

# Daoist Thought through Symbols Observed in the Architecture of Tu An Hieu Nghia Pagodas and Temples from the Tri Tôn District, An Giang Province

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## Abstract

Daoism was introduced into the South-West of Vietnam via two main entries: the missionaries from North and Central Vietnam who migrated to the South by following the Southward movement and the spread of Daoism by Chinese migrant men who came and settled in the South-West of Vietnam from the late seventeenth century to late nineteenth century. However, the biggest influence of Daoism in the Southwest of Vietnam was mainly the Chinese missionaries of Daoism. As time went by, together with the impacts of social and historical circumstances, Daoism had a strong influence on the lives of the South-West people in terms of different aspects, especially their faith and religions. The impact of Daoism into people's faith and religion was considerable, especially to the indigenous religions, of which the religion, Four Debts of Gratitude, is a representative example.

With the aims of clarifying how Four Debts of Gratitude was influenced by Daoist thought and how the indigenous religions and systemized ideologies in the South-West of Vietnam were related during the period of living condition expansion as well as cohabitation of several ethnic groups in the region, this article focuses on Daoist thought expressed in typical symbols in the sacred architecture of the Four Debts of Gratitude such as *Cổ Lầu*, wine gourds, and the Eight Trigrams. Once properly examined, it becomes clear that the prominent symbols and other Daoist elements show that Daoism had a profound influence on the Four Debts of Gratitude.

**Keywords:** Daoist thought; symbols; pagoda architecture; the Four Debts of Gratitude

## Introduction

Four Debts of Gratitude (四恩孝義, Tú Ân Hiếu Nghĩa) was founded in 1867 by Ngô Lợi (吳利), nicknamed Ông Đạo núi tượng (a Daoist hermit in Tượng mountain). This was the second indigenous religion which appeared after Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương in An Giang province. According to several previous research projects and statements by the followers of the Four Debts of Gratitude, the religion is actually a branch of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương (寶山奇香).

The process of the foundation and spread of Four Debts of Gratitude by Ngô Lợi was associated with people's campaigns of wild land reclamation and hamlet establishment in Thất Sơn with its center being the Ba Chúc and Lương Phi communes, located in Tri Tôn district, An Giang province. The construction of pagodas and temples indicated that the religious followers had on one hand settled down and on the other committed to themselves to completing the basis for their religion system and model of religion organization during the early campaigns of spreading their new religion.

The complexes of pagodas and temples for Four Debts of Gratitude were built in different periods, mainly after Ngô Lợi took a group of followers to the Tượng Mountain for settlement from 1876 to 1890, when he finally passed away. These pagodas and temples were built under the guidance of Ngô Lợi. However, during Ngô Lợi's "evacuation trips", these religious constructions were burned down by the French rulers who took up crusade campaigns to kill Ngô Lợi due to their accusation that he was "heretical figure", and the head of an anti-government movement. He was suspected of this because brought large groups of military-age men together. When the political turmoil was over, Ngô Lợi and his followers began the restoration and reconstruction of their pagodas and temples. After his death, these pagodas and temples were further rebuilt and renovated into their modern-day forms.

Because the history of the religion's spread was conducted unfolded under a challenging and complicated situation, this article seeks to explain the meanings of the religion and its religious thought as expressed through the symbols featured in the architecture of the order's pagodas and temples. The first matter to determine is whether or not these architectural characteristics actually came from the ideas of the religion's founder. Second, it should be asked if there were there any alternatives or adjustments to the architecture under the guidance of Mr. Trò or Mr. Gánh. Additionally, were there any different ideas behind those constructions? Preliminary conclusions about the meanings and religious thought contained within the symbols found in the architecture of the order's pagodas and temples were reached via three focuses: firstly, a reference to religious values, secondly, pictures of pagodas and temples collected for an investigation in 1975, and lastly, confirmation of findings and clarification by elder followers and groundkeepers of pagodas and temples.

Religious thought is expressed not only in the scriptures, teachings, and other such mediums but also through the architecture of the sacred spaces. The relationship between religious thought and the architecture produced by those religions can be clearly seen. For example, the architecture of Hindu temples, Buddhism temples, Islamic mosques, Cham temples, Theravada Buddhist temples all depict various ideological aspects of the religions to which they belong. In the same way, since its birth, Daoism has expressed the most prominent concepts from its system of thought through the architecture of their sacred spaces. Over time there has been an evolution to those architectural structures; however, the symbols — the “expression” of their religious thought via temple and shrine architecture —remains well-preserved.

The system of architecture used to produce Daoist pagodas and temples is very rich and diverse in terms of concepts related to construction such as: how the size of the temple corresponds to the subject of worship, attention to directions, the architectural style, and other such considerations. All of these matters require an in-depth and systematic study. However, not all the temples and shrines of Daoism express meaning and thoughts through architecture because there are also temples and shrines that are intentionally plain and undeveloped. Therefore, in this article will focus on explaining the Daoist meanings and thought expressed through some of the most prominent symbols shown in the architecture of some pagodas and temples that can be easily seen. The differences in pagoda and temple architecture among Daoists, Buddhists, and indigenous religions will also be brought up for comparison. The pagodas and temples selected for this study will be those with significant historical value and those that play an important role in the religious life of Daoist followers in Tri Tôn district and many other localities in the South-West of Vietnam.

