

Staying Afloat: Vietnamese Water Puppetry as Intangible Cultural Heritage

Sam Pack

Kenyon College, Gambier, OH, USA

Email: pack@kenyon.edu

Abstract: This article is based on data gathered for a research project titled “Digital Repatriation in Vietnam: Towards an (Alter)Native Media Tradition” that was funded by a 2010 ASIANetwork Freeman Student Faculty Award. The research team consisted of Sam Pack, the faculty advisor, and five undergraduate students from Kenyon College (Michael Eblin, Eliza Leavitt, Jean Mougin, Carrie Walther, and Said Zaghera) as well as a group of Vietnamese translators (Ly Huong Nguyn, Mai Thu Doang, Le Quyen, and Truong Thanh Nhon). The information for this project was collected through numerous discussions, interviews, focus groups, and observation sessions, primarily taking place in Bao Ha village in northern Vietnam, in addition to the nearby village of Nhan Muc, Hai Phong City, and in the capital city of Hanoi. Informants consisted of individuals from wide ranges of age, backgrounds, occupations, and levels of involvement with tourism and water puppetry. Government officials from different ministries and offices, performers and directors from multiple water puppetry troupes, academic researchers from various Vietnamese universities and institutions, and representatives from Vietnamese tourist agencies likewise contributed their expertise, cooperation, and friendship. The Vietnamese government has promoted water puppetry as intangible cultural heritage. In recent years, domestic and international tourism has emerged as the driving force behind the formation of water puppetry troupes and continued practice of this traditional art form.

KEYWORDS: water puppetry; tourism; intangible cultural heritage; Vietnam

1. A brief overview of Vietnamese water puppetry

Water puppetry (known in Vietnamese as *múa rối nước*) dates back as far as the 11th century when it originated in the villages of the Red River Delta area of northern Vietnam. In ancient times, the rural Vietnamese believed that spirits controlled all aspect of their lives. The Vietnamese devised water puppetry as a way to satisfy these spirits, as well as a form of entertainment, using whatever they could find in their environment. Ponds and flooded rice paddies after harvest were the stage for these impromptu shows. Water puppetry shows reflected how Vietnamese peasants long ago adjusted to the landscape through economic as well as cultural practices.

Using an elaborate system of rods and pulleys to manipulate the puppets, the puppeteers themselves stand behind a screen in waist deep water, which serves both as the stage of the performance and as a means of concealing the control mechanisms. The puppets tend to be anywhere from 30 -100 centimeters in height and typically weigh anywhere from 5 to 15 kilograms (Linh 2005). The plays historically have depicted scenes of life in rural northern Vietnam, often featuring fantastic creatures from Vietnamese mythology alongside characters such as farmers, townspeople, and the ever-present emcee/jester “Teu”. As a theatrical performance unique to this region of Asia, it has come to be a time-honored tradition with deep associations the culture and peoples of northern Vietnam.

Modern water puppetry is performed in a waist-deep pool of water with the water surface being the stage. Performances today occur on one of three venues:

traditional ponds in villages where a staging area has been set up, portable tanks built for traveling performers, or in a specialized building where a pool stage has been constructed. The puppets are made out of wood and then lacquered. A large rod supports the puppet under the water and is used by the puppeteers, who are normally hidden behind a screen, to control them. Thus, the puppets appear to be moving over the water.

The deep associations of Vietnamese water puppetry with important aspects of religion and spirituality in northern Vietnam have manifested over the centuries in various components and dimensions of the water puppetry performance (Linh 2005). From the physical structure of the stage—being tied to the village pond and communal house—to the symbolic meanings behind ritual scenes of performance, Vietnamese water puppetry is deeply rooted in the religious values of agrarian life in northern Vietnam. As one French critic noted, “Water puppetry is the soul of the Vietnamese rice field (Linh 2005, 66; see also King 2006).

Vietnamese water puppetry belongs to a larger family of object-performance theater common throughout much of Asia, falling in a genre consisting of rod or stick puppets, along with the *wayang golek* of Java (Orr 1974). Often tracing their roots back to centuries-old rituals of theatrical performance centered in religious contexts, many of these forms of puppetry are thought to have been associated with “animistic worship and community rites, such as the rice harvest festivals” (Ibid., 74). Numerous genres of Asian puppetry have undergone varying periods of rise and decline in popularity, with some flourishing greatly as others wane in influence. In modern times, institutions

such as puppetry troupes and festivals have been established at local, national, and even international levels with the aim of “preserving” these cultural performances in the context of rapid change brought on through globalization and development (Orrenstein 2008). With similar goals in mind, numerous books, encyclopedias, and other forms of literature have been published, alongside art gallery exhibitions and professional tours on the international level (Blumenthal 2005; Clark 2005; Leiter et al. 2008; Rubin et al. 1999).

