

THE VIETNAMESE THEATRE



SONG BAN

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FOREWORD

Nothing more clearly indicates the Vietnamese people's great love for the theatre than the fact that our theatres are too few and too small to accommodate the audiences. Even the Hanoi People's Theatre, with its ten thousand open air seats, is not large enough for big performances.

This love for the theatre has been evident for centuries. In feudal society considered the lowest of trades, and looked at askance by the French colonialists, the Vietnamese theatre has always had the support of the common people who, by mere oral tradition, have handed down from father to son the rules of its art and its stock plays. Royal troupes and those sponsored by the great mandarins performed only to entertain the dignitaries ; and professional troupes touring the country used to be rare. However, the peasants formed their own troupes. Those village troupes of amateurs, which performed in the off season and disbanded in the busy

season, kept up and handed over the traditional theatrical flame from generation to generation.

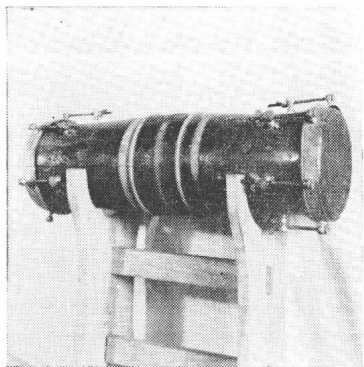
The extremely slow evolution of our theatre is explained by the inflexibility of Vietnamese feudal society. But at the beginning of the 20th century it received a stimulus with the birth of a national bourgeoisie and proletariat and the setting up of modern towns. Leaving the courtyards of communal houses, the actors mounted a true stage and began to accustom themselves to scenery and footlights. New styles appeared. But this evolution was soon checked. The theatre could neither improve nor develop as long as the subject-matter dear to the playwrights, the artistes and the theatre-goers — i.e. the struggle against colonialist and feudal oppression — was pitilessly put down by a police censor.

The struggle to secure a healthy trend in the theatre and waged against its exploitation for reactionary and anti-national aims, went on continually until the triumph of the August 1945 Revolution. The progressive plays which extolled patriotism, exposed social contradictions or fought against the inhuman exploitation of the working people only got across the footlights occasionally. Such plays were immediately forbidden but never forgotten. The peasant and working class mass movements led by the Indochinese Communist Party since 1930 has a decisive influence upon the evolution of our theatre.

The Vietnamese theatre, which received a strong impulse from the August 1945 Revolution, continued to grow uninterrupted during the Resistance war (1945-1954). It was in the heart of the battles of that war that our people laid the first strong foundation of their theatre.

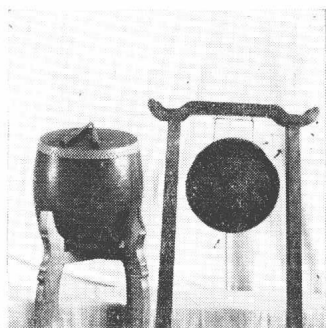
Since the restoration of peace in July 1954, a large mass movement and an unprecedented development of the theatre has been witnessed in the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam. Not only are professional artistes developing their cherished art, but their efforts are encouraged, supported and enriched by an irresistible amateur movement. Almost every village and every government department has its own theatrical group ; every province, its art ensemble. A whole people, under the Lao Dong Party's leadership, have taken in hand the future of their theatre. Vietnamese schools of music, song, dramatic art and ballet have been set up for the first time in history. The training they are giving to the rising generation is paving the way for a great socialist expansion of the arts.

PERCUSSION AND WIND INSTRUMENTS



← *Tambourin*

Small drum and gong →



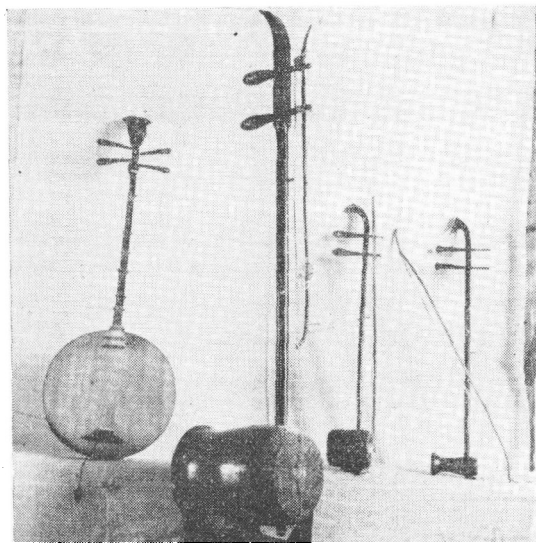
*Bell, cymbals, rattle,
trumpet, flute and fife*





*Chorus of young girls accompanied by an orchestra of
dan thap luc (sixteen-stringed instruments)*

