FROM FOLKLORE TO INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE: THE CASE OF "SPACE OF GONG CULTURE"

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Abstract

This article takes a close look at the specific case of minorities' gong culture in the Central Highlands of Vietnam to examine the uses and the shift of local cultural elements from folklore nation-building projects to globalisation of heritage recognition. I closely focus on two different time periods, the 1980s and 1990s, when the Vietnamese state took gongs into account in supporting its further purposes in respect of its cultural politics. I not only describe the state's celebrations and reassessments of the values of the gongs, but also extend the picture to explore the ideologies that inform the state's attitudes and policies towards ethnic minorities and their culture, as well as examine how the state readjusted its rhetoric and governance strategies in line with the new political circumstances.

Keywords: *Gong culture, Folklore, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Heritagization, Nation-Building*

1. Introduction

This article examines the uses and the shift of local cultural elements from folklore nation-building projects to globalising heritage recognition, specifically in the case of minorities" gong culture in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Folklore, from the nineteenth century in Europe, coincided with the rise of nationalism (Kuutma 2015). As Kuutma notes, this was particularly evident in countries where the process of nation-building was occurring simultaneously with the collection of rural peasants' verbal lore. These poetic accounts considered folk cultures as the generators of the national spirit, having a symbolic core in the nation-state's profound reformulation, thus essentially supporting coherent national-historical narratives. In other words, in these nation-building projects, folklore essentially engaged with efforts to testify to the origin of the national

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identity and became instrumental in creating national pride (ibid.: 43). Behind these efforts, as Herzfeld (1982) observed, folklorists crucially contributed to build up and defend the national identity as well as "created a national discipline of folklore studies, providing intellectual reinforcement for the political process of nation building that was already well under way" (ibid.: 4).

Since the 1980s, there has been a cultural, political, disciplinary and semantic shift from "folklore" to "intangible heritage" that happened worldwide (Blake 2017; Kuutma 2015) and has been observed in Italy, the Czech Republic (Testa 2016), Estonia (Kuutma 2016) and China (Zhang 2018). According to Blake (2017), this shift involves moving from seeking to safeguard "traditional culture and folklore" to regulating the neologism of "intangible cultural heritage" in international law. On a broader view, Kuutma (2015) explains that this conceptual shift was established by the UNESCO Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity program in 2000 and the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003. It reflected new, growing global tendencies and a wider reaction to globalisation and concomitant economic processes. It also recognized political manipulation and nationalist abuse of cultural expression, leading to international initiatives for cultural protection (ibid.: 50). In a critical view, Testa (2016) discusses that this semantic shift has resulted in a "filiation" between folklore and intangible cultural heritage and has affected both institutional and social practices related to the notions of "folklore" and "intangible cultural heritage."

This article takes a close look at the specific case of gongs and the gong culture of the ethnic groups in the Central Highlands. I examine how, in different historical periods, folklore in Vietnam, and more specifically the gongs and gong culture of the Central Highlands, have been acknowledged by the state, as well as endowed with specific meanings that serve the state's cultural political purposes. It was how, after 1975, gongs gradually came to be considered an essential symbol of Vietnamese "national identity". Since 2005, moreover, the "Space of Gong Culture" has served further political purposes in being presented as "intangible heritage" and honoured as a "masterpiece" of human culture in need of urgent protection.

In particular, I examine two different moments in time, the 1980s and 1990s, when the Vietnamese state took gongs into account in supporting its further purposes in respect of its cultural politics. I not only describe the state's celebrations and reassessments of the values of the gongs, but also extend the picture to explore the ideologies that inform the state's

attitudes and policies towards ethnic minorities and their culture, as well as examine how the state readjusted its rhetoric and governance strategies in line with the new political circumstances.

Along with Herzfeld (1982) discussion about scholars" roles in national cultural projects, I will highlight the active roles of cultural experts and cadres by examining Vietnamese scholars" own discourses to see how they have contributed to the state's ways of acknowledging and using local folklore, especially in the case of gongs and gong culture. I then describe how the state works closely with UNESCO to shape its political and legal framework and to design a systematic and modern bureaucratic system to manage and support cultural heritage.

2. A shared bronze culture? Gongs in nation-building projects

In the spring of 1985, on the tenth anniversary of the liberation of the south, the Department of Culture and Information of Gia Lai-Kontum, * together with the Vietnam Institute of Music Studies, organised a double event consisting of a festival and a conference on the gongs and gong culture of the ethnic minorities in Gia Lai-Kontum province, as well as in Vietnam's Central Highlands as a whole. These two events were carried out over four days (21-24 March 1985).

According to the Department of Culture and Information of Gia Lai–Kontum (Sở Văn hóa Gia Lai-Kontum 1986: 9-19), this was the first time that a gong folk-music festival (*liên hoan nghệ thuật dân gian cồng chiêng*) had been organised in the form of a folk-art performance activity (*sinh hoạt văn nghệ dân gian*). Indeed, it was also the first time a musical instrument of the minorities became the central object of a folk-art event. The festival was part of an initiative launched by Gia Lai-Kontum"s Department of Culture and Information to create a new custom of practising culture (*một truyền thống sinh hoạt văn hóa mới*), the intention being to help selectively protect and transmit valuable local cultural heritage.

Along with the gong folk-music festival, a conference† entitled "The Art of Gongs" (*nghệ thuật cồng chiêng*) was

* Gia Lai–Kontum was established as a single province on 20 September 1975. On 12 August 1991 it was decided to divide it into two: Kontum Province and Gia Lai Province.

