

CAI LUONG THEATRE THROUGH THE ORAL/LIFE HISTORY OF ITS
PERFORMERS

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Trinh Nguyen

Dissertation Committee:

Kirstin Pauka, Chairperson
Elizabeth Wichmann-Walczak
Markus Wessendorf
Stephen O'Harrow
Patricio Abinales

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Trinh Nguyen

For My Family in Vietnam and the United States

Nguyen Thi Phan Thanh
Nguyen Thi Kim Van
Nguyen Thi Phan Khanh
Nguyen Thi Kim Trang

And last but not least,
The love of my life

James Michael Weir

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ABSTRACT

Cải lương, or “reformed theatre”, came into being at the turn of the twentieth century when Vietnamese people and customs encountered aspects of Western culture introduced by the French. Among *Cải lương*’s defining characteristics is its openness to many sources, its constant changing appearance and scope, and its diverse interpretation and employment in different eras and places, making its’ identity as an artistic form easily identifiable and yet hard to pin down historically. This dissertation begins to tease apart the complex layers of *cải lương*, and presents a comprehensive overview of the artistic and historical development of *cải lương* as a theatrical form, with special consideration of the spoken narratives of *cải lương* performers interviewed. The birth and development of *cải lương* has always been tightly linked to the many historical changes of Vietnam. Therefore, the Vietnamese history under focus in relationship *cải lương* is divided into three main periods: 1) the French presence in Vietnam at the start of the early twentieth century (1900-1945); 2) the First Indochina War until the introduction of the open door policy called *đổi mới* (1945-1986); and 3) the post U.S.-Vietnam War era until the early twenty-first century (2000-2010). In doing so, I investigate how historical changes over these periods in Vietnam have influenced the production, performance, and reception of this unique aesthetic form. As equally important is how the lives of those who have been involved in *cải lương* have been affected. These personal narratives gathered are then used to analyze and interpret the challenges that *cải lương* is confronted with today. Through the eyes of a small group of highly respected *cải lương* performers my goal is to

better understand the history of *cải lương*, shed some light on the state of the theatrical form today and to come closer to understanding this rich element of Vietnamese culture.

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PREFACE

This study on the current status of *cải lương* was triggered by a personal quest that began over fifteen years ago to learn more about my own history. I went back to Vietnam with my family for the first time in 1994. A month in Vietnam sixteen years ago made me realize that I had many unanswered questions about my parents' history, and that an understanding of my own life and identity as an immigrant child was to be found nowhere else but in Vietnam.

I first left Vietnam for France when I was four years old. At the age of ten I moved to the United States from France. I grew up speaking three different languages and living between cultures. Often, these cultures lived in a tenuous relationship inside me, competing to claim my feelings and actions. In 1998, I returned to Vietnam alone in an attempt to make sense of these feelings, and in search of the missing pieces of the puzzle of a life I had experienced through my parents' lives and left behind as a young child. I hoped to better understand the dynamics of my past, as well as the lives of my parents and the Vietnamese-American experience more generally.

As an immigrant youth in France and the United States, I always felt uncertain about my identity. Opposing social pressures sought to tell me who I should be and who I was not. I lived most of my childhood in France and then adolescence in America and felt lost, not knowing who I was, where I belonged, or how I was supposed to act. Most of my childhood and high school years were marked by self-questioning and cultural conflict.

The absence of a strong Vietnamese cultural identity caused me to ask questions and search for answers that slowly led me to the idea for this dissertation.

My parents fled Vietnam as refugees but were unable to leave together or even aware of the other's departure. As a former U.S. military employee during the War, my father escaped Vietnam with no time to say goodbye to his family or return to his hometown to pick up my mother and me. He found himself alone, heading for Guam, two days before the fall of *Sài Gòn*¹ on April 30th, 1975. He took refuge in Guam for two years before being transferred to the United States. My father and mother were separated for almost ten years starting in 1975 before they located each other again.

Once in the United States, my father decided not to contact his family for many years out of fear such contact, if detected by the North Vietnamese authorities, might endanger us. With no information, my mother had to accept that he might be missing in action or dead. After months of mourning, she pulled herself together and managed to find a way to get herself and me out of Vietnam, but her ability to leave involves a story from another war and of mixed identity.

During the French occupation of Vietnam, my grandmother, my mom's mother, was kidnapped by a French soldier and forced to marry to him. My mother is a result of this union. My mother's mix-ethnicity, being half French and half Vietnamese, was often

¹ *Sài Gòn* was the Capital city in Southern Vietnam prior to 1975. Once the Socialist Republic of Vietnam defeated the Southern regime and the U.S. government the Northern leadership replaced the city's name to Hồ Chí Minh City, naming it after their revolutionary leader Hồ Chí Minh. The Capital of Vietnam was then moved to Hà Nội, a city in the North.

considered by my mother as she was growing up in Vietnam as a curse. Her light brown hair, white skin, and high nose made her an enemy to many as she became associated with the foreign imperialist. At the time, she did not know that these cursed foreign features would turn out to be a blessing, as her mix-ethnicity was our ticket out of Vietnam. In December of 1975, seven months after the War ended, my mother and I were sponsored to go to France under the Franco-Asian Act, which the French government started in the seventies to aid children of Vietnamese mothers and French soldiers.

In this way, I am one of the luckier refugees. Unlike most Vietnamese refugees, mother and I did not risk our life walking for months through the treacherous jungles of Cambodia and Thailand; we didn't float aimlessly in the wide open sea with little to no water and food, only to be robbed, raped, or killed by pirates; and we certainly didn't suffer the harsh conditions of a refugee camp in Thailand, Hong Kong, and Malaysia for years, only to be deported back to Vietnam.

My mother and I lived in France from 1977 to 1983 before joining my father in the United States. Growing up in the United States, my parents spoke very little about their life in Vietnam. Dwelling on the past might have been too painful for them and perhaps distract from their immediate goals: looking only ahead; quickly assimilating me into the American system; giving me, my brother, and sister the best education that they could offer; and providing us with the most comfortable material life they could have ever imagined for themselves. I am eternally grateful for all their sacrifices. But perhaps their unspoken efforts contributed to my urge to learn more about my family and 'our' cultural

heritage. I soon found myself across the globe, and it was during my first return to Vietnam that I discovered the history of my mother's family theatre troupe.

The threads (connecting my life back to that of my parents' life took form) of my own life began to unravel as I spent a lot of precious time going from one grandmother's coconut leaf shack to another, listening to their stories about themselves, our family, my mother, and me. But most intriguing of all the stories was learning about my mother's family's theatre troupe. My grandmothers² have little recollection of when exactly our family theatre troupe³ began. They know, however, that my great grandfather started the theatre company sometime at the end of the nineteenth century, and since then the entire family has been involved. They remembered training and performing on stage as young girls. My grandfather named the troupe "Phước Tân", meaning "to advance forward", and they performed mainly two theatrical forms, *hát bội*⁴ and *cải lương*. Their passion for this art has held the family together psychologically, economically, and spiritually for almost three generations. Although a few members of the "Phước Tân" troupe are still performing today, they are likely the last generation of my family to uphold our family theatre tradition.

² Whenever I speak of "grandmothers" I am referring to my biological grandmother and her sisters.

³ Family narrations I have incorporated into the dissertation were offered directly from my maternal side of the family including four grandmothers, four aunties, three uncles, and a cousin. Therefore, "my family's troupe" is referred only to my mother's side of the family.

⁴ *Hát bội* is a Vietnamese classical theatre with its origin dating back to the thirteenth century when the Vietnamese general Trần Hưng Đạo defeated the invading Mongolian forces and captured the Chinese actor, Lý Nguyên Cát who brought a form of Chinese theatre to Vietnam.

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, *cải lương* is having a hard time keeping up with contemporary Vietnamese society. For the past three decades, Vietnam has undergone rapid changes. Since the start of *đổi mới*⁵ in 1986, the transition from a socialist economy to a market economy has introduced Vietnamese culture with new ideas, cultural forms, technologies and foreign investments. As a consequence, many aspects of Vietnamese culture, and especially Vietnamese theatre, have changed, often affecting the livelihood of those involved in these traditional art forms in drastic ways. According to Taylor “In particular, *cải lương*, formerly a live, staged genre, was defenseless against new technologies such as video, tapes, cassettes, CDs, and karaoke laser discs which satisfied the demands of the huge youth market and provided cheap access to high-quality productions from the United States, Hong Kong, and Japan” (2003: 140).

In the meantime, *cải lương* theatres and performers barely make ends meet. No longer can they survive or raise a family by solely performing *cải lương* as their profession. Many performers today are required to supplement their income by taking on other kinds of work and/or participating in a new phenomenon among performers in Vietnam called *chạy show*, literally translated as “running to shows”. *Cải lương* performers begin their evening singing a few *vọng cổ* songs at a local restaurant. They then quickly rush off to another restaurant, sometime still wearing a *cải lương* costume, but this time performing

⁵ *Đổi mới* is an economic reform launched by the Northern leadership in Vietnam in 1986 to help the country transition from a socialist to a market oriented economy.

not traditional songs but Vietnamese “modern” music called *tân nhạc*⁶ (literal translation “new music”) music. Afterwards, without time to catch their breath they find themselves on another stage performing a short *cải lương* skit. They end the night at about midnight or later at a dance club where they may sing *tân nhạc* or Vietnamese pop music. An informant tells me, “*Cải lương* artists can perform many different kind of musical genres because most of us already have the required talent to quickly learn new skills. *Chạy show* is an easy way for us to make quick money” (Ngọc Giàu, Interview, 2010). Hastily performing multiple shows in an evening a few times a week is the only way *cải lương* performers can make up for the loss in income because of the dramatic drop in interest for *cải lương* theatre. Many performers have been dramatically forced to give up this life-long family tradition. My cousin, Trang, supplements her income going between waitressing at a local restaurant and singing Vietnamese pop music at various karaoke bars and nightclubs a few times a week.

My academic interest in *cải lương* emerges out my desire to reconnect with the life that I had left behind, and to make new connections to my homeland. This study answers an obligation I felt to help document, preserve, and perhaps over-optimistically, even help revive aspects of the form. My goal is to collect and incorporate into the dissertation the voices of *cải lương* performers like my family members.

⁶ *Tân nhạc* is a new kind of music that emerged in the 1930’s as Vietnamese singers started performing popular French songs to Vietnamese lyrics. *Tân nhạc* is sometimes referred to as “modern” music, and it is still popular both in Vietnam and among the Vietnamese people overseas.

I conducted field research for the first time in April 2003 and then again recently in January 2010, with the sense that *cải lương* as a unique art form to Vietnam, has already changed shape, and perhaps will soon completely disappear. I want to acknowledge that my passion, opinions, and concerns reflected in this dissertation are not shared in the same way, nor do I expect them to be, by all of whom I have interviewed in Vietnam about this art form. However, I can confidently say that many performers I have spoken to feel the strong presence of *cải lương* missing in their lives. They have also come to accept that its gradual demise is beyond their control. Their immediate concerns are to eat and survive, even at the expense of letting go of a major aspect of their own existence.

And this I would suggest points to perhaps a tenuous connection between *cải lương* and my own life. From thousands of miles away, I too have struggled not to forget my own my distant past. Having been forced to flee my birth country, growing up without grandparents and extended family members, and going through a majority of my life uncertain about my identity, I recognize I have also been blessed with a life full of material abundance, an exceptional education, and a quality of life unavailable if I had remained in Vietnam. I enter this project with the full awareness that I am privileged. Yet I have chosen to give back by sharing with you the story of *cải lương* through the lens of my own family's history and the histories of other performers like them, who have lived and died by its side for generations.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of Study

Cải lương, or “reformed theatre”, came into being at the turn of the twentieth century when Vietnamese people and customs encountered aspects of Western culture introduced by the French. It developed as a modernized form of the Vietnamese traditional opera, *hát bội*. *Hát bội* has roots in China mixed with modern Vietnamese vernacular and naturalistic acting style. Stylizations and conventions borrowed from *hát bội* theatre combine with French influences creating a cross between spoken drama and traditional opera.

Cải lương first appeared in the rural areas of the Mekong Delta performed by amateur musicians who combined spoken declamation and stylized gestures known as *ca ra bộ* (literal translation, “singing with gesture”) to musical accompaniment. As it developed, the *cải lương* repertoire slowly expanded, adopting stories, musical influences and performance styles from the court and folk genres of different regions of the country. Music, instruments, themes, plots, forms and costumes were also borrowed primarily from the Chinese and French. It flourished in the urban centers under the management of producers who made *cải lương* a component of vaudeville and circus shows as they introduced many innovations in content, form, and technology.

Among *Cải lương*'s defining characteristics is its openness to many sources, its constant adaptation to circumstances and cooptation by political forces, and its diverse interpretation and employment in different eras and places, all making its identity as an artistic form very easily recognizable and yet hard to clearly pin down. This dissertation begins to tease apart the complex layers of *cải lương*, and presents a comprehensive overview of the artistic and historical development of *cải lương* as a theatrical form, with special consideration of the spoken narratives of *cải lương* performers interviewed. The birth and development of *cải lương* is tightly linked to the historical changes of Vietnam and I consider the political circumstances in which *cải lương* changes over time. The Vietnamese history considered here can be divided into three main periods: 1) the French presence in Vietnam at the start of the early twentieth century (1900-1945); 2) the First Indochina War until the introduction of the open door policy called *đổi mới* (1945-1986); and 3) the post U.S.-Vietnam War era until the early twenty-first century (2000-2010).⁷ I investigate how historical changes over these periods in Vietnam have influenced the production, performance, and reception of this unique aesthetic form. Equally important to this investigation is how the lives of those who have been involved in *cải lương* have been affected by changing historical and political circumstances. Use personal narratives for a variety of artists to analyze and interpret the challenges that *cải lương* is confronted with today. Through the eyes of a small group of highly respected *cải lương* performers my goal is to better understand the history of *cải lương*, shed some light on the state of

⁷ A few sources on *cải lương*, particularly those in Vietnamese have also separated the investigation of *cải lương* into historical phases. Some of these texts include "The Art of *Cải Lương*" (1997); "Theatre History of Vietnam" (1987); Hauch dissertation (1972), Nguyễn dissertation (2010).

the theatrical form today and to come closer to understanding this rich element of Vietnamese culture.

1.2 What is *Cải Lương*?

In Vietnam today *cải lương* is considered the most famous of Western-influenced, Vietnamese theatrical forms. Its origins can be traced back to the early twentieth century when French culture permeated Vietnamese society. Reflecting changes in Vietnam at the time while appealing to the new tastes of audiences recently exposed to Western influences, theatre troupes of the time made use of this important slogan:

Cải cách hát ca theo tiến bộ (Reform singing to progress)

Lương truyền tuồng tích sách văn minh (Pass on traditional stories to civilize)

The name *cải lương* derived from the first words of this famous phrase, meaning “to reform in order to reflect a changing society.”

Cải lương first appeared in the countryside as a musical form and quickly became popular in the city and associated dialogue, gesture, song, and music combining influences from Vietnam, China, and France. Stylizations and conventions of *hát bội* theatre, with its roots in China, combined with French repertoire and Vietnamese music, songs, and stories, to create this new “reformed theatre”.

For centuries prior to the twentieth century the Vietnamese language was written in a Sino-Vietnamese script called *chữ nôm*⁸. The popular theatre form, Vietnamese traditional opera called *hát bội*, was also written in Sino-Vietnamese and the audiences understood well the language of these plays. However, in 1913 the French introduced into the Vietnamese school system a new writing script known as *quốc ngữ*⁹ (literal translation, “national language”). Under French influence a new generation of Vietnamese found it no longer bearable to listen to a play whose language they no longer understood. Meanwhile, the newly French-educated Vietnamese started to write their own plays applying the modern Vietnamese script they grew up with and consequently it became infused into the *cải lương* theatre.

There are ten main types of *cải lương* plays, all of which can be generally categorized into traditional or modern *cải lương* plays. Traditional plays consist of *lịch sử* (historical), *dã sử* (fictional), *Tàu* (Chinese), *bây* (Flying), *La Mã* (Roman), *Phật* (Buddhist), *kiếm hiệp* (Sword fighting), *huong xa* (far away destination) plays. Only *xã hội* (social), *Tây* (Western), and *chiến tranh* plays fall under the modern category. Modern *cải lương* plays are performed in contemporary dress with plots focusing on contemporary social and domestic problems.

Traditional *cải lương* plays are performed in attires from the feudal time with plots based on

⁸ *Chữ nôm* – China occupied Vietnam for more than a thousand years from 111 BC - 938 AD. In the tenth century Vietnam adapted Chinese script to write its own language. When *chữ nôm* first emerged it became the dominant language of the elites. A handful of significant Vietnamese literatures to exist today were written in *chữ nôm* by notable intellectuals. *The Tale of Kieu* written by Nguyễn Du in the eighteenth century is the most well known literature of *chữ nôm*.

⁹ A French missionary named Alexandre de Rhodes who modified the Roman alphabet with accents and signs to suit particular consonants, vowels, and tones of the Vietnamese language developed *Quốc ngữ* in the seventeenth century. It was first used only in the Vietnamese Christian communities, but by the early twentieth century *quốc ngữ* was made mandatory by the French administration. *Quốc ngữ* is now universally used in Vietnam and is the official writing system.

historical episodes from Vietnamese and Chinese.

The backbone of *cải lương* is a melody called *vọng cổ* (literal translation, “nostalgia for the past”), which came from the rural areas of the Mekong Delta in the South of Vietnam. It is typically associated with approximately twenty songs, each of which can be sung with different emotional tempos to make up various versions. *Vọng cổ* is sung in a first person narrative with spoken words often interspersed between singing melodies of *vọng cổ* to allow the character to express his/her deep inner feelings of joy, anger, love, and happiness. *Vọng cổ* is performed with wind, stringed, and percussion instruments such as the *tranh* (sixteen-stringed zither), *nguyệt cầm* (two-string moon lute), *đàn tỳ bà* (pear-shaped lute), *đàn nhị* (two string spike fiddle), *đàn bầu* (monochord), *tiểu* (the straight flute) or *sáo* (transverse) flute. The “modern and Western” instruments of violin and guitar were added to the orchestra sometime at the start of the 1930’s.

Cải lương plays today are commonly performed in enclosed permanent theatre buildings similar to those found in the West. However, before the French began to build permanent theatre structures in Vietnam in the early twentieth century *cải lương* was primarily performed outside in a courtyard environment commonly found in the center of most villages. Theatre structures were often temporarily constructed.

Until approximately thirty years ago a *cải lương* play would run for three to five hours and could be repeated a few times a week while at any given location. Catering to the short attention span and limited time available to modern spectators, *cải lương* plays have been shortened to two

hours maximum, with evening productions occurring only once or twice a week.

1.3 Justification

Since Hauch's dissertation in 1972 no other comprehensive study of the *cải lương* tradition have been conducted in English. This research aims to study *cải lương* by incorporating the voices of people, including my own extended family, many of whom have been involved in *cải lương* for most of their lives and whose lives the different historical forces from the past four decades have influenced. To the best of my knowledge this dissertation is the first time that anyone has employed oral history to study *cải lương*, and very few studies exist since the end of the U.S.-Vietnam War in 1975.

The study has given me an opportunity to record an element of traditional Vietnamese culture, which I believe has changed drastically in the past few decades, and may soon disappear.

Vietnam, at least in the West, is too often associated with the Vietnam War, Communism, and the refugee experience. In this dissertation I try to go beyond these stereotypical associations fostered by the American and Vietnamese governments and mostly nurtured by a plethora of scholars focused on war and politics since 1975. Vietnam has a profound history and rich culture that far transcends this relatively brief historical period and these narrow prisms. Although there continues to be much work to be conducted on post-war reconciliation and contemporary Vietnam in recent literature, few scholars have examined this transition period through extended research of a performance art in Vietnam.

As I have suggested, while this dissertation is scholarly in executions, it is also a personal project for me used to mend family ties that have been severed by war. Oral historian Misztal writes, “Family is an important group that plays a crucial role in the construction of memory.” She continued by saying,

As long as the family jointly produces and maintains its memory, its cohesion and continuity is ensured. Listening to a family member recount a shared experience...ensures that new members, by identifying with groups’ past, attain a required social identity. When a family is unable to maintain or pass on a living memory then the quest for family roots begin. (Misztal, 2003: 19).

Phước Tân, my family’s theatre troupe, has been an integral part of my ancestors, parents, and me. To this end, this project helps to close a gap between myself and my family’s history created by my refugee experience.

1.4 Limitations

While I explain some of the scholastic/scholarly and personal justifications for pursuing this project, the scholarly and personal limitations to this research are also worth acknowledging to extent that I recognize them. Academically, the historical developments of *cải lương* are difficult to document with accuracy, as the written record is quite sparse. Almost all the written primary and secondary sources in Vietnamese and English are generalizing in nature, mentioning the historical origins and influences in only a few pages. These secondary sources published in Vietnam after 1975 are further compromised as they become heavy in nationalist content and printed only by state sanctioned publications. This presents me with a scant and often times questionable historical record upon which to base this study.

Personally, as a researcher who was born in Vietnam, but lived most of her life outside of her birth country, and returned to her parents' homeland to conduct fieldwork, I inevitably bring into this study shortcomings and (mis) conceptions connected with this dislocation.

Although the circumstances surrounding the war were beyond my two-year old control and thirty-seven years have passed since then, the people I've approached for interviews, nevertheless, often treated me with suspicion. To many of the informants I am associated with betrayal, privilege, and wealth. Again, the past remains a living presence, impossible to ignore, and difficult to accept.

My first encounter with potential informants almost always began with a session of interrogation. I must not only be willing to answer a string of questions about my family and myself, but also prove to them that my interest in *cái lương* is genuine. Where is your family from in Vietnam? What did your father do before 1975? What do they do now in the U.S.? Why do you want to learn about *cái lương*? What will you do with this research? Only when I have passed this background test would they then agree or diplomatically reject an interview.

While sometimes resenting the fact that I had to explain myself and my parents' decisions, actions, and experiences to strangers, I also understand why this has to take place. I don't blame my informants for questioning my intentions. After all, who am I to return after thirty-five years

to reap the benefits of what's available in Vietnam now that their struggles have eased.

Throughout the course of my fieldwork I too often asked myself "Is this project just about me? Why should they sit through this interview? How will they benefit from sharing their life stories with me? Does this research serve any purpose beyond my Ph.D.? Will anyone else really care about what I have to say about *cai luong*, in English?"

While there were persistent reservations about conducting this research I am clear that the inspiration for the topic comes out of love. Historian Theodore Rosengarten raises the question of "love" in social inquiry. He believes that scholars must do the work that is meaningful to her or him for to Rosengarten "detachment lead towards superficial research and bland interpretation" (Yow, 1997: 59). Although I try to balance the various voices and differing opinions, I do not claim to speak with objectivity and freely acknowledge a deep personal attachment to the topic.

1.5 Literature Review

Scholarly research on *cải lương* is faced with at least three major challenges. First, currently Vietnamese and English scholarly works on *cải lương* are scarce. Second, among those that exist, most are not comprehensive and have a strong social realism¹⁰ framework. Third, the majority of these sources are outdated. I find that even among the few sources that are published recently they continue to represent a version of history that is often laden with Communist ideology.

¹⁰ *Social realism* is an art form that was launched by Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union in 1934 to depict heroic acts of the working class and peasant through various art forms. This policy style later became a dominant art model for many socialist countries such as Vietnam pushing to move towards socialism.

Most Vietnamese sources are governmental or officially sanctioned publications, the majority of them from “Thế Giới Publishers” and “Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa”, which have been administered by the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture and Information. For example, a recent state published text *Nghệ Thuật Cải Lương (Art of Cải lương)* was published in 1997 in Vietnam and was written by Trương Bình Trùng, a playwright and a cadre who worked on the reorganization of *cải lương* for the government after 1975. Another more current work on *cải lương* was written by Hoàng Như Mai, a professor and theatre critic, who clearly represents in her work the interests of the Vietnamese state. Both Trùng and Hoàng seem to take the stance that *cải lương* should be managed and altered to re-create a new ‘communist’ identity of for Vietnam. Although these texts are politically motivated, they nevertheless offer an valuable insight into the intentions of the government concerning the role and significance of *cải lương*. In the dissertation I refer to Trùng’s text often to compare and analyze *cải lương* against the information that was provided to me by my informants.

Similarly to Trùng and Hoàng’s work, most of these secondary sources in Vietnamese are important for my purposes in that they provide supplementary materials for my research. Đắc Nhân’s book on the music of *cải lương* called *Tìm Hiểu Âm Nhạc Cải Lương (Getting to Know the Music of Cải lương)* begins to investigate the roots of *cải lương* music and the musical structures of *cải lương* songs. Writings of Vương Hồng Sển’s in *Năm Mươi Năm Mê Hát (50 years of Love for Singing)*, Ba Vân’s in *Kể Chuyện Cải Lương (Telling Stories about Cải lương)*, and Song Kim’s in *Cuộc Đời Sân Khấu Của Chúng Tôi (Our Lives Together on Stage)* offer individual narrations and stories of legendary *cải lương* performers. Furthermore, general books

on the theatre of Vietnam such as *Nghệ Thuật Sân Khấu Việt Nam (The Art of Vietnamese Theatre)* and *Lịch Sử Sân Khấu Việt Nam (History of Theatre in Vietnam)* presents me with an overview of *cải lương* from the perspective of Vietnamese scholars of theatre.

English materials on *cải lương* are found mainly in anthologies and collections that deal with Southeast Asian theatre forms with a short section devoted to Vietnam. Texts written or edited by respected Western scholars such as James R. Brandon, Faubian Bowers, and Colin Mackerras often result in unavoidable over-simplification and generalization. James Brandon in the *Theatre in Southeast Asia* spent more than three years observing and interviewing troupe members in Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. He described twenty-five of the most important theatrical forms, grouping them according to their origins as folk, court, popular, or Western theatre. He considered the theatre from four perspectives: its origins, its art, its role as a social institution, and its function as a medium of communication and propaganda. However, because of the sweeping nature of the book, investigation into specifically *cải lương* is limited. His book discusses Vietnamese theatre at large. His research on the performance features as well as the internal organization and membership composition of *cải lương* troupes provided me with a firm foundation in which to begin my own studies. However, Brandon's ethnographic study was conducted in the 1960's, so my aim here is to build upon and update a component of his work with this research.

Working in a similar frame to Brandon's book, Bowers encyclopedia, *Theatre in the East*, provides the reader with descriptions of various dances and drama of fourteen Asian countries from India to Japan. This book is a great source for theatre-lovers and travelers with little

knowledge of Eastern theatre. However, it is introductory and for anyone interested in exploring in detail any given theatre form such as *cải lương* it also is limited. In the case of Vietnam Bowers in his survey of diverse theatrical genres of the East dedicated only five pages to Vietnamese theatre as a whole and with three paragraphs discussing *cải lương*.

Colin Mackerras' article *Theatre in Vietnam* was a product of two months of ethnographic research in 1984 in Vietnam. He was able to attend five theatre performances, interview the members of a cultural troupe, and visited several artist organizations. This piece is once again only a brief assessment of Vietnamese theatre. A majority of information provided by Mackerras was available in other English and Vietnamese materials on *cải lương* mentioned above.

The one extensive study of *cải lương* in English I have located is a dissertation written by Duane Hauch in 1972. His work is important for its insightful analysis of the origins and development of *cải lương*. My research will build on this work but will focus on changes in the development of the art form since 1975, the period in which Hauch ended his own research, relating these transformations to changing socio-historical contexts as possible.

Similar to the problems faced by existing current works in Vietnamese on *cải lương*, texts translated by Vietnamese scholars into English such as *Vietnamese Theatre* by Song Bân or *Cải Lương, a Theatre in Rapid Development* by Tú Lương are also overly influenced by the social realist perspective. All Vietnamese and English texts mentioned above were published in the 1970's and 1980's, with only a small handful of sources published in the 1990's and the early twentieth century. While most of these sources are outdated they also offer beneficial

information that acts as a foundation to my own research.

The most updated source on *cải lương* considered in this study is a dissertation and an article by Nguyễn Khai Thu. Nguyễn's dissertation, *Sensing Vietnam: Melodramas of Nation from Colonialism to Market Reform*, completed in 2010 and her article published in the Asian Theatre Journal (ATJ) in the spring of 2012 issue entitled *A Personal Sorrow: Cải lương and the Politics of North and South Vietnam* offers important data about how *cải lương* was used by the Northern leadership after 1975 in helping to define a new nation-state and identity of Vietnam. While it is refreshing to have current sources about *cải lương*, I found that Nguyễn continues to rely on Vietnamese literature that are state-sanctioned to support her hypothesis. Although referencing government officials in her work upholds her critique of how *cải lương* became politicized by the State it does not for the most part include Vietnamese sources from performers that I find usefully illuminating and a corrective to these more nationalist studies.

Other more recent secondary literature on *cải lương* comes from the *Báo Sân Khấu* (*The Theatre Magazine*). *The Theatre Magazine* is a weekly publication operated by the Theatre Association, a government funded body that oversees all performance activities Hồ Chí Minh City. Articles on *cải lương* found in this magazine include play reviews, short biographies of performers, discussions on particular performance techniques, and the socio-political status of the form.

Current information on *cải lương* is also collected from a variety of online sources such as www.cailuong.com; www.cailuong.org.vn; www.vnexpress.com; and www.dulichtrongoi.com. Articles from *The Theatre Magazine* and these websites provide the research with a more up-to-

date perspective on *cải lương* theatre, particularly in the second half of the dissertation where the issues and concerns of *cải lương* in its more recent and contemporary state is examined.

In addition to the literature on *cải lương* published both in Vietnamese and English my dissertation also makes use of the rich body of scholarship on the history of Vietnam. This is important since the birth and development of *cải lương* has always been tightly linked to the many historical changes of Vietnam. William Duiker's *Vietnam, Revolution in Transition* explores the development of Vietnamese history from its birth to the end of the Vietnam War. His study of Vietnam from a wide spectrum of angles provides my research with a thorough overview and a useful foundation to comparing Vietnam's conflicts and socialist transformations with developments in *cải lương*. Duiker's discussion about culture and the arts after the Vietnam War is particularly useful for my own analysis of *cải lương*.

Similar to *Vietnam, Revolution in Transition*, Neil Jamieson's *Understanding Vietnam* is a great source for learning about the history of Vietnam. In particular, Jamieson's inclusion of the voices from Vietnamese writers helps to provide me with a starting point to associate my own research with to *cải lương* artists. David Marr's *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial* offers a detailed study of Vietnam prior to the First Indochina War. This source is especially important for my investigation into *cải lương* at the start of the twentieth century to 1940's.

Patricia M. Pelley's *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* examines the evolution of historical writing in Vietnam in the periods following the First Indochina War. Pelley traces the North Vietnamese agenda to re-create history in their efforts to build a new

family-state for Vietnam. In doing so, she provides me a deeper insight into the minds of the Northern leadership from 1954 onwards. Along the same line as Pelley's work, *The Country of Memory* by Huệ Tâm Hồ Tai focuses on how the subject of history, and particularly commemoration is remembered by the Vietnamese in modern day Vietnam. This collection of essays provides a useful assessment of social and cultural change in Vietnam since the 1980's.

Mandy Thomas and Lisa Drummond's book *Consuming Urban Culture in Contemporary Vietnam* is a useful complement to my own work. It analyzes how Vietnam and the Vietnamese people are culturally and socially negotiating the future as the country transitions from a centrally planned economy to a rapidly urbanizing market economy with a very sudden infusion of globalized culture at the start of the 1980's. The source suggests that artists benefited from the fast increase in levels of wealth and the gradual freeing up of state control over the art and cultural activities, but these positive changes do not come without certain consequences to more traditional art forms like *cai luong*.

While much of the scholarship on Vietnam offers perspectives on the socio-political and historical background of the country from the top, it rarely, however, engages the individual voices of those without power and authority, and generally neglects the contemporary narratives of people and their life stories. My dissertation is takes another direction by using oral history to fill this gap in the more mainstream literature on Vietnam.