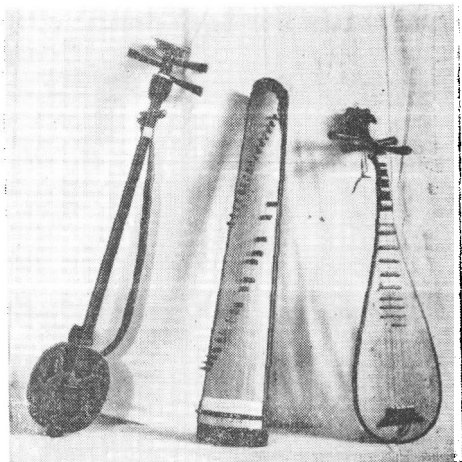
STRINGED INSTRUMENTS

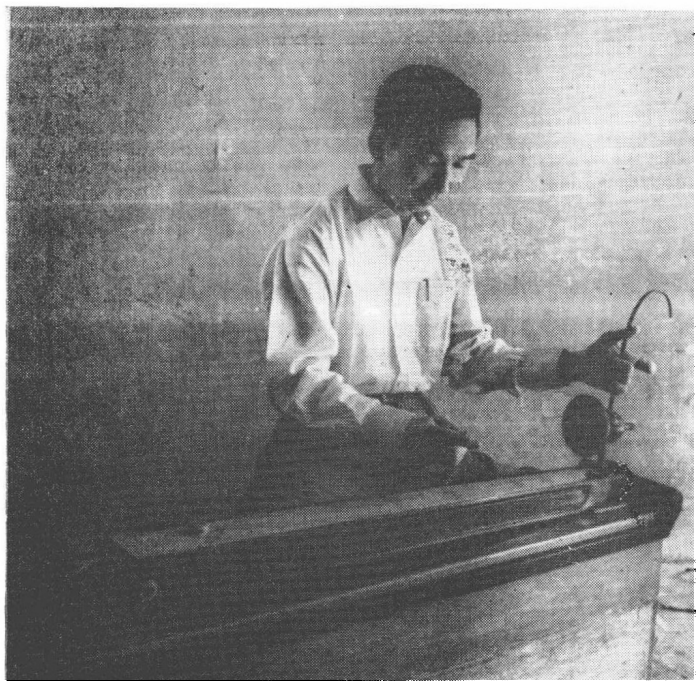


Dan nguyet
(moon - shaped
guitar) and dan
nhi (two-stringed
violins)



Dan tam, dan thap
luc or tranh and dan
ti ba (three, sixteen
and four - stringed
instruments)





An original instrument : The one - stringed dan bau

CHAPTER I

THE VIETNAMESE THEATRE BEFORE THE AUGUST 1945 REVOLUTION

THE uninformed foreigner able to visit several Hanoi theatres during one evening would be much surprised by his discoveries. It is not the number of theatrical styles which would strike him most, but the differences between the styles : differences in the means of expression, differences in the stage rules, and in the first place, differences in the general conception of dramatic art.

In one place, he would see an almost bare stage and characters vaguely resembling those of the Peking Opera, in another he would witness a folk operetta, elsewhere he would discover modern drama, or else a kind of comic opera, the gentle music of which recalls the singing accent of the southern Vietnamese.

The adoption of a new theatrical style has never caused the old ones to disappear in Viet Nam, even at

the time of feudal despots and colonialists who looked askance at whatever could harm them, so skilled were our compatriots in safeguarding the national cultural heritage, often by mere oral tradition. Since the Revolution, which brought about its full growth, the Vietnamese theatre has for the first time been highly considered and has become the object of concern not only on the part of the people but on the part of the leaders as well.

It explains why the traditional and modern styles can flourish simultaneously and enjoy the same esteem. During one evening, our tourist would go through the essential stages of the history of our theatre, illustrated by two traditional styles : the *hat cheo* or Popular theatre, and the *hat tuong* or Classical theatre, and two new styles : the *hat cai luong* or Reformed theatre and the *kich noi* or Spoken theatre.

A — THE TRADITIONAL STYLES

1 — The Hat Cheo or Popular theatre



LET us enter a *hat cheo* theatre. Nine times out of ten, the audience is laughing. As is expressed by its name (*cheo* is the vulgarized pronunciation of *trao* which means 'satire'), the *hat cheo* is a theatre with an essentially satirical origin. Courageously taking to task feudal rule, it masterfully handled the whip of satire to flog the mighty ones of the time and heap ridicule on them.

The origin of this theatre goes back to the remotest times, and its spirit has been faithfully handed down from generation to generation through the centuries, though the plays in its repertoire have been revised, modified and enriched many a time.

It is not born of religious rites, but comes directly from popular rejoicing which annually marked the end of work in the fields in the food-providing delta of the Red River. Music, dances and folk songs, which have preserved our ancestors' wisdom and sensibility have given birth to this form of theatre, which has a seasonal and local origin.

Until the end of the 19th century it was played not on a stage, but simply in the forecourt of the communal house, enclosed by ropes stretched between the columns. These ropes separated the actors from the spectators, who surrounded the former so closely that they could touch them. The costumes were openly displayed on the rope at the back of the stage, behind which was a small space set aside for making-up. For lack of lighting, the performances were preferably given by day, and were free. The communal fund or a rich financier would foot the bill.

