

# Negotiation over religious space in Vietnam



From the 1950s, North Vietnam underwent anti-superstition campaigns in the name of the new socialist modernisation project. After the end of the Vietnam War this process included the South. In Vietnam, like in China and Soviet Russia, religion was considered a harmful superstition. In its ideological struggle the state aimed to build a 'new culture' that would substitute religion. A glimpse into the Government Gazette – *Công Báo* – displays the failure of this secularising agenda, its transformation over the years, as well as dissonance between the state's goals and their realisation in everyday life.

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ONE OF THE MAIN TARGETS of the new socialist modernising agenda of the Vietnamese government was to strip the traditional social order of its sacred character and mysterious aura in order to transform the Vietnamese people into a new and advanced society, with its progress based on education and rationality rather than 'Gods works'. The Party attempted to raise the masses' political awareness through instruction, in the hope that they would voluntarily abandon superstition without the need to reinforce it with a ban. In its efforts to make Vietnam a secular society, the government adopted Marxist-Leninist theory according to which religion will naturally disappear when humankind enters the period of Communism, and 'highly advanced material production, culture and science'. The Party ideologists blamed religion for the hardship and backwardness of the life of the masses, saying it wasted time and money that could be better spent on education or national agriculture production.

It is not without significance that the first task of the policy of 'separation of politics and religion' was a total restructuring of local village politics in which the two spheres were merged. It was believed that a systematic selection of 'proper' aspects of Vietnamese tradition would put an end to 'corrupt and feudal practice'. In light of such rhetoric, village festivals, life-cycle rituals and places of worship – the spaces that sustained old power and prestige – became targets of the state's campaign against superstitions. Following Marxist principles, religious buildings such as village temples, pagodas and shrines were defined in terms of class struggle and considered to be a hotbed of feudalism, ignorance and exploitation. The state, concerned with introducing a 'new culture' and a 'new way of life', undertook the task of turning religious buildings into spaces of secular rather than religious utility.

Nevertheless, implementation of the new ideological agenda was not always a peaceful process as the state had intended. In Northern Vietnam from the 1950s to the late 1980s, sacred spaces that, as it was believed, sustained unequal relationships and wastage of village resources were converted into granaries, storehouses and schools, while clergy were forced to cast off their robes and return to secular life. Spirit medium rituals were banned and ritual professionals were controlled by local authorities. Since 1975, this process has spread across the southern parts of Vietnam as well and lasted until 1986, when the state relaxed its enforcement of anti-superstitious law. The most severe persecutions of religion occurred in 1976-79, when the state attempted to pursue a policy of collectivisation in the South.

## Religious building or exhibition hall? Debating religion

Various researchers working either on Soviet Russia, China or Vietnam describe the process of separation of politics and religion and of a total restructuring of local village politics as 'secularisation', 'desanctification' and the 'desecration' or 'disempowerment of the religious domain', or 'ritual displacement'.<sup>1</sup> I do not aspire to argue here which of these terms is the most satisfactory. Rather, my aim is rather to present the *emic* viewpoint, which gives us a sense of how this process is presented in official discourse. Comparing various issues of the Official Government Gazette – *Công Báo* – and local narratives, the gap between the official goals of a new usage of sacred spaces and their implementation and the people's feelings about it becomes evident. While for the state the ongoing process of transferring authority from religious communities to the state was an attempt 'to disenchant' the local landscape and to make it predictable and manageable, for the common people it was an abuse and profanation of spaces that had not ceased to have sacred status.