I consult a body of work on oral history as I incorporate contemporary voices and life stories into my dissertation. In examining the origin, development, and the place of oral history as a research

method I refer to scholarship by oral historians such as James Bennett, Michael Frisch, Sharan Merriam, Alessandro Portelli, Paul Thompson, and Valerie Yow.

Paul Thompson is regarded as a pioneer of oral history. He is the founder of the *Oral History Journal* and the National Life Stories, a leading oral history archive based at the British Library National Sound Archive. Thompson is said to have led the oral history and life stories movement in Europe with his publication of *The Voice of the Past*. This work provides a comprehensive historical investigation of oral history and the methods applied by various veteran interviewers. Alessandro Portelli is another notable scholar to have helped define the purpose of oral history. In the essay “What Makes Oral History Different” Portelli argues that oral histories could provide historians with new ways of understanding the past. With his work he has shifted the attention among social scientists from the need for historic accuracy of the narrator’s account to the meaning of the story.

While I refer to Thompson and Portelli’s sources for a historical background of oral history, I use Sharan Merriam’s work, *Case Study Research in Education: A Qualitative Approach*, for a practical guide on how to apply the in-depth interview from oral history to my research. I compliment Sharan Merriam’s text with an article entitled “Oral History, Quantification and the New Social History” published in the *Oral History Review* by Richard Jensen. In it he addresses the pros and cons of using questionnaire versus the in-depth interview process. Jensen concludes in his book that although there are some advantages in evaluating systematic response to the identical questions, he favors the richness of narrative detail offered by the in-depth interview. For more applied technical questions about developing a written interview guide, using tape

recorders to probing questions during in-depth interviews, and editing transcriptions I consult Valerie Yows' book *Recording Oral History*.

While oral history may seem to be far removed from the arts, and especially theatre, the interaction between the two have been richly applied by academics and artists in two principal ways. First, oral history and the arts have been linked to produce a body of analytical works. Examples of these kind of sources include *Warhol: Conversation about the artists*, *The Outrageous Life of Henry Faulkner: Portrait of an Appalachian Artist*, and *Remembering: Oral History and Performance*. These works tend to be more academic in nature and use eyewitness accounts to study a particular art form and/or artist of a particular genre from a specific time in history. Second, oral history can be used in a more practical manner and applied to stimulate an artistic process that seeks to foster healing and reconciliation while also trying to build historical and cultural knowledge. This approach is commonly associated with a Brazilian director and Workers' Party activist named Augusto Boal who takes oral history collected through life stories and employs it as the basis of performance. The primary purpose of such method is to initiate communication, to educate about a political experience, or to inspire political or social action based upon a life experience.

The first approach mentioned above, bridging the arts with historical scholarship, is less commonly employed and is the one in which this dissertation falls under. In the same manner, I study how *cải lương* has changed over time using eyewitness accounts from performers who have lived through many historical changes in Vietnam. Oral history data

is collected with in-depth interviews, and then transcribed and analyzed to better understand how *cải lương* has developed over time and where it is at today (2010).

Play synopsis are weaved through out the dissertation to give the readers examples of the type of *cải lương* plays being discussed. These summaries are extracted from a combination of sources including secondary texts, online websites, DVDs, and oral history interviews.

1.6 Methodology

The data presented in this study was gathered in Vietnam between the period of April 2003 and January 2004, and January 2010 until September 2010. The materials used in the dissertation derived from three main types of sources: in-depth interviews, personal observations, and secondary sources from books and periodical materials in Vietnamese and English. Information collected during my interviews and personal observations spanning over two main research phases (2003 and 2010) have been integrated with newspaper and magazine articles in Vietnamese on *cải lương* and supplemented by existing literature on theatre and Vietnamese studies.

While on a Fulbright IIE Fellowship in April 2003 I undertook a six-month field research trip to Vietnam for my Masters thesis in Anthropology at Hunter College, CUNY. At this time I conducted interviews with performers in Hà Nội on the origin of three main form of Vietnamese theatre: *hát bội*, *hát chèo*, and *cải lương*. In regards to *cải lương* I had the privilege to observe rehearsals at two major theatres in Hanoi: the *Nhà Hát Cải Lương Hà Nội* (*Cải lương Theatre of*

Hanoi) and the *Nhà Hát Cải Lương Trung Ương (Cải lương Theatre of Vietnam)*. During this time I also collected a number of academic publications and newspaper articles in Vietnamese on *cải lương*. I also began informal interviews with my family in Hồ Chí Minh City.

This research led me to ask deeper questions about the three Vietnamese theatre genres I had studied. Curiosity inspired me to expand the Master thesis into a dissertation whereby a more comprehensive investigation and analysis of the artistic and socio-historical development of *cải lương* could be conducted.

This dissertation uses oral history as a research method for interpreting, presenting and expanding upon the information already available to me on *cải lương*. For nine months in 2010 I conducted individual in-depth interviews with seven informants using audio recordings and a substantial amount of data for this study is drawn from formal in-depth interviews and informal discussions with *cải lương* performers in Hồ Chí Minh City. Additionally, materials from people I have interviewed once or twice in 2003 and 2010 are also incorporated throughout the dissertation.

In using oral history as a method for the dissertation I consider unrecorded stories and perspectives about *cải lương*. As Alessandro Portelli suggests in the article *Peculiarities of Oral History*, “interviews often reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of known events, and they always cast new light on unexplored sides of the daily life of the non-hegemonic classes (1981: Vol. 12, 99).” With the increasingly hegemonic power of the North Vietnamese Communists in the country since the 1950’s, narratives and political discussion contrary to their political

ideologies and objectives were censored or repressed. Pelley in *Postcolonial Vietnam* writes, “From 1954 to 1975, Southern historians were extremely prolific. Northern historians only very rarely acknowledge their perspectives, and in the period after reunification in 1976 the stifling of Southern voices was even more complete” (2002: 6). From 1975 onwards, this body of scholarship by Southern historians has been largely ignored or denied. Hue-Tam Ho Tai explains state-imposed narratives silenced preexisting beliefs and practices that were at odds with the state (2001:8).

Since 1975 when the North Vietnamese took control of the government they have sought to recreate their past by re-writing history and typically emphasize the “narrative of heroic and triumphant struggle against foreign domination and inscribing the future as a vision of communist utopia (Ho Tai, 2001: 4).” Phạm Huy Thông¹¹, a key figure in the efforts of the Northern regime to use history as an instrument to mobilize popular support during wartime, confirmed this intention by saying in an interview in 1973 “History is a sort of comfort to us” (Ho Tai, 2003: 4). Pelley in her study tracks the Vietnamese government’s efforts to redefine Vietnam and concludes that the work of these historians “played an essential role in establishing a new collective memory of the past” and “provided the foundation for new rituals of the state” (2006:20). In response, this dissertation uses oral history to consider counter narratives from *cải lương* performers whose versions of history have been silenced in official history.

1.7 My Own Fieldwork

The appeal for me in conducting in-depth interviews is its ability to allow informants leeway to

¹¹ *Phạm Huy Thông*- Phạm was aide to Hồ Chí Minh and later the director of the Institute of Archeology.

answer as he or she chooses, to attribute meaning to the experiences under discussion, and to interject topics of his or her choice, thus creating space for new hypotheses to be generated if required. In not adhering to fixed testing methods as quantitative research often requires, my goal is to be open to learning things unanticipated, that is things that may not have been considered in the original hypothesis at the start of my fieldwork. In describing this approach Renato Rosaldo says, “Ethnographers begin research with a set of questions, revise them throughout the course of inquiry, and in the end emerge with different questions than they started with (1989:7).” In allowing for the openness in method I leave space for outcomes that may be interrelated to one another as a whole and hoping to downplay or correct preconceived notions.

In this study interviews were founded upon pre-established surveys with open-ended questions. Open-ended questions were emphasized to avoid leading people into saying what they thought I wanted to hear. Interview sessions always include questions about how performers first became involved in *cải lương* and in which ways they thought their lives as performers have been affected by the many historical changes that Vietnam has had to endure. This was followed by discussions on how informants thought *cải lương* has changed over time, and what they believe is happening with *cải lương* today. I tried to always conclude the interview with impressions about the future directions of *cải lương* and suggestions the narrators may have to preserve and revive the form. Some overarching questions includes: How life has been for them as *cải lương* performers; what kept them going all this time despite the many political changes that Vietnam had been confronted with; what they thought artistically has changed about *cải lương* through

the differing historical periods; and most importantly how *cải lương* performers are coping personally and professionally with the rapid demise of *cải lương*.

Qualitative research with in-depth interviews required an extended period of trust building and many meetings with each informant during the course of the nine months. The process first involved at least two informal initial meetings with most potential subjects before the formal interview with preestablished survey and tape recorder. For this reason in-depth interviews with only a small number of informants was possible. Conducting life stories with more than eight narrators could have been possible but it requires more time and money, both of which I did have at the time.

Most of the narrators I interviewed see themselves first as *cải lương* performers and then as playwrights, directors, and/or scholars of *cải lương*. Choosing informants with a diverse *cải lương* backgrounds was intentional. I wanted to capture stories and opinions from a wide spectrum of perspectives while giving special attention to the specificity and richness to each individual's experiences. British historian Trevor Lummis sums this approach up writing, "There is no doubt that the strength of having the account of the various dimensions of life together in one lived experience gives all the data a particular strength lacking in virtually any other source of evidence. (1975: 6)" Narratives gathered from these interviewees are presented in this study mainly in the form of anecdotes and then used to analyze and interpret the historical development of *cải lương*. James Bennett writes in *The Oral History Review*,

When the presentation is made in a speaker's own words, the image of a person is created that a reader is better able to identify with than would be possible with impersonal prose... This personal contact may be pleasant (even when it is painful), makes it easier to get a message across, and where action is appropriate, an oral history might motivate a reader more strongly than an impersonal account would. (1983, Vol. 11:1-15)

Informants for the study were chosen based on some general rules: 1) The willingness of the narrators to share about their life; 2) Those who have first hand knowledge of the topic; and 3) The mental and emotional well-being of the interviewees were also taken into account. Most of the informants I have chosen to interview are over fifty five years of age. While age was a serious consideration, the integrity of the narrator was an equally important factor in the selection process. All narrators included in the dissertation have been involved with *cải lương* for most of their life. Many were either born into the tradition or started at a very young age. All my informants recognized at an early age that the stage and *cải lương* is their key to survival. And because of this life revivification they made an active decision at a young age to take on the craft seriously as their life profession. With hard work and practice for many decades the people I interviewed thrived as performers and became leading masters in the field of *cải lương*.

In-depth interviews sources were used along with observation of rehearsals and performances. I attended on average one rehearsal or performances every other week during the nine months of fieldwork. The variation of activities enabled me to observe and make sense of the many performance elements I had read about and heard discussed by my informants. During these performances and rehearsals I got a chance to talk to some performers and audience members.

Notes were taken from these conversations and observations based on my memory and incorporated into the study. This informal process has helped me to develop over time a keen awareness of the differences in quality between performances (as discussed by my informants). Thompson writes, “Oral history is connecting value which moves in all sorts of different directions. It connects the old and the young, the academic world and the world outside, but more specifically it allows us to make connections in the interpretation of history; for example, between different places, or different spheres, or different phases in life (1994:11).”

1.8 Translation, Spelling, and Wording

Whenever a Vietnamese word appeared in the dissertation it is italicized with the English translation in parenthesis right after the Vietnamese word. Thereafter the word continues to appear in italicized Vietnamese only. These italicized words are included in the glossary at the end of the dissertation. Titles of plays and books emerge first in Vietnamese and are italicized. This is followed by italicized English titles in parenthesis. Subsequently, the English titles are used throughout the dissertation. Names of cities and provinces in Vietnam are written in Vietnamese throughout the dissertation. The same system is applied to individual names and names of theatre troupes that appear in the text.

The words *interviewee*, *informant*, *narrator*, and *subject* are employed interchangeably to refer to the people I interviewed during my fieldwork. The word “Sài Gòn” is used in discussing the historical period prior to 1975. Otherwise, “Sài Gòn” is replaced by “Hồ Chí Minh City” to refer to the city and era after 1975. I chose to apply this procedure because “Sài Gòn” was renamed to “Hồ Chí Minh City” after the Vietnam War.

1.9 Chapter Overview

Below is a summary of the Chapters that follow:

Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of *cải lương* performance features including costume, make-up, and scenery from the period of 1920 and 2010. As plays, troupes, and the social conditions of *cải lương* have been characterized by distinct periods of growth and change with the history of Vietnam, the staging techniques of *cải lương* should also be investigated in the same terms. However, unlike plays, troupes and social conditions of *cải lương*, I've determined that its 'staging techniques has changed very little over time. While Vietnam in general has become progressively modernized, ironically *cải lương* theatre structures have become increasingly dilapidated. Costume, make-up, and scenery have remained fairly similar to the 1920's except for slight changes to some types of *cải lương* plays. Wardrobe and make-up of modern *cải lương* dramas such as social or war plays tend to be more historically accurate than ancient dramas centered on Vietnamese legend or story line adopted from the Vietnamese traditional theatre, *hát bội*. Scenery of *cải lương* has become a little more sophisticated over time, moving from painted backdrop to the usage of real props on stage.

Chapter 3 begins with a brief summary of the people and geography of Vietnam. It is followed by sketches of the key periods in the history of Vietnam. The goal here is to provide the reader with a general background of Vietnam from the pre-historic era up to the early twentieth century, the period in which *cải lương* was conceived. Where possible these main historical phases are presented within a cultural context and placed in relationship to the arts, particularly theatre and

music. However, in order to provide a clearer picture of *cải lương* a discussion of the development of *hát bội* theatre is required. Chapter 4 provides a sweeping discussion of *hát bội*, a Vietnamese traditional theatre with its origin dating back to the thirteenth century. This form introduced to Vietnam from China blended with local Vietnamese folklore, music, song, and dance, became a unique form of its own with distinctive characteristics. Some of *hát bội*'s key performance elements will later be shown to have influenced *cải lương*.

In exploring the origin of *cải lương*, chapter 5 begins with the myths and multitude of opinions and contradictions among scholars surrounding the origins of *cải lương*. An analysis of what I believe constitutes *cải lương* is presented. The first part of this section is dedicated to examining the indigenous population of Southern Vietnam who contributed to the conception of *cải lương*. The second half investigates the various musical forms that have influenced *cải lương*. Ceremonial music and folk songs, and two forms distinctive to Vietnam called *nhạc tài tử* (Vietnamese style chamber music) and *vọng cổ* (Nostalgia for the past songs) will be discussed. The first step of *cải lương* as a theatre form known as *ca ra bộ* (singing with gestures) is also explored. This chapter concludes by introducing the reader to the first playwright of *cải lương* and the two first *cải lương* plays.

The exploration into the development of *cải lương* continues in Chapter 6 where it focuses more specifically on *cải lương* during the 1920 and 1945. The main focus here is on *cải lương* in the period between 1920 and 1945. The chapter begins with a summary of key historical events in Vietnam during this era. By the 1920 the French presence in Vietnam had been firmly set. Their

mission to “civilize” Vietnam and improve the livelihood of the Vietnamese people, created greediness that led to extreme oppression of the general local populace. The colonialists in Vietnam were becoming dramatically richer while the Vietnamese people became rapidly poorer. Under this harsh reality that the Vietnamese nationalists felt an urgent need to shape their own identity and build a culture distinct from the influence of the French. Political activists started to employ the arts, and particularly *cải lương* in their efforts to mobilize the masses. Out of this first initial resistant act by the local people a few major *cải lương* plays were conceived. Thus, in the chapter *lịch Sử* (Historical) and *Dã Sử* (Fictional) plays are sketched out followed by a discussion the *hát bội* influenced *cải lương* plays, *tuồng tàu* (Chinese-influenced) and *tuồng tây* (Western-influenced) plays. Key individuals, major troupes, and notable plays associated with this period are included in this section. An investigation into the journey of *cải lương* from South to North Vietnam concludes the chapter.

Chapter 7 starts by investigating the state of *cải lương* during the First Indo-China War (1945-1954) between the Communist Party led by *Hồ Chí Minh* and the French colonialists, who have occupied Vietnam for almost 100 years. With the communist victory against the French in 1954 South and North Vietnam soon found themselves in a civil war over differing political ideologies. All aspect of society: people, art, and culture, including *cải lương*, found itself caught between fictional geographical borders and tense political rivalries. Here I will analyze how these two major political periods in the history of Vietnam led to the conception of new *cải lương* genres such as social, far away destination, and war plays. Furthermore, I will develop how the North and South Vietnam utilized *cải lương* during the First Indo-Chinese War in 1945 and the U.S.-Vietnam War in 1975 to their own advantage. This chapter continues by examining

the ways in which *cải lương* had been perceived and renovated by the Northern leadership in the decade following the U.S.-Vietnam War.

Chapter 8 picks up where chapter 7 ended in its analysis of *cải lương* in the periods after 1986.

For decades since the U.S.-Vietnam War, films and media from the United States have reinforced two images of Vietnam: the jungles of the South where the communist, known as the *Việt Cộng*, ambushed fresh-faced American boys, and a sort of colonial idyll from the days of the French occupation. However, beneath the images and stereotypes Vietnam is a country struggling to come to grips with modern times. The question of modernity in Vietnam, its past development and current institutional forms, appears as a fundamental problem in the twenty-first century. On the one hand, modernity in Vietnam starting with *đổi mới* has led to an accentuation of economic stability and cultural diversity for society as a whole, yet on the other, it has undercut rich traditional habits and customs, such as Vietnamese theatre including *cải lương*. By primarily using narratives collected from my ethnographic research I will present a diversity of challenges facing *cải lương* today since the government enacted the policy of socialization (known in Western term as privatization) to the arts. Issues such as censorship, audience, creativity, centralism, and theatre critics will be explored. Using personal narratives collected during my field research this chapter concludes with a discussion of the effects of socialization, censorship, and tight control policies on *cải lương* performers during this period.

The conclusion chapter begins with a discussion of positive developments that have taken place for *cải lương* and ends the chapter with an analysis of the road ahead for *cải lương*. Despite

gloomy prospect discussed above, my research in 2010 has revealed that some promising changes are taking place. Since the 1990's the Vietnamese government at large has made some efforts to help identify *cải lương*'s challenges and propose solutions. For instance, two popular *cải lương* award shows and conferences focusing on *cải lương* are evidence of these attempts. The steps taken by the government to help revitalize *cải lương* is followed by proposed solutions offered by my informants. A presentation of the actions already taken and recommendations leads to my own analysis on the challenges facing *cải lương* today. Since the study gives special consideration to the oral narratives of *cải lương* performers, it is only appropriate and just that the dissertation concludes with my informants' personal opinions on the current status of *cải lương* and prospect for its' future.

1.10 *Giỗ Tổ*: Paying Respect to the Founder of Theatre

An important tradition of the performance art in Vietnam is kept in this dissertation as I begin to talk about *cải lương*. Paying respect to the Founder of Theatre is required. On the 11th and 12th of the eighth lunar month each year (mid-to-late September), drama enthusiasts celebrate the death anniversary of the legendary founder of the theatrical arts, *Giỗ Tổ*, to pay respect to the Founder of Theatre. Many traditional ceremonial activities are held at the celebration. During my fieldwork in 2003 and 2010 I got the opportunity to attend two *Giỗ Tổ* anniversaries. This is my observation of both events:

A dance between the Sun and the Moon (performed by a man and woman) and a dance of the four directions by four male artists were performed. At the end of the dances, a drummer summoned the memory of the Founder, and a *đàn cò* (zither) player begins the music. An old

and prestigious artist wearing a long tunic dress and turban then burned incense in front of an altar filled with flower and food offerings, to invite the Founder's presence. A group of men and women each stood on either side of the stage holding a stick of burning incense. After the two groups have made their prayers, artists were invited to approach the altar to make their own prayers for the development of the theatrical arts and their careers.

My family tells me *Giỗ Tổ* is an occasion for drama professionals to gather and review what they have achieved in the past year. They tell each other stories of their life and careers. Artists perform their favorite songs and pray before the altar. For them, these are sacred moments for laughter and weeping at the same time. (Family, Interview, 2010) In return performers believe that the Founder of the Theatre promises them a bright future professionally.

An altar paying respect to *Giỗ Tổ* is usually found in the backstage of a *cải lương* performance. Before the show begins performers burn incenses to pray for a smooth performance. "They ask his help in remembering their lines, keeping their costumes intact, giving them dynamic energy, and bringing in a lively audience". (Family, Interview, 2010)

CHAPTER 2

PERFORMANCE FEATURES OF CAI LUONG

2.1 Chapter Summary

This chapter briefly overviews *cải lương* performance features including costume, make-up, and scenery over the period between 1920 and 2010. As plays, troupes, and the social conditions of *cải lương* have distinct periods of growth and change that generally parallel the history of Vietnam, the staging techniques of *cải lương* would appear to warrant investigation based upon these same periods. However, I find that, unlike the types of plays, troupes and social conditions of *cải lương*, the staging techniques have actually changed very little over time. Additionally, while Vietnam in general has modernized, *cải lương* theatre structures have mostly remained stagnant. Costume, make-up, and scenery have remained fairly consistent with what used in the 1920's except for slight changes accompany certain types of *cải lương* plays that have emerged over time. Wardrobe and make-up of modern *cải lương* plays such as social, Western, or war plays tend to reflect contemporary time and aim for more historical accuracy with a degree of realism. Meanwhile, traditional *cải lương* plays based on historical stories from China and Vietnam and usually involving the royal court with the king trying to retain his power tend to maintain the same stylistic elements. As a result, wardrobe, makeup, and scenery of traditional plays reflect those of feudal times and early theatre.

2.2 Performance Features of Traditional *Cải Lương* Plays

As mentioned earlier, traditional *cải lương* plays such as Chinese, flying, sword fighting, and many Buddhist plays are mainly influenced by Vietnamese classical theatre, *hát bội*, which came to Vietnam from China in the 12th Century. As a result, traditional *cải lương* plays borrowed many of its performance elements such as costume, makeup, scenery, and gesture directly from the Vietnamese Classical theatre. Similar to the Vietnamese classical theatre, physical reality in *cải lương* plays is not depicted through elaborate scenery but by using conventional gestures and simple standard scenic pieces. The audience is then required to imagine the reality of the idea.

The acting area of both traditional and modern *cải lương* plays are bare, rectangular stages with size varying from theatre to theatre. Traditionally, at the back of the stage a decorated cloth of gold or red is hung, with doorways cut into each end for entrance and exit. Since the late 1960's permanent theatres have begun to use painted backdrops. Even today in 2010, troupes rarely use painted sets except for palace scenes where painted flat help to establish an extravagant environment. Up until the 1980's the stage is generally illuminated at all times in the same manner. Thus, darkness is commonly portrayed with the actor holding a lighted candle in his hand and moves about the stage as though it were completely dark. Hauch also infers in his study in the 1972 that “technically the use of lighting and scenic construction has not improved measurably since the *kiếm hiệp* [*sword-flying*] plays of the late 1940's and 1950's” (1967: 207)” in which lighting were used most elaborately to mark the flying scenes by an energetic and exciting atmosphere.

Since the stage lacks the scenery to define its environment, a scene becomes defined by the use

of properties, gestures, and vocal description. For example, a table and chairs serve as a centerpiece, which can be in a palace or amongst mountains, depending on its conventional arrangement and the actors' treatment of these properties to complete the symbolism. For example, a table could be placed upstage with a chair on either side and a third chair placed on top of the table. The audience doesn't know what this arrangement signifies until an actor portraying a king enters, he climbs up one of the side chairs onto the table and sits on the chair mounted atop the table. This action by the character immediately allows the audience to imagine a court scene, the king sitting on a throne.

Moreover, gestures of traditional *cải lương* plays generally describe action as well as symbolize emotions and character traits. For instance, an action of riding a horse is depicted with an actor holding a whip with tassels hanging from it. When the actor mounts the horse, he points the whip toward the floor and kicks his downstage leg upward, hitting the whip. Or to express sadness, if a character is of little refinement, he will roll on the ground, or beat his fists on his chest, thighs, or ground and sob loudly. If a character is of refinement, he will raise one hand toward his face, shielding his eyes from the sight of other characters at the same time that he moves his torso in a slow convulsion. A character stroking the length of his beard indicates that he is in deep thought.

Characters in traditional *cải lương* plays reflect the social standing of the character and so provide the audience with facts about the character. Characters appearing in stories about China or other foreign countries are costumed in a style that resembles the Chinese theatre costume coming from Vietnamese classical theatre, but without the rippling sleeves, characteristic of

Chinese theatre costume. In stories concerning Vietnamese kings and their courts, the costumes are patterned after the clothing styles worn by the actual Vietnamese kings and their courts with subtle distinctions of ranks. For instance, a king, prince, or a general wears a bright colored, tight-fitting costumes to highlight their height and broad shoulders. Female characters such as a queen, princess, and servant are shown in soft and flowing costumes that highlight their gentle features and grace of movement. Women warriors, like male characters, also wear bright colored costumes and form fitting attires to show their strength.

Makeup in traditional *cải lương* plays is a simplified version of the Vietnamese classical theatre. Few colors are used to paint the faces. White powder is applied unto the face as a base color with black lines used to accent the eyebrows, sideburns, and moustaches. Beards are commonly used for older male characters such as the king, wise man, and evil characters.

2.3 Performance Features in Modern *Cải Lương* Plays

A rectangle-shaped stage, 23 feet wide and 15 feet deep is a typical acting space of modern *cải lương* plays such as social, Western, and war plays. Sceneries of modern and traditional *cải lương* plays have been kept to a minimum. At the start of the 1930's when the first Western-influenced play was produced, wooden panels or cloth sheets with standard painted images such as mountains, rice fields, forest, or simply wall paper prints (to indicate inside of a house scene) were commonly used as backdrops for modern *cải lương* plays. "If a production is important, scenery will be especially built; if not, stock drop-and-wing scenery will be used" (Brandon, 1967: 326). Brandon went on to suggest if a play is economically viable sometimes "it was possible for each troupes to construct scenery for each production because the high cost of

construction can be recovered during the long run of the play (1967:153)".

An altar, two chairs, a simple table, and a vase with flowers are common props found in an inside a house scenario. War plays contained the most technologically sophisticated staging compared to other *cải lương* plays, including traditional *cải lương* plays. Hauch suggested it appeared during the Vietnam War in the 1960's and continued to say he thought it was "not only powerful but violent" with skeletons of tanks, airplanes, cannons, and machine-guns featured on stage. Short war documentary films were also projected on a screen in the background while action took place in front of the screen. (Hauch, 1972:54) After 1975, sceneries and props from one modern *cải lương* play were regularly used for another with very little consideration to historic accuracy. (Grandmother, Interview, 2010) However, since the 1990's to today (2010) sceneries and props in social and Western *cải lương* plays have tried to returned to the principle of depicting real life settings on stage.

In regards to costume and makeup, and despite performer requests to look sometimes unnecessarily beautiful, actress Ngọc Giàu told me a realistic approach has always been the underlying goal. In modern *cải lương* plays character's costumes represent his/her social-economic status. For instance, in *The Life of Miss Luu* (play summarized in Chapter 5), a peasant is represented by wearing a black pajama with a plaid scarf wrapped around his/her neck. Working class characters regardless of gender are seen in pajamas or Western clothing. On the other hand, a male character from an upper class is often represented with a suit, tie, and a sometimes a Western gentleman's hat. An elitist female role can be seen in a traditional

Vietnamese tunic dress called *áo dài* or a Western dress. *Áo dài*, however, is not necessarily worn by upper class women exclusively. It is the national female costume of Vietnam therefore women across social and economic status can be seen in it on stage. The approach of portraying contemporary life characters, settings, and issues on stage holds true to this day (2010) in modern *cải lương* plays. In regards to makeup, it used to be that in a social and war play the eyes were accented heavily, the skin slightly whitened and the cheeks coated with a layer of light pink powder, and this remains true to this day. In fact, many of the people I interviewed have suggested that makeup in *cải lương* has become more out of character has other things become modern and more realistic. An interviewee provided me with an example. He said,

Male roles in *cải lương* plays today wear too much makeup. Their faces are caked with a thick layer of white powder, pink blush, red lipstick, and colored eye shadow. Many young actors in *cải lương* look like they belong in a transgendered show. How does this portray real life? They also have a bad habit of needlessly changing costumes. (Giang, Interview, 2010).

For the past few decade performers have been required to provide their own makeup and even wardrobe. Performers traveling from one production to another with their own wardrobe and makeup save the troupe managers and theatre companies the expense of a purchasing large number of costume and makeup. Actresses and actors today (2010) in fact prefer to dress themselves and apply their own makeup. However, according to my informants (Khê, Nguyễn, Giang, Già, Interview, 2010) this freedom leads to historical inaccuracy in costume and makeup for both modern and traditional *cải lương* plays. According to my informants, the increasing need to simply look beautiful regardless of the locale or socio-economic condition of the character has made the genre increasingly superficial.

The frequent change in costume which my informants spoke about is not a new phenomenon. Hauch concluded in his dissertation that this was already an issue at the start of the 1960's. He says, "It has become characteristic of recent social plays that actresses have an opportunity to change frequently from one beautiful costume to another... When plays are written, composers must consider this feature or the lead actresses will not consent to perform (Hauch, 1971, 205)."

Bigger troupes and theatre companies prefer performers to bring their own wardrobe and makeup because of two main reasons: First, it saves them money of purchasing large number of costumes; and second, most medium size *cải lương* theatre has small and limited offstage storage areas. Traveling troupes between the 1920's and 1960's had no choice but to travel with their own costumes, instruments, backdrops, and curtains, while also needing to transport the physical materials to construct the temporary stage for performances. My grandmother told me,

Small canoes were all we had to transport all our staging equipment. Roads did not exist in remote areas where we went to perform. We had to travel for hours, arrive at our destination late into the night, sleep for a few hours, only to wake up at the break of dawn to begin constructing our stage. As soon as the production ended we had to strike, pack, load our boats, and resume our journey again and again. This constant traveling was hard on us physically and mentally. (Interview, 2010).

The temporary stages that were traditionally constructed by traveling troupes were generally made of bamboo and rough planking covered with palm thatch (Aunt, Interview, 2010). Since the 1960's most *cải lương* plays have been performed in permanent theatre buildings with a raised stage, proscenium arch, front act curtains, and a backdrop. This proscenium style staging was modeled after "the standard proscenium staging of the West. The audience is placed on one side of the stage separated from the acting area by the raised stage, proscenium wall to watch the

action of the play unfold (Brandon, 1967: 152)”. Theatre buildings in the provinces are also similar to the proscenium style that Brandon has described but only smaller in size. A medium *cải lương* theatre in the province can seat approximately 100 people, while those located in Hồ Chí Minh City and Hà Nội can hold up to 300 people. Permanent theatre spaces in in the early twentieth century in the cities were mainly lit with a few large floodlights, while traveling troupes used banks of ordinary lights mounted in tin cans covered with cellophanes (Khê, Interview, 2010). He went on to say that the lighting technique has not changed much since the 1960’s when colored light panels had been installed to give the production more versatility (Khê, Interview, 2010).

Currently (2010) theatre buildings in the provinces and cities have dramatically deteriorated. Chipped paint, and heavily marked up walls and stage flooring is the norm; the curtains, once a deep vibrant red is now a faded pink color; and seats have holes or are broken. The sound and lighting projects a sad, dark, and heavy aura. Sitting in the Trần Hữu Trang Theatre in Hồ Chí Minh City I closed my eyes for a few minutes and tried hard to envision what this physical space and the spiritual energy had been like almost a century ago.

CHAPTER 3

BRIEF HISTORY OF VIETNAM IN A CULTURAL CONTEXT

3.1 People and Geography of Vietnam

Vietnam is shaped as an elongated S that is directly South of China, with, Laos and Cambodia in West, the Gulf of Tonkin in the Northeast, and Thailand in the Southwest. The length of Vietnam is over one thousand miles with its width between forty-five and three hundred miles.

