

# Political Power, Religion and Gender: The Case of the Vietnamese in Poland

Grażyna Szymańska-Matusiewicz\* 

*This paper thoroughly examines the gender patterns of religious activity within the Vietnamese – the largest non-European migrant community in Poland. Basing on the result from anthropological field-work which I conducted in two pagodas currently operating in the suburbs of Warsaw I analyse this issue in the light of traditional gender patterns of religious life in Vietnam, as well as in the context of the politicisation of spiritual life under communist rule. The results of my research prove that whether a religious institution will become a ‘women’s sphere’ or will remain under the influence of male actors depends to a great extent on its political emplacement and relations with formal institutions of the Vietnamese state.*

*Keywords: Vietnamese diaspora; Buddhism; gender*

## Introduction

While the Vietnamese form the largest non-European migrant community in Poland (Office for Foreigners 2016), relatively little is known about the activities of Vietnamese migrant organisations, including those active in the sphere of religion. Despite the fact that two Vietnamese pagodas currently operate in Poland, two Vietnamese priests serve the needs of the Vietnamese Roman Catholic community and a number of syncretic ‘New-Age’ religious movements have developed on the territory of this country, there is a great paucity of information regarding this aspect of the migrants’ lives. On the other hand, while the Vietnamese diaspora in Poland has been subjected to analysis from many angles, with the most important issues discussed being its members’ integration into Polish society (Górny, Grzymała-Kazłowska, Kępińska, Fihel and Piekut 2007; Halik 1999; Halik and Nowicka 2002), economic situation (Klorek and Szulecka 2013; Wysińska 2012) and identity dilemmas of the second generation (Szymańska 2006; Szymańska-Matusiewicz 2007), the ‘gender issue’ has thus far been poorly addressed in the literature on the topic. Furthermore, existing studies addressing the gender dimension (Kindler and Szulecka 2013), tend to concentrate exclusively on the economic strategies of migrants.

---

\* Institute of Sociology, University of Warsaw, Poland. Address for correspondence: g.szymanska@gmail.com.

© The Author(s) 2018. Open Access. This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

To establish an empirical basis for the paper, I conducted ethnographic research from 2014 until 2017 in two Vietnamese pagodas located in the vicinity of Warsaw: Chùa Thiên Phúc and Chùa Nhân Hòa. Ethnography is here understood in accordance with Falzon's (2009: 1) concept of 'an eclectic methodological choice which privileges an engaged, contextually rich and nuanced type of qualitative social research, in which fine grained daily interactions constitute the lifeblood of the data produced'. Thus, in this case the fieldwork involved not only participant observation during multiple religious ceremonies and social gatherings taking place in the pagodas but also informal interviews with pagoda activists and attendants, as well as content analysis of social media (the Facebook profiles of pagodas) and the migrant press (*Que Viet*, the most widely and regularly distributed title).

While focusing in this paper on the case of two Vietnamese pagodas operating in Poland, I argue that gender remains a crucial factor shaping the nature of the social activity of Vietnamese migrants. Analogous to a study by Alexander Soucy (2012), who investigated a diversity of men and women's religious practices in Vietnam, the importance of the gender dimension in the case of the Vietnamese in Poland reveals itself in the living practices of men and women participating in rituals, prayers and the preparation of festivals. Since formal and informal power hierarchies emerging in the course of religious practices are intertwined with hierarchies existing in other spheres of Vietnamese migrant community activity, alongside depicting their interconnectedness with the country of origin I will shed light upon the gender dimension of Vietnamese migrant associations, both religious and non-religious. As I analyse the above-mentioned aspects, I will come to the broader issue of the emancipating role that religious institutions might play for a woman, especially in respect to migrant communities. Therefore, my aim is to provide answers to the following research questions:

- What factors contribute to the empowerment of women in the Vietnamese migrant community in Poland?
- In which spheres of activity do they possess the most power?
- Do the religious institutions create space for women, enabling them to be involved in social activities?
- Can religion be described as a 'women's sphere'?

### **Religious activity in the Vietnamese diaspora in the network of transnational relations**

The role of religion has received some coverage in respect to the diverse groups constituting the Vietnamese diaspora worldwide. Academics use the notion of 'diasporic religion' to analyse the American-Vietnamese community, a group of predominantly refugee origin. While examining the specific nature of Vietnamese 'lived religion' as practiced by the community of Little Saigon, Padgett (2007) points to the interconnectedness of categories such as 'home' (*nhà*) and 'homeland' (*quê hương*) with spiritual and religious experience. The activity of religious institutions 'in exile', as defined by Padgett, manifests itself in the reconstruction of 'the order', which means making efforts to restore things to the way they existed in diasporans' lost homeland (i.e. Vietnam before the year 1975) in a new geographical location. It is important to stress that, because of its post-war origins, the community in the United States is characterised by a strong anti-communist attitude. As a result, Vietnamese Buddhist pagodas in this country have been operating independently of the state institutions of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and have not been affiliated by communist-controlled Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam (*BVS, Giáo Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam*).

