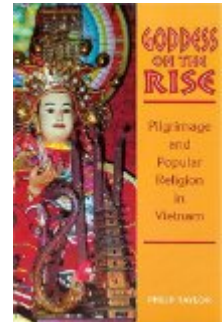


Phillip Taylor. *Goddess on the Rise: Pilgrimage and Popular Religion in Vietnam.*
Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004. x + 332 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN
978-0-8248-2648-2.



Reviewed by Kirsten Endres

Published on H-Buddhism (December, 2004)

Since the mid-1980s, the shrine of Ba Chua Xu, the "Lady of the Realm," has been receiving an ever-growing stream of visitors. Stories about her efficacy gradually increased the popularity of the goddess residing at the foot of a mountain in the southern Vietnamese border region to such an extent that a Vietnamese scholar nicknamed her "the Britney Spears of the Vietnamese religious world" (p. 203). A market vendor offers a concise explanation for the Ba Chua Xu frenzy: "Every spirit has its time. This is hers" (p. 202). *Goddess on the Rise* is a highly topical book that vividly captures the pulse of contemporary Vietnamese religious life. Though its primary focus is a goddess located in southern Vietnam, the author's analytical discussions of various points of intersection between popular Buddhist interpretations and religious notions and practices related to the veneration of powerful beings make this book a noteworthy addition to our current understanding of popular Buddhism in Vietnam.

At the center of this study is the phenomenon of mass pilgrimages to the shrines and temples of responsive female goddesses and spirits in the

Mekong Delta region in southern Vietnam, in particular to the shrine of the Lady of the Realm. These pilgrimages are an important aspect of Vietnam's burgeoning religious life, which has experienced a tremendous upsurge throughout the whole country since the introduction of the reform policy known as *doi moi*. This religious resurgence is in stark contrast to the Weberian argument that saw a "disenchantment" of the world as the most likely consequence of modernization. It opens up a variety of intriguing questions that Philip Taylor pursues, using as a case study the popular religious practices that revolve around the Lady of the Realm, above all pilgrimages to her sacred precincts at the base of Sam Mountain.

Taylor's rich ethnography draws from several field trips to Vietnam between 1995 and 1998, during which he "had a marvelous time drinking endless sweetened coffees with pilgrims, smoking cigarettes, eating durians, and chatting endlessly about all manner of religious topics" (p. viii). The spirited pleasure Taylor found in trooping around with the pilgrims and chatting with everyone is palpable throughout the book. His vivid and liter-

ary renderings of sites, situations, characters, and conversations build the base for his insightful interpretations and analyses of this multifaceted goddess and the religious journeys that her worshippers undertake in pursuit of a better life.

Taylor reflects on the spiritual delineation of borders in chapter 1, given the fact that the Lady of the Realm dwells on the fringes of the Vietnamese state, in the Lady's case the border with Cambodia. Chapter 2 takes up the issue of the goddess's ethnicity. Not surprisingly, popular ideas about the goddess's identity greatly diverge from officially recognized narratives and national myths. Rather than promoting the spirit of resistance against foreign aggressors, these unauthorized tales speak of an intense cultural exchange between the ethnically diverse inhabitants of the southern plains and acknowledge the achievements and legacies of the different ethnic groups such as the Khmer, Cham, Chinese, and Indians.

In chapter 3 Taylor moves the reader's attention from ethnicity to economy. He points out that notions of female business acumen correspond to a general preference for female spirits as counterparts in symbolic transactions, such as borrowing money from a goddess. Chapter 4 discusses differences in urban and rural or local conceptions of the Lady of the Realm and the ritual practices that surround her, and points out the changes that the goddess's recent superstar fame has inflicted on the latter.

Before venturing out on a proper pilgrimage in the second half of chapter 5, Taylor looks at different theoretical approaches towards pilgrimage and their applicability to the given context. He concludes that, in many aspects, a pilgrimage to the Lady's shrine is not so much a journey out of the ordinary than an extension of people's daily pursuits in the city that entails an intensification of the familiar rather than an inversion of the everyday, as other approaches suggest. Whereas the pilgrimages described in this chapter took place outside the annual festival to the Lady of the

Realm, chapter 6 provides an ethnographic account of this annual event. Taylor not only depicts the ritual aspects of the festival but also incorporates fairground activities into his analysis: watching the notorious gatherings and performances of transvestites (who in former times used to entertain the goddess rather than the festival crowds), taking pictures of each other and being photographed, buying forbidden images of the Lady, and indulging in incessant consumption.