Vietnam is often described as two rice baskets separated by a bamboo pole. The rice basket on one end embodies the Red River Delta region in the North and the basket on the other side represents the Mekong Delta River area in the South. The pole connecting these two baskets characterizes the narrow strip of Central Vietnam.

The largest ethnic group known as the *Kinh*, make up approximately eighty-five percent of the population and are found in primarily in the lowland areas. Ethnic groups such as the Cham, Hmong, Khmer, Muong, and Tai have settled in the mountains, hills, and tropical forests. For geographically small country, Vietnam has many ethnic groups, approximately fifty-four ethnic groups, as many as China.

According to some scholars such as historians Duiker, Jamieson, and Marr, apparently relying on secondary French sources, suggest that the Vietnamese people emigrated from Central China to the Red River delta in present-day North Vietnam in the first millennium C.E. But this earlier hypothesis has been undermined by recent historical and archeological scholarship in Vietnam

itself. It now appears that the earliest population who came together to form the Vietnamese nation had largely existed *in situ* for many generations before the first contact with the Chinese¹². A legend is often evoked (first collected and compiled in the 13th and 14th Century) to explain the start of the formation of the Vietnam. The legend is says:

A Vietnamese Prince named *Lạc Long Quân* (*The Dragon Lord*) came from the sea and married a princess from the mountain named *Âu Cơ* (*Mountain Fairy*). They had 100 children. The instability of their lives on earth together led *The Dragon Lord* to return to the sea and *Mountain Fairy* back to the mountains, each taking 50 children with them. Those that followed the Princess to the mountain became the ancestors of the ethnic minorities of Vietnam and the ones that went with the Prince to the sea became the ancestors of the *kinh* people. Their eldest son Hùng Vương became the first of the eighteen Vietnamese kings. He formed the first dynasty called Hồng Bãng.

The people of Vietnam traditionally consider *Lạc Long Quân* and *Âu Cơ* as their primal ancestors. For this reason, the legend of *Lạc Long Quân* and *Âu Cơ* has been narrated countless times in a variety of dramatic literature and enacted in all forms of Vietnamese theatre.

3.2 Chinese Domination (111 B.C. – 939 A.D.)

Vietnam fell under the domination of the Chinese in 111 B.C. The Vietnamese remained subject to Chinese ideas, political administration and culture until 938 A.D. Another favorite folklore of the Vietnamese people that has been retold countless time in Vietnam centered on the first

¹² O'Harrow, Stephen, 'From Co-Loa to the Trung Sisters' revolt: Viet-Nam as the Chinese found it" *Asian Perspectives*, vol. 22, No. 2 (1979), pp 140-164.

attempt by the Chinese to invade Vietnam. The story is about the legendary uprising of the *Hai Bà Trưng (Trưng Sisters): Trưng Trắc* and *Trưng Nhị*. The Trưng Sisters came from an elite class of hereditary district chiefs. According to Vietnamese tradition, husband *Trưng Trắc* were killed when the Chinese invaded Vietnam. In revenge, Trưng Trắc with her sister Trưng Nhị organized an army to revolt against the Chinese. After victory against the Chinese Trưng Trắc declared herself queen of the kingdom, but her period of influence lasted only briefly. The Chinese returned to attack and reclaim the Red River Delta. It is said out of despair the Trưng sisters committed suicide by throwing themselves into a river. This conclusion is favored in state-published literature and state-produced theatre productions to portray the heroic acts of the Vietnamese. Other storytellers say that the Chinese killed the Trưng sisters.

3.3 Ngô Dynasty (10th – 11th Century)

Eventually Chinese domination ended in 939 A.D. with a revolt led by General Ngô Quyền. Internal chaos and civil war quickly ended the Ngô dynasty at the end of the tenth century. A secession of ne dynasty came to power taken the names of Đinh, Lê, Lý, and Trần. These were houses that came to be known as the country of *Đại Việt (Great Viet)*. The *Greater Viet* dynasties progressively instilled political and economic stability between the tenth to the fourteenth centuries. With a stable state and a growing population *Đại Việt* began to expand southward to conquer the State of Champa, a sea-faring Indianized state, who inhabited the Central coastline of Vietnam in the seventh century. Subsequently, the Cham territories officially disappeared by the beginning of the nineteenth century.

3.4 Lý Dynasty (11th – 13th Century)

The performing arts, and particularly music, were greatly influenced by Vietnam's contact with the kingdom of Champa during the Lý Dynasty. As Vietnam won many battles against the Champa state they brought Cham entertainers to the Vietnamese court. Hauch notes that the *Việt Sử Lược* (*A Summary of Viet History*), written in classical Chinese during the fourteenth century, recorded some facts about the Cham influences on the performing arts during the Lý Dynasty (1970:6). This is what it documented:

The three Lý emperors (1000-1225) were also dedicated patron of Cham music, song, and dance. King Lý Cao Tông (1176-1210) is said to have been fond of sad tunes borrowed from Cham music. According to him, "sad music made listeners think of their home in the countryside, so he had sad songs to be played at official Vietnamese events to inspire spectators to think about their homelands with nostalgia" (Hauch 1970:7). These sad tunes of the Cham people had a strong influence on music of South Vietnam, and were consequently incorporated into the music of *cải lương*.

Phạm and Hauch also suggests that the word *tuồng*, literally translated as "a play", was mentioned for the first time during the Lý Dynasty, indicating that a theatre form existed at this time. Phạm writes, "A Tông priest came and taught the Vietnamese the art of singing and dancing (1975: 111). He went on to say the performances were of humorous stories *trò hề* ("farce") from various countries such as the Chinese story *Tam Quốc* (Normally called *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*). "*Trò hề* often included dwarfs as jokers and the characters with made-up faces". (Phạm, 1975: 111) Hauch writes, "A *tuồng* by means of song and dance was first performed during the inauguration of King Lý Thái Tông (1028-1054).

3.5 Trần Dynasty (13th – 15th Century)

After two prosperous centuries under the Lý Dynasty the Trần emperors came to power. The new empire focused mostly on building a national defense while continuing to work on domestic and foreign relations that had been started by the former kings. The Trần Dynasty continued to grow in strength and, under the leadership of General Trần Quốc Tuấn (also known as the Hưng Đạo Prince), managed to prevent an invasion by the Chinese Mongol Dynasty in the thirteenth century. It was at this time that the Hưng Đạo Prince captured a Chinese actor, Lý Nguyên Cát who probably brought a form of Chinese theatre known as *zaju*¹³ to Vietnam. Vietnamese stories, songs, dances, and language were likely added to *zaju* and became a theatrical genre in Vietnam called *hát bội*. Certain concepts and styles of *hát bội* went on to influence major components of *cải lương*. (Discussed in details under Chapter 3).

Constant contact with the Chinese during Trần Dynasty resulted in additional Chinese influence on the performance arts of Vietnam. According to Hauch, the *Đại Việt Sử Ký*¹⁴ (literal translation, “Annals of the Great Viet”) recorded that in thirteenth century during the reign of another Trần king, a Chinese actor came to the Trần court in Hà Nội to teach Vietnamese actors Chinese production technique “The actor, Đinh Ban Đức, brought his family, and they taught

¹³ *Zaju* first originated as a short variety play from North China during the Song Dynasty (960–1127), and later during Yuan Dynasty (1206–1368) it developed into a mature four-act dramatic form with songs, dance, and dialogue. (Dolby, 1976: 40-60)

¹⁴ *Đại Việt Sử Ký* –Literally translation “Annals of the Great Viet” is an official historical text during the Trần Dynasty in the thirteenth century. This 30 volume book is considered to be the first comprehensive account of the history of Vietnam that covered the period from Triệu Đà, the first king of the Triệu Dynasty in the third millennium to the last ruler of the Lê Dynasty in the fifteenth century.

acrobatics and magic tricks to court performers (Hauch 1970:9).” Phạm in his research called this form in Vietnamese *hát cỡi trần* (literal translation, “shirtless singing”) and *hát giấu mặt* (literal translation, “masked singing”). He notes, “These actors often wore masks and performed acrobatic skits shirtless” (Phạm, 1975:112). Although neither Hauch or Phạm suggest this fact in their research, I argue that the farce, “shirtless singing”, and “masked singing” that appeared at this time contributed to the establishment *hát bội* and was later integrated into *cải lương*.

3.6 Lê Dynasty (15th – 18th Century)

The Trần Dynasty were overthrown in fourteenth hundred by Hồ Quý Ly. In 1407/8 the Ming dynasty invaded Vietnam to restore the The Trần. But instead of doing so, they took over the country and attempted to re-intergrated it into China. General Lê Lợi successfully evicted the Chinese from Vietnam and established the dynasty of Lê Lợi. General Lê Lợi became a major Vietnamese national hero for successfully defeating the Chinese. He is a popular figure in Vietnamese literature and drama, and his story is often reenacted in *hát bội* and *cải lương*. Although Lê dynasty only lasted until 1527¹⁵ it nevertheless made significant contributions to the establishment of a sophisticated military, administration and judicial system.

3.7 Nguyễn Dynasty (18th – 20th Century)

The demise of the Lê Dynasty (briefly under the lordship of the Mạc [1527-1982]) led to conflict between two rival aristocratic clans: The Trịnh in the North and the Nguyễn in the South. This tension divided the country into two separate zones from 1674 until 1802 when Emperor Gia Long of the Nguyễn family united Vietnam. Gia Long was a patron of the performance arts,

¹⁵ Technically speaking, the Lê lasted until 1789, but 1527 onward, the court was dominated by a series of warlord.

particularly *hát bội* theatre. In 1804 he ordered the design of the Imperial City of Hué, which included a royal theatre called *Duyệt Thị Đường*. Hauch says,

Prior to the time of the Gia Long, actors had been considered part of the king's household staff, along with the cooks, valets, and other servants. They had not held a titled position nor had they an official status in the organization of the Imperial Court. King Gia Long organized the actors and singers into ranks and paid them as he paid his soldiers (Hauch 1970: 12).

Emperor Gia Long would not have succeeded in uniting Vietnam without the aid of the French who, at the time, already made their definitive mark on Vietnam. In exchange, the French were hoping that their assistance would lead to trade and missionary advantages in Vietnam. However, their wishes were not met, because Gia Long rejected refused to ratify a treaty with Paris. As a result, tensions between Vietnam and France escalated until the second half of the nineteenth century. Starting in 1859 France began to use military force to intervene in Vietnamese affairs. In 1867 France forced Vietnam to give up its Southern provinces, followed by the rest of Vietnam in 1884, placing the entire country under French rule. By the turn of the twentieth century French control was firmly ensconced in Vietnam.

Although a number of revolts took place, the French colonized Vietnam for almost one hundred years. French occupation led to rapid westernization of certain section of the society. A number of Vietnamese attended French schools, adopted French as a medium of communication, and were introduced to French literature, music, and theatre. This new generation of Vietnamese became well versed in French culture. They were the first to experiment with mixing Vietnamese traditions and modern French influences. *Cải lương*, a hybrid genre that juxtaposes French music

and theatrical realism with Vietnamese songs, singing styles, and stories, came to life out of this curiosity and playfulness. Sometime between 1916 and 1917, a group of Vietnamese intellectuals and artists staged this new theatrical genre for the first time. Within two decades of its inception, *cải lương* had become the most popular theatrical form in Vietnam.

CHAPTER 4

HAT BOI, A TRADITIONAL THEATRE OF VIETNAM

4.1 Origin of *Hát Bội*

Cải lương came into being out of the will and desire by the French-educated locals to modernized a Vietnamese traditional opera, *hát bội*. In order to provide a more concise picture of *cải lương*, a brief discussion on the development and characteristics features of *hát bội* is necessary. As mentioned above, *hát bội* can be back to the thirteenth century when the general Trần Hưng Đạo defeated a Mongolian force and captured a Chinese theatre troupe. Ten actors and two actresses surrendered to King Trần Nhân Tông (1258-1308). In exchange for his life, Lý Nguyễn Cắt, the troupe leader was ordered by the king to train suitable young Vietnamese his art. Although there exist few descriptions of the kind of theatre that he brought with him some evidence suggest it may have been similar to the Chinese theatre form *zaju*. Brandon, Khê, and Ban infer that generally they presented stories with scenes in brocaded costume with painted faces. Citing from the *Đại Việt History*, Hauch writes, “The actors were said to be so effective that when they performed in a sad manner, the audience was sad; when they performed in a happy manner, the audience was happy (Hauch 1970: 9).”

When *hát bội* was first introduced to Vietnam it was called *tuồng*, which was identified earlier in the dissertation to mean *play*. Later it became known as *hát bội* as it transitioned from a court to a popular form. *Hát* means to “sing” and *bội* means to “gesture”. Together, *hát bội*, produces singing in highly stylized movements.

The Vietnamese kings embraced this form of theatre until the arrival of the French when financial support for court entertainment was cut. James Brandon notes in *Theatre of Southeast Asia* that the Vietnamese emperor housed hundred of actors and musicians at his palace in Huế, Central Vietnam, during the nineteenth century¹⁶. At the start of the twentieth century theatre, however, budgets for such activities disappeared.

4.2 *Hát Bội* during the 17th Century

Đạo Duy Tu was known to have popularized *hát bội* and was credited for introducing *hát bội* to Southern Vietnam. Born in the sixteenth century Đạo Duy Tu was a son of an actor associated with the Lê court of Northern Vietnam. He was brought into his father's profession unwillingly because he was not permitted to take the mandarin administrative examination to become a civil servant, a career he wanted to pursue. Out of frustration he moved to South Vietnam where he was given a job with the Nguyễn princes. Given the position as an official advisor he convinced them to use theatre as a medium to educate the people of the Southern Vietnam about their policies.

4.3 *Hát bội* during the late 18th and 19th Century

Hát bội, however, had its greatest influence under Emperor Minh Mang at the start of the early nineteenth century. Schooled in Chinese literature and the arts Emperor Minh Mang wanted Vietnamese court theatre to be like Chinese theatre. He insisted that Vietnamese court theatre

¹⁶ Hauch cites in his dissertation that records of *hát bội* being offered to the general public were not referenced until the 17th century. (Hauch, 1972:10)

followed the make-up, costume, and acting system of Chinese theatre. He brought over to Vietnam a Chinese actor from Canton to teach Vietnamese actors Chinese acting technique. (Brandon, Khê, and Hauch)

By the middle of the nineteenth century *Hát bội* performance features and literary scripts became conventionalized with the reign of King Tự Đức. Hauch writes, “King Tự Đức organized a conference with hundreds of actors and scholars from around the country to record, edit, and standardized *hát bội* plays. After a large amount of *hát bội* plays were sorted, King Tự Đức ordered to have them distributed among theatre troupes to be performed” (1970:10). Present at this conference was a poet name Đạo Tân, known for the scope and caliber of *hát bội* plays he wrote. He revised a play called *Son Hậu* originally written by Đạo Duy Tư, which became the most produced play of *hát bội*. (Khê and Hauch)

4.4 *Hát Bội* by the 20th Century

In the second half of the nineteenth century modern French music and drama started to catch the attention of the young French-educated locals and consequently pulling them away from *hát bội*. By the early twentieth century *hát bội* was showing sign of decline and started to be replace by a newer and more modern French influenced Vietnamese drama known as *cải lương*. Yet despite its’ waning in popularity *hát bội* made considerable impact on the formation of *cải lương*. Significant performance techniques and a large number of *hát bội* stories were borrowed by *cải lương* troupes.

By the 1970’s *hát bội* was rarely seen in Hồ Chí Minh City. Only a handful of theatres in

Vietnam today still produce *hát bội*. These theatres are still standing although barely functioning. Most are surviving on a small state budget and currently private money and profit from the sale of tickets is almost non-existent. On average, productions only take place twice a year running for a few days a week often with less than forty or fifty spectators a night. Young audience members are rarely spotted at these *hát bội* shows. Most spectators are over fifty years old. This is in part a result of old scripts most of which are still in Sino-Vietnamese, a form of Vietnamese only the older generation can understand. However, the deterioration of audiences and failure to attract the younger generations has more to do with the competition from other forms of multi-media entertainment pouring into Vietnam for the last 30 years, especially since Vietnam began its open door policy in 1986 and the lifting of the trade embargo by the United States in 1992.

Since this time it seems obvious that the main intentions and focus of the government have been concentrating most on the economic state of Vietnam. The shift from a socialist society, at least into one more oriented towards capitalism produced a number of both positive and negative consequences. Valuable traditional art forms such as *hát bội* were abandoned in the process. Artists whose only livelihood and passion had been to perform *hát bội* could no longer make a living. They are now forced to leave the arts for a more lucrative kind of work in order to survive. *Hát bội* and those involved in this form are in a dire situation. It is competing with *cải lương* for attention to be saved, but so far it looks like *hát bội* is losing this race.

Whether *hát bội* will survive the next ten years is ambiguous. What is clear about the role of *hát bội* is that it is undeniably one of the main influences on *cải lương*. *Cải lương* cannot be fully understood without at least a basic knowledge of *hát bội*. After all the birth of *cải lương* was in

part a response to *hát bội*, for many progressively minded local intellectuals and artists at the start of the twentieth century had already started to view *hát bội* as obsolete element of the past.

CHAPTER 5

THE ORIGIN OF CAI LUONG

5.1 Who are the People of Southern Vietnam?

The origin of *cái lươg* is linked to Southern people, culture, and terrain. Southern Vietnamese were originally composed of people who wanted to escape war and corruption. In an effort to flee hardships and find peace they began to expand southward settling in the areas known today as Hồ Chí Minh City and along the Mekong Delta.

For over two centuries the people of North Vietnam had to endure war and corruption. A series of conflicts continued to take place throughout the nineteenth century after 175 years of war between the Trịnh and the Nguyễn princes. Poor farmers displaced by these conflicts were some of the first to have explored the Southern land. A handful of those with money also expanded into the Southern territories in search of new opportunities. Soldiers tired by continuous conflicts and/or disbanded by the military up North also made their way South in search of a more peaceful homeland. In addition, the people of Chinese, Khmer, and Cham ancestry who needed to escape political persecution back in their country also fled to South Vietnam. (Minh Ngoc, Interview, 2010)

At first daily life was hard for the new settlers. Untouched land with thick jungles and dangerous wild animals filled the Southern terrain. However, these pioneers were determined not to return to war and poverty and so they made this treacherous land cultivatable. They took advantage of the undeveloped land, untouched large bodies of water, and undiscovered abundance of natural

resources, eventually converting the Southern land into one of the most vibrant areas of commerce and trade by the mid of the eighteenth century.

Those who were willing to endure the geographic hardships had learned overtime to become more accepting of their neighbors of different background and culture. Out of this unique history South Vietnam became a region known for being open-minded, creative, and pragmatic, which consequently brought about an eclectic hybrid form known as *cải lương*.

5.2 Debates Surrounding the Birth of *Cải Lương*

The birth of *cải lương* cannot exactly be determined. However, a number of differing opinions exist among scholars in regard to the origin of this art form. Scholars such as Ban, Khê, and Hauch propose that at the beginning of the twentieth century a musical innovation occurred, which was to have an effect on the development of *cải lương*. They say that a group of musicians went to Paris in 1910 to perform Vietnamese music and, upon returning, began to organize European-style concerts. Hauch suggest that these organized concerts were competitions with modern French songs sometimes translated into Vietnamese performed in tearooms (1972: 19). Phạm simply infers that *cải lương* was created by a number of learned men who lived close to the country people. He does not further elaborate on whom he is referring to as “learned men”. Brandon, on the other hand, suggests that *cải lương* sprang from earlier traditions.

Traveling troupes of actors, musicians, and singers have been part of Vietnamese life for many centuries. From the earliest period of Vietnamese history, emperors have kept singing and dancing girls as concubines and to provide royal entertainment. When these girls were released from their service to the emperor, many of them established troupes that performed in public. It is from this ancient tradition that the most popular Vietnamese theatre genre, *cải lương*, has sprung. (75)

Making no mention of the French, educated men, or concubines, the government publication *Vietnam: The Land and The People* suggest that *cải lương* first appeared in the nineteenth century as an inherently revolutionary development, an act of resistance against colonialism.

According to this source, the story of the birth of *cải lương* is narrated thusly:

The Court at the time was despotic even in the field of music. The Southerners soon rebelled. People began meeting in private to play music. A great popular movement developed, especially in the countryside. Almost every village had a band of amateur musicians [Vietnamese chamber music] who, in the beginning, performed various musical pieces. Later, words were put to the music and songs were created to fit stage performances. Gestures and movements were also added to the songs, which by that time had made use of most of the melodies of the South and the Centre, and different roles were drawn into the dramatic plot. Such was the birth of *cải lương*. As it grew in popularity among the masses through the staging of well-known poems and other literary works as well as popular tales and new creations on social themes, it began to take up social criticism. *Cải lương* joined other traditional art forms in a national theatre devoted to the struggle for cultural identity and social liberation. (1994: 201)

Thus, the emphasis here is that *cải lương* was conceived as a result of Southern resistance against the monarchy, and later joined the nationalist revolution. Vương Hồng Sển in his memoir, *A Diary of Fifty Years of Love for Singing*, also links *cải lương* with the growing sense of national identity that was emerging in the South during colonialism. According to him, *cải lương* was employed as a form of entertainment by which nationalism can be defined. He says, “At first singing and playing, mixing French into our language, playing at life, making fun..., putting a love of country into an old performance, we kept on transforming, chanting it, and *cải lương* was born unexpectedly, from what year no one knows for certain” (Vương, 1968: 21-22). However, contrary to the story portrayed by the government (cited above), Vương Hồng Sển claims in his

text that *cải lương* emerged with a less intentional and politically overt plan. He writes, “At the time, in the South there was a mysterious wind: ‘the rise of patriotism.’ We no longer resisted, because we could not defeat [the French] with force, we could no longer be revolutionaries, so patriotism boiled and brewed silently within us” (Nguyễn, 2012:261).

My informants take a differing perspective from the government’s point of view and Vương Hồng Sển’s story. According to them *cải lương* originated more out of a time of cultural vibrancy in which local Vietnamese trained in the French school system embraced the art and culture of the French. An informant tells me, “Some of us were genuinely excited about incorporating elements of French culture we had learned into our own work. We saw this as an opportunity to advance” (Anonymous, Interview, 2010). I followed this comment by asking my informant, “In this case what was your political stance on the French presence in Vietnam?” My informants answered,

I didn’t support an indefinite occupation of Vietnam by the French, but I believe politics and the arts can be separated. I saw something beautiful and unique in French culture and believed it could help make our own more beautiful. In which case, why not use it? This was a matter of being smart and pragmatic. It had little to do with politics (Anonymous, Interview, 2010).

Another narrator told me, “*cải lương* came into being as a result of various factors coming together over time. It was first an attempt to modernize a traditional art form that had already been in existence with younger, newer, and more exciting components. Consequently, it became employed and interpreted by various regimes for their own purpose” (Văn Đức, Interview, 2010).

5.3 Music in *Cải lương*

The theories surrounding the birth of *cải lương* presented by scholars of Vietnamese theatre, presented earlier, differ profoundly from the opinions held by many of my interviewees. Yet despite the debates, most scholars and practitioners of Vietnamese theatre generally agreed that the development of *cải lương* involved five major steps. First, *cải lương* was created approximately in the year 1916 and 1918 by a new generation of Vietnamese who were exposed to French culture. Second, *cải lương* is a synthesis of *nhạc lễ* (ceremonial music) from Central Vietnam and *dân ca* (folk songs), which were later improved and turned into a form called *nhạc tài tử* (Vietnamese chamber music, also known as “amateur music”) by semi-professional musicians from the countryside of the Mekong Delta. Third, musicians and scholars over time continued to add lyrics to *nhạc tài tử* to form a kind of song called *tứ đại oán* (sad ballads) involving written dialogue patterns with one character singing one or two lines and the other character singing the reply while standing or sitting in one spot to produce a dramatic form of musical storytelling known as *ca ra bộ* (singing with gestures). Fourth, at around the same time that *ca ra bộ* emerged the most popular tunes in *cải lương* known as *vọng cổ* (nostalgia for the past) song was also developing. Fifth, “nostalgia for the past” songs were added to “singing with gestures”, thus leading to the inception of *cải lương* with the modernization of *hát bội* theatre and the incorporation of French music and repertoire.

The following section discusses some key musical compositions that contributed to the development of *cải lương* based on my interview with world re-known ethnomusicologist, Dr. Trần Văn Khê.

Trần Văn Khê was born in 1921 to four generations of musicians. Khê's paternal grandfather, his father, and aunt were notable musicians of Vietnamese traditional music. His maternal grandfather was an avid lover of Vietnamese music who had three children who followed in his footsteps and became musicians of chamber music. Among them his uncle became a famous song writer and music teacher. Khê's cousin became a famous musician. At a very young age he learned from his family members how to play many basic traditional songs with a variety of Vietnamese instruments such as the *đàn kim* (2 string moon-shaped lute), *đàn cò* (2 string instrument fiddle), *đàn tranh* (16 string zither).

His mother Nguyễn joined the anti-French revolution movement in the early 1920's. She helped to establish the Communist Party in 1930 but she died in the same year. Broken hearted his father followed his mother to her grave a year later in 1931.

He was only 10 years old when both of his parents died, leaving him and his brothers in the care of an aunt named Ba Viện. She made sure they were provided with a well-rounded education by sending them to a regular school, but also enrolled them in a special immersion arts and culture program to learn Vietnamese poetry, music, and theatre.

In this program Khê got an opportunity to learn Sino-Vietnamese script with a well-known poet named Thượng Tân Thị. In 1934 he was the only student in his province to have passed the Sino-Vietnamese examination. Because he was such a good student Khê received many scholarships: First, to a reputable middle school and then in 1938 to travel

North to Hanoi where he got to visit a number of other cities throughout Vietnam along the way. In 1941 Khê also received a travel scholarship to go to Cambodia on a cultural exchange program.

In 1942 Trần Văn Khê moved to Hà Nội to study science. In Hà Nội he was appointed to lead a number of respected music clubs composed of many legendary musicians. Khê was pro-active in many cultural and political movements at the time. He supported and promoted the establishment and expansion of the new Romanized Vietnamese script, *quốc ngữ*, created by the French.

In 1943 Trần Văn Khê married Nguyễn Thị Sương. Soon after their marriage she gave birth to their son, Trần Quang Hải, who today is also a respected scholar of Vietnamese music. Many family problems forced him to quit school in Hà Nội and return to the South.

In 1949 Khê went abroad to France to study at the Political Science Institute of Paris. Afterwards he continued with his studies to pursue a doctorate degree in Vietnamese traditional music. In 1958 he completed his doctorate and went on to conduct research and lectured on Asian music and methodology at countless universities and institutes around the globe. Khê has received many awards for his research and his work on Asian traditional music is widely published in Vietnamese, French, and English. Trần Văn Khê is undeniably one the greatest masters of Vietnamese traditional music and theatre today. After 50 years of residing and teaching overseas, Khê has returned to Vietnam where he

continues to conduct research and lecture on Asian music and theatre. Khê agreed for me to conduct interviews with him during the course of my fieldwork in 2010. I am grateful for the invaluable information he provided me on *cải lương* and Vietnamese culture in general. Khê offered the following information regarding Vietnamese musical composition:

Vietnam's geographical location belongs as much to both East and Southeast Asia. Vietnam was under Chinese domination for a thousand years (from the first to the tenth century). The music of Vietnam has therefore been most strongly influenced by China. Musical instruments, the sixteen string zither, four string pear shaped lute, two string moon-shaped lute, two string fiddle, and vertical and transverse flutes are said to have originated from China. Names of some musical instruments were also written in Chinese characters but their pronunciation varies depending on whether they are read by a Chinese or Vietnamese. For example, the sixteen string zither is *zheng* in Chinese and *tranh* in Vietnamese and the four string pear shaped lute *pipa* in Chinese, *ty ba* in Vietnamese. (Khê, Interview, 2010)

Along with musical instruments, Khê said some first theories of Vietnamese music were also copied from China during the Lê dynasty (1428-1788). These theories included the principle of seven tones and basic tones, and the eight categories of court music such as music of heaven, temple music, music of the five sacrifices, music for helping the sun and the moon in the event of the eclipse, music for formal audiences, music for ordinary audiences, banquet music and palace music. The Vietnamese musical notation of *hồ, xu, xang, xê, công, liu* was still written in Chinese until about 1918. (Khê, Interview, 2010). He added, "the scales in Vietnamese music

follow the pentatonic style of China, with exception of the South, where the scale can be bent” (Interview, 2010), for example, “not fixed, permitting a variation of the note to be a quarter tone sharp or flat” (Hauch, 1972: 62). According to scholars and musicians (Addis, Hauch, Khê, Phạm, Vinh Bảo) of Vietnamese theatre the flexibility in Southern music has been linked mainly to the Southeast Asian influence through Vietnam’s encounter with the kingdom of Champa at the start of the Lý dynasty (1009-1225).

The tonality of the Vietnamese spoken language depending on the region makes the most profound impact on Vietnamese music. Four, five, or six different tones can be found in Vietnam whether the speaker is from the North, Center, or South of Vietnam. This tonality has influenced the development of Vietnamese music. Typically, a word with a high rising tone cannot be sung with a falling melody and a falling tone cannot be sung with a rising melody. This common necessity of matching tones of words to notes in melodies could have posed barriers to creative music if it had not been for the development of a style of music, which has permits improvised changes of notes melody to fit the tones of the words used. Such quality of improvisation is essential to *vọng cổ* (nostalgia for the past) songs and *nhạc tài tử* (Vietnamese chamber music), two musical forms considered to be the principal foundation of *cải lương* theatre. In addition, “within any musical pattern, any tone may begin the scale, but in the melody at any time a rest measure may occur in which the scale may change and a new pattern will arise” (Addis, 1971: 130).

In the Mekong Delta region *nhạc tài tử* became a musical movement. In English literature *nhạc tài tử* is sometime referred to as “amateur music” and sometime “Vietnamese chamber music”.

Nhạc tài tử was initially called “amateur music” because it was deemed to be performed by men who were not formally trained and who only played it as a hobby. (Vinh Bảo, Interview, 2010) However, *nhạc tài tử* is closer in association to Western chamber music for it was mainly performed in a private setting by semi-professional musician and attended by a small audience.

It came about as musicians started to mix popular musical genres of *nhạc lễ* (ceremonial music) with a variety of *dân ca* (folk songs) from the South. This fusion of musical forms helped to contribute to the development of *Nhạc tài tử*, which was later incorporated in the modernized version of *hát bội* and *vọng cổ*.

Below is a brief description of *Nhạc lễ* (ceremonial music) and Southern *dân ca* (folk songs):

5.3.1 *Nhạc Lễ* (Ceremonial Music)

Ceremonial music first came about during the 18th and 19th centuries when the Nguyễn dynasties in Central Vietnam established musical groups to perform in royal ceremonies. Many members of these ensembles later moved to the Southern Vietnam to escape war and economic hardship (discussed above). They earned their living by playing music at village offerings to the gods and saints, as well as at funeral ceremonies. As ceremonial music moved away from the patronage of the court, it began to be adopted by the peasants, Confucian scholars, and the urban middle class. Overtime, ceremonial music was incorporated into other kinds of traditional music such as *nhạc dân ca* (folk songs).

5.3.2 *Dân Ca* (Folk Songs)

Three main Southern folk genres highly influenced the music of *cải lương*: 1) *nói thơ*; 2) *hò*; and 3) *lý*. *Nói thơ* is a form of spoken poetry usually accompanied by an instrument called *đàn bầu* (one string spike fiddle). *Nói thơ* is way of telling a story, and is also found in North and Central Vietnam. In *nói thơ* the performer tends to keep to the exact verses without any improvisation. *Nói thơ* first became a significant way of reciting Sino-Vietnamese poetry. Khê said the people of Vietnam love *nói thơ* because Vietnam is a poetry-centered culture. Our language, stories, and songs are very poetic. (Interview, 2010) Trùng claims that the people loved *nói thơ* for it was one medium in which men can learn about themselves and their society (1997:20). It was later adapted into *hát bội* and *cải lương* as a declamatory style in speaking.

