

When the Sage Becomes a “God”: The Spiritualized Confucian Sect of Minh Đức Nho giáo Đại đạo in Southern Vietnam

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Abstract

Southern Vietnam’s tradition has been mainly built on Confucian ideology, although it is a transformed one. There have been two types of Confucianism in the region: state-sponsored and mass Confucianism. During the period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, under harsh colonial rule, a number of messianic religious movements emerged. The Minh Đức Nho giáo Đại đạo sect (MĐNGĐĐ, founded in 1932 in Trà Vinh province) is one such movement. The sect takes Confucian norms and values as its basic platform and further acculturates and transforms the philosophical values and rituals of Buddhism, Daoism, and Caodaism, as well as popular religions, to consolidate its settings.

This article uses fieldwork—survey data and written documents—and applies historical particularism and acculturation theories, as well as the concepts of “standardization” and “de-standardization” by Watson (1985), to generalize the birth and features of MĐNGĐĐ in the local context. The study provides a comprehensive means to access the history of social thought in pre-modern Vietnam and possible principles of Confucian propagation and transformation in the country. The study finds that Confucianism may easily transform into a religious institution if the civilizing missions of local elites are missing.

Keywords: Minh Đức Nho giáo Đại đạo, Southern Vietnam, spiritualize, sage, god

Ko modrec postane »božanstvo«: Poduhovljena konfucijanska sekta Minh Đức Nho giáo Đại đạo iz Južnega Vietnama

Izvilleček

Tradicija Južnega Vietnama je bila osnovana predvsem na konfucijanski ideologiji, pa čeprav v njeni dokaj prirejeni obliki. V regiji sta obstajali dve vrsti konfucijanstva: konfucijanstvo pod pokroviteljstvom države in konfucijanstvo množic. V času med poznim

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devetnajstim in zgodnjim dvajsetim stoletjem so pod jarmom trde kolonialne oblasti vzniknila številna mesijanska verska gibanja, med katerimi je bila tudi sekta Minh Đức Nho giáo Đại đạo (MĐNGĐĐ, osnovana leta 1932 v provinci Trà Vinh). Osnova sekte so konfucijanske norme in vrednote. Da bi utrdila svoj položaj, sekta v svojo osnovo prav tako akulturira in preobraža nekatere filozofske vrednote in obrede iz budizma, daoizma, caodaizma in popularnih religij.

Članek umešča nastanek in značilnosti MĐNGĐĐ v njen lokalni kontekst, pri čemer uporablja terenske raziskave – podatke anketiranja in pisne vire –, teoriji zgodovinskega partikularizma in akulturacije ter Watsonova (1985) koncepta »standardizacije« in »de-standardizacije«. Ta študija tako ponuja sredstvo, s katerim je mogoče izčrpno dostopati tako do zgodovine družbene misli v predmodernem Vietnamu kakor tudi do možnih načel širjenja in preobrazbe konfucijanstva v državi. Študija razkriva, kako se, kadar pri lokalni eliti primanjkuje pobude za civiliziranje, lahko konfucijanstvo enostavno preobrazí v versko ustanovo.

Ključne besede: Minh Đức Nho giáo Đại đạo, Južni Vietnam, poduhovljenje, modrec, božanstvo

Minh Đức Nho giáo Đại đạo— The Elements and Characteristics

In 2015, during field studies in coastal districts of Trà Vinh province, the author experienced the pluralism and harmony of the local cultures established by the Viet (Vietnamese), Khmer, and Hoa (Chinese) ethnic groups in the region. In this remote land, a religious form of Confucianism “penetrated”, “mutated” and “fossilized”: the Minh Đức Nho giáo Đại đạo ((明德儒教大道), or MĐNGĐĐ in short).

Research on MĐNGĐĐ has been terribly limited. There have been three articles in total relating to the sect published so far: Emi Nogami’s (2015) “A Case Study of Khổng Tử Thánh Điện (Minh Đức Nho giáo Đại đạo) in Cầu Ngang County, Trà Vinh Province, Vietnam”, Trần Hồng Liên and Lâm Thị Thu Hiền’s (2016) “Confucian Imprints in Minh Đức Nho giáo đại đạo”, and Nguyen Ngoc Tho’s (2017) “The Confucian Transformation in Southern Vietnam: Minh Đức Nho giáo đại đạo in Trà Vinh”. All three articles mainly describe the inherent features and absorption of Confucianism in MĐNGĐĐ; however, there has not been much discussion on the position of this sect in the systematic picture of Vietnamese and East Asian Confucianism. The aim of this article is thus to address this gap in the literature.

MÔNGĐỒ is a religious sect that is said to be the “descendant” of the Tiên Thiên Đạo (*Xiantiandao* 先天道)¹ and the Ngũ Chi Minh Đạo (*Wuzhi Mingdao* 五支明道)², both of which have close relationships with Caodaism (高台教)³, although it is designated a Confucian Sect. Ignoring the diversity and syncretic nature of its origin, as well as its intimate relationships with Buddhism, Daoism, Caodaism, and others, MÔNGĐỒ is, above all, an extension and transformation of Confucianism, as seen vividly in its name.

MÔNGĐỒ was founded by Mr. Lư Cường Cánh⁴ in the coastal area of Ba Động village, Trà Vinh province in 1932 with the principle of using the essence of Confucian ideology as norms and values to educate people and restore morality and social order (see further Nogami 2015; Trần and Lâm 2016). After becoming “enlightened”, Lư Cường Cánh was honoured as the Lord Thánh Đức Thiên Quân (聖德天君), the founder of MÔNGĐỒ. This primary religious establishment in Ba Động is called Chí Thiện Đàn (至善壇).

MÔNGĐỒ’s believers show their basic faith in the Jade Emperor of Heaven, called “the Supreme God” (*Đấng Tối cao*). MÔNGĐỒ focused on the Confucian philosophy in the book *Daxue* (大學, *The Great Learning*), which considers the principle of Three Bonds as the core foundation. The main teachings uphold three Confucian values: *minh đức*, *tân dân*, and *chí thiện*. The concept of *minh đức* (明德) means “to illustrate illustrious virtue”, *tân dân* (親(新)民) means “to renovate the people”, and *chí thiện* (至善) means “to rest in the highest excellence”. All three norms imply the positive renunciation of bad habits, the promotion of self-realization,

- 1 Xiantiandao 先天道 is the syncretic popular religion made from the combination of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism by Huang Dehui (黃德輝) in China at the end of the Ming and the beginning of the Qing dynasties (see Nogami 2015).
- 2 Wuzhimingdao 五支明道 comprises five denominations established during the Ming dynasty in China, namely Mingshi (Ming Sư 明師), Mingtang (Minh Đường 明堂), Mingli (Minh Lý 明理), Mingshan (Minh Thiện 明善), and Mingxin (Minh Tân 明新). The deities in Wuzhimingdao include the Eternal Mother Goddess (Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu 瑶池金母), Jade Emperor of Heaven (Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế 玉皇大帝), various Buddhas, and various hermits (Takatsu 2012, 28; Nogami 2015).
- 3 Caodaism, fully called *Đại Đạo Nam Kỳ Phổ Độ* (Great Way of the Third Period of Salvation), is a syncretic religion founded by Ngô Văn Chiêu (1878–1932) in 1926 in Tây Ninh, 100 kilometers northwest from Ho Chi Minh City in Southern Vietnam. Caodaism was constructed on the foundation of Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, ancestor worship, Catholicism, and other religions. There are around five million followers living in the Central and Southern Vietnam (see Ho Tai 1983, 77–78, 100; Takatsu 2012; Dutton, Werner and Whitmore 2012, 429–30). MÔNGĐỒ classics sometimes mention Caodaism’s Three periods of Salvation (Tam kỳ phổ độ), Goddess of Three Palaces (Tam tòa Thánh mẫu), Celestial Coordination Pavilion (Hiệp Thiên Đài), Nine Layers Pavilion (Cửu Trùng Đài), etc. (see MÔNGĐỒ 1977; 2002).
- 4 Also called Lư Văn Cánh, or Mươi Cánh, a local farmer, born in Nha Roi village, Thạnh Trị District, Sóc Trăng province.

self-improvement and mutual assistance of the people in their process of “renovation”.⁵ MĐNGĐĐ currently possesses three establishments in Trà Vinh with the names focusing on the great Confucian virtues: Tân Dân Đền (新民壇, Human Renovation Shrine),⁶ Chí Thiện Đền (至善壇, Highest Excellence Shrine), and Chí Thiện Minh (至善明, Shining Excellence Shrine). By conveying these basic philosophies, MĐNGĐĐ is consistent with the judgment of the author Ngo Duc Tinh (1984) that popular belief is an indispensable part of traditional culture, a place of production, integration, conservation, and transmission of many cultural values. MĐNGĐĐ is a spiritualized form of Confucianism, a religious sect.