In official discourse, spots of scenic beauty, exhibition halls, cultural houses and schools were presented as better substitutes for sacred locations, as places of education and social life. It is worth pointing out that the state was selective in its acceptance of the ways of converting temples, in its view, into more functional, non-religious spaces. The analysis of the Official Gazette – *Công Báo* – from 1953 onwards reveals that the state had its own vision of how to make use of temples. In its rhetoric, the government proclaimed that although the 'communal houses, Buddhists pagodas, shrines, and temples, and imperial tombs have for centuries been exploited by feudal tyrants, who turned them into places giving them prestige in order to be close to all classes of people and to sow superstitions to captivate people'<sup>2</sup> they should be utilised in accordance with a new cultural project of building a modern nation.<sup>3</sup> In reality, the state's concern was dictated by practical considerations to develop them as places of historical interest, cultural value or scenic beauty that the masses could visit as tourists rather than as places of religious activity. More importantly, this development aimed to replace superstitious beliefs with a new socialist creed. Thus, the fate of these places was not a trivial and unimportant matter since their new role was supposed to fill the spiritual void that the anti-religious campaigns had left and to serve the state machinery in building a new society. The Ministry of Culture, conscious of losing control over the management of temples and of the fatal consequences of anti-religious zeal, blamed its own followers for a 'lack of proper view'. In a self-critical mood, the *Công Báo*<sup>4</sup> describes the temples' destruction:

Above: New Year Festival, Central Vietnam, 2007.

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'...as a result of the need for material for building new projects, a number of the objects of our age-old architectural legacy (*di sản kiến trúc cổ truyền*) have been demolished; some of them have been used to support co-operative art or the production of oil lamps for meetings, others have been turned into shopping centres, storehouses and markets; while some of them remain in the hands of superstitious old ritual masters, the majority have no one looking after them; some people with little consciousness destroyed these places or used them as private houses.'

Then, it continues:

'It is prohibited to defile architectural monuments or to use them in illegitimate ways such as: making improper drawings on the walls, pillars, and statues, or on the objects of worship; raising chickens and ducks; piling straw; storing excrement in communal houses, pagodas, shrines, and temples, or imperial tombs; taking memorial plaques, tiles, wood, wooden panels with Chinese characters, or lacquered boards belonging to communal houses in order to demolish them or to make piers, plank-beds, or chairs or to bake lime.'

Yet, the public admission of shortcomings did not result in a lessening of the tension between popular religion and official ideology. The state continued contesting, taking over and re-fashioning ritual spaces according to its secular vision. Anagnost<sup>5</sup> calls this process the 'politics of ritual displacement', a sort of 'uneasy accommodation' that engages both the local community and the state in a struggle over the symbolic meanings of temples. By removing sacred objects from temples, shrines and pagodas and turning them into functional buildings, the state attempted to divest these places of their sacred aura and show that local gods were nothing more than powerless effigies.

Despite the total restructuring of local sacred spaces, in the official discourse the tradition of preservation of communal houses, temples and shrines goes back to 1945 when *Hồ Chí Minh* issued a decree in the context of land reform on protecting national heritage.<sup>6</sup> However, all these directives had been largely ignored. The Official Gazette of 1956, continued to lament the pitiful situation of destroyed sites of local cults not only by the communist guerilla, which had used well-tried scorched earth tactics in order to deny the enemy any space to quarter their troops, but also by people who demolished the buildings.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, in the later issue of 1960, the state showed its disquiet over the popular reaction and feelings about the 'dilapidated situation of temples falling into ruins and with pieces lying about higgledy-piggledy', which might have resulted in a 'negative political impression among local visitors and foreign guests'. It recommended to provincial offices of culture and the People's Committees to remove all defacements from monuments and to beautify the local landscape by planting trees.<sup>8</sup> Note that in the official discourse, these temples underwent a metamorphosis into places of historical and cultural interest. Thus, the state worried not about religious but, above all, about national spaces. To rectify all 'committed mistakes and shortcomings', local authorities were strongly encouraged to protect and preserve 'all old architectural and other locales of scenic beauty and to use them in an appropriate way without wastage'.<sup>9</sup> The 'appropriate way' was understood as 'turning all places of worship into schools, exhibition halls, gathering places, and cultural houses'.<sup>10</sup> However, the next six years did not bring a significant improvement in the situation and the Party had to sharpen its tone. Still in a self-critical temper, Prime Minister *Phạm Văn Đồng* reacted to the destruction of temples by pointing out the poor record activities of administrative committees (*ủy ban hành chính*) to 'preserve all places of historical interest, to teach people about their value and to transform them into museums'.<sup>11</sup> He stressed that these places have been lost and destroyed due to the lack of interest or even awareness of the official duty of preserving the historical heritage and, as a consequence, of the low level of training of local cadres.<sup>12</sup>