Hò, another popular Southern folk genre, also went on to be integrated into *cải lương*. The word is translated to mean a “calling”. Each region in the South has a particular *hò* associated with it. *Hò* mainly originated from areas where land meets water and are considered to be working songs for people to motivate themselves for hard labor. These motivational working songs gradually evolved into love songs originally sung in duets during work or rest. It was later performed as boys and girls call-and-response songs at festival and ceremonial events. One of the most popular kinds of *hò* is considered to be those sung while rowing a boat called *hò chèo ghe* (boat rowing calls). The voice is the most important element of *hò* songs. Natural talent for a long drawn-out voice in this form is most desired.

Lý is the third most popular Southern folk form that also contributed to *cải lương*. It was first established as children’s songs and later became part of the music of Central Vietnam, to *chèo*,

hát bội, and then *cải lương* theatre. Although *lý* songs are performed in the North, Central, and South regions of Vietnam, it is more developed in the South. *Lý* is considered to be a short song with soft lyrics. Unlike *hò* songs in which the performers are given the flexibility to improvise, *lý* singers cannot improvise. There are hundreds of *lý* songs and most of which from the South depict activities, feelings, and the thoughts of the people in their daily lives. One of the most popular *lý* songs is the *Lý Con Sáo (Lament of the Seagull)*. The first two verses from this song are quoted at the beginning of the dissertation. *Lý* is generally described as a popular tune whose warmth and lyricism reflect the passionate temperament of Southerners. (Khê, Phạm, Bảo).

5.3.3 *Nhạc Tài Tử* (Vietnamese Chamber Music)

As mentioned earlier musicians at this time were well versed in *nhạc lễ*, *hò*, and *lý*. Ceremonial musicians can play folk music, and vice versa. As this exchange and overlap took place over time, *nhạc tài tử* flourished with talents that were passed down from many generations. *Nhạc tài tử* was conceived in the Mekong Delta region of Southern Vietnam. Lê Tài Khị (1862-1924) referred to as “The Talented Saint” and Ba Đợi considered the father of Vietnamese chamber music, both came from the Mekong Delta. Ba Đợi was a key figure in helping ceremonial music from Central Vietnam and Vietnamese chamber music flourish in the South. (Trùng, 1997:27) His death anniversary is celebrated every year on the 19th of January.

During my fieldwork in 2010 I met with musician Vĩnh Bảo, who according to many performers and scholars is considered to be one of the most respected *nhạc tài tử* musicians still living today. Vĩnh Bảo is 93 years old. He lives and works in Hồ Chí Minh City. Since the age of 5 he learned how to play folk music, and by the age of 10 he could build instruments. Because of his

clear understanding of music and the nature of wood, he managed to turn the ancient 16-chord zither into the current 21-chord instrument, enhancing its melody. It is said that among Vietnam's chamber music performers, Bảo holds a record for having studied with the most number of teachers. Dr. Nguyễn Tuyết Phong, a re-known Ethno-musicologist of Vietnamese music today and a student of Bảo told me that Bảo absorbed the talents of approximately 200 teachers. (Interview, 2010)

In the early twentieth century Sài Gòn gradually became the center for Vietnamese chamber music and musicians from all regions of Vietnam began to gather and share their talent there. Musicians primarily came together to see their fellow musicians perform and have a good time. These gatherings often involved some element of competition. "Competing and winning, however, was irrelevant. Mostly, they [the events] were set-up for musicians to jam and showcase their talents." (Khê, Interview, 2010). Vinh Bảo commented about this time:

The atmosphere can no longer be repeated. Every week we would meet at a different home. The houses were very tiny back then. Sometimes over twenty of us would try to squeeze into this small space. If there was no place to sit we played the music standing up. The thin metal sheet walls vibrated to the sound of melodies as each one of us played as hard and loud as he could. (Interview, 2010)

Vinh Bảo was born in 1918 in a province along the Mekong Delta called Sa Đéc to a family of scholars with a love for Vietnamese chamber music. By the time he turned ten years old he already knew how to play a variety of traditional instruments such the *đòn kìm* (two string moon-shaped instrument), *đòn cò* (two string fiddle), *sáo* (straight flute), and *tiêu* (transverse flute). He learned to play music from some of the notable masters at the time.

When the Sài Gòn School of Music was established in 1955 Vinh Bảo was invited to teach courses on the *đàn tranh* (sixteen string zither) and Vietnamese traditional music. In 1963 Vinh Bảo quit his teaching position to travel abroad to lecture on Vietnamese traditional music. He attended a Southeast Asian Music Conference in Singapore in 1963, and in 1972 he traveled to France to record a CD entitled “The Chamber Music of South Vietnam” produced by Acara Company and UNESCO. Between 1970 and 1972 he taught *đàn tranh* at the University of Illinois. In 1998-1999 at the age of 80 he was again invited to teach traditional Vietnamese music to a group of young students in France. When I interviewed Vinh Bảo in 2010 he was continuing to teach music. He also wrote many books on how to teach traditional music in Vietnamese, English, and French. In 2010 the Culture and Information Publishing House in the Province of Long An was in the process of printing his memoir.

Moreover, among the popular activities at the time were the small home based chamber music schools. These types of music schools are called *lò*, literally translated as a “furnace”, referring - I suspect - to a place where “hot” and “good” things are being cooked. During this time *lò* schools were commonly found throughout the city. Today few *lò* schools remain and only those involved in a small circle of *cải lương* know they exist today and where to find them. A *lò* school instructor conducts private lessons from his/her home usually with no more than two or three students at a time. Khê told me that once there was a long waiting list to be admitted into such schools and students had to already showcase great talent in order to be accepted. He continued to say it was a great honor to be admitted. This is no longer the case today. (Khê, Interview, 2010)

During the course of my fieldwork in 2010 I got a chance to attend a *lò* school in Hồ Chí Minh City. It operated out of musician Danh Phận's house. Danh Phận is currently 87 years old and has played music since he was 10. Along with musician Vinh Bảo, Nguyễn Tuyết Phong, and Trần Văn Khê he is considered to be one of the last few living legends of Vietnamese chamber music. Out of a 10 x 10 room in his house he teaches four students twice a week. Three come to him for vocal lessons and the fourth to study how to play the two stringed moon-shaped lute, an instrument once commonly found in Vietnamese chamber music and *cải lương* theatre. For a musician who was once so well-known and highly respected Danh Phận today lives a humble life. He survives on a fifty dollar fee he charges each student for private lessons and a one hundred dollar government allowance he receives monthly from the Theatre Association¹⁷.

I visited Danh Phận once a week to learn how a *lò* school is conducted, but mainly to gain some insights on the life of a *cải lương* artist. My time with him was mainly unstructured and informal, often going between him telling me stories of his past days of performing and singing *vọng cổ* songs while playing the lute or electric guitar. Although I was often the only person in the room he always played music passionately with his eyes closed almost as though he was trying hard to re-capture a great period in his life that can no longer be. My visits with him always left me with a feeling of sadness for *cải lương* artists like Danh Phận and a sense of pessimism for the future of the form.

5.3.4 *Vọng Cổ* (Nostalgia for the Past) Melody

Along side *nhạc tài tử* the history of *cải lương* is undeniably connected to the history of *vọng cổ*.

¹⁷ The Theatre Association operated by the government distributes a salary and a certain amount of rice each month to artists whom the state considers to be living in poverty.

Vọng cổ is the most-often-performed song and considered the backbone of *cải lương*. A *nhạc tài tử* musician named Cao Văn Lầu, better known as Sáu Lầu (1892-1976) was responsible for inventing *vọng cổ* at the age of seventy. Sáu Lầu was born into a poor family with a long musical tradition in the Southern province of Long An. At the age of four Sáu Lầu moved with his family to Bạc Liêu. In Bạc Liêu Sáu Lầu learned to play a variety of musical instruments such as the drums, the *đàn kìm* (two string moon shape lute), *đàn nhị* (two string fiddle), and *đàn tranh* (sixteen string zither) with a talented teacher.

When he was 23, Sáu Lầu married a woman named Trần Thị Tấn. Their happy life ended when the couple tried to conceive a child for many years and was unable to do so. Following local tradition that a married couple must have children, and especially a son, Sáu Lầu's family forced them to separate so that he could marry someone else even though they loved each other dearly.

Sáu Lầu thought of his wife day and night. He grieved over their separation and resented the society that had taken his wife away from him. Sáu Lầu turned to poetry and music to express what he could not say openly. Thus, *Hoài Lang (Longing for Her Husband)* was born in 1919. The song is written as a lament from a wife's perspective of losing her husband. The song came about as Sáu Lầu tried to imagine his wife's pain to be exactly as his as they were longing for one another from a distance.

Sáu Lầu was seen every morning and night at a local temple playing the drums and bells to the song of *Hoài Lang*. For this reason, his friends suggested that he changed the title to *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang (Longing for Her Husband at the Sound of the Echoing Drums)*. He was then later advised

again by friends to change the name from *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* to *Vọng Cổ Hoài Lang* (*Longing for Her Husband at the Sound of the Echoing Drums*), marking the birth of the tune *vọng cổ*. (Khê, Interview, 2010) *Vọng cổ* remains the most important musical piece in *cải lương* to this day.

Vọng cổ is distinguished for its storytelling mode. Deep emotions are expressed lyrically in *vọng cổ*. The first melodic line of the original song developed by Sáu Lầu was divided into four phrases of two measures each. *Vọng cổ* later evolved from four phrases to twenty phrases when it was introduced to the *cải lương* stage for the first time in 1923.

In 1927 *vọng cổ* changed from two to four measures. Most scholars of Vietnamese theatre and music (Bão, Khê, Phạm, Phong,) have agreed that Sáu Lầu is the father of the original *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* with four phrases and two beat measures. However, since its inception with Sáu Lầu many musicians over the next few decades have contributed to the elaborate development of *vọng cổ*. From 1934 and 1936 *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* evolved from four to eight beat measures. Shortly afterwards from 1944 to 1954, *vọng cổ* developed into sixteen beat measures. Today, there are *vọng cổ* of thirty-two and sixty-four beat measures in existence, both of which started between 1954 and 1964. *Vọng cổ* with thirty-two measures is considered to be the most commonly used *vọng cổ* in *cải lương* plays today.

Vọng cổ appears several times in a drama, and is often sung as a solo by an important character, or in a duet trading off melodic lines. For example, in the play *Kim Vân Kiều*, Kim Trọng begins singing phrase one of the *vọng cổ* and Thúy Kiều follows him immediately by singing phrase two. Hauch also suggests that sometimes in a given scene, “the performer will not sing a

complete *vọng cổ* song; instead certain phrases will be chosen by the writer or director” (1972: 64). However, the *vọng cổ* song is usually performed in a duet with the practice of placing spoken dialogue between the sung phrases. (1972: 63). Hauch says that this technique has been prevalent since the 1950’s and has considerably advanced the actor’s opportunity to improvise. If a singer is forced to follow another in a duet, attention must be paid to maintaining the flow of the melody, which the previous singer has established. “If any improvisation could occur, it would have to do so in the middle of the phrase.” (Hauch, 1972: 64). Addis comments,

As in all Vietnamese music the notes are free, with a structure providing the basis, or musical map, for the performers to improvise on. “The words may dictate part of the melody, since a high-rising inflection on a word cannot be sung on a downward melody but much of the improvisation is the attempt by the singer and the musicians to add life and meaning to a traditional form (1975:146).

The first note, however, is the most important in the phrase and is held. The ability to capture the sentiment of this first note is the crucial test of an aspiring *cải lương* singer. No performer can become a *cải lương* star without being able to successfully handle this note. If the performer enters the song from his line of dialogue he/she may begin singing on any word he chooses since the performer usually sings a number of words before the musicians start to accompany him/her. “It is not the meaning of the word which is important to convey to the audience; rather it is the actor’s ability to manipulate the sound of the word” (Hauch 1972: 64) to express the soul of the performer and the character. After the delivery of the first word by the performer clapping is expected from the audience.

While being able to improvise, the performer must maintain the rhythm within the sung phrase.

In *cải lương* today, as it was a few decades back when Hauch conducted his fieldwork, performers “sing one chorus of a modern Vietnamese song which uses a Western rhythm and then switch to a traditional Vietnamese folk song, either maintaining the Western rhythm or reverting to the traditional one” (1972:65).

The voice of a performer is more important than his/her acting skills. A performer cannot be a lead in a play unless he/she sings well. Most Vietnamese believe that *cải lương* is not *cải lương* without *vọng cổ*, and many are drawn to the theatre to hear their favorite artist interpret his/her favorite *vọng cổ*. “Audiences demand to hear *vọng cổ*, and singers demand to be heard singing it, since their reputations rest on their ability to sail flawlessly through its intricate vocal arabesques” (Brandon 1967: 134).

Towards the end of Sáu Lầu’s life he was very aware that his original song has already been changed. In a 1963 letter printed in a Sài Gòn newspaper he made a plea to composers to maintain the original beauty that he had created. In it he says,

Thanks to your contributions, *vọng cổ* has been the spiritual child of all of you. Now I give it to you. Please take care of it. Do not turn it into an illegitimate child with a dull rhythm and tasteless singing style. To be honest, I can’t stand the distortion of *vọng cổ*. It robs the song of its purity. I beg composers and singers to perform it with the tune and the context as I originally made them. (Vietnam Cultural Window 2002: 5, my translation).

Musician Vinh Bảo and Ethnomusicologist Nguyễn Tuyết Phong also agreed with this statement. In my interview with them in 2010 they told me that they thought *vọng cổ* today is being overly

exhausted. They said, “Nowadays *vọng cổ* is too often performed without feelings, and most people don’t know the difference between a *vọng cổ* song and other traditional music”. (Bảo and Nguyễn, Interview, 2010) They continued to tell me that in *cải lương* few performers can explain *vọng cổ*. They concluded the interview by asking a rhetorical question, “If life long *cải lương* experts can’t even do this then how can it be passed on to the next generation?”

5.4 Ca Ra Bô (Singing with Gesture): The First Step in Cải Lương

With Vietnamese chamber music and *vọng cổ* songs already well along in their development, *ca ra bô* (singing with gesture) came along approximately in the year 1915 or 1916. It developed as a response to a popular demand to have a form that could be watched as well as to be listened. *Ca ra bô* lasted only for a few years and was mainly performed as a supporting program for film showings and interludes at circus shows. However, much speculation about the formation of *ca ra bô* exists. Song and Hauch suggest two main origins for the gestures and movements incorporating into the *tứ đại* (sad ballads)¹⁸ song to create what is known as *ca ra bô*. The first claim went back to a wedding ceremony in the city of Cần Thơ in 1916. (Hauch, 1972: 20)

Among the guests was a lively elderly man who knew the song and volunteered to sing. Attributed to his normal lively character or to the drinks, the man sang the role with such a profusion of gestures and animation that the enthusiastic audience cued the performers to their next performance, and immediately *tứ đại* songs became more highly animated. (1972: 21)

Hauch’s second origin story involves a performance in early 1916 by two actors. These two

¹⁸ Hauch says of *tứ đại* that “songs of this genre were based on ballads, whose origins were famous Vietnamese epic poems, written in dialogue patterns, which were sung. The songs were divided in such a manner that one character could sing one, two or three lines and then another character could sing the reply.

actors were scheduled to sing a song on stage with two chairs placed closed to one another as they usually were. However, on this one particular day the chairs were accidentally set far apart. When the singers ascended the stage, they began to improvise sentences of dialogue between the sung portions of the song while moving the chairs about the stage. (1972: 22)

Phạm, on the other hand, infers in *Music of Vietnam* that *ca ra bộ* resulted from a mixing of *hát bội* and the realistic character of dialogue-based drama.

In a show selling bonds to help the French, the musicians Trần Văn Thiệt, Tống Hữu Dinh, Trần Văn Hường, Trần Văn Diệm presented songs of amateur music and one song with gestures: “The actors who played the roles of Bùi Kiệm, Bùi Ông, and Nguyệt Nga (three characters in the narrative poem ‘Lục Vân Tiên’ by Nguyễn Đình Chiểu) sang and made gestures in two scenes “Bùi Ông Scolds at Bùi Kiệm” and “Bùi Kiệm Flirts with Nguyệt Nga (1975: 140).

Trùng in *The History of Cải lương* also suggests that *Bùi Kiệm – Nguyệt Nga* (*Bui Kiem - Nguyệt Nga*)¹⁹ was the first *ca ra bộ* play to be produced. Addis tells his reader that this first little play only took fifteen minutes, and was part of a variety program. He summarizes the story follows:

“With some talking but mostly singing, this told how Bùi Kiệm, after failing his examination returns to his home. His uncle has rescued Nguyệt Nga, a lovely young girl who threw herself in the river after an unhappy love. Bùi Kiệm falls in love with the girl and all ends happily.” (Addis, 144)

Scholars have suggested that *Lục Vân Tiên* was written at a time when Vietnamese society was facing challenges from the French invasion of Vietnam. The tale acts to reaffirm Vietnamese

¹⁹ Names of the two leading characters from one of Vietnam’s most famous nineteenth century epic poem called *Lục Vân Tiên* written by Nguyễn Đình Chiểu.

moral virtues such filial piety, love, loyalty, and kindness. Therefore, it is no surprise that Trương Duy Toàn would borrow this important story for the first play for *cải lương*.

5.4.1 Trương Duy Toàn: The First Playwright of *Cải Lương*

Trương Duy Toàn (1885-1957) wrote *Bùi Kiệm – Nguyệt Nga* in approximately 1914-1915.

(Trùng, 1997:49) He is considered to be the first playwright of *cải lương* and the most important writer of *cải lương* plays during the period between 1917 and 1922. Trương Duy Toàn wrote for the biggest troupe at the time called *Thầy Năm Tú-Mỹ Tho*.

Trương Duy Toàn's was a political activist before his involvement with *cải lương*. He was one of the earliest members of the Reform movement in Vietnam known as the *Duy Tân*²⁰ (Restoration) and *Đông Du* (Eastern Study) Movement²¹ launched in 1904. Revolutionaries such as Trương Duy Toàn argued that Vietnam's civilization under the control of their French colonizers was too static and promoted innovation in all sectors of Vietnamese society. After being released from prison in 1913 for his political activities Trương Duy Toàn started to experiment with the theatre. Trương Duy Toàn was said to have been inspired to do so for two main reasons. First, his short time in Paris exposed him to French theatre. Second, his musical background in *nhạc tài tử* provided him with a strong foundation to experiment with a new artistic genre once he returned home from France. (Trùng, 1997:50) Not only did he compose

²⁰ *Duy Tân* Movement – Literal translation, “Restoration” is anti-French movement established in 1904 by a pioneer of the nationalist movement, Phan Bội Châu, who also started the *Đông Du* Movement.

²¹ *Đông Du* Movement – Literal translation, “Eastern Study” is a Vietnamese movement led by one of the most notable revolutionaries of the early twentieth century named Phan Bội Châu. He encouraged young Vietnamese to go east to Japan to study with the hope that these new educated revolutionaries returning from Japan would rise up against the French colonizers.

the first *ca ra bộ* theatrical piece he also wrote the first two fully developed *cải lương* plays, *Lục Vân Tiên* and *Kim Vân Kiều*²².

5.4.2 *Ca Ra Bộ* Plays and Troupes

Trương Duy Toàn was asked to produce his first full-length *cải lương* play, *Lục Vân Tiên*, by a circus group named Thầy Thận before they disbanded in 1917. After this production, Thầy Năm Tú, the new owner of the Thầy Thận circus asked Trương Duy Toàn and his performers to join his newly formed group in 1918. Together they formed the biggest troupe during the first phase of *cải lương* called Thầy Năm Tú-Mỹ Tho. Thầy Năm Tú-Mỹ Tho troupe opened successfully with Trương Duy Toàn's second full-length play called *Kim Vân Kiều*, named after the leading character in the local novel written by Nguyễn Du in the early nineteenth century called *Truyện Kiều* (*The tale of Kieu*).

The Tale of Kieu tells a story of a beautiful and learned young woman named Vương Thúy Kiều who was born into a well-educated family. She fell in love with a young man named Kim Trọng but their love was disrupted when disaster struck her family. Kiều's father and brother were falsely accused of a crime they didn't commit and were sent to prison. In exchange for their life, she sold herself. From that moment on, continuous calamity ruined her life. She had to follow her fate of being cheated and held in a brothel as a singer, concubine, and servant. *The Tale of Kieu* is a sad story of a talented woman struck by a series of bad luck, but more importantly it was used by Nguyễn Du to criticize the feudal society for its cruelties and

²² The stories of *Lục Vân Tiên* and *Kim Vân Kiều* are considered to be two of the most famous Vietnamese epic poems of all time written in the nineteenth century in *nôm* (Sino-Vietnamese script). The titles were taken after the main characters of each story.

injustice.

Numerous artistic productions such as paintings, children's books, movies, and songs in Vietnam have been created based on the story of Kiều. Most people in Vietnam know the story well and can recite at least a quarter of its 3, 254 verses. Countless *cải lương* plays since the first production by Trùng Duy Toàn have been staged.

Between 1919 and 1921, after the formation of the Thầy Nam Thú-Mỹ Tho, six other troupes emerged in the Mekong Delta region. These new troupes such as *Đông Báo Nam*, *Tân Phước Nam*, *Nam Đồng Ban* also performed the Tale of *Kieu*. (Trùng, 1997:55)

CHAPTER 6

CAI LUONG BETWEEN 1920 AND 1940

6.1 Chapter Summary

The exploration into the development of *cải lương* continues in Chapter 6. The main focus here is on *cải lương* in the period between 1920 and 1945. The chapter begins with a summary of key historical events in Vietnam during this era. By the 1920 the French presence in Vietnam had been firmly placed in Vietnam. Vietnamese nationalists felt an urgent need to shape their own identity and build a culture distinct from the influence of the French. Political activists started to employ the arts, and particularly *cải lương* in their efforts to mobilize the masses. Out of this initial act of resistance by the local people several major types of *cải lương* plays were conceived. Those covered in this chapter include: *lịch sử* (historical) and *dã sử* (fictional) *tuồng Tàu* (Chinese-influenced), the *hát bội* influenced *cải lương* plays, and notable plays associated with this period also discussed in this section are *tuồng Tây* (Western-influenced), *tuồng la ma* (Roman), and *tuồng phật* (Buddhist) plays. An investigation into the journey of *cải lương* from South to North Vietnam concludes the chapter.

6.2 Historical Overview

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, Vietnam was mostly under the control of the French authority. The colonial government employed the best methods to keep the native populations obedient while at the same time designed the most effective means of exploiting the

local resources²³. For instance, between 1918 and 1930 French investment increased by 600 percent, with the rubber plantation industry tripling (Jamieson 1995: 90). Moreover, no income tax or any other tax was imposed on French citizens residing in Vietnam although they earned the highest salaries, and owned most of the properties in Vietnam. (Duiker, Jamieson, Marr)

As the colonialist in Vietnam was becoming dramatically richer, the Vietnamese people became rapidly poorer. The latter were hit with the combination of heavy taxes, high rents, and horrific labor exploitation in factories, coal mines, and rubber plantations. Such injustice led the Vietnamese to an unbearable level of existence. Marr writes,

Conditions were abysmal, including endemic malaria, contaminated or insufficient food and water, long hours, the docking of wages, and vicious punishments. Consequently the turnover rate due to death, escape, and non-renewal of contracts was extraordinarily high, as indicated by the fact that the rubber plantation work force never exceeded 41,000 in any one-year (Marr 1981:7).

Economic greed and prosperity in Vietnam for the French also required a firm grip on Vietnam's geo-politics. By the 1930's the French controlled five main territories called the Indochinese Union comprised of North, Central, and South Vietnam including Cambodia and Laos. The French education and administrative systems were now securely in place throughout Indochina. They had French officials ruling the region from Paris and on the ground, with local people assisting them in their efforts. In such a harsh colonial environment, a handful of Vietnamese

²³ Many French citizens believed that they were morally responsible for bringing the benefits of modern society to places where they considered as being backwards. Their main objective was to transform Vietnam into a 'civilized' nation and to assist the national economy as well as improve the living standards of the Vietnamese people. This plan, however, did not take place. Many scholars (Duiker, Jamieson, Marr) agreed that the colonial powers were simply enticed by the financial profit they could gain from the exploitation of raw materials that existed in Vietnam.

nationalists felt the urgent need to reclaim their land and create a culture they could proudly call their own, distinct from that of the French colonizers. Out of this desire, a group of revolutionaries started to organize to expel their French masters employing a variety of methods.

6.3 Lịch Sử (Historical) and Dã Sử (Fictional) Plays

Political activists who were involved in the theatre, particularly *cải lương*, began to use Vietnamese history and legend as their main story line in an attempt to mobilize the masses. These dramas are known as *lịch sử* (historical) and *dã sử* (fictional) plays, which became favorites of the countryside where anti-colonial sentiments had been strongest during this period. (Hauch, Khê, Phạm)

These plays included stories such as *Trung Trắc Trưng Nhị*, based on the Trưng sisters who became national heroines for their resistance against the Chinese invasion in 43 A.D. *Trung Trắc Trưng Nhị* composed by Đào Châu was staged for the first time by the Văn Hĩ Ban group. To the best of my knowledge, no sources have mentioned Đào Châu's involvement in the anti-colonial resistant movement, although *The Theatre Institute* suggests that this particular play led to many other plays of this nature being utilized as tools to fight oppression. It writes, "The story of the Trưng sister's courage to stand up and fight against a powerful Han dynasty inspired the spectators to fight the French colonialists" (*The Theatre Institute* 1987: 96). Khê also confirmed this information by telling me that in 1927 the only all-female troupe named Đồng Nữ Ban of Miss Ba Viện (Khê cousin's) from Mỹ Tho were forced to disband after their production of *Trung Trắc Trưng Nhị*. (Trần Văn Khê, interview, 2010).

Many *cải lương* plays based on legendary Vietnamese historical figures such as the general Trần Hưng Đạo and Lê Lợi, as well as the emperor Gia Long were also banned at the time by the colonial authority. For instance, in 1930 during mid-show a performance of *Lê Lợi Khởi Nghĩa (Le Loi Rose Up in Arms)* by Nguyễn Công Mạnh was interrupted by French officials who arrested Nguyễn Công Mạnh for promoting Communist ideologies on stage (Trùng 1997:56).

The legend of *Le Loi Rose Up in Arms* has many versions. According to one, a fisherman catches a sword blade and sells it to *Lê Lợi*. The sword is inscribed with the words *Tuận Thiên* (literal translation, “according to heaven's will”). *Lê Lợi* later finds a handle that fits the blade perfectly. The discovery inspires *Lê Lợi* to gather up men to fight the Chinese. When the country is liberated, *Lê Lợi* crowns himself king and settles in what is now the capitol of Vietnam, Hà Nội. One day, as King *Lê Lợi* is taking a leisure boat trip on a lake at the center of the capital, a Golden Turtle God appears from the lake. *Lê Lợi* draws his sword, but it magically slips out of his hand and flies to the Golden Turtle God who catches it, nods to the king, and dives away. After this incidence, King *Lê Lợi* orders the lake to be renamed *Hoàn Kiếm* (literal translation “Returned Sword”). *Hoàn Kiếm* still lies at the center of *Hà Nội* with a temple dedicated to King *Lê Lợi* in the middle. Ancient turtles estimated to be hundreds of years old are said to be living in the lake, making it today one of the most popular tourist destinations.

Although no sources substantiate this legend, one can infer that the story of how *Le Loi Rose Up in Arms* was probably used by Nguyễn Công Mạnh as an indirect approach to arousing the

morale of the Vietnamese people to encourage them to take heroic action against the French as *Lê Lợi* did against the Chinese. Historical and fictional dramas such as this one seemed to have played an important role at the start of the anti-colonial movement. However, this did not last long. Khê tells me that *cải lương* plays based on Vietnamese history and legendary characters were not financially successful from the 1930's on because they were often used with nationalist intentions and were therefore repeatedly censored, which meant such that they came to be rarely performed. (Khê, Interview, 2010)

6.4 Early *Xã Hội* (Social) Plays

Only plays emphasizing proper social behavior and other moral themes given permitted by the French authorities. (Hauch and Phạm) Such plays are known as early *xã hội* (social) plays. Hauch infers that early social plays were largely based on the “lessons taught in *Minh Tăm Bửu Giám*, a book containing stories as examples of proper standards of behavior (1972:30).” The *Lịch Sử Sân Khấu Việt Nam (A History of the Vietnamese Theatre)* sites an example of a typical *xã hội* play called *Thằng Bán Nhật Trình (The Boy Who Sells Newspapers)* by Ba Đô. (1987: 88). In it,

A happy couple with a daughter and a son are randomly killed one day. The two kids find themselves suddenly orphaned. The parents' family agrees to take care of the daughter. Her brother, on the other hand, is left on his own. He is forced to take on a job as a newspaper boy. One day while selling newspapers he befriends a wealthy man with whom he begins to share his family's tragedy. The wealthy man feels great empathy for him and decides to make him part of his family by marrying his daughter to the newspaper boy. The daughter refuses to be married to

a boy with no family, no home, and no money. After great resistance she runs away, only to be forced home by her father. In the end, she agrees to marry the newspaper boy and they eventually live happily ever after.

6.5 *Tuồng Tàu* (Chinese Plays)

Early social plays such as this one that appeared in the 1920's also had strong competition from another theatre form. This new type of play, called *tuồng Tàu* (Chinese plays) and was influenced by a stylized Vietnamese traditional theatre form with its roots from China. Hauch says "It was at this time that *cải lương* began to borrow techniques from *hát bội* theatre (1972: 34)." In describing this kind of theatre, Brandon writes, "*tuồng Tàu* was a kind of popularized *hát bội*. *Hát bội*'s stiff, difficult conventions of acting and raucous din of Chinese horns, cymbals, and drums were dropped, while its appealing costuming, makeup, and vigorous action were retained. (1967:75) "Although the Vietnamese audience for the most part did not understand the language of these plays, they were nevertheless strongly drawn to its sense of entertainment" (Hauch, 1972: 33). In order to fulfill the demands from the audience, talented *hát bội* performers under the control of innovative directors started to adopt Chinese conventions and stylization from *hát bội* into *cải lương*.

The emergence of *tuồng Tàu* is closely associated with a Chinese-Vietnamese man named Triều Châu. Triều Châu formed one of the most popular Chinese plays troupe at the time, Tập Ích Ban. Triều Châu carefully trained his performers, putting them through rigorous voice and movement classes. He also asked a well-known *chữ nôm* (Sino-Vietnamese) writer at the time named Nguyễn Trọng Quyền, better known by his pen name as Mộc Quán, to compose plays for him

based on existing Chinese stories. (Theatre Institute, 1987: 103) Well-known Chinese novels borrowed by *cải lương* theatre included *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *By the Water's Edge* (also known as *All Men are Brothers*), *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, and *Trip to the Western Regions*.

Unlike *hát bội*, modern Vietnamese dialogue was now applied to these Chinese stories.

The voice was produced in a normal range rather than in a falsetto range as in *hát bội*.

(Brandon, 1967: 75) However, musically *tuồng Tàu* did incorporate two key melodies from *hát bội*: *điều bắc* (Northern) and *điều nam* (Southern) tunes. *Bắc* (Northern) melody was kept to emphasize action scenes while *nam* (Southern) melody was applied to sad, emotional, love, and devotion scenes. In addition, Cantonese tunes called *quãng*²⁴ were also adopted into *cải lương* under their original or their Vietnamese names (Khê, Interview, 2010). Hauch suggest the term *quãng* came from a Chinese troupe named Quãng Đông who had resided in a Chinese area of Sài Gòn. (1972:35) Phạm, on the other hand, suggest it was borrowed from the Vietnamese translation for the word “Cantonese” in Vietnamese, Quãng Đông. (Phạm, 1975: 143) Khê confirmed that both sources were indeed correct. He believed that Quãng melody came from a Cantonese troupe that went by the name Quãng Đông.

