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Student perspectives on worship services from Instructor Jennifer Garvin-Sanchez's Religious Studies 108 Human Spirituality undergraduate course at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Chùa Hoa Nghiêm

by Mimi Nguyen

I attended Chùa Hoa Nghiêm a Buddhist temple, on Sunday September 20, 2015 at around 11 a.m. This pagoda is located in Fort Belvoir, Virginia. The address is 9105 Backlick Rd., Fort Belvoir, Virginia 22060. The presiding official is named Thầy Thích Kiến Khai.

The pagoda, which is a Buddhist temple or sacred building, was an off-white color. A typical pagoda is a many-tiered tower, but this building was not as tall as most are. It's more of a mock of a traditional pagoda; similar to a large home with roofing that curls on the outer corners. Lots of greenery, many trees had been planted in the front of the building. There are also statues of Buddha near the front entrance. Once you walked up the few steps leading to the front door, you had to remove your shoes, which made me uncomfortable, although I always remove my shoes before walking around my home. Removing your shoes and leaving them in the front of a strange place, where many others' left their shoes was just a little weird to me. The inside was spotless, bright red fluffy carpet covered the floor. The inside colors were red and gold, which represents good luck.

I went on a Sunday, which I believe is one of their busiest days. The majority of the visitors were Vietnamese, many of which were older. I saw a lot of families; there were about 30 people there during the 45 minutes I was there. Many of the elderly packed together, seemed like they all saw each other every weekend. A

few people greeted me, a lot of people were a little standoffish because they weren't sure if I was Vietnamese or not. Once they knew I was Vietnamese they began greeting me. I'm sure I was more comfortable than any other raced person would be, since I'm Vietnamese and basically everyone there was Vietnamese as well. I still felt a little uncomfortable because I can understand conversational Vietnamese, but I can't speak it very well. It was also actually very difficult to understand the monk.

Let's start off with the standard etiquette: Hats and shoes should always be removed, voices lowered, no smoking, phones on silent and Buddha statues must be respected. One removes his or her shoes before entering the temple as a sign of respect. Temples are used for either, private prayers and meditation, or for formal teachings. In a formal teaching one will engage in practices such as prostrating to the teacher, chanting prayers and making offerings. It is customary to stand as the teacher enters the room and to remain standing until he or she is seated. We also stand as the teacher leaves the room. Overall, everything was pretty casual, after listening to the chanting of the monk, you grab an incense stick and pray. After that everyone tours the pagoda and mingles quietly. Then before you leave, there's a room near the entrance and exit that you can go into to donate money.

Attending a Buddhist temple was a nice experience. My parents are actually practicing

Buddhists, but never pushed me onto any type of religion. So usually they go without us, or we wait in the car while they go inside. They were definitely surprised when I asked if I could join them this time. •

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