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Vietnamese Water Puppet Theatre: A  
Look Through The Ages

Derek Gaboriault  
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# Vietnamese Water Puppet Theatre:

## A Look Through The Ages

Derek Gaboriault

Senior Thesis

Submitted to the Honors College of

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Approved by

  
The image shows three handwritten signatures in blue ink, each written over a horizontal line. The signatures are: 1. A cursive signature that appears to be 'Derek Gaboriault'. 2. A cursive signature that appears to be 'David Yang'. 3. A cursive signature that appears to be 'Angela Jones'. Below these three lines is a fourth, empty horizontal line.

## ABSTRACT

Through scenes depicting heroism, courage, perseverance, and others, Vietnamese Water Puppet Theatre serves as a tool for fostering nationalism, creating and solidifying a cultural identity, and serving as a reminder to the Vietnamese of their agrarian past. Water puppetry has endured many setbacks like the Vietnam War for example, however troupes like the Thăng Long Theatre Troupe and Central Puppet Theatre Troupe are able to dually serve to attract tourists and have a strong connection with many of the Vietnamese. Tuồng and Chèo Theatre have coexisted alongside Water Puppet Theatre and has helped reiterate the importance of traditional theatre within Vietnam.

INDEX WORDS: Vietnamese, Water Puppets, Theatre, Vietnam

VIETNAMESE WATER PUPPET THEATRE: A LOOK THROUGH THE AGES

by

DEREK GABORIAULT

A Capstone Experience/Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of

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2009

VIETNAMESE WATER PUPPET THEATRE: A LOOK THROUGH THE AGES

by

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May 2009

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this first and foremost to my mother, Anne-Marie Armbruster. Without her guidance, encouragement and support I would not be the person who I am today.

I would also like to dedicate this to my friends: Ellie Cundiff, Zach Elmore, Ryan Boyd, and Jeff Bracken for always cheering me on throughout the duration of this project.

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## **Introduction**

This research was initially motivated by personal interest and transformed into a desire to expose my community and hopefully beyond, to a form of Asian theatre largely unknown outside of Southeast Asia. For the past two years, I have researched Vietnamese Water Puppet Theatre in the U.S. and in Vietnam, through archival research, personal interviews, by attending live performances and more. The intricacy and beauty of this art form, the allure of the language, and the lack of available information in the U.S. led me to pursue the research further. My in-country experience revealed the importance of this art form to the Vietnamese people, both past and present. My research in the U.S. and abroad was overwhelming, largely due to the lack of resources available in the United States and the amount of important resources in Vietnam which are presently only available in Vietnamese. Vietnamese Water Puppet Theatre functions not only as a relief from the grueling work day, but also as a window into the past that helps reinforce traditional values and cultural identity in a country plagued by occupation and war.

As a whole water puppetry is primarily known within the borders of Vietnam, but in recent years largely through international tours and artistic exchange it has spread beyond the borders of Vietnam. I believe many Vietnamese artists and I have the same idea: that people need to experience water puppetry in order to appreciate it. It is a hidden gem in the world of puppetry that has slowly come to light. However, many Americans do not know what Water Puppet Theatre is much less its importance.

In order to fully appreciate Water Puppet Theatre, I found it necessary to discuss other histories of puppetry. Puppetry is one of the most ancient forms of theatre with a sporadically documented history making it difficult for scholars to agree on its origins in many cultures. Unfortunately, there is incomplete evidence leading scholars to an exact origin or path of

puppetry evolution in many regions, thus the history of puppetry is fascinating and complex. Many cultures have some form of puppet theatre tradition. Indian culture is known for Shadow Puppetry, many European countries hold the puppet Punch in high esteem, Japan's cultural and traditional values are reflected in Bunraku, and puppetry in the U.S. blends and incorporates puppet traditions from many other cultures. This list merely scratches the surface, but provides a fundamental basis for understanding the importance of Water Puppet Theatre in Vietnam. Shadow Puppetry, Punch, and Bunraku all have both political and social implications in their respected cultures: helping to preserve history and culture, providing escape, and offering a pivotal glimpse into culture.

There are two additional forms of Vietnamese Theatre that must be discussed to fully understand Water Puppet Theatre. The Tuồng and Chèo Theatre have co-existed with water puppetry for some time and have contributed to shaping Water Puppet Theatre as it exists today. Both are very significant in Vietnamese culture and have also played important social and political roles in Vietnam. Without the presence of these two forms of theatre, Water Puppet Theatre may not have enjoyed the success or growth it has in the past and continues to experience in the present.

Water Puppet Theatre has grown to be an essential part of the lives of many Vietnamese. I want to explore why this is so and why it remains to be so through both Vietnam's history and Water Puppet Theatre's history, this will include a look at the ancient and recent history of Vietnam and water puppetry in order to draw a conclusion about the impact water puppetry has had on the lives of many Vietnamese throughout the ages.

## Chapter 1

### A Brief Puppet History from India to the U.S.

#### *Shadow Puppetry*

Many cultures have a poorly documented puppet theatre history. Shadow Puppetry, a prominent and popular form of puppet theatre in Asia, like other forms, endures exhaustive scrutiny and debate surrounding its origins. Before archeological evidence proved otherwise, some scholars pointed to a commonly accepted Indian legend “*Rāmāyana*”<sup>1</sup> as the origin of Shadow Puppetry. This legend suggests Lord Rama told a ferryman, Guha, to take “my image, tell my story to others...” and generations after Guha followed suit (Singh 155). This led scholars to believe it to be the most concrete literary point of origin since thus far because oral storytelling traditions were the most commonly used form of passing on stories. Recently discovered, however, were 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. documented performances of the “*Mahābhārata*”<sup>2</sup> and “*Rāmāyana*” in India and China that are believed to be the first performances (Chen 26). This helped narrow down the time and place of the beginnings of Shadow Puppetry.

When examining different Shadow Puppetry traditions in Southeast Asia, one will invariably discover differing performance conventions such as varying size puppets (up to six feet tall), constructed from a wide variety of materials (such as cloth or leather); however, what each performance tradition has in common is the ritual component that varies in significance by both region and occasion. In addition, across Asia performances are commonly comprised of

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<sup>1</sup> 24,000 verses long and written over 2,000 years ago by poet Valmiki. The *Rāmāyana* foretells the events leading to the Golden Age of India (Tripathi 38).

<sup>2</sup> An epic Indian poem containing more than 90,000 stanzas, making it the longest in the world. The *Mahābhārata* is said to have been written over a 1000 year span (Fairservis Jr. 46).

music, a curtain to conceal the puppets and puppeteers from the audience, and a source of light to create the illusion of shadows (Singh 154).

The conventions used in Shadow Puppetry are similar to those used in Water Puppet Theatre: the use of music to create mood and a curtain used to conceal the puppeteers. As widely known as Shadow Puppetry is, its popularity does not exempt it from having an uncertain origin, much like Water Puppet Theatre.

### ***Marionettes and Hand and Glove Puppets***

Most familiar of European puppet forms are marionettes<sup>3</sup> and hand and glove puppets<sup>4</sup>. Greek historian Herodotus first wrote of wire-controlled figures used in fertility rights, which were later used for entertainment (Barasch 158). In later centuries, the name for these figures came to be known as marionettes, derived from the Old French word *marionette*, a diminutive of *marion* from the *Virgin Mary* (“Marionette,” 2004).

Though puppetry was described as a lucrative profession by a Syracusan entrepreneur in Greece, European history contains scant information concerning puppetry from approximately 400 to 1200 C.E. (Barasch 158). It was during the 13<sup>th</sup> century that records of hand and glove puppets first appeared in Europe. After the fall of Rome, puppeteers joined wandering minstrels “to perform in the barbarian world” and together survived Christian prohibitions against theatre (qtd. in Barasch 158). These wandering troupes used hand and glove puppets to earn a living during this time. In 1344, Jehan de Grise’s illustrations in *Li romans du boin roi Alexandre*, book based on tales of chivalry and folk tales, described performance spaces for hand and glove

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<sup>3</sup> Puppets controlled from above from strings manipulated by a puppeteer.

<sup>4</sup> Quite literally as the name states: a puppet created to be manipulated by the hand.

puppets as temporary booths often made to represent a castle (Barasch 159). This puppetry convention continues today, for example some Czechoslovakian puppet troupes use marionettes or hand and glove puppets to stage Shakespearean classics in what appears to be a castle (Bogatyrev 98).