The actors were mostly amateurs, village peasants of both sexes whose vocation and talent had been revealed in duets sung during planting or irrigation work. Of course there were a number of professional troupes who toured the country, on the occasion of local festivals or looked for private festivities at a rich landowner's, but these troupes were not numerous ; the trade was despised and could not provide a living. Though this nomadic existence gave the artistes an opportunity to get away from the bamboo-fences of their villages, it was full of risks and privations. "To sleep in a wing of the communal house and eat in a corner of the market", was how the actors themselves defined their existence.

Now this peasant theatre, handed down orally through the centuries, was considered dangerous by the monarchy. The despots of the Nguyen dynasty hindered its extension toward the south, while in the north, it could not be performed in the towns. There is no doubt that this fact hampered the development of the *hat cheo*, but it contributed the more surely to keeping intact down the centuries all its rural relish, all the purity of its popular source. There is very little foreign influence in

the music and songs of the *hat cheo* or in its general conception.

The musical instruments are those which can be found in all villages : gongs, rattles, drums, tambourines, flutes and a few simple string instruments. All the songs derive from folk songs.

Most noteworthy is the distinctly realistic character of the *hat cheo*, its links with real life in which it is rooted like a tree drawing subsistence from the earth.

The necessary rules are reduced to the minimum, they are not the result of "stylisation" with a symbolical value but arise rather from the absence of scenery, which itself derived from the scantiness of technical means. Thus, conventional gestures are not an end in themselves, as in the classical theatre.

The characters, even legendary heroes and those bearing foreign names, belong to Vietnamese rural society : farmworkers, notables, craftsmen, soothsayers, bonzes, rich landowners, petty mandarins, etc. All bear the stamp of the sentiments and ideas of the common people, and act and speak according to the popular conception of good and evil.

The success of the *hat cheo* arose from the fact that the spectators recognized themselves, their friends and their foes in the staged characters. If it was difficult in real life to laugh at the mighty, it was most gratifying to see on the stage these arrogant personages in a sorry plight and mercilessly mocked. The illusion of life was all the more perfect as the audience participated effectively in the unfolding of the plot. Each new character of some importance had to ask the spectators aloud : " Must I say

who I am ? ” and the public would shout : “ Yes, you must ! ” Before reciting a poem, the actor would announce : “ Here is a poem ! ” and the spectators would urge in chorus : “ Let us hear it ! ” which enabled the actor to carry on. Even now in the countryside, the spectators do not fail spontaneously to play this role of collective voluntary supernumeraries, but in the towns, it devolves on a chorus who remain in the wings.

Like all forms of folk art, the *hat cheo* is not only realistic. It stands up for the weak against injustice and oppression by the strong. It has a set purpose. The authors always avoid subjects in which the sympathetic heroes die, or, in a historical subject the plot of which cannot be changed at will, such as “ The Trung Sisters ”, they end the action in the heroines’ moment of triumph and not later, when they are defeated. Pious sons such as Luc Van Tien, faithful and devoted wives such as Bach Xa or Phuong Hoa, are always rewarded, honest people such as Thach Sanh or Thi Kinh are honoured. On the other hand, traitors, usurers, the corrupt, misers, greedy mandarins, unfrocked bonzes, etc., are always punished as they should be in life. This morality seems to be schematic and artificial, but on the contrary, it is a reflection of the people’s optimism and confidence in the ultimate triumph of good, their refusal to regard a victory of evil as decisive. This morality without ambiguity is all the better served in that the peasants’ very keen observation misses nothing and that their shafts of wit are cutting. Social satire sometimes attacks the feudal hierarchy right at the top. In the play “ Putting the snake in the hen-house to kill the family poultry ”, the story of Gia Long, who called on the French to put down the peasant revolution

of the Tay Son at the end of the 18th century, is stigmatized with the greatest vigour.

The *hat cheo* was more than an entertainment and a school of optimism for our people. It was a living book where the illiterates could read history and legends, where those who knew no other horizons beyond their rice-fields could discover the world, and which fostered a love of the beautiful and the just, and hatred for oppression and injustice in the hearts of the eternally oppressed. It constituted a treasure of wisdom and poetry for those whose spiritual life could in this way survive the endeavours made to destroy it by poverty.

One finds nearly everything in the repertoire of *hat cheo*: historic plays, illustrations of national legends, intrigues with a foreign origin but adapted to the Vietnamese, social satires and farces. Everything is viewed in the people's way, everything is brought back to plain common sense. The satire is sharp, the conversation free, sometimes loose, but the language is never foul ⁽¹⁾.

To illustrate what we have said, let us analyze the celebrated play "The Goddess Quan Am". We have deliberately chosen this legendary and at the same time foreign (Korean) story, to show better how the authors of *hat cheo* transformed the subjects and transposed them to a national level and from the peasant viewpoint.

The story of the Goddess Quan Am, whose real name was Thi Kinh, has, with the development of Buddhism since the 10th century in our country, been a moving Vietnamese legend which everybody knows in all its details from childhood. It has even given birth to a proverbial expression "Oan Thi Kinh" used to designate a condemned innocent. Of course, the notion of