

Musical minorities

Seb Rumsby



Musical Minorities: The Sounds of Hmong Ethnicity in Northern Vietnam

Lonán O'Briain. 2018.

New York: Oxford University Press
ISBN 9780190626976



Above: China Langde - Miao Lusheng players. Image reproduced under a Creative Commons license courtesy of Anja Disseldorp on Flickr. Original Image: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/jadis1958/5043493763>. License: CC BY 2.0

Until recently, Hmong studies has overwhelmingly focused on the more accessible Hmong populations in Thailand, Laos, and Western diasporas, despite the fact that three quarters of Hmong live in Vietnam and China. Along with Sarah Turner, Christine Bonnin and Jean Michaud (*Frontier Livelihoods: Hmong in the Sino-Vietnamese Borderlands*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015) and Tām Ngô (*The New Way: Hmong Protestantism in Vietnam*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), Lonán O'Briain's new publication *Musical Minorities: The Sounds of Hmong Ethnicity in Northern Vietnam* is a welcome counterbalance. Like the others, O'Briain situates his work in relation

to James Scott's controversial but influential thesis of upland Southeast Asia being a 'zone of refuge' for avoiding or resisting state structures (*The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). He is not the first to apply this concept to the realm of Hmong music – an interesting precursor is Catherine Falk's work on the concealed musical meanings of the *qeej*, a traditional instrument

with multiple bamboo pipes ("If you have good knowledge, close it well tight": Concealed and framed meaning in the funeral music of the Hmong *qeej*, *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 12(2), 2003: 1–33). However, O'Briain's monograph is more detailed and offers a wider sociopolitical contextualisation.

Taking an evolutionary approach to assess the resilience of Hmong music cultures in Vietnam, O'Briain attempts to avoid unhelpful stereotypes and disciplinary partitioning by pointing to the wide diversity of musical practice within one minority group, emphasising the outside influences and constant flux of music cultures. The book's main argument is that "attempts to categorize ethnicity by using cultural traits such as music are futile unless one cuts out the inconsistencies, the participatory discrepancies that keep these communities of creative practice relevant and vibrant" (p.180). This is precisely what the Vietnamese state (and, later, tourist industry) has done by exploiting and sanitising minority music to promote national unity. A fascinating example is the so-called 'Hmong flute' (*sáo mèo*), the iconic sound of Hmong ethnicity in Vietnam, which is in fact not a native Hmong instrument but was created by an ethnic Kinh (Vietnamese majority) in the 1970s. While O'Briain acknowledges the creative possibilities of such hybridization, unequal majority–minority power relations are never far away as Kinh representations of Hmong culture tend to drown out minority voices.

One strange feature of the book is the order of chapters. O'Briain starts with two chapters on the importance of Vietnamese state and media influence as a form of cultural imperialism, arbitrarily categorising and essentialising minority music cultures, before focusing on Hmong traditional music and folklore in Chapter 3. The book's core argument may have been delivered more powerfully if the reader were to first appreciate the plurality and depth of Hmong musical cultures, and then move on to observe the destructive effects of such cultural imperialism. Of course, this is only one side of the story and in later chapters O'Briain highlights the agency of Hmong musical actors in accommodating, resisting or adapting to shifting external pressures and opportunities such as tourism, Christianity, and Hmong transnationalism. Nevertheless, the book ends with a warning that "although the multiplicity of styles enhances the resilience of their cultural practices, certain

outside influences are placing unprecedented pressure on the ecosystems in which these practices exist" (p.181).

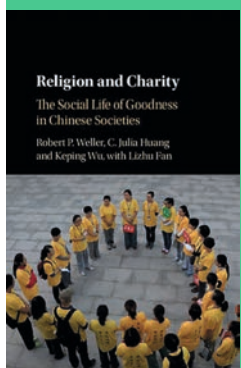
Musical Minorities is an engaging read with much to commend, not least the thick descriptions and ethnographic observations which bring the book to life, along with the accompanying audio-visual materials available online. O'Briain's extensive fieldwork over the space of several years and interviews with key state actors allows him to reveal not just detailed technical and linguistic features of Hmong music but also give voice to divergent interpretations and contestations within the Hmong community and further afield. The author's outsider positionality is acknowledged, adding character and sometimes humour to the fieldwork vignettes. Furthermore, the book's interdisciplinary nature, drawing on wider historical, cultural, and political debates, makes it both accessible and useful for a non-musicology audience.