Around the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the first documented instances the Church banning European puppeteers dabbling with religious drama first appeared (Barasch 160-161). Despite this some were able to continue to perform in the homes of wealthy patrons. In 1599, the Mayor of Chester made an attempt to abolish blasphemous aspects of performances, including “gods on strings,” supporting the theory that marionettes were used for this play (Speaight, *English Puppet Theatre* 53-54). Similarly, in Vietnam, ancient kings made attempts to abolish water puppetry believing it to be a form of idolatry, but the water puppet troupes continued to thrive because, like the European counterparts, performing was their sole source of income. The marionettes and hand and glove puppets also helped maintain a connection to the past, which is a critical aspect of Eastern culture.

A more well-known example of marionettes in European history come from *The Romance of Flamenca*<sup>5</sup> which describes a celebration in honor of the King and Queen of France as having an entertainer that “made the puppets play” (qtd. in Barasch 159). *Flamenca* describes a puppeteer performing scenes from ancient Greece, the Bible, the Knights of the Round Table story, and popular romances with marionettes. George Speaight, a theatre historian and leading authority on puppet theatre, notes the description of the puppeteers performances continue to appear in English puppet plays three and four hundred years later (Speaight, *English Puppet*

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<sup>5</sup> A poem written in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, author is unknown.

*Theatre* 31-32). Water Puppet Theatre, among other forms of theatre, recycles beloved stories that strongly influenced to audiences.

### ***Punch or the Universal Clown***

One of the biggest parallels between Western puppetry and Vietnamese Water Puppet Theatre is the clown character. In English Theatre this character is known as Punch, a major reoccurring stock character from English hand and glove puppetry. Punch emerged in different versions throughout the world, in Russia he is known as Petrouchka, in Germany, Kasperl, in ancient Greece, Karaghiozis, and finally Chú Tễu in Vietnam. It is commonly believed that Punch or PUNCHINELLO (introduced to London on May 9, 1662 by an Italian showman) developed out of the Pulcinella<sup>6</sup> character from Italian *Commedia Dell'arte* (Speaight, *English Puppet Theatre* 74). Early European representations of Punch depict him as a country bumpkin, harking back to medieval morality plays (Speaight, "Petrushka and Punch" 11). The Russian version of Punch is most clearly illustrated in *Petrushka*, one of Ballets Russes<sup>7</sup> most popular productions, which includes dancers playing characters based on well known puppet characters (Remy 430).

In Russian puppetry, Petrushka initially developed as the comic companion of the chief puppet. Soon he grew more popular than any other puppet and the show was renamed and restructured to feature Petrushka (Speaight, "Petrushka and Punch 11-12). Although there was no fixed Petrushka play, the middle-class, who opted for more refined versions of the plays, and the lower-class appreciated them equally. In most puppet traditions, this clown acts as a link between

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<sup>6</sup> A stock commedia character played by a live performer

<sup>7</sup> A dance company founded in 1909 by Sergei Diaghilev which split into two groups during WW II and later disbanded in 1960.

what is unfolding on stage and the audience. This clown bridges the gap between the inanimate puppets and the live audience creating a more active and engaged audience.

As was the custom in Russia during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, wealthy families employed foreign tutors, who in turn introduced small hand and glove puppets to the children. As political tensions increased in Russia, the role of puppets in Russian culture changed from a tool for entertaining children, to a more educational and provocative role in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century when puppet performances began addressing greater social and political issues (Solomonik 25-26).

Despite the differences in the clown character from country to country, his role remains integral in the puppet world by providing commentary, laughter, and insight into performance, this clown often symbolizes the voice of the people. Water Puppet Theatre uses Chú Tễu to not only explain the action, but its significance. Punch, Chú Tễu, or whatever his name may be is able to transcend all language, age, and racial barriers to connect with the audience.

### ***The Evolution of Modern Puppet Theatre***

Puppetry in the U.S. incorporates conventions and characters from many countries including England, Italy, and India. Marionettes flourished in America as they had in Europe, where they were often used to attract customers to fairs (Speaight, “Petrushka and Punch” 15). Their popularity, along with hand and glove puppets, was due to their portability and ease of transport. Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the development of Vaudeville and motion pictures, interest in puppetry declined in the U.S. However, in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, puppetry experienced a rebirth through college programs, companies like the Bread and Puppet Theatre, and artists like Julie Taymor. Adaptability has been vital to puppetry’s survival. Instead

of relying solely on live performances, programs like Jim Hensen's Muppet Show have helped reinvent puppetry.

It is more difficult however, for much of Eastern puppetry to adapt. This is due mainly to the concept of the superiority of the traditional over the contemporary. Slow adaptability to tradition is illustrated in Bunraku, an important and well-known example of Asian puppetry from Japan's Edo Period<sup>8</sup>. Bunraku performers: the puppeteers, narrators, and musicians (all performers were male) were originally fully concealed from the audience by a curtain. In 1703, a group of puppeteers broke with tradition by performing with a translucent curtain between themselves and the audience. Two years later, the curtain was eliminated completely and in 1728 the Yuka, an additional stage for the musicians and narrators, was introduced.

Initially, only one man manipulated the Bunraku puppet but in 1734, puppeteer, Yoshida Bunzaburo, created a three-man system to manipulate the puppets which continues today. Originally the puppeteers held the puppets above their heads, over the curtain. Now, the main puppeteer controls the head and the right arm, another controls the left arm, and the last puppeteer controls the feet without attempting to conceal themselves from the audience. This performance convention separates Japanese puppetry from other traditions in which puppeteers conceal themselves from the audience. During the Meiji Restoration, in 1868 C.E., a series of events drastically changed Japan's political and social structure eventually resulting in a major change in Bunraku. Foreign influence led to the introduction of female performers and led to the formation of the Otome ("Maiden") Bunraku Troupe, founded in the early 1900s by Kiriake Monzo V. This troupe is comprised exclusively of female performers who individually manipulate the puppets by utilizing their own hands and feet (Skipitares 13-14, 21). Many of the

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<sup>8</sup> The Edo Period in Japan lasted from 1603-1868 C.E.

puppets and scripts created by the original Otome troupe were lost during World War II. Today, only a few women have developed the skills to perform in this troupe and are trying to keep this unique form of Bunraku alive.

The importance of puppetry is evident in each culture: serving as a source of income; functioning as a tool for commenting on the social and political atmosphere; acting as an escape and relief from daily life. Puppetry has retained its usage as a versatile instrument used for a diverse range of occasions. Vietnamese puppet traditions have been especially vital in the history of Vietnam. Following will be an exploration of two major theatrical forms within the Vietnamese culture: Tuồng and Chèo Theatre. Both have similar cultural functions and have aided in the development and endurance of Vietnamese Water Puppet Theatre.

## Chapter 2

### Tuồng Theatre (Classical Opera)

Compared to other Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam was one of the earliest to document established theatrical activity (Su 468). Vietnam is a country that has suffered many cultural upheavals, conflicts, and foreign occupations (most prominently, the Chinese, Japanese, French, and American occupations), yet has persevered. Many Vietnamese learned to appreciate aspects of occupying cultures and integrate them into their own culture: today, American music can be heard in various restaurants and clubs, French and English words have filtered into the Vietnamese language, and Chinese Confucianism is a prominent religion. Despite this, Vietnamese theatre maintains many of its traditional conventions and style (Brandon 249). Theatre as a whole in Vietnam has helped the country cope with its violent and tumultuous past. By offering a sense of relief from the monotony of daily life, jobs, and serving as a reminder of traditional values, the theatre has a critical position in the Vietnamese culture.

A major point of contention in the history of Vietnamese Water Puppet Theatre, similarly in European and Indian theatre history, is its origin. Exploring two other major Vietnamese traditional theatrical styles, Tuồng (Vietnamese Classical Opera) and Chèo (Vietnamese Folk Drama), will provide a deeper understanding of the importance, influences, and development of Water Puppet Theatre and the role it plays in Vietnamese society. These three forms of theatre have served as a strong influence on many Vietnamese throughout the ages and are distinctly different in their presentations, yet maintain the underlying sense of tradition that the Vietnamese value so highly.

Tuồng opera is also referred to as Hát Bội, Hát Bộ, Hát Tuồng (Hát means “sing” or “to perform”; Bội, Bộ, and Tuồng all mean “drama”), all of these variations translate literally to some kind of music or performing drama. While sources disagree on the exact origins of this classical opera, one source reports this theatre style originated in China and was brought to Vietnam during the Trần Dynasty<sup>9</sup>. One theory is when the Mongols attacked the Red River valley in Northern Vietnam in 1283/84 C.E., a group of Chinese artists led by Lý Nguyên Cát were captured. After being treated well, and by order of King Trần Nhân Tông<sup>10</sup>, Cát taught the children of upper-class families Chinese Tuồng Opera traditions (Ngọc Hữu and Lady Borton 23). Another source states that Cát was captured in 1285 C.E. by a Vietnamese general and subsequently taught Tuồng Opera traditions to Vietnamese performers (Brandon 245-246).

