



**Barley Norton, *Songs for the Spirits: Music and Mediums in Modern Vietnam***

Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009. xvi + 280 pages, 10 b/w photos, 2 line drawings, 7 tables. Cloth, US\$45.00. ISBN 978-0-252-03399-5.

THE AUTHOR presents a lively description of the Vietnamese *len dong*, a ritual that is connected to the rich world of the spirits. This world is contacted by qualified mediums with the help of music, dance, and mental strength, which is summarized as the genre *chau van*. The roots of *len dong* and *chau van* respectively reach back to the eleventh century and are considered to be the “true religion of the Vietnamese” (CADIÈRE 1992), in comparison with various Chinese imports of Mahayana Buddhism.

The book is divided into seven chapters, plus a DVD with important material from the author’s field collection that accompanies the book and helps readers to understand the subject. In the structure and titling of chapters, a number of interesting points of discussion are raised. The work is a kind of music-ethno-sociology closely related to political science, and an investigation of traditional rituals which seem to be far from any atheist propaganda is refreshing in Vietnamese cultural studies. Although it is unnecessary to discuss whether Vietnamese people feel that their socialism is entering into its later stages or not, it would have been helpful if the question of how such categorizing of history can influence the views on ritual practices in the regional context of Southeast Asia had been touched upon.

The first point related to that kind of time framing—that is, the categories of history—is the periodization of the author’s study. Barley Norton cannot give a complete compendium of this complex ritual practice. Embedded into local history, *len dong* is steadily changing the performance of belief and awakening cultural self-discovery. Therefore, the author focuses on modern Vietnam, which spans the late colonial period at the beginning of the twentieth century to the turn of the twenty-first century. He writes: “Anthropological research on the intensification and resurgence of ritual and religious practices other than mediumship has investigated the changing dynamics between government policies and local practices.... This body of research illuminates aspects of cultural and ritual transformation during the colonial, socialist, and late socialist eras” (7).

Although his time period structure seems to reflect the main twists and turns in the history of the Viet people, the terms “colonial, socialist, and late socialist” are a mixture of different perspectives that do not fit completely with the reality of social development. Thus a consistent term following “colonial period” could be “period of independence.” Social ideas such as nationalism, socialism, or communism mark another level of historical discussion that is almost abstractly reflected

from an outside viewpoint. Consequently, the term preceding “socialist” should be “capitalist” or “imperialist,” which the author carefully avoids. Thus he gets into contradictory arguments that switch between different levels of explanations. His literature review of the colonial period considers the strong characteristics of different viewpoints. In the first chapter he analyzes the history of *len dong* perception in colonial times and relativizes as follows: “Some Vietnamese nationalist intellectuals influenced by modernist ideals also voiced their disapproval of the ‘backward’ and ‘irrational’ practices of their countrymen” (25).

Later periods are described as a dichotomy of the suffering of the suppressed masses and the abstract evil-like impersonal system imposed on them. Rather than express their individual opinions, those cited represent this abstract system. The author does not clearly differentiate his external analytical view from the individual self projection of the main *len dong* and *chau van* protagonists and their audiences. Thus it is somewhat difficult to not feel that Norton’s interpretation is unbiased. A broader view on various developments in Southeast Asian countries could have shed light on the appearance of nationalism and new cultural policies after achieving independence, which would set his observation into relation and correct the overemphasis of an imaginary socialist typicality.

The author defines the main aim of his work clearly as follows: “At the heart of this study are an investigation of the phenomenon of spirit possession and the multifaceted relationship between musical and ritual performance” (17). Nevertheless, his discussion of special instances of seemingly socialist policies is a dominating feature of the design and it “provides the backdrop for the rest of the book by tracing the history of *len dong* and *chau van* from prerevolutionary times, through the rise of communism and the long periods of war since the 1940s, to the current reform era” (17). Thus his clear definition is preceded by assertions such as “Revolutionary socialist ideology has had a profound impact on musical expression and pedagogical methods” (17). He also proposes an idea of “communist-inspired appropriations and adaptations of traditional music” (17). Ten pages later he admits that “Based on oral accounts of elderly musicians in the 1990s who learned *chau van* prior to the August Revolution of 1945, it would seem that performance practices in the 1940s and 1950s were not radically different from today’s.... Today’s *chau van* does not bear any obvious hallmarks of radical renovation, and contemporary musicians have maintained a conservative attitude toward fundamental aspects of musical style” (27).

Chapters 2 to 6 provide the most interesting sections of the book. The author’s writing style is admirably refreshing and although not free from stylistic jumps between irony to analysis to generalization, his descriptions and considerations are a goldmine of information. His reflections give an authentic impression of ritual practices shifting from the countryside into the urban context. They shape a lively image of the protagonists, including the author himself, their strong and weak sides, their world views and their different understanding of the subject.

