình thường tại tư gia, có tụng Di Lạc Chơn Kinh và Kinh Cứu Khổ cho Cửu Huyền Thất Tổ</li> <li>▪ Tối đến, đồng đạo, xóm làng đến thăm, chia buồn.</li> </ul> <b>Ngày 2</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 6:00 a.m cúng thời Mẹo</li> <li>▪ 9:00 a.m Cúng Triều</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Completing the obituary and setting tables for funeral altars with a spirit table of the deceased.</li> <li>▪ Ritual to inform ancestors of the death, pray for the funeral attires, offer sacrifices to the soul of the deceased and distribute mourning bands to the bereaved family members.</li> <li>▪ In addition to the funeral rites on the first day, four daily worship rituals are maintained. These include chanting the Maitreya Buddha Scripture and the Scripture of Alleviating Suffering for the ancestors.</li> <li>▪ In the evening, fellow Cao Đài followers and neighbors visit to offer condolences.</li> </ul> <b>Day 2</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 6:00 a.m. Daily worship ritual in front of the altar of Master Cao Đài.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The coffin is positioned to the left of the house if the deceased is a woman, and to the right if the deceased is a man.</li> <li>▪ The clergy coordinates with the bereaved family to complete the obituary and hangs it up at the funeral site for public announcement. Tables and other necessary objects for the funeral are available at local Cao Đài Temples and transported to the funeral site.</li> <li>▪ If the bereaved family is poor and cannot afford funeral attire or other necessary objects for the funeral, the Charity Committee the local temple will provide them free of charge.</li> <li>▪ Cao Đài Clergy and Choristers take turns being available at the funeral site for various ritual ceremonies.</li> <li>▪ The bereaved family often offers rice soup or fruit to guests. If they cannot afford it, the Cao Đài Charity Committee will cover the cost.</li> </ul>
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Local Cao Đài Clergy and Choristers lead these rituals.</li> <li>▪ The ritual is assisted by ritual servants (Lễ sĩ)</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 12:00 p.m. Cúng thời Ngọ</li> <li>▪ 2:00 p.m Cúng Tịch</li> <li>▪ 3:00 p.m. Lễ Đãng Điện, Tế Lễ,</li> <li>▪ 4:00 p.m. Lễ Cầu Siêu</li> <li>▪ 6:00 p.m Cúng thời Dậu</li> <li>▪ 8:00 p.m Tụng Di Lạc Chơn Kinh, Kinh Cửu Khổ cho Cửu Huyền Thất Tổ</li> <li>▪ Ban Nhạc Tòa Thánh đến biểu diễn hòa đờn, nhạc Đạo Cao Đài.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 9:00 a.m. Ritual to offer food to the soul of the deceased, in front of the funeral altar.</li> <li>▪ 12:00 p.m. Daily worship ritual in front of the altar of Master Cao Đài.</li> <li>▪ 2:00 p.m. Ritual to offer food to the soul of the deceased, in front of the funeral altar.</li> <li>▪ 3:00 p.m. Ritual Sacrifice for the deceased by family members and fellow Cao Đài followers.</li> <li>▪ 16:00 p.m. Chanting scriptures to pray for the redemption of the soul of the deceased.</li> <li>▪ 18:00 p.m. Daily worshipping ritual in front of the altar of Master Cao Đài.</li> <li>▪ 8:00 p.m. Chanting the Maitreya Buddha Scripture and the Scripture of Alleviating Suffering for the ancestors.</li> <li>▪ Cao Đài Music Performance: By musicians from the Cao Đài Holy See.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ In this ritual, the choristers chant scriptures in a different style called “Thài”, characterized by a slower rhythm and lingering voice, which sounds very emotional.</li> <li>▪ This ritual is one of the most important rites during the three-day ceremony, attracting many fellow Cao Đài followers, neighbors and acquaintances who come to collectively chant scriptures to pray for the redemption of the soul of the deceased.</li> <li>▪ If the deceased is a Cao Đài dignitary of the religious rank of Priest or higher, and the coffin is placed in the Guest House (Khách Đình) or the Temple worshipping the Eternal Mother (Báo Ân Từ) for funeral rites, there will be a theatrical performance of the Bát Nhã Boat Drama by the Cao Đài Funeral Committee.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Ngày 3</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 6:00 a.m. Cúng thời Mẹo</li> <li>▪ Lễ Cáo Từ Tổ</li> <li>▪ Lễ cúng vong, đọc kinh cầu siêu. Chức sắc Hội Thánh thực hiện hành pháp, đoạn căn hoặc độ thăng</li> </ul>	<p><b>Day 3</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 6:00 a.m. Daily worship ritual in front of the altar of Master Cao Đài.</li> <li>▪ Ritual to inform ancestors of the moving of the coffin to the cemetery.</li> <li>▪ Ritual to offer food to the soul of the deceased, in front of the funeral altar. Chanting scripture to pray for the redemption of the soul of the deceased. Ritual to transport the coffin to the cemetery on the Bát Nhã Boat.</li> <li>▪ Ritual to place the coffin into the grave at the cemetery.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ During this ritual, the Bát Nhã Boat is pulled or driven to the funeral site by the Cao Đài undertakers.</li> <li>▪ During this time, a professionally trained dignitary from the Cao Đài Holy See performs Cao Đài-styled talismanic practices for the soul of the deceased.</li> <li>▪ If the deceased is an ordinary Cao Đài follower, this ritual is called ‘cutting off secular ties or roots’ (đoạn căn). If the deceased is a dignitary of the rank of student-priest or higher, the ritual is called ‘promoting the soul’s salvation’ (Độ thăng).</li> <li>▪ The talismanic practices are unique to funeral ritual ceremonies in contemporary Vietnam. After this ritual, the soul of the deceased is believed to be purified, to have attained enlightenment, and to be ready to board the Bát Nhã Boat for the return journey.</li> <li>▪ The Cao Đài funeral undertakers will perform the ‘moving-the-coffin ritual’ (Lễ di quan) before placing the coffin on the Bát Nhã Boat and heading to the cemetery.</li> </ul>

<p>Mourning Period</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Di quan đi ra thuyền Bát Nhã đi ra nghĩa trang.</li> <li>▪ Lễ Hạ Nguyệt tại nghĩa trang.</li> <li>▪ Lễ Tụng tuần Cửu cho người quy vị, 9 tuần Cửu trong 81 ngày.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Periodic rituals assist the soul of the deceased in reaching different realms in Heaven, lasting for 81 days after death.</li> <li>▪ First anniversary of death (小祥 xiǎo xiáng): 281 days after death</li> <li>▪ Second anniversary of death (大祥 dà xiáng): 581 days after death</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ In total, there are nine periodic rituals called “Tuần Cửu”.</li> <li>▪ One “Tuần Cửu” is held at the local temple every nine days, lasting for 81 days after death.</li> <li>▪ In the ninth “Tuần Cửu”, the soul of the deceased is believed to reach the Realm of Creation and Nurture (Tọa Hóa Thiên), headed by the Eternal Mother.</li> <li>▪ On this day, the soul is believed to have reached the Realm of Nothingness, headed by Dipankara Buddha (Nhiên Đăng Cổ Phật).</li> <li>▪ After this second anniversary of death, the soul is believed to have reached the Realm of Cosmic Chaos (Hỗn Ngươn Thiên), headed by the Maitreya Buddha, to attend the Assembly of the Dragon Flower (Hội Long Hoa). After this Assembly, it can be determined if one has attained ranks of Buddha or not.</li> </ul>
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