

# Musical minorities

Seb Rumsby



## Musical Minorities: The Sounds of Hmong Ethnicity in Northern Vietnam

Lonán O'Briain. 2018.

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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 mào*), 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).

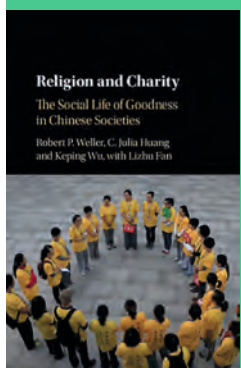
Musical Minorities is an engaging read with much to commend, not least the thick descriptions and ethnographic observations which bring the book to life, along with the accompanying audio-visual materials available online. O'Briain's extensive fieldwork over the space of several years and interviews 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).

# The precarity and persuasion of migration in rural Bangladesh

Chandni Singh

## Remittance Income and Social Resilience among Migrant Households in Rural Bangladesh

Mohammad Jalal Uddin Sikder, Peter Harry Ballis, and Vaughan Higgins. 2017.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan  
ISBN 9781137577719



Above: Motion in Rural Pabna, Bangladesh. Image reproduced under a Creative Commons license courtesy of Saadat Shahidi on Flickr. Original Image: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/saadatshahidi/33298687890>. License: CC BY-NC 2.0

## The case for studying migration and its outcomes

The issue of human migration has never been more pertinent than now. The World Bank's latest Groundswell Report (Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration, The World Bank, 19 March 2018) predicts that Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America could see more than 140 million people move within their countries' borders by 2050. Simultaneously, the International Migration Report (The International Migration Report 2017 (Highlights), United Nations, 18 December 2017) found that 3.4 per cent of the world's population are international migrants, up by 49 per cent since 2000. But what do these numbers mean for the experience of migration? How does this ever-increasing flow of migrants shape lives of those who move and those who are left behind? And do remittances really help improve quality of life?

*Remittance Income and Social Resilience among Migrant Households in Rural Bangladesh* answers these questions by

drawing on rich empirical evidence from Bangladesh, a country at the interface of poverty, rapid development, and a large, increasingly mobile population. The book focusses on the impacts of remittances on migrant households, especially on those who are left behind, to draw conclusions about how households use remittances to change their life circumstances, adapt to crises, and plan for the future. To study the impacts of remittances, Mohammad Jalal Uddin Sikder, Peter Harry Ballis, and Vaughan Higgins use the lens of social resilience, commonly understood as the ability to bounce back or cope in the face of substantial adversity. Early in the book, they rightly question the idea of remittances only being 'inflows of money from migrants to their families' saying they go beyond monetary flows to encompass technological transfers and social remittances such as skills, practices, and identities.

The book draws on in-depth interviews

with 36 migrant households – a small number that compensates in depth what it lacks in breadth. Chapters 1 and 2 set the context through a review of the extensive literature on the role of remittances in household income and consumption. Importantly, rather than exploring this seemingly binary relationship of remittances and household spending, the authors expand the 'uses' of remittances by assessing their impacts on social resilience.

## The uneven geography of remittances

Across chapters 3–6, the authors use their rich empirical evidence and an intimate understanding of the study sites to elaborate on three key aspects of migration. First, they discuss 'life chances' (p.119) or circumstances that allow remittances to be used to create opportunities to improve quality of life.

These are explained through examples of how remittances are used to improve food security and enable spending on clothes, durable assets, constructing houses, and children's education. Encouragingly, the discussion demonstrates the dynamic nature of livelihoods and the opportunistic nature of household risk management, thus making an important contribution to studies around the 'climate-migration-development nexus' (Giovanna Gioli et al., *Human mobility, climate adaptation, and development, Migration and Development* 5(2), 2016: 165).

Second, the authors demonstrate how remittances change the household economy, by providing people required finances to invest in other income-generating activities. The analysis also highlights the intangible benefits that accrue from remittances such as promoting individual status and prestige, and increasing personal satisfaction. In this way, the book corroborates existing evidence on the positive aspects of remittances; as a means of livelihood diversification and a form of insurance.

Finally, and most importantly in my view, the book discusses the 'uneven geography of remittances' (p.191) to demonstrate that not all households benefit equally through remittances. They show that the socio-economic benefits of remittances are differentiated based on factors internal to the household (e.g. idiosyncratic events such as illness, the centrality of remittances to total household income), and external to the household (e.g. availability and nature of jobs in destination areas).

## Final words

*Remittance Income and Social Resilience among Migrant Households in Rural Bangladesh* is a useful read for migration researchers, development practitioners, and students interested in development studies and livelihoods research.

Overall, an engaging read, what adds depth to the analysis is the use of extensive quotes from migrants and family members left behind and the pictures that give readers, even those unfamiliar with the Bangladeshi or South Asian context, an opportunity to understand local conditions and everyday living. While I would have enjoyed a deeper conceptual engagement with social resilience, the book definitely adds to the current migration and livelihoods literature.