Many Vietnamese theatrical and religious traditions are thought to have originated in China. Undoubtedly connected to the fact that Vietnam was occupied by the Chinese for nearly ten centuries. Sources conflict on whether China or Vietnam is more likely to have started these traditions.

### ***The Characteristics, Development, and Evolution of Tuồng Theatre***

Many Tuồng operas have happy endings like their proposed predecessors from China. Some scholars associate the happy endings with the influence of Chinese Confucian values and ideals. Characters are able to reach their goal of “good”—whether through total transformation or by persevering under trial. This aligns with the Confucian idea of *yi* that, in short, one’s dignity, demeanor, and righteousness “...should make a person’s conduct morally acceptable

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<sup>9</sup> The Trần Dynasty lasted from 1225-1400 C.E.

<sup>10</sup> King Trần Nhân Tông reigned from 1279 to 1293 C.E.

toward others and that should justify the the morality of human action” (Liu 364-365). Audiences can watch the scenes and enjoy the triumph of characters reaching their personal goal of “good”. This is one of the aspects of Tuồng Theatre that is the most appealing to a Vietnamese audience. Hoan T. Bac, a Vietnamese instructor for the Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute Program says many Vietnamese yearn to “see a glimmer of kindness in people that much of the media neglects to report ... Tuồng [and other theatre] has been a great help to remind us that there is still hope for humanity” since Vietnam has been subjected to so much conflict and turmoil (Personal interview, 18 July 2008).

By introducing the Indian-influenced emotional musical styles of Champa<sup>11</sup> in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (or 16<sup>th</sup> century depending on the source), the actor Dao Duy Tu is credited as having helped popularize this classical performance style in central Vietnam. This musical style was intriguing to the common people because “it contrasted music from foreign countries and the stylized speaking that was already a part of this operatic form” (Brandon 246). Scenes are accompanied by traditional Vietnamese percussion instruments (such as a small drum, a larger, principal drum, or a war drum) and songs. The songs come in three styles: falsetto Chinese, soft Southern Vietnamese, or prose recitative, which are typically accompanied by stringed instruments, such as a two-string violin.

Tuồng Theatre was primarily a northern court entertainment from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Brandon 246). The Champa style helped Tuồng Theatre become more widely accepted throughout the country, resulting in more productions and an increased number of companies. Finally, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, this style of classical opera was introduced to the more

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<sup>11</sup> Descendants of the Malayo-Polynesian people, the Chams occupied the central and southern coast of Vietnam from the 7<sup>th</sup> century to the 1830s when the final part of their land was annexed. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E. the Champa adopted Indian culture and religion.

southern regions of Vietnam under the guidance of the Nguyễn Dynasty<sup>12</sup> and reached the height of its popularity. Emperor Minh Mạng reinforced any existing Chinese influence by importing Chinese theatre performers to rework the opera. This reworking could be why Tuồng Theatre bears a resemblance to Cantonese opera in gesture, costume, and makeup. Despite this, Vietnamese performers have incorporated distinctly Vietnamese sentiments in scripts as well as Vietnamese musical characteristics (like drums and flutes used in water puppetry) and theatrical conventions, thus, distinguishing Tuồng from Chinese classical opera. Some scholars believe the incorporation of Vietnamese sentiments after the reworking by the Chinese performers indicates that Tuồng Theatre originated in China despite its popularity in Vietnam. However, there has not been any research to support this claim.

Whether or not Tuồng Theatre originated in China, the Chinese influence on Tuồng Theatre cannot be denied. It was not until playwright and scholar, Dao Tan gathered 300 actors in the King's Court in Huế around the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to document important Tuồng stories, originally passed through oral tradition, that a conscience decision to lessen the influence of Chinese theatre in Tuồng Theatre was reached (Su 468). One of the strictly Vietnamese adaptations is in the language of the dramatic texts. The Vietnamese and Chinese language of Tuồng is more formal and aristocratic. In production, the abundance of Chinese words posed a difficulty for troupes and hindered audience understanding and appreciation of performances. Most foreign words were replaced with more easily comprehensible Vietnamese words and phrases. Instead of having Chinese words that only loosely mirrored Vietnamese words, the Vietnamese words allowed for a greater understanding and a deeper audience connection to performances. In the 1940s, Doan Quan Tan attempted, and succeeded to some degree, in

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<sup>12</sup> The Nguyễn Dynasty ruled from 1802-1945 C.E.

completely removing the remaining Chinese words. During this time, the existence of *Phuong Nha Tro*, an official court troupe, attests to *Tuồng Theatre*'s continued popularity. In addition to the lessening of Chinese performance traditions, primary story themes evolved along with cultural changes within Vietnam. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, traditional stories involving loyalty to kings evolved into plays *questioning* blind loyalty to kings, corrupt courts, and staying true to oneself. During the French (1862-1954 C.E.) and American (1965-1975 C.E.) occupations, plots containing heroes conquering oppressors became dominant themes.

Today, there are two different *Tuồng Theatre* performance styles: *Tuồng Pho* and *Tuồng Do*. The first deals with the affairs of the state and aristocracy while the second has a more comic tone and deals with the more common people (Su 468). This diversity enables *Tuồng Theatre* to remain popular with all classes throughout the country.

### ***Symbolism in Tuồng Performance***

In Indian Sanskrit Theatre actors train for years to perfect essential and strictly codified traditional stage movements imbued with strong cultural meanings. Likewise, *Tuồng Theatre* contains great cultural symbolism which much of the Vietnamese audience has grown to expect and understands from traditional education and performances. An illustration of this symbolism can be found in the make-up: white, for example, represents treachery or a black, curly beard means the character is aggressive. The set in *Tuồng Theatre* is traditionally bare with the exception of two tables and chairs; the set serves as an open space for characters. On the sparse stage characters reveal inner feelings through codified movement and gesture. The stage movements and gestures are exaggerated, stylized and are meant to suggest more than physically portray, much like the set which is usually bare except minor props. If a character gestures like

he is brandishing a whip, the audience understands him to be on horseback or if a character uses an oar, the scene must be taking place in a body of water. Another example would be when two characters are fighting. This typically represents two very large groups clashing or can represent only two people. Tuồng Theatre also utilizes symbolism when telling stories of Vietnam's past triumphs in war ("History/Origins", 2006). The symbolic meaning in Tuồng performance is very significant to the overall experience.

Tuồng Theatre is still staged today in various parts of Vietnam; albeit it has encountered a decrease in popularity since the 1970s (Brandon 246). The simultaneous need for tradition and adaptability has been a part of Tuồng Theatre since it began. Tuồng performers wish to keep audiences returning by incorporating newer stories but still keep in touch with the traditions that make up Tuồng Theatre. The easiest way to do this is through the political reminders of Vietnam's triumphs. Water Puppet Theatre troupes have dealt with the same issues of keeping with popular taste but not lose the sense of tradition.

## Chapter 3

### Chèo Theatre (Traditional Folk Opera)

This form also referred to as Hát Chèo (the English equivalent of Chèo is “traditional folk operetta”), originated from the annual festival of the wet rice villages<sup>13</sup> in the Red River Delta. Chèo is considered a folk art form of the peasants of the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. In its early years, a Chèo group could consist of a few artists who performed on a thin mat with a trunk full of instruments in front of an audience (Su 468). These performances usually occurred during festivals in front of a wealthy mandarin’s house or in front of the communal house.

Animism religious traditions shared by many villagers in Vietnam mean that everything from simple objects to the complete universe possesses a soul. Many hold fast to connections to the past and worship the Thành Hoàng, or “guardian spirit”<sup>14</sup>, among other gods. These guardian spirits and gods are believed to have begun to appear in Vietnam with the spread of Buddhism from India to the ancient city of Luy Lâu<sup>15</sup> in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E. Monks from India and China entered Vietnam and consequently rural festivals became primarily tied to Buddhist traditions (“History/Origins,” 2006). This connection is seen in Chèo opera through rituals performed by the players to please the gods.

As the form grew, Royal Court Theatre Troupes, like the Thương Lám Đệ Tử (The Upper Forest Brotherhood) formed. In 1363 King Trần Dụ Tông began presenting awards to princes and princesses who exhibited superior plays—establishing the first theatre festival recorded in

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<sup>13</sup> A village that has a flooded area of land used for growing rice.

