Kirsten W. Endres


Those who are interested in studies on contemporary popular religion in Vietnam might be familiar with the vivid spectacle of the Vietnamese spirit world. The account of spirit mediumship is especially appealing in terms of performance and materiality. Recent anthropological research has contributed to the understanding of the efflorescence of mediumistic practices after the 1986 Renovation Policy. From the mid sixteenth century until the recent Renovation, popular religious practices have exhaustedly survived through the control and surveillance under Confucian kingdom, French colonial rule, and recent Vietnamese revolutionary authorities. Kirsten W. Endres’s Performing the Divine adds to the existing scholarship by focusing on possession rituals of the Mother Goddess Religion or Four Palace Religion in the urban context of Hanoi.

Endres puts the spirit mediums’ life histories against the backdrop of socialist market economy and social transformation in northern urban Vietnam. By employing narrative theory, she explores the way in which her informants construct their lives and create coherence and meaning. It illuminates their experiences of socio-cultural sufferings, life crisis, and a process of empowering the self. All Endres’s lively characters go on the stage of unsettling effect from the economic reform. After centuries as an indigently war-ravaged state, Vietnam shifted first to a centrally planned control economy and more recently to a market-based one with socialist characteristics that has boomed. Endres captures the emergence of urban spirit mediumship in terms of the presence of ongoing modernity. Rejecting post-modernisation, she takes the approach of modernity which she argues ‘as a discursive space in which different actors continuously “vernacularise” their own subjective notions of what it means to be modern’ (p. 7). She emphasises that the book ‘will show that urban spirit mediumship is one of the many multivocal arenas in contemporary Vietnam wherein the alternatively modern is articulated and negotiated’ (p. 7).

With respect to its orally transmitted knowledge and outstanding characterisation, Four Palace mediumship is a religion that emphasises ritual practice over conceptual doctrine. Endres gives the reader ethnographic information, which is fully detailed with ritual actions, material, and performative aspects, and human emotion. The first two chapters deal with the stories that took the author to Vietnamese spirit pantheon and brought the spirit mediums to
their profession. Endres describes her sojourn into the studies of mediumship in contemporary urban Vietnam and explores the pathway of becoming spirit mediums. 'Root of mediumship' in life narratives is central to her discussion. It accounts for not only the notion of spiritual connection that determines a person to become a servant for particular deity in the religion of the Four Palace but also the self-construction in constrained Confucian-Buddhist oriented society. Endres suggests that 'the notion of root being inextricably linked with a diverse range of spirit identities transforms the common ways of narrating the self, as it allows mediums to comprehend their personalities in different terms than mainstream society' (p. 50).

Performance is the main discussion of the book. In chapter 3 and 4, the author discusses the development of the Four Palace religious practice as theatrical enactment and conceptualises the spirits' rules and individual styles. Performative skills justified charisma and ritual efficacy. Endres emphasises the importance of ritual consumption and aesthetics in the context of the transition to the market-oriented and modern Vietnam. Vietnamese spirit mediumship ritual has emerged from popular theatre, the entertainment of ordinary people, performed in remote areas on special occasions to celebrate the divinities. She engaged anthropological theory on ritual and performance to elucidate the theatrical characteristics of rituals in the Four Palace religion. Interestingly, she indicates that urban spirit mediums wanted to dissociate themselves from the image of rural mediums and Vietnamese traditional countryside as the way 'the Party state formulated its vision of a civilised way of life as that rejected irrational beliefs and instead subscribed to rational thinking and scientific reasoning' (pp. 77–8).

A discussion on gender is essential in the studies of spirit mediumship. Endres provides the insightful ethnography of the construction, negotiation and enactment of gendered identities in the constraints of hegemonic social norms and traditions in chapter 5. Even though male master mediums seem to dominate religious authority of Sino-Vietnamese ideologies, Endres suggests that Four Palace mediumship provides a creative liminal domain in which non-normative, or transgressive, gender identities are acted out. In chapter 6, the author moves to the performative aspect of the Four Palace religion in relation to national identity and cultural revolution. She examines public and official discourses towards the ritual practices that intend to tame and formulate the 'superstition' to be a national 'beautiful tradition'. Endres concludes that the Party-state’s secularisation campaign is successful. But she makes an interesting comment that 'the intensification of ritual cannot be explained entirely as a result of the economic prosperity Vietnam has witnessed in the past decades. Instead, it may also be interpreted as a response to increased feelings