Academics have noticed a trend in the development in these forms of puppetry from ritualistic or religious functions to more secular ones, beginning with the influence of powerful Southeast Asian historical figures and continuing into modern times (Orr 1974). During the Vietnam War, for example, water puppetry performance was used to promote the communist regime in north Vietnam.

In the ponds of Hanoi, the Vietnamese children may see enemy planes crash in flames, shot down by the heroic men of the Peoples’ Army to the accompaniment of fire crackers. The ancient theme of the dragon and the phoenix now reoccurs in modern garb, defeating enemy soldiers and sending them underground, i.e., under water (p 78).

This trend of development towards more secularized orientation continues in the present day. A 2002 BBC News report on the water puppetry troupe of Hai Dzuong province in northern Vietnam describes how the performance art has been used to educate villagers about numerous social issues, such as legal codes and ecological preservation (Arthurs). The adoption of new themes in storytelling and increased orientation towards the tourist audience has also led to new representations of a ‘traditional culture’ in this art form.

Water puppetry is created based on the two main factors: the puppets and the water. The puppet is the product of sculpture art while water constitutes one of the essential factors in rice farming. Evidence for the creation of water puppetry relating to the farming of Vietnam rests in how most of the traditional puppetry guilds are located around the fertile land of the Red River Delta where the ancient Vietnamese culture began. This area consists of many rivers and is often prone to flooding.

Using water as the stage for the puppets to perform represents the uniqueness of this art form. Water is not only a setting where the puppets act their roles, but it also plays a supporting factor by concealing all the secrets of this art. The audience can only see the puppets without being able to see the performers, which creates curiosity and stirs enjoyment. Watching water puppetry is an outdoor activity, which enables the audience to experience the performance as well as the setting utilizing all of their senses. In this context, water puppetry highlights itself as a

testament to human creativity as well as the human ability to control nature.

2. The process of performing a play

A water puppetry performance consists of many folk games, and the audience enjoys the show with continuous surprises. Even though one performance includes many excerpts, it is never scattered but very smooth and all the parts proceed well with each other. In order to facilitate smooth movement between excerpts, there are some transition parts in between. According to the artist Tran Van Phuoc, who works in the puppetry guild of Vinh Bao, a typical program of the guild will include the following performances:

1. Waving flags
2. Teu (the common character in Vietnamese puppetry)
3. Dragon dance
4. Frog fishing
5. Fox catching ducks
6. Fishing
7. The cult of honor
8. Phoenix dance
9. Le Loi returning the sword
10. Boat racing

Each puppet possesses its own characteristics, which is partially based on music. Indeed, the music controls the speed, rhythm and movement of the activities. Since the puppets are inanimate objects, music also contributes to the liveliness of the puppets on the stage. The traditional guilds utilize Vietnamese instruments such as the main drum, bamboo tocsin, two-stringed vertical fiddle, monochord zither and so on. The music in water puppetry borrows its characteristics from the summer festivals, with which performers and audience members are happily familiar.

Water puppetry traces its roots from the tender pace of rural life, the persistence to overcome difficulties, and the courage to protect the homeland from invaders. The performances are simple and easy to understand. From the very basic content, water puppetry enables audiences to discern between right and wrong through a juxtaposition of real life and fantasy.

Considered the spirit of the show, the character Teu has the most important role in any puppetry performance. He serves as the bridge that connects the performers and the audience. Teu is larger than all of the other puppets even though his hairstyle indicates that he is only a young boy. His cherubic appearance is punctuated with an ever present smile on his face.

Indeed, in ancient Vietnamese, Teu means “smile.” As a specialty character, he is always playful and behaves freely to make the audience laugh. Teu is the character that plays the role of the narrator or the emcee of the show. All the puppetry guilds employ Teu as the introductory character. His customary greeting to open a performance is “Hey

everyone, be quick to your seat! What does everyone want to see?"

3. Tourism

As Vietnam raises its global profile as an economic force, the government is also promoting the country, not coincidentally, as an international tourist destination. Vietnam has developed tourism in recent years due to the new foreign policy, which is to

implement consistently the foreign policy line of independence, self-reliance, peace, cooperation and development; the foreign policy of openness and diversification and multi-lateralization of international relations. Vietnam proactively and actively engages in international economic integration while expanding international cooperation in other fields. Vietnam is a friend and reliable partner of all countries in the international community, actively taking part in international and regional cooperation processes (extract from The Political Report of The Central Committee – Vietnam Communist Party, 9th Tenure, at The Party's 10th National Congress).