In comparison with the US-based diasporic group and Vietnamese migrant communities in Western Europe, the religious life of Vietnamese communities in Central and Eastern Europe has been shaped by a significantly different historical context. The Vietnamese appeared in this region during the Cold War era as a result of 'fraternal assistance' programmes operating within the 'global socialist ecumene' (Bayly 2009), a community of Soviet Bloc countries. While, in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, contract workers – being a source

of cheap labour in state-owned factories – formed the majority of in-coming Vietnamese (Alamgir 2014; Schwenkel 2015), Poland's 'socialist mobility' was characterised by the prevalence of students who constituted a vast majority of the Vietnamese coming to Poland at that time (Szymańska-Matusiewicz 2014, 2016). It is worth stressing that, although there are no systematic data regarding the gender ratio of students arriving in Poland during the Cold War era, ethnographic evidence (Szymańska-Matusiewicz 2016) suggests that a vast majority of them were male. Despite the differences characterising particular Eastern European countries, all Vietnamese migrant communities inhabiting them can be labelled after Long Le (2014) – who applied Sheffer's (2003) distinction of two kinds of diasporic community – as representing a 'state-bound' diaspora. Since their formation, the communities in CEE countries have maintained intense relations with their country of origin, including with state institutions which exert their power over migrant organisations acting either directly or through various intermediaries such as other migrant associations (Szymańska-Matusiewicz 2016).

In consequence, the development of religious activities within the Polish Vietnamese community has been connected with the issue of relations between religion and state in Vietnam. Therefore, during the Cold War era, when the communist authorities of Vietnam tended to suppress some manifestations of spirituality (such as spirit possession) and strictly supervise others – for example, the activities of Buddhist Sangha (Atsufumi 2016; Endres 2011), religious practices were barely noticeable among representatives of the Vietnamese diaspora in Central and Eastern Europe. This phenomenon can be simply attributed to the temporary nature of a primarily student mobility which did not allow for the development of any established religious institutions. However, the policy of the Vietnamese government constituted a far more important factor. Students delegated to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) remained under the strict control of both the embassies and the 'group leaders' (*trưởng đoàn*) in the respective CEE countries. Therefore, they were not allowed to develop any forms of social organisation other than those initiated and supervised by the state (Szymańska-Matusiewicz 2016).

After the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, the inflow of Vietnamese to Poland did not cease but the nature of their migration changed significantly. Some of the former contract workers and students decided to stay on in Europe instead of returning to their homeland. Soon they were joined by new waves of economically motivated newcomers from Vietnam who were looking for opportunities offered by emerging markets in countries undergoing the transformation towards a capitalist economy. Bazaars, large open-air markets such as the Decennial in Warsaw, Dong Xuan market in Berlin or Sapa market in Praha (Hüwelmeier 2015; Szulecka 2007) were the most important places in which the migrants' activity was concentrated. The bazaars, aside from being a centre of migrant economic activity, also became areas where religious and spiritual life was manifested. This phenomenon is exemplified by the existence of 'bazaar pagodas' in Berlin (Hüwelmeier 2013) and Warsaw (Hüwelmeier 2015). In the case of the Polish capital, the Thiên Việt pagoda operated in the vicinity of the Decennial Stadium until 2008 as part of a larger institution, the Thăng Long cultural centre owned by a Vietnamese businessman.

Migration is often conceptualised as a factor boosting the religious needs of people re-located to a new spatial and social context. However, the role that religious practices play in the process of adaptation of migrants may be manifold. Padgett (2007) described the Buddhist practices performed by former refugees from the Republic of Vietnam living in the United States as an attempt to reconstruct the 'true essence' of Vietnamese-ness as opposed to the reality of a contemporary communist Vietnamese state. In the case of the Vietnamese from CEE countries, however, relations with the country of origin and attitudes towards the communist order were significantly different. As Hüwelmeier (2013) noticed in her analysis of the spiritual activity of Vietnamese migrants in Germany, emerging religious institutions were inevitably embedded in the transnational context involving relations not only with the country of origin but also with internally diverse segments of the Vietnamese diaspora. Therefore, in a subsequent part of the paper I will consider the impact of embeddedness in a transnational network on the gender dimension in terms of a community's religious activity.

However, to acquire a broader perspective on the problem it is necessary to examine the gender-related patterns of religious institutions seated in Vietnam.

### **Religion as a ‘women’s sphere’? Gender patterns of religious institutions in Vietnam**

This paper uses a concept of gender derived from Raewyl Connell’s theory of gender and power, according to which ‘gender is the structure of social relations that centres on the reproductive arena, and the set of practices (governed by this structure) that bring reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes’ (Connell 1987: 10). This approach – defining gender as an outcome of cultural and historical circumstances which shape social interactions – is particularly relevant in my analysis, which is based on ethnographic observation of diverse social practices, such as social activism and religious worship.

