In 2009, UNESCO’s committee on intangible cultural heritage inscribed *quan họ* Bắc Ninh folk songs on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Decision 4.COM 13.76). The committee’s Decision describes how the “element” (*Quan Họ* Bắc Ninh Folk Songs) meets each of the selection criteria, including its role as a symbol of local and regional identity; that the inscription would promote greater awareness of musical traditions and cultural dialogue; that measures have been taken to safeguard the element; and that the local communities and authorities were involved in and gave their free consent to the process (UNESCO 2010:8). The road to inscription involved several years of preparations and mobilization of information by local and national officials, researchers, both domestic and foreign, and *quan họ* singers in Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang provinces. These efforts were coordinated by the Vietnam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies (VICAS). The political implications of inscription are evident in the language of the Decision, in particular in the statement about *quan họ*’s potential value once inscribed on the list: “Inscription of the element on the Representative List would contribute to ensuring visibility and awareness of musical traditions on local, national and international levels, promoting social integration and enhancing inter-regional communication, cultural dialogue and respect for diversity” (ibid.). Thus, international recognition of *quan họ* comes with a heavy responsibility for
this local folk form: *quan họ* must radiate out beyond its local origins to promote cultural dialogue regionally, nationally, and internationally.

The inscription language refers to the social importance of *quan họ* to local communities and its role in the work of international cultural exchange. However, what is not evident in the Decision and inscription materials is that the soundscape in which *quan họ* is found has a history and that designating *quan họ* as intangible cultural heritage is just the most recent episode in that history. The cultural politics of post-colonial nationalism, socialism, and reform have shaped and reshaped the soundscape of *quan họ*. For over half a century, *quan họ* folk song has had an extensive presence in the Vietnamese mass media and been the focus of interest and intervention of government officials and scholars in the region. As a result, *quan họ* is well known in Vietnam beyond its locality of origin, the villages of Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang provinces. The form that scholarly and governmental interventions in the region have taken in this period has evolved over time. In the most general terms, it has shifted 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. Consequently, *quan họ* has become one of many focal points through which formations of state power and national and local identity are contested and enacted in contemporary Vietnam.

This book explores the cultural politics that have shaped the *quan họ* soundscape and the people who sing and listen to *quan họ*. It weaves together an examination of the construction and evolution of Vietnamese discourses on folk music, cultural nationalism, and cultural heritage since the August Revolution of 1945 with an ethnographic account of the changing social practice of *quan họ* folk song as it has moved from the village onto the stage. Through the lens of *quan họ* folk song and performance, I explore how discourses on culture have been an important source of political and cultural capital with which the Vietnamese government, intellectuals, and ordinary people represent Vietnam locally, nationally, and, increasingly, on the global stage.

In attending to the ethnographic details of *quan họ* practice, one becomes acutely aware of the pleasure that singers take in singing and listening to the songs and also how such pleasure is linked to the social and collective experience of singing. A theme that runs throughout this book is the connection between the sensory experiences (aural and visual) that occur within the *quan họ* soundscape and the emotional experience of performing and listening to the music. I examine in ethnographic detail how village
practitioners of this socially embedded folk form negotiate the increasing attention to the form by those outside the village, their designation as “living treasures” who embody a traditional folk form, and their ordinary lives as people who love to sing quan họ. It also examines how professional singers of modernized quan họ are incorporated into this soundscape in an effort to highlight and popularize the culture of Bắc Ninh province in the national context.

Quan họ and its singers are embedded in the history and politics of the nation and this book examines a number of divergent readings of the past and present, from political ideology, local and national identity, the body, to the stage and television. The acceptance of quan họ on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity will certainly have a dramatic effect on many of the practices and discourses about the genre both in Bắc Ninh and elsewhere. This development necessitates continued work on the topics presented in this book.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS

