



Weatherhead East Asian Institute
Columbia University

Soundings

A Newsletter for and
by Undergraduates

the performance issue

East Asia Monthly

Volume V Issue VI

May 2010

Sounds of Vietnam in New York

By Ann Chou, CC '13

Imagine a beautiful wood instrument inlaid with mother-of-pearl. It looks like an enlarged fingerboard of a violin, with a thin antennae-like rod sticking up at one end. Much like the violin, the dan bau can achieve a range of complex sounds, and techniques such as vibrato. Unlike the violin or other typical string instruments, however, the dan bau has only a single string. On April 21st, this unique instrument was center stage at the Asia Society's "Music of Vietnam" concert. Roughly 75 attendees listened to the world-renowned musician, Ngo Tra My play her dan bau, and at-



Above, a young performer plays on the dan bau on stage, dressed in traditional garb.

tended a tour of the "Ancient Arts of Vietnam" exhibition from 6:00-9:30 pm.

The "Music of Vietnam" program accompanies the Society's current exhibition "Ancient Arts of Vietnam". It was presented by the Asia Society and the Institute for Vietnamese Culture and Education, in association with the Mission of Vietnam to the United Nations. The night began with a reception on the eighth floor of the Asia Society's NY headquarters, where attendees filled up on traditional Vietnamese food. The curator of "Ancient Arts of Vietnam" then led the group on a tour of the exhibit on the second floor before the performance began at 8:00pm.

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About the
Weatherhead
East Asian Institute:



Since its establishment in 1949, Columbia University's Weatherhead East Asian Institute has been a major center for research, teaching, and publishing on modern and contemporary Asia. The Institute's mission is to train new generations of experts in the humanities, social sciences, and the professions and to enhance understanding of East Asia in the wider community.

Reviving "South Pacific": Decoding Mixed Messages from Postwar America

By Katherine Marshall, CC '12

At Lincoln Center's production of "South Pacific," the sold out crowds in attendance attest to the timelessness of "Some Enchanted Evening". Directed by Bartlett Sher, the show is the first Broadway revival of the Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1949 smash hit and considered by many to be the rendition of the play closest to the original material. The first production of "South Pacific" ran for 1,925 performances and garnered eight Tony awards

and a Pulitzer Prize in Drama among its many accolades. It was also Rodgers and Hammerstein's most topical work, addressing a war that had only ended four years earlier and an ongoing US military presence in the South Pacific. The play is based on James Michener's book, *Tales of the South Pacific*, which chronicled his travels while on active duty during World War II in the United States Navy.

In the current production, Laura Osnes, who recently starred as Sandy in the Broadway production of "Greece,"

dazzles as Nellie Forbush, the Southern ingenue turned Army nurse, and opera baritone Paulo Szot plays French ex-pat Emile de Becque. The beautiful set and the score performed by the flourishing orchestra effortlessly transport the audience to the American military base in the South Pacific where the story unfolds.

In addition to the outstanding quality of the Lincoln Center performance, "South Pacific" deserves to be revisited for the political and cultural

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Reviving “South Pacific”: Decoding Mixed Messages from Postwar America

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lessons it both consciously and unconsciously offers its contemporary viewers. Rodgers and Hammerstein cast a critical, if Orientalist eye on World War II in East Asia and the domestic issues of racial discrimination and prejudice in America. “South Pacific” is to a degree typical of the West “writing” the East in the mid-twentieth century. In the play, the East is described as feminine, passive and seductive and American troops lust after the mysterious, exotic island “Bali Ha’i,” which purportedly calls to the hearts of the soldiers, “Here am I, your special island! Come to me, Come to me!” The playwrights’ representation of the Tonkinese is emasculating, as there is no presence of a single indigenous man throughout the entire play; only women and children are shown. Native girls are described as “Younger Than Springtime” and can exchange “Happy Talk” with their lovers, as proclaimed in two songs of such titles extolling their virtues.

“South Pacific” additionally presents idealized, equitable relationships between the indigenous inhabitants of the island and the American troops stationed there. Both groups are portrayed as seeking freedom: the Tonkinese from the threat of Japanese occupation and the soldiers from restrictive orders and the inertia of life on the island’s base. This schema notably diverts attention from the effective colonization of the Americans on the island. Moreover, economic equity is presumed in this fantasyland, where relationships are balanced. Bloody Mary,



Courtesy of USA Today

Pictured above, a scene from South Pacific where characters perform a number, There Is Nothin’ Like a Dame

a Tonkinese woman, imports American consumer goods to the natives of Bali Ha’i and sells grass skirts, dried heads and religious icons to Americans. Both parties benefit from this transaction, though the selling of artifacts and body parts hints at the Americans’ problematic parodies of the indigenous culture.

