

# The Musical Heritage of Water Puppet Performances in Hanoi, Socialist Republic of Vietnam

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## ABSTRACT

*Rối nước (water puppetry) is a national art of Vietnam that represents the traditions, folklore, beliefs and lifestyle of the local people. This qualitative research is conducted in the context of Hanoi, Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The research objectives are to understand the history, status and role of the water puppet show, its music and inheritance. This article shows that the water puppet shows are widely found in many villages and provinces in the alluvial plains of the Red River Delta. The important elements of the water puppet show are the puppets, music, puppeteers, mechanisms and manipulation methods, theater and story. The music in water puppet shows was formerly produced by percussion instruments, such as Trống Cái (drum), Chùm Choẹ (cymbals) and Mũ (wooden percussion instrument). Presently, many more musical instruments have been added to create more melodies. The sound of music in the water puppet show is from the folk song called Chèo, which is a short melodic verse played repeatedly. The melodic verse style is matched with the dancing posture of the puppets. The music of the water puppet show has been adapted to the changing social and western influences through conservation, rehabilitation, musical application and new generation compositions.*

**Keywords:** *conservation, inheritance, music, Vietnam, water puppetry*

## INTRODUCTION

The performing arts of Southeast Asia are a reflection of local lifestyles, beliefs and traditions that have been inherited across generations (Pongpaiboon 1999). The arts of each location tell a specific story of the ethnic groups that have influenced the area (Nutong 1988). Puppetry is an example of a performance art created by one's ancestors and passed down by word-of-mouth, observation and apprenticeships; it plays a prominent part in local entertainment throughout the world.

Initially, puppets used in performances were unable to move but as time progressed adaptations were made so that the figures could make rudimentary movements and develop a character of their own (Gaboriault 2009). There is little documentation to confirm when puppets were first popularised but paintings on the interior chamber walls of the pyramids indicate that puppetry was prevalent in ancient Egyptian communities over five thousand years ago. The writings of Aristotle, Horace and Plato suggest that early puppetry was purely for aesthetic and ceremonial purposes rather than for entertainment (Department of Fine Arts 1982).

Puppet shows require the expertise of artists in many different fields, from sculpture to costume design, from dance to music (Maijaroen 2009). Music is especially important for puppetry shows because it can create the mood and emotion of the performance and allow the audiences to connect with and relate to the story and characters. Puppetry is a particularly popular form of entertainment in the countries of Southeast Asia. Many forms of puppetry are known; they include the Indonesian animal-hide shadow puppetry called *Wayang Kulit*, and the fabric-based Cambodian shadow puppetry known as *Sabek Thom*. The most common stories enacted during the puppet shows are regional adaptations of the Ramayana.

Water puppetry is unique to the Northern region of Vietnam in the communities around the Red River Delta. In the rainy season, the area is prone to flooding and the people have strong ties to the water. Out of local creativity and a respect for the mystical power

of the river, water puppetry was born. The puppeteers stand in a hip-height pool behind a backdrop, which is fixed in the water. Each figure is made from wood weighing approximately 15 kilograms and controlled by four people using bamboo rods. The stories retell aspects of local Vietnamese lifestyle and also recount local legends. Each village has its own puppet troupe, which performs in pools outside the central administrative building in the area. The local puppetry techniques are often closely guarded but the essential component of the performances is music.

The musical accompaniment to water puppet performances acts as a medium for telling the story. However, the music that has been inherited from past societies has also been altered from its original format due to influences from China. In the past, the three musical instruments used to maintain the rhythm of the performance were the *Trống Cái* (drum), *Chùm Chọc* (cymbals) and *Mõ* (wooden percussion instrument), which were all played by skilled local instrumentalists. Nowadays, these instruments have been supplemented by the *Đàn Tranh* (16-string zither), *Đàn Nhị* (2-string fiddle), *Đàn Bầu* (Monochord zither), *Đàn Nguyệt* (2-string guitar), *Đàn Tam Thập Lục* (36-string hammered dulcimer), *Sáo Trúc* (Flute) and local singers. In addition, modern sound and lighting systems are used to enhance the volume and quality of the performances. These changes have made the water puppetry of Northern Vietnam more interesting for audiences (Nguyễn 1996). The increase in attractiveness has also caused water puppetry to become a major cultural tourist attraction. Given the ever-expanding tourist industry, water puppetry has allowed the musicians and artists to pursue their hobby as a career. In the last 30 years, water puppetry has also been recognised on the international stage, ever since the first international performance in Europe in 1984 (Teekantikul 2002).

