

THEATRE IN VIET NAM

Dr. Tran Van Khe

We should refer to "the theatres" in Viet Nam since, besides traditional styles the *hat tuong*, traditional theatre, and the *hat cheo*, folk theatre, the Vietnamese theatre comprises two other modern styles: the *hat cai luong*, modernised theatre, and the *kich noi* or *thoai-kich*, spoken theatre.

Within the framework of a single article, it is not possible to trace the history of the Vietnamese theatre, nor give all the necessary information about the plays and other theatrical representations. One can only stress what distinguishes one theatrical style from another; or the characteristics of the Vietnamese theatre in comparison with the Chinese theatre from which it derives. A bibliography will help the reader to complete his information. Here we can examine successively the traditional styles, the modern styles and the actual situation of the theatre in Viet Nam.

Origin of Traditional Styles

The *hat tuong* and the *hat cheo*: the *hat tuong* is also called *hat bo* or *hat boi*. This form of theatre which certain people term "classic" has unquestionably descended from the Chinese theatre, whereas the *hat cheo* is of popular origin.

If we refer solely to historical texts, the *hat tuong* had its beginnings under the dynasty of Tran Nhan Ton (1279-1293): a Chinese actor

named Li Yuan Ki (Ly Nguyen Cat) taken prisoner by the troops of General Tran Hung Dao taught the Vietnamese the Chinese theatrical art. No precise indication has been given of the origin of *hat cheo*. Some have seen in the *hat cheo* a popular debasing of *hat tuong*. But according to the most commonly held hypothesis, the *hat cheo* existed before the *hat tuong*. These two theatres differ from each other by the nature of the plays, the material organisation of the troupes, the theatrical technique and the music.

The Plays

As with the Chinese theatre the themes of the traditional plays are taken from Chinese history, whilst the repertoire of the folk theatre comprises plays drawn from Vietnamese history, illustrations of national legends, and social satires.

The plots used in these two theatrical forms are publicly known in advance; the "denouement" is always the same: the good rewarded, the bad punished. But plays of the traditional theatre chiefly exalt loyalty towards the King, a loyalty for which other feelings must be sacrificed. Plays of the Popular Theatre glorify noble sentiments like patriotism, filial piety, conjugal faithfulness and satirise human vices such as cupidity, malice and infidelity.

The plays of the traditional theatre are written, for the most part, in the learned Sino-Vietnamese language. Names of several authors have come down to us, although a great number of plays remain anonymous. Amongst others, we have Dao Tan (1846-1903) who has left more than 15 plays, certain of which are still acted today in Binh Dinh, a province of central Viet Nam where the theatrical tradition has lasted for several generations; Hoang Tang Bi (1883-1930) who was the first to write plays in the language of the people. The plays of the folk theatre are anonymous. There is a preference for using the language of the people; the texts and the melodies are orally transmitted.

Basic Organisation

The setting of the traditional theatre is often a stage 3 x 4 metres, with a backdrop of a large piece of red or blue fabric, surmounted by embroidery, representing two dragons quarrelling over a ball of fire

with the Eight Immortals crossing the oceans on either side. The first theatre building was constructed about 1804 within the very precincts of the Palace in Hue, ancient capital of Central Viet Nam. The *hat cheo* was acted in the market square or the courtyard of the communal house and only a string stretched between two trees or two pillars separated the audience from the actors.

Properties, which were not very numerous in the *hat tuong* and almost non-existent in the *hat cheo*, were not of great importance. The audience's whole attention had to be concentrated on the actors.

The sumptuous costumes of the *hat tuong* resemble those of the Chinese theatre, whilst actors of the *hat cheo* are dressed as villagers, in turban, tunic, silk sash.

Presentation

Duration: A more-or-less long prologue, *giao dau*, precedes each representation of both the traditional and folk theatre. But whilst the first lasts for several days, *tuong pho*, the second does not take longer than one night. Now-a-days, no representation takes longer than 6 or 7 hours.

Theatrical Technique: The *hat tuong* follows the Chinese theatre in its technique: symbolic coloured masks, stylised gestures and expressions, falsetto voices in the rhetorical speeches and "songs" (songs being something between a chant and a melodic song as we know it); battle scenes arranged like ballets. In the *hat cheo* certain conventional gestures, which have evolved due to the absence of scenery, are found every time they are necessary to the comprehension of the play. Make-up is rudimentary; "production" non-existent. The falsetto voice is not compulsory.

