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Localized listening to state-sponsored heritage-making in Kam minority communities of southwestern China

Public talk by Dr. Catherine Ingram

Representations of the cultural heritage of minority groups are common in contemporary China, yet the complexities associated with such representations are not always well understood. Moreover, practical, linguistic and conceptual obstacles have often hindered researchers from grasping indigenous perceptions of both the heritage itself and the role of the state in the heritage-making process. This paper argues for the importance of “localized listening” to state-sponsored heritage-making through examination of custodian responses in two cases of state-sponsored, tourism-oriented heritage-making influential within Kam (in Chinese, Dong 侗) minority communities in southwestern China: the case of Kam “big song” and the case of the creation and promotion of local festivals surrounding the important Kam figure of See-yai. Drawing on more than 24 months of participant-observation musical ethnographic research amongst Kam communities since 2004, Dr. Ingram will briefly describe the ways in which each case exemplifies the state’s role in Kam heritage construction, and outline custodian responses to this process. While the state’s role in both cases could be analyzed as top-down interventionist activity that irrevocably alters local culture, “localized listening” — here, involving the investigation of indigenous perspectives — indicates that such a view would ignore the important access to agency and voice that many Kam residents felt they gained through aspects of Kam culture being thus identified and “developed” as intangible cultural heritage.

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