

*Opusculum de Sectis apud Sinenses et Tunkinenses (A Small Treatise on the Sects among the Chinese and Tonkinese): A Study of Religion in China and North Vietnam in the Eighteenth Century.* By Father Adriano di St. Thecla. Translated and annotated by Olga Dror. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2002. 239 pp.

For much of the period between the late seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries Catholic proselytizing activities in China and Southeast Asia were conducted under the shadow of an ecclesiastical debate known as the Rites and Terms Controversy. It was essentially an attack on “accommodationism”, an evangelistic strategy first conceived by the Jesuits which required missionaries to master local languages, and when necessary, to adapt Christianity to local customs. Although located far from the centre of the controversy, a small mission of the Order of the Discalced Augustinians in eastern Tonkin, as northern Vietnam was known at one time, was coming increasingly under the scrutiny of the Vatican for its so-called accommodationist views. It was against this turbulent backdrop that Father Adriano di St. Thecla, a missionary of the Italian house of the Order who had arrived in Tonkin in 1738, wrote the *Opusculum de Sectis apud Sinenses et Tunkinenses* (A Small Treatise on the Sects among the Chinese and Tonkinese). As stated in the introductory chapter of the *Opusculum*, after examining several works on indigenous practice produced by other members of his own order, Adriano di St. Thecla immediately felt the need to make new investigations, even though it was clearly no easy task conducting research in a land constantly plagued by unrest and rebellion, not to mention the risk of expulsion and excommunication. It is to the author’s credit, therefore, that he managed under such circumstances to create a detailed and vivid picture of religious life in China and Vietnam during the first half of the eighteenth century.

Completed in 1750, the *Opusculum* opens with an introductory chapter in which Adriano di St. Thecla presented his theory regarding the origin of polytheism, or idolatry as it is called in the treatise, in accordance with the teachings handed down by the Catholic Church. The painstaking effort with which the author developed his argument

about idolatry seemed to reflect a genuine desire on his part to understand this aspect of religious experience — rather than dismissing it simply as superstitions — in various cultures and societies. At the same time, Adriano also sought to launch his own view, according to which polytheism was not inherent in human nature; rather, it was the end result of a gradual process of spiritual and moral decline among the peoples of the world, including the Chinese and Vietnamese people. As testimony to the author's originality and innovative analytical approach, the legendary emperors Nghieu (Yao), Thuan (Shun), and Vu (Yu) traditionally revered by Chinese people for their wisdom and righteousness, were depicted as believers and worshippers of the "true God", untainted by idolatry and superstitions. Not long after their passing, the author argued, people's souls became corrupted by fear and ignorance, and knowledge of the "true God" was gone from the land.

The treatise would have been even more intriguing if Adriano had also included in his discussion the legendary Hung kings who ruled over the Vietnamese people long before the period of Chinese domination. As it turns out, however, his "Introduction" devoted more attention to China, despite the title "On the Sects of the Chinese and Annamites", which would suggest an effort to examine the roots of polytheism in both countries. In fact, there are numerous occasions throughout the entire manuscript where the line of demarcation between the religious experience of Vietnam and China become somewhat nebulous, when the author launched into a discussion of Chinese rites as if they applied equally to the Vietnamese as well. Nevertheless, the reader is left without any doubt that Adriano had considerable expertise on the cult beliefs and observance of the Vietnamese people. His presentation of religious rites and ceremonies, such as the sacrifice to village gods or tutelary spirits, revealed a familiarity with local customs and traditions, which could only have derived from direct experience.

Any serious study of religious beliefs and practices in China and Vietnam must contain at least some reference to the "three teachings": Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism; and the *Opusculum* is no exception to the rule. At first, one has the impression that the treatise would be concerned mainly with these doctrines, as is announced in the

Introduction, but perhaps as evidence of his fascination with local cults, Adriano di St. Thecla also included two chapters on the worship of spirits and the practice of divination and fortune-telling as they were observed and performed by the indigenous population at that time. Indeed, the second chapter, on “Spirits and Their Cult”, is by far the longest in the entire manuscript, featuring numerous detailed descriptions of religious rites and ceremonies held in honour of a multitude of spirits, from the spirits of Heaven and Earth to those of sage-kings from antiquity, deceased ancestors, legendary figures, and village gods, to name but a few. Besides the profuse information on various categories of spirits, their legends and modes of worship, this remarkable chapter also contains vivid descriptions of certain rites and ceremonies specific to the Trinh regime — the *Te Ky Dao* (Sacrifice to the Leader’s Banner), a special rite performed by the Military to banish the souls of dead rebels from the kingdom, for instance — and as such would have passed into oblivion but for Adriano’s testimony.