Despite the fact that the three shrines have three different names (Tân Dân Đền, Chí Thiện Đền, and Chí Thiện Minh), they commonly share the same title, “Confucius God Temple” (Khổng Tử Thánh Điện 孔子聖殿). This title is obviously unorthodox compared with state-sponsored Confucius temples (Khổng Miếu 孔廟, or Văn Miếu 文廟)⁷ in late feudal Vietnam. When addressing a proper shrine, academicians generally take the full name, such as Khổng Tử Thánh Điện—Chí Thiện Đền, Khổng Tử Thánh Điện—Tân Dân Đền, in order to differentiate it from the state-sponsored ones. In this article, we prefer the Vietnamese name of Khổng Tử Thánh Điện since it maintains the original implication. While Trần Hồng Liên, a current ethnological writer, calls it a temple (廟) (Trần and Lâm 2006), the local people also address it as “miếu Khổng Tử (孔子廟, Confucius Temple)”. After the first shrine was built by Mr. Lưu Văn Cánh in Ba Động village, in 1961, another shrine, Khổng Tử Thánh Điện—Chí Thiện Minh, was built by a wealthy follower, Mr. Lâm Văn Thương—a local Chinese man—in the town Cầu Ngang of Trà Vinh province⁸. This shrine allows over 100 devotees to gather and perform rituals in each session. According to Mr. Chon Minh Kiu, the 64-year-old priest of the temple in Cầu Ngang, every weekend the ritual attracts around 30 to 50 people, since many others are busy in farming or doing business out of town (see also Nogami 2015). Mr. Kiu further

5 See <https://cextext.org/liji/da-xue>. Wang Yangming once discussed this point, saying: “The theory of beginnings and ends is in general right. Even if we read “renovating the people” as “loving the people” and say that manifesting the character is the root and loving the people is the branches, it is not incorrect. The main thing is that root and branches should not be distinguished as two different things” (in Chan 1963, 663).

6 Besides these three temples in Trà Vinh, there is another one built in Đông Hồ Street, Ho Chi Minh City.

7 There are dozens of state-sponsored temples that are currently being preserved. In Southern Vietnam, one can see such institutions in Đồng Nai (Văn miếu Trấn Biên), Vĩnh Long (Văn miếu Vĩnh Long), and Gò Công (Văn miếu Gò Công).

8 The current administrative owner of this establishment is Ms. Lâm Thị Lệ, daughter of Mr. Lâm Văn Thương.

claims that his shrine is the most popular among three establishments in Trà Vinh province, even though the Liturgical Board is currently directed and operated by himself alone. In 1966, Mr. Ngô Nghiêm Sanh built one more facility in Trà Vinh City: the Khổng Tử Thánh Điện—Chí Thiện Đàn, after successfully practicing divination.⁹

The structure of worship in each Khổng Tử Thánh Điện may have shifted, but still expresses a sense of pluralism, in which the key figures are Confucius, Amitabha Buddha, the Jade Emperor of Heaven, the Eternal Mother Goddess, Laozi, Guandi (Chinese God of War), Avalokiteśvara (Goddess of Mercy), and others. In Chí Thiện Đàn (at Ba Động village), the main altar consists of the Jade Emperor of Heaven, Amitabha Buddha, Confucius, and Laozi (太上老君). In addition, one can see the statue of the Eternal Mother Goddess (*Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu* 瑶池金母), the unnamed tablets of generic “ancestors” as well as early village pioneers who made a significant contribution to the founding of the sect (Trần and Lâm 2016). In Chí Thiện Minh in the town of Cầu Ngang, the main hall is dedicated to three main gods: the Goddess of Mercy (left), Confucius (centre), and Guandi (right). The subordinate hall opposite to the main hall is used to worship the local “earth gods”, including Nguyễn Kim Chi (called Thổ địa Ngũ phương (五方土地爺, the General Landlord)), and Trần Thái Độ (Thổ địa Nam phương (南方土地爺, the Lord of the South)) (fieldwork data, 2016). To a certain extent, MĐNGĐĐ has a point of similarity with Caodaism: the worship of the Supreme God and the Jade Emperor of Heaven. Khổng Tử Thánh Điện—Chí Thiện Minh in Cầu Ngang is located about 100 meters from a vibrant Caodai temple; its faith and religious practices are consequently somewhat influenced by this religion, and some of the followers participate in rituals in both the Caodai temple and MĐNGĐĐ shrine (fieldwork data, 2016). Informants in Cầu Ngang and Trà Vinh City report that MĐNGĐĐ comprises one fundamental philosophical basis of *Minh đức—Chí thiện—Tân dân* and three core component structures of *Tam giáo đạo* (三教道, Three Teachings Way),

9 Divination is very popular in MĐNGĐĐ. It is normally practiced by member(s) of the liturgical board when they hold festivals or encounter a serious issue that they need to ask Confucius and other supernatural powers about for “guidance” and “teaching”. Beside Confucius, other supernatural powers include Dīpaṃkara (Nhiên Đăng Cổ Phật 燃燈佛), Amitābha Buddha (A-di-đà 阿彌陀佛), Avalokiteśvara (Quan Âm Bồ tát 觀音菩薩), Cundhi bodhisattva (Chuẩn Đề Bồ tát 準提菩薩), Three Daoist Celestial Masters (Tam Thanh Thượng Phu 三清尚夫), Jade Emperor of Heaven (Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế 玉皇大帝), Celestial Communication Lord (Thông Thiên giáo chủ 通天教主), Caodaism Masters (Cao Đài Thượng Phu 高台尚夫), Eternal Mother Goddess (Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu 瑶池金母), Lê Sơn Mother Goddess (Lê Sơn Thánh Mẫu 黎山聖母), Monkey King (Tề Thiên Đại Thánh 齊天大聖), Li Jing protector (Lý Tĩnh 李靜), Dongfang Shuo (Đông Phương Sóc 東方朔) (see MĐNGĐĐ 2005).

Tam giáo tòa (三教座, Three Teachings Seats),¹⁰ and *Giáo tông Nho giáo* (儒家教宗, Confucian Lords)¹¹ (see also MĐNGĐĐ 2002).

In the institutional structure, the highest unit of MĐNGĐĐ is the liturgical board. At the Khổng Tử Thánh Điện in Ba Động the board consists of four men—the First Master, Mr. Ngô Minh Bé; the Second, Mr. Ngô Nghiêm Sanh; the Third, Mr. Võ Văn Dân; and the Fourth, Mr. Lâm Văn Thường—while at the temple in Cầu Ngang it consists of only one man, Mr. Chơn Minh Kíu. The texts are all recorded from divination, called *The Holy Classics* (聖教經). Divination in the early period was performed in Chinese characters, but it is currently performed in the Vietnamese Romanized script—*chữ Quốc ngữ*.

MĐNGĐĐ advocates polytheism. Its believers trust in karma–samsara transferability, in the dichotomy of heaven and hell, and in the transferability of the good and the bad. According to this faith, the jobs people do and the status they have are due to God’s arrangement based on their karma. This feature has made MĐNGĐĐ closer to Buddhism and Indian philosophy. Accordingly, people who want to get released from the misery of samsara have to comply with the Three Bonds and Five Virtues. They are advised to practice vegetarianism regularly or permanently. Believers voluntarily enter the sect, regardless of their age and social position. They must partake in an initiation ceremony, in which they have to swear their loyalty to the supreme God. After the ceremony, they do not have to stay at the temple, even though they have gained full membership. Instead, they stay at home and perform rituals at the shrine regularly. Members of MĐNGĐĐ call each other “brother” and “sister”, depending on their gender and age. Every day, the liturgical board organizes prayers four times at the hours of the Rat (00:00), Rabbit (07:00), Horse (12:00), and Rooster (19:00 pm). Liturgical activities are quite simple, and mainly include chanting/reading texts and giving offerings (fruits and cakes) to Confucius and other gods. They burn incense sticks when they organize the ritual. The number of daily prayers aligns MĐNGĐĐ with Caodaism, while the incense-burning attaches it with Mahayana Buddhism. On the fifteenth and thirtieth days of every lunar month the liturgical masters and believers conduct larger collective rituals, and chant *Huỳnh Đình sutras* to pray for peace and blessings. The main annual festivals of MĐNGĐĐ include the Founding Day (the Double-Fifth of the lunar calendar), and Confucius’s Anniversary Day (August 27), while secondary activities are more diverse,

10 Three Teachings Seats are for Thái Thượng Lão Quân (太上老君, The Grand Supreme Elderly Lord), Nguyên Thi Thiên Tôn (元始天尊, the Primeval Lord of Heaven) and Thông Thiên giáo chủ (通天教主, Celestial Communication Lord).

