

EDYTA ROSZKO

*Fishers, Monks and Cadres: Navigating State, Religion and the South China Sea in Central Vietnam.*

Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2020. 284 pages.

Winds, currents, and reefs make it impossible to navigate the seas in a straight line. Vessels must instead tack back and forth, taking these forces and obstacles into account to reach their destinations. Edyta Roszko, in her engaging book, details how fishers, monks, and cadres do the same along the western edges of the Eastern Sea—an area more commonly known as the South China Sea to non-Vietnamese speakers. The study, the product of multi-sited research based on years of fieldwork, is notable for many reasons. But perhaps most broadly, Roszko successfully decenters the academic literature on Vietnam, which is heavily tilted toward either its northern or southern regions due to the research questions historically posed. In doing so, Roszko rightly points to the importance of the maritime in the making and remaking of the country over time.

To ground her analysis, Roszko interweaves historical materials with ethnographic ones, with a focus on one coastal village (Sa Huỳnh) and another village on nearby Lý Sơn Island. Despite their proximity, Roszko illustrates how each locale is, to varying degrees, both connected and disconnected from state power. These dynamics, Roszko argues, are most clearly evident when conceptualized in triadic terms, which she defines as the shifting relationship between three domains: village life, religious belief and practice, and the administrative power of state authority. These shifting relationships, as each of the chapters demonstrates, generates

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“pluralities” rather than binaries, as the multiple agendas in play defy reduction to either-or outcomes.

To support her argument, Roszko employs three concepts: “semiotic ideology,” “purification,” and “indiscipline.” The first concept refers to symbolic meanings as mobilized by different actors both within and across different semiotic systems. The second concept concerns the tensions between orthodoxy, on the one hand, and heterodoxy, on the other hand. The tensions are most apparent in the religious sphere, though efforts to promote “purity” and resistance to it are also present in other contexts. The final concept, “indiscipline,” encapsulates the ways in which state and non-state actors, typically ones who hold subordinate positions in relation to those wielding power, strategically appropriate concepts and practices to create spaces to achieve their goals.

In terms of overall structure, the first chapter describes how the inhabitants of her two field sites narrate their histories, geographies, and mobilities. The next three chapters, summarized below, are thematically organized in ways that highlight the triadic relationship of collaboration and confrontation that Roszko employs as her analytical frame. The final case study foregrounds an issue that runs through each of the chapters, but warrants focused discussion of its own—namely, women and how they differently engage with political, economic, and symbolic shifts in the gendered relations among fishers, monks, and cadres.

More specifically, chapter 2, which concerns itself with religion, provides a summary of the socialist state’s efforts to eradicate “superstition”—to “purify” practice in a manner that placed “official” Buddhism under government control—and the state’s later rehabilitation of some village-level spiritual traditions. The historical arc of the chapter highlights how successive efforts to cleanly delineate politics from religion, science from superstition, and orthodoxy from heterodoxy have never been fully successful. Instead, “fuzziness,” as Roszko describes it, has been a defining feature of these contestations, a point that challenges the longstanding academic tradition of either top-down or bottom-up analyses of power in Vietnam.

Chapter 3 continues this exploration of “fuzziness” by examining how fishers and farmers are linked in ways that again upend hierarchical

arguments that subordinate life on “the sea” to life on “the land,” with the latter traditionally representing what it means to be authentically Vietnamese. Central to her discussion are the multifaceted ways in which identity and territoriality combine and recombine over time due to the interdependencies between mainlanders (farmers and craftsmen) and seafarers (fishers).

Chapter 4 again returns the discussion to religion, but this time through the concept of “indiscipline.” As was the case in the previous chapters, Roszko emphasizes the ways people strategically mobilize elements of the binaries rendered “fuzzy” in chapter 2 so as to enlarge the space for them to pursue their interests both in and around existing constraints.

Commemorative politics are the focus of chapter 5, with an analysis of the ways the disputes over ownership of the Paracel and Spratly Archipelagoes have reconfigured Vietnam’s geo-body to more centrally include its maritime territory. While popular protests and diplomatic wrangling between Vietnam and China have dominated the press, Roszko directs attention to the ways that local beliefs about the nation and lineage, as well as ancestors and ghosts, are harnessed by the government to advance its interests, as the residents of her two field sites simultaneously seek to do the same. The resulting reconstructions of the past, and thus the terms of the present, once again illustrate the agency of local actors.

The final case study on gender similarly provides a historical overview of women’s “identity” as refracted through patriarchal practices and state symbols. Roszko’s key insight here concerns the multiple ways in which some women have crafted ritual practices in a manner that permits them to become “authentic” bearers of religious authority.

The author convincingly demonstrates how the triadic relationships disrupt the binaries that structure relationships among fishers and farmers, laypeople and monks, people and cadres, as well as men and women. Less clear is how these binaries powerfully reassert themselves in the face of such continual disruption. Both Carolyn Nordstrom’s “Shadows and Sovereigns” (*Theory, Culture, & Society*, 2000: 35–54) and Timothy Mitchell’s “Everyday Metaphors of Power” (*Theory and Society*, 1990: 545–577) offer useful ways to rethink the process of reconstitution against which fishers, monks, and cadres “navigate” their lives. This minor criticism aside, Roszko

provides us with a valuable contribution to the history and ethnography of one small part of Vietnam. In doing so, she opens up the space for future comparative studies, not just of Vietnamese coastal communities elsewhere, but of the Southeast Asian littoral more generally.

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