† The conference gathered together scholars from the Vietnam Institute of Music Studies, the Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, the Institute of Folklore Studies (today the Institute of Cultural Studies) and the Institute of Cultural and Information Studies. Also present were politicians, cultural cadres from the centre (Vietnam Ministry of Culture and Information; Department of Mass Culture, Board of Collecting, Exploiting and Promoting Traditional Music) and provinces (Gia Lai-Kontum and Phú Khánh, now separated into Phú Yên and Khánh Hòa provinces). Contributions to the conference were collected and published in a conference proceeding entitled "The Art of Gongs" (*Nghệ thuật Cồng chiêng*) by the Gia Lai-Kontum province Department of Culture and Information.

co-organized by the province's Department of Culture and the Institute of Musical Studies of Vietnam. According to Tô Vũ, Vice Director of the Institute of Music Studies and co-organizer of the conference, this was also the first time that the gongs and gong music of minority groups in the Central Highlands of Vietnam had been brought in to be studied and discussed by music scholars (Tô Vũ 1986: 51).

One might ask why, at that specific time, gongs and gong music, among many other traditional instruments of the minorities in the Highlands, drew the particular attention of cultural cadres and scholars and why gongs took centre stage in folk-art performances? In fact, the chronicle of the Gia Lai-Kontum Department of Culture and Information had acknowledged notable appearances of other traditional instruments in folk-art performances before 1985. * However, as I will elaborate below, during the 1985 conference scholars (including folklorists, historians, musicians and anthropologists) and cultural cadres from the provinces of the Central Highlands gathered specifically to address and discuss the values and roles of gongs and gong music.

2.1. Gongs: Connecting lowland and highland national-historical narratives

Many contributions in the conference produced "archaeological" evidence to strongly support the hypothesis of a cultural and historical connection between Central Highlands gongs and the Bronze Age Đông Sơn culture in lowland Vietnam. This argument had been part of a larger effort by the Vietnamese state to distinguish Vietnamese from Han Chinese culture after 1945. Now it serves the additional purpose of integrating Central Highlands culture and history into the unified nation of Vietnam.

The "archeological" evidence, which was cited many times in the conference, consisted of an image on the surface of a 2,500-year-old Đông Sơn bronze drum † that depicts an orchestra playing seven gongs.

* For instance, according to Phạm Cao Đạt (2000: 45) in 1965, Y Lôi, an artist from the Sê Đăng ethnic group, introduced the *klong put* instrument in a mass round performance (*hội diễn văn nghệ quần chúng*). Similarly, in 1978, in the first provincial Festival and Conference on Folklore of Gialai-Kontum province held in Pleiku, the *Đinh Tút* instrument of the Giẻ Triêng ethnic group won high appreciation from cultural studies scholars, cultural cadres and the audience.

† To be more exact, the Ngọc Lũ I bronze drum is a typical type of drum in a diverse collection of Đông Sơn bronze drums. Ngọc Lũ I was named after the place where the drum was found: Ngọc Lũ village, Bình Lục district, Hà Nam province. Today the drum is stored at the National Museum of Vietnamese History in Hanoi. For more comprehensive details about Ngọc Lũ I and Đông Sơn bronze drums, see Nguyễn Văn Huyên and Hoàng Minh 1975.

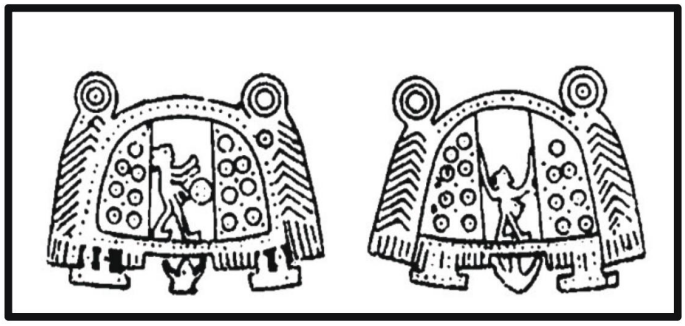

Figure 1.: Image of an"orchestra of gongs" on Ngọc Lũ bronze surface (Nguyễn Văn Huyên, Hoàng Minh 1975: 168)

Figure 2: The shape (left) and the surface (right) of Ngọc Lũ I bronze drum (ibid: 166-167)

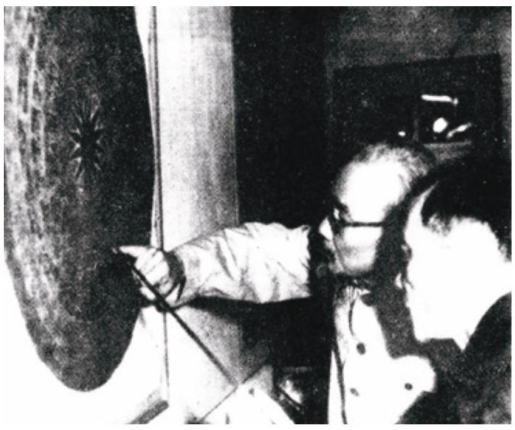

Figure 3.: Hồ Chí Minh reading Ngọc Lũ I bronze drum surface (ibid. 1975: 4)

In his 1986 article, "From the music of gongs to the culture of the Central Highlands" (*Từ âm nhạc cồng chiêng đến văn hóa Tây Nguyên*), Nguyễn Tấn Đắc, then Vice Director of the Institute of Southeast Asia Studies in Hanoi, interpreted this as evidence that gongs might have been made and played by the Ancient Việt, or at least that they had had a very close relationship with the bronze drum. Based on this point, Nguyễn Tấn Đắc suggested that gongs provided a new path and method for looking at Vietnamese history. Previously, he remarked, many French scholars had believed that Vietnam belonged to the culture of the Far East. They had taken China as the centre of this culture because they had looked at Vietnamese culture only in relation to a particular historical period when Vietnam was under China's strong influence. Given the similarities and relationships between gongs and drums, however, Nguyễn Tấn Đắc suggested that scholars should take a new path in tracing back Vietnamese national identity. Scholars should look back into the Đông Sơn culture and explore contemporary folklore culture,

as this would enable them to point out many common cultural characteristics between Vietnam and other Southeast Asia countries, the most famous example of which are gongs.

