


SAMSTAG / WINTER SEASON



James N. Nguyen & Victoria Pham: RE:SOUND- ING

In search of latent vibes: unforgetting the song of the Đông Sơn drum

The bronze drum traditions of southern China and Southeast Asia carry reverberations from the depths of pre-history. Many believe that these musical traditions originated in the so-called 'Đông Sơn' cultural milieu of northern Vietnam, which flourished in the Hong River basin from at least 600 BCE through to around 200 CE.

Much admired for developing sophisticated bronze-casting technologies, the Đông Sơn milieu constitutes one of Southeast Asia's most distinctive pre-historic cultural complexes. Contemporary knowledge of this period has largely been derived from archaeological excavations that were initiated by European scholars in the late nineteenth century. Along with a range of other bronze artefacts, including tools, weapons, ornaments, vessels and bells, the majestic bronze drums have provided historical insights as well as fostering intrigue and debate.

The circular head of a Đông Sơn drum, which is sometimes over a metre in diameter, is decorated with intricate designs that seem to document life in ancient Asia. Almost like a prototypical form of writing, the designs follow a systematic template, with concentric bands of visual information encircling a central star motif. Some bands consist of geometric patterns, while others illustrate animals or depict humans engaging in agriculture, seafaring and social activities.

Đông Sơn drums have often been found buried in the tombs of high-ranking individuals, suggesting that they were status objects or that they had a spiritual purpose. But some scholars focus on the prevalence of lightning patterns and frog figurines around the rim of the drums to argue that they were rain-calling devices. Others point to the lines of human figures marching around the bands as a sure sign that the drums were used to rally troops.

The motif of a long boat is commonly featured in the decorative bands, and one thing we know for certain is that the Đông Sơn drums travelled far and wide across the ocean and along the river systems of southern China. They have been found in archaeological digs throughout Southeast Asia, as far west as Burma and as far south as Timor-Leste. In China, they have been unearthed as far north as the Yangtze River region, with large concentrations in the Yunnan Province and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. This broad distribution of weighty Đông Sơn drums indicates that they must have had significant meaning and value within the trade networks of ancient Asia.

The archaeological evidence indicates that the Bronze Age Đông Sơn culture was figuratively pushed underground by Chinese incursions into northern Vietnam around two thousand years ago. But, while ancient Đông Sơn drum traditions ceased in the Hong River basin at that time, bronze drum practices were retained across southern China and among the Muong ethnic groups occupying the mountainous areas of northern Vietnam. In these surrounding areas the bronze drum has morphed in style and meaning but nonetheless continues to resonate in contemporary life.

The Karen people, for example, adopted the use of bronze drums over a thousand years ago in southern China, before migrating into Thailand and Burma, where they continue to use Đông Sơn-style drums today. Their version of the bronze instrument is more slender, with a wider lip, but it carries the characteristic design elements of ancient Vietnamese drums, and is treasured as a ritual object in contemporary Karen households.

It would be a mistake, however, to think of Đông Sơn drums as passive commodities whose meaning is determined by larger political and economic contexts. These mercurial objects also have the power to generate their own movements, engendering vibes that drive cultural activity. In this respect, the meaning of these objects doesn't really lie in how they index a world that was, but rather in how they make worlds move.

Were the Đông Sơn drums pounded to embolden the hearts of warriors? Did spiritual leaders tap and pat them to draw people into the rhythms of ritual? Were the drums used as tools of sorcery, providing a meter for chants that could gather storm clouds? Or did seafarers sound them across misty expanses of ocean as a form of sonar navigation? We can only guess, and reasonably assume that their meaning varied through time and circumstance.

James Nguyen and Victoria Pham's RE:SOUNDING project harnesses this latent potential of the Đông Sơn drum. Using live performance, time-based video installations and digital collaboration platforms, they have created a performative space in which the ancient bronze artefacts can articulate new trajectories of meaning while in motion.