The relationship of Lieutenant Cable, a Princeton grad, with Liat, the young daughter of Bloody Mary is also troublingly romanticized. Bloody Mary sells Liat as a prostitute to the Lieutenant and the two fall in love but Cable refuses to marry the Tonkinese girl because he fears the stigmas attached to interracial marriage. Although Rodgers and Hammerstein clearly emphasize the Lieutenant’s racism as problematic and destructive, they hypocritically sentimentalize the exploitation of young girls that occurred in World

War II and perhaps more notoriously in the Vietnam War.

In spite of “South Pacific’s” significant ethnic and cultural insensitivities, the play also espouses a humanistic liberalism. It importantly attacks prejudice in its many manifestations and argues that we are all the same both in our susceptibility to being shaped by such beliefs as well as our ability to unlearn them. Nellie Forbush, the naïve, Arkansas-bred heroine who claims, “I’m a little hick!” and the East Coast, Ivy League educated Lieutenant Cable both deny true love due to their racist upbringings and are tormented as a result. However aphoristic this message may seem, its implementation is not always apparent. A 1957 issue of Time magazine reports that the audience at a Long Island revival of the play stopped the performance for three minutes with incessant boos and hisses when they

heard Nellie say she was from Little Rock

“South Pacific” is an undeniable relic of the Orientalism in popular culture that helped legitimize the racisms and attitudes that shaped America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. Nevertheless, the play genuinely contributed to the discourse on the elimination of prejudice in America and serves as an important reminder of the conflicting racial attitudes that defined American politics in the mid-twentieth century. It also remains one of the most highly acclaimed and cherished musicals ever produced. As poignantly today as in its original incarnations, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s production asks its viewers to carefully examine the prejudices they hold and how such beliefs manifest themselves in everyday matters of life and love.

Chinese Music and Magic on Campus

Courtesy of Weatherhead East Asian Institute



Performers from the Chinese Theater Works group showcased their work on Avery Plaza on Friday, April 30.

By Samantha Seto, CC '11

The plump man in the colorful costume stuck out his hand at one of the audience members. He wanted her to shake it. He jerked his head left and the next moment we knew, his mask changed into a different color. It was trippy. That is the magic of Chinese Theater Works.

On Friday, April 30th 2010, the Weatherhead East Asian Institute held an outdoor performance on Avery Plaza as part of an undergraduate study break. The performers were a non-profit group called “Chinese Theater Works.” The show included Chinese folk music, acrobatic theater dance, as well as tricks and magic. The favorite performance of the program was the “Face-changing Magician” who could change his outfit and mask in less than a second, right before our very eyes. A Chinese pop tune with lyrics about the history of the Chinese opera rocked out in the background as the magician strutted around, showing us his

tricks. At the end of his performance, he was throwing out free magic trick toys and key chains at the audience. The final moment climaxed with an explosion of confetti that popped out of his sleeves, filling the air with bright colors.

Another one of these performances was one entitled “Fight in the Dark,” a witty dance-like scene in which two characters sword fight as if they could not see each other. At one time, they both climbed onto the same table, one standing, one sitting, just inches apart, yet acting completely unaware of the other’s existence. The audience, especially the faculty children, enjoyed the comedy of their naivety. “He’s right there!” one of them squealed from the front row.

In another performance, a middle-aged Chinese woman wearing a silk traditional qipao dress played three songs from the guqin, a wooden instrument similar to the harp but laid horizontally. The emcee had the audience raise their hands

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Sounds of Vietnam in New York

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The dan bau is an unusual instrument. A traditional Vietnamese monochord, it is unique for being surprisingly unrestricted by its having only one string. The dan bau can in fact cover three octaves (the same range achieved by many popular instruments like the flute or tuba) and achieve a large variety of sounds. The right hand plucks the strings while the right pinky plays one of any seven harmonic notes. At the same time, the left hand controls the tension—and thus the sound’s pitch—with the rod. This “sprout” can also be manipulated to produce vibratos.

The Music of Vietnam concert was also to be headlined by another renowned Vietnamese performer, Nguyen Thanh Thuy, but she was unable to perform at the last minute. The audience was informed at the beginning of the concert that Ms. Thuy’s flight to United States was delayed by the Icelandic volcanic eruption on April 14th that brought air traffic over Europe to a standstill. Ms. Thuy was to play the dan tranh, a 17- to 22-stringed zither which has been very popular in Vietnamese and East Asian history.

Ms. Ngo Tra My is a lecturer at the Hanoi National Conservatory of Music and the Malmo Academy of Music in Sweden. The three types of music which made up the program were Cheo (traditional operatic), Hue (combination of popular local music and the royal chamber music of the Hue court), and Tai Tu Nam Bo (“Music of the Southern Amateurs”). The high, clear sounds from the dan bau ranged from sweetly melodious to softly ele-



The dan bau, pictured above, is a traditional monochord instrument from Vietnam.