<sup>14</sup> This “guardian spirit” was likely adopted from the Chinese during the Tang Period (618 C.E. to 907 C.E.). Instead of protecting castles and small towns, the Vietnamese geniis protected small villages (Tran & Reid 34).

<sup>15</sup> During the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E., Luy Lâu was an established Buddhist center. Presently, the ruins of Luy Lâu can be found in the Hà Bắc province in the Northern region of Vietnam.

Vietnam. This event served as a precedent for documenting later theatrical activities in Vietnam. The troupes flourished until abolished by King Lê Thái Tông in 1437. Though the troupes disbanded, many members returned to their villages and continued to perform. Much like the wandering minstrels and troupes of medieval Europe, the troupes had to perform in small regions around the country, slowly gaining more recognition as a vital art form as well as rekindling their popularity.

### ***Characteristics and Performance Conventions of Chèo Theatre***

By the 10<sup>th</sup> century C.E., Chèo Theatre included poetry, mime, singing, and dancing. It was not until the 1501 C.E. that Vietnamese scholar and theorist Luong The Vinh codified the rules for Chèo drama in the book *Hi Phuong Pha Luc* (Su 468). Although the rules were codified, the performances still remained improvisational. This technique offers opportunities for actors to improvise while also following an existing scenario, allowing a characters' actions and words to remain more connected to the cultural and historical circumstances of the moment. If an improvisation is good, then it is integrated into future performances. The practice of adding contemporary gestures and actions (and their meanings) from improvisation continues today. Among Vietnamese traditional theatre, Chèo Theatre is one of the few forms that allow room for innovation through improvisation. The success of this style of theatre has helped contemporary traveling troupes learn to perform solely from improvisation, like many artists in western theatre. During the French occupation of Vietnam<sup>16</sup>, Chèo performers like Nguyễn Đình Nghi worked to modernize the art form by making several independent scenes and acts that created a more cohesive play. Prior to this, scenes were performed without any connecting theme.

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<sup>16</sup> 1864 – 1954.

Chèo dialogue and music are of folk origin, making them more colloquial than that found in Tuồng Theatre. The clown stock character uses the language of the people to comment on the action on stage in a comical and satirical way (“History/Origin,” 2006). The dialogue is mixed with poetry and does not follow the rhythm of the accompanying bronze drum or other instruments, such as the flute or cymbals. The bronze drum is considered the most important instrument of Chèo and is only used for special occasions, performed by high ranking officials in the village (Nguyễn, 14:18). It was also used to signal the beginning of a Chèo performance to the villages (“History/Origin,” 2006).

In performance, the narrator always relates the plot in the prologue. Additional actors come on stage, perform a recitative and sing what is essentially the story. Characters are easily recognizable because many are stock characters familiar in Vietnam similar to those found in commedia. The three most common stock characters are: the hero, heroine, and a clown character (ibid.). The characters of Chèo are similar to those found in Water Puppet Theatre but different from those found in Tuồng Theatre; Chèo characters are typically depict a common, working person while Tuồng primarily centers on aristocratic characters. Chèo Theatre scenarios are well known to performers yet few written Chèo Theatre texts actually exist and those that do reveal little, yet hundreds of traditional and well-known traditional songs are associated with Chèo (Su 468).

Plots are linear, simple, and called the “thân trò” (play body) by veteran performers. After the current structure of a larger connected play developed, the dàn đế characters appeared. The dàn đế plays a similar role to that of the Greek chorus and are specific to this type of drama. Depending on the size of the production, the number of dàn đế can vary from a few to a sizable group. Chèo stories usually center on the common person and mock those in power while

exposing injustices done to lower officials and common people. They are usually positioned on mats around the staging area. This is the main reason why those in power did not like Chèo Theatre.

The settings and performance demands of Chèo Theatre vary widely from the fantastical to the intimate. A play might call for a thousand actors (represented by the *dàn đé*), or for a simple cast in a more intimate story, it may require an elaborate setting (such as a village pagoda) that can be represented by a few mats on the ground. Like Tuồng Theatre, Chèo Theatre is not confined to realistic time or space permitting the stage to be more versatile.

Also true in the West, only the most influential and popular stories are passed to future generations in Chèo Theatre. Though Chèo stories proved important to the generations that produced them, major political and social changes in Vietnam may have caused them to lose significance in subsequent generations. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as modern forms of entertainment became increasingly popular, Chèo Theatre enthusiasts and practitioners attempted to stage more contemporary stories to compete with the growing competition. The opera's popularity waned until it returned to its traditional forms of storytelling. Not long afterwards in 1964, the government noted that Chèo Theatre was a valuable tool in teaching Vietnamese heritage and established the Vietnam Chèo Theatre in order to continue research in Chèo and perform throughout the country ("History/Origins," 2006).

Chèo and Tuồng Theatre have co-existed with Water Puppet Theatre for many centuries. Similar stories have been passed down from troupe to troupe, reiterating important themes, cultural connection, and ties to the past. Though performance conventions vary greatly, each of these forms have been imperative to the success of creating a more positive identity for Vietnam for foreigners and furthering an understanding of the importance of knowing one's past.

## Chapter 4

### Múa Rối Nước Kịch (Water Puppet Theatre)

The origin of Múa Rối Nước Kịch (Water Puppet Theatre) is as uncertain as the puppetry traditions of India, China, and even of Chèo and Tuồng Theatre. One theory is that water puppetry began in China where the earliest references in literature to Water Puppet Theatre occurred during the reign of Emperor Ming-ti<sup>17</sup>. The reference describes the performance of “a wheeled wooden puppet powered by water, which could beat a drum” (Foley 131). This alludes to a hydro-powered stationary puppet with moveable arms that struck a drum as the water moved the wheel. The Sung and Ming Dynasties<sup>18</sup> each had its own version of water puppetry, but scholars theorize that this form never flourished in China because traditional Chinese theatre emphasizes elements like dance instead of scenery and spectacle like Vietnamese theatre (Hsu 182). In contrast, this form flourished in Vietnam, leading some scholars to believe that it may have actually started in Vietnam and was later adopted by the Chinese, like that of Tuồng Theatre. Additional evidence for this theory is that the Chinese word for water puppetry is taken from the Vietnamese term.

The first documented instance of Water Puppet Theatre in Vietnam can be found at the Long Đọi Sơn Pagoda<sup>19</sup>, inscribed around 1121 C.E. The inscription describes entertainment that occurred at a birthday celebration for King Lý Nhân Tông<sup>20</sup> of the Lý Dynasty. The inscription description a scene from Water Puppet Theatre: “The golden tortoise, swimming in a leisurely

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<sup>17</sup> Emperor Ming-ti reigned from 227-239 C.E.

<sup>18</sup> The Sung Dynasty lasted from 969-1126 C.E.; The Ming Dynasty lasted from 1364-1644 C.E.

<sup>19</sup> A Buddhist pagoda in the Sóc Trăng Province, located in the Đồng Bằng Sông Cửu Long (Red River Delta) in northern Vietnam

<sup>20</sup> King Lý Nhân Tông reigned from 1072-1127 C.E.

way, carries three mountains on its head above the rippling wave ... Casting at the bank, it opens its mouth to spurt waters toward the jetty ... A Courtly musical prelude is played, the door for the grotto opens and fairies appear in a dance” (Foley 131-132). Another inscription on the pagoda goes into more detail about the same scene: “A golden tortoise ... was seen on the rippling surface of water ... On the back of the golden tortoise, the gates of the caves in the three mountains opened up. Different puppets figuring as fairies in the play appeared on stage and dance ... Then, the golden tortoise was brought ashore to be operated by hand, and the show continued on land” (ibid.). These inscriptions describe the popular story of *The Legend of the Restored Sword*<sup>21</sup> where a golden turtle asks a king to return the magical sword that helped win a battle (Dunning par. 5). The second inscription not only describes the scene, but also provides insight into the evolution of water puppetry.

### ***Development of Múa Rối Nước Kịch***

During the Trần Dynasty<sup>22</sup>, water puppetry was held in high esteem in Vietnamese culture. Regarding a puppet show he saw, King Trần Thái Tông<sup>23</sup> wrote: “Everybody sees clearly that wooden puppets rely on mechanical means and use strings to create movements. They are able to move and dance as living creatures. They would come to a standstill if the strings were to be dropped” (Vietnamese Theater 57). Although people understand the puppets do not move on their own, this fact is often overlooked and forgotten once a masterful puppeteer begins his manipulation.

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<sup>21</sup> A longer explanation can be found in later sections

<sup>22</sup> The Trần Dynasty lasted from 1225-1400 C.E.

<sup>23</sup> King Trần Thái Tông reigned from 1225-1258 C.E.

