

Vietnam



Lauren Meeker, *Sounding Out Heritage: Cultural Politics and the Social Practice of Quan Ho Folk Song in Northern Vietnam*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013. viii+ 192 pages. 18 illustrations, notes, glossary, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN 978-0-8248-3568-2.

LAUREN MEEKER's book *Sounding Out Heritage* is about the construction, deployment, and transformation of tradition in contemporary Vietnam. She focuses on *quan họ*—a north Vietnamese musical genre—and particularly on developments during the twenty-first century that accompanied the genre's inscription on UNESCO's register of intangible cultural heritage. A caveat before proceeding—my reading of Meeker's book is based on my experience working to document musical

traditions with Tibetan communities in China (with the Plateau Cultural Heritage Protection Group; see <http://www.oralliterature.org/collections/pchpgcollections.html>) and my training as an anthropologist more broadly, rather than as an expert on Vietnam, its musical traditions, or cultural politics.

Sounding Out Heritage is based on ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation and both formal and informal interviews carried out during almost twenty continuous months from 2003 to 2005, as well as during two one-month follow-up visits in 2008 and 2009. Meeker also makes ample use of Vietnamese textual sources. Chapter 1, on the transformation of *quan họ* following the 1945 August revolution and the emergence of an independent Vietnam, draws on textual sources to a greater extent than any of the other chapters. The following chapters are based on interviews with practitioners and culture brokers, attendance at festivals, observations of performances, visits to sites of cultural production and consumption, and analysis of multimedia products.

A wide range of topics is covered in the book, all pivoting around the focal genre of *quan họ*. Chapter 2 provides an overview of *quan họ* as it was performed prior to the 1945 revolution; Meeker gives rich details of the genre's features, from vocal quality to body language, lyrics, and affect. Chapter 3 looks at the institutionalization, professionalization, and commercialization of the genre, while chapter 4 examines how *quan họ* has been transformed in its migration from the intimate space of village homes and temples to stages, television, and other performance mediums. Chapter 5 addresses related developments in the transformation of village festivals, a significant venue for the performance of *quan họ*, and how such events create spaces for not only performing music, but also local and national identities.

The book's theoretical orientation is fairly straightforward post-structuralist anthropology. Key theoreticians cited by Meeker are Homi Bhabha, Roland Barthes, Thomas Csordas, Michel Foucault, Edward Schiefelin, Gayatri Spivak, and Victor Turner. Some of the important organizing concepts of the book are performance, embodiment, the senses, identity, and the political uses of culture. In this regard, a useful contribution by Meeker to post-structuralist ethnomusicology is her concept of "amplification," which she uses both to refer to the actual amplification of sound, as well as "the transmission of sound that enables [people] to hear themselves as participants in and representatives of a cultural form" (127). Meeker's book therefore serves as a useful addition to the corpus of post-structural anthropology, particularly ethnomusicology. Having said this, the book could have benefited from deeper engagement with the ethnomusicological literature. Two sources that come to mind as being of direct relevance to Meeker's project are FELD (1990) and DIEHL (2002).

Sounding Out Heritage also has the potential to contribute to other debates and disciplines. For example, the book has insights to offer in the still-ongoing debates about modernization emerging from WEBER's book (1976). Although Weber was a firm proponent of unilinear modernization theory, responses to his book have nuanced his arguments by examining how "tradition" was transformed into multiple modernities due to different responses to and uses of technological developments—mass transport, mass media, and so on—by different political regimes

(CABO and MOLINA 2009). Meeker's book has much to say in this regard about how different historical experiences and political ideologies lead to tradition being defined, deployed, and transformed in very different ways. She does an outstanding job of relating the role of traditional music in the unfolding of a specifically Vietnamese modernity.

Another area where Meeker's book will certainly make a useful contribution is regarding the emerging approaches to heritage management that draw on ecological notions of sustainability in an attempt to avoid static, preservationist constructs of culture. In the field of ethnomusicology, this trend is exemplified by GRANT's recent work (2014). Meeker's detailed ethnographic account highlights the complex predicament that traditional music faces in the twenty-first century as local practices are drawn into national and international contexts. This book therefore provides an excellent case study that may bring new insights to how cultural diversity may be sustained, lost, and recreated.

Before concluding, a few technical notes. The book contains a glossary, which, unfortunately, only contains key Vietnamese terms mentioned in the text; a comprehensive glossary containing all Vietnamese terms would have been useful, especially for nonspecialist readers. Photographs are spread evenly throughout the text and are used judiciously to illustrate key points, and this is especially helpful when dealing with the performative aspects of *quan họ* in both its traditional and modern guises. The index is well-constructed and very helpful for anyone wishing to dip into the book for specific information. However, with the body of the text coming in at just under 150 pages, and given the author's accessible style, *Sounding Out Heritage* is a relatively quick read.

In conclusion, Meeker's book is a solidly researched, focused, and detailed piece of post-structuralist ethnomusicology. It has important contributions to make to our understanding of how tradition is defined and transformed, as well as debates about modernization and cultural sustainability. It could also be used in classroom settings such as introductory courses on Asian culture, higher-level undergraduate classes on contemporary society and modern history in Southeast Asia, as well as more advanced classes on ethnomusicology and cultural heritage.

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