11 *Giáo tông Nho giáo* includes Li Jing the protector (Lý Tịnh 李靜), Guandi (Quan Thánh Đế Quân 關聖帝君) and the Middle Celestial Lord (Trung Thiên Thánh giáo 中天聖教).

including the Day of Thiên Tôn Di Lặc (the first day of Lunar New Year), Day of Trung Thiên Thánh Giáo (January 9), Day of Guandi (January 13), Day of the Goddess of Mercy (February 19), Day of Shakyamuni Buddha (April 8), Day of Laozi (July 1), and so on. Throughout the seventh lunar month, members come to the shrine every day to read the prayers for dead spirits. These activities bring MÔNGĐĐ closer to popular religions which actively practice Universal Salvation Rites¹² for lonely ghosts in the seventh full moon of the lunar year. The establishments in Cầu Ngang town and Trà Vinh city organize annual almsgiving to the poor (mainly rice), and sometimes hold charity trips to other places. In terms of costumes, members have to wear white long dresses with black fringes when performing the ritual. Men wear a black hat while women wear a white sharp cowl down to their back. The most prestigious members of the community wear yellow belts while the general members use green ones.¹³ When practicing the ritual, all have to bow to four times to Confucius and other gods.¹⁴

Being a religious sect associated with the masses (mainly peasants), MÔNGĐĐ, like Zhengyi (正義) Daoist tradition, advocates for the association of its religious activities with local customs and the daily practices of local farmers. Important rites of passage, such as maturity, weddings, funerals, and sacrifice, are of particular concern for believers and their relatives. Perhaps the most noticeable are funerals. When a member of a family is about to die, all liturgical members come to attend the ceremony, aiming to guide “the soul” of the dying to return to “the Holy Land”. During the funeral, the priests are in charge of praying for the dead, while the others comply with his guidance and leadership. MÔNGĐĐ followers strictly organize nine ritual performances after the death (performed once every nine days), which they call *Tuần Cửu* rituals (循九). Members participate in the funeral rituals with sincerity, considering it good karma to accumulate their virtues. While this activity has somewhat faded nowadays due to the impact of modernization, the priests and most loyal members are always willing to partake in the voluntary chanting ceremonies for the deceased. MÔNGĐĐ does not clearly define the incarnation of gods or the self-transcendence and rebirth of the priests and believers; therefore, MÔNGĐĐ can be considered somewhere between the worldly institutional Confucianism and a transcendental religion.

MÔNGĐĐ is registered with the local authorities as a religious sect. Although MÔNGĐĐ has its own texts and canon, the mode of propagation of religious

12 In Vietnamese language: *lễ cúng cô hồn* or *Trung nguyên phổ độ*. In Chinese language: 中元普渡 (*zhongyuan pudu*).

13 A similar description is found in Trần and Lâm 2016.

14 In many parts of East Asia, such as China and Vietnam, people bow three times if they worship ancestors, four times if they worship a god or Buddha (see further Weller 1987).

education is mainly oral, through folk poetry. During the fieldwork surveys at Cầu Ngang in 2016, interesting teachings came to light which help show the essential nature of the Sect:

Living and acting simply and normally, you do not pursue and have a luxurious life,

You who understand my Way know that it is not necessarily widespread,

Living and acting simply and normally, you cultivate yourself effectively

Laymen do not wear robes, do not shave your hair and do not leave your home,

You ought to take care of your parents and fulfil the virtue of filial piety,

Husband and wife ought to preserve their faithful heart, and be as pure as the lotus rising up from a muddy pond

You ought to feign ignorance, do not let others know that you are laymen ...¹⁵

The Generic Source of MĐNGĐĐ: The Classical Vietnamese Confucianism

Culture is an ongoing tradition. It is not something given but something to be gradually discovered and preserved by members of society. People always try to live together even though the world is very diverse, and culture is diverse if one focuses on components of the whole society, while unified if one observes society as a whole. Culture is born in a specific context; therefore, when the context changes, there may be some parts of the culture that transform. According to Robert Weller (1987, 5, 172), people create and deploy culture as part of daily life within a system of social relations. Therefore, the analysis and generalization of MĐNGĐĐ's features greatly depend on its temporary settings. MĐNGĐĐ was born as a special form of religious movement in the early twentieth century in Vietnam, so it conveys the historic imprints of the local society in its doctrine and liturgical practice. Being an extended region of Vietnam reclaimed in the last three centuries, Southern Vietnam has witnessed the fading out of orthodox Confucianism and state-sponsored traditions. Instead, ground-level dynamics have

15 Orally told by Mr. Lê Văn Kú, the liturgical priest at Không Từ Thánh Điện – Chí Thiện Đàn (Cầu Ngang town).

been popularized due to various transcultural encounters and multi-cultural acculturation in the region.

Classical orthodox Confucianism in Vietnam has been reluctantly acknowledged by many Western writers. It is far more tenuous to claim that Vietnam truly belongs to Confucian civilization.¹⁶ Stephen O’Harrow explained that even though traditional Vietnam shared the same source of social ideology and political institution, its fate has been different to that of China (O’Harrow 1979, 170), for the Vietnamese were “always disregarding the totality of the norms of civilized conduct in China, chose to take into account specific instances of such experience” (Wolters 1988, 6). Instead, the Vietnamese localized the Confucianist system by fragmenting it and cutting passages, removing their original contextual meaning, and amending some of the content to serve their domestic political and social activities. The indigenous tradition of Southeast Asia in Vietnam has limited the actions of the state and people with regard to adopting and adapting to the whole package of Confucian orthodoxy from China. In the case of MÔNGĐỖ, the founders and followers adopted only the basic concepts of *Minh đức*, *Chí thiên* and *Tân dân* in the *Daxue*, without accepting the interpretative contexts in which the discursive implications of these concepts are generated. Instead, MÔNGĐỖ puts *Minh đức*, *Chí thiên* and *Tân dân* as well as other Confucian virtues such as loyalty, filial piety, respect, righteousness, and so on in the mystical explanatory paradigm close to Buddhist and Daoist philosophies. MÔNGĐỖ followers understand that they can attain *Minh đức*, *Chí thiên* and *Tân dân* by continuously cultivating their heart-mind (good deeds, good karma), so that “gods” like Confucius, the Jade Emperor of Heaven, Laozi and Buddhas will “save” them from suffering (samsara). There is almost no logical explanation or interpretation within the classical Confucian framework. For example, in *The Confucian Classics 1932–2005* (2005), MÔNGĐỖ alleges:

Praying to the Antarctic Lord to promulgate students’ merits of *Minh đức*, *Tân dân* (...),

The golden bell’s ringing sounds, like compassions, are pushing the Confucian students,

All insist on practice so they later can be able to return to the Penglai Wonderlands for the sake of saving all beings. (MÔNGĐỖ 2005, 30)¹⁷

16 This idea has early been confirmed by many writers, such as Rozman 2014, 6–7; FitzGerald 1972, 22; Woodside 2002, 116–17; and Duong 2004, 289–318.

17 Original text: “Đầu vọng bái Tiên Ông Nam Cực; giúp các trò Minh đức, Tân dân.... Tiếng chuông vàng càng kêu vang dội; lòng từ bi hồi thúc quần Nhu. Chúng con quyết chí lo tu; trở về Bồng Đào mở tù chúng sanh.” (MÔNGĐỖ 2005, 30)

Students obtaining *Tân dân, Minh đức* virtues will be secure since they are protected by the masters, lords, goddesses, and saints. (MĐNGĐĐ 2005, 37)¹⁸

In MĐNGĐĐ, “heart-mind” stands at the core position; however, it has been explained in terms of Buddhist cause-effect transferability. In a part of *The Confucian Classics 1932–2005*, it says: “Leaving the Confucian shrine after a prayer session, you need to consistently self-cultivate your heart-mind; such good deeds will set you free from plagues, suffering and always keep you in a peaceful, noble-minded status.”¹⁹ (MĐNGĐĐ 1977, 2–3)

The concept of loyalty shares a similar feature. *The Confucian Classics 1932–2005* continues: “Confucian students firmly persevere, keeping in mind the virtue of loyalty, patience, unity, and scholarly spirit; they silently look for good companions and stay in harmony under the Buddhas’ and celestial gods’ sanctity.” (MĐNGĐĐ 1977, 40)²⁰

In terms of ethnicity, the indigenous Vietnamese are mainly descendants of both Mon-Khmer and Thai speakers, called the *Lạc Việt* (*Luo-Yue* 駱越). The early Vietnamese tattooed their bodies and practiced chewing betel nuts, which they long shared with all Southeast Asian peoples. Confucianism was brought into Vietnam in the early days of the Chinese occupation in the second century BC; however, it did not motivate social transformation until the era of Tang rule (the seventh century). Jennifer Holmgren stated that the first six centuries of Chinese rule in Northern Vietnam “saw more ‘Vietnamization’ of local Chinese than Sinitization of the indigenous Viets”. Many Chinese clans who were “Vietnamized Chinese groups” settled into, helped modify, and were finally absorbed into the social, economic and political environment in Northern Vietnam (see Holmgren 1980, 61, 115–30).²¹ C. P. FitzGerald concluded similarly after showing various evidence that the Chinese troops and migrants became absorbed into and assimilated with the native people in Vietnam (FitzGerald 1972, 214). The strength of localization in ancient Vietnam has thus been widely noted.

18 Original text: “Tân Dân Minh Đức Quy về; Có Thầy có Mẹ dựa kẻ trường Tiên.” (MĐNGĐĐ 2005, 37)

19 Original text: “Giã từ Chí Thiện Nho đàn; trau dồi tâm tốt phụ hoàng mến thương. Lướt qua những cảnh tai ương; siêu siêu minh yếu an bường thanh cao.” (MĐNGĐĐ 1977, 2–3)

20 Original text: “Đạo Nho sĩ từ quyết lòng trung; Đại nhĩ đại hòa thêm sĩ hùng; Ân nhĩ canh thân tìm bạn lữ; Thịnh Tiên rước Phật để chung cùng.” (MĐNGĐĐ 1977, 40)

21 See also Wang 1958, 35, 37, 41, 48, 70, 120; Miyakawa 1960, 27–29; Buttinger 1972, 36; Taylor 1983, 130; Zhang 1995, 40–43, 127–50; and Sun 2010, 47.