After reading about the development of water puppetry in Vietnam and observing performances, the research team realised the importance of music to the shows and became interested in examining the inheritance of music for water puppet performances in Hanoi. The researchers consider this a particularly important endeavour considering the impending concentration of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). In 2015, ASEAN

member states will be fully integrated as an ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community and there is a danger of countries neglecting traditional local and national practices and customs once full cooperation and participation of the ten ASEAN nations is in place. This qualitative investigation was thus conducted in the National Puppet Theatre on Trường Trinh Road and the Thang Long Puppet Theatre on the banks of Hoan Kiem Lake, Hanoi. The investigation gathered data from interviews and observations, with two objectives: (1) To study the background, current condition and role of water puppetry in Hanoi; and (2) To study the music of Vietnamese water puppetry and its continuity as an intangible cultural heritage.

### **THE HISTORY OF VIETNAMESE WATER PUPPETRY**

Water puppetry is a traditional art that serves to promote the identity and lifestyle of Vietnamese people (Photo 1). The first physical evidence of water puppetry dates back to the Late Lê Dynasty (1428–1778) when performances were held in the Thầy Temple, which was located in the historical Hà Tây Province. The Fuda Water Puppet Troupe was closely linked to the Thầy Temple and performed a special show on the anniversary of the death of a former temple abbot (Teekantikul 2002). To Sanh (1976) reminds us that although the first documented evidence places water puppetry in the 15th century, it was probably performed much earlier than that, even as far back as the Hồng Bàng Dynasty in 1000BC.

Water puppetry, as recognisable in its modern form, became more prevalent when Emperor Lý Công Uẩn relocated his administrative seat from Hoa Lư to Thăng Long in the 11th century. The period was renowned for its skilled artisans who contributed to the design of the new governmental seat and influenced the growth and popularity of art in the area. The water puppet performances reflected the beliefs, culture and lifestyle of locals in communities of the Red River Delta. The golden age of water puppetry was from the rule of the Hồ Dynasty

in 1400 to the end of the Late Lê Dynasty in 1778. During the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, the art form declined to a position where it is now reserved for festivals and special occasions rather than for more general entertainment.



**Photo 1** A water puppetry performance in Northern Vietnam.

In 1956, then President, Hồ Chí Minh watched a puppetry performance by the Radost troupe from Czechoslovakia. Following the performance, the President invited the Radost troupe to help establish a national Vietnamese puppetry group to entertain the public (Teekantikul 2002). By the end of the project, a group of Vietnamese performers had been selected and trained to participate in the national troupe. When the Radost group returned to Czechoslovakia, the Vietnamese puppeteers experimented with their techniques and adapted the performances to their own style. From 1957 to 1958, the Vietnamese government introduced a policy to resurrect and revive interest in traditional water puppetry in the country so that the art did not disappear. The national artists went to the local villages and rural parts of Northern Vietnam to study and analyse the practices of the local people and water puppeteers. This initiative, instigated by President Hồ Chí Minh, was the start of a transformation that saw water puppetry become the national performing art of Vietnam.

## **PERFORMANCE PROCESS OF WATER PUPPETRY**

There are now two water puppetry theatres in Hanoi that hold shows for foreign tourists. These are the National Puppet Theatre on Trường Trinh Road and the Thang Long Puppet Theatre on the banks of Hoan Kiem Lake. Several performances are held every day in the two theatres. Although the performances at the two theatres are very similar, the performance sequences may differ slightly. Each theatre now uses modern technology in lighting and sound to enhance its shows. The sequence of the shows is as follows:

Performance of the traditional *Home Rong* musical prelude – a traditional Vietnamese song.

