

ANCESTOR WORSHIP AND PILGRIMAGE IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

One of the most influential discourses on the concept of 'religion' in Vietnam is linked directly with the state. What counts as 'good religion' or legitimate beliefs and 'beautiful customs' is continuously negotiated by the state, Vietnamese scholars, the media and local ritual actors. This applies particularly to traditions such as the worship of ancestors, legendary heroes, national heroes and local guardian deities and is articulated in a revitalization and heritagization of pilgrimage sites.

Pilgrimage Landscapes as Multidimensional Arenas



Ancestor Worship for the Nation

As a ritual of return to one's origins, which is focused on the family, the community, commensality and autochthony, ancestor worship (in the broadest sense) has been called the 'national religion of Vietnam' as well as 'Vietnam's religion of nationalism'. Ancestor worship plays an important role not only in daily life, but also during pilgrimages to specific sites and graves.

Homeward Movements

In recent years, many overseas Vietnamese, have returned to Vietnam from all over the world to celebrate the New Year, *Tết Nguyên Đán*, at home (*về quê*). This 'homeward movement' (*về nguồn*) is not only tolerated, but actively promoted in the official policies of 'opening up'. Once again pagodas, temples and sacred sites become vehicles of local memory that restore a sense of history, ritual traditions and a distinctive cultural identity.

Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage can be many — even contradictory — things at once: a political movement and a memorial, a celebration of roots or homecoming and an experience of liminality, a personal journey of healing and of entertainment, and a place of

comunitas, but also of conflict and division. Sites of religious pilgrimage or patriotic commemoration in Vietnam have grown into tourist attractions, where commercial refashioning is a constant part of the business. While pilgrims may act like tourists, tourists, especially overseas Vietnamese travelling home, may become pilgrim-tourist hybrids looking for their roots. Both roots-tourism and pilgrimage are best viewed as multi-vocal semantic systems.



Ethnographic Foci

By following my Vietnamese informants and interlocutors (some of whom I got to know in Germany, others in Hanoi) to many different sites of commemoration and worship of ancestors, I was able to study the intersection of different discourses and ritual practices: not only the national-patriotic, but also the spiritual-religious and the touristic-economic. As a result, my fieldwork, too, had to be multi-dimensional and multi-sited,

moving between public and private spheres of activity, from official to 'subaltern', informal contexts, and in a very literal sense following people from one place to another. Multi-sited research was essential for my project, since the agency at all religious sites in Vietnam is changing in response to political, economic, ideological and cultural transformations in a range of translocal contexts.

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