Lê Huy (1986), a Vice Director of the Vietnam Institute of Music Studies (Vietnam Ministry of Culture*), was more cautious in interpreting this evidence. Nonetheless, in his contribution to the conference, he wrote that, even though the appearance of gongs on the Đông Sơn bronze drum may not be convincing proof that the gongs originated in Vietnam, the evidence at least confirmed that gongs had existed there since no less than 2500 years ago, corresponding to the age of the Đông Sơn drums. Besides, Lê Huy wrote, the evidence shows that at that time gongs must have been one of the main musical instruments of the Viet people.

Like Lê Huy, Tô Vũ (1986), another Vice Director of the Vietnam Institute of Music Studies, stated in his keynote speech to the conference that the evidence of the appearance of gongs on the Đông Sơn bronze drum is absolute proof that the ancient Viet people used a set of seven gongs in the same period as the bronze drum, if not before. Thus, as Tô Vu argues, gongs are not only a particular cultural characteristic of the Central Highlands, they are also typical of the whole Viet nation (1986: 51). Continuing this "flow of thought" (*dòng suy nghĩ*), as Tô Vũ himself put it, he also expressed the "feeling" (*cảm tưởng*) from different types of gongs in other Southeast Asian countries (Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Indonesia) that Tây Nguyên is the centre of gong culture, from which gongs spread all over Southeast Asia (ibid.: 55). Continuing his "flow", Tô Vũ emphasised the strategic significance and importance of researching gongs. He argued that:

"Researching gongs is not simply a matter of understanding the characteristics of a type of instrument of an ethnic group or a geographical area in Vietnam…. More significantly, it contributes to shedding light on a major issue: the formation of the regional indigenous culture, which is unique and independent from external influences. (1986: 55)

By "external influences", Tô Vũ, like Nguyễn Tấn Đắc, means cultural influences from India or the Han Chinese. Pushing his argument further, Tô Vũ states that, if Vietnamese scholars could prove the hypothesis that the Central Highlands was the "cradle" from where gongs spread to the whole of Southeast Asia, this would

* The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism was established on 20 August 1945 under the name of the Ministry of Information and Propaganda (Bộ Thông tin, Tuyên truyền). The Ministry was renamed the Ministry of Culture (Bộ Văn hóa) in 1955, the Ministry of Culture and Information (Bộ Văn hóa, Thông tin) in 1992 and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism from 31 July 2007 up to the present.

be a way for the Vietnamese people to "determine our position in the general music culture of the whole region, a position that surely each of us can be proud of" (ibid.: 56).

Even though at the time of the conference in 1985 the discussion as to whether or not the image on the surface of the Đông Sơn drum depicted gongs remained inconclusive, contributors to the "Art of Gongs" conference regarded it as a meaningful tool with which to build up the points I have briefly described above. By arguing for a close relationship, if not the same origin, between the highland gongs and lowland bronze drums, scholars developed a meaningful narrative that emphasised Vietnam's non-Chinese cultural identity, legitimised the integration of the Central Highlands into Vietnamese national history and situated Vietnamese culture within the Southeast Asian context.

These efforts to tie together lowland and highland history supported the Vietnamese state's integrative policy of building "unity in diversity" (*thống nhất trong đa dạng*) traditional Vietnamese culture which was articulated by cultural scholars and supported by the state. Alongside the concept of "one nation of many peoples" (*quốc gia đa dân tộc*), it has been used since the August Revolution of 1945 to include local folk cultures as an integral part of a national identity within a broader national Vietnamese culture (Pelley 2002; Meeker 2013).

Vietnamese folklorists also worked hard to argue for the integration of minority folk cultures and history within a united national Vietnamese culture. Đinh Gia Khánh (1989), for instance, in his comprehensive work summarising the initial period of folklore studies in Vietnam,* argued that folk culture and folklore, as cultural product of the grassroots, worker class, is considered (by Soviet states) as the a culture with a genuinely people-oriented character (*nền văn hóa mang tính nhân dân thực sự)*. Global South countries use folklore to assert their "own culture" which is different from outside political cultural influences. More specifically, he argued that the "brother minorities" (*anh em các dân tộc thiểu số*) have created very diverse and unique works of folklore, with high and sometimes very delicate (*tinh tế*) values. Thus, their culture contributes to portraying Vietnamese folk culture in its diverse beauty as a colourful flower garden (*vườn hoa nhiều màu sắc*). Furthermore, to bridge the gap between locality and nation, Đinh Gia Khánh argued that this characteristic of diversity does not lead

* Đinh Gia Khánh is the founder of the Department of Folklore Studies, which was established in 1983 under the Commission of Social Sciences of Vietnam (now renamed the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences). The book *On a Journey Exploring Folklore*, together with some of his other works, received the prestigious Ho Chi Minh Prize in 1996.

to divisive regionalism (*chủ nghĩa địa phương*): in the long history of fighting for national independence and unity, the ethnic majority and minorities have all stood side-by-side. Thus, Đinh Gia Khánh concluded that folklore and folk culture have played significant roles in building up the national culture throughout the Viet nation's history of four thousand years (Đinh Gia Khánh 1989: 239-240). Together with the efforts of the Communist Party to incorporate the Central Highland minorities' anti-colonial struggle into its revolutionary history, the arguments deployed in the "Art of Gong" conference strengthened the status of the Central Highlands as an integral part of the Vietnamese nation.