The Vietnamese national government promotes tourism as a key industry in the growing economy. In the 1980s, the country started to open its doors to the international tourism industry and sought to capitalize on the vast potential revenue that could be gathered from foreign travelers. Government funds were used to, and still continue to, facilitate construction projects such as paving roads, building community pavilions, improving existing buildings, and providing villages with more elaborate stages for performances in order to make villages designated as "cultural" or "tourist destinations" (sites recognized by the Vietnamese government as having some form of "traditional culture" that needed to be preserved and could be utilized as features of "culture tours" in the developing tourism industry) more appealing to international tourists from locations such as North America or Europe.

In the early 2000s, water puppetry was becoming a popular tourist attraction for foreigners throughout the country. This coincided with the government declaring in 2002 that water puppetry was a precious Vietnamese art that needed to be cultivated once more. While professional water puppetry troupes had been organized prior to this, it was not until this period, after the era of reform and change in the late 1980s, that the art started to be used to capitalize on a growing tourist market.

Evidence for the growth in popularity of Vietnamese water puppetry on a global scale can be seen in other writings besides those of contemporary academics. International tourists often describe their experiences in foreign countries on popular travel blog websites on the Internet. Certain sites devoted to travel experiences in Asia

contain fairly detailed accounts and descriptions of travelers' observations and personal research on water puppetry (Bailey 1998; King 2006; Pham 2009; Spivey 1999; "The Water Boys"). In reading these accounts, it is clear how the popularity of this art form is spreading amongst international travelers and 'cultural tourists' alike. Also contributing to water puppetry's rise in global popularity are international tours. Starting in 1984 in France, village troupes from northern Vietnam (gradually becoming more "professionalized" over the years) began touring foreign countries in order to spread awareness of this performance art. Since then, professional troupes have begun attending festivals and going on tours in countries all across the world (MCST 2006; Orrenstein 2008; Phillips 1999; Taylor 1995).

Local tourist companies promote "rural tourism," a type of niche-market of "cultural tourism" that appeals to both domestic and international travelers. A popular option includes day trips to rural areas such as B  o H  a. Clients seek the peacefulness and tranquility of nature, a view of "authentic" agrarian life, and the ancient cultural traditions of local villages, including water puppetry performances. In an era of increased immigration to cities, domestic travelers from urban centers are drawn by similar desires, as well as their own childhood memories of life in the countryside or searches for cultural, familial, or spiritual roots.

As water puppetry has gained popularity among tourists, modern practitioners have altered key components of their performances in terms of both content and format in order to appeal to Western audiences. For example, stories are now less about day-to-day living in rural Vietnam and more likely to address more "universal" topics such as romance and courting. The stories have been significantly shortened as well to maximize the number of performances in a day. Other cultures have also influenced Vietnamese water puppetry. Cowboy hats have been incorporated into some shows, and stories about the war between Vietnamese and French have been incorporated.

The changes affecting Vietnamese water puppetry have been the cause of some concern for both academics and performers alike. In the past, people performed water puppetry for a variety of reasons serving both spiritual and secular purposes, such as celebrating harvests or honoring various mythological figures (Linh 2005). In the present day, however, various troupe leaders, puppeteers, and other authoritative figures have claimed that contemporary performances have lost some the connections to ancient ritualized performances associated with rural Vietnamese spirituality, such as widespread performances once put on during harvest festivals. Troupes in the present day perform more and more for the economic benefits brought on by performances for increasingly foreign audiences. As researcher Nguyen Thi Thuy Linh notes:

The changes were brought about through the government's policy on "rehabilitation" and "extension" of this unique art. International touring of various troupes helped water puppetry gain

worldwide fame and provided a realistic picture of rural life in Vietnam to new audiences. However, these changes also caused some “spiritual degradation” to water puppetry (2005, p 72).

Linh goes on to describe the “professionalization” of the water puppeteers guild throughout much of northern Vietnam and the targeting of international tourists as an important demographic in audiences as other important factors leading to this sentiment.

The Red River Delta village of Bảo Hà became a tourist destination for both domestic and foreign visitors in 2000. International tourists mostly come from the countries of the United States, France, Great Britain, Russia, China, Japan, and Korea. The foreigners usually do not interact with villagers because they cannot communicate; however, as one informant noted, the villagers and tourists “still love each other.” Community members assert that they are very happy with the influx of tourism and they welcome tourists when they come to the festivals or water puppetry shows. Many think it is a good opportunity for foreigners to learn about festivals in Vietnam as well as cultural activities of community members.

The most obvious effect of tourism on life in Bảo Hà is an increase in the standard of living. Tourists spend money to buy statues, see water puppetry shows, and offer money at the temple. One resident claimed that “this village could not have developed like it has without water puppetry.” When tourists purchase carving statues, they ensure that the craftsmen remain employed, so the local people directly benefit from the service they provide for the tourists. Many informants, including the co-founders of the troupe themselves, have stated that the attraction of international tourism is the driving force behind the formation of water puppetry troupes and regular performances of the art. Informants have claimed that without the income generated by performing for tourists, villagers would never have enough money to sustain the tradition. Tourism has been recognized by local residents as a viable way to increase their income and thus have more time and resources to devote to the production of water puppetry. Thus, although tourism has indelibly altered this traditional art form, it is also responsible for the rejuvenation and continued existence of water puppetry.