## **Daoist Thought Shown by the Symbols on Architecture in Pagodas and Temples**

As mentioned, the construction of pagodas and temples was carried out by Ngô Lợi after the time of wild land reclamation to establish a village for the followers' life settlement in the Tượng mountain (Ba Chúc commune, Tri Tôn district). The first place of worship to be built was “tiền đình, hậu tứ” with the An Định communal house (front) and Phi Lai pagoda (back) on 19 November 1877. “In An Định communal house hundreds of Gods and heroic martyrs were worshiped while in Phi Lai pagoda the Buddhas as well as a Trần Diệu<sup>1</sup> were worshiped in the main hall” (Ha 1971, 21). According to Phan Tất Đại, Phi Lai pagoda worships Tay An Buddha at the ancestral altar and a Trần Diệu painting is enshrined at the main altar (Phan 1975, 7). Sơn Nam, a researcher on South-West culture said, “Phi Lai pagoda worships a form of the Jade Emperor, Ngọc Hoàng Huyền Khung Cao Thượng Đế (玉皇玄穹高上帝), who is alluded

to symbolically through a large purple cloth unaccompanied by any other image” (Son 2009, 58). In fact, according to our records from fieldwork, and through our consultation with the elder followers of the religion, Phi Lai pagoda is the place to worship the Jade Emperor, which in Vietnamese folk people call him Trời, as studied by Sơn Nam. The expression for the image of the Jade Emperor is the large symbol of Trần Triều dynasty on the wall of the main hall of the pagoda. Around the altar dedicated to worship of the Jade Emperor are four separate altars for worshipping other gods. This layout expresses Daoist thought quite clearly. Those four altars enshrine “four stones” covered with red cloth placed at the four directions (East, West, South, and North) around the altar for the Jade Emperor. These deities are called the “four great gods” or “the four great continents” by Daoist followers. The “four great gods” and “four great continents” are the four islands of the “Fairy Land (or land of immortals)” positioned around the Heavens. These deities guard the Heavens. This can also be referred to as “four great continents in the sacred realm” (Nguyen 2003, 681). “Eastern Đại Bộ Châu, Western Đại Bộ Châu, South Đại Bộ Châu, and Northern Đại Bộ Châu” (Nguyen 2003, 865)



Figure 1. Eastern Đại Bộ Châu, Western Đại Bộ Châu, South Đại Bộ Châu, and Northern Đại Bộ Châu

In addition, on the two sides and in front of the altar for the Jade Emperor, there are three other altars: Thiên Hoàng (天皇, Emperor of Heaven), Địa Hoàng (地皇, Emperor of Earth) and Nhân Hoàng (人皇, Emperor of Humanity). These altars express the concept of the inseparable cosmological relationship between Heaven, Earth and Humanity and the process of the birth and movement of the universe<sup>2</sup> according to the concept of Daoist Dịch lý (易理, patterns of change).

Given that the Jade Emperor is the main focus of worship, the symbols in the overall architecture of Phi Lai pagoda convey meanings tailored to conveying that the God of Heaven, the Jade Emperor, is the most powerful force behind the creation of

the universe according to Daoist thought. Structurally speaking, the foundation and facial architecture in the style of four statues (also representatives of the five elements when combined with the main altar) is typical of what is found in the architecture of communal house pagodas in the Southwest; however, Phi Lai pagoda bears some profoundly unique symbols such as the block known as the “three-floor tower” stretching straight on the roof of the pagoda in the front room and two symbols of “Hổ Lô” (Wine Gourd) on the left and right sides in the space behind. The Wine Gourd on the left is where the bell is placed, and the one on the right is for the drum. They are called the Bell Tower and Drum Tower respectively. The religious-ideological significance of the architectural symbols of this ancient tower and gourd is associated with the subject of the “supreme spirit” of the Jade Emperor, who is worshiped inside the main hall of the temple.



Figure 2. Phi Lai Pagoda's Bell Tower and Drum Tower were designed to resemble the shape of a wine gourd

According to previous researchers, the architectural symbols at Phi Lai pagoda, including “the image of two giant wine gourds of the Bell Tower, the Drum Tower, and the fire on its top” create close and impressive image like the architectural style of the “garlic shaped” tower of Islamic mosques and like the fire seen on the roofs of Khmer pagodas (Dinh 1999, 154). Similarly, according to Phạm Anh Dũng, the architectural symbols of Cỏ Lầu and Wine Gourd represent: the most significant basic architectural feature in the integration of Cham pagoda architecture with Vietnamese pagoda architecture (not communal houses), which is the simplification of the “circular arch” roof (also known as the “onion” roof). This feature creates a special highlight in the overall architecture of the façade (Pham 2013, 141). However, these explanations have not really elucidated the religious significance from the symbols and have even partly incorrectly stated the connection between the temple's architectural symbols and the religion's ideological thought. Based on the ideological aspect of religion, the

characteristics from other symbols, the concept of spiritual objects of worship, and other such factors, we realize that these symbols are the result of a deep influence from the Daoist ideology of the Chinese people. This also makes evident the process of the spread of Daoism and its multifaceted influence in the South.

Regarding the symbol of *Cổ Lầu* (ancestral house or communal house), its overall structure is a three-level architectural block on the roof of a pagoda. The highest symbol is a pavilion with the shape of four statues. The length of each side of *Cổ Lầu* is not uniform at each level. At the lower level, the length is more than 2 meters, with the total area of nearly 10 m<sup>2</sup>. The top-level edge is about 0.5 meter in length. The height from the top to the foot of the Co floor tower is more than 4 meters. Around the upper floor, there is a tetrahedral corridor. The middle and lower floors are the second and third levels of roofs respectively. The most important structure of *Cổ Lầu* is the pavilion on the top.