Northern Vietnam adopted Confucian norms and values from the Chinese Tang dynasty, due to the tight control of the Tang rulers. In particular, orthodox Confucian institutions were set up at the provincial level, which motivated Confucian education among the Vietnamese villagers (see further Taylor 1983, 174).

In 938, Ngô Quyền declared Vietnamese independence after defeating the Southern Han troops in the Red River Delta. After the short-term dynasties of Đinh and Tiền Lê, Vietnam entered a long era of Buddhist-driven social evolution under the Lý (1009–1225) and Trần (1225–1400) dynasties, even though Confucian ideology was still adopted and promoted by the royal families and bureaucratic elites (see Wolters 1988). As shown by many writers, the Lý and Trần rulers pursued forms of legitimation other than Confucianism (see Taylor, 1987). John Whitmore clarified that while it was correct to confirm Chinese influence in Vietnam, one had to re-examine the extent of its penetration. He asserted that while dealing with Confucianism the Vietnamese did not hide their non-Confucian nature (Whitmore 1976, 200).

Confucian dominance was at its peak during the fifteenth century, under the Lê dynasty (1428–1527).²² However, Confucian classical learning was often mixed with Daoism and Buddhism. Before the Lê dynasty, Hồ Quý Ly's (1336–1407) reforms were said to bring Vietnam closer to the Chinese Confucian trajectory (Whitmore 1985) even though there was a “big gulf” between Vietnamese and Chinese Confucianism (Nguyen 2016). To a certain extent, these reforms would become threatened under the Chinese Ming Emperors,²³ which finally led to the Ming invasion and rule of Vietnam during the period 1407–1428. During this short period, the Ming rulers promoted exporting Chinese ideology and technology to Vietnam (de Bary 1988; Whitmore 2010, 107). Moreover, the practice of book-burning by the Ming troops in Vietnam did significant damage to local non-Confucian texts, thus affecting the indigenous culture (Alexander 2010, 162). This policy strengthened the nationalist sentiments of the local Vietnamese and thus sharpened the sense of independence at any cost (Buttinger 1972, 45). After defeating the Ming rulers, Vietnam's Lê kings decided to use orthodox Confucianism to rebuild and revitalize the state, making the fifteenth century the first peak of Vietnamese Confucianism. However, Vietnamese Confucianism declined in the mid-sixteenth century because the territory was split into two components (Tonking and Cochinchina) which lasted until the late eighteenth

22 See McHale 2002, 398; 2004, 70; and Whitmore 2010.

23 The author owes gratitude to Kathlene Baldanza for this idea (see Baldanza 2013, 60).

century. The rise of Nôm script²⁴ literature during the seventeenth century further promoted “de-emphasizing Confucian orthodoxy and official views in favor of more ‘popular’ themes” (Ostrowski 2010, 21). The Nguyen dynasty (1802–1945) tried to recover orthodox Confucianism; however, Western intervention in Vietnamese politics prevented the movement. After 1858, French colonialism in Vietnam nearly put an end to the long-standing orthopraxy of Confucianism in the country, even though they were said to be supportive of the slight revitalization of Vietnamese Confucianism in the 1920–1930 period.

Regardless of the ups and downs of the history of Vietnamese Confucianism, it remained the intellectual and ideological backbone of Vietnam for almost the last ten centuries (see Nguyễn 1974, 17). However, state Confucianism has been weak in Vietnam (as compared with East Asian states such as China or Korea), because the Vietnamese adopted shallow versions of Confucianism rather than internalizing it (McHale 2002, 409–10). Instead of adopting and developing the Confucian ideology further, the Vietnamese have been “loyal” to the pre-imperial (Zhou dynasty) Confucianism²⁵ even though they also adopted post-Zhou imperial innovations (such as Neo-Confucianism in the Song dynasty). Such primary norms are vividly found in MÔNGĐỒ in Trà Vinh. Under their specific circumstances, the feudal elites of Vietnam did not have a strong demand for any metaphysical counterattraction to Buddhism, as was present among the Chinese upper class (Woodside 2002, 117); instead, they tended to enforce the de-civilizing mission to draw a clear line between Vietnam and China (see Baldanza 2013, 56). A similar feature can be found in Vietnamese literature in the same period (Richey 2013, 64–65). Phan Ngọc (1998) concluded that Vietnamese elites effectively utilized four remarkable prisms (motherland (祖國論), identity (身份論), village-based cultural tradition (村莊文化傳統), and Southeast Asian paddy-rice agriculture (東南亞稻作文化)) to deal with Chinese Confucianism, thus creating changes in local Confucian evolution. In the first half of the twentieth century, Ho Chi Minh changed the five cardinal Confucian virtues into humanness, righteousness, knowledge, bravery, and honesty to be well-adapted to the Vietnamese tradition.²⁶ Therefore, to a certain extent, the Vietnamese are of two varieties, one

24 The Nôm script, or chữ Nôm (字喃): the Vietnamese pre-modern script system originated from Han scripture but transformed to signify the local vocabulary. Chữ Nôm appeared early; however, it was used popularly in parallel with Han script from the fifteenth century until the early twentieth century.

25 The author agrees with Alexander Woodside that feudal Vietnam focused more on primordial texts, which limited the development of Neo-Confucianism and Confucian universality as they were in China, Korea, and Japan (Woodside 2002, 140).

26 More descriptive discussion can be found in Duong 2004, 295.

similar to other Southeast Asian communities and the other Chinese or Korean (see further Reid 1988, 199).

Even though Vietnamese state Confucianism was much-localized, the reform made by Lê Thánh Tông (1442–1497) consolidated the state’s centralized power, causing the Vietnamese conquest over the Kingdom of Champa (present-day Central Vietnam) and the mass migration to Southern Vietnam during the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries.²⁷

Westerners introduced the Romanized writing system and Western ideology. Chữ Quốc Ngữ spread quickly in the late nineteenth century, far beyond expectations. Quốc Ngữ texts and Western education signified an alarming threat to the Confucian-educated officials and landowning class (FitzGerald 1972, 32–3), thus seriously damaging orthodox Confucianism. MÔNGĐỒ quickly transformed its divination texts from Chinese characters into Chữ Quốc Ngữ to fulfill the pragmatic demands of the rural population. The confrontation between state Confucianism and Western ideology as well as the practical encounters between the Vietnamese migrants, the indigenous Khmer, and the Chinese from overseas in the South gave way to the rise of Mahayana Buddhism, even though Confucianism and Daoism were still universally practiced.²⁸ This is also one of the prerequisites for the birth of MÔNGĐỒ.

As a matter of fact, during the middle and late feudal dynasties, Vietnamese kings and elites learned to organize commoners through harmonizing Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism—each inclusively intertwined with the others (see Ho Tai 1983, 20). As analysed by Rodney Taylor (1990, 2), Confucianism has a “single thread” that runs throughout the tradition: its religious nature. This primary attribute has laid the basic foundation for the conflation of the Three Teachings. Indeed, the Three Teachings formed a syncretic belief system that integrates Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist tenets that could be found at all levels of Vietnamese society.²⁹ Typical of the total absence of religious dogmatism among the Vietnamese is Caodaism and Hoahaoism. Caodaism “consists of a mixture of Confucian, Christian, Buddhist, and Taoist creeds combined with odd practices of spiritualism”, while Hoahaoism “has modified Buddhism for the poor peasants by eliminating anything costly from the religious ritual” (Buttinger 1972, 15).³⁰ As shown in MÔNGĐỒ texts, almost all sages, Buddhas, supreme gods, celestial

27 See Li 1998; Cao 1996; Sun 2010, 65–66; and Nguyen 2014.

28 See also Giran 1904, 200; Buttinger 1972, 15; and Woodside 2002, 140.

29 See Dutton, Werner and Whitmore 2012, 114; and Duong 2004, 289–318.

30 More details can be found in Buttinger 1972, 15; Ho Tai 1983; and Dutton, Werner and Whitmore 2012, 429.

lords, and various hermits³¹ are mentioned as supernatural powers who are always ready to “save” those who cultivate the core merits of *Minh đức*, *Chí thiện* and *Tân dân*.

MÔNGĐỒ was born in such a broad background; hence it deploys no more than an ordinary Vietnamese Confucian institution. As a non-elite religious sect, MÔNGĐỒ absorbs no more than a “shallow” and “broken” theoretical framework of Confucianism (presented mainly by the three essential values, *Minh đức*, *Chí thiện* and *Tân dân*) and deploys its main functions in the personal and family domains (self-realization, self-cultivation, and filial piety education). Community services, such as assisting others to “realize” and transform, funeral praying and chanting, etc., are not excluded in the working sphere of the virtue of filial piety.

MÔNGĐỒ: A “Reflective Mirror” of Local Background in Southern Vietnam

MÔNGĐỒ was born in a special context. Departing from the Vietnamese classical Confucian platform, MÔNGĐỒ embodies the historic multi-ethnicity and cultural pluralism of Southern Vietnam.