Photo courtesy of Dantranh.com

gical. The total effect was the creation of a wonderful space in which to meditate and appreciate the serene tones of a unique instrument. “Music of Vietnam” provided a lovely opportunity to relax to the serene music of the dan bau, and learn about Vietnam’s rich history and musical tradition.

The Asia Society is located at 725 Park Avenue, between 70th and 71st. Its exhibition “Ancient Arts of Viet Nam” ran this year from February 2nd to May 2nd. Admission costs \$5 for students with a valid ID, and is free on Friday nights from 6:00pm to 9:00pm.

The following is an excerpt from the winning essay in the Weatherhead East Asian Institute's 2010 undergraduate essay contest.

The prompt: *What is an important challenge confronting East Asia and its role in the world in the 21st century and what can we do to help meet that challenge?*

For full paper and citations, please visit <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/weai/undergrad-resources.html>

China's Borders Flooded with Toxins

By Jessica Chace

In a couple of years, the computer from which I am writing this article will be recycled. It will probably be taken to a local facility that boasts the ethical and proper processing and disposal of electronic waste, but what most likely will happen is that it will be shipped to the port of Hong Kong, from where it will be disbursed with thousands of other computers just like it for villagers in remote areas of mainland China to break down the plastic, bake its circuit boards, and wash them with acid baths in order to recover the precious metals hidden within this recently disposed computer. "China has been accepting vast quantities of discarded televisions, computers, printers, and other equipment from abroad since the early 1990s," (Stone 2009) and e-waste has rapidly become one of the biggest environmental concerns that China, and the world, faces today.

This is not hard to imagine considering that Samsung, Dell, Apple, and a host of other competitors, put out new products, such as the iPad, every couple of months, not to mention other electronics such as CD/DVD players, flat screen monitors, laser printers, fax machines, and old VHS players that also are considered to be e-waste. In the United States alone, 130,000 computers are thrown out everyday and over 100 million cell phones each year. The United States, the principal producer of e-waste, does not have the funds or the physical labor for the proper disposal and comprehensive

recycling of all of its e-waste and instead sends out about 80% of it to China.

So what exactly is in this e-waste? Precious metals such as gold, platinum and silver, are among the most valuable metals that are extracted from old computer circuit boards. But there are also toxic substances like lead, cadmium, mercury, beryllium, which are known to cause brain damage, kidney disease, mutations, and several types of cancers. In addition, flame-retardants like polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) are added to the plastic resin that encases these mainframes and are known to be among the most dangerous compounds in the world. These PCBs are released into the atmosphere when the plastics are melted down over coal fires, known as "circuit board baking," or when computers are left outside in hot weather, the resin leaches off the electronics and seeps into the soil. And yet, we still continue to send out this e-waste to China for villagers using 17th century technology, like acid baths and coal fires, to process 21st century technology.

In a recent study conducted by Xia Huo, et al. in 2009, the blood lead levels of children living in an e-waste processing site, Guiyu, were compared with those of children living in a textile village, Chendian, where no e-waste was present. The study revealed that even children around the age of 5 who had not been occupationally exposed to e-waste processing had significantly higher blood lead levels than the control group. Older children in Guiyu had higher BLLs

than the younger children, due to prolonged environmental exposure to the e-waste toxins. Women in e-waste processing sites are six times more likely to have a miscarriage, and many of the villagers suffer from skin damage, nausea, chronic gastritis, and gastric and duodenal ulcers. What is worse, workers do not take safety precautions such as wearing protective masks or gloves to shield them from the toxic fumes that are released when they melt down these old electronics.

In 2000, China passed a law that prohibits their ports from accepting e-waste from other countries, but these laws are not enforced enough to protect China's borders from being inundated with toxic chemicals. Instead, e-waste continues to be traded illegally by dishonest recycling companies who do not recycle these old computers and monitors, but instead, merely broker the trade of this e-waste between the US and China for distribution to rural areas for the processing and retrieval of precious metals. But this is just the beginning of the remediation that needs to take place in order that China's rural land does not become completely buried with toxins.

There needs to be systemic remediation within environmental legislation that regulates private technology companies such as Samsung, Dell, and Apple, and many more to take on the responsibility of managing the manufacturing and disposal of their products, cradle to grave. The Electronic Device Recycling Research and Development Act (S. 1397) would address

this need to expand and fund research and development for efficient recyclable technology. Furthermore, this bill is just the beginning of the kind of educational initiatives that need to be implemented in order to raise awareness of the potential dangers of e-waste processing among professional recyclers and civil engineers, as well as the general public.

