



## VIET-CHI POST No 25

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### ABOVE THE OCEAN

*Series of letters from Master Phan-Hoang*

*Trời dài đất rộng, đi thật, sống thật, ghi vội, gửi về...*

*Cánh Thư Phan-Hoàng*

**ĐẦU SÓNG NGỌN GIÓ**

**Thư Số 13: THẦN ĐẠO SHINTO**

### Letter 13 : SHINTO

*none edited text*

#### LETTER 13

*(continued from Letter 12)*



#### SHINTO

In Japan, as well as in Vietnam, the original form of Shinto is rooted very far back in history, long before the birth of Buddhism in India. “*Shin*” means “Spirit”, “Soul” or “Deity” and “*To*” means “The Way”, “Religion”, the suffix “ism” (so the term of Shintoism is a curious English word!). Shinto is characterized by veneration of nature spirits, heroes, and ancestors. Japanese Shinto is called in Vietnamese language as “Thần-đạo” and the “*Vietnamese Shinto*” is called in Vietnam as “Thờ Thần” or, in a larger way, as “Đạo Ông-Bà, Thần Thánh”. I think, for the sake of clarity, I would call this religion, as it is known in Japan by “Japanese Shinto” and its cousin, as it is practised by Vietnamese people as “Vietnamese Shinto” (Việt Thần-Đạo). If one is searching for the apparent difference between them, it’s easy to point out many differences. But if one is concerned by knowing how things have been changed during the course of history one should focus on the discovery of similarities. The average Japanese and the Vietnamese as well, visit shrines only a few times a year. But the spirit of Shinto is permanently present in their day-to-day life and activities. The shame for failing to preserve the honour of ancestors is greater than the shame of being arrested by police for wrong doing. For most of Vietnamese people it doesn’t matter that they believe or not in their religion but it matters that they must believe in the moral values provided by their religion called “Đạo Ông-Bà, Thần Thánh”. In Japan, under Meiji period (1852-1912), the Japanese government made Shinto the state religion in order to shape national spirit and unity. The government support Shinto because they want to make good citizens, the citizens who respect the law because they respect themselves and because they are accountable towards their ancestors and deities. Their fear of ancestors is greater than their fear of police. Shinto provides strong foundation for that. As a result, in Japan, streets are safe at night although one doesn’t see much police in the street, public parks are clean although one could hardly find much public



garbage bins in any park.

Could we call Shinto a religion? For some western minds it is not a religion because by definition a religion is a “belief in and reverence for a supernatural power regarded as creator and governor of the universe”. Well, by this definition, Shinto is not a religion. But who has invented this definition? What if we understand that a religion is a set of beliefs, values, and practices based on spiritual teachings and with reverence for supernatural powers? This is exactly the way Asian people consider spiritual life. They care about the way they live and not much about the rhetoric. Strong spiritual life is alive more in the way people live than in the wording and the ceremonies provided at official temple.

I left the shrine Tsurugaoka and walked along a small road without knowing exactly where I was going. Walking without knowing where to go is a magical process, thousand ideas will come. At a quiet place, I made a stop and did the form BAI DI-XA to uplift my energy level then I continued on doing the Tinh-Mat form, thinking of the 28 secrets in life. I felt happy for having such a form to do when I am travelling alone, facing to myself. Arrived at a small hill I saw a big stele erected at the entrance of a small road. When I climbed up to the stele I was still reciting names of Tinh-Mat, at the sequence of “Rise-and-Fall” (Can trung tham hai de-Chuyen bo diem am giao). I felt relaxed. I sit and entered in Zen meditation.

Charles Phan-Hoang, January 2009.