In addition, the scholars' attempt in the "Art of Gongs" conference to date the age of highland gongs back to at least 2500 BC, which corresponds to the age of the Đông Sơn bronze drum, and to claim a non-Chinese identity for the highlands significantly supported the state's efforts to distinguish Vietnamese from Chinese culture. Indeed, according to Pelley (2002), in their struggles to build their own national identity, the postcolonial Vietnamese strongly rejected the Han emperors'' Sino-centric position that the Vietnamese are not a distinct people but merely come under the labels of "Hundred Barbarians" or "Southern Barbarians". Vietnamese scholars also rejected the interpretations of Western scholars (especially Parmentier, Olov Janse and Victor Goloubew) of Bronze-age culture in Vietnam, which tended to support the Sino-centric position. For instance, in 1924 European scholars led by Parmentier gathered to discuss bronze artefacts, especially the Đông Sơn bronze drums found in Vietnam, and rejected the assumption that they had been produced locally (ibid.: 149). Similarly, in 1929 the Russian archaeologist Victor Goloubew stated that China had inspired the introduction of the Bronze Age in Vietnam (ibid.: 150). Critical of "colonial scholarship" and the Sino-centric perspectives of the Han Chinese, Vietnamese scholars worked hard to trace their national origins back to 2879 BCE. In doing so, as Pelley (2002: 152) states,*

historians were able to assert the antiquity and vulnerability of Vietnam. Because the antiquity of Vietnam predated the antiquity of China, Vietnam was recast as a truly generative power, and postcolonial scholars were able to affirm that Vietnam was not, as the French had claimed, a minor derivation of China.

* For more detail about Vietnamese scholars' work in tracing back their national origins, see Pelley 2002: 147-161.

As part of the same efforts, Vietnamese scholars also replaced the term "Heger 1",* a category coined by Franz Heger, an Austria scholar, with the term "Đông Sơn Drums" to affirm that this type of gong is representative of the Đông Sơn culture of the Ancient Việt (Nguyễn Văn Huyên and Hoàng Vinh 1975: 5).†

In their attempts to distinguish Vietnamese from Han Chinese culture, Vietnamese scholars also established "Vietnam as a focal point of Southeast Asia rather than an insignificant periphery of East Asia" (Pelley 2002: 156). Thus, even though, in the "Art of Gong" conference in 1985, scholars such as Nguyễn Tấn Đắc, Lê Huy and Tô Vũ developed their hypothesis by following their "flow of thinking" or "feeling", their arguments about the connection between gongs and bronze drums were seamlessly integrated into the national history of Vietnam that earlier scholars had attempted to construct.

2.2. Gong musical practices: the Mass Art for a new life in Highlands

Other ethnographically based papers from the 1985 conference strongly acknowledged the central roles played by gongs in festivals of local life. For instance, Tô Vũ argued that gongs are present throughout a person"s life-cycle rites, from birth (the ear-blowing ceremony) until death (the funeral) and beyond (the grave-leaving ceremony). Playing gongs is also an essential practice in seasonal rites. In other words, "looking up from the plains, lowland people can easily imagine the voice of gong music as representative of the ethnic groups in the Highlands" (Tô Vũ 1986: 52).

Moreover, folk-art activities were the most important part of local festivals in the sense that they occupied the greater part of the time in which they were held. Among these folk activities, gongs and gong music occupied the central place and were the pillars (*trụ cột*) of the festival in the sense that the sounds and rhythms of gong music linked the villagers at the festival socially and magically (Sở Văn hóa Gia Lai-Kontum 1986: 9-19).

Đỗ Kim Tấn, the Vice-Director of the Department of Culture and Information of Gia Lai-Kontum Province, gave the most imaginative description of the gongs" central role. He wrote: "If traditional music is like a tree, then gongs are the roots, whereas singing and other instruments are just like leaves, branches, flowers and fruits" (1986: 76).

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* Franz Heger, in his work published in 1902 (*Alte Metalltrommeln aus Südostasien*, Leipzig 1902), classified 165 gongs he had examined in many museums all over the world into four types, called after his name: Heger 1, Heger 2, Heger 3 and Heger 4. Of these four types, Heger 1 mostly consists of gongs found in northern Vietnam.

† For more on the debate over the origin of the bronze drum, see Xiaorong Han 2004.

By looking at gongs and gong music in local festivals as connecting all the other folk genres and binding people into communities, attendees addressed another essential purpose of the conference, that is, exploring ways of effectively using gongs and gong music in the Mass Culture and Art Movement (*phong trào văn hóa nghệ thuật quần chúng)*. Indeed, in his conclusion to the conference, Tô Vũ stated that gongs should be seen as "a subject of the Mass Art Movement, not only as a subject in musical studies" (1986: 250).

The Mass Culture and Art Movement started in 1945 as a specific type of "cultural resistance movement" aimed at "drowning out the sound of bomb explosions with the sound of songs" ("*tiếng hát át tiếng bom*") during the Vietnam War (Trần Quốc Vượng et al. 1998: 204-205). In subsequent years, the movement became an important pillar of socialist construction.

