



**Beth Szczepanski, *The Instrumental Music of Wutaishan's Buddhist Monasteries: Social and Ritual Contexts***

Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Ashgate, 2012. 196 pages. 10 b&w illustrations and 9 musical examples. Hardback/ebook, £60.00; ISBN: 978-1-4094-2743-8 (hardback); 978-1-4094-2744-5 (ebook).

BETH SZCZEPANSKI'S BOOK is based on eleven months of fieldwork carried out between 2005 and 2007 at Shuxiang si, a temple in the Wutaishan mountain region, Shanxi Province, some 250 miles from Beijing. Szczepanski took music lessons at the temple and spoke with everyone she could about the music on offer in that locale. The resulting book was first offered as a doctoral thesis at Ohio State University in 2008 (the thesis is available at [http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc\\_num=osu1211286766](http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=osu1211286766); accessed 7 October 2014).

Szczepanski's preface discusses the challenges of being a woman living among male monks, an agnostic asking questions in a religious community, and a researcher who has to overcome linguistic deficiencies to engage fully with those she met. This is a useful account, especially for those contemplating the apparent barriers to ethnographic field study in socially distant settings and the potential limits to participation and insider insights. I have a tiny interpretational quibble: Szczepanski cites a passage from the early *Sutra in Forty-Two Sections*, which educates the monkish reader in appropriate behavior toward women and includes the warning, "Above all, consider in your reasoning that what you see is only the external appearance, within that body what vileness and corruption!" Szczepanski explains that she dressed conservatively in baggy clothing to de-emphasize her "vileness and corruption" (xiv-xv). As I read it, the sutra is warning the faithful monk that the true dangers of womankind lie within, already well disguised by surface appearances; dressing conservatively further veils the threat Szczepanski's presence brought to impressionable monks at Shuxiang si, but—theologically speaking—it doesn't do anything to reduce those risks.

Chapter 1 provides a history of Buddhist music in the Wutaishan area. Buddhism has been strongly established in this location for almost 2,000 years, and the landscape of sixty-eight temples has recently achieved recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Buddhist music traditions found here include two styles of chant, known as Northern and Southern, an opposition found widely across the Chinese musical sphere, and one that points to musical aesthetic choices at least as much as it does to matters of geographical origin. Typically, styles named northern are more musically energetic and robust, whereas those termed southern are gentle, elegant, and fluid in style. Then there's the *shengguan* music, literally that for mouth organ (*sheng*) and reedpipe (*guan*), although such an ensemble often includes the transverse bamboo flute (*dizi*) and percussion such as cymbals (*faqi* or *bo*) and possibly the tuned gong set (*yunluo*). This latter ensemble may have reached Wutaishan only five hundred years ago but it became well established there in two forms, one found in Tibeto-Mongolian temples and the other in those that promote Han Chinese Buddhism, although it has declined and is now found in only a handful of temples (7–8, xiii–xiv). Szczepanski attributes the decline mostly to a series of disruptions throughout the twentieth century, most notably that of the Cultural Revolution (20–21), concluding the chapter with a summary of the impact of tourism on the area since 1978, which has prompted a major revival of ritual and its associated music.

In the second chapter, Szczepanski looks briefly at four monasteries that sustained some kind of *shengguan* music at the time of her research. The largest, found in the temple to which she affiliated herself, was itself the result of a recent process of revival led by a small group of elderly monks. Elsewhere, *shengguan* practice appears to have been mostly very occasional and sometimes reduced only to a couple of performers.

Chapter 3 is an account of rites sponsored by donors, a practice especially significant in Chinese Buddhism once monastery lands were confiscated during the twentieth century (38). *Shengguan* accompanies some of these rites, but most are reliant upon singing and chanting. Szczepanski provides short transcriptions of sample vocal melodies, although these lack a tempo indication, and so one has to guess how quickly they might be sung. The latter part of the chapter looks at the *shengguan* music. Again, the transcriptions give some sense of the tune, but the single melody line given provides few clues as to instrumentation, whether musicians play heterophonically (that is, each with his own realization) rather than in strict unison, whether or not the mouth organs play more than one note at once, whether there are percussion parts or not, and a host of other such musical questions. Many ethnomusicological studies come with a CD or DVD, in which case an outline transcription can be enough to guide the listener. The author regularly mentions having made recordings but this study is published without one, and so the partial transcriptions offer some information but still leave rather a lot to the reader's musical imagination.