According to some elderly Daoist followers, the two key symbols at Phi Lai pagoda are the *Cổ Lầu* and Wine Gourd. Between the two, naturally the *Cổ Lầu* is of the greatest importance. The meaning of this ancient three-level pavilion is also explained as the symbol of the Three Emperors or the Three Generative Forces. The highest floor is for Thiên Hoàng (Emperor of Heaven), the middle floor is for Địa Hoàng (Emperor of Earth), the bottom floor is for Nhân Hoàng (Emperor of Humanity), or Thiên (天 Heaven), Địa (地 Earth), and Nhân (人 Humanity). In addition, it is said that the *Cổ Lầu* of the three level pavilion represents Buddhas, Sages, and Immortals, and the top being the throne for Ngọc Đế (the Jade Emperor) (Nguyen 2019). Because the “Supreme God” worshiped in the temple is Ngọc Hoàng (the Jade Emperor), the God who created the universe and human beings according to the Daoist Principles attested to in *The Book of Changes*, the highest peak of *Cổ Lầu* is the place upon which the Jade Emperor reigns. The trinity of Three Generative Forces, Heaven, Earth, and Humanity, is an eternal relationship that forms real life. The three are seen as binding each other in the universe like the inseparable structure of *Cổ Lầu* from high to low and vice versa.

The symbol of *Cổ Lầu*, the highest temple worshipping the Jade Emperor according to the Daoist conception, not only appears at Phi Lai pagoda but it can also be observed at some other pagodas of Four Debts of Gratitude or in the architecture of more recently established sects. No matter what form it takes, these examples still retain the symbolic design and religious significance of a *Cổ Lầu*, and their presence results overall in architectural features that separate these holy sites from Buddhist temples. Mr. Trần Lê Văn Mưu (1856–1935), one of Ngô Lợi’s followers went to Bà Rịa Vũng Tàu to preach in Long Sơn Big House, the temple where he presided over the construction being built as a space for religious practice and worship ceremonies. The overall architecture of the Big House has many different floors. Each floor symbolizes the “reigning place” of the worshiped spirit. Under this scheme, the place for worshipping the Jade Emperor is



called the “Forbidden Pavilion.” The Forbidden Pavilion was given its name to indicate that it is a pure place, where the Jade Emperor often comes down to reign when he descends to the earth. Therefore, it is only open on religious holidays and only those with duties such as religious dignitaries are allowed to enter there during ceremonies. Women are forbidden to go upstairs due to these purity rules (Phan 1975, 112). According to the elderly Daoist followers who had talks with us during our field trips, “Cổ Lầu represents the Jade Emperor, and it is also seen as the place where the Jade Emperor rests. Consequently, ordinary people are forbidden from entering that holy space” (Nguyen 2019).

Based on the central subject of worship, the Jade Emperor at Phi Lai pagoda, it can be said that Cổ Lầu is a form of Forbidden Pavilion, where the Jade Emperor or Heaven “reigns” and resides when he descends to the earth. In the first decade of the twentieth century, these Cổ Lầu, Forbidden Pavilions, and High Towers were also spaces of right practice and cultivation or of religious practice and other related practices performed by Daoist followers or the variant tradition, Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương. In Daoism, the divinity known as the Jade Emperor is the supreme god and the master of Daoism. In accordance, the worship and practice of Daoism often take place at “high floors” like those of Cổ Lầu, Emperor Pavilions, and Forbidden Floors. These are sacred symbols that order to find “thông công” (通功, an act of communion) between human beings and the Supreme Being.

Regarding to the symbol of the wine gourds: two large wine gourds located on the left and right behind Phi Lai pagoda are actually the Bell Tower (Bell Pavilion) and Drum Tower (Cổ Lầu), which were designed in the shape of a wine gourd. Each bell tower and drum tower are equally shaped like a gourd with the structure of a “wine gourd shaped tower.” Three features can be highlighted here: first, on the top of the gourd tower, the mouth of the wine gourd is designed as another smaller wine gourd to form a “dual gourd” with the widest diameter of the wine gourd being about 3 meters and the height from top to bottom being about 1.5 meters. Second, the middle floor is octagonal, and each side corresponds to one of the Eight Trigrams of Dịch Lý, the patterns of change (Heaven, Lake, Fire, Thunder, Wind, Water, Mountain, and Earth). Third, the bottom floor is a tetrahedral structure with the interior area being about 8 meters square where bells, drums, and altars for the “common gods” and “ancient gods” are placed. Outside the tetrahedron floor, there is a surrounding corridor.

Through in-depth interviews, the image of these two ancient wine gourds dated from the period of the re-establishment of the pagoda around 1886–1889 by Master Ngô Lợi; a time after the French colonialists no longer oppressed believers. According to the description recorded by Hà Tân Dân in 1971, the current Drum tower and Bell tower were formerly a tower with a gourd-shaped image above them. Perhaps that is why the author, due to the influence of the “onion” pyramid architecture in the Islamic mosque's architecture, thought that this gourd symbol had an “onion” shape. In fact, in



terms of the architectural history of this temple and other similarly shaped (wine gourd-like) temples; all were deemed to be influenced by the architecture of Islamic mosques. According to the described image in Hà Tân Dân's research, in the past, there were domes around the tower, and on each floor, there was an image of a “dual-gourd.” In later repairs, the followers replaced the tetrahedral dome-shaped tower with the current large wine gourd, while the dual gourds on the top remained unchanged.