Opening announcements – introduction of the program

Act 1 – Elevation of the dragon

Act 2 – Rural life, children blow recorders on the back of buffalo and farm the land

Act 3 – Catching frogs

Act 4 – Grandparents raising ducks and chasing away foxes, children playing in the water and catching ducks

Act 5 – Dragon breathing water and fire

Act 6 – Fishing

Act 7 – Customary singing and dancing

Act 8 – Swan dance

Act 9 – The story of the lake returning the sword

Act 10 – The dragon headed unicorn seizing the ball

Act 11 – Angel dance

Act 12 – Coloured sacred animal dance (dragon, dragon-headed unicorn, turtle and swan)

The water puppet figures are usually made from light hardwood, such as Tiger's Claw (*Erythrina variegata*) or Fig Tree (*Ficus carica*). There are two parts to the puppets, the main body and the moving rods. Usually the body and lower limbs of the puppets are sculpted separately from the upper limbs and head, allowing the puppets to move freely. The puppets must be waterproof. Rods are attached to the legs and bottom of the puppets and controlled underwater. The rods are also used to make the puppets stand upright.

In the past, water puppetry was not a professional art and the puppeteers were members of the local community. The puppeteers were all male. Women were banned from taking part as puppeteers due to the physical strength required to control the figures. There was another reason for the ban on female participation. Traditionally, women were expected to marry and move away from their parents to raise a family. If women knew the puppetry techniques, the secrets of their fathers and grandfathers could be in jeopardy. Age was another factor in determining an individual's readiness for work as a puppeteer. People with experience were preferred for the role. Thus, puppeteers were generally middle-aged men. Nowadays, women and young people take part in the shows and are acknowledged when the curtains are raised at the end of the performances. Nevertheless, social expectations and traditions have caused very few women to take up roles as puppeteers because they are viewed as too weak to stand in water for prolonged periods of time controlling heavy wooden figures (Nguyễn 2014). Puppeteers learn their art by observing, practicing and building their techniques through experience.

During the performances, the puppeteers must stand waist-deep in a pool of water (Photo 2) (Nguyễn 1998). There are three principle techniques used: (1) By holding long, simple, bamboo rods, the puppeteer can control puppets at long distances and use the rods to make the puppets change direction and posture; (2) By using long rod and rope systems, the puppeteer can control the position of the puppet and its head and arm positions simultaneously; and (3) By using rope systems, the puppeteer can generate many intricate movements from the figures.



**Photo 2** Puppeteers taking a curtain call at the end of a production.

All water puppet arenas are composed of three component parts: a 36m<sup>2</sup> backstage section where the puppeteers control their figures, a front water stage and an audience seating area. Initially, water puppet shows were performed with no accompanying words and retold local stories and legends. Now, there are three types of story content based on traditional beliefs, history and everyday lifestyle.

### MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND MUSIC IN WATER PUPPETRY

Originally, there were three instruments used in the music of the water puppet shows:

Trống Cái (a large drum), Chùm Chọc (cymbals) and Mõ (a wooden percussion instrument). Now, the following 15 types of instruments are used (Table 1) (Photo 3).