In the South, the so-called “Confucianism” is not the actual state Confucianism (Cao 1996, 147).³² Most of the people primarily observe Buddhism, instead. They may practice Confucian norms and rules daily but many don’t care (or don’t need to know) who Confucius is. In the region, the classics and ideological canons are used in an adaptable way. It is in the Mekong River Delta where Mahayana Buddhism reunites with its Buddhist counterpart, Theravada Buddhism, through the ethnic Khmers, making Buddhism the core philosophy for almost all reconstructive processes that shape new religious movements in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. MÔNGĐỒ has no specific denomination but has embodied Buddhist values in its doctrine. MÔNGĐỒ texts are full of Buddhist concepts and terms such as *hội Long Hoa* (Longhua final meeting, 龍華會), *cứu khổ* (salvation), *cát hung* (good or bad samsara), *tránh nạn* (avoiding suffering), and so on. (MÔNGĐỒ 1977; 2005). Vietnamese Buddhism, by comparison to state-governed Confucianism, is found in each family’s tradition. In the particular situation of Southern Vietnam, the family functions as the fundamental core of social and cultural activities (see Brocheux 1995, 209).

31 See part “Minh Đức Nho giáo Đại đạo—The Elements and Characteristics” of this article.

32 The Vietnamese translation is “*Nho mà không Nho, không Nho mà Nho*” (Chinese translation: 儒而不儒, 不儒而儒).

Since the fifteenth century, Vietnamized Confucianism propagated its norms and values throughout the state, but Southern Vietnam still retained Southeast Asian cultural patterns until the seventeenth century.³³ Confucian ethics were penetrating to the village level no earlier than the mid-seventeenth century (see also Takatsu 2012). Cochinchina's (Central and South Vietnam's) Confucianism was spread during the period of the Nguyen Lords (the mid-sixteenth–eighteenth centuries) and was revived in the early period of the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945). Along with the process of “whole-packaged” emigration³⁴ from Northern Vietnam to the northern part of the Central Region, classical Confucian institutions followed in their entirety despite being affected by the new environments. However, in the later period the Vietnamese migrated to the South in an individualistic way. Confucianism became partially “broken”, since various families from different backgrounds gathered together to build villages in the South. Confucianism had to be absorbed into Mahayana Buddhism and transform for survival. Cao Tự Thanh called it “the unlikely Confucianism” (Cao 1996), while FitzGerald (1972) and Brocheux (1995) affirmed that the historic multi-ethnicity in the South drove the transformation of almost all aspects of life, including ideology, norms and the value system, communal and family life, rites of passage, rituals, and so on. The Vietnamese writer Trần Văn Giàu (1982) asserted that a village in the South was not similar to those in the North. It was “entrenched behind (its inhabitants') bamboo hedges”, and “its peasants were far less prone to bow to feudal authority or be bound by Confucian ethics”. Instead, Buddhism, which incorporates Daoism and local traditions, has been a much stronger influence. Such a trend is vividly shown in local religious movements such as Caodaism, Ngũ chi Minh đạo, MÔNG ĐỒ, and others. At a certain level, Northern Vietnam remained more rigidly committed to Confucian social hierarchies, while the downfall of Confucian orthodoxy in the South enabled the development of a newfound social mobility there, and northern Confucian scholars considered Southern Confucianism to be not truly Vietnamese, even though the core values embraced in the North actually were Chinese in origin (see Richey 2013, 68–9).

Basic Confucian values continued running as an undercurrent to family and social practices. The Vietnamese successfully expanded to the South (from Northern Vietnam), thanks to both the farming migration and the power of “a Confucian state” (Evans and Rowley 1990, 6). Nguyễn Văn Trung emphasized the idea that Southern Vietnam got modernized through the process of Westernization; however, this modernization process did not limit or break up the local tradition, which was

33 This point has also been discussed in Yu 1978, 92–96; and cited in Reid 1988, 146.

34 The emigration of villages was as a whole, including ideology, communal and family traditions, social structures, and practices.

significantly based on Confucian values (Nguyễn 2014, 551–58). Southern elites and commoners actively adopted and acculturated Western values to reshape their worldview and ideology since the late nineteenth century. In addition, Southern Vietnamese Confucianism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was radically refreshed by the Yangming School brought by the Chinese from overseas, and developed by a group of Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese Confucians such as Võ Trường Toản (武長纘) (?–1792) and his students in the late eighteenth century (Ngô Nhơn Tịnh 吳仁靜 (1761–1813), Trịnh Hoài Đức 鄭懷德 (1765–1825)). Consequently, Southern Vietnamese Confucianism, by comparison to its Northern counterpart, is vividly practical and closely associated with the breath of life.

The emigrant Vietnamese community quickly became the majority group in the South thanks to their capacity of connecting multi-ethnic traditions and rebuilding a commonly shared environment. Nguyễn Công Bình (1998) stressed that the Vietnamese had to learn to integrate all sources of traditions to become stable and progressive, and this community proved to be able to subjugate and control all communities in these new lands by using Confucianism and Buddhism or something made by the combination of both. In the context of a Vietnamese community where orthodox Confucianism partially declined, the Government of Cochinchina (1558–1778) built Trần Biên Confucius Temple in Dong Nai in 1715³⁵ to affirm the role of this ideology in the new lands and educate an intellectual force to cultivate state Confucianism in the region. Mạc Thiên Tứ 莫天賜, a Governor-General of Hà Tiên (河仙) in the early eighteenth century, built a Confucius Temple and established the Confucian Academy of Chiêu Anh Các to cultivate and develop Confucianism in the region. Unluckily, the temple and the academy were then destroyed due to warfare and the decline of Hà Tiên polity. Later, the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945) ordered local authorities to build Cao Lãnh Confucius Temple in 1857³⁶ and Vĩnh Long Confucius Temple in the period 1864–1866.³⁷ In 1972, the Saigonese Government sponsored local elites in Gò Công to build a Confucius Temple in the town.³⁸ Moreover, the ethnic Hoa community in Châu Đốc city (An Giang province) also set up a hall dedicated to Confucius in a Guandi (關帝) temple in the mid-nineteenth century. While Southern scholars were not many in number, many of them became well-known for their intellectual dedication, such as Võ Trường Toản (?–1792), Lê Quang Định (1759–?), Trịnh Hoài Đức (1765–1825), Ngô Nhơn Tịnh (1761–1813), Nguyễn Đình Chiểu (1822–1888), Nguyễn Thông (1827–1884), and so on.

35 French colonialists largely destroyed it in 1861, later being rebuilt in the period 1998–2002.

36 This temple was first built in present-day Ward 3, and moved to Ward 1 in 1978.

37 This temple is located in present-day Ward 4, Vĩnh Long city.

38 This temple is located in present-day Ward 1, Gò Công town, Tiền Giang province.

One may ask why MĐNGĐĐ was formed in Trà Vinh and not another place in Southern Vietnam? It is in Trà Vinh, Sóc Trăng and An Giang provinces where multi-ethnicity and cultural diversity are found, as is typical in the whole Mekong River Delta. Sóc Trăng has been shown to be of overwhelming Chaozhou Chinese influence, while An Giang (next to Cambodia) was already home to many other locally-born religions since the late nineteenth century, such as Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, and Hoahaoism. It is the coastal dunes of Trà Vinh province where the acculturation of traditions among the Viet, Hoa (Chinese) and Khmer has taken place strongly. The remoteness of Trà Vinh province in general, and Ba Động village in particular, created relative safety for MĐNGĐĐ from being interfered with by the French colonialists or other forces. On the other hand, the proximity of Trà Vinh province to Vĩnh Long city, where the state-sponsored Confucius Temple was built in 1864 by the orthodox scholars and state elites,³⁹ allowed for the transmission of Confucian values among the local communities while the agrarian nature of MĐNGĐĐ helped retain its separation from being incorporated into orthodox Confucianism. Besides the universal and local religions stated above, popular religions are, of course, closely associated with the birth of MĐNGĐĐ. For instance, according to Takatsu (2012, 41), at the beginning period, a group of MĐNGĐĐ laypersons came together at Guandi Temple (關帝廟) in Thủ Dầu Một City (Bình Dương province) to preach, deliver herbs and translate Chinese texts for a while. This historical fact showed that MĐNGĐĐ bore a close relationship with Chinese secret societies⁴⁰ in its early years.