6.5.1 Năm Phi: First Legendary Actress of *Cải Lương*

Because *tuồng Tàu* plays were so financially successful at the time it prompt the establishment of a number of troupes to specialize in *tuồng Tàu* plays. For example when Phước Cường had first

formed it exclusively performed Chinese plays and rose to fame in 1925 with their adaptation of a well-known *hát bội* play based on a Chinese novel called *Xử Án Bàng Quí Phi* (*The Trial of General Bang Qui Phi*). (Hauch, 1972: 35) Năm Phi (1906-1954), the first legendary actress of *cải lương* and manager of the Phước Cường group at this time, rewrote the script, changed songs, created new dances, and designed a new set of costumes for this particular production. (Hauch 1972:38) Năm Phi also gave herself the leading role of General Bàng Quí Phi in *The Trial of General Bang Qui Phi*. Her interpretation of *The Trial of General Bang Qui Phi* proved to be so successful that in 1931 the troupe was chosen as the first *cải lương* troupe to be invited to perform in Paris and then again in 1934 in Thailand with the same play (Hauch 1972:38).

Cải lương and particular *tuồng Tàu* plays during these early decades went hand and hand with the name Năm Phi. She was born in Mỹ Tho to a well-to-do family. Three of her siblings were also *cải lương* performers. At a young age Năm Phi didn't go to school. For this reason she was illiterate all her life, and unable to read any of her *cải lương* scripts. During rehearsals Năm Phi had her assistant read lines out loud to her which she would repeat numerous times until all her lines were memorized (Trùng, 1997:115). Trùng also added that often in a performance she couldn't follow a beat to a song, and instead musicians had to follow her singing. But Năm Phi's acting skills were so exceptional that this flaw didn't seem to matter. Năm Châu, one of the most famous *cải lương* playwrights of all times described her acting as "heavenly" (Trùng, 1997:115). Khê said Năm Phi was known for her talented ability to be able to perform a variety of characters in many different kinds of plays such as Chinese, social, and Western drama. (Interview, 2010)

Năm Phi delivered such an outstanding performance in *The Trial of General Bang Qui Phi* that she is said to have received a standing ovation from the Parisian audience. The text, “A Theatre History of Vietnam” cited the French newspaper the *Intransigent* as writing, “I have seen a Vietnamese actress whose artistic skills is as sophisticated as those of our own actresses.” It continues to state that another French newspaper, *The Comédia*, said of Năm Phi’s acting, “The talented actress can take us on whatever journey she likes” (Theatre Institute, 1987:108).

Along with *The Trial of General Bang Qui Phi*, the story of *Mạnh Lê Quân* (*Manh Le Quan*) is another example of a common *tuồng Tàu* play. *The story of Manh Le Quan* is based on a Chinese legend of an intelligent young girl who disguises herself as a boy in order to go to school because girls at the time were not permitted to attend formal classes nor compete in mandarin exams. *Manh Le Quan* passed the exam with a high score and is appointed as a minister to the king. While working for the king her identity is revealed by a young heroic general. Manh Le Quan and this young general falls in love with one another. The king accepts their love, pardons her, and they get married.

6.5.2 Năm Châu: A Playwright of *Xã Hội* (Social) Plays

The story of Manh Le Quan was written in 1925 by a talented actor-writer named Nguyễn Thành Châu, better known as Năm Châu. He formed his own *cải lương* troupe at the age of fifteen in Cần Thơ in 1921 called Sĩ Dương Du and began improvising comic plays based on local news events. In 1923 he disbanded this troupe and established another group called Tái Đồng Ban with two legendary *cải lương* performers named Phùng Há and Tú Chờ. (Hauch 1972: 37) With the Tái Đồng Ban troupe Năm Châu made a name for himself by experimenting with script

composition and musical technique in *tuồng Tàu* plays. “He used rhymed verse found in *hát bội* instead of prose found in social plays to create a more poetic effect and to distinguish between Vietnamese and Chinese stories” (Hauch 1972: 37). Hauch goes on to say that Năm Châu did not use the *bắc* and *nam* tunes, but “he did borrow the techniques of leading from one melody into another which was so characteristic of *hát bội* performances” (Hauch 1972: 37)

Năm Châu was not only a talented craftsman of the theatre. He was also a political revolutionary who wrote and produced some of the first anti-colonial plays. Nine of his plays were banned and even at the start of 1927 the French authorities started to monitor his activities. Censorship on his work began in 1927 with the play *Ngọn Cờ Nữ Hiệp* (*Female Warrior*). (Trùng, 1997: 110) *Female Warrior* is a story about a revolutionary general who revolted against a king influenced by an evil mandarin. The general is sent to prison. He tries to escape but is wounded and is forced to disguise himself as a mandarin. During his capture, the general’s wife trains a group of female dancers to become sword-fighters to help rescue her husband. En route to the capital to save her husband, the group detains a wealthy mandarin and uses his money to build a strong army to overthrow the misguided king. They succeed in their plan and the husband and wife are united. At the end of the play, they are reconciled with the king.

The “king” here represents the local Vietnamese who have sided with the French, considered to be the “evil mandarin”. The Vietnamese nationalists fighting the corrupted regime are portrayed by the “general” and his “wife”. Năm Châu chose to conclude the play with the Vietnamese people - the general, his wife, and the king- uniting and rising up successfully against the foreign power. Many plays such as this one that directly or indirectly criticized the French colonial

authority were banned. Playwright Kiên Giang says, “Anyone who dared to write plays with nationalist contents at this time was punished”. He went on to say, “This was also where we got our energy. The more we were told not to do it, the more fueled we got from it to continue our resistance” (Interview, 2010).

Although Năm Châu is highly regarded for his originality in *tuồng Tàu* plays, he is also credited with another bold invention in *cải lương* theatre. Until 1928, *xã hội* plays were typically restricted to common Vietnamese social situations. Beginning with Năm Châu’s play *Tội Của Ai* (*Whose Sin Is It?*), European elements began to appear on stage. Hauch describes *Whose Sin Is It?* as a love story, which took place in Sài Gòn, but for the first time the characters on stage wear European style clothing, portraying a new social condition not reflected on stage before. *Whose Sin Is It?* was produced for the first time by the Trần Đất troupe in 1928 and heralded. The birth of a new type of social play, one featuring new musical tune called *tuồng Tây* (Western) plays began to flourish, as Western culture was firmly established in Vietnam in the 1930’s. (Hauch, 1972:42)

While many Vietnamese were not politically opposed to French presence in Vietnam, some were not so anti-French and were in fact drawn to French culture and the arts. Such juxtaposed feelings were expressed by some of my informants in the Chapter 4 of the dissertation, and like them playwright Năm Châu grew up attending French schools, learning French as well as his mother tongue, and was introduced to French literature, music, and theatre. Well versed in French culture and the arts he and other members of this new generation of local Vietnamese began to experiment with French theatre and music. They adapted French literature and

employed French music on *cải lương* stage, and simply referring to the result as *tuồng Tây* (“Western”) plays.

6.6 *Tuồng Tây* (Western Plays)

Many plays written and produced in the 1930’s were taken from Western literature. Music was borrowed from French songs or consisted of newly composed songs. For example, Ngô Vinh Khang adapted *Trà Hoa Nữ* from Alexandre Dumas’ *La Dame aux Camelia* in 1932, mixing French songs with the sad *vọng cổ* tunes. In 1933 Năm Châu adapted Schiller’s *Maria Stuart*, and between 1935-1936 he adapted *Hernani* and *Ruy Blass* by Victor Hugo. In 1939 the *cải lương* version of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was produced for the first time. Hauch comments, “While the costumes and scenery proved impressive, the play relied so heavily on one actor that no one could be found with adequate talent to perform the role successfully; and, after a few performances, the *cải lương Hamlet* closed” (1972: 45). Unlike previous types of *cải lương* plays already discussed up to this point Western plays such as *Hamlet* contained fewer musical numbers. As far as I know there are no sources detailing how much of the original scripts of Western plays had been adapted to *cải lương* theatre. Even Dr. Khê whom I had interviewed in 2010 and perhaps the most likely informant to be able to comment on this subject had little to add. He did tell me that *cải lương* productions of Western plays were better received in Hà Nội than in Sài Gòn. (Khê, Hauch) Hauch claims unfortunately with no further explanation that the audiences from Hà Nội preferred a less musical version of *Hamlet* because they were more literary. (Hauch, 1972: 46) Khê, however, had a different opinion. He suggests that the music in *cải lương*, and particularly *vọng cổ* tunes, reflected the sentiments of Southern people and culture, and so for this reason they expected music be made an emphasis in a *cải lương*

production. (Khê, Interview, 2010)

In the 1930's *vọng cổ* was not the only kind of music that was found in *cải lương*. Many other types of music were freely adapted to *cải lương*. French songs were the most commonly borrowed kind of music, especially for Western plays. However, music in Western, Chinese, and social *cải lương* plays was often changed to fit the mood and the type of play. For instance, “During a love scene in a social play, it would not be unusual to see a couple dancing a tango, then halting while they sang a *vọng cổ* song and then returning to the tango” (Hauch, 1972: 48). However, “faster rhythms from Western songs with melodies commonly used in *cải lương* during the 1920's and 1930's” are utilized for fighting scenes while *vọng cổ* is still used for sentimental scenes. (Hauch, 1972:48) This system still holds true to the present. (Khê, Interview, 2010)

However, the consistent popularity of *tuồng Tàu* plays in the 1930's forced some troupes to experiment with *tuồng Tây* plays. They mixed *tuồng Tàu* and *tuồng Tây* plays giving rise to a new form called *tuồng bay* (literal translation, “flying plays”) plays. At the time *tuồng bay* plays were considered to be exceptionally original because they incorporated an exciting new technique introduced to the Vietnamese by the French that involving scenes with fighters flying across the stage. Flying scenes continued to be popular with most *cải lương* troupe in Sài Gòn up until the 1980's. (Khê, Interview, 2010) Khê added, “the entertainment nature of its action scenes containing loud upbeat tunes managed to draw the short attention span of the modern audience for a short time”. (Khê, Interview, 2010) *Tuồng bay* plays were drawn mainly from translations of modern Chinese novels about fictitious characters in Chinese history that were

born with supernatural power to perform magic. Hauch infers the use of magic first appeared on stage in the 1920's and became more sophisticated in the 1930's. (Hauch, 1972:46)

6.7 *Tuồng La Mã* (Roman Plays)

Popular also throughout the 1930's were plays involving the fictional presentation of Roman history known as *tuồng la mã* plays. Old Chinese stories were borrowed, with characters' names and the locations changed to ancient Roman times. These plays often included action scenes with fighting and flying techniques adopted from *tuồng bay*. For example, Zorro became a popular character of *tuồng la mã* plays, mainly for his ability to fly on stage. Hauch comments, "Mộng Vân troupe produced a number of plays in which the characters wore masks primarily in the style of the Zorro half-face black mask; soon terrifying masks which represented characters from Japanese bandits to evil spirits and ghosts embellished the trend" (1972:47). The fictitious accounts and entertaining nature of *Tuồng la mã* offered *cải lương* audiences an excuse to escape from their daily problems that were steadily growing at the start of the Great Depression in the 1930's.

The Great Depression impacted Vietnam's economy directly. The global economic depression also halted the economy of Vietnam and severely hurt the general population of South Vietnam whose livelihood depended on agriculture, and particularly the cultivation of rice. Therefore, it is no surprise that with such daily hardships few people could afford to do anything, including to the theatre. *Cải lương* troupes were forced to cut their ticket price by half with bigger troupes charging the equivalent of 10 cents while smaller troupes only charged 5 cents for a show. "Even then nobody came to the theater. It was an extremely difficult for everybody, not just for artists.

Many of us stopped performing and did whatever we could to survive. “We made it through this difficult time because of the financial and spiritual support that we provided for each other” (Grandmother, Interview, 2010).

6.8 *Tuồng Phật* (Buddhist Plays)

During this difficult time the Vietnamese people not only had each other but also turned to religion, and particularly Buddhism to help guide them through their daily struggles. Light-hearted *cải lương* stories related to Buddha’s founding of the religion and Buddha in Nirvana known as *tuồng phật* (Buddhist) plays and *tuồng tiên* (fairy) plays gained popularity. The Tân Thịnh troupe was the first group to have produced *tuồng phật* and *tuồng tiên* plays. (*The Theatre Institute*, 1987:78). The most well-known *tuồng phật* play is based on the legend of *Quan Âm Thị Kính* (*Legend of the Quan Yin Buddha*) written by Nguyễn Công Mạnh. The *Quan Yin* is my mother’s favorite *cải lương* play and below is her detailed account of it.

Quan Yin is a beautiful and talented young woman who comes from a humble family. Many rich and handsome men had asked her to marry them, but she kept on refusing their offers. Instead she chooses to marry a poor and less attractive peasant. Life is difficult for them, but they manage to still find happiness with one another. Until one day when her husband is asleep in a hammock, she notices a stray piece of hair sticking out of his beard. She decides to take a knife, approach her husband, and is about to cut it for him when he woke up. Frightened he starts to call for help and accuses his wife of murder.

Utterly shocked that her husband has accused her of murder, *Quan Yin* offers no statement in her

defense and is found guilty. She is exiled from her home. The community treats her badly. Even her family does not take pity on her. Tired of this life, *Quan Yin* renounces the world and seeks escape in religion. She disguises herself as a man and enters an order of Buddhist monks.

Despite the simple religious attire and shaved head *Quan Yin* is still very beautiful. She catches the attention of a young devotee who falls in love with her. This young girl pleads for *Quan Yin* to leave the religious order and marry her, but she refuses outright every time. Angered by the constant rejection the young woman decides to react in retaliation by having an affair and becomes pregnant. She goes to another village to give birth to the child but then returns home to place the baby at the gate of the temple with a note accusing *Quan Yin* of being the father.

While the note is being read by the head monk with other people around the baby begins to cry. Acting on her nurturing character *Quan Yin* immediately reaches for baby to help calm her down. This gesture of love and compassion is mistakenly perceived as indicating that *Quan Yin* is the father of the baby, and she is expelled from the temple. Feeling sorry for the child *Quan Yin* decides to take care of her and walks about the streets with the child in her arms begging for food. Finally she can no longer sustain herself so she returns to the temple and knocks at the gate of Buddha. There she reveals her secret, begs for pardon for her sins and for those who caused her misery, and sinks to the ground and dies.

The play concludes when the emperor of China hears about *Quan Yin*'s story and is deeply moved by her life and moral character. By royal decree he gives her the rank of divinity with the title *Quan Âm Thị Kính* for "Compassionate Protector of Children".

The usage of contemporary theatre such as *cải lương* mixed with a well-known thousand-year-old Vietnamese folk tale gave *Quan Âm Thị Kính* its popularity. But as the Great Depression came to an end in the late 1930's, the popularity of *tuồng phật* and *tuồng tiên* plays declined as the people of Southern Vietnam could again afford to spend more money on various leisure activities, including the theatre. (The Theatre Institute, Hauch, Phạm, Trùng).

6.9 Cải lương in North Vietnam

It seemed that the well being of *cải lương* went hand in hand not only with the economic but also political stability of the country. State sanctioned publications suggest that politically, the formation of the Communist Party in 1930 gave the people of Vietnam a new sense of hope as tensions started to escalate between them and the French Colonial government. According to Trùng the *cải lương* community took on the cause and found a niche for themselves in this movement. Thus, according to him the period between 1930 and 1945 was the most dynamic time in the history of *cải lương*. (1997:10) An informant I interviewed confirmed this information, “Indeed this was true, and this time [1930's and 1940's] was an exciting time for writers, performers, and political activists.” But he added, “We had a cause but it did not necessarily mean we were all on the same side. Some of us supported the French” (Anonymous, Interview, 2010). My grandmother, on the other hand, had a different take on this period. She said, “It was good for those who wanted to be in the fight. But for the rest of us, we were like a single leaf vulnerable to wherever the wind took us. We didn't have much control, besides most troupes were still trying to come out of the depression” (Grandmother, Interview, 2010).

Once the vitality of the economy kicked in by the late 1930's, competition among troupes also increased, and forcing *cải lương* troupes to improve on their own work. As the quality improved the demand for more *cải lương* shows also increased, and in the process *cải lương* troupes started to expand northward and blossomed throughout Vietnam.

Besides *hát bội*, *cải lương* is the only art form that has spread throughout Vietnam. During my fieldwork in 2003 and 2010 I learned that most people, whether they are from the North, Center, or South region of Vietnam, are at least familiar with *cải lương*. Hà Nội has two official theatre dedicated to *cải lương*, Huế has one, and Hồ Chí Minh City has four, all of which are subsidized by the government. These theatre companies have troupes that travel once in a while to the surrounding provinces performing *cải lương* and in the process introduce the form to a new population in the area. In contrast, Hồ Chí Minh City and Huế do not have *hát chèo* (folk theatre from the North) or *múa rối* (water puppet, also from the North) theatres. To my surprise I spoke to some people in the South who didn't even know these forms existed. On the other hand, traveling through the countryside in North and Central Vietnam I sometimes heard *vọng cổ* songs being played from a house or local café. This was not the case with *hát chèo* or *múa rối* in Huế and Hồ Chí Minh City. Therefore, it is important to set aside a moment to trace the journey of *cải lương* from South to North Vietnam. According to many theatre sources (*The Theatre Institute*, Hauch, Phạm, Trùng), such expansion followed four common steps:

First, publicly sold recordings of *cải lương* plays were available for the first time. Sometime in the 1920's a French record company by the name of Pathé-phonò started recording *cải lương* songs that were sold by troupes before and after their performances. This practice was

encouraged on a large scale in the late 1930's when two popular troupes, Phung Háo and Trần Đất, began to produce their play's songs on record. (Khê, Interview, 2010) As a result, numerous recordings of Vietnamese chamber music and *cải lương* made their way to Central and North regions of Vietnam.

Second, the one of the first troupes from the South brought *cải lương* to Central and North of Vietnam. Around the same time that the first *cải lương* plays were recorded, a circus troupe by the name of Văn Súng travelled North through Central Vietnam to perform. (Khê, Interview, 2010) They organized circus shows with interludes of *ca ra bộ* in their performances thus exposing the people of the North to the initial phase of *cải lương* for the very first time.

Third, a group of Southern students studying in Hà Nội introduced a full-length *cải lương* play to the residents of Hà Nội for the first time in 1923. In 1925 a law student from South Vietnam staged another *cải lương* play. Then in 1926 and 1927 a third play was produced by a group of students also from the South. Unfortunately, little else is known or recorded about these student productions.

Fourth, towards the end of 1927 many *cải lương* troupes from the South travelled North. The Nghĩa Hiệp Ban was the first troupe to have done so, followed by other big groups such as the Phước Cương, Năm Châu, Nam Thịnh, Trần Đắc, and Tân Hí Ban. The Tân Hí Ban made their fame in the North as the first troupe to have used a Northerner in the leading male role for their play. This show proved to be so successful that all their shows were sold out. (Trùng 1997: 74) In addition, the construction of two theatre buildings in Hà Nội in 1927, the Quảng Lạc and San

Nhiệm Đại, was an incentive for many big and well-known troupes from the South to travel the North to perform there” (Trùng, 1997:74).

In the 1920’s a chain of smaller *cải lương* troupes formed in North Vietnam. In the early 1930’s, a group of Southern *cải lương* artists settled in the North to form the first *cải lương* troupe in Hà Nội, the Tân Lộc Ban. Furthermore, the publications of *cải lương* songs, scripts, combined with the recording of *cải lương* songs made the art more easily accessible throughout Vietnam (Trùng, 1997: 77). Trùng also tells us that by 1943 there were sixteen big troupes performing all over the North (1997:78). At the same time Northern *cải lương* troupes were also travelling and performing in the South marking the maturity of Northern *cải lương*.

Chinese, Western and social plays were commonly performed in the North in the 1920’s and 1930’s. However, in the 1930’s and 1940’s social plays and plays based on Vietnamese history and legends became more popular. The adaptation of these plays by troupes from the North was often based on notes taken by Northern performers who had performed with Southern groups, or on published lyrics, scripts, and records of *cải lương* plays. (Trùng, 1997:79).

Despite the growing interest in *cải lương* in the North, the South remained the center of the *cải lương* movement. Hauch attributes the fact that *cải lương* theatre was not as popular in the North as the South to a number of factors: 1) *hát chèo*²⁵, a Northern folk theatre form, was still popular

²⁵ *Hát chèo* is a satirical Northern folk theatre with dances, songs, and skits, which evolved from ceremonial entertainment.

in the countryside; 2) The audience preferred the Western-style plays known as *kịch nói*²⁶; 3) The pronunciation of the words in a Southern accent, distinctive to *cải lương* theatre, was also difficult for many Northern singers. (Hauch 1972:49)

While *cải lương* in the North at the time were not as popular, *cải lương* in the South continued to thrive. From 1940 to 1944 there appeared in the Sài Gòn newspapers a series of Chinese stories based on fictional accounts of Chinese characters. This kind of play became known as *kiếm hiệp* (sword-fighting) drama.

Earlier stories of Vietnamese heroes such as *Trung Trắc Trung Nhị* (*Trung Trac and Trung Nhi*) were revived for *kiếm hiệp* plays. The success of this kind of play derived from a mix of popular elements distinctive to a *kiếm hiệp* play. It includes short preliminary songs on a stage lit with multi-colored lighting; evil characters carrying swords; and flying from one end of the stage to another. Another special characteristic of the *Kiếm hiệp* play that was added a little later on is the hidden theme underlying all its plays, the idea of a revolt against oppression, featuring the anti-establishment concept that people should rule rather than be ruled by fascist foreign powers. Hauch suggests, “These plays were to be the forerunners of the very obvious anti-French plays which dominated the theatre between 1945 and 1954 (1972:50).” However, Trùng infers that this trend of only focusing on political topics did not last long. In 1947 these troupes returned to strictly sword-flying plays. (Trùng, 1997:101) Khê disagrees with Trùng’s point of view about the return to “strictly” sword flying plays. He infers that politically oriented sword flying plays

²⁶ *Kịch nói* – Literally “spoken drama”, is a Western style theatre form based on Western realism portraying real life on stage.

continued to exist throughout the 1940's and 1950's, except fewer were produced because of the close monitoring of art activities by both governments [French and *Việt Minh*]. (Khê, Interview, 2010)

The development of *kiếm hiệp* plays is associated with a writer and musician named Mộng Vân. Although Mộng Vân lived a short life, and his involvement in the theatre lasted for only 16 years, he nevertheless left a significant mark in the history of *cải lương*. He wrote approximately 70 plays and composed over 30 songs for the *cải lương* theatre. (Trùng, 1997:101).

According to “The Art of *Cải Lương*”, Mộng Vân was born in Bạc Liêu, also home to Sáu Lầu who created the first *vọng cổ* song, *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang*. In 1936 when *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* officially became *vọng cổ*, he became of the first to actively incorporate this song into his plays. With the *kiếm hiệp* plays Mộng Vân pioneered in changing the measure of *vọng cổ* tune from ten to thirty-two beats. He is also linked to the invention of short songs performed by the actors and actresses as a transition segment into the main *vọng cổ* tune. These short preliminary songs were often performed on stage with the accompaniment of colorful lighting, a stage technique also associated with Mộng Vân's *kiếm hiệp* plays. (The Theatre Institute, Hauch, Phạm, Trùng) New *vọng cổ* songs were composed with each new play that was written by Mộng Vân. Trùng says his plays were produced by many troupes and that many famous *cải lương* actors and actresses at the time also performed in Mộng Vân's plays. (1997:103).

Due to the popularity of *kiếm hiệp* plays between 1940 and 1945, the interest of *tuồng Tàu* and *tuồng Tây* plays declined among the general *cải lương* audiences. The spectators

during this period were more drawn to *kiếm hiệp* plays because, like roman plays during the Great Depression they now needed another exciting form of entertainment to take them away from the reality of the escalating tensions between the French and the Vietnamese nationalists. “Many felt that *tuồng Tàu* and *tuồng Tây* plays during this period were too politicized” (Khê, Interview, 2010). *Tuồng Tàu* and *tuồng Tây* plays were predominantly utilized as a political tool by both regimes to try to gain support in their war efforts. In 1943 the French government established a theatre group called the Quốc Gia Kịch Đoàn (National Troupe) which mainly presented scenes from Chinese plays (Hauch, Phạm, Hauch) says the Quốc Gia Kịch Đoàn was made up of members mainly from the Phước Cường group, who specialized in Chinese plays, but actors from other troupes joined as well. (Hauch 1972: 51)

Troupes performing Western plays also performed plays criticizing the establishment and all oppressive customs. According to Hauch, “In 1943 the Đức Huy troupe performed Western plays whose themes urged a less strict adherence to past customs. Playing in small villages and traveling by foot, the troupe spent one year travelling, proceeding to reach Sài Gòn via Cambodia” (1972:51).

Although activities by these troupes during this period are mentioned, no sources discussed the exact kind of plays they presented, where they performed these plays, and whether their efforts were successful. What we do know is that Chinese and Western plays became highly nationalistic after World War II. I will return to this topic in greater detail in the next section as I discuss *cải lương* at the start of 1945.

In summary, *cải lương* advanced in a number of ways during the period between the period of 1920 and 1945. First, many types of *cải lương* plays including historical, social, Chinese, and Western plays emerged for the first time. Second, along with the establishment of specific types of plays, the numbers of talented writers for *cải lương* theatre also increased. Third, the repertoire and scope of *cải lương* songs grew as types of *cải lương* plays expanded. Fourth, *cải lương* troupes started to specialize in only one or two play types instead of performing all kinds of genres. Fifth, as troupes began to specialize in particular types of plays, the number of highly skilled performers and successful plays such as *tuồng Tây* also rose. Sixth, *cải lương* theatre became an increasingly desirable medium for various regimes to spread their political ideologies and organize the masses. Seventh, *cải lương* spread to the North during this period and flourished all over Vietnam.

CHAPTER 7

CAI LUONG BETWEEN 1945 AND 1986

7.1 Chapter Summary

This chapter starts by investigating the state of *cải lương* during the First Indo-China War (1945-1954) between the Communist Party led by *Hồ Chí Minh* and the French colonialists, who had occupied Vietnam for almost 100 years by 1945. With the communist victory over the French in 1954 largely communists North Vietnamese soon found themselves in a civil war with the South Vietnamese over differing political ideologies. Many aspects of society came to be contested: the arts and culture, including *cải lương*, found itself caught between geography and politics. Here I will analyze how these two major political periods in the history of Vietnam led to the conception of new *cải lương* genres including those that came to known as “social”, “far-away destination”, and “war” plays. I will discuss how the North and South Vietnam variously utilized *cải lương* during the First Indo-Chinese War in 1945 and during the U.S.-Vietnam War in 1975 to their specific agendas. This chapter continues by examining the ways in which *cải lương* has been perceived and renovated by the Northern leadership in the decade following the U.S.-Vietnam War.

7.2 Historical Overview

By the late 1930's Japan started to get involved in the domestic affairs of Vietnam, mainly driven by the promise of rich mineral resources in Southeast Asia.²⁷ In effect,

²⁷ Japan started to place their attention on Vietnam when their plan to expand into Soviet Siberia was diverted by their World War II ally Germany signed an agreement with the Soviet Union in 1939.

Japan developed a new military strategy in 1940 called the “Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere” with the goal of putting under their control the European colonies in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam. (Duiker, 1995: 43) Pursuing this objective Japan declared Vietnam independent, ignoring the fact that the French had been in Vietnam for almost one hundred years. The Japanese closely scrutinized and imprisoned French citizens living in Vietnam, with the result that Vietnamese had to contend with problems created by the French and the new puppet government of Vietnam under Emperor Bảo Đại. (Duiker, 1995: 44-45)

Taking advantage of this fragile political situation in Vietnam Hồ Chí Minh, with the support of the Chinese communist party, established an independent nationalist movement known as the *Việt Minh*. The *Việt Minh* “mobilized support from the peasants and workers, set up liberated base areas in isolated parts of the country, and implemented a combination of guerilla tactics and popular uprisings”. (Duiker, 1995:45) At the end of World War II in 1945 Japan was forced to surrender their power to the allies, and this included Vietnam. The *Việt Minh* seized the opportunity this created. Duiker writes, “Within two weeks, the communist under the leadership of uncle Ho took almost all of the North and the central region”, but was less successful in the South where French support had been relatively moderate. (Duiker, 1995: 43).

However, the *Việt Minh*'s newly occupied regions were quickly returned to the French

Moreover, Japan's plan to dominate China was also sidetracked by the unexpected resistance from Chiang Kai-shek.

with the help of the British²⁸. The *Việt Minh* was left weakened but they did not stop fighting. Tensions grew between the French and the *Việt Minh* and by 1945 became a full-blown war known as the First Indochina War²⁹.

In this volatile environment, cultural life in Vietnam, including theatre, became an arena to compete over. While many troupes found themselves in disarray and struggled to stay together, a handful of groups managed to stay intact. Some of these troupes quickly became pulled into the political arena, while others actively participated, lured by the prospect of an independent Vietnam.

7.3 Xã Hội (Social Plays)

Nationalism and patriotism grew during this period and many troupes turned toward social plays to portray the chaos that they were witnessing in society. Some troupes engaged indirectly while others confronted social problems head on. Groups that preferred a more subtle approach such as Kim Thanh troupe focused on family relationships. These became known as social plays such as “*Lộng Mẹ (Mother’s Love)* and *Con Tám Con Cầm (Tam and Cam)* were written with the aim of arousing sentimental feelings for family relationships, especially during time of political conflict.

(Hauch, 1972: 53)

²⁸ The British out of sympathy for the French, as they were also at the time one of the biggest colonizers, decided to assist the French in fighting the *Việt Minh* and other nationalist groups in Vietnam. (Duiker, 1995: 43)

²⁹ The war between the French and *Việt Minh* is referred to as the “First Indochina War” to distinguish it from the war between the U.S. and Vietnam, which sometimes is referred to as the “Second Indochina War”.

Other troupes, like the Việt Kịch-Năm Châu, were more inclined to reflect directly on the problems caused by war. *Người với Người (People to People)* was the second of Năm Châu plays to have been banned. (Trùng, 1997: 110) As Trùng summarizes, *People to People* traces a journey of an anti-French revolutionary named Linh. After committing a terrorist act against the French Linh was sent to Côn Đảo³⁰. He soon escaped Côn Đảo and found himself on a nearby island. Here he meets the Goddess of this tiny island. She agrees to hide and take care of Linh. Over time they fall in love. But Linh's political journey did not end. He returns to the mainland to join his friend and little sister who were also actively involved in the revolution. The French colonial authorities arrested the three of them. Linh managed to escape again. This time he returns to the tiny island, where his lover has been patiently waiting for him and they live happily ever after together.

7.3.1 Trần Hữu Trang: A Legend of Social Plays

Along with Năm Châu, Trần Hữu Trang was another writer to have gained fame during this period with his revolutionary plays. Trần Hữu Trang plays are considered the epitome of social plays. Most of the social plays he wrote during this period remain popular and continue to be performed. Such plays include *Tô Ánh Nguyệt (Miss Tô Ánh Nguyệt)*, *Chị Chồng Tôi (My Sister In-law)*, and *Đời Cô Lựu (Miss Luu's Life)*. They often present contentious issues dealing with familial and societal disintegration as a result of corruption and oppression by local landlords and colonialists.

³⁰ Côn Đảo- Côn Đảo is an island about 110 miles off the Southeastern coast of mainland Vietnam. For 113 years, this island was home to one of the country's harshest prison, established by French colonists in 1862 and later ruled by South Vietnamese and American forces until Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese in 1975.

Đời Cô Lựu is one of the most loved *cải lương* plays of all times. The older generations such as those of my mom's and grandmothers' have seen it at least a dozen times. It appeared on stage for 75 years, and has been performed by many generations of famous actors and actresses. During my fieldwork in Vietnam in 2010 I got a chance to see a live show of *Đời Cô Lựu* at the Trần Hữu Trang theatre. Below is a detailed synopsis of the play:

Miss Lựu is the beautiful wife of Hai Thành, a tenant of a local aristocrat named Thăng. Miss Lựu and Hai Thành are happily married, but Thăng desires Miss Lựu. In order to get rid of Hai Thành and make Lựu his wife Thăng frames him for a crime. When the couple is out, Thăng has his men place a revolver in Thành's home and then informs the police of the presence of the illegal weapon. Hai Thành is arrested.