The wine gourd is a popular symbol on the temples and shrines of Four Debts of Gratitude in Tri Tôn, An Giang province. The wine gourd symbol appears in many different positions. Sometimes it becomes a typical symbol in the overall architecture of the temple. For example, at Tam Bửu pagoda (opposite of Phi Lai pagoda), where the Buddha and the Great Master are worshiped, on the roof of the pagoda there is a symbol of a “three-leveled gourd” or a “duplicated gourd,” which means that the gourd is divided into “three folds.” To explain, below is a large yellow gourd, in the middle is a small gourd, on the mouth of a small gourd there is a smaller red gourd. On the top of the mouth of the smallest gourd is the Buddhist symbol of the swastika (卐). In other temples such as Tam Bửu Pagoda (An Thành village, Ba Chúc commune, Tri Tôn district), Mã Châu Temple, Hội Đồng Temple, Quan Âm Temple, Thanh Lương Pagoda, and An Thành Temple, all feature the typical symbols of the wine gourd with one to three pieces placed in different positions.



Figure 3. Hồ Lô (wine gourd) Symbols at Hội Đồng Temple

In some places, the wine gourds are placed on the top of the tower in the middle of the roof, and in some pagodas, consecutive gourds are placed on the tops of the towers in accordance with the pagoda-roofs in the shape of four consecutive “comparable” statues, or the wine gourd is placed on the highest top of the “Mộc trụ thần quan (poles of banners).” In general, the wine gourd symbol, regardless of its position, size, or number, can be taken as a typical symbol in the pagodas and temples of Four Debts of Gratitude in Tri Tôn district.

The meanings implied through the symbol of wine gourd-shaped architecture at Phi Lai pagoda or the wine gourd symbol placed on the roofs of the temples of Four Debts of Gratitude have no specific explanation; even to the followers of this religion we consulted. The followers said that they obliged and repaired the pagodas by following how the Great Master taught them in “poetic lines” or how the pagodas looked in the previous time. They gave more explanation that before building the pagodas, the Great Master sketched the “lộp lảng (blueprint)” for the pagoda, and then he and his followers built the pagoda in accordance with the sketch.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 4. Tam Bửu Pagoda (Wikipedia)

Regarding the symbol of wine gourd, Mr. Đạo Trần, a disciple of Ngô Lợi, on his acceptance of the Master's order to go out to preach, was given a wine gourd, which he later explained to the religious people “represented the sky and earth” (Phan 1975, 31) The meaning of gourd, as explained by Mr. Đạo Trần, is to be “one with the sky and earth.” This is similar to the interpretations given by some elderly believers who we surveyed. The two wine gourds at Phi Lai pagoda represent Heaven and Earth meaning the sky and earth in the wine gourd (Nguyen 2019). The wine gourd collects all things and sends them out in the manner of a few Daoist hermits (Nguyen 2019). In another explanation, it is said that the wine gourds are depicted in two varieties: the one with a swastika on the top represents the Buddha (and Buddhism) whereas the one without the swastika on the top represents Daoism (Nguyen 2019). According to our investigation, the types of wine gourds with a swastika on the top placed on pagodas and shrines of Four Debts of Gratitude were present only in Tam Bửu pagoda (An Định) while the rest did not feature swastikas. It is possible that since Tam Bửu pagoda is dedicated to worship of “the Buddha and the Great Master,” the wine gourds there bear a swastika, the highest symbol for “Buddhas.” Following that logic, the wine gourd symbol below the swastika is a symbol of Daoism as shown in other pagodas or temples. This is a form of cultural exchange and fusion between Buddhism and Daoism, and that fusion is clearly reflected in the thought and devotional practices of the Four Debts of Gratitude.

The wine gourd has become a representative symbol in the overall architecture of temples and shrines of the Four Debts of Gratitude; however, this symbol rarely appears in Buddhist temples. Little ornamental dots may be seen on the top of the tower of a Buddhist temple; nevertheless, these dots are not considered to be an important part of the temple's architecture. Because of this, it is not often considered to be specifically indicative of Buddhist architecture.

The wine gourd symbol appears prominently in Daoist thought and practices, and this is especially pronounced in the Daoism of cultural and ethnic groups in Southeast Asia. According to Đinh Hồng Hải, the wine gourd, which is one of the forms of the gourd symbol, "... is quite common in the culture of the Vietnam and Southeast Asian ethnic groups. It is also considered as a symbol of the origin of the formation of ethnic groups in this area" (Đinh 2018, 67). However, the gourd in a general cultural and ethnic Southeast Asian context is different from the concept of the wine gourd in Daoism because it has more natural social and ecological functions than it does spiritual functions. In other words, the gourd in Southeast Asian culture has more functions such as "saving people from hunger" and "saving people's lives" than it does spiritual functions. In the Daoist worldview and ideological thought, the gourd often goes hand in hand with outward manifestations and symbolizes the spiritual practice, and mystical medicine of the Daoists, and most importantly, the concept of creating all things in the heaven and on earth. "Hỗ Lô can represent the Way because 'chaos' and 'Hỗ Lô' are closely related in their sound and meaning. Mystics often say: Heaven and earth are in the wine gourd, and this includes how the character 'hỗ (葫)' in the word 'Hỗ Lô (wine gourd)' contains the component 'nhất (一, oneness, monism)' (Truong 2012, 274)".