**Photo 3** Positioning of the orchestra during the modern Vietnamese water puppet shows.

**Table 1** Instruments used in the music of modern Vietnamese water puppet shows.

Class	Name	Description
Chordophone	Đàn Tranh / Thập Lục	A long zither with 16 brass strings that are plucked using a thimble worn on the thumb, forefinger and middle finger.
Chordophone	Đàn Nhị / Nhi	A vertical violin deriving from China and India with two strings and played with a bow.
Chordophone	Đàn Bầu	A four-part monochord zither.
Chordophone	Đàn Nguyệt	A crescent-shaped lute with two strings, previously plucked with the fingernails but now more commonly played with a plastic pick.
Chordophone	Đàn Tam Thập Lục	A 36-string hammered dulcimer played with bamboo sticks.
Aerophone	Sáo Trúc	A 40–55 centimeter long bamboo flute.
Membranophone	Trống Cái, Trống Bân and Trống Đẽ.	Drums played with sticks and often accompanied by cymbals.
Membranophone	Trống Cơm	A hand beaten rice drum.
Idiophone	Chùm Ma Hình	A brass instrument of the Tai ethnic group in Vietnam played by shaking in groups of five to eight people.
Idiophone	Chiêng	A metal gong with a raised centre that is beaten with a stick.
Idiophone	Tíu Cảnh	A traditional Vietnamese metal plate beaten with a stick.
Idiophone	Thanh La	A traditional Vietnamese metal bowl beaten with a stick.
Idiophone	Chũm Chọc	Metal cymbals.
Idiophone	Sênh Tiền	A 25 centimeter long coin clapper.
Idiophone	Mõ	A wooden percussion instrument.

In the past, the musicians were local people (Nguyễn 1996). Presently, the music has been adapted and developed to include the sounds of the increased variety of additional instruments, including Đàn Tranh (plucked zither), Đàn Nhị (bowed, two-string fiddle, related to the Chinese huqin instrument family), Đàn Bầu (monochord zither), Đàn Nguyệt (moon lute), Đàn Tam Thập Lục (36-string hammered dulcimer) and Sáo Trúc (bamboo flute)<sup>1</sup>. There is a musical prelude before the beginning of the water puppet show and the rest of the performance depends on the story being told. There are usually six musicians at the national theatre, which include two singers and four instrumentalists. "The singers also play percussion instruments".<sup>2</sup> At the Thang Long Theatre, there are nine musicians: two singers and seven instrumentalists. The lyrics and music have been inherited from traditional folk songs and national compositions.

The name for the music used in water puppet performances is Chèo, which derives from the traditional folk music of Northern Vietnam. The objective of Chèo music is social observation and the music allows the artists to reflect the lifestyle of the Vietnamese communities. The music involves short melodies and allows for repetition, which is key in creating a variety of characters and moods for the puppets. Most pieces are in the hemitonic, pentatonic scale. The melodic verse style is matched with the dancing posture of the puppets. The rhythms are slow, moderate and fast, and can be switched from slow to fast (Photo 4). Today, the music of the water puppet show is inherited from past folklore, knowledge and wisdom to add more value to the culture.

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## Ru Con

Dân ca Nam Bộ

chậm-tha thiết

Gió mùa thu mẹ ru mà con ngủ, năm canh  
chày lá nâm canh chày thức đủ vữa nâm Hỡi chàng chàng  
ơ hỡi người người ơi em nhớ tôi chàng em nhớ tôi  
chàng. Hãy nín nín đi con, hãy ngủ ngủ đi con, con hỡi mà con  
hỡi, con hỡi con hỡi con hỡi con hỡi con hỡi con hỡi con.

**Photo 4** Sheet music from Ru Con, a folk lullaby played as the third piece of the water puppet performance at The Thang Long Water Puppet Theatre, Hanoi.  
Source: [http://damsan.net/showthread.php?google\\_seo\\_thread=Ru-con-D%C3%A2n-ca-Nam-B%E1%BB%99](http://damsan.net/showthread.php?google_seo_thread=Ru-con-D%C3%A2n-ca-Nam-B%E1%BB%99).

There are four methods used to ensure the cultural continuity of the music used in water puppetry. The first method is conservation. The traditional music techniques, instruments and songs have been inherited from the past and, although other Vietnamese instruments have been added to the performance, western musical influence has not yet crept into the performances. The conservation of Chèo music is currently achieved by word of mouth, observation and experience. The second method of ensuring cultural continuity is restoration. The art has twice undergone periods of intense focus and revival, first under the watch of Lý Công Uẩn, who reigned Đại Việt from 1009 to 1028, and later in the 1950s and 60s under President Hồ Chí Minh. The third method of ensuring cultural continuity is adaptation. The music has been adapted to incorporate more instruments to make the performance more interesting for modern audiences. The final method of ensuring cultural continuity is new composition. The artists of the 1950s revival added their own creative influence to the water puppet music so that the modern version of the art is a true Vietnamese creation.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

Water puppetry in Vietnam is a national cultural symbol and plays three important roles in Vietnamese society. Firstly, the art form is instantly recognisable around the world as Vietnamese heritage. "It is unique to the Red River Delta and [secondly] helps preserve a number of cultural and artistic traditions, including puppetry, costume design, dance and music" (Trung 2014). Finally, water puppetry is a cultural product that attracts tourists to Northern Vietnam. This enables the artists and performers to pursue careers and dedicate their lives to the art because they are able to generate a decent income (Hà 2014).