Thăng steps in, pretending to help Miss Lựu in her time of need. He takes her to the local official to "straighten out matters" and lends her money to hire a lawyer for her husband's defense. In spite of these efforts, the colonial administration finds him guilty of possession of an illegal weapon and sentences him to a 20-year term on Côn Đảo Island. Miss Lựu is deeply grateful for Thăng's help and accepts his proposal for marriage even though she is pregnant with Hai Thành's baby.

When she delivers, Thăng hides the baby and gives it to an orphanage. He tells Miss Lựu her baby died from convulsion. The neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Hương, sympathies with their good friend Hai Thành and see through Thăng's conspiracy. They secretly go to the orphanage and ask

to adopt the baby, whose name is Minh Luân. Miss Lữ, unaware of the neighbors' actions, continues to mourn her baby's death. With Thằng she has a daughter named Kim Anh. Nineteen years later, Hai Thành escapes from jail and searches for his wife. He meets with the neighbor, Hương, who reports to him what has happened since he was taken away. Hai Thành is outraged at his wife's disloyal behavior and writes her a letter demanding financial support for his son. If she does not come up with the money within three days, he will take revenge on her. He gives the letter to Minh Luận to deliver to Miss Lữ. After reading the letter, Miss Lữ gets excited that her husband and son are alive. She is remorseful at the injustice perpetrated on Hai Thành and her son Minh Luận. She attempts to secure the amount requested by Hai Thành and confides in her daughter, Kim Anh. Kim Anh pawns her jewelry and substitutes them with fake ones so her husband would not find out. Minh Luận refuses to accept the money. Miss Lữ asks him to live with her and offers to take care of him. She writes a letter to Hai Thành and gives it to Minh Luận to deliver. Kim Anh's husband finds out that she has been selling her jewelry, and becomes suspicious that Minh Luân, who is now spending a lot of time in their house, is his wife's lover. When he spots the letter in Minh Luân's pocket, he assumes it is from his wife to her lover and demands to see it. Luận refuses to betray his mother, and in a scuffle between the two men, Luận is shot and rushed to the hospital. When Miss Lữ visits her son in the hospital, she meets her former husband who is also visiting Luận. She explains her story and sentiments to Hai Thành. He finally understands and sympathizes with her. Just then Thằng enters, recognizes Hai Thành and informs the police who takes him away to be returned to prison. Minh Luân falls upon Thằng and kills him. Hearing that her brother has killed her father, Kim Anh goes mad. Miss Lữ is left a widow, her son charged of murder, her husband back in prison, and her daughter mad. She is devastated and decides to shave her head to become a Buddhist nun.

Đời Cô Lựu was staged for the first time in 1937 by the Đại Phước Cương Troupe. The story depicts controversial subjects of the time between the local people and the nation, and farmers versus landowners. In *The Art of Cải Lương*, Trần Hữu Trang is quoted as saying “he wrote *Đời Cô Lựu* at a very difficult time when suppression by the French authority was extremely strong. Despite the harsh political reality Trần Hữu Trang went on to say he did the best he could in the story to give justice to the common men who were abused by corrupted aristocrats. In doing so, he concluded the story with Thằng, representing the landed gentry, killed at the hands of Minh Luân, a commoner. And although he wanted the life of Minh Luân and Hai Thành to end in more optimistic manner, he also told his audience that he could not do so because the censorship board would have not allowed it to be performed. (Trùng 1997: 113). I presume he felt comfortable making such compromise because he believed his main point about the current state of society still came across despite not being able to conclude the story in the way he had ideally hoped for. Social plays such as *The Life of Miss Luu* written by Trần Hữu Trang, though often conclude with a sad ending, are nevertheless successful in drawing sustained interest and sympathy of the audiences. (Khê, Interview, 2010)

7.3.2 Phùng Há: A Distinguished Actress of *Cải Lương*

Actress Phùng Há played the female lead role of Miss Luu for the first time. Phùng Há (1911-2009) is considered to be one of the most famous and respected *cải lương* actresses of all times. She was born in a province along the Mekong Delta named Mỹ Tho in 1911. Phùng Há began her career in the theatre at the age of 13 and soon after her appearance on stage at this young age, was acting along side many notable actors and actresses including Năm Châu (Trùng1997:

121).

Phùng Há's outstanding performances as the female lead in two of the most popular social plays: *The Life of Miss Luu* and *To Anh Nguyet* remain memorable among *cải lương* fans to this day. "Those of us who were lucky enough to see her perform these roles live on stage will never forget." (Bà Xuân, Interview, 2010) Phùng Há was outstanding in social plays but she was more known for her ability to play both leading female and male roles in Chinese plays. (Bà Xuân, Interview, 2010) Trùng writes, "She can perform exceptionally well in literary as well as acrobatic *tuồng Tàu* plays ... [he continued by adding] few performers can sing *quảng* (Cantonese-style) songs as perfectly she can" (1997:121).

In 1958 Phùng Há bought a piece of land with a dream of building a Temple and a cemetery for the souls of *cải lương* artists to lay in peace. She envisioned it to be a place where artists from all walks of life, particularly those who were struggling economically and spiritually, could come to receive assistance and burial. She named this place *Chùa Nghệ Sĩ* (*Temple of the Artists*) and according to Khê it is unique worldwide (Trần Văn Khê, 2010, Interview). *Temple of the Artists* is devoted to *cải lương* artists and Buddhist worshippers. Those who come to the Temple burn incense, pray, and pay their respects to the many generations of *cải lương* artists before them with a walk through the artist cemetery located behind the Temple.

After purchasing the land, Phùng Há ran out of money to continue her dream of the building the temple and cemetery. The land was left undeveloped for ten years. In 1968 Năm Công, manager of the Lê Minh Công troupe offered to help Phùng Há begin the construction of the temple. The

project was halted before completion because Năm Công also ran out of money. A year later, a successful businessman by the name of Nam Thắng - a great lover of the arts, and particularly *cải lương* - agreed to invest in the project. In the *cải lương* community Nam Thắng is endearingly called Bầu Xuân (Manager Xuân).

Bầu Xuân was born and raised in Hồ Chí Minh City. Today he is in his seventies and has been the Director of The Temple of Artist for over four decades. Prior to 1975 he owned one of the most successful paper companies in Vietnam. When the Vietnam War ended Bầu Xuân was sent to a (re) education camp and assets were taken away from him by the Communist Party. He was released in 1994 and since then he has dedicated himself full-time to The Temple.

His relationship with *cải lương* began with a friend who was a *cải lương* performer. The friend was very poor and struggling, and had approached Bầu Xuân for financial help. His willingness to assist this friend introduced him to the world of *cải lương*. As he got to know *cải lương* and the life of those who dedicated their life to this form, Bầu Xuân's commitment to *cải lương* grew. He continues to be one of the longest and most highly respected patrons of the arts in Hồ Chí Minh City.

Bầu Xuân became involved in *cải lương* at a time when the arts and activism were motivated by the Franco-Việt Minh conflict. Out of this fragile and political situation Bầu Xuân not only invested in a number of *cải lương* groups but he also established many of his own troupes. He told me that although the groups were short lived, his time with them were some of the most memorable experiences in his life. "We were young, very idealistic, and fearless...we weren't

afraid to express our opinions. First we performed social plays and then began to experiment with war plays” (Interview, 2010).

These war plays are known as *tường chiến tranh* and first appeared in the early 1950’s out of the conflict between the French and *Việt Minh*. Their primary purpose was to evoke feelings of nationalism and patriotism against the French rulers. Hauch writes, “These plays often involved two fictitious countries at war with one another and were designed for the audience to easily identify which side represented Vietnam and which depicted France” (Hauch, 1972: 53).

Although these war plays only lasted for a short period in the 1950’s, they returned as soon as the U.S.-Vietnam War started in the 1960’s³¹.

7.4 *Tường Hương Xa* (Far Away Destination Plays)

However, before this takes place another key type of *cải lương* drama emerged called *tuồng hương xa* (literal translation, *far away destination* plays). Plays with foreign topics, including Western, Chinese, and sword fighting *cải lương* plays all in one category were considered to be *tuồng hương xa*. Hauch suggest *tuồng hương xa* became a favorite of the Southern audiences because of its exciting foreign settings, action, elaborate scenery, and unusual costumes (Hauch, 1972: 55). A focus on amusement became one of the dominant goals of *cải lương* troupes in the South after the 1954 and in the following years leading up to the Vietnam War. Hauch says, “The needs of the audience to find a simple method of passing the time and escaping the realities of the war pushed *cải lương* writers to compose *tuồng hương xa* plays incorporating Chinese

³¹ The United States became more deeply involved in Vietnam towards the end of the 1950’s when the U.S., at the height of the Cold War, believed their cause in Vietnam was to stop the spread of communism around the globe.

boxing and sword-fighting with spirits appearing and disappearing” (1972: 57).

Tuồng hươg xa came about during a time of significant political change for South and North Vietnam. In 1952 the French and the Northern government³² agreed on a cease-fire. This agreement led to a divide in Vietnam into two separate zones with the *Việt Minh* in the North and the French and the supporters of the *Bảo Đại* government in the South. All parties involved met in Geneva, Switzerland, to draft a treaty known as the Geneva Agreement. Its main objectives were to temporarily halt the conflict until local elections could be held in the French governed areas of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam and also to help buy time for the French to prepare for their withdrawal from these regions. The French left Vietnam by 1954, but the election never took place. The Southern government, supported by the United States, did not accept the agreement to have an election. The difference led to further conflict between the two regions, setting the circumstances for a civil war between the South and North that lasted almost two decades.

With two completely different visions for the future Sài Gòn became the capital of South Vietnam and Hà Nội, the capital of North Vietnam. Sài Gòn expanded relations with foreign countries, particularly those in the region. Phạm writes about the South during this time, “After World War II, and especially after the Geneva agreement, transportation between other countries was rebuilt and a flow of foreign films poured into Vietnam, bringing a new form of entertainment to the people” (1975: 148). As a consequence, “many elements of traditional

³² The Northern leadership in 1952 formed an official party known as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).

Vietnam were lost” (Khê, Interview, 2010). I would go as far to say this period marked the beginning of many of the challenges that continue to face traditional Vietnamese culture. *Cải lương* was no exception. In order to keep up with the demand of the market and essentially to survive, many *cải lương* troupes took their themes from foreign films such as *Samson and Dahlila*, *Rashomon*, *Tarzan*, and *Sayonara* to create *tuồng hương xa* dramas. Both Brandon and Bowers who conducted their research in the South in the 1960’s suggest *cải lương* became both too commercially oriented and of poor quality (Bowers, 1960: 37; Brandon 1967: 74). Yet despite these drawbacks many Vietnamese still preferred *tuồng hương xa* for its exotic locations and the escapism it offered from the harsh realities of daily life, especially as compared to the innumerable propaganda plays produced by the government.

7.5 *Cải lương* in the South During the Vietnam War

The Southern government saw in *cải lương* an opportunity to spread their political ideologies to the masses, particularly as tensions escalated between the two the North and South. Brandon notes that in the South many amateur and semiprofessional troupes were set up within a variety of youth organizations and the Vietnamese army (1967: 294-295). He goes on to say, “generally these plays aimed to entertain and to demonstrate the cruelty of the *Việt Cộng* (Vietnamese Communist) as well as to raise money for charities.” (Brandon 1967: 296) Another Asian Theatre scholar writes:

Beginning in March 1966, the anti-communist Vietnamese government developed the *Van Tac Vu* teams, which perform songs, magic tricks, and dramas, especially comedy. They wandered from place to place, giving shows at night to villages considered “secure” and during the day to those where Communist influence were known to be strong. (Mackerras 1987: 12)

Nevertheless and not surprisingly, the government-published text *Vietnamese Theatre* makes no mention of such anti-communist theatrical activities from the South. This source, however, suggests that Southern artists in the city support the nationalist movement “to comment and rectify backward plays and to present more progressive creations on a variety of topics” (1999: 77). In an effort to portray the inhuman actions of the Americans and the Southern government, the *Vietnamese Theatre* tells us that as a result of the progressive character of these plays, these particular *cải lương* troupes were “threatened with revenge, or repressed by the Sài Gòn Administration” (1999: 78). Brandon also confirms that there were also many communist troupes working in the South³³. He says:

In 1963 in the province of *Ba Xuyên* along the Mekong Delta, the Vietnamese army captured a complete *Việt Cộng* troupe. They carried simple equipment hung on poles slung over their shoulders the way itinerant troupes of actors have done in Vietnam for centuries. They followed canals and rice-field footpaths from roads and big towns. During the day they hid. At night they would enter a village, *Việt Cộng* regulars would round up an audience at gun-point, for an hour or so the troupe would perform its propaganda plays glorifying life under Communism and contrasting it with the cruelty and corruption of the present government. (1967: 298)

Trùng in *The Art of Cải Lương* explains *cải lương* performances took place every night [in the South] in Sài Gòn during this time (1997:161). This was in effort to educate, motivate, and organize the populace to join the war efforts. In addition, Trùng explains this tactic was also how a new generation of artists, and particularly *cải lương* playwrights, matured in their craft.. (1997:161) Between 1955 and 1975 a new generation of *cải lương* performers and writers emerge,, especially as the first generation of playwrights such as Năm Châu and Trần Hữu

³³ Communists based in the South during the U.S-Vietnam War were known as *Việt Cộng*.

Trang, age and rarely write.

Driven by a promise for an independent Vietnam, a handful of younger writers such as Kiên Giang blossom. I was fortunate to have Kiên Giang agreed to share with me his life history. Here is a brief biography of his life:

Kiên Giang, birth name Trương Khương Trịnh, is not only a revolutionary playwright of *cải lương*, but also a highly respected poet and journalist. He was born in 1929 along the Mekong Delta in a province he is named after, also named Kiên Giang. Kiên Giang first gained popularity with a poem he wrote entitled *Hoa Trắng Thôi Cài Trên Áo Tím (A White Flower Pinned to a Purple Shirt)*. This poem was later turned into a song and remains one of the most well-known and commonly performed songs.

Before 1965 Kiên Giang worked as a journalist for established newspapers in Sài Gòn. In 1974 he led a movement, which brought journalists out in the streets to protest a ruthless policy called *Sắc Luật 007 (Metal Law 007)*³⁴ established by Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, the president of South Vietnam from 1967-1975. Under the *Metal Law 007* many newspaper firms were shut down; editors from various newspaper companies were punished; and a handful of journalists were sent to jail. The newspaper industry, with Kiên Giang as one of the lead organizers, united in response to this harsh law. They successfully attracted the attention of the international community to the kind of cruelty that was taking place in Vietnam during the War. For his involvement in this uprising Kiên Giang was sent to jail and tortured. In our first official

³⁴ The name of this law suggested that the government must applied hard and strong (like metal) regulations to control all form of media productions in South Vietnam. (Kiên Giang, Interview, 2010)

interview together, he freely revealed to me the torture scars on his leg and proudly told me he is political dissident against a government. (Interview, 2010) Right away I understood I was before a unique human being with a wealth of stories and knowledge I needed to collect and document. For three years from 1987 to 1990 Kiên Giang directed the *Hội Nghệ Sĩ Ái Hữu (Artists Association United)*³⁵ where he continues to be an active member of to the present. He can be found here every morning and this was where I met with him every other week for coffee and rich conversation.

Kiên Giang wrote one of the first anti-American plays called *Nguru Lang-Chức Nữ (Legend of the Milky Way)*, paving the way for other anti-American plays from between 1954 and 1975. (Trùng 1997:172) *Legend of the Milky Way* is based on the Vietnamese version of a common Asian folk tale about the origin of the Milky Way. It is a love story between the daughter of the King of Heaven named Chức Nữ and a shepherd named Nguru Lang. Chức Nữ is a skilled and hard working young woman who can be found everyday sitting by the river weaving textiles for her family. Everyday, Nguru Lang goes to the same river to graze his herds. One day the princess and the shepherd meet and soon fall madly in love. Although the shepherd comes from a lower caste the king agrees for the young couple to wed because he sees that Nguru Lang is as equally hard working as Chức Nữ. But before he allows them to get married he makes them promise to continue fulfilling their daily responsibilities. However, after the wedding the couple does not

³⁵ In 1958 actress Phụng Há created the *Hội Nghệ Sĩ Ái Hữu* with the main intention of helping financially struggling artists and their families. The organization allocates 750 Đồng (approximately \$40 U.S. dollars) every month to an artist living in poverty; provides a kilogram of rice to an artist upon request; and organizes volunteer missions with artists in the City to distribute clothing and provide healthcare services to poor community in rural areas. (Kiên Giang, Interview, 2010)

want to be apart so they spend all their time with one another and forget to do their daily chores. Such neglect makes the king angry so from the heavenly meadows he decides to divide the river into two, creating a shimmering light across it to separate Nguu Lang and Chức Nữ forever. He denounces their love and tells them from now on they must be apart for the rest of their life. For a long time the young couple desperately search for one another and although they are separate for a long time they never stop loving one another. The king witnessing their loyalty and pain for one another agrees to let them see each other once a year on the seventh month of the lunar calendar.

Legend of the Milky Way opened for the first time in 1954, after the Geneva Agreement was signed, at the largest theatre in Sài Gòn called Nguyễn Văn Hào. (Kiên Giang, Interview, 2010) Kiên Giang said he adopted this legend into *cải lương* because he felt the story of Nguu Lang and Chức Nữ depicted the experience of the Vietnamese people when the country was also divided in two regions. He wanted to demonstrate on stage the vulnerability of the people during this period of political chaos (Interview, 2010). “The entire nation was in disarray. No longer did we have control of our life. It was in the hands of politicians who didn’t have our best interest in mind as they go about making their plans, splitting our families and land in two” (Kiên Giang, Interview, 2010). Despite circumstances of pessimism, he concludes the story with a happy ending by allowing the couple finding each other. In doing so, he wants to let the Vietnamese people know that if they can endure the temporary pain of loss and separation and continue to fight they too will be reunited like Nguu Lang and Chức Nữ.

After 1975 Kiên Giang joined the Thanh Minh-Thanh Nga troupe, he helps to launch the career

of one the most beloved actresses in the history of *cải lương*, Thanh Nga. She made her career debut in one of Kiên Giang's most notable plays, *Bà Vợ Không Bày Giờ Cưới* (*The Wife Who Will Never Re-Marry*). Thanh Nga was born into a family with a strong background in the arts. Her father was a famous *cải lương* actor, musician, and troupe manager named Năm Nghĩa. Năm Nghĩa and her mother, Nguyễn Thị Thơ, started a successful troupe called Thanh Minh in 1949. With her family in the entertainment business Thanh Nga received a solid education and quickly rose to prominence as an actress. Huỳnh says, "In the morning she attended regular school; after school she studied traditional music; in the evening she went to the theatre where she learned how to sing and befriended many actresses and actors (Volume 4, 2006:7)."

7.5.1 Thanh Nga: A Beloved Actress of *Cải Lương*

At a very young age Thanh Nga played roles opposite her father and other famous performers such as Út Bạch Lan and Hữu Phước (Huỳnh, Volume 4, 2006: 7). Recognizing that Thanh Nga had a special gift for the theatre, her father often created characters specifically for her in his plays. At the age of only 15 she was cast as the female lead in Kiên Giang's play *The Wife Who will Never Re-Marry*. For her role as Phà Ca in this play Thanh Nga became the first actress to have been granted a prestigious performance award called Thanh Tâm. Although the Thanh Tâm prize only existed for a short period it nevertheless made a significant mark in the history of *cải lương*. For this reason I briefly take an aside to present it.

The Thanh Tâm Award - similar to the Tony Awards in the U.S. - was launched in 1958 and was considered to be the most respected award presented annually to a *cải lương* performer. In 1957, Trần Tấn Quốc, a newspaper company owner and a patron of *cải lương*, created the

Thanh Tâm Award. It was given to a *cải lương* performer based on three major criteria: the performer's voice, acting skills and his/her physical beauty. This award only lasted from 1957 to 1967 because of the fragile political situation at the time" (Trùng, 1997: 199; Kiên Giang, Interview, 2010).

After a successful run as an actress, Thanh Nga in 1960 joined her mother as the family's troupe manager. They changed the group's name from Thanh Minh to Thanh Nga-Thanh Minh. Together they managed the troupe until Thanh Nga's death in 1978. A state published text writes "in a physical struggle to protect her son from being kidnapped Thanh Nga was shot and died instantly at the crime scene at the age of 36" (Trùng, 1997: 199). However, many of my informants believe that Thanh Nga was murdered by the *Việt Cộng*, mainly for her political involvement on and off stage³⁶. Although she died young, *cải lương* fans today still remember her with extreme fondness and respect. Those who knew Thanh Nga or had the opportunity to work with her spoke about her with nostalgia and respect.

7.6 *Cải lương* in the North During the Vietnam War

Between 1954 and 1975 *cải lương* theatre in the North was also quite active, much as it was in the South. The Northern regime also used *cải lương* as a means of communicating with the masses. The *Vietnamese Theatre* reveals to us that:

In the resistance war (1946-1954) urban troupes evacuated to rural areas. Their lively performances encouraged people to engage in mass education, to increase production or to join the army, etc. A number of artists who were trapped in French-controlled cities

³⁶ The perpetrators of Thanh Nga's death were never brought to justice.

(*Hà Nội* and *Hải Phòng*) founded troupes of their own. Those troupes in the liberated zones tried their best to overcome hardships to serve the people and revolutionary armed forces. (*Vietnamese Theatre* 1999: 75)

In the North *Cải lương* became employed as a national art to be promoted while its shortcomings was removed (*Vietnam Social Sciences* 1987: 59). Although the author of this source does not specify what those “shortcomings” may have been, many scholars of Vietnamese Theatre (Brandon, Hauch, Khê, Diamond, and Nguyễn) have concluded that the Northern leadership attempted to revamp *cải lương* by setting two main objectives: one, purging *cải lương* of *vọng cổ* (nostalgia for the past melodies); and two, clearing *cải lương* of Western elements. According to the Communist Party at the time, any aspect of the culture influenced by the West was deemed corrupt and immoral. The Communist believed that this corruption was especially prominent in South Vietnam, where the general population was more accepting of Western culture. The Northern government first tried to ban *vọng cổ* from *cải lương* after Vietnam’s victory over France in 1954 because they considered it be “mawkish” and counter productive in their efforts to instill a sense of Vietnam with liberated people working together to build a nation. (Diamond, 1991: 381) Khê confirms Diamond’s claim saying, “The government at the time perceived sad emotions in *vọng cổ* as a hinder to their most immediate goal, which was to motivate the masses into taking heroic deeds in rising up, first, against the French colonialists and then later against the Americans, for the good of the nation.” However, they did not fully achieve this goal. In addressing this subject, Hauch writes:

The writer still considers it necessary to use a South Vietnamese song, *vọng cổ*, in the saddest moments of the play....He [the writer] justifies the use of Western music such as tango and rhumba rhythms played in the romantic scenes by stating that such music would keep the audience from feeling excessively romantic. For the heroic and patriotic scenes, new melodies are composed to express the necessary heroic feeling, using

Western instruments instead of Vietnamese instruments. (1972:56)

While needing to compromise on *vọng cổ*, the *Vietnamese Theatre* suggests that, “*cải lương* troupes in the North made an active contribution to social life with their progressive plays” (1999: 75). The communists produced shows depicting Americans as villains on stage. Daring plays such as *Bọt Biển 1,2* (Sponge 1,2) by Nguyễn Phương; *Tâm Lòng Cửa Biển* (The Heart of the Sea) by Hà Triều Hoa Phượng; and *Cánh Cò Trắng* (The White Stork Wing) by Thu An presented Americans killing the local population and destroying the community’s traditional ethics (Mackerras 1987: 13). The *Vietnamese Theatre* summarizes the role of *cải lương* during the Vietnam War period thus:

In August 1964 the United States began to bomb North Vietnam. The War spread over the whole country. “Shock brigades” were formed to give traveling performances in the war zone as during the resistance war. In the anti-American war, *cải lương* theatre, like other forms, had continued to be active until the country was reunified in 1975. (1999: 76)

Hauch, who researched the historical development of *cải lương* up to 1972, writes in his conclusion,

It is generally agreed by most of the persons interviewed that *cải lương* has been deteriorating steadily since 1963. The war since 1963 has created a number of social problems. The loneliness of women whose husbands are fighting far from home, the misery of more than three million refugees forced to flee their burned-out homes in the countryside, the rising cost of living to the scarcity of goods, the problems of large numbers of unwanted half-breed children who serves a constant reminder of the American presence, the influence of American television programs and Western movies, and the rush in the desire for luxury goods which are beyond the means of most people who sink deep into debt in order to purchase them. All of these factors have combined to influence the present direction of the *cải lương* stage. (1972: 57)

My research of the period between 1954 and 1975 has revealed that war provided the conditions for the first widespread professional practice in which large numbers of artists were deployed in Army Ensembles performing as part of their military strategy. Both the South and North regimes focused on the heroism of the arts. Especially with *cải lương* the emphasis was on developing new social and war plays that were launched first, as a result of the divide of Vietnam into two territories, and then later by addressing the U.S.-Vietnam War. Both Southerners and Northerners acknowledged the value in *cải lương* by using it to serve their own political purposes. Troupes on both sides managed to operate despite the numerous obstacles posed by the War. Revolutionaries such as Năm Châu, Trần Hữu Trang, Kiên Giang, Bầu Xuân, and Thanh Nga showed courage and loyalty to their beliefs as they continued to perform, write, and produce as many of their activist and artist friends were imprisoned and murdered.

Summarizing the period between the First Indochina War (1945) and the U.S.-Vietnam War (1975), Hauch writes,

In spite of the gloomy conditions existing at present, there is a feeling among the older actors that when peace comes, there will be greater demand for *cải lương* performances and that the quality will once again attain the level of the plays written in the 1930's. (Hauch 1987: 59)

Unfortunately, I find the prediction of these older actors overly optimistic and the greater demand for high quality *cải lương* has not occurred. My research reveals that since the 1970s the state of *cải lương* has continued to deteriorate, and today is confronted by many problems that did not exist in the past. *Cải lương*'s decline was primarily a consequence of some major political and cultural renovation policies that were put into place by the Northern leadership in

the years following the U.S.-Vietnam War. Common dilemmas discussed by my informants during my fieldwork in 2003 and 2010 are presented and analyzed in the following section of the dissertation.

7.7 *Cải Lương* in the Years Following the Vietnam Year

Once the U.S-Vietnam War ended in 1975 and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam gained victory, North Vietnam leadership began the task of reforming the South, pushing for a new culture with a socialist content and a national Party. In order to quickly implant their new policy the Northern government marked South Vietnam as an area of “neocolonialism” (Philip Taylor, 2001:23) that must be purged of its “evil” colonial past. A million Vietnamese from Hồ Chí Minh City³⁷ were sent to undeveloped and non-arable areas to establish farmland. Mountain people, mainly composed of ethnic minorities, were displaced from their homes to grow foods for the entire country, while lowland Vietnamese who were dominantly of Kinh origin were allowed to take over their land under the newly established economic zones. A million people in the former Republic of Vietnam were sent to “reeducation” camps to do hard manual labor and suffer starvation. At a culture level, literary works from some of the most notable writers and poets from the South were banned and many newspaper presses were shut down. In addition, a kind of pre-1975 Southern music known as “yellow music”³⁸, considered by the Northern leadership to be sick, weak, and feudal, was also censored. (Taylor, 2001:39)

³⁷ When the communist defeated the Southern and U.S. regime in 1945 they immediately renamed the Southern capital of Sài Gòn to Hồ Chí Minh City, after their revolutionary leader Hồ Chí Minh.

³⁸ “Yellow” music is used to describe sentimental songs from the South before the reunification of Vietnam in 1975. (Khê, Interview, 2010)

With this said, it is important to acknowledge that while control over the arts and culture has been more pronounced in South after 1975, this policy has existed in the North for more than half a century, since Hồ Chí Minh decided in 1945 to incorporate it into the Vietnamese communist revolutionary agenda. In 1948, the party established a National Congress on Art and Literature with the aim of acting as an umbrella institution for all creative organizations and professionals in Vietnam. In 1951, Hồ Chí Minh noted in a brief to all artists:

With regard to your creative work, you must understand, get in close touch with and go deeply into the people's life. Only by doing so will you be able to depict the heroism and determination of our soldiers and people and to contribute to the development and heightening of these qualities. (Duiker 1995, 181)

According to Hồ Chí Minh, art should not be separated from politics, and should be in the style of socialist realism, depicting soldiers, farmers, and laborers.

In 1956, following the example of the Hundred Flowers campaign³⁹ in China, the party briefly allowed intellectuals to voice criticism against newly enacted programs. Some artists, writers, scholars showed courage by taking on the challenge of criticizing the party. The government was shocked by the boldness of these critics and decided to intimidate the dissidents. They repressed any movements in Vietnam throughout the 1960's and 1970's working toward greater creative freedom.

Following Hồ Chí Minh's speech to artists in 1951, the Communist Party stated in a pamphlet

³⁹ In China the Communist Party had introduced a program of liberalization in art and literature known as "Let a Hundred Flowers bloom" encouraged artists and writers to speak out against shortcomings in their party's policy (Taylor 2001:116).

submitted to the second Arts Association congress in 1962 that, “art must reflect the essence of the past and present struggles of the people against imperialism and feudalism” (Taylor 2001: 113-114). Taylor goes on to use examples of particular paintings created by the state to support her argument. According to Taylor:

The Resistance Class painters produced paintings of soldiers, combat heroes, women warriors, and the good deeds of the army along with more conventionally patriotic landscapes and rural scenes. These works, intended to be accessible to the masses, were visible everywhere, not only in the state art exhibitions, art publications, and journals but also on stamps, posters, and calendars. (2001: 112-113).

Other forms of artistic expression also became mediums for serving the cause of social revolution and national reunification. “In novels, plays, and poems, North Vietnamese writers portrayed in romantic terms the glorious struggle of their countrymen to bring about national independence and to achieve the goals of constructing a socialist culture in the North and achieving unification with the South” (Duiker 1995: 182). Woodside states that actors and the plays of theatrical companies at the village level were often used to teach peasants the proper performance of new roles. He writes:

About 1968, Hà Nội decided to turn its back upon many Western theatrical techniques, and to revive ‘courageously’ the ‘basic trademarks’ of symbolism of the pre-modern Vietnamese theater, which had called upon actors to express such acts as looking at themselves in mirrors, or building a house, or riding in a sampan, by means of ‘empty’ or abstract movement. Drums and gongs, popular in traditional theater, were used to replace Western musical instruments. (1976: 267)

Specific forms of Vietnamese traditional theatre such as *hát chèo*, *hát bội*, and *múa rối nước* have been used extensively in the second half of the twentieth century in Vietnam by the communist party as a form of communication and mass organizing. They seemed to favor *hát*

chèo because this is a Northern folk theatre that tends to favor the prevalent theme of commoners over the ruling class. As Grace Cheng notes,

Hát chèo plays are based upon popular folk tales. Along the lines of the dominant theme of many tales is the theme of goodness' triumph over evil. This theme is usually depicted in a plot where an honest commoner is ultimately victorious over the evil deeds of a self-serving and dishonest person. In traditional *chèo*, the evil character is often overtly a member of the ruling class. (1994: 42)

Hát bội is also a great example of why the government preferred one theatrical form to another.

