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WORLD

Clairvoyants See Good Fortune in Capitalist Vietnam

Once suppressed, spirit worship is finding favor with business owners and love seekers; 'Now that people are making more money, my phone keeps ringing'



Nguyen Thi Yen, a clairvoyant who practices a centuries-old spirit worship known as Len Dong, stands in front of her shrine on the third floor of her home in Hanoi. *PHOTO: JAMES HOOKWAY/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By JAMES HOOKWAY

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HANOI— Nguyen Thi Yen took up golf after she retired from her job as an immigration official. She studied Japanese cuisine and dabbled in the local property market, much as many other middle-class Vietnamese do.

Now she has found something else to fill her time: communing with the spirit world, sometimes with up to 36 deities at a time.

For years, séances and mysticism, known here as Len Dong, were suppressed. French colonizers and the country's Marxist leaders both regarded the rituals as a dangerous superstition. Ms. Yen, who is 57, says she studied them in secret. "I would have lost my job otherwise," she said.

Today, though, as Vietnam's economy springs to life, growing around 6% annually in recent years, there is a growing market for clairvoyants to dispense advice on whom to marry or when to sign deals and start new businesses, often to the exact hour and minute.

Lighting some incense sticks at her shrine on the third floor of her home, Ms. Yen lists a series of companies that have sought her services, including some from Singapore, Japan and South Korea.

"Their local partners need to see them checking all the boxes before they do business with them, especially if they are building something that disturbs the spirits," Ms. Yen explained. Buddha statues, whiskey bottles and \$100 bills, offerings to the gods, jostled for prominence in the display behind her.

Ms. Yen prefers not to discuss how much she earns for her services. Some clients of other clairvoyants say it is commonplace for offerings to run up to thousands of dollars.

"I find peace of mind by attending the ceremonies and I think a lot of other people do, too," said one devotee, Phan Hong Thanh, 34.

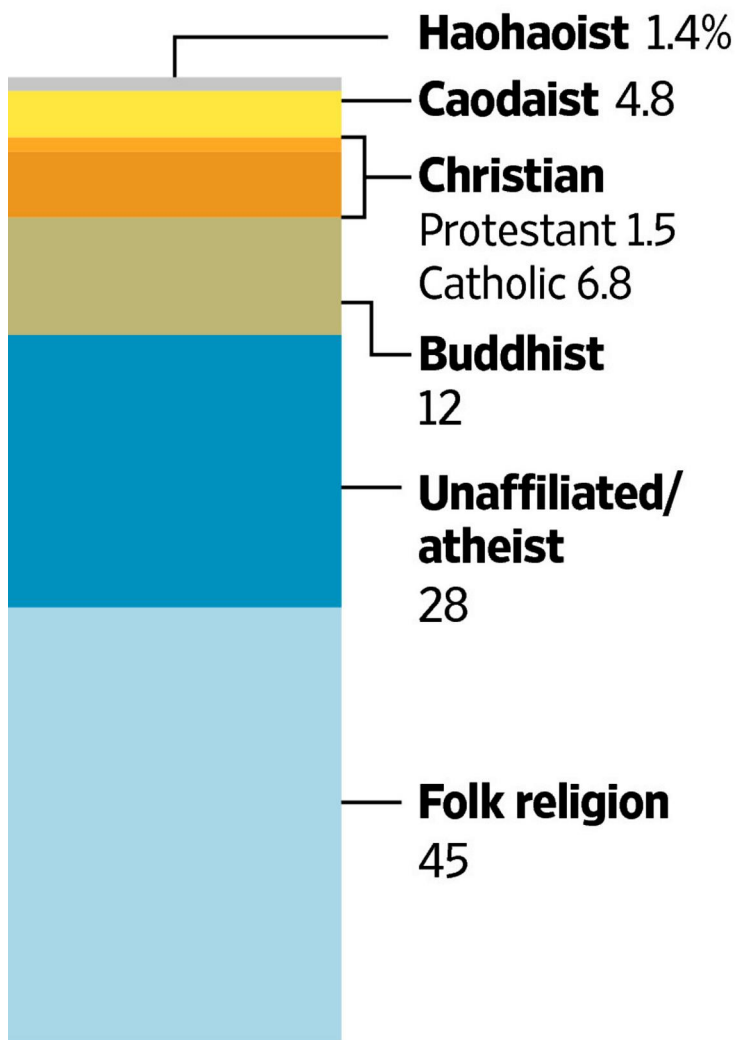
Viet Tu, a theater director here, notes that the surge in interest reflects how, as fresh waves of countries modernize, they don't necessarily follow those that have gone before. One of his new productions is modeled on Len Dong practices and involves a live band and dancing choreographed to mimic a shaman's trance.

"I wanted to do something that wasn't influenced by the West or China, and this was it," he said.

The strait-laced Communist Party is getting into the spirit of things, too. It is lobbying the United Nations to recognize Len Dong, part of a centuries-old system of spirit worship, as an intangible cultural asset. Other nominees this year include Belgium's candidate, beer, and a North Korean form of wrestling known as Ssireum.

Differing Beliefs

Communist-run Vietnam is home to a variety of religious faiths



Sources: Government of Vietnam;
Pew Research Center

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Pham Sanh Chau, the foreign-ministry official leading the effort, said that if the government can't stop Vietnam's clairvoyants, then it might as well support them. "It's hard, even impossible to stop them," he said.

Vietnam has been loosening constraints on religious and spiritual freedoms in recent years, partly to help smooth trade with the U.S., where Congress regularly used to raise Hanoi's patchy record on the issue.

Roman Catholicism, Buddhism and Caodaism, a home-brewed blend of Christian and Confucian teachings, have been protected by law since 2004. In 2007, former Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung became the first Vietnamese leader to meet the pope, who was then Benedict XVI.

Since then, more Vietnamese have gained the confidence to openly practice their beliefs. Len Dong is becoming more popular, too, so much so that police are now cracking down on bogus clairvoyants who they say use the rituals to defraud their clients.

Several have been arrested in recent months, raising the awkward question of how to tell a sham shaman from the real deal.

“They’re a nuisance,” said Ms. Yen. “They copy some of the moves but they get it all wrong. All they succeed in is making the rest of us look bad.”

A proper Len Dong ceremony, in contrast, takes hours.

Puffing on a large, hand-rolled cheroot during one recent performance, Ms. Yen wafts the smoke around a restaurant a client has hired for a séance as a drumbeat steadily builds. Normally Ms. Yen doesn’t drink or smoke. But over the course of the ritual she will do both as she takes on the characteristics of different spirits before awaking from her trance with advice for her clients.

A successful medium also has to give up meat and abstain from sex for a week before a performance. Then there are the various papier mâché offerings that must be prepared for the spirits, including an elephant with nine tusks.

“It’s exhausting,” Ms. Yen said. “Now that people are making more money, my phone keeps ringing. There’s not even time to play golf anymore.”

—*Vu Trong Khanh in Hanoi contributed to this article.*

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