The portrayal of the two rituals dedicated to the four spirits—Third Mandarin, Second Lady, Tenth Prince, and Third Princess—is very particular and appears to be one of the essentials of this book. The author is blessed with versatile observation skills and a fantastic sense of situation. In connection with the video examples on

DVD, this section is a work of art and this alone makes it worth purchasing. From this chapter, the author moves on to certain changes that have taken place in the present, an important part of the book in which the author's practical knowledge of *len dong* musicianship clearly unfolds. Nevertheless, the thesis, with its previously elaborated political dimensions of music pedagogy and socialist culture is still remarkable, although the author knows that the main changes took place in another way. They are only marginally connected to officially-introduced concert performances which were verbally modernized according to contemporary tastes. Compositions such as *Que ta* by Xuan Khai did not affect the ritual and its music; they make it even more distinct from staged entertainment. *Chau van* was obviously used, like all other music traditions with differing historical and ideological backgrounds, as melodic-rhythmic material, indicating localness and rootedness. Structural fragmentation serves musical creativity in many parts of the world independent from any ideological direction. Thus the author explains in chapter 5 that "The sound of amplified voices, with heavy reverb added, drifting above synthesized backing tracks of karaoke discs was a ubiquitous feature of the Vietnamese soundscape... the use of amplification and electronic reverberation has affected aesthetic sensibilities. It is now the norm for performances of traditional music to be amplified" (151).

To illustrate the real fundamentals of serious musical changes, he let one of his informants say that "Now, because Western [popular] music has come to Vietnam, *chau van* has become noisier.... If people sing... word by word with ornamentation between each sentence, it drags, and people who are accustomed to lively music find it dull" (152). Musical changes caused by environmental transformation—and these changes appear worldwide—might be inescapable, especially in the fast-growing urban areas of Southeast Asia. The question still remains whether the prevalent ideological view on ritual music in countries such as Vietnam could help to analyze any special appearance.

In chapter 3, the author attempts to give an overview of the repertoire, which, importantly, has been changed step by step to some extent. He states that "Classification of repertoire is further hampered by regional differences, by the lack of standard nomenclature for songs, and by the fact that musicians have differing opinions about which songs constitute the repertoire" (91). He brings up the painful question of whether our understanding of classification or of standard nomenclature is helpful at all in the context of his subject. Actually, we should welcome the situation of that terminological disorder, which indicates a huge diversity of opinions and interpretations. Thus, the author unexpectedly initiates a discussion that is long overdue. Lacking a standard nomenclature, and regional differences, is exactly the way traditional music and rituals are shaped. The opposite would result in us being assailed by doubts. The author goes even further: used in modern anthropological queries, he applies them directly to his subject and discovers some very revealing insights. He says: "In the initial stage of planning my fieldwork on mediumship, I gave little thought to how my gender and sexuality would affect my research. I was more concerned about the political problems I might face than about gender issues" (160).

Norton's observations on gender and sexuality in the context of his field research are striking in so far that he is not aware of the socioeconomic background,

the foundation of the described behavior of some of the male and even female mediums and their friends. His appeal is based on being a Westerner, a person not only of a distinct race, but first and foremost of a distinct economic system that seemingly knows no shortage of goods and possibilities, or of the poverty such as that found in Vietnam. For that very reason, he seemed to be the right person to become closer to them; someone like him could even become a financial supporter from abroad, or even better than this, promise prosperity through marriage. Unfortunately, this way of thinking still exists among common people. Thus the only really typical pattern of communication according to a socialist environment seems to be disregarded.

Retrospectively, many remarks on political complications that could make the author have an irrational fear concerning security questions are possibly constructed by his acquaintances to attract his attention. Especially from the late 1980s onwards, I often observed that verbally accommodating some political expectations of Western researchers—spread through postwar journalism—became a tool to work out personal interests. At first, it may have been hard to differentiate between real and unreal fates, and so researchers attempted to verify what was told to them by their informants and which fit into their political expectations with their own methods.

In the first chapter, the author quotes a passage from Ho Chi Minh's writings regarding spirit possession rituals: "if that kind of restoration is carried out in the countryside, many places will forget production and continue to drum and sing willy-nilly. Some communes spend millions of Vietnamese dong buying clothes, hats, and shoes. Is this kind of restoration of old traditions right?" (HO CHI MINH et al. 1976; cited by the author on page 28). Ho Chi Minh unmistakably named the very reason for revising all forms of superstitious expressions, and first and foremost he showed his strong economic intentions. He was not attacking the belief itself, as was later assumed and repeated. In most official cases, mediums and musicians misused superstition economically by offering superstitious solutions in times of hunger. Ho Chi Minh was not concerned about ideological danger but about the empty stomachs of the people.

Although it is true that in distant times more than a few state representatives abused their power to settle outstanding scores by taking discussed cultural guidelines as formal reasons, most of the active musicians and mediums could continue to practice. To curry favor to a Westerner—and considering the common strategy mentioned—was not well received by those protecting national interests. Thus they were internally criticized—not because of political differences between the two systems, but because of the insincerity on which the strategy was based. The author states that "wealthy male mediums in Hanoi seemed wary of my presence and tended to be unavailable for any discussion" (160), which is understandable from their viewpoint. A close but possibly discreditable acquaintance could not help these securely established—that is, wealthy, male mediums anymore. Hence, the author was just not needed. Thus searching for subjects to study, he became a subject himself, being studied from another completely different perspective.

Despite all these aspects worthy of discussion in the broader context of the region, Barley Norton's *Songs for the Spirits: Music and Mediums in Modern Vietnam*

is an exciting document of a locally diverse and unique ritual practice of the Viet people and their music. Furthermore, it provides instructive research on a society which moves between extreme conditions on both sides: that of the investigated field and that of the researchers. I strongly recommend this book; it is a vital work among the very few well-investigated studies of Vietnamese traditional culture and should not be missed in any good library.

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