The gongs" potential role as a powerful tool for building the Mass Art Movement in the postwar Central Highlands was justified above all by the use of gongs during the national revolutionary struggle. In his speech at the conference, the provincial politician Phạm Tu (1986) recalled how gongs accompanied the socialist struggle (*công cuộc đấu tranh xã hội chủ nghĩa*) by encouraging the people to fight for national salvation and protect their villages from the French and afterwards from the United States. Moreover, as Phạm Tu put it, the gong prompted thousands of young people to join the socialist army (*bộ đội*) and fight against the nation"s enemies, encouraged soldiers during battles and celebrated their victories. He also described gongs as a special weapon with which to attack "enemies" (i.e. Highlanders who had joined the Southern Republic of Vietnam) by reminding them about their "home country" and calling them to return to the revolution. After the war, he said, gongs had accompanied people in reclaiming "wasteland" (*khai hoang*) in mountainous areas. Moreover, Phạm added, the gong also encourages and attracts Party members to migrate to, live in and contribute to "building" (*xây dựng*) the Highlands. Phạm Tu"s words about the contributions of the gongs endowed them with an excellent socialist profile, and he thought they should undertake a specific mission, that is, they should assume a central role in the socialist Mass Art Movement.

As Phạm also put it, "collecting, exploiting and promoting ethnic equality in harmony with modern art has served our mission of working, producing and fighting well, following the mission requirements of the situation" (1986: 48). In the contemporary era, the mission would continue with a new type of practical and public performance: Kontum was the first province to initiate (*sáng kiến*) a gong music festival and to have gongs

played at province-level celebrations for political events such as Hồ Chí Minh"s birthday, celebrations of the founding anniversary of the Vietnam Communist Party and celebrations of the liberation of the south.

Figure 4. Gong players forming a circle during a gong music performance at the 1985 festival (Sở Văn hóa Gia Lai-Kontum 1986: 40)

Together with the "Art of Gong" conference, the Gong Music Festival was organised in 1985 as a standard example of this initiative. Twelve gong folk-music groups from different districts of Gia Lai-Kontum province joined together with two groups from Đắk Lắk and Phú Khánh provinces. The folk artists came from very diverse ethnic groups: Ê Đê, Giarai, Bân, Xê Đăng, Giẻ Triêng and Chăm Hroai. These fourteen gong groups performed their music over two days (21-22 March 1985) (Sở Văn hóa Gia Lai-Kontum 1986). Besides playing traditional pieces of gong music, some groups also performed socialist songs, such as "Praise the Vietnam Communist Party'' (*Ca ngợi Đảng cộng sản Việt Nam* - Đỗ Minh)), and "As if Uncle Ho is with us on this happy victory day"(*Như có bác Hồ trong ngày vui đại thắng* - Phạm Tuyên), being highly appreciated by the organizers and the audience (Sở Văn hóa Gia Lai-Kontum 1986: 12).

The arguments of the contributors to the 1985 "Art of Gong" conference in favour of the new role of gongs and gong music in the Mass Art Movement and the way the gong music festival was organised are part of Vietnam's reform-era cultural policy, which Salemink (2003, 2013) calls a cultural policy of "folklorization". As Salemink (2013: 168) puts it, cultural folklorization entails "that particular cultural practices are decontextualized from the cultural setting in which they acquire locally specific (social,

economic, ritual, religious) meanings, and re-contextualized for a different public for whom esthetic meanings are paramount criteria". Indeed, ever since the Department of Culture and Information of Gia Lai-Kontum province took the initiative in 1985, folk-art activities have been organised every year. In this type of festival, gong music is included as a social musical theme to which the state may add other political meanings. Gong festivals (*hội cồng chiêng*) continued to be organised in Pleiku in 1988 and 1990 in which local heroes were instrumentalized to promote "patriotism and the tradition of fighting foreign invaders" *(yêu nước, truyền thống chống giặc ngoại xâm).* Salemink (2003: 264) describes the insights he acquired from a video documentation as follows:

... the Hội cồng chiêng minorities" music festival of 1988 celebrated the presence of the legendary hero Nup, a Bahnar who had played a much publicised role in the resistance against the French (1946-54) and later the Americans, together with Siu Alwin, who had been elected but not yet succeeded as King of Fire. Thus, the film conveys the present regime"s desire to extend its genealogy of resistance to foreign rule in the Highlands by incorporating the much older genealogy of the p"tau.[*]

Over time, the conjunction between gongs and the Mass Art Movement produced expressions and performances of gong music similar to those affected in other types of folk music such as *Quan họ* (Meeker 2013) or *Chầu văn* (Norton 2009).

From 1985 on, mass art events have become essential activities organised by local Departments of Culture, Sports and Tourism in the form of folk performing arts festivals (*hội diễn*, *liên hoan đàn hát dân gian*, *liên hoan dân ca và nhạc cổ truyền*). It was not until the late 1990s that Vietnam started to apply for its cultural assets to be inscribed on the international lists of tangible and intangible heritage. When the notion of intangible heritage was institutionalised in the early 2000s, gongs and gong music became part of the state's new cultural strategy.