According to Cheng, *hát bội* unlike *hát chèo* often glorify the ruling class. Cheng wrote,

“[...T]hese plays reflect strongly the themes and views of society as perceived by the literati elite. Generally, they were not openly critical of the present body or system of power [but were] usually about the king's struggle to retain power [.]” (1994: 17). However, there seems to be an attempt by the state to discount the form as elitist. In an English text called *In Vietnam: the Land and the People* produced by the Vietnamese government to promote tourism, investment, and study in Vietnam writes,

[T]he feudal dynasties tried in vain to turn to good account the popular veneration offered to national heroes in order to consolidate monarchical authority. The people would always, by their humanism and critical spirit, question all the precepts that might be inculcated into them. Even at the time when this supposedly orthodox art was enjoying great favor at the Court, kings would often be depicted as spineless, incapable creatures outwitted by sycophants and plotters. (2001:199)

Although many scholars (Brandon, Cheng, Hauch, and Mackerras) suggest that *hát bội* has its roots in China, *Vietnam: the Land and the People* includes no mention of China. It says,

[*Hát bội*] ... May have its source in the practice of worshipping great men of the past, which itself originated from the cult of ancestors. During rural festivals, people liked to recall the feats of legendary or historical heroes: the Hung kings, founder of the Vietnamese nation; Thanh Giong who vanquished invaders; the Trung sisters who, in the year 40, rose up against Northern rule. At first simply recited stories combined with dialogue and mimicry to make the episodes recounted livelier, these performances [...] became in the course of time with the help of gestures and dances, a rough form of historical drama. A theatre devoted to traditional heroism came into being. (2001:198)

Instead they portrayed *hát bội* as a reaction to a vital national need and show that it was not only performed in the courts but also “enjoyed [...] popular favor” (2001: 198). And like all the art forms and cultural movements described in *Vietnam: the Land and the People*, *cải lương* is presented strictly as an inherently revolutionary development, an act of resistance against totalitarianism and, later, colonialism. As I believe I have demonstrated, such an account is only partially true.

South Vietnam encountered a very different experience. Unlike their counterparts in the North “not all residents of Hồ Chí Minh City viewed the incursions of capitalism and the opening up of the cultural world in such bleak terms” (Taylor 2003: 141) in the years during and after the U.S.-Vietnam War. The older generation, who had earlier come across capitalist culture during the French presence in Vietnam, “greeted the return of foreign investors and tourists by polishing up English-language skills acquired while working for the Americans in the 1955-1975 Republican Era and metamorphosed from down-at-heel accountants or cycle drivers into professional English teachers” (Taylor 2003: 141). Taylor went on to say that their children, too, “welcomed the arrival of foreign investors, discotheques and video culture with enthusiasm” (2003: 141).

Duiker writes that in literature:

The influence of American individualism produced a rush of novels and short stories laced with satire, romanticism, and sexual love themes. Many dealt with issues raised by the war, but others were simply escapist and reminiscent of the bittersweet era of the colonial 1920s. Popular music, too, reflected influences from the West. Popular tunes mingled indigenous themes with the rock beat of the contemporary West and, aided by the presence of a half-million United States servicemen, the cultural heroes of the 1960s and early 1970s in the West achieved similar popularity in South Vietnam. (1995: 180)

After the communist victory in 1975, the party's immediate priority was to get rid of the remnants from the American era out of Southern Vietnam and instill a socialist society throughout Vietnam. The government decided that all forms of art influenced by the French or Americans had to be removed. The 1980 constitution in Vietnam stated that any arts:

Considered harmful to the struggle to build a socialist society were banned. Books and printed songs that portrayed such alleged Western bourgeois attitudes as individualism, selfishness, sexual license, and mysticism were confiscated and burned. In their place, stories and folk songs reflecting 'the genuine spirit of the people' were revived and propagated, and new creative works were produced to meet the standard of socialist realism and to help create the new citizen. (Duiker 1995:186)

As an art form, *cải lương* was also affected by the Northern leadership's agenda in their efforts to transform South Vietnam. Trương Bình Tòng, playwright and political official from the North who was assigned to reform *cải lương* after 1975 said in his text *The Art of Cải Lương* that performance in *cải lương* had to be completely reformed. (1997: 219) In his opinion *cải lương* representing Southern culture and identity is "excessively sentimental", "emotionally weak", while easily manipulated by outsiders such as the French and Americans, as well being highly corrupted by capitalism. (1997: 219) In an article entitled *Cải Lương Bắc, Cải Lương Nam* (*Northern Cải lương, Southern Cải lương*) found in issue #307 of *The Theatre Magazine*,

Trùng quoted Lê Duy Hạnh, the Director of the Theatre Association, as saying, “*Cải lương* activities in the North are restricted to government subsidy, while *cải lương* in the South is controlled by the market-economy” (Trùng, 1997: 224). According to Lê, *cải lương* in the South operates too heavily under control of the current market at the expense of quality productions (Trùng, 1997: 231) He credits the government [Northern] for creating plays of high caliber without commercial objectives or foreign influences with their subsidy system (Trùng, 1997:231). Most of my interviewees did not agree with Lê’s point of view. They felt that the subsidy system provided by the Northern officials was just a tactic to control *cải lương* activities and Southern artists, and because of this it brought down the quality of productions, and thus created the sad situation of *cải lương* today (Anonymous, Interviews, 2010).

Furthermore, in their efforts to regulate and nationalize *cải lương*, the Northern government in the years shortly after 1975 got rid of all privatized theatre troupes and buildings. According to the state, private theatre takes advantage of performers and exploits them under a greedy capitalist system. (Khê, interview, 2010) Contrary to the government’s take on this matter, an informant told me that many *cải lương* troupes in the South during this period were operated by small family troupes. She said, “We were not capitalist profiting from *cải lương*. In fact it was the opposite. Most of us were barely surviving, but we stuck with it because we love the art. But mainly because this is all we know what to do. How else were we to live?” (Anonymous, Interview, 2010).

Two types of *cải lương* groups formed in the city with the elimination of private troupes after

1975: First, *đoàn nhà nước* (national groups) under the management of the government; and second, *đoàn tập thể* (collectives) under the oversight of the local political officials. *Cải lương* artists who were loyal to the Party were put into collectives called Sài Gòn I, Sài Gòn II, and Sài Gòn III to “fulfill the audiences desire for opera” (Trùng, 1997: 220). A few private troupes from the pasts were reconfigured under collectives such as Hương Mùa Thu, Thanh Minh-Thanh Nga, and Phước Chung. (Trùng: 1997: 220) Nhà Hát Cải lương and Trần Hữu Trang, the most notable *cải lương* theatre to exist today based in Hồ Chí Minh City, were established in 1977 by the union of two former troupes known as Cải Lương Nam Bộ and Nhà Hát Cải Lương Giải Phóng (Trùng, 1997:221).

The banning of private troupes in the South served two main purposes. First, the Communist Party wanted to end any product of capitalism in the South. Second, they felt that *cải lương* hybrid qualities originated in its abilities to be easily manipulated by foreign invaders such as the Chinese, French, and Americans. Therefore, they wanted to make *cải lương* a homogenous cultural form removed from its hybrid qualities. The government not only tried to remove *vọng cổ* from *cải lương*, Taylor suggest that many of the Chinese stories, costumes, and choreographies were also eliminated from post-1975 reformed *cải lương*, including Western musical genres from tango to love songs, foreign costumes, and use of Western stories and motifs drawn from sources as Ancient Rome, Egypt, India, and the US Wild West (Taylor, 2001:151). According to Taylor revolutionary reforms in the South after 1975 tamed *cải lương* by directing its emotional “excesses” toward the building of socialist and revolutionary values. (Taylor, 2005:152)

An informant tells me, “*vọng cổ* at first was banned because it was considered to be depressing and therefore discouraging of heroic actions” (Anonymous, Interview, 2010). However, the attempt to discard *vọng cổ*, did not completely work because this feature proved to be too central to the existence of *cải lương*. While the goal of banning *vọng cổ* was not entirely successful the Northern government managed to control its usage. A few sources, including my informants, have confirmed that the Northern government continued to allow expression of sadness in *vọng cổ* but only followed by an heroic action. (Hauch, Nguyễn, Phạm, Anonymous, Interview, 2010).

According to the communist *vọng cổ* melody in *cải lương* was just one problem they had to reform, they also perceived excessive emotions in *cải lương* generally to produce linear thinking without a clear purpose. Nguyễn in her dissertation cites a professor and theatre critic whom she interviewed as saying the emphasis on the form, gesture, and visual qualities of *cải lương* does not reveal the “truth” of society. She continued by implying that the “truth” in *cải lương* according to this source refers to a narrow definition. It is one in which only socialist realist practices are allowed to be depicted on stage. (Nguyễn, 2010:124) The December 1980 constitution stated that literature and the arts should be used as a means of educating the people in the line with policies of the Party and the State, teaching them revolutionary ethics, developing their aesthetic sense, as well as raising and satisfying their cultural needs (Mackerras 1987:11). Furthermore, in a political report addressed in March 1982 by Secretary General Lê Duẩn to the Fifth National Congress of the Communist Party, he requests specifically that all artistic activities, including theatre should play a role in building a new culture and molding a

new people (Mackerras 1987: 12). As a result of such an explicit order from the top, the government began to invest money in forming theatre troupes to support them in their attempt to re-shape Vietnam into a society with a strong socialist realist character and to further their national cause. According to official statistics cited by Mackerras, the number of popular theatrical troupes rose from 7,704 in 1976 to 12,526 in 1980, and the number of theatergoers increased from 32 million in 1976 to 39 million in 1980 (1987: 14) with patriotism listed by the Vietnamese-Language publication of 1980 as being the most common theme of contemporary dramas (1987: 18).

In the 1980s, *cải lương* plays based on Hồ Chí Minh's life were very popular in Northern Vietnam. In celebration of the fourth anniversary of the Communist Committee in 1976, the Cải Lương Trung Ương Theatre for the first time staged a play in the North about Hồ Chí Minh's life called *Người Công Dân Số Một* (*The Number One Citizen*). *The Art of Cải lương* cited an article from *The Theatre Magazine* written in 1977, "If the Russian Theatre has many plays about Lenin, then Vietnamese theatre must have plays about Uncle Ho" (Trùng 1997: 234). A play about Hồ Chí Minh did not appear in South Vietnam until 1990. *Đêm Trắng* (*White Night*) was staged at a government theatre called Cải Lương Tập Thể Sài Gòn I and it received the Gold Metal at a National Performance Festival in 1990. (Trùng 1997: 234)

The National Performance Festival was launched for the first time in 1958 in the North and then took place other two times in 1962 and 1970 before it was forced to end temporarily for ten years as a consequence of the war. (Trùng, 1997:242) Trùng tells his readers the National

Performance Festival was created to showcase the diversity of performance art forms such as *tuồng*, *chèo*, *kịch nói*, and *cải lương* of Vietnam. Furthermore, the event is said to allow for artists to share their experiences as performers and for troupes to present their best work to their colleagues from other parts of the country. Awards were given to the best productions and performers at the festival. In 1980 the Festival reconvened with ten *cải lương* troupes participating during this year. (Trùng, 1997:242) Since 1980 the event is organized every five years and remains the biggest performance gathering as well as the most important event for performers in the country. Three informants told me the National Performance Festival was created for the government to have a better medium to control artists and their activities, but more importantly for state to define the kind of plays that are acceptable. (Anonymous, Interview, 2010). In looking back at its history, my informants' opinions about the governments' intention seem to hold true. Only productions such as *White Night*, *Tiếng Trống Mê Linh* (*The Drum of Me Linh*) and *Thái Hậu Dương Nga* (*Empress Duong Nga*) were awarded the National performance Festival prize. All three plays involve national heroic figures from the history of Vietnam who've sacrificed for their country and triumph in the end. For example, *The Drum of Me Linh* and *Empress Duong Nga* tell the stories of three legendary female leaders from Vietnam who showed courage against foreign dominance. *The Drum of Me Linh* is about the two Trưng heroines who manage to awaken the spirit of the Vietnamese people to fight against the Chinese in 43 A.D. by creating exciting and powerful sounds from the beating of a drum. *Empress Duong Nga* centers on the life of an Empress from the Đinh Dynasty in the 10th century. She later became an empress again to the first emperor of the early Lê Dynasty in the 11th century. During her period of control she reigned successfully and became the first woman in Vietnamese history to have married two emperors.

Both plays were staged in the late 1970's by the well-known revolutionary troupe, Thanh Minh-Thanh Nga. Productions such as these not only suggest the government's agenda, but they also imply subtle tensions between Southerners and Northerners that continued even after the war officially ended. In 1977 a grenade exploded half way through the play of *The Drum of Me Linh*. Trùng says, "Thanh Nga and two other performers were injured, and two young musicians were killed. He showed their courage and resilience by telling his readers that "Once Thanh Nga returned from the hospital the production of *Tiếng Trống Mê Linh* resumed" (1997:237).

According to an informant, Bàu Xuân, the years between 1978 and 1983 seemed to be relatively stable for *cải lương*. He told me, during 1978 and 1979 his troupe, Sông Bé, "with only mediocre performers playing traditional plays can still attract a crowd". Even in 1982 and 1983 he had noticed few challenges to *cải lương*. "Although livelihood was difficult for everyone, the audience were still easily convinced...and this was mainly because they didn't have many other options to pass their time and escape from the hardships following the war" (Bàu Xuân , Interview, 2010). However, the spectators desperate cling to *cải lương* only lasted for a short period. The situation quickly changed by the middle of the 1980's.

CHAPTER 8

CAI LUONG BETWEEN 1986 AND 2010

8.1 Chapter Summary

By the early 1980's it became evident that the communist party's was struggling to maintain their ideology and in the face of pressing, especially economic, realities. "Economic stagnation persisted, and grumbling from within the ranks and among the population at large that the 'old men at the top' seemed unable to keep abreast of changing needs intensified" (Duiker 115). In order to save face and Vietnam from gradually falling, the party decided to introduce a new reform known as *đổi mới* (literal translation, "change anew") in 1986. *The lifting of the trade embargo initiated by president Clinton in 1991 followed Đổi mới* and this opened Vietnam to a host of new ideas, cultural influences, and possibilities. For three decades since the start of the U.S.-Vietnam War in 1959 the nation and its people were mostly isolated from developments occurring around the world. But once the door opened the people fully embraced the changes these new policies enabled, and Vietnam underwent immense social and cultural change. And, many aspects of the traditional arts and culture in Vietnam have been eroded since *đổi mới*, including *cải lương*. Since *đổi mới* was initiated in 1986, *cải lương* has steadily changed for the worse. .

8.2 Challenges Facing *Cải Lương*

As a part of *đổi mới* reforms, the government enacted a policy known as *xã hội hóa* (literal translation, “socialization”). *Xã hội hóa* had a direct impact on *cải lương*, in that “the Ministry of Culture and Information has now decided that society and not the government has the responsibility to financially support the arts” (Khê, Interview, 2010). In western terms, *Xã hội hóa* mean “privatization”. Khê went on to say the governments’ justification for this policy was to encourage higher quality art by reducing the number of theatre companies. Socialization was enacted under the rationale that lesser quantity will produce greater quality. Khê continues, “Unfortunately, socialization did not create any incentives or allow the freedom for artists to produce higher quality work” (Khê, Interview, 2010). The government did not present a plan with socialization. Theatre companies struggled to transition from total reliant on state subsidies to greater financial independency, supposedly in the name of higher quality work. The problem is further exasperated by state control and censorship that discourages a new creative body of work outside of the government’s socialist ideology.

8.2.1 Censorship

Theatres in Vietnam have been a government institution for more than half a century, ever since Hồ Chí Minh decided to incorporate them into Vietnam’s revolutionary movement in 1945. Their activities have been solely dependent on subsidies from the government or local authorities, with a fixed annual budget from which they were required to meet a certain number of performances per year. Their main task was to serve the revolutionary, political, and social causes of the nation. Since 1945, a play cannot be performed live, aired on T.V., or recorded on videotape without permission from the

government's Censorship Council. The sole responsibility of the Council is to secure the ideology and artistic quality of the play meet party requirements. Censorship can be applied at different steps of the production process, and the permit is often given after the last dress rehearsal. A government employee I spoke in 2003 regarding this topic commented, "This process aims to ensure the artistic quality and the positive ideology of the play" (Anonymous, Interview, 2003). On the other hand, many *cải lương* artists I spoke to in 2003 and 2010 expressed frustration explaining that the audiences are losing interest in *cải lương* because the government only allows *cải lương* plays that demonstrate the heroic acts of Vietnam's people, soldiers, workers, or farmers to be produced. One informant said, "Whenever I turn on the TV and see a *cải lương* actor in black pajamas and a red scarf around his neck, I turn off the TV right away. I am tired of revolutionary stories" (Anonymous, Interview, 2010). This kind of dissatisfaction expressed existed at least as far back as the early 1990's. Taylor's research from the 1990s in Hồ Chí Minh City cites the very same issues as the primary reason for the form's stagnation. He writes, "many of the *cải lương* performers, scriptwriters, choreographers and followers with whom I spoke in the 1990s labeled the genre 'repetitive and boring', 'catering to the lowest denominator' or bereft of artistic value" (2003:140).

8.2.2 Audience

An actress lamented to me that audiences once filled the theatres by the hundreds, but "today we are happy just to see a few faces" (Lai Nguyễn An, Interview, 2003). Most of the *cải lương* performances that I attended in Hà Nội in 2003 had on average

approximately sixty people in the audience, and the majority of these spectators were women over fifty years of age, who grew up during the glory period of *cải lương*, and continue to appreciate the form. My fieldwork in Hồ Chí Minh City in 2010 revealed a similarly depressing situation for the art form. The demographic group and the numbers attending *cải lương* shows had not changed much between 2003 and 2010. In fact neglect was more evident in 2010, especially evident in *cải lương* theatre infrastructure.

Many people I interviewed mentioned poor theatre facilities as major issue with *cải lương*. “Modern audiences cannot be blamed for not wanting to go to the theatre.” (Khê, Interview, 2010). *Cải lương* theatres in Hồ Chí Minh City were noticeably more dilapidated than the performance spaces of other genres, such as those of spoken drama, music, and movie theatres, that I have visited. Everything in the theatre - stage, walls, floors, seats, and bathrooms - required renovation.

A young Vietnamese friend laughed at me when I invited him to a *cải lương* show. He was surprised that a young Vietnamese woman, especially one who grew up outside of Vietnam, would have any interest in such an “old form of theatre” like *cải lương*. He said, “The younger generation in Vietnam doesn’t understand *cải lương*. “Only spoken drama appeals to the younger audiences today” (Hồ Quốc Hùng, Interview, 2003).

Another actor I interviewed spoke passionately, with tears in his eyes, about the passing glory period of *cải lương*. According to him, *cải lương* theatres were most active in the sixties when Vietnam had a purpose and a need. He said, “The revolution during this time

of difficulty brought us together. Our standard of living was low, and we were all struggling to survive. The theatres were lacking in resources and the performers were untrained and inexperienced. With not enough food to eat or enough clothing to keep them warm, performers made due with what they had and managed to continue performing with all their might. Despite these difficulties, in the countryside as well as the city, people packed the theatre in significant numbers with excitement to see a show” (Anh Chiên, Interview, 2003).

In 2010 a *cải lương* performer noted, “The enthusiasm from the audience was what distinguished the glory period of *cải lương* as a special moment in Vietnam’s history and a time worth remembering. However, the days in which people got each other out of the house to stand in line for tickets to the theatre, as they did to collect government subsidized food-stamps, no longer exist” (Bạch Tuyết, Interview, 2010).

It seems that perhaps that overly nationalist agenda during tumultuous times has contributed to the demise of this unique art form. Contemporary audiences no longer want plays dealing with Vietnamese national heroic personalities of the past and their struggles against the Chinese, French, or Americans. The spectator’s concerns and interests have shifted since the struggle for liberation and reunification has ended in Vietnam. I am concerned that *cải lương* as a live performance form may cease to exist in the next decade, unless the government can let go of their control over the theatres and begin to help fund them again. Taylor says,

Many residents of Hồ Chí Minh City attributed blame not to the operation of the market forces, not to the ‘vestigial’ influences of the neo-colonial era, but to the harm done by

socialist policies themselves...postwar regime's policy of 'building of a new life' had been carried out at the expense of cultural traditions and had led to the neglect of a rich heritage in pursuit of an overly narrow conception of tradition as 'anti-foreign resistance. (2003: 145)

Fundamental changes in people's lives and attitudes have occurred since the introduction of *đổi mới*. Today, young Vietnamese have become well acquainted in the culture of the West through the television and social media. Taylor says, "critics linked the crisis in the nation's arts to insufficient controls on the flood of 'depraved cultural products' entering the country through its newly opened doors" (2003: 140). Similar to the period of the Vietnam War, theatre began to decline as Vietnamese-made movies and foreign films became available. Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc, one of the most re-known and controversial contemporary Vietnamese playwrights, theatre directors, and actresses, told me that once these foreign films began to be shown on television at the start of the 1990's, traditional theatre became antiquated in the eyes of the modern audience (Interview, 2010).

In 2004 Minh Ngọc was honored by Vietnam's Television Network as Artist of the Year. She is a recipient of more than 30 awards in literature and theatre and is the co-founder of an Experimental Theatre in Hồ Chí Minh City. She has taught acting and drama at various institutions, including; The Theatre and Cinema University, the Trần Hữu Trang Theatre, and the Social Science and Humanities College.

Minh Ngọc graduated from the Theatre and Cinema school in 1975, but she started writing well before 1975 when she was still in high school in her hometown of Phan

Thiét. Some of her short stories were first published when she was only 16 years old. Her accomplishments includes seventy *cải lương* and contemporary plays as well as thirty screenplays, documentaries and feature films.

Currently she lives in the United States, but continues to return to Vietnam regularly to collaborate with Vietnamese artists on domestic and international projects. In 2000 I had the honor to meet Minh Ngọc when she was one among eight visiting artists recruited from Vietnam by the Asian Cultural Council based in New York City to participate in a Mekong Artists Program. Since then we have maintained our friendship. She confides in me often about her struggle as an artist but also of her sadness in witnessing the rapid decline in audiences. In expressing her concern, she said, “The theatre does not exist without an audience....I don’t exist without an audience” (Minh Ngọc, Interview, 2010).

Cải lương artists such as Minh Ngọc are fully aware that they must experiment with modern themes in order to compete with other entertainment forms and to adapt to changing circumstances. However, the government and its counterparts within the theatre worlds have clung to outdated styles, old ideologies and power. They have tried for the past four decades to isolate the next generation from the cultural currents that have swept through the nation as it has increasingly come into contact with the outside world since *đổi mới* in 1986.

Cải lương artists have not confronted the party over these issues of censorship (Minh Ngọc,

Interview, 2010). Unlike their counterparts in the visual arts, young critics in 1994 at an Arts Association Congressional meeting advocated replacing the revolutionary guard of painters with the non-revolutionary group of artists who either had been marginalized or had marginalized themselves from art circles for thirty years (Taylor 2001:120). Such bold action has slowly forced the Artists Association to recognize the contributions of a number of nonconformist artists to modern art history in Vietnam (Taylor 2001:120). However, this movement has not yet taken place within the *cải lương* or theatre community. According to Taylor, the painters who have opposed and distanced themselves from revolutionary policies were born too recently to remember their country's struggle for independence (2001:120). While, the managers who have administered the *cải lương* theatres up to this point tend to be older men born into and trained from a generation based on a Marxist vision of an egalitarian classless society.

8.2.3 Creativity

An environment of political repression for artists has detrimental results on creativity. The kind of artistic products that have been created are not only controlled by the State, but also caused self-censorship among artists, becoming ingrained and sometimes unconscious. Artists apply self-censorship to their work in order to be able to keep creating, performing and touring shows in their own country. An informant commented, "Working outside the system is difficult and almost impossible. For those of us who want to continue getting paid and doing art we must accept giving up a certain level of creativity" (Anonymous, Interview, 2010). Taylor says *cải lương* theatres have been "stripped of subsidies and forced to operate as commercial ventures, theatres, musicians and artists lost their capacity to provide social commentary and forge new

paths” (2003:140).

8.2.4 Education

Another element adding to this crisis for *cai luong*, the government has given little attention to training programs in Vietnam. *Cải lương* requires years of intensive training, yet one of the key problems in Vietnam since *đổi mới* is the lack of adequate teachers and training facilities. “Most qualified teachers have retired or past away. This issue is worsened by the fact that it is difficult to recruit the few adequate teachers because the salary is too low” (Anonymous, Interview, 2010).

Lack of training courses or too few courses also affects student enrollment. I was told that from 1980 up to 2010 the *Đại Học Sân Khấu- Điện Ảnh* (Theatre and Cinematography University) in Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City offer only three courses per academic year for students majoring in *cải lương*. Few courses mean that students have less opportunity to improve their skills, which then provides little incentives for students to complete their degree. For students who manage to finish, they often find themselves upon graduation unemployed and without psychological support and physical site to perform and produce their work. “Playwriting students today students are forced to resort to other kinds of writing, such as journalism to earn a living...that is if they are lucky enough to find a job that allows them to continue writing” (Minh Ngọc, Interview, 2010).

While a weak training program and low enrollment rate are key challenges facing *cải lương*, classroom absenteeism among matriculated students is another issue. Actress

Bạch Tuyết who has been teaching for over three decades told me, “Students miss many classes because they are too tired to attend after running from night clubs to restaurants the evening before trying to earn a living” (Interview, 2010).

Bạch Tuyết is considered by many people in Vietnam to be the most famous contemporary performer. She comes from a poor and remote village near the Vietnam-Cambodia border. Her mother moved her and her sister to Sài Gòn when her father abandoned them for another woman. Bạch Tuyết’s mother worked hard as a tailor to provide for her two daughters. She said, “Our most valuable possession was an old sewing machine” (Interview, 2010). Bạch Tuyết always looked forward to Tết (Lunar New Year). One year her mother made new clothes for her and her sister from pieces of discarded cloth and cooked a special meal of sour soup. On the first day of the New Year her mother took them to the zoo and did not know at the time that this day was going to be one of her last days with her mother. Five days later Bạch Tuyết’s mom died in a car accident. In 1955, at the age of 9, after her mother’s death, she and her sister went to live with their father. During her time with him she was sent to a convent school. She recalled, “At school I sang and acted in performances on Tết and Christmas. I remember liking to read, sing, draw, and play music very much, but back then I had never imagined one day I would be an artist” (Interview, 2010). Bạch Tuyết continued to tell me,

When I was fourteen years of age some friends and I went to the theatre to see the famous actress Thanh Nga perform. After the show I timidly approached her for an autograph. After signing the photo she handed it back to me and then suddenly asked me if I knew how to sing. Timidly, I replied ‘Yes a little bit’. She then gently raised my chin and said to me ‘Go and sing, with a face like that you will

be very famous'. I didn't think much of her comment back then because I thought she was just being nice to a little girl. Now that I am famous, I wondered how Thanh Nga could have predicted my future" (Interview, 2010).

At the age of sixteen Bạch Tuyết decided to live independently and sing to support herself. She started learning the basics of singing from a friend's father, who was a well-known performer. Bạch Tuyết said when she was younger she took her training very seriously. "I worked hard to be like the performers I had admired and respected. Today as a teacher myself I am saddened by the lack of artistic creativity and professionalism which my students bring to their training" (Interview, 2010). In addition, Bạch Tuyết acknowledges the fact that she wouldn't be where she is today without the determination of many talented teachers. "Teachers nowadays complain too much of being tired and professionally burnt out" (Interview, 2010).

8.2.5 Overworked Directors

However, teachers are not the only ones to complain about being burnt out. Theatre directors also find themselves overworked and under appreciated. They are constantly under pressure to balance their budget and break even for every show. In order to save money, directors are forced to multi-task. Not only are they directing the show, they are simultaneously managing the stage, overseeing the stage sets, costumes, and make-up. Responsibilities for music, props, and lighting tend to be negotiated between the director and the members of the company. According to another director "the members of our company have lost their excitement for the theatre because they spend too much energy worrying about the financial matters of the theatre" (Anonymous, Interview, 2010).

8.2.6 Centralism

Centralism was another issue that recurred with a handful of people I interviewed in 2003 and 2010. Since 1975 training curriculum have been designed by Northerners often from Hà Nội with little to no artistic background in *cải lương*. (Anonymous, Interview, 2010). Yet the branch in Sài Gòn and in the provinces throughout the country are required to follow the government's program. Many informants feel that this situation has made the curriculum poor and boring. (Anonymous, Interview, 2010).

Centralism also leads to laziness. This is in part because artists are provided with little incentives for hard work or talent. Government employees are paid the same low salary regardless of hard work or talent. (Anonymous, Interview, 2010). Yet despite this shortcoming, many artists told me they are willing to work hard to continue doing their art, but they felt they are unable to do so because of the method of management. Many managers in positions of authority are composed of unqualified people who are former artists or political officials with no training in financial, marketing, or administration (Anonymous, Interview, 2010). Another informant provided me with a specific example. He said managers who oversee the theatres frequently lack the knowledge and skills to analyze and estimate the value of a play. There is a concern among theatre practitioners that managers are overlooking good plays. "Managers are commonly too closed-minded because they represent the government or they prefer to stick to safe topics in order to steer away from government criticism and censorship" (Anonymous, Interview, 2010). A

common complaint is that plays chosen for production focus too much on local stories of famous heroes and heroines, as well as on political and historical events of the past.

While this is the case, it is important to mention that since the 1990's new *cải lương* plays have been produced by adapting stories from foreign and local popular novels, films, and plays. A handful of newly written plays depicting contemporary Vietnamese society have also been recently produced. For instance, in 1996 the Trần Hữu Trang Theatre in Hồ Chí Minh City produced a Vietnamese version of *The House of Bernada Alba* called *Nhà Tôi Không Có Đàng Ông* (*The House with No Men*). The play quickly became popular for it acted as a social critique on the hamstrung country and as an implicit criticism on those who left Vietnam and were still leaving at the time. *The House with No Men* was also perceived as a commentary on the government's repressive actions that curtailed the aspirations of the younger generation. Lastly, the play expressed antagonism towards those whose bitterness about the past cripples them and destroys the lives of those around them.

More recent productions have borrowed stories from classic *cải lương* plays such as *A Mother's Love*, from the 1940's (Discussed in Chapter 5). The 2010 re-produced version of *A Mother's Love* was adapted to a subject matter of concern the contemporary audiences.. *A Mother's Love* tells a story of a woman who emigrated to the U.S. and returns to Vietnam to surprise her mother with the news that she is going to sponsor her to the U.S. The mother expresses her love for the daughter, but refuses to move to the U.S. She tells her daughter that she was born in Vietnam and wants to die in Vietnam.

Common themes found in the twenty-first century *cải lương* plays includes issues of family separation; love and sex in modern Vietnam; and a rise of materialism among the younger generation.

Yet despite these recent developments, many of my informants feel the many challenges with *cải lương* continue to center around the government's policy of socialization. Again, the plan of cutting state subsidies funds from theatre troupes while also maintaining tight control and censorship hinder artistic quality. Instead the policy creates a domino effect that causes repetition, mediocrity, boredom among artists and audiences, problems further exasperated by the inability of the government to loosen their grip on artistic activities. All contributing to a series of problems including unqualified managers, a poor training system with laziness and dispassionate teachers and students, as well as overworked directors.

8.3 *Cải Lương* Performers Encountering Socialization

As the theatres struggle to stay afloat, performers face many associated difficulties. The small amount of subsidy provided to the state theatres by the government is not enough for performers to earn a living wage. An actress friend said, “many talented artists have lost their will to live and die for the arts like we once did. Our immediate concern today is the livelihood of our family” (Ngọc Giàu, Interview, 2010). A number of performers do not consider acting as their main profession. Those who have a harder time letting go of performing *cải lương* find themselves resorting to part time jobs such as *chạy show*, performing at restaurants and nightclubs to supplement their income.

At the wedding of my family's friend in *Cần Thơ*, I met a *cải lương* singer named Trang⁴⁰. My aunt told me that although Trang is not known in *Sài Gòn*, she has a special voice that draws many *cải lương* lovers in from the countryside. After presenting a *vọng cổ* (longing tune) to the bride, Trang rushed out to return to the city, where she was scheduled to perform that night. This lifestyle is common for many *cải lương* artists today. What keeps them working hard is their joy and devotion to the art of *cải lương* and to the few fans they have left.

Trang was born into and raised in a family troupe. As a young girl, she followed her father everywhere and performed many different characters for his company. Trang took over her father's theatrical company when he became too old to manage it. Unlike other *cải lương* companies in the city, Trang's troupe was never subsidized by the government. Her troupe has survived mainly on fees collected by performing in the countryside. The troupe makes little money, and she could barely pay her performers or replace her decaying costumes and stage sets.