Since, in Vietnamese popular discourse, religious practices are perceived more as a ‘women’s sphere’ (Atsufumi 2016) than as a ‘men’s’ thing, experiencing and practicing religion may seem different between men and women. Therefore, it is of vital importance to include an aspect of gender differentiation in examining the religious activity of Vietnamese migrants. Although the results of an official census conducted in Vietnam show that most Vietnamese claim not to adhere to any religion (81.9 per cent according to GSO 2009), religious practices – including making offerings in pagodas and temples or prayers conducted at home altars – are prevalent. As Leopold Cadière noticed in his classical study *Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Vietnamese*, the majority of Vietnamese people are not religious in the sense of a Western (Judeo-Christian) common understanding of religion; a concept of God is generally absent from their world-view. However, if religion is understood as a set of moral beliefs and practices shaping individual morality, the Vietnamese can be described as ‘deeply religious’ (Cadière 1989). While the stance taken by Cadière could be perceived as obsolete and shaped by Western/Christian perspectives, it gained wide acceptance among contemporary Vietnamese scholars of religion.. In most cases, people adopting the above-mentioned practices do not perceive themselves as belonging to any religious denomination, such as Buddhism. In the literature, they are described as adherents of the traditional Vietnamese ‘triple religion’ (*tam giáo*) which is derived from the seventeenth-century concept of *tam giáo đồng nguyên* and originates in three large religions: Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism (Gillespie 2014; Tran 1993). Nowadays, ‘triple religion’ can be defined as a non-institutionalised form of venerating various religious phenomena stemming from the three great traditions. Therefore, it is quite common for the Vietnamese to pay a visit to a Buddhist pagoda (*chùa*), a Confucian temple (*miếu*) or a temple dedicated to local heroes (*đền*) and, at the same time, perceive themselves to be non-religious persons.

The migration context provokes the adaptability of religious institutions, which is a widespread phenomenon and by no means limited to the Vietnamese diaspora. Migrant religious institutions play not only a role as religious centres but they also serve as places where one can strengthen one’s ethnic identity and remain in contact with the culture of the country of origin. Nevertheless, there is yet another factor which significantly impacts on the profile of Vietnamese migrant pagodas – namely the nature of Vietnamese religiosity; it is characterised by a minor role of formal belonging to an institutionalised religion, such as Buddhism, and the importance of a national dimension of a religious cult.

Religion has always played a significant, yet ambiguous, role in shaping the nature of gender relations in Vietnam. Analysis of its historical background has shown the legacy of the two most important religious traditions shaping the Vietnamese culture – Confucianism and Buddhism (Halik 1999; Jamieson 1995). The former was transferred to Vietnam from China as a result of the Chinese invasion in the third century B.C. and is commonly associated with patriarchy and the strict subordination of a woman to a man (Jamieson 1995; Mai and Le 1978; Nguyen 1995). The rule of ‘three subordinations’ by which each woman had to abide is

often invoked to illustrate the idea of the hierarchical gender relations prevalent in Confucian thought. It encompassed subordination to the father during a female's maiden years, to the husband during their marriage and, after the husband's death, to the eldest son. Even nowadays analogous gender-related concepts based on traditional Confucian rites are ubiquitous in Vietnam in the form of ancestor worship practices. The core ideas of ancestor worship have been concentrated around patrilineage (Jellema 2007a, b), which means that women were perceived primarily as an 'external' resource necessary to provide the continuation of a family.

Contrary to these ideas, another religious tradition that originally arrived in Vietnam from China – namely Buddhism – is believed to be a much more egalitarian system promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women. For example, women commonly played an important role in village pagodas (Jamieson 1995). A contemporary study by Soucy (2012), who conducted ethnographic research in an urban space of Hanoi, indicates that, while women are prevalent among Buddhist adherents, patterns of religiosity are distinct as far as gender is concerned. Female participation in religious practices varies. Elderly women take part in pilgrimages, while young women opt for more diverse religious performances. On the contrary, religious Buddhist men, mainly the elderly, play a role as 'guardians of the orthodoxy' within the space of a temple. Therefore, even though a pagoda may sometimes become an area of struggle for power between the two genders, the role of women remains undoubtedly of great importance.