References

- Arthurs, Clare. “Vietnam’s water puppets make social waves.” *BBC News: World Edition*. 23 Jul. 2002: n. pag. Web. 10 Feb. 2010. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/2144376.stm>>.
- Bailey, Steven K. “Water Puppetry in Vietnam: Better than the Muppets.” Posted on ThingsAsian. 1 Nov. 1998. Web. 20 May 2010. <<http://www.thingsasian.com/stories-photos/1239>>.
- Barber, B. (1995) *Jihad vs. McWorld*. New York: Times Books.
- Blumenthal, Eileen. *Puppetry: A World History*. New York City, NY: Harry N. Abrams, 2005.
- Bruner, Edward M. *Culture on Tour: Ethnographies of Travel*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Clark, Bradford. Rev. of *Divinities, Demons, Kings and Clowns: Puppetry of India and Southeast Asian*. Curated by Kathy Foley and Michael Schuster, held at University Art Gallery of the University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA. *Asian Theatre Journal*. 22.1 (2005): 164-168. *Encyclopedia of Asian Theatre*. Edited by Samuel L. Leiter et al. 2 vols. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2008. Print.
- Jhala, Jayasinhji. “The Shaping of Gujarati Cinema: Recognizing the New in Traditional Cultures.” *Visual Anthropology* 11 (1998): 373-385.
- King, Bobby. “Soul of Vietnam’s paddy field.” Posted on ThingsAsian. 27 Mar. 2006. Web. 20 May 2010. <<http://www.thingsasian.com/stories-photos/3575>>.
- Linh, Nguyen Thi Thuy. “Water Puppetry And Peasants’ Life In Vietnam.” *Journal of Mekong Societies*. 1.3 (2005): 45-75.
- Little, Walter E. *Mayas in the Marketplace: Tourism, Globalization, and Cultural Identity*. 1st ed. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004.
- MacCannell, Dean. *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1999.
- Morley, David. “Where the Global Meets the Local: Notes from the Sitting Room.” *Screen* 32.1 (1991): 1-17.
- Ngo, Le Van. *World Socialist Web Site*. Interview by Richard Phillips. 5 Feb. 1999. Web. 20 May 2010. <<http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/feb1999/viet-f05.shtml>>.
- Notar, Beth E. “Authenticity Anxiety and Counterfeit Confidence: Outsourcing Souvenirs, Changing Money, and Narrating Value in Reform-Era China.” *Modern China*. 32.1 (2006): 64-98.
- Orr, Inge C. “Puppet Theatre in Asia.” *Asian Folklore Studies*. 33.1 (1974): 69-84.
- Orrenstein, Claudia. “XIVeme Festival Mondial des Theatres de Marionnettes, Charleville Mezieres, France, 15-24 September 2006.” *Asian Theatre Journal*. 25.1 (2008): 148-154.
- Pham, Ha. “Vietnam’s Water Puppet Show Secret Discovered.” posted on ThingsAsian. 1 Feb. 2009. Web. 20 May 2010. <<http://www.thingsasian.com/stories-photos/34411>>.
- Phillips, Richard. “A glimpse of the cultural life and times of ancient Vietnam.” *World Socialist Web Site*. n. pag. 5 Feb. 1999. Web. 20 May 2010. <<http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/feb1999/viet-f05.shtml>>.
- Schwenkel, Christina. “Recombinant History: Transnational Practices of Memory and Knowledge Production in Contemporary Vietnam.” *Cultural Anthropology*. 21.1 (2006): 3-30.
- Spivey, Lisa and Albert Wen. “Water Puppet Performance.” posted on ThingsAsian. 1 Nov. 1999. Web. 20 May 2010. <<http://thingsasian.com/stories-photos/1286>>.
- Stronza, Amanda. “Anthropology of Tourism: Forging New Ground for Ecotourism and Other Alternatives.” *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 30. (2001): 261-283.
- Taylor, David. “Vietnamese Water Puppets.” *The Puppetry Home Page*. Sagecraft Productions, 18 Sep. 1995. Web. 20 May 2010. <<http://www.sagecraft.com/puppetry/traditions/Vietnamese.html>>.
- Wilk, Richard. *Home Cooking in the Global Village: Caribbean Food from Buccaneers to Ecotourists*. New York City, NY: Berg Publishers, 2006.
- The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*. Edited by Don Rubin et al. Vol 5: Asia/Pacific. New York City, NY: Routledge, 1999.