In general, the populace of Southern Vietnam was less heavily affected and controlled by the educated-Confucian elites than those in the North. This fact is vividly demonstrated by the point that MĐNGĐĐ was shaped and operated by non-elite members. Despite many revival efforts, Southern Confucianism has changed compared to the Northern tradition, and it was this transformation that underlay the formation of MĐNGĐĐ. Cultural change is objective, and national culture is an on-going tradition. Trần Quốc Vượng, the late cultural expert of Vietnam, emphasized the cultural acculturation which he dubbed “the specific feature of Vietnamese culture” (Trần 2008, 48). Therefore, adaptation and change are two successive and parallel processes of the Vietnamese people, who have a strong sense of “tolerance”. J. Feray (cited by Trần 2008, 48) once described Vietnamese culture as never rejecting the opportunity to absorb exogenous factors. To a certain extent, it is also an expression of flexibility in the Vietnamese

39 Such as Phan Thanh Giản (1796–1867), and Nguyễn Thông (1827–1884).

40 Chinese secret societies were relatively popular in Southern Vietnam at the junction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Guandi Temple in Thủ Dầu Một city was one of the most popular “headquarters” of these societies.

cultural character. A couplet placed on the front of Thới Sơn Communal House in Tịnh Biên district, An Giang province, states: “The king and his people all join the common excitement; father and his son in harmonization can share common happiness”⁴¹ (fieldwork note, 2016). The Southern Vietnamese villagers are mainly taught to comply with Three Bonds and Five Virtues (male) or Three Compliances and Four Virtues (female), but barely know exactly who Confucius and Mencius are or where these norms come from. These doctrines are accepted and applied in flexible ways, many of which, like MÔNGĐỒ, are embedded in religious colours. In a discussion of Confucian patriarchy in marriage, Yu Insun discovered that as late as the seventeenth century the Southern Vietnamese still preserved an older Southeast Asian pattern—they practiced the giving of bride-wealth at marriage, and in many cases the grooms came to live with the families of their brides (Yu 1978, 92–6). This de-centralizing Confucian feature greatly sharpened the simplicity and religiosity of MÔNGĐỒ.

Confucius as Both a “Sage” and a “God”

MÔNGĐỒ is a result of many cultural processes, in which the first step must be the transformations—the de-orthopraxy and the spiritualization of classical Vietnamese Confucianism. The case of MÔNGĐỒ as a circumstance of Confucian transformation in Southeast Asia is not new, since the locally born Chinese in Java in (Indonesia) established “Confucian churches” on the island to compete with Christian churches and Islamic mosques as well as to promote Chinese-style education among the young Chinese residents.⁴² However, MÔNGĐỒ manifests some specific features developed by non-elite laypersons.

MÔNGĐỒ largely ignores the standardized forms and narratives of the earlier dynasties, as well as the orthopractic movements by local Confucian scholars. After such a deconstruction process, the local commoners and rural elites in the South only preserve the primordial norms and core values, such as pre-imperial concepts of *minh đức*, *tân dân*, and *chí thiện*, etc. MÔNGĐỒ focuses more on family life and personal self-cultivation than social interaction.⁴³ Regarding the “connection” between Confucius and Mr. Lưu Cường Cánh (the founder of MÔNGĐỒ), *The Confucian Classics* of MÔNGĐỒ writes: “The Sage Confucius

41 It is written in Chinese script: 君非君臣非臣臣皆共樂，父不父子不子父子是同歡。

42 This statement can be found in Coppel 1981, 186, 195; Chambert-Loir 2015, 67–107; and McKeown 2017, 324.

43 This motto is actually derived from the concept “self-cultivation as the root” in *The Great Learning* (chapter 1).

handed the Confucian Way to our Master; (so that people of later generations could) implement his wish of Great Harmony”⁴⁴ (MÔNGĐỒ 2005, 19).

MÔNGĐỒ followers are strongly motivated with regard to self-realization and self-cultivation as the good deeds that will help them avoid bad samsara and as fundamental conditions to get saved by Confucius and other supernatural powers. In Ba Động Temple, visitors can easily find the Confucian *Seven commandments* on the wall of the main hall, including

Mind is not good, *feng shui* is useless; Parental disrespect leads to useless ancestor-worship; Brotherhood is not respected, friendship is useless; Reading is useless to those who commit unrighteous work; The smartest person has no real virtues if he makes others disappointed; One fails to preserve his pneuma can't find any sustenance useful; Inappropriate fortune doesn't bring success.

Neo- and New Confucianism both strongly appreciate the “self-realization” (and after that, the “self-cultivation”) of the superior man, MÔNGĐỒ puts both “self-realization” and “interactive realization” in their spectacular interpretation of the core virtues written in the *Daxue* (the Great Learning). “*Tân dân*” (to renovate the people) has been emphasized with two significant missions for lay-people: “self-realization” and “self-cultivation”, and assisting others in realization and transformation under the supernatural powers’ sanctity, even though the doctrine doesn’t assert the goal of being a “superior man”. As Tu Weiming once stated, “self-realization” is “not a lonely quest for one’s inner spirituality but a communicative act empowering one to become a responsible householder” (Tu 1994, 182). MÔNGĐỒ looks to person-to-person interaction and transformation with a religious approach.

As a virtue-based religious sect, MÔNGĐỒ only adopts a halfway practice of classical Confucianism. MÔNGĐỒ’s founders and supporters did not get in touch with the original version of the *Daxue* or other texts of *Four Books* and *Five Classics*. Instead, they extracted and composed their philosophical foundation from secondary texts such as *Tứ thư thể chú* (四書體注, *Ontological Notes of Four Books*), *Tứ thư địa toàn tiết yếu* (四書大全節要, *The Brief Interpretation of Encyclopaedia of the Four Books*), *Minh tâm bửu giám* (明心寶鑑, *Precious Mirror of the Clear Heart*) which were relatively popular in Southern Vietnam during the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Texts on family life and family education mainly include *Nhị thập tứ hiếu* (二十四孝, *Twenty-four Stories*

44 Original text: “Giữa trường Tiên ân ân nhắc nhở, phụ cùng con rặng rõ yên lòng; Thầy giao mỗi đạo Nho tông, để Ngài gìn giữ Đại đồng tròn xong.”

about Filial Piety), *Trị gia cách ngôn khuyên hiếu ca* (治家格言勸孝歌, *Family Instructions and A Song to Persuade People to be Filial*), and *Gia huấn ca* (家訓歌, *The Family Training Ode*).⁴⁵ Like orthodox state-sponsored Confucian elites, MĐNGĐĐ elites and laypersons did not read Chinese orthodox classics directly. Secondly, in the primary poetic verse transmitted orally, laypersons insist that “You ought to feign ignorance, do not let others know that you are laymen” (see above), showing that the ultimate goal of MĐNGĐĐ is not to revivify the state but to transform (renovate) oneself and others around one by cultivating good deeds. As a matter of fact, MĐHGĐĐ focuses on the first two goals of a classical Confucian student (“practicing self-cultivation” (修身, *tu thân*), and “regulating the family” (齊家, *tề gia*)) yet puts them in a Buddhist paradigm of cause-effect transferability and a Taoist cornerstone of celestial support. The deeply-rooted concepts of “Hell” and “Salvation” have differentiated MĐNGĐĐ from state-sponsored Confucian institutions. MĐNGĐĐ founders and laypersons realize that an ordinary person, due to his lack of wisdom and all means of scholarly life, needs external support from the unseen forces to “save” and “transcend” himself. MĐNGĐĐ, unlike Neo-Confucianism, encourages self-realization and self-cultivation but does not generate the native relationship between self-cultivation and wisdom. Instead, the sect stresses that self-realization and self-cultivation enable a person to realize the frontiers of good and bad karma, to realize and fulfil his ordinary duties in life and to meet the requirements of posthuman salvation. Accordingly, a successful MĐNGĐĐ layperson bears both self-cultivation and transcendent salvation from supernatural powers. He puts “virtue” and “hell” in sharp opposition. In a divination session dedicated to Confucius, a spirit-medium incanted:

Today’s disciples pray for the sage Confucius to descend to earth and instruct the spirit-medium,

How sacred you are and how miraculous the Confucian teachings are,

We wish you take the benevolence chariot rapidly to descend to save sentient beings

Yan, Zeng, Si, Meng, Zhu, Cheng all sincere masters and holy sages please land on this profane world,

Having you by our side, we are enabled to overcome mountains of hardship,

45 This is a 976-line Vietnamese verse text written by the Confucian scholar Nguyễn Trãi (阮鵬, 1380–1442) in Chinese.

By honest heart-mind, we pray for Confucius and the heroic spirits!⁴⁶
(MĐNGĐ 2005, 26)

Furthermore, unlike state-sponsored Confucianism, MĐNGĐĐ does not aim to attain the further virtues of “governing the state” (治國, *trị quốc*), and “making the whole world peaceful and happy” (平天下, *bình thiên hạ*) or to show signs of upward mobility in the socio-political life of the laypersons. At a certain level, especially under a non-religious viewpoint, MĐNGĐĐ stays in line with the Neo-Confucian concept of human cultivation of the heart-mind even though their goal and approach may be different. By embedding basic social norms and virtues, MĐNGĐĐ remains partially as a socio-cultural institution in a loosely-defined terms. Thus, Confucius is still a “sage” in a broader sense.