Early one evening in the summer of 2001, I stepped up into the backseat of a black company-owned sport utility vehicle and sat down next to the CEO of a successful media company in Hanoi. We wound through the streets of Hanoi to pick up his friend before speeding off up the brand-new divided highway towards Bắc Ninh Town (now Bắc Ninh City). They were taking me to hear a kind of Vietnamese folk song as a thank-you gesture for helping the CEO practice reading English that afternoon. The CEO wanted to introduce me to his favorite kind of music and something that in his mind was truly Vietnamese. Upon entering the town, the CEO flipped open his phone and arranged to meet one of the singers along the way who would lead us to a local restaurant. Not long after, a young woman on her motorbike waved us down; this was his friend, the singer. We settled down on the floor of a small, private dock overhanging the restaurant’s pond. Two other women arrived and the three women disappeared to change into brightly colored costumes. The six of us settled down around a large tray of food and the first singer began to tell a story of how, hundreds of years ago, two mandarins used to sing with each other and this eventually became known as quan họ. Then, they began to sing. I was captivated by the music.

What was this music? Aside from the legend told by the singer and the restaurant setting, I had no social context for this music. Was it used in a form of courtship or courtesanship? What was not being said here? Upon
returning home that evening and in the following week before I flew back to the United States and to school, I began to seek out as much information as I could about this music. And, indeed, it seemed to be everywhere. I turned on the television and there it was. I asked my language teachers and they explained. I looked for books and compact discs and they were plentiful.

Once I began my field research into folk music and performance in northern Vietnam in 2003, my story of first contact had receded into the background as an aberration or as an inauthentic experience of quan họ. From that starting point, I was perpetually directed back by friends, teachers, and colleagues with whom I spoke on the subject: back in time, back to the village, back to a more authentic form than that which I had heard there next to the pond that night in Bắc Ninh Town. This going back would eventually take me to where, as an anthropologist engaged in ethnographic fieldwork, I was “supposed” to be. The locus of my research was meant to be the place where the “other” resided, which, my Vietnamese friends and colleagues told me was somewhere rural and the seat of an authentic form of the culture. Yet, while waiting for permission to conduct research in the villages, I wandered through different forms of “not-quite-authentic” folk song in Hanoi: UNESCO folk-song clubs, performances for tourists, televised folk song and performance. What was surprising to me at that time was that during these explorations, in seemingly contradictory fashion, many people emphasized these particular urban, staged, and recorded performances as representative, as real, as Vietnamese, even while they stressed that the villages were the places to find original quan họ. Eventually, by digging my way backwards towards what I was told was a more authentic style of singing, village singing, I came to realize that I was, in fact, re-enacting one of the dominant discourses on Vietnamese traditional culture. This discourse asserted that the authentic locus of Vietnamese traditional culture was in an idyllic, rural past, in a time and place where folk practices were as yet untainted by the upheavals of colonialism, war, revolution, and modernization and that it was essential to record and, if necessary, to restore these authentic forms of culture.

My early introduction to quan họ contained conflicting messages about authenticity that pointed to a much more complicated social construction of folk song than simply something that could be divided into what was “new” or “old” and “authentic” or “changed.” My initial confusion about the message and social context of quan họ now—after several years of following many paths marked by different signposts to “the real”—points to the dynamic and open-ended ways that folk music is understood, performed,
and represented in Vietnam today. New and old, past and present, village and city, rural and urban, these binary divisions that people often articulated on behalf of quan họ folk song blurred in the face of so much movement. How people variously situate and represent quan họ in Vietnam today, I will argue in this book, is a historically, politically, and socially situated practice. It is also a physical process located in, performed, and experienced through the body. The particular relationship between the past and the present in Vietnam is, in many ways, a constantly shifting ground for individuals and for society as a whole. It is the place where old forms of social relationships are contested and new ones are created. From this vantage point, speeding “back” up a new highway in a shiny black sport utility vehicle is in many ways an appropriate beginning for an examination of the complex ways that traditional culture is constructed, embodied, and performed in contemporary northern Vietnam.