Another interesting example of the 'women's sphere' is provided by the case of Vietnamese 'popular' or 'folk' religions which are widely practiced in contemporary Vietnam alongside Buddhist or ancestor-worship practices. Popular religion concentrates around the cult of *Đạo Mẫu* (the Mother Goddess), a deity associated with various mythological or historical figures such as princesses, national heroines or royal concubines. The Mother Goddess cult is also linked with *lên đồng* (spirit possession) practices in which spirits possess the body of a medium who provides a connection between two worlds: the world of human beings and the world of spirits (Endres 2011, 2016; Fjelstad and Nguyen 2006; Ngo 2006). The role of the medium is often played by females who constitute the majority of both mediums and practitioners (Norton 2006). Moreover, during spirit possession rituals, gender roles are commonly transgressed. A woman may take on a male role, which means that she adopts male behaviour – including a choice of clothing style, smoking and consumption of alcohol – during the performance. However, in the case of the opposite sex, the role of 'transgender' mediums has often been taken by trans- or homosexual men who find that acts of impersonating females provides them with a culturally appropriate space in which to express their sexuality.

Throughout Vietnamese history, the role of women has been of much greater importance in ecstatic religious practices involving elements of trance and spirit possession than in the case of practices strictly connected with social hierarchy and order – such as ancestor worship. This conclusion is partially in line with Lewis' (1989) argument according to which women, as an oppressed and marginalised social group, tend to stick to 'marginal' religious cults often connected with shamanist or trance practices which allow them to achieve their goals of self-fulfilment. However, as Fjelstad (1995) argued, spirit possession should not be perceived as a 'marginal' cult in Vietnam, as it is widely performed among the Vietnamese and often intertwines with other religious practices.

In recent history, the authorities of Vietnam have conducted a 'selectively repressive' policy towards religious practices (Malarney 2002). While spirit possession and other informal cults in which women could develop their agency were banned, male-centred ancestor-worship practices were permitted, yet subjected to careful supervision by the state authorities. In the *dổi mới* era<sup>1</sup>, which started in 1986, the policy of the state was relaxed. Consequently, various religious phenomena have been revived, including both male-dominated ancestor worship and village festivals, as well as practices incorporating women – such as activities in Buddhist pagodas and spirit-possession rituals. Therefore, women have been provided with the possibility to re-create

spaces for their social activity located inside religious institutions which, in some cases, has enabled them to construct social support networks (Atsufumi 2016; Endres 2011; Luong 2016).

As I have documented, Buddhism is associated with a non-male-dominated representation pattern in the landscape of Vietnamese religious institutions. However, gendered patterns of participation and activity which are significantly different in the case of the two Vietnamese Buddhist pagodas operating in Poland remain to be explored. I will explain the reason behind the distinctiveness of these patterns later in the paper.

### ***Thiên Phúc* and *Nhân Hòa* pagodas: a ‘women’s sphere’ vs ‘institutions related to formal structures of power’**

The two Vietnamese pagodas located in Laszczki in the vicinity of the Wolka Kosowska trade centres came into being after the closure of the Decennial Stadium (a market) in the centre of Warsaw. The decision to close the market put an end to the *Thăng Long* culture centre situated nearby. With its disappearance, the first Vietnamese pagoda (*Thiên Việt*) housed there, the only Buddhist Vietnamese institution in Poland at that time, would also cease to exist. Therefore, there was a need to rebuild it in a new location. However, the very fact of constructing two separate pagodas resulted from personal conflict between the owner of the *Thang Long* cultural centre – Mr Bùi Anh Thái – and the Association of Vietnamese Admirers of Buddhism in Poland (AVABP, *Stowarzyszenie Wietnamskich Miłośników Buddyzmu w Polsce*), a formally registered migrant organisation which had managed the former *Thiên Việt* pagoda.

The first of the two currently operating temples, *Chùa Thiên Phúc* (Pagoda of Heavenly Happiness), situated on the premises of a private house, was adapted and then opened for religious use in 2012. However, after a two-year strenuous effort to reconstruct the pagoda, its founder, Mr Bùi Anh Thái, repatriated to Vietnam, leaving its management rights to a newly established association, the Association of Vietnamese Buddhists in Poland (AVBP, *Towarzystwo Wietnamskich Buddystów w Polsce*). Currently, the pagoda does not have a resident monk on site but frequent visits are paid by representatives of the Vietnamese Buddhist clergy. Moreover, the pagoda is formally under the supervision of one of the high-ranked Buddhist monks from the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam, *Thượng tọa Thích Minh Trí*.

In the course of my fieldwork, I visited *Thiên Phúc* pagoda on multiple occasions, both during various holidays and festivities and on regular days when no celebrations were organised. On each and every occasion, women prevailed among the attendees. This phenomenon is not surprising; it can be observed during many religious practices – e.g. in the case of Vietnamese Pentacostals in Germany (Hüwelmeier 2010). What I found particularly interesting during the visits was the fact that women played an important role in managing the pagoda’s affairs, such as organising festivals and welcoming guests, including Polish ‘outsiders’, to the pagoda. When I arrived at the pagoda once with a group of students, Ms Bùi Thi Vân, a prominent activist and the leader of the AVBP, became our guide. Being in the role of a ‘religious expert’, she explained the basic concepts of Buddhism and described the range of pagoda activities for which she was, to a great extent, responsible.