In 1973, two years before the end of the Vietnam War, the state, specifying its agenda towards Buddhist pagodas and the clergy, had to again remind local authorities of the policy of protecting all places of historical and cultural interest. The government directive<sup>13</sup> called for 'preserving thoughtfulness and cleanliness' vis-à-vis Buddhist pagodas and forbade 'hurting the feelings and beliefs of the people' by destroying Buddhist sculptures and instruments or using them in an inappropriate way.

According to the government order, all sites of historical interest including sites of scenic beauty that could be Buddhist pagodas and temples are managed by local People's Committees (*ủy ban nhân dân*) and cultural offices (*sở văn hoá*).<sup>14</sup> It means that any renovation and construction work in places of worship and of historical and cultural value must be officially approved by these bureaus. In the North, during the land reform (1956) and the time of budget subsidies, many Buddhist pagodas, like communal houses and local shrines, suffered extensive destruction as their



## State rhetoric and realities of daily life

facilities and property were repossessed by village agricultural co-operatives or simply cleared of clergy and left empty. As a result, monks and nuns who depended largely on these properties were dissociated from the basis of their livelihoods.

Theoretically, the Buddhist clergy could count on official guarantees to continue their religious activities, if they voluntarily handed their land to the village co-operatives and joined common production. The co-operatives were expected to allot the monks and nuns to brigades based on practical abilities and their religious tasks in order to ensure their livelihoods.<sup>15</sup> In reality, however, the clergy had little choice: the state recommended training the most suitable local clergy as tour guides. It was supposed that monks and nuns could help local cadres with instructing visitors on the history of pagodas and scenic sites.<sup>16</sup> During the land reform, those pagodas that temporarily maintained their plot of land were taxed and their clergy were expected to work in its rice fields, shoulder-to-shoulder with common people instead of relying exclusively on the believers' labour.<sup>17</sup> Although a campaign of agricultural collectivisation generally failed in the southern regions of Vietnam, many temples and pagodas lost their properties.

In reality, the Vietnamese procedures of converting temples into secular places did not differ markedly from those implemented in Republican and later in Communist China and Revolutionary Russia. Yang and Poon<sup>18</sup> report that a large proportion of urban temples were turned into modern schools and exhibition halls and sacred objects were broken or smashed with a hammer. In Luehermann's<sup>19</sup> analysis of desecuration in Post-soviet Russia, one can find examples of sacred groves in the countryside turned into parks or of cemetery churches used as public toilets. Malarney<sup>20</sup> also gives an account of what happened in the Thinh Liet commune of North Vietnam after the land reform in the mid-1960s. Smashing many symbols, destroying the structure of temples or turning them into private houses, granaries and the like was performed with such great vigour that it is remembered vividly by the villagers even today. Nonetheless, most of the villagers felt that the abuse of and irreverence towards temples and gods must, sooner or later, meet with supernatural punishment.

Yet as Poon<sup>21</sup> illuminates, the shrinking and peripherisation or even desecration of religious space hardly led to a break with religious traditions. In Guangzhou City, the temples in their secular disguise as schools and exhibition halls still retained sacred status as people managed to preserve small deity images that they continued to worship. Yang<sup>22</sup> gives an example of a temple located close to Shanghai where, in 1927, the young Nationalists beheaded the city god. The local people pulled the head from the gutter and put it on the altar, when the temple was restored. In Siberia, in the 1930s, even though all village churches were closed down people did not cease to gather at nights behind anti-religious activists and chant their prayers.<sup>23</sup> In Thinh Liet commune, as soon as anti-religious vigour subsided, the villagers resumed worshipping their deities.