This book is based on fieldwork conducted “back” in Bắc Ninh Province between October 2003 and May 2005, and for two months in the summers of 2008 and 2009. My methods included the anthropological approaches of participant observation combined with formal and informal interviews. I also recorded quan họ songs of village singers with whom I worked. I primarily worked with singers in the villages clustering within a few kilometers of Bắc Ninh City. Many of my village informants were elderly singers whom I followed around, interviewed, and with whom I attended events. I also interviewed several middle-aged female singers and observed their classes to teach quan họ to village children and youth. These women also attended village and regional events that I observed. I interviewed officials at the Bắc Ninh Department of Culture and Information (now renamed the Bắc Ninh Department of Culture, Sport and Tourism), in particular, researchers at its Center for Quan Họ Research. My research into village quan họ practice relies heavily on the memories of the elderly singers, their current activities, and on the rich body of work on quan họ published by Vietnamese scholars. My research on the new-style quan họ is based upon interviews with and participant observation of professional performers, attendance at performances by the Bắc Ninh Quan Họ Folk Song Troupe in Bắc Ninh City, and work with students and teachers at the Bắc Ninh Secondary School of Culture and Arts.

The remainder of this introduction provides some introductory background on quan họ folk song and the geographical, social, and political contexts in which it occurs. I also outline the theoretical frameworks that inform this book.
THE QUAN HỌ FOLK-SONG REGION

Quan họ is one of the famous folk song forms of our country and this shining cultural tradition is a source of pride for the people of Hà Bắc in particular and all the people [of the nation] in general. By way of its beautiful lyrics and music and through its history, quan họ folk song has reflected in part the activities, perceptions, thinking, sentiment, and aesthetic ideals of the people. (Đặng Văn Lưng, Hồng Thao, and Trần Linh Quý 1978:9)¹

Quan họ practice originated in a number of villages of what are today Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang provinces. The bulk of the villages are in Bắc Ninh Province, whose capital, Bắc Ninh City, is located approximately thirty kilometers north of the national capital, Hanoi. The quan họ region, which covers about two hundred and fifty square kilometers, clusters around the “T” formed by the Cầu River in the North, which divides Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang provinces and runs roughly west to east, and Highway 1, which runs north to south (see Đặng Văn Lưng 1982:610).

Not all of the villages in this region have the custom of singing quan họ. It is commonly held that there are forty-nine “original” quan họ villages in Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang provinces. The number of villages is said to correspond to the forty-nine male and forty-nine female attendants who accompanied the legendary founding ancestress of quan họ, the princess Vua Bà, daughter of one of the Hùng kings, on a trip to the region. It was she who taught the locals to sing quan họ and her attendants are said to have paired off to found the forty-nine quan họ villages.² Although residents of the area say that they are unsure of the identity of all forty-nine of these villages, scholars have identified forty-nine villages that they believe to be original quan họ villages (Trần Linh Quý 2006 [1974]; Lê Đanh Khiêm 2000). Đặng Văn Lưng, Hồng Thao, and Trần Linh Quý, three renowned scholars of quan họ, use two criteria to identify the forty-nine quan họ villages as they existed prior to the 1945 August Revolution. First, the village had made official partnerships or friendships (kết bạn) with groups in other villages and had sung with groups in other villages continuously for at least two to three generations; and, second, the village was recognized by other quan họ areas as a quan họ village (1978:20). Forty-four of the villages recognized by these and other authors (Lê Đanh Khiêm 2000) lie in what is today Bạc Ninh Province and five are in Bạc Giang Province.³ There are also a number of villages in both provinces that practice quan họ but are not considered to be “original” quan họ villages.
The quan họ region lies in the fertile flat plains of the Red River Delta. Historically, the majority of the quan họ villages have primarily relied upon wet-rice agriculture for subsistence, supplemented in some places by secondary occupations or handicraft production. Many of the significant quan họ singing events, as do many other communal village activities, follow the cycle of planting and harvesting. The region as a whole has a number of villages well known for cottage industries such as pottery, woodwork, bronze casting, papermaking, and so on (Ngô Đức Thịnh 2006:127). The region belongs to what was historically known as Kinh Bắc, the name assigned to the district (lộ) in 1241 under the Trần Dynasty (1225–1400) (Ngô Đức Thịnh 2006:126). Today, many cultural historians refer to Kinh Bắc as the “cradle” of Vietnamese civilization (Huu Ngoc 2001; Trần Quốc Vương 2001) because it is considered to be one of the important locations of the origin (nơi phát tích) of the Kinh (or Việt) majority civilization (Nguyễn Văn Phú et al. 1962:11). Kinh Bắc is renowned as an intellectual center because of the large number of pagodas, temples, and other historical sites and because of its high number of degree holders under the imperial examination system. Six hundred and forty-five of the two thousand nine hundred and ninety-one recipients of the tiến sĩ degree (those who had passed the regional exams and the national exam in Hanoi but had not passed the palace exam) between the years 1075 and 1919 were from Bắc Ninh Province. Over one-third of those passing the palace exam, the highest level, were from Bắc Ninh (Hoàng Kỳ 1982:641; Trần Đình Luyện 1997:101).