MĐNGĐĐ was founded on a religious platform; therefore, its essential notation and rituals are in line with other popular religions in the region. The Southern Vietnamese started constructing new religions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by absorbing the attractive qualities of all religions and philosophies together and rebuilding them under a new ideological framework. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (1983) stood on the perspective of political history to call this “the millenarian movement”. Several millenarian sects were founded during this period, among which include Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương,⁴⁷ Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa,⁴⁸ and Hoahaoism⁴⁹ in An Giang province, Caodaism in Tây Ninh, and other popular

46 Original text: “Kim đồ đệ bái kỳ Khổng Thánh, giảng đàn tiền xuất tánh cơ đồng;
Anh linh hiển hiện bành thông, huyền vi yếu lý Nho tông chỉ truyền
Nguyên Từ Bi xa Tiên cấp giá, giảng phạm trần giáo hóa chúng sanh;
Nhan, Tăng, Tư, Mạnh, Châu, Trình, chí thành chí thánh chí linh độ trần
Kính như tại thánh như tại, cảm ư tư mặc nãi trùng san;
Vọng kỳ Khổng thánh giảng cơ, anh linh hiển hích chơn tiên lai đàn.”
(Chinese transcription: 今徒弟拜祈孔聖, 降壇前出性乩童,
英靈顯現彭通, 玄微要理儒宗指傳,
願慈悲車仙急駕, 降凡塵教化眾生,
顏、曾、思、孟、朱、程, 至誠至聖至靈渡塵
慙如在聖如在, 感於思膜奈重山
望祈孔聖降乩, 英靈顯赫真仙來壇.)

47 Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương is a syncretic religion founded by Đoàn Minh Huyên (1807–1856) in 1849 in Châu Đốc, An Giang province. Currently, there are around 15,000 followers in the Mekong River Delta (see more Ho Tai 1983, 20–27).

48 Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa is a syncretic religion under a branch of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương that combines Mahayana Buddhism, Linji zong 臨濟宗, Tiantai zong 天台宗, Confucianism, Daoism, ancestor worship, and patriotism. It was founded by Ngô Lợi (1831–1890) in Ốc Eo village, Tịnh Biên District, An Giang province. There are around 80,000 followers living in Southern Vietnam nowadays (see more Ho Tai 1983, 3, 12, 66, 146, 177).

49 Also called Hoahao Buddhism, Hoahaoism was founded in 1939 by Huỳnh Phú Sổ (1919–1947) in Hòa Hảo village, Tân Châu district, An Giang province. Hoahaoism continued Bửu Sơn Kỳ

religious movements. Research by Truong Van Chung in 2016 shows that more new religions, such as Yiguandao (一貫道, *Nhất Quán đạo*),⁵⁰ Jehovah’s Witnesses,⁵¹ Minh Sư,⁵² and Hà Môn,⁵³ have been disseminated or founded recently in Vietnam (Truong 2016, 450–595). In his analysis, Truong Van Chung stated that new religions are built and operated by the shift from belief to brainstorming, capacity for self-experience, secularism (changeability and adaptation), pragmatism (reality-based practices) and religious benefit-based nature (ibid., 674–77). Many millenarian leaders, as well as newly-emerging sect organizers, have taken advantage of an obvious feature of the Vietnamese personality to form their religious foundation—religious harmonization and tolerance. Such a feature was first shaped by the former state leaders and elites and sharpened under the continuous challenges due to state-building and external confrontation. Spirit possession and divination have long been proven to be the actual needs of people in different cultures.⁵⁴ Sacredness does not need to exist in reality, because “people ascribe sanctity to a place, then define and characterize it following their culture, experience, and purpose” (Jackson and Henrie 1983, 94–107; Phạm 2009, 43). Like devotees of other religions and their gods, MÔNGĐỒ laypersons worship Confucius because he provides “efficacy”. In their eyes, Confucius is a “god”.

However, unlike those religious movements, MÔNGĐỒ was formed by a process of multicultural integration based on Confucian ethics; therefore it is a unilinear acculturation process rather than general acculturation (see Berry 2003, 22). During the formation process, MÔNGĐỒ absorbed Buddhist and Daoist philosophies (cause-effect transferability, the *wuwei* concept, etc.), and got partially affected by Caodaism’s cosmological structure and liturgical activities; however, its Confucian core values remain vividly presented, making MÔNGĐỒ a special spiritualized form of Confucianism at the village level. Research by Huỳnh Ngọc Thu (2017) shows that Caodaism, an indigenous religion which was founded in the same period

Huong’s philosophy; however, it adjusted the structure. Hoahaoism took Mahayana Buddhist philosophy as the foundation and added ancestor worship (see Ho Tai 1983, 17–19, 26–37, 125, 170; also Trần 2001, 472–75).

- 50 Yiguandao is a Chinese syncretic religion that was transmitted to Vietnam by Chinese from overseas during the 1980s (Truong 2016, 451).
- 51 The Jehovah’s Witnesses are a Western religion that was transmitted to Vietnam in 1935 by a French priest, Frank Rice, from Australia (Truong 2016, 525).
- 52 Minh Sư, one branch of Ngũ chi Minh đạo that originated in China, was disseminated to Vietnam in the middle of the 19th century, and officially acknowledged by Vietnamese Government in 2007 (Truong 2016, 564).
- 53 Hà Môn is an expanded and localized religion of Catholicism in Kon Tum (Central Highlands) that was founded at the end of the twentieth century.
- 54 See Lewis 1971; Kendall 1985; Brown 1991; Sharp 1993; Turner 2006; and Phạm 2009.

and from the same social background as MĐNGĐĐ, was mainly formed on the equally integral acculturation of Daoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity and local popular religions, thus its main god has no proper name, it is simply the Supreme God (*Đấng Chí tôn*). MĐNGĐĐ is said to have a close relationship with Caodaism; it focuses mainly on Confucian ethics. Therefore, Confucius has been the main god. MĐNGĐĐ's core values—good virtue, goodness/perfection, and new people—are not the integral concepts of multiculturalism, they are Confucian virtues. A similar situation can be found among different popular religions or Daoism in Southern Vietnam, such as La Hán Đền (羅漢壇) in Sóc Trăng and Thiên Hòa Temple (天和寺) in Cần Thơ (a Daoist sect which absorbs Buddhist influences), Tam Vị Temple (三位廟) in Cái Nước district, Cà Mau province and Thiên Ý Đền (天懿壇) in District 6, Ho Chi Minh City (traditional gods/hero-worship which absorbs Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism), and so on (fieldwork data 2015; 2016). Being instituted as a virtue-based system, MĐNGĐĐ ritualizes its liturgical practices and stays in line with other religions; consequently, it lies somewhere between orthodox Confucianism and popular religions.

Many writers have noted and appreciated the role of local elites in building and transforming local culture. According to Gramsci (1971), culture is not something that “persists through time, handed down from one generation to another”. It is also partly made by intellectuals who have transformed the “incoherent and fragmentary feelings” of others into “a coherent and reasoned account of the world” (Gramsci in Crehan 2002, 129–30). Michel Foucault (1980) also valued the intellectual knowledge which crucially produces and maintains both state power and popular discourse (see Pham 2009, 176). Arthur Wolf emphasized that there was a big difference between the religion of the elite and that of the peasantry (Wolf 1974, 9), and therefore the latter are less active in building and controlling the local agenda of development. However, this is not correct in the case of MĐNGĐĐ: local farmers and popular laypersons were able to establish their way of life without too much contact with the administrators (either earlier colonists or and today's authorities) and elite communities. This is in closer agreement with the Japanese researcher, Masao Tominaga, who defined MĐNGĐĐ a “grass-roots” Confucianism sect at the village level (Tominaga 2009; see further Nogami 2015); however, the current study shows that it is merely a religiously transformed Confucianism.

Culture, especially in the local traditions, is always the product of long-standing struggles of different classes in their local context. Culture has been “continually imagined, invented, contested, and transformed” both by the state and the agency of individuals (Foster 1991, 252). Among the various social classes, the elites tended to develop more ideologized and rationalized religious interpretations (Weller 1987, 10, 53), while the commoners largely depended on their local elites'

agenda. However, under special circumstances, the local commoners did and still do have enough capacity to create and operate their traditions. In the case of the Vietnamese, Hue-Tam Ho Tai pointed out that Confucian values were largely applied in governmental operations by the scholar-officials, while Buddhism and Daoism had more effects in the daily life of the Vietnamese commoners (Ho 1983, 20). The local farmers in Trà Vinh in the early twentieth century, being significantly affected by the harsh colonial rule of the French, actively rebuilt state-sponsored Confucianism into MÔNGĐỒ in a simplified and spiritualized way. Having adopted the idea that the French took advantage of Confucian hierarchy to ensure their control over the Vietnamese (Elman et al. 2002, 8), Mr. Lư Cường Cánh and his fellows did not violate the colonial principles when promoting Confucian virtues in family-based education and personal self-cultivation under a rather mystical approach. As Keith Taylor emphasized, in general Vietnamese Confucianism does not exemplify a social role or a national identity, but rather produces “a sense of self that entertains the anxiety of occupying a heterogeneous space of fragments and encounters and of living” (Taylor 2002, 369), they know when and how to break the rules and pursued “an experience of self”, as well as knowing when and how to transform and re-invent new sources of culture.

After a long period of establishment and evolution, MÔNGĐỒ has become different from orthodox Confucianism in a number of specific ways, such as:

Table 1: Comparing specific features between orthodox Vietnamese Confucianism and MÔNGĐỒ.