The Audience: In a representation of *hat tuong* only the clowns speak to the audience, whereas in a representation of *hat cheo* the public participate in the unfolding of the plot. A newly introduced character asks the crowd: "Must I tell you my name?", and the public reply: "Yes, of course you must!" For representation of *hat tuong* the audience delegates a connoisseur to emphasise the good passages by beating a drum which for this reason is called "drum of praise".

Music: This is the essential element which distinguishes the traditional theatre both from the Chinese and the folk theatre.

The orchestra of the *hat tuong* is composed of a drummer who is the conductor, an oboe, *ken* player, and a two-stringed fiddle player. According to their appropriateness, the drummer uses the battle-drum, *trong chien*, one-skinned drum, *trong bat cau*, and the drum known as "rice drum", *trong com*. Certain orchestras also contain a player of *ho* or a *dan gao* fiddle with a resonator made of coconut shell, a 3-stringed lute, *tam* and a transverse flute, *sao*.

The repertoire of *hat tuong* consists of *Noi loi*, declamations; *Xuong, Bach, Than*, recitations; *hat Khach* or *hat Bac*, songs known as "Chinese" or in the *Bac* style; *hat Nam*, songs known as "Vietnamese" or in the "style of Nam", *hat Bai*, songs particular to a character; and *hat Noi nieu*, varied songs.

There are four kinds of *Noi loi*:

Noi loi xuan or *Noi loi tuong*, a theatrical rhetorical speech used as exposition and to present characters;

Noi loi ai, mournful rhetoric;

Noi loi bop, violently rhetorical speech;

Noi loi giam, everyday speech.

The *Xuong, Bach* are sung by warriors, or the genii, before the *Xung danh*, presentation of characters. The *Than* are lamentations which precede the sad songs.

The songs correspond to definite situations or characters.

There are four kinds of *hat Khach*:

Khach thi, song in septameter verse performed by a warrior, a candidate, or someone taking a walk;

Khach phu, a song in rhythmic prose used in dialogue;

Khach tau ma, a song known as "that of the galloping horse" which is used during scenes of pursuit;

Khách tu or *Khách hon*, death song.

There are three kinds of *hat Nam*:

Nam xuan, song of the person taking a walk, or of sadness restrained and hidden;

Nam ai, di, sad song (slow tempo)

Nam ai, chay, song of distress (quick tempo)

There are several kinds of *hat Bai*:

Bai thang bot, the song of the mandarin's son, with the general sense of the song of the spoilt, irresponsible son.

Bai dien, madwomen's song;

Bai phuong, beggars' song.

According to Doan Nong, there exist 18 kinds of *hat Noi nieu*. Amongst others there is the magician's song; the song of the barbarians, the *Moi*; certain folk songs like the *Ho mai day*, boatmen's songs. The *hat Bai* are often considered as *hat Noi nieu*, varied songs.

The repertoire of the folk theatre is entirely different. It too contains rhetorical speeches, gay songs, sad songs and songs exposing character, all of which are of popular origin. The rhetorical speeches of the folk theatre are of a recitative nature. One finds the *via* (introduction) and four varieties of *Noi su*, (seriously styled rhetoric); *Su chuc* for the prologues; *Su xuan* of a gay nature; *Su rau* or *Su sau* of a sad nature; *Su van* of a mournful nature; and *Noi lung* or *Noi lech*, rhetoric in a light or gallant style.

For gay situations, songs such as the *Sap* exist, with several varieties; *Sap co phong*; *Sap qua cau*; *Sap dung*; *Luyen Tam Tang*; *Loi lo*; *Cach cu*. For sad scenes, there are songs such as *Ba than*; *Hat van*; *Lan tham*; *Nhip duoi*. There are the *Sa lec*; *Huong xuan*; *Hat dum*; for the love scenes, and for the courting scenes we have the *Cam gia*, the *Binh - Thao*. The buffoons have the *He moi*; *He gay*; the *Sap chot*; the madwomen sing the *Con ga rung*; the *Con chuon-chuon*. The buddhistic monks the *Van mau thien* etc.

The orchestra of the popular theatre consists of a fiddle player, a flutist and a drummer, and one often finds a 3-stringed lute player. To-day, the orchestra of the National Popular Theatre Troupe, in North Viet Nam, comprises 20 instruments when complete.