In the Yin-Yang system, the Dao (or "Vitality") is a form of chaos in the universe that gives rise to the duality of yin and yang. The yin-yang symbol is an initial form of the wine gourd symbol. According to Từ Tuấn Kiệt, "Daoism attaches great importance to the image and symbolic meaning of the wine gourd. Daoists and Daoism originated from Lao Tzu. In Vietnamese Daoism, Lao Tzu's mentor was Ho Tu (何託 or 何托 depending on the source), a native of the Trinh kingdom during the Spring and Autumn period. Ho Tu was also known as Hỗ Lô which is a homophone with hồ lô (葫蘆, wine gourd) (Nguyen 2013, 376)". In the first decade or the end of the 20th century, some followers of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương and Four Debts of Gratitude also did Daoist practices such as "going into isolation to practice the Way" on the "Three Daoist Pavilions," taking the symbol of wine gourd containing "medicine for mysterious diseases," and placing a wine gourd on the altar.<sup>4</sup> These methods of practice and the wine gourd symbol are the remnants of Daoist practice forms that the followers of Four Debts of Gratitude have been influenced by in the past and from the Chinese immigrants who spread Daoism in the Southwest throughout different time periods. In addition to these traces, the thought and practice

of Daoism in Four Debts of Gratitude are reflected in the system of teachings and practices of the followers. This was mentioned by many previous researchers and the followers themselves who summarized it as “Training Essence, Vitality, and Spirit according to Daoism” (Ha 1971, 123).

From the references to the wine gourd symbol in Daoism and the thought and practice of Daoism in the Four Debts of Gratitude, it can be said that the architecture imitating the shape of a wine gourd and the wine gourd symbol at the temples and shrines of Four Debts of Gratitude originated from Daoist thought and its perception of cosmology. Cosmology in this context can be spoken of as “the occult” (玄牝) and the “heavenly root” (天地根), i.e. the origin of heaven and earth (Nguyen 2013, 368). Caodaism is also deeply influenced by Daoist thought and symbols, including the wine gourd symbol: “a wine gourd is one of the two treasures of Li Tiezhuo (李鐵拐), one of the Eight Immortals. Today they came to earth, guiding sentient beings, setting an example for men” (Tay Ninh Holy See 1999, 35). In Daoism, Li Tiezhuo is one of the “eight immortals who cross over the sea.” He is depicted carrying a wine gourd of “boundless magic power,” and often uses the wine gourd to eliminate violence and destroy evil. He grants “reincarnation” to human beings. It seems that the wine gourd has been closely associated with the idea of immortality and the revival of the Daoist Fairy world (realm of immortals) in folklore (Nguyen 2013, 368).

Thus, based on many aspects, it can be recognized that the architecture bearing the wine gourd symbol and the gourd image placed on the shrines of Daoist religions carries the ideological thought and symbolic significance that symbol also has in Daoism. This is done according to the hybrid practice system of the Three Religions (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism), in which “*đi Phat đi tông*” (taking Buddhism as the main religious practice), the wine gourd is one of the symbols of Daoism representing the universe and people as “heaven and earth.” With specific regard to the Daoist spiritual practice, it is spoken of in terms of training Essence, Vitality, and Spirit to “preserve the flesh (*Đặng Tiên nguyên thể*).”<sup>5</sup>

Along with the gourd symbol, another remarkable symbol at Four Debts of Gratitude pagoda that clearly expresses Daoist thought would be the shape of the Eight Trigrams which is frequently worked into architecture. Prior to reconstruction Tam Bửu pagoda<sup>6</sup> was built opposite Phi Lai pagoda. In addition to the overall architecture of the façade and the pagoda's foundation that adopts the shape of the four icons commonly seen in communal houses and pagodas in the Southwest, on the top of the pagoda, rested the main architectural symbol which occupied two-thirds of the temple's roof area. The tower had a circumference of more than 4 meters, and it stood about 3 meters high. The tower was divided into three levels: the highest was the gourd symbol, the middle was the tower's body, and the lower portion was the base of the tower. Excluding the gourd symbol, the main structure of the tower was the middle body and the base of the tower.

The overall shape of the tower, the middle body, and the base of the tower, was such that it had eight sides. The tower and the eight-sided figure represented the shape of the Eight Trigrams in the Daoist concept of Qing Li (清理, purification) and Separation Thought. The surface between the sides of the tower was engraved with “lines” corresponding to the Eight Trigrams: Heaven, Lake, Flame, Thunder, Wind, Water, Mountain, and Earth.



Figure 5. Tam Bửu Pagoda (<https://angiang.gov.vn>)

The roof of the pagoda in the form of the Eight Trigrams Tower or an architectural style in the form of the Eight Trigrams system can also be observed at pagodas such as Tam Bửu pagoda (An Thành village) , Phi Lai pagoda (with the Eight Trigrams and wine gourd symbols as mentioned above) and Thanh Lương pagoda. At the construction site of Tam Bửu pagoda in An Thành village, in front of the pagoda is a “Vô Quy” temple that is about 5 meters high and 20 meters wide. “Vô Quy” has a low three-leveled roof with the symbol of gourd on top.



Figure 6. Thanh Lương Pagoda

Below is an eight-sided tower roof corresponding to the Eight Trigrams. On the surface of the edges the Chinese characters for “the Eight Trigrams” are engraved. The entrance to the left of “Vô Quy” is called “the Eight Trigrams Gate.”