3. (Re) connecting to the world: From folklore to Intangible Cultural Heritage

On 25 November 2005, the "Space of Gong Culture" was added to the list of the "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" as considered to contain "outstanding" values. What was the process that underlay the considerable moves which transformed gongs and gong music (objects and a performance genre) into a "cultural space", brought

* *P"tau* or *pötao* are two religious leaders of the Jrai people in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, already mentioned in Chapter 3. For a comprehensive analysis of these two Jrai leaders' background, see Dournes 1992.

it out of the Mass Art Movement" and on to the list of human intangible heritage, and caused it to be acknowledged not only as a symbol of Vietnamese cultural identity, but also as the repository of "outstanding" human values? There are many complex acts and relationships behind these transformations, demonstrating not only the growing evaluation of gong culture itself, but also changes in the state's diplomatic strategy, especially in dealing with the United Nations and UNESCO. It also reflects UNESCO's own "intangible turn" with respect to culture.

3.1. Folklore(s) in the "Intangible" turn of UNESCO

Since the mid-1980s, since the collapse of socialist regimes in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe, the Vietnamese party-state has been pursuing a new strategy to strengthen legitimacy through reform, the *đổi mới* agenda. Together with the rapid economic developments that have taken place in Vietnam since *đổi mới,* the state has also enthusiastically promoted a policy of cultural diplomacy (*chính sách ngoại giao văn hóa*) with the slogan "Vietnam is always willing to be the friend of every country" as its main message.

Vietnam's cultural policy and national image also seem to have counterparts and a real impact in political policies. For example, from a human rights point of view, Logan (2010) suggests that the state's recent policies regarding heritage and the promotion of minority cultures represent a softening towards ethnic groups. Logan acknowledges that its cultural policies help Vietnam approach current international statements regarding minority rights and predicts further likely effects:

> *By promoting the gongs through UNESCO, the government can be seen to be working at the highest international level to support the local traditions and, at the same time, helping to raise living standards. This may have the effect of placating local separatist voices and of quietly drawing the Tay Nguyen minority into the mainstream through increasing their economic links to the national and international tourism industries. (ibid.: 204)*

Thus, promoting cultural values so that they can be added to UNESCO's heritage list is a crucial strategy for Vietnam to strengthen its relations with this intergovernmental organisation. Again, Vietnamese scholars have actively participated in Vietnam's new campaign of promoting the national culture, a campaign that this time has taken place on the international stage. I learned about the active roles of scholars from interviews with Tô Ngọc Thanh, one of the most prestigious scholars of traditional music in Vietnam. Previously he held the position of Director of the Vietnam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies

(VICAS), which comes under the Ministry of Culture, and was in charge of preparing the heritage applications to UNESCO. Currently, he is Chairman of the Association of Vietnamese Folklorists (*Hội Văn Nghệ Dân Gian Việt Nam*). Tô Ngọc Thanh played a crucial role in promoting Vietnam's folklore to UNESCO and in securing some of it as "heritage". Eventually a free slot appeared in his schedule for me to conduct an interview with him.

In an interview, I asked Tô Ngọc Thanh about the context in which gongs and gong culture had been chosen for the application to UNESCO for the title of Intangible Heritage. Tô Ngọc Thanh drew me back to the 1990s, when he was attending UNESCO meetings. It was at this time, he explained, that countries from Africa had started to raise their influential voices to criticise the way UNESCO only considered "tangible" heritage worthy of recognition and protection, giving no consideration to the "in"-tangible culture of countries in the Global South. Tô Ngọc Thanh's observation is in line with Brumann's (2018: 22) remark in his review of UNESCO"s history that, due to the lack of entries from the Global South in the UNESCO World Heritage List, "already by the late 1980s, criticism of what appeared to become a Eurocentric affair was rising". Blake (2017: 42) also reports that, in the 1990s, the increased recognition of cultural rights went along with the growing dissatisfaction among developing nations in the Latin American, African, and Asia-Pacific regions with the "Eurocentric" approach of the 1972 Convention. It led to the fundamental question of whether a broader cultural approach or an intellectual property-based approach would be more effective in safeguarding and protecting "traditional culture and folklore".

According to Tô Ngọc Thanh, those voices were supported by the Director of UNESCO at that time, Federico Mayor. Returning to Vietnam after these meetings, Tô Ngọc Thanh started to actively promote Vietnam's intangible culture for nomination to UNESCO"s programmes. The first successful case was Nhã nhạc Cung đình Huế* (in 2003), and the "Space of Gong culture" was considered in 2005.

It is doubtful whether the discussion with UNESCO about Vietnam's intangible heritage was as simple and straightforward as Tô Ngọc Thanh presented it. To begin with, none of the new terms was easily agreed upon by UNESCO itself. Noriko Aikawa-Faure (2009) describes the long and complicated discussions within UNESCO over the proposed

* *Nhã nhạc cung đình Huế* is a form of Court Music of Nguyễn Dynasty. In 2003, it became Vietnam's first intangible heritage to be included in UNESCO's list of Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

term "intangible heritage and the terms of the 2003 Convention, which brought it international currency. Federico Mayor, the director of UNESCO, was interested in creating a strategy for the international consideration of intangible heritage. However, he spent a long time campaigning for the 2003 Convention and for use of the term "intangible heritage". During Mayor's campaign, Denhez, a heritage lawyer, was commissioned to find a way to promote international recognition of "cultural spaces", defined by UNESCO as "locations where cultural activities occur, having the characteristic of shifting over time and whose existence depends on the presence of these forms of cultural expression" (UNESCO 1997: 9, cited in Aikawa-Faure 2009: 18). The term had been used earlier for the urgent protection of a Moroccan site in 1996. Thus, in the long process of arriving at the official use of the term "intangible heritage" and the ratification of the Convention, as explained by Aikawa-Faure, the term "cultural space" was put forward as a useful "buffer" for a short period of time.