Amongst the traditional styles of theatre, we should also mention performances of songs and dances given by the *A dao* (kind of professional singers, whose functions correspond to those of the Japanese *Geishas*). As well as their repertoire of chamber music, they often perform dances with flower lanterns, *mua bai bong*, and act in sketches. These go under the name of *hat bo bo* or *phuong nha tro*.

New Styles

Hat cai luong, modernised theatre;

Kich noi or *Thoai kich*, spoken theatre.

In 1918 a new style of theatre appeared under the name of *hat cai luong*, but within the limits of this article we cannot relate the circumstances which had given rise to it. Just what does this modernisation consist of?

The plays have changed both in essence and in form, the themes being chosen not only from Chinese but from Vietnamese history, from novels, from the history of the various religions, or from everyday life. The plays, divided into 4 or 5 acts, are written in the language of the people.

The setting is adorned with a curtain and scenery, and more and more theatrical properties are being used.

Photographs: P 11: *Hat Cai Luong*, modernised theatre showing warrior (Mrs. Phung Ha) and young lady (Miss Kim Cuong) in "Phung Nghi Dinh". P. 12. 1. *Hat Cheo*, folk theatre, Thi Man tries to seduce the disguised Thi Kinh not knowing she is a woman, in "Quan Am Bo Tat". 2. *Hat Tuong*, traditional theatre, showing three characters, Happiness, Prosperity and Longevity opening a performance at the Court Theatre.





There is an attempt to become more natural and the conventional gestures and stylised attitudes are now only to be found in historical plays.

The repertoire is entirely different from that of the traditional theatre. The music of the *cai luong* is nothing more than that of "amateurs"; a kind of chamber music to which are set words suitable to the situation. The pieces of *Bac* are for light scenes, and the *Nam* pieces for sad scenes. Little by little, Chinese and European songs are being adapted.

This theatre, born in 1918, after an initial phase of "feeling its way", went through a flourishing period (1924 — 1945) during which the actors Nguyen Thanh Chau, alias Nam Chau; Huynh Thu Trung, alias Tu Choi; Ba Van; Bay Nhieu; Tu Anh; Duy Lan; and the actresses Nam Phi; Phung Ha; Kim Thoa raised the modernised theatre to an artistic level.

Several tendencies are noticeable: the return to the traditional theatre in the borrowing of ideas, of gestures and repertoire from the Chinese theatre; the imitation of the Occident in the comedies of manners or social plays, in the cloak-and-dagger type of play, gratifying the audience's taste by mystic plays whose theme is the life of Buddha. During the period of the war in Viet Nam (1945-47) the theatre was inactive, reasserting itself with the *Cac bum* type of play, (*Cac bum*: onomatopoeia of gunfire with the modern war as its theme), social plays and adaptations of traditional Western plays ("Hamlet", "The Merchant Of Venice"). In 1953 the presentation of a play in verse, "*Tay - Thi*" ("The Beautiful *Tay Thi*") by Hoang Mai Luu, by the Nam Chau Troupe constitutes an event in the history of the modernised theatre. The first play in verse with a ballet and modernised songs was undoubtedly *Tuc-Luy* or the *Fallen Fairy*. This play, written by Khai Hung and The Lu and set to music by Luu Huu Phuoc was first performed in Hanoi by the pupils of the Lycee Dong Khanh in 1942 and in Saigon by the pupils of the Lycee Gia-Long in 1943. But it was not until 1953 that performances given by the Nam-Chau Troupe stimulated the general public's interest in this new kind of theatre. The modernised theatre has not undergone such a marked development in North Viet Nam as in the South.

The Spoken Theatre

On the 25th, April 1920, according to Song Ban, (1921 according to Dao-duy Anh). the first performance of the play *Benh Tuong*, a translation of Moliere's *Le Malade Imaginaire* took place at the Municipal Theatre of Hanoi. It met with moderate success. The Vietnamese public who cannot conceive a theatre form without songs do not welcome the spoken theatre with enthusiasm. About 1935, "the Association des Amis de l'Art" animated by Claude Bourrin, a French actor, presented other translations or adaptations of Moliere's characters, having Vietnamese names, dressed in Vietnamese costumes enacting their roles before a Vietnamese decor. But the efforts of "The Association des Amis de l'Art" and of the "North Vietnamese Stage" were not crowned with success; according to Bay Nhieu, an accomplished actor, the adaptation of Moliere's *L'Avare* was performed by some amateur actors in South Viet Nam about 1917-18, at the same time as a play inspired by Victor Hugo's novel *Les Miserables*, had no success. In 1942, 1943 plays of the spoken theatre, written and acted by students of the University of Hanoi were sympathetically received by the public of Hanoi and Saigon. We quote *Dem Lam-Son* by Hoang Mai, retracing the struggle led by Le Loi, founder of the former Le Dynasty, against the Ming, at the beginning of the 15th century; *No Me Linh* by the same author, glorifying the heroism shown by the two Trung sisters in their fight against Chinese domination. But the general public have not yet been won over by the new style.

