

# The Blessed Virgin Mary Wears *Áo Dài*: Marianism in the Transnational Public Sphere between Vietnamese Catholics in the U.S. and Vietnam\*

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## Introduction

“Just as Our Lady of Fatima had saved Russia in 1989, so too will she save Vietnam,” said a priest in his Sunday Vietnamese mass sermon at the 2011 Annual Marian Festival in Carthage, Missouri. On the altar next to him and facing more than 5,000 attendees were statues of Our Lady of Fatima in a white robe and Our Lady of Lavang as a Vietnamese woman dressed in *áo dài*, a Vietnamese traditional costume. This was no ordinary Catholic event. The three-day festival attracted more than 70,000 people. They were mostly Vietnamese Catholics who drove from the two coasts of the U.S. to this small town of approximately 15,000 residents. Many flew in from other countries, including Vietnam, Canada, France, and Australia. They described themselves as the children of the Virgin Mary who have been dispersed throughout the world, isolated from each other, and have recently reconnected through her. They had come together to pray for her blessings, to heal the historical wounds that have fragmented their community and placed their country of origin under communism.

This chapter investigates how and why Vietnamese Catholics in the U.S. are motivated to maintain ties with coreligionists in Vietnam through the image of Our Lady of Lavang. In doing so, it aims to understand how Vietnamese Catholics in the U.S. negotiate with the meanings of religion in the private and public spheres of their new host society. While religion is often a family-based practice that manifests into public domains in Vietnam, it is a constitutionally protected individual right in the U.S. Therefore, it is common for Vietnamese Catholics, as well as their coethnics belonging to other religions, to come from a family of several generations of members professing the same religion. In contrast, nuclear families in the U.S. are unpredictably diverse in religious affiliation—a man may profess Christianity, his wife may follow Buddhism, and their son may be an atheist.

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I argue that Vietnamese Catholics have resisted the reclusion of religion into the private, individualistic arena in the U.S., although this is their new host society and most do not see themselves returning to Vietnam. Through Our Lady of Lavang, they have interpolated their religious practices into the transnational public space. During decades of geographical isolation and separation from their homeland following the end of the Vietnam War, Vietnamese Catholics in the U.S. prayed to Our Lady of Lavang for hope, forgiveness, and solace. This cross-border, shared appeal mediated continuity and linkages between Vietnamese Catholics in the U.S. and coreligionists in Vietnam, breaking down the public-private barriers as these processes traverse through political, cultural, and economic domains. These processes have only expanded further since 1995, when the two countries established diplomatic ties. Today, Our Lady of Lavang has become synonymous with a global Vietnamese Catholic collective identity.

### **Mother Worship in the Transnational Public Sphere**

Research on immigrants in the U.S. has discovered that Marianism exhibited in the public space often transcends national borders and is intertwined with ethnicity. In his study, Tweed (1997) has found that Marianism, through Our Lady of Exile, plays a crucial role in linking Cuban Catholics in Miami to their homeland. He observes that, through Our Lady of Exile, they create a “trans-temporal” and “trans-locative” space at their church to reinterpret their history of displacement and envision a future in which they would return to their homeland. In doing so, Tweed argues that they transpose the conditions of displacement into survival and aspirations, reinterpreting their experiences of exile as hope and envisioning a future when they will return to Cuba. Similarly, Catholic and non-Catholic Mexican immigrants have evoked Our Lady of Guadalupe’s image to appeal to a transnational ethnic identity (Horsfall 2000; Duricy 2008).

There is no current in-depth study on Marianism among Vietnamese in the U.S. However, observations of Mother Goddess worship among this population have found that this practice is also emerging into a transnational public sphere. Originally relegated to the private sphere, usually practiced individually or in small groups at home, Fjelstad and Nguyen (2011) have observed that the Mother Goddess practice has created a semi-porous community and inspired many young Vietnamese adults to learn and maintain their Vietnamese roots, including traveling to the homeland for the first time.