Chapter 5, which deals with Buddhism, holds special interest for this reviewer. It turns out to be rather disappointing, however. In a complete departure from the extensive and meticulous research, which we have come to expect of Adriano di St. Thecla, his discussion of “Sect of the Worshippers of Buddha” is based almost exclusively on two relatively obscure Vietnamese texts called *Tam Dang* (Lamp of the Heart) and *Bi Chi* (The Secret Branch), without any reference to Buddhist sutras and canonical texts. The type of Buddhism presented in this chapter is a bewildering mix of elements of Confucian philosophy, Daoist ideas, and popular Buddhist beliefs. While this can be a potent illustration of Buddhist syncretism in Vietnam, the glaring omission of many important Buddhist thoughts and practice, such as those of the Zen and Pure Land schools, proves the biggest disappointment. Moreover, Adriano di St. Thecla’s presentation of Buddhism completely ignores moral cultivation, which has always been a central feature of this religion since its appearance in Vietnam in the late second century of the Christian era. Such lamentable omissions can only be understood in terms of the hostility and disdain with which Christian missionaries in Vietnam, and elsewhere in Asia, often

regarded the Buddhist religion. On this and other issues, the translator's explanations are particularly illuminating.

For reasons unknown to us, the last chapter, on Christianity, ends abruptly with accounts of state persecution against missionaries in China and Japan. Although incomplete, this chapter is very important for creating an impassioned narrative of Christian missionary activity in Asia from the sixteenth through to the eighteenth centuries. It may also have been Adriano's intention to use the final chapter on Christianity to draw together the various strands of his argument concerning the state of polytheism in China and Tonkin.

With the exception of Christianity, which the author accepted without question as the "true religion", all other major religious currents in China and Tonkin were fundamentally depicted as the cult of spirits. The emperor's sacrifice to Heaven, the worship of Confucius and Buddha, for instance, were little more than a sophisticated version of the rites and ceremonies conducted by ordinary people in honour of their ancestors, tutelary genies, and spirits of various ranks.

The *Opusculum* is essentially an account of the religious beliefs and practice of the Chinese and Vietnamese people as seen through the eyes of a foreign missionary. For this reason, it is not entirely free from prejudice. We should not be oblivious to the fact that Adriano di St. Thecla was a Christian missionary, a man of his time, and a product of his religious training. However interested he was in popular cults, sacrificial rites or ancestor worship, Adriano could not help imposing on them the preconceptions that were almost required of him. At one point in the manuscript, for example, the author remarked to the effect that sacrifices made to Confucius, tutelary genies, and other spirits were filled with superstition and idolatry because participants in these ceremonies believed in the power of the spirits to bestow blessings on their worshippers.

Nonetheless, the *Opusculum* is one of the first detailed accounts by Christian missionaries of the remarkable richness and variety of religious beliefs and practice as found in China and Vietnam during the early decades of the eighteenth century. The treatise stands out as an exceptionally valuable document, not only for Adriano's extensive research and

keen observations, but also for his lavish attention on the religious life of ordinary people.

Despite its importance as a source of information for the study of religion in China and Vietnam, the *Opusculum* languished in obscurity for two-and-a-half centuries until Olga Dror, the translator and annotator of the manuscript, chanced upon it in the Archive of the Foreign Missions in Paris during her search for materials on the popular cult of Princess Lieu Hanh. Not only did Dror rescue this relatively unknown Latin text and its author from oblivion, she also renders it accessible to researchers and general readers alike with a highly informative translator's introduction and extensive annotations. This reviewer especially enjoys Dror's Introduction and her insightful analysis of the *Opusculum*. Clearly, this is a labour of love and so it will be appreciated and remembered for a long time to come.

PHAM Thu Thuy