Denhez found that the most practical and fastest way to gain international support for the term "intangible heritage" while waiting for the long discussions in the Convention to conclude was to introduce small-scale, prestigious prize projects honouring the "outstanding" value of selected cultural activities. Therefore, the title of "Masterpiece of Oral Heritage of Humanity" was created. Overall, as Aikawa-Faure describes things, the "Masterpiece" program achieved great results:

Experiences of the Proclamation of Masterpieces had been extremely useful from political, conceptual and operational aspects. The programme served notably as a gauge to measure the political "temperature" of each member state vis-à-vis the issue of ICH. It also contributed to refining the definition and scope of ICH for the Convention. Although this small-scale programme was prepared rather hastily, without much conceptual elaboration, its impact among member states was much stronger than expected. The primary goal of the programme, "raising awareness of the significance of the Intangible Cultural Heritage", had been achieved rapidly at the state's level. The proclaimed Masterpieces, of which there are now 90, will be integrated into the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity within the framework of the ICH. (Aikawa-Faure 2008: 36)

Aikawa-Faure's convincing observation is in line with Blake"s (2017: 42) comment on the success of UNESCO"s 2003 Convention and the new category of Intangible Cultural Heritage that the Convention then won a very high rate of ratification by the Member States. Besides, Kuutma

(2015: 42) critically notes the global effects of the shift. According to Kuutma, this "disciplinary change and renaming that has taken place in all corners of the world should not be underestimated, because an international concept as "folklore" or "intangible cultural heritage" can become instrumental in local contexts". In the next part, I will explore the heritagization process, which turns folk gong musical practices into the "Space of Gong culture" heritage.

3.2. From local folklore "Gong art" to the Masterpiece "Space of Gong Culture"

When Vietnam's Institute of Culture and Arts Studies started preparing the necessary documents for applying to have gong culture inscribed into UNESCO's "Masterpieces programme, Tô Ngọc Thanh retired. Nguyễn Chí Bền replaced him as the new Director of VICAS and took over the responsibility for creating a successful campaign for gong culture. "I was a total newcomer at that time in terms of making heritage applications", Nguyễn Chí Bến told me when I approached him for an interview in February 2016. As someone who have had to start from scratch, one of Nguyễn Chí Bền's strategies was "to learn from international friends'' (*học hỏi từ bạn bè quốc tế*). One of the most important questions received from outside was: "Vietnam is not the only country that has gongs; many other Southeast Asian countries have gongs as well. So, what is the particular characteristic of Vietnamese gongs in comparison to other countries?" The question stayed in Nguyễn Chí Bền's mind during most of the time he led a team to write the application.

To learn more about Southeast Asia and its "international friends", Nguyễn Chí Bền and VICAS organised an international conference entitled "Cultural Values of Brass Percussion Instruments of Vietnam and Southeast Asia Countries" * in September 2004. Besides representatives from all five provinces in the Central Highlands, VICAS also invited scholars of musical studies from Cambodia, the Philippines and Japan. Nguyễn Chí Bền also managed to invite gong music groups from all five Central Highlands provinces to perform gong music in the Vietnam Ethnology Museum. Attendees at the conference were then invited to enjoy gong music during a "conference excursion" to the museum. "It was not about lobbying, as someone might call", Nguyễn Chí Bền told me when he explained his strategy of organising an international conference and asking for expert consultants. He said, "the document is too narrow to explain our culture to outsiders. What we tried to do was to offer outsiders a

* VICAS then published the conference proceedings in a book, see VICAS (2006).

chance to see, listen to and touch our heritage."

The conference also offered Nguyễn Chí Bền and his team to learn from international experts" advice to make an effective application. One among the most valuable recommendations came from a Japanese music expert's question on the "local folk" character of Central Highlands gong culture in Vietnam. It was the advice to the VICAS team to place an image of seven women from the big ethnic group who were depicted playing the gongs in a prominent position in the document. "Woman playing gongs is not something normal in Southeast Asia; it represents an ancient custom and thus might help distinguish Vietnam's gongs from those of others", Nguyễn Chí Bền explained (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: A group of Bih ethnic women were playing gongs (Source: Tô Ngọc Thanh and Nguyễn Chí Bền (edit) 2006: 77)

Ultimately, a six-kilogram document was sent to UNESCO. On 25 November 2005, "The Space of Gong Culture" was listed as a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity". Thus, from playing a central role in the socialist state's Mass Art Movement, gongs were promoted to the international level. The "Masterpiece" gong music is described as an "ancient and rich musical tradition" with a history of more than three thousand years (Alperson et al., 2007). Gongs have never been produced in the Central Highlands; the most valuable, high-quality gongs were produced in and imported from Laos and Burma (Alperson et al. 2007: 17). But the music has been claimed as the Highlanders" masterpiece because the Highlanders "created the gongs" soul" by playing them, creating melodies and using them as a link to the deities (Nguyên Ngọc 2013: 219).

