

***Fishers, Monks and Cadres: Navigating State, Religion and the South China Sea in Central Vietnam.* By Edyta Roszko. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2020. Hardcover: 288pp.**

Discourse on rising tensions in the South China Sea invariably focuses on inter-state relations—more specifically, between the dominant power, China, and the much weaker Southeast Asian claimants. However, little has been written about the fishermen whose lives are intertwined with the coastal areas and who have been drawn into the territorial and jurisdictional disputes. Edyta Roszko’s book, *Fishers, Monks and Cadres: Navigating State, Religion and the South China Sea in Central Vietnam*, is thus a well-timed contribution.

Drawing from her years of ethnographic research in Vietnam’s central province of Quang Ngai, Roszko meticulously examines the way fishing communities interact with the “triad of contested categories” (p. 15)—the state, religion and village—in a changing environment marked by escalating challenges to the geopolitical order. By incorporating the three analytical concepts of semiotic ideology, purification and indiscipline, the book explores how fishermen navigate their religious practice between different binaries: land versus sea, religious versus secular, fishers versus farmers, male versus female, and ancestors versus ghosts (p. 200). Some binaries are particularly captivating. For example, the interdependent relationship between farmers and fishermen is illustrated by the ties between rice and fish sauce (p. 105), a connection widely acknowledged by those who have lived long enough in central Vietnam.

Yet instead of viewing the binaries through the usual religious-secular dichotomy, Roszko examines how various actors—including cadres, religious figures, fishermen and women—enact, debunk and re-enact these relations (p. 197). For example, from the severe suppression of religion during the High Socialism period (1976–79), when all performances of rituals and worship were forbidden, the state has since reinterpreted selected religious practices as an expression of Vietnamese “culture” and “national heritage” (p. 64), while suppressing other unauthorized practices as “superstitious” (*me tin*) or “heterodox” (*di doan*) (p. 76) in the *Doi Moi* era. The fishermen in Ly Son, for instance, have navigated through this changing landscape and shifting language, and linked their ancestor worship with the commemoration of the Paracels flotilla, to receive the state’s official recognition (p. 138).

However, not all efforts are successful, as shown in Chapter Five which examines the case of a village lineage's failed attempt to elevate their female ancestor to the status of local heroine. From this point, Roszko brings in an intriguing analysis in Chapter Six, of how women in peripheral, coastal areas transcend their ritual exclusion and marginality in a male-dominated culture to construct and validate their gendered practice of ritual identity (p. 195). They cleverly navigate between the state and religion to criticize the prohibition of women's participation in village rituals as "feudal" and "outdated". One of the best quotes in the book comes from a female villager who said, "The goddess has to accept the reality and follow the progress of modern society!" (p. 178)

Structurally speaking, the book is well organized with six main chapters, an Introduction and a Conclusion. Chapters One and Two provide a solid historical and geographical background for the book's ethnographic research. By tracing the Vietnamese party-state's policies towards religion over the years, the author shows how the state has attempted to channel the discourse on Vietnam's identity into new directions after the withdrawal from a socialist modernity (p. 69). Chapter Three describes how the fishermen—thanks to the growing demand for marine products and the consequences of the South China Sea dispute—move up the social hierarchy and play a more important role in the religious life of the coastal area. Chapter Four details how the fishers, monks and cadres encountered, contested and negotiated the relocation of a Buddhist statue. Roszko's account of the dialogue between the state official and head monk is excellent, vividly illustrating the competing agendas of state agents and religious authorities, while the villagers navigate their religious practices in between (pp. 124–25).

Chapter Five deals with the state's commemorative projects in Ly Son Island, which are part of a strategy to assert its sovereignty claims. This has produced mixed results for the villagers. While benefitting from the state's policy to preserve and promote their religious practices, the villagers are unable to commemorate the event in their own way as responsibility for important rituals is vested wholly with the state authorities (p. 142). In addition, the villagers and the state do not always agree on the "historical production" of local memorials. While the former rethink, subvert and manipulate narratives according to their own culturally constituted desires (p. 157), the latter chooses narratives which best suit a "history" which strengthens the legitimacy of its claims in the South China Sea.

Roszko's book contributes to the current scholarship in several aspects. First, it is a rare ethnographic study of coastal Vietnamese society, which has been understudied in comparison to other regions such as the Red River and Mekong Deltas. In doing so, the book provides insights into the complex dynamics within this geographical area during the course of *Doi Moi* through its masterful navigation between the binaries of *lang* versus *van*, inland versus island, farmers versus fishers and so on.

Second, the book offers a "human face" to the South China Sea, which has been dominantly understood as an inter-state dispute. Through a carefully crafted ethnography, the author illustrates how geopolitical risks affect the fishermen's lives—from denying fishermen access to their traditional fishing grounds, to the changing complexity of state-society relations, as the coastal areas move from the periphery to the centre of the nation's attention.

Third, several concepts that Roszko uses in the book—particularly the concept of "indiscipline"—is useful for analysing Vietnamese politics and society in general. The country's complexity requires researchers to avoid the convenient trap of binary thinking and rigid classification. Outright rejection of state imposition is rare. Instead, more frequently employed is the practice of "social navigation", as demonstrated by the fishermen in this book as well as in other domains including civil society and business activities.

In addition, Roszko's writing style and narratives make the ethnography lively and engaging. In addition to the skilful incorporation of various academic literature, the author provides some pleasing daily life stories. My favourite is the description of women's silent resistance against a male-leaning ritual in the worship of Thien Y A Na by using a spoilt chicken, so that the offerings could not be eaten in a sacred place.

The book will be an important reference for future research on the relationship between the state, religion and society in Vietnam—and, hopefully, a starting point for more human-centred studies on the South China Sea dispute.

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