

Living in Intimacy: A Case Study of Women's Community at a Caodaist Temple in Hanoi*

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Introduction

Recent studies have pointed out the significance of a new perspective on the notion of community (Cohen 1982; Anderson 1983; Wenger 1998; Amit 2002; Delanty 2003). In this chapter, I will critically reconsider Wenger's (1998) idea of "community of practice" which is essential to understanding the relationship between the community and practice in religious activities for women in Vietnam. The concept "community of practice," focuses on the cognitive processes in which people commit to and identify themselves within a community, by participating in the practical process of building new knowledge and skills. Tanabe (2002; 2008), however, criticizes Lave and Wenger's theory, arguing that it does not fully consider the process through which community members affect changes through their group participation, which forms new relations among the members and creates a new style of knowledge and practice. In addition, Tanabe emphasizes that group participation among community members breeds self-confidence that enables them to better apply their skills in broader society. Thus, Tanabe (2002) suggests that the term "community" implies a space or a situation in which the affectional and social relations of individuals are constructed by everyday practices. Based on Tanabe's arguments, Hirai (2012) also suggests an idea of "community as practice" that is completely different from the traditional view of community as an affiliation based on birthplace and kinship relations. To this end, Hirai indicates five key points concerning the "community as practice" approach as follows: (1) People are thrown and throw themselves into a community, (2) a community is always reconstructed through practices, (3) relationships within a society are inherent in the community, (4) modes of knowledge and practice are realigned recursively, and (5) the community pays attention to affectional conjectures (Hirai 2012, 16–18). Community,

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FIGURE 6.1 *The Caodaism Hanoi Temple*

SOURCE: PHOTO BY ITO MARIKO.

in this sense, connects affection with the community in settings where people create alternative “intimate spheres” for individuals (Tanabe 2008, 122–25).

In this chapter I focus on the religious community of the Caodaist Hanoi Temple (Thánh Thất Thủ Đô Hà Nội), which might also be regarded as an example of a community *as practice*. The Hanoi Temple is a subgroup of the Ban Chính Đạo sect, the second-largest sect in Caodaism, and it is the only Caodaist institution of that sect in central Hanoi. At present, almost all the members of this temple community are women, in particular middle-aged and elderly women who have experienced suffering in their lives. They are involved in most of the temple activities as core community members. These activities are shaped by a unique relationship shared by these women. They describe this relationship using the word *thân mật*, which can be translated into Chinese as 親密 and into English as “intimate.” In this chapter, I examine the possibility of an alternative intimate sphere through the analysis of the *thân mật* relationships among these women gathering at the Hanoi Temple (Figure 6.1).¹

1 I conducted long-term field research in two phases. The first was from September 2000 to October 2001, and the second was from April 2004 to October 2005. I recorded not only women's daily practices, including their religious activities at the Hanoi temple, but also the life stories of ten women. I frequently visited the women's houses to conduct these interviews.