The music that is played as an accompaniment to water puppetry performs a vital role in building the characters and moods of the stories. It makes the entire performance more exciting and dramatic (Srinivarsan 1991). As such, the music has been central to the

revival and popularity of water puppetry in Northern Vietnam. In fact, as many scholars in the growing school of ethnomusicology have attested, the changing nature of music is a reflection of wider changes in society (Maceda 1981; Nettl 1964; Samrongtong 2004). In this case, the revival of Vietnamese water puppetry and the importance of its music can be linked to external political motives. In the first case of revival, Emperor Lý Công Uẩn was determined to create a legacy and make his own mark on Vietnamese history by moving the capital and focusing on the culture and art of his people. The second case of revival was driven by the progressive thinking of President Hồ Chí Minh and a need to create entertainment and cement an identity amid the atrocities and upheaval of war and revolution. All the while the continuous adaptation and creation of the music reflects audience need for excitement in a faster and more hurried world.

It would be of use for people concerned with the conservation of Vietnamese water puppetry to analyse and apply the research of Bunjaroen Bamrungchu (2010). Bamrungchu studied a method of conservation and development of Isan Nangpramotai (a type of folk performing art) for adding value to local culture. She concluded that conservation should be divided and targeted into four areas: (1) Conservation of performance components, including music, stories and performers; (2) Conservation of presentation, including theatre, staging and lighting; (3) Conservation through public relations and advertising; and (4) Conservation of performance times and events. This systematic form of conservation may be of use to Vietnamese water puppetry and could help identify specific areas in need of attention. From the findings of this investigation, the research team would also like to make the following three suggestions for further investigation:

1. Research should begin with the creation of a curriculum for primary and secondary school students that incorporates the art of water puppetry in Northern Vietnam. This will help the conservation process from a grass roots level.

2. Other types of traditional music in Vietnam should be investigated as part of a dedicated study to broaden the knowledge of indigenous Vietnamese culture.
3. A comparative investigation should be conducted to examine the differences between water puppet performances in different parts of Vietnam.

Although the addition of musical instruments may be seen as a divergence from traditional water puppet music, the sound of the music is now more complete. As supported by the research of Bennett (1998), this is due to a fuller character in six musical areas: melody, harmony, rhythm, timbre, form and texture. Moreover, the musical instruments that were added to the performance came from the traditional ethnic groups in Vietnam rather than from foreign cultures. In this way, the essence of the water puppetry has been retained. The music has been complemented by new lighting designs and sound technologies, which make the entire production seem more professional and modern. Such additions have been found to benefit other forms of traditional performing arts as well (Upatamnarakorn 2009).

The music of modern water puppetry in Northern Vietnam was created in the twentieth century as part of the restoration drive of President Hồ Chí Minh. Having said this, the majority of the music, aside from the singing and lyrics, was largely based on the original Chèo format. As Wongpaiboon (2010) has argued, if the principle of the music remains the same, new creations are not always harmful to the original art. Indeed, in the case of Vietnamese water puppetry, the singing and new music have allowed water puppetry to become well recognised across the globe; income is generated for the performers by the tourist industry, which helps to ensure the continuation of this particular form of Vietnamese culture. Moreover, music and culture are interrelated (Nettl 1964). As culture continuously evolves, so too does music. These changes and additions to Vietnamese water puppetry music are part of this ongoing evolution of culture.

## NOTES

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3. Trung, T. 2014. Interview. Hanoi
4. Hà, M. H. 2014. Interview. Hanoi.

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