The focus of chapter 4 is funeral services, with the bulk of the writing being a description of a funeral the author attended. Meanwhile, chapter 5's subject is that of calendrical observances, and the author briefly describes a series of significant rites spaced out through the year that involve music. The sixth chapter introduces the wind and percussion instruments, providing information as to how they are

played in the ensembles already discussed. This material goes some way to answer questions raised by the transcriptions in chapter 3, and might have been better positioned earlier on rather than as a separate chapter in itself.

Chapter 7 is more extended, going into some depth on the use of *gongchepu* notation in this music. Music scores of this kind employ a series of simple Chinese characters to record musical pitches, rather like the do-re-mi shorthand used in the West. Found in much of China, there are typically small distinctions reflecting local variations of usage in orthography and performance practice, and the *shengguan* music of Wutaishan turns out to be no exception. The discussion of whether or not ensembles might shift to using other kinds of notation offers an interesting case study of the pros and cons of a move toward potentially more detailed forms of writing music down (easier to learn but less space left for improvisation, for instance). It is unusual to see cipher notation called “Western cipher notation” throughout (for example, page 100). Its origins are indeed European, but this system (which replaces *gongchepu* symbols with numerals and adds rhythmic underscores and certain other symbols derived from staff notation) is now very thoroughly sinicized.

In chapter 8, Szczepanski reflects on her observations of young monks’ lessons and her own experiences. There is not a huge amount of ethnographic data here, but the short chapter provides an engaging overview that might work well for readers new to such a topic. Chapter 9 discusses surviving manuscript books of tunes and traces apparent origins of tunes preserved in these *shengguan* scores, with quite a number also found elsewhere in China, including among secular repertoires. The discussion underlines both the porosity of folk musical repertoires in China and the historical significance of Wutaishan as a site for pilgrimage, one that evidently drew external musical influence to the temples in that region on a regular basis (114).

The final part of the book looks at *shengguan* traditions outside the temples, with short chapters given to concert and festival contexts, politics, and business. As Szczepanski notes, a temple performance may be observed as entertainment by tourists; thus, even a single performance contains “layers of sacred and secular function” (127). Chapter 10 summarizes the content of preexisting recordings and talks about festival and concert performances, with considerable coverage given to observations on a TV show recorded using the Shuxiang si musicians. The primary mediator, Buddhist music expert Han Jun, does not come out of this too well, appearing anxious to manipulate the music and musicians in search of a televisual image that bears only partial resemblance to the living tradition itself. His views are not incorporated into the ethnography, however, and we do not hear what the monks involved thought about their own participation in the event either. Chapter 11 begins by providing a historical context for the overlap of Buddhism and politics in the present day, offering notes on such topics as state involvement in *shengguan* concerts and the maintenance of links between power brokers in the state apparatus and those in Wutaishan’s monasteries. Chapter 12 is a brief but balanced look at what might be seen as the other side of the coin: the business and economic aspects of Buddhist music. A conclusion of just a page or so completes the book’s arguments.

The study is an original contribution, and so to be welcomed in that sense. But it does not dig deep, whether musically or ethnographically, and some reordering

and editing would bring more clarity and cumulative impact to the content and its communication. Most of the book's short chapters have the feel of initial fieldwork reports rather than finished analyzes based on in-depth ethnographic enquiry. As a reader, I particularly missed encountering the perspectives of the musicians themselves, who, other than one or two teachers, are almost entirely absent as voices contributing to the account. Even these teachers appear mostly as people with materials to impart rather than as living, breathing human beings going about their lives. I believe Szczepanski has done enough to show us the potential value of this topic for in-depth ethnomusicological research, but the resulting book suggests that the difficulties with which she opens her account finally proved overwhelming.

Jonathan P. J. Stock  
*University College Cork*