What UNESCO considered a "Masterpiece of the oral and intangible

heritage of humanity" on 25 November 2005* is not only gong music itself, but the "Space of Gong Culture". The gong "reflects the animistic, agrarian, and ancestral aspects of traditional ethnic life" and "has connections with ritual and the sacred, as well as with the mundane" (Alperson et al. 2007: 17). A description of Vietnamese heritage on the official website is indicative of how gong music is said to play a central role in creating a sacred, social space in religious and social events:

During the festival season, when people dance in circles around sacred fires and drink wine from jars, and the sound of gongs echoes through the surrounding hills and forests, the Central Highlands become a romantic and fanciful cultural space. The gongs thus contribute to the epics and poems that depict the Central Highlands as imbued with romantic and grandiose cultural characteristics. (Published 2 April 2013; source: disanthegioi.info accessed 12.2.2017)

Due to the rapid and critical political, economic, religious and cultural changes that took place in the Central Highlands, this idealising term came under criticism (e.g. Salemink 2013). However, Nguyễn Chí Bền taught me that being considered to be "at risk and in danger of disappearing" is actually a strong advantage for a heritage to gain UNESCO recognition. He told me that, among the characteristics that led the "Space of Gong Culture" to be nominated for the Masterpiece lists, the most important was not the Gongs" excellent values, but its situation of being "on the edge of disappearance". Thus, this heritage needed effective protection. Indeed, as Meeker put it when she examined *quan họ,* the concept of tradition emerges as an object in modernity only after its initial disappearance and "lives on in discourse (as heritage) in the many representational practices which are, to varying degrees, in dialogue with that discourse" (Meeker 2007: 19). Like the case of *quan họ*, the very traditional image of the "Space of Gong Culture", with its ensemble of gongs, gong music, rituals and traditional artists, "lives on" as "structural nostalgia" (Herzfeld 2016) in both heritage discourses and practices.

Becoming one of many "masterpieces'' of humanity, gong culture received even more official public honours. In 2007, Vietnam hosted the First International Festival of Gong Culture (2007) in honour of the "Space of Gong Culture" as a

* Even though, in the long run, the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage was discussed at UNESCO's General Conference (17 October 2003), it was not until 2006 that the convention was ratified by UNESCO Member States and could enter into force. Thus, in 2005, "The Space of Gong culture" was still listed as a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity". And until 2008, as UNESCO converted the "Masterpiece" title into the "Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity", the "Space of Gong Culture" was accordingly moved to the new list, though its official heritage name remained the same.

Masterpiece of the cultural heritage of humanity, the pride and honour of the Central Highlands" minorities' culture and of Vietnam's culture. The most prominent, conspicuous vocabulary repeated when honouring the Space of Gong Culture during this festival was "humanity, the WTO and UNESCO'' (*Ban Tuyên giáo tỉnh ủy Đắk Lắk* 2007: 36). The words of Gadi Mgomezulu, the Director of UNESCO'S Department of Cultural Heritage, were cited, characterising the Central Highlanders' gong culture as "contributing to the cultural diversity of humanity" (ibid.: 15). The festival was also a chance for Vietnam to reiterate its image as a united yet multi-ethnic nation, thus refining an image that had been some twenty years in the making.

In the Huế Festival * of 2006 observed by Salemink (2013: 171), gong performances and drum dances were made to resemble each other, literally performing the historical narrative that links the ancient Đông Sơn civilization with the Central Highlands and that makes them both antecedents of the Vietnamese nation. Thus, recalling the hypothesis put forward in the "Art of Gong" in 1985, the allegedly intimate historical connection between the bronze drum and the gongs was presented as an image of Vietnamese "unity in diversity" on the heritage stage.

4. Conclusion

From 1986 to 2005 there was a shift in the state's view of the role of gongs and their uses. Within the state's "authorised heritage discourse" (Smith 2006), gongs moved out of use in the Highlanders' daily practices into a central position in the campaign of building a national identity, a new socialist life, and then on to the status of human heritage. The state's increasing recognition of the positive value of gongs and gong culture shows a shift "from a concern with post-colonial and socialist nation-building to a concern with preserving the disappearing cultural heritage in the face of rapid development and modernization" (Meeker 2013: 2). The state's invocation of the possible disappearance and death of this "heritage" should be viewed with caution. It is also a "terminological shift… from traditional culture (*văn hóa cổ truyền or truyền thống*) to that of cultural heritage (*di sản văn hóa*)" (Meeker 2007: 20).

In 1985, gongs were considered important for their role in strengthening historical national ties between the highlands and lowlands, thus contributing to Vietnam's culture of "unity in diversity". From the 2000s,

* Huế is the former capital of Vietnam. The Huế festival is a large-scale cultural festival organised to promote cultural heritage and tourism in the city.

along with the UNESCO "intangible turn", gongs became an ideal representative of Vietnam's culture in the country's international diplomatic policy, which came to be crucial to the state. Or in other words, what we have is the shifting of gong culture from its uses in the struggling "front" of culture (*mặt trận văn hóa*) to joining the cultural heritage diplomatic "front" (*diện mạo*) of Vietnamese culture in the international sphere. This shift from "folklore" to "intangible heritage" also happened worldwide and has been observed in Italy, the Czech Republic (Testa 2016), Estonia (Kuutma 2016) and China (Zhang 2018).

This article also shows that, in state's projects of acknowledging and promoting folklore/folk culture as "national identity" or "cultural heritage", the Vietnamese folklorists and scholars played an important role as "soldiers" in the "front of culture" (*những chiến sĩ trên mặt trận văn hóa*) and then as cultural experts. They actively argue for the meaning of folklore and define how and what folklore would be a relevant contribution for the national culture. The Vietnamese folklorist tasks and works are similar to what Herzfeld (1982) observed in the way in which the "Greek scholars constructed cultural continuity in defence of their national identity" by collecting "what they considered to be relevant cultural materials and used them to state their case. In the process, they also created a national discipline of folklore studies, providing intellectual reinforcement for the political process of nation building that was already well under way" (Herzfeld 1982: 4).

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