Possession by the Spirits deals with the resurgence of len dong spirit possession rituals associated with the Mother Goddess religion, or Dao Mau, in Vietnam as well as other transnational contexts where Vietnamese communities have emigrated to. The noted lack of prominence of spirit possession and mediumship in the ethnographic literature on contemporary Southeast Asia, at least in the limited case material available, as compared with Africa, for instance, makes this edited book a timely and necessary response to this dearth. In particular, it also fills the lacunae of empirical data on len dong rituals in Vietnam, which were once marginalised and sanctioned before the economic 'Renovation' (doi moi) period.

The ethnographic data that forms the bulk of the edited collection is insightful and brings to light once limited information of Vietnam. The book, comprising an introduction and nine other substantive chapters written by both local and foreign specialists in the field, covers various aspects of the religion and its practices. It begins appropriately in the second chapter with an introductory description of the primary features, origins, and practices of Dao Mau, though it has been rightly recognised that these features are in flux and take on different forms contextually and historically. Chapter 3 further demonstrates the malleable character of the religion by analysing the close relationship between Dao Mau and the Saint Tran cult, once historically separate entities. There is more ethnographic data presented in Chapter 4, which examines the centrality of music and gendered performance in Vietnamese mediumship, with a focus on the negotiation and traversal of their gender identities during len dong possession rituals. Chapter 5 explicates the social forces that compel individuals to become mediums and the social repercussions of their decisions and concomitant interactions. Through the personal narratives of three mediums, it shows that the call into mediumship is often non-voluntary, whereby their refusal can potentially lead to severe retribution by the spirits that have selected them to become mediums. Chapter 6 introduces the transnational component of len dong rituals in Vietnamese diasporic communities. Using the case of mediums in Silicon Valley (USA), it shows that there is both a continuation and adaptation of certain rituals and religious paraphernalia used, though meanings assigned to len dong have also changed. Similar issues of initiation and self-transformation among Vietnamese mediums in such diasporic contexts are further illustrated in the ensuing chapter, demonstrating that their experiences in such contexts can vary from those in Vietnam. Chapter 8 investigates the gradual popularity and expansion of producing and burning votive paper offerings during len dong rituals and shows how some people take advantage of this revitalisation and increased consumer demand to create profitable businesses for themselves in an open-market economy. Chapter 9 scrutinises several issues, but largely attends to the learning processes of young mediums from a master (dong thay) who teaches them the ways to become ‘good’, ‘moral’ disciples. The final chapter attempts to locate the study of popular religious phenomena within a broader ‘East Asian’ landscape and addresses provoking and important conceptual questions that problematise the currency of comparisons and the propensity towards ‘sterile typologies’ and ‘pigeonholing’. However, it introduces several common themes in the study of popular religion in East Asia and, to a lesser extent, Southeast Asia, and reiterates the fluid and dynamic quality of popular religions, such as Dao Mau.
While the book is generally interesting and provides rich ethnographic detail, there are several broad empirical and conceptual concerns that need to be deliberated upon. First, the organisation of the different chapters could have been framed and grouped together more thematically to create an overarching narrative and a more coherent read, though there is a concerted attempt to converse with each other, which very little edited collections achieve. The editors do mention in their introduction that there are fundamentally two approaches taken — one that deals with individual micro-realities and the other which treats len dong as a socio-cultural phenomenon. While this may be a practical strategy, this dichotomy, however, is largely artificial and neglects the dialectical processes and social interfaces embedded between these two purportedly ‘separate’ realms.

Second, many chapters in the book make references to the syncretic character of Dao Mao, which has also been employed in many other studies of religion to show the intermingling and interaction of different, seemingly ‘separate’ and bounded religious traditions. These, however, have not been sufficiently theorised by the various authors in the book (as well as in other works), who conflate various expressions, such as ‘syncretism,’ ‘hybridisation’ and ‘blending’ together, so much so that they are often treated as coterminous and interchangeable. More crucially, how do we make sense of these purportedly free-flowing, intersecting interactions that produce what is commonly known as ‘syncretic practices’? Are these social processes and interactions necessarily always harmonious and free from tensions? What socio-cultural and political conditions account for the presence of such receptivity towards differences, or the lack thereof? As such, the social processes and nuances embedded in such concepts like ‘syncretism’ and ‘hybridisation’ need to be fleshed out and further explicated to show their conceptual utility and relevance in particular contexts. A possible direction of exploration lies in the informal and flexible character of popular religions, such as Dao Mau, which not only allows the flourishing of interaction and change across boundaries, but also explains its legitimacy and durability.

Third, the intersection, instead of separation, of both class and gender vis-à-vis the ‘empowerment’ of individuals and groups, particularly for women, could be made more explicit and situated in the extant literature available. While it has been argued in some of the articles that women mediums have the possibility of ‘challenging’ and ‘destabilising’ normative gender boundaries through the act of spirit possession — a contention that is not particularly novel given other cross-cultural examples in African and Asian societies — there are many counter-examples to show that gender/class asymmetries and hierarchies still continue to exist in Vietnam. In addition, it will also be interesting to explore the instances of resistance and counter-discourses against such practices (especially informal mechanisms) in reaction towards popular varieties of religious practice and the ‘reconfiguration’ of gender norms. Though there are hints and allusions in the chapters that Dao Mau is still regarded as a superstitious practice, it seems as if the general outlook depicted is ‘rosy’ and that tensions, while existent, have been generally eased.

Fourth, methodological questions need to be discussed more seriously in some of the chapters of the book, especially those which deal with religious experiences. When these are addressed, they are brief and often described in broad-brush strokes that such experiences of spirit mediums in various contexts are ‘different’. This then begs several questions that confront most studies dealing with religious experience. Is language able to capture and articulate in its entirety the magnitude of these experiences? Can we focus articulately on the subjective foundation of our actions while experiencing and performing such actions?