Unlike Tuồng and Chèo theatre, Water Puppet Theatre was appreciated and accepted by both the aristocracy and commoners since the earliest records of its existence in Vietnam. In 1350 C.E., performers such as Đinh Bảng Đức ventured from China to earn a living in Vietnam. During the Lê Dynasty<sup>24</sup>, literature began to become valued over puppetry and the lierati emerged, but Water Puppet Theatre remained important to village festivals and ceremonies. During this period, the largest stage house for Water Puppet Theatre was built on Long Trì Lake near the Thầy Pagoda located in the Hà Tây Province in northern Vietnam. Also, the scripts used during the earlier centuries were not traditional scripts but more closely resembled suggested scenarios. They had a few lines suggesting what would be said and in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century they developed into more official scripts. These scripts were guarded by the troupes that created them and only recently have they been permitted to be translated into other languages. The scripts are short since many of the water puppetry productions consist of short scenes.

Though Tuồng Theatre increased in importance during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, water puppetry remained consistently popular in the rural areas of Vietnam, and remained an important and vital form of entertainment in the Royal Court. Performances generally occurred in Huế, known as the Imperial City, located in central Vietnam. Ceremonies held in Huế included puppetry to mark important events such as a new king ascending the throne or the birthday of the king.

Throughout the history of foreign occupation in Vietnam, water puppetry and other forms have thrived in villages under the philosophy provided by Hoan T. Bac: “don’t let anyone be idle and live at the expense of others, and never tolerate those who bring the enemy home” (Personal interview, 18 July 2008). In Water Puppet Theatre performances Uncle Tễu, a stock clown

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<sup>24</sup> The Lê Dynasty lasted from 1428-1788 C.E.

character similar to the European Punch, greets the audience by saying: “We would rather come back to our own pond to take a bath whether its water is clear or troubled, we have since long gotten used to it” (ibid.)

Puppetry in Vietnam, Múa Rối Nước Kịch included, had fallen into decline due to the French occupation before the August 1945 Revolution; moreover, equipment and puppets were destroyed by a Vietnamese war with the French in 1946. Hope for the resurrection of water puppetry appeared in 1954 when the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam<sup>25</sup> reintroduced it throughout the country, revitalizing its popularity.

### ***Evolution: Mechanics, Trends, and Recent Developments***

Unlike Tuồng and Chèo Theatre, the stage for Water Puppet Theatre is exactly what the name implies water. In previous centuries, the performances were staged in rice paddies, rivers, or ponds—any body of water was acceptable. In the 11<sup>th</sup> through the 13<sup>th</sup> century, during the height of its popularity in the Ly and Cham Dynasty, it was not uncommon for water puppetry to be performed on floating pavilions (Phillips, “Glimpse” par. 3). Once troupes began touring, water puppetry’s popularity grew and more permanent structures appeared, a portable pool also appeared in the 1930s<sup>26</sup> (Bailey par. 3).

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<sup>25</sup> The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN), also known as North Vietnam, was founded by President Ho Chi Minh and was recognized by China and the USSR in 1950 and by France in 1954 after their defeat.

<sup>26</sup> Note Figure 1.



Figure 1: A Water Puppet Theatre performance space. All stages for water puppetry appear like this, but the portable pools are slightly smaller in size than the natural bodies of water. Personal photo taken September 27, 2007.



Figure 2. The top of a building in the Water Puppet Theatre set. Whether the house is a communal house or a pagoda, the flags are present. Personal photo taken September 27, 2007.



Figure 3. Puppeteers after a performance. Personal photo taken September 27, 2007.

The most common locations for water puppetry are on ponds where a permanent or temporary staging area has been constructed, in a portable pool, or in specialized buildings with a permanent stationary pool (Foley 130). The pool used in touring is rectangular and nine foot long. The audience is generally seated on three sides of the playing space. The remaining side used by the puppeteers is decorated, to resemble either a pagoda or a communal house from a village as seen in Figure 1 and more specifically in Figure 2. Around eight to ten puppeteers stand in waist deep water (Figure 3) manipulating the puppets from behind a bamboo scrim. The scrim is thin and has slits enabling them to watch the puppets, gauge the audience reaction, and ensure the puppet choreography is being properly executed. There are two doorways on each

side of the area housing the puppeteers. The door to the east is the “door of life” where puppets enter the playing area and the door to the west is the “door of death” where they return behind the scrim after a scene has ended (Foley 130). Since the stages for these performances are natural bodies of water, the puppeteers are susceptible to catching colds. To avoid this, they drank fermented nước mắm, or “fish sauce.” To alleviate this problem, modern puppeteers wear wet suits under their colorful costumes to avoid hypothermia (Grant par. 7).

The puppets come in a variety of forms. Usually, they are carved out of the fig trees that are prominent in Vietnam. Since the puppets are in water for extended periods of time, resin from lacquer trees is used to make them waterproof. Ranging from two to ten pounds, the puppets average from 12 to 40 inches in height. Strings are attached to the head and arms, which are the only moveable parts (Bailey par. 10).



Figure 4. Two puppets in a canoe. Personal photo taken September 27, 2007.



Figure 5. Dragon puppet. Personal photo taken September 27, 2007.



Figure 6. Line of ducks and a male figure puppet. Personal photo taken September 27, 2007.

There are three ways to control the puppets. For smaller puppets, the first method is to fasten them to the end of bamboo poles and maneuver them around the water. Bigger puppets require a large circular disc used as a flotation base. Finally, some of the more complicated puppets (such as a dragon) use a combination of the first two and can include the incorporation of a rudder to make the movements easier (Phillips, “Glimpse” par. 4). Depending on the length and width of the body of water, the average length of bamboo rods (with strings also connected to them) can range from 10 to 15 feet. The use of strings may suggest marionette puppets, but because the rods and strings go beyond the curtain and not above the stage, the difference is enough to warrant a distinct classification. The water is somewhat murky, typically blue or dark green if in a portable pool, in order to conceal the techniques used to move the puppets and to help create the illusion that the puppets move themselves (Bailey pars. 11, 15). Many troupe members are versatile and can switch from puppeteer to instrumentalist to whatever needs to be done. Those who do not manipulate the puppets either play instruments on certain sides of the

stage or rest during performances. Those who rest are typically those who ensure the puppets are safe during transportation and storage or those who have performed multiple shows in a row.

Although technological advancements have developed in European and American puppetry, Asian puppetry has largely retained traditional operation techniques. With the secrets of operation still closely guarded, theories and speculation surround the specific techniques of Water Puppet Theatre; an outsider can merely observe the ancient performance techniques as an audience member.

Originally, only men who performed in Water Puppet Theatre did so only for the love of the art, not for money. The members still treat each other like a close-knit family. Money also comes from donations from the local community and a small number of grants. If a member falls ill the other members of the troupe will help care for him. Troupe leaders, like the troupe head, puppet-maker, or mechanism operator assume the role of father figures (Bailey par. 15). The troupe travels with a sense of home as a result of this close relationship dynamic. An important element for success—trust—develops from honing the craft with fellow troupe members over the course of many years.

Recently water puppet performances have spread beyond the Vietnamese border. In 1986, the Central Puppet Theatre, the Thăng Long Theatre<sup>27</sup>, and other troupes were granted the opportunity to perform abroad. At the same time, tourism has grown in Hà Nội and in various parts of Vietnam. Water puppetry seemed to satisfy the desire to see traditional theatre abroad. Performances in England, Sweden, the U.S., France, Japan, India, and more helped convince the foreign “business community that Vietnam was ready for visitors and foreign investment” (Foley

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<sup>27</sup> These troupes will be further discussed in a later section.

135). Vietnam saw this art form as a “tool of cultural diplomacy” that could be used to help other countries see and understand Vietnamese culture (ibid.).

Performances abroad attracted some tourists to Vietnam to experience Water Puppet Theatre in its home country. Even though there is a language barrier, this does not deter foreign visitors from enjoying Water Puppet Theatre performances. A country outside of Vietnam that has embraced this form of puppetry is Australia. Since 1996, the Thăng Long Theatre Troupe has performed annually at the Sydney Festival at the Royal Botanical Gardens. Previously, the Thăng Long Troupe had never been denied entry visas to any country in which they planned to perform (including Sweden and Japan). Days before the troupe was set to leave for Sydney to perform at the 1999 Sydney Festival, the Australian embassy in Vietnam was informed that the troupe had been denied entry by the Australian government. The reason was the suspicion that some members might attempt to seek permanent residence in Australia. The leading organizers of the festival urged and pleaded with the Immigration Department in Australia to allow the Thăng Long Troupe entry. Ultimately, they were granted entry and the festival went on without a hitch (Phillips, “Glimpse” par. 20). These international tours not only serve as entertainment, but also serve to counterbalance Hollywood’s image of Vietnam. Instead of being seen as a country plagued by war and trauma, Water Puppet Theatre provides a perspective of the rich culture and hospitality Vietnam has to offer visitors.