Women also played a decisive role in organising *Tết*, a lunar New Year ceremony, in February 2018. While the role of the religious Master of Ceremonies was occupied by a monk, a male leader, women were the ones who were responsible for scheduling the event and planning and organising the celebration. Not only did they prepare ritual offerings or cook festive meals but they also played decisive roles by announcing the beginning and the end of a particular stage of celebration – such as singing karaoke or obtaining special blessings from the monk.

The importance of women’s agency in the case of the *Thiên Phúc* pagoda is also confirmed by the gender composition of the AVBP’s management. Four out of five members of the management board are female,

including the leader, Ms Bùi Thi Vân. Ms Vân also represents the pagoda during meetings and celebrations such as *Tết* or Women's Day outside the pagoda, which bring together various Vietnamese institutions. Her role as a representative seems to be of particular importance as, in Vietnamese culture, women have been commonly considered responsible only for 'internal matters', the most often connected with domestic affairs, whereas men have been associated with representative functions taking place 'outside' in the wider society (Luong 2016).

Being regarded as a 'women's sphere' might also imply being a place where *lên đồng* (spirit possession) rituals are performed. During one of my visits to the pagoda, I witnessed a mediumship ceremony which was organised especially for a group of scholars, including myself, guests 'from outside' the community. The medium was a middle-aged woman who, during the ceremony, changed into a male outfit, smoked cigarettes and drank vodka in order to indicate that she was possessed by a male spirit. A group of women participating in the ritual explained that *lên đồng* ceremonies were organised in the pagoda whenever somebody expressed a willingness to have the ritual performed for his or her sake. The informants also told us that the female medium was a professional who had offered mediumship services in Vietnam.

In the case of the second pagoda, *Nhân Hòa*, which has been under construction since 2013 (yet is operational), gender patterns seem to be significantly different. Its construction was undertaken by the Association of Vietnamese Admirers of Buddhism in Poland (AVABP), a formally registered migrant organisation which had managed the former *Thiên Việt* pagoda. Unlike the establishment of the *Thiên Phúc* pagoda, which was, to a large extent, a private enterprise of Mr Bùi Anh Thái, the *Nhân Hòa* pagoda was supposed to be a 'community undertaking'. Its funding was, therefore, provided by various Vietnamese enterprises in Poland and by private people. Vietnamese migrant organisations, which maintain manifold connections with Vietnamese state institutions, actively supported the construction of the pagoda. Therefore, it is true to say that the *Nhân Hòa* pagoda was constructed, albeit indirectly, under the auspices of Vietnamese state institutions.

During participant observation which I conducted in the *Nhân Hòa* pagoda, I noticed that events organised on the premises usually attracted fewer participants than those taking place at the *Thiên Phúc* pagoda. However, during all the important celebrations such as the *Hùng Kings'* or *Tết* festivals, I registered the presence of a significant group of male participants. This group consisted of 'men in power', people occupying leadership positions within the Vietnamese migrant community – i.e. presidents and management members of various migrant organisations such as the Association of Vietnamese in Poland and the Association of Vietnamese Businessmen in Poland, the editors of the *Quê Việt* newspaper and representatives of the Vietnamese Embassy.

Like the *Thiên Phúc* pagoda, the *Nhân Hòa* pagoda is also managed by a religious association, the Association of Vietnamese Admirers of Buddhism in Poland (AVABP, *Hội Người VN tại Ba Lan Yêu Đạo Phật*). Contrary to the female-dominated management of the AVBP, the management of the AVABP consists solely of men. During my visits to the pagoda, I encountered either a monk based in Vietnam who was on one of his regular visits to various pagodas in Eastern Europe, or other male activists. They explained the role which Buddhism plays particularly in the life of Vietnamese migrants who commonly experience multiple challenges connected with their precarious situation. Although women were present among the worshippers and were responsible for some preparatory work, especially food preparation, they did not seem to hold any leadership position nor did they seem to have any means of exerting their power.

### **Gender and political empowerment: the key to understanding a gendered profile of migrant religious institutions**

Formal political power is yet another important factor in the analysis of the distinct gender profiles of the two Vietnamese religious institutions. While the *Thiên Phúc* pagoda, being a private enterprise, has maintained ambiguous relations with both the Embassy of Vietnam and Vietnamese organisations cooperating with the Embassy, the bond between the *Nhân Hòa* pagoda and official Vietnamese state institutions seems much more evident due to the involvement of migrant associations politically loyal to the authorities of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in its construction. Therefore, the next part of the paper will examine the gender patterns prevalent in the official power institutions of the Vietnamese state and in Vietnamese migrant associations in Poland.