One aspect of this multi-platform project has involved physically experimenting with a Đông Sơn drum to see what sounds it can make. Whether pouring rice over the bronze instrument, running chopsticks over its textured surface or sawing the rim of the drum with a violin bow, their experiments have been couched in the material world of the contemporary Vietnamese diaspora. These investigations explore the question of what the drums might do next in this world, rather than what they once did. By recording these experiments and making them available as open-source sound stems, the artists also recognise the transformative vitality in affirming ongoing processes of collaboration and cultural exchange.

A large number of Đông Sơn drums recovered from archaeological digs during the 1920s—while Vietnam was under French colonial rule—were expatriated to foreign museums and private collections. It appears that many of the Đông Sơn drums held in Australian collections came from this period. Part of the RE:SOUNDING project involves uncovering these largely suppressed chains of provenance, and finding ways to reconnect inert museum objects with contemporary expressions of Vietnamese identity.

Sometimes Nguyen and Pham speak about repatriation, but I think the tone and texture of their practice suggests something more radical. Repatriation is all well and good, but it generally fails to redress the ways in which colonial-capitalism has grasped cultural heritage as transferable property rather than lived process. RE:SOUNDING involves reconnecting these ancient musical technologies with the forces of germination, and celebrating the implicit agency of performative objects. By collaboratively activating the enigmatic Đông Sơn drum as a contemporary art project, Nguyen and Pham set their heritage adrift within this broader conception of creativity and give it a chance to make some new moves.

— Stephen Zagala

STEPHEN ZAGALA is a critical writer and collection curator with a background in art history, philosophy and social anthropology. He has been commentating on contemporary art and visual culture for over 30 years and is currently the Research Fellow in World Cultures at the South Australian Museum.

JAMES NGUYEN & VICTORIA PHAM /
RE:SOUNDING



Image: James Nguyen & Victoria Pham,
RE:SOUNDING, 2020

**JAMES NGUYEN & VICTORIA PHAM /
EXCEPT RE:SOUNDING MYTHOLOGY OF A DRUM**

... Can we, by listening and recording these objects from far-flung places, reclaim the identity of these instruments? Can we democratise the Đông Sơn Drum by activating its sound, rather than keeping it silent and rarefied? By sharing these recordings, can we reach across these impossible separations and estrangements¹? As a first step, we aim to return the sound from these objects to communities and nations who have profound cultural kinship to these objects. These activities are a transnational catalyst for producing collective knowledge during times of continued historical, cultural and physical separation. From these initial exchanges, we will share new music by these contemporary musicians, opening up our archive of recordings and extending access to audiences who are interested in the stories and sonic potential of these instruments.

SYMPOSIUM / Thursday 15 July, 10am—2pm, online

James Nguyen and Victoria Pham with Stephen Zagala (Research Fellow, World Cultures, South Australian Museum) will participate in an online conversation to discuss cultural agency, the politics of display, colonial legacies, and generative pathways to repair.

For more details visit our website.

¹First published in *ADSR Zine* 009, June, 2020. Excerpt facilitated by ADSR Zine editors Elia Bosshard, James Hazel and Sonya Holowell. View the full article [HERE](#).

Acknowledgement of Country in Vietnamese /

Sinh cảm ơn người Wurundjeri và người Boon Wurrung của đất nước Kulin, và người Gadigal của đất nước Eora, và người Kaurua trên đất người ấy mà chúng tôi đã sáng tác và trình diễn các tác phẩm này. Chúng tôi thêm cảm ơn những dân tộc đã sống đầu tiên ở Úc Châu và Việt Nam, và các tổ tiên của những người ấy. Chúng tôi hiện nay đang sống và làm việc trên các nơi vẫn bị người khác lấy đi nhưng chưa bao giờ nhường. Trên những mảnh đất này, chúng tôi may mắn được tới từ nơi khác để kiếm bình an, sự sống và được chia sẻ những chuyện này hôm nay.

Artist acknowledgement /

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**JAMES NGUYEN & VICTORIA PHAM /
RE:SOUNDING**

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Samstag Museum of Art, Gallery 2

RE:SOUNDING curator: Gillian Brown

Catalogue author: Stephen Zagala

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