Though there are many performances and annual international tours, the troupes also rely on the Vietnamese government for largest portion of funding by submitting an annual budget in order to receive funds. The Vietnamese government has realized the influential power of the Thăng Long Theatre Troupe and the Central Puppet Theatre Troupe on the tourist industry in Vietnam and on many Vietnamese people, so the government wants the troupes to continue to

perform. Le Van Ngo, the artistic director of the Thăng Long Theatre Troupe, shares the sentiment that the extra money from the government is not worth it for many of the performers if as a result they lose their voice to that of the government (Phillips, “Unique”, pars. 26-27).

The only technological addition to performances is the use of intricate lighting and special effects, this incorporation occurred only recently. In contrast to Vietnam’s more traditional forms of entertainment, Thăng Long’s marquee is now one of the brightest in Hà Nội’s night sky. The addition of lights is mainly found in the larger, more extravagant theatre spaces (Phillips, “Unique” par. 27).

While water puppetry was created in the Red River Delta it is now centered prominently in Hà Nội. Beginning in the 1950s, research into village arts was supported by the Vietnamese government which brought attention to many local theatre practitioners. Additionally, Vietnam and Eastern Europe began to have arts exchanges that began also in the 1950s. This relationship rapidly accelerated when the Vietnam War ended in the 1970s as more resources became available for both land and water puppetry (Foley 134). As more resources became available, production values rose leading to better facilities and water puppetry reaching a larger audience. These changes helped move water puppetry from the Red River Delta to Hà Nội while also reinforcing the value of water puppetry as an important art form.

### ***Structure of Múa Rối Nước Kịch***

Performances of Múa Rối Nước Kịch entail 20 to 30 scenes, and can last from one to two hours. Each scene may appear to be a separate story, but a common theme connects a few or all of the scenes, depending on the program and troupe. Vietnamese audiences can more easily understand the symbolism, value, and historical placement of the scenes than a foreign spectator.

Scenes from the past have been altered throughout the years, usually to be more relevant in the contemporary environment. To appeal to younger generations, themes from older scenes are used to develop new scenes with more relevant and contemporary circumstances while still conveying traditional values and lessons. Symbolism remains constant within the scenes, Vietnamese audiences are able to have a more nuanced understanding of the symbolism, but the foreign spectators are able to understand some of it as well.

Presently, productions are performed in a variety of languages including Vietnamese, English, and French to accommodate the ever-growing diversity of the audience (Foley 136). Even as a foreign spectator, the general idea of the story often transcends the language barrier because the interaction between the puppet characters and mood created by the music are easily interpreted. For a Vietnamese audience member the meaning is determined more by the text while the interaction and music serve to emphasize the meaning.

Scenes are usually set within a village, unless there is a scene that calls for a character to return from finishing the intensive mandarin exams<sup>28</sup>, depicting a war, a celebration for a king, or to tell of a fantastical story involving a dragon puppet (Figure 5). A long-standing basic structure of a program may contain scenes comprised of three elements: a reminder of the farming origins of Vietnam, Vietnam's success in triumphing over their oppressors, and the belief in the country's current stability and future prosperity<sup>29</sup> (Foley 136). Depending on the troupe, the entire program can tie all of the scenes together.

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<sup>28</sup> Intensive tests administered by the government to determine a person's career path.

<sup>29</sup> In "Examples of Scenes," this structure is further expanded on.

### *Chú Tễu Character*

Chú Tễu is to Water Puppet Theatre as Punch is to European puppetry. Chú Tễu (Chú meaning “Uncle” and Tễu derived from the ideographic script signifying “laughter”) appears in nearly every water puppet program. He serves as the “Master of Ceremonies” commenting on the stories, critiquing corruption and rejoicing with the couples in love stories (Hữu Ngọc 28). He appears to be relatively immature and ill-suited for the his given title—appearing fat with disheveled hair—but at the same time, his rosy complexion and cheerfulness make him more valuable to the production than the rest of the puppet characters. He is a powerful personality on stage and his crude appearance (sometimes crude humor as well) has transcended all social classes. Audiences enjoy Uncle Tễu who serves as a contradiction to the serious tone of some of the scenes, by flailing his arms around, while wearing a loincloth that exposes his fat belly, and taunting the audience. The other puppets involved are only limited to individual scenes, so their versatility does not match Chú Tễu’s.

Chú Tễu also acts as a catalyst to begin performances on time by encouraging the audience to sit quickly. Troupes use him to introduce performances, the style of which can vary from troupe to troupe. According to scripts owned by Nguyễn Văn Tước, a member of the Chàng Sơn Troupe, an introduction accompanied by music may be as follows:

We wish long lasting happiness and prosperity to our audience and all our people. Now, the moment has arrived to begin our story set in former times, a long time past. The green and red flags are out! The puppet soldiers stand ready in two marching columns on either side, together with their prancing horses, their steady elephants firm as mountains, and their menacing guns that wait only for fire to touch their mussels before they roar in destruction.

But wait. Look! Up above, delightful fairies fly in the pleasant air! Below them are a woodcutter, a farmer, a weaver, and some people fishing. A man at the bronze foundry is casting bells and statues. The monks and their devotees burn incense in prayer. The pagodas and communal houses are splendid. Look closely at the water! See the unicorn, tortoise, and phoenix! See the rat, dragon and snake!

Everyone—young and old—is bursting with anticipation. The words of the gods have been followed to the letter. The poets say:

“Many children and many honors: Much prosperity.

Be talented, Be lucky: Live a long life.

Brothers and Sisters, start the drums and castanets!” (Hữu Ngọc 29-30).

Essentially, Chú Tễu may give a complete summary of the characters and actions within the introduction. During transitions between scenes or even during the action, he adds commentary about the characters and at times interacts with them<sup>30</sup>.

### *Significance*

Taking apart the name, Múa Rối Nước, can offer some insight to its lingual significance. Múa means “to dance” or “to brandish a weapon.” Rối means “tangled” or “entangled,” and Nước means “water” and/or “country.” The combination Múa Rối can mean “puppetry” or “the art of puppet-showing,” “a marionette-show,” or “a puppet-play.” A clearer definition is seen with the addition of nước: “water puppets.” In a contemporary setting, dancing puppets are common in theatre, but what makes Vietnamese puppetry unique is the addition of water.

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<sup>30</sup> Examples of this can be found in Chapter 5.

From the Vietnamese perspective, water holds high importance. It provides nourishment for rice fields in the villages, symbolizes rebirth, and a connection to heritage. Water is extremely important in the growing of rice which is a primary and essential component of the Vietnamese diet. A drought or poor harvest can cause widespread starvation or unemployment. In regards to heritage, little is known about the exact origins of the Vietnamese people. A legend says the first ruler of Vietnam was King De Minh, a descendent of a mystical Chinese ruler of agriculture De Ming. King De Minh is said to have had a child with an immortal fairy which they named Kinh Duong who became the ruler of the Land of Red Demons<sup>31</sup>. He in turn married the daughter of the Dragon Lord of the Sea and they had a son. Their son, Lac Long Quan, known as the “Dragon Lord of Lac” is considered the first true king of Vietnam. He married Au Co in 2800 B.C.E., which brought forth the Hung Kings, Vietnam’s first dynasty (Buttinger, et. al. pars. 100-103). *The Dance of the Dragons* and *The Dance of the Faeries* are two scenes based on this legend.

Since then Vietnam has had an entire millenium of Chinese occupation, ending in the 9<sup>th</sup> centry C.E. From this extended occupation many aspects of Chinese culture were adopted by the Vietnamese, such as some Chinese words, religions like Buddhism and Confucianism, and different forms of art. Water Puppet Theatre possesses both Chinese linguisitic and religious influences. Buddhism is one of the leading religions in Vietnam and its ideas are present in the scenes of water puppetry<sup>32</sup>. France and Japan were next to occupy Vietnam and after the French Indochina War, Vietnam declared independence. It was divided into the Communist North Vietnam and anti-Communist South Vietnam. In 1964 a war erupted between the north and south

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<sup>31</sup> Reportedly named Land of Red Demons after the dragons living there.