Figure 7. An example of an Eight Trigrams Gate

According to believers, this “Eight Trigrams Temple” is used as a gathering place for believers use during important religious practice such as worshipping Tam Nguyễn and worship on the day commemorating the opening of the temple.

The roof of the pagoda in the shape of the Eight Trigrams and the Eight Trigrams synagogue are not only reflected in the temples and shrines built by Ngô Lợi but also in the temples built by his disciples and later religious believers. These key examples of the influence of Daoist thought. One typical example is the shrine (also known as Ba pagoda) to Tây Vương Mẫu (西王母, Queen Mother of the West) in Núi Tô commune, Tri Tôn district. At Tây Vương Mẫu Temple, the top of the pagoda roof is designed in the shape of the Eight Trigrams tower, and it occupies two-thirds of the area there. The surface of each side of the tower is engraved with “lines” corresponding to the hexagrams in the Eight Trigrams system. As the name of the temple indicates, the main deity worshipped is “Queen Mother of the West (Tây Vương Mẫu)”. Devotees believe that she is a Mother Buddha in the West as a directional correspondence with the Five Elements which directionally represent East, West, South, North, and Center. Similar to this point of view, in the Cao Dai dictionary, Nguyễn Văn Hồng explains the following about Tây Vương Mẫu: “Tây means “the West,” referring to femininity. Vương means “king,” and Mẫu means “mother.” The West is the direction where the sun sets, and that is where Yin vitality gradually becomes feminine while the opposite is East, the direction where the sun rises. Yang vitality gradually becomes masculine. According to fairy tales, in the East, there is Đông Vương Công, who controls Yang Vitality, and in the West, there is Tây Vương Mẫu who controls Yin vitality. Đông Vương Công (King Lord of the East) is also known as ‘Mộc Công (Lord of Wood),’ because according to Five Elements, wood corresponds to the East. Tây Vương Mẫu is also called Kim Mẫu (the Golden Mother), because of the metal (Kim means ‘gold’ but also the element, ‘metal’) corresponds to the West.

Many traditions take Đông Vương Công to be the Supreme Being, and thereby, he is synonymous with the Jade Emperor of Heaven, who is in charge of Yang light. Tây Vương Mẫu is spoken of as Đức Diệu Trì Kim Mẫu (Her Holiness the Golden Mother of the Jade Pond), who controls Yin and Light.

The monks who aim to achieve the Way of the Fairy are supposed to first go see Đông Vương Công and then see Tây Vương Mẫu. After that, they are to attend the ceremony of Taishang Laojun (Lao Tzu's deified form) and Đức Ngươn Thi Thiên Tôn (元始天尊, the Celestial Worthy of the Primordial Beginning)(Nguyen 2003, 314).”



Figure 8. A shrine to Tây Vương Mẫu (Queen Mother of the West)

By examining the image of Tây Vương Mẫu, we can see that the Tây Vương Mẫu Temple's worship practices were adapted from the Mother Goddess worship of Daoism that originated in the religion dedicated to Tây Vương worship. Despite the transformation of the names and images, the concept of the universe's creation according to the Eight Trigrams system in Daoist thought is still evident through the Eight Trigrams tower located on the temple's roof.

With regard to the Eight Trigrams within the context of Daoist thought, there is specific reference to the relationship between Heaven and Earth and the movement of Heaven and Earth that gradually forms the third subject, human beings (and all myriad things). These comprise the Three Generative Forces that is mentioned in some teachings of the Four Debts Gratitude. In general, this movement took place in a process: the universe was the first in a chaotic mass and then extreme polarities were formed, those polarities generated heaven and earth, and those two elements gave rise to various phenomena eventually leading to the emergence of the Eight Trigrams (Heaven, Lake, Flame, Thunder, Wind, Water, Mountain, Earth). In turn, the Eight Trigrams gave birth to all other myriad forms. According to the concept of the Four Debts of Gratitude, the supreme deity who ruled over the universe in that turbulent period was the Jade Emperor, as mentioned in their scripture regarding the Jade Emperor. Devotees consider the translation of their scripture to be sacrilege,



and with that in mind, a description of the relevant section will be offered in place of a translation. The scripture is comparable to Chapter 42 of the *Daodejing* or Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhou Dunyi's *Taijitu*; both of which depict the sequential unfolding of the universe. The unique feature of the scripture is that it centers around the Jade Emperor as the Mover and/or Overseer of the unfolding of the universe, and the specific items mentioned as coming into existence include but are not limited to the Three Generative Forces, Taiji (the Grand Ultimate, Yin and Yang), and the Eight Trigrams (presumably as the natural phenomena represented through the trigrams but perhaps also as trigrams themselves).<sup>7</sup>

In the Daoist *Book of the Five Texts* (五教文), the movements of Heaven and Earth, as well as the movements of the Eight Trigrams (Heaven, Lake, Flame, Thunder, Wind, Water, Mountain, and Earth), are associated with the lunar year timeline. For example, Heaven corresponds to the years of Tuất (Dog) and Hợi (Pig); Lake corresponds to the Year of the Rat; Flame corresponds to the years of Sửu (Buffalo) and Dần (Tiger), and so on. The movements of the Eight Trigrams correspond to the lunar years and are linked to the birth of sages who rule over Heaven and Earth, and to the forecasting of calamities and blessings in human life and the universe. Moreover, it also refers to the ultimate goal of establishing the Thượng nguyên (上元), a happy realm for the well-being of humans.<sup>8</sup>