The issue of gender equality has been a substantial part of the ideology of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) from the beginnings of its coming to power. Similar to the ideological systems of other communist countries inspired by Marxism, the liberation of women from the constraints of ‘ancient regime’, often labeled as ‘feudalism’, was one of the important postulates of the CPV. In 1945, soon after proclaiming the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), a nationwide organisation responsible for women affairs, the Women’s Union, was established. The first constitution of DRV ratified in 1946 included a declaration of men’s and women’s equality. A new Law on Marriage and Family, introduced in 1959, forbade the discriminatory practices which were allowed during French colonial rule, such as arranged marriages and polygyny; it proclaimed the equality of men and women in both private and public spheres of life and provided protection for women in cases of domestic violence (Rydstrom and Drummond 2004).

However, the Vietnamese state has fallen short of these goals. Despite multiple programmes dedicated to the issue of promoting gender equality, such as the National Strategy for the Advancement of Women or the National Strategy on Gender Equality, women seem to face the effects of a ‘glass ceiling’. While, as of 2010, women constituted 33 per cent of members of the Communist Party of Vietnam, they occupied only 23 per cent of both municipal and regional leadership positions. In 2016, Ms Đặng Thị Ngọc Thịnh was appointed Vice-President of Vietnam, thus far the highest formal position ever held by a woman in the communist government of Vietnam; nevertheless, the Vice-President plays a mostly representative role with no actual power. The most important position in the Vietnamese political system, the First Secretary of the CPV, has never been occupied by a woman. However, it should be noted that the shortage of women in the sphere of formal political power is not a feature unique to Vietnam; other former Soviet Bloc countries are a good example of states in which women were barely represented among the highest state officials.

Regarding Vietnamese migrant institutions in Poland, a similar gender pattern can be observed. In the case of the Association of the Vietnamese in Poland (the former *Stowarzyszenie Wietnamczyków w Polsce ‘Solidarność i Przyjaźń’*), the largest general-profile organisation having a supervisory role over other organisations, the positions of president and vice-president have, since its establishment, been occupied by men; the management board consists only of male members. Regarding the Association of Vietnamese Businesspeople in Poland, only one board member is female. Other positions, including that of the president, are occupied by men. Accordingly, in order to interpret this fact, it must be remembered that the majority of the formal officially registered migrant associations operate in cooperation with the Embassy of Vietnam and maintain many connections with institutions of the Vietnamese state. For example, leaders of the Association of the Vietnamese in Poland are members of institutions acting in the political system of the Vietnamese state such as the Vietnam Fatherland Front or the Communist Party of Vietnam. The Vietnamese Women’s League, an organisation catering for the needs of Vietnamese women in Poland, receives formal visits from representatives of the



Vietnamese Women's Union, a mass organisation acting within the framework of the Vietnamese communist state (Szymańska-Matusiewicz 2016).

However, gender patterns take a significantly different shape in the case of another category of Vietnamese activists in Poland – members of the anti-communist opposition. Despite the general state-bound profile of a Vietnamese migrant community, pro-democratic activists advocating political change in Vietnam have been active in Poland since the late 1990s. Tôn Văn Anh, who cooperates with a Polish NGO, the Society for the Freedom of Speech, has for many years been the face of the anti-communist movement. This young woman, who went to Poland in her childhood, has often been present in the Polish media during various television broadcasts and in prominent newspapers such as the *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

Within the Vietnamese community there are, however, other women playing prominent roles as pro-democratic movement leaders. Although they might not be widely recognised by the Polish public, they have had a significant reception within the community. Mạc Việt Hồng and Nguyễn Thái Linh are the most important women. The former is the editor-in-chief of *Đàn Chim Việt*, a newspaper opposing the Vietnamese communist government. The latter is one of the organisers of the anti-Chinese protests in May 2014 which resulted in the participation of over 3 000 Vietnamese. Therefore, the involvement of women in public activity seems to be related to the involvement of particular movements or organisations in the formal structures of power connected with the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

## Conclusions

Analysis of the gender patterns of two Vietnamese religious institutions in Poland – namely the *Thiên Phúc* and *Nhân Hòa* pagodas, reveals differences in the roles played by men and women in both institutions. Placing these cases in the broader context of gendered structures of power in the political system of the Vietnamese state proved that a religious institution may become a 'women's sphere' only if it maintains a certain level of independence from formal political institutions. In the case of the Vietnamese migrant community in Poland, institutions and movements either opposing the Vietnamese state or maintaining their independence from its official structures are the most likely to provide women with the opportunity to play a leadership role. In this respect, religious institutions seem not to differ from other associations. The case of the Vietnamese bazaar pagodas in Berlin dominated by female activists and adherents (Hüwelmeier 2013) suggests that the pattern described can also be observed in other migrant communities located in the area of the former Soviet Bloc. Therefore, the example of Vietnamese migrant religious organisations in Poland illustrates a paradox of communist ideology regarding a 'women's issue'. The paradox transgresses the territory of the Vietnamese state to become a transnational phenomenon affecting migrant communities. While political movements based on Marxist principles advocate gender equality, the formal political structure of Vietnam – an authoritarian country still referring to socialist ideology – seems to effectively exclude women from possessing actual political power both within Vietnam and in the state-bound diaspora.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Đổi mới* (Renewal) era is a term used to denote the series of reforms introduced by the Vietnamese government in the 1980s, aimed at reshaping the economic system from centrally-planned towards 'socialist-oriented market economy'.