Upon rigorous scrutiny, there are a few minor errors such as historical records of Hua Miao in southern China being termed as 'flowery Hmong', although the former is a linguistically distinctive group better known as the A Hmao (albeit sharing many cultural traits with the Hmong). Some readers might also find the uncritical reproduction of Scott's anti-state thesis problematic. However, this reviewer is more critical about O'Briain's engagement with Hmong Christianity in Chapters 5 and 6. Firstly, why does O'Briain only record the music of Hmong Catholics, who are vastly outnumbered by the numbers of Hmong Protestants, even in the supposedly Catholic district of Sapa where O'Briain conducted most of his fieldwork? Perhaps it was too politically sensitive to research Hmong Protestant music at the time; if so, it would be helpful to acknowledge this. Later, O'Briain incorrectly claims that the majority of Hmong in the United States are Christian, when in fact the figure is only around 30 per cent. This then calls into question his claim that Christianity is the 'unofficial religion' of the Hmong ethnonationalist community.

Nevertheless, *Musical Minorities* remains a highly commendable ethnomusicological study with important ramifications for ethnic relations, tourism economies and the politics of representation in Vietnam and beyond. More than that, this book provides a model for those wishing to conduct interdisciplinary research on the performing arts of marginalised groups.

Seb Rumsby University of Warwick,
United Kingdom

Religion and the unlimited public good in Chinese societies



Religion and Charity: The Social Life of Goodness in Chinese Societies

Robert P. Weller, C. Julia Huang,
and Keping Wu, with Lizhu Fan. 2018.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
ISBN 9781108418676



Above: Anniversary celebration of the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation. Image reproduced under a Creative Commons license courtesy of 總統府 on Flickr. Original Image: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/presidentialoffice/7193617608>. License: CC BY 2.0

In *Religion and Charity: The Social Life of Goodness in Chinese Societies*, Robert Weller, Julia Huang, Keping Wu, and Lizhu Fan provide a comparative study of what doing good means in late 20th and 21st century China, Taiwan, and Malaysia. The authors argue that while particular methods of doing good and visions of goodness have come to dominate engaged religions in these places – what the authors respectively call 'industrialized philanthropy' and 'the unlimited good' – they have also been shaped and reconfigured by the local historical and political situations in each of these locations.

Weller et al. propose the concept of industrialized philanthropy to describe three interrelated phenomena at the core of religious philanthropic practices in China, Taiwan, and Malaysia. Industrialized philanthropy entails large-scale philanthropic practices that are "increasingly rationalized and bureaucratized", with institutions employing accounting methods, forming boards of directors, recruiting members, using new media, and developing relations with governments (p.2). It engenders and relies on a new vision of the self that makes autonomous decisions, embodies a vision of

universal goodness, and voluntarily dedicates time and resources to the causes of doing good. Weller et al. term this new sense of goodness the unlimited good; it is a form of goodness that espouses great love and compassion for all beyond the boundaries of family lineages, local communities, ethnicities, and nations. Driven by this vision of unlimited goodness, many religious institutions, particularly those in Taiwan and their branches in mainland China and Malaysia, disseminate a "model of industrialized philanthropy by virtue of an ecumenical universalism" (p.109).

Industrialized philanthropy, as Weller et al. explain, emerged out of two waves of globalization, namely the Christian models of missionaries, charity, and education dated as far back as the late-Qing dynasty and a later cluster of developments that the authors see as the global expansion of Taiwan's Buddhism (p.100). While Christian charity organizations typically operated as an outside provider of charity, the expansion of Taiwanese Buddhism, particularly that of Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation (hereafter Tzu Chi), tapped into the local and transnational Chinese networks. The intensified development of industrialized philanthropy in all three Chinese societies in the 1980s was no coincidence. Weller et al. show that this decade marked the beginning of crucial sociopolitical changes in all three societies. These include market reforms in mainland China, the political loosening both in China and Taiwan, the enforcement of the affirmative action policies favoring Malays over Chinese in Malaysia, advancements in communication technologies, and increasing flows of international and internal migration (p.9). All of these factors contributed to changes in the social fabric of the three societies that broke earlier social ties and relations, while allowing new connections to be developed. In both China and Malaysia, Tzu Chi first expanded through the migration of devout Taiwanese businesswomen who mobilized their social networks to proselytize Tzu Chi's religious messages and to organize large educational and philanthropic programs (p.106 and 168–72).