There is a clear need for the design of and implementation of new legislation, as well as increased awareness of the consequences of e-waste, and for the development of e-waste research. By continuing to bring forth the environmental and human rights injustices that continue to ensue because of this growing e-waste dilemma.

In order for China to continue to move forward successfully as an economic contemporary of the United States, China needs to protect itself against the inundation of toxic wastes that flood its borders. No longer can China continue to allow peasant workers to choose between poverty and their health in addition to releasing thousands of tons of toxic gases that contribute to China's increasingly severe pollution problem. If however, there is reformation of environmental legislation and more bills like the Electronic Device Recycling Research and Development Act are ratified, there is hope for cleaner and safer methods of e-waste disposal, and more rural areas like Guiyu will no longer carry the burden of processing America's e-waste.

Chinese Music and Magic on Campus

Photo courtesy of Weatherhead East Asian Institute



Above, an ensemble of traditional Chinese instruments was showcased at the Chinese Theater Works event hosted by the Weatherhead East Asian Institute. Left: Performer Kuang Yu poses for a photo after the show.

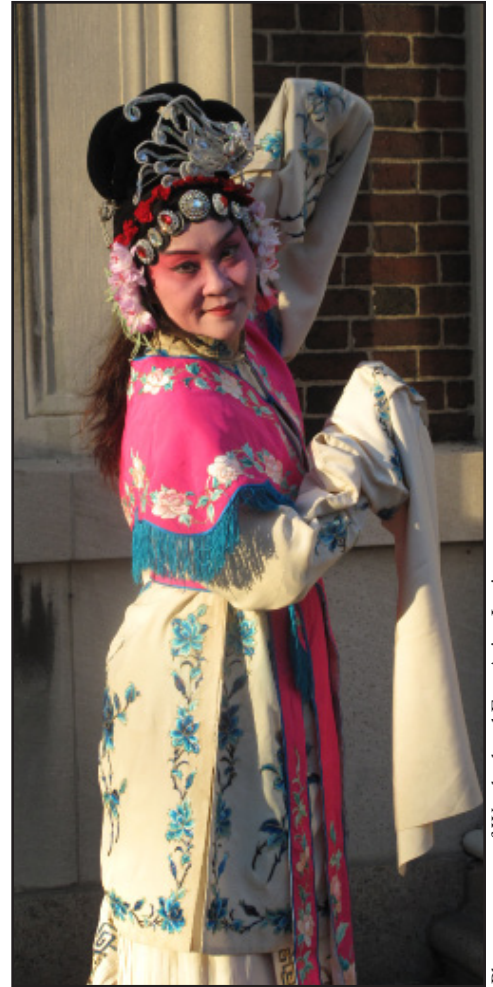


Photo courtesy of Weatherhead East Asian Institute

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and guess how many strings were on the instrument. “Thirty” exclaimed one man. “Less than that.” “A hundred!” guessed a wise-cracking undergrad, who probably was probably releasing some excess exam stress energy out in the form of sass. As soon as the guqin played, the tent full of people who were shouting numbers with gusto just moments before, suddenly became silent and still, entranced by the smooth melodies. We could feel the mood of the room suddenly

change into one of tranquility and relaxation, as if being transported back into the nostalgia of ancient China.

Overall, the evening was a wonderful study break for the undergrads as well as a great family event for faculty and their children. Loads of free red bean and green tea ice cream bars were stacked in large bowls, which were the perfect snack on a warm, spring evening. With great entertainment, delicious creamy frozen treats, all who came enjoyed this wonderful display of Chinese performance art.

Summer at the Weatherhead East Asian Institute

2010 Symposium in Taiwan

**“Taiwan in the Twenty-First Century: Politics,
Economy, and Society”**

Sunday, June 13, 2010

2:00 PM – 8:00 PM

Taipei, Taiwan

Shangri-la’s Far Eastern Plaza Hotel

Join the Weatherhead East Asian Institute for a symposium exploring present day Taiwan and the possibilities its future holds.

Registration required. Please visit
<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/weai/taiwan/>

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Columbia Alumni Association*

CONTRIBUTE TO SOUNDINGS

This summer, keep an eye out for the East Asia in your life and contribute your experiences this fall for an epic Travel issue, coming September 2010.

Travels should include some East Asian component, whether it be in New York or around the world.

Please email article pitches to
EL2375@columbia.edu by September 21, 2010.

ABOUT SOUNDINGS



Published monthly by the Weatherhead Undergraduate Council, Soundings is edited by Ellen Liu. If you have any questions or comments, or would like to contribute, you can contact her at EL2375@columbia.edu.