In some accounts, the high level of culture and scholarship in the region is directly linked to the difficulty or sophistication of quan họ lyrics. For instance, Lê Danh Kiinema, a quan họ researcher at the Bắc Ninh Culture Center, points out that many quan họ lyrics are based on poetry or derived from famous works of literature such as The Tale of Kiều (Truyện Kiều), Apricot Flowers Twice in Bloom (Nhị Độ Mai), and The Woman Graduate (Nữ Tú Tài) (pers. comm., 6/13/04). Quan họ culture is thus said to be embedded in the historically and culturally rich Kinh Bắc region. The landscape of fertile green rice paddies, rivers, and occasional low hills rising out of the flat plain and its corresponding cultural traditions figure frequently in the lyrics of quan họ songs. The landscape is today often invoked in descriptions of quan họ that portray the songs and its colorfully costumed singers as part of a picturesque rural ideal. Contextualizing quan họ as such is an important element in the discourses that frame it as an age-old tradition rooted in the traditions and culture of the region. There is also a countervailing argument that emphasizes quan họ's origins as “folk” music or music of the people, an
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The art form that derives from work songs and folk poetry (see Lê Hồng Dương 1972). This argument, which highlights the importance of laborers and the equality of men and women in quan họ practice, makes quan họ compatible with socialist and post-colonial reclamations of Vietnamese culture in the period following the 1945 Revolution.

Research and Popularization of Quan Họ

While very limited English language literature has been published on quan họ (Chan Ngọc Le 2002; Phạm Duy and Whiteside 1975; Dao Trọng Tú 1984b; Nguyễn and Hồng Thao 1993), a rich body of Vietnamese language ethnological and ethnomusicological work on quan họ emerged after the 1945 August Revolution as part of the national project to collect and record traditions that were feared to be disappearing (Đặng Văn Lùng, Hồng Thao, and Trần Linh Quý 1978; Lê Hồng Dương 1972; Hồng Thao 2002; Trần Linh Quý 2006 [1974]). Beginning in the 1950s, a number of scholars and musicians began to research and collect quan họ in depth, in part in response to the Vietnam Communist Party’s efforts to create a new national culture for Vietnam after the Revolution, a project discussed in detail in chapter one of this book. Several researchers such as Trần Linh Quý and, in particular, Hồng Thao, a Bắc Ninh native, were well known to quan họ singers throughout the region for their work and dedication to the genre. Musicians such as Nguyễn Đình Phúc, Lưu Hữu Phước, and Lê Yên collected, transcribed and arranged quan họ songs. They subsequently published research articles in The Music Review (Tạp Sản Âm Nhạc) and song collections, including one with two hundred fifty songs published by the Department of Arts (Vụ Nghệ Thuật) and three volumes of songbooks (totaling sixty transcribed songs) published by The Music Publishing House (Nhà Xuất Bản Âm Nhạc) (Nguyễn Văn Phú et al. 1962:4–5). The Hà Bắc Department of Culture (today the Bắc Ninh Department of Culture, Sport and Tourism) was also actively involved in quan họ research and collection (Nguyễn Văn Phú et al. 1962:11), and eventually organized a series of six conferences on the subject in 1965, 1967, 1969, 1971, 1974, and 1981 (Lê Hồng Dương 1982). The published proceedings from the 1971 conference, “Some Issues Concerning Quan Họ Folk Song” (Lê Hồng Dương 1972), provide an important collection of articles on quan họ. This body of work has continued to grow up until the present day (see Nguyễn Thị Minh Đoàn 2000; Lê Danh Khải 2001; Trần Chính 2000). As a testament to this body of literature, in 2006, the Vietnam Institute of Culture and Information published a collection of articles on quan họ, with original publication dates from the 1950s up to
Vietnamese scholars’ efforts to research, collect, and preserve quan họ village practices have paralleled efforts to develop and popularize the genre. These efforts were institutionalized in the late 1960s with the establishment of the professional Bắc Ninh Quan Họ Folk Song Troupe, discussed in chapter three. The troupe, comprised of professionally trained singers, developed a new modernized style that it popularized regionally and nationally through staged performance, and radio and television broadcasts. The “old” and “new” style quan họ are dramatically different in musical and performance style, lyrics, and performance venue. Nonetheless, both styles are proudly held up as local Bắc Ninh culture by singers, scholars, and local officials. The tension between these two styles of singing, old or village and new or modernized, is a crucial context for many of the arguments presented in this book.

