Review
Performing the Divine: Mediums, Markets, and Modernity in Urban Vietnam by Kirstin W. Endres
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Kirstin W. Endres

Performing the Divine: Mediums, Markets, and Modernity in Urban Vietnam

Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2011. 240 pages w. illustrations. $90.00 (cloth); $32.00 (paper).

In *Performing the Divine*, Kirstin Endres argues that Four Palace mediumship [Tứ Phủ] (also known as the Way of the Mother Goddess or Đạo Mẫu) in urban Vietnam creates a space of “alternative modernity” that vernacularizes the past with contemporary rapid transformations since Renovation [Đổi Mới]. Focusing on Hà Nội, the author maintains that the locally-spawned religious rituals of Four Palace mediumship [lên đồng] in the capital are neither about preserving distinctive Vietnamese traditions or rejecting Western ideas of modernization. However, it is precisely at the juncture of negotiations between present and past experiences that Vietnamese mediums configure modernity particularly for the case of Vietnam under marketization.

In Chapter One, the author frames the theoretical orientation of the book by reconceptualizing modernity as culturally specific and sociopolitically conditioned. In doing so, she recognizes the historical roots and contemporary expressions of religious practices in Vietnam as relational to each other, continually informing and altering each other in unpredictable trajectories. In Chapter Two, Endres reveals that traditional ideas of fate [in] and spiritual debts [nợ] are the main motivations for Vietnamese to become a medium in the Four Palaces after encountering challenges and life hardships. This awareness also entails personal transformations as mediums let go of their subscribed social roles and open themselves to new experiences during lên đồng, such as deeper levels of exchanges with different spirits that are of the opposite gender or different age and ethnicity.
Chapter Three focuses on the rituals of mediumship and their engagements with modernity. Endres argues that participation in rituals, from bodily performance to the aesthetic presentation of beauty, is about mimetically appropriating the divine other in order to embrace changes rather than about recreation. Endres has observed that although student mediums may be under the spiritual guidance of their masters and confined by rules of rituals, they also personalize their possessions with the motivation of adhering to “modern standards of civility, hygiene, and bodily control” (81). In Chapter Four, she maintains that this process of negotiating ritual boundaries converges in the rationalization of the state’s secularizing efforts and the individual spiritual needs of deities as “partners” (104) in obtaining wealth in modern Vietnam. This is further illustrated in Chapter Five, in which Endres shows that as medium masters compete for students, they evoke religious discourses to construct unique marketable identities based on gender and sexuality. For example, while male masters must appeal to reputation, face, and authority, their female counterparts can only rely on the efficacy of blessings to build their followings. Moreover, the former group has a wider spectrum of sexual orientation to assert their divine position while the latter are constrained by ideas about femininity, which may explain the tolerance and popularity of feminine male masters but less so for masculine female masters.

In Chapter Six, Endres traces the condemnation of Four Palace mediumship as a superstition to its elevated status as a folk performing art by the Vietnamese government. This transformation, she maintains, implies that the Vietnamese party-state’s secularization campaign has succeeded in continuing to deny the recognition of Four Palaces as a religion. Along with signs that lên dòng does not always satisfy personal needs and has consequentially dissuaded followers to continue the practice, Endres suggests in Chapter Seven that Four Palaces may be declining in popularity in Vietnam. However, she speculates that the religion could thrive outside of its native country as it expands across ethnic and national boundaries.

While the Four Palaces historically informs and locally situates alternative modernity, as Endres illustrates, it seems this practice is also closely embedded within global contingencies. With the opening of national borders under marketization, Vietnam is pursuing modernity through cultural practices not only in reflection of itself but also through the eyes of its others, such as the United
Performing the Divine is an important contribution to the ongoing discussion about religious practices and marketization in Vietnam. Endres analyzes very rich and in-depth data extracted from forty interviews and two hundred pages of field notes, which she collected from years of developing trust and relationships with mediums including her direct participation in the rituals. The author makes this piece an engaging read by immersing herself into the data presentation and theoretical analysis.

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In Performing the Divine, Kirsten Endres tackles a complex of fluid ritual practices commonly, though problematically, gathered under the rubric of mediumship or lêơn đồng (literally, the mounting of the medium by supernatural entities). In this practice, the medium becomes possessed by these entities, acting as a seat [ghế] for the spirit or god. Endres tracks the practice of Four Palace mediumship as it reveals the complex intersection of spiritual practice, local community needs and histories and state power in contemporary Vietnam.

For a long time the literature on mediumship or spirit possession in anthropology focused on the event as an act of protest or resistance, with the instance of spirit possession framed as a critique of capitalist discipline and/or inequalities generated by prevailing socioeconomic, political, or gender formations. In much of this earlier work, the medium or possessed individual, occupying what is perhaps the exceptional space par excellence, the ecstatic state, is authorized to speak and enact a (supernatural) truth to power. Endres notes how more recent scholarship addresses these practices in terms of their creative or expressive qualities.

At one level, her book is a patient ethnographic depiction of the contemporary practice of lêơn đồng, with all of its intricacies, contradictions and complexities. It is at its best, however, when Endres uses mediumship as a vehicle to explore the shifting tides that have produced profound dislocations,