<sup>32</sup> The ideas are explained in further detail in Chapter 5.

and the U.S. occupied Vietnam to help the south win the conflict. In 1973, the Vietnam War officially ended and in 1975 Saigon finally fell to the North Vietnamese. After the end of the Cold War, Vietnam re-established diplomatic and trade relations with other countries with the U.S. being one of the last in 1995. Throughout these turbulent times, Water Puppet Theatre helped ease the tension the Vietnamese faced on a daily basis. As with the Chinese, the Vietnamese incorporated cultural, linguistic, and religious influences from France, the U.S., and Japan. Water puppetry continues to reiterate the importance of good deeds and moral behavior as well as strengthen nationalism.

## Chapter 5

### Múa Rối Nước Scenes and Troupes

The two major troupes, the Thăng Long Theatre Troupe and Central Puppet Theatre Troupe perform about 17 and 16 scenes respectively, ranging from one to seven minutes (Bailey par. 17). There are nearly 134 basic scenes within water puppetry that troupes can adapt to fit their needs. About 15 of them are staple scenarios common to water puppet troupes (Foley 136). On the surface, the scenes may appear to be about village life, include Buddhist imagery, and classical satire; but they also represent Vietnam's past. Programs follow a predictable formula that includes scenes depicting Vietnam's agricultural origins, triumph over oppressors, and a positive outlook on the current state of the country (Foley 136).

A sample text about Vietnam's agricultural heritage is illustrated in the following scene in which a boy playing a flute is riding on the back of his water buffalo. The sounds from the flute and the text allow the minds of older generations to drift back to the times of their youth:

Let me tell you about the rice fields, the villages, enclosed  
is emerald green bamboos,  
the sound of a flue floating above the back of a buffalo  
la-a-a

Come back those who miss the homeland. (qtd. in Foley 136).

This scene is supposed to evoke an emotional nostalgia for farming and village life. The agrarian aspect has a positive tone in this scene, but others may include a farmer suffering from a drought. This shows not only helps foreigners understand the hardships of farming, but also reminds the Vietnamese of their perseverance.

The mood shifts as the next portion of scenes which depict the turmoil within the country, which the characters will eventually overcome:

In our countryside and villages where our life was so sweet before!

(la...)

Who is the author of smoke and ash?

Our country is in turmoil like a boiling flood. Oh my brothers and sisters

Everywhere the countryside has risen up just like water:

Thousands of people are advancing with weapons. (qtd. in Foley 138).

The heroic characters are usually Vietnamese heroes fighting Chinese warriors. Scenes with French and American troops being defeated by Vietnamese forces emerged during the times of the respective occupations. This element serves the dual purpose of fostering nationalism and warning foreigners that Vietnam has continually triumphed over above its oppressors (Foley 138). This allowed the theatre to become a refuge for many Vietnamese, reminding them of their heritage and what they were fighting to preserve. An example of contemporary events being incorporated into this aspect of the structure is when the French withdrew in 1954 and the following text was said by Têu:

And I, Têu, shout these few watchwords at the top of my voice:

Long live the Workers Party of Vietnam!

Long live President Ho!

Long live world peace and stability! (Foley 134).

The finale of a program may consist of a scene involving contemporary political, social, and economic progress. Positive Buddhist characters can be seen dancing and singing the lyrics: “The dragon, phoenix, tortoise, and unicorn—four sacred creatures—rejoice together at the

festival. This is an auspicious omen for a peaceful life” (qtd. in Foley 138). In full, a typical program encompasses Vietnam’s ancient past, recent past, present, and looks toward the future.

The themes presented in the following scenes relate to a daily routine for the Vietnamese. Many Buddhist religious ideals are found in the scenes, which is why the Vietnamese hold these scenes in high regard. The more prominent themes emphasize strong moral behaviors and values such as purity and compassion.

The scene *Buffalo Hides in an Opium Pipe* includes two fighting buffaloes and a farmer. This scene depicts the devastation resulting from opium addiction. The buffalo hiding within the pipe is consumed by addiction and is lost to the farmer. The other buffalo represents a concerned individual and the farmer represents society. Within much of the Vietnamese culture, each person in society is important and valuable. This scene serves to encourage the audiences to intervene, as in the case of a friend or relative suffering from substance abuse. Similar scenes contain the same message of intervening but with less intense subject matter. A troupe typically has variants of *Buffalo* in their repertory which can be adapted for child audiences.

The theme of courage takes many forms in Water Puppet Theatre. *Hero Fights a Tiger* has three characters—the hero (the son), the father, and a tiger. The father, a woodcutter, is gathering wood in the forest the tiger kills him. His son vows to avenge his father, ultimately taking the head of the tiger. In this scene, the son exemplifies the importance of the values of respect, honor, and duty that children are obliged to give parents in Vietnamese culture. Another symbol is the act of defeating the tiger which demonstrates the courage of the individual.

The scene *Getting into a Palanquin, Dismounting a Horse* involves six characters—two servants carrying the palanquin, a prince, a parasol bearer, a flag carrier, and Miss Tám, the village beauty who loses her shoe while attending a festival in the countryside. The prince finds

the shoe and searches for its owner. In the midst of the journey, a flower emerges from the water to reveal Miss Tám. When the prince sees Miss Tám he dismounts his horse and invites her to rest on the palanquin. The couple fall in love and head for the Royal Court to marry. This echoes the European story of Cinderella: a beautiful girl loses her shoe at a ball, a prince decides to search for the owner of the shoe, they meet, fall in love, and marry. This story promotes honesty suggesting it is rewarded with good fortune. Honesty is a reoccurring value reinforced in many Water Puppet Theatre scenes.

The scene *Avoid Stealing Antique Objects* is based on the folk tale *The Toad Sues Heaven*. In this scene, village members are gathering near the water to clean Buddha's statue, however, under the cover of darkness, a thief steals the Bodhisattva Kwan Yin's<sup>33</sup> statue. Chú Tễu and a group of animals search for the statue to no avail. Pleading for help, the toad asks the Kitchen God to tell the Jade Emperor what has happened. The Emperor sends a fairy with a magical telescope and the statue is retrieved. Two major themes in this scene are: respectfully asking for divine help/wisdom and good triumphing over evil. The latter is one of the most prominent themes in water puppetry. Since Buddhism is the primary religion in Vietnam, figures of Buddhism frequently appear as characters or in the dialogue between characters. Many Vietnamese Buddhists believe living a life according to the doctrines of Buddha will help them overcome evil within their lives. The toad's plea for help from the Kitchen God is connected loosely with this idea: by asking Buddha for help unselfishly, help will be given. The act of submission to a higher power exemplifies how many Vietnamese believe they should live.

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<sup>33</sup> Bodhisattvas's statue represent one of the highest ethical ideas in Buddhist tradition, Bodhisattvas dedicate themselves to rescuing living beings from suffering. (Mrozik 176).

The scene *Unicorns Fight for a Ball* includes two unicorns that prance through the water and lay down lazily when suddenly a ball appears. The two unicorns pursue it, but cannot catch it. After two attempts, they pretend to sleep and when the ball comes near again, they race toward it, failing once more. On their fourth attempt, the two unicorns succeed in capturing the ball, illustrating the philosophy of “try, try again.” The consequences of a bad harvest due to drought, locusts, too much rain, or a prized water buffalo dying are a harsh reality for Vietnamese farmers. The consequences of a bad harvest year can be numerous and cut across class lines in the form of unemployment, marital strife, food scarcity, and financial challenges. This scene helps remind farmers and non-farmers alike that perseverance pays off in the end and one should not quit when conflict arises.

In the scene *The Legend of the Restored Sword* from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, King Lê Lợi is traveling in a boat following the Vietnamese uprising of 1418-1427 against the Chinese. A magical golden tortoise, considered a demi-god, appears out of the water and asks the King to return the sword he possesses. This sword has many different stories surrounding it, including that the sword has the power to make the king grow taller and have the strength of many men; or the sword was retrieved from the lake, but King Lê Lợi’s added his own hilt to the sword. Regardless of which myth is more popular, the sword is returned and the lake is renamed the Restored Sword Lake (Phillips, “Glimpse” par. 11). A different version of the story tells of the tortoise surfacing, taking the sword from the king’s belt and diving back into the river. After searching for the sword, the king accepts it has been returned to the lake by the tortoise.

In Vietnamese history, King Lê Lợi is considered the embodiment of wisdom and a powerful leader because he led a vast army against the Chinese succeeding in victory. A respect

for history and its leaders is an important Vietnamese cultural virtue. Current leaders look to kings like King Lê Lợi for insight and wisdom. The following excerpt illustrates this idea:

The three-foot length of the magic sword  
has purged the enemies  
Songs echo everywhere in mountain, river, and throughout the land.  
The turtle brings the precious sword back to its former place,  
The Lake of the Returned Sword glows with reflected light. (qtd. in Foley 138).