We had to wait until 1945-46 before we saw the spoken theatre flourish with revolutionary inspiration.

Then came a long period of the war for Independence during which the training of traditional actors was rather difficult. The peoples' artists had to build up plays to "maintain the morale of the population and soldiers", in a very short time they were trained in the Stanislavski method, and short plays were written to praise the sacrifice of the soldiers, to criticize the "collaborators". Among others, we can mention: *To Hieu* by Nguyen Cong My (To Hieu was the name of a Communist who died in the prison of Sonla), *Bac Son* by Nguyen Huy Tuong, telling the progress of the people's insurrection in Bac Son in 1940-41.

In the villages, in the battle units and later, in the factories, bands of spoken theatre were created and the general public got used to that new style.

Now-a-days, traditional theatre is declining. In Saigon one single troupe of traditional theatre is giving rare performances. In the city of Binh Dinh a few small bands are perpetuating the traditional art. But they have had to stop their performances because of the attacks of the bombing.

The modernised theatre is still appreciated by the general public. But in spite of the attempts of the great artists like Mrs. Phung Ha, M. Nam Chau, Duy Lan, Ba Van, it is passing through a crisis. Many new styles were created: *cac bum* (onomatopoeia noises of guns used for a play about the modern war), *la ma* (literally means 'Roman': used for plays with themes taken from Japanese, Indian or Chinese history), but they have no artistic value. Short plays of spoken theatre are presented with modern songs as different items of a music-hall programme.

In North Viet Nam, though the traditional theatre and modernized theatre are less popular than the folk theatre (*hat cheo*), all the styles are taught at the National School for dramatic arts. *Luc Van Tien* (name of faithful lover) and *Mau Don Tien* (of the a "Love of a Fairy,") were created with great success by the National Troupe of modernized theatre. Besides the National Troupe of folk theatre in Hanoi, there are several other small bands in the provinces: seven hundred troupes in Hai Duong. Modern plays are written for the spoken theatre, and western operas and ballets are performed by the Vietnamese singers and dancers.

Both in South and North Viet Nam, the creation of a national school for dramatic arts, the increasing number of the public for different types of theatres allow us to hope for a better development of the theatrical art in Viet Nam. But we can fulfil the promotion of musical and theatrical arts only when peace returns to a troubled land.

Bibliography

- Cordier G., *Le theatre annamite*, in *Revue Indochinoise*, Juin, 1912. p. 564—587.
 Coulet G., *Le theatre annamite classique*, Toulon, Mouton et Cabasson. 1928, 125 p.
 Id. *L'organisation materielle du theatre populaire chez les Annamites*, Siagon, Imprimerie commerciale 1927, 162 p.

- In Vietnamese**

- Doan Nong, *Su tich va nghe thuat hat bo* (Histoire et technique du theatre traditionnel), Mai Linh, Hanoi 1942, 321 p.
- Hoang Ngoc Phach — Huynh Ly, *Cheo va Tuong* (Theatre populaire et theatre traditionnel), Hanoi 1958, 23 p.
- Pham Duy, *Hat bo Binh Dinh*, (Theatre traditionnel de Binh Dinh), Revue Sang Doi Mien Nam, no 5, Dec., 1959, p. 11, 12, 15.
- Id. *Hat cheo* (Theatre populaire), Revue Van Nghe Moi, Numero special Printemps Canh Ty (1960), p. 5, 8, 43, 47.
- Mich Quang, *Hat Tuong* (Theatre traditionnel)
- Than Van Nguyen Van Quy, *Hat boi* (Theatre traditionnel).

Dr. Tran Van Khe, Assistant Director, Centre for Oriental Studies, Institute of Musicgyolo, Paris; Member Executive Committee, International Music Council, UNESCO. See Sangeet Natak 2.