The changes to quan họ practice are, in many ways, a localized manifestation of the dramatic political, social, and economic changes that Vietnam as a whole has undergone as a result of the 1945 August Revolution, the war of resistance against French colonialism, the American war and, more recently, as a result of the economic reforms (Đổi Mới) initiated in 1986 at the Sixth Party Congress. Today, scholars and officials worry about the loss of traditional knowledge in the face of modernization and, more recently, of globalization.

While the revolutionary and the post-reform discourses on national culture have significant differences, both rely upon references to an authentic version of folk culture. Even before the Revolution, many intellectuals argued over the need either to reject traditional culture or to reclaim it as part of anti-colonial mobilization, yet the Revolution definitively brought culture directly into the center of the political and ideological project of the new government (see Kim Ngoc Bao Ninh 2005; Pelley 2002). Feudalism and colonialism were seen to have had a negative effect on Vietnamese culture. Thus, in the decades after the Revolution and before reform, the Party and government of the new nation actively and aggressively worked to build a “new culture” that would reflect their goals for a progressive socialist modernity of the masses and people of Vietnam. In this period, historians, culture workers, and ethnologists reached into the past to find an essential Vietnamese history and culture “untouched” by the ravages of colonialism that they could call their own. Folk culture became an important part of this project because it was seen to belong to the peasants and their village culture and, as such, was said to be real or original. In the period following
the August Revolution, memories of the past referenced an “essence” or “spirit” of the people and nation (tình dân tộc) that had transcended the histories of colonialism and war. That which was seen to be outside history, to transcend it—folk culture—was at the very foundation of the vision for the socialist present.

Since the economic reforms were initiated in 1986, the revolutionary cultural discourse has been giving way to discussions about Vietnam’s cultural heritage, a concept that increasingly plays a central role in shaping both scholarship and cultural policy. Literally, “changing for the new,” Đổi Mới is often referred to as “renovation.” These reforms began a process of political and economic liberalization to deregulate markets and institute limited political reforms. Reform has had a tremendous impact on many aspects of social and cultural life in Vietnam, including the diverse ways that Vietnamese relate to and remember their past. In post-reform Vietnam, references to an essential Vietnamese spirit still echo, in particular, in the discursive differentiation between the practice of quan họ in the village and the mass-mediated form by which it has become popular among a wider public. Increasingly, authentic quan họ is said to reside in elderly quan họ singers, whose memories provide the essential key to reconstructing past practices that had disappeared because of wartime necessity or socialist ideological pressure.

**PLACING QUAN HỌ**

In contemporary Vietnam, the discourse on authentic or “original” (nguyên si) quan họ is often articulated in terms of place and time. Where quan họ singers are from (Bắc Ninh or elsewhere), how they are trained (in the village or a conservatory), and how old they are (trained before or after 1945) are crucial elements in the discursive construction of quan họ singers as “authentic.” This construction of authenticity relies upon memories: the memories of elderly singers used to reconstruct an “original” form of practice, and the collective cultural memories of an idealized past located in rural life.

In recent years, academic discourse in Vietnamese studies has focused sharply on memory, particularly on discursively constructed memories of the past in the reform period. As Hue Tam Ho Tai remarks, “Commemorative fever is threatening to blanket the Vietnamese landscape with monuments to the worship of the past” (2001:1). She argues that the upsurge in commemoration is a by-product of reform but is not simply a salvage operation. After reform, “the decline of High Socialist orthodoxy, relative prosperity, and prolonged peace have encouraged other actors besides the state