Chapter 7 pursues the question of which symbolic properties account for the exceptional attractiveness of goddesses like the Lady of the Realm in contrast to the (predominantly male) spirits of renowned historical personages associated with meritorious deeds, most often in defense of the country. Taylor points out that unlike the "warrior-scholar-official spirits," the goddesses' assumed human existences are obscure and their identities fluid. The tales that circulate often attribute them with a marginal existence and untimely death that left their potential largely unrealized. Taylor assumes that their extraordinary responsiveness to human requests is rooted in the popular conception that they are forever trapped in their karmic manifestation and depend on human bequests to sustain themselves. On a more theoretical level, their vague identities lend them "the polyvalent quality that Turner identified as characteristic of religious symbols" (p. 207).

Chapter 8 offers an animated discussion of assorted views articulated by Buddhist monks, nuns, and laypeople concerning the compatibility of Buddhism and spirit worship. More often than not, however, popular interpretations stress the similarities between the two rather than the differences. Taylor maintains that this is because Buddhism in Vietnam has been incorporated into an ethics of reciprocity and mutual obligation that not only informs social norms and practices but equally applies to transactions with the spirit world. One problem Taylor briefly touches on certainly calls for more in-depth explorations that

would have been beyond the scope of his study: the intertwining of Buddhist orthodoxy, popular religious understandings, and "magical" practices that exists within and outside the Vietnamese Sangha.

Chapter 9 assesses claims by Vietnamese scholars that associate female religious symbols with ancient matriarchal values and women's favorable status in society and, more generally, with claims of a persistent substratum of an autochthonous Viet culture. Taylor explores four different Vietnamese women's perspectives on the question of whether goddesses such as the Lady of the Realm are seen as symbolic of autonomy. Their tales are emblematic of women's various concerns and ideas of femininity in contemporary Vietnamese society. Likewise, they highlight the amenability of female deities to different interpretations, which, according to Taylor, is a key to understanding their immense popularity.

In his brief but dense epilogue, the author further elaborates on this popularity in the context of Vietnam's late socialism that is marked by a thriving, urban-based economy. To the same extent as the vibrant markets are dominated by commanding women, the world of spirits, with whom a significant number of them enter into a symbolic, reciprocal relationship of support and indebtedness, is predominantly inhabited by female deities. The study of pilgrimage in southern Vietnam, as Taylor has expertly shown, moves far beyond the study of a folk religious practice and offers insights into the hybrid complexity of contemporary Vietnamese society.

There are, however, a few minor shortcomings I would like to point out. In chapter 7, Taylor contrasts the duration of the Lady of the Realm's festival with the single day commemoration of the warrior spirit Tran Hung Dao (p. 199). This may be true for branch shrines that have been erected in honor of the thirteenth-century general, but certainly not for his main temple in the north of Vietnam (Kiep Bac, Hai Duong province). While,

as an icon of national defense, his shrine and commemorative practices have largely been appropriated by the Party state, "folk religious practice" has been incorporating the powerful and efficacious spirit of Saint Tran into the pantheon of the Four Palaces religion. The female spirits of this pantheon--which is "supervised" by the three Mother Goddesses--are the northern counterparts of Taylor's goddesses. They may not have acquired superstar status, but their shrines--many of which are located in the northern mountainous border region--are prime destinations for pilgrimages organized by adherents to the religion of the Four Palaces, most of whom are practicing spirit mediums. Several chapters in Taylor's study indicate that possession rituals may also play an important role in southern Vietnamese goddess worship. Contrary to Taylor's suggestion, there is ample reason to assume that spirit performances may not be limited to transvestites alone. Including this fascinating aspect into his book would not only have enriched the sparse scholarship on southern Vietnamese mediumship but may also have further deepened the understanding of the spirited journeys into the Lady's Realm.

Despite these minor criticisms, I think this captivating and powerful book will be greatly welcomed not only by a readership interested in Vietnamese Studies but also as an invaluable addition to the study of religion and society in Southeast Asia, and for scholars interested in the intersection of popular religion with Buddhism.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism>

Citation: Kirsten Endres. Review of Taylor, Phillip. *Goddess on the Rise: Pilgrimage and Popular Religion in Vietnam*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. December, 2004.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10064>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.