Item	Orthodox Confucianism in Vietnam	Mình Đức Nho giáo Đại đạo
Temple	Temple of Literature (文廟/文聖廟), Confucius Temple (孔廟)	Confucius Temple (孔子聖殿)
Concept of Three Bonds	Loyalty (忠), filial piety (孝), and righteousness (義)	Mainly filial piety (孝); righteousness (義) is subordinate.
Concept of Five Virtues	Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and sincerity	Mainly benevolence and righteousness.
Institutional essence	Social-ideological institution	Spiritual-religious institution
Classes	Intellectuals, elites, and rural Confucians	Farmers and a few rural elites
Attribute	Sociality, worldliness	Somewhere between sociality and spirituality, between worldliness and transcendence

While Orthodox Confucianism looks for social engagement and educational improvement, MĐNGĐĐ tends to combine both the salvation of mystical “divines” (spiritualized Confucius, Buddha, celestial lords, etc.) and moral self-cultivation. The tendency to “sanctify” philosophical theories to form a part of the local tradition is not unique in the case of MĐNGĐĐ. Trần Văn Giàu (1993), in his discussion of the formation of Caodaism in the early twentieth century, once stressed that the commoners intentionally look at liberation in the next life, and easily step onto the religious pathway. Truthfully, under the harsh policies of the French colonists, the Vietnamese peasants and part of the patriotic elites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had to choose this mysterious way to deal with the socio-political pressures as well as to solve problems within themselves.

In comparison with East Asian communities, the traditional Vietnamese emphasize “righteousness” (義), which is composed of the merits of righteousness, patriotism, loyalty and filial piety (see Nguyen 2016, 645–71). They clarified the concept of righteousness into two categories, great righteousness (大義) and regular righteousness. Great righteousness undoubtedly means patriotism (愛國). Similarly, the concept of filial piety has also been divided into two sub-concepts, great filial piety (大孝) and regular filial piety (小孝). Great filial piety is a metaphor for patriotism while regular filial piety is understood as the regular respect and care of the younger generation towards their parents. Similarly, the ultimate loyalty in Vietnam is that to the country and people, yet not to the king. Therefore, the Vietnamese have developed the concept of righteousness into a figurative category, covering a wide range of meaning, including patriotism, loyalty, filial piety and righteousness itself. Being a part of this tradition, MĐNGĐĐ emphasizes this modification. In a part explaining the concept of great righteousness (patriotism), the classics *Thánh giáo (Teachings of the Sage)* cited the patriotic story of Two Trưng Kings⁵⁵ and highlighted the following: “Heaven’s gate is wide open to the heroes and heroines, feminine power is as great as a good man’s; National history always shines the merits of Two Trưng Kings, so today we follow to cultivate and complete ourselves”⁵⁶ (MĐNGĐĐ 1977, 23). Similar ideas can be also found in other religious movements in South Vietnam at the same time, such as Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, and Ông Đạo Trần.⁵⁷

55 Two female heroines, Trưng Trắc and Trưng Nhị, played key roles in the great revolt against the Chinese Han’s invasion and rule in the Red River Delta Region (present-day North Vietnam) during the period of 39 AD–43 AD.

56 Original text: “Môn Thiên mở rộng rước anh tài, nữ liệt anh thư mưa chó sai; Xán lạn Nhị Trưng còn sử tạc, hôm nay Chí Thiện để thi tài.”

57 Also called Ông Nhà Lớn Sect, a separation of Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa in Long Sơn island, Bà Rịa–Vũng Tàu province, founded in the early twentieth century.

Noticeably, the above-mentioned merits of MĐNGĐĐ are usually associated with the efficacy of relating to supernatural powers. For instance, *The Confucian Classics 1932–2005* says:

Confucian students firmly preserve in mind the virtues of loyalty, patience, unity, and scholarly spirit; they silently look for good companions and stay in harmony under the Buddhas’ and Celestial lords’ sanctity.⁵⁸ (MĐNGĐĐ 2005, 40)

For indigenous religions in Southern Vietnam, the faith strongly reflects the practical economic, cultural, and social life of residents; therefore, once the socio-economic background has changed (especially after the 1986 Reform policy), the inherent social cohesion of MĐNGĐĐ also changes. MĐNGĐĐ is the enlightened pathway of the spontaneous folk community. It lacks a scientific organizing structure and a concrete mechanism to evolve. There are signs of a gradual decline in MĐNGĐĐ, especially in its radial attraction and social impact. The administrative means of local authorities may produce some sort of challenge; however, the most serious challenge is the institutional structure of MĐNGĐĐ itself. Rob Weller once concluded that “religious unity or diversity depends in large part on how much intellectuals (who develop the ideologies), their backers, and their institutions succeed in influencing the conceptual system of other groups in the society” (Weller 1987, 170–71). James Watson (1985) claimed that the state created a system of symbols and overall value systems, and the intellectual and local elites, in turn, conveyed those values to the grassroots level through the process of cultural standardization. Similar conclusions can be found in the works of Donald S. Sutton (2007), Michael Szonyi (2007), Paul Katz (2007), Guo Qitao (2003), and others. Elites are generally willing to cooperate with the state (both to show loyalty and to achieve the goal of cultural unification of the state).

The state in Vietnam in the early twentieth century was controlled by French colonialists; therefore, Vietnamese elites did not support their civilizing mission in local areas. Instead, many of them decided to live quietly, while others joined the Liberation Front of Việt Minh. MĐNGĐĐ currently lacks the intellectual leadership often provided by professional elites (or priests), and the inherent relationship between faith and liturgical practices is getting weaker. It seems that the birth and operation of MĐNGĐĐ convey a contemporary value system. They reflect the actual consciousness and practices of some of the local farmers in Southern Vietnam under colonial control. The farmers concealed their patriotism

58 Original text: “Đạo Nho sĩ từ quyết lòng trung, đại nhẫn đại hòa thêm sĩ hùng; Ân nhân canh thân tìm bạn lữ, Thánh Tiên rước Phật để chung cùng.”

and progressive aspirations in Confucian ethics; however, the absence of elite participation limits MĐNGĐĐ from building a strong institutionalized establishment. Instead, they built their own “cultural nexus of power”.⁵⁹

If Confucian core values (*minh đức, tân dân, and chí thiện*) can be grouped as “the notation” of MĐNGĐĐ, and regular liturgical practices and other forms of ceremony are defined as “ritual”, then, in applying Seligman and Weller’s (2012) point of view, the founders and local devotees of MĐNGĐĐ in Trà Vinh have directly created and promoted a common “shared experience”. As Mary E. Tucker said, “the rituals reflect the patterned structures of the natural world and bind humans to one another, to the ancestral world, and to the cosmos at large” (Tucker 2004, 25). In the notational domain of MĐNGĐĐ, Confucius is a “sage”; however, in religious faith and liturgical aspects, he is a “god”. By having the notion, the ritual, and shared experience installed, MĐNGĐĐ has brought people together, at least within their religious space.

Conclusion

As Jeffrey L. Richey once remarked, Vietnamese Confucianism is a native expression of Vietnamese values rather than an ongoing flow of East Asian tradition (see Richey 2013, 60). Confucianism has transformed so greatly (in both content and form) that O.W. Wolters suggested one should “think twice” before using the term “Confucianism” in Vietnamese cultural history (Wolters 1976, 203–26). It is not Confucianism as a whole package of Chinese imperial ideology that has been applied in Vietnam; instead, the Vietnamese actively adopted the norms and values needed to localize and develop further to serve their own national and family interests. No one has given a particular name to this synthetic “Confucian tradition” of Vietnam so far, except the generic term “Vietnamese Confucianism”; however, appropriate regard and consideration are reasonably emphasized. MĐNGĐĐ is a part of this pattern, and if it needs a proper interpretive name, can be dubbed “the village-based spiritualized Confucianism Sect”.

Along with the colonial socio-historical processes in Southern Vietnam during the first half of the twentieth century, Confucianism—the orthodox socio-ideological system in feudal Vietnam—has, in turn, experienced de-standardization and de-orthopraxy, leaving behind the pre-imperial Confucian norms and values among the commoners. Local farmers in remote areas in Trà Vinh actively transformed Confucian ethics into a form of religious sect by adding mystical

59 The concept was suggested by Prasenjit Duara 2010.

metaphysics and liturgical practices into the broken and simplified Confucian philosophical structure to generalize faith and trust. This denomination is a concrete representation of the new religious movements that arose throughout Southern Vietnam during the period of the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, vividly reflecting the spontaneous reaction, flexibility, and multicultural integration of the residents and their traditions. The formation and maintenance of this sect through historical periods shows the diversity of the cultural needs, cultural psychology, and lifestyle on the part of Vietnamese commoners, especially during the time of colonial rule. The nature of MÔNG ĐỒ represents a core principle that, even without the orientation and leadership of state agents (the bureaucracy and the elites), the peasants in Southern Vietnam were able to create their worldview and way of life which maintain a certain level of difference from the orthodox tradition. Confucianism, with its ontological spirituality (“immanent transcendence”, “heavenly virtue”, and “anthropocosmic vision”),⁶⁰ always provides a way for all classes as long as they learn the values of Confucian norms and practices. Without the state’s engagement and intellectual leadership, the non-elite community easily transforms and applies Confucian ethics in a spiritualized way.

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60 See Tu 2004, 480–508; and Tucker 2004, 1–27.

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