

Zhou Xun and Francesca Tarocco, **Karaoke: The Global Phenomenon**, Reaktion Books, 2007, 207 pp., \$19.95 (paperback).

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Karaoke may be known as an activity in which people engage when they've had one too many drinks while belting out "Like a Virgin" in front of dozens of strangers. But this in no way makes it lightweight as a topic of critical inquiry. Zhou Xun and Francesca Tarocco maintain in *Karaoke: The Global Phenomenon* that karaoke represents a singular technological tool that allows users to tap into the unrestrained energy of popular music and identify with others around them. Xun and Tarocco take a scholarly approach, probing the roots of karaoke technology and exemplifying its global influence.

The book is not intended to be an "encyclopedia of karaoke," and though it occasionally drifts in this direction, the authors construct a set of pertinent case studies to explore karaoke cultures and their links to globalization. *Karaoke* is not a classic academic text; instead, it is an inviting blend of glossy photographs, ethnographic information and media theory. Unlike Toru Mitsui and Shuhei Hosokawa's collection *Karaoke Around the World: Global Technology, Local Singing*, Xun and Tarocco's contribution dissects the particularities of karaoke while producing a book that appeals to pop culture enthusiasts, musicians and media studies scholars alike.

Setting down the theoretical groundwork for the rest of the book, Xun and Tarocco contend that karaoke signifies one sphere of globalization where the precedent is not set by America or the West. Karaoke culture is an elaborate web with no margin or center, traveling in inconstant and irregular ways. Xun and Tarocco conclude that terms such as "ethnicity" and "multiculturalism" may not be sufficient to describe the convolution of the global karaoke phenomenon.

There are a whole host of claims about the origins of karaoke, from Japan, Singapore, and the Philippines to China and even Wales, where some argue that the tradition of public singing can be traced back to the Elizabethan period when hymns and carols were treated as a form of mass entertainment. The early prototype of the karaoke machine called the "8-juke" was invented in Japan in the early 1970s. Since then, karaoke has developed into a full-blown industry and a fundamental aspect of Japanese culture. Social and corporate life in Japan revolve around karaoke events, which require careful attention to etiquette and employee hierarchies.

Key to Xun and Tarocco's argument is the idea that karaoke becomes enmeshed in the cultural atmosphere of the place it inhabits. In Southeast Asia, where the sex industry is a tourist draw and a significant component of the economy, karaoke venues featuring female sex workers abound and choosing a "hostess" is a regular part of the experience for men who seek late night companions. Thailand is a major trafficking center for so-called "service girls," who are enticed by high salaries and often exploited

by “brokers.” In Bangkok and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, distinctions have arisen between family-friendly karaoke joints and their more licentious counterparts.

In North America, karaoke has taken on similarly risqué associations, from events like “pornoake” where participants create sound and dialogue for old pornographic movies, to Porn Star Karaoke (PSK) where adult film stars gather with fans to perform karaoke hits. Discussions about the use of karaoke in somewhat lewd contexts are contrasted with a chapter about its application in religious settings. In both Buddhist and Christian frameworks, karaoke has been employed as a vehicle for proselytizing, and there is solid demand for karaoke CDs and VCDs of Buddhist chanting and of Christian worship songs to be sold in the “holy leisure” market.

Karaoke's discussion of life in post-reform China provides an important glimpse at the relationship between politics and new media. Xun and Tarocco describe Beijing as a center of “Disneyfication,” where consumers live out their fantasies in kitschy karaoke joints full of Western memorabilia. Karaoke machines are now ubiquitous in urban Chinese homes, giving all people access to major emblems of power from the previous era – microphones and remote controls.

While Xun and Tarocco's exploration of assorted karaoke cultures offers a sweeping view of the trend around the world, their approach also leads to oversimplification. In a section devoted to the Philippines, they touch on Filipinos' love of Frank Sinatra: “In Manila, karaoke is more than just singing: it is a shared experience about everyday living. The Filipinos are proud, dramatic, defiant, emotional, yet tolerant and forgiving, and ‘My Way’ is their perfect song...” (79). Xun and Tarocco make a similar declaration in a section about karaoke in Vietnam: “The Vietnamese are a romantic people, and their passion for karaoke has a romantic flavour” (85).

Though intended as colorful descriptions, these phrases come across as dangerously simplistic. The language echoes that of early British anthropologists such as E.B. Tylor, who were immersed in colonial rhetoric and spoke in broad terms about the cultural characteristics of “primitive” cultures. Such generalized descriptions do not appear in portions of the book about Europe and North America, suggesting that Xun and Tarocco treat Filipino and Vietnamese cultures as being more easily encapsulated. While the book sets out to subvert common assumptions about globalization and the West, wide-ranging statements about groups of people counteract this aim.

If the ethnographic content is occasionally problematic, the theoretical underpinnings of *Karaoke* remedy its uncertain elements. One of the most persuasive segments is about the role of the microphone in karaoke performance. As the advent of the first microphone at the beginning of the 20th century changed the way performers communicated with audiences, karaoke has made it possible for virtually anyone to hold a microphone and sing. Xun and Tarocco suggest that karaoke introduced an element of populism into worldwide music performance by giving voice to anyone who owns a karaoke machine or walks into a venue and picks up a microphone. Part of the thrill is in taking center stage and briefly becoming a rock star. Though in some situations, peer and family interaction are given higher priority than performance quality, karaoke systems like the “Magic Mic” are able to add reverb, slow down the

tempo, and change the key of the song, letting the performer delve further into a rock star reverie by providing the tools necessary to sound like a commercial recording artist.

To the greatest extent possible, the karaoke user has control, making the medium as versatile as a blank canvas. Xun and Tarocco's research enables us to conclude that karaoke can be used in a range of complex and contradictory ways. It can help preserve cultural traditions, develop community, and act as an educational device, while assisting in religious worship, symbolizing modernity, and facilitating aspects of the global sex trade. The strength of *Karaoke* is in the diversity and breadth of its material. Xun and Tarocco offer a perceptive outline of this captivating medium, raising nearly as many questions as they answer and supplying scholars and karaoke fans with provocative fodder for further inquiry.