Additional scenes like *The Little Buddhist Monk*, *The Story of a Chaste Woman*, *The Lo River*, and *Triumphant Return* serve to maintain the traditional values many Vietnamese are searching for in the ever changing and modernizing world (Tilakasiri 48). The themes presented in these scenes coincide with the Vietnamese cultural values of Buddhism and Confucianism and encourage. Foreign spectators can still understand the symbolism and main themes without understanding Water Puppet Theatre's pivotal influence in Vietnam.

### ***Thăng Long Theatre Troupe***

The troupe got its name from the city of Thăng Long, which was renamed in the 1830s to Hà Nội. Established on October 10, 1969 the troupe originally performed primarily land puppetry (Foley 136). The troupe was organized like the Central Puppet Theatre Troupe; and they did not immediately perform and only invited artists with extensive training to join. Membership in this troupe was, and still is, exclusive requiring extensive training, generally taking ten years of study. To be considered as a potential member, one must possess at least a high school diploma. The student apprentices who earn a high school diploma must condition themselves through an initial six-year training program during which time they build their

strength (both mental and physical) and hone their skills by studying stagecraft, movement, acting, and singing. An additional three years of training includes study at a university, like the Art College. Besides study at the Art College, many troupe members are graduates from the Hà Nội Institute for Performing Arts where they may be required to undertake an additional year of study, depending on the students' aptitude. It is only after graduation that different theatre troupes send their requests for these students to the Art College or the Hà Nội Institute. In order to begin troupe training, the students are contacted, interviewed, and placed based on their skill set (Phillips, "Unique" par. 29-31). The skills required for water puppetry are exercised daily in order to maintain a clear, polished performance (Foley 136).

The apprenticeship criteria to become a member of this troupe ensures that potential members are dedicated to this craft. Judith Ladinsky, chair of the U.S. Committee for Scientific Cooperation with Vietnam and Associate Professor of Preventative Medicine at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, says, "Puppeteers are recognized as highly skilled artisans. Although people usually decide in their teens to become puppeteers, it's not something you do for a couple of years and then leave" (qtd. in Grant par. 12). Ladinsky remarked that dedication is one of the reasons the Thăng Long Troupe has survived many historical setbacks. The criteria for other troupes vary, but for this troupe and the Central Puppet Theatre Troupe the criteria is essentially the same<sup>34</sup>.

The Thăng Long Troupe originally used what are known as land puppets in performances largely created to educate young people during the Vietnam war, resulting in extra safety precautions across the country, including evacuations of large cities to the countryside which negatively affected the troupe's popularity. Instead of giving up, the troupe brought

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<sup>34</sup> For smaller troupes like those solely performing in villages, the information is not available.

performances to the countryside. Since many of the relocated people were spread throughout the country, the troupe decided to break into smaller groups to bring the puppets to as many villages as possible. The troupes had many shortages as a result of the War: limited technical equipment and instruments. When bombing raids erupted through the country, the troupes would stop performing, hide, and resume after it stopped (Phillips, “Unique” par. 9).

There are actually two main branches of the Thăng Long Theatre Troupe today. While both perform the same water puppetry and stories, the areas where their performances vary. One branch of the troupe tours internationally and the other remains in Hà Nội. Le Van Ngo has been with the troupe since 1970 and is now the artistic director. He is enthusiastic about this form and is often the artistic voice behind many of the stories. Le Van Ngo must incorporate fresh ideas into the performances while maintaining the traditional values of the puppetry—a task he takes seriously. When the troupe was first established, there were only nine members and with the administrative and technical workers, the troupe consisted of 20 people total. Currently, Le Van Ngo’s troupe has over 30 puppeteers that are divided between the international and domestic troupes (Phillips, “Unique” par. 4, 21).

From 1969 to 1983 Le Van Ngo’s troupe performed mainly using land puppetry. However, Le Van Ngo had the troupe(s) learn water puppetry techniques in 1983. Using different muscles and adapting concepts proved that much preparation was needed before the troupe could tour internationally. Following the end of the Vietnam War, resources became increasingly available, making training easier than in the past. Also in 1983, the government persuaded village puppet masters to reveal their long kept secrets about water puppetry techniques by explaining that their art was confined to the villages instead of reaching a larger audience (Phillips, “Unique”, par. 15). In 1987, the Thăng Long Theatre Troupe was finally able to perform outside of Vietnam,

however this was not the first time water puppetry was introduced outside of the country: in 1984, village puppeteers performed in France (Phillips, “Unique” par. 16).

### ***The Central Puppet Theatre Troupe***

In 1956, President Hồ Chí Minh hosted the Czechoslovakian Rodost Troupe<sup>35</sup>. It was at this point that he decided puppetry could be an important tool for teaching children. The Rodost Troupe did hand-and-rod puppetry and soon trained Chèo artists in this technique. These artists developed what is now known as the Central Puppet Theatre Troupe in Hà Nội. Later, these artists trained in Vietnamese land puppetry and learned local alternatives for the hand-and-rod technique within the next few decades. In the 1970s, it became standard practice for professionally trained artists to give village workshops (Foley 134-135). Artists going to villages and learning from local puppet masters was crucial from the perspective of the Communist regime because it deemphasized the elite arts that existed within the literati and ruling classes of the past. For the Communist regime, local village arts were more suitable in a proletarian or egalitarian society (Foley 140).

The Central Puppet Theatre Troupe trained in Nam Cham and by 1972, an experimental wing of the troupe broke away to focus on water puppetry. Unlike the Thăng Long Theatre Troupe, they began performing in just two years time. The villagers that knew water puppetry techniques taught the Central Puppet Theatre artists in exchange for being taught land puppetry techniques. (Foley 134-135). As a result of this direction, Kathy Foley Professor of Theatre Arts at the University of California, notes that the first female troupe member, Nguyen Thi Chanh, joined the Central Puppet Theatre Troupe. Land puppetry in Vietnam was largely based on

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<sup>35</sup> A Czech puppet troupe that performed land puppetry and was a model for the Central Puppet Theatre Troupe.

Czech puppetry in which troupes included both gender performers. The inclusion of women added diversity and brought support from those countries who support gender equality (Foley 135).

The Central Theatre Troupe continues to utilize the model Ngo Quynh Giao (an alumnus of the Institute of Puppetry in Prague) created and has also been adapted by other professional companies (Foley 135). As far as those in positions of authority within this troupe, Ngo Quynh is often credited with developing contemporary water puppetry, which may include newer stories and the incorporation of newer technology. Dang Anh Nga (an alumnus of the Damu Stage Arts Institute also in Prague) currently heads the Central Theatre Troupe. These two men inspired troupe members and furthermore, when the Central Troupe toured with a smaller troupe from the Nguyen Xa village in 1984, the tour helped garner international interest in water puppetry. Part of the appeal for foreign audiences was Giao's inclusion of refined elements from the Nguyen Xa and Nam Chan villages including: larger, professionally carved figures, an arrangement of scenes designed to create a more cohesive flow, the refinement choreography, and an expansion of the musical accompaniment. In contrast to the Central Theatre Troupe, the Thăng Long Theatre boasts more extravagant performances, and the artistic director balances simple yet elaborate productions as to not detract from the traditional stories being presented.

## **Conclusion**

As a result of this thesis and from the exploration of different puppetry traditions and conventions, I have come to realize the importance that puppetry has within culture. Not only does it provide entertainment, it reacts to society, and keeps its audience aware of important changes. Many puppetry traditions have endured fluctuations in popularity and changes in conventions while encompassing cultural identity. Vietnamese Water Puppet Theatre captures the raw essence of the country by presenting its humble beginnings, depicting its struggles and focusing on a more hopeful future. The dedication of audience members, performers, and water puppetry's willingness to adapt has helped it survive. Water puppetry is able to preserve cultural identity because it is strongly rooted in the past and yet able to connect to and influence the present. Water Puppet Theatre reminds many of the Vietnamese of the past using examples of kinds and other ancestors to work toward a better future.

The expansion to more foreign countries has also led to a newer role for the main Water Puppet Theatre troupes. Since the 1980s, there has been an influx of tourism in Vietnam partially thanks to the main touring troupes; however, troupes like the Central Water Puppet Theatre Troupe and the Thăng Long Theatre Troupe also wish to educate foreigners about the rich culture and history of Vietnam. From witnessing shows and speaking with artists personally, I believe the troupes have managed to strike a fine balance of satisfying the government and maintaining ties to tradition.

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