

Southeast Asia

Alexander Soucy

Zen Conquests: Buddhist Transformations in Contemporary Vietnam

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Anthropologist Alexander Soucy describes his astonishment when visiting a temple outside Hanoi. Unlike the temple he describes in *The Other Side of Buddha* (2013), where women prayed to Buddha alongside other spirits, Sùng Phúc Zen Monastery presented itself as self-consciously Zen. Here, monks promoted a vernacular liturgy, and participants engaged in silent mediation. This brand of Zen appealed to urban middle-class residents, men and women and old and young alike, for it offered a mode of self-fashioning that was both distinctly modern and Vietnamese.

Sùng Phúc Zen Monastery is affiliated with the teachings of Thích Thanh Từ. Soucy describes his form of Buddhism as a “missionary movement,” a Zen conquest of both northern Vietnam and the Vietnamese diaspora as exemplified by more than forty centers worldwide. Soucy traces the movement’s roots to the early twentieth century. During this period, monks and scholars increasingly labeled Buddhism a “religion” in order to distinguish it from popular cultural practices infused with magic, superstition, or devotionism. In northern Vietnam, these reform movements were cut short in 1954 with the territorial division of the country, but they flourished in southern Vietnam and beyond. Monks drew on the tenets of engaged Buddhism and traveled eastward to Japan and the United States. However, unlike Thích Nhất Hạnh and Thích Thiên Ân, two well-known monks who studied and taught in the West, Thích Thanh Từ followed a different path. His biography depicts his dissatisfaction with Buddhist practice and his quest to revive a distinctively Vietnamese form of Zen, Trúc Lâm, which first appears in annals from the fourteenth century. This form of Zen, as Soucy argues, may draw its legitimacy from the past, but it is based on modernist interpretations in the early twentieth century and situated in the global processes in which Zen emerged as a key trope premised on individual experience.

Zen Conquests is both an ethnography of a particular place and an analysis of the roles of reform movements and secularism in redefining Buddhism as a category of social life. One strength of Soucy’s analysis is in how he reads the social space of the monastery and the activities of participants through his earlier work. He notes how activities, unlike in other temples in northern Vietnam, do not follow the lunar calendar; nor is the air thick with smoke from people burning offerings in a furnace. People instead gather to listen to monks deliver lectures and sit in meditation, distinctive practices that Soucy links to global transformations of Buddhism that are nevertheless always localized. In the final section on participants, for example, Soucy focuses on the experiences of women, men, and young people who attend Sùng Phúc Zen Monastery, some attracted by the healing power attributed to meditation, others by its emphasis on individual practices, still others by the status that Zen confers in contrast to what they consider traditional Buddhism.

He also provides a context for the appeal of Thích Thanh Từ as patriarch of a distinctively Vietnamese type of Zen Buddhism that goes beyond the place-based focus

on the Sùng Phúc Zen Monastery or the experiences of participants themselves. In chapters 1 and 3, Soucy examines global processes, such as the 1893 Congress of World's Religion held in Chicago, that offered Asian leaders a stage to proclaim Buddhism more appropriate than Christianity for the modern age. Likewise, he shows the contradiction in Buddhism's global appeal and TrúC LâM's nationalist rhetoric, a tension found as well in analyses of Zen Buddhism in Japan.

Globalizing forces, as Soucy reminds his readers, never follow a straight line, for they must always be localized. In this regard, Soucy's analysis of TrúC LâM is situated in northern Vietnam, even though many of the monks are from southern Vietnam. His analysis leads the reader to wonder what ethnographic insights would be generated from other sites, such as TrúC LâM Monastery in Vietnam's central highlands or in one of its branches in Santa Ana, California. Thích Thanh Từ's teachings are themselves, then, vehicles for Buddhism's globalization because of their influence on how Buddhism is practiced, both in Vietnam and in the diaspora. Monks claim legitimizing power by attending retreats at his centers with grounds that are immaculately tended.

This book would be a welcome addition for a seminar on global Buddhisms. Select chapters would also be effective for courses in religious studies or Asian studies for how they provide compelling material about the role of secularism in shaping religion as a category and the rise of the middle class. Above all, *Zen Conquests* does Buddhist studies and Southeast Asian studies an enormous service by making available the contributions of Thích Thanh Từ's teachings for English-language readers.

REFERENCES

Soucy, Alexander. 2013. *The Other Side of Buddha*. University of Hawai'i Press.

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