## Funding

The funding of the research constituting the empirical basics of the paper was provided by the grant received from the Polish National Science Centre (NCN), *Political Engagement of Diaspora in the Era of Global Interconnectedness. Vietnamese Migrant Community in Poland and Its Transnational Connections*, no 2017/25/B/HS6/01201.

## Conflict of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## ORCID ID

Grażyna Szymańska-Matusiewicz  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1480-5187>

## References

- Alamgir A. (2014). *Socialist Internationalism at Work*. Unpublished PhD thesis. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University.
- Atsufumi K. (2016). Introduction, in: K. Atsufumi (ed.), *Weaving Women's Spheres in Vietnam: The Agency of Women in Family, Religion and Community*, pp. 1–24. Leiden: Brill.
- Bayly S. (2009). Vietnamese Narratives of Tradition, Exchange and Friendship in the Worlds of the Global Socialist Ecumene, in: H. G. West, P. Raman (eds), *Enduring Socialism. Explorations of Revolution, Transformation and Restoration*, pp. 125–147. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Cadière L. M. (1989). *Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Vietnamese*. Monash, Victoria: Monash University, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies.
- Connell R. W. (1987). *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Endres K. W. (2011). *Performing the Divine: Mediums, Markets and Modernity in Urban Vietnam*. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press.
- Endres K. W. (2016). Imperious Mandarins and Cunning Princesses: Mediumship, Gender, and Identity in Urban Vietnam, in: K. Atsufumi (ed.), *Weaving Women's Spheres in Vietnam: The Agency of Women in Family, Religion and Community*, pp. 193–217. Leiden: Brill.
- Falzon M. A. (2009). Introduction, in: M. A. Falzon (ed.), *Multi-Sited Ethnography: Theory, Praxis and Locality in Contemporary Research*, pp. 1–23. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Fjelstad K. (1995). 'Tu Phu Cong Dong': Vietnamese Women and Spirit Possession in the San Francisco Bay Area. Unpublished PhD thesis. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i.
- Fjelstad K., Nguyen T. H. (eds) (2006). Introduction, in: K. Fjelstad, T. H. Nguyen (eds), *Possessed by the Spirits: Mediumship in Contemporary Vietnamese Communities*, pp. 7–18. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, Southeast Asia Program Publications.
- Gillespie J. (2014). Human Rights As a Larger Loyalty: The Evolution of Religious Freedom in Vietnam. *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 47(1): 107–149.
- Górny A., Grzymała-Kazłowska A., Kępińska E., Fihel A., Piekut A. (2007). *Od zbiorowości do społeczności: rola migrantów osiedleńczych w tworzeniu się społeczności imigranckich w Polsce*. CMR Working Paper 27(85). Warsaw: University of Warsaw, Centre of Migration Research.