The mystical meanings of the Eight Trigrams in the sutras or as indicated through the architectural symbols of the temple such as the Eight Trigrams tower and the Eight Trigrams house show that Daoist thought and practice hold an important position in the practice and thought of the Four Debts of Gratitude. The Eight Trigrams tower, the Eight Trigrams house in the architectural system of the temples and shrines of Four Debts of Gratitude carry Daoist cosmological meanings regarding the formation of heaven, earth and human beings. This is seen as a “beautiful sacred realm” that directs people to firmly follow the spiritual path to change their fortunes and future. In addition, through the symbols of the Eight Trigram architecture, it is also explained that Daoist thought always goes hand in hand with Buddhist and Confucian thought. This forms a tightly bound co-existence among the Three Religions.

In addition to the architectural symbols of Cổ Lầu, Wine Gourd, towers, and the Eight Trigram house, the pagodas and temples of Four Debts of Gratitude are often built with the architectural symbol of a “three-level tower” in the same system or isolated on different roofs of temples and shrines. This can be observed at temples like Thanh Lương, Tam Bửu, Temple of the Canton, Linh Bửu Pagoda, and the Temple of Quan Âm. On the roof or at the roof points connecting the four icons, the temple there often features towers. Thanh Lương Pagoda has the symbol of three consecutive high towers on the roof as a highlight for the entire temple's architecture. This trio of towers is such that each tower has a completely different design and size. Viewed from the front side,

the front and rear towers bear the symbols of wine gourd on the top. The middle tower does not. The front tower is larger, the body of the tower is octagonal, and each side corresponds to the trigrams that make up the Eight Trigrams: Heaven, Lake, Flame, Thunder, Wind, Water, Mountain, and Earth. The middle tower and the last tower are designed in a tetrahedral style wherein each side corresponds to the four icons and the four directions: East, West, South, and North. This type of architecture and the demarcation of the central deity in the temple partly expresses the concept of the universe and human life. This too, complies with Daoist thought. Thanh Lương Pagoda worships the spiritual image of Diệu Trì Kim Mẫu. According to the concept of Daoism: “Diệu Trì Kim Mẫu is the one who keeps the division of power of the Supreme Being (be that Heaven or the Jade Emperor or other another deity depending on tradition). She was created by the Supreme Being to control the Yin Light and ‘to create and bring forth the myriad created spirits (tạo hóa ra Vạn linh)’ in the invisible sacred realm. After doing so, the myriad spirits descended to earth to form all things; that is to say, they became sentient beings” (Huynh 2017, 87).

The delimitation of the position of the gods in the temple is related to the symbol of the shape of the three towers on the roof of this pagoda and the connected symbol of a three-tiered tower. Three neighboring towers are adjacent to each other at Thanh Lương Pagoda and some other temples, shrines, and single towers, but in the form of a three-tiered tower symbolizing “Thiên Hoàng, Địa Hoàng, and Nhơn Hoàng” or “each tower or each floor of the tower is seen as an abode for Buddhas, Sages, and Immortals as they reign (Nguyen 2019). These interpretations of the significance of these symbols act as additional supporting evidence that demonstrates how the concept of the creation of the universe and life and the harmony between the “tangible” and “intangible” spirits of the universe throughout the realms of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity (the Three Generative Forces) in Daoism is sometimes further symbolized in human form as “Buddhas, Sages, and Fairies (immortals).” In either variety, the influence of Daoist thought on this indigenous religion is clearly shown. What is conveyed is the birth of the universe from Heaven or Jade Emperor and Earth or the Queen Mother whereby all things are created in Yin Light.

Therefore, it can be preliminarily determined that the towers built at the most typical positions on the roofs of temples and shrines of Four Debts of Gratitude bear the religious significance of Daoist ideological influence. This occurs in two different variations: one wherein single-tower structure uses each tower floor for numerological meaning and the other wherein three-tower structure use each tower to convey the same numerological teaching. Either way, the deity being worshiped and the position of that deity in the theology and practice of the religion takes place within the emphasis on the number three which alludes to the Three Religions. The architectural symbols of the three-level monolithic tower or the row of three consecutive towers on the roof of the

pagoda and shrine become the highlight of the overall architecture of the pagodas and temples of Four Debts of Gratitude in Tri Tôn. This architectural symbol built into these towers is completely different from the architectural style of temples of other religions such as Buddhism, Bửu Hương Kỳ Sơn, Caodaism, or Hòa Hảo Buddhism.

## Conclusion

The above-mentioned symbols in the architecture of pagodas and shrines of Four Debts of Gratitude in Tri Tôn clearly show the impact that Daoist thought and Daoist cosmology had on this indigenous religion. Daoist ideology is not only expressed through poetry, chanting prayers, and spiritual practice but also through the architecture of temples. The symbols of Cổ Lầu, Wine Gourd, towers, the Eight Trigram houses, and three-level monolithic towers or three adjacent towers on the roof of the pagoda, have all become identifying features or symbols brought up for comparison between the religious temples' architecture with existing interwoven multi-ethnic and multi-religious cultures in Tri Tôn district in particular and in An Giang in general.

