



THE SOCIAL PLACING OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN VIETNAM IN THE CONTEXT OF ASIAN MODERNITY

In contemporary Asia religion has become a genuine part of modernity. Religion is not only shaped by modernity – religion plays a crucial role in handling, mediating, negotiating and shaping modernity. Against this background, Vietnam offers an intriguing field to study the dynamics of these entanglements of religion and modernity

Multiple Articulations of Religious Forms and Modernity



Since the socialist government started its reform policy (*đổi mới*) in 1986, religious life in Vietnam has developed in an astonishingly dynamic way. Religion plays an important role in contemporary life as well as in various modern contexts and modernist agendas such as touristic consumption, constructing cultural and national identities or defining the role of religion in integrating the society socially and morally. How is “religion” practically articulated with Modernity within these entanglements?

An intriguing field to find answers to this question is the most prominent religious sphere in Vietnam which comprises Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, the Religion of the Mothergoddesses and the beliefs and rituals related to ancestors, tutelary gods, local spirits, heroes and other spiritual beings and forces. On the one hand, this religious sphere is not a homogenous field. The religious forms to be found here are articulated to modernity very differently. Buddhism, for example, is a global religion closely related to Western modernity for a long time and has organized structures such as the Buddhist Church of Vietnam, which is officially recognized by the socialist state. It is very differently entangled with global structures and the state as for example the Religion of the Mothergoddesses, which has become global only recently within diasporic relations, which has no encompassing



organizational structures and which was object of stately repression until the 1990s and is officially legitimized today within discourses of cultural heritage.

On the other hand, the religious forms within this sphere cannot be understood separately. All the religious forms mentioned are practically related within the multiritual praxis of the actors and of the places of worship bringing together different religious forms mediating thereby different ways of being articulated with Modernity.



Ethnographic foci

The double characteristic of differentiating and mediating forms of articulating religion and modernity is observable in religious places in the Ancient Quarter of Hanoi. This quarter has changed dramatically over the last 150 years and so have the religious places there in their social, political and religious functions. The temples (*đền, linh từ*), communal houses (*đình*) and Buddhist pagodas (*chùa*) in the Ancient Quarter are multireligious and

multifunctional places bringing together different religious forms and different modern practices such as capitalistic economy, urban planning, tourism or ideas about cultural heritage. Deeply localized and in the same time globally entangled these places are promising ethnographic contexts to study the multiple entanglements of religion and modernity in Vietnam.

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