Musical minorities: The Sounds of Hmong Ethnicity in Northern Vietnam

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by Sab Rumsby

Until recently, Hmong studies has overwhelmingly focused on the more accessible Hmong populations in Thailand, Laos, and Western diaspora, despite the fact that three quarters of Hmong live in Vietnam and China. Along with Sarah Turner, Christina Bonnin and Joan Michaud (Frontier Livesheds: Hmong in the Sino-Vietnamese Borderslands, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015) and Tam Ngoc (The New Way: Hmong Protestantism in Vietnam, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), Londén O’Brian’s new publication Musical Minorities: The Sounds of Hmong Ethnicity in Northern Vietnam is a welcome counterbalance. Like the political situations in each of these locations.

Robert P. Weller, Julia Huang, and Keping Wu, with 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.

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with multiple bamboo pipes (“I trừ good knowledge, close it well tight”. Concocted and framed meaning (p.181). Musical Minorities is an engaging read with much to commend, not least the thick description and ethnographic observations, which bring the book to life, along with the accompanying audio-visual materials available online. O’Brian’s ongoing 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 by Hmong Catholic in Northern 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. Sab Rumsby University of Warwick, United Kingdom

Industralized philanthropy, as Weller et al. explain, emerged out of two waves of globalization, namely the Christian models of missionaries, charity, and education dated back as the late Ching Dynasty and a later cluster of developments that the authors see as the global 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 social 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 women in China, Taiwan, and Malaysia. All of these factors contributed to changes in the social fabric of the three societies that broke earlier social ties and relations, while new connections were being developed. In both China and Malaysia, Tzu Chi expanded through the migration of former Taiwanese businessmen 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).

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 esposes great love and compassion for all beyond the boundaries of family lines, 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”

universal goodness are influencing places unprecedented pressure on the ecosystems in which these practices exist” (p.181). Industrialized philanthropy, as Weller et al. explain, emerged out of two waves of globalization, namely the Christian models of missionaries, charity, and education dated back as the late Ching Dynasty and a later cluster of developments that the authors see as the global 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 social 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 women in China, Taiwan, and Malaysia. All of these factors contributed to changes in the social fabric of the three societies that broke earlier social ties and relations, while new connections were being developed. In both China and Malaysia, Tzu Chi expanded through the migration of former Taiwanese businessmen 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).