Right: New Year Festival organised by local authorities, Central Vietnam, 2007.

In the last 20 years, one can observe a noteworthy upturn in the state's attitude to religious spaces: the temples' festivals have been revived...publications devoted to famous ancient Buddhist pagodas, temples and the national heroes who defended the country's sovereignty have flooded the bookshops and the restoration works and renovation of religious buildings have become an inherent part of the local landscape.

### Revival and the changing discourse on religion

The recent liberalisation of the market in Vietnam fostered profound changes not only in the economic but also in the social sphere. In the last 20 years, one can observe a noteworthy upturn in the state's attitude to religious spaces: the temples' festivals have been revived as a glorification of the national culture after a long absence in village life, publications devoted to famous ancient Buddhist pagodas, temples and the national heroes who defended the country's sovereignty have flooded the bookshops and the restoration works and renovation of religious buildings have become an inherent part of the local landscape. Religion, previously excluded from the public sphere by the state, has been revived under new socio-political conditions. However, in opening up public space for religion, the socialist state neither admits limitations to its power nor resigns control over religious practices. Although the state no longer plays the strong ideological role in people's lives that it did before 1986, it still tries to standardise religious practices. The state has begun to promote a new rhetoric of harmony between ethical religious values and the ideology of the socialist system. In stressing this attitude, it utilised the architecture and art of pagodas and temples to be a symbol of the Vietnamese tradition. Villagers who want to re-claim their sacred spaces are encouraged by local state agents to apply for official recognition of the sites for which they can prove an artistic and historic value or the historical or cultural character of the residing deity. This has far-reaching implications for religious practice since remaking the identity of their gods and temples into state recognised ones required from villagers a kind of momentary and strategic conformity.

### Conclusion

The study of the *Công Báo* reveals that through the 1950s and the 1960s the state faced difficulties in implementing its agenda. In reality, the local officials were little concerned with the new roles of village temples and used them as it was most convenient for them: as granaries, storehouses, private houses or for co-operative production. While earlier issues sound the alert over the miserable conditions of religious buildings, the late 1970s issues give up the self-critical tone and ignore the actual desperate state of the temples. This sudden silence is only broken in later editions which depict a landscape of mushrooming historical and cultural monuments across the country.

These days, the relationship between religion and the Communist state is presented in the public sphere as a harmonious institution in which the state is tolerant and helpful. At the same time, some of the religious traditions are seen as representations of Vietnamese culture and national identity. For example, the traditional cult of ancestor worship has been revived as a 'hero-centred political culture', since the state's focus is on the exemplary service of the ancestors. In theory, the Vietnamese state allows full religious freedom; in practice, it enforces its power on religion by patrolling and directing religious practices. Most of all, this guidance occurs at the rhetorical level. However, it sometimes happens that the state executes a more rigorous campaign against religious practices. Religious freedom is guaranteed in the 70th article of the Vietnamese constitution, but the article directly after warns that the state will not tolerate activities in opposition to the socialist programme. From the state's standpoint, all attempts to take advantage of religious freedom and to disturb peace, independence and unity of the country and to propagate superstitious practices are discordant with law.

While relations between the state and religion remain rather antagonistic, the state is not extremely repressive. At the same time, the state continues a functionalist attitude towards religion. Religion became a useful tool in the hands of the Communist Party to legitimise and carry out the socialist project of a national and cultural homogeneity. Moreover, religion linked to the politics of nationalism is seen by the state as a protection against the inundation of western culture in Vietnam and so-called social evils.

To end, the best summary would be that of Philip Taylor, whose analysis well captures the nature of the relationship between modern cultural policy and popular religion: 'Although Vietnam's military war with the United States was long over and economic hostilities ended with the lifting of the U.S trade embargo, Vietnam remained at war; and in this cultural battle such buildings and their associated rites and festivities were in the front line.'<sup>24</sup>

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Left: Worshipping Ho Chi Minh, Central Vietnam, 2007.