

Southeast Asia

Edyta Roszko, *Fishers, Monks and Cadres: Navigating State, Religion and the South China Sea in Central Vietnam*

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Since the 1990s, religion in Vietnam has seen a remarkable resurgence. The Vietnamese religious landscape is diverse and dynamic, and recent years have seen the construction and restoration of many temples, pagodas, and churches. Reflecting these developments, scholars of Vietnamese religion have published fascinating ethnographic studies in English on topics such as popular Buddhism (Soucy 2012), urban spirit mediums (Endres 2011), and popular pilgrimage (Taylor 2004). Edyta Roszko's monograph *Fishers, Monks and Cadres: Navigating State, Religion and the South China Sea in Vietnam* is an important addition to this growing field. Contrary to most of the existing literature on Vietnamese culture and religion, this book focuses neither on the north nor on the south, but on the center. To my knowledge, this is the first study in English of popular maritime religion in central Vietnam.

Fishers, Monks and Cadres is based on long-term fieldwork in two fishing communities, the coastal town of Sa Huỳnh and the island of Lý Sơn, both in Quảng Ngãi province. As Roszko argues, Lý Sơn in particular is central to the state's project of reconstructing Vietnam as a "maritime nation," which serves to justify its territorial claims. Local ritual traditions that were deemed "superstitious" until recently now "provide evidence of maritime heritage and hence Vietnam's long-standing sovereignty in the South China

Sea” (10). Thus, this peripheral fishing community has taken on new significance not only as a popular domestic tourist destination but also, more importantly, as a symbol of the nation and its sovereignty.

The book is divided into an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion. Chapter 1 introduces the two fieldwork sites, their geographical settings, and their histories. In this chapter, the reader also learns more about the recent maritime turn in nationalist ideology, “recasting Vietnam from the village-based, rice-growing nation depicted during its various ways against foreign occupiers to a maritime nation (*nước biển*) oriented towards the ‘East Sea’” (51). Chapter 2, “Doing and Making Religion in Vietnam,” contains an in-depth analysis of the category “religion” (*tôn giáo*) in Vietnam, and its relation to categories such as “folk beliefs” (*tín ngưỡng dân gian*) and “superstition” (*mê tín dị đoan*), which carry different connotations. All these categories are politically embedded, and their meanings and contents are subject to intense contestation by state actors, academics, and local stakeholders. I would recommend this chapter not only to sociologists and scholars of religion interested in Vietnam but also to those specializing in other geographical regions and traditions, as it provides some interesting comparative perspectives.

In chapter 3, Roszko provides a detailed discussion of the difference between farming villages (*làng*) and fishing communities (*vạn*), drawing on a wealth of historical and ethnographic material. Among other things, this chapter briefly discusses the whale god, Ông Nam Hải, an important protective deity for fishers throughout south and central Vietnam. In passing, Roszko refers to a spirit medium séance used to approve the appointment of the chief of the *vạn* (93). This is intriguing, not least because contemporary whale god worshippers often insist that no *lên đồng*-type rituals take place at whale mausoleums (*lăng cá Ông*)—a claim that is probably incorrect but understandable, considering that such practices are still considered “superstition” and banned at many places. I would have liked to read more about spirit mediumship in Quảng Ngãi, especially in relation to the whale god, but unfortunately Roszko does not elaborate further upon this topic.

Chapter 4 is fascinating—probably my favorite chapter in the book—because it shows that state-religion relations are multifaceted, messy, and subject to continuous negotiation also in socialist countries with strict anti-religious policies. The chapter focuses on a statue of Quan Âm (Guanyin) in Sa Huỳnh that survived attempts by the police to have it destroyed in 1978, whereupon it was transferred to a non-Buddhist temple on a nearby cliff. Twenty-eight years later, a new Buddhist head monk tried to have the statue returned to his pagoda. The chapter demonstrates convincingly that state representatives are not always the main agents of secularist purification projects; religious specialists can also be active in establishing spatial and discursive distinctions between “secular” and “religious” spaces, and in distinguishing between “proper” religion and “superstition.” In this case, the villagers found a creative way to respond to the demands of both the local government and the Buddhist monk while simultaneously continuing their own devotional practices and leaving the old statue on its cliff.

In the last two chapters, Roszko elaborates further upon some of the themes introduced in previous chapters. Chapter 5 focuses on the changing significance of Lý Sơn in the context of territorial conflicts (the Paracel and Spratly Islands), the new role of islanders as “guardians” of the nation, and the creation of new commemorative rituals that support nationalist historical narratives. Chapter 6, finally, builds further

upon chapter 4, focusing on the role of gender in ritual practices—in this case, those pertaining to the goddess Thiên Y A Na. It discusses some of the tactics employed by local women to navigate and subvert a religious and political system dominated by men. Like chapter 4, it presents some fascinating ethnographic material.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. The ethnographic and geographical descriptions are detailed and lively. I learned many new things about popular religion in central Vietnam, a region where I have lived and researched myself. I am grateful to Roszko for answering some of my questions, for instance, concerning the ambivalent relations between institutionalized Buddhism and popular goddess worship. In addition, I appreciate the nuanced discussion of state-religion relations, which shows convincingly that the state is not a single monolithic actor, and that government officials, party cadres, monks, and worshippers all actively negotiate and give shape to both “the state” and “religion” at the local level. As Roszko states in her introduction, “religion in Asia is either approached through a dichotomous and often antagonistic framework of state-religion interactions . . . or through the framework of embodied and experienced religious practices that leaves the state out. . . . One of the aims of this book is to refocus those debates by asking how people engage, selectively accept, and eventually subvert state discourses when it comes to religious practices” (14–15). In this, the book has succeeded very well.

In sum, *Fishers, Monks and Cadres* is an important study. It is not only rich in ethnographic detail but also contains insightful reflections on state-religion relations in post-*đổi mới* Vietnam, social changes in fishing communities, and the gendered nature of ritual practices. This makes it a must-read not only for scholars and students of contemporary Vietnam but also for scholars of religion and anthropologists who work on topics such as the politics of religion, religion and gender, and maritime popular religion elsewhere.

REFERENCES

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