Chandni Singh Indian Institute for Human Settlements, India

## Religion–state relations

Weller et al. challenge two dominant hypotheses in the study of engaged religion: the interfering state and the state failure hypotheses. While the former holds that state interference with grass-roots philanthropies leads to the deterioration of these charitable endeavors, the latter attributes the contemporary proliferation of grassroots charities to state's failure to provide social assistance. Both of these hypotheses, the authors insist, do not hold up well in the contexts of China, Taiwan, and Malaysia. On the one hand, the state in these three societies are neither failed nor weak states. All three states are powerful enough to regulate and interfere with philanthropic causes, and neither Taiwan nor Malaysia ever tried to function as a welfare state so there has been no welfare retrenchment. On the other hand, state endorsement can be crucial for the success and survival of religious philanthropies. Weller et al. argue that the rise of religious philanthropies signifies a "different model of governance in which the state is able to access and better harness grassroots desire to contribute to the public good" (p.59).

The authors thus propose to look at political merit-making, that is, "the relationships religious groups cultivate with the state in order to gain more legitimacy, political support, autonomy, or even ways of influencing policy-making" (p.59). The monograph documents three different patterns of religion–state relationship. In China, political merit-making is defensive as the state controls religious organizations through the methods of financial auditing and registration. Thus, it is in the

interest of the organizations to develop political merit with state officials (p.70). In Taiwan, religious organizations and the state has a *collaborative* relationship – a domain where political power is legitimized through politicians' involvement in religious philanthropy; and religious activities benefit from state endorsement (p.74). In Malaysia, political merit-making is *enclaved* because of Malaysian's policy to limit charity to ethnic enclaves; Chinese religious institutions can be free from governmental control if their activities stay in the Chinese enclave (p.83). These patterns demonstrate that industrialized philanthropy is distinctively configured based on the local historical and political conditions.

## A new subjectivity

As mentioned, central to industrialized philanthropy is a new vision of subjectivity, that of "volunteers as deployable agents of civic love" who are ready to dedicate time and resources to the 'Protestantized' voluntary imperative, and who willingly embrace a cosmopolitan identity and embody the collective ideals of 'loving hearts' (p.122). Tzu Chi volunteers in Taiwan, China, and Malaysia, as well as those from other religious institutions, participate in what Weller et al. refer to as 'civic serving', where volunteers engage the common good and place themselves in a larger moral and political order predicated on the notion of the cosmopolitan unlimited good (p.124). A notable trend in all three societies is that women and young people are leaders and active participants of newer forms of industrialized philanthropy.

This stands in stark contrast with previous forms of charitable activities by local Chinese temples and lineage associations whose leaders are "relatively wealthy, middle-aged or older, and almost always male" (p.143).

Weller et al. observe that despite certain shared characteristics, civic serving does vary among the three societies. While civic serving in China and Taiwan harkens back to socialist morality and the Kuomintang's civility campaign respectively, civic serving in Malaysia attempts to go beyond the Chinese ethnic enclave and "thus breaking away from the ghettoization of purely Chinese associational life" (pp.124–5). It is also important to note that the Chinese understanding of goodness has a long heritage in Chinese notions of benevolence (仁) and impartial love (兼爱), the Daoist vision of cosmic retribution, and the Buddhist field of merits and bodhisattva ideals (pp.90–100). In tracing these linkages to Chinese traditions and the varieties of civic serving, Weller et al. refrain from calling these new volunteers 'neo-liberal' and thus destabilize the usage of neo-liberalism as a dominant analytical lens to examine new forms of religious voluntarism and philanthropy. As such, Weller et al. join other scholars of East Asia (e.g. Donald M. Nonini, *Is China becoming neoliberal?*, *Critique of Anthropology* 28(2), 2008: 145–76; Christina Schwenkel and Ann Marie Leshkovich, *How is neoliberalism good to think Vietnam? How is Vietnam good to think neoliberalism?*, *Positions* 20(2), 2012: 379–401) in registering their concerns about the applicability of neo-liberalism to the contexts of East Asian societies where the states remain consistently present in many spheres of social life.

With *Religion and Charity* Weller et al. have written a timely monograph that explores the complexity of religion's involvement in the provision of social welfare and the public good in Chinese societies. The book draws on a wealth of ethnographic materials collected during a span of more than four decades of research. While industrialized philanthropy and the unlimited good have come to dominate Chinese engaged religions in the last decades, Weller et al. carefully show towards the end of the book that alternative visions of goodness continue to exist, focusing on local community building, cultural heritage, spiritual life, and daily problem-solving (p.180). The book proposes rigorous conceptual and theoretical frameworks to productively investigate the rise of religious voluntarism in Asia. As a comparative study, the book at times sacrifices depth for breadth. A multitude of examples of religious organizations are included, but the fragmented treatment of these otherwise complex operations are streamlined to achieve theoretical coherence. This shortcoming, however, does not negate the theoretical significance of the book. It will provide the roadmap for innovative anthropological theory on the subject of engaged religions in East Asian societies and encourage further research into religious voluntarism and what Joel Robbins calls 'the anthropology of the good' (Joel Robbins, *Beyond the suffering subject: Toward an anthropology of the good*, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19(3), 2013: 447–62).

Dat Manh Nguyen  
Boston University, USA