Due to many social and historical reasons that affect religion, it is difficult to be sure whether or not these symbols are completely the “inheritance of architectural values established from thought in the past.” However, considering the following aspects: a) historical image, b) the principle of religious beliefs of the leaders of the former congregations and religious communities in carrying out the “words of the Great Master” when they were not yet affected by economic and multitudinous socio-political issues as the religion is at present, c) theology and subjects of worship in religion, d) interpretation of elderly believers, the meaningful and strong degree of similarity between the given aspects, it can be concluded that the typical symbols in the architectural system of temples and shrines of Four Debts of Gratitude such as Cổ Lầu, Wine Gourd, the Eight Trigram architecture, and towers contain deep and profound meanings found within Daoist thought. The Daoist influences expressed through the architectural symbols of the temples along with many other elements in this religion contribute to the affirmation that Four Debts of Gratitude is a religion that integrates the three religions: Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism.

## Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Trần Điều is a deep purple cloth stretched out on a plank or a piece of wall that is painted deep purple. The size of the cloth is flexible and dependent on the size of the space allocated to the enshrinement.
- <sup>2</sup> According to the followers of Four Debts of Gratitude, the deployment of the pagodas worshipping spirits was decided by Ngo Loi. Phi Lai pagoda worships the Jade Emperor; Tam Buu (An Dinh hamlet) pagoda worships Buddha and the Great Master; Thanh Luong pagoda worships Dieu Tri Kim Mau.
- <sup>3</sup> According to the followers of the Four Debts of Gratitude and Ha Tan Dan's statistics, from the time he went to Tuong mountain for land reclamation in 1876 to the time he passed away in 1890, Master Ngo Loi built 16 pagodas, temples, and communal houses for the followers. From that time on, no additional pagodas or temples have been built; however, some sites have been restored.
- <sup>4</sup> The matter is not cited here for numerous reasons.
- <sup>5</sup> In Buu Son Ky Huong or Four Debts of Gratitude, there are tales about "giữ gìn nhục thể (preserving one's carnal form)" and "đăng Tiên nguyên thể (using one's body to achieve immortality)". The examples are a tale about Cừ Đa, about the death of Ta Paul or about Ngo Loi.
- <sup>6</sup> The pagoda was demolished and reconstructed. The information in this article relates to the previous site pre-demolition.
- <sup>7</sup> Four Debts of Gratitude, Ngoc Hoang Cot Tuy Chan Kinh, Ba Chuc, typed copy, p.20, 21. According to the perspectives of the followers of Four Debts of Gratitude, the believers can only read the Daoist sutra in Sino-Vietnamese characters for comprehension, not for translation. The believers state that nobody could understand the words spoken by Buddhas, Sages, or immortals, and therefore, it cannot be translated. Efforts at translating are equated with committing transgressions because misrepresenting holy words is transgressive. Believers insist that the scripture be only transcribed into Chinese characters and special Vietnamese characters. In deference to their string wishes, here is the original: "爾時世尊高上玉皇 (Nhị thời thế tôn cao thượng Ngọc Hoàng)/虛空自然運轉三才 (Hư không tự nhiên vận chuyển tam tài)/八卦太易太初 (Bát quái thái dị thái sơ)/太始太素太極 (Thái thủy thái dĩ thái cực)/一天二地三人 (Nhứt thiên nhị địa tam nhân)/轉八卦乾坎艮震巽離坤兌 (Chuyển bát quái càn khảm cấn chấn tổn lý khôn đoài)."
- <sup>8</sup> "Bây giờ còn hồi đình ninh/Chuyển vận Bát quái mới bình mới an/Cung Càn vốn thiệt tam liên/Còn trong Tuất Hợi nào phiến chúng sanh/Cung Khảm trung mãng đã dành/Năm Tý bước tới dữ lành mới hay/Cung Cấn phúc hoân tỏ bày/Sầu Dẫn xuất Thánh phép hay vô thường/Cung Chấn ngưỡng bốn khá thương/Năm Mẹo bước tới thanh trường phục nam/Cung Tổn hạ đoạn chưa kham/Thin Ty mới có thông tam côi đường/Cung Ly trung hư rõ ràng/Qua Ngọ thôi mới Minh Hoàng trị ngôi/Cung Khôn lục đoạn thương ôi/Mùi Thân tứ giáo mới ngôi định phân/Cung Đoài thượng khuyết cũng gân/Tới Dậu có Phật mười phần thành thôi/Chuyển luân Bát quái đất trời/Chân nhi phục thủy lập đời Thượng Nguyên" (Duc Bon su nui Tuong n.d., 12). According to the perspectives of the followers of Four Debts of Gratitude, the believers can only read the Daoist sutra in Sino-Vietnamese characters for comprehension, not for translation. However, in order to provide the readers with the content of the sutra, we would like to transcribe this passage into Chinese characters, as this is a common and accepted alternative way of writing the Sutra of The Four Debts of Gratitude: 此刻還叮嚀問，八卦轉運才平安，乾宮三連原始，眾生煩惱在狗豬年之中，所口宮中滿當然，至子年兜或善才知，艮宮福換錶示，醜寅出聖法好極了，震宮四門可憐，卯年進到肅清復南，巽宮下段沒受，龍已開通三界，離宮中虛清楚，過午年明黃龍主宰，坤宮六段傷哉，未申坐下劃定四教，兌宮靠近滿缺，至酉年有佛才十分體胖，天地八卦轉運，真兒水復立上元（《五教文》像山本釋德，安江省知尊縣，12頁）。
- <sup>9</sup> It can be argued that thap tam cap could also be called a "co lau."

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