- GSO (2009). *The 2009 Vietnam Population and Housing Census: Completed Results*. Online: [https://www.gso.gov.vn/default\\_en.aspx?tabid=515&idmid=5&ItemID=10799](https://www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=515&idmid=5&ItemID=10799) (accessed: 12 December 2018).
- Halik T. (1999). *Tradycja niekonfucjańska: Jej rola w kształtowaniu się społeczeństwa i państwa w Wietnamie*. Warsaw: Nowy Dziennik.
- Halik T., Nowicka E. (2002). *Wietnamczycy w Polsce. Integracja czy izolacja?* Warsaw: Instytut Orientalistyczny, Wydział Neofilologii, Uniwersytet Warszawski.
- Hüwelmeier G. (2010). Female Believers on the Move: Vietnamese Pentacostal Networks in Germany, in: G. L. A. T. Bonifacio, V. Angeles (eds). *Gender, Religion and Migration: Pathways of Integration*, pp. 115–131. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Hüwelmeier G. (2013). Bazaar Pagodas: Transnational Religion, Postsocialist Marketplaces and Vietnamese Migrant Women in Berlin. *Religion and Gender* 3(1): 76–89.
- Hüwelmeier G. (2015). From ‘Jarmark Europa’ to ‘Commodity City’. New Marketplaces, Post-Socialist Migrations, and Cultural Diversity in Central and Eastern Europe. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 4(1): 27–39.
- Jamieson N. (1995). *Understanding Vietnam*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Jellema K. (2007a). Everywhere Incense Burning: Remembering Ancestors in Đồi Mồi Vietnam. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38(3): 467–492.
- Jellema K. (2007b). Returning Home: Ancestor Veneration and the Nationalism of Đồi Mồi Vietnam, in: P. Taylor (ed.), *Modernity and Re-Enchantment: Religion in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam*, pp. 57–89. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Publishing.
- Kindler M., Szulecka M. (2013). The Economic Integration of Ukrainian and Vietnamese Migrant Women in the Polish Labour Market. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39(4): 649–671.
- Klorek N., Szulecka M. (2013). *Migrant Economic Institutions and Their Environmental Influence: A Case Study of Trade Centers Located in Wolka Kosowska*. Research Report 3/2013. Online: <http://interwencjaprawna.pl/docs/ARE-313-Wolka-Kosowska-en.pdf> (accessed: 1 October 2018).
- Le L. S. (2014). Introduction: The Formation of the Global Vietnamese Diaspora, in: Y. W. Chan, D. Haines, J. Lee (eds), *The Age of Asia Migration: Continuity, Diversity, and Susceptibility. Volume I*, pp. 172–181. London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Lewis I. M. (1989). *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*. London: Routledge.
- Luong H. V. (2016). Gender Relations in Vietnam: Ideologies, Kinship Practices, and Political Economy, in: K. Atsufumi (ed.), *Weaving Women’s Spheres in Vietnam: The Agency of Women in Family, Religion and Community*, pp. 25–56. Leiden: Brill.
- Mai T. T., Le T. N. T. (1978). *Women in Vietnam*. Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House.
- Malarney S. K. (2002). *Culture, Ritual and Revolution in Vietnam*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.
- Ngo D. T. (2006). The Mother Goddess Religion: History, Pantheon, and Practices, in: K. Fjelstad, T. H. Nguyen (eds), *Possessed by the Spirits: Mediumship in Contemporary Vietnamese Communities*, pp. 19–30. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, Southeast Asia Program Publications.
- Nguyen V. H. (1995). *The Ancient Civilization of Vietnam*. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers.
- Norton B. (2006). ‘Hot-Tempered’ Women and ‘Effeminate’ Men: The Performance of Music and Gender in Vietnamese Mediumship, in: K. Fjelstad, T. H. Nguyen (eds), *Possessed by the Spirits: Mediumship in Contemporary Vietnamese Communities*, pp. 55–76. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, Southeast Asia Program.
- Office for Foreigners (2016). *Statistics. Annual Comparison*. Online: <https://udsc.gov.pl/en/statystyki/raporty-okresowe/zestawienia-roczne/> (accessed: 13 December 2018).

- Padgett D. M. (2007). Religion, Memory, and Imagination in Vietnamese California. Unpublished PhD thesis. Indiana: Indiana University.
- Rydstrom H., Drummond L. (2004). *Gender Practices in Contemporary Vietnam*. Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- Sheffer G. (2003). *Diaspora Politics: At Home Abroad*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schwenkel C. (2015). Socialist Mobilities: Crossing New Terrain in Vietnamese Migration Histories. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 4(1): 13–25.
- Soucy A. (2012). *The Buddha Side. Gender, Power, and Buddhist Practice in Vietnam*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Szulecka M. (2007). *Obecność cudzoziemców na targowisku zlokalizowanym wokół Stadionu Dziesięciolecia z perspektywy kryminologicznej*. CMR Working Papers 24/(82). Warsaw: University of Warsaw, Centre of Migration Research.
- Szymańska G. (2006). Tożsamość etniczna studentów wychowanych w Polsce, in: S. Łodziński, E. Nowicka (eds), *Kulturowe wymiary imigracji do Polski. Studia socjologiczne*, pp. 278–306. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Prolog.
- Szymańska-Matusiewicz G. (2007). Interakcyjne wymiary tożsamości młodych Wietnamczyków w Polsce, in: I. Borowik I., K. Leszczyńska (eds), *Wokół tożsamości: teorie, wymiary, ekspresje*, pp. 228–243. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Nomos.
- Szymańska-Matusiewicz G. (2014). Vietnamese from Eastern Europe As a Transnational Migrant Community, in: Y. W. Chan, D. Haines, J. Lee (eds), *The Age of Asian Migration: Continuity, Diversity, and Susceptibility. Volume 1*, pp. 189–210. London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Szymańska-Matusiewicz G. (2016). Migration and Cultural Flows Between Vietnam and Poland. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 25(3): 275–295.
- Tran T. B. T. (1993). The Two Buddhist Literary Tendencies of Vietnam's Middle Ages. *Vietnamese Studies* 38(1): 6–34.
- Wysieńska K. (ed.) (2012). *Sprzedawać, gotować, budować? Plany i strategie Chińczyków i Wietnamczyków w Polsce*. Warsaw: Institute of Public Affairs.

**How to cite this article:** Szymańska-Matusiewicz G. (2018). Political Power, Religion and Gender: The Case of the Vietnamese in Poland. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 7(2): 153–164.