A few years before I met Trang in 2010,, she gave up her family's troupe to join the *Hội Nghệ Sĩ* (Artists' Association). *Hội Nghệ Sĩ* was founded in 1957 with the aim of creating a national artistic workforce that would produce art to serve the propaganda needs of the government. Taylor writes,

⁴⁰ She asked that I not use her real name.

It was founded as a branch under the Ministry of Culture and ruled by an executive committee elected by members of the Association. Any artist could join if he or she fulfilled the requirements of submitting works to a jury and paying a small membership fee. (2001:110)

Performers who join the Association have many advantages. In a society trapped between a market and socialist economy, the Association provides artists with exposure to other artists' works, possibilities to perform live throughout the country, as well as a steady income. On the other hand, these rewards have consequences that are mainly based on predetermined criteria. Such predetermined criteria require that artists only create, produce, and perform work the party considers valuable to the revolutionary cause. Anything outside of this realm is unacceptable. Taylor writes, "These criteria set by the Association became the cause of disputes by the current generation of painters at the 1994 Arts Association congress" (2001:113).

In the beginning, Trang tried to avoid joining this organization, but since her theatre company disbanded, she was forced to participate in the *Hội Nghệ Sĩ* to make a living. At first she was surprised to see that so many well-known artists were also members of this Association. Trang quickly learned that the *Hội Nghệ Sĩ* is perhaps one of the best ways for artists like herself to maintain their status as professional performers. She is grateful to the Association for enabling struggling artists like herself to make a stable income as a performer. But this said, Trang also expressed disappointment that the people who come to see them are not as enthusiastic as a dedicated audience of *cải lương* lovers. In addition, she acknowledges the golden age of *cải lương* has ended.

Thus, with their struggle to make ends meet, it is no surprise that many *cải lương* artists are hesitant to return to the stage. Often these artists find themselves traveling from the city to the countryside, performing for various culture centers, restaurants, nightclubs, and parks. In addition, the better-known performers spend their time performing *cải lương* on television or recording *cải lương* videotapes. This situation has left few *cải lương* performers for the stage and with directors often scrambling to find talented performers.

CONCLUSION

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS AND THE AMBIGUOUS ROAD AHEAD

Despite the gloomy prospects discussed above, my research in 2010 has revealed that promising changes are also taking place. Since the 1990's the Vietnamese government at large has made some effort to help identify *cải lương*'s challenges and propose solutions. For instance, two popular *cải lương* award shows and conferences focusing on *cải lương* are evidence of these attempts.

Trương Vàng Vọng Cổ (Golden Vọng Cổ Award) show focuses specifically on Vietnamese chamber music in *cải lương*. It is produced by one of the major TV channels in Hồ Chí Minh City (HTV) and the competition takes place annually from October to November in Hồ Chí Minh City and the province of Cần Thơ. Every year approximately 300 performers register to compete. After the first round, 50 performers are chosen to move on to the next level. The last round entails three days of performances, ending with 10 finalists competing for the winning title.

Another award show called Trương Trần Hữu Trang (Trần Hữu Trang Prize) is currently in its 11th year. Competition takes place first in the provinces before it ends in Hồ Chí Minh City. Once the competition starts in Hồ Chí Minh City it is also aired on the City's main TV channels and a major radio station. The Trần Hữu Trang Prize was launched in 1990 and since then it takes place every two years. Performers compete in singing and acting.

Award shows such as the Golden Vọng Cổ Award and Trần Hữu Trang Prize were created with the objectives of discovering young talent; keeping the tradition of *cải lương* alive in the community; and fostering an appreciation of *cải lương* among the young people. An informant told me these television competitions have helped a little, especially since so many younger people watch television nowadays. “This has been an effective strategy to hook the younger clientele” (Anonymous, Interview, 2010). Someone else said to me, “The growth in changes through television competitions such as these ones have been too slow” (Anonymous, Interview, 2010).

Alongside these shows the government has been organizing conferences to help foster a forum whereby critical issues on *cải lương* can be discussed. The biggest and the most important convention organized by the government takes place every five years to review the successes and failures of theatre in general, and to develop an agenda for the following five years. Heads of theatre companies and various culture associations as well as political officials from the Ministry of Culture are invited to attend this event. The following is a detailed summary by an informant who attended the latest conference that took place in June of 2010.

Representatives from the People’s Party in Hồ Chí Minh City, Heads of the Teachers’ Association from the City, and members of the Culture and Arts groups throughout the country participated. An *hát bội* troupe welcomed the participants with a short performance. Lê Duy Hạnh, Director of the Theatre Association in Hồ Chí Minh City made the welcoming remarks and then reviewed the key theatre activities that took place

between the period of 2005 and 2010, followed by a statement of the government's goals for 2010 and 2015. He also presented a variety of concerns and suggestions offered by the theatre community. Some topics included socialization of the theatre; rapidly declining interest in traditional performances, including *cải lương*; poor infrastructure of theatres buildings; and lack in qualified theatre critics. After Lê Duy Hạnh's presentation, Mrs. Nguyễn Thị Hồng, Associate Director of the People Party of Hồ Chí Minh City, gave a speech. An informant said, "In it she provided no tangible plans to the concerns brought forth by the theatre community" (Anonymous, Interview, 2010). In addressing a less critical problem mentioned by the theatre community, this is what she had to say:

The lack of qualified critics and research has been hindering the theatre from developing. In order to support these two problems the conference committee must establish a strong line-up of critics with strong and clear opinions and seek out people who will listen. We must have experts who are theatre critics. I believe that in the near future the Theatre Association will be able to create a place for critics to be supported and in the long run this effort will help push the theatre to move forward. (*Theatre Magazine*, June 2010, Vol. #21)

Mrs. Nguyễn stated nothing but the obvious in saying that professional theatre critics are needed, and then ends her speech regarding this matter with an ambiguous statement about the Theatre Association being able to create a place for critics to be supported in the "near future". First, what does "near future" mean? Second, the lack of qualified theatre critics has been a problem since the 1980's. The Theatre Association has not been able to help thus far with this situation. How are they to do the job now? After all why are theatre critics so important anyway? I asked Khê and Kiên Giang to help clarify for me this question in regards to the role of theatre critics in Vietnamese society. This is what

they told me:

Cải lương's survival has mainly been dependent on its ability to exist as a commercial theatre form. The primary goal of commercial theatre is to generate profit. In order to make a profit a show must be able to draw interested paying spectators. A critical way of doing so is with the words and opinions of the theatre critics. For a long time up until approximately three decades ago with the increasing popularity and usage of the television and internet, the newspaper had been the main source for obtaining information about current events especially in a highly literate society such as Vietnam⁴¹. However, along with the decline of the newspaper and the rise of the television and internet, the number of theatre critics have also lessened.

Furthermore, in Vietnam, written criticism up until recently have played an important role in maintaining the general public's interest in the arts, particularly theatre. It is no surprise that the number of theatre critics, and especially qualified critics have declined since 1975. Since the Northern leadership started to take over the entire country there has been little openness for any kind of opinions that did not support the government's beliefs. Only the critics who have either supported the government's policy are willing to do so to continue working have survived. However, such circumstances do not breed honest or interesting analysis of the arts that have been produced. The decrease in number of qualified theatre critics have worsen by the fact that many of them have left the theatre

⁴¹ In 2009 approximately 94% of the population aged 15 years or over is literate in Vietnam. (UNFPA Fact sheet)

industry entirely in search of more lucrative employment somewhere else. The people who have appeared increasingly as art critics have either no training in writing and/or have little to no background in *cải lương*. A director expressed his frustration with the situation this way, “Their criticisms often take a subjective viewpoint that is usually carried out by request of another person, what other choices do we have?” (Anonymous, Interview, 2010).

In 2010 the issue of unqualified theatre critics continues to present a challenge to *cải lương*. Nowhere in the statement made by Mrs. Nguyễn Thị Hồng (above) does she propose a concrete plan to tackle this particular problem nor the diversity of concerns brought up by performers and specialists of *cải lương*. Such indirect talk about addressing problems further aggravates the already existing frustration that many of my informants have shared with me. Everyone I interviewed credits the government for trying to help *cải lương*. Yet most of them told me consistently they felt the governments’ efforts have yielded little positive changes and often too slow. Dr. Khê said, “The government keeps telling the people to respect *cải lương*, but they don’t say specifically who should do so and how?” He continued by saying, “They [the government] have good intentions, but no concrete plan of action and they provide little resources to the right people to do so” (Interview, 2010). Another informant said, “There is a lot of talk about saving *cải lương*, but I have not seen any changes. The situation is the same or perhaps even worse then it was ten years ago” (Anonymous, Interview, 2010). Another person commented, “I am pessimistic about this [*cải lương*] situation. Artists have called attention to the sad condition of *cải lương* for many years, but I think

the government is only now beginning to hear our voices. But, I am not hopeful that the changes come soon enough.” (Anonymous, Interview, 2010).

Musician Vĩnh Bảo believes the government should not be held solely accountable for saving *cải lương*. He suggested that they should maintain their involvement in assisting to facilitate the work, but he emphasized that “they should leave the important decision making to specialists who really know *cải lương*” (Interview, 2010). According to Vĩnh Bảo older *cải lương* performers, directors, and scholars are the only ones who understand the work of *cải lương*. Vĩnh Bảo and Dr. Nguyễn Tuyết Phong agreed “people’s knowledge today about *cải lương* is very limited. For example, they only know that *vọng cổ* is associated with *cải lương*, but they don’t understand it requires a team of experts that involves performers, musicians, playwright, and directors to produce a successful *cải lương* show” (Interview, 2010).

In reflecting upon the historical development of *cải lương* from its conception to 2010, the period in which I conducted my fieldwork, it is not difficult to understand why artists are opposed to a forced utopian model of theatre created by the government. After a generation of conflict, the Vietnamese people are now looking ahead and building an easier and brighter path for themselves and their children. Taylor explains that younger artists in Vietnam are shaped by new global possibilities and fresh prospects for the future. She says “many of the works on display in galleries in Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City depict scenes of the Vietnamese countryside and village life, not as a political statement against the state nor as a patriotic message, but rather because those images seem to attract foreign buyers.” (2003:130) Furthermore, Taylor’s research

shows that young painters in Vietnam have found a new theme for their paintings, but most importantly, she concludes that these Vietnamese painters have “not rejected nationalist concerns entirely. In an attempt to forget the past and begin paving the way toward the future, they have instead chosen to remember the past in a new way” (2003:131). “Although these artists are eager to join the international market, this does not mean that they are *antirevolutionary*, but simply *nonrevolutionary*.” (2003: 132)

As with the visual arts, perhaps it is possible for *cải lương* to uphold the nation’s characteristic deemed acceptable by the state while with also creating a new vision. Hue-Tam in discussing *đổi mới* in her book *The Country of Memory* quotes a Vietnamese historian as saying, “Now we are at peace, we need a new theme around which to organize our historical narrative.” (2003: 4)

While many artists and scholars recognize that a new historical narrative is necessary in today’s Vietnam, the state is slow to embrace a bold, new path. They must allow for greater freedom of expression in *cải lương*, and at the same time allocate financial assistance to theatre companies long enough for them to become less dependent on government subsidy. Taylor writes:

A commonly encountered view was that *cải lương*’s decline came when it lost its following among intellectuals, who had once enthusiastically patronized the genre as a popular and vibrant medium of social commentary. According to some critics, the state’s appropriation of the moralizing voice of the form had choked its capacity to act as a moral counterweight. State control, which some saw as a legacy of the post-war ‘Stalinist’ era, was held responsible for casting the survival of *cải lương* in doubt (2003: 149).

All of the informants I interviewed during my field work in 2003 and 2010 agreed that striking the right balance between government involvement and the open market is one of the most

important step towards revitalizing *cải lương*. They went on to suggest other recommendations.

According to Nguyễn Tuyết Phong many *cải lương* talents are hidden in the rural areas where he believes the heart and spirit *cải lương* is still alive. He said, “Young performers from these areas are less driven by fame and money. Government and schools need to make more of an effort to recruit the unexplored talent from the countryside” (Interview, 2010).

Khê recommended incorporating *cải lương* into the overall education system. He said, “Not so that students will become performers necessarily, but more importantly so that they stay connected to their ancestors and in the process understand and value their own culture” (Khê, interview, 2010). To him this emphasis on art education is a long-term solution that will prevent many elements of the Vietnamese tradition culture from declining any further.

Another informant told me, “It is extremely difficult to find a play that I like nowadays.” She continued to admit that performers and directors today are not as good as they used to be. But she holds the Ministry of Culture mainly responsible for these problems and believes that the problem rests with the training system that currently exists. (Anonymous, Interview, 2010) For this narrator the key solution is in supporting the younger generation of *cải lương* performers. The logic of this suggestion is that *cải lương* can only survive if the future generation have an interest in it and this goal can only be met by younger performers who are given the support they need to help entice other young people like themselves to be interested in traditional art forms. This scenario is based on the most optimistic outlook that eventually over time these small group of enthusiastic young performers will be able to close the increasingly widening gap between *cải*

luong and more modern form of entertainments.

Investing in the future generations of performers is unquestionably critical, but the real test is for *cải lương* to find new ideas to support contemporary interest in a changing world, while at the same time discover meaningful elements of traditional culture that can be incorporated into the form without ossification. This effort is already proven to be a big challenge for *cải lương* artists and government as they are competing in a race, one in which they are losing, with a fast rising economy that is leading to a consumer centered society with a growing urban middle class quick to forget the past (easily manipulated by the infinite material wealth now available to them).

On the positive side, globalization has brought about a higher standard of living for the people of Vietnam, as well as an increase in exposure to new ideas and thinking via information technology. Furthermore, more visiting artists and teachers are coming to Vietnam, and Vietnamese artists are presented with greater opportunities to travel overseas. In the twenty-first century Vietnam has become one of the most popular destinations for Westerners who come out of curiosity or with an interest in the culture. More artists are visiting Vietnam than any other time prior to this era. These opportunities will inevitably initiate a diversity of collaborations that will offer more creative models for applying contemporary interest, ideas, and techniques to re-invent the artistic tradition of *cải lương*. However, this goal can only be achieved if *cải lương* manages to re-discover the unique features that brought life to it in the first place.

Cải lương on many levels typifies not just South Vietnam, where the form was born, but also the country at large as it has absorbed diverse musical, costume, and plot influences drawn from many eras and areas of the country and the world, for as Taylor said, “among its Central characteristics of constant transformation” (2003: 147). “*Cải lương* is not merely a reflection of colonial and post-colonial influences, but of Vietnam’s long history as a place of exceptional cultural ferment” (Taylor 2003: 147). *Cải lương*’s fluid ability to adapt, transform, hybridize, and commercialize itself when necessary not only reveals the form’s uniqueness, but also demonstrates the key characteristics of the Vietnamese people.

Many informants I interviewed in 2010 consistently defined *cải lương* in relationship to the Vietnamese culture and people. They believe that *cải lương* will not disappear because it is a gateway into the “heart and mind” of the Vietnamese. Khê said, “*Cải lương* is struggling to find its breath, but the people continue to value *cải lương*. They see themselves in the genre and for this reason they will not let it vanish completely from Vietnamese society” (Interview, 2010). Another narrator commented, “Yes it is true...*cải lương* is in danger of dying, but it has “not” died. As long as Southern culture and its people continue to exist, *cải lương* will live on” (Bầu Xuan, interview, 2010). Actress Ngọc Giàu stated poignantly and powerfully,

Cải lương is like a big and strong tree in the ground. Yet despite its size and strength this tree still needs care and attention like anything else in this universe. If you don’t water it and give it the right nutrition the tree will obviously wilt and die. But even after it dies it will not be able to fall over and disappear from the earth. Its’ root is too engrained in the soil. I see *cải lương* the same way. It is a vital part of Southern culture but the people of Vietnam have neglected it. *Cải lương* will never completely vanish, but it will stay standing in the earth with few leaves and definitely no flowers or fruits for people to enjoy. One day and I don’t when exactly the people will wake up and realize that they have been missing an important part of their life. The desperation to reclaim this need will require

people to care again for *cải lương*. (Ngọc Giàu, Interview, 2010)

Such testimonies have convinced me, quite contrary to what I have originally hypothesized at the start of my fieldwork, that *cải lương* has not died and will continue to endure as its people have through many historical periods of conflict and change. In looking back at the development of *cải lương* it is no surprise that the future of *cải lương* is uncertain at this fragile yet critical juncture in its country's history. At the start of the twentieth-first century the Vietnamese people, including its government, are in the midst of re-defining their identities and values. Perhaps once they have done so, the people of Vietnam will be able to pave a more secure, smoother, and clearer road ahead for themselves. In doing so, they can then assist *cải lương* in finding its way, not necessarily back to where it used to be, but to a new place where it can call home.

APPENDIX A

Informants Interviewed in 2010

Bạch Tuyết
Actress, Director, Producer, Playwright

Bầu Xuân
Director of The Temple of Artist, Patronage of *cải lương*

Danh Phận
Musician, Composer

Kiên Giang
Poet, Playwright, Director

Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc
Playwright, Director, Producer, Actress

Nguyễn Tuyết Phong, Ph.D.
Professor of Ethnomusicology

Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo
Musician, Director, Composer

Phong Thị Ngọc Giàu
Actress, Director, Producer, Playwright

Thanh Trường
Actor, Director, Producer, Playwright

Trần Vân Khê, Ph.D.
Professor of Ethnomusicology

Ngoại Muội, Grandmother Muội
Actress

Ngoại Hút, Grandmother Hút
Actress

Ngoại Thêm, Grandmother Thêm
Actress

Gì Phấn, Auntie Phấn
Troupe Manager, Actress, Director

Cậu Hai, Uncle Hai
Troupe Manager

Cậu Hùng, Uncle Hùng
Troupe Manager, Actor

APPENDIX B

Informants Interviewed in 2003

Trọng Khôi
General Secretary, Performance Artist Association

Hồ Quốc Hùng
Former Office Manager, Performance Artist Association

Anh Châu
Director, Nhà Hát Kịch Nổi

Lê Chức
Director, Nghệ Thuật Biểu Diễn

Anh Quân
Director, Nhà Hát Chèo Việt Nam

Nhật Minh
Director, Nhà Hát Cải Lương

Nguễn Xuân Hỹ
Musician

Quốc Toan
Director, Nhà Hát Kịch Việt Nam

Nguyễn Thịnh Thuật
Director, Nhà Hát Tuổi Trẻ

Nguyễn Liên, PhD
Associate Professor, American Literature
Hà Nội University and University of the Social Sciences and Humanities

Lai Nguyên An
Chief Editor, Nhà Xuấ Bản Hội Nhà Văn

Anh Khiêm
Director, Nhà Hát Tuồng

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions Conducted in 2010

What is your birth name and what is your stage name? *Tên sinh đẻ của bạn là gì? Tên sân khấu của bạn là gì?*

How old are you? *Bạn bao nhiêu tuổi?*

Where did you grow up? *Bạn sinh đẻ ở đâu?*

When did you first perform on stage? *Khi nào bạn đã thực hiện trên sân khấu và ở đâu?*

How did you begin this career path and are you the only one in your family? *Làm sao bạn bắt đầu con đường sự nghiệp này và bạn là người duy nhất trong gia đình của bạn?*

Has performing been your main form of financial support? If not, how else did you support yourself? *Có phải nghề cải lương của bạn là nghề chính không? Hay bên ngoài bạn còn có nghề phụ nào nữa?*

How long have you been performing/directing/writing cải lương? *Bạn đã theo nghề cải lương bao lâu rồi?*

Where were you trained to do this and for how long? *Bạn huấn luyện ở đâu và được huấn luyện bao lâu?*

What is the primary and secondary role you performed in? *Vai chính trong đoàn/gánh của bạn là gì?*

What was the first play you performed in? *Vở đầu tiên mà bạn diễn là gì và năm nào?*

Approximately how many plays have you perform in? *Trước khi cho đến bây giờ bạn đã diễn khoảng bao nhiêu vở?*

What was the most memorable play you performed in? *Theo bạn cái gì là kỷ niệm đặc biệt nhất trong nghề cải lương của bạn?*

What were some troupe(s) did you performed for? *Trước khi cho đến bây giờ bạn đã làm cho đoàn/gánh nào?*

According to your own experience, when was the most exciting time in the history of cải lương, and why? *Theo bạn thời gian nào là thú vị nhất trong lịch sử cải lương và tại sao?*

What was life like for you as a cải lương artists during the: *Cuộc sống nghệ sĩ cải lương của bạn như thế nào trong thời gian: 1940 và 1950, 1960 và 1970, 1980 và 1990, và trong 10 năm qua?*

What is the most exciting and the most challenging? *Điều gì thú vị nhất và thách thức nhất trong thời kỳ nay?*

Can you please describe the atmosphere of the theatre and the audience during these different periods? *Bạn có thể vui lòng mô tả không khí của sân khấu và khán giả trong các thời kỳ khác nhau.*

What do you believe to be the main difference between *cải lương* performers of your generation and that of the later ones? *Những gì bạn tin là sự khác biệt chính trong điều biểu diễn cải lương giữa thế hệ của bạn và thế hệ sau này?*

According to your own experience, what is the most difficult period in the history of *cải lương*, and why? *Theo kinh nghiệm của riêng bạn, khoảng thời gian khó khăn nhất trong lịch sử của cải lương là gì, và tại sao?*

In your opinion, do you believe *cải lương* represents the soul and culture of Vietnamese people, and how? *Bạn có nghĩ rằng cải lương là một tượng trưng cho tâm hồn và văn hóa của người Việt Nam? Và như thế nào?*

Many consider *cải lương* today to be a dying art form. Do you believe this is the case, and why? *Ngày nay nhiều người coi cải lương là một hình thức nghệ thuật gần chết. Bạn có tin rằng đây là trường hợp, và tại sao?*

What do you believe needs to be done to revive and preserve *cải lương*? *Điều gì bạn tin rằng cần phải được thực hiện để giữ gìn và hồi sinh cải lương?*

GLOSSARY

Âu Cơ – A mountain fairy married a Dragon Lord named *Lạc Long Quân* from the sea. *Âu Cơ* and *Lạc Long Quân* had one hundred children who became known according to legends of Vietnam as the original ancestors of the Vietnamese people.

Âu Lạc – A Kingdom of Vietnam that formed in the third millennium C.E.

Ca ra bộ - Literal translation, “singing with gesture” is first step in the development of *cải lương*.

Chạy show – Literally translation, “running to shows” is a late twentieth century phenomenon in *cải lương* whereby performers rushes from one location to another such as restaurants, night clubs, and theatres, performing short skits or songs of various genres in an attempt to make as much money as possible from performing.

Chữ nôm – China occupied Vietnam for more than a thousand years from 111 BC - 938 AD. In the tenth century Vietnam adapted the Chinese script to write its own language. When *chữ nôm* first emerged it became the dominant language of the elites. Some significant Vietnamese literatures to exist today were written in *chữ nôm* by notable intellectuals. *The Tale of Kieu* written by Nguyễn Du in the eighteenth century is the most well known literature of *chữ nôm*.

Đàn bầu – Known also as *độc huyền* is a Vietnamese monochord, or one-string guitar.

Dân ca – Literal translation, “folk songs” is found in the North, Central, or South regions of Vietnam. In particular, three types of Southern folk songs (*lý*, *nối thơ*, and *hò*) were incorporated into *cải lương*.

Đàn cò - Also called *đàn nhị* is a Vietnamese two-string fiddle with a sound box on one end that is generally covered with snakeskin.

Đàn nguyệt – Also known as *đàn kìm* is a Vietnamese two-string guitar often played in Vietnamese folk and classical music.

Đàn ty ba – A Vietnamese four-string pear shape musical instrument.

Đại Việt – Literal translation, “Greater Viet” is an official name of several powerful Vietnamese emperors (Đình, Lê, Lý, and Trần) starting with the third king (Lý Thánh Tông) of the Lý Dynasty in the eleventh century. Under the successful reign of these emperors from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries, the Greater Viet dynasties progressed toward political and economic stability allowing Vietnam to expand southward.

Đại Việt Sử Ký – Literal translation “annals of the Greater Viet” is an official historical text composed during the Trần Dynasty in the thirteenth century. This 30 volume book is considered to be the first comprehensive account of the history of Vietnam covering the Triệu Dynasty in the third millennium to the last ruler of the Lê Dynasty in the fifteenth century.

Điệu bắc – Literal translation is “Northern melody” and is used to emphasize action scenes in *hát bội*. *Điệu bắc* was later adopted into *cải lương*.

Điệu nam – Literal translation “Southern melody” is used to express sad, emotional, love, and devotion scenes in *hát bội*. It was later adopted into *cải lương*.

Đông Du – Literal translation, “Eastern Study” is a Vietnamese movement led by one of the most notable revolutionaries of the early twentieth century named Phan Bội Châu. He encouraged young Vietnamese to go east to Japan, as he did, to study with the hope once they have returned that they will become educated leaders, who will rise up against the French colonizers.

Độc huyền – Also called the *đàn bầu* is a Vietnamese one-string musical instrument.

Đổi mới - An economic reform launched by the Northern leadership in Vietnam in 1986 to help the country transition from a socialist to a market oriented economy.

Duy Tân – Literal translation, “Restoration” is anti-French movement established in 1904 by a pioneer of the nationalist movement, Phan Bội Châu. He also started the *Đông Du* Movement.

Duyệt Thị Dương - An Imperial City located in Central Vietnam constructed during the reign of Emperor Gia Long in 1804. A royal theatre called *Duyệt Thị Dương* is located inside this Imperial City.

Giỗ Tổ - Every year from the middle to late September drama enthusiasts pay respect to the theatre arts by celebrating the anniversary of the Founder of Theatrical Arts. *Giỗ Tổ* is a time for artists to come together to share their fondest performance memory of the past year.

Hát chèo – A type of satirical folk play from Northern Vietnam.

Hò – Literal translation, a “calling” is a popular Southern folk genre mainly places where land meets water. It is considered to be working songs for people to motivate themselves through hard labor. It is one among three key folk forms that were incorporated into *cải lương*.

Hương xã – Literal translation, “far away destination”, is a type of *cải lương* play that came about at the start of the U.S.-Vietnam War in the 1960’s with themes taken from foreign films and sources such as Rashomon, Tarzan, and Sayonara.

Kịch nói – Literally translation “spoken drama” is a Western style theatre form based on Western realism portraying real life on stage.

Lạc Long Quân – Literal translation “Dragon Lord” is a Vietnamese Prince who married *Âu Cơ*, the immortal mountain fairy. *Âu Cơ* and *Lạc Long Quân* had one hundred children whom according to myths of Vietnam are considered to be the original ancestors of the Vietnamese people.

Lạc Việt – A term given to the ancestors of the present day Vietnam who emerged from the Red River Delta during the end of last the millennium.

Lý – A popular Southern folk form of short songs with soft lyrics. *Lý* can be found throughout Vietnam, but is most popular in South Vietnam. It is one among three main folk forms that were incorporated into *cải lương*.

Lò - Literally translation, “furnace” is small home-based school of Vietnamese Chamber Music. Up until the 1970’s *lò* was a common way to learn Vietnamese Chamber music. It is barely in existence today.

Nam Việt – Formed in 208 B.C. *Nam Việt* is an ancient kingdom occupying what is known today as North Vietnam and Southern China.

Nhạc lễ - Literal translation, “ceremonial music”, with its origin in Central Vietnam, was regularly performed at the emperor’s palace. *Nhạc lễ* musicians brought this form to South Vietnam who later incorporated elements of it into Vietnamese Chamber music.

Nhạc tài tử - It is sometimes referred to as “amateur music” and othertime “Vietnamese chamber music”. *Nhạc tài tử* emerged out of the countryside along the Mekong Delta and was mainly performed in a private setting by semi-professional musician for a small audience.

Nói thơ – A form of spoken poetry accompany by an instrument called *độc huyền*, a Vietnamese one string musical instruments. *Nói thơ* is way of telling a story, and is also found in North and Central Vietnam. It was later adapted into *hát bội* and *cải lương* as a style of speaking. It is one among the three main folk forms that were incorporated into *cải lương*.

Pipa – The Chinese word for a Vietnamese four-string pear shape lute called *đàn ty ba* in Vietnamese.

Quảng – A term use to describe Chinese-influenced tunes.

Quốc ngữ - Introduced by Portuguese missionaries and then later further developed in the seventeenth century by a French missionary named Alexandre de Rhodes. He modified the Roman alphabet with accents and signs to suit particular consonants, vowels, and tones of the Vietnamese language. It was first used only in the Vietnamese Christian communities, but by the early twentieth century *quốc ngữ* was made mandatory throughout the Vietnamese education system by the French administration. *Quốc ngữ* is now universally used in Vietnam and is the official writing script.

Sáo- Transverse flute commonly used in Vietnamese folk music and *cải lương*.

Tân nhạc – A new kind of music that emerged in the 1930’s as Vietnamese singers started performing popular French songs to Vietnamese lyrics. *Tân nhạc* is sometimes referred to as “modern” music, and it is still popular both in Vietnam and among the Vietnamese overseas.

Thăng Long – A cultural structure considered to be an imperial citadel. It was first built during the Lý Dynasty, expanded in the Trần Dynasty, and lasted to the end of the Nguyễn Dynasty. Today it is referred to as the Hà Nội citadel.

Tiểu – A straight flute commonly used in Vietnamese folk music and *cải lương*.

Tranh – A Vietnamese sixteen-string zither.

Từ đại oán – A famous Vietnamese epic poem, written in dialogue pattern that involved one character singing one or two lines with the other character singing the reply while standing or sitting in one spot. It often expresses pain or sorrow and is considered to be the first phase in *ca ra bộ*.

Tuồng bày - A type of *cải lương* play involving complicated scenes with fighters attached to wires and flying across the stage.

Tuồng chiến tranh – A type of *cải lương* play that often involves two fictitious countries at war with one another and was designed for the audience during the Vietnam War to easily identify which side represented Vietnam and which depicted the other country.

Tuồng dã sử - A type of *cải lương* play that involves fictional accounts of Vietnamese history.

Tuồng kiếm hiệp - A type of *cải lương* play that involves sword fighting adopted from fictional accounts of Chinese stories taken from popular Sài Gòn newspapers.

Tuồng la mã – A type of *cải lương* play which centers on fictitious accounts of Roman history.

Tuồng lịch sử - A type of *cải lương* play with stories taken from Vietnamese history.

Tuồng phật - A type of *cải lương* play with stories related to Buddha's founding of the religion and Buddha in Nirvana.

Tuồng Tàu – A type of *cải lương* play that has taken many of its performance features and stories from the Vietnamese classical theatre, *hát bội*,

Tuồng Tây - A type of *cải lương* play that has taken its performance elements and stories from the West.

Tuồng tiên - A type of *cải lương* play featuring fairies and saints.

Tuồng xã hội - A type of *cải lương* play emphasizing proper social behavior and other moral themes.

Tứ trụ thiên vương – A dance of four directions performed by four male artists at the anniversary for the Founder of the Theatrical Art, *Giỗ Tổ*.

Trưng Nhị - One of the two female national heroines from Vietnam who fought against the first Chinese invasion in the year 40.

Trưng Trắc – The second of the two female national heroines of Vietnam who rebelled against the first Chinese invasion in the year 40.

Việt Cộng – Also known as the National Liberation Front (NLF), it was a political organization and army in South Vietnam that fought against the United States and the Southern regime during the Vietnam War. In 1960 the *Việt Cộng* was formed by communists based in the South with the primary purpose of recruiting non-communist into the insurgency.

Việt Minh – A national independent organization established in 1942 by Hồ Chí Minh and composed of mainly communist who were fighting for Vietnam's independence from the French.

Zaju - First originated as a short variety play from North China during the Song Dynasty (960–1127). During the Yuan Dynasty (1206–1368) *zaju* developed to become a four-act dramatic form with songs, dance, and dialogue.

Zheng – A